

**EFFECTS OF DISTANCE LEARNING TOWARDS UNIVER-  
SITY STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE  
AND LANGUAGE LEARNING MOTIVATION**

Bachelor's thesis

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Tiivistelmä - Abstract <p>Vuoden 2020 keväällä alkaneen COVID-19 pandemian seurauksena koulut jouduttiin sulkemaan yhteiskunnan turvan takaamiseksi. Opetus siirtyi verkkototeutukseen, pakottaen oppilaat ja opiskelijat ympäri Suomen jatkamaan koulunkäyntiä kotoa käsin etäyhteyksien turvin. Ennalta-arvaamaton oppimisympäristön muuttuminen etätoteutukseksi oli merkittävä muutos, sillä ennen pandemian alkua kouluissa ja oppilaitoksissa opetus toteutettiin lähes poikkeuksetta lähiopetuksessa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli tutkia etäopetuksen vaikutuksia yliopistotasoisien englannin kielen pääaineopiskelijoiden oppimiseen, oppimismotivaatioon sekä suoritustasoon opiskelussa. Tutkimus pyrki kartoittamaan opiskelijoiden näkemyksiä ja kokemuksia vuoden 2020 keväällä pandemian vuoksi alkaneesta etäopetuksesta, sekä selvittämään miten etäopetus on vaikuttanut englannin kielen oppimiseen. Ydintavoitteina tutkimus pyrki selvittämään tekijöitä, jotka ovat vaikuttaneet opiskelijoiden oppimismotivaatioon ja opiskeluun, sekä sitä millaisiksi kielten etäopetuksessa käytetyt oppimistavat ja harjoitukset oli opiskelijoiden näkökulmasta koettu.</p> <p>Verkossa lähetettyyn kyselytutkimukseen osallistui yhteensä 41 englannin kieltä pääaineenaan lukevaa yliopisto-opiskelijaa. Tuloksista selvisi, että opiskelijoiden psyykinen hyvinvointi, oppimismotivaatio sekä produktiivisuus oli laskenut etäopetuksen myötä. Lisäksi sosiaalisten kontaktien puuttuminen koettiin merkittävänä negatiivisena seikkana opinnoissa. Toisaalta osa opiskelijoista oli hyötynyt sosiaalisten paineiden laskiessa etäopetuksen myötä. Opiskelun joustavuus koettiin positiivisena vaikkakin verkko-opetukseen oltiin osittain tyytymättömiä. Valtaosa kyselyyn vastanneista opiskelijoista oli etäopetuksesta huolimatta edennyt halutussa tahdissa englannin opinnoissaan. Tutkimustulokset luovat pohjaa laajemmalle jatkotutkimukselle kielten etäopiskelun vaikutuksista muun muassa yliopisto-opiskelijoiden tuntemuksiin, oppimiseen ja oppimissuorituksiin.</p>	
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION .....	4
2	THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	6
2.1	Defining distance learning and motivation .....	6
2.2	Learner autonomy and teaching methods in distance learning.....	7
2.3	Motivation and learning performance in distance learning context .....	8
3	THE PRESENT STUDY .....	11
3.1	Aim and research questions.....	11
3.2	Data collection.....	12
3.3	Methods of analysis .....	13
4	RESULTS.....	15
4.1	Distance learning and its effects on learning English.....	15
4.2	Factors affecting learning and learning motivation in distance learning..	16
4.2.1	Positive factors considering English language learning and studying during distance studying .....	17
4.2.2	Negative factors considering English language learning and studying during distance studying .....	19
4.3	Students' experiences of distance learning practices .....	21
4.3.1	Positive and effective learning practices and ways of learning.....	22
4.3.2	Poor and insufficient learning practices and ways of learning.....	24
5	DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .....	26
5.1	Discussion.....	26
5.2	Conclusion.....	28
	BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	31
	APPENDIX	

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of year 2020, a new respiratory virus entered populations around the world forcing people to work and study remotely from home to avoid the infection. As COVID-19 extended to Finland, all university level students had to quickly adapt into a new online studying environment to continue with their degrees. Due to this rapid and unexpected change of learning environment, both educators and students faced new learning and teaching conditions. As studying needed to be done remotely, language learning became a little different.

Perhaps one of the most talked topics regarding distance learning has revolved around the students' wellbeing; previous studies have shown that coping with the studies in a new learning environment has been undeniably challenging for many (Consilz 2020; Hazaymeh 2021; Stevanović, Božić, and Radović 2021). With this in mind, the present study focuses to survey the effects of distance language learning towards the students' learning motivation. Another interesting topic regarding distance learning is educators' contribution in a changed language learning environment, as implementing suitable and innovative methods have been shown to be crucial for effective distance learning (Consilz 2020). Thus, the present research studies how language students have perceived online teaching and the methods used in the distance teaching of English.

Studies with similar purposes have been previously conducted in different parts of the world, while the knowledge of the impact of distance learning in Finnish context seems to be lacking. Thus, this research was done with an intention to study

the effects of distance learning more closely particularly in a Finnish higher education context, from the viewpoint of university students. The effects of distance learning towards university students' learning are worth studying, as Finnish students in institutions of higher education were forced to study remotely through the whole pandemic, whereas pupils in comprehensive schools and upper secondary level carried on mostly face-to-face.

The purpose of this research is to establish new information of how Finnish university students have perceived distance language learning of English. The main aims are to study how distance learning has affected the students' learning motivation and performance as well as to examine of how the students have felt of language learning methods and exercises used in distance teaching and studying.

## **2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 Defining distance learning and motivation**

Distance learning is understood as an instructional approach in which the educator and learner are not physically together in the same context, in the case of the present study, school (Mehrotra, Hollister and McGahey 2001, Sadeghi 2019). Today, majority of distance learning takes place in internet, meaning that learners can take part for example from home. These digital learning environments allow learners efficient ways to communicate with other peers, as well as different ways to keep in touch with their educators (Sadeghi 2019). Moreover, distance learning can be explained as a factor that enables technological separation of learners and educators, still allowing them to meet and learn in real time (Valentine 2002).

Distance learning has been recognized to have many advantages, since it allows learners flexibility in many matters. Nagrale (2013) addresses time efficiency as one of the greatest advantages of distance learning, as learners have the freedom to choose their own schedules. Thus, time used for studying can be adjusted effectively according to one's individual resources. Another important matter raised in Nagrale's (2013) article is the ability to learn wherever at any time. This allows learners to for example explore international courses and easily access course materials from any part

of the world. Having access to learning materials from across the globe, as well as the possibility to manage an individual learning schedule, one's alternatives to choose courses flexibly greatly increases. Additionally, distance learning can be cost-efficient as learners do not have to spend money on commuting or expensive degree fees, as remotely offered online courses or degrees can be cheaper compared to those provided on campuses (Sadeghi 2019). They also note how those seeking for eco-friendly options might choose a distance learning program (Sadeghi 2019). Therefore, studying from home can be considered ecological for example as all learning materials are in electronic form.

Motivation has been recognized as one of the key factors influencing second and foreign language learning by having a significant role especially in accomplishing long-term goals and in ensuring achievement (Dörnyei 1998). Therefore, motivational aspect to the topic is included in the present study. While there is a great amount of literature on motivation, it is quite difficult to form a solid meaning for it as a multifaceted factor influencing second language learning. Gardner (1985) defines L2 motivation as the learner's extent to work and strive for language proficiency because of their inner desire to do so and for the satisfaction gained from the linguistical achievements. Quite similarly, Keller (1983) states: "motivation refers to the choices people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid, and the degree of effort they will exert in this respect."

## **2.2 Learner autonomy and teaching methods in distance learning**

With regards to distance learning, autonomy can be named as one of the most crucial factors of self-learning (Sadeghi 2019). Firat's (2016) study introduces learning autonomy as the capacity to take control of one's own learning as well as the ability to function independently in learning processes that are both self-directed and regulated. They conclude these definitions by expressing learner autonomy as "a learner's intervention in his or her own learning" (Firat 2016). Moreover, the role of autonomy in

learning needs to be addressed in distance learning setting as learners are responsible of their own development (Zimmerman 2002, cited in Sadeghi 2019).

As distance learning differs from in-class learning, the instructors need to consider and adopt different teaching techniques. A new set of skills is required in order to function as a manager of students' resources (Ali and Ahmad 2011), meaning that the teacher has to use such techniques and tools which enhance their students to individually widen their knowledge. In a distance learning environment, the teacher does not direct each learning session by being a primary source of information by providing knowledge, explanation and feedback as usual, but rather functions as a mediator between students and the materials (White 1995, Ali and Ahmad 2011). This forces students to utilize their skills of autonomy when accessing the materials individually to build themselves a vaster knowledge.

Moreover, online course designs need to be rich in communication meaning that the used practices should involve a lot of discussion, as the course discussions have been recognized as one of the most crucial features in distance learning and therefore learner satisfaction (Ali and Ahmad 2011). Walcott (1994, cited in Valentine 2002) describes how instructors need to address distance learning from student's viewpoint. They also noted the importance of developing a sense of community between students, as it is crucial in distance teaching to view learning as a collaborative process. Additionally, these collaborative learning processes have been recognized to provide students the access to deeper levels of knowledge for example through mutual goals and shared meaning making processes (Palloff and Pratt 2000, cited in Valentine 2002).

### **2.3 Motivation and learning performance in distance learning context**

In the beginning of year 2020 a worldwide pandemic emerged, forcing people work and learn under distance circumstances. Thus, schools were closed and classes moved into digital form i.e., distance courses taught via internet. This change in learning



environment undoubtedly caused both educators and students difficulties in many areas, especially with maintaining their level of motivation and learning performance. Consilz (2020) explains that learning motivation is believed to vary depending on the setting as community of inquiry, a concept aiming to build a solid social and teaching presence to stimulate learners' cognitive presence, has been shown to affect one's motivation. Furthermore, motivation is known to have a great impact into learning performance; learners' ability to achieve goals and complete tasks as well as to their improvement on critical thinking and problem-solving skills during the time (Consilz 2020). Moreover, Geng et al. (2020 cited in Consilz 2020) explain that students' learning motivation has been shown to be highly related to teaching activities and strategies used by their teacher.

Several of the previous studies with similar topic indicate that learners' motivation has decreased as a consequence of switching to remote learning environment (Consilz 2020, Hazaymeh 2021, Stevanović, Božić and Radović 2021). The results from Stevanović et al. (2021) study of undergraduate L2 English students' experiences towards distance learning reported that the students, especially those that had previously attended traditional learning, felt lack of motivation and focus because of the unexpected change in learning environment. Moreover, the lack of learning motivation was studied to affect negatively towards learners' concentration, as students were experiencing difficulties when working remotely (Consilz 2020, Stevanović et al. 2021)

Another prominent factor in many of the previous studies was students' dissatisfaction towards distance learning because of the lack of socialization. The lack of interaction and physical contacts as well as teacher's presence were highlighted as one of the main downfalls of distance learning in many of the studies, since these factors greatly influenced feelings of motivation and performance among the learners (Consilz 2020, Hazaymeh 2021, Stevanović et al. (2021).

Teachers' contribution in online learning environments has also been studied to influence greatly towards learners learning performance and motivation (Consilz 2020, Hazaymeh 2021). The results from previous studies indicated that learners' interest towards learning decreases due to technical difficulties, and because of the

lack of presence and timely feedback of the course instructor (Consilz 2020, Hazaymeh 2021). Still, the results from Hazaymeh's (2021) study of undergraduate EFL students' perceptions towards distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic expressed that online learning was perceived partially effective, as it had helped students to enhance their communication and collaborative skills. Moreover, the usage of technology was being appreciated, despite the sometimes-occurring technical issues, as students had learned to use appropriate digital platforms for more efficient learning processes (Hazaymeh 2021).

Additionally, Ali and Ahmad (2011) studied that instructor assistance and feedback, as well as the accessibility of the information are considered as factors determining students' satisfaction in online learning setting. Teng, Wang and Wu's (2021) study of university level English students in a distance learning setting produced similar findings, noting how educators should pay careful attention to their instructions and feedback in distance learning environment, since "self-efficacy belief is related to motivational constructs". Thus, well-encouraged students with high self-efficacy beliefs are more likely to be well-motivated and therefore succeed better in English language learning. Moreover, learners who were confident in their language skills were found to meet the requirements of remote learning better, since they were more efficient in evaluating and monitoring their studying (Teng et al. 2021).

As the end of the pandemic is yet to be seen and studying remotely seems to be the new norm, more similar studies are needed in order to gain knowledge to develop even more suitable, efficient and motivating language learning environments and exercises for English language learners across the globe.

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

#### **3.1 Aim and research questions**

The main aim of the present study is to examine the effects of distance learning towards English language learning. The focus is to investigate Finnish university students' language learning motivation and learning performance, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the present study aims to analyze the experiences of university students to understand how they have perceived the used language learning methods and exercises during distance studying. Furthermore, the present study analyses university students' views of how language learning methods used in distance learning have possibly affected their learning motivation and learning performance. To do this, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How has distance learning affected English language learning among Finnish university students?
2. Which factors in particular have affected these university students' learning motivation?
3. What kind of language learning methods have been used in the learning of English and how have these practices been perceived by the university students, during the distance learning period?

### 3.2 Data collection

To cover the research aims, I set out to explore how university students themselves *perceive and view* different aspects towards distance learning. The data was conducted through an online survey using Webropol. The question form for data collection was distributed via student union's email-list for students studying English language at the University of Jyväskylä. The questionnaire consisted of four open-ended questions and three sets of closed (numerical) questions which were presented on a Likert scale ranging from 1-5. Altogether 41 respondents answered the online questionnaire sent via email. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study in the same email with the questionnaire link. The instructions and ethical issues were further clarified in the beginning of the questionnaire form. The answers of individual participants cannot be recognized as no identifiable information was gathered. The anonymous questionnaire form was filled individually online and estimated to take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

Questionnaire survey as the data collection method for this research was chosen because of its suitable nature. As questionnaires can be used to examine for example actions, opinions and values of a restricted group of people or to collect information of different phenomena in society (Vehkalahti 2008: 11), they suit well for this research topic and study aims. Moreover, as this research includes quite a few aspects for analyzation, the most inclusive data analyzing method would be a questionnaire survey, as it allows to examine students' thoughts on a larger scale (Denscombe 2010: 156). Thus, more precise results can be gathered from a larger study sample. Additionally, a survey suits well for the present research as it enables to gather more varied data to examine through both closed and open-ended questions. Finally, an online survey suits for the present study well, as it is such data gathering method that will perhaps attract many to participate - without requiring too much time from those participating (Denscombe 2010: 159).

Regarding the present study, a survey with open-ended questions can offer detailed insights of how the effects caused by changed learning environment have been perceived by the students. Moreover, closed questions can offer numerical data of how distance learning has affected their motivation and learning performance as students evaluate themselves and their learning on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. Therefore, the data collected appears as multifaceted on its nature, offering versatile insights as participants are offered to motivate their answers.

### **3.3 Methods of analysis**

The majority of the data in the present study consisted of open-ended questions that offered qualitative data, making it a qualitative research. However, the present study contains features of quantitative research, as closed questions provide numerical data in the form of percentages.

The open-ended questions were analyzed by using categorization from qualitative content analysis as a method. The reason I chose content analysis for the questionnaire's open-ended questions was since it allows to measure "positive and negative views on things" (Denscombe 2010: 282). Therefore, the answers from the open-ended questions were analyzed in terms of frequencies of various factors occurring in the answers. Moreover, the relationships of different factors in the answers were studied.

Each of the four different open-ended questions in the questionnaire were analyzed individually with the help of categorization to compartmentalize the data in an explicit way. First, I identified and created different categories of the frequently mentioned factors for all open-ended answers. Often an answer from one participant was so thorough that it named more than one factor, meaning that one answer was sometimes able to produce data for several categories. When all answers were distributed to one or more categories, it was easy to analyze and highlight the most interesting and insightful answers to be included in the results. The findings from open-ended

questions are presented through analytic examples and direct quotes from the participants' answers.

Closed questions of the present study provided data on a five-point Likert scale. The data from closed questions is presented numerically in statistical tables including percentages of how many participants chose a certain answer to encapsulate the findings in a clear way. Based on the answers from closed questions, I was able to interpret and analyze the numerical data by drawing conclusions from the percentages of how the participants perceived and viewed the studied matters.

## 4 RESULTS

### 4.1 Distance learning and its effects on learning English

In the present study, the participants were asked whether they have experienced negative or positive effects towards their learning, considering distance language learning. Table 1 presents data gathered from question number 5., where participants answered to the following six statements on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. The most common answer based on participants answers has been highlighted for each question.

Table 1 Distance learning and its effect on learning English

	1 strongly disagree	2 somewhat disagree	3 neutral	4 somewhat agree	5 strongly agree
Distance learning has affected my learning positively	19.5 %	<b>34.1 %</b>	17.1 %	24.4 %	4.9 %
Distance learning has affected my learning negatively	7.3 %	14.6 %	14.6 %	<b>34.2 %</b>	29.3 %
I prefer distance teaching than contact teaching in English subject	29.3 %	<b>31.7 %</b>	17.1 %	14.6 %	7.3 %
Learning has been as easy remotely, compared to contact teaching	19.5 %	<b>29.3 %</b>	14.6 %	26.8 %	9.8 %
Teachers of English subject have been easily accessible, during the distance teaching	0 %	12.2 %	12.2 %	<b>48.8 %</b>	26.8 %

Teachers of English subject have been difficult to access, during the distance teaching	36.6 %	34.1 %	17.1 %	12.2 %	0 %
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The respondents' answers in the Table 1 above suggest that most of them were unpleased towards distance learning, as over one third fairly agreed, and another third of the study participants strongly agreed with distance learning having a negative influence on their learning. The same dissatisfied effect was also seen from the participants' answers regarding the division between remote and contact teaching, as 31.7% of the students fairly disagreed, and 29.3% strongly disagreed with preferring distance teaching over contact teaching in English subject.

The results divided on the fourth statement in Table 1, when respondents were asked to compare the easiness of distance teaching towards contact teaching. 29.3% of the participants fairly disagreed, whereas 26.8% thought the opposite, showing that they were fairly agreeing with this question statement. Still, almost a half of all the participants fairly agreed that the teachers of English subject have been easily accessible during the distance learning period.

## 4.2 Factors affecting learning and learning motivation in distance learning

Table 2 displays a set of six different closed questions regarding motivation during the distance learning and teaching, that are answered on a five-point Likert scale. The most common answers are again highlighted for clarity.

Table 2 Effects of distance learning towards learning motivation in the subject of English

	1 strongly disagree	2 somewhat disagree	3 neutral	4 somewhat agree	5 strongly agree
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Distance studying has had a positive effect to my learning motivation in English studies	<b>43.9%</b>	21.9%	19.5%	9.8%	4.9%
Distance studying has had a negative effect to my learning motivation in English studies	4.9%	7.3%	24.4%	24.4%	<b>39.0%</b>
My English studies have proceeded at a wanted pace during distance studies	9.7%	9.8%	4.9%	36.6%	<b>39.0%</b>
I have felt myself motivated in distance teaching of English	17.1%	29.3%	19.5%	<b>31.7%</b>	2.4%
Distance teaching of English, towards learning and studying, has been motivating and encouraging	7.3%	<b>31.7%</b>	<b>31.7%</b>	26.8%	2.5%
Lack of physical contacts has had a negative influence towards my motivation in the subject of English	4.9%	17.1%	9.7%	24.4%	<b>43.9%</b>

The first two statements of Table 2 show that the respondents have experienced distance learning and teaching as negative towards their motivation. Almost a half of all the respondents strongly disagreed with that the distance learning would have affected positively towards their learning motivation. Similarly, altogether three of every four participants of the study fairly or strongly agreed with that the distance learning has affected their motivation negatively. These answers indicate a clear characteristic for the present study, as a strong majority of the respondents express a decrease in their motivation with regards to distance learning. Although one third of the participants in Table 2 had felt themselves motivated during distance teaching, the opinions divided greatly on how motivating the teaching itself has been felt. Finally, many thought that the lack of physical contacts has affected their motivation in a negative way.

#### **4.2.1 Positive factors considering English language learning and studying during distance studying**

Frequently named positively affecting factors during the distance learning were the following: flexibility, teachers' contribution, decrease of social pressure(s), clear/versatile learning materials and social support. Moreover, three from 41 respondents said that there were no such factors that would have been experienced as positive with regards to distance teaching and learning.

Especially teachers' contribution to distance teaching was amongst the factors that became mentioned frequently, as many told that teachers have been encouraging and motivating despite the difficulties during the pandemic. Example 1 shows how the respondents' educators motivating attitude was addressed to benefit and promote meaningful language learning:

*Example 1: Joiden opettajien asenne on motivoinut; ovat ymmärtäväisiä sekä joustavia ja tekevät parhaansa että olisi mielekästä opiskelua kaikille*

*The attitude of some teachers has motivated; (they) are understanding and flexible and do their best so that there would be meaningful studying for all*

Additionally, many thought that their teachers and lecturers have done their best despite the difficult learning circumstances. Given this difficult situation and fast change in learning environment, many of the participants praised their teachers for their adaptability and flexibility, as Example 2 below expresses:

*Example 2: Huomioiden tilanteen äkillisen muutoksen, opettajat ovat hoitaneet tilanteen hyvin.*

*Considering the abrupt change in the situation, the teachers have handled the situation well.*

Moreover, many enjoyed the flexibility that came with studying remotely, as it made studying possible from anywhere. Some of the respondents explained also that as there has not been any need or rush to go on campus, more time has been released for example for leisure time and sleep. In Example 3, one of the respondents was happy for the flexibility that had come with distance studying as well as the time left for self-fulfillment telling:

*Example 3: Päivän jaksottaminen oman olotilan mukaan on myös ollut helpompaa, koska ei ole tarvinnut huolehtia paikan päälle menosta.*

*Periodizing of the day according to your own situation has also been easier, since (I) have not had to worry to go on-site.*

An interesting division in the answers addressed the effect of social relationships during distance studying. Some said that distance learning had helped in decreasing social pressure, while others thought that social support from peers, friends and family has been one of the biggest benefits to cope with distancing. Many told also how participating in online lectures had been felt easier and less unnerving. One participant revealed that they had even participated to courses that they normally would not, stating:

*Example 4: Etänä ollessa olen ikäänkuin piilossa ruudun takana*

*Remotely I am sort of hidden behind the screen*

Finally, clear and versatile online learning materials were named as positively affecting factors. Three respondents mentioned how clear Moodle-workspaces had especially been helpful in accessing the course materials and contents. Additionally, the versatile online learning materials received a praise from the students. These responses comply the findings from questions number 11. and 12., which are studied more closely in chapter 4.3.

#### **4.2.2 Negative factors considering English language learning and studying during distance studying**

In contrast, negatively affecting factors that became mentioned most frequently in the answers were lack of social contacts and interaction, concentration issues, insufficient learning platforms and technical issues and finally, insufficient teaching and exercises of poor quality. Out of these factors above, the lack of social contacts and interaction became mentioned most frequently regarding the respondents' open-ended answers of motivation towards studying and learning. This indicates that the aforementioned

mentioned positive social support in the previous subchapter has been inadequate for most, during distance studies. Despite the possibilities to meet with friends outside school, it is possible that many have suffered from the lack of physical working environment on campus, where they normally would learn together with other peers. Many mentioned the lack of real interaction and peer support when lectures are held via online learning platforms, demonstrating how the feeling of solidarity and the sense of community had slowly vanished as a result of lectures being moved online. A few mentioned that they had been less in contact with their friends whilst others felt that they had not had the chance to get acquainted with other students at all. One of the participants crystallized their feelings towards learning and studying via online platforms, stating:

*Example 5: Mulle on todella tärkeää nähdä kavereita ja kanssaopiskelijoita. Ihmiskontakteja ei korvaa mikään, varsinkaan nimilista Zoomissa*

*For me it is very important to meet friends and fellow students. Human contacts cannot be replaced with anything, especially with a name list on Zoom*

Additionally, almost a half of all the respondents named the difficulty to concentrate when working from home. Online lectures were said to be “mind-numbing” and more difficult, as everything happens behind the screen. It had been hard for many to stay motivated as the focus would disappear more easily when working alone from home. Some also mentioned how coping and scheduling became harder as studying and free time now happened inside the same walls, which again decreased the students’ learning motivation.

Moreover, many expressed that there were problems in both teaching and the exercises used, on top of the poor online learning platforms and the technical issues that might appear along the usage. Especially the “hollow” and “stiff” learning atmosphere on online learning platform Zoom became addressed multiple times. The respondents explained that the lectures had also been felt poorer in quality during distance learning because of lacking interaction, poorly formed online practices, or technical issues with the used online platforms. In addition, a few mentioned that the

motivation to study had decreased as the workload had increased with distance learning, since most of the tasks suddenly required more independent individual work. On the other hand, group assignments were not praised either since collaborating online had felt unnatural and heavy on top of nonchalant attitude of some peers, or sometimes even teachers, towards working together effectively.

### 4.3 Students' experiences of distance learning practices

The following table displays a set of six different closed questions regarding distance learning methods and practices in the subject of English. The following claims were answered on a five-point Likert scale. The most common answers are again highlighted for clarity.

Table 3 Distance learning of English and methods used in distance teaching

	1 strongly disagree	2 somewhat disagree	3 neutral	4 somewhat agree	5 strongly agree
The quality of English teaching has been as good during the distance learning, when compared with contact teaching	4.9%	<b>31.7%</b>	21.9%	29.3%	12.2%
I have gotten enough of support from the teachers/lecturers/study counselor during the distance learning	2.4%	12.2%	14.6%	<b>48.8%</b>	22.0%
Instructions concerning the course work/contents from teachers/lecturers has been clear in the subject of English	0%	24.4%	14.6%	<b>51.2%</b>	9.8%
Practices, materials and assignments used in the subject of English have been good	0%	7.3%	21.9%	<b>65.9%</b>	4.9%
Teaching practices used in distance learning of English (=distance lectures/ distance seminar/remote study groups/etc.) have been good	0%	19.5%	21.9%	<b>48.8%</b>	9.8%

Lack of physical contacts has affected negatively to my learning results in the subject of English	14.6%	19.5%	9.8%	26.8%	<b>29.3%</b>
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The findings from Table 3 suggest that the majority of the respondents were mostly satisfied with the used learning and teaching materials and practices, as well as with online learning assignments and instructions. Interestingly, one third of all the participants expresses their dissatisfaction towards the quality of distance learning whilst over half of all show that they are pleased with the teacher instruction and the practices used. This finding indicates that while learning environment has been felt worse than before amongst the students, their teachers have done a good work in changed and difficult learning conditions. Although a clear majority expresses that they have been given enough of support from their teachers and staff, the lack of physical contacts is again felt negative towards the learning results.

#### **4.3.1 Positive and effective learning practices and ways of learning**

The most positively viewed effective learning practices in the respondents' answers were group discussions, group assignments/working in groups, individual assignments and individual inclusive tasks. The most frequently mentioned form of an effective distance learning practice was a group discussion. In these results, group discussions refer to small groups that are assigned by the instructor in an online learning platform Zoom into so called "breakout rooms" where students can discuss together in private, in between lecturing. This finding can therefore be explained with the fact that group discussions force students to participate and work with each other, thus increasing the sense of community and interaction amongst the students even online. These small group discussions were given a praise by the students, especially when the discussion topics are well defined and instructed and when everyone chooses to engage in the discussion with having their web camera on. On Example 6 below, one student wrote the following:

*Example 6: Tykkään pienryhmissä keskustelemisesta ja niissä ihmiset oikeasti osallistuvat, toisin kuin isossa ryhmässä luennon aikana. Nämä keskustelut ovat jopa olleet mielenkiintoisia ja antaneet motivaatiota opiskeluun/aiheeseen tutustumiseen*

*I like discussing on small groups and in them people really participate, unlike in the greater group during the lecture. These discussions have been even interesting and given motivation to study/familiarization of the topic*

However, individual assignments were almost as popular as group discussions based on students' answers. Perhaps as the self-regulated learning is rather a norm when studying in the university, the change in learning environment was tolerable for many. Individual assignments that the students mentioned included learning diaries, essays and other written assignments, as an example, along with reading tasks that could for example mean a study article to read for the next lecture. Additionally, a couple of the respondents praised "home exams" that could be done either individually or with a pair or group at a wanted time during the given time frame. Home exams were said to be more efficient than regular exams, as there is not as much pressure to complete them with a wider time frame, and as they help one to learn and memorize things better instead of just "cramming" for the exam.

One third of the participants mentioned inclusive tasks as efficient, as they increase concentration and participation during the lecture. Inclusive tasks in this study mean language learning tasks and practices that include inclusion and require participation of students, therefore raising the sense of community and interaction with one another. This kinds of tasks and practices named by the students were for example utilization of different online platforms such as whiteboard-type Flinga or Padlet "walls" and (reflective) discussions in either oral or written form.

Finally, "traditional" group assignments such as presentations became mentioned by a quarter of the study participants. The relatively low endorsement of group exercises might be explained with the answers in the study chapter 4.2.2., where a few told that group work online does not work ideally compared to normal circumstances. Still, some told that presenting work online has been positive as it has not felt as difficult or oppressing compared to regular classrooms.

### 4.3.2 Poor and insufficient learning practices and ways of learning

Although a clear majority of the participants expressed that they were fairly satisfied with the language learning methods used in English teaching, there still remained some practices and ways that had left the university students feeling unsatisfied. The respondents felt the increase in workload and students' own responsibility, difficulties with group assignments, problems in lecturing and poorly utilized breakout room discussions as the most negative learning practices and factors. A part of the respondents also expressed that there were no practices that had been felt as negative.

Based on students' answers regarding insufficient learning practices and ways of learning, the majority considered lecturing. Especially those lectures where the lecturer speaks alone for long periods of time were mentioned as insufficient towards learning. This result can be tied together with concentration issues discussed in previous subchapter 4.2.2., as many validated their answer based on how they have experienced the constant talking of the teacher as tiring and unmotivating.

As discussed in the previous subchapter, the students were pleased with small group discussions if the assignments given by their teacher have been clear. From the answers to survey's question 14 we can discover a counter-reaction as one fifth of the respondents mentioned how small group discussions do not work effectively if they are poorly utilized or when peers are choosing not to engage. One respondent said that it depends largely on the group itself, whether the conversations are held in breakout rooms, as well as the teachers time management for the given task. A couple of the students mentioned that the time scheduled for the discussions is often clearly too long, which again wastes time during the lectures or even inadvertently prolongs them. Two of the students in Example 7 and 8 even suggested direct improvements for the educators, stating:

*Example 7: - - mielestäni voisi teknologiaa hyödyntää paljon enemmän ja käyttää eri alustoja ja työkaluja "keskustelua" varten*

*- - in my opinion technology could be utilized much more and use different platforms and tools for the "conversation"*



*Example 8: Myös opettajien kannattaisi miettiä enemmän, minkä kysymyksen pohdinta voisi olla hedelmällistä breakout-huoneissa, ja mitkä taas eivät ole niin tärkeitä*

*Also teachers should think more of which questions' reflection could be fruitful in breakout rooms and which ones again are not that important*

Moreover, a part of the participants' described how distance learning had affected negatively because of the increase in workload. Many had felt the new circumstances demanding, as studying and assignments had suddenly been expected to be done alone from home. Especially the prior readings for the English lectures that were described as long and arduous among the students had seemed to increase due to change in learning environment. In addition, group assignments were again mentioned in a negative manner. The respondents described working in groups as challenging in distance learning, since planning and working remotely has been harder than physically. The initiative to start working with the given group was also viewed demanding, as everything was done remotely.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Discussion

The present study aimed to answer three research questions regarding the Finnish university students' experiences towards English studies during distance learning. The main aim was to find out how distance learning has affected English language learning among the university students. The results from the study questionnaire established that distance learning had had a negative impact on both students' physical wellbeing and learning motivation. These results were presumed as the previous studies from Stevanović, Božić and Radović (2021), Hazaymeh (2021) and Consilz (2020) also showed that online learning had had a negative impact on learning motivation and therefore studying. Moreover, the sense of community and feelings of productivity had suffered in consequence of online learning environment in the present study. The same findings were established in Consilz (2020) and Hazaymeh's (2021) studies in which the lack of both peer and teacher support were found to directly impact the students' performance and learning motivation.

Still, the students in the present study evaluated that their overall learning performance had not suffered that much, as the majority of the respondents expressed that they had kept their pace with their English studies despite the above-mentioned changes. The fact that the participants had succeeded well in their studies during

online studying goes along with findings from Teng et al. (2021) study which showed that confident language learners are able to efficiently monitor and evaluate their learning. As all of the study participants had English as their major subject in the university, they are expected to manage with the language well; since good monitoring skills play an important part in university-level studies, it is logical that the majority of these study participants already had acquired sufficient skills to succeed in their studies.

Moreover, the present study aimed to study what are the positive and negative factors affecting university students' learning motivation. The answers varied greatly, but the clearest positive factor affecting university students' motivation considered the flexibility of studying online. The flexibility again helped for example with establishing and using versatile learning materials that were seen as positive. These findings go along with Hazaymeh's (2021) study, which similarly showed that undergraduate EFL students were satisfied with getting to know more about digital platforms and variable online exercises. Additionally, the findings in the present study regarding the factors that were felt negative towards motivation covered the lack of social contacts and concentration when studying online. These findings were very similar with Stevanović et al. (2021), Hazaymeh (2021) and especially Consilz's (2020) study which indicated how the lack of teacher's presence in an online setting had impacted the students' concentration drastically.

Notable was also how at least one important new aspect that was not covered that much in the previous articles, decrease of social pressure(s), arose from the present study. Surprisingly many of the respondents addressed this factor as positive towards their language learning motivation, explaining how they had felt relieved when studying could have now been done more individually. This notion added a paradoxical message into the findings since the lack of social interaction was also addressed as a negative factor towards learning motivation. This finding offers an aspect for educators to think of especially when designing online courses and exercises. Perhaps the gap between different language learners and their learning preferences could

be reduced with the help of hybrid learning environments that allow the students a freedom of choice between remote and on-site studying.

Finally, the present study also examined how the university students felt of the language learning methods used in distance learning of English. The respondents in the present study were somewhat dissatisfied with online teaching as well as with learning platforms and exercises used, as for example the workload had increased and utilizing some of the exercises had been more difficult online. As most of the participants in the present study had attended on-site courses before the pandemic, these findings go along with Stevanović et al. (2021) study which discovered that a sudden change in learning environment had been felt negatively especially by students who had managed to begin their studies on-site. Thus, we can understand how most of the respondents' answers in the present study indicate dissatisfaction towards the online learning practices and exercises. Still, individual and inclusive tasks were enjoyed by many along with effective group discussions and projects. These findings were equivalent to Hazaymeh's (2021) study that found out how especially collaborative practices were perceived as effective among the EFL students, mainly since those tasks produced communication that otherwise was lacking during online studying.

## 5.2 Conclusion

The findings from the present study show that there still remains room for development for the English language teachers and universities in order to offer the university students high-quality teaching in an alternate learning environment. The main result gained from the findings was quite evidently that distance learning has affected negatively towards university students learning motivation. Still, the students' learning performance had not suffered that much, although some of the used online learning practices and exercises had been felt stressing when studying needed to be done remotely. Additionally, the findings showed that the respondents' answers regarding online learning practices and online teaching were divided. According to these

findings, online studying has increased the learning pressure of university students and their English studies. Despite the difficulties brought by remote learning, the majority of the university students in the present study had succeeded and adapted into the changed learning environment well, indicating that many possess good self-regulatory skills and autonomy towards their learning. Still, in the light of the findings from present study, the communication between educators and their students should be more efficient especially during distance learning so that the workload could be assisted to the changed learning setting and not be felt as too heavy by the students. Similarly, the findings suggest that educators would need to evaluate the used practices more actively together with their students to offer suitably challenging exercises.

The strengths of the present study consider the insightful data gained from conducting it, as the results present clear factors, views and suggestions that enlighten us about this recent change in the field of education. The findings offered a great amount of data that be seen as highly beneficial especially for educators as well as software developers to develop and enhance better learning practices, environments and platforms to meet the demands of the students in today's multimodal learning settings. By utilizing the knowledge provided by the present study, the students' needs and wishes could be met more effectively resulting in more productive, satisfied and focused language learning students and better learning outcomes. Moreover, this research offers important insights for educators especially with regards to university students physical wellbeing regarding their workload during the pandemic.

However, as small-scale research the present study had some evident limitations. The representative sample of the university students in this study was relatively small, meaning that the findings of the present study cannot be generalized to represent a wider student population. As all respondents attended the same university, they are only reflecting on the practices of a single institution. Moreover, some of the respondents' answers to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire appeared as quite narrow, meaning that conducting interviews could have perhaps resulted in more in-depth answers, therefore offering more thorough data regarding the phenomenon. Additionally, the usage of five-point Likert scale with some of the study

questions perhaps offered a too narrow to answer to for some, as many of the questions were ambiguous.

As a suggestion for future research, more similar studies could be done especially with an aim to examine the long-term effects of the pandemic and distance studying towards the university students' language learning performance and learning motivation as well as their general wellbeing. Larger-scale research, including for example each university of Finland offering English studies ought to be done to observe the aspects covered in this research more thoroughly. During the time of this study being conducted, the English classes were still offered online and the teaching was only starting to reconvene back to campuses, meaning that the difficulties were yet to be over. Finally, the distance learning practices and platforms together with language learning exercises could be studied more closely to gain data to help educators to develop their technical and teaching skills. With competent educators it would be possible to offer more effective and well-targeted exercises that respond to each English language students' needs and skill-levels efficiently also when studying online.

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## APPENDIX

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### APPENDIX 1 COPY OF THE STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

## Tutkimus etäopiskelun vaikutuksista yliopisto-opiskelijoiden englannin kielen opiskeluun

Pakolliset kysymykset merkitty tähdellä (\*)

Tervetuloa vastaamaan tutkivaan verkkokyselyyn englannin kielen etäopetuksen vaikutuksista oppimiseen ja opiskeluun.

Tässä Jyväskylän yliopiston englannin kielen opintosuunnalle tehtävässä kandidaatintutkielman kyselyssä selvitetään englantia opiskelevien yliopisto-opiskelijoiden kokemuksia COVID-19 pandemian seuraksena tapahtuneesta etäopiskeluympäristöön siirtymisestä. Tutkimuksen pääpiste on havainnoida etäopiskelun vaikutuksia yliopistotasoisten englannin kielen opiskelijoiden oppimiseen sekä heidän oppimismotivaatioonsa. Tämän verkkokyselyn kautta saatuja vastauksia käytetään humanistis-yhteiskuntatieteellisen kandidaatintutkielman tutkimusaineistona.

Kysely on tarkoitettu Jyväskylän yliopistossa englannin kieltä pääaineenaan lukeville opiskelijoille. Jos olet aloittanut opintosi englannin kielen opintosuunnalla joko aineenopettaja-, kieliassiantuntija- tai KIMO-linjalla viimeistään vuoden 2021 syksynä ja opinto-oikeuttasi on vielä jäljellä, olet lämpimästi tervetullut vastaamaan kyselyyn!

Kysely on suomenkielinen ja se koostuu sekä monivalinta- että avoimista kysymyksistä. Kyselyn vastaamiseen kuluu aikaa noin 10-15 minuuttia.

Vastaamalla tähän kyselyyn vakuutat olevasi vähintään 18-vuotias ja annat luvan vastauksesi käyttämiseen yllä mainitussa kandidaatintutkielmassa. Tutkimuksessa kerättyjä tietoja ja tutkimustuloksia käsitellään luottamuksellisesti tietosuojalainsäädännön edellyttämällä tavalla. Kyselyyn vastaaminen tapahtuu anonyyminä. Vastanneiden identifioivia henkilötietoja ei kerätä, eikä vastauksien perusteella voida siten tunnistaa yksittäisiä kyselyyn vastanneita henkilöitä. Tutkimukseen osallistuminen on vapaaehtoista ja näin ollen voit halutessasi keskeyttää kyselyyn vastaamisen missä tahansa vaiheessa.

Kiitos osallistumisestasi!

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Taustatietoja

### 1. Sukupuoli \*

- Nainen
- Mies
- Muu
- En halua kertoa

### 2. Opiskeluvuoteni yliopistossa \*

- 1. vuosi
- 2. vuosi
- 3. vuosi
- 4. vuosi
- 5. vuosi
- 6. tai sitä useampi vuosi

### 3. Englannin oppiaineessa olen yliopisto-opiskelujeni aikana ollut \*

- vain lähiopetuksessa
- vain etäopetuksessa
- sekä lähi- että etäopetuksessa
- muu, mikä?

#### 4. Etäopetuksen vaikutus oppimiseen englannin oppiaineessa \*

Vastaa kysymyksiin asteikolla 1-5, jossa 1 = täysin eri mieltä, 2 = jokseenkin eri mieltä, 3 = neutraali/en osaa sanoa, 4 = jokseenkin samaa mieltä ja 5 = täysin samaa mieltä

	1	2	3	4	5
Etäopiskelulla on ollut positiivista vaikutusta oppimiseeni	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Etäopiskelulla on ollut negatiivista vaikutusta oppimiseeni	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pidän enemmän etä- kuin lähiopetuksesta englannin oppiaineessa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Oppiminen on ollut mielestäni vähintään yhtä helppoa etänä, lähiopetukseen verrattuna	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Englannin oppiaineen opettajat ovat olleet helposti tavoitettavissa etäopetuksen aikana	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Englannin oppiaineen opettajat ovat olleet vaikeasti tavoitettavissa etäopetuksen aikana	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Voit halutessasi tarkentaa tässä vastauksiasi ylläoleviin kysymyksiin

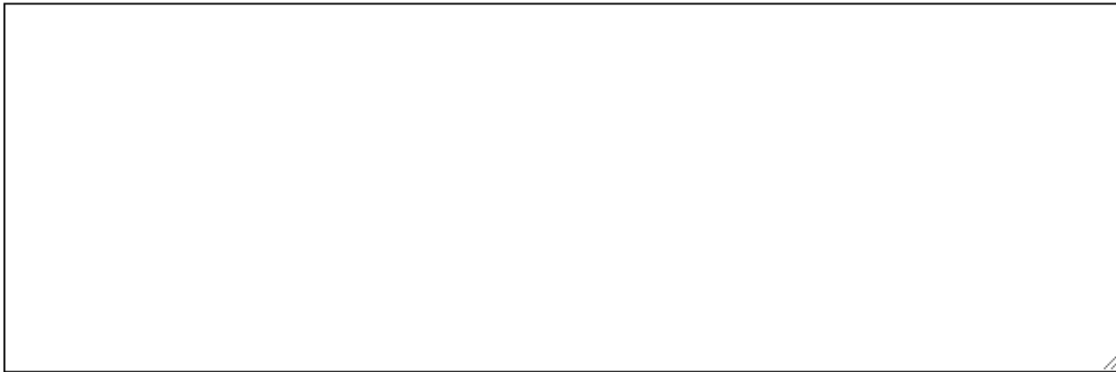
### 5. Etäopiskelun vaikutus opiskelumotivaatioon englannin oppiaineessa \*

Vastaa kysymyksiin asteikolla 1-5, jossa 1 = täysin eri mieltä, 2 = jokseenkin eri mieltä, 3 = neutraali/en osaa sanoa, 4 = jokseenkin samaa mieltä ja 5 = täysin samaa mieltä

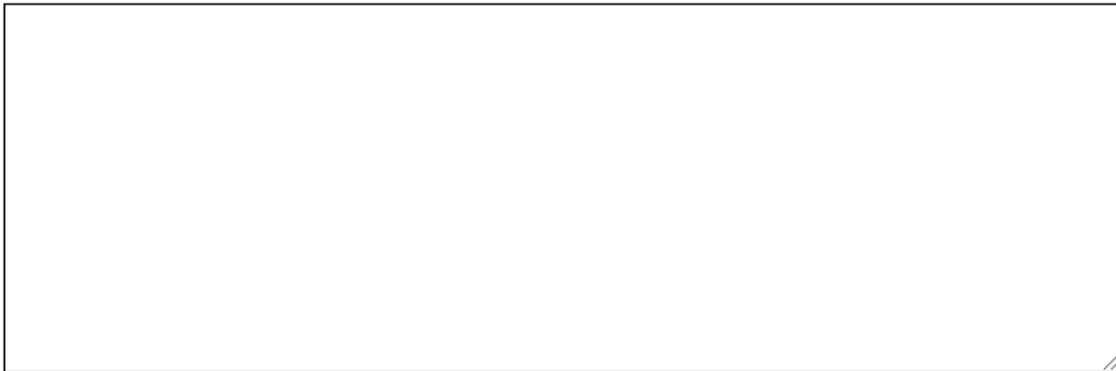
	1	2	3	4	5
Etäopiskelulla on ollut positiivista vaikutusta opiskelumotivaatiooni englannin kielen opinnoissa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Etäopiskelulla on ollut kielteistä vaikutusta opiskelumotivaatiooni englannin kielen opinnoissa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Englannin kielen opintoni ovat edenneet halutussa tahdissa etäopiskelun aikana	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Olen tuntenut itseni motivoituneeksi englannin kielen etäopetuksessa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Englannin kielen etäopetus on ollut oppimiseen ja opiskeluun motivoivaa ja kannustavaa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fyysisten kontaktien puuttuminen on vaikuttanut negatiivisesti motivaatiooni englannin oppiaineessa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Voit halutessasi tarkentaa tässä vastauksiasi ylläoleviin kysymyksiin

**6. Mitkä seikat ovat vaikuttaneet positiivisesti englannin kielen opiskeluusi ja oppimiseesi etäopetuksen aikana? \***

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the respondent to write their answer to question 6. The box is positioned below the question text and occupies a significant portion of the page's width.

**7. Mitkä seikat ovat vaikuttaneet negatiivisesti englannin kielen opiskeluusi ja oppimiseesi etäopiskelun aikana? \***

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the respondent to write their answer to question 7. The box is positioned below the question text and occupies a significant portion of the page's width.

## 8. Englannin etäopetus ja etäopetuksessa käytetyt menetelmät \*

Vastaa kysymyksiin asteikolla 1-5, jossa 1 = täysin eri mieltä, 2 = jokseenkin eri mieltä, 3 = neutraali/en osaa sanoa, 4 = jokseenkin samaa mieltä ja 5 = täysin samaa mieltä

	1	2	3	4	5
Englannin opetus on ollut laadultaan vähintään yhtä hyvää etäopetuksessa, lähiopetukseen verrattuna	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Olen saanut tarpeeksi tukea opettajilta/ luennoitsijoilta/ opintosuunnittelijalta jne. etäopetuksen aikana	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Opettajilta/luennoitsijoilta tullut ohjeistus kurssityöskentelystä on ollut selkeää englannin kielen etäopetuksessa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Englannin kielen etäopetuksessa käytetyt tehtävät, materiaalit ja harjoitteet ovat mielestäni olleet hyviä	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Englannin kielen etäopetuksessa käytetyt opetustavat (=etäluennot/ etäseminaari/ pienryhmätyöskentely etänä/ jokin muu) ovat mielestäni olleet hyviä	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fyysisten kontaktien puuttuminen on vaikuttanut negatiivisesti oppimistuloksiini englannin oppiaineessa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Voit halutessasi tarkentaa tässä vastauksiasi ylläoleviin kysymyksiin

**9. Millaiset etäopetuksessa käytetyt oppimistavat- ja harjoitukset olet kokenut  
hyviksi/ toimiviksi englannin oppiaineessa? \***



**10. Millaiset etäopetuksessa käytetyt oppimistavat- ja harjoitukset olet kokenut  
huonoiksi/ epäsopiviksi englannin oppiaineessa?**

