



Article

Teaching English to First-year Students in Russia: Addressing the Challenges of Distance Learning

Irina Karpovich , Galina Borschenko, Yuliana Koroleva  and Tatiana Krepkai

Department of Foreign Languages, Institute of Humanities, Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University, Saint Petersburg 195251, Russia

* Correspondence: karpovich.ia@flspbpu.ru

Abstract: (1) The aim of this study is to investigate the psychological climate in first-year students' academic groups in Russia after they experienced the period of distance learning at the initial stage of university studies (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and to find out how different it is compared with the academic groups of first-year students whose university studies were not influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. (2) Methods: Mixed quantitative and qualitative methods were applied to collect data using A. N. Lutoshkin's questionnaire with closed-ended questions. The questionnaire determines the psychological climate in students' academic groups. (3) Results: The results of the study reveal considerable differences in the psychological climate of the investigated groups. The findings suggest that the students whose university studies were not influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic considered their academic groups to have more mutual understanding, a greater desire to cooperate with other teams, a better mood in the team, a greater desire to participate in the joint affairs, etc., in comparison with the students who experienced a period of distance learning at the initial stage of their studies. (4) Conclusions: The transition to distance learning allows students to continue their studies under epidemiological restrictions. However, the factors affecting the speed of the adaptation of first-year students in distance learning and the determination of the degree of their influence on the socio-psychological state of the students remain insufficiently studied. This study contributes to the field by defining the peculiarities of the psychological climate in first-year students' academic groups after they experienced a period of distance learning at the initial stage of university studies. It also specifies how the psychological climate is different from the academic groups of first-year students who were taught in a traditional format. As psychological climate plays a crucial role for EFL instruction, measures must be taken to ease the first-year students' adaptation process while studying online.



Citation: Karpovich, I.; Borschenko, G.; Koroleva, Y.; Krepkai, T. Teaching English to First-year Students in Russia: Addressing the Challenges of Distance Learning. *Educ. Sci.* **2022**, *12*, 560. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12080560>

Academic Editors: Neil Gordon and Han Reichgelt

Received: 8 July 2022

Accepted: 13 August 2022

Published: 17 August 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Keywords: first-year students; pedagogical support; psychosocial adaptation; self-adjustment; teaching English at university; distance learning

1. Introduction

1.1. First-Year Students: Challenges of Transition Period

University academic success is directly influenced by the academic performance of first-year students and whether or not they can deal with all the difficulties regarding the learning process and can manage well on their own. The primary task of higher education is to provide students with support, help, and all the conditions needed for their active involvement in the learning process from the very beginning. Nowadays, due to adverse circumstances, undergraduates and first-year students in particular have to face the strongest psychological pressure, increased by the COVID-19 pandemic that is still spreading around the world. Therefore, distance learning enables students to continue their studies despite everything. This study aims to identify the factors that affect first-year students' emotions, their university life, and their perceived stress and resilience skills related to their distance learning experience.

Students' academic achievements mainly depend on the degree and level of their adaptation. The factors that make the adaptation process effective are the following: the psychological well-being of students, their satisfaction with the study program they have chosen, the results of the progress they finally made, and their campus life and relationships with their groupmates [1–8]. The adaptation of first-year students is essential as it enables students to be resilient to the negative impact of the challenges encountered on the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and conceptual levels of their professional development. These challenges include the following: failure to cope with workload; difficulties in adaptation to some specific features of the learning process organization and management; contradictions between the greater autonomy of the students and their low capacity to self-regulate their learning; the necessity to establish interpersonal relationships in the group; foreign students' adaptation to the new living conditions; and the necessity to solve problems on their own [1–14].

According to some experts, the success of the first-year students' adaptation is inextricably linked with such factors as academic achievements, critical thinking skills, and social and emotional health [1,2,5,7,8]. Therefore, those of them who have not managed to adapt promptly tend to be faced with the value-based and motivational components of adaptation, including its cognitive and socio-psychological spheres. As university academic success depends crucially on the degree and level of first-year students' adaptation, one of the most relevant research issues related to education regards the provision of students with the conditions they need to successfully participate in the learning process. Let us analyze the main directions of the current scientific research on the problem of the first-year students' adaptation.

As the context of interculturalism has become vitally important, one of the main directions is interaction between students and the communication between Russian and international students in particular. Therefore, it is necessary to create multicultural learning conditions in which students have to overcome language barriers and adapt to the socio-cultural aspects of a new environment [2–5]. In addition to the above-mentioned issues, the adaptation of international students is a complicated, dynamic, multilevel, and multilateral rebuilding process of their motivational sphere under new conditions. Cooperation in education is one of the most critical tasks of the world community as it plays a vital role in the international collaboration process [6]. The increasing number of foreign students studying at university contributes significantly to its achieving a high status and to the establishing of its reputation. Moreover, communication with foreign students is a valuable source for the building of strong international relationships.

The socio-psychological sphere of first-year students' adaptation is a popular scientific research topic. Such aspects as the effect of anxiety on students' academic performance and its relationship with academic motivation, the influence of stress, and the difficulties related to the social sphere of adaptation on students' progress or emotional resilience are becoming increasingly common nowadays [7]. An anxiety state that first-year students frequently experience is closely related to the following aspects: academic achievements, finances, and the necessity of forming new social bonds [8]. The social sphere of adaptation includes one of the most important components, which is social interaction with peers. Furthermore, the issues regarding the role of this interaction in facilitating the process of academic adaptation are becoming more and more serious as well [9].

As there are adverse conditions, which the process of adaptation implies, students are more likely to experience such emotional states as anxiety and frustration, including certain psychological disorders, such as depression [10]. Experts claim that first-year students tend to suffer from depression, anxiety, and stress [11,12]. Thus, a lot of the research results show that a moderate level of anxiety and depression among first-year students is 69.5% [10]. The researchers who deal with the issue of teaching first-year students note that such factors as poor sleep quality, lack of physical activity, and excessive use of the internet can lead to anxiety and cause depression [10–12].

Both social support and homesickness play a vital role in students' adaptation to a new learning environment. Homesickness is quite common among students of different age groups, no matter whether they are first-year students of a boarding school or university students living in dormitories. Those of them who have strong social support do not suffer from homesickness, whereas those students who do not receive it from their new learning environment are more vulnerable to homesickness. The symptoms of homesickness can be various and tend to have a negative influence on students' academic success, their social involvement, and their capability to adjust to a new learning environment [13]. This emotional state has a negative influence on various components of students' psychological functioning and its cognitive, emotional, behavioral, physical, and social aspects. University authorities should spot students who are suffering from homesickness, and they should also provide them with some effective programs or courses aimed at developing the students' ability to adapt to a new academic environment [14].

Problems related to the cognitive component of adaptation are not uncommon. The reason for it is that students lack the skills they need to work with academic materials. Moreover, there are also some students who do not have adequate critical thinking skills [1]. The ability to use educational materials properly is the key to students' academic success. However, many experts share the opinion that first-year students do not have it. Many of them have poor academic literacy skills, and they are also reluctant to study [15]. What is more, the research results show that first-year students are extremely biased when choosing a particular source of information during the learning process and evaluating its reliability [16].

The cognitive or formal aspects of adaptation involve introducing students to new forms of learning-process organization (lectures, seminars, and training), methods of organizing lesson activities, and teaching methods of particular disciplines, as well as familiarizing them with the university educational system. That is why it is vitally important to create a positive learning environment aimed at facilitating the first-year students' adaptation process through mutual interaction between teachers and students and students and peers [17–19]. Academic self-regulation or self-regulated learning, which also refers to self-assessment, self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-development, is regarded as one of the key factors in facilitating the adaptation process and in the first-year students' achievement of academic success. Students should be supported by both the teaching staff and the university authorities in order for them to be able to develop self-regulation skills [1,18,20]. It is believed that it will help first-year students to improve their self-efficacy and to reduce the stress that they usually experience [21–28].

The literature review on the challenges of teaching first-year students made it possible to conclude that students face some problems in both the academic and the socio-psychological spheres of adaptation. These difficulties can impede the process of EFL instruction at university and affect the academic performances of students.

1.2. Teaching EFL to First-Year Students

It is vitally important to use various teaching methods, to consider the adaptation process and its particular aspects, and to fully integrate the elements of teaching staff support into the educational process for first-year students to learn foreign languages effectively. Teachers should not only provide students with instructional guidelines, inform them about assessment criteria, but should also be aware of all the possible difficulties that first-year students commonly have to deal with. Foreign language skills development is likely to refer to synergy, as the challenge for a teacher is to help students to learn not only the main elements of the language system (e.g., pronunciation, grammatical system, and lexical units) but also such elements as language functions and sociocultural standards [29,30]. It is particularly important for students when they are involved in practicing their speaking skills. According to Brown, they must include three main aspects: (1) form (teaching primarily focused on pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary), (2) meaningfulness (deliberate instructions on creating a meaningful verbal message with a real communicative goal), and

(3) prospects (fluency development) [31]. Therefore, during English conversation classes, students go through the process that involves receiving the information, analyzing, and finally creating and transferring thoughts verbally in a logical and consistent way.

Classwork assignments that are commonly conducted during conversation classes usually have two main forms: dialogues and monologues. In dialogues, students establish interpersonal communication, showing interaction referring to a certain situation, whereas, in monologues, it is not necessary to have a partner to speak to [31]. A monologue is defined as a student's individual verbal work aimed at processing all language system aspects; it not only improves the language skills but also increases students' self-confidence and helps them to reduce anxiety in situations of verbal communication in a foreign language. To prepare this speech performance, it is necessary to set a clearly stated task indicating how much time one needs to have to complete an assignment [32]. In education science, the most commonly used types of speech acts are various options of oral presentations (e.g., describing personal experience, different processes, providing information). They mainly include descriptions of both simple everyday information (e.g., descriptions of plans and events, habits and actions, personal experience) and a wide range of topics related to abstract areas of interest and detailed explanations of complex objects and phenomena. However, discourse complexity can vary from speech patterns, simple sentences, or short sequentially interrelated paragraphs to the integration of several subtopics into a logical, coherent, and meaningful description [33].

According to Doe, the initial phase of completing an assignment during speaking practice class involves the process of converting a message into linguistic material by following lexical, grammatical, and phonological rules. At this stage, the appropriate lexical units and grammatical and phonological rules are selected for further speech transformation [29]. These types of classwork activities develop thinking and sharpen the speaking and language skills that the students need to use in applicable communicative situations [34].

While participating in classwork activities aimed at developing speaking skills, a systematic approach is liable to cause high performance by alleviating academic adaptation problems that often lead to students' experiencing fear, shyness, anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and motivation. Students tend to believe that speaking practice related to mastering a foreign language is essential, and they are willing to work hard and make a lot of effort to be able to express themselves using a foreign language accurately and appropriately. However, many of them avoid speaking the English language for fear that they will be criticized or laughed at [30]. Thus, the students' fear of making mistakes becomes a contributing factor in their unwillingness to speak a foreign language, English in particular, during conversation classes [35]. Another negative factor that might prevent students from taking part in English conversation activities is their shyness, which is usually experienced by students when they are required to speak a foreign language. The results of some of the research work referring to first-year students have shown that students' shyness and their motivation for speaking the language are inextricably linked [36]. In some studies, self-efficacy and the influence of anxiety on students' speaking skills when used by them while learning the discipline "Foreign language" are also taken into account [37]. Negative psychological states have a significant negative impact on students' speaking skills [38]. Feelings of anxiety can be closely related to such factors as self-confidence. Those students who lack confidence in themselves and in their level of foreign language ability usually experience negative psychological states during foreign language classes [35]. This statement is confirmed by the conclusions made by R. Roismanto (2018) and I. Gürler (2015), who argue that there is a significant correlation between self-confidence and the ability to speak a foreign language [39,40].

Students with low self-esteem, high levels of anxiety, and low motivation tend to have considerable difficulty in developing their speaking skills even though they know the grammar and vocabulary perfectly well, whereas students with higher motivation and lower anxiety levels can speak easily and effectively [35–39]. This is particularly relevant to

the process of teaching first-year students. Therefore, this factor should also be considered when organizing and arranging English conversation classwork activities.

In addition to relieving tension in the classroom, adverse effects can be minimized by providing students with detailed instructions on how to prepare themselves to complete certain types of classwork assignments. From a methodological point of view, a carefully chosen form of communication between teachers and their students can also raise the effectiveness of teaching and improve first-year students' academic performance. This factor should be considered in solving didactic problems during English conversation classes as well. Such types of interaction can be encouraged in the learning process through peer assessment, which, according to many experts, has a positive effect on first-year students' academic performance [41]. In their study, Harris and Brown note that in order to assess each other's speaking skills accurately and effectively teachers should provide students with comprehensive assessment instructions, determining some specific aspects of a particular activity and highlighting those aspects that need to be paid special attention to [42]. The results have shown that when students are given clear assessment criteria, they can evaluate the performance of their peers in the same way as their teachers do [43]. Moreover, the process of assessing encourages students to analyze their own performance more thoroughly and, finally, it contributes to the students' development of self-organization and self-regulation skills.

The above-mentioned studies allow us to conclude that the interaction between peers, including the mutual assessment method, can have a positive effect on the foreign language learning process and increase the effectiveness of English conversation classes. Both the assignments aimed at creating students' speaking performance (either in the form of dialogues or monologues) and the interactions between peers can improve first-year students' foreign language skills. First-year students' psychological states related to the necessity of overcoming adaptation process problems are also of great importance as they help students to increase the effectiveness of their learning process. The integration of teaching staff support elements into the educational process by means of creating a positive learning environment leading to communication and mutual understanding will definitely help students to reduce anxiety during their speaking practice classes and to succeed in learning the discipline "Foreign language". Let us now analyze the additional challenges entailed by distance learning.

1.3. Challenges of Distance Learning

Nowadays, first-year students have to face intense psychological pressure that is currently only increasing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Distance learning allows students to continue their studies under the conditions of these epidemiological constraints. However, it often has a negative impact on the process of the first-year students' adaptation to the higher professional education system, which, in turn, largely determines the students' academic performance at the university. Distance learning is a relatively new mode of learning, and it involves the adaptation of educational process participants in psychological, motivational, and cognitive spheres, which can influence the learning process of certain disciplines and the process of first-year students' language training in particular.

The cognitive aspect of distance learning also has a number of special features. In the process of distance learning, students develop their cognitive independence. The effectiveness of this process is directly related to the quality of online interaction between students and a university teacher. It has been concluded that it is the students' awareness of educational interaction and of the ways of its implementation that enables them to perform their classroom work well, which, in turn, contributes to the development of individual professional qualities that university graduates need for their successful life in the future [42–47]. At the same time, online learning activities include the students' independent studying of modules according to the curriculum and completing tasks and tests at an individual pace at any time convenient to them, as well as the reading of reference books and the using of other information resources recommended by their teachers.

It has been noted that the necessity to create the prerequisites for university students' cognitive development by means of a foreign language, particularly when studying online, predetermines the importance of the methodological support of the educational process taking into account the cognitive aspect of teaching a foreign language and the focus on students' cognitive independence.

As for the issue of first-year students' language training, the fear of making mistakes and the shyness that students suffer from when they are required to speak a foreign language are the two major factors in students' experiencing negative psychological states during foreign language classes [41]. These negative feelings can be even more stressful when students have to study online; therefore, these factors have a significant negative impact on students' speaking skills. In general, they make the process of first-year students' language training more difficult [35].

Distance learning is directly related to the self-regulation that is essential for educational activities. The problem that educational process participants have to deal with when studying online is a decrease in the interpersonal interaction both between a teacher and students and between students and their peers. That is particularly relevant to the process of students' language training. It imposes additional requirements on teachers' training, their skills, their computer literacy, and their ability to apply teaching methods through online classes. Due to the current epidemiological situation, there has been a tremendous shift from the traditional form of education, with its proven methods of organizing practical classes and forms of learning material delivery and control of knowledge, to a brand new one, unfamiliar to most of the teachers, i.e., distance learning.

The literature review made it possible to conclude that the fear of mistakes and shyness that first-year students experience when they are required to speak a foreign language are the main factors of experiencing negative psychological states in foreign language classes. Conditions of this kind can increase during distance learning and can have a significant negative impact on first-year students' speaking skills. The formation of a positive psychological climate in first-year students' academic groups can influence the process of adaptation, eliminate the feelings of fear, anxiety, and shyness, and improve the academic results in the process of EFL training. Consequently, it is crucial to find out whether the distance learning format of education influences the psychological climate and what influence it can have on the success of teaching EFL to first-year students.

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of this study is to investigate the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What is the psychological climate in first-year students' academic groups after they experienced the period of distance learning at the initial stage of university studies (due to the COVID-19 pandemic)?

RQ2: How is it different from the academic groups of first-year students whose university studies were not influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic?

An exploratory inductive approach was adopted in this study. The researchers applied mixed quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data using A. N. Lutoshkin's questionnaire with closed-ended questions. The questionnaire determines the psychological climate in the students' academic groups. The study involved the quantitative and qualitative data analysis using the descriptive statistical analysis and the correlation analysis of the quantitative data. The study took place at Peter the Great Saint Petersburg Polytechnic University, Russia. The survey was carried out at the end of the 2nd semester of the 2020–2021 academic year. It involved first-year students of engineering and computer science training programs (about 60 students, both male and female, aged 18–20). English is included into their syllabus as a foreign language as the great majority of the students are citizens of the Russian Federation. The participants were studying English for general purposes (EGP), and the level of English language proficiency among them varied from A2 to B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The research data were obtained by means of Google Forms. This tool allowed us to organize the survey in a convenient remote way and to obtain instant access to its results. A recruitment email was distributed. Participation in the survey was anonymous and voluntary. All the respondents volunteered to take part in the survey; they were informed about the objective of the study and were guaranteed anonymity.

The data analysis was carried out in two stages. Stage 1 focused on analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data in closed-ended survey questions concerning the issue of the psychological climate in the academic groups. The questionnaire covers several aspects, which represent the components which make up the psychological climate of a group. These aspects can be indicated qualitatively in a positive or negative way. The sets of responses containing the qualitative data were processed and coded into a quantitative form according to the instructions of A. N. Lutoshkin's questionnaire (Table 1). Each parameter had its positive and negative features. Scales were added to indicate the extent to which the properties are manifested in a group: "3"—is always manifested (if it refers to a positive feature); "−3"—is always manifested (if it refers to a negative feature); "2"—is manifested often enough (if it refers to a positive feature); "−2"—is manifested often enough (if it refers to a negative feature); "1"—is manifested enough to notice (if it refers to a positive feature); "−1"—is manifested enough to notice (if it refers to a negative feature); "0"—is not noticeable.

Table 1. The parameters represented in A. N. Lutoshkin's questionnaire.

| Properties | Positive Features | Negative Features |
|---|---|--|
| Mood in the group | A cheerful mood prevails | A pessimistic and depressed mood prevails |
| Manifestation of goodwill in relationships | Goodwill in relationships prevails | Conflict in relationships, aggressiveness prevails |
| Desire to communicate and cooperate with other groups | The group interacts and cooperates with other groups | The group is reluctant to interact and cooperate with other groups |
| Mutual understanding | Groups within an academic group show mutual disposition and understanding | Groups within an academic group conflict with each other |

For further processing the data were entered in SPSS Version 23 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA, 2016) to present them in numerical form. The descriptive statistics software was run to calculate the means and standard deviations. These findings helped the researchers answer Research Question 1.

Stage 2 involved the correlation analysis of the results acquired in Stage 1 and the results obtained from the study carried out in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic. These two sets of data are comparable due to the fact that students entering the university training programs yearly are almost equal in numbers and similar in personal characteristics. After the data were tabulated into MS Excel files, the evaluation of the *t*-test *p*-values with the admissible error limit of $\alpha = 0.05$ was performed to compare the results before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Thereafter, the researchers applied the comparative method to analyze the levels of the first-year students' adaptation and integration into the university academic environment. The results of Stage 2 helped the researchers answer Research Question 2.3.

3. Results

The survey based on the questionnaire by A.N. Lutoshkin showed a significant difference in the psychological climate in the students' academic groups in 2019 and 2021. The results are presented in Table 2 and Figure 1.

Table 2. Findings on the psychological climate of the groups in 2019 and 2021.

| Indicators | 2019 | 2021 | <i>t</i> -Test <i>p</i> -Value $\alpha = 0.05$ |
|---|------|------|--|
| Mood in the group | 2.8 | 1.3 | 0.00 |
| Manifestation of goodwill in relationships | 2.6 | 1.6 | 0.00 |
| Desire to communicate and cooperate with other groups | 2.7 | 1.0 | 0.00 |
| Mutual understanding | 2.9 | 1.6 | 0.00 |
| Participation in joint projects | 2.3 | 0.9 | 0.00 |
| Empathy for the successes and failures of individual members of the group | 1.8 | 1.1 | 0.00 |
| Approval and support | 2.1 | 1.3 | 0.00 |
| Respect for the opinion of others | 2.0 | 1.2 | 0.01 |
| Emotional unity in difficult moments for the group | 1.8 | 1.3 | 0.01 |
| Experiencing the achievements and failures of the group | 0.7 | 1.0 | 0.03 |
| Attitude to new members of the group | 1.9 | 1.5 | 0.01 |
| Participation in socially useful work | 1.4 | 0.8 | 0.02 |
| Fair attitude to all members of the group | 1.7 | 1.3 | 0.05 |
| A sense of pride in the group if it is noted by leaders/educators | 1.6 | 1.3 | 0.09 |

The study revealed that the students surveyed in 2019 showed better results on almost all the indicators that were tested by the questionnaire. The findings suggest that the students whose university studies were not influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic considered their academic groups to have more mutual understanding, greater desire to cooperate with other teams, better mood in the team, greater desire to participate in the joint affairs, etc., in comparison with the students who experienced a period of distance learning at the initial stage of their studies.

The consistency of the results and the better performance of the groups of first-year students whose university studies were not carried out in the online format must be treated as the evidence of the influence of distance learning on the psychosocial sphere of adaptation (the psychological climate in academic groups, in particular). We observed deterioration in such important factors of the psychological climate in the study group as approval and support (−0.8), empathy for the successes and failures of individual members of the group (−0.9), and manifestation of goodwill in relationships (−1). The indicators of psychological climate that demonstrated the most significant changes are as follows: desire to communicate and cooperate with other groups (−1.7), mood in the group (−1.5), participation in joint projects (−1.4), and mutual understanding (−1.3).

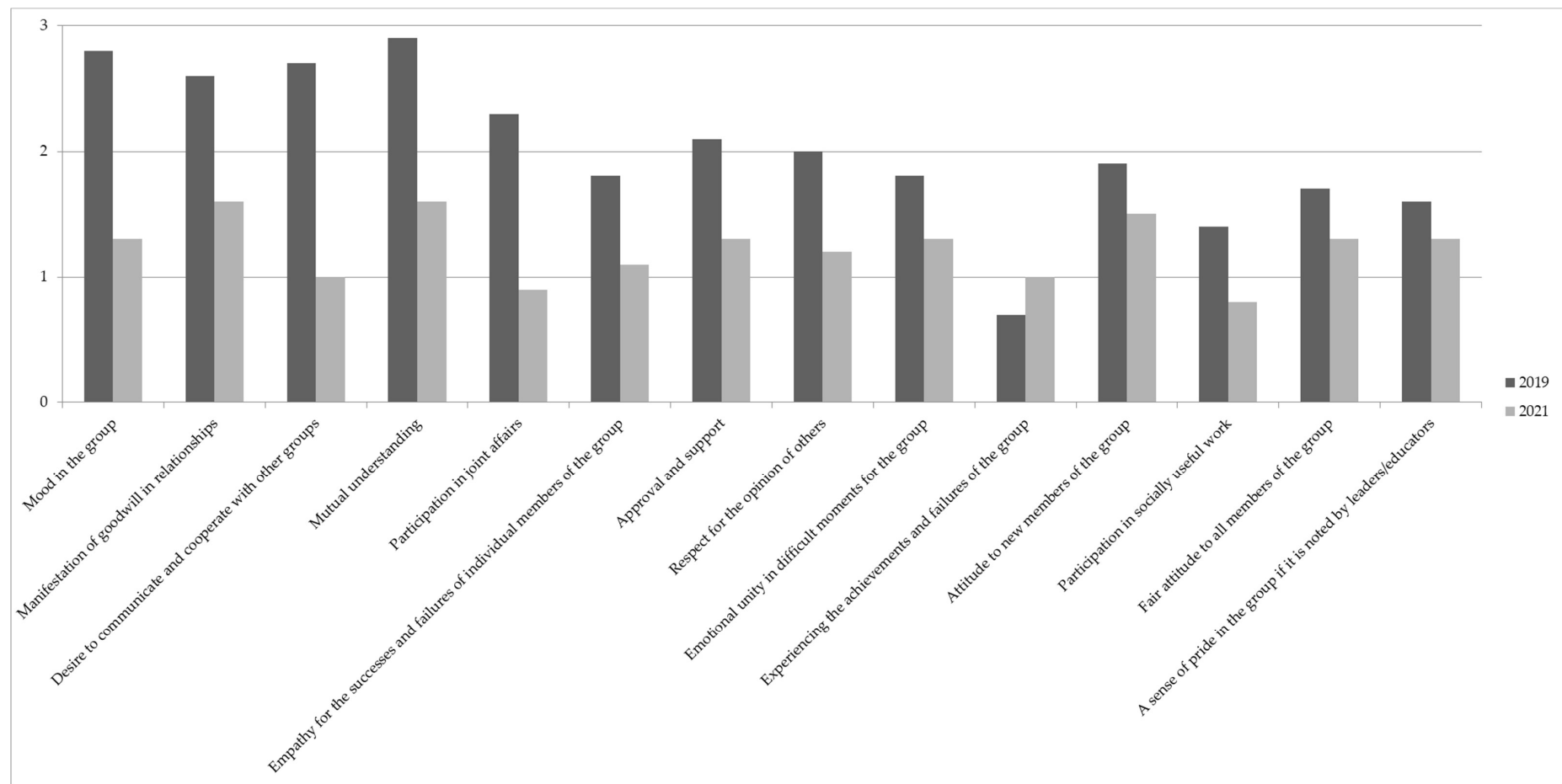


Figure 1. Comparison of the psychological climate of the groups in 2019 and 2021.

4. Discussion

The adaptation of first-year students to the system of higher education determines the psychological comfort of the students, their satisfaction with the choice of specialty, their academic results, their student life, and their relationships in the study group. This problem has become particularly relevant to distance learning.

In this study, we managed to find out more about the psychological climate in first-year students' academic groups after they had experienced the period of distance learning at the initial stage of university studies (due to the COVID-19 pandemic). We also tried to answer the question of how the psychological climate differs from the one in the academic groups of first-year students whose university studies were not influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The poor results of first-year students who studied online may be explained by the insufficient support of peer interaction in the distance learning format of study, resulting in a lack of desire to communicate and cooperate with each other and other groups. They prefer the individual form of work and are less willing to participate in joint projects.

The better performance in the psychosocial sphere of the students interviewed in 2019 can be explained by the influence of the pandemic in general and the effect of distance learning in particular. Evidently, first-year students who were forced to use the exclusively online format of communication did not have a chance to establish rapport and organize peer interaction properly. It can be supported by the findings of other authors who emphasize the fact that many students encounter difficulties related to adaptation due to the lack of the learning environment that involves effective communication between teachers and students [15,21,22]. The interaction between teachers and students is a crucial factor in developing students' academic self-identity and in increasing their motivation. However, one more important factor is students' interaction with their peers during the learning process [25–27,41–43].

Traditionally, when studying in the classroom, this kind of interaction tends to be realized through project activities, teamwork, and students' mutual assessment. It motivates students to analyze and complete assignments and meet all the necessary requirements, and the productive dialogue between students and peers fosters a positive attitude towards learning and leads to successful academic performance by improving the self-regulation mechanism. Teamwork has a positive impact on both the development of educational skills, metacognitive abilities, and self-regulation and on creating a positive learning environment in a group. The most effective language training process can be implemented through the interaction with other participants of the educational process, which is often difficult to organize online.

When teaching English to first-year students, a systematic approach can lead to better results by eliminating problems of academic adaptation, which are often expressed by such conditions as fear, shyness, anxiety, low self-esteem, poor ability to self-regulate, and lack of academic motivation. As the psychological climate plays a crucial role for EFL instruction, measures must be taken to eliminate the negative effects of distance learning. As was mentioned above, feelings of fear, anxiety, and shyness increase in the adverse conditions of an unfavorable psychological climate and impede students' ability to demonstrate good academic results. The support received from teaching staff can ease the first-year students' adaptation process while studying in the online format and influence its academic, social, and psychological aspects in a positive way. Good relationships with peers encourage and motivate first-year students to analyze and fulfil tasks following all the requirements. What is more, constructive dialogues of students within their group help them to foster a more positive attitude to learning in general and to improve their academic performance due to self-regulation in particular. It becomes evident that teaching staff should focus more on organizing appropriate peer interaction in the distance format of education and should foster team spirit via establishing a good rapport with students.

Online teaching should provide a personal-learning environment in order to adapt to students' learning styles, support collaborative instruction, help set educational goals, and find, categorize, and share information. However, it should also enhance communication

within the study group. First-year students can communicate with their peers, graduate students in academic communities, and teaching staff, including representatives of the university authorities in collaborative activities [16,20,24]. Tutoring is widely used in various areas of life, and it can be effectively applied to higher education as well. The assistance offered by peer tutors has a positive effect on the academic adaptation process and social engagement, and it also provides a higher level of psychological comfort while studying at university [26]. Student organizations aimed at facilitating the process of first-year students' adaptation are successfully arranged by teachers at the very beginning of students' studying at university [27,28]. It means that more attention should be paid to the work of such communities in the online format.

5. Conclusions

Overall, the consistency of the results proves that a better psychological climate in academic groups of first-year students taught traditionally in classrooms must be treated as the evidence of the impact of distance learning on the psychosocial sphere of adaptation. The given study provides another example of the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education. The academic groups of first-year students who had a period of distance learning at the initial stage of university studies due to the COVID-19 pandemic seem to experience more problems in the psychosocial sphere of adaptation. They tend to have less emotional unity with the group and less empathy for the successes and failures of individual members of the group. Such groups are less likely to demonstrate fair attitudes to all members of the group and are less willing to participate in joint projects.

We consider it to be important to organize pedagogical support for first-year students who study online in order to improve the psychological climate in the study groups. Pedagogical support performed through the creation of a distance learning educational environment can improve the effective communication of the participants in the educational process and help reduce the state of anxiety, which will be beneficial to the successful language training at university. Students' English oral communication includes the combination of monological and dialogical speech as well as such forms of interaction as a discussion and a cross-discussion with other groups. Despite the high level of digitalization of the educational process and a wide range of technologies used, communication in the distance format may be organized less efficiently than in the traditional format, especially when peer interaction is not organized well enough. Online learning can be performed via various digital means of organizing the communication of the participants in the educational process (video conferencing, messengers, and communication tools integrated into the LMS), though it may be difficult for the teachers to monitor and control the process of discussion within the groups. To increase the efficiency of the educational process in general, and language training in particular, it is necessary to propose clear requirements for the interaction mechanisms to support students' learning activities in a distance learning environment. It is also essential to implement the requirements into educational programs in order to create an online learning environment that can facilitate the process of student peer interaction, in order to create a positive psychological climate in study groups.

The study highlights the importance of the improvement of the psychological climate in groups of first-year students instructed online. As it is the initial attempt to assess the influence of the distance learning format on the psychological state of the first-year students, some additional research should be conducted. The main limitation of the study is the fact that a detailed background of the surveyed students (e.g., such as how experienced these students were with using technology) and its influence on the psychological climate in study groups was not taken into consideration.

The above-mentioned points, which were beyond the scope of the given study, could be related to future studies in this area. Additionally, further studies could concentrate on other spheres of adaptation influenced by the distance learning format, such as the motivational and cognitive ones.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, I.K. and T.K.; methodology, I.K., G.B. and Y.K.; software, I.K., G.B.; validation, I.K., G.B. and Y.K.; formal analysis, Y.K.; investigation, I.K., G.B., T.K. and Y.K.; resources, I.K.; data curation, I.K. and G.B.; writing—original draft preparation, I.K., G.B., T.K. and Y.K.; writing—review and editing, I.K., T.K.; visualization, G.B.; supervision, T.K.; project administration, T.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The research is funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation under the strategic academic leadership program ‘Priority 2030’ (Agreement 075-15-2021-1333 dated 30 September 2021).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Institute of Humanities (protocol code 8 dated 31 January 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. van der Zanden, P.J.A.C.; Denessen, E.; Cillessen, A.H.N.; Meijer, P.C. Domains and predictors of first-year student success: A systematic review. *Educ. Res. Rev.* **2018**, *23*, 57–77. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
2. Ata, A.W.; Tran, L.T.; Liyanage, I. *Educational Reciprocity and Adaptivity*; Routledge: London, UK, 2018. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
3. Beech, S.E. Adapting to change in the higher education system: International student mobility as a migration industry. *J. Ethn. Migr. Stud.* **2017**, *44*, 610–625. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
4. Wang, Y.; Li, T.; Noltemeyer, A.; Wang, A.; Zhang, J.; Shaw, K. Cross-cultural adaptation of international college students in the United States. *J. Int. Stud.* **2018**, *8*, 821–842. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
5. Haktanir, A.; Watson, J.C.; Ermis-Demirtas, H.; Karaman, M.A.; Freeman, P.D.; Kumaran, A.; Streeter, A. Resilience, Academic Self-Concept, and College Adjustment Among First-Year Students. *J. Coll. Stud. Retent. Res. Theory Pract.* **2021**, *23*, 161–178. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
6. Odinokaya, M.A.; Karpovich, I.A.; Mikhailova, J.O.; Piyatnitsky, A.N.; Klimová, B. Interactive technology of pedagogical assistance as a means of adaptation of foreign first-year students. *IOP Conf. Ser. Mater. Sci. Eng.* **2020**, *940*, 012130. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
7. Kotzé, M.; Kleynhans, R. Psychological well-being and resilience as predictors of first-year students’ academic performance. *J. Psychol. Afr.* **2013**, *23*, 51–59. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
8. Fam, J.Y.; Murugan, S.B.; Yap, C.Y.L. What worries first-year students? Psychometric properties of the Student Worry Scale. *Scand. J. Psychol.* **2020**, *61*, 410–415. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
9. Arlashkina, O.; Naumova, E.; Tevlyukova, O. Social adaptation of the first-year university students (following the research data). *Theory Pract. Soc. Dev.* **2017**, *11*, 54–58.
10. Islam, S.; Akter, R.; Sikder, T.; Griffiths, M.D. Prevalence and Factors Associated with Depression and Anxiety Among First-Year University Students in Bangladesh: A Cross-Sectional Study. *Int. J. Ment. Health Addict.* **2020**, *20*, 1289–1302. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
11. Vitasari, P.; Wahab, M.; Othman, A.; Herawan, T.; Sinnadurai, S. The relationship between study anxiety and academic performance among engineering students. *Procedia Soc. Behav. Sci.* **2010**, *8*, 490–497. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
12. Fasoro, A.A.; Oluwadare, T.; Ojo, T.F.; Oni, I.O. Perceived stress and stressors among first-year undergraduate students at a private medical school in Nigeria. *J. Taibah Univ. Med. Sci.* **2019**, *14*, 425–430. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
13. Zulkarnain, Z.; Daulay, D.A.; Yusuf, E.A.; Yasmin, M. Homesickness, locus of control and social support among first-year boarding-school students. *Psychol. Russ. State Art* **2020**, *12*, 134–145. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
14. Biasi, V.; Mallia, L.; Russo, P.; Menozzi, F.; Cerutti, R.; Violani, C. Homesickness experience, distress and sleep quality of first-year university students dealing with academic environment. *J. Educ. Soc. Res.* **2018**, *8*, 9–17. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
15. Nallaya, S. An exploration of how first year students are inducted into their discipline’s academic discourses. *Int. J. Educ. Res.* **2018**, *87*, 57–66. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
16. Silva, E.; Green, J.; Walker, C. Source evaluation behaviours of first-year university students. *J. Inf. Lit.* **2018**, *12*, 24. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
17. Adebola, O.O. The use of supplemental instruction in university classrooms as a strategy to enhance the academic performance of first-year students. *Univers. J. Educ. Res.* **2020**, *8*, 6289–6296. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
18. Talsma, K.; Norris, K.; Schütz, B. First-year students’ academic self-efficacy calibration: Differences by task type, domain specificity, student achievement level, and over time. *Stud. Success* **2020**, *11*, 109–121. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
19. Hawe, E.; Lightfoot, U.; Dixon, H. First-year students working with exemplars: Promoting self-efficacy, self-monitoring and self-regulation. *J. Furth. High. Educ.* **2019**, *43*, 30–44. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
20. Ribeiro, L.; Rosário, P.; Núñez, J.C.; Gaeta, M.; Fuentes, S. First-Year Students Background and Academic Achievement: The Mediating Role of Student Engagement. *Front. Psychol.* **2019**, *10*, 2669. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

21. Putra, A.H.; Ahmad, R. Improving Academic Self-Efficacy in Reducing First Year Student Academic Stress. *J. Neo. Konseling* **2020**, *2*, 282.
22. Alharthi, M. First-year students' adjustment to university life: A case study of implementing college buddy program. *Int. J. High. Educ.* **2019**, *9*, 116. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
23. Tinto, V. Taking Student Retention Seriously: Rethinking the First Year of College. *NACADA J.* **1999**, *19*, 5–9. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
24. Gonta, I.; Bulgak, A. The adaptation of students to the academic environment in university. *Rev. Rom. Pentru Educ. Multidimens.* **2019**, *11*, 34–44. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
25. King, A. Structuring peer interaction to promote high-level cognitive processing. *Theory Pract.* **2002**, *41*, 33–39. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
26. Tsang, A. The value of a semi-formal peer mentorship program for first-year students' studies, socialization and adaptation. *Act. Learn. High. Educ.* **2020**. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
27. Voronova, L.; Karpovich, I.; Stroganova, O.; Khlystenko, V. The Adapters Public Institute as a Means of First-Year Students' Pedagogical Support During the Period of Adaptation to Studying at a University. In *Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems*; Springer: Cham, Switzerland, 2020. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
28. Tabolina, A.; Kozlovskii, P.; Popov, D.; Yudina, I.; Snegirev, N.; Tretyakov, D. Socio-psychological Program for the Selection of Students in the Adapters Public Institute. In *Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems*; Springer: Cham, Switzerland, 2020. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
29. Doe, T. *Oral Fluency Development Activities: A One-Semester Study of EFL Students*; ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, Temple University: Philadelphia, PA, USA, 2017; p. 276.
30. Medvedeva, O.D.; Rubtsova, A.V.; Vilkova, A.V.; Ischenko, V.V. Digital Monitoring of Students' Soft Skills Development as an Interactive Method of Foreign Language Learning. *Educ. Sci.* **2022**, *12*, 506. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
31. Brown, H.D. *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*, 2nd ed.; San Francisco State University: San Francisco, CA, USA, 2001.
32. Harmer, J. *Essential Teacher Knowledge: Core Concepts in English Language Teaching*, 1st ed.; Pearson Longman: London, UK, 2012.
33. Council of Europe. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment—Companion Volume*; Council of Europe Publishing: Strasbourg, France, 2020. Available online: <http://www.coe.int/lang-cefr> (accessed on 10 June 2022).
34. Pavlikova, K. Use of Monologues, Games and Problem Solving Activities for Development of Speaking Skills. In *Boosting the Educational Experiencing of Language*; International Association for the Educational Role of Language: Gdańsk, Poland, 2019; Volume 1, pp. 83–92.
35. Ivanova, P.; Burakova, D.; Tokareva, E. Effective Teaching Techniques for Engineering Students to Mitigate the Second Language Acquisition. In *Proceedings of the Integrating Engineering Education and Humanities for Global Intercultural Perspectives*, Saint Petersburg, Russia, 25–27 March 2020; Springer: Cham, Germany, 2020; Volume 131.
36. Marhamah, M. The Relationship between Shyness and Motivation to Speak English of the First Year Students of English Study Program of FKIP UIR Pekanbaru. *J-SHMIC J. Engl. Acad.* **2016**, *3*, 47–57. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
37. Alci, B.; Bademcioglu, M.; Ergin, A. An investigation into university students. Foreign language speaking anxiety. *Procedia Soc. Behav. Sci.* **2016**, *232*, 382–388.
38. Zahiri, A.; Berlin, S. To What extent do anxiety and self-efficacy effect the EFL students' English monologue speaking skill? *Int. J. Educ. Res.* **2017**, *5*, 151–160.
39. Roysmanto, R.A. Correlation between Self-Confidence and the Students' Speaking Skill. *Res. Innov. Lang. Learn.* **2018**, *1*, 1–8. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
40. Gürler, I. Correlation between Self-confidence and Speaking Skill of English Language Teaching and English Language and Literature Preparatory Students. *Curr. Res. Soc. Sci.* **2015**, *1*, 14–19.
41. Karpovich, I.; Sheredekina, O.; Krepkai, T.; Voronova, L. The Use of Monologue Speaking Tasks to Improve First-Year Students' English-Speaking Skills. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 298. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
42. Harris, L.R.; Brown, G.T.L. Opportunities and obstacles to consider when using peer- and self-assessment to improve student learning: Case studies into teachers' implementation. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* **2013**, *36*, 101–111. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
43. Mrudula, P. The Influence of Peer Feedback on Self- and Peer-Assessment of Oral Skills. *Lang. Test.* **2002**, *19*, 109–131.
44. Odinokaya, M.A.; Barinova, D.O.; Sheredekina, O.A.; Kashulina, E.V.; Kaewunruen, S. The use of e-learning technologies in the Russian University in the Training of Engineers of the XXI century. *Mater. Sci. Eng.* **2020**, *940*, 012131. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
45. Medvedeva, O.D.; Andreeva, S.S.; Krepkai, T.N. Teaching listening comprehension through online academic lectures. *IOP Conf. Ser. Mater. Sci. Eng.* **2020**, *940*, 012139. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
46. Karpovich, I.A.; Krepkai, T.N.; Voronova, L. Novice university educators: Professional, psychological and motivational spheres of adaptation. *IOP Conf. Ser. Mater. Sci. Eng.* **2020**, *940*, 012136. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
47. Medvedeva, O. Monitoring Of Students' Soft Skills Development Within Foreign Language Learning Using Online Technologies. In *Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference—Digital Transformation on Manufacturing, Infrastructure and Service (DTMIS '20)*, Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 18–19 November 2020; Volume 63, pp. 1–10. [\[CrossRef\]](#)