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An Insight into Online Foreign Language Learning and Teaching in the Era of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has completely changed and transformed the traditional educational setting. Both teaching and learning have been transformed to online settings at all educational levels. The purpose of this article is to discuss students’ perception of and attitudes to online foreign language learning in the COVID-19 pandemic at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic. The key method was a questionnaire survey, which was conducted among the third-year distant students. The results, based on five constructs/variables, i.e. language skills, learning materials, students’ motivation to study online, preparedness for online teaching and learning, and effectiveness of foreign online teaching, reveal that students do not feel that they have improved their language skills by studying purely online. The results also demonstrate students’ preference for printed materials because they are more suitable for taking notes and retaining new words and phrases, especially when students can highlight them. In addition, the findings confirm that both teachers and students are well prepared for performing their online instruction. Although students felt motivated to study online, these students experience social distance as those who are not stimulated to learn online. Moreover, the results confirm that students consider the online language classes effective, but face-to-face classes cannot be replaced. In this respect teacher’s role is irreplaceable. Therefore, educational institutions should invest in supporting them technically, mentally, as well as financially, in this difficult period in order to ensure and provide quality teaching for future generations.

Keywords: Foreign language learning, online teaching; COVID-19 pandemic

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1. Introduction

This academic year at Czech universities has been run purely online since September 2020 [1]. Therefore, institutions of higher learning had to completely modify and change their traditional, face-to-face classes. Fortunately, most of them had experience with online teaching in the form of the so-called blended learning, i.e., a combination of face-to-face instruction with computer mediated instruction [2]. This was also the case of the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM) at the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic. In fact, FIM was one of the first institutions in the Czech Republic to develop eLearning courses, which started to be used already in 1997 [3] and nowadays, there are more than 200 eLearning courses at this institution. Thus, most of the traditionally taught classes had their online counterparts, predominantly used as supporting online courses for distant students before the pandemic. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were asked to use another online tool – Microsoft Teams.

Overall, at present, teachers at FIM can use the following three online tools in order to efficiently run their classes online: official university e-mail, online blackboard courses, and Microsoft Teams [4]. The e-mail is usually used for informing students about some changes in their course or as teacher’s way of encouraging his/her students in their studies. The online blackboard courses mainly serve as a database of students’ learning materials and a platform for distributing tasks/ assignments and testing. The Microsoft Teams platform fully substitutes traditional classes and represents a platform for running classes online. It has both advantages and disadvantages. As far as the advantages are concerned, it offers a possibility to interact with students and provide almost immediate feedback, record lectures or seminars for those who cannot participate, test students’ knowledge, create virtual rooms in which students can be divided and thus do the teamwork and, in language classes, develop their speaking skills more intensively. On the contrary, the Internet connection might not be sometimes good and the interactions/response time between the teacher and students might be slightly delayed. Furthermore, there is absence of traditional classroom socialization [5], as well as decreased attentiveness [6].

All these changes impose new challenging tasks on teachers who acquire four different roles in this process of online teaching: pedagogical and intellectual role, social role, managerial and organizational role, and technical role [7]. Figure 1 below provides an overview of these roles.

| Pedagogical and intellectual role | Social role | Technical role | Managerial and organizational role |
|----------------------------------|------------|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| Teacher questions and provokes discussions on critical concepts, principles and skills. | Teacher creates pleasant and friendly learning environment. | Teacher is a competent ICT user. | Teacher sets and ensures that learning objectives are achieved, plans learning activities. |

This is also true for foreign language teachers, who have to run their classes purely online. They have to struggle with modification of the learning materials, which is sometimes time-consuming. Furthermore, they face a lack of students’ motivation and engagement [8]. In addition, most of the students are not willing to switch on their cameras so that teachers face just blank screen with students’ initials, which makes teachers’ work slightly uncomfortable.

Research indicates that the online instruction of a foreign language seems to be effective especially in developing reading, listening skills and vocabulary [9]. Most recent findings by Hopp and Thoma [10] show that temporary suspensions of foreign language teaching do not necessarily have detrimental effects on students’ general foreign
language development, even though no or only a small compensatory foreign language instruction took place during the school lockdowns. In addition, the findings of a Chinese study [11] state that foreign language teachers have clear cognitions about features, advantages, and constraints of online foreign language teaching and they have acquired information and communication technology literacy through understanding students’ learning needs. On the other hand, research reveals that students also have relevant skills necessary for online learning [12].

The purpose of this article is to discuss students’ perception of and attitudes to online foreign language learning in the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Methods

The methodology is based on a questionnaire survey, which was conducted among the third-year distant students, who have been studying English as a foreign language (EFL) at FIM already for three years and thus they had a chance to compare traditional teaching versus pure online teaching. All of the students were studying a Bachelor program - Management of Tourism.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 open questions, out of which two questions were demographic and focused on respondent’s age and sex. The rest of questions was divided into five constructs/variables, i.e. language skills, learning materials, students’ motivation to study online, preparedness for online teaching and learning, and effectiveness of foreign online teaching (consult Table 1 below). Students’ responses were collected in the course of summer semester of the academic year 2020/2021. Before students were given the questionnaire, they had been presented with the purpose of the study. The survey was anonymous, it was not obligatory, and students were informed they were allowed to stop completing the questionnaire at any time they wished.

Table 1. An overview of the measurement scales

| Constructs/variables                          | Measured items                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Language skills                               | 1. Which language skill/s and feature/s do you think are good to practise online? Please delete what is irrelevant for you.  
2. Do you feel you have improved your language skills while studying purely online? Please explain. |
| Learning materials                            | 1. What learning materials do you prefer: printed or electronic? Please explain. |
| Students’ motivation to study online          | 1. Do you feel motivated to learn online? Please explain.                        |
| Preparedness for online teaching and learning | 1. Do you think that teachers of foreign languages are well prepared to provide instruction online? Please explain.  
2. Do you think you are well prepared to study purely online? Please explain. |
| Effectiveness of foreign online teaching      | 1. Do you consider online foreign language teaching effective or ineffective? Please explain.  
2. How would you yourself imagine the online foreign language learning and teaching? |

3. Results

The findings show that out of 26 students who study the Course of Practical English, 19 (70%) students eventually submitted the questionnaire. Out of these students 79% were females and 21% were males. Their age range was from 22 years up to 46 years with an average of 31 years.
Figure 2 below then illustrates the language skills and features which students consider the best and worst to practise online. The findings indicate that students would like to practise mainly listening comprehension and speaking, followed by pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. The least appreciated skills are then reading and writing, which in fact does not differ much from face-to-face classes.

As for the improvement of the skills and features described above, majority of students (69%) feel that they did not improve their English because first, their language classes were not held regularly every week, but were divided only into two intensive blocks of six classes each. Second, they reported that they could be lazy and say that their microphone was not working and simply did not respond. Furthermore, they stated that it was difficult to pay attention when studying online and sometimes there were problems with hearing. On the contrary, 31% of students feel that they extended their vocabulary, learned new idioms and were less stressed when being asked to respond.

Figure 3 below indicates what learning materials students prefer. The results reveal that 63% of students welcome the printed materials because they can write in them their own notes, highlight the key information and thus make the text visually more memorable. One of the students also remarked that it hurt his/her eyesight less in comparison with staring into the computer screen. 16% of students would appreciate the electronic materials because they consider them more ecological and easier to work with. The rest of students did not care.
As for the students’ motivation to learn online, the results show that 53% of students feel motivated to study online, while 47% of students do not. The latter is mainly connected with a lack of social contact, especially with their peers, difficulties with concentration, and a need for having more time to respond. On the contrary, those who feel motivated stated that the main driving force was their desire to improve their language skills and knowledge. Moreover, one of the students also reported that s/he was used to motivating herself/himself by being a distant student.

Overall, the respondents think that both the teachers and students are well prepared for online foreign language classes (consult Figure 4 below). Nevertheless, they also indicated that they would rather prefer the face-to-face classes which are more interactive and socializing. They also think that older teachers are less flexible, prepared and willing to run online foreign language classes. But they admit that teachers really try hard to make the online foreign language teaching stimulating.

![Fig.3. Learning materials students prefer](image-url)
Although 47% of students consider online foreign language teaching effective, they still would rather welcome face-to-face classes. 37% of students think that the online foreign language teaching is not effective for several reasons, such as delayed response time, difficulties with understanding due to the bad internet connection, or simply due fewer interactions between the teacher and students. 16% of students were not sure about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of online language teaching.

The question on student’s ideas about the online foreign language teaching generated several stimulating ideas for teachers. Some students admitted that they would themselves appreciate it if their peers had their camera on so that the interactions were faster and learning environment was not that much hostile to a teacher. Furthermore, teachers should send them learning materials beforehand so that students could get prepared for the online classes. They welcome recordings of their classes since they can go through them after the lesson again and make sure that they did not miss any important information or they can clarify once again what they did not fully understand. In addition, breaks in the online classes are important because students report that it is difficult to concentrate for a long time. They also suggest including a combination of online presentations, exercises, videos, and interactive activities into online language teaching to make foreign language learning more stimulating.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the language skills students want to develop most are listening and speaking. This is in fact in line with other studies, such as [13], but partially contradicts with study by [9], which also emphasizes the development of reading comprehension. For instance, Darancik [13] states that students will be more successful and willing in foreign language lessons when they hear and understand it correctly and they can speak it correctly and effectively. The language skill students want to study online least is writing, which seems to be the most boring skill for Czech students. However, as Frydrychova Klimova [14] states in her study, writing has a unique position in language teaching since its acquisition involves a practice and knowledge of other three language skills, such as listening, reading and speaking. Moreover, this skill is ideal for both teaching and learning online. The findings also show that students think that they do not improve their language skills by studying online.

Although nowadays most of the information is spread electronically, students still prefer printed materials to electronic ones, especially when learning a foreign language. They claim that they can retain information more easily by highlighting it. This has been confirmed by other research study by Vilar and Zabukovec [15], who also maintain...
that electronic materials are not convenient for taking notes and they do not give opportunities to students to be actively engaged in study materials. Therefore, the printed materials are especially preferred for deep learning.

The findings reveal that slightly more students feel motivated to study online. Nevertheless, also these students experience social distance as those who are not stimulated to learn online. The results from other research studies [16-17] on online learning in COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate that students are generally less satisfied with online learning and report that their own motivation is decreasing.

As far as the preparedness of online foreign language teaching and learning is concerned, both groups, i.e. teachers and students, seem to be well prepared for online language classes. This is in line with the findings from previous studies [11-12].

The findings of this study indicate that generally, students consider the online language classes effective, but yet majority lacks their face-to-face classes. Similarly, Panda et al. [18] report that online teaching cannot not replace traditional face-to-face teaching. Furthermore, Poluektova et al. [19] state that the communicative environment of the traditional training process is not transferred to the online environment in its original form. With the Internet technologies, it is difficult to provide a strong teaching presence, which is a catalyst for the development of social and cognitive presence and a key component of traditional professional training. In the online learning mode, students are overloaded with self-study and written assignments, and mastering the necessary professional knowledge, competencies, and skills become their own responsibility. Therefore, in this respect, teacher’s role is irreplaceable and therefore educational institutions should invest in supporting them technically, mentally, as well as financially, in this difficult period in order to ensure and provide quality teaching for future generations.

The key limitation of this study consists in a relatively small sample of the respondents. Although the findings might seem limited, they indicate that there are many similarities with the findings of already published research studies.

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