

COVID-19 DISTANCE LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Marjana Vaneva

University American College Skopje, School of Foreign Languages, Skopje, R.N. Macedonia

Vladica Maleska

University American College Skopje, School of Foreign Languages, Skopje, R.N. Macedonia

vladica.maleska.stanley@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This study investigates distance learning of English as a second language in primary and secondary schools in the Republic of N. Macedonia during the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in March 2020 when the government of our country, like everywhere else, decided to close the schools in order to protect student's health. The aim of the study is to define distance learning as a concept, and elaborate on the four main pillars or aspects of distance learning in general and of English language learning, specifically: technological pillars or infrastructure, human resources, the design of the teaching system and pedagogical and social dimension. Data and information for all four aspects have been collected from primary and secondary resources and analyzed accordingly. Questionnaires and interviews have been used as tools to give us insight into the research problem.

The findings have shown that both teachers and students find distance learning quite challenging. Although it is functioning well, there are certain barriers to overcome and better methods for learning to be found. The study recommends that the country should help more by providing funding for better learning platforms, and to help and support school teachers. Distance learning is the only alternative in the COVID-19 pandemic, but all stakeholders (ESL teachers, pupils, parents and experts) included in our interviews, agree that language is acquired through interaction, that language development is a social construct and pupils need to have lots of peer interaction.

KEYWORDS: *English as a second language, distance learning, mediated learning, COVID-19 pandemic, distance education, pillars of distance learning, design of the teaching system, learning platforms*

INTRODUCTION

Last year, when the pandemic took its toll, the author was a primary school teacher in NOVA schools International. The shift from regular school setting to electronic happened so fast; as it was announced in the news that all schools were closing, the next thing we know was that everybody was teaching online and we were doing all our work on our laptops. This was quite a challenge. The most obvious challenge was the lack of physical/human contact – taking students to lunch or break was no longer required, while working with them by only using a laptop seemed very unnatural. Other challenges were: bad internet connection, need for parent’s assistance in order for a child to follow the class, signing in the right time and uploading homework. Parents, teachers and students were all confused and anxious.

Of course, every change requires adaptation, but in this case two things were needed. Adaptation and acceptance that this is the way things will be for quite some time. The sooner all-party members accepted this, the better the situation became. That is why in the thesis we will go into several objectives, which are as follows: describe how distance learning is attained, communicate and evaluate the tools for conducting English language teaching from a distance (online learning), explore the experience of children and parents involved in this process, analyze the experience of English teachers, compare distance learning with classroom learning, make conclusions about the pros and cons of distance learning and give conclusions and directions based on the research.

Hopefully, the thesis will reflect on the current situation giving insight into how we can improve distance learning if this becomes the “new normal” in the future or, at least, how we can be always prepared for online learning when the next pandemic hits.

WHAT DISTANCE LEARNING IS AND ITS ORIGIN

There are different definitions of distance learning. According to the definition of distance learning given in Cambridge Dictionary (1995), it is a “a way of studying in which you do not attend a school, college, or university, but study from where you live, usually being taught and given work to do over the internet”. Similar definition comes from Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning (2011) saying: “Distance learning is an outcome of distance education. Where learners and teachers are separated by geographical and/or temporal distance, a form of mediated learning can be achieved using a combination of technologies”.

Distance learning, also referred to as “distance education” and sometimes simply as “online learning” or “distributed learning,” is a term used to describe the practice of learning at a distance (Oxford Bibliographies, 2010). According to this definition, the term dates back to 1880’s when pupils would exchange student work by mail to their teacher. Now the only difference is that the technology has improved, making distance learning much more practical and easier. However, although this is so, according to this definition, online learning continues to evolve.

In Britannica (15th edition, 2010), the definition is that “Distance learning, also called distance education, e-learning, and online learning, is a form of education in which the main elements include physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication”.

In the same source, Britannica, they explain that distance learning is not as new as one would imagine it to be. Distance learning was first seen in the 19th century in correspondence schools: these

schools were established for an educated trade and working class brought on by industrial and urban development. They worked on improving printing and postal services. These same schools first showed up in Germany, Britain and the US according to the article.

Mentioning the earliest schools, one would ask what the earliest technologies aid used in distance learning were. That would be the Linnebach lantern also called Linnebach projector, theatrical lighting device by which silhouettes, color, and broad outlines can be projected as part of the background scenery. These were mostly used in schools that required traveling and projecting pictures, according to this article from Britannica. Another early technology in distance learning was the phonograph. Phonograph, also called record player, is an instrument for reproducing sounds by means of the vibration of a stylus, or needle, following a groove on a rotating disc. After World War 1, these devices become more common in schools. Soon films appeared in classrooms. Film was no longer used just for technical or propaganda purposes, according to the article.

Another interesting article on the history and origins of distance learning from Florida National University stated that distance learning advanced as time went on and technological advances played a pivotal role in distance education. The introduction of the radio allowed universities to broadcast information and courses to students. According to an info graphic, in 1922, “Pennsylvania State College became the first college to broadcast courses across radio networks.” About a decade later, the University of Iowa followed suit, becoming the “first university to employ television as a learning tool”. Today, the University of South Africa is known as one of the world’s open distance learning mega colleges, as it became a champion and innovator of distance learning

since reshaping its mission in 1946. So, it can be seen that many universities used technological advances, such as the radio practice distance learning tool.

Other ways students practiced earliest forms of distance learning were learning from home and watching TV courses made by universities for them, according to the same article. Even though it could be hard to believe, students who studied by TV courses did get diplomas at the end. After the TV, the computer came and it completely revolutionized distance learning.

That is some brief information about what distance learning is and its early origins that may even surprise many people due to the fact that we mostly believe it is a new phenomenon.

TOOLS FOR DISTANCE LEARNING IN MACEDONIA, AND IN GENERAL

Seven types of distance learning are the main options for teaching online, according to View Sonic Library article on Distance learning⁴⁰.

Those types are: video conferencing, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, open-schedule, fixed-time, computer based and hybrid learning.

Video conferencing is a common way for teachers to interact directly with students in live lessons. This could be a one-on-one session or a class-like scenario in which multiple students connect to the teacher live. Synchronous learning is when all the students learn together at the same time (and often even place) but the instructor is at another location. It often features video or teleconferencing that connects teachers and learners digitally. Asynchronous learning is a less connected but also less constrained format. Instead of live online lessons, students are given learning tasks with

⁴⁰ <https://www.viewsonic.com/us/distance-learning>

deadlines. They then self-study to complete the assignments. Open-schedule online courses add yet another layer of flexibility. It is a type of asynchronous course setup, except there aren't any deadlines either. This is ideal for learners with other demands on their time, such as professionals or stay-at-home parents. Fixed-time online courses are a type of synchronous course that requires all online users to visit a specific virtual location at a set time and place (e.g. a webinar). Unlike more rigid synchronous lessons, this does allow students from anywhere in the world to connect and interact online. Computer-based distance education is a fixed-time, synchronous lesson on computers, usually in a computer lab. This is most common in existing institutions that already have access to the necessary devices. Hybrid learning is a specific type of blended learning where students are learning the same lesson in real-time (i.e. synchronous distance learning) but some of the students are physically present while others are learning remotely.

Tools for distance learning in Macedonia: the Ministry of Education and Science and other state institutions worked to provide distance learning mainly through the following platforms: E-classroom (direct on-line learning); TV classroom Educational programs broadcasted on the Macedonian Radio and Television channels, providing content for K12 students, and Eduino educational platform (www.eduino.mk).

CURRENT STRUCTURE FOR ON-LINE LEARNING

In 2009-2010, the computer equipment for elementary and high schools in Macedonia was attained, and it is mostly used for subjects such as IT. However, there are not enough computers to implement distance learning, while the internet they use is provided by the Ministry for Education.

Current experiences using distance learning in middle and high school until now show that distance learning comes down to individual teachers who use the platform for realization of this kind of learning. The health crisis with Covid19 caused a lot of schools, for a very short period of time, to go from learning at school to distance learning starting from March 2020. Besides the primary and high schools, higher educational institutions used the advantages of distance learning, too.

The experience shows that the following internet portals have been used until now:

Eduino is an internet portal, created by the Ministry of Education that provides digital services, as support for the educational process in the country. The main parts of the portal are: 1) system e-education used with video educational lessons, 2) system for early learning and early development. The part with "e-education" consists of: e-classroom, e-schedule and e-tests.

E-classroom is video classes made by the teachers and it covers: 1) setting up technical criteria for making video lectures and infrastructure for their storage, 2) good technical training and support to the teachers, 3) system for control and verification of materials that have arrived.

E-schedule is a system that enables digital schedule of the lectures, sharing the schedule with the students, and accomplishing the lectures through integrated teleconferences tool.

E-tests are a system for additional information students might need in their studies.

EDMODO is a free educational platform created to connect the students, teachers, and parents. It enables making groups, sharing educational documents,

following the work of students or certain groups, communication with other teachers, parents, saving (storing in archive) the complete student work in one place, and so on.

Learning Management System – LMS, is a platform for managing learning that is used from Ministry of Information Society for classes. In short, LMS is like one's own online university. The system allows storing and creating eLearning courses, provides learners access to the content, and helps evaluate the results.

EPISTUM, on the other hand, is a web-based platform designed to provide educators, administrators and students with a unique, robust, secure and integrated system for creating personalized learning environments. The same enables easy uploading and sharing of materials, and includes online discussions and talks, quizzes, checking tasks and grading them.

And the following digital contents:

E-schoolbooks: This portal <https://www.e-ucebnici.mon.gov.mk> represents a digital library for keeping and searching for electronic books, mostly for children in middle and high school but also for teachers and parents. The aim of the portal is for students to be able to download their materials and to study the material. They are mostly in PDF format. Although the idea of this portal is to download schoolbooks, there should be an upgrade to the e-books too. New e-books should be introduced, such as audio books, interactive books, and so on.

Video lectures: The Bureau for Development of Education through the Eduino portal, in the period from March to June 2020, established a system for creating and cataloging video lectures according to teaching contents and their verification and quality control. The video lectures are made in five different languages.

HUMAN RESOURCES

If we want to ensure effective teaching, human resources are a must. In this process, there are: around 18 272 teachers who are included in the primary education, around 7 476 teachers included in the high-school education, and around 1 000 teachers holding classes in IT for primary and high school students. Additionally, approximately 100 administrators employed in the Ministry of Information Society and Administration. These are distributed regionally throughout the country, who have the task to support schools in their smooth functioning of both the Internet and equipment, and other assistance that might be needed, such as teachers, staff, and material and so on.

In the world, there are three different ways to distance learning according to the way the technologies can be used, tools and the process in education:

Implementing technology – the technology for teaching is implemented in the typical traditional class. This approach should be used in the regular teaching where students and teachers will use the technology for better attaining the aims of learning.

Combined approach – parts of the class are still in a traditional classroom and part of the education is done by tools for distance learning. The combined approach can be used in regular education, where certain tools and materials are available 24/7, as well as the fact that physical attendance of students is not a must.

Total conversion – traditional classical education and training are completely switched to one or more formats of distance education. The total conversion is an approach used in situations like this in which we find ourselves where the physical presence of the students is not

possible and the teaching takes place completely online.

To summarize, the pillars of distance learning are the following:

Technological infrastructure (platform for distance learning, digital contents and organizational preconditions. (E.g.: the *hardware device* has to have enough capacity to support the national platform for learning without any problems. *Internet-access* is one of the main preconditions for distance learning to function. It must be taken into consideration that a *personal device* is needed for each student in order to follow classes, read and write homework,

Human resources, meaning teachers and their training for distance learning,

The design of the teaching system refers to the appearance of educational contents (on E-classroom, Eduino, public education on television and so on), and

Pedagogical and social aspect of distance learning (the relationship between teachers and pupils during the learning process and afterwards, as well as the relationship between pupils and their surroundings).

LITERATURE REVIEW

TECHNOLOGICAL PILLAR AND HUMAN RESOURCES: THE PROBLEM OF INEQUALITY

It is impossible to organize distance learning without modern technology, meaning computers with hardware which has enough capacity to support platforms for distance learning and all that to be without any problems. Internet access is also one of the main preconditions for functioning of distance learning. It must be taken into consideration that a *personal device* is needed for each student in order to follow classes, read and write home work.

Previous research in Macedonia as well as statements from our interviews with experts, teachers, students and parents confirm that not all students have easy and efficient access to on-line learning tools. For example, many Roma children use mobile telephones instead of computers and the quality and performance of their distance learning is quite low, which raises the question of inequality. UNICEF has more of these findings on inequality between children, on its report on their web page. According to Henrietta Four, UNICEF Executive Director:

“For at least 463 million children whose schools were closed due to COVID-19, there was no distance learning. The huge number of children whose education has been completely disrupted for months is a global alarm in education. The repercussions can be felt in economies and societies for decades to come”.

The findings of the “Metamorphosis Foundation” research confirm the same:

“The main problem that arises before the start of the new school year 2020/21, viewed from a purely technological point of view, is the situation with the technical aids, especially laptops and computers, necessary for the maintenance of the obligatory online teaching. According to the data from our research, almost half of the participants (44.5%, n = 337) reported that they use their own laptop at school for business purposes. The teaching staff, in most cases (84.9%), use private email addresses for business communication. This is problematic from several aspects, especially from the aspect of protection of personal data of students, who are minors during primary education. In addition, almost one third of the teaching staff (31.6%) stated that they have internet at school only on their mobile phone. Unfortunately, there are locations where schools do not offer any internet access, which calls into question the whole process of conducting

online teaching for these students. The results also show that many teachers in the online teaching process faced challenges of administrative nature, such as lack of clear guidelines for managing an electronic portfolio (82.4%) and, in particular, clear guidelines for the process of assessment (85%). In many families with more children of school age, the problem was the “sharing” of technical aids (laptop, computer), the situation usually required only one of the students to be able to attend live classes. In addition, it often happened that the parents themselves attended the classes and / or conducted them at home with their children, i.e. had the role of “substitute teachers”. Due to the inability of these families to procure new aids for online teaching, they were often in a position to choose who would attend (and maintain) online teaching within families. Although most of the respondents agree that various trainings, focused on specific software and tools used in the online teaching process, would be of great benefit to them, still, almost all participants in the research (97.1%) emphasized that for a successful online teaching continuous technical support is required from teachers”.

The main findings of the Concept for development of a distance education system in primary and secondary schools in the Republic of Northern Macedonia, made by the Ministry of Education and Science are:

“To develop into “21st century teachers”, they need to be fully supported in the acquisition of competencies (both pedagogical and IT). First of all, it is necessary to provide basic conditions and technical means for performing quality distance learning (computer, internet connection). Then, it is necessary to train teachers to use the equipment, use the national platform, as well as offer them training to create content, remote monitoring and evaluation, etc. The technical

support of the teachers should be provided by the school (by appointing a person for technical support of the teachers), by the local community (by providing equipment, internet connection), by the Ministry / Bureau for Development of Education / the Center for Vocational Education and Training (by providing appropriate training)”.

THE DESIGN OF THE TEACHING SYSTEM AND THE APPEARANCE OF EDUCATIONAL CONTENTS

In the research “Teaching at the Blaže Koneski Faculty of Philology during a pandemic”, (2017), Elena Oncevska and Ruska Ivanovska Naskova came to the conclusion that the design of the teaching system on distance for students is quite satisfactory.

“Our preliminary findings suggest that the pandemic did not affect students’ attendance significantly. Lecturers were able to teach their syllabi and the online tools they used in their teaching (video conferencing platforms and email) were generally in line with the students’ expectations. Opinions of both students and lecturers were divided with regard to whether the use of social networks is justified for teaching purposes. Furthermore, the use of one-way email communication as a format of teaching did not get much support due to the understanding that learning necessitates interaction. When prompted to compare the efficiency of online teaching with face-to-face teaching, the students seemed to be more critical than the lecturers, which was not in line with the lecturers’ expectations. Reflecting on what constitutes good and poor quality online teaching, the students offered a range of ideas, which suggests sophisticated understandings and clear expectations of online teaching. Moreover, it transpired that lecturers’ and students’ physical and mental health alike were affected by the pandemic. Looking back on their teaching/learning

experiences during the pandemic, the respondents offered suggestions for improving online teaching, as well as teaching in general”.

Of course, there is a difference between students of English Language and the students from elementary and high schools. Students from elementary and high schools were oriented to use e-classroom where they have lectures with teachers or to use Eduino where the lectures of English language, for example, are recorded. The statements of teachers and pupils differ. The interviewed teachers were satisfied with the design of teaching tools for distance learning although of larger scope of engagement. In contrary, students and their parents expected more interaction and engagement by of the teachers. Many pupils need support from their parents or other adult people which is very difficult to achieve, because the parents usually work.

2.3. PEDAGOGICAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

In their paper “Pedagogical Aspects of Teaching, Learning, Assessing the Reading-Writing Elements for Primary School” published in the Semantic Scholar journal. Olga Chiş and Claudia Doina Greb (2016), stress that:

“The main feature of the educational process lies in its complexity, variability and diversity of its related set of correlations that exists between objective and subjective factors involved: the individual characteristics of learners, their intellectual level and their potential, personality and skills of teachers, the teaching strategies they use, the educational background, etc. Introduced in big rush, due to the pandemic situation, distance learning in our schools, narrowed, at least at the beginning, this complexity of the learning-teaching process. The main concern of all involved in the process was the de-

sign and technological aspects. How this process influences and is influenced by the social and psychological development of learners is left for better times?

Similar opinion has the researcher and professor Natalija Shikova. In her research on distance teaching she says:

“The transition from classroom teaching to e-learning is not a simple undertaking at all, because in addition to adequate technical infrastructure and a certain level of knowledge of digital skills, the implementation of the learning process requires great support from the family. This situation created extreme stress not only for the teachers, who were pushed into a new unexpected task, but also for the students because they had to replace the daily school activities and the way of socializing with teaching assignments obtained electronically. Of course, many parents have come under tremendous pressure in trying to help their children adjust to the rapid changes as quickly and painlessly as possible.”

REMOTE ESL TEACHING AND LEARNING

The previous types of research we mentioned above inspire the author to pursue her own research to collect primary data through interviews. She conducted interviews with ESL teachers in primary and secondary schools; with students in secondary schools, with parents of students in primary schools and educational experts. The questionnaire is included in this paper, Appendix A(10 interviews and 10 respondents)

Everything that has been said so far about distance learning, in general and in our school system, refers in full to the learning of English language.

The world experience is shown through what Emily Frances, an ESL teacher at Concord High School, said for the newspaper “Education of North Carolina (EdNC)”:

“It’s like I’m talking to myself, and it’s so different. Language is acquired through interaction.” She added that “from a language development perspective and even from a brain development perspective, we know that language development is a social construct, and kids need to sit with each other and have lots and lots of peer interaction.”

Amaya Garcia, deputy director for “English learner education”, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington said for “US News Today”: “You need to be able to hear it. You need to speak it back. That speaking and listening part is being left out of the equation. It’s almost like the screen makes the students feel more anonymous and isolated. In a live classroom they’d be expected to speak English.

OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESIS

In answer to the previous methodological questions, we focused on a specific objective in order to achieve the goals. **The objective of this research is English as a second language (ESL) distance learning during COVID-19. The accent will be on the school system in Macedonia.** The set of goals includes answers to the following questions:

What is the justification of introducing distance learning during the Covid19 pandemic?

What was the previous experience in our country concerning distance learning?

What is the impact of distance learning on the traditional way of learning after the pandemic?

What are the overall experiences regarding distance-learning?

To achieve the set of goals and answer the research questions, working definition of distance learning is needed. As such a definition, we will use the concept of distance learning given by the Minis-

try of Education in its “Concept for developing distance education systems in primary and secondary schools in the Republic of Northern Macedonia”, where it is said: Distance education or distance learning is an area of education that focuses on pedagogy, technology and the design of teaching systems that effectively provide education to students who are not physically “in the same place” in the process of acquiring their education. Instead, teachers and students communicate asynchronously (at a time of their choice) by exchanging printed or electronic learning materials / resources, or through technology that allows them to communicate in real time (synchronously).

To achieve these goals, this research starts with its descriptive hypothesis:

As a relatively new concept in our country, intensively introduced during the Covid19 pandemic in 2020, distance learning demonstrated its justification and obstacles in three main aspects: technology, the design of the teaching system, and its pedagogical and social aspects.

Operationalization of the hypothesis will include indicators of all three main pillars/aspects:

- **Technology** (data and statements of teachers, pupils, officials from the Ministry of Education, IT specialists) and human resources (teachers and their training),
- **The design of the teaching system** (data and statements of the teachers, pupils, officials from the Ministry of Education, other experts in the field of education),
- **Pedagogical and social aspects** (data and statements of the teachers, pupils, officials from the Ministry of Education, other experts in the field of education).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The most important part in the process of preparing this paper was to choose a topic that will be relevant and will contribute to the field of linguistics. From a methodological point of view, the chosen topic should keep the interest of the public and at the same time there should be enough sources of conceptual and empirical nature that can be used. We tried to make the topic broad enough to have social significance, while focusing on specific problem-related distance learning during the Covid19 pandemic in order to gain deeper insights. The advice of the authors of “Sociological projects” (Barrat & Cole, 1991, p.18) guided us in answering the following questions: is there any available literature on the topic; are there institutions that could be sources of data and could we return to them, are there similar researches that could be helpful in preparing this specialist thesis; are there aspects of my personal experience that are relevant here? The answer to all these methodological questions was positive. We especially emphasized the benefits of personal involvement. During the pandemic, when schools were closed by government decision and teaching took place remotely (from home), the author worked as an English teacher at NOVA International Primary School. The group she worked with were 7-year-old pupils from different cultural backgrounds who attended English classes online. This personal involvement was a strong motivation for her to choose distance learning as the topic of this specialist work. She thought that this experience, as well as the contacts with other teachers, could be used to formulate more general knowledge about the topic. In doing so, she will try not to let the emotional aspects of this involvement have a decisive impact on the research results.

The research in this thesis was conducted by sending a questionnaire to parents

from the school ‘Goce Delcev’. The data was collected in Google forms and was sent to 20 parents from the school who were asked to give their opinion on distance learning. From 20 participants only 10 answered. Some of the questions were descriptive, other were ‘yes’ and ‘no’ questions. Further, an interview was done with: teachers, professors, students and experts etc. After we go through the general definitions of research methods, the findings of this thesis will be presented below.

Research methods are techniques used for collecting data (Gosling & Taylor, 2005, p. 56). What is important to stress here is the distinction between primary and secondary data.

Primary data is information that researchers collect for themselves by, for example, interviewing people or observing them. **Secondary data** is information that is already in existence before the research starts. For example, a researcher may make use of government statistics, content of newspapers magazines or TV programs as well as other researches. (Gosling & Taylor, 2005, p. 56)

We will use both research methods.

Our primary data will be collected from: ESL teachers, students, parents and educational experts. More concretely, by:

- interviewing primary school teachers of ESL (2)
- interviewing high school’s teachers of ESL (2)
- interviewing University professors from the Department of English Language (2)
- interviewing educational experts from the Ministry of Education or non-governmental organizations (1)
- interviewing high school students (3)
- -interviewing parents of elementary school students (10)

Secondary data will be collected through:

- materials from the Ministry of Education,
- other already existing researches, reports and news,
- on-line sources.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The results presented in this section are from secondary data, mainly already existing researches who will lead to our own research and discussion

In our own research we used two methods: **survey and interview.**

Survey: Our primary data was collected in Google forms and was sent to 20 parents from the school who were asked to give their opinion on distance learning. From 20 participants only 10 answered. Some of the questions were descriptive, other were 'yes' and 'no' questions. The discussion in this section is based on survey and interviews conducted during our research. Although a relatively small number of parents in our survey answered the questionnaire, the results presented in the 'pies' below, provide an opportunity for discussion. Parents generally think that the school system was not ready for this kind of learning. This probably refers to the equipment of the schools with computers, internet and trained teachers for on-line teaching, because when asked if they are satisfied with the tools, such as e-classroom, most of the parents answered that they are satisfied. Most of them are also satisfied with the Edmodo platform, but it should be stress that some parents noticed certain omissions, such as non-literary speech by teachers, etc. Most parents (70%) are satisfied with learning English at a distance, but suggest using more diverse sources of knowledge and materials from world-renowned educational centers. Parents,

however, believe, albeit in smaller numbers, that children have not learned English better, using only the distance learning method, which raises the question of combined methods in learning English. It will be interesting and useful to cite, what the parents answered to the question: *What are the advantages of distance learning, specifically English language learning?* Here are the answers:

"I don't think there are advantages"

"It's better in the classroom"

- "It depends on the teacher and how he/she will organize the lecture"
- "Except for staying close to measure against spreading Covid, I see no other advantages"
- "Maybe easier accessible materials from internet"
- "Flexibility, for classes to be followed from home while we are physically unable or on a trip"
- "We have a wonderful teacher"
- "If distance learning is applied well, the advantages can mean the children would gain more time for direct communication with the teacher, and more concentration with completing their own tasks"
- "There can be links shared in English langue that are very helpful for classes"
- "More independent work"

The following question was: *What are the challenges for distance learning, especially in English?* We received interesting answers for pro and against distance learning

- "No time for the teacher to dedicate herself/himself to each student separately"
- "Keeping focus for a longer period of time without the distraction of the surrounding"
- "Easier communication with the group of smaller children can be achieved. Easier discipline because

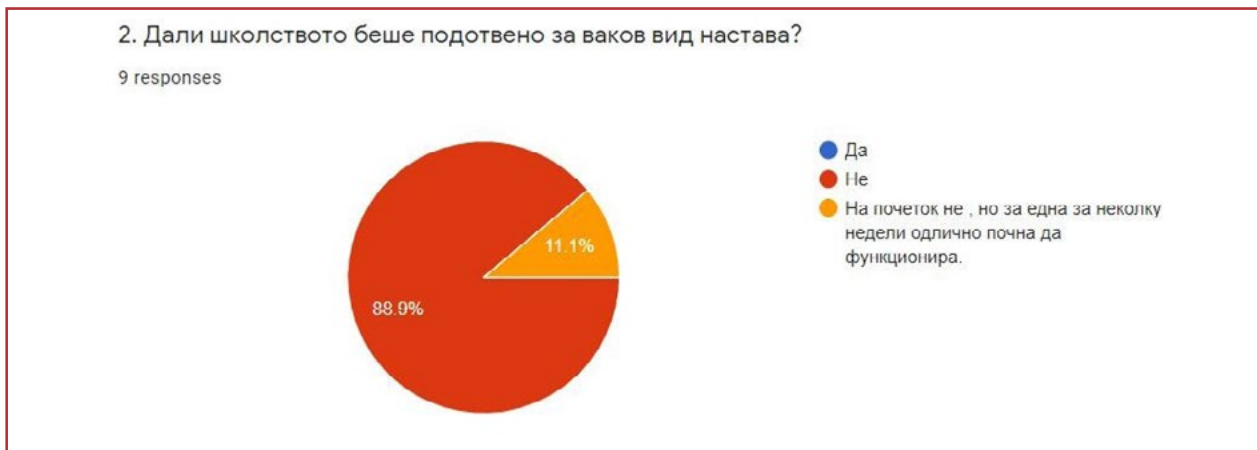
there is always on parent next to the student”

- “It is okay”
- “Equally allowing kids to participate during the class, no opportunity to check the homework’s that were done”
- “A challenge is (as all other subjects) the training and capability of the

teachers to use the technology (some of the teachers cannot use Teams and other internet platforms well)”

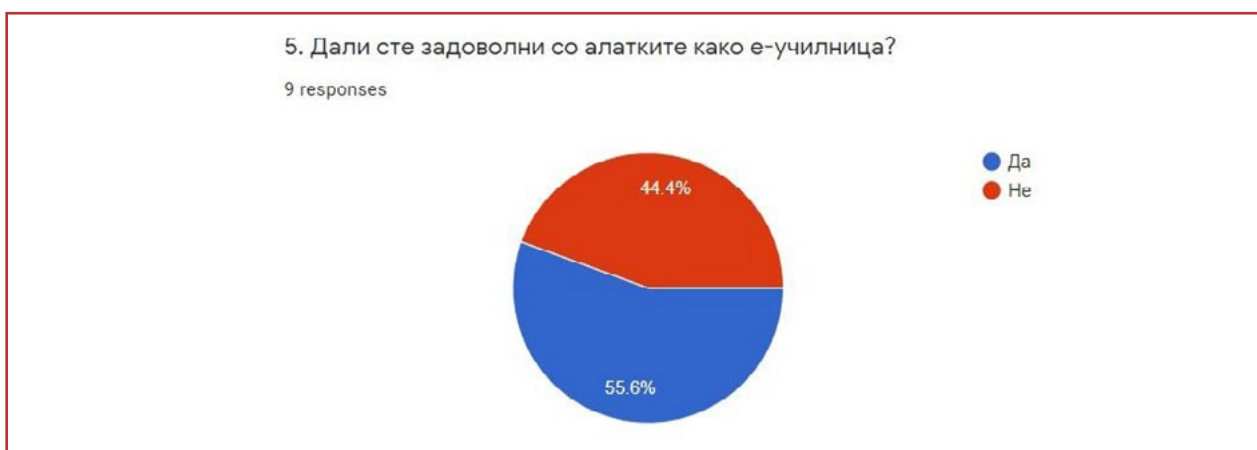
Findings from the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ questions, was possible to present in ‘pie charts’:

Question 2: Was our school system prepared enough for this kind of learning?



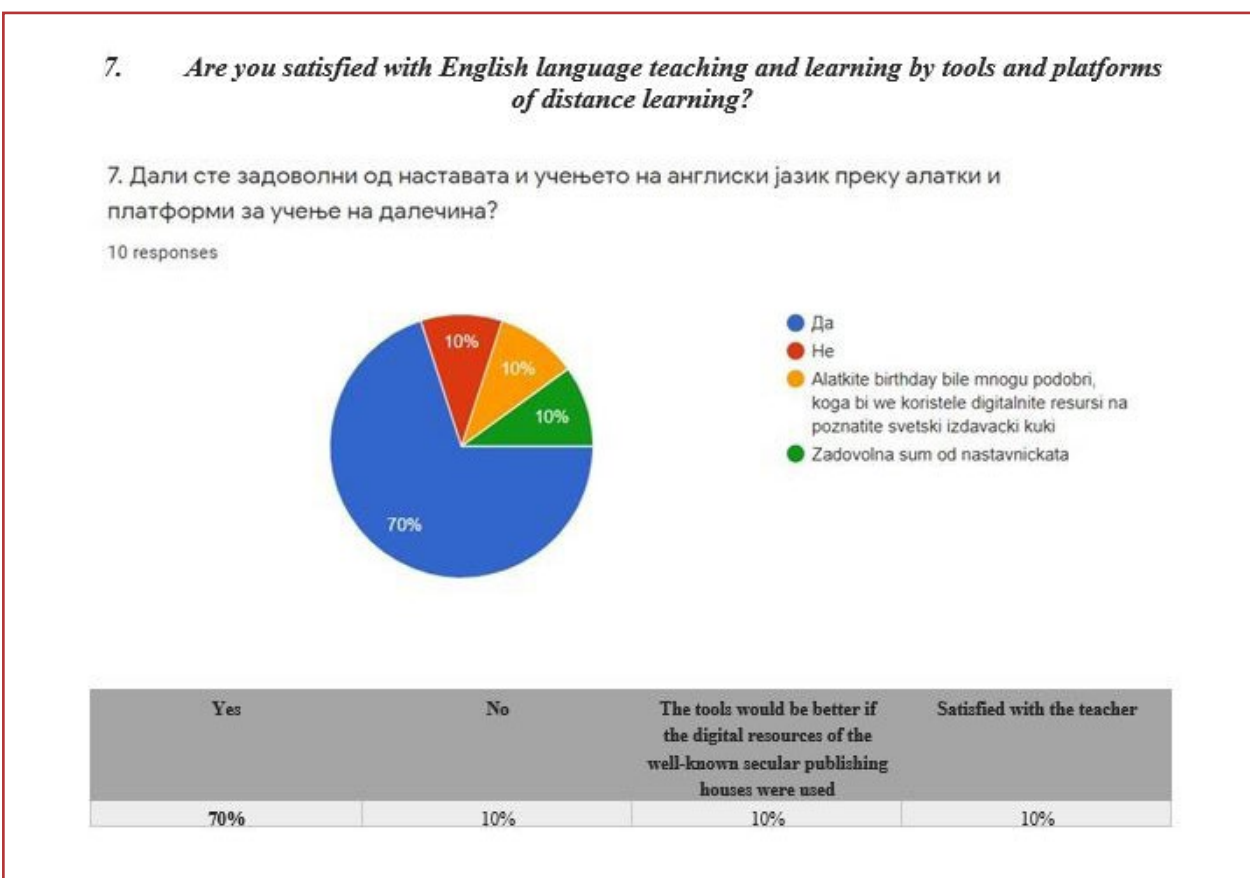
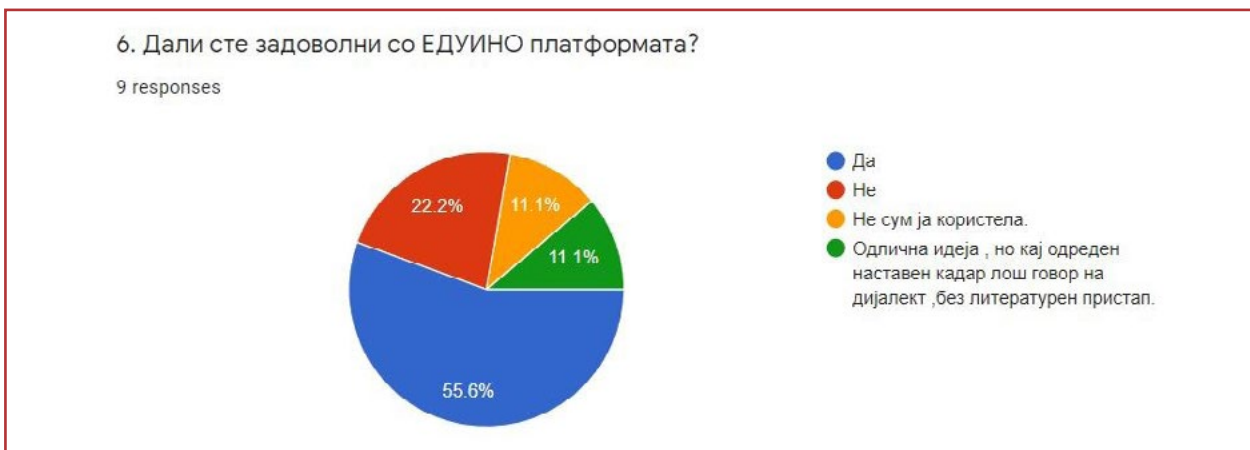
YES	NO	At the beginning no, however after a few weeks it started functioning
/	89.9%	11.1%

Question 5: Are you satisfied with tools like e-classroom?

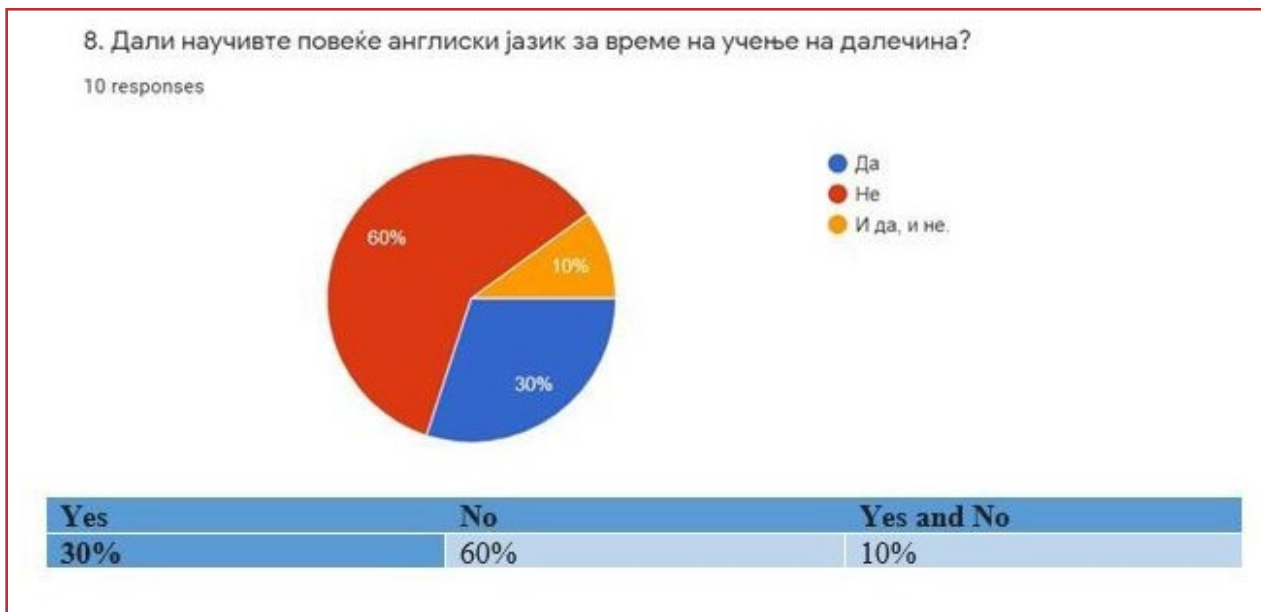


Yes	No
55.6%	44.4%

Question 6: Are you satisfied with Eduino platform?



Question 8: Did you learn more English through distance learning?



Interviews: From the interviews (10) that we conducted, it is quite obvious that the school system in our country was not fully equipped with computers and easy, cheap and efficient internet access. The space of learning is also problematic. For example, a Roma woman from the municipality Shuto Orizari told us that her and other poor families, during the winter hit only one room. It happens that three or more children should learn online in the same room at the same time which is very difficult. She said also that the internet is expensive for them, while some family have not it at all. The children go outside to find place where they can access internet. Her family as well as many in her municipality have only cheap mobile phone and the children use them for on-line classes.

In her interview, the professor of English Language and Literature at the University Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje, says: “Interaction between students can help facilitate skills like problem solving, not to mention the fact that students are more willing to try speaking in a second language if they are doing so with other students focused on the same task. These

are things that just can’t be replicated online.

She adds that sitting in front of a computer for a long time is tiring, the concentration drops and can compromise the whole process. Also, checking the knowledge if it is reduced to only oral answering at a distance, does not give objective results. In short, we struggle in many ways to maintain the continuity and quality of teaching, but we cannot wait to return to the usual way of education - in a real classroom. Using all digital tools is useful for learning English and they should continue to be used as a supplement to the curriculum.

The interviewed parents stress that primary school students need help during on-line classes and that they are not able to help them, especially in the case with ESL. They go to work or have no knowledge of English. Especially parents from the Roma community can’t help children to achieve better knowledge of English and, they said, the children’s knowledge is poor. First graders have English lessons on line only once a week due to the school program where the accent is

put on mathematics. The interviewed students complain on the poor sound of Eduino when it comes to English lectures. They also complain that it is difficult to them to follow on line lectures all the time and not to have direct communication with other students and the teacher. It is difficult to learn English if you can't practice it with others, they said.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, distance learning wasn't something the schools and their staff expected or saw coming. Due to the pandemic, everyone had to react in the best possible way they could. As from the findings above, we can see even the best schools were not adequately prepared. There was not enough time for schools to make a new agenda for distance learning, not enough technological equipment, teachers were trying their best with the equipment they had and pupils were trying their best to adapt. This is not the first time in history distance learning has been used. From our finding we can see that there were early attempts for online learning around the world when students could not take part in person. The only difference is that this was done on a global scale.

However, thanks to modern technology and some historical experience, education didn't suffer much during Covid-19 pandemic. Educational institutions quickly reacted and prepared platform for distance learning, although, at the bottom line, the society faces the issue of rising inequality.

Distance learning was a great experience for all: teachers, pupils and institutions. Adaptation to a kind of self-discipline was needed.

Visual contents in the core of distance learning can be very attractive and

interesting and such visualization develop creativity and fantasy of pupils.

The obstacles of distance learning are: 1. Lack of technical equipment for all students 2. Lack of sufficient technical equipment, education of teachers and students and lack of clear protocols for assessment of pupils. First graders cannot study remotely on their own. On the other side, not every parent can play the role of substitute-teachers. 4. Absence of the social moment (socializing and playing, which is important part of the mental development of children).

ESL especially lean on direct communication between students and teachers, because speaking English is the best way to learn it.

All in all, schools did manage to adapt to this new way of teaching but parents played a major role in it. Thanks to the global percentage of parents having internet and laptops at home students were able to learn online. As for the children in poverty, most of them missed classes and even though donations were made from the parents to several students who remain anonymous in this paper, that study in Goce Delcev, it is not enough for future generations. So, in distance learning we all play a role. The schools, teachers, internet, parents, and pupils and the local governments. If we fail to manage as a whole, then distance learning is not adequate enough and available to all. Much more needs to be done and it should also have been done with love. This might not be appropriate to be included in a paper of this sort, but during a pandemic where people have died and are dying, not much of this fear and overcoming it by talking and understanding was done by the teachers. It was avoided and this is not good for children's mental health. Education without love and compassion, done by internet or in the classroom, in no education at all.

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APPENDIX A-QUESTIONNAIRE

Here we present the questions and answers:

1. *What do you think about distance learning?*
2. *Was our school system prepared enough for this kind of learning?*
3. *What do you think about technological aspects of distance learning?*
4. *What do you think of pedagogical and social aspect of distance learning?*
5. *Are you satisfied with tools like e-classroom?*
6. *Are you satisfied with Eduino platform?*
7. *Are you satisfied with English language teaching and learning by tools and platforms of distance learning?*
8. *Did you learn more English through distance learning?*
9. *What are the advantages of distance learning, specifically English language learning?*
10. *What are the challenges for distance learning, especially in English?*

ANSWERS:

1. *What do you think about distance learning?*
 - “Its needed as a concept, so that it can be available to all, however, in our country it is not conducted in a proper manner”.
 - “An option that should remain in the future to provide classes for students, who for whatever reason, can not come to class physically”.
 - “Due to the situation, its fine”
 - “Excellent solution”
 - “It works, in certain situations”
 - “Bad start due to the internet quali-

ty in the school, although there was a period of time when the internet was functioning and the classes were with satisfactory quality”. The teachers try and manage to pass on the knowledge that is learnt in school”.

- “In these circumstances its okay, but it must not become a practice”,
 - “Excellent choice as a second option during a pandemic”.
2. *Was our school system prepared enough for this kind of learning?*

YES	NO	At the beginning no, however after a few weeks it started functioning
/	89.9%	11.1%

3. *What do you think about technological aspects of distance learning?*
 - “Before it is implemented, there are certain technical criteria’s that should be adopted at least a year in advance, and to provide computers for the vulnerable categories”
 - “They help and improve the user by mastering the tools that are used”
 - “Students get tired easily, ie. the eyes suffer more, but the hours are shortened again (to 30 minutes)”
 - “They are fine”
 - “It is necessary to work on the quality of the internet connection and the equipment of the school and the mentors”
 - “Money is needed for everything and with so much personal investment, distance learning proved the title “free education” for all is not true”
 - “The platform provides excellent possibilities”
 - “The schools not being prepared meant: no safe and stable internet connection, no computers with

camera for the staff, no research with the staff as to whether they need training or not. It seems the parents and children seemed more prepared for distance learning than the schools themselves, although it was very apparent that with the pandemic, distance learning was needed”.

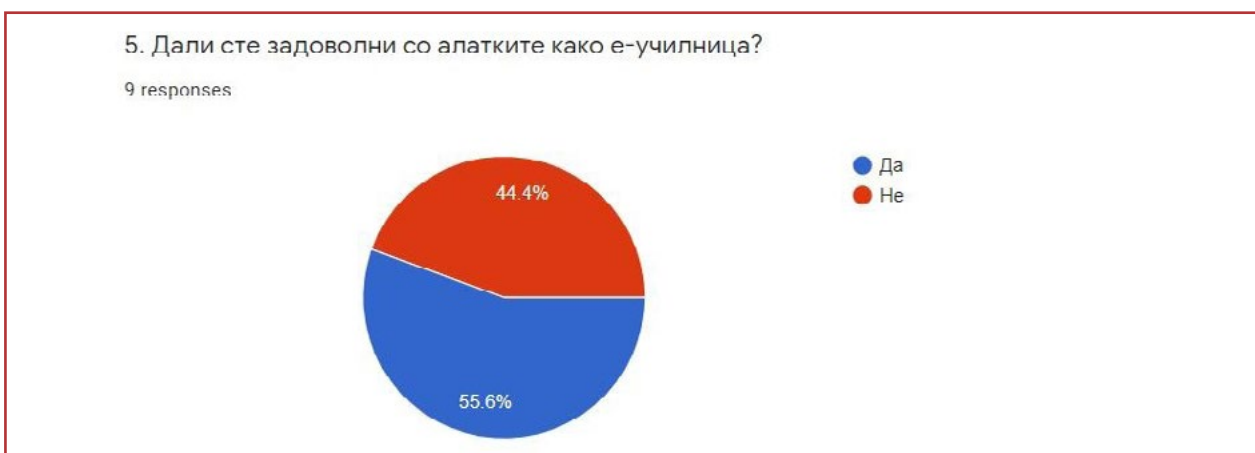
4. What do you think of pedagogical and social aspect of distance learning?

- “The way it seems, and the way it is conducted in our schools, is an improvisation. The social aspect is neglected”
- “Concerning the pedagogical approach, I believe there is no difference in online or psychical leaning. What matters is the commitment, will of the teacher. For the social aspect, of course the physical presence is of great advantage especially if they do group work”
- “Its fine”
- “I can say the effect is excellent, there is even friendship and exchange of information, even discussion be-

tween the teachers and students. The only moment when a crisis was felt, was when they would see some of the students are in class (those who attended), and wanted to be there”.

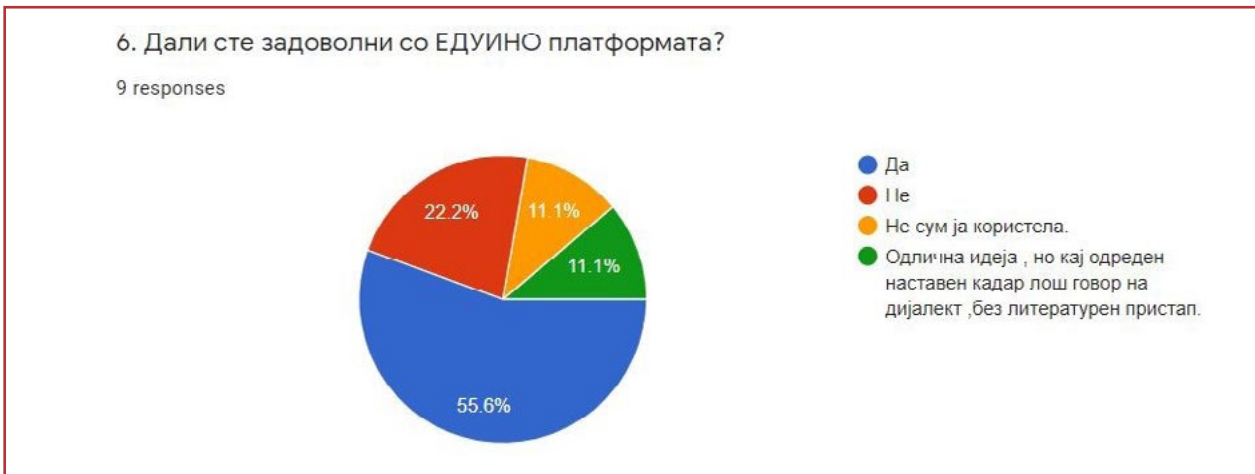
- “It is a serious problem”
- “The teacher gives her best to make sure that all children are questioned, participate in class, however it is not the same as going to school”
- “There is no codex of behavior, and the control of the teachers over the children is decreased. Being friends online is anti-social on its own. From a pedagogical point of view two things are neglected. One, the social aspect of teaching children step by step not to be shy and the second aspect, to get more use to virtual learning. The two aspects are neglected by the teacher and the focus is just on exchanging facts and information in the shortest time frame possible. At moments it seems the focus is on informing the teachers’ materials in order for the parents to know what to work on with the kids at home”

5. Are you satisfied with tools like e-classroom?



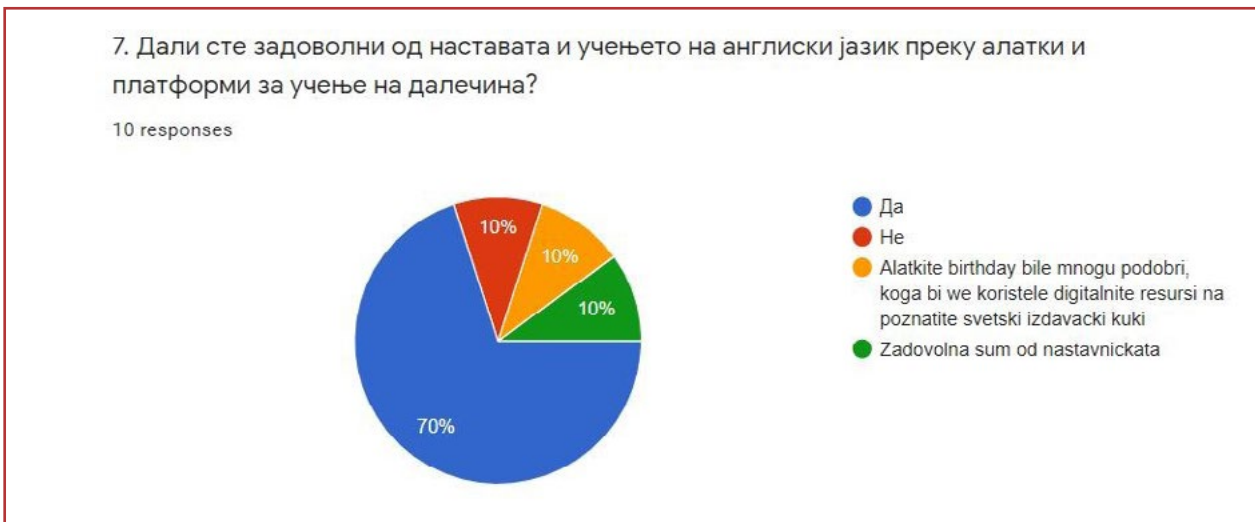
Yes	No
55.6%	44.4%

6. Are you satisfied with Eduino platform?



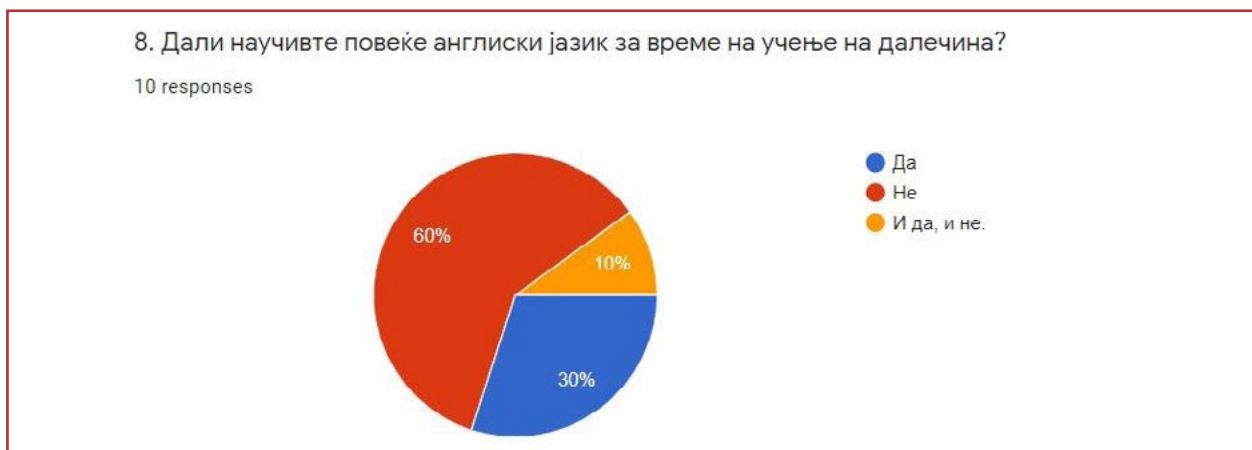
Yes	No	Have not used it	Excellent idea, but with certain teacher's bad dialect, without a literary approach
55.6%	22.2%	11.1%	11.1%

7. Are you satisfied with English language teaching and learning by tools and platforms of distance learning?



Yes	No	The tools would be better if the digital resources of the well-known secular publishing houses were used	Satisfied with the teacher
70%	10%	10%	10%

8. Did you learn more English through distance learning?



Yes	No	Yes and No
30%	60%	10%

APPENDIX B: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

1. Kalina Maleska, University professor of English Language
2. Natalija Shikova, University professor, Balkan University
3. Ena Sachmarovska, student, primery school
4. Andrej Gegaj, student, high school
5. Vaska Zulfi, parent, Shuto Orizari
6. Mila Karjakov parent, Centar, Skopje
7. Snezana Sholjakova, teacher, ESL
8. Sonja Arsovska, teacher, Goce Delcev
9. Despina Mukoska, teacher, Nova
10. Iskra Belceva, expert, CUP