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Current Trends in ELT Educational Communication during Crises: An Overview to the Special JLE Issue

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The sudden emergence of Covid-19 which began in March 2020 up to these days in December 2021 has brought to us, overall, new habits of living and, more specifically, educators as well as language instructors from all over the world have had the urgent need to rapidly change teaching habits so as to adapt to an online teaching due to this pandemic. This special issue offers the readers new approaches and trends on the teaching and learning process of English as a foreign language through various indeed interesting experiments which have taken place at different educational setting during the forced lockdown caused by the pandemic crisis of the Covid -19.

The issue begins with the editorial article headlined *Covid-19: an impromptu or trend-setting factor in research on language and education?* (by L. Raitskaya and E. Tikhonova).

We will try to summarize the different papers from this issue on ELT during the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, we start with an overview of the eleven research scientific papers. The first paper headlined *Dealing with Emergency Remote Teaching: The Case of Pre-Service English Language Teachers in Turkey* by R. Ağçam, Y.E. Akbana, and S. Rathert, offers a qualitative study in which the perceptions of a group of 67 pre-service English language teachers on Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) practices were explored. An interview form and a focus group interview were chosen to obtain findings. The obtained data in this research proved that the majority of the participating student preferred face-to-face lessons than ERT emerged due to the pandemic. The authors of this study focus on the need to help both students and instructors by offering strategies and instructions on how to organise learning and teaching. Ağçam, Akbana, and Rathert conclude by advising the different ELT stakeholders to take advantage of ERT's opportunities.

Secondly, the article *Online Learning During the Covid-19 Pandemic: How Has this new Situation Affected Students' Oral Communication Skills?* by E. Alcalde-Peñalver and J. García-Laborda investigated the difficulties faced by students learning English within the online learning context, paying special attention to oral communication skills. For this purpose, the authors utilized an exploratory survey research design with the aid of a questionnaire. The findings of this research proved that learners highlighted technical problems as some of the main challenges, and they did not feel completely comfortable in the online learning environment because oral communication was completely absent. The participating students also found group video or audio calls to be the most useful tool for enhancing oral communication in English.

Thirdly, the next research headlined *Account of a Foretold Death: Analysing the Response to the Pandemic in Spanish Schools* by A. Chabert concentrated on the relevance of technology accessibility as well as digital competence within the language learning process during Covid-19. The author of this qualitative research analysed and contrasted with the aid of questionnaires on the manner schools and educators in the Valencian region (Spain) helped learners during the confinement in primary education. Through different interviews to teachers from four schools in the province of Castellon, Chabert examined and compared between the nowadays reality of the use of technology in primary school and the national guidelines as well as frameworks offered for teachers.

The fourth article *Who Wants to Learn English Online for free?* authored by R. Chacón-Beltrán and R. Echitchi is aimed through their demographics research at assisting LMOOC developers and, more specifically EFL MOOCs

in Spanish-speaking settings, improving more appealing courses for future learners, taking also into consideration that alternative learning approaches, such as the MOOC, are necessary due to the Covid-19 pandemic. With the aid of a questionnaire, the findings of this qualitative research showed that most learners were middle-aged adults who had completed a university degree. Moreover, results of this research apparently indicate that female learners are more likely to take the courses than their male counterparts. Overall, these findings represent a good starting point for further research with the main purpose of helping educational authorities know how positive LMOOCS could be to reach a wider audience.

The next article *A Telecollaboration Project on Giving Online Peer Feedback: Implementing a Multilateral Virtual Exchange During a Pandemic by M. J.* Ennis, M. Verzella, S. Montanari, A. M. Sendur, M. S. Pissarro, S. Kaiser, and A. Wimhurst dwelled upon telecollaboration as a tool to enhance language skills acquisition, intercultural competence, and digital literacies. These authors described a case of a multilateral telecollaboration project designed to train students on developing collaborative writing tasks. This experiment took place during the Covid-19 pandemic since there was a sudden switch to remote teaching and learning. With the aid of various data sources, such as correspondence, observations, class discussions, surveys, reflective writing, etc, the findings of this research demonstrated that even during a global pandemic, both students and teachers face similar logistical challenges. Yet, this research reveals the resiliency of telecollaboration in the face of extreme disruption and its didactic possibilities to exploit virtual exchange so as to develop learning strategies (such as methods for giving and receiving peer feedback) and meta-awareness of how language is utilized in the real-world (such as the implications of English as a lingua franca).

The sixth paper headlined *The Language of Russian Fake Stories: A Corpus-Based Study of the Topical Change in the Viral Disinformation Spread During the First Year of the Covid-19 Pandemic authored by* A. Monogarova, T. Shiryaeva, and N. Arupova, considered the outcomes of a corpus-based study of Russian viral fake stories which circulated during the year of 2020, the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors proposed a specific method to analyse the both the main themes as well as the dynamics of topical change within the context of the Russian Covid-19 fake story. To this end, a set of tools for extract keywords and their frequencies counts were utilized. The authors evaluated the obtained findings to determine the dynamics of thematic shifts by tracking the changes in keyword frequencies as well as the use of other high-frequency corpus words.

In the seventh article headlined *Students' Perceptions of ESP Academic Writing Skills through Flipped Learning during Covid-19* written by S. Montaner-Villalba*,* the author focused on analysing university students' perception of ESP academic writing skill and, more specifically, Business English written competence in the Valencian Polytechnic University within the context of the online learning during the pandemic Covid-19 utilizing the Flipped Learning approach. The findings obtained in this research proved that the outcomes were positive since most of them showed students' awareness of their needs and ESP written requirements.

A. Otto and B. López Medina, in their article *Promoting Metacognitive and Linguistic Skills: Digital Learning Logs in Pre-Service Teacher Training,* report on the implementation of digital learning logs within an online education university in Madrid (Spain) in the context of pre-service teacher training. This paper is aimed, firstly, at analysing whether the learning logs assisted to enhance learners' autonomy as well as self-reflection and, secondly, to observe whether these learning logs contribute to the improvement of students' linguistic competence using the English language. Participants of this research (n=47), from the Primary and Infant Education degrees, specializing in Didactics of the English language, were required to complete a digital questionnaire on their own experience utilizing the logs, answering questions as for the suitability of logs so as to promote students' language skills and enhance effective strategies to gain autonomy as learners. Additionally, individual semi-structured interviews were carried out to gather information on those students who had not completed the learning log (n=11). The outcomes of this research proved that a huge number of participants agree on the didactic possibilities of learning logs not only as a useful tool to keep track of their learning process but also to improve linguistic skills and metacognitive awareness.

The next article headlined *Pandemic Language Teaching: Insights from Brazilian and International Teachers on the Pivot to Emergency Remote Instruction* authored by A. Sevilla-Pavón and K. R. Finardi reflected on language teachers' experiences from Brazil, Spain, France, Cyprus, Costa Rica, and Taiwan during the pivot to emergency remote teaching during the 2020 pandemic. In particular, the authors were aimed at describing these teachers' perceptions regarding online teaching during Covid-19. Mixed method, consisting of an online questionnaire

as well as focus group interviews, were utilized so as to analyse the data of this research. Whereas, on the one hand, the findings of the questionnaire showed negative aspects, such as that a huge number of participating students did not feel prepared enough due to lack of institutional support and training, the results of the focus group interviews indicated that a vast number of educators showed concerns regarding the limitations of virtual teaching for both examination and interacting, on the other hand, some positive aspects included a chance to develop moreself-directed and autonomous learning. This research overall suggests that, after the pandemic and with due training, some of the online technologies and approaches experimented with will be included into pedagogical practices in hybrid learning, representing a real trend and possibility for language teaching in the post-pandemic context.

The tenth paper *Assessment under Covid-19: Exploring Undergraduate Students' Attitudes towards their Online Thesis Proposal Presentations vs. Face-to-face Presentations* by O. Stognieva and V. Popov is based on the study conducted in the EFL classroom during the fourth year of a Business Informatics degree. It investigated students' perceptions of the thesis proposal presentation involving a Skype online presentation and students' end-of-course assessment experience in the context of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic at HSE University in Moscow. To analyse the data obtained in this study, a mixed-method approach utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data was applied. The findings of this mixed-method research indicated that emergency transition to the online teaching did not affect students' satisfaction or the outcomes of the oral presentation. The authors of this paper conclude giving recommendations for language instructors and students.

The last research paper of this special issue is headlined *An Appraisal Look into Shielded Online Education in Covid Era: Resilience Revisited* and authored by M. Teimortash and M. Teimortash. The article aimed to depict the adversities exerted when online education was required to be implemented due to the Covid-19 spread in Islamic Azad University Tehran. Since the notion of resilience could be introduced in the context of online education, a resilience questionnaire was conducted before and after an online course in the second semester of the year 2020-2021 with undergraduate EFL students specialising at Translation Studies. This Resilience Questionnaire was collected from both the treatment group as well as the control group. The findings obtained through quantitative method showed that shielded distance courses outperformed significantly in promoting students' resiliency during the pandemic era.

In addition to research articles, the special JLE issue brings out several reviews and studies. Thus, the publication headlined *From On-site to online class: The Role of Mediation in Online Teaching Simulation* by O. Polyakova and B. Pastor-García presented the outcomes of a pilot study at the Catholic University of Valencia exploring the relationship between mediation and teaching simulation tasks during a postgraduate course for CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) during the lockdown occurred in Spain due to the pandemic crisis and, thus, held online. The findings of this research were the display of feasibility of the curricular adaptation by offering (1) CLIL teaching simulation planning, (2) teaching simulation assessment sheet and (3) questionnaire responses. These three considerations were closely related to both mediation as well as online education. The authors proved that this research yielded positive effects of the CLIL approach. For this reason, the authors of this paper recommend developing the connection between mediation, online instruction and CLIL teacher training opportunities implementing the lessons learned in an authentic school context.

The systematic review headlined *Language Education in Emergencies: A Systematic Review of Empirical Research* is authored by A. Thumvichit, S. Varaporn, and V. Tuvachit. These researchers bring together the available research within the field of language learning and teaching in the current emergency context so as to analyze the state of affairs, and the situation's inherent challenges and opportunities for both language instructors and learners. The authors of this systematic review article included a total of 38 studies in order to reflect the current trend, with 16 of these in-depth reviewed. A vast number of publications were carried out in the context of University education. Thumvichit, Varaporn and Tuvachit conclude their work, highlighting that teachers do their best to retain their teaching principles and implement them regardless of the abrupt transition.

This special issue on *Current trends in ELT during the Covid-19* ends with a review of the book entitled *University and School Collaborations during a Pandemic. Sustaining Educational Opportunity and Reinventing Education* (2022) edited by Fernando M. Reimers and Francisco J. Marmolejo. The book review is authored by Anastasia V. Lazareva.

As seen from this brief introduction, the special issue addresses a wide range of interesting topics relevant not only to the current world crisis but to other complicated situations in language learning and teaching. It is self-evident that technology and active participation of different educational stakeholders play a significant rule in overcoming the constraints that teaching during crises bring about. In this sense, this special issue is a good collection of experiences that can provide ideas to both researchers and practitioner teachers. It is the editors' hope that the potential readers will enjoy this special issue as much as we did when preparing it. We want to extend our gratitude to the authors who wrote, revised and worked thoroughly on their papers, to all the reviewers who gave suggestions on improving the original submissions, and also to the JLE editors who gave us the possibility to provide the international readership with life experiences that have changed the way we currently understand Language & Education.

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Covid-19: An Impromptu or Trend-setting Factor in Research on Language and Education?

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With the flood of research on Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021, pandemic-induced emergency is giving rise to new unprecedented challenges for all strata of the society, including science and education. The JLE editors focus on the first outcomes and hurdles the pandemic-caused research publishing has led to. The authors dwell upon the research on education in the context of Covid-19 constraints with a special accent on higher education and L2 teaching, considering the key trends as a response to the gaps in the field knowledge. Some attention is paid to emerging linguistic research and new word coinages to define the new phenomena. The editors summarize the obstacles that "fast-track" publishing and shortened peer review have built up, suggesting some estimates as of the Covid-19 effects of the research avalanche for science.

Keywords: Covid-19, higher education, emergency remote teaching, emergency publishing, neologisms

Covid-19 Effects: Setting the Stage

Starting with the outbreak of the novice Covid-19 infection, in addition to the human toll it causes, the world has been facing significant material and non-material losses elsewhere. Though, the magnitude of the losses is still uncertain, as some indirect consequences may follow this watershed period for the humanity with some delay. Many aspects of human life will never be the same. Disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are multiple across different sectors and areas of life (Reimers & Marmolejo, 2022). The pandemic impeded, accelerated, or accentuated the previously existed trends and societal problems (Ahlburg, 2020).

Journals and publishers throughout the world "claimed unprecedented volumes of journal submissions and published articles"[1] in 2020. The rise has further accelerated in 2021. Research in medicine accounts for the bulk of the avalanche submissions. The Covid-related growth in publications is essentially fuelled by medical research on Covid-19. According to Dimensions[2], the world's largest linked research information dataset, covering 122 m publications across all research fields, the skyrocketing growth in medicine research resulted in 412,221 publications; 20,282 datasets; 13,182 grants; 2,291 patents; 13,459 clinical trials; and 7,291 policy documents for both 2020 and 2021 (as of November 30, 2021). The major fields of research include Medical and Health Science (219,808), Public Health and Health Services (105,528), and Clinical Sciences (71,548). The total citations of the above documents worked out at 1,247,780 and 2,190,704 in 2020 and 2021 respectively.

The estimates are based on "Covid-19" as the keyword search enquiry and limited by the publication period of 2020 and 2021 (incomplete data). The second search was conducted on the keyword "Covid-19 and education" enquiry, showing 24,664 publications (of which 8,901 in 2020, and 15,743 in 2021 – incomplete data). The most

[1] https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2020/11/19/guest-post-scientific-output-in-the-year-of-covid/

[2] All statistics in this section are borrowed from http://app.dimensions.ai(as ofDecember 2, 2021in response to the search enquiries "Covid-19" and "Covid-19 and education").

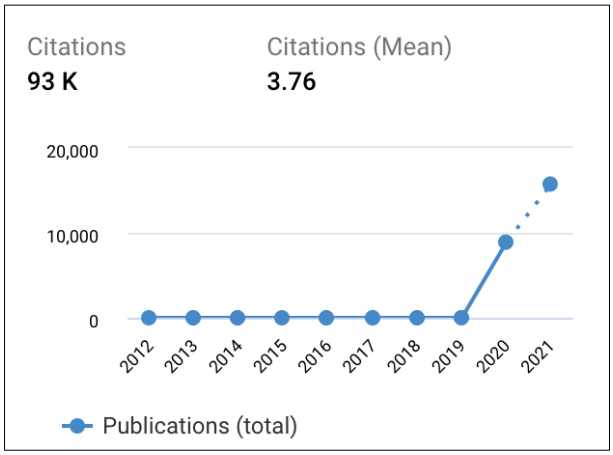
prolific authors (2020-2021) were Muhlasin Anrullah with 31 publications; Daisy E. Fancourt with 21 articles, Andrew Patrick Steptoe with 15 publications.

The fields of research embrace Medical and Health Sciences (9,632); Education (9,218); Specialist Studies in Education (8,732); Public Health and Health Services (7,450); and Curriculum and Pedagogy (3,237). The total publications (24,664) were categorized as 20,237 articles; 1,990 preprints; 1,312 proceedings; 974 book chapters; 120 edited books; and 31monographs.

The leading source titles include SSRN Electronic Journal (558); medRxiv (440); International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health (296); JMIR Preprints (261); Sustainability (221); PLOS ONE (188), and others. Open access (OA) has become the prevailing form of publications in 2020-2021, with 19,350 open access research out of 24,664, including Gold OA (9,952), Closed OA (5,314), Bronze (4,390), Green (2,753), and Hybrid (2,255). The Covid-19 situation has obviously encouraged open access and preprint proliferation. Citations of the Covid-19-related educational research had reached 93K by December 1, 2021.

Figure 1

Publications and Citations of Research on Covid-19 Impact on Education



Source: Dimensions Data Platform, as of November 30, 2021.

The publication trends and patterns found on the Dimensions platform are supported by those in the Scopus database. The total number of publications on Covid-19 in both 2020 and 2021 worked out at 230,109 as of December 4, 2021. 178,580 publications out of 230,109 are open access of all types. The breakdown of the publications shows the same prevailing fields of research: Medicine (141,584 publications), Social Sciences (32,006 publications), and others. The most frequent affiliations include Harvard Medical School (3,234 publications), the University of Toronto (2,339 publications), Inserm – the National Institute of Health and Medical Research, France (2,205 publications), Oxford University (2,112 publications), and Huazhong University of Science and Technology (1,928 publications). The research geographically spreads among the USA (57,395 publications), the UK (23,646), China (21,462), Italy (18,174), India (16,634), and other countries with fewer than 10,000 publications each.

The search on "Covid-19 and education" in the Scopus database brought 20,173 publications (5; 6,845; 13,210; and 113 publications in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 respectively) on December 3, 2021. The bulk of the articles were published in the fields of Medicine (9,969 publications), Social Sciences (6,796 publications), and Computer Sciences (2,364 publications). The journals, leading by the number of the publications on the Covid-19 impact on education, are *Sustainability Switzerland*, *Education Sciences*, and *Academic Medicine*.

Educational Landscape

Though the sector of education is beyond the matters of life and death, it was severely affected by disruptions and lockdowns. The emergency shift of the teaching and learning to the online platforms took enormous effort

of all the parties concerned (teachers, faculty, administration, and students). To alleviate the effects of the pandemic, universities had to comprehensively respond to the educational landscape formed in emergency, to address challenges ranging from the societal constraints to student disengagement with learning, and to fill up the skill gaps facilitating independent learning and remote teaching. The research focus in the field of education, thus, has been following the needs to fill up the gaps connected with online didactics competencies, psychological adaptation of students and occasionally teachers to the virtual classroom, new efficient forms of online assessment. Some fresh new topics have emerged (emergency remote teaching and learning; new approaches to online assessment; teacher engagement and emotion regulation in coping with stress caused by online teaching).

Semanticscholar.org ranges the most influential publications, outlining highly influential citations identified by "utilizing a machine-learning model analysing a number of factors including the number of citations to a publication, and the surrounding context for each". [3] The article scored most in this category (with the total citations of 652, including 55 highly influential citations as of November 30, 2021) is headlined "Covid-19 and online teaching in higher education: A case study of Peking University" (Bao, 2020). The article overviews six prevailing instructional strategies based on "high-impact principles of online education" (Bao, 2020, p.113). It took universities days to transfer their face-to-face courses and materials online, with faculty members, lecturers, professors, and students being essentially deficient in some online skills. The research attracted much attention as it became of the earliest published papers (accepted for publication March 20, 2020) focusing on the more or less successful instructional online strategies in the tertiary institutions.

Educational Research: Tackling the Pandemic Challenges

This editorial does not aim to make a detailed in-depth review of the publications on the Covid-19 impact on education. Anyway, we have examined a range of the relevant research published in 2020 and 2021 and found that there are clear-cut topics of interest across the educational aspects of the pandemic. As JLE tends to stay within its scope, we have focused on higher education issues, L2 and EFL teaching, psychological aspects of adaptivity to emergency remote learning and teaching, technology-driven language teaching during a pandemic, online assessment in education, especially in language learning. The most of the research agenda is not brand-new. To be precise, it looks like revisiting many interrelated topics in the context of emergency shift to new patterns of teaching and learning.

During the pandemic, universities arose as the centres engaged in conducting comprehensive research aimed at filling the knowledge gaps as far as emergency remote learning and teaching are concerned. Secondary schools do not have enough resources and competencies to take up the issues independently on their own.

Teaching L2 and foreign languages has been tackled as a separate and specific area with its unique approaches in the following research fields and sub-fields and selected sample publications:

> (1) emergency teaching and learning languages with technology during a pandemic, including emergency remote teaching and learning (Charania et al., 2021; Cheung, 2021; Choi & Chung, 2021; Hazaea, Bin-Hady & Toujani, 2021; Ionela, 2020; Levina, Zubanova & Ivanov, 2021; Moser, Wei & Brenner, 2021);
>
> (2) online assessment in teaching languages (Abrar-ul-Hassan, Douglas & Turner, 2021; Mahapatra, 2021);
>
> (3) psychological challenges, adaptivity, learner and teacher autonomy, student engagement and motivation, teacher stress and coping (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020; Resnik & Dewaele, 2021; Gregersen, Mercer & MacIntyre, 2021; Heydarnejad, Zareian, Ghaniabadi & Adel, 2021).

Defining New Phenomena: Research on New Word Coinages and Usages

All major fateful periods in human history always give rise to new word coinages and usages in all world languages to reflect the emerging phenomena and attendant circumstances. The pandemic broke out in the

[3] https://www.semanticscholar.org/faq#influential-citations

time of worldwide access to linguistic big data that registered a simultaneous and synchronized inflow of the new words and new meanings into almost all languages.

The most impressive influx was registered as early as the first four-six months from the beginning of the pandemic. The Oxford English Dictionary regularly contributes updates to the dictionary, with some 100-500 entries every 2-4 months. The year of 2020 was not an exception. It is surprising that really new coinages in English were few (Covid-19, covidiot, covident). Most of the updates to the Oxford dictionary covered words with new connotations. You will find below an abridged list of the neologisms, new connotations of the existing words, frequently used words and phrases related to or associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Where appropriate, we state the years, when these words or phrases were originally or repeatedly registered in the discourse (see the brackets).

An Abridged List of the Covid-19 Related Neologisms, New Connotations, and Frequently Used Words (Phrases)[4]

Words & Phrases with New Connotations

coronavirus (1968; 2008)
SARS "severe acute respiratory syndrome" (2003)
social distancing (1957)
self-isolating (1841)
self-isolation (1834)
shelter in place (1976; 1994)
self-quarantined (1878)
infodemic (2003)
elbow bump; hand slap; high five (1981)
WFH "working from home" (1995)
PPE "personal protective equipment" (1934 as a full phrase; 1977 as an abbreviation)

New Coinages 2020-2021

Covid-19[5] (2020)
SARS-CoV-19 (2020)
covidiot (2020)
covidient (2021)

Frequently Used Words & Phrases (Frequencies are measured per million tokens)

pandemic
stay-at-home
furlough
lockdown
(phased) reopening
school closure
non-essential travel
flu-like
Zoom
disinfectant
mask
face-covering
ICU "Intensive Care Unit"
telemedicine
frontline worker/ employee/ staff

[4] Based on the neologisms and frequently used words (phrases) collected by the researchers (Asif, Zhiyong, Iram & Nisar, 2021; Lei, Yang & Huang, 2021) and the updates to Oxford English Dictionary published at http://public.oed.com/updates/

[5] One should note that the name of the disease is spelled as both "Covid-19" and "Covid-19". There is a clear preference of the spelling with an initial capital in British English, while American English gives preference to the word with full capitals, i.e. Covid-19. See https://public.oed.com/blog/using-corpora-to-track-the-language-of-covid-19-update-2/

It is natural that research publications on neologisms should come out amid the emerging new social and political realia. In this instance, the publications were not numerous but arouse wide public interest as they concentrated on the emerging discourse.

The trend was registered in various languages: in Polish (Cierpich-Kozieł, 2020; Jablonka, 2021); in Arabic (Haddad & Montero-Martínez, 2020); in Portuguese (Jablonka, 2021); in Spanish (Zholobova, 2021), etc. The bulk of the new words and usages were initially formed in English and borrowed by other languages. The researchers single out metaphor-based neologisms, consider linguistic innovation during the Covid-19 pandemic, analyse the ways the lexeme "coronavirus" influences various languages.

Trending neologisms in English also became the object of study, with several articles containing a deep linguistic analysis (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021; Asif, Zhiyong, Iram & Nisar, 2021; Lei, Yang & Huang, 2021; Wang & Huang, 2021). The researchers focus on the ways the new words are coined, the spread of the new usages of the words and phrases dating back to previous epidemics or associated circumstances. A striking feature of the present-day lexical update is rather frequent use of medical terms in everyday discourse of mass media and people at large. "These terms are used widely on social media and press conferences of different medical fields globally" (Asif, Zhiyong, Iram & Nisar, 2021). For example, they include "asymptomatic", "community spread", "flatten the curve", "ventilator", immunity", names of medicines, and others. Social media contributed much to the spread of these terms and new usages.

Scholarly Publishing and Peer Review in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Though, the medical scholarly community in China initially had an edge over their colleagues elsewhere as the Covid-19 outbreak started there, the involvement of researchers in other countries followed the way the virus was spreading (India, Europe, the USA). An analysis of publications on both Covid-19 and its impact on education shows the similar pattern, with the USA, the UK, and China being the most numerous publications (Scopus; Dimensions; PubMed).

The drive to get their research published, on authors' part, and to bring out articles written on the top priority themes, on journals' part, resulted in the flood of Covid-19 publications. It raised again the problem of critical peer reviewing, as fast-track publishing eventually induces inadequate or unfair evaluation of some research. As peer review aims to ensure that only valuable scientific contributions based on scientific methodology should be published, its shorter time and fast-track conditions might ruin unbiased review feedback. Thus, the scholarly community is inclined to suggest that open peer review should be encouraged as it is the simplest and most efficient way to evaluate new research without bias or mistake. Open peer review and Publons may promote the ethical standards in reviewing by detecting fraudulent peer reviews and fake reviewers' identities via proving digital identity verification and blocking fake reviewers' accounts (Teixeira da Silva & Al-Khatib, 2021).

One more feature of publishing during the Covid-19 pandemic is open access and preprints. In his interview to The Scholarly Kitchen blog, Daniel Hook, CEO of Digital Science, underlines that "many publishers have made the research … freely available through a variety of different mechanisms".[6] Open access popularity is proved by the statistics of the Covid-19 publications.[7] He also comments on preprints as being a "double-edged sword" with their universal access to the research content fresh from the labs. Immediate awareness of scientists of the cutting-edge research combined with open pre-publication discussion may occasionally result in misinterpretation of the research results by "general public" that has no understanding of scholarly communication. Thus, general public sometimes may come to wrong conclusions.[8]

In addressing old and new challenges that scholarly publishing faces, world scholarly community will have to further proceed with Open Science without delay, especially against the pandemic backdrop.

[6] Harington, R. (2020). How Covid-19 is changing research culture: An interview with Daniel Hook, CEO of Digital Science. *The Scholarly Kitchen*. https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2020/06/24/how-covid-19-is-changing-research-culture-an-interview-with-daniel-hook-ceo-of-digital-science/

[7] Dimensions Data Platform as of November 30, 2021. Detailed information is given above (Section "Covid-19 effects: setting the stage").

[8] Harington, R. (2020). How Covid-19 is changing research culture: An interview with Daniel Hook, CEO of Digital Science. *The Scholarly Kitchen*. https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2020/06/24/how-covid-19-is-changing-research-culture-an-interview-with-daniel-hook-ceo-of-digital-science/

Concluding Remarks

The Covid-19 pandemic and pandemic-induced rather long period of constraints in social life worldwide have caused some shifts in social patterns applicable to education and scholarly publishing. Education has suffered from shifts to emergency remote teaching and a new paradigm of schooling and learning in the essentially virtual environment. The latter has become the major cause of stress and disengagement for students. With much progress in overcoming slow or delayed adaptation of students and teachers to the new virtual challenges, education at large is revisiting many concepts previously considered immutable or habitual (assessment in language learning; student and teacher engagement; teacher stress and coping; emotion regulation, etc.).

The pressure to urgently publish articles on the emergent topics resulted in the avalanche publishing, with the publishers introducing shorter fast-track peer review. The latter has led to some ill-conceived and sometimes errant publications.

The Covid-19 pandemic has generated a great inflow of new words and usages into languages throughout the world, increasing the research published on the topic.

Though still being formed, the emerging research agenda combines publishing brand-new issues and revisiting older concepts and topics.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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Ağçam, R., Akbana, Y. E., & Rathert, S. (2021). Dealing with Emergency Remote Teaching: The Case of Pre-Service English Language Teachers in Turkey. *Journal of Language and Education, 7*(4), 16-29. https://doi.org/10.17323/jle.2021.11995

Dealing with Emergency Remote Teaching: The Case of Pre-service English Language Teachers in Turkey

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Education has been offered in the form of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) worldwide since March 2020 due to the spread of Covid-19. This compulsory transition has often been marked by disregard of the technological infrastructure of educational institutions, digital literacy skills of teachers and students, and their access to technology. A growing body of research discusses challenges faced in ERT; however, further studies are needed to arrive at validated conclusions to inform formal language teaching and learning. Against this backdrop, this qualitative study aimed at adding context-dependent knowledge to the literature by reporting on the case of university students majoring in language teaching. For this reason, the perceptions of a group of 67 pre-service English language teachers on ERT practices at a Turkish state university were explored. Data were collected through an interview form developed by the researchers and a focus group interview. The data were analysed inductively using content analysis. Half of the participants reported that specific skills were conducive to doing tasks in an ERT environment. They not only reported a variety of challenges related to the perceived ineffectiveness of learning, technical insufficiency, and inappropriateness of the learning environment, but also acknowledged contributions to their personal and academic development. That is, they found ERT flexible, time-saving, and favourable for learners who felt more confident in virtual classrooms, and some considered ERT as an opportunity for self-actualisation. Nonetheless, the majority favoured face-to-face education over ERT appreciating the enhanced effectiveness of in-class education. In sum, the study emphasises the need to support learners and teachers by providing instructions and strategies on how to organise learning and teaching. Moreover, schools, policy makers, and governmental authorities may need to provide ERT-tailored programmes and an infrastructure in terms of technical equipment to meet the requirements of education delivered in ERT and to realise effective language learning in virtual environments. Broadening the knowledge base concerning ERT in language teacher education, this study advises to address drawbacks of ERT and to take advantage of its opportunities.

Keywords: Covid-19, English language teaching, emergency remote teaching, online learning, pre-service teachers

Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak not only raised health concerns globally (WHO, 2020, March 11), but also forced education to be run behind computer screens in a remote way (Crawford et al., 2020). Due to the uniqueness of this unprecedented educational shift, the term 'emergency remote teaching' (henceforth, ERT) was introduced, and gained popularity in research even though the concepts of virtual teaching and remote education have long been on the agenda. Although the terms are often used interchangeably in the relevant literature, ERT, virtual teaching, remote education, distance education, and online learning have been distinguished from one another in different sources. Bilton-Ward (1997), for instance, identified virtual teaching as the utilisation of videoconferencing tools when teachers and learners are in different locations. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) distinguished between distance education and remote education by stressing that the former refers to a spatial and temporal distance between learners and teachers or learning resources, while the latter applies to a special distance exclusively. According to Gedik et al. (2013), online learning is a form of education in which courses are delivered partially or completely online either synchronously or asynchronously. Of relevance for the context of this study is the introduction of the term ERT, which denotes a form of remote teaching when—as in

the case of the Covid-19 pandemic—the cancellation of in-class teaching is the only option available (Hodges et al., 2020). A growing body of research has examined ERT practices exploring stakeholders' perspectives encompassing teachers, learners, school administrators, and policy makers. Technological and pedagogical challenges were identified at different levels ranging from governmental and institutional domains to classrooms with teachers and learners and their individual needs (Hazaea et al., 2021). Nonetheless, due to the novelty of ERT, there is still a need for more studies from various contexts exploring affordances and challenges to inform programme designers, material developers, and teachers assigned to deliver remote education. Reasonably, current research needs to consider a variety of significant factors including but not limited to the technological infrastructure provided by and for educational institutions or the digital literacy of teachers and students.

In their literature review of online teaching and learning practices with a focus on teacher education, Carrillo and Flores (2020) highlighted the need to arrive at new pedagogical conceptualisations that appreciate the integration of technology in general and the implementation of online tools in particular as an opportunity to enrich instructional practices. To this end, the authors advise to investigate teachers' and learners' previous experiences and their emerging dispositions towards online teaching and learning. Given the complexity of delivering and receiving instruction using online tools, teachers and learners should be given opportunities to experience and make sense of this new mode, and to develop roles and identities that differ from the roles and identities they have established as participants in classroom teaching. They propose that contextual factors with an impact on the quality of the experiences such as limited access to technology and internet should not be ignored to minimise factors contributing to exclusion and inequalities (e.g., limited access to technological means). Additionally, they advocate the significance of maximising students' participation in their learning process through useful pedagogical approaches including clear goal-setting, coherent and flexible designs, consistent, and clear monitoring, and evaluation. Finally, they emphasise the need to consider pre-service teachers' and teacher educators' roles and responsibilities in online education to draw implications for learning under the conditions of ERT.

The review of the existing literature on ERT practices in teaching other languages has shown that most of the studies were published in the form of reports that contained solutions to the problems likely to occur in remote teaching of foreign or second languages (Guillén, et al., 2020; Ross & DiSalvo, 2020; Yi & Jang, 2020) and that a limited number of studies explored the views of teachers, students, and administrators on remote teaching practices mostly at the tertiary level (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Ghounane, 2020; Masterson, 2020; Svalina & Ivić, 2020; Syahrin & Salih, 2020). These studies conducted on ERT practices from the perspective of tertiary level students were mostly designed to cover the views and experiences of non-English major students studying subjects other than foreign or second language teaching (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020; Doncheva et al., 2020; Gacs, et al., 2020; Huang, et al., 2020; Hristakieva, 2020; Shahzad et al., 2020; Torun, 2020). Some of these studies revealed that students appreciated ERT practices and virtual classrooms (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020; Doncheva et al., 2020; Shahzad et al., 2020), while others indicated that students preferred traditional classrooms over virtual learning environments due to the challenges put forth by ERT (Al-Nofaie, 2020; Ghounane, 2020).

Investigating Thai pre-service English as a foreign language teachers' (PSEFLTs) competency and perceptions towards remote English language teaching, Inpeng and Nomnian (2020) reported that the participants were not confident in conducting online classes and needed support from their trainers due to a lack of experience. Based on their findings, the researchers concluded that the utilization of social media and online learning technology needed to be explored more fully to effectively benefit from them in teaching and learning irrespective of whether they were implemented under unprecedented conditions such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Conducting a case study on digital learning in foreign language teacher training, Carlon (2020) scrutinized PSEFLT perceptions of the effectiveness of emergency remote education in a blended undergraduate course. He reported that participants acknowledged the effectiveness of teaching when opportunities for social interaction and cognitive involvement were implemented in the course. In the Turkish context, Öztürk-Karataş and Tuncer (2020) explored the impact of ERT on language skills development of PSEFLTs and concluded that it was most advantageous for their writing skills and least advantageous for their speaking skills noting that writing had become the new mode of communication replacing speaking. The researchers attributed this finding to the tendency to nurture writing skills through constant use of homework, assignments, and projects.

In sum, the pertinent literature does not seem to provide evidence on an extensive exploration of perceptions of ERT held by PSEFLTs. Additionally, the studies conducted so far have focused on aspects different from the current study. Inpeng and Nomnian (2020), for example, primarily investigated the integration of Facebook into a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program to promote pre-service EFL teachers' English language literacy, pedagogical knowledge, and ICT skills. Carlon (2020), on the other hand, investigated students' perceptions on the effectiveness of emergency remote education implemented in a graduate course developed within the Community of Inquiry framework. The current study did not focus on an integration of social media platforms or methodological frameworks into ELT programmes, but was carried out with Turkish pre-service teachers of English as a foreign language at a Turkish state university where course attendance was not compulsory during the pandemic.

In order to generate more context-dependent knowledge and to arrive at more valid generalisations, the current study set out to analyse the perceptions of a group of PSEFLTs on ERT practices. More specifically, it aimed to reveal whether and to what extent the participants appreciated ERT practices and what challenges they encountered during their studies delivered through ERT, and to develop practical implications based on the findings. In line with the research aim, the following research questions were posed:

1. What available competencies and support to engage in remote learning do the participants report?

2. How do the participants perceive ERT?

Materials and Methods

Study Design

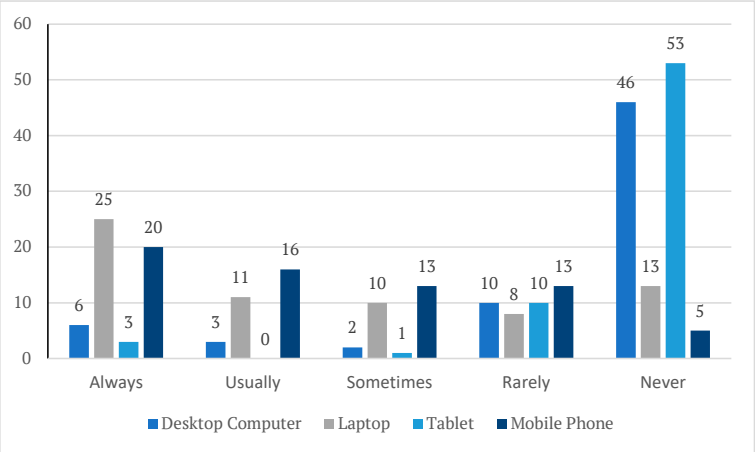
To address the research interest, this study was planned and conducted as a qualitative inquiry following a case study design. Given that there is considerable disagreement on what case studies actually are (Patton, 2015), the researchers were interested in how ERT was experienced by a specific group of PSEFLTs while being exposed to ERT. Restricted through the circumstances of the pandemic which suggested the application of remote data collection tools and excluded, for example, observations, it was decided to employ written and spoken interviews to find out what meanings the participants attached to their experiences and to take their narrations as proxies for reality (Seidman, 2006). This study was descriptive in nature aiming at both detecting general patterns in the participants' reports as well as documenting specific perceptions not shared by the majority of the participants (Yin, 2003).

Participants and Context

Sixty-seven PSEFLTs attending a Turkish state university participated in this qualitative research. Pursuant to the research objectives, they were chosen through purposive sampling, "a random selection of sampling units within the segment of the population with the most information on the characteristic of interest" (Guarte & Barrios, 2007, p. 277). They were young adults whose ages ranged from 18 to 32 with an age average of 19.8. 72% of them were female (n = 48) and 28% were male students (n = 19). Of these participants, two thirds were freshmen (n = 44), while the rest were sophomores (n = 23). Thirty-seven participants reported they had unlimited access to the internet and thirty participants reported limited access. They used desktop computers, laptops, tablets, and mobile phones to connect to the online platform of the university. Figure 1 documents the participant's device preferences showing how often they used certain devices during ERT.

Figure 1

Frequency of device usage



While the results shown on Figure 1 may be attributed to personal preferences or the availability of devices, they show that all learners had access to the virtual courses offered in the programme, which were completely delivered using remote teaching. The university allowed the academic teachers to deliver lessons either synchronously or asynchronously. According to the university's regulations, there was no compulsory attendance.

Data Collection Procedures

Informed by the emerging body of literature on ERT (cf. Mae-Toquero, 2021), an electronically accessible interview form was developed by the researchers to elicit demographic information about the participants and explore their views on ERT practices. The form was comprised of open-ended questions allowing the participants to report their perceptions of the assumed complex issue without being guided by pre-established response choices (Cohen et al., 2007, p.5). Considering the fact that the participants were still learners of English despite their achieved proficiency, the form was prepared in Turkish and they were requested to respond in Turkish to elicit as much and as precise data as possible. The first draft of the data collection tool was revised by three faculty members with in-depth specialization in English language teaching, Turkish language teaching, and curriculum and instruction. Subsequently, it was piloted with three ELT students who would not participate in the study. As a result of the piloting, one of the items was excluded from the interview form as the interviewees reported comprehension difficulty. Finally, ethical approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of the university. Table 1 shows the relation of the research questions to the survey questions.

Table 1

Implementation matrix

Research Question	***Survey Questions***
1. What available competencies and support to engage in remote learning do the participants report?	What do you feel strong about in remote education practices? Do you get help from others/other sources to solve the problems you encounter in the remote education process? If so, please explain.
2. How do the participants perceive emergency remote teaching (ERT)?	What are your thoughts on the suitability of your learning environment in the remote education process? What kind of skills do you think remote education enables you to gain? How do you think remote education affects you (psychologically, socially, financially, etc.)? If you were asked to choose between face-to-face education and remote education after the pandemic, what would you choose? Why? What are the difficulties/challenges you encounter in remote education?

The interview forms were filled out in online sessions which lasted approximately two hours each with the researchers who provided guidance in case of need. Subsequent to the data collection through the interview forms, two of the researchers conducted a focus group interview with ten participants in order to get deeper insights into their ERT experiences. The sessions were held online and lasted approximately for two hours. Rather than asking questions during the online sessions, the researchers used prompts, generated based on a preliminary analysis of the survey data, to engage the participants in a natural conversation that allowed the participants to express their perceptions of remote education while negotiating their experiences with their peers. To avoid pressure, the focus group interview was not recorded, but the researchers took notes and wrote down illustrative quotes to document reported perceptions.

Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data were inductively analysed using initial codes out of which coding categories were developed. At early stages of the data analysis, all three researchers engaged in initial coding of a part of the data; then the initial codes were discussed and aggregated to coding categories with explanatory power (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) through debriefing (McMahon & Winch, 2018). The involvement of all three researchers aimed at attaining consistency between the codes (Creswell & Poth, 2016). After establishing the coding categories, the whole data were re-coded by two researchers based on the established coding categories. In debriefing sessions, the coding results were compared and consensus was reached. Then about 20 percent of the data were coded by the third researcher, and inter-rater reliability was tested using the formula suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 64). The inter-rater reliability was found to be high (.83) as it exceeded the proposed consistency rate of .70.

Frequencies of codes were determined by examining how many participants mentioned a particular code in the survey data. Frequency calculation was not adopted for the focus group interview because this data collection tool aimed at revealing a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions not explicitly stated in the survey responses with no interest in representativeness of the data. To additionally support the validity of the coding categories, direct quotations have been included in the presentation of the data in the results section. As an outcome of the data analysis, one participant's responses were excluded from the data set because they were irrelevant or opaque.

Results

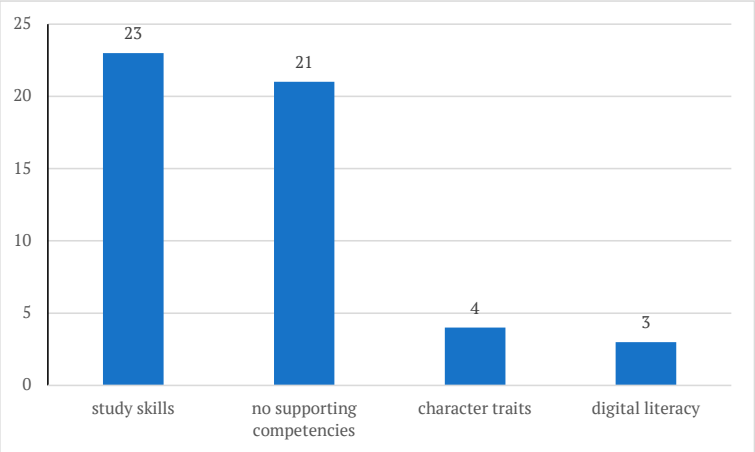
This section reports on the results of the study and is organised following the order of the research questions. The participants' competencies and support were presented first (RQ1: What available competencies and support to engage in remote learning do the participants report?). Then the participants' perceptions were reported (RQ2: How do the participants perceive ERT?). This subsection was divided into three subthemes (*affordances, constraints, preferred education*) to report the specific perceptions. It should be noted that all the data collected through the data collection tools has been integrated in this section. However, the participants did not always answer questions asked and provided other information. For this reason, the reported numbers of responses do not always match with the number of participants.

Reported Competencies and Support

The pre-service EFL teachers reported three different sources that allowed them to deal with the challenges of ERT. A remarkable number of participants stated that they did not have supporting traits conducive to studying under ERT conditions. Fifteen participants did not provide information about available competencies in their responses. The results have been summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Reported Competencies

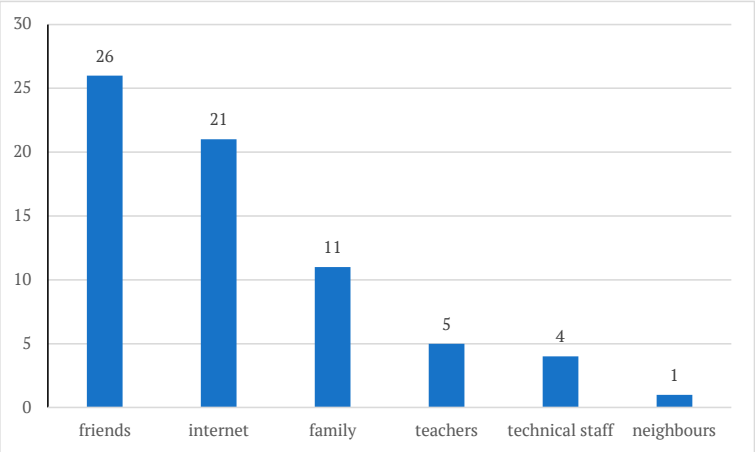


As shown in Figure 2, about a third of the participants pointed to their study skills including constructs of commitment, awareness of responsibilities or research, time management, and linguistic skills as the main support for their online education. Four participants attributed their capability to adapt to ERT with character traits such as patience, empathy, and confidence. Despite the expected relationship between the participants' age group and information technology, only three pre-service teachers stressed their digital literacy. Twenty-one participants stated that no competencies helped them during remote learning.

Another source for addressing the challenges of ERT was the support received from outside. Figure 3 displays the participants' responses.

Figure 3

Support Received to Address ERT Challenges



The participants apparently preferred support from the expertise offered by their friends or the internet. One pre-service teacher stated:

> *It is more than enough because if you can use the internet properly, it turns into an unlimited pool of information and I think I use the internet correctly. (P31)*

The academic teachers were not the first to be contacted in case of problems:

> *It is enough because my family has 12 members and I can reach them whenever I want. When I can't reach them, I ask the class groups. If I do not get enough answers, I report the problem to my advisor. (P9)*

Twenty-four out of 40 participants found the received support adequate, 10 found it inadequate, and 5 somewhat adequate, while one participant did not express a preference.

Perceptions

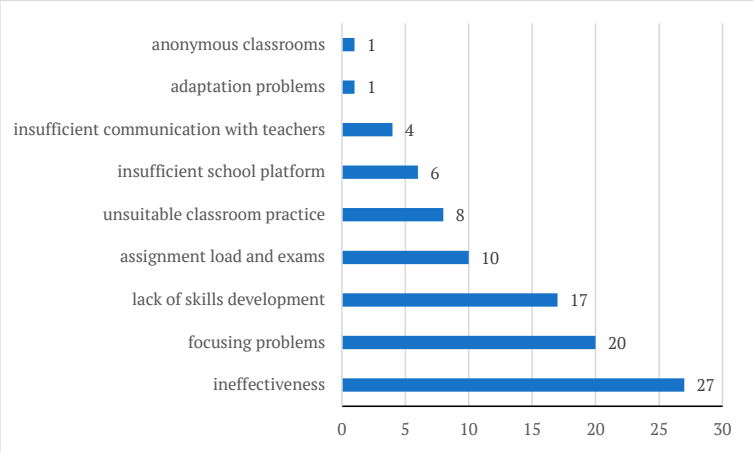
The results concerning the pre-service teachers' perceptions have been presented in two sections reporting constraints and affordances. Within these sections, the emerging themes (learning and instructional practice, learning environment and infrastructure/tools, learner psychology, and wider aspects for constraints; learning and instructional practice, learning environment, and new opportunities for affordances) served as the organising principle to show the results.

Constraints

A variety of negative views on ERT were related to the perceived insufficiency of this form of teaching and learning. The participants mentioned the aspects shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Perceived ERT Constraints on Learning and Instruction



The most frequently expressed concern was that ERT was ineffective without further explications. The other perceptions accentuated different aspects that contributed to the perceived ineffectiveness. Some pre-service teachers remarked that the ineffectiveness was due to a combination of enhanced assignment load and missing feedback due to the inaccessibility of teachers:

> *We have to study more in the ERT modality because we have to follow tasks every week but they don't contribute to our learning because we don't get feedback. (Focus Group Interview)*
>
> *Teachers think that we have a lot of time and give nearly twice as much homework and make exams more difficult. (P37)*

A further negative effect was exerted by the opportunity offered to the teachers to deliver lessons asynchronously by recording videos in which only the teacher's voice was heard:

> *There should be both voice and vision even in the asynchronous classes because some teachers only show presentations. (Focus Group Interview)*

Also live lessons delivered over videoconferencing tools were perceived insufficient in terms of interaction and exposure to the unnatural experience of observing oneself while communicating:

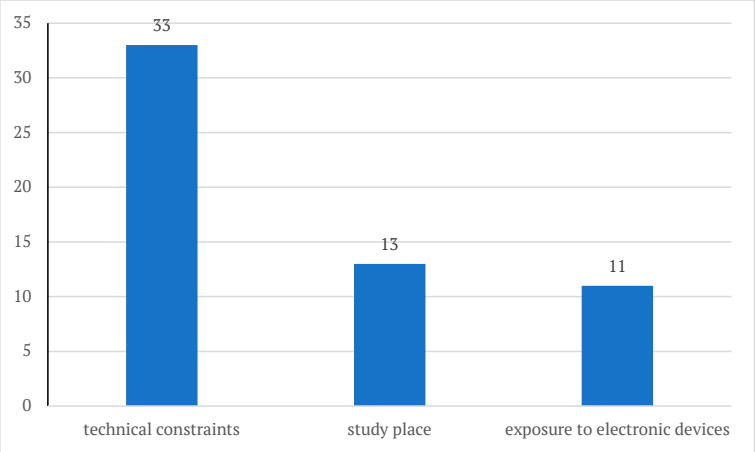
> *In remote education, classes are less interactive in terms of both student-teacher interaction and student-student interaction. (P41)*
>
> *I find it weird because I both see myself in the camera and talk at the same time but in the face-to-face classroom I don't see myself, I just talk. (Focus Group Interview)*

The learning management system of the university (called ALMS) was another factor shaping the students' perceptions due to its limited capacities leading to system crashes and impractical features such as complicated mute-unmute procedures encouraging academic teachers to use alternative videoconferencing tools, instead. It can be assumed that these factors were distracting and made it difficult for the students to focus on lessons, a perception that was shared by 20 participants.

The students' learning environment (usually their homes) and the technical side of ERT were further factors contributing to the participants' perceptions. Figure 5 displays the results.

Figure 5

Perceived ERT Constraints Related to the Learning Environment and Infrastructure/Tools



A considerable number of participants experienced ERT-driven technical constraints referring mainly to malfunctions of devices. The participants specifically pointed to poor internet connection and power cuts. Additionally, they reported on unsuitable devices showing that not all students had their own computers but used other devices (e. g. their neighbours') instead. Along with the online platform provided by the university, the effects on the quality of the education were considered major:

> *Inadequate internet infrastructure in the country and the ALMS used by universities: I believe that remote education is not suitable unless both infrastructure and internet speed are raised above a certain level. (P38)*

Eleven participants pointed to another specific constraint of online education. They said that exposure to digital devices, especially to small mobile phone screens, affected their health negatively by causing "*neck and eye pain and headache because of the computer screen*". (Focus Group Interview)

Some participants pointed out that their homes (usually their parents' homes, often shared with siblings) made studying difficult. For example, one participant reported:

> *Which ones shall I count? As if it's not enough that I'm always at home, I constantly either attend classes, watch videos of lessons I couldn't attend, or do homework. This is very tiring for me. Moreover, I do not have a computer that allows me to fully benefit from online classes. I have to use our neighbour's computer for some homework. (P54)*

This excerpt is insightful as it indicates that ERT removes (or can remove) the study place-workplace distinction and therefore harms the work-life balance. This is also documented in the effects on the learner's psychology. Forty-five participants reported that they suffered from anxiety, boredom, desperation, and demotivation resulting in pessimistic views of their upcoming studies:

> *I am always at home and cannot go out and don't know when this will end but I feel anxious and bored. (Focus Group Interview)*

Another effect on the learner's psychology was documented in the data coming from two participants. They felt that the modality of ERT, forcing students to attend a virtual classroom that is being recorded, exerted an additional stress to their self-perceived low proficiency or confidence so that they avoided attendance or oral participation:

> *Sometimes I do not attend classes because I have difficulty in explaining myself. I think that my teachers may have negative thoughts about me and I have anxiety about how effectively I can use the language in the future. (P3)*

Besides these perceptions related to the immediate or broad school context, two wider aspects were explicitly addressed by the participants. Twenty-three participants mentioned the lack of social contact due to lockdown regulations and eight participants reported on financial drawbacks as they had to buy devices to follow online classes or could not benefit from scholarships. Indeed, the data clearly show that the students' perceptions were shaped in the complex interplay of different factors:

> *Although I am at home, I can't spend time with my family because I constantly do homework, cannot see my friends, and sometimes I have to do group work with people I don't know. (P21)*

> *Remote education has affected me socially and financially. Nowadays, because everything is expensive, I can't afford a computer to catch up with classes, and I have a lot of trouble on the phone, I also have a lot of problems with the internet. (P9)*

The modality of ERT affected the private domain, and the private domain affected the pre-service teachers' education since it had become part of the school domain. All perceptions were shaped by the limited opportunities to socialise and the dependence on electronic devices.

Affordances

The participants also saw affordances of ERT related to instruction and learning; they mentioned the aspects displayed in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Perceived ERT Affordances on Learning and Instruction

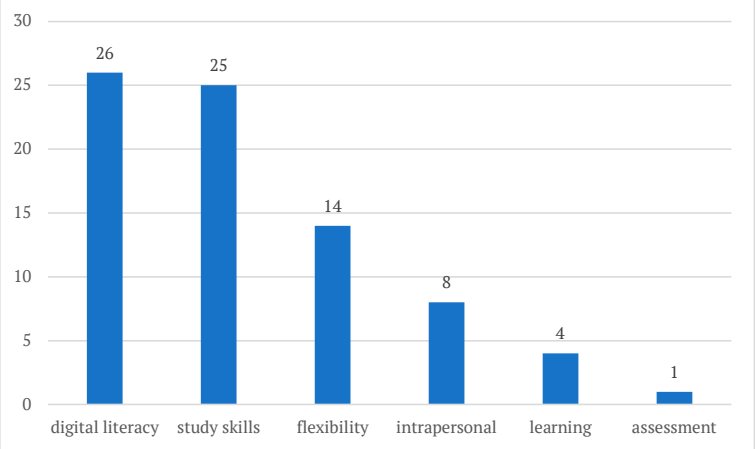


Figure 6 indicates that the participants most appreciated ERT for providing them with the opportunity to improve their digital literacy, which is not surprising given the digital nature of this form of education. A remarkable number also pointed to the positive effect on the development of study skills in terms of creativity, self-directed learning, engagement in activities, problem solving skills, and autonomy. Both digital literacy and study skills actually appeared to be connected in some participants' responses:

> *I use the digital devices for research purposes, which require us to find information, analyse it and then synthesize it using technology. (Focus Group Interview)*

> *Most of the assignments require us to do research. By doing so, I believe our research skills have improved and the knowledge we learn is long lasting. (Focus Group Interview)*

A further advantage was the flexibility of ERT, which allowed students to view recorded lessons to the online platform and to organise their learning based on their own schedule:

> *We can watch the class videos more than once but in face-to-face education what we learn is limited to what we can note down. (Focus Group Interview)*

> *I guess the advantage is being able to go back and listen to the points we miss or overlook. (P38)*

> *I can sleep until noon and follow the classes at night. (Focus Group Interview)*

ERT also seemed to favour the learning of students with strong intrapersonal intelligence such as those who prefer to study independently, or those who shy away from in-class education:

> *I prefer remote education. Taking my introvert personality into account, it relieves me from the feelings of sitting in a classroom in face-to-face education. (P36)*

A rather low number of pre-service teachers appreciated ERT as conducive to learning. As shown in the following excerpt, the effectiveness seemed to depend on the actual instructional practice delivered by their teachers:

> *Two of our instructors encourage us a lot to follow their classes online. They run their classes in an environment full of energy and let our voices come through. We learn a lot from their classes. (Focus Group Interview)*

Contrary to the negative comments on assignments and exams (see the section on *constraints*), one participant stated that the exams delivered in ERT were easier because students were given more time to answer exam assignments, and two participants appreciated ERT as completely unchallenging.

Related to their learning environments, nine students referred to the comfort of their homes despite some disadvantages:

> *I have an appropriate learning environment at home because my family attaches significance to our education, but I am faced with challenges when I need to stay in hospital due to my treatment. (P9)*

> *I have a comfortable learning environment but sometimes there is distraction by noise. (P24)*

Fourteen participants pointed to financial advantages provided in ERT, as exemplified in the following excerpts:

> *I don't pay for house utilities or food and drinks because I live with my family. (Focus Group Interview)*

> *Online education is more advantageous for me because it is economically more comfortable. I also feel better psychologically because I love to be with my family, so I prefer online education. (P12)*

Additionally, twelve students reported new opportunities created by ERT as it allowed them to have side jobs or self-actualise by improving their soft skills, uncover hidden sides of their personality, or explore new areas of interest. Finally, one student stated that ERT was preferable for health reasons in that they felt protected against a Covid-19 infection.

Preferred Education

The participants were asked about their preferred delivery of education irrespective of the pandemic. Forty-eight participants favoured face-to-face education (73%), 14 participants favoured remote education (21%), and three favoured a hybrid form, while one pre-service teacher remained undecided. This result mirrors the prevailing perception of ERT as afflicted by several drawbacks. Despite the acknowledged drawbacks, the pre-service teachers were aware of the benefits of ERT as evidenced in the responses to the fourth survey question:

> *Remote education is a more comfortable educational system, but I prefer face-to-face education because I believe it will be more efficient. (P23)*

> *I don't think remote education has any advantage for me other than being comfortable attending and doing homework at home. I definitely prefer to take my lessons in face-to-face education. I cannot get the efficiency I get from face-to-face lessons in remote education. (P48)*
>
> *I absolutely prefer face-to-face education. Yes, education is not a compulsory thing to be performed within the four walls; however, the fact that education is not conducted in the classroom environment with teacher-student and student-student interaction is again a major obstacle to the development of both teachers and students. It is a difficult process in terms of both social and academic development. (P49)*

The following sections summarise the key findings in relation to the existing literature and offers practical implications for teachers and policy makers in the light of the reported findings as well as suggestions for further research.

Discussion

This study sought to explore ERT perceptions held by first- and second-year pre-service teachers in an English Language Teaching department at a Turkish state university. The results showed that ERT practices were evaluated critically in terms of effectiveness of learning, and the participants expressed concerns about aspects related to their learning environment as evidenced in the unsatisfactory technological infrastructure and home environments inappropriate as study places. Besides perceived negative psychological effects, the participants also pointed to some advantages of ERT as it allowed for improved digital literacy and study skills and offered opportunities to organise learning more flexibly. The perceived advantages, according to some students, created new opportunities in terms of self-actualisation.

The results of the present study are in line with those reported in studies which previously described similar challenges brought about by ERT such as inappropriate learning environments (Al-Nofaie, 2020; Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Spurrier et a., 2020; Uro, et al., 2020), students having limited access to technology and internet (Altavilla, 2020; Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Doncheva et al., 2020; Shahzad et al., 2020; Spurrier et a., 2020), and negative psychological effects of ERT and ineffectiveness of educational practices due to its modality (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020; Al-Nofaie, 2020; Altavilla, 2020; Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Doncheva et al., 2020; Hristakieva, 2020; Russell, 2020; Shahzad et al., 2020; Svalina & Ivic, 2020; Syahrin & Salih, 2020; Uro et al., 2020).

A notable finding is that limited access to technology and internet was the most frequently cited ERT-driven challenge reported by the participants. This mirrors the findings in Carrillo and Flores' (2020) review of studies related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on teacher education contexts. The present study also emphasises Hazaea et al.'s (2021) remark that ERT challenges are twofold as they point to technical and pedagogical constraints.

The results of this paper also coincide with previous research reporting on ERT-driven affordances such as its contribution to the improvement of learners' study skills such as creativity, self-directed learning, engagement in activities, problem-solving skills, and autonomy (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020; Egbert, 2020; Ghounane, 2020; Masterson, 2020; Svalina & Ivić, 2020; Taguchi, 2020; Torun, 2020; Uro et al., 2020) and digital literacy skills were developed (Al-Nofaie, 2020). The acquisition of these skills is critical for pre-service teachers irrespective of their educational level and major. Pre-service teachers are expected to become role models for future generations as creative and autonomous teachers with advanced problem-solving skills are likely to teach their students how to employ creativity, autonomy, and problem-solving strategies to overcome learning challenges.

The data analysis revealed somewhat inconclusive results, which is to some extent expected because individual learners will always perceive instructional programmes and practices differently, and other studies on ERT are in line with the mixed perceptions reported in this paper (Ghounane, 2020; Doncheva et al., 2020; Hristakieva, 2020). This is also mirrored in the participants' overall perceptions according to which face-to-face education was regarded advantageous over remote education by the majority of the participants, especially because the latter was perceived as less effective for learning based on the modality of virtual classrooms with diminished interaction. However, there were also student voices supporting remote learning, and it is obvious that digital

literacy and study skills such as time management or problem-solving skills enabled learners to overcome the constraints of ERT and arrive at some kind of appreciation of remote teaching and learning. In sum, this study contributes to the emerging understanding of the impact of ERT on teaching and learning with its opportunities and drawbacks as it reports on a context different from comparable studies investigating tertiary level students' experiences of ERT (e.g., Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020; Doncheva et al., 2020; Gacs, et al., 2020; Hristakieva, 2020; Huanget al., 2020; Shahzad et al., 2020; Torun, 2020).

Conclusion

The findings of the current study showed that the participating pre-service English language teachers developed skills and traits to achieve tasks in an ERT environment while experiencing several challenges due to technical constraints, inconvenient learning environments, and perceived ineffectiveness of the instructions received. In spite of learner voices expressing satisfaction obtained from opportunities to personal and academic growth, the ERT modality was not favoured by most of the participants, who emphasized the merits of face-to-face education.

Drawing on the results evaluated in light of existing research on ERT, the current study emphasises the need to support students by offering instructional help to deal with ERT by, for instance, organising advising sessions (Ross & DiSalvo, 2020), student-led learning communities (Guillén et al, 2020), and self-access learning opportunities (Mideros, 2020). Specifically related to teacher education, opportunities should be created in which pre-service teachers can share and discuss their own experiences of ERT so that they can benefit from their "values, beliefs and knowledge as an integral part of the learning process" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 183) and are enabled to develop their personal beliefs about and approaches to remote education. In a similar vein, teachers need to receive professional development on how to plan and conduct lessons in virtual teaching environments by sequencing asynchronous and synchronous instructional units (Moorhouse & Beaumont, 2020), creating compelling tasks (Egbert, 2020), and giving efficient feedback (Guillén et al, 2020; Inpeng & Nomnian, 2020), an issue that was explicitly raised by some participants. Furthermore, ERT requires governmental authorities and school managers to provide a technical infrastructure (by providing learners and teachers with devices and learning management systems) and communication channels open to all stakeholders (Hazaea et al. 2021). Moreover, this study suggests that hybrid solutions for teaching and learning may be promising irrespective of the current threat exerted by the pandemic to enhance learner autonomy and to favour the special needs of learners with intrapersonal intelligence (Al-Nofaie, 2020).

This study has limitations regarding sampling and data collection procedures. First, the participants were comprised of a group of pre-service English language teachers at a state university in Turkey. Second, the data were self-reports collected through an interview form and a focus group interview. While these limitations advise against incautious generalisations, they indicate areas for further research. Similar studies in disciplines different from English Language Teaching and other geographical contexts may inform researchers and practitioners about how generalisable the results of this study are and will enhance knowledge of the affordances and constraints of ERT in teacher education. Additionally, observations and data collection tools that invite participants to self-reflect on concrete ERT experiences such as journals or stimulated recalls will reveal deeper insights on how students perceive learning through this modality. Finally, it is desirable to examine to what extent ERT-directed policy making suggested here and in other studies is beneficial to overcome the challenges of ERT.

To generate betterment in instruction delivered through ERT, it is crucial to rely on context-dependent knowledge. This was exactly the motivation for this case study, and the hope is that it contributes to broadening the knowledge base concerning ERT in language teacher education.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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Online Learning During the Covid-19 Pandemic: How Has This New Situation Affected Students' Oral Communication Skills?

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Employing technology has become imperative to accelerate learning efforts and offer methods to enhance interactions between learners, and among learners and tutors. In this paper, we investigate the difficulties faced by learners in learning virtually and, specifically, in English language learning, with a focus on oral communication skills. Research questions of this study are related to the main difficulties that students face to enhance their English oral communication skills. The tools and methodologies that worked best for them for this purpose are also in focus. In the literature we present a review of pertinent studies connected with learning responses in the Covid-19 period and those specifically related to the topic of our study. The methodology used for the study was an exploratory survey research design using a questionnaire to collect the necessary data for our research. Results showed that students highlighted technical problems as some of the main challenges, as well as not feeling completely comfortable in the online learning environment due to the lack of real communication, which also had an impact in the perception of their progress. They also found group video or audio calls to be the most useful tool for communication purposes. The results of this preliminary study are relevant to educational developers and policymakers. They give an understanding of aspects to be considered to improve the efficacy of learners' when it comes to enhancing their English communication skills, such as difficulties regarding interaction or level of satisfaction in an online learning environment.

Keywords: communication skills, Covid-19, e-learning, English as a foreign language, technology

Introduction

People worldwide were stunned after the emergence of Covid-19, which started in the city of Wuhan, China, in November 2019 and then became a global pandemic. Since then, the name of the disease has unfortunately gone from not existing before February 2020 to being part of the daily vocabulary for the vast majority of the world's people (Piller et al., 2020).

The education sector was not immune to these impacts. Following restrictions on physical contact imposed on students and teachers in their schools, the initial educational responses adopted in various countries were school closures and the delivery of online teaching and learning. Presently, faculties have converted their curricula to an online or at least hybrid environment based on a daily or weekly in-person attendance. Even in cases where face-to-face learning has been restored (even partially), the possibility of being able to provide content through an online platform and to be prepared for a totally virtual scenario has also been the norm (Maloney & Kim, 2020)[1].

Unfortunately, this transition to the online environment has not generally been a demonstration of good online pedagogy (Dreamson, 2020; Hirsch, & Allison, 2020[2]) for many higher education institutions around the globe (Wotto, 2020) in not just a few cases due to teachers' constraints and personal issues (Cutri & Mena,

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2020; Perrotta & Bohan, 2020; Romero-Ivanova et al., 2020) which has been generally overcome through the teachers' increase in self-efficacy (Gültekin et al., 2020). Indeed, shifting classes online so quickly became a "double-edged sword" that raised many questions related to privacy, equipment for both teachers and students and teaching and learning methods (Atrey, 2020[3]; Park & Kim, 2020). At the University of Alcalá (Madrid, Spain), where this study was developed, the situation was no different and all teaching activity had to be adapted to an online environment in which the platform BlackBoard Collaborate started to be used for all the classes that were taking place in the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020 (UAH, 2020a[4]). The health situation in Spain improved during the summer and uncertainty prevailed on what the teaching modality would be for the new semester starting in September 2020. Finally, as a preventive measure and also considering the possibilities of having a second wave during the fall, which has actually been the case, a hybrid scenario was adopted and half of the classes have been physically taught with considerable security measures, whereas the rest have been online (UAH, 2020b[5]).

Thus, given this situation, this study aimed to explore the use of technology and its impact on communication skills in learning English as a foreign language during the Covid-19 period specifically at this university. Technology has definitely been a way to reach people, especially learners, during this challenging period in many parts of the world (Jang & Choi, 2020), but it can also entail some problems when it comes to enhancing communication skills, which should always be at the center of the teaching and learningprocess of foreign languages (Myslihaka, 2016). Therefore, these were the Research Questions (RQ) we aimed to answer with our study: RQ1: What were the main challenges students encountered when communicating in English in an online setting?RQ2:What perceptions do students have of the tools and methodologies that have worked best to enhance their English oral communication skills in English in an online setting? These were the Research Objectives (RO) established in line with the above mentioned RQs:

RO1: To analyse students' main challenges when communicating in English in an online setting.

RO2: To analyse students' perceptions of the tools and methodologies that worked best to enhance their oral communication skills in English.

To answer these questions, first of all this paper opens with a general introduction to the Covid-19 pandemic in which the core issues of the research study are described. The difficulties facing students and teachers regarding online teaching and learning are presented through a literature review of relevant works that relate to teaching, learning and educational responses during the Covid-19 period. The analysis of this literature sheds light on the initial responses and obstacles to the use of technology in this period. Then the methodology used to present some preliminary results on how this situation has affected students' oral communication skills in the English foreign language classroom at the University of Alcalá will be explained. Results are subsequently analysed and contrasted with the theoretical part of the paper. Finally, we conclude with some suggestions and reflections to overcome the outlined difficulties.

Literature Review

Online education is a way of maintaining undisrupted learning and facilitating flexible learning during the Covid-19 pandemic (Alhabshneh et al., 2020; Zaharah et al., 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020[6]; Zhang et al., 2020; Basilaia et al., 2020; Kerres, 2020). However, the technological infrastructure has been identified as an obstacle to effective delivery of online education. Alhabshneh et al. (2020) studied the education of dental

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students during the pandemic and reviewed their online learning experiences, tele-dentistry and the significance of implementing dental virtual simulation in preclinical/clinical courses. The study identified that students and teachers faced challenges such as access to online learning equipment, internet connectivity and a lack of technological skills. Zaharah et al. (2020) also examined the impact of the pandemic on e-learning/ teaching activities conducted using technological devices. The study identified difficulties such as the unavailability of online academic systems, internet-connected devices and poor internet connections.

Different countries have been responding to the pandemic in various ways, ranging from a lack of response to social isolation strategies and curriculum redevelopment for online learning (Crawford et al., 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; Bao, 2020; Mulenga & Marban, 2020), which has in some cases been identified as an impediment (Kanwar & Daniel, 2020[7]). Crawford et al. (2020) studied the higher education digital responses of 20 countries during the pandemic. They claim that students and teachers are liable to face difficulties which include different learning style preferences, a lack of social services and medical attention, and the unavailability of efficient/suitable assessment and evaluation methods due to class sizes.

Reimers & Schleicher (2020) proposed an education response to support the exchange of knowledge at all levels of educational governance during the outbreak. However, they identified difficulties such as the unavailability of parents/guidance to aid virtual learning and teaching at home, the absence of communication between teachers and parents to ensure learning is aligned with the curriculum, and inadequate relationships with students. Bao (2020) studied the initiation of online teaching in higher education using Peking University's online education, noting that while teachers lacked preparation, virtual teaching experience, and assistance from educational technology personnel, students also lacked learning materials, self-discipline and a good learning environment at home.

Moreover, online education has an influence on the wellbeing or psychological nature of students (Sahu, 2020; Smart Learning Institute of Beijing Normal University, 2020[8]). Sahu (2020) analysed the impact of the outbreak on the education and mental health of students and teachers and identified challenges such as a lack of resources/infrastructure, the inability to monitor students during online tests to avoid cheating, a lack of internet/accommodation facilities, resilience (Mays, 2020[9]) and traumatic stress (Gross, 2020). Alhabshneh et al. (2020) posited that students faced challenges such as class sizes, feelings of disconnectedness, a loss of teacher immediacy and interpersonal interaction. Reimers & Schleicher (2020) and Zhang et al. (2020) suggested that students often lacked the motivation, strategies, resilience, learning abilities and skills to enhance individual and online learning, and they had poor emotional health and complex home-environments for studying.

When it comes to language learning, since the outbreak of the pandemic various research studies have been published on the many different issues that the process of adapting to this new situation has raised. However, none of them have as their main focus the impact of the pandemic on oral communication skills. Regarding the learning process, Wargadinata et al. (2020) described in their paper the shift in Arabic learning at their higher education institution, which was transformed from a personal-cultural approach to an instrumental-functional approach. In this case, students were more likely to use the video function through the Whatsapp application and have peer-discussion activities. At a more psychological level, MacIntyre et al. (2020) studied language teachers' coping strategies during the Covid-19 conversion to online teaching and showed that this situation had indeed resulted in high levels of stress for them, which undoubtedly also has a consequence on the students' learning process. The report of the British Council (2020)[10] also focused on teachers' needs during the pandemic and highlighted that they perceived online teaching to be more tiring for them as well as for students compared to physical interaction. It also took them longer to plan their lessons and they believed that the success of

[7] Kanwar, A., & Daniel, J. (2020). Report to commonwealth education ministers: From response to resilience. Commonwealth of Learning. https://search-proquestcom.ezproxy.uned.es/docview/2458995621?accountid=14609

[8] Smart Learning Institute of Beijing Normal University. (2020). Handbook on facilitating flexible learning during educational disruption: The Chinese experience in maintaining undisrupted learning in Covid-19 outbreak. UNESCO International Research and Training Centre for Rural Education.

[9] Mays, T. (2020). Towards more resilient schooling: Possible models for the future. Commonwealth of Learning. https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.uned.es/docview/2458993339?accountid=14609

[10] British Council (2020). A survey of teacher and teacher educator needs during the Covid-19 pandemic April-May 2020. https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/covid19-teacher-teacher-educator-survey.pdf

online learning depended on students' self-discipline. Some recommendations were also provided in this report (p. 5), such as giving teachers opportunities to share learning, provide training and support on how to teach remotely, provide clear guidance on how to choose platforms or develop material in combination with television, radio and other 'distance learning' methods. Another study published by Sayer & Braun (2020) on the impact of Covid-19 remote learning on English learners in the United States showed some socioeconomical disparities due to the lack of preparation of some students to move to remote learning. Moreover, there were also some communication challenges in this situation, since the online resources that were provided lacked the necessary meaningful social interaction for language learning despite significant efforts in the second language classroom (Altavilla, 2020). Another study also found that participation in a discussion in an online setting also depended on how comfortable students felt when speaking in English, and some found it more difficult to communicate complex ideas through texting or commenting functions and they preferred conversations with their teachers and peers in person (Williams & Carhill-Poza, 2020[11]). In this regard, Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) revealed, among other findings, that the pandemic was more challenging for students than for teachers and it affected their oral communication skills since they experienced less language development for speaking than for writing. The Education Development Center (2020)[12] also stated that teaching English online can be a struggle for both teachers and learners since many of the strategies used do not translate into virtual environments, especially with the implications that this situation has for the enhancement of oral communication skills. As for effective tools for teaching English online during the pandemic, Destianingsih and Satria (2020) conducted a study in which they found that students mainly preferred the use of Google Classroom compared to WhatsApp and Zoom. Another study conducted by Altam (2020) revealed that students felt enthusiastic using social media to learn English during this period and that they felt their language skills improved. In this same line of research, Amuthan Krishnan et al. (2020) conducted a study to find out students' perceptions regarding the use of blogs and forum for English learning during the pandemic. The results show that students were eager to use these resources and that it contributed to the overall acquisition of language skills. However, they all agreed that they would prefer this to be combined with face-to-face classes.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

An exploratory survey research design was chosen for this study using a questionnaire to collect the necessary data for our research. This method is exploratory since it aims to describe students' perceptions in an issue that has not been deeply examined to date, to shed some light and initiate further research in this respect. Moreover, the research was cross-sectional since the data for the study was collected once and a mixed-method approach was used with quantitative (numerical) as well as qualitative (students' answers) data.

Participants

Participants were students from the Education Degree at the University of Alcalá who had a course of English as a second language which requires upon completion a B2 level of language competence (19 participants out of 24 students that were part of the class in total). The rest of students of the class did not participate because they did not follow the process of continuous assessment in which class participation is required, and thus they only take the final exam. All participants were aware of the aims and objectives of the study and accepted to participate voluntarily.

Instruments

The survey used (Appendix 1) was adapted from two other existing ones that aimed to study issues in English language learning (British Council, 2020) and perceptions of students in higher education institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic (Demuyakor, 2020). It was subsequently validated by two Spanish university professors

[11] Williams, T. P. & Carhill-Poza, A. (2020). For many immigrant students, remote learning during Covid-19 comes with more hurdles. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/for-many-immigrant-students-remote-learning-during-covid-19-comes-with-more-hurdles-144633

[12] Education Development Center (2020). How is the Pandemic Affecting English Learners? https://www.edc.org/how-pandemic-affecting-english-learners

and anonymously distributed through a Google Form link to the participants.The reason why the questionnaire was used is because it is an instrument that allows the researcher to collect a considerable volume of data easily and quickly (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2019) and, in general, it is not an instrument that requires a lot of time on the part of the participants, which is essential for them to be encouraged to participate and respond in the most reliable and precise possible way. Results were analysed in a descriptive way, since this is considered a preliminary research study to set the basis for further research in this topic in the future. This was done using the numerical data from the survey as well as the qualitative answers added by respondents.

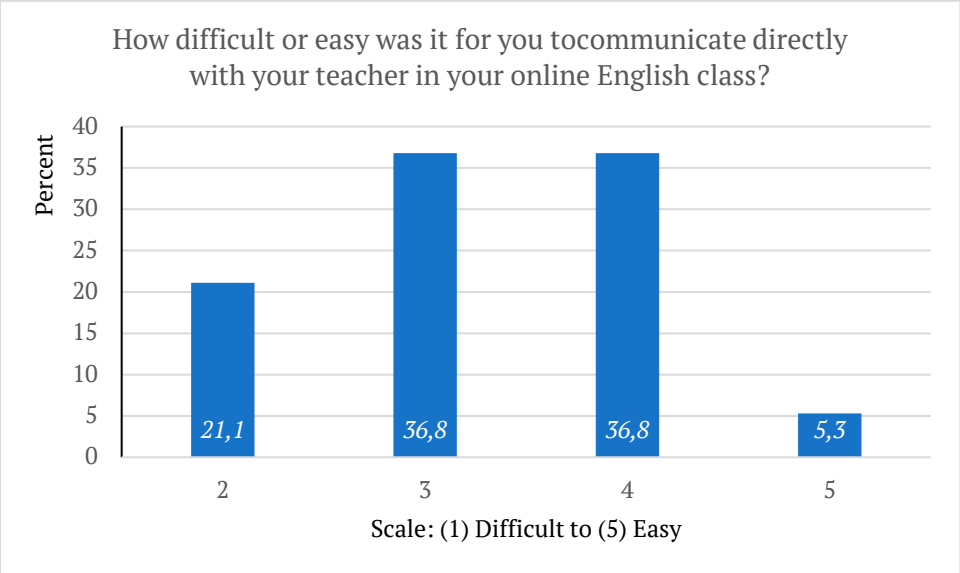
Results and Discussion

In this section we will analyze the results obtained through the distribution of the survey in order to answer the RQs stated in the introduction of the paper. First of all, regarding the tools that students perceived as the best to enhance their communication skills in English, group video or audio calls (which can take place via Zoom or Skype for example) were perceived as the most useful ones (88,9%), followed by online games and materials (50%) and mobile phone messaging and app messaging (33,3%) and social media (27,8%). Compared to what studies cited in the theoretical part of our study stated (Destianingsih & Satria, 2020; Amuthan Krishan et al., 2020), in which other tools were used that were not specifically oriented towards the enhancement of oral skills, in this case the mentioned resources were more focused on the communication process in the online classroom. However, according to students' responses, teachers mainly used group video or audio calls, but social media and gamified online content were not among their most used tools. Regarding their justification for these options, students highlighted the lack of interaction, the feeling of having someone listening to you and motivation as key aspects of the tools they find more useful for them. Some of these reasons were mentioned in the studies conducted by Reimers & Schleicher (2020) and Zhang et al. (2020) as factors which can be problematic when teaching online. However, in this case students perceived them as part of the justification of why they thought that the tools they chose could be beneficial for their learning.

When asked about how easy or difficult they found communicating with their partners in class, Figure 1 shows that the highest percentage of participants had an average perception about it.

Figure 1

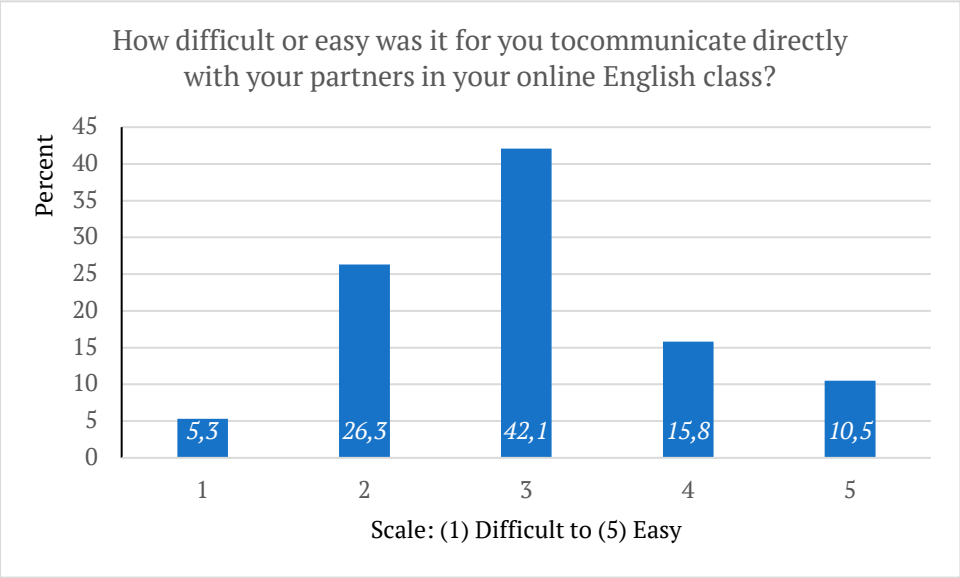
Respondents' Perceptions on How Easy or difficult it Was for Them to Communicate with Their partners in Class



However, when asked about this interaction with their teachers, results showed a higher difficulty (Figure 2), which was also highlighted by Reimers & Schleicher (2020).

Figure 2

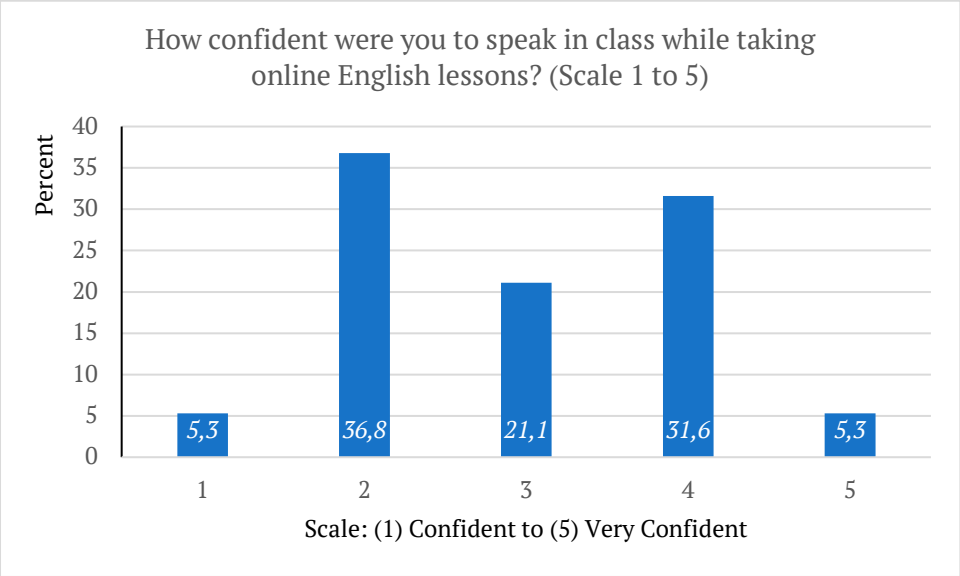
Respondents' Perceptions on How Easy or Difficult it Was for Them to Communicate with Their Partners in Class



Regarding their confidence, results showed that 42.1% of participants had an average perception about how difficult or easy it was to communicate directly with their partners in their online English class (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Respondents' Level of Confidence when Speaking in an Online Class

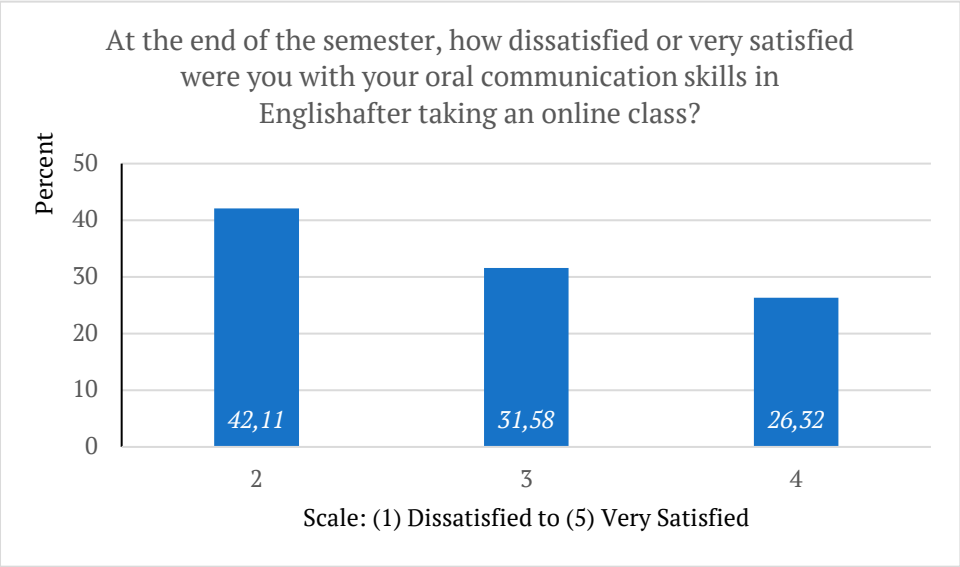


In this sense, the main challenges that students faced while communicating in English were related to technical problems (83,3%), the artificial environment (50%), feeling shy (50%) and too many distractions at home (44.4%). The technological challenges seem thus to be a general factor of discomfort for the learning process, as stated by previous studies (Zaharah et al., 2020).

When students were asked about their level of satisfaction with their oral communication skills in English after taking an online class, none of them felt completely satisfied and the highest percentage of students showed a low level (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Respondents' Level of Satisfaction with Their Oral Communication Skills in English after Taking an online Class

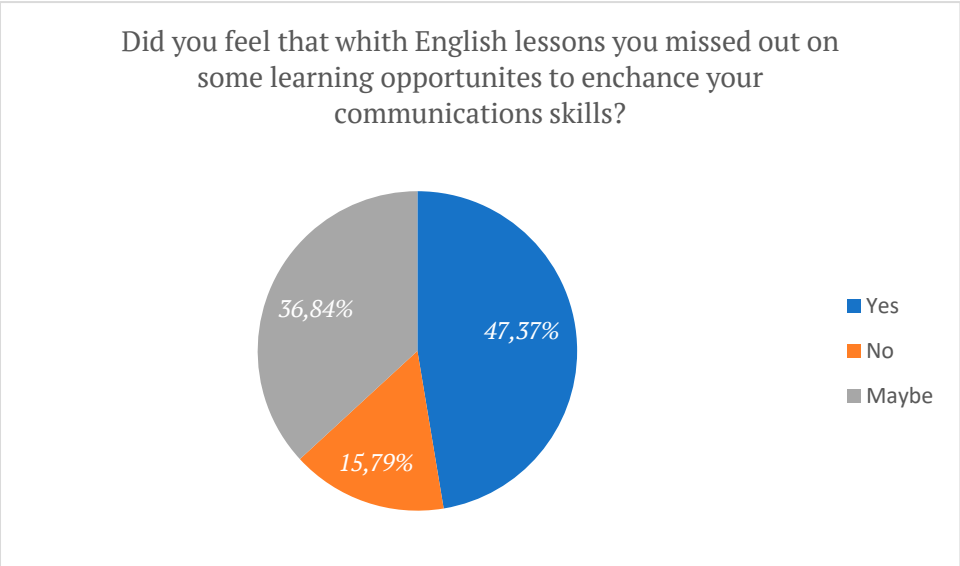


Students' main concerns in this regard were related to connection problems and the lack of "real communication", which did not allow them to speak as much as in a face-to-face class. This is in line with the results by previous studies (Alhabshneh et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020).

When asked if they felt they had missed out on some learning opportunities to enhance their communication skills, the lowest percentage corresponds to those who answered negatively, which shows that most of the students felt as they were not getting as much as they would in a physical class (Figure 5). This is also in line with the results of the study published by Hastshorn & McMurry (2020).

Figure 5

Respondents' Perception about Having Missed Out on Some Learning Opportunities to Enhance their Communication Skills



Finally, regarding the main differences they felt that existed when comparing online and face-to-face lessons, students highlighted again problems related to not feeling confident enough to speak in front of the computer, the artificial environment of the online class and technical problems they had to face, which is also in accordance with what was stated previous studies (Williams & Carhill-Poza, 2020).

These results allow us to answer the two RQs that we established in the introduction of our paper. First of all, to answer RQ1, students highlighted technical problems as some of the main challenges, as well as not feeling completely comfortable in the online learning environment due to the lack of real communication, feeling shy and too many distractions at home which resulted in average results when asked about their level of satisfaction with their oral communication skills after taking the online class. This also had a consequence in the perception of their progress, since the majority felt that they had somehow missed out on some learning opportunities. In this regard, more attention should be paid by universities in general to solving the technical problems that students have been forced to deal with and also in providing teachers with training so as to tackle issues relating to boosting students' confidence when it comes to speaking in a foreign language in a virtual environment.

Regarding RQ2, students found that group video or audio calls were the most useful tools due to the communication component that enabled them to benefit from, followed by online games and materials. This is in line with what was stated by Destianingsih and Satria (2020) regarding the use of Google Classroom, which also allows students to use this kind of communication tools, or the study by Amuthan Krishnan et al. (2020) in which results showed how students perceived online materials such as those published in blogs as very useful to improve their language skills. However, only group video or audio calls were the most used tools by teachers, and online games and materials were not among their preferred options. This data could be of interest for future teaching considerations, since gamification has become a popular teaching methodology with many learning benefits that can be considered also in the online classroom and includes some of the key aspects highlighted by the respondents of our survey such as interaction and motivation.

Conclusion

The two aims of this paper were to analyse students' main challenges when communicating in English in an online setting as well as their perceptions about the tools and methodologies that worked best for them to enhance their oral skills. In order to answer the research questions associated with these aims, first of all in our introduction we reflected on the current situation of education and the changes that this pandemic has brought to it. In the theoretical framework we reviewed the most recent literature related to our topic of analysis, which allowed us to compare and contrast it with the results we obtained after distributing an online survey. These results were quantitatively and qualitatively analysed to provide a preliminary basis on what the main challenges that learning English online entails for enhancing students' oral skills in English. According to these results some of the main challenges students encountered were related to technological problems and the lack of real communication in the online environment, which they perceived as artificial. As for the main tools and methodologies, students found that group or audio calls, as well as gamified content were the ones that worked best of them, but they reported a lack of gamification techniques used by teachers in the virtual classes.

Although this is just a preliminary study on how the pandemic has had an impact on communication skills for students learning English as a second language, we believe that it provides an opportunity to challenge its status quo and explore and reflect on new approaches to the delivery of quality education in this regard. Regarding the limitations of the study, it must be said that the sample is limited and the study was only conducted in one university. However, we believe that this type of research studies are of special relevance in this period of time to educational developers and policymakers because it gives a preliminary understanding of aspects that can be considered to improve the efficacy of learners' and what teachers should consider in their virtual classes when it comes to enhancing English oral communication skills.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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Appendix 1

Communication in English in online settings

Age _____ ***Place of residence*** _____

Which tools did your teachers use to teach English remotely? (Tick all that apply)

- ☐ Group video or audio calls (e.g. Zoom, Skype, etc.)
- ☐ Recorded video and screencasts Slide presentations (e.g. PowerPoint)
- ☐ Email
- ☐ Phone calls
- ☐ Social media (e.g. Facebook, Edmodo, etc.)
- ☐ Other

Which tools worked best to enhance your communication skills in English? (Tick all that apply)

- ☐ Group video or audio calls (e.g. Zoom, Skype, etc.)
- ☐ Recorded video and screencasts Slide presentations (e.g. PowerPoint)
- ☐ Email
- ☐ Phone calls
- ☐ Mobile phone messaging or app messaging
- ☐ Online games and materials
- ☐ Social media (e.g. Facebook, Edmodo, etc.)

Explain why the tools you chose in the previous question worked best for you.

How easy or difficult was it for you to communicate directly with your partners in your online English class?
(1 being very difficult and 5 very easy)

How easy or difficult was it for you to communicate directly with your teacher in your online English class?
(1 being very difficult and 5 very easy)

How confident were you to speak in class while taking online English lessons?
(1 being not confident at all and 5 very confident)

What were the top three biggest challenges you faced while communicating in English in your online class?

- ☐ Artificial online environment I was not used to
- ☐ Feeling shy
- ☐ Too many distractions at home
- ☐ Technical problems
- ☐ General anxiety about the coronavirus pandemic
- ☐ Other

At the end of the semester, how satisfied were you with your oral communication skills in English after taking an online class?

(1 being not satisfied at all and 5 being very satisfied)

Provide a justification for your previous answer.

Did you feel that with online English lessons you missed out on some learning opportunities to enhance your communication skills?

☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ Maybe

Provide a justification for your previous answer.

What were the main differences that you experienced while taking online English lessons compared to face-to-face learning regarding your oral communication skills in English?

Is there anything else you would like to tell us in relation to your experience learning English in an online environment?

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Account of a Foretold Death: Analysing the Response to the Pandemic in the Schools of Castellón (Spain)

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The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on education, not only due to its dramatic interruption of the school year (2019-2020) but also its potential effect on many aspects regarding teaching in the future. In particular, focusing on Spain, this year's events have also highlighted the lack of digital resources and preparedness of the schools, which has resulted in some difficulties when adapting to the new circumstances. In this paper, the author will start by explaining how the digital competence has developed into an indispensable competence for learning in the past decade, which the current global pandemic has emphasised even more. As a consequence of this pandemic, schools and education centres remained closed from March 2020 to the end of the academic year in Spain. This article focuses on the importance of technology accessibility and digital competence in language learning, as well as the way it was overlooked in practice. The immediate response from the Ministry of Education will be analysed and compared to the way teachers and schools in the Valencian region (Spain) supported the students during the enforced lockdown in the last trimester of the academic year in primary school. For this, teachers in four schools in Castellon (Valencian region) were interviewed, and drawing from their replies, the current reality of the use of technology in primary school will be examined and compared to the national guidelines and frameworks provided for educators. Questionnaires were used and analysed using a qualitative approach, while comparing the current situation to the expected response according to the educative guidelines.

***Keywords*:** digital competence, communicative competence, pandemic, Covid-19, language learning, school curriculum

Introduction

The novel disease Covid-19 has become the fifth documented pandemic since the flu pandemic in 1918 (Liu et al., 2020). While it was first reported in Wuhan, China, around December 2019, it rapidly spread worldwide affecting most of the planet by March 2020. Because of the aggressive - and potentially deadly - nature of the symptoms and high risk of contagion, the world shut down in its majority, resorting to long quarantine periods of isolation. Consequently, as well as many other sectors, education was greatly affected. Some classes were cancelled, and others moved to online platforms. Countries around the world provided internal general guidelines to their educators, with restrictions and policies for the schools to follow and provide online support to the students. And Spain was no exception. For a long time now, digital competence had become vital to educators and learners, finding its place among the essential learning competences of the 21st century (Ferrari et al., 2012; van Laar et al., 2017). Yet, this competence is linked to different contextual factors.

The objective of this paper is to discuss the essential role of digital competence in education, along with the factors involved in its use, within the context of the pandemic. This paper reveals the contrast between the unpreparedness of schools in terms of integrating this competence, which has been highlighted dramatically in such a moment of necessity, and the confusing guidelines received from the governmental institutions. Throughout this paper the author will focus on the experiences of English language teachers during the pandemic, starting with an analysis of the concept of competence and digital competence involved in language learning; following with its inclusion in the curriculum; and, finally, examining real teacher experiences along with data on the schools' responses to the pandemic.

The aim of this research is to draw attention to the inconsistencies between guidelines and practice in the school setting, along with the need of integrating digital competence in language learning from a realistic perspective, taking into account school resources and students' access to technology.

Literature Review

Competences

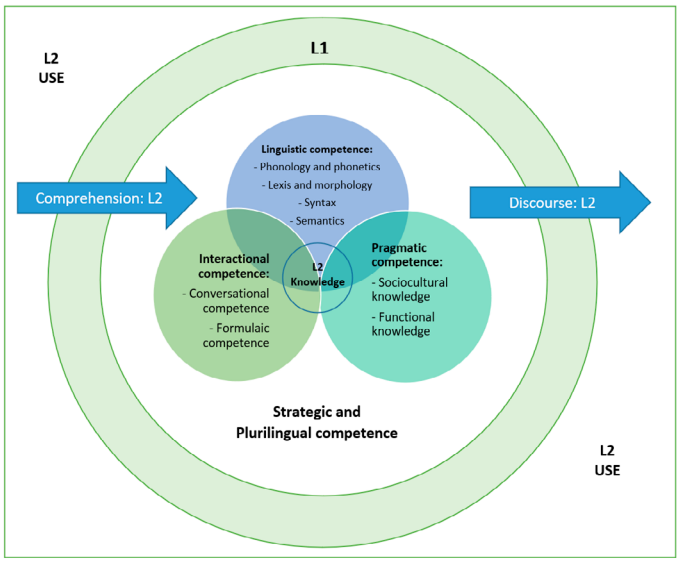
The concept of 'competence' has been theorised and described in education time and time again. Nevertheless, the coining of the term is generally credited to Chomsky, along with the dichotomy between competence and performance (Chomsky, 1965). His intention was to depart from the Saussurean distinction between langue and parole, and proposed a distinction between linguistic competence, understood as the knowledge underlying the necessary skills to use a language, and performance as the actual use of language in specific situations. While Chomsky was the first to define this concept, a very complete definition of what constitutes a competence is provided by Martínez-Carrasco (2017, p. 154)[1]:

> A polyhedral, complex construct composed of a dynamic cluster of forming elements that apply to specific, situated work conditions. Knowledge, skills, behaviour, and attitudes, whose weight in the overall competence construct may vary according to the particular task to be performed, play the most relevant role in the said cluster.

Such is the complex and varied nature of the concept of competence that defining the competences involved in language learning has been one of the main foci of Second Language Acquisition. From purely linguistic competences, the focus shifted towards interaction and communication. In fact, the communicative competence has been on the spotlight for decades, going from Hymes (1972), through Celce-Murcia (1995), and Dornyei (2009), among many others. It has become one of the key competences according to the most used language learning framework worldwide, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment[2] . This competence, however, has now developed into a macro-competence encompassing different sub-competences. Chabert and Agost (2020) provide a visual interpretation of the communicative competence and its sub-competences from a plurilingual perspective, which is provided below for further reference and illustration of the competences involved in language learning:

Figure 1

Competences Involved in the Communicative Model



[1] Martínez-Carrasco, R. (2017). *Epistemological approaches to legal translation education: A situated account* [Universitat Jaume I]. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/tesis?codigo=13683

[2] Council of Europe. (2018). *Common european framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors*. Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, available at https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989

Note. Competences involved in the communicative model in LX learning. Reprinted from "Communicative language teaching: Is there a place for L1 in L2 learning?", by A. Chabert and R. Agost, , 2020,*European Journal of Language Policy*, *12*(1), p. 62. Copyright 2020 by Liverpool University Press. Reprinted with permission.

In the above illustration (Figure 1), the different competences involved in Additional Language Learning can be observed, which, in the case of this study, would refer to English teaching. Nevertheless, these competences do not account for the limitations brought by the pandemic, which relied on a more computer-based learning.

By the end of the twentieth century, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) was brought to the spotlight thanks to the progress in technology. According to Chapelle (2009), already at the start of the 1990s, computer technology began to be considered something that teachers could add to other learning materials and activities. The role of technology started to change and to add dimensions to communicative competence. In line with this, she stated that "anyone who uses technology to produce, comprehend, and interact in an L2 [second language] today is easily convinced that communicative competence is tied to the technologies chosen and used" (Chapelle, 2009). Yet, despite the direct link with communicative competence, the transversality of digital competence transformed this construct into an independent essential skill of the twenty-first century rather than a sub-competence of communicative competence.

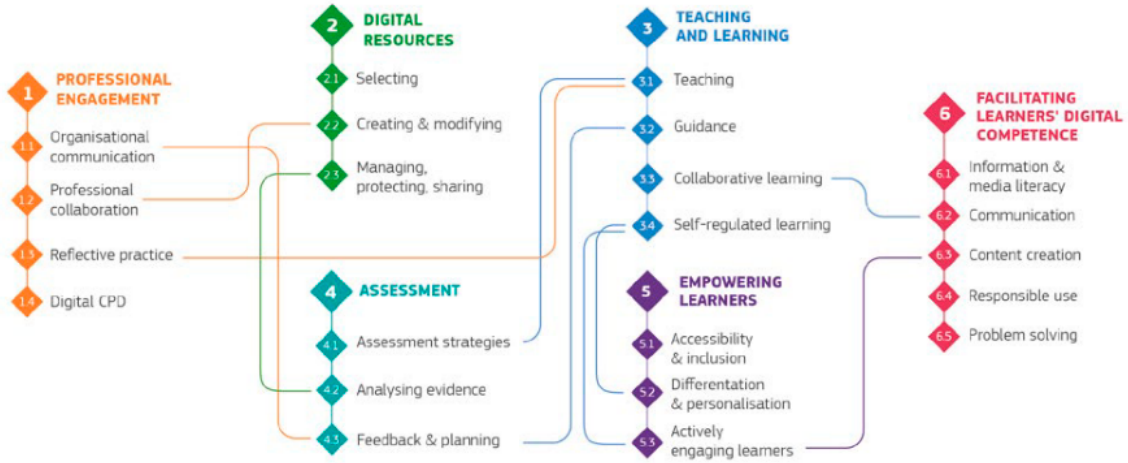
Digital competence is an evolving concept, as it is intrinsically interconnected to the development of technology. A study from the University of Helsinki analysed 76 educational research articles attempting to define digital competence and suggested that it consists of different competences and abilities (Ilomäki et al., 2016): technical competence, the meaningful use of digital technologies in every life aspect, the ability to evaluate technologies, and the motivation to participate in digital culture. Ilomäki et al. (2016, p. 657) define digital competence as an emerging and broad connecting concept that "operates as a loosely defined boundary concept (and a transdiscursive term) amongst policy-makers, practitioners and researchers." However, the European Commission has not only defined it, but has created a framework to be implemented in European policy. According to the Commission, a lack of digital skills has a direct impact on people's chances in life . Consequently, this framework was created in order to identify and describe the main competences and skills involved in digital competence. This way, the DigComp project was launched with the aim of identifying the key components of digital competence, developing its descriptors to feed a conceptual framework and propose guidelines (Ferrari, 2012). This framework was to be implemented in multiple domains including education and employment, with DigCompEdu focusing on a framework specific to educators (Redecker & Punie, 2017).

Due to the current technological requirements, teachers are required, now more than ever, to first develop their digital competence to help students become digitally competent. For this, DigCompEdu provides the 22 elementary competences organised in 6 areas that are illustrated on Figure 2 below:

- Area 1: Related to the professional environment of educators
- Area 2: Focused on the digital resources, their use, creation and management
- Area 3: The use of digital technologies for teaching and learning
- Area 4: The use of digital strategies and technologies for assessment
- Area 5: Empowering learners through the use of technology
- Area 6: Focused on specific pedagogic competences involved with digital competence

Figure 2

Educators and Learners Competences Involved in Digital Competence



Note. Diagram on the learners and educators' competences Involved in Digital Competence. From *European framework for the digital competence of educators*, by C. Redecker, and Y. Punie, 2017, p. 8. Copyright 2017 by Publications Office of the European Union. Reprinted with permission.

The above competences (Figure 2) reflect the areas involved in digital competence and required in digital learning. From this table, it can be observed that, if any of the areas fail (such as the digital resources due to a lack thereof), digital learning and its competences will suffer as a result.

Not long after this project, the Ministry of Education launched the Common Framework for Teacher Digital Competence based on DigComp, and its use was agreed between the State and Regional governments[3]. This framework was focused on the continuous development of educators in the competences involved in digital competence. Throughout the document it is proposed to promote the implementation of the relevant guidelines that would allow the acknowledgment and evaluation of the educators' digital competence according to the common framework, as well as promoting the implementation of reference national digital systems[4]. According to this, and the Spanish Curriculum analysed below, it would be safe to assume that, for educators to be able to develop and use their digital competence, education centres would have to provide the educators with the necessary platforms and resources. Nevertheless, the guidelines are mainly focused on the teacher's knowledge, skills, development and strategies to prepare for the digital world, somehow underestimating the need for a good digital infrastructure.

Information and Communication Technology in the Spanish Curriculum

Since its reform in 2013, the Spanish Education Law that was current during the school year 2019-2020 (LOMCE[5], for its acronym in Spanish) emphasised three main foci[6]: ICTs (Information and Communication Technology), Plurilingualism, and the modernisation of Professional Training studies, which are well-established European key points (Breidbach, 2003; Council of Europe, 2001, 2008; European Commission, Council of Europe, European Economic and Social Committee, & Committee of the Regions, 2018). This law also highlighted digital competence as a 21st-century key competence, according to the report from the

[3] Spain is a nation divided in autonomous regions, hence, while the State provides general guidelines to be followed at a national level, each of the regions have certain freedom within those parameters and regulate education, resulting in some differences across the country.

[4] INTEF. (2017). Marco común de competencia digital docente. – Septiembre 2017 [Common framework for digital competence in education. - September 2017]. https://aprende.intef.es/sites/default/files/2018-05/2017_1020_Marco-Común-de-Competencia-Digital-Docente.pdf

[5] LOMCE (Ley Orgánica 8/2013, de 9 de diciembre, para la mejora de la calidad educativa). BOE 2013. BOE-A-2013-12886

[6] While these foci still remain, there was a new reform published on the 28th of December 2020 (LOMLOE), which focuses on the development of competences, inclusivity, and, among other changes, eliminates final tests in primary and secondary school. (BOE, 2020a)

European Commission[7]. The LOMCE recognised the impact of new technologies and globalisation in the current way of learning and communicating stating that[8]:

> The general implementation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) into the educational system, which will take into account the principles of universal **accessibility** for everyone, will make it possible to **personalise education and adapt it** to the needs and pace of each student. [Own translation]

The above section starts with the principle of accessibility and adaptability of ICT resources, which follows with an emphasis on the importance of a methodological change in teaching and the digitalisation of resources, all while urging the schools to adhere to their budgets, as it can be read on the next section (BOE, 2013, p.10):

> **Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) will be a fundamental piece to carry out the methodological change** that will lead us to achieve the objective of improving the educational quality. […] Having evaluated the above, **it is essential that the school digitalisation model chosen is economically sustainable**, and that it focuses on the creation of a national digital ecosystem that allows the regular development of the options for each educational administration. [Own translation]

This regulation continues by focusing on virtual environments and digital platforms, as well as claiming that accessible platforms will be available for the whole education community.

> **Virtual learning environments used in public schools will facilitate the implementation of specific educational** plans designed by teachers to achieve specific curriculum objectives, and should contribute to **the extension of the concept of the classroom in time and space.** […] **The Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports will offer digital and technological platforms accessible by the entire educational community**, which may incorporate didactic resources provided by the educational administrations and other agents for their shared use. The resources should be selected according to parameters of methodological quality, adoption of open standards and availability of sources that facilitate their dissemination, adaptation, reuse and redistribution and will be recognised as such. [Own translation]

Yet, despite the statement on "general online platform availability", the PISA 2018 study from the OECD[9] shows that only 51.5% of educative centres use online platforms and only 53.3% of schools consider the number of digital devices with internet access as sufficient.

A year after the 2013 Reform, an update of the primary school national curriculum included digitalisation and the use of technology throughout the curriculum as part of the transversal skills and competences required in all subjects. In fact, Article 10 in the BOE of 2014[10], focuses on transversal elements and states that:

> Without prejudice to their specific treatment in some of the subjects of each stage, reading comprehension, oral and written expression, audiovisual communication, **Information and Communication Technologies**, civic and constitutional education and projects **will be included on in all subjects**. [Own translation]

However, when focusing on the curriculum for foreign language learning it can be observed that there are no direct guidelines for ICTs, other than a general statement requesting their integration in the learning process. One of the main criticisms against these guidelines is the fact that ICTs are expected to be included in school subjects and that educators are required to be digitally knowledgeable; but, they do not seem to consider the actual technological resources available to students in and out of the schools.

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[7] European Commission. (2008). Improving competences for the 21st century: An agenda for European cooperation on schools. In COM(2008) 425 final. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0425:FIN:EN:PDF

[8] See page 9 in BOE-A-2012-5403. Ley Orgánica 8/2013, de 9 de diciembre, para la mejora de la calidad educativa, 1 [Organic Law 8/2013, of 9 December, for the improvement of the quality of education, 1] (2013). https://www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2012-5403

[9] OECD. (2020). PISA 2018 Results (Volume V): Effective policies, successful schools, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/ca768d40-en.

[10] BOE-A-2014-2222. Real Decreto 126/2014, de 28 de febrero, por el que se establece el currículo básico de la Educación Primaria, Boletín Oficial del Estado 19349 [Royal Decree 126/2014, of 28 February, establishing the basic curriculum for Primary Education, Official State Gazette 19349] (2014).https://www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-2014-2222

While the relationship between language learning and technology has been long and fruitful (Trujillo Sáez, Salvadores Merino, & Gabarrón Pérez, 2019), access to new devices and resources has meant that the use of technology in language education continues to be in a constant state of development. Yet, the reality is that the theory does not seem to go hand in hand with the practice, as it can be observed in the response to the pandemic in Spain.

Response to a Pandemic

It was only when the pandemic broke out back in March 2020 that the real use of technology in the classroom was put to the test. On the 14th of March of 2020, the State of Alarm was declared in Spain, which closed schools and required educators to continue the third semester of the school year online. The national Ministry guidelines had to adapt to Covid-19 publishing an adapted legislation in 2020[11], stating that educative centres would identify the students who were not able to connect online and prepare plans to achieve their connexion to education in order to ensure they could continue learning as soon as possible. This order also asserted that the Administration, as well as education centres, would identify the students lacking digital media and would increase the availability of technological resources to be lent to these students. In regard to the curriculum, the educators, along with the schools, were advised to develop tools and continue classes online so that the students were able to continue learning from home. As observed above, according to the law of 2013 technological platforms would be accessible by the entire educational community. However, most of the schools did not have, by the start of 2020, an online platform and the Ministry of Education provided a very limited number of online resources to teachers.

The objective of this paper is to examine the inconsistencies between guidelines received by the schools during the Covid-19 pandemic and actual experience from the teachers during that period. This research will highlight the need of integrating digital competence in language learning from a realistic perspective, taking into account school resources and students' access to technology. Having reviewed the current literature on competences, in particular on digital competence and its position in the Spanish curriculum, the author analyses the teachers' response and experience during lockdown in 2020. This is a small-scale research paper focused on a reduced sample, however its purpose to highlight the differences and lack of guidance in different schools even in such a small sample is testimony to the need for a better understanding of the need for technology in education in the future.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

In order to carry out the research, the author followed a qualitative method using open-ended question interviews, that is, using semi-structured interviews where the respondents had to answer pre-set open-ended questions, and analysed the data based on grounded theory. A questionnaire was created online using Google Forms, which was shared to the teachers via e-mail. This questionnaire had a Spanish and Valencian version, and both were sent to each teacher so that they could choose the language they would like to answer in. The same questions were asked to all participants, so that the interviews could be more easily analysed and compared. This approach was particularly useful to get the story behind the participant's experiences. Given the length limitation on this paper a summary of the interview replies of the teachers that participated in the study was provided.

Participants

The sample was focused on English language teachers of four different schools. In order to acquire specific data from the area of Castellón, a small questionnaire was shared with teachers of English in fifth and sixth year of

[11] BOE (2020b). BOE-A-2020-4609. Orden EFP/365/2020, de 22 de abril, por la que se establecen el marco y las directrices de actuación para el tercer trimestre del curso 2019-2020 y el inicio del curso 2020-2021, ante la situación de crisis ocasionada por el Covid-19., [Order EFP/365/2020 of 22 April establishing the framework and guidelines for action for the third quarter of the 2019-2020 academic year and the start of the 2020-2021 academic year, in view of the crisis situation caused by Covid-19.] No. EFP/365/2020, BOE-A-2020-4609 (2020). https://www.boe.es/eli/es/o/2020/04/22/efp365/con

four primary schools (one teacher was interviewed in each school). The schools were located in very different areas: the first one (School A) belonged to a humbler district of the city of Castellón, whereas the second one (School B was located in a wealthier area, where most of the families belonged to an upper-middle class status. The third one (School C) was located in a regular middle-class area and contained a high number of students per class. Lastly, the fourth one (School D) in the small town of Borriol, which belongs to the Castellón area, but it is located 10km towards the mountains.

All four schools had female English teachers aged between 30 and 45, who were comfortable with digital technology.

Instruments

This paper uses two main instruments: a questionnaire to gather the personal experiences from teachers in schools in Castellon and a review of current education guidelines.

The author examined the current national and regional guidelines along with the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning (CEFR, henceforth) following a comparative legal research methodology. With the purpose of getting the full picture, the CEFR is examined as a framework according to the current learning guidelines and education laws that have been developed. Consequently, the education laws in Spain that were current during the year 2020[12] are contextualised along with the political measures implemented during lockdown.

In terms of the questionnaire, the following questions were asked (the below have been translated into English):

- During the State of Alarm implemented in Spain from the 14th of March to the 21st of June, were the classes fully cancelled or were they continued online?
- If you continued the classes online, please tell us about your experience.
- Did your students have technological access?
- Do you think the pandemic situation had a direct impact on the English level of the students?
- Given the fact that the classes were online, did you focus on a specific competence more than another one?
- Bearing in mind that you teach English but you were limited by technology, did you have to use your mother tongue (Spanish or Valencian in this case) more than you would usually do?

Procedure

Grounded theory methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) were used to shape these qualitative interviews via questionnaire. Thanks to the ongoing contact with several schools during the pandemic for ongoing research on English learning, it soon became apparent that each of the schools were facing the pandemic differently. Following inductive reasoning, the author focused on the specific points affecting the different approaches in each of the schools, namely technological access, and applicable legislation. These strategies led to studying concrete realities and rendering a conceptual understanding of them (Khan, 2014). The open-ended questions allowed an exploration of the teachers' subjective experience during the pandemic within resources and guidelines constraints that were analysed for further contextualisation.

Analysis

From the questionnaires common themes were extracted: access to technology (and digital resources available), as well as the confusing or inaccurate guidelines received from different education institutions. The teachers' experience was complemented with an analysis of the curriculum and guidelines, as well as the subsequent review of literature on the digital divide in Spain and the new Government programs that acknowledge the circumstances experienced by the teachers and aim to prevent this in the near future. The analysis of the

[12] BOE (2020a). BOE-A-2020-17264 - LOMLOE, Ley Orgánica 3/2020, de 29 de diciembre, por la que se modifica la Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de Educación. [Organic Law 3/2020, of 29 December, which amends Organic Law 2/2006, of 3 May, on Education] https://www.boe.es/eli/es/lo/2020/12/29/3

national guidelines also brought to light the main focus on the teachers' digital competence, rather than the students' access to technology and their preparedness for distance learning.

Results and Discussion

In School A, the teacher confirmed that no classes were carried out due to the lack of resources. She also pointed out how this fact increased inequalities between children and reduced their oral and listening skills on the new academic course. She confirmed that tasks were given to the students on a weekly basis via e-mail. This school did not have an educative platform, so any activities or doubts were solved via e-mail. Consequently, not all competences were able to be developed, with the focus being kept on written activities only, so that they could be provided via e-mail. This had a direct effect on the students' English language development. Likewise, the school did not have the means to provide devices to vulnerable students either.

In School B, however, classes continued fully online, since this school did have an online platform and the students had access to technology at home. However, the teacher confirmed that the classes were very different to what was initially programmed. From the national guidelines, the teachers were advised not to progress on any content and to review for the rest of the academic year. This teacher confirmed to try and work on all language learning skills and stated that there was no difference in language use of the mother tongue in the English classroom. Despite the fact that no new content was learnt, the students continued practising English and this teacher felt like the quarantine did not have a significant impact on the students' learning.

In School C, in contrast, the classes stopped but a blog was created as a way of providing a virtual classroom. However, the teacher complained that the attendance to the 'virtual' classroom was very difficult to control and, in the end, it became more of an asynchronous solution. She mentioned that, in order to teach online a good platform for classroom management was necessary, as well as different tools. This school was able to provide some students with tablets so that they were able to have technological access. Yet, she confirmed that some students did not do anything at all, while others were in regular contact until the end of the school year. She stated that online classes, in her opinion, do not work in primary school for long periods of time. Also, because the classes are big and students are reluctant to participate, some students were feeling demotivated by the situation. According to this teacher, the students that did not follow the online class did lose a lot of fluency and their English level was reduced.

Lastly, in School D the teacher taught adapted content online (via Zoom) but confirmed she was unable to progress with the curriculum in accordance with the national guidelines provided. In this school, the classroom groups were much smaller due to the small size of the town. The teacher confirmed she focused more on writing and reading comprehension, rather than listening and speaking. She also stated that: 'Obviously, this school interruption has resulted in increasing level inequalities among children and reduced oral and listening skills'. She mentioned that they had online meetings daily to solve queries and send more homework. Those final three months at the end of the academic year were used to review the content the students had studied until that point, which helped them consolidate vocabulary and structures.

In relation to the competences involved in language learning including the correct implementation of digital competence, it was observed that the learners' competences could not be developed in their totality during the pandemic. This was the result of a lack in resources from both students and the schools, and it also led to a divide among the learners in terms of language levels.

All in all, the situation of each school appears to be more limited by the school resources than the actual digital competence of the teacher, which seemed to be the focus before the pandemic, based on the European and current Spanish national guidelines and frameworks.

The Digital Divide

Consequently, the focus must shift the digital divide, which includes factors such as the unequal opportunity to access information, knowledge and education (Serrano-Santoyo & Martínez-Martínez, 2003). The digital divide is characterised by two main factors: not being able to use ICTs (which was the main focus prior to the

pandemic) and the lack of access to technology either at home or school. The lack of access to ICT or its poor use result in exclusion (Cañón Rodríguez et al., 2016), which can be observed on one of the fragments from the account of the teacher in the first school, which is provided below in Spanish (original) and its translation:

> 'Para dar clase a distancia es necesaria una buena plataforma, programas de edición y ordenadores en condiciones. Todo esto no existía para primaria… Algunos alumnos no tenían material adecuado para seguir las clases. Los alumnos que siguieron las clases poco a poco se iban desmotivando, sus circunstancias de encierro tampoco favorecían la motivación.Los que no siguieron las clases, han perdido mucho.'
>
> ('In order to teach from home, you need a good platform, editing software and computers. All this did not exist in primary school…Some students did not have adequate material to follow the classes. The ones who followed the classes gradually became demotivated; their confined circumstances did not favour motivation either.Those who didn't follow the classes have lost a lot [of knowledge]')

In terms of resources, the four schools participating in this study had interactive whiteboards in the classroom, but only two of them had devices available for the students to take home in case of need and only one of them had an actual online platform, while the other three depended on the teachers to prepare and provide the necessary resources to the students.

A national statistical analysis of 2020 shows that 75.3% of household in Spain situated in areas with a smaller population than 10,000 had at least one device per home (this includes PC, tablets, laptops and similar gadgets), while in the household located in cities of 100,000 inhabitants or more the percentage was higher than 85%[13]. This already presents an inequality based on the area. While in the analysed case the difference between rural and urban areas did not appear to affect the access to technology, the difference between economically diverse areas played a major role.

Learning from Mistakes

While the conclusion above can appear to be anecdotal, it can be extrapolated to what Spain has lived as a whole, as it was confirmed by the Ministry of Spain in the new guidelines proposed for the current academic year 2020-2021.

According to the new addendum to the programme 'Educa en Digital' (Digital Education) from October 2020 by the Ministry of Education and Professional Training, along with the Public Company Red.es[14], the Government seems to have acknowledged this shortage of technological material launching a programme to promote the technological transformation of education in Spain. This initiative started in the academic year 2020-2021 and is still ongoing. Its objective is to provide half a million devices to educative centres so that they are available to the students. This addendum admitted that:

> The closure of schools as a measure to combat the pandemic meant that many **vulnerable students were unable to continue their learning** process because they did not have the appropriate devices, connectivity, or tools to do so. [Own translation]

This programme also acknowledges that education in Spain requires a process of digital transformation along with the standardisation of online resources, ICT tools for communication and collaboration, availability of devices and connexion to the internet not only for the educators but also for the students in the classroom, and also from home.

[13] Fernández, R. (2020). Porcentaje de viviendas equipadas con ordenador en España en 2020, según hábitat. Statista [Percentage of homes equipped with a computer in Spain in 2020] https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/539611/porcentaje-de-viviendas-con-ordenador-segun-habita

[14] BOE (2020c). BOE-A-2020-7682. Convenio entre el Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional y la Entidad Pública Empresarial Red.es, M.P., para la ejecución del programa «Educa en digital» en las ciudades de Ceuta y Melilla, mediante acciones para apoyar la transformación digital, Boletín Oficial del Estado 91879 [Agreement between the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training and the Public Business Entity Red.es, M.P., for the implementation of the "Educa en digital" programme in the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, through actions to support digital transformation, Official State Gazette 91879] (2020). https://www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2020-7682

As a result of the pandemic, the Ministry has launched the educative website 'Aprendo en casa'[15] (Learning from home), with the aim of channelling quality educational resources, tools and applications available to teachers, families and students. Through this portal multiple links allow access to learning materials developed and implemented by the autonomous regions, private entities and other agents collaborating with this project.

Limitations

There were some limitations to the present study that affected this research. Firstly, one of the main limitations was site management and school participation during the pandemic. While several schools were contacted, only four, which had previously participated in another study, were willing to participate. At the same time, due to the pandemic restrictions at the time the author was not able to carry out interviews on-site and the teachers requested to be able to answer the questions via online form to have more flexibility. While this still allowed valuable extracted data, it limited the researcher's opportunity to ask further questions or clarifications on certain points. The fact that having schools in different regions of Spain would have been a very interesting analysis is duly acknowledged, unfortunately the Covid-19 lockdown and restrictions made the contact with new schools extremely difficult.

Despite the above limitations, however, the author managed to accomplish the task of providing a general view of the teachers experience during the pandemic and contextualising the regulations that affected this experience.

Conclusion

While the theory surrounding digital competence has played a big role in the past couple of decades, now the focus is on the actual practice. Digital competence does not only depend on educators but on the infrastructure, which is key. One of the most important learnings of the current events has been the realisation that there is a need for standardised access to technology and accessibility for all students. At the same time, it can be observed that the current curriculum in primary school did not delve into the use of specific ICT use in the classroom and was not prepared for fully virtual teaching, which meant that it was bound to fail in a situation of crisis, such as the current pandemic. The relationship between technology and pedagogy is complex but symbiotic and therefore it cannot be excluded from the guidelines. This research demonstrates that there is indeed a disconnect between legislations, theory and practice. The academic curricula will have to adapt the use of technology to the current needs of the students and society, given that, as it has been demonstrated, the educative centres cannot be excluded from the technological transformation, especially when education needs to be prepared for never-expected eventualities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a severe disruption of education. The cancellation of face-to-face teaching along with the initial move to the virtual space limited by the digital platforms of each of the schools, has accelerated the digitalisation process of education. It has shed light on the current digital divide and stressed the importance of technology in education. Nevertheless, while virtual teaching might appear to be a response to the current situation, it is expected to stay for the future. Technologies have evolved greatly in the past 20 years, to the extent that long are the days that technology was just a synonym for computer use in the classroom. The call for an integrated use of technology in the day-to-day classroom to the point that the use of technology becomes seamless is still relevant, and now more than ever. Even though the idea is to go back to on-site teaching, the benefits of online learning have not gone unnoticed and will most likely stay for the foreseeable future, even if it is combined with face-to-face traditional learning.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

The protocol for the study was approved by the participants through a verbal informed consent and by filling out the questionnaires. While no separate written consent was obtained from the participants, the questionnaire specified the purpose of the survey and its posterior use in research preserving participant anonymity.

[15] https://aprendoencasa.educacion.es/

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Who Wants to Learn English Online for Free?

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This study of demographics is aimed to help LMOOC designers develop courses that are more appealing to prospective learners, and thus fight low completion rate which remains one of the main drawbacks of MOOCs. In addition, as the world battles against the Covid-19 pandemic, looking for alternative learning approaches is unavoidable. The data presented in this paper were collected between 2016 and 2020 by means of a questionnaire that over 29,000 participants completed upon registration. The questionnaire, which included three multiple-choice questions aimed at obtaining responses regarding age, level of education and gender, revealed that most learners were middle-aged adults who held a university degree. In addition, our findings seemed to indicate that female learners are more likely to take the courses than their male counterparts. The aforementioned findings, which provide an insight into the demographics of EFL MOOCs in Spanish-speaking contexts, are a good starting point for further research which could ultimately help educational authorities know the impact of EFL MOOCs and enable the latter to reach a wider audience.

Keywords: LMOOCs, English Language, Distance Learning, Demographics

Introduction

This study seeks to provide an insight into the profile of learners enrolled in Language Massive Open Online Courses (LMOOCs) through the analysis of learner demographics, namely age, level of education and gender. It comes in a context where traditional education has been hit hard by the global Covid-19 pandemic thus making educational authorities push for a transition towards distance learning. The contribution of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) MOOCs to fostering distance education is possible, so long as extensive research is carried out in order to find out more about the people who turn to those courses to learn English. On the surface, one of the major challenges the design of LMOOCs poses is the heterogeneity of participants (Bárcena -Madera & Martin-Monje, 2014; Martín-Monje et al., 2018) and the resulting difficulty in designing contents that suit all users. Though a wide range of factors might affect learners' motivation to complete the courses (Jordan, 2014; 2015; Martín-Monje et al., 2018; Li, 2019), we believe course designers' inability to come up with materials that appeal to a diversity of students is one of the main reasons why learners end up dropping out.

This article analyses two LMOOCs aimed specifically at learners of English as a Foreign Language. Our research was motivated by the belief that the analysis of learner demographics in both MOOCs could provide valuable information which could eventually help educational authorities develop MOOCs that are appealing to a wider audience. Further motivation for this study was the scarcity of publications addressing specifically MOOC demographics in Spanish-speaking contexts, apart from a few ones (Alario-Hayos et al., 2014; Martín-Monje at al. 2018) which emphasized engagement rather than personal background. Therefore, to get more information regarding LMOOC learners' personal background, three variables were taken into account, namely, age, level of education and gender. Then, results were compared to similar publications, and this led to conclusions that we believe could guide course designers and educational authorities. Therefore, after reviewing the literature on MOOCs and presenting the method we used, we shall present our findings and discuss them in an attempt to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Are learner demographics in our courses different from other MOOCs'?
RQ2. Do learner demographics vary depending on course level?
RQ3. What was the impact of Covid-19 on learner demographics?

Literature Review

cMOOCs and xMOOCs

The development of the first MOOCs was motivated by the need to make education available to everyone through the creation online platforms that broke away from traditional learning settings where students were seldom actively involved in the learning process. Cormier (2008) coined the acronym MOOCs, which he used to describe Stephen Downes and George Siemens's "Connectivism and Connective Knowledge" online course. Since then, MOOCs have evolved and most of them now seem to be different from Downes and Siemens's course.

MOOCs are often divided into two broad types, namely cMOOCs and xMOOCs (Veletsianos & Shepherdson, 2016). CMOOCs, with "c" standing for "connectivist", were designed with a view to breaking away from traditional pedagogy. On cMOOCs platforms there are no teachers or specific curricula per se, but all members of the online community can serve as facilitators by eliciting discussions and sharing knowledge. Early MOOC developers such as Bousquet[1] (2012, cited in Beaven et al. 2014) believed that "good MOOC's" should rather be student-centred and based on a connectivist approach to learning. Therefore, the courses they ran were meant mainly to be platforms where learners would connect and build knowledge through online exchanges and networking with no need to rely on a teacher or specific syllabus.

As concerns xMOOCs,Sokolik (2014, p. 18) explains that their development was inspired by "the open course model originally formed as MITx, which was then joined by other universities, and has evolved into edX.org". Bárcena-Madera and Martín-Monje (2014, p. 8) go further to indicate that the use of 'x' in xMOOCs reflected the desire to make MOOCs "eXtensions", or as Read (2014, p. 99) explains, "continuation[s] of other types of eLearning courses that institutions have undertaken…". While cMOOCs were developed as a reaction against traditional learning approaches, xMOOCs tend to mirror formal learning environments and therefore distinguish between learners and instructors. Furthermore, xMOOCs are often centred around a specific topic and characterised by clear assessment methods which may entitle course participants to a certificate (See Reeves & Helberg, 2014, and Read, 2014 for a contrastive analysis of cMOOCs and xMOOCs).

Nowadays, most MOOCs seem to follow a content-based approach, and this is exactly why the acronym "MOOCs" may very often refer to xMOOCs, as they are more common and have been the subject of most publications in the field. Nevertheless, some researchers still believe that cMOOCs are inherently superior, thus making Sokolik regret that "there has developed a kind of hierarchy, where many consider cMOOCs to be superior in form and function" (2014, p.18). Sokolik further indicates that both xMOOCs and cMOOCs have positive features that can be used to foster learning. CMOOCs' emphasis on building a sense of community and promoting interaction are great advantages in any learning environment, while the traditional learning approaches in xMOOCs may help learners feel comfortable and at ease, when trying to acquire knowledge.

The covert conflict between cMOOCs and xMOOCs may be the reason behind Barcena-Madera and Martín-Monje's (2014) desire to emphasize the use of LMOOCs, which stands for Language MOOCs. LMOOCs, as described by the aforementioned authors, "are dedicated Web-based online courses for second languages with unrestricted access and potentially unlimited participation" (2014, p. 2).Though LMOOCs can be either cMOOCs or xMOOCs, Read (2014) suggests that developing a MOOC that only mirrors a traditional learning setting while completely avoiding the need to connect will prove inefficient. He then concludes that "a middle ground is required that enables a hybrid-xMOOC to be designed, including cMOOC features…" (p. 102). It is therefore not suprising to see that most LMOOCs tend to draw on the strengths of both xMOOCs and cMOOCs to result in what Sokolik refers to as "an eclectic mix of practices and tools aiming to engage students in the use of the target language in meaningful and authentic ways" (2014, p. 20).

[1] Bousquet, M. (2012, July 25). Good MOOC's, bad MOOC's. The Chronicle of Higher Education. URL: https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/good-moocs-bad-moocs

Profiles of MOOC Participants

Research on the profiles of MOOC participants has targeted various issues such as user demographics, engagement and achievement. As concerns demographics, the variables that have attracted more scholarly interest include gender, level of education and age. With regard to gender, there have been conflicting reports regarding which gender group would most likely make use of MOOCs. For instance, while Christensen et al. (2013) and Despujol et al. (2014) revealed that 56.9% and 56% (respectively) of their respondents were male, Morris et al. (2015) and Bayeck (2016) on the other hand found women to represent respectively 59.83% and 60% of learners in their courses. Therefore, as MacLeod et al. (2016) indicate, it may not be a good idea to make general claims about gender distribution, as the latter may vary depending on the contents of the course. Courses whose contents are appealing to the male population (due to social factors that go beyond the scope of this paper) would likely attract more males, and the other way around. As concerns level of education, research points to the fact that MOOCs mostly attract university graduates. For instance, Christiansen et al. (2013) studied 32 MOOCs offered on the Coursera platform and found that 83% of their research population had a post-secondary degree, with 79.4% holding a bachelor's degree. Similar findings were reported by Despujol et al. (2014), Dillahunt et al. (2014) and Bayeck (2016). Finally, most researchers agree that MOOC learners are more likely to be adults. For instance, Morris et al. (2015) obtained a mean age of 36.17 years old for participants in their study, while Martín-Monje and her colleagues (2018) found that overwhelming majority of learners in their MOOC were aged between 31 and 50. Finally, most MOOC users in the study carried out by Despujol et al. (2014) were adults whose median age stood at 33 years old. Though most researchers indicate that MOOCs tend to attract learners in their 30's or 40's, some studies have revealed that on some occasions the majority of users could be slightly younger. For instance, in their study of MOOCs in the Republic of Korea, Yong Kim et al. (2019) found that learners were aged between 20 and 29 years old. Furthermore, Christensen et al. (2013) revealed that most students enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania's Coursera MOOCs were younger than 30.

Other publications on MOOC user profiles have focused on classifying them according to engagement. For instance, Grünewald et al. (2013) grouped MOOC participants into *inactive*, *passive*, *reacting*, *acting* and *supervising* learners. After registration, inactive learners would never actually log into the course. Passive learners might go through the course to gain knowledge without partaking in any activities, as opposed to more active learners, who would only react to questions asked by their peers (reacting), initiate discussions through various means (acting) or moderate discussions and even summarise what has been learned from such discussions (supervising). The aforementioned classification is not very different from that of Hill (2013), who divided MOOC users into five self-explanatory categories, namely *no-shows*, *observers*, *drop-ins*, *passive* and *active* participants. Alario-Hoyos et al. (2014) slightly modified this categorization by talking about *non-engaged* and *engaged*, rather than passive and active participants. She went on to add two more categories, namely *latecomers* and *drop-in latecomers*. Finally, Martín-Monje et al. (2018), used Anderson et al.'s (2014) taxonomy to classify LMOOC students into five categories, namely *all-rounders* (who watch all videos and complete most assignments), *viewers* (who watch course videos but rarely complete assignments), *solvers* (who complete assignments but rarely interact with videos), *collectors* (who watch some videos and complete some assignments) and *bystanders* (who are completely inactive learners). No matter the taxonomy used, research has proved that most MOOC users tend to be made up of more passive learners than active ones. This definitely leads to low completion rate, which remains a real issue (Jordan, 2014, 2015; Martín-Monje et al., 2018).

Heterogeneity and Low Completion Rates

MOOCs' free and open access unavoidably leads to learner heterogeneity which not only applies to variables such as age, location, level of education, profession, but also affects motivation and engagement amongst learners. In fact, some users may enrol out of mere curiosity without really being interested in the course contents (Cross, 2013; Christensen et al. 2013). Furthermore, lack of time may be a great factor behind low completion rate (Conole, 2013), as taking a MOOC tends to be seen as a side activity, even amongst highly motivated learners. Finally, Onah et al. (2014) suggested that some learners may drop out of MOOCs due to other reasons such as "course difficulty and lack of support", "lack of digital and learning skills" and "bad experiences".

Whatever the case, a careful analysis of the profiles of MOOC participants is never a bad idea. Given the worldwide coverage of MOOCs, knowing more about the people who tend to enrol in specific courses could help instructors design materials that are appealing to their target population. Research on MOOC participants has the potential to make MOOCs more efficient, since having specific learners in mind can indeed contribute to the design of more engaging contents and activities. Finally, getting to know more about the profiles of MOOC users may contribute to the sustainability of the courses and lead to further research on how to incorporate MOOCs into traditional education.

Methodology

Background

This article is centred around two MOOCs that were designed by UNED's Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics and were first run in 2013. The two courses build on the strengths of both cMOOCs and xMOOCs and are dedicated to the teaching of English to Spanish-speaking learners. All editions of the courses discussed in this paper were hosted on the OpenEdx platform and included video presentations, extra materials, assessment and discussion forums. In addition, course instructors would often intervene to elicit discussions, answer questions and guide learners throughout the month each edition lasted.

Empieza con el Inglés: Aprende las mil palabras más usadas y sus posibilidades comunicativas (beginner English: Learn the thousand most common words and their use) is one of the two courses discussed in this paper and will be referred hereafter as Empieza A1. It targets beginner-level learners of English and is supposed to be completed in 4 weeks. The course is made up of 6 modules where lexical items belonging to common domains of use are presented, translated into Spanish and discussed. The other course studied in this paper is *Starting to Write English with no Mistakes*, (hereafter Starting B1) which is a lower intermediate course whose goal is to introduce students to writing in English. This course consists of 12 modules in which users are taught how to plan, produce and self-correct their essays or other pieces of writing with the help of dictionaries and/or normative corpora such as the British National Corpus.

Apart from their distinct contents, it is also worth mentioning that Spanish is the main medium of instruction and discussion in Empieza A1 whereas English is the main language of teaching in Starting B2.

Participants

Both courses were meant to target specifically learners of English as a Foreign language. Furthermore, as the courses were designed by staff at a well-known university in Spain and advertised mainly on the university website and social media platforms, we assumed participants would likely be native speakers of Spanish or a language spoken in some parts of Spain, such as Catalan, Valencian, Basque or Galician. In fact, registered users' IP addresses, which we were able to obtain, indicated that most of them were based in Spain (72%), while others logged in from Latin American countries like Mexico (2.6%), Peru (1.3%), and a wide range of other locations in Europe or America.

Research Instrument and Procedure

The data that will be presented and analysed subsequently was obtained through a questionnaire made up of three questions that course participants were asked to complete while registering for the course. In other words, in addition to entering an email address and a password, they would provide information about their age, level of education and gender. While we asked an open-ended question to elicit responses regarding age, closed-ended questions were used for level of education and gender, so learners were provided with a limited number of choices. As concerns level of education, they had to choose between nine options, namely "no formal education", "primary", "middle", "secondary", "associate", "bachelor's", "master's", "doctorate" and "other", while for gender they were provided with three choices, i.e., "female", "male" and "other". The results presented in this paper cover fourteen editions of the courses that were run between April 2016 and April 2020. The 14 editions of the courses added up to a total of 32,133 registered learners and about 93% of them completed the

questionnaire. After downloading those results from the course analytics section on OpenEdx, all we had to do was to compare and constrast the frequencies obtained in Empieza A1 and Starting B1.

Results

Before going any further, we would like to point out that the very nature of MOOCs makes it impossible (or at least very difficult) to generalize the findings of a study such as ours. Nevertheless, we still believe that this research can be a point of reference for researchers interested in the demographics of EFL MOOCs in Spain as most registered users were indeed based in the country.

Age

As we mentioned earlier, studying the age of learners is a suitable way to obtain more information about the demand for a specific type of knowledge. In addition, it can foster the design of materials that are more engaging, and therefore reduce learner dropout. As concerns this study, both Empieza A1 and Starting B1 seemed to attract an audience mostly made up of middle-aged adults as found in Table 1. Overall, the median age in both courses is about 40 years and doesn't really fluctuate over time. Nevertheless, users in Empieza A1 were found to be slightly older than the ones in Starting B1, and this is why the overall median age in Empieza A1 is about 44 years old, while registered learners in Starting B1 were about 40 years old on average.

Table 1

Median Age over Time

	EMPIEZA A1	***STARTING B1***
Editions		
April/May 2016	44	40
November/December 2017	47	42
May/June 2018	44	42
November 2018/ February 2019	43	38
April/June 2019	43	41
November/December 2019	44	40
April 2020	42	33
Overall median age	**43.85**	**39.42**

A close look at Table 1 reveals a possible outlier in the April 2020 edition of Starting B1, where the median age dropped to 33. This can be explained by the number of learners aged 25 and under, which was larger than usual. The higher turnout of learners under 26 is probably due to the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, which made governments across Europe and beyond impose national lockdowns. This led to the closure of all educational institutions in Spain, which could have made students look for alternative ways to learn English. Whatever the case, the number of learners under 26 in both courses increased gradually over the years even far before the pandemic (See Table 2). Though we are unclear as to what could have caused the increase, this finding seems to indicate that more and more youth may resort to EFL MOOCs to complement formal education. As regards Empieza A1, in April 2016, 4.3% of the users who enrolled in the course were younger than 26, 36.6% were aged between 26 and 40 (both inclusive), and 41% were 41 and older. Though more and more learners under 26 have been enrolling in the courses, they still fall behind older users. Hence, in April 2020, there were 7.1% of users under 26, 39.3% aged between 26 and 40, and 53.6% aged 41 and older. A similar trend was witnessed in Starting B1, where the frequency of learners under 26 increased from 3.1% in the first edition to 20.2% in the April 2020 edition.

Table 2

Percentages of Users Aged 25 and under

	EMPIEZA A1	***STARTING B1***
Editions		
April/May 2016	4.3	3.1
November/December 2017	3.4	4.8
May/June 2018	5.7	6.3
November 2018/ February 2019	7.2	9.9
April/June 2019	7.2	7.5
November/December 2019	8.5	11.3
April 2020	7.2	20.2
Mean percentage	**6.2**	**9**

Another striking finding about age is that Empieza A1 seemed to attract a higher proportion of older participants (aged 41 and above) than Starting B1. This is very obvious when having a look at Figures 1 and Figure 2. While there is some disparity between the number of learners aged between 26 and 40 on the one hand and learners older than 40 in Figure 1, the difference is not that striking in Figure 2. Figures 1 and 2 also reveal that, on the whole, Starting B1 seemed to be appealing to a larger number of younger learners than Empieza A1.

Figure 1

Evolution of Users' Age in Empieza A1

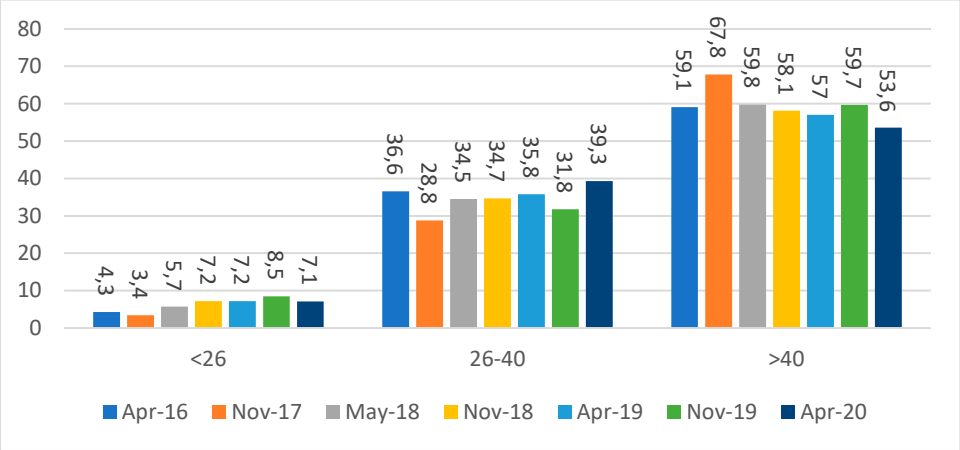
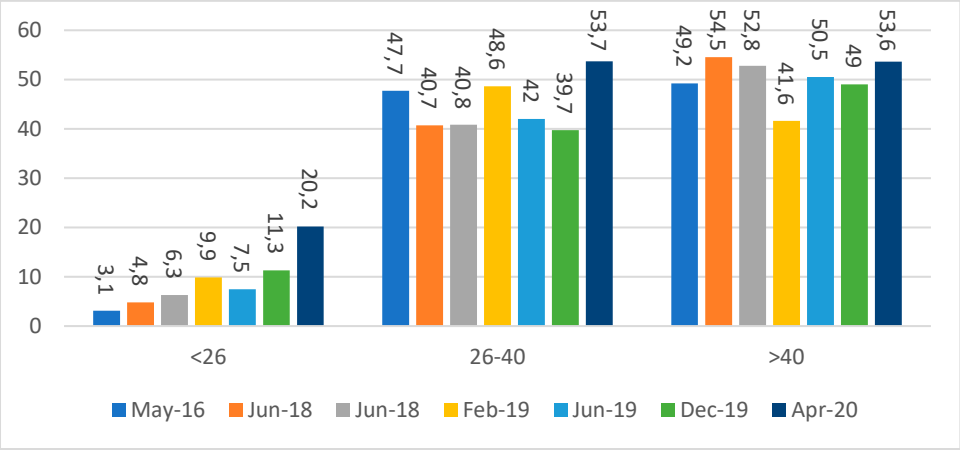


Figure 2

Evolution of Users' Age in Starting B1



At this juncture, it is important to indicate that even though there were many more older learners in our MOOCs, this does in no way mean that EFL MOOCs could not appeal to larger numbers of users under 26. The fact that they flocked into the courses during lockdown is clear evidence that MOOCs can be an alternative way to teach English, not only to older learners but also to youth. Furthermore, the higher percentage of younger learners in Starting B1 seems to indicate that the growing importance of English in Spain and the fact that its teaching is more widespread than ever before may be contributing to higher proficiency amongst younger learners. Though further research should be carried out to confirm this, we believe EFL MOOCs in Spain may have to emphasize intermediate and advanced proficiency in order to be appealing to many more youths.

Level of Education

This research was also motivated by the desire to know users' levels of education and eventually relate it to the two proficiency levels that each respective course targeted. To achieve this, users were asked to provide information about their highest educational attainment, with options ranging from "primary school" to "doctorate". In addition, people with little or no formal schooling could indicate it by selecting "other" or "no formal education".

The most salient finding here is that across all editions of both Empieza A1 and Starting B2, the majority of participants were university graduates. On average, nearly 60 percent of registered users in both courses held a bachelor's or any other associate degree.

Table 3

Percentages of Users Holding an Undergraduate Degree

	EMPIEZA A1	***STARTING B1***
Editions		
April/May 2016	62.1	60.7
November/December 2017	61	62.7
May/June 2018	59.7	60.8
November 2018/ February 2019	55.8	57.8
April/June 2019	57.7	56.7
November/December 2019	57.3	58
April 2020	58.1	56.9
Mean percentage	**58.8**	**59**

Furthermore, there was a high percentage of registered users who said they hold a master's degree (See Table 4), which might be surprising since we are dealing here with beginner and lower intermediate courses. These findings could thus indicate that tertiary education may not always guarantee proficiency in English in Spanish contexts. When looking closely at the percentages of master's degree holders, one could notice a difference between Empieza A1 and Starting B1, with the latter attracting a higher percentage (27% versus 21.1%, overall). Nevertheless, this difference is not significant enough for one to assume that master's degree holders in Spanish EFL contexts are more likely to be intermediate learners of English than beginners.

Finally, it is important to point out that other researchers who did not target specifically EFL LMOOCs also found most MOOC learners to be university graduates (Christensen et al., 2013; Despujol, 2014, Dillahunt et al., 2014 & Bayeck, 2016). Therefore, it would be too far-fetched to even attempt to establish a clear causal relation between the high presence of bachelor's and master's degree holders in the courses and their English skills.

Table 4

Percentages of Master's Degree Holders

	EMPIEZA A1	***STARTING B1***
Editions		
April/May 2016	20.9	26.9
November/December 2017	20.3	26.5
May/June 2018	21.4	25.2
November 2018/ February 2019	22.3	27.8
April/June 2019	21.4	29.5
November/December 2019	21.5	27.5
April 2020	20.4	25.7
Mean percentage	**21.1**	**27**

In general, those participants who hold only a primary or secondary education certificate represent a very tiny percentage of respondents. Many reasons may account for this situation. In Spain, it is compulsory to complete 10 years of education and students are often encouraged to graduate from high school and go to university. Moreover, perhaps primary and secondary school leavers do not find the courses to be very interesting because they are most likely employed in low-skilled jobs that may not require the ability to speak a foreign language such as English. In addition, members of this group may be less aware of ICT educational tools and less skilled when it comes to accessing and making use of them.

To sum up, the findings of this paper indicate that our respondents would most likely be middle-aged individuals who hold a university degree. Their quite advanced age may indicate the need to upgrade their skills in a context where English language proficiency is in great demand.

Gender

The last variable that this research attempted to study was gender. The aim here was to find out which gender group was more likely to enroll in our courses, and compare our findings to what was obtained by other researchers. Therefore, learners in both Empieza A1 and Starting B1 were asked to provide information about their gender, with three options available, namely "female", "male" and "other", which would enable those learners who were not clear about their gender or did not abide by binary approaches to gender to express themselves.

Figure 3

Gender Distribution in Empieza A1

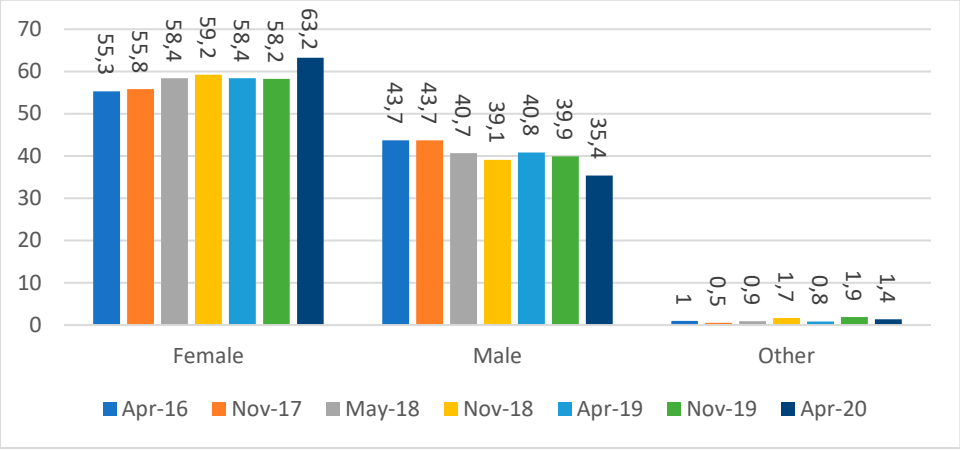
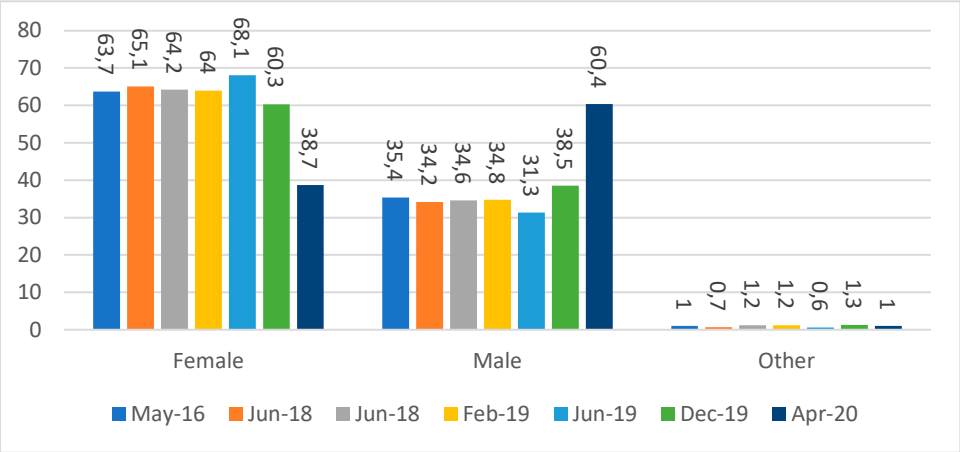


Figure 4

Gender Distribution in Starting B1



Findings revealed that overall, women were more likely to enrol in the courses than men. Out of the fourteen editions of both Empieza A1 and Starting B1, men outnumbered women only in one edition of Starting B1 (See Figures 3 and 4). Though these findings concur with those of Morris et al. (2015) and Bayeck (2016), they are contrary to what Christensen et al. (2013) and Despujol et al. (2014) obtained.

It is very difficult to explain the imbalance between the number of men and women in our courses, and this is certainly not because of low demand for beginner and intermediate English amongst Spanish men. In fact, the few studies which correlate English proficiency with gender in Spanish-speaking contexts suggest that female learners actually do better than their male counterparts (Fernandez Fontecha, 2010; Jimenez Catalan, 2010). In addition, the percentage of male learners in the April 2020 edition of Starting B1 (run during the Covid-19 lockdown), which stood at 60.4%, further indicated how difficult making general claims about gender distribution could be. Therefore, we suspect that course content and other socioeconomic reasons beyond age, level of education, employment or proficiency might actually explain gender distribution in MOOCs. Therefore, it would be too risky to make assumptions regarding gender distribution in EFL MOOCs without considering those other variables.

Discussion

This section will attempt to provide answers to the research questions that were asked at the beginning of this paper. In order words, we shall indicate whether or not the findings of this paper are specific to EFL MOOCs, discuss the link between course proficiency level and demographics, and finally discuss the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on LMOOC learner demographics.

EFL MOOC Vs MOOC Demographics (RQ1)

The findings of this research, which were related to age, level of education and gender did not really clash with what was obtained by researchers who studied MOOCs in other fields of study. The findings of this paper validate previous publications (Christiansen et al., 2013; Despujol et al., 2014, Dillahunt et al., 2014 and Bayeck, 2016) which indicated that MOOCs tend to attract university graduates. Furthermore, just like Morris et al. (2015) and Despujol al. (2014), we found that most MOOC participants are middle-aged adults. Finally, the fact that men inexplicably outnumbered women in one edition of the course is evidence that it is impossible to establish clear patterns relating to gender. All in all, this research has made us understand that EFL MOOCs are not very different from MOOCs in general with regard to their tendency to attract university graduates and adults. In addition, it has consolidated the belief that making general claims regarding gender might not be a good idea (MacLeod et al, 2016).

Course Proficiency Level and EFL MOOC Learner Demographics (RQ2)

This study has confirmed that course proficiency level somehow determined the demographics of the courses we studied. To begin with age, though the bulk of participants in both courses were middle-aged adults, Empieza A1 attracted a larger number of older learners than Starting B1. In addition, the proportion of learners under 26 in Starting B1 skyrocketed in the last two years while it remained quite steady in Starting A1.Though these findings cannot be generalized until similar studies are carried out, it goes without saying that the spread of English education in the past 20 years has indeed had a positive effect on language proficiency amongst younger learners in Spain, making them more likely to take intermediate and advanced proficiency courses.

As far as academic level is concerned, the only thing we can say for sure is that master's degree holders in Starting B1 were greater in number than the ones in Empieza A1, although the difference was not that significant. Therefore, even though it seems postgraduate degree holders would most likely enrol in an intermediate course, it is impossible to make a definite claim in a study like ours.

Finally, gender never really affected course proficiency level. In both the beginner and intermediate course, there were more female than male learners, overall.

Covid-19 and LMOOC Learner Demographics (RQ3)

We included two editions run during Covid-19 because we wanted to compare the demographics obtained before and after the spread of the novel coronavirus in order to find out whether or not the pandemic had affected learner demographics in our courses. While overall there were no significant changes in both Empieza A1 and Starting B1 in terms of level of education, gender distribution and age, the percentage of younger users in the 2020 edition of Starting B1 was quite different from previous editions. Over 20% of learners under 26 enrolled in this edition of the course, which is quite remarkable given that in previous editions the average percentage of learners within that age range was around 9%. It seems that due to lockdown, many students, who in other situations would be busy attending formal educational institutions, decided to enroll in the course in order to improve their English writing skills. As mentioned earlier in this paper, this change affected only the B1 course. This seems to indicate that most younger Spanish learners nowadays already have beginner knowledge of English thanks to greater emphasis on English language teaching in formal educational settings.

The 2020 edition of Starting B1 was also the only one in which men outnumbered women. Nevertheless, it is impossible to correlate this change with Covid-19 because both men and women were affected by the restrictions governments imposed. Therefore, a more logical thing to do is to consider this either as a random happening or the result of other factors that go beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

This paper studied the profiles of learners enrolled in two MOOCs over a period of four years in order to gauge the demand for free online English language courses in Spanish-speaking contexts and draw conclusions that might help course designers develop materials appealing to a wider audience. After studying a population which totalled over 32,000 participants located mostly in Spain, we were able to obtain data pertaining to three main variables that have been used to study population groups, namely age, level of education and gender.

With regard to age, our findings revealed that most learners were individuals in their late thirties or forties. The overall median age of registered learners in both Empieza A1 and Starting B1 might be explained by various reasons. One of them is that until the beginning of the 21st century, the teaching of English as a Foreign Language in Spain was not as widespread as it is nowadays. Furthermore, those who received quality English education at school might have failed to practise the language on a daily basis. If they lived in a context where knowing English was not that necessary, they might have lost their skills over time. This might explain why our sample is made up of an overwhelming majority of university graduates, comprising a large number of undergraduate degree holders and a decent percentage of postgraduate degree holders too, including those who completed a PhD. Finally, this study has proved that both Empieza A1 and Starting B1 tend to be more appealing to female learners, even though it is impossible to explain why women outnumber men in the courses.

As concerns the questions that guided this study, our findings have revealed that EFL MOOCs parallel other types of MOOCs when it comes to age distribution and level of education amongst users. What's more, our analysis of gender also confirmed the unpredictability of this variable, something that was pointed out in our review of the literature on MOOC demographics. The findings of this research also seem to indicate that level of education could somehow influence users' decision to enroll in a beginner or intermediate course. Nevertheless, a more comprehensive study has to be carried out to generalise these results and provide a definite answer to our second research question. Finally, Covid-19 indeed had a clear impact on course demographics, especially as concerns the intermediate course we studied. As a matter of fact, Starting B1 attracted a much larger number of younger learners after lockdown, and we believe those younger learners enrolled in an attempt to find alternative ways to learn English, since schools were closed.

Limitations and bases for further research

It is important to end this article by indicating that our intention was never to make definite claims, which would be very difficult as learner dropout rates in MOOCs tend to be high. We are aware that not all our respondents eventually completed the courses, this is why our results are based on initial interest rather than course completion. In addition, the findings of this study, which are limited to the research sample and the courses we ran, need to be confirmed by further research. Until more studies on the profiles of EFL MOOC users in Spain are carried out, everything stated in this paper should be taken with a pinch of salt. Notwithstanding these limitations, this research might guide educational authorities working on the development of LMOOCs aimed at fostering the study of English as a Foreign Language, especially at beginner and intermediate levels. For instance, one thing that has been confirmed is that it is necessary to find ways to make MOOCs appealing to a wider target population, since university graduates still make up the bulk of registered users. Therefore, it might be a good idea to work towards the promotion and dissemination of such courses amongst people with lower qualifications and the development of contents that might be of interest to them.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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Ennis, M. J., Verzella, M., Montanari, S., Sendur, A. M., Simeonova Pissarro, M., Kaiser, S., & Wimhurst, A. (2021). A Telecollaboration Project on Giving Online Peer Feedback: Implementing a Multilateral Virtual Exchange During a Pandemic. *Journal of Language and Education, 7*(4), 66-82. https://doi.org/10.17323/jle.2021.11914

A Telecollaboration Project on Giving Online Peer Feedback: Implementing a Multilateral Virtual Exchange During a Pandemic

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Telecollaboration, also called virtual exchange or online intercultural exchange, is a form of collaborative learning whereby language learners in different locations engage in computer-mediated communication to complete tasks online. There is ample evidence that telecollaboration promotes the acquisition of language skills, intercultural competence, and digital literacies. Challenges faced implementing virtual exchanges include differences in time zones, learning objectives, academic calendars, and cultural attitudes. The present article describes a case of a multilateral telecollaboration project based on the *facilitated dialogue model* involving four institutions—two in Europe and two in the United States—that was designed to prepare students for the experience of giving online peer feedback on *collaborative writing* assignments. Our initial goal was to explore the challenges students would face and the benefits they would receive from a complex telecollaboration project involving multiple institutions and two task sequences: 1) input and reflection on giving and receiving peer feedback, 2) completion of the collaborative writing task to be peer reviewed. However, new challenges and opportunities emerged after the switch to *emergency e-learning* and *remote teaching* during the Covid-19 pandemic. Relying upon multiple data sources—including correspondence, observations, class discussions, surveys, reflective writing, and information stored in virtual learning environments—our methods of data collection involved convenience sampling, while data analysis was predominantly descriptive. Our results demonstrate that even during a global pandemic, students and instructors face similar logistical challenges and reap similar benefits as has been reported in the literature. Yet our experience also reveals the resiliency of telecollaboration in the face of extreme disruption as well as the potential to exploit virtual exchange to develop learning strategies—such as methods for giving and receiving peer feedback—and meta-awareness of how language is used in the real-world—such as the implications of English as a lingua franca.

Keywords: telecollaboration/virtual exchange, facilitated dialogue model, English as a lingua franca (ELF), peer feedback, collaborative writing, remote teaching, emergency e-learning

Introduction

A key goal of higher education in the 21st Century is to prepare students to succeed in diverse, global, and interdependent societies. Mission statements of most international universities thus promise to help students become global citizens. Becoming a global citizen entails the development of the ability to communicate and collaborate across cultures, including proficiency in foreign languages, communication skills, and intercultural competence (Crowther et al., 2000; Beelen & Jones, 2015), which can be defined as "the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways" (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 422). Traditionally, mobility programs have been viewed as the gold standard for fostering such skills, but too few students can afford the costs of trips abroad

and study places are limited.[1] In addition, the covid-19 pandemic has provided further proof that universities need to offer students alternative opportunities to interact and collaborate with peers from foreign countries.

One alternative model to internationalization abroad is internationalization-at-home (IaH), defined as on-campus programs and initiatives that connect students from different cultural backgrounds. IaH initiatives can engage all students and, in general, they appear to be more sustainable compared to traditional study abroad. Some scholars have demonstrated that IaH can be even more effective than study abroad in helping students develop their ability to communicate across cultures (Soria & Troisi, 2014).

Among the various IaH initiatives that can be organized by university instructors, *telecollaboration* stands out as the one that has gained most traction in the last twenty years. Telecollaboration, also known as *virtual exchange* or *online intercultural exchange*, can be defined as any activity in which language learners from different institutions—typically based in different countries—collaborate to complete online tasks or projects with the aid of computer-mediated communication (Dooly, 2008; Guth & Helm, 2010; O'Dowd, 2006). In the context of language education, telecollaboration combines computer assisted language learning with social constructivist theories (Warschauer, 2005). In addition to promoting language acquisition, scholarship has suggested that telecollaboration can be exploited to foster the development of intercultural communicative competence (Dooly, 2008; Guth & Helm, 2010; O'Dowd, 2006, 2007; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016; Ware & Kramsch, 2005) and digital literacies (Guth & Helm, 2010, 2011). Whereas early models of telecollaboration, such as *e-tandem* (Cziko, 2004; O'Rourke, 2007), focused on giving language learners the opportunity to partner with "native speakers," more recent schemes are based on the *facilitated dialogue* and *lingua franca* models, whereby trained educators facilitate online exchange involving "non-native speakers" (Helm, 2016, 2017).[2]

Another benefit of telecollaboration is that such projects reproduce the complex conditions under which professionals increasingly work today in cross-cultural virtual teams (Maylath et al., 2013). Lack of alignment in the organization of curricula, class schedules, attendance policies, and learning outcomes results in different levels of commitment on the part of students and several other problems that instructors and participants must resolve through constant mediation. In particular, multilateral telecollaboration projects—i.e., those that involve three or more partner universities—are characterized by complexity (Maylath et al., 2013; Arnó Macià et al., 2013). Instructors and students need to find ways to manage this complexity, which means negotiating divergent goals and constraints and coping with the fact that tasks are dispersed across space and time due to the application of internet communication and collaboration tools (e.g., Google Drive, e-mail, Skype, Zoom, and WhatsApp), where each tool provides specific affordances while carrying specific ideologies that motivate their use.

Background

Against this background, this article presents a case of a multilateral telecollaboration project linking seven classes taught by five instructors at two universities in Europe and two universities in the United States. The project was conceived, in part, as a Transnational Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Project (TEP) under the auspices of UNICollaboration.[3] UNICollaboration is an academic organization that offers a hub for virtual exchange practitioners (O'Dowd, 2018). The driving force behind the UNIcollboration initiative is the INTENT (Integrating Telecollaborative Networks into Foreign Language Higher Education) consortium, whose members published a position paper in 2014[4] that defines virtual exchange as "technology-enabled, sustained, people to people education programs" (sect. 1). Virtual exchange initiatives link students from partner classes in geographically distant locations so that they can collaborate in projects that "foster intercultural dialogue, the development of digital and critical literacies as well as foreign language skills" (sect. 1). Importantly, these programs help students improve cross-cultural understanding and their ability to collaborate as part of diverse teams (sect. 3). The UNIcollboration online platform allows instructors to find project partners for different forms of virtual exchange.

[1] See https://www.iie.org/Why-IIE/Announcements/2017/11/2017-11-13-Open-Doors-2017-Executive-Summary

[2] We use the terms "native speaker" and "non-native" speaker in full awareness of the debates surrounding their use. In fact, we challenged students' notions of these concepts throughout our project. However, these terms are widely used in the telecollaboration literature. Furthermore, in the context of our study there was a clear distinction between L1 users of English and L2 learners.

[3] For more information, see https://www.unicollaboration.org/

[4] See https://www.unicollaboration.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Position-paper_1.pdf

Our telecollaboration project involved a TEP component, although our multilateral partnerships were formed before connecting with UNICollaboration. Specifically, our project linked the following courses offered at four universities:

- One English as a foreign language (EFL) course offered by the Language Centre of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (unibz);
- Two EFL/English for specific purposes (ESP) courses offered by the Language Centre at Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Krakow University (AFMKU);
- Two ESL bridge program courses offered by the English Language Centre at the University of Las Vegas Nevada (UNLV);
- One course on rhetoric and composition and a second course on writing for the web offered by the English program at Penn State Erie, The Behrend College (PSB).

The initial impetus for our project came from the unibz Language Centre, which had been seeking virtual exchange opportunities. During recent collaborations on unrelated projects with a founding member of UNICollaboration and two co-authors of the present study, the English language coordinator at unibz was exposed to a concise overview of the effectiveness of telecollaboration in fostering intercultural competence in English as a lingua franca (ELF) contexts (Helm, 2017) as well as an example of a trans-Atlantic virtual exchange involving collaborative writing with feedback from native-speaker peers (Verzella and Sendur, 2019). A similar project seemed to be an ideal solution at unibz, a trilingual university where English primarily serves as a medium of instruction and a lingua franca between L1 speakers of German and Italian, but where students have few opportunities to practice writing in English and few opportunities to interact with native speakers of English outside the EFL classroom.

UNICollaboration encourages TEP coordinators to adopt a *facilitated dialogue model* of virtual exchange (see Helm, 2016, 2017), whereby the participants—who predominantly come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds—use the English language as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2007, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2011). The aim of this model of telecollaboration—also called the *facilitator-led model of virtual exchange* (O'Dowd et al., 2019, p. 5), or the *dialogic model of telecollaboration* (Helm, 2013, p. 36)—is to help students develop critical thinking skills, audience awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and digital literacies with the aid of trained facilitators (Helm, 2013, p. 36; Helm, 2017, p. 138). The facilitators moderate synchronous and asynchronous interactions between cohorts of students, and help the students construct identities, establish relationships, and manage and mediate miscommunications and misunderstandings. In the remainder of this paper, we will therefore refer to the partners who designed and implemented the TEP module as "facilitators", while the partners who were responsible for the design and implementation of the seven courses at the four institutions will be called "instructors".

Goals and Research Questions

The aim of our project was to pilot a novel form of telecollaboration involving four institutions located in three countries. This article should therefore be read as a case which might inform the design and implementation of multilateral virtual exchanges. During a previous project, two of our partners, Verzella and Sendur (2019), reconfirmed the effectiveness of *collaborative writing* (Mousten et al., 2018; Mulligan & Garafolo, 2001; Saunders, 1989; Storch, 2005, 2011) in language education, but found, among other things, that students require input from their instructors when peer reviewing or being peer reviewed across national boundaries via the internet, especially when native speakers are commenting on the writing of L2 learners. Building upon their experience, we agreed that our project would likewise involve collaborative writing tasks that would be peer reviewed, but that the TEP facilitators would first offer students the opportunity to discuss and reflect on norms and strategies for giving and receiving peer feedback (Baker-Smemoe, 2018; Rollinson, 2005).

Our initial goal was to explore the challenges and benefits of a multilateral telecollaboration project involving two parallel task sequences, one in which students participated in a TEP that prepared them for the experience of giving and receiving feedback from their foreign peers, and a second which required students to collaboratively compose multimodal texts that would subsequently be peer reviewed. As partner institutions began to grapple with the corona virus, a secondary goal became to explore the feasibility of such a complex design amid a global pandemic.

At its onset our study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What challenges would our students encounter as they collaborated with peers on a digital writing project that culminated in peer feedback from speakers with varying levels of proficiency in English?
RQ2: What benefits would our students gain from this experience, in particular from their discussions and reflections on giving and receiving peer feedback?

The story of any multilateral telecollaboration project cannot be easily constrained within the conventions of technical reports. Nevertheless, the remainder of the paper will attempt to follow the IMRaD structure to provide anchoring for a research project that also had to cope with the tidal wave of Covid-19 disruptions. Clearly, the pandemic added another level of complexity and "messiness" to our telecollaboration project. In addition to negotiating divergent needs and expectations across classes and institutions (e.g., different course syllabi and academic calendars) and in addition to managing intercultural communication and online interactions, course instructors and online facilitators soon found themselves dealing with unexpected difficulties. Our experience, however, demonstrates the adaptability and sustainability of carefully planned telecollaboration projects, even in the face of a global pandemic which shuttered academic institutions and entire nations.

Although we view the design and implementation of our project to be the products of a complex negotiation process, and as such to be research results in their own right, the methods section that follows will illustrate these aspects as well as our data collection procedures. The subsequent sections present findings related to student engagement, learning outcomes, and the reflections of the authors and the students as pertain to the value this experience has for the teaching of EFL/ESL and English composition. The conclusion aims to consolidate findings across institutions and comment on the implications for planning and implementing multilateral virtual exchanges.

Methodology

Participants

Six students from unibz participated in the project. At unibz English serves as one of three languages of instruction as well as a lingua franca between L1 speakers of German and/or Italian but is taught and learned as a foreign language (see Ennis, 2015). The unibz language curriculum is structured into modules aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). The Language Centre generally divides each CEFR level into four forty-hour modules so students can progress through each CEFR level in a linear fashion. The telecollaboration project was integrated into a B2.2a general English module. To enroll in the course, students had to either complete an online placement test or successfully pass the B2.1b module. At unibz remote teaching/learning was mandated starting on March 10, 2020, shortly before the scheduled start date of the course on March 15.

Forty-eight students participated in the project at AFMKU. They were all enrolled in Film and TV Production Management, an English-taught Bachelor of Arts program. The class consisted of students from Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and Turkey. To be accepted to the program, the candidates had to provide a B2 English certificate. The program in which the telecollaboration project was incorporated was English for Media Production—an EFL/ESP course aimed at developing the students' general language skills to a C1 level and equipping them with ESP skills. The project was conducted during the second semester of a two-semester course. The students were divided into two groups—of twenty-three and twenty-five students—and were taught by two instructors. Project teams were created before all university classes switched to online instruction on March 12.

Twelve students from four countries—China, South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam—participated in the project at UNLV. They were enrolled in Level 6 (Academic), the top level of the ESL Bridge Program, and had to demonstrate a B2 language proficiency level in order to enroll. The ESL Bridge Program at UNLV is a 6-level, full-time intensive English program offering 20 hours of ESL instruction per week in all modalities: grammar, listening and speaking, reading, writing, and ESP. On March 23, all ESL classes transitioned to remote instruction due to

Covid-19. At that time, the international telecollaboration project became a major component of the Advanced Listening and Speaking course and the Academic Writing course, which each met for 5 hours per week for a total of 10 hours of remote instruction. These two ESL classes were taught by the same instructor.

Forty-four students from PSB participated in the project. Penn State Behrend students were enrolled in two courses: Rhetoric and Composition (RC) and Writing for the Web (WW). In preparation for the telecollaboration project, class discussions in both courses covered the challenges of writing for the global community of users of English, and the use of ELF. Students also reflected on the limits of the ideology of monolingualism (Bou Ayash, 2016) and the fact that global Englishes and ELF are often defined by their lack of conformity to standard rules (Lu & Horner, 2013). As opposed to the ideology of monolingualism, translingual theory (Horner et al. 2011; Horner et al., 2011) argues that what matters in composition is adaptability and flexibility in language use, the same adaptability that writers must have across modes, media, genres, and contexts (Donahue, 2018, p. 206). PSB switched to remote teaching on March 16.

The Collaborative Writing Project: Creating and Assessing Websites

Our initial plan was to ask all participating EFL/ESL students to collaborate across institutions (synchronously and asynchronously) in the creation of a website that would contain a range of multimodal texts. However, we immediately encountered some of the challenges identified by O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) at the *class* and *socio-institutional* levels of telecollaboration. These challenges were accentuated by the number of courses, instructors, and institutions participating in the project. Each of the partners was fully committed to realizing the project, but course syllabi were fixed and largely inflexible, and semester schedules—start dates, end dates, and breaks—were not aligned.

In response, we decided that it would be implausible to require students based in different countries to submit an online project together. Instead, we reached a consensus to grant each instructor the flexibility to integrate the project into their respective contexts, thereby accommodating for divergent curricula, syllabi, teaching styles, and learner needs. The tasks assigned to students enrolled at the four universities were as follows:

- Unibz students had to create a website which aimed to persuade UNLV and AFMKU students to study at unibz. As will be discussed in the Results section below, the course instructor substituted another instructor on short notice after the switch to emergency remote teaching. As a result, the instructor did not have sufficient time to integrate the project into the existing syllabus and instructions were rather vague. The project was in effect treated as optional homework which students completed autonomously.
- AFMKU students had to create a website which aimed to persuade visitors to study Film and Media Production Management at AFMKU. The websites were to include three obligatory pages: a video presenting the University or the course, a film review, and a film and media production glossary, as well as some optional elements students could choose. It was stressed that the task was to be done collaboratively and all participants were responsible for the final results.
- UNLV students also had to create a website. Since many ESL Bridge graduates plan to transition into a Hospitality major at UNLV, their websites focused on persuading their audience to select Las Vegas for their next vacation destination. The websites featured a 700–800-word persuasive essay, a 300–500-word written article, and a 3–5-minute student-generated video.
- All PSB students were native speakers of English. Those enrolled in Writing for the Web (organized in eight groups) had to browse the websites produced by their peers at AFMKU and offer suggestions using a feedback form created by the two instructors. The students enrolled in the Rhetoric and Composition (RC) course had to offer comments on the three websites developed by UNLV students during whole class discussions conducted in three class meetings. This alternative method for feedback was chosen because there were only three websites to evaluate for the 20 students enrolled in the RC course. Second, the instructors were interested in seeing what observations the RC students would offer once they compared the three websites.

The capstone of this task sequence of the telecollaboration was peer feedback: It was planned that drafts of each website would undergo two rounds of peer assessment: first by fellow EFL/ESL learners at unibz, AFMKU, and UNLV and then by the native-speaker peers at PSB. All students negotiated specific rules for providing

constructive peer feedback. Unibz, AFMKU, and UNLV students were prepared for this experience during the second task sequence mediated via the TEP, while PSB students were prepared by their instructor.

The TEP: Preparing to Give and Receive Feedback

The purpose of the TEP—which was pre-approved and fully supported by UNICollaboration—was to prepare the EFL students for the experience of giving and receiving online feedback from peers whom they would likely never meet face-to-face. Initially, we discussed the possibility of requiring all students to participate in the TEP and using the same virtual learning environment to facilitate the TEP and the submission and peer review of the websites. However, after much discussion, it was discovered that some course instructors were concerned about overburdening their students with additional tasks and online platforms. Whereas a collaborative writing task could be easily integrated into a course syllabus, the training on peer feedback was perceived by the instructors as "extra work" for their students. In addition, all course instructors were already using a VLE and other digital tools in their courses. Ultimately, it was decided that only the EFL learners would participate in the TEP, not the native-speaker students from PSB. Furthermore, TEP participation was optional for the AFMKU students, but mandatory for the unibz and UNLV students, at the discretion of the respective instructors. Thus, while the TEP was designed and administered by the TEP facilitators, the website project and the peer review process were managed separately by the course instructors, primarily via each institution's own VLE and via email.

It was agreed that for the EFL students, the sequence of tasks that comprised the TEP would be assigned as approximately eight hours of autonomous homework, which in the case of AFMKU meant "optional" homework. While completion grades were awarded at the discretion of the instructors, all students who successfully completed the TEP were eligible to receive an *open badge*[5] through UNICollaboration.

The decision to treat the TEP and the website task separately added another layer of complexity to our project. The alignment of the two strands of the project—the creation and peer assessment of the websites, on the one hand, and the TEP activities, on the other hand—is outlined in Appendix 1, whereas the alignment of the project to the different semester schedules is presented in Appendix 2.

Instructional Design of the TEP

The TEP component of our virtual exchange was designed and implemented by three facilitators based at unibz. These facilitators were required to complete a training course on the UNICollaboration platform before planning their own TEP. This hands-on experience introduced the facilitators, both in form and in content, to the instructional design of the facilitated dialogue model. Based on this training, the facilitators created the task sequence and then moderated online discussions over a four-week period.

The TEP was delivered fully online using the Moodle platform of UNICollaboration. The instructional design consisted of three key components:

- The task sequence;
- The roles of the facilitators; and
- The digital tools employed to facilitate interaction.

The task sequence included three task types commonly adopted in virtual exchanges (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009; Guth & Helm, 2011): *information exchange* tasks, *comparison and analysis* tasks, and *collaboration* tasks. The sequence was segmented into five sessions (see Appendix 1). Each session consisted of a main theme or discussion topic and required students, who were divided into three mixed work groups, to engage in informal asynchronous dialogues with their peers and facilitators (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009, p. 175). The five sessions were loosely aligned with Salmon's (2013) 5-stage model of teaching and learning online: "access and motivation, online socialization, information exchange, knowledge construction, and development" (p. 46), which offered facilitators clear guidelines to follow (Dooly, 2008, p. 65).

[5] For details, see: https://www.unicollaboration.org/index.php/2020/02/20/open-badges-for-virtual-exchange/

Following the guidelines of the facilitated dialogue model (Helm, 2013, p. 36), the main task of the facilitators during the implementation phase was to encourage students to participate actively in all tasks, especially the asynchronous and synchronous dialogues. To this end, facilitators attempted to establish a positive rapport with and among students within the VLE, engage students in the discussion forums, and cautiously intervene at first sight of miscommunication or conflict.

The primary digital tool utilized was Moodle's *discussion board* activity, mainly because of its asynchronous nature, which has the advantage of being space- and time-independent, giving students extra time to reflect and respond to peers (Helm, 2013, p. 30; Salmon, 2011, p. 16). Moreover, discussion boards can host a variety of learning activities, including links to readings and videos, which accommodate a broad range of learner preferences and specific learning differences in processing information, by combining textual and visual modes of communication to encourage encoding (Paivio, 1986).

Implementation of the TEP

The TEP task sequence was designed so that each session built upon the previous in preparing the students for giving and receiving online peer feedback. Each session consisted of a warm-up discussion board activity which served as an ice breaker and advance organizer. This was followed by a series of activities, mostly discussion boards, which required students to share experiences, opinions, and interpretations in response to multimodal input related to giving and receiving feedback online. To support intercultural learning, students were urged to reflect upon and respond to the discussion posts of their peers and the constructive feedback and commentary provided by the facilitators.

The first session (see Appendix 1) orientated the students to the platform, challenged their existing (auto) stereotypes, introduced their facilitators, supported them in constructing online identities, and established some *netiquette* for the purposes of the TEP (Guth & Helm, 2011, p. 45; Salmon, 2013). In session two, students reflected on the role of feedback in language learning and shared their own diverse experiences, thoughts, and preferences regarding teacher-led feedback versus peer feedback, in an attempt to emphasize the validity and importance of the latter. In these first two sessions the facilitators attempted to make students feel welcome and provided many scaffolds and affordances to encourage participation.

In session three, students were asked to compare online feedback with face-to-face feedback. At this stage the facilitators attempted to focus students' attention on the distinguishing features of and useful strategies for online communication (Dooly, 2008, p. 57), not only to prepare them for the experience of giving and receiving feedback from their peers via online tools and platforms, but also to mitigate misunderstandings and ease online communication among students during the TEP itself.

In session four, the students were required to consolidate the input and ideas they encountered during the first three sessions as they collaboratively constructed ten rules for giving feedback in the form of a wiki. These rules would then inform the first round of peer feedback on the first draft of the websites they were preparing contemporaneously (Appendices 1 and 2). The facilitators actively encouraged participating students to contribute to constructing these rules and commented on the final products.

In the final session, students were required to reflect upon different perspectives on English as a lingua franca and its implications for receiving feedback from native speakers, prior to submitting a second draft of their websites for feedback from their native-speaker peers at PSB (see Appendix 1). The implied upshot was that such feedback should ultimately focus on their goals as learners of English and the contexts in which they (will) actually use English. Especially during this set of tasks, the facilitators aimed to enhance reflection and promote metacognition.

After sessions four and five, students participated in synchronous sessions offered by UNICollaboration. These sessions were held via Zoom and served as a debriefing after each round of peer feedback, so that students could reflect further upon the experience.

Data Collection

Students were informed that their instructors would be collecting data to evaluate the effectiveness of the project and all students who participated in the TEP gave informed consent for data stored in the UNICollaboration Moodle platform to be used for research purposes. The research team therefore had many sources of data at their disposal.

All course instructors made observations and kept notes to document students' progress as well as their questions and reflections about virtual exchange and peer feedback. In addition, instructors conducted class discussions before, during, and/or after the telecollaboration. Two instructors (AFMKU and UNLV) conducted separate surveys (n=17 and n=12, respectively), while UNLV students also reflected on the entire experience in a follow-up writing assignment (n=12) where they wrote a persuasive text on whether or not future ESL Bridge students should participate in similar telecollaboration projects. Two final sources of data were the email exchanges and conference calls that facilitators and instructors had throughout the project.

Regarding the TEP, data was primarily collected via the platforms used for that component of the project. More specifically, there were four sources of data during the TEP: the observations of the unibz facilitators during asynchronous interactions with and between students via Moodle discussion forums; the observations of the UNICollaboration facilitators made during the facilitated dialogues conducted synchronously via Zoom; a final assessment for which students were asked to write a short essay to describe the most important lesson they learned from participating in the TEP (n=18); and a survey administered to all TEP participants by UNICollaboration (n=17). The use of Moodle and Zoom for the TEP also enabled unibz facilitators to quantify student engagement via user logs, task submissions, and the awarding of open badges.

Data collection could therefore best be described as convenience sampling and data analysis is predominantly descriptive in nature.

Results and Discussion

As Table 1 illustrates, we observed a drop in student participation during our project. This was in part due to the expected decline in student motivation over time and in part because of the effects of the pandemic. The many factors which contributed to students dropping out of the TEP, their website projects, or even their English courses will be discussed in the subsequent sections. At this point it is important to note that that the proportion of AFMKU students who completed the TEP was much lower than the proportion of unibz and UNLV students. This was clearly because TEP participation was optional for the AFMKU courses and mandatory for the unibz and UNLV courses.

Table 1

Participation in the Project

Participating Institutions	***Participating Courses***	***Participating Students***	***Website Participants***	***TEP Enrollments***	***Synchronous Meeting 1***	***Synchronous Meeting 2***	***Open Badges***
AFMKU	2	48	43	34	18	1	10
PSB	2	44	44	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
unibz	1	6	5	6	5	4	3
UNLV	2	12	12	12	11	0	11
TOTAL	***7***	***110***	***104***	***52***	***34***	***5***	***24***

Challenges Encountered

Many of the challenges observed during our project are universally reported by telecollaboration organizers and participants (see O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). Although these challenges were exacerbated in our case by the pandemic, some of them would have been encountered in some measure even if everything had proceeded according to plan. For example, comments collected in surveys and class discussions demonstrated that the

students' main source of dissatisfaction was having to wait too long before receiving replies to their posts during the TEP and before receiving peer feedback on their websites. The lag in replies and feedback was a result of the partner institutions following different academic calendars (see Appendix 2). Facilitators and instructors attempted to compensate for these differences in the careful alignment of the telecollaboration schedule, which resulted in tight deadlines and made students feel that the time available to complete tasks was often insufficient. The switch to emergency remote teaching merely made the deadlines more difficult to maintain.

In general, group work presented challenges due to normal group dynamics or the simple fact that some writing teams were perhaps too large, especially at AFMKU, where the average was six students per group, in comparison to three to five per group at unibz and UNLV. In response to open-ended questions included in the survey administered at AFMKU, some students revealed that they did not enjoy collaborative writing, explaining that it did not allow them to express their personal viewpoints, and instead demanded a consensus. Students asserted that collaborative writing required more time and effort, which made it more difficult to work toward strict deadlines.

There is an important caveat to students' criticisms of heavy workloads and tight deadlines. Many of the students who complained about these issues added that they thought the tasks would not have been so cumbersome if not for the switch to online classes, which made the project extremely time-consuming. In fact, students from all participating universities mentioned problems with internet connection and asynchronous collaboration, which hindered online teamwork on the website and participation in the TEP.

Perceptions of the quality of the peer feedback also varied. PSB students offered plenty of feedback on website design and the use of multimedia, whereas students from AFMKU and UNLV expected a stronger focus on the linguistic aspects of their writing, such as grammar, collocations and colligations, and register and style. These issues were a problem of differing expectations. European students, who were non-native speakers of English, seemed to rely on native speakers in the US as language experts, but the native speakers hesitated to play this role because they did not feel they had a good grasp of English grammar themselves.

Regarding the TEP, the time differences between participants' countries and the variations in the academic calendars among participating institutions posed logistical challenges. For example, the UNLV students completed the first two modules of the TEP one week in advance, as the due dates for those sessions were scheduled during UNLV's Spring Break (see Appendix 2). One UNLV student lamented, "waiting for the other people in [the] group to reply [to] the topics… made [me] late for the deadline." The AFMKU students who opted to participate in the TEP brought up the time commitment required to complete all tasks. In their final essay during the TEP, some students described the necessity of responding to other students' comments as "forced"; they felt they had to do it just for the sake of completing the task and not because of a real need to express their opinions. The TEP facilitators noticed this in the curtness of some of the students' posts to the discussion forums.

The TEP facilitators also remarked that the separate treatment of the TEP and the website project made the projects seem disconnected from one another and made them feel somewhat excluded from the website project, in that they gained access to the final products but not the first and second drafts or the feedback provided by peers. As such, they never really experienced the fruits of their labor.

Originally, only the TEP and the peer feedback were to be completed online. The respective courses and the website projects were expected to be completed as face-to-face classroom activities and/or homework. However, as the partner institutions closed their doors to face-to-face teaching, all aspects of the courses were soon conducted virtually. It is therefore impossible to describe and evaluate this project adequately without careful reflection on the effects of emergency remote teaching. The next section will present the main challenges this project faced during the first months of the pandemic.

Disruptions Caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic

Successful completion of the project required regular communication between partners, and there were, of course, many expected challenges that could be anticipated and managed on a case-by-case basis, such as issues with technology, different time zones, or miscommunication and conflict between students (O'Dowd & Ritter,

2006). But the greatest challenge that emerged during our project was the unexpected disruption to higher education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in the Spring of 2020. As has been reported extensively throughout the pandemic, our experience provides further evidence of the *fatigue* and *digital overwhelm* associated with *emergency e-learning* (e.g., Gacs et al., 2020; Murphy, 2020). In addition, the sudden absence of face-to-face interaction between classmates and between the instructors and their students at times inhibited the communication of objectives and instructions, made it more difficult to evaluate student progress, and impacted learner motivation to participate in ungraded activities.

The immense shock to the lives of students—some of whom found themselves isolated in a foreign city or country, forced to return home, sometimes without textbooks and personal devices, or experiencing other ramifications in their personal lives—resulted in some students finding refuge in telecollaboration and others prioritizing more important personal matters. The instructors and facilitators observed a steady decline in the number of active participants as the pandemic—and the emergency responses thereto—spread from Italy, to Poland, to Pennsylvania, to Nevada.

As each course consecutively switched to emergency remote teaching, and students returned to their homes in other cities or countries, the role of the TEP within the telecollaboration project seemed to get muddled in the onslaught of instructions and platforms, and the facilitators had to clarify frequently. Even our UNICollaboration contacts and facilitators and the instructors of the participating courses often asked the unibz facilitators for reminders and clarifications. These observations coincided with a decline in active participation in TEP activities from session to session (see Table 1).

At unibz the switch to remote teaching/learning due to Covid-19 shortly before the start date of the course resulted in far fewer enrolled students than had been expected, a one-week delay in the course start date (see Appendix 2), and a substitution of the instructor before the course began. The unibz students therefore initiated the TEP and the website project one week after their peers at UNLV and AFMKU, and they were forced to recuperate the missing TEP session during their first week of lesson. In addition, the new instructor had not participated in the planning of the telecollaboration and was not privy to prior discussions of how the project would be integrated into existing syllabi by the other instructors. Whereas the UNLV and AFMKU instructors adapted composition tasks already included on their course syllabi into subtasks of the website project, unibz students were merely asked to work in groups to design the website as an additional ungraded assignment, without indications of text types or length. Thus, for the unibz students, completing the project did not require them to produce the specific genres that were taught in the course. The instructor of the course doubted the pedagogical value of the resulting website, as students tended to focus on the visual features of their website while neglecting written text. In addition, unibz students were only able to participate in the first round of peer feedback with AMFKU students, well after the indicated deadline, and never interacted with PSB students.

Further complications, specifically for PSB students, were due to the project timeline. PSB students started to work three weeks before the end of the semester, when they were also focusing on their own final projects. At that moment, all Penn State campuses had already switched to remote-only instruction and some students had to cope with various logistic issues. Some of them could not access their dorm rooms where they kept books and computers; others had problems with their devices and other hardware; and yet others did not have a quiet study space available to them.

Many students, especially at unibz, AFMKU, and UNLV had to deal with travel restrictions which either made it difficult to return to their home countries or resulted in them being stranded in a foreign country during a lockdown. Although none mentioned it explicitly, UNLV students from Asia had to cope with negative stereotypes prevalent in the American news media and on social media.

Benefits Gained

Notwithstanding the challenges detailed above, responses to surveys and reflection tasks as well as instructor observations during class discussions suggested that a high percentage of students perceived the overall learning experience as satisfying and in line with their expectations. A key question of the AFMKU questionnaire, for example, asked students to evaluate specific elements of the project on a five-point scale, where 1 meant “didn’t like it” and 5 meant “liked it very much”. The website project, which included creating the websites, revising

them based on peer feedback, and providing feedback to the foreign partners, received an average of 3.5. Giving peer feedback in the telecollaboration project was something the students enjoyed the most, with a mean score of 4.5. The AMFKU students who opted to participate in the TEP also gave that experience a high rating (4.3 out of 5).

At unibz, all five regularly attending students passed the course. Despite the challenges faced implementing the website projects, all five contributed to the website and all five enrolled in the TEP. Four of five students participated in both synchronous meetings and three of five completed enough of the TEP to receive an open badge (see Table 1). In class discussions, students expressed positive attitudes toward both the website project and the TEP component. In particular, students stressed the value of meeting the facilitators and foreign students online during the initial period of the lockdown in Italy.

At UNLV, the instructor and students were very satisfied with their participation in this project. In their follow-up writing task, ten of the twelve UNLV students shared that they would recommend such telecollaborations for future ESL Bridge students because of the potential benefits: improved critical thinking, communication, and digital literacy skills and enhanced intercultural awareness and competency. One UNLV student noted, "Simultaneously, giving and receiving peer feedback from websites have facilitated the development of my ability to evaluate and observe ideas." UNLV students also appreciated the "different cultures, languages, … [and] group work … [through] shar[ing] all group members' ideas and put[ting] together the website, essay, article, and video." As another student concluded,

> What I have learned is very worthy to me, because I may encounter more difficult tasks in the future, and the experience I have accumulated may come into use. I absolutely recommend the next Bridge class [participate] in this project, because we can learn many contents which cannot be learned in class, such as creat[ing] website[s] . . . communicat[ing] with different students in the world, [and] learn[ing] about their culture, their education and their life. In the process, we can practice our skills and improve our ability. This is a rare opportunity.

Receiving feedback during this project benefited students in terms of immediacy and validity (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wiggins, 2012) because the rounds of feedback followed directly after the websites were completed, which kept the students focused on the project. One UNLV student felt that such sequencing of tasks facilitated collaborative revision: "[O]nce we got the feedback, no matter positive or negative, we just revised immediately until all members [were] satisfied." Moreover, having an actual audience of peers and receiving feedback from the target audience made the writing process authentic and purposeful. The students were better able to grasp the rhetorical concepts of audience, purpose, and tone as the comments were coming directly from their audience and peers, not simply from their instructor.

PSB students also took away some key lessons from the project. A key problem of telecollaboration projects is that "native" speakers are frequently (implicitly or explicitly) presented as the "language experts" whereas "non-native" speakers are reductively presented as the "learners" who needexposure to "native English" (Verzella et al., 2021b). Intercultural communication can never be conceived as a one-way road in which non-native speakers who use English as a lingua franca (ELF) have to meet native speakers in their linguistic comfort zone (Verzella et al., 2021a). Native speakers must also try to understand how ELF works, how native English is only one of the varieties of English used on the world wide web, and how different cultural traditions might affect content creation, rhetorical approaches, and stylistic choices in the creation of digital content.

This presented an important learning moment for PSB students to ask questions about their role as language consultants in this project. They were not sure how to find a balance between pointing out problems related to what they perceived as ineffective rhetorical strategies or the use of non-idiomatic English, on the one hand, and praising their peers for their creative resourcefulness in the use of ELF or appreciating their use of rhetorical moves and strategies that are not always familiar to North American audiences, on the other hand.

The questions that PSB students asked about their role in the telecollaboration were addressed during class discussions that helped all students understand their role as both cautious consultants and learners. Collectively, they decided to avoid imposing native-English conventions on users of ELF. Rather, they understood their role as linguistic negotiators and cultural mediators. One of the most interesting reflections

shared by several PSB students was that in the attempt to imitate native/idiomatic English, their peers had used language that American audiences would find confusing or inappropriate considering the communicative goals of the websites.

Based on the data collected during the TEP, we observed that most students acknowledged the many cultural differences in the conventions of online communication and attitudes toward teacher-led versus peer feedback, demonstrating enhancement of cultural awareness. The writing task assigned at the end of the TEP revealed that students had indeed reflected on giving and receiving peer feedback via the internet, which changed their opinions about the inherent value of feedback from peers, as opposed to from teachers, and changed their online behavior when interacting across cultures.

For these reasons, and many others, we believe that our study confirms previous findings that show how telecollaboration fosters the development of language skills and intercultural communicative competence (Dooly, 2008; Guth & Helm, 2010; O'Dowd, 2006, 2007; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). The types of questions asked and the comments shared with the instructors and the TEP facilitators throughout the telecollaboration demonstrated how students developed critical thinking skills, audience awareness, and intercultural sensitivity.

Conclusion

Despite the obvious limitations of a description of a singular experience, this case study offers several important findings which might inform the design and implementation of virtual exchange, also in the absence of a global pandemic. When traditional mobility programs came to an abrupt and premature end due to the outbreak of Covid-19, this multilateral telecollaboration project went on, allowing students to connect and exchange ideas with peers in a time of forced isolation.

Telecollaboration is sustainable even when course syllabi do not overlap and semester schedules are not aligned, or are forced to change, because instructors can organize flexible projects that allow students to work at different paces and with different goals. This is not to say that our project proceeded without hitches or that our students did not experience the fatigue and digital overwhelm associated with emergency remote teaching during the pandemic, but the telecollaboration demonstrated for students and teachers alike the importance of understanding the affordances of computer mediated communication at a time when a rapid development of their digital literacies became imperative.

That the unibz group struggled to fully integrate the project into their course, that some students felt overwhelmed by the amount of work to be completed within tight deadlines, or that others felt that communication with peers abroad felt "forced" at times, indicates that telecollaboration projects must always remain open to revision and modifications and necessitate continuous communication and coordination—between teachers and students and across partner institutions. In future iterations, our team might consider, for instance, using a single platform for both task sequences and requiring TEP participation for all students.

As has been reported elsewhere, there is ample evidence to suggest that our students were afforded valuable opportunities to practice their English, reflect on the use of ELF in intercultural communication, understand writing as a process that requires mediation and collaboration with target audiences, and engage in intercultural learning. One novel finding of our experience is that telecollaboration can also be exploited to develop learning strategies — such as methods for giving and receiving peer feedback—and meta-awareness of communication and language in use — such as online etiquette or pragmatic strategies for effective communication in ELF.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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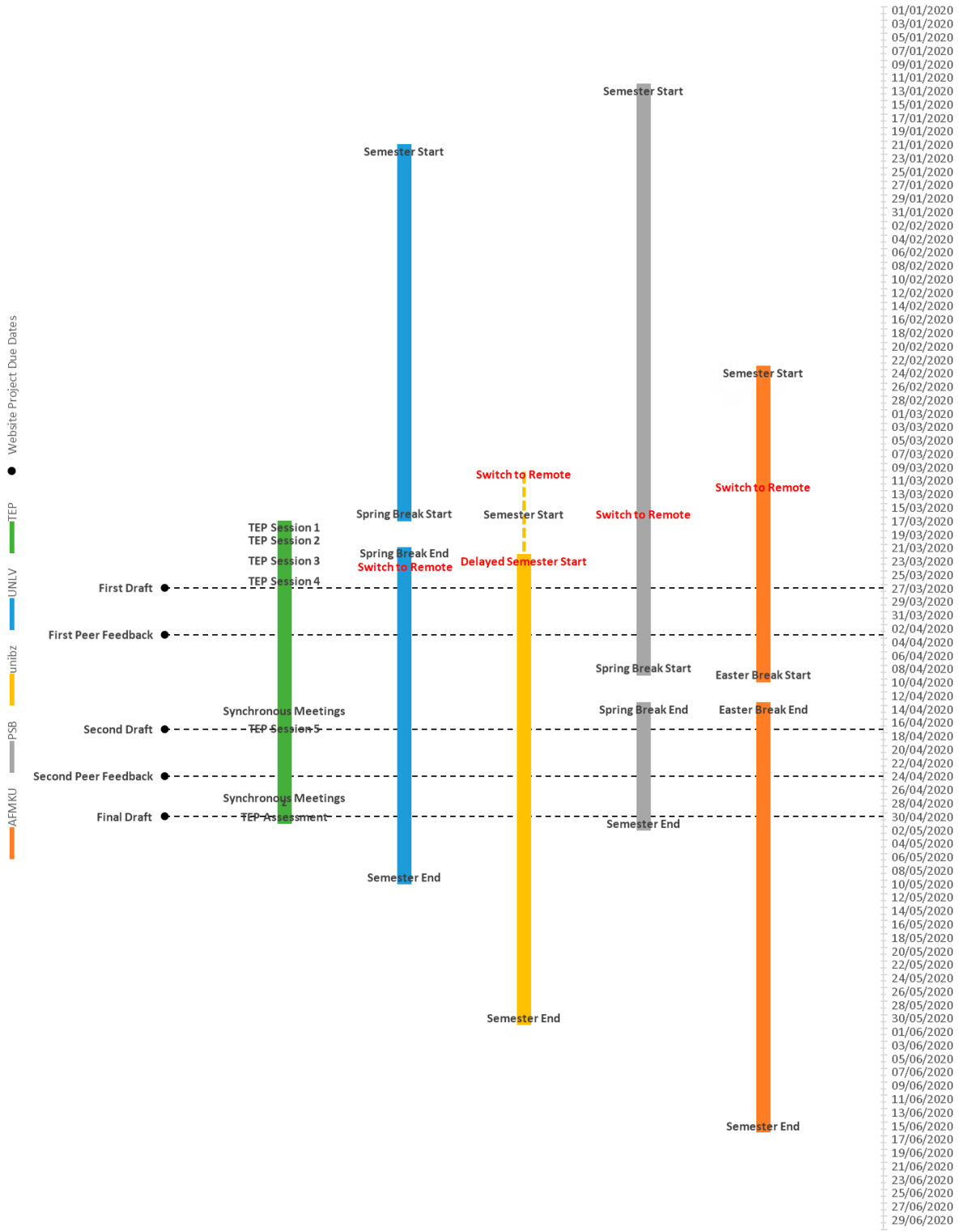
Appendix 1

Alignment of the Parallel Task Sequences

Website Project	Fixed Deadlines	TEP
	March 18	**Session 1**: Ice breaker; constructing online identities; Issues of online communication and etiquette
	March 20	**Session 2**: The importance of feedback in language learning; teacher-led vs. student-led feedback; Sharing positive and negative experiences with feedback: Personal expectations and cultural differences
	March 23	**Session 3**: Differences between face-to-face and online feedback
Step 1: unibz, AFMKU, UNLV submit first drafts	**March 27**	**Session 4**: 10 Rules for feedback during telecollaboration (student-generated list of rules for giving feedback during the project)
Step 2: unibz, AFMKU, UNLV offer peer feedback especially on English and texts	**April 3**	
	April 14/15	**First synchronous meeting**: Reflecting on first round of peer feedback
Step 3: unibz, AFMKU, UNLV submit second drafts	**April 17**	**Session 5**: ELF and WE perspectives on English as a global language and NSs and NNSs: Implications for giving feedback
Step 4: PSB Behrend students offer feedback especially on rhetoric and multimodal web design	**April 24**	
	April 27/28	**Second synchronous meeting**: Reflecting on second round of peer feedback
Step 5: unibz, AFMKU, UNLV submit final drafts	**April 30**	**Assessment**: Brief reflection text and survey of attitudes toward website project and TEP
Assessment: Instructors evaluate formally	**Varies**	

Appendix 2

Alignment of Schedules



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The Language of Russian Fake Stories: A Corpus-Based Study of the Topical Change in the Viral Disinformation

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The spread of disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic is largely associated with social media and online messengers. Viral disinformation disseminated in 2020–2021 was related to a wide range of topics that caused panic among people. Many false narratives emerged and attracted public interest over time, which mainly reflected the general public's utmost belief in these topics. Text mining can be used to analyze the frequencies of keywords and topic-related vocabulary in order to track the changing focus of the public concerning online disinformation. In this paper, we present the results of a corpus-based study of Russian viral fake stories circulating during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. We propose a method for analyzing the central topics and dynamics of topical change in the context of the Russian Covid-19-fake story. In order to accomplish this objective, we make use of a set of tools to extract keywords, count their frequencies and analyze corresponding contexts. We apply these tools to the compiled specialized diachronic corpus of Russian viral false Covid-19-related stories. The obtained data is evaluated to determine the dynamic of topical shifts by tracking the changes in keyword frequencies as well as the use of other high-frequency corpus words. The findings of the work concerning topical fluctuations in the Russian viral Covid-19 disinformation agenda as well as given explanations for the identified drifts in public interest in the topics during the first year of the pandemic can contribute to developing effective strategies for combating the spread of fakes in the future.

Keywords: disinformation, Covid-19, fake story, infodemic, viral text, specialized corpus, word frequency, topic change

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has proven that online messengers and social networks have a great potential to make disinformation go viral. Huge amounts of unverified materials written on the web about the Covid-19 pandemic during 2020 led to the coinage of a new term "infodemic," meaning "too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak"[1]. In Russia, viral texts about Covid-19 and related issues did rounds on social networks and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Viber. Many of the circulating texts contained false information about the symptoms and treatment of the new virus, the numbers of Covid-19 cases, the state of hospitals and upcoming government-imposed restrictions. Due to overwhelming public interest and trust in such texts, the dissemination of disinformation was criminalized in Russia, and eventually, WhatsApp imposed a strict limit on the number of messages that can be forwarded as a measure to stop the viral spread of disinformation regarding Covid-19.

Malicious use of social media during the Covid-19 pandemic has been instrumental in the creation of misleading news on key topics related to Covid-19. According to a study on virus-related infodemic and its impact on public health (Islam et al. 2020), more than 5,800 people around the world were admitted to hospital and at least 800 people died in 2020 as a result of false information on social media. Since the Covid-19 infodemic evidently poses a real danger to human lives, it is necessary to study the texts containing the most

[1] WHO (2021) Public health research agenda for managing infodemics. World Health Organization.

popular fake stories in order to understand why certain narratives were successful in fueling conspiracy theories and initiating panic among people.

The growing application of corpus-based research (e.g., Webber & Stroud, 2013; Koplenig, 2017; Karjus et al. 2020) can be attributed to the fact that representative corpora are useful in obtaining quantitative data on the units of analysis and answering a number of questions about the texts, storylines and key topics. In this paper, we propose a quantitative method to measure the topical change in the Russian Covid-19 disinformation spread by counting word frequencies in diachronic collections of target data. The diachronic analysis of viral Covid-19-related fake stories spread in Russia during the first year of the pandemic involves identifying key topics of the fake news and tracking topical shifts in public interest over time. According to Karjus et al. (Karjus et al. 2020, 86), such shifts are reflected in a specialized diachronic corpus in changing frequencies of the topic-related vocabulary. Thus, we expect the frequency distribution of the corpus terms to capture the changes in the disinformation agenda over time.

Previous works (Faust, 2018; Pesta et al., 2018; Mariani et al., 2019) based on the keyword research model, also focus on capturing peaks and troughs in diachronic data to track topical changes in a certain field; however, they do not study the factors that determine fluctuations of public interest in different topics. In addition, the above studies aimed at determining topical drifts use specialized corpora containing academic or media texts as target material. Our work is, so far as we are aware, the first occasion on which word frequencies have been used to analyze the changes in the disinformation agenda (namely, the texts that deliberately mislead the reader).

Describing the dynamics of topical change in the disinformation agenda can contribute to the development of strategies to fight the spread of disinformation about Covid-19 and related issues. The derived knowledge on why public interest on some topics is short, while others remain consistently popular among the public may shed light on what factors make certain fake narratives go viral.

The paper is structured as follows: In the Methodology section we introduce the related work in the literature and describe the proposed method. The Results and Discussion sections present the obtained results and analyze the frequencies of keywords and topic-related vocabulary along with the periods of time when different topics on the Russian disinformation agenda gained or lost popularity while depicting topics that retained their popularity throughout the first 13 months of the pandemic.

Methodology

Building Specialized Corpora

This work is inspired by the prior corpus-based research built on the premise that collecting and analyzing large amounts of discourse samples is an effective tool for understanding the way people communicate (e.g., Biber et al., 1998; Stubbs, 2001; McCarthy & Carter, 2001; Budge & Pennings, 2007; Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). When dealing with specialized corpora targeted towards a particular text type, genre or subject field, vocabulary sorted by frequency can provide very illustrative information (Ngula, 2018). Our research model is based on the assumption that analyzing word frequencies within a corpus with a narrowed text focus (Covid-19-related fake stories) can assist in identifying some patterns in the language of Russian viral fake stories.

When people make up fake stories with the intention of promoting disinformation, they alter their language to not only fit the agenda but also play to the audience's feelings (e.g., fears, desires, interests, etc.) in order to draw their attention to the story and make it go viral. Thus, the vocabulary used in such stories may reflect patterns that allow us to draw conclusions about the general linguistic characteristics of fake narratives. Thus, before discussing the used methodology in detail, we should outline the research agenda by answering three main questions. What types of texts are suitable to address the specific objectives of the study? What is the unit of analysis? What type of corpus (raw or annotated) better suits the research goals?

The design of the specialized corpora complies with the standards of a linguistic investigation if collected texts, representing a particular domain of use, are balanced and sampled. Biber and Jones (Biber & Jones, 2009, p.

1288) note that the term "corpus composition" refers to the text categories that are included the corpus structure. Texts selection is based on a sampling method according to which the collected data should represent the target text categories and the texts should be of similar size. Register variation is also an important issue in the framework of this research, as we intend to analyze Covid-19-related text and audio messages containing fake narratives that went viral during the first year of the pandemic in Russia. These texts are inhomogeneous in terms of style and strategic organization, and their authors have used different registers. Therefore, the corpus should be designed to represent all used registers.

In contrast to discourse analysis, which focuses on a detailed discussion of a few texts, corpus studies analyze large volumes of texts, indicating that this method gives high importance to corpus size. Large corpora are used in historical research for tracing lexical and semantic changes. Such studies require a larger number of units (words and collocations) to be processed, and these units may occur in texts with low frequencies. Therefore, statistical procedures should be applied to very large text collections (Leech & Fallon, 1992; Scott, 2001; Baron et al, 2009). The number of texts sufficient enough to analyze narrow-profile subjects depends on a variety of text categories (genre, format, etc.) that characterize a particular discourse. For example, British Academic Written English (BAWE) is a specialized corpus that consists of good-quality student assignments across disciplines (from first-year to master's students), with a total of 2896 independent texts and 6,514,776 words. Air Traffic Control (ATC) corpus is represented by 70 hours of recorded conversations between controllers and several aircraft in three major airports of the United States. These collections are representative of a special-purpose corpus that offer numerous possibilities of examining and interpreting data from particular areas. However, more targeted corpora (e.g., Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays that contain essays written by British pupils and university students with a total of 324,304 words) also provide sufficient evidence for specified studies related to lexicology or grammar (Curzan, 2009).

Corpora structures can also be determined by the type of units chosen for analysis. Stefanowitsch and Gries (2009, p. 933) mention that, for a long time, lexical issues have been the focus of most corpus-based research, which means they were considered the primary unit of investigation in corpus linguistics. Before the first corpora containing grammatical annotation were built, words and word forms were the only available tools for assessing corpora, and therefore, they were of particular interest to the researchers in this field (Stefanowitsch, 2006, p. 62). However, advances in text processing have broadened the research horizons to include higher-order structural units of analysis. According to Biber and Jones (2009, p. 1289), three main units of analysis in modern corpus studies are each occurrence of a linguistic feature, each individual text or the entire corpus. These units are used in different research designs to either compare texts and define the differences between them or to analyze the use of the linguistic structure. The nature of the units of investigation is different since each represents a different level of language. Some of them do not even have quantitative characteristics. For example, while grammar categories are not numeric and cannot be subjected to quantitative analysis, texts have quantitative characteristics, and numerical procedures can be applied to them (Biber & Jones, 2009, p. 1290). In this work, the units of analysis are keywords and topic-related vocabulary of every part of speech regardless grammar category. Therefore, we preprocess the corpus by lemmatizing it. This would ensure that each word is represented in its original form.

The next research question is whether to annotate the corpus or to use a raw collection of texts. Annotated corpora include additional interpretative linguistic information that could easily be separated from the raw corpora in order to avoid causing any loss of information. The type of information that could be used as an annotation depends on the study objective. For example, POS-tagging is considered to be the most common annotation. It refers to tagging words in a corpus in order to indicate the part of speech they belong to (Leech, 2005, p. 17). There is no consensus among scholars on which corpus, raw or annotated, is best suited for analyzing linguistic phenomena. Sinclair (Sinclair, 2005, p. 5) specifically prefers to work with a raw corpus since it is a "pure" experimental material that most accurately reflects the language features a linguistic study can focus on. Some researchers (Leech, 2005; Wilbur et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2008), while discussing annotation issues, have stated that it is a tool for enriching the original corpus through value addition and may be useful not only for the annotator but also for other linguists who may apply it in their work. Meurers (2005, p. 1620) asserts that large corpora containing million tokens or more can only be annotated automatically. Today, however, semi-automatic annotation procedures are applied even for smaller corpora.

Counting frequencies of specific units in diachrony is one of the methods of historical corpus linguistics. Statistical techniques can be applied to compare distributions of specific groups of words and to determine the words that can be found in the corpus significantly more or less frequently than expected (Baron et al., 2009, p. 41). Outlining possible research directions, Sinclair (Sinclair, 1991, p. 31) mentions that when the word count indicates notable changes in frequencies of the units, which generally have a stable distribution, it may provide significant information on the types of text being studied. Since this work focuses on tracing the dynamics of topic change in manipulative e-communication during a certain period, we apply the technique of keyword analysis, which is one of the most widely-used methods for determining significant words based on comparing the frequencies of words in a target corpus with frequencies of the same words in a reference corpus (Baron et al., 2009, p. 41). Through quantitative analysis, researchers get a list of words sorted based on their raw or relative frequencies in texts. The results may be unexpected with the flagging of some linguistic trends that are not obvious without statistical data.

Procedure

The overall framework of the proposed methodology can be described in three main steps. First, we build a corpus of Russian viral fake messages (13 sections, one for each month of the first year of the pandemic, including March 2021) and preprocess the corpus by removing punctuation and graphic elements and normalizing all texts to lowercase letters in order to avoid word doubling in the statistics caused by lowercase or uppercase differences. Next, the texts are lemmatized, stopwords are removed from them and absolute synonyms, different forms of the same word or words, are replaced with one lemma. Then, we use a network graph showing topic clusters and term frequencies across all sections of the corpus to track the dynamics of topic change in Russian fake stories being circulated during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020 to March 2021). We also analyze the most common non-Covid-19-related vocabulary and determine contexts surrounding high-frequency words and collocations.

Methods and Instruments

Input Data. Corpus Structure

From the very beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, users have been posting/reposting on their social media accounts and forwarding to each other via messengers a lot of false content; however, though these texts could be characterized as fake narratives, not all of them went viral. In this section, we introduce the principles of text selection developed to ensure that the compiled corpus is representative and well balanced.

What is a viral fake story? A Covid-19-related fake narrative refers to text containing information about the recent pandemic caused by Covid-19 (and its related aspects) that was officially announced as false by federal agencies, scientific organizations and officials. Such narratives were spread by many users through popular virtual informal communication channels, primarily social media platforms (such as Instagram, Facebook, Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, etc.) and mobile messengers (such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber, etc.) regardless of whether the intention was to deceive or not. Within the framework of this research, a text is considered viral if it has more than 50,000 unique views. Counting the number of reposts and views in messengers is not always possible, as people send texts to personal and group chats, which are not accessible. Therefore, when selecting study materials, we accounted for the number of views for the forwarded texts via open channels, profiles, bots, public chats and groups. The authors of fake content are usually unknown, and the information in their stories is either completely made up or presented in a significantly distorted manner.

Data source. We began gathering fake narratives about Covid-19 from March 2020 when the WHO made an official announcement of the pandemic. The sources of the texts are popular Russian social networks and mobile messengers. When collecting data, viral audio messages were transcribed. However, video fakes were not considered unless they went viral in the form of texts spread on the web. It is difficult to establish the original source of some texts and the date of their first appearance since most of the authors are anonymous and the texts have been reposted many times. In addition, on April 1, 2020, the President of Russia passed a law[2] imposing criminal punishment for spreading disinformation. Many of the texts that had already been

[2] Federal Law of April 1, 2020 N 100-FZ "On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and Articles 31 and 151 of the Criminal Procedure Code of the Russian Federation". Collected Legislation of the Russian Federation of April 6, 2020 № 14 (Part I) Art. 2030.

added to the corpus were subsequently deleted from the web sources at the request of Rospotrebnadzor (Russian Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights). Therefore, in the appendix to the compiled corpus, against the deleted texts, we have placed links to the resources dealing with Covid-19 myth debunking since they post original texts. The corpus (in raw and preprocessed versions) was registered with the Russian Federal Service for Intellectual Property as a database[3]. In this work, we have specified the episode number in this database when examples of fake narratives are introduced.

Data verification. Covid-19-related disinformation covers wide-ranging topics (restrictions, lockdown, healthcare advice, vaccination, etc.), and there is a need to prove that all of the considered texts contain false information. For each text added to the corpus, one of the official institutions (health authorities, ministries, and agencies and federal media) has refuted the claim made in the story on their websites or verified pages on social networks. We also used the following resources to fact-check the information from the collected narratives: Covid Infodemic Europe, Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network and Coronavirus Facts Alliance.

Types of false narratives. The corpus of Russian viral fake stories about Covid-19 is stylistically heterogeneous, containing texts across all genres and categories that were popular among Russian users in the first year of the pandemic ("insider" information from reliable sources (officials, doctors, scientists); warnings; guidelines (how to wear a mask, how to behave during restrictions); pseudo-medical advice/ recipes; information from medical personnel working in "the red zone"; fake stories disguised as news or scientific article; fragments of a pseudo-research; conspiracy theories; and fake documents).

Character limit and the number of episodes. The typological diversity of included texts entails setting a maximum limit of 2000 characters and a minimum of 200 characters (an average fake narrative consists of about 600 characters). This is an important step for data balancing since if both ultra-short texts and large narratives are included in the corpus, the raw frequencies of keywords will not give accurate information about the dynamics of topic change and public interest in a certain topic. These limits enable us to eliminate the disproportion between the number of episodes and the number of keywords extracted from each episode (short texts exhibit lower occurrences of keywords, while the same number of large episodes contain a lot of keywords related to the same topic). It must be noted that the distribution of texts by month is uneven. The number of fake Covid-19 stories peaked for the first time in March 2020 (52 episodes) and April 2020 (48 episodes) during the period of self-isolation in Russia. During the summer of 2020, only 66 texts that meet the established research principles went viral on the web. Since the fall of 2020, there has been an increase in the number of viral fake stories, with statistically significant peaks in November 2020 (48 episodes), December 2020 (54 episodes) and March 2021 (54 episodes), after the start of vaccine testing in Russia (see the Table below for more details on episode statistics).

One of the major obstacles to corpus balancing is the so-called "chain fakes," i.e., texts significantly distorted due to paraphrasing and specifications as a result of multiple reposts. Thus, the question arises as to what the original text looked like and when it first appeared. For example, there is a popular fake story of doctors and police officers coming to people's homes and forcing them to get vaccinated («*Если придут врачи с полицейскими. Отказывайтесь от любых тестов на вирус. Потом заставят пройти повторный тест, а он уже покажет наличие вируса. Как вирус подтвердится.* <…>» (Episode #56, April 2020). This story was first posted on Instagram in March 2020 and was refuted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs that stated that the information was false and no vaccine has been found yet. However, the story began circulating in messengers again in January 2021 and looked even more convincing than the original text since vaccination had already started in Russia at that time. In such cases, we add a text next to the earliest recorded date in the corresponding chronological section of the corpus.

Corpus Preprocessing. Lemmatization and Data Cleansing

To enable accurate word frequency analysis and extraction of keywords and topic-related vocabulary, the original text corpus should be preprocessed, i.e., all forms of one word are converted to its base form so they are analyzed as a single item. Components that do not carry additional meaning are eliminated from the texts.

[3] Russian-language bank of electronic texts containing verbal markers of linguistic manipulation. Database #2021621693, registered with the Federal Service for Intellectual Property of the Russian Federation 08/14/2021. Authors: Monogarova, A. G., Bagyan, A. Yu

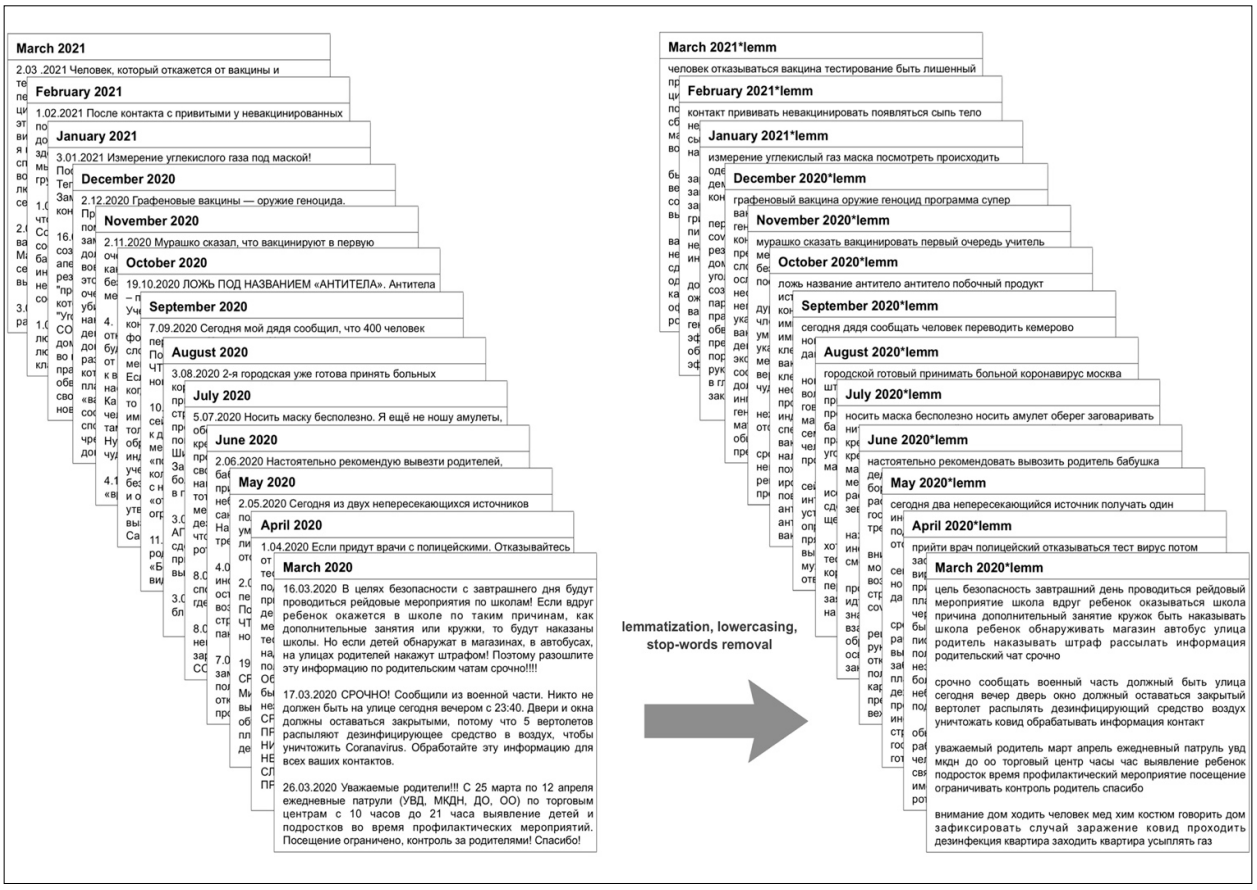
These elements primarily include stop words, absolute synonyms and punctuation marks. Viral Covid-19-related fakes are often characterized by emotional presentation, and many e-texts contain graphic elements (pictograms, logograms, ideograms and smileys). Moreover, uppercase letters are used to draw the audience's attention to particular bits of information.

As the first step to corpora preprocessing, we performed *lemmatization* and *denoising* (lowercasing and the removal of punctuation and graphic elements) using Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) in Python. After lemmatization, all the words in the corpus are represented with their regularized forms, which helps avoid retaining "multiple terms representing the same word or phrase and thus decrease the vocabulary size" (Sarica et al., 2020). The number "19" was removed from *ковид-19/Covid-19* so that the word frequency counter recognizes each of these terms as a single word form.

Then, we continue to clean the data by removing *stopwords* (commonly used words such as most pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and quantifiers that do not hold much meaning) from the corpus. These groups of words are statistically significant since they appear in texts multiple times as a part of the sentence structure in order to make narratives coherent, but they give no considerable information about the analyzed bits of discourse. To exclude these words from frequency index, we customize a NLTK pre-existing stopwords list that already contains most Russian function words by expanding it with some common adverbs (*вообще, совсем, просто, еще, только, явно, тоже, настолько, насколько, вовсе, почти, очень*), all forms of possessive and demonstrative pronouns and some interjections that are commonly used in expressive fake narratives (*ну, ага, ого, увы, ура, вау, эх, ой, ох, господи, боже мой*). The overall denoising procedure has been illustrated in Fig. 1.

Figure 1

Corpus Preprocessing



Collected samples of discourse contained four groups of words that hampered text normalization since their occurrence in the corpus could distort the results of frequency-based statistical analyses. These groups are as

follows: synonyms that can be substituted in all possible contexts; multi-word terms that are found in fake texts in both full and shortened forms (acronyms, initialisms, etc.); words that have several spelling variations within the corpus; and terms containing numbers or symbols. To avoid any ambiguity in decoding results of frequency analysis, we normalize the texts by *replacing similar words with one lemma*.

First, absolute synonyms are replaced with one semantically equivalent word form. For example, in the case of synonymous words for the coronavirus, (*ковид*, 256 occurrences in the corpus before word replacement), *коронавирус* (159 occurrences), *covid* (94 occurrences), *корона* (48 occurrences), three less common words are filtered out and replaced with the most common form, *ковид*. The word *прививка* (106 occurrences) is substituted with the term *вакцина* (316 occurrences). Likewise, the term *вакцинированный* replaces the word *привитый*. Note that the adjectives *дистанционный* and *удаленный* were not replaced, since, within this discourse, they are not total synonyms; the word *дистанционный* refers to online education, and *удаленный* refers to working in a virtual format.

Most multi-word terms in the corpus are names of organizations and toponyms that are more often used in an abbreviated form (ВОЗ/Всемирная организация здравоохранения, МВД/Министерство внутренних дел, США/Соединенные Штаты Америки/Америка/штаты, КНР/Китайская Народная Республика/Китай/Поднебесная, РФ/Российская Федерация/Россия и т.д). The choice of the substitute depends on the following conditions. If there is a one-word variant of such a term (e.g., *Россия, Италия, Китай*), then all forms in the row are replaced with it. When a term has only multi-word variations (e.g., *полимеразная цепная реакция/ПЦР*), we choose the abbreviation as the substitute form. These will ensure that unit searching and frequency counting are easier as a one-word abbreviation is easier to automatically find in a text than a combination of two or more words.

Different spellings of the same terms are also an obstacle to the analysis of word frequencies as each form has a separate frequency index. This can result in serious ambiguity in the statistics. In different texts across the corpus, the names of vaccines are spelled either in Latin or Cyrillic (*Pfizer/Файзер, AstraZeneca/АстраЗенека, Moderna/Модерна, Sputnik/Спутник)*. In this case, the term with higher frequency was chosen as a replacement. Furthermore, the adjective *коронавирусный* is misspelled (*короновирус*) by the authors of viral stories in 58 episodes. Therefore, the wrong spelling is replaced with the correct one. The term *CDC* appears in fake narratives in three different forms, namely, in Latin, Cyrillic and abbreviations *(CDC/ЦКПЗ/ Центр по контролю и профилактике заболеваний)*. We choose the English abbreviation CDC as a replacement, as it occurs in the corpus (31 occurrences) more often than the other forms.

Most automatic word frequency counters recognize the numbers or symbols in the structure of a term as separate units. For example, in almost all original texts, the term denoting the fifth-generation mobile network is represented by the abbreviated form *5G*. Therefore, the frequency analyzer we use in this work (Voyant Tools) recognizes this compound term as two words. Therefore, we replace it with a Russian word *пятьджи*, which appeared in the original texts only a few times. However, this replacement enables us to receive accurate statistical data.

By employing the word replacement procedure, we compress the vocabulary without losing the word's meaning. In normalized texts, all semantically identical words are replaced with one lemma (with most satisfying the requirements of the chosen analysis toolkit). Thus, all occurrences of these words are attributed to one term providing us a clear picture of topic development and topic change in Russian fake story-making during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the material of this study represents a corpus of 13 sections (12 first months of the pandemic + March 2021), 491 viral texts (episodes), with each containing at least 200 and at most 2000 characters. After data preprocessing, the corpus contains 26,964 words, with 16,002 unique word forms (see the table below for more detailed information).

Table 1

Statistics for the Corpus before and after Denoising and Lemmatization

			Before Denoising and Lemmatization			*After Denoising and Lemmatization*	
Corpus ID	***Number of Viral Fake Episodes***	***Average Words Per Episode***	***Vocabulary Density***	***Total Words***	***Unique Word Forms***	***Total Words***	***Unique Word Forms***
March 2020	52	85.9	0.483	4,470	2,160	2,593	1,269
April 2020	48	80.1	0.513	3,845	1,972	2,373	1,243
May 2020	36	88.1	0.540	3,173	1,712	1,966	1,121
June 2020	22	93.2	0.553	2,052	1,134	1,205	717
July 2020	24	90.3	0.588	2,169	1,275	1,007	804
August 2020	20	87.8	0.591	1,757	1,039	1,014	695
September 2020	25	85.3	0.624	2,134	1,331	1,010	791
October 2020	30	104.5	0.537	3,135	1,682	1,812	1,115
November 2020	48	94.1	0.498	4,517	2,250	2,640	1,817
December 2020	54	110.1	0.481	5,950	2,859	3,604	2,008
January 2021	41	90.8	0.537	3,724	1,998	2,110	1,315
February 2021	37	85.1	0.527	3,151	1,662	2,351	1,201
March 2021	54	94.9	0.483	5,128	2,478	3,275	2,006
Total	**491**			**45,205**	**23,552**	**26,964**	**16,002**

Analyzing the Dynamics of Topic Change using Word Frequencies

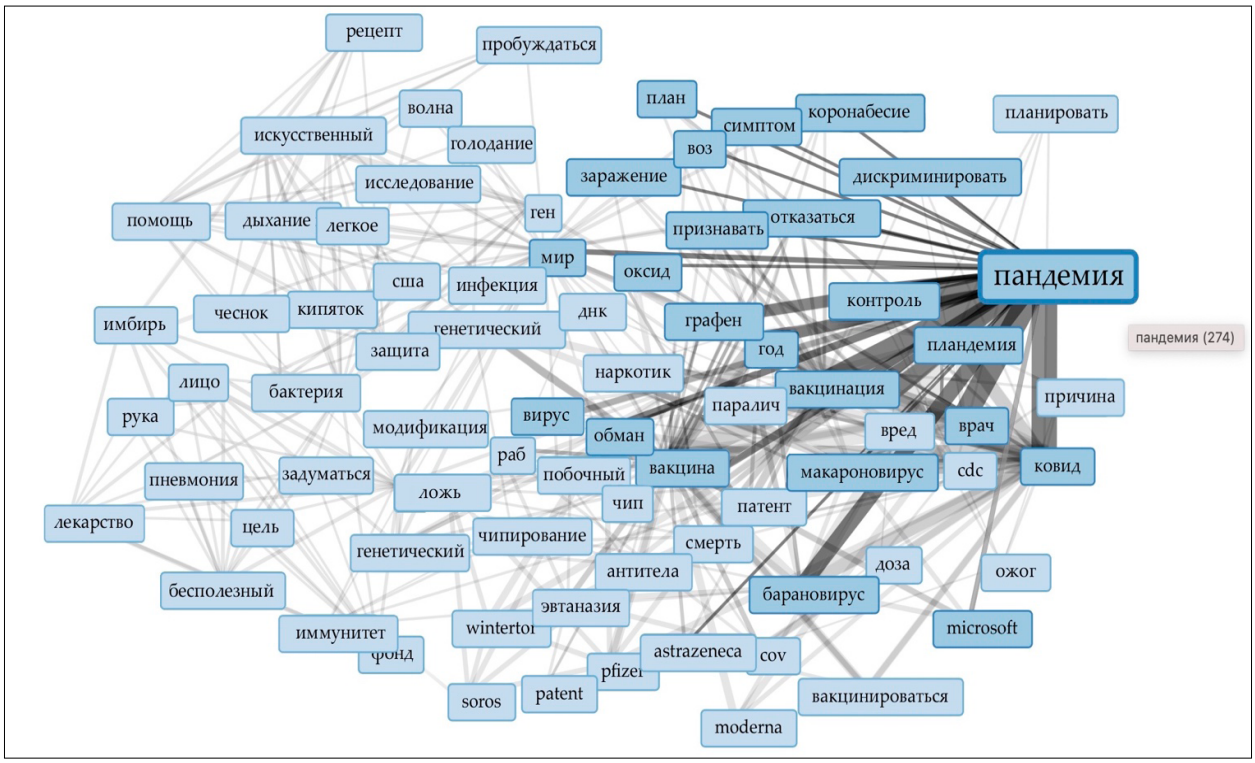
Counting frequencies of words in the corpus and studying the contexts surrounding the keywords and topic-related vocabulary were performed using Voyant Tools, developed by S. Sinclair and G. Rockwell, which is a web-based application for performing text analysis. Preprocessed collection of digital texts is evaluated with tools such as Trends (that depicts the distribution of a word's occurrence across a corpus), Corpus Collocates (that represents keywords and terms occurring in close proximity to them), Collocates Graph (that visualizes the semantic proximity of words within the corpus based on a distribution semantic model) and Contexts (that shows each occurrence of a keyword with a bit of surrounding text) (Sampsel, 2018, p. 153). All of the graphs presented in the Results section were also made using Voyant Tools.

Network Graph and Term Frequencies

When the corpus is uploaded to Voyant Tools, all 13 sections, representing data from March 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic was officially announced till March 2021, are allocated chronologically. We then generate a network graph from the preprocessed data, where nodes are terms, and edges represent similarities between them. A fragment of the graph is shown in Fig. 2. This is a graphic representation of the higher-frequency terms that appear in close proximity, and we use the clusters of keywords and collocates to extract topics and topic-related vocabulary. Keywords are extracted based on their raw frequencies (the total number of occurrences in the corpus) and collocates are mined according to their frequencies in the context of the related keywords.

Figure 2

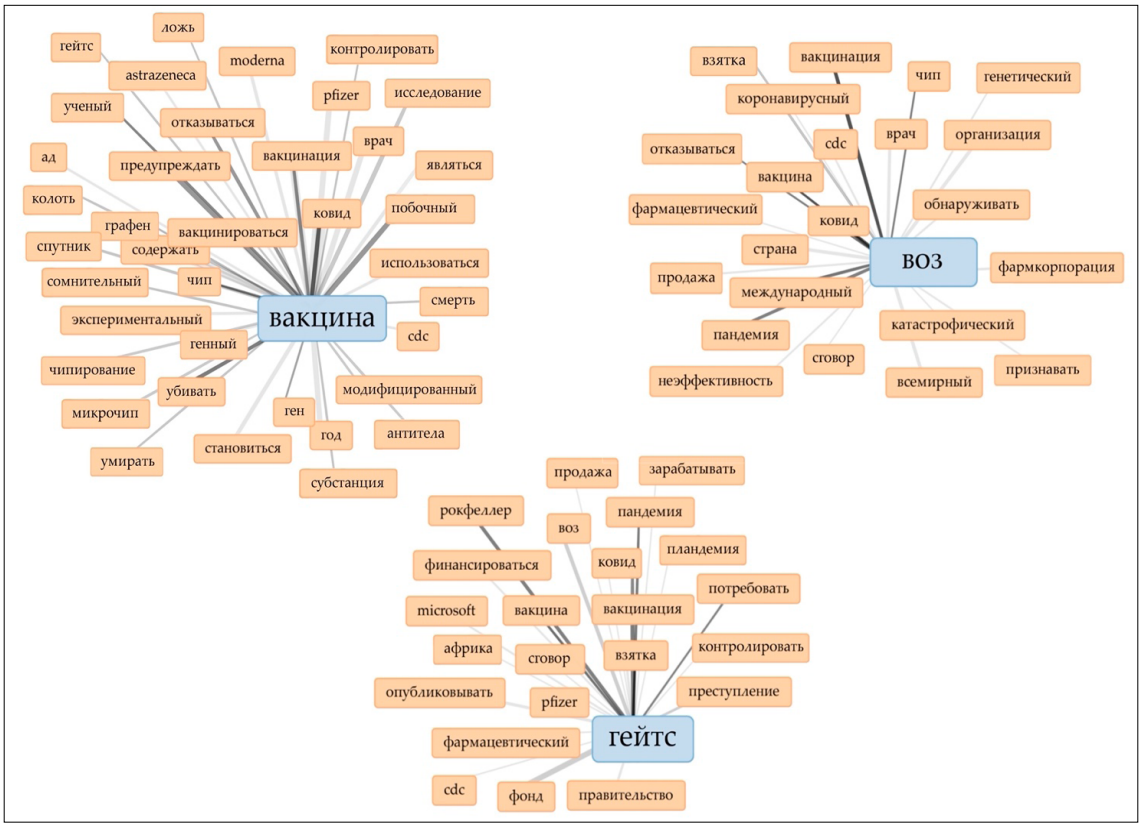
Fragment of the Network Graph Generated from Fake Covid-19 Narratives



Graph clustering simulates flow within a graph, "promoting flow where the current is strong, and demoting flow where the current is weak" in order to show only the collocates that frequently occur in high proximity to a keyword (Jurisica & Wigle, 2005, p. 122). Clusters represent small topics within a larger set of fake texts and contain the vocabulary used to represent made-up storylines in fake narratives (some cluster structures are illustrated in Fig. 3). Although frequencies of keywords alone allow the tracking of the dynamics of topic change in disinformation agenda, counting the frequency of topic-related vocabulary can provide more illustrative data. The distribution of keyword frequencies depicts an increase or decrease in user interest in the topic over time, while frequencies of the topic-related vocabulary show the attitude of the authors towards a topic. For example, in most Russian mass media texts, the term *вакцина* "vaccine" has the following lexical environment—*ковид, вирус, инфекция, новый, коронавирусный, действовать, эффективность, защищать, антитела, иммунитет, уровень, компонент, близкий, вакцинация, распространение, коллективный* (based on texts in the news about Covid-19 vaccine during September 2020 – Mar 2021, 50 episodes in total). In fake stories, the same term is most often found in connection with the following words: *ковид, ложь, побочный, ученый, контролировать, исследование, cdc, врач, вакцинация, отказываться, предупреждать, ад, колоть, графен, спутник, вакцинироваться, pfizer, astrazeneca, moderna, содержать, гейтс, сомнительный, чип, экспериментальный, генный, чипирование, микрочип, убивать, умирать, ген, становиться, год, субстанция, антитела, модифицированный, смерть, использоваться.*

Figure 3

Topic Clusters (A Keyword and Collocates)



Using cluster data, we compiled a list of key topics that constitute the disinformation agenda in the first year of the pandemic and also extracted the topic-related vocabulary. Then, we applied the Trends Tool to determine the frequency of each keyword in each of the 13 months. A diachronic study of the compiled corpus allowed us to track user interest drifts over these months. The dynamics of increase and decrease of user interest in different Covid-19-related topics are demonstrated in the distribution graphs in the Results section.

N-grams and Surrounding Contexts

The search for the most frequent word combinations in the corpus is based on n-grams extraction (unigrams not considered) for which we made use of the Corpus Collocates tool. In the framework of this research, we refer to an n-gram as a collocation composed of a contiguous (linear) sequence of n-units (two or more terms; bigrams, trigrams, etc.) that occur together more often than expected by chance. The extracted phrases are further arranged into a rank-ordered list, indicating their occurrences throughout the first 13 months of the pandemic.

For interpreting the data received from frequency distributions, we employ the Contexts Tool to determine the context surrounding high-frequency keywords and topic-related vocabulary. The tool helps us select and group false narratives together based on the shared keywords. This allowed us to cluster the narratives into a wide range of scenarios (major fake storylines, false rumors and conspiracies) that misinformed people about different Covid-19-related issues.

Results

A diachronic analysis of the length of the texts showed that, over time, fake narratives became longer and longer. From March 2020 to May 2020, viral fake texts mainly sent out short warnings, news and announcements of up to 500 characters. However, in October 2020, 86% of the texts contained at least 700 characters, with the

average increasing to more than 750 characters in March 2021. We have determined the two most probable reasons for the increase in the length of an average text episode. First, during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, Russian users received (via social networks and messengers) a lot of misinformation about Covid-19 and related aspects, and many of these fake stories were repeatedly refuted by the media, Russian authorities and reputable sources in the blogosphere. This naturally increased the level of information filtering by users; in other words, the audience became more skeptical about any Covid-19-related information. Thus, by the end of the year, to convince readers of the veracity of a theory or news, authors of fake stories needed to provide more detailed arguments, and this, we believe, resulted in the increase of average character length. The second assumption is based on a change of a key subject in the disinformation rhetoric. Prior to mid-autumn 2020, fake story creators focused on topics such as quarantine, restrictions, masks and statistics on Covid-19 cases. This type of disinformation was mostly represented in the form of short alarming texts and announcements. However, since the beginning of the winter of 2020, the majority of fake stories revolved around vaccines and their associated dangers. The greater part of these narratives involves argumentation mimicking scientific evidence, numerous statements of pseudoscientists and fake discoveries.

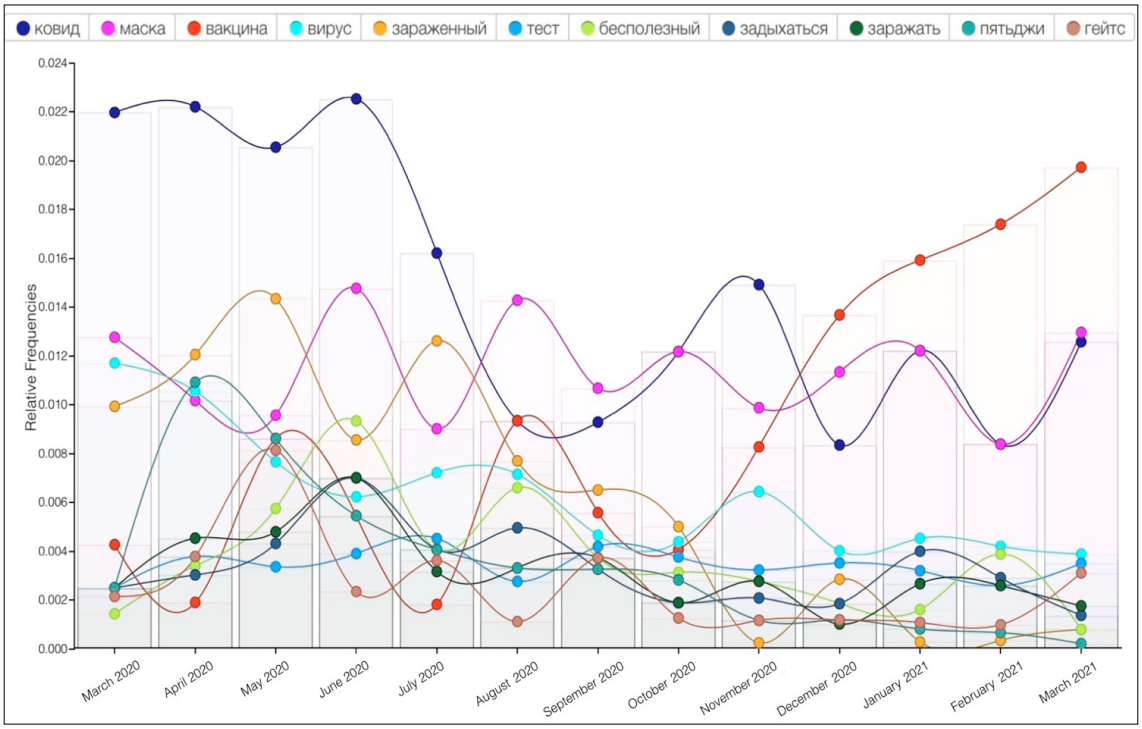
The evolution of the fake news agenda over time is also associated with an unequal ratio of neutral vocabulary and terminology in the corpus. In the first half of the year, terminological density was relatively low (except for keywords such as *ковид (covid), пандемия (pandemic), пневмония (pneumonia),* etc.). However, the density increased significantly from December 2020 to March 2021 since specialized terms from the fields of biology, medicine and physics frequently began occurring in the texts during this period (e.g., *оксид (oxide), графен (graphene) гематоэнцефалический (hematoencephalic), рандомизированный (randomized), валентный (valence),* etc.). Likewise, most of the fake narratives in the second half of 2020 and early 2021 tend to stylistically mimic scientific articles to appear more convincing to readers.

The words with the highest raw frequencies in the corpus are *ковид* (*covid*, 557 occurrences), *маска* (*mask*, 460), *вакцина* (*vaccine*, 422), *вирус* (*virus*, 240), *зараженный* (*infected*, 197), *тест* (*test*, 138), *вакцинация* (*vaccination*, 131), *бесполезный* (*useless*, 121), *врач* (*doctor*, 115), *задыхаться* (*suffocate*, 115), *заражать* (*infec*t, 110), *5G/пятьджи* (110), *скрывать* (*conceal*, 109). Interestingly, some of the top words of 2020[4] (*самоизоляция* (*self-isolation*), *удаленка* (*remote work*), *дистанцирование* (*distancing*), according to the Institute of the Russian Language. A.S. Pushkin, appear in the corpus only a few times. Moreover, some of the main Russian neologisms of 2020, *ковидарность, коронакризис, зумиться, карантиниться* (Ivanenko & Zhuravleva, 2020, p. 66), are not present in the corpus at all. Since the word *ковид* (*covid*) is a key term outlining a range of topics related to the pandemic, it appeared in almost all episodes, and therefore, we will not consider its frequency separately within the analysis of topic change. However, it must be noted that for the first months of the pandemic in Russia, *ковид* ranks first in the frequency list (March 2020 – 62 occurrences, April 2020 – 59 occurrences and May 2020 – 43 occurrences). This is due to the extreme demand for information about this new virus, as well as its nature, origin and symptoms. Later, the public interest switched from Covid-19 as an independent topic to other Covid-19-related issues. Moreover, starting from August 2020, there has been a decrease in the frequency of *ковид* in the corpus (August 2020 – 17 occurrences, September 2020 – 20 occurrences and October 2020 – 39 occurrences). August and September show the growing interest in the term *маска* (mask) (August 2020 – 26 occurrences and September 2020 – 23 occurrences), and after December 2020, the term *вакцина* (*vaccine*) dominated the fake news agenda (December 2020 – 82 occurrences, January 2021 – 60 occurrences, February 2021 – 54 occurrences and March 2021 – 102 occurrences). (Fig. 4 and other graphs show the relative frequencies of the terms, while the text presents raw frequencies.)

[4] Osadchy, M.A. (2021). Results of the study "Word of the Year" by State Institute of the Russian Language named after A.S. Pushkin. https://www.pushkin.institute/news/detail.php?ID=27341

Figure 4

Frequencies of 11 Most Common Terms Across the Corpus



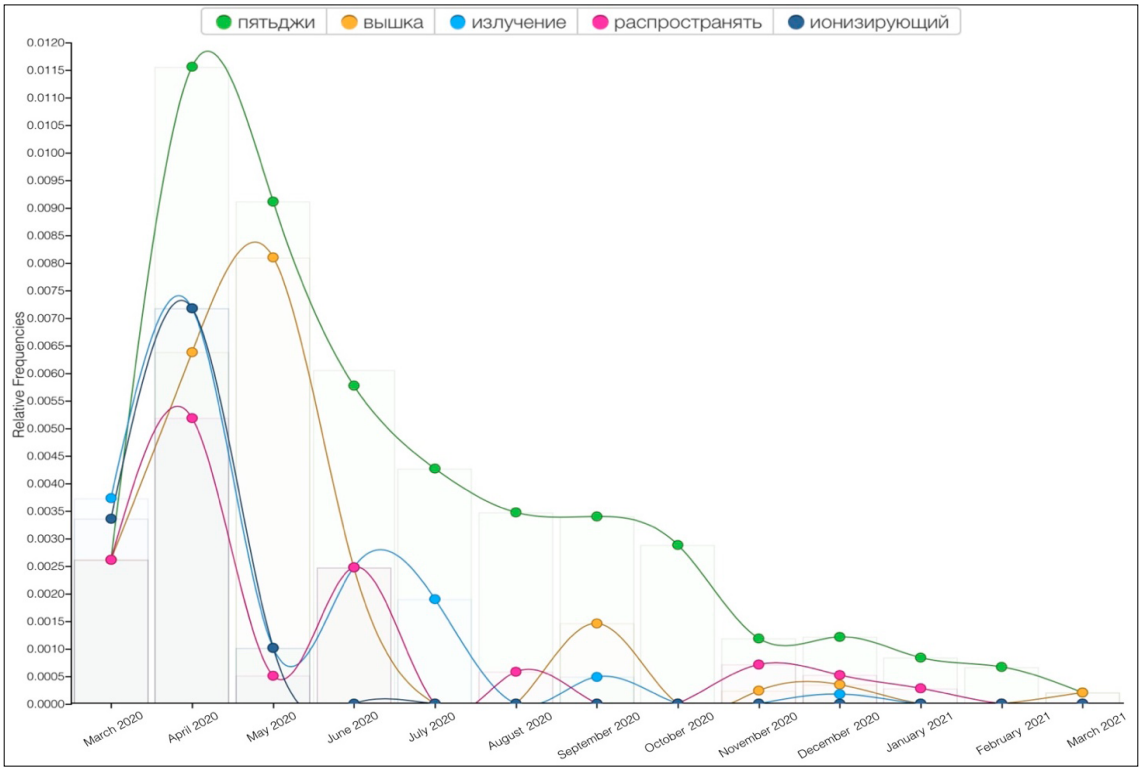
A sharp rise followed by a similarly sharp drop in the frequency of some keywords and topic-related vocabulary during the year suggests that user interest in the corresponding topics only *boomed for a short period of time*. Most of these topics were essentially conspiracy theories that appear, rapidly gaining popularity due to their claim of revealing "secret information," and then fade away as quickly along with public interest. For example, the conspiracy theory about *5G* (*пятьжди*) causing Covid-19 was popular from April to May 2020 (*5G/пятьджи*, April 2020 – 29 occurrences and May 2020 – 18 occurrences). Later, after numerous public refutations from experts, the interest of the Russian public in this topic declined (Fig. 5). In July 2020, the term 5G was mentioned only nine times, and in December 2020, the number of occurrences decreased significantly to four as compared to the April peak (of seven occurrences). This number went down further, with only two occurrences in February 2021. On the network graph, the keyword *5G/пятьджи* is found in a cluster with the topic-related vocabulary, *вышка, сеть, излучение, распространять, ионизирующий, радиочастотный, контроль, ковид, контролировать, управлять, вакцина, тест, китай, смертельный, подчинять, сгорать, электромагнитный*.

Top Fake Stories about Covid-19 and 5G

1. 5G towers spread Covid-19 infection: *«Карантин – обман народа. Все придумано для внедрения цифровизации общества. Коронавирус распространяется из-за 5G. Первый город, где появилась вышка 5G – китайский Ухань, а после тестирования там новой технологии организм человека дал иммунный ответ, что привело к коронавирусу»*. (Episode #84, April 2020)
2. Authorities/some "secret organizations" use 5G waves to control people through PCR tests and vaccines: *«ВНИМАНИЕ! ПОЧЕМУ НЕЛЬЗЯ ДЕЛАТЬ ПЦР-ТЕСТЫ! В Германии врач провел под микроскопом исследования теста ПЦР на Covid-19. И обнаружил на кончиках тестов, металлические скобы, которые реагируют на волны 5G. <…> Их таким образом вводят далеко в нос. Скобы прикрепляются в носу и реагируют на сигналы 5G. А связи с тем, что тесты заставляют делать по любой причине. Но такие скобы могут накопиться, и последствия управления волнами 5G будут на лицо»*. (Episode #42, March 2020)

Figure 5

Frequencies of the Keyword "пятьджи" (5G) and Topic-related Vocabulary



Another series of fake texts based on the chemtrail conspiracy theory interested many Russians in November 2020 (*химтрейл*, November – 42 occurrences). According to chemtrail theorists, some organizations sprayed chemicals from passenger planes and infected the population with Covid-19. However, February 2021 shows a sharp decline in the frequency of *химтрейл*, with the term being mentioned only three times and all within one episode. The increase and decrease in the popularity of this term and topic-related vocabulary are shown in Fig. 6. The terms in close proximity to the keyword *химтрейл* in the corpus are *химикат, геноцид, распылять, депопуляция, распространять, белый, ковид, самолет, след, дорога, отравлять, лететь, высота*.

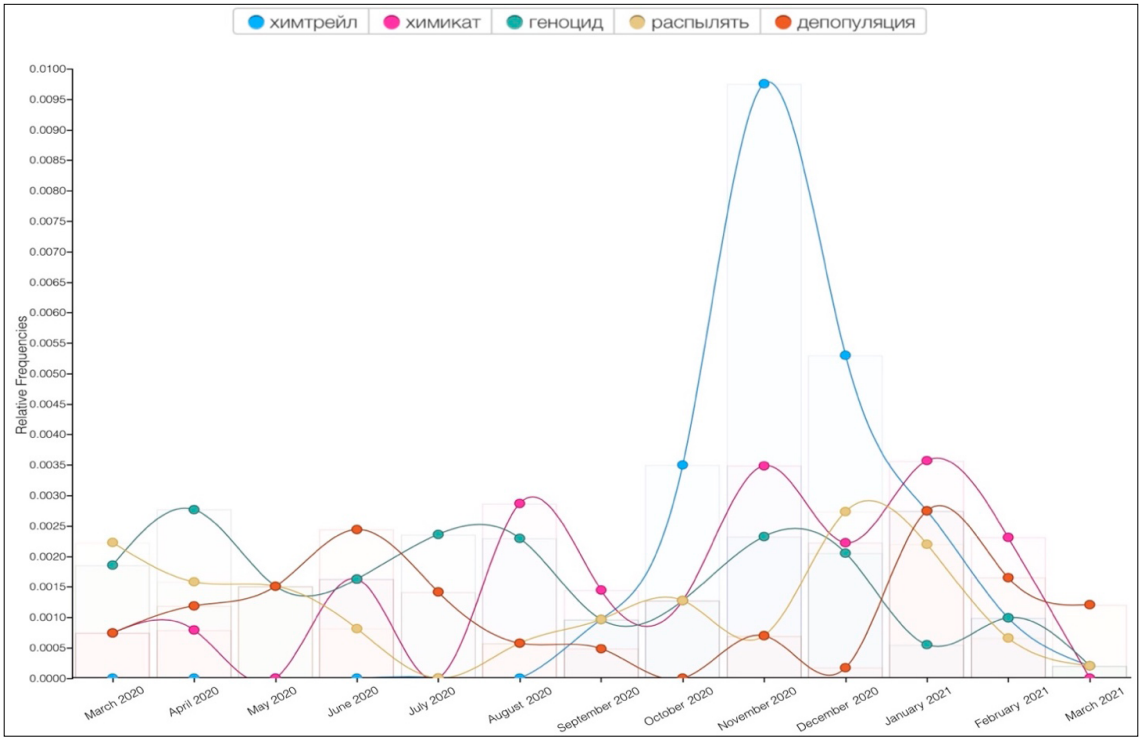
We indicated one popular fake storyline that was represented in various forms in 15 viral episodes about chemtrails. All these episodes were united by the idea that Covid-19 victims were poisoned by chemicals sprayed from the sky. We illustrate this fake story with the most popular text: *«То, что нам выдают за ковид в тяжелых случаях, когда заражены легкие, на самом деле химический ожог легких или химический пневмонит, начинается с першения в горле и кашля. Это реакция дыхательной системы на химическое отравление. Нас травят с воздуха химтрейлами, и это уже не секрет, видимо эффективней в разы, если еще вышки 5G настроить на определенную частоту»*. (Episode #81, November 2020)

User interest in a number of topics throughout the year had a wave-like character. These topics include misinformation on restrictions during the self-isolation period, fines and passes required to move freely around the city/region/country, etc. Although no official quarantine (карантин) was announced in Russia (only a mandatory self-isolation regime), many Russians used this term to refer to restrictive measures. Fake narratives associated with quarantine and related issues occupied one of the leading positions among misleading viral texts from March to May 2020 when the restrictions were lifted in Russia (карантин, March 2020 – 10 occurrences, April 2020 – 14 occurrences and May 2020 – 7 occurrences). Then, the term карантин practically disappeared from the agenda, only occurring nine times in a few fake announcements throughout the summer of 2020. Later, however, due to the spread of rumors about new lockdowns around the world, false warnings about upcoming quarantine measures in Moscow and some large regions in Russia began to be shared through messengers. The revival of this topic can be traced by the high frequencies of the keyword карантин in

September 2020 (17 occurrences) and November 2020 (12 occurrences). We also indicated the increasing frequencies of the topic-related vocabulary (локдаун, штраф, пропуск, протокол, полицейский, ковид, разрешение, запрет, незаконный, италия, необходимость, первый, день, отказаться, право, комендантский, час, сажать) during this period (Fig. 7).

Figure 6

Frequencies of the Keyword "химтрейл" (Chemtrail) and Topic-Related Vocabulary

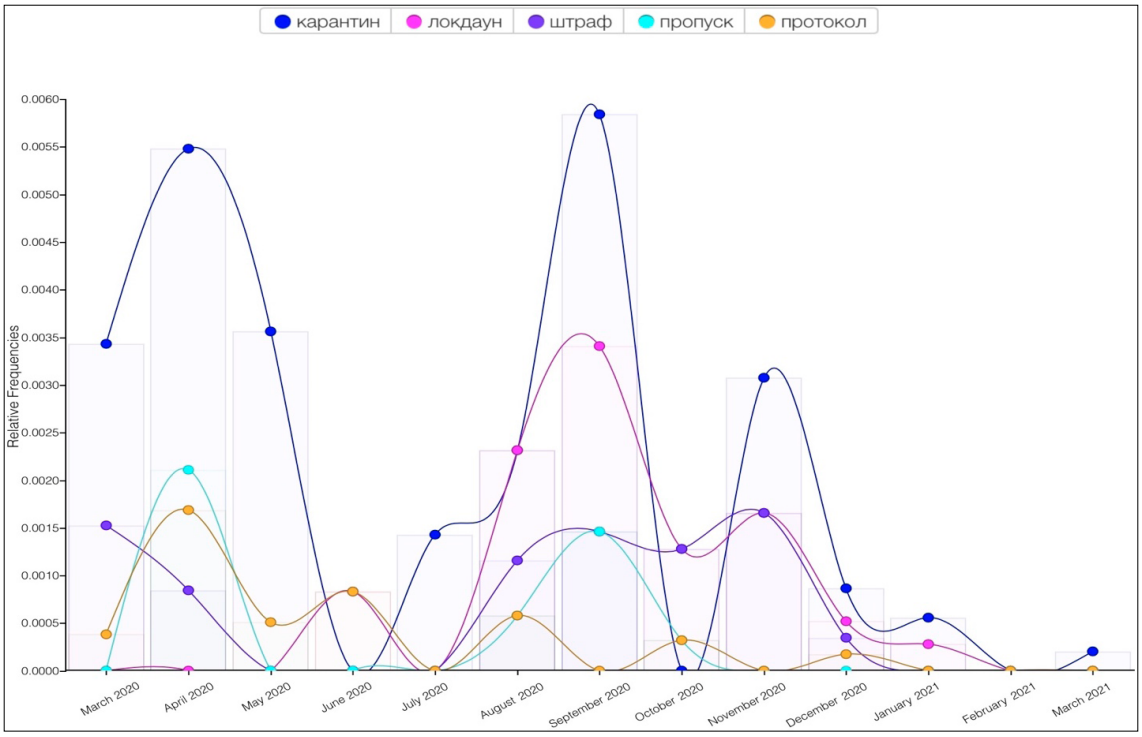


Top Fake Announcements about Quarantine and Lockdown from "Officials" and "Insiders"

1. Disinformation about restrictions/passes/freedom of movement during the period of self-isolation: «*С понедельника 13 апреля 2020 года спецпропуска старого образца прекращают свое действие и тем, кому необходимо в условиях коронавируса передвигаться пешком или на автомобиле по городу, необходимо получить новый пропуск.* <…> *Оформить пропуск можно в отдельном разделе на сайте мэрии – сказать заявку и получить заполненный пропуск на свою электронную почту*». (Episode #64, April 2020)
2. The new quarantine in Russia/around the world will last from three to six months: «*Инсайд: Германию сажают на цепь с 30 августа. 31 июля немецкий сайт liebeisstleben.de сообщает, что через месяц, с 30 августа 2020 года в Германии начинаются повторные карантинные блокировки, которые продлятся от ТРЕХ до ШЕСТИ месяцев. То есть до 1 марта 2021-го года*». (Episode #167, July 2020)
3. Quarantine and other restrictive measures are illegal: «*Апелляционный суд Португалии признал ПЦР-тестирование фейком, а карантин незаконным. И вот теперь уже доказанный на практике факт, что ПЦР-тестирование никак не годится для выявления каких бы то ни было инфекций, в частности ковид-19* <…>». (Episode #287, November 2020)

Figure 7

Frequencies of the Keyword "карантин" (Quarantine) and Topic-related Vocabulary



Some topics, on the contrary, aroused *stable interest* from the public throughout the first year of the pandemic. These topics are primarily part of fake narratives that provide "arguments" against using essential matters of the new Covid era, including masks and coronavirus viral and antibody tests (164 out of 491 episodes). A significant number of occurrences of the term *маска* (*mask*) was first witnessed in March 2020 (36 occurrences) after the announcement of the compulsory use of masks in all Russian regions. These guidelines introduced a mask regime in Moscow on May 12, 2020, which resulted in a prolonged boom in fake stories about protective face masks, lasting throughout the next 10 months of the pandemic (Fig. 8). The last month considered in this research is March 2021, and disinformation about protective masks was still hugely popular on the web. More and more erroneous theories were arriving throughout these months. For example, summer fake stories were more focused on numerous cases of the development of heart disease and hypoxia (a condition caused by oxygen deprivation) allegedly from wearing masks. This trend can be reflected in the high frequencies of the term *задыхаться* (*suffocate*) (spring 2020 – 24 occurrences and summer 2020 – 27 occurrences). The arrival of the new trend in misinformation about face masks was marked by growing frequencies of the term *червь* (*worm*) that often occurred in the same contexts as the term *маска* (*mask*) (*червь*, January 2021 – 25 occurrences and March 2021 – 23 occurrences). After analyzing this term in original texts using the Contexts Tool, we found out that its frequent use during that period resulted from the spread of a false story about worms being placed on face masks by some pharma companies to harm public health. The typical narrative is the presentation of the results of an alleged experiment of examining a mask under a microscope and discovering thousands of "moving worms" on it.

Top Misleading Narratives about Protective Face Masks

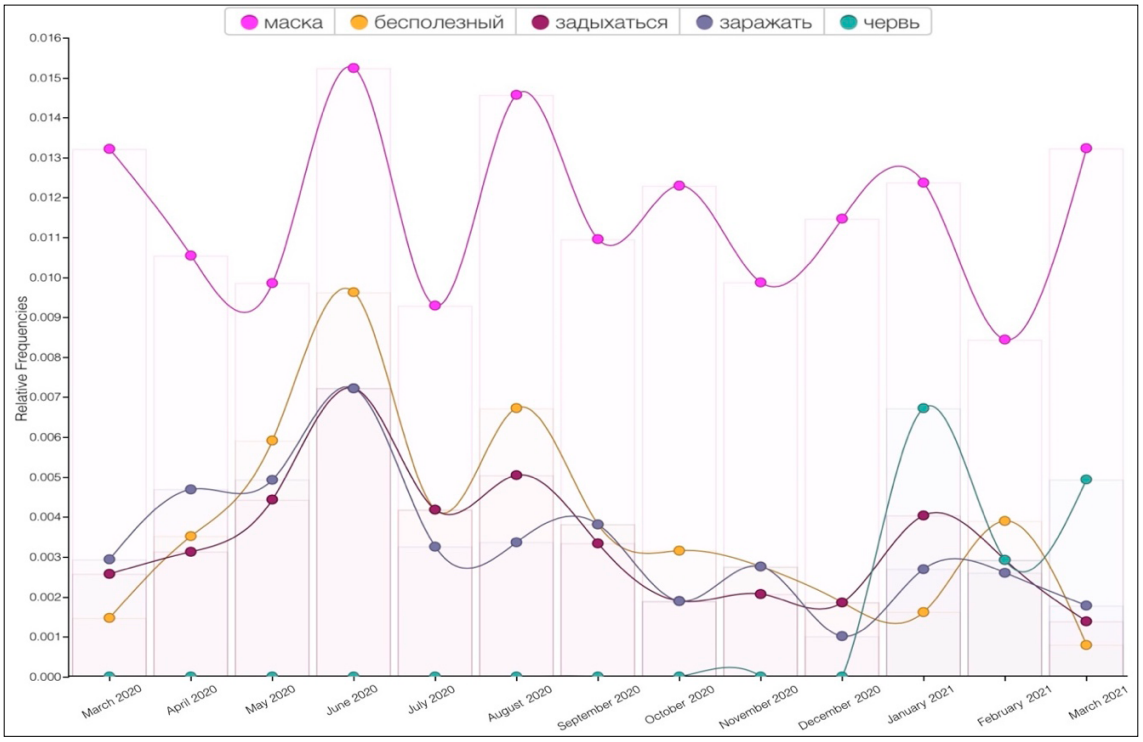
1. People who wear face masks are more likely to get infected by Covid-19 and other diseases: «*ВРЕД МАСОК И ПЕРЧАТОК. ПАМЯТКА Копируйте и распространяйте! Маски нужны для того, чтобы люди засорили себе легкие! Им нужны больные, а маска будет очень скоро провоцировать инфекционные заболевания, в том числе и туберкулез!* <…> *НАС ТРАВЯТ!!!*» (Episode #130, June 2020)
2. Some people, allegedly representatives of a political party, are distributing free face masks soaked in chemicals/drugs/substances infected with Covid-19: «*Новый вид криминального ПРЕСТУПЛЕНИЯ сейчас.*

Ходят «волонтеры» от различных партий… от двери к двери, раздавая маски. Они говорят, что это инициатива местных властей. Просят вас «примерить» маску… если «подойдет» то «дадут» 3–5 штук… в зависимости от количества членов семьи… МАСКА ПРОПИТАНА химикатом с наркотическим действием… Человек просто «отключается» (Episode #194, September 2020)

3. Stories about people who died or were injured as a result of wearing a face mask; for example: a) «<…> *Установлено, что ношение маски №95 часами может СНИЗИТЬ ОКСИГЕНАЦИЮ крови на 20%, что приводит к ПОТЕРЕ СОЗНАНИЯ. Именно эта ситуация случилась с несчастным парнем, который ездил на своей машине в маске №95. В итоге он потерял сознание, попал в ДТП и получил травмы*». (Episode #139, June 2020); b) «<…> *В Германии в результате ношения маски 13-летняя девочка потеряла сознания в школьном автобусе и вскоре умерла в больнице! Ребенку просто ЗАПРЕТИЛИ СНИМАТЬ МАСКУ. Сколько еще это будет продолжаться?!*» (Episode #233, October 2020)
4. Viruses and moving worms were found on face masks: «*Мы положили маску на горячую воду. Видно, как там что-то двигается. <…> Это нереально, вот такие черви в этих масках*» (Episode #490, March 2021)

Figure 8

Frequencies of the Keyword "маска" (Mask) and Topic-related Vocabulary



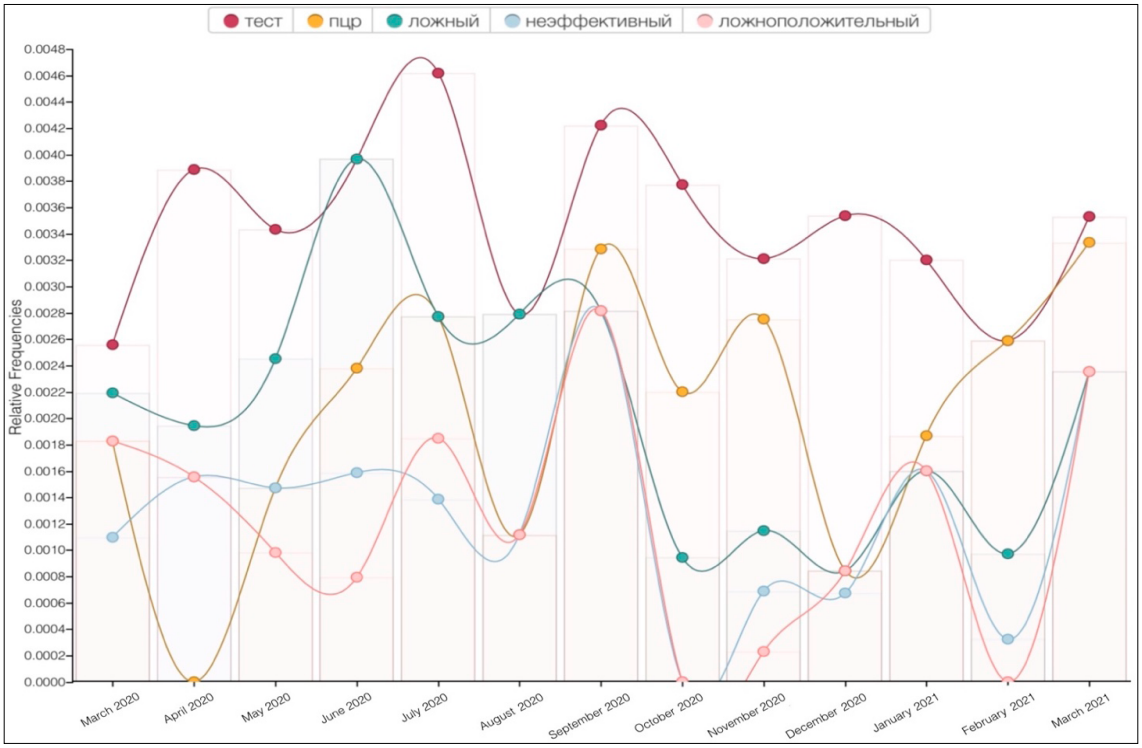
PCR tests, as the most popular method for detecting the virus, have also been the subject of numerous "truth-revealing" stories throughout the year. Every month (albeit in different numbers), new stories about the dangers of PCR testing were going viral. The term *тест* (*test*) occupied the 6th rank in the corpus, with higher frequencies in July 2020 (13 occurrences) and September 2020 (10 occurrences) and the lowest frequencies in August 2020 (6 occurrences) and February 2021 (5 occurrences). Despite the inconsistencies in the number of occurrences, the topic remained popular throughout the study period (Fig. 9). In most viral fake stories, PCR tests are defined as "useless sticks" that are incapable of distinguishing the flu virus from the coronavirus. The adjectives *бесполезный* (*useless*) and *неэффективный* (*ineffective)* occur 28 and 19 times, respectively, in high proximity to the keyword *тест* (*test*). The words *ложный* (*false*) and *ложноположительный* (*false positive*) also appear 22 and 18 times in the same contexts with the keyword, respectively, as part of the arguments supporting the idea that PCR tests are constructed to indicate positive results in order to increase the number of infection cases. Other words found in the closest proximity to the term *тест* (*test*) in the corpus include *пцр, антитела, вред, положительный, опасность, зараженный, опасный* and *отказываться*.

Top Fake Stories about Covid-19 Antibody and Viral Tests

1. The real purpose of PCR testing is to destroy people's immune defenses: «*Эта информация исходит от моих коллег-врачей. Вред ПЦР-тестирования. Доступ к мозгу осуществляется через нос. Тест имеет другую цель. Введения тестового стержня глубоко в нос вызывает повреждение гематоэнцефалического барьера и даже эндокринных желез. Цель этого глубокого нарушения состоит в том, чтобы сломать барьер и создать вход в мозг для каждой инфекции. <…> Это НЕ от ковида. Это посягательство опасно!*» (Episode #41, March 2020)
2. PCR tests are ineffective in diagnosing Covid-19; for example: a) The tests give the flu for Covid-19: «*Тестирование на коронавирус – это глобальный фейк. Тест НЕ СПОСОБЕН показать, что человек — носитель именно ковида-19, так как содержит лишь три гена-маркера. <…> По сути гены-мишени теста ПЦР не являются специфичными для Covid-19, и поэтому подобный тест не способен определить, что человек является носителем именно SARS-CoV-2*». (Episode #165, July 2020); b) Lemon/coca-cola/chicken fillet tested positive for Covid-19: «*Посмотрите! Тест на макаронавирус у лимона положительный!!!!! Экспресс-тесты на Covid-19 дают положительный результат, если просто капнуть на них сок лимона.* <…>». (Episode #264, November 2020)
3. The tests infect people with prions/Morgellons disease: «<…> *Тест доставляет прионы прямо в цель. Смертность – 100% в течение 10 лет. Никто не проверяет тесты, и вообще никогда никто не проверяет заражение прионами. Вы знаете, что такое прионы? Наверняка – нет.* <…>». (Episode #465, March 2021)

Figure 9

Frequencies of the Keyword "тест" (Test) and Topic-related Vocabulary



Other topics popular among Russian Internet users throughout the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic are pseudo-medical advice and homemade medication. The keywords *рецепт* (*recipe*) (26 occurrences), *лекарство* (*medication*) (25 occurrences) and *совет* (*advice*) (17 occurrences) are found on the network graph, forming intersecting relations with the following topic-related vocabulary: *дыхание, дыхательный, гимнастика, чеснок, имбирь, кипяток, глотка, лимон, перец, бикарбонат, израиль, японский, ученый, исследование, сода, луковица, лук, проверять, больница, проверенный, статья, нагревать, принимать, день, тест, подавлять, блокировать, лечить, уходить*. Malicious narratives describing folk recipes against Covid-19 can be found in all 13 sections

of the corpus (i.e., in each month). Interestingly, in March 2020, April 2020 and May 2020, there was an increased interest in recipes and recommendations, which allegedly come from foreign (non-Russian) doctors. The most common digrams collected from the corpus in a close proximity to the keywords such as *рецепт (recipe), совет (advice)* and *рекомендация (recommendation)* during this period are collocations noun + adjective, indicating the origin of the expert who gave advice; for example, *японские ученые* (*Japanese scientists*, 4 occurrences), *тайваньские ученые* (*Taiwanese scientists*, 2 occurrences), *израильские ученые* (Israeli scientists, 2 occurrences), *израильский рецепт* (Israeli recipe, 2 occurrences). However, after September 2020, this trend gradually faded giving way to another—anonyms recommendations and advice from some unnamed "experts" and "doctors."

Top Pseudo-health-care Advice and Homemade Recipes for Treating Covid-19

1. Home testing for Covid-19: «<…> *Тайваньские эксперты советуют простую самопроверку на коронавирус, которую мы можем проводить каждое утро: сделайте глубокий вдох и задержите дыхание более, чем на 10 секунд. Если вы успешно завершите его, не кашляя, не испытывая дискомфорта, заложенности, стеснения, и т.п., то это доказывает, что в легких нет фиброза, и это указывает на отсутствие инфекции*». (Episode #28, March 2020)
2. Homemade "interferon": «*Домашний интерферон – защита от короны. Алгоритм приготовления домашнего интерферона: взять 2 сырых белка от куриных домашних яиц в эмалированную узкую кастрюлю, добавить сок половины лимона* <…>». (Episode #108, May 2020)
3. Pepper / onion / garlic / ginger / lemon / soda / boiling water as a treatment for Covid-19. For example: a) «*И еще один СЕРЬЕЗНЫЙ ПРЕВОСХОДНЫЙ СОВЕТ от японских докторов, лечащих случаи Covid-19: вы должны постоянно обеспечивать увлажнение своего рта и горла, не давая им пересыхать.* <…> *питье воды или других жидкостей смоет его через пищевод в желудок. И уже в животе … ваша желудочная кислота убьет вирус». (Episode#20, March 2020); b) «ИЗРАИЛЬСКИЙ РЕЦЕПТ ПРОТИВ КОВИДА. В Израиле не смертей о Covid-19. Было найдено лекарство от вируса Covid19 или способ его устранения. Рецепт простой: лимон, бикарбонат. Смешивайте и пейте как горячий чай каждый день,* <…>». *(Episode #92, April 2020); c) «У КОРОНАВИРУСА аллергия на ИМБИРЬ!!! К таким заключениям пришли специалисты. Что необходимо для того, чтобы не дать вирусу проникнуть и «завладеть» вами? 3 раза в день ЖЕВАТЬ ИМБИРЬ.* <…>». (Episode#81, October 2020)

The analysis of the frequency distribution of the corpus vocabulary also revealed that some Covid-19-related topics started growing rapidly as a result of the emergence of new realities. For example, fake stories about vaccines, green passes and mandatory vaccination exploded at the end of 2020 and continued to gain popularity among Russian users at the end of the study period (March 2021).

Although the keyword вакцина (vaccine) ranked third in the corpus with 422 occurrences throughout the year, vaccines practically remained off the disinformation agenda until November 2020. Vaccination was critically discussed in general, as Covid-19 vaccines had not yet been tested and were undergoing development. However, vaccines (вакцина) became a key subject of fake narratives in December 2020 after the start of vaccination in large Russian cities (вакцина, December 2020 – 82 occurrences, January 2021 – 60 occurrences, February 2021 – 54 occurrences and March 2021 – 102 occurrences) (Fig. 10). Recent studies published on the impact of official refutations on the spread of misinformation found that refutations reduce demand and sharing of fake stories (MacFarlane et al 2021: 248). Thus, the promotion of revealing argumentation against fake stories through reputable sources can reduce user interest in that topic. Our data show that although conspiracy theories about vaccines have remained steadily popular since the appearance of the first fake story on this topic, viral texts about vaccines did not "live" long, as every month a new theory replaced the previous one. The analysis of the corpus show that argumentation against Covid-19 vaccines is based on the following three false ideas. In December, users actively shared texts about vaccination modifying modify people's genes, affecting their heredity aspect (ген (genes), December 2020 – 16 occurrences, модифицированный (modified) – 6 occurrences). In January, arguments against vaccines were based on alleged huge amounts of graphene in vaccines (графен (graphene), January 2021 – 18 occurrences). In February and March 2021, the word чип (chip/microchip) appeared 10 and 22 times, respectively, in close proximity to the keyword вакцина (vaccine) in fake stories claiming that vaccines were being used by the WHO and world elites to control the population by implanting microchips in people's bodies.

Top Fake Stories about Covid-19 Vaccines

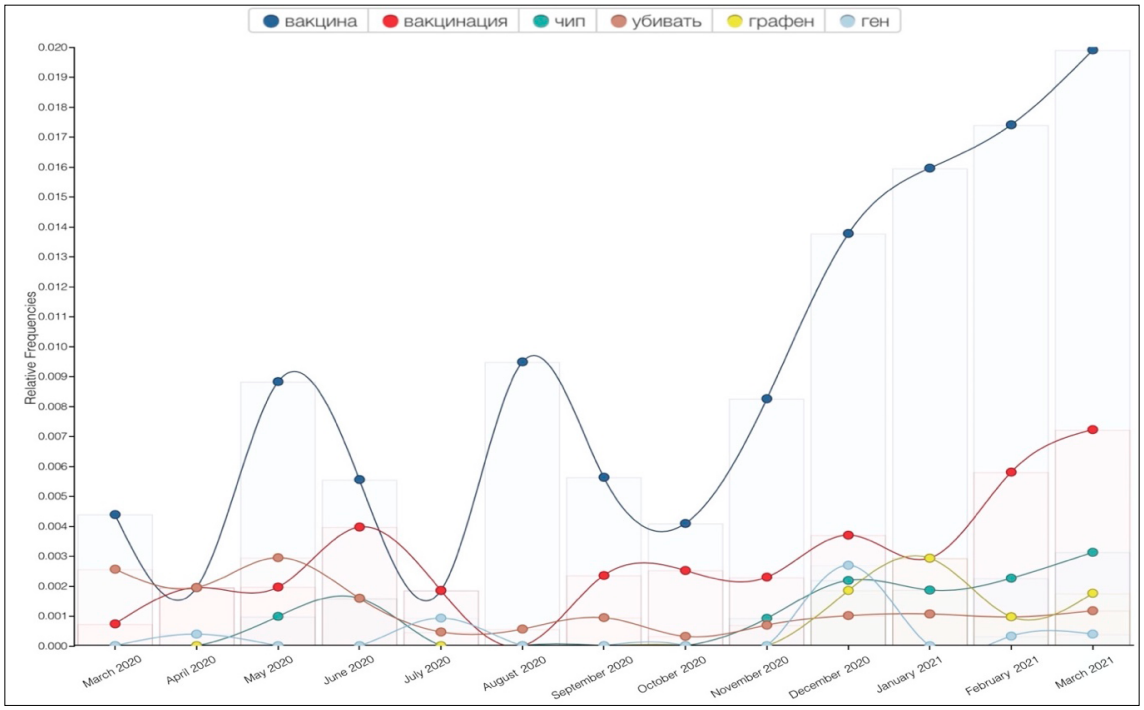
1. Hazardous toxic substances / abortive material / graphene / luciferin are secretly placed in vaccines: «*Сенсация! Испанские исследователи обнаружили в электронный микроскоп, что вакцина Pfizer содержит 99% оксида графена и практически больше ничего!* <…> *Этот продукт не был разработан, чтобы избежать инфекции, вызванной вирусом. Истинная цель этого продукта остаётся скрытой. Токсичность оксида графена - достаточная причина, чтобы остановить глобальную программу вакцинации*». (Episode #303, December 2020)

2. Vaccines are a means of inserting microchips in people and establishing control over them: «*Наночастицы, описанные в патенте Microsoft (патент США WO 2020/060606 A1), являются датчиками, которые должны быть рассеяны в организме вакцинированного человека, чтобы иметь возможность обнаружить его. Добавленные во флакон с вакциной, они вводятся в организм вместе с прививкой в момент вакцинации. Как только они попадут в организм, от них невозможно избавиться, в отличие от подкожного цифрового следящего микрочипа. С этого момента привитых людей можно будет обнаружить по мобильному телефону, находящемуся поблизости*. <…>». (Episode #371, January 2021)

3. Stories about mass deaths caused by vaccination: «*Почему никто не говорит о Гибралтаре?* <…> *На 6 января у них было всего 10 смертей типа от новомодного гриппа. 10 января на остров привезли субстанцию под названием «вакцина». К 20-му января погибло 53 человека. Сегодня WOLDOmeter показывает, что погибло 70 человек. СЕМЬДЕСЯТ!!!*» (Episode #391, February 2021)

Figure 10

Frequencies of the Keyword "вакцина" (Vaccine) and Topic-related Vocabulary



Some Covid-19-related topics cannot be extracted based on one keyword. For example, misleading information about the number of Covid-19 cases was circulating on the web throughout the year. The purpose of these fake texts was to either increase the level of panic among the public by exaggerating the number of Covid-19 cases and related deaths (it was reported that there were no places in hospitals) or spread doubts in people's minds by substantially understating the numbers of infection cases. When no keyword can extract the topic, we use related vocabulary to trace major narratives. The following words are frequently used in texts containing

misinformation on the number of Covid-19 cases: *зараженный, врач, заражать, скрывать, смерть, умирать, больница, смертность, статистика, госпиталь, завышать, занижать, лгать, бояться, приказ, закрытый, показатель, информация, медсестра, знакомый, переоборудовать*. Based on the data on the frequencies of these words across the corpus, we conclude that Russian Internet users demonstrated a significant amount of interest in information on the numbers of Covid-19 cases from March 2020 to July 2020. Later, the popularity of the topic faded, and in 2021, it did not appear in the disinformation agenda at all (Fig. 11).

Top Fake Stories about the Numbers of Covid-19 Cases and "Killer" Doctors

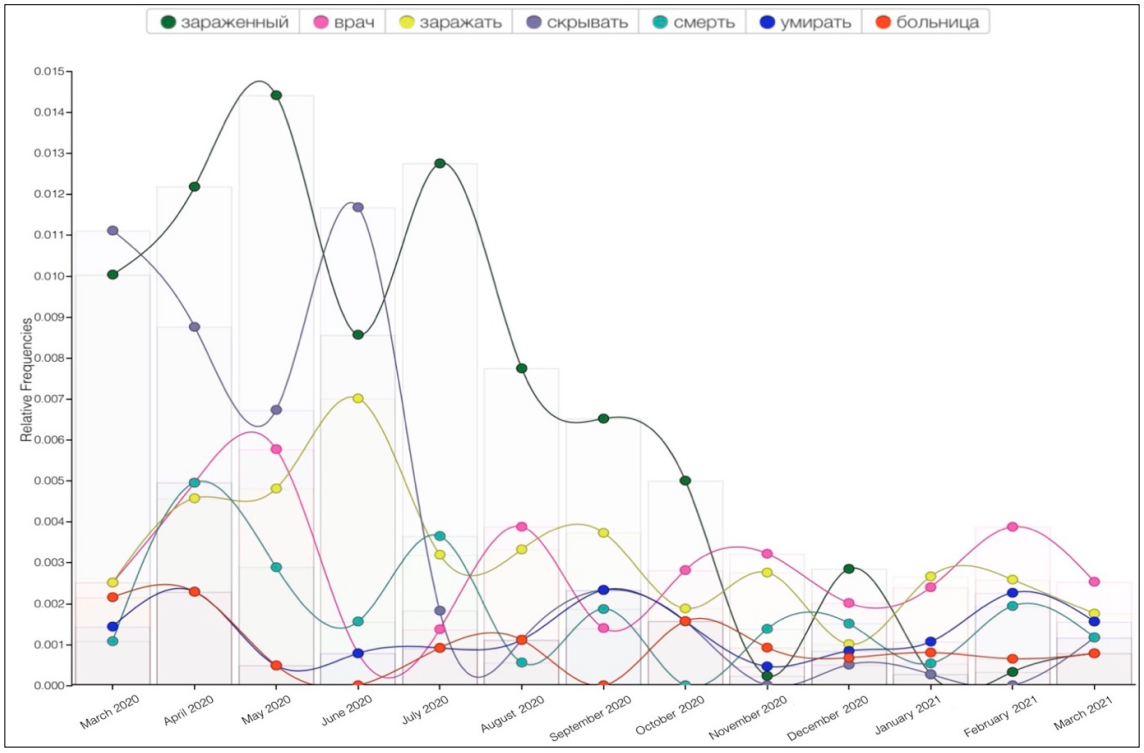
1. There are much more infected people than official statistics say / there are no places in hospitals: «*Девочки, привет. Информация на этот час. Много мертвых, уже больше 20, зараженных больше 1000, ночью их возят скорые. Ситуация очень плохая. Просто этих старых, ничего с ними не делают, просто их отвозят в сторону, а молодых лечат, потому что у них аппаратов для искусственного дыхания нет*». (Episode #12, March 2020)
2. The number of Covid-19 cases is inflated / there are no infected people at all: «*Сегодня из двух непересекающихся источников получила одну и ту же информацию, что родственникам умершего предлагают деньги за то, чтобы они подписали лист подтверждение, что человек умер от Covid-19. Вот отсюда и статистика*». (Episode #57, April 2020)
3. Stories about people who were not infected with Covid-19 but were killed by doctors in hospitals to increase the Covid-19 statistics: «*Для нагона плана статистики смертности, эту самую смертность выполняют при помощи т.н. «лечения». <…> Соседской бабушке 91 год. Бодренькая, живенькая, активная, жить и жить. Но плановая проблема с желудком, необходима операция. Увозят в больницу, делают анализы. <…> Из которой ее уже не выпускают. Труп. Причем, разумеется, никакого вскрытия. <…>*». (Episode #244, October 2020)
4. "Insider" information from the medical staff about doctors purposefully killing Covid-19 patients: «*Фельдшер из Латвии рассказала, как самостоятельно дышащих людей подсаживают на ИВЛ врачи. <…> Они дают самостоятельно дышащим пациентам лошадиную дозу мышечного релаксанта, который полностью расслабляет мышцы. И диафрагма, которая дает нам возможность дышать, расслабляется и перестает «качать» воздух. Таким образом, они останавливают дыхание, чтобы подсадить на ИВЛ*». (Episode #313, December 2020)

The keyword *ВОЗ* (WHO), ranked 27th in the corpus, was found in 19 viral episodes, representing a hybrid of true and false statements. These texts are based on a popular scheme for constructing manipulative narratives, "false headline + true statement (made by a WHO representative) + commentary leading to false conclusions." In the following example, a misleading headline is followed by a true text: *«ВОЗ признала самоизоляцию граждан бесполезной для борьбы с Covid-19. Глава ВОЗ Тедрос Гебреисус признал, что самоизоляция граждан и ограничения на передвижение не помогут ликвидировать пандемию коронавируса. По его словам, такие меры позволят выиграть время с распространением коронавируса, однако для спасения жизней этого недостаточно. Так можно лишь создать «окно возможностей»* (Episode #97, April 2020). Digital narratives with clickbait tools (the use of a headline that does not reflect what the main text is about) proved to be effective in spreading disinformation. According to recent studies (Anspach et al., 2019), more than 70% of social media users only read the headlines of articles before commenting. Other popular headlines of misleading texts representing false interpretations of the statements from the WHO found in the corpus are *«ВОЗ признала, что пандемии не существует» (The WHO has recognized that there is no pandemic), «ВОЗ заявила, что маски бесполезны» (The WHO has announced that masks are ineffective), «ВОЗ признала, что коронавирус никогда не был выделен» (The WHO has admitted that the coronavirus has never been discovered)*.

N-gram extraction from the corpus showed relatively high frequencies of the following digrams: *вторая волна (15), принудительная вакцинация (12), комендантский час (10), система пропусков (9), социальная дистанция (9), цифровой концлагерь (6), тест пцр (5), нулевой пациент (5), массовая вакцинация (4), электронный концлагерь (3)* and trigrams *(режим обязательной самоизоляции (7) тест на антитела (5)*.

Figure 11

Frequencies of the Keyword "зараженный" (Infected Person / Covid Case) and Topic-related Vocabulary



Discussion

Diachronic corpora with a narrowed text focus can depict (depending on the unit chosen for analysis) changes in the use of a linguistic feature and certain groups of words over time. In this work, high-frequency words and significant changes in their frequency distribution in a diachronic collection of Russian viral fake Covid-19 stories serve as indicators of a change of topic on the disinformation agenda during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recently proposed models evaluating term variation over time (Webber & Stroud, 2013; Mariani et al., 2019) allow measuring the topical change in diachronic collections in articles published in scientific journals (JDDDMP and NLP4NLP). These models are based on the quantitative method of measuring changes in keyword usage. Frequency distribution of keywords points out significant changes in term frequencies across the corpus, respectively, and flagging increases or decreases in the number of texts devoted to the related topic. This methodology is not only effective in tracking the time when a change of a topic takes place but also enables us to identify the dynamic patterns of topical fluctuations, i.e., it shows whether the drifts are sharp or gradual. However, in contrast to the above studies, the focus of the present work on the dynamics of topic change is of particular importance since there is a different factor that affects the keywords frequencies.

Furthermore, when dealing with viral Covid-19 fake stories, the topical changes are largely associated with the public interest drifts over time. Thus, the study demonstrates a correlation between the changing focus in the viral disinformation agenda (and the nature of this change) and some extralinguistic factors that could affect it. The viral disinformation agenda and the nature of this change explicate the type of public interest (rising, falling, or stable) in the topic during the year. The developing situation in the world, media coverage of the topics, official refutations, and materials debunking Covid-19 myths are some examples in this context.

Many works have focused on identifying thematic drifts and emerging topics (cf. Nel et al., 2011; Weismayer & Pezenka, 2017; Pesta et al., 2018). A keyword analysis alone is applied to diachronic corpora to determine the

keywords (the words that occur more frequently in a corpus than in the reference corpus) representing topics. However, in a case of a stylistically heterogeneous corpus containing texts across many genres and categories (as in the case of the corpus of Russian viral Covid-19 fake stories), the technique for measuring topical changes over time can be supplemented by analyzing frequencies of the words found in close proximity to the key terms in a wide variety of contexts (Williams, 1998; Brezina et al, 2015; Murakami et al, 2017). In a sense, our research can be viewed as an application of Brezina's comprehensive methodology for capturing peaks and troughs in diachronic data based on collocation networks (Brezina, 2018). We use the cluster data to extract the collocates of a word of interest and then to trace the occurrences of this topic-related vocabulary across the diachronic corpus (as shown in the section "Network Graph and Term Frequencies"). Counting frequencies of such tokens enabled us to evaluate the authors' attitude of false narratives to the covered topic and compare the lexical environment of keywords in media texts and fake stories (the Results section).

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to find explanations for all the identified drifts in public interest in the topics over time, the obtained data contributes a clearer understanding of the significant topical fluctuations in the Russian viral Covid-19 disinformation agenda during the first year of the pandemic. In addition, this study also depicts the key fake storylines related to Covid-19 that were most popular with Russian Internet users.

Conclusion

The frequency-based analysis showed that globally the most popular terms changed over the months indicating an intense dynamic of the topical change in the Russian Covid-19 disinformation agenda. In the initial months of the pandemic, Russian users were interested in issues related to restrictive measures and quarantine, symptoms of the new virus, the impact of 5G towers on the spread of coronavirus infection; this can be traced in the high frequencies of the corresponding Russian keywords. Already in the summer of 2020, these terms have lost popularity, and a few topic-related vocabulary units showed zero frequencies since that period. Increases in the footprint of the keywords *вакцина* (vaccine) and *вакцинация* (vaccination) indicate a shift in the topical focus of Covid-19 disinformation at the end of 2020. Misleading texts about masks, tests, and folk recipes against coronavirus enjoyed relatively stable user popularity; keywords related to these topics occurred in Russian fake narratives during the first year of the pandemic without showing a sharp rise and drop in the frequencies.

Notably, the words that are not related to the realities of life coronavirus life also appeared to be relatively popular within the corpus. For example, the terms *графен* (graphene), *червь* (worm), *абортивный* (abortive), *химтрейл* (chemtrail) frequently occurred in high proximity to the corresponding keywords (*вакцина* (vaccine), *маска* (маска), *ковид* (ковид) in fake texts, but these words are never found in proximity to the same keywords in the Russian texts outside the Covid-19 disinformation agenda (except for the articles and reports that debunk the ideas presented in coronavirus-related fake narratives). Thus, with the help of misleading viral texts, a new discourse is being created on the Internet, based on concepts that do not correspond to reality. A person who receives information from certain channels that massively spreads fakes has a false picture about several topics related to coronavirus infection.

The negative effects of viral disinformation about Covid-19 indicate the need to continue the fight against the spread of fakes, which is already in place in Russia today at the state level. High-quality argumentation against fakes stimulates the growth of skepticism about the infodemic among Russian users. Theories about Covid-19 and vaccines have been popular for some time, but numerous reports in the media exposing these theories have contributed to the fading of public interest in them. For instance, the term *вакцина* (vaccine) has been the most frequent corpus word since December 2020 while the corresponding topic-related vocabulary, referring to various vaccine-related theories, was losing popularity within one or two months. Public interest in the topics that were completely based on false ideas (for example, 5G, chemtrails) dropped very quickly and did not recover within a year.

As this article is being prepared, the coronavirus pandemic continues, new topics emerge, and so do false arguments against vaccines and new regulations. This research can be further developed to track the topical changes in Covid-19 disinformation. It is also necessary to investigate the factors that determine public interest

in certain topics and misleading texts as it will contribute to developing effective strategies for combating the spread of fakes.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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Students' Perceptions of ESP Academic Writing Skills through Flipped Learning during Covid-19

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Learners studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at University regard writing academic papers as a complex process since they have to consider issues about academic writing conventions as well as ethics. This current research examines university students' perceptions of ESP academic writing within the context of the online learning which emerged due to Covid-19 and, therefore, through the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and, particularly, utilizing the Flipped Learning approach as an active learning strategy to enhance ESP academic written competence. To be more specific, we examined how students, in tertiary education, perceived ESP academic writing skills within the field of Business English. The participants are 28 students doing the Degree in Administration and Business Management in a Spanish polytechnic. A mixed method research has been conducted for this current paper since both quantitative as well as qualitative methods were utilized for data collection. Regarding this study, both a questionnaire and a focus group interview were utilized to analyse the data. The outcomes proved that students' perceptions towards academic ESP written competence, using Business English, within the Flipped Learning approach was positive. The major results showed students' awareness of their needs and ESP written requirements. This research concludes with some future research suggestions.

Keywords: academic writing, written skills, English for Specific Purposes, business English, perceptions, flipped learning, Covid-19

Introduction

Academic writing is conceived as a written work or assignment, which is offered to students in academic contexts, and is a key aspect when teaching and learning in tertiary education. University students are required to actively develop their academic writing, implying, therefore, that these students need to develop specific academic writing skills. The research paper is an excellent example of academic writing. In the context of this current work, a research paper in tertiary education is conceived as a written academic paper or an essay written by ESP (English for specific purposes) students on specific themes related to the Faculty of Business and Administration.

Many ESP students find writing the research paper a complex process (Foster, 2006; Rohayah & Naginder, 2006; Ismail, et al., 2010; Pandey, 2020). This occurs, generally, because the written competence is viewed as a spontaneous task by learners. However, some students of ESP perceived greater difficulties in language-related problems (Hisham, 2008; Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Kotamjani, Samad, & Fahimirad, 2018) than general academic written competence. While some authors (Hisham, 2008; Al-Khasaweh, 2010) aimed at researching the academic writing problems of Arab post-graduate students on a Business English course, proving that the university students faced problems related to organization of ideas, grammar, vocabulary register, spelling and referencing, Kotamjani, Samad, & Fahimirad (2018), on the other hand, in their qualitative research, showed that the most difficult areas were writing with coherence, paraphrasing and summarizing, using adequate academic language and vocabulary, as well as utilizing adequate lexical phrases.

What is more, academic writing skills require not only organisation of thoughts (Rafik-Galea, Arumugam & de Mello, 2012) since students should make up ideas in order to create facts according to certain academic conventions, as well as discussion and thoughts on diverse aspects such as the knowledge of specific writing rules (Arumugam, 2011). A huge number of ESP students do not manage to understand how specific academic

writing conventions work. Moreover, these students lack academic writing skills (Al-Khasawneh, 2010) since they struggle with academic written competence. Acquiring good writing skills is a task, which is usually learnt with the aid of formal teaching practices (Kim & Kim, 2005). Academic written competence should, thus, be taught with the aid of useful approaches, feedback and collaborative multi-drafting for example, in higher education within the learning of English as a foreign language (Bowker, 2007; Heffernan, 2006).

Research on the teaching and learning of academic written competence in ESP has focused on not only students' but also teachers' perceptions (Ismail, 2011; Butler, Trosclair, Zhou & Wei, 2014) on the relevance of acquiring and, thus, improving academic writing skills in ESP as well as in the English for Academic Purposes classroom. Similarly, Ismail (2011) investigated ESP students' perceptions of writing and, particularly, an academic writing course from an ESP educational programme. The author, using a variety of research methods, determined that ESP students were aware of both their needs as well as ESL writing requirements, which implied students' positive attitudes towards academic writing skills. On the other hand, Butler, Trosclair, Zhou & Wei (2014) researched both ESP students' as well as ESP teachers' perceptions on written academic competence. The outcomes here proved that both students and teachers have a high regard for competence in academic writing not only from the process approach but also from the product approach.

Since this experiment took place within the context of distance education due to Covid-19, a brief overview state of the art will be next offered on the enhancement of academic ESP writing skills through the use of ICT. On the one hand, Kuteeva (2011) focused on wikis as a tool to enhance writing in the course of Effective Communication in English with the ultimate purpose of analysing how the wiki influenced the writer-reader relationship, showing that the wiki made learners become aware of the relevance of both grammatical correctness as well as structural coherence. On the other hand, Wang (2014), in his case study research, aimed to verify whether Taiwanese students' EFL writing skills improved. Wang proved that students engaging in collaborative writing activities obtained mastery in business writing. In addition, the findings showed that wikis helped students enhance their written competence as well as boosting their collaboration skills.

In coherence with this research, which is focused on ESP academic written competence, it is also worth mentioning the works by Montaner-Villalba (2017, 2019) who focuses on blogging as a tool for enhancing ESP written competence in the context of Vocational Training. Montaner-Villalba (2017), in his case study research, proved that there was not a relevant improvement in the development of writing skills while, conversely, there was a significant improvement in the learning of specialized vocabulary as well as reading competence. This research took place face-to-face. On the other hand, Montaner-Villalba (2019) showed, in his action-research paper, that blogging from the perspective of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in an ESP course helped students from Vocational Training to notably improve their ESP writing skills. This experiment was developed completely online. As for blogging from the approach of PBL, Halimatus Sa'diyah and Cahyono (2019) aimed at researching the effect of EFL written competence through a quasi-experimental research, showing that learners from the treatment group improved much better than learners from the control group (Montaner-Villalba, 2019).

Flipped Learning (hence, FL) has become, within the last ten years, the most popular approach in both distance education as well as blended learning. Many studies have produced significant findings in the application of FL compared to conventional classroom methods (Ferreri & O'Connor, 2013; Tune et al., 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2014). While traditional learning offers transmission of knowledge from teachers to students in a classroom context, FL gives students the opportunity to acquire knowledge before the class and utilize classroom time to practice and implement concepts through interaction with both teachers and peers. Then, after the class, students reflect upon the received feedback to use it to their further learning. FL, within the modality of blended learning, redistributes the learning spaces so that explicit instruction is offered online and more active learning strategies take place in the classroom (Keengwe, Onchwari, & Oigara, 2014; Santiago, 2017).

Technology-Enhanced Language Learning can be integrated with FL where learners can acquire grammar, vocabulary, syntactic structures, and other linguistic aspects (Egbert, Herman & Chang, 2014) outside the classroom context by themselves through online activities and learning materials. Regarding the Flipped Classroom approach applied to enhance EFL academic writing, Tsytovich & Boronenko (2018) explored the use of the Flipped Learning approach to enhance academic writing skills in the English language in order to justify the choice of blended learning at tertiary level, proving positive outcomes at the end of the experiment. This research took place at the Center of Academic Writing at the South Ural State University.

Regarding the FL approach within the teaching of academic ESP written competence, some new literature focusing on the field of engineering has been published. While, on the one hand, Martínez-Saéz (2019) aimed at enhancing undergraduate students' writing skills through a detailed analysis of the steps carried out to redesign the practice of academic writing in the fields of Biotechnology, Food and Agricultural Engineering and, additionally, the author designed an initial questionnaire to learn what students' perceptions regarding the Flipped Learning were; on the other hand, Sukerti, Rudiastari and Yogi Susana (2020) proved the effectiveness as well as the implementation of flipped learning to enhance ESP writing skills. Research participants were students in higher vocational education specializing in electrical engineering at the time of the experiment. The outcomes obtained here proved that the Flipped Learning approach was a determinant in improving ESP students' written competence.

In coherence with this research, which is focused on analysing students' perceptions of their ESP writing skills and, to be more specific, in the field of Business and Administration, through Flipped Learning, relevant and worthwhile research has been recently published such as that of Salem (2018) and Tri & Trang (2019). In this vein, whereas, on the one hand, Salem (2018) aimed to investigate the impact of utilizing flipped classroom to improve functional written competence within the field of Business, proving that students from the experimental group gained positive results in comparison with the control group learners, on the other hand, Tri & Trang (2019) offered a case-study research, so as to prove whether ESP students improved their academic writing skills within the Business field. The findings showed that flipped learning boosted students' performance, as well as increasing their motivation and critical thinking.

This piece of research analyses students' perceptions of ESP written competence through the Flipped Learning approach. This research aims to address the following research questions:

Q1 How do students view writing skills in English?
Q2 How do students perceive their own writing competence in English?
Q3 How do students regard their writing skill in English for specific purposes?
Q4 How do students view their ESP writing competence through Flipped Learning?

Methodology

Context and Participants

This experiment took place at the Faculty of Business and Administration in a Spanish state polytechnic in the Valencian Region in Spain during the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020 and, approximately, from the second half to the end of the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020. This small project was developed between end-April and mid-June. Therefore, we had to carry out this experiment while instructing online with the aid of both the virtual platform of the university and the videoconferencing tool, Microsoft Teams, since we had to be locked down due to Covid-19 from March to June, 2020.

The participants were 28 students who were studying ESP as part of their Degree in Business and Administration. They were in the 4th academic year of Business and Administration at the time of conducting this research. These students were enrolled in the subject "English Language B1" which was an optional subject throughout the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, that is, from end-February to mid-June. This subject was preparation for the Business English Certificate (BEC) and, particularly, the Cambridge English Business Preliminary, which is the equivalent to the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL). In fact, the students' level of the English language was expected to be B1, according to the CEFRL. These university students were selected in a random manner from, at least, three different groups following alphabetical order. They were aged between twenty-one and twenty-three approximately. The researcher of this work was also the instructor.

Research Tools

Two main instruments were used to collect data from the participating students. Firstly, a seventeen-item questionnaire was created to collect the data, according to the research questions of this study. All the variables

were classified into three items to meet the structural requirements of the research questions. This questionnaire consisted of a five-point Likert scale, which decreased from "5" as strongly agree to "1" as strongly disagree. An open-ended question was given to students so that they could express their opinion freely regarding what they liked and disliked about writing in English. The reliability of the questionnaire was 0.88 through Cronbach Alpha Formula. In the second place, the focus group interview technique covered four questions, which were aimed at consolidating through the above-mentioned questionnaire. These questions were flexible, allowing the participants to reflect upon and express their own answers freely. These questions were checked by two instructors in the university (excluding the researcher of this paper) to find out whether they were consistent with the data intended to be gathered through the questionnaire. Open-ended questions were chosen for this research to acquire a much deeper understanding of the findings obtained through the questionnaire with the main purpose of reaching some definite conclusions on how students perceived their ESP writing skills through FL within the context of distance education.

Data Collection

The researcher and instructor of this ESP classroom collected the data during the tenth week of the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, that is, from 6th to 10th April 2020. The participating students had been previously offered enough time to develop their ESP written competence and, at the same time, the researcher who was their ESP teacher had the chance to establish an excellent rapport with the students. The questionnaire was completed by the twenty-eight participating students at the beginning of the class. Students were given between, at least, eight and ten minutes to complete the questionnaire. The focus group interviews took place through Microsoft Teams between end-April and mid-June.There were four interview sessions, in accordance with the research questions. Each interview session took place for at least 10-15 minutes before finishing the online ESP lesson via Microsoft Teams.

Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized to analyse the data. Whereas, on the one hand, the SPSS programme was employed to obtain various kinds of descriptive statistics as well as independent sample t-tests from the quantitative data, which were obtained through the 17-item questionnaire, on the other hand, qualitative data analysis was employed to examine the data collected through the focus group interviews. According to Creswell (2003), interpreting the quantitative five scale Likert questionnaire data was supported by the qualitative data which were obtained through the focus group interview with the final purpose of comparing students' perceptions about ESP academic writing skills. Students' opinions from these interviews were included with the discussion of outcomes obtained from the questionnaire for each research question, where convenient. This current research focused on the analysis of ESP written competence by students from the Business and Administration faculty. The outcomes of the questionnaire were examined in the same sequence as the four research questions were established earlier.

Results and Discussion

At the time of examining the outcomes of the first research question (*How do students view written skills in English?*) (see Appendix A, table 1), we find out that the mean score was 4.4 on a 5-point scale which decreases from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The mean proved that Business students of English had high perceptions about the relevance of their ESP written competence. This implied that ESP students were conscious of the need to improve the quality of their written competence in the English language. This result was in accordance with research by Ismail (2011) about the EFL needs of Arab undergraduate students in both the College of Education as well as the College of Humanities. The outcomes proved that the students understood perfectly the relevance of improving their written competence in English. In addition, the outcomes of this current research were also similar to the study by Mazdayasna and Tahririan (2008), who explored the general language proficiency from EFL Iranian students enrolled at the College of Nursing as well as the College of Midwifery, showing that these university students had reached a positive attitude towards their language proficiency.

While the focus group interview was taking place, a considerable number of students from the College of Business and Administration indicated that they needed to improve their writing skills since they were preparing to work abroad at various international business sectors where the use of the English language was relevant. The focus group interviews offered the participants from this research an interesting chance to reflect on their language learning needs. The participating students of this research expressed that their level of EFL writing, in general, was low, implying that their level of academic ESP writing could not initially be of high quality. A lack of academic vocabulary in ESP was indeed the reason why these Business and Administration students felt that they needed to improve their written competence. The same issue is described in the work by other authors (Al-Hazmi's, 2006; Ismail, 2011) who verified that reflection was key since it allowed students to share their opinions and thoughts, as well as evaluate their own language learning experience.

The second research question (*How do students perceive their own written competence in English?*) (see Appendix A, table 2) focused on students' perceptions about their EFL writing skills. While looking at the data for this research question in detail, we observe that the mean scores of the EFL students from the College of Business and Administration, participating at this current experiment, regarding their opinions about their EFL written competence, was from 2.28 on this 5-point scale. This meant that these students did not have positive beliefs about their own perceptions of their writing skills when utilizing the English language. This outcome might be interpreted regarding the students' educational background since many of them had previously attended high schools belonging to the state, where a national curriculum was implemented in a very specific manner. In this vein, Ismail (2011) interpreted the outcomes of his research in relation to both the students' educational as well as social background, taking into consideration that a huge number of students participating in this research were female students who had previously had a similar educational experience. In addition to this, Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002) showed that students' EFL written competence could be influenced by their own experience in writing using their first language. The findings of this research showed that Japanese students proved to be more skilful in reading than the American ones, who proved to develop their writing skills more. This research by Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002) is in line with the findings of this current research since Spanish students of ESP perceived that their writing skills could be influenced by their own first language written experience since the ESP students, participating in this research, had not previously been offered the chance to practice writing academic texts before studying at university.

Another interpretation could be related to the students' comprehension of the question. The students could understand that they might be required to think about their own written experience. Since nearly every student was required to write their corresponding tasks in other areas utilizing the English language, while the focus group interview was being held, these students from the College of Business and Administration indicated that they successfully completed their written assignments for other areas because they were getting good marks. However, these high grades might have given these students the impression that their written competence in EFL was excellent. Moreover, at the focus group interviews, students stated that other teachers from other diverse areas belonging to the College of Business and Administration did not correct their mistakes which possibly contributed to their false impression about their writing skills. For this reason, the students participating in this research could falsely have believed that they had already mastered their ESP written competence. At this point, it should be highlighted that a content teacher's aim is not to check any kind of language mistake since they are not language instructors.

While examining the outcomes of each individual variable under this question, we noticed a few significant differences. The score means for the students' negative feeling (hating writing) about their EFL writing was 1.69 for Business and Administration students. The Business and Administration students seemed to be positive about their ESP writing skills, since they believed that they were excellent writers. Their answers to the "opinion question" (*"How do you feel with class writing tasks?",* see Appendix A, table 2, variable 6) could possibly have been based on that perspective from students. The mean scores accounting for their feeling toward class writing tasks were 2.49 for the students from the College of Business and Administration. While the focus group interview took place, some students expressed that they would prefer a writing task provided they were given the chance to work in teams since this learning experience took place online because of Covid-19. This finding was similar to Ismail (2011) and Storch (2005) about collaborative writing. When the participating students were offered the choice to work either in groups or individually, a huge number of these students chose to work in groups and created shorter pieces of writing of a high quality within the approach of Flipped Learning. In this current research, all the students showed a positive attitude, in general terms, towards group work and

collaborative writing and, more specifically, to the practice of ESP academic written skills through the Flipped Learning approach within the context of online education caused by the Covid-19.

When students were asked if they were good writers in both English as well as in Spanish, which is their mother tongue, these students responded that their writing proficiency in both languages was not good. Regarding this specific variable, the mean score was 1.64. These students from the College of Business and Administration answered that they were not efficient writers in their mother tongue. Therefore, this may have had an influence on their ability to develop a proficient written competence in the foreign language, which is object of study at this current research. This issue was in line with both Ismail (2011) as well as Spack (1997), in which the outcomes revealed that first language learning might possibly shape how students experienced foreign language learning. The participating Business and Administration students from this research may need further training on ESP written competence so as to develop their proficiency as stated by the authors mentioned above (Spack, 1997; Ismail, 2011). Researching their language proficiency development might be a potential theme of a future study.

Research question 3 (*How do students regard their writing skills in English for specific purposes?*) (see Appendix A, table 3) is focused on students' perceptions about their ESP written competence. The mean score for the students from the College of Business and Administration was 2.81. The findings of this question proved that these students were a little positive about their ESP writing skills. This could be because of their assumptions about their written proficiency that was regarded to be acceptable from their own perspective. These students may feel that their practice in developing their ESP written skills was easy and, consequently, they were not acquiring significant learning regarding the practice of their ESP written competence. The focus group interview showed that these students from the College of Business and Administration believed that their learning experience on developing ESP written competence was not difficult. However, this learning covered many writing tasks. These participating students highlighted that this practice of ESP writing skills made them learn to plan, organize, edit and, then, end their essay. These ESP students consider their views and expectations about learning and teaching in the classroom useful, and every attempt to learn is always guided by these factors.

The outcomes of the "course attractiveness variable" proved that the Business and Administration students did not have a positive attitude towards this learning experience on the practice of ESP written competence. The mean for this variable (*The ESP written competence experience is enjoyable*) was 3.11 for these students. Similarly, the mean for the variable "*The ESP written competence is useful*" was 2.71 for the participating students. The lack of positive attitude of these Business and Administration students could be attributed to their lack of experience writing for specific purposes in their first language, Spanish. The reason for finding their ESP written competence experience enjoyable could be due to the fact that they felt that this learning experience helped students learn something new. While the focus group interview took place, a considerable number of students from the College of Business and Administration stated that the learning experience taught them to organize their essays as well as to express their ideas in a clear manner. This finding was in line with what Ismail (2011) and Storch and Tapper (2009) highlighted about their University students' perspectives about their learning experience on the practice of ESP written skills. In both cases, the authors verified that educational programmes on English for Academic Programmes can have a positive impact on students' attitudes towards their writing. The students participating in this current research asserted that students' feedback on the ESP written skills learning experience through Flipped Learning within the context of Covid-19 had been challenging. What is more, the students' opinions offered through questionnaires at the end of the experiment proved this.

Regarding the variable (*The ESP written competence experience is less challenging than the General Written Course*), the outcomes asserted what the participating students mentioned while the interview took place; moreover, it verified the general assumptions among ESP teachers that the participating students from the College of Business and Administration can find their learning experience challenging. The mean of this variable was 2.61 for these Business and Administration students. Even though these students perceived their ESP writing skills learning experience very easy, they considered their learning experience more challenging if comparing it with the General EFL Written Competence practice. However, they considered this experience beneficial since it helped them improve their own confidence through their writing skills. Similarly, Ismail (2011) in his research

about ESP students' perceptions towards academic ESP written competence found that students regarded ESP written competence beneficial since it helped them develop confidence in their writing proficiency.

While looking at the findings of the fourth research questions ("*How do students view their ESP written competence through Flipped Learning?*) (see Appendix A, table 4), which deals with students' perceptions and opinions about the ESP writing skills with the aid of Flipped Learning, we find out that the mean score for the Business and Administration students was 4.7 on a 5-point scale. This mean showed that the ESP participating students had high perceptions about the importance of their ESP written competence through the Flipped Learning approach. This outcome was approximately in line with research by Tayan (2017), who focused not only on ESP Business students' perceptions but also teachers' feedback on Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). The outcomes here proved that these ESP students understood the importance of learning Business English through MALL. Moreover, Jaramillo (2019) examined both students and teachers in a flipped intermediate Spanish school where the outcomes from students' surveys showed that students' perceptions were lower than teachers' but were nevertheless positive. However, it should be noted that the references mentioned above did not focus on students' perception of ESP writing skills through the Flipped Learning approach. This suggests that this current research offers worthwhile and significant value to the field of study in this current paper.

During the focus group interview, many participating students indicated that they needed to improve their academic ESP writing skills, in general terms, through ICT because they were still not familiar with digital tools and, particularly, with Flipped Learning as a pedagogical approach to practice their academic ESP written competence within a complete online learning experience which emerged in March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic worldwide. However, as mentioned above, they expressed that they were satisfied regarding the fourth research question.

Conclusion

This research explored ESP students' perceptions of academic writing in English as a foreign language through Flipped Learning within the context of distance education during the Covid-19 pandemic. The outcomes highlighted the students' expectations and views which they brought with them to the online writing class through both the online platform as well as the videoconferencing tool, Microsoft TEAMS. The results emphasized the learners' positive attitudes toward the practice of academic ESP written competence and, in particular, the development of ESP written competence through Flipped Learning within the context of online education with a special emphasis on ESP students' own views and opinions of their ESP written competence. One of the most relevant issues was the students' misunderstanding about their writing skills. Some students responded that they were satisfied with their written competence when, in fact, they still needed to pay attention to improving this skill through Flipped Learning. To conclude, this research contributes partially to understanding students' perceptions of ESP writing using the Flipped Learning approach in the context of online education. Future research needs to be conducted on analysing ESP tertiary students' perceptions of their academic written competence through Flipped Learning in other subjects, such as Computer Engineering and Design Engineering.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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APPENDIX

Table 1

Students' perceptions of writing in English

Variables	*Mean*	*T-test*
Learning to write in English is a very relevant competence for my academic study at the university.	4.83	1.27
I need to learn to write in English because it is a rather relevant skill for my professional career.	4.98	4.53***
I love to write in English since I write perfectly in Spanish.	3.36	.73
I love writing in English.	4.76	3.22**
I think that I might be a good writer provided I keep practicing daily.	4.20	0.50

Note: *p< 0.05 **p< 0.01 ***p< 0.001

Table 2

Students' views of their own written competence in English

Variables	*Mean*	*T-test*
I would like to learn all language skills except writing	3.51	1.62
Writing is not a relevant skill for me	1.97	1.64
I hate writing in English since I do not know how to write	1.69	3.81**
I cannot write because my English is not good	2.39	1.83
I am not a good writer in both Spanish and English	1.64	2.48*
I am not happy with class writing tasks	2.49	2.72**

Table 3

Students' perceptions of their own writing skills in English for Specific Purposes

Variables	*Mean*	*T-test*
The ESP written competence experience is enjoyable	3.11	2.30*
The ESP written competence experience is useful	2.71	.8
The ESP written competence experience is less challenging than the General Written Course	2.61	1.95*

Table 4

Students' expectations of their own ESP writing skills through Flipped Learning

Variables	*Mean*	*T-test*
The ESP writing skill through FL is not interesting	4.20	0.50
The ESP writing skill through FL is OK	4.85	1.29
The ESP writing skill through FL is really useful	4.99	4.54***

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Promoting Metacognitive and Linguistic Skills: Digital Learning Logs in Pre-Service Teacher Training

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This paper reports on the implementation of digital learning logs in the context of pre-service teacher training in a distance university in Madrid. The learning log, which had been previously implemented in the subject as a learning tool, has proven to be especially useful in Covid-19 times since the students had to work more independently and could use it to reflect upon their learning without the conventional teaching they were used to. The paper has a two-fold aim: first, to analyze whether the learning logs helped in promoting students' autonomy and self-reflection, and second, to observe whether they contribute to the development of their linguistic competence in English as a foreign language. Participants of the study (n= 47) are students of the Primary and Infant Education degrees, specializing in English teaching, whose L2 level ranges between B1 and C2. At the end of half term, they were given the possibility of completing a learning log to record their learning process, review concepts and be aware of potential learning gaps and needs, and act accordingly. For this purpose, and to encourage participation, L1 or L2 could be chosen as vehicular languages. Participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire on their experience using the logs, answering questions regarding the suitability of this tool to enhance their language skills and promote effective strategies to become independent learners. The data drawn from the questionnaires submitted (n=29) were later analyzed through SPSS. In addition, individual semi-structured interviews were carried out to collect information on those participants who had not completed the learning log (n=11). The findings of the study show that the vast majority of participants agree on the potential of learning logs as a useful tool to keep track of their learning process and to develop metacognitive awareness and linguistic skills.

Keywords: digital learning log, metacognition, online learning, higher education, language skills, EFL teacher training

Introduction

The role of digital learning tools which are used to facilitate the achievement of learning objectives and outcomes has been recently analyzed in the area of foreign languages for virtual and online teaching modes (Cok, 2016; Golshan & Tafazoli, 2014; Pinto-Llorente et al., 2017, among others). Within the plethora of available instruments, learning logs have proven to be valuable instruments in face-to-face learning environments due to their versatility and potential, allowing teachers to have a better understanding of the students' learning throughout a period (Kamijo, 2013; Porto, 2007). In this respect, the interest in promoting activities to make students more independent and autonomous has led teachers to a quest for instruments that can facilitate out-of-class activities which complement in-class learning. Out-of-class activities are relevant in foreign language learning or subjects taught through an additional language since there seems to exist a correlation between the quality of out-of-class activities in the target language and the learning (Lai, Zhu & Gong, 2015; Ohron, 2018, and Sundqvist, 2011, among others). However, scarce attention has been paid to the role of metacognition parallel to language learning through digital learning logs. This kind of activity is especially relevant in the context of distance learning since these students are required to be more autonomous and independent to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction with the teacher and peers (Attard, Di Lorio, Geven & Santa, 2010; Moallem, 2015; Smith & Darvas, 2017; Swan, Garrison & Richardson, 2009; Traxler, Bárcena & García-Laborda, 2015).

This study explores pre-service teaching students' impressions on how the use of the learning logs favors metacognition and develops language skills.An online questionnaire with both Likert-scaled and open-ended questions was administered to 36 participants enrolled in the subject *Advanced Didactics of English as a Foreign Language* at the School of Education of a distance university in Spain who had completed this optional activity. The subject belongs to the foreign language specialization track, and students usually take the course in the third year of their undergraduate program. Students were able to monitor their learning and record any significant learning experience in their online learning logs. Upon completion of the logs, a questionnaire combining both Likert-scaled and open-ended questions was administered, and the answers were analyzed through descriptive statistics, through SPSS to observe the students' satisfaction with this tool.

For the study, two research questions were posed:

1. Do the students perceive they can enhance the metacognitive processes of autonomy, reflection, and ways to study with the use of learning logs?
2. Do the students perceive they can improve their L2 language skills with the use of learning logs?

Methodology

Theoretical Background

Students' perceptions of any learning experience provide valuable insights for teachers and students alike. For students, reflection upon their learning involves an analysis of learning outcomes which can set the basis for future learning processes. For teachers, those perceptions can be useful for future classes to be better equipped when preparing syllabus and learning activities. In the case of pre-service teachers, a cyclical review of the learning processes regarding metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive control processes is essential to be able to transfer these skills into their future professional life (Kurt, 2007), as it will help them to prepare students for the "ability to learn", the most important competence according to the Education Council (2001).

Learning tools can facilitate reflection on the learning process. A learning log, a reflective journal to monitor and reflect upon learning, is considered by Braun & Thomas "an effective tool to help students develop cognitive awareness of their learning» (2013, p.1457). It is characterized by its wide variability, and it can present a variety of formats and structures (Friesner & Hart, 2005). Learning logs can also vary in length, depending on the number and frequency of entries (Litzler & Bakieva, 2017a). In addition, the activities they can gather are diverse (Litzler & Bakieva, 2017b) and their purposes are also multifaceted. For instance, they can be used for self-assessment (Chang & Gaery, 2005), to record learning experience (Friesner & Hart, 2005), and as a reflection tool, which is their main use (Dewi, Warsono, & Faridi, 2018), as reflection «opens up the opportunity for deeper learning and understanding, allowing the learner to draw conclusions» (Friesner & Hart, 2005, p. 118).

Learning logs have proven to be successful instruments, especially in higher education (Stephens & Winterbottom, 2010), since abstract thinking is a competence fully developed by this stage. More specifically, within the area of foreign language learning, research shows positive results on the use of helping students improve their learning autonomy (Chang & Geary, 2015) and motivation (Litzer, 2014).

Apart from the above-mentioned benefits, there is evidence of the metacognitive awareness parallel to the cognitive development involved in the process of recording the learning experience (Braun & Thomas, 2013). Metacognition, or the act of reflecting on how to learn, refers to the student's ability to regulate their learning processes. However, for this regulation to be effective, it is important to plan, monitor, and evaluate these learning processes that are carried out when the learning logs are used (Kurt, 2007).

Online learning logs seem appropriate for students following distance education, who are used to working with digital tools in all subjects. The use of learning logs allows the asynchronous interaction with the teacher, giving students "time to consider their thoughts, and engage with the content more deeply," (Watts, 2016, p. 27). For the teacher, digital learning logs facilitate the analysis of students' information especially regarding fastness and convenience (Friesner & Hart, 2005), since the digital format allows for immediacy in teacher-

student interaction, and Moodle is a user-friendly educational platform. Besides, in the case of pre-service teachers, these tools prepare them for the digital educational environments they will inevitably face in the future (Engeness, 2020; McGarr & McDonagh, 2019; Redecker, 2017).

Context

The study was conducted within the context of a distance university in Spain. All the subjects are hosted in Moodle, a user-friendly online learning management system, which includes various formats such as lecture videos, presentations, documents, pictures, and assessments of assignments and quizzes. Teaching methodologies at this university are based on phone tutorials, video conferencing, communication in the virtual classroom, and lesson plans adapted to distance learning, audio-visual materials, databases, glossaries, Google docs, and cloud-based collaborative tools.

The dominant pedagogy underpinning teaching and learning processes at the School of Education is the promotion of critical thinking and formative assessment practice, as these two actions are commonly requested by students through the end-of-term satisfaction surveys. Assessment is, therefore, conceived in a formative way so that students are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning process at the same time that they use the English language in future educational contexts.

The Covid-19 crisis has brought to light more than ever the need of shifting towards student-centered models where teachers and students communicate and interact through the multiple tools offered by current technological platforms (Pérez-López, Vázquez-Atochero & Cambero-Rivero, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Although online learning is firmly established in this university, specific actions were adopted to accelerate and improve learning (World Bank, 2020)[1], and to offer flexibility and enhance student autonomy (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). Among the measures implemented, we can highlight the following: more flexible deadlines, a closer follow-up of students' progress, support for online tests using the virtual platform, and extra tutorial sessions. In addition, an increase of asynchronous activities such as learning logs was adopted to cater to the exceptional circumstances derived from the Covid-19 outbreak.

Participants

47 students enrolled in *Advanced Didactics of English as a Foreign Language,* an elective 30-ECTS-credit subject in the Degree of Education, were invited to complete the above-mentioned questionnaire on learning logs. Out of the 47 participants, 36 handed in the learning logs, and 29 from this group filled in the questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews were held with those who had not handed in the learning logs to collect information on the subject matter.

Regarding the demographics, 82.8% of students are over 25 years old, and there is a high prevalence of women (86.2%). Most of them already hold a degree and combine studies with work-life, an aspect which makes it difficult to attend online synchronous lessons. Students, whose L2 level ranges between B1 and C1, had previously pursued basic didactics of foreign language teaching so they were supposed to have an awareness of the underlying theoretical principles of teaching EFL.

Instruments

A total of two tools were deployed to gather the data consisting of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. *The questionnaire* administered to students (Appendix) was adapted from Litzler & Bakieva's (2017a). It involved six closed questions in the form of a Likert-scale, and four open-ended questions since both kinds allow analyzing data from a qualitative and quantitative perspective (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). The first closed question, on general satisfaction about the learning log, ranged from one to ten to explore responses in greater depth. Questions two to six, referring to specific features of the log, ranged from one to seven.

The questions referred to the learning log which weighed 10% of the student's final grade followed Jarvis' model of reflection (2001), which categorizes four levels of reflective learning conveying a progression towards

[1] The World Bank. (2020). Lessons for Education during the Covid-19 Crisis. https://inyurl.com/hlgx925n

critical or higher-order thinking: descriptive (non-reflective), descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection, and critical reflection.

The first section in the activity ("Things I learned") can be subsumed into the category of descriptive reflection, where the student is invited to comment on the main topics in each unit. The second section ("Something I found interesting") went a bit further in metacognition and thus, it can be considered critical reflection, as it offered students the opportunity to examine the topics in-depth, develop opinions and make value decisions. Lastly, in the last section ("Some questions you still have") students were also introduced to critical thinking as they assessed their knowledge by posing questions to the teacher. Instructions for the learning log were as follows:

Your learning log
This activity deals with the process of reflecting on your work. You need to
write a separate entry and reflection for each unit using the template below reflecting on the following:
- *Things I learned*
- *Something I found interesting*
- *Some questions you still have*

Bear in mind that the entries can be written in Spanish or English.
Remember the deadline!

After the students had completed the online learning logs, the questionnaire was written in Spanish, and administered through an online Google form. Likewise, to elicit feedback on the typical reasons for not handing in the logs, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone. Finally, data from the Likert-scale questions were entered into SPSS for statistical analysis, and for the open-ended questions, responses were analyzed to gather additional information on students' views.

In addition, *semi-structured interviews* were conducted in Spanish to collect insights from participants who have not used the log as a learning tool through the term. It is believed that this type of interview allows informants to express their views in their terms, and can provide reliable qualitative data.

Procedure

Over the course, students were invited to complete the digital learning logs choosing between English and Spanish, since the main purpose of this activity was to promote reflection over the use of language (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback on language use (grammar accuracy, vocabulary use, and word order, among other aspects) was provided to those students who chose English, the vehicular language for the final exam. However, to favor metacognitive processes and to allow students to express themselves freely, no penalization was made on mistakes if they did not impede comprehension (Bigelow & Ranney, 2005).

Apart from the individual comments accompanying the grade, feedback was also provided by the teacher through videos where questions regarding the content of the subject along with linguistic issues were addressed. The answers to these questions posed by students were then grouped by the teacher around common topics. Besides, the teacher also recommended additional resources and readings on topics of general interest. These videos were publicly available in the virtual classroom so that all students could benefit from their peers' contributions and, thus, learn from each other.

Results

Overall, the descriptive data from the closed questions indicate that the participants in this study are satisfied with the use of learning logs in the subject. To Q0 related to the general impression of the logs: *Upon completion of the learning log, indicate your level of satisfaction from 1 (very unsatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied),* 65. 5% of the students give it a score of 9 or 10, the rest of participants 34.4%, between 7 and 8. These results offer the highest mean score (mean= 8.76, Std.= .912), therefore showing the learning log as a valuable learning tool according to the students' opinion. This general satisfaction can also be noticed in the students' comments to

open-ended questions where they indicate this is an interesting tool suitable for primary education contexts, considering its potential use in their future teaching profession:

> *It's a very useful tool. Many times, we teachers act in the classroom without noticing what we do, in a mechanical way. We need to reflect critically about our teaching style; sometimes, we apply rules from manuals we have read but we never take notes- this leads us to forget important information either because we are in a constant rush or because we are not used to doing that. Keeping a diary or journal is good as it can help us as a guide we can rely on according to our needs in the class (St02).*
>
> *I'd love to use this in my future teaching practice, as I have checked it can help you reflect on what you have learned (St07).*

Finally, those students who had not completed the learning logs explained it is a useful tool they would all have completed (n= 11) had it not been for the lack of time derived from the difficulties to carry out studies, work, or family issues throughout and after lockdown. As one of the students pointed out, one of the reasons was the difficulty of carrying out the observed teaching practice which is mandatory in the Education degrees and other academic tasks because of the past and current situation:

> *As for me, I couldn't do this activity. I was called up to start my observed teaching practice. I couldn't do it last academic year; everything became so complicated and I am still trying to balance this practice, studying the subjects, kids, and everything. To this day, I am still 'huffing and puffing' with the syllabus. I am trying to catch up and I will certainly complete the next one, in which I intend to include this reflection too, if possible. […]This is an interesting activity and it can help us to be more open-minded, and reflect on our educational work (St01).*

Research Question 1: Do the Students Perceive They Can Enhance the Metacognitive Processes of Autonomy, Reflection, and Ways to Study with the Use of Learning Logs?

The descriptive data regarding autonomy (Q1), ways to study (Q3), and reflection (Q4), indicate a mean higher than 5.00 (out of 7.00 in a 1 to 7 Likert scale) showing, therefore, the participants' positive views on these features. To the statement Q1 *The learning log has helped me to increase my autonomy when studying the subject*, over three quarters (75.8%) rank this item between six and seven; With a mean of 5.76 and an Std. of 1.272, these questions offer a similar mean to Q3: *The learning log has helped me to explore and find other ways to study*, (mean= 5.38). The answers in the latter case are split with slightly over a half (51.7%) rank it between 6 and 7 (Std. =1.545). It is interesting to observe, nevertheless, how in Q4, *The learning log has assisted me to study the subject in-depth and clarify doubts*, also related to metacognition, a vast majority of participants (86.2%) rank this question between 6 and 7 (mean= 6.28 and Std. =.882).

Research Question 2: Do the Students Perceive They Can Improve Their L2 Language Skills with the Use of Learning Logs?

English was the preferred language for nearly two-thirds of the students (62.1%). Since they pursue a major in English, most of them want to use the language as much as they can: *English is essential for my future profession as a teacher, so I decided to write the learning log in English to practice (St16)*. Those who opted for writing the log in Spanish (37.9%), report not feeling comfortable with using English and they seem to be afraid of making mistakes or not being clear enough. As one of the participants points out: *I don't have the required level, I'm afraid. Spanish is my mother tongue and thus, it is more natural to me to write in this language. I am proficient in Spanish so I can express myself better. Also, as I don't have much time to complete the tasks, I can finish them quicker (St03).*

For Q2, *The learning log has helped me to improve my English level*, roughly two thirds (65.5%) of students who wrote the logs in English state that they managed to practice and improve their L2 level with the help of the teachers' corrections and comments (answers ranked between six and seven in the 1 to 7 Likert scale). Only 6,85% of students consider they did not improve significantly, maybe because their level was good enough (mean = 5.76, Std. =1.576).

The successful acceptance of this tool might be due to the explanatory videos recorded by the teacher providing answers to all the students' questions regardless of the language they used for that purpose. The wide majority of respondents (96.5%) recognize the value of videos as educational resources in asynchronous online contexts during the pandemic. The mean of 6.62 out of 7 and the lowest Std. in the questionnaire (Std. = .561) demonstrate the students' evident support to the videos as a useful resource complementing the learning log.

Table 1

Questionnaire Descriptive Statistics

	N	*Minimum*	*Maximum*	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*
Satisfaction	29	7,00	10,00	8,76	,912
Autonomy	29	1,00	7,00	5,76	1,272
English Language	29	1,00	7,00	5,76	1,573
Ways to study	29	1,00	7,00	5,38	1,545
Reflection	29	4,00	7,00	6,28	,882
Videos	29	5,00	7,00	6,62	,561
Valid N (listwise)	29				

Discussion

The case study presented here has described and evaluated the use of learning logs as a reflective practice in an undergraduate course at an online university during the pandemic. The study shows the students value the learning logs to improve the planning, organization, and evaluation of their work, making use not only of metacognitive but also cognitive strategies (Oxford, 2016). These skills become even more relevant during difficult times such as a pandemic, where the students need to draw on more self-regulation and motivation. Also, the critical reflection promoted by the learning logs can compensate for the absence of face-to-face class interaction and implement a student-centered approach. In this respect, and as previous studies have demonstrated (Chang & Lin, 2014; Cheng, 2017), in online learning, students using the learning logs benefit from a more relaxed atmosphere, have time to think on their own, and they are not constrained from the presence of the teacher and peers when posing questions.

Likewise, in this context, students can take advantage of wait-time, an essential feature in EFL, which gives way to more student contributions (Alsaadi & Atar, 2019).Overall, participants seem to be satisfied after using the logs, which contributed to their learning through reflective practice. As can be seen from their entries and the numerous questions posed to the teacher, topics were examined in-depth, and students had the opportunity to develop their opinions regardless of the language they used. Likewise, the logs helped them share their knowledge and opinions on interesting subjects, such as contexts for learning English, teachers' beliefs, and ways of developing positive attitudes towards English. For instance, concerning the topic of classroom management, some participants are eager to know the best ways to motivate students in heterogeneous groups with different English levels and ambitions, and how to create a warm atmosphere with disruptive children. Regarding the use of English, to quote a further example, some teachers are concerned that their level of English might be insufficient to teach upper levels: *Can my worries with English affect my teaching? I have a positive attitude to English, however, sometimes I can be less confident about my own English because not all the topics are equally difficult, but I always try to do my best. Although I can have doubts, I look for a solution or I ask for help. My deeper concern is: Will my level affect my pupils? Will I be teaching them correctly? (St14).*

As for language achievement, some students still find reflective writing challenging in English, maybe because their English level in this specialization track is ranked between B1 and C1. Although they are supposed to improve their language skills throughout the course and degree, and as English is the language they will use in their professional lives, it is important to notice that some of them are still reluctant to use it, as they do not feel confident when writing or talking, probably due to their age. This is corroborated by the fact that only two students out of the whole group agreed to share their written work with their peers in the virtual class and

following Li, Ogata, Hou, Uosaqui & Mouri (2013), whose study reflects the participants' difficulties when learning from their peers' logs. The authors, however, consider that "a learner's learning log cannot merely be available for himself, but can also be shared with other learners who have the same learning needs" (p. 363).

Despite participants' reluctance to share their work, the videos recorded by the teacher and uploaded to the virtual platform allowed the implementation of oracy and discussion in the online learning environment, which often lacks wider means of synchronous interaction among students. In fact, by sharing questions about the main topics on English didactics, the group helped to create an 'open classroom climate', and build a virtual learning community based on self-reflection and communication among peers, thus empowering the students as the protagonists of their learning process. This commitment towards their learning is also depicted in the students' comments about the future use of this tool, in line with Stephens and Winterbottom's findings (2010), since participants indicate they can transfer skills to their future teaching profession and state that they have gained confidence in their abilities.

About their future career, they advocate for the following suggestions to be implemented shortly: *Learning logs can be designed around practical case studies*.*It would be nice to relate the logs with the most common situations we can find as teachers of English: describe teaching-learning situations in relation to the syllabus to provide an answer for the existing problems (St15)*. As for the language choice in writing the logs, some of those who chose English believe they made a big effort which should be somehow compensated as can be seen from some of their comments: *To encourage all students to write in English. To give a higher score to those who write in English (St08)*.

Finally, they also propose to share the main conclusions from each participant so that all learners can learn from each other. Furthermore, the fact that they can freely complete the learning logs and also receive feedback through the videos supports the double function of technology as a resource chosen by the teacher to compile information on the learning and as a dialogic interface with the class, in line with García-Esteban & García-Laborda (2016).

Conclusion

According to the results of the study, and as was pointed out in the discussion, students appeared to be highly motivated to use learning logs in this subject, as they seem to promote self-learning and critical thinking, and prepare them for future life regarding both language and academic skills. It is important to notice that the critical reflection promoted by the learning logs can compensate for the absence of face-to-face class interaction and implement a student-centered approach, which, in turn, allows students to work at their own pace while maintaining interaction with their peers.

Considering the students' comments, what follows is a series of recommendations for practitioners on the use of learning logs in online contexts: First, in the future, high proficient students should be encouraged to complete their logs in English. This would assist them in the writing of academic English, a condition which they will inevitably have to follow in the final written exam. As for those with low English levels, students can be offered the option to write the logs using their mother tongue rather than losing critical reflection at the cost of language proficiency.

Second, to conduct the assessment in a formative way, a rubric to measure students' achievement in this task to avoid subjectivity in the assessment process deems necessary. This rubric would help students to be informed and familiarized with the assessment criteria, and the teacher to correct the activity following a criterion-based assessment rather than a norm-based one.

Furthermore, although students taking part in this study took advantage of the teacher's videos, learning logs, as some of the students suggest, could be publicly shared in the virtual class ensuring confidentiality so that all students can see their peers' work and learn from each other. Sharing students' work can contribute to higher quality work as they can check their assignments before they are published, see what other students do, find their flaws, critically evaluate other students, and finally, create an online learning community where participants integrate feedback effectively and improve future work.

Finally, research on the topic of digital learning resources (still scarce) should be conducted to analyze the impact on pre-service teachers' FL learning and reflection on content matter. After the implementation of the learning logs, the positive impact on the students' learning has exceeded all expectations, making researchers wonder about their implementation in face-to-face contexts to compare learning outcomes and results. In this respect, a larger sample would be needed to obtain a more accurate picture of the students' perceptions. We should, therefore, explore the possibilities offered by the digital learning logs, exploiting their potential for reflecting on the learning processes in subjects taught through an additional language.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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APPENDIX

LEARNING LOG QUESTIONNAIRE

Learning logs in Advanced Didactic of English as a Foreign Language.

The following questionnaire aims to gather information about the learning logs you have completed in your learning activity 1 (LA1). This information will help your teacher to improve the activity in the future. Responses are confidential and will be treated anonymously. Thank you very much for your collaboration!Dr. Ana Otto

*Compulsory

DEMOGRAPHICS

1. What is your gender? * ☐Female ☐Male ☐Prefer not to answer ☐Other:
2. What is your age? * ☐19-21 ☐22-24 ☐Over 25

THE LEARNING LOG

3. I wrote the learning log in *☐English☐Spanish
4. Why did you choose that language?*
5. On a scale from one to then, how satisfied are you after having completed the learning log? (1: wholly satisfied/10: highly satisfied) *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

PLEASE INDICATE TO WHAT EXTENT YOU AGREE WITH THE STATEMENTS BELOW

6 The learning log has helped me to learn autonomously *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7 The learning log has helped me to improve my English level *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8 The learning log has helped to find alternative ways to study *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9 The learning log has helped me to reflect about the topics and better understand the subject *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10 The videos in which the teacher answers the questions posed in the learning log have helped me to study and clarify doubts *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS BY JUSTIFYING YOUR ANSWER

11 Do you think you will use the learning log as a teaching/learning tool in your future teaching profession? Why (not)? *

12 Would you suggest anything to improve the learning log so that it promotes and enhances student autonomy? *

13 If you wish to comment on the learning log or the videos associated with this activity, please use the space below: *

Thank you for your collaboration.

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Pandemic Language Teaching: Insights from Brazilian and International Teachers on the Pivot to Emergency Remote Instruction

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This article reflects on the experiences of language teachers from Brazil, Spain, France, Cyprus, Costa Rica and Taiwan during the pivot to emergency remote/online instruction during the 2020 pandemic. The research question motivating the study was what language teachers' perceptions regarding online teaching during the pandemic were. Data were analyzed qualitatively, contrasting data from a questionnaire shared in an asynchronous online form with data from focus group interviews carried out via videoconferencing. The analysis of the questionnaire data showed that the vast majority of respondents used different digital technologies to teach online, both synchronously and asynchronously, but felt unprepared to work in this modality, mostly because of lack of institutional support and training. The analysis of the focus group interviews suggested that most teachers expressed concerns as to the limitations of online teaching for interaction and exams. In addition, some teachers displayed negative attitudes towards online teaching due to the lack of preparation and institutional support. This was aggravated by political implications of migrating to online education that could result in precariousness of the teacher profession. The positive aspects highlighted were the possibility of developing more self-directed and autonomous learning, as well as experimenting with different technologies and approaches. Overall, the analysis of the data suggests that, after the pandemic and with due preparation and support, some of the digital technologies and approaches experimented with will be incorporated into pedagogical practices in blended approaches, which represent a real trend and possibility for language teaching in the post-pandemic context.

***Keywords*:** Online Language Teaching and Learning, Covid-19, pandemic, teachers' perceptions

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic changed many of our social practices, imposing physical/ social distancing measures that impeded face-to-face interactions, thus forcing many activities to migrate to online environments (Henrique, 2020). This was done in order to enhance social connectedness so as to counter the feelings of loneliness, isolation, anxiety and even depression caused by the absence of social interactions during lockdown (Moore and March, 2020). Professional practices have also been affected by the pandemic and teachers were no exception: they were forced to migrate to online teaching, in some cases, overnight and without any specific training or preparation. The exceptional situation we have experienced since then has forced many language teachers to implement activities either in emergency remote/online teaching or in the distance learning format.

Emergency remote/online teaching is a temporary solution for the continuation of pedagogical activities (online) and it should not be confused with distance learning. The latter is an umbrella term (Moore and March, 2020; Keegan, 1996) used to refer to an educational modality with its own pedagogical design to cover contents, tasks and student evaluation with specific teacher training and support from tutors as well as specific technological resources. Initially, the term "distance learning" highlighted the constraints associated with "distance", such as time and place (Guilar and Loring, 2008; Newby et al., 2000). However, its meaning evolved to describe other forms of learning, such as online learning, e-Learning, technology-mediated learning, online collaborative learning, virtual learning, and web-based learning, among others (Conrad, 2006).

In a recent article, Castells (2020)[1] suggests that the current pandemic has highlighted what was already happening, that is, we were already living in the digital society in many ways. The social distancing measures imposed by the pandemic have made us become physically distant though virtually closer, showing that the Internet can serve to either connect or isolate/alienate individuals in this new reality or 'virtuality'.

Castells (2020) also warns us that there will be no setback in this new digital society, since the new normal will not be what we knew before, but a new reality that is also virtual. Based on data from 2019, this author reports that 91.4% of households in Spain have access to the Internet through a computer, and in the case of families with at least one young person, these figures increase to 93.3%. Regarding access to smartphones in the same report, 97% of people in Spain have cell phones, 87% of which are smartphones, meaning they have a computer with Internet access in their pocket or the palm of their hand.

In the case of Brazil, where most of the respondents from this study come from, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) reports that in 2019 the Internet was used in 82,7% of households, showing a 3.6 increase in relation to 2018. Yet, it is important to note that most of these households with Internet access are located in urban centers. Nevertheless, the most recent data available from IBGE[2] shows that the growth in Internet connection was more significant in rural areas, raising from 49.2% in 2018 to 55.6% in 2019. This increase corresponds to 6.4%, whereas in urban households it rose from 83.8% in 2018 to 86.7% in 2019.

More recently, in a survey carried out during the pandemic at the Federal University of Espítrito Santo in Brazil, it was found that only about three quarters of the students had adequate conditions to participate in remote/online classes. In this sense, and even though Castells (2020) refers mainly to the Spanish context in his article, making some references to Latin America, it is important to bear in mind the social inequalities that increase the digital divide, thus affecting online teaching/learning. In Brazil, the social / digital divide became more evident during the pandemic, when people from lower socio-economic classes struggled to cash in government financial support to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, since those funds could only be requested through the national bank app via smartphones.

Still, according to data from 2019 reported by Castells (2020), people spend an average of 5.5 hours per day online. In other words, online communication/interaction was part of our lives before the pandemic, making the transition to online activities during lockdown less dramatic. However, this does not mean that the transition to online activities is less complex or challenging, especially if we consider the different contexts where this transition to remote/online teaching and learning took place.

Regarding teacher preparation to deal with the mediation of technology in this new reality, several studies have already shown (see, for example, Mendes & Finardi, 2018; Fadini, 2016; and Macedo, 2017 for Brazil; and Kessler & Hubbard, 2017 and Masterson, 2020 in general) the lack of specific teacher training for the integration of digital technologies into pedagogical practices. The social distancing measures imposed by the pandemic have challenged and decentralized the teaching/learning processes, breaking the walls, curricula, and routines of educational institutions and parties involved.

The "global" pandemic is also very "local" in the sense that, depending on the context in which each person experiences it, its impact may be perceived in a completely different way (see, for example, Moorhouse, 2020 in Hong Kong, Assunção Flores & Gago, 2020 for Portugal, and Hoenig & Wenz, 2020 for Germany). French philosopher Morin (2000) reminds us of the importance of connecting parts to the whole and vice-versa in education. His reflection, coupled with our interest in delving into how language teachers dealt with local and global challenges to overcome the effects of the disruption of classes caused by the pandemic using technologies in remote/online approaches to build / develop a (new) teaching-learning mode, is what motivates this study.

Having outlined this panorama, the present study aims to contribute to this reflection by offering a glimpse of how language teachers in different contexts around the world are facing the challenges imposed by the

[1] Castells, M. (2020). O digital é o novo normal [Digital is the new normal]. https://www.fronteiras.com/artigos/o-digital-e-o-novo-normal?fbclid=IwAR1iTxx5DuuO-wpo4CFM3a6IeCsfgk5GLOZ6CpGxbL6gjZSaicpLLvI0Hng

[2] Pesquisa mostra que 82,7% dos domicílios brasileiros têm acesso à internet [Research shows that 82.7% Brazilian homes have internet access].https://www.gov.br/mcom/pt-br/noticias/2021/abril/pesquisa-mostra-que-82-7-dos-domicilios-brasileiros-tem-acesso-a-internet#:~:text=Em%202019%2C%20entre%20as%20183,estudantes%20(75%2C8%25)

pandemic, thus helping us to prepare for a new reality. With that aim, the methodology used for analyzing the perceptions of language teachers in Brazil, Spain, France, Cyprus, Costa Rica and Taiwan is described, as well as the corresponding findings.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 76 (N=76) participants took part in the study. Out of those, the 64 (n=64) participants from the Brazilian group were language teachers in Brazil. Meanwhile, the 12 (n=12) participants from the international group were language teachers in Spain, France, Cyprus, Costa Rica and Taiwan. All of them were aged between 30 and 55 and had various levels of teaching experience.

8 participants (N=8) out of the 76 questionnaire respondents were subsequently randomly selected and invited to take part in the focus groups discussions. Out of those, 4 were Brazilian and 4 were from the following countries: France, Cyprus and Spain. In the Brazilian focus group, participant A is an English teacher who runs her own business; participant B is an English teacher with an open language learning course focusing on Business English and English for Specific Purposes; and participants C and D are both private English teachers. In the international group, participants A and C are English for Specific Purposes lecturers in public higher education institutions in France and Cyprus respectively; participant B is an English language lecturer in a public higher education institution in Spain and participant D is a teacher-training lecturer in a public higher institution in Spain who has experience as a teacher of Spanish as a Foreign Language.

Research Design

The research question motivating the study is: what are language teachers' perceptions regarding remote/ online teaching during the pandemic? The approach employed to analyze the data was qualitative, contrasting data from the questionnaire shared in an asynchronous online form with data from the focus group interviews, which were carried out synchronously. The context of the study is foreign language teaching (mostly English except for one Spanish participant who was a teacher-training lecturer with experience in teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language) in Brazil, Spain, France, Cyprus, Costa Rica and Taiwan.

Procedure

In the first phase, the online questionnaire (APPENDIX A) with 12 questions was shared on social networks and via email with the purpose of analyzing the use of digital technologies for teaching during the pandemic. It was answered between September and October 2020 by 64 Brazilian language teachers (APPENDIX B), and by 12 language teachers in Spain, France, Cyprus, Costa Rica and Taiwan. The responses to the questionnaire were discussed in Portuguese with a group of four Brazilian teachers who also participated in a focus group interview, as well as with 4 teachers in Spain, France and Cyprus in another focus group interview carried out in English. The focus group interviews were carried out online in Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate in November 2020. Once the analysis of the questionnaire responses was completed, the next phase took place: 8 of the questionnaire respondents were randomly selected and invited to participate in semi-structured interviews in the form of focus group discussions via Zoom in Portuguese (in the case of the Brazilian participants) and Blackboard Collaborate in English (in the case of the participants from Spain, France and Cyprus) so as to allow for more in-depth discussions of the issues raised in the questionnaire.

Analysis

The results of the questionnaires and focus groups conducted with the Brazilian and international participants were contrasted and analyzed qualitatively by the two researchers, discussing similarities, differences and also trends in the data. In the initial stages of the data analysis process, inter-rater reliability was achieved by means of a discussion of the analysis framework and the subsequent coding of 25% of the data. This was followed by a cycle of comparing results and ensuring there were not any inconsistencies. Furthermore, Cohen's kappa coefficient (κ) was used to measure inter-rater reliability (as well as intra-rater reliability) regarding the

analysis of the data from both the Brazilian and the international groups. Given that there was very strong agreement between the two raters, $\kappa = 1.000$, $p < .0005$, the categories were agreed upon and one of the researchers coded both data sets.

Results

Brazilian Teachers

Regarding the geographical distribution of the 64 Brazilian respondents, they came from nine Brazilian states. Most of them (65.6%) were from Espírito Santo (ES). In addition, 17.2% were from Rio de Janeiro (RJ), 1.6% from São Paulo (SP), 6.3% from Bahia (BA), 1.6% from Alagoas (AL), 1.6% from Amazonas (AM), 3.1% from Goiás (GO), 1.6% from Rio Grande do Sul (RS) and 1.6% from the Federal District (DF). Furthermore, almost half of them worked in open language learning courses (39.1%), 32.8% of which were private and 29.7% of which were public. It is important to highlight that the states of ES, RJ, SP are located in the Southeast region of Brazil, which is the most populated, urban and rich region in the country.

More than half of the Brazilian respondents (53.1%) had worked in their current educational institution for over 5 years, 18.8% had worked there between 5 and 10 years, 14.1% between 11 and 15 years, 4.7% between 16 and 20 years, and 9.4% had worked there for over 20 years. Therefore, we can say most of the Brazilian teachers had some sort of institutional stability or job seniority before the pandemic disrupted their teaching.

In regard to their experience with remote/online teaching, almost half of the Brazilian respondents (43.8%) were teaching only online, while 34.4% were teaching partially online and 21.8% were not teaching online at all.

Regarding their experience with online teaching, a considerable number of Brazilian respondents (23.4%) said they had taught online or had been implementing online activities even before the pandemic. Almost half of them (43.8%) claimed to have been teaching online or implementing online activities for over a month, while 25% stated they had been teaching online for less than a month at the time of data collection.

More than half of the Brazilian respondents (56.3%) had never taught online before the disruption caused by the pandemic, while 29.7% had taught online before. Meanwhile, 12.5% had used blended/hybrid approaches, doing most of the teaching in a face-to-face/in-person format, combined with some online activities.

In terms of their feeling of preparation to teach online, 37.5% of the Brazilian respondents said they did not really feel prepared for the experience of remote/online education, while 29.7% felt prepared and 20.3% felt unprepared to teach in this modality. The rest of Brazilian respondents declared being in the adaptation phase, receiving guidance, investing in equipment and / or training, or learning from their own practice. Furthermore, 34.4% were teaching online asynchronously, 25% were teaching synchronously and 32.8% were doing both.

Most respondents (76.6%) considered that their workload had increased, as they needed to prepare online contents, though 21.9% thought it was possible to organize the materials better since, according to 31.3% of the respondents, it had become necessary to provide an introduction for each unit, as well as explain in more detail how to use online materials and resources. In addition, 53.1% mentioned the need to provide even more specific instructions during online teaching, and 34.4% highlighted the need to provide students with an activity template. Finally, less than 2% of the respondents were working online with the same textbook they had been using in their face-to-face/in-person classes.

The most widely used platform was Zoom (54.7%), followed by Google Classroom (37.5%), Google Meet (23.4 %) and Moodle (15.6%), though other applications or social networks, such as Skype, YouTube, WhatsApp, institutional e-mail or even a website created by the educational institution were mentioned, but to a much lesser extent. Almost half of the respondents (48.4%) used pre-recorded videos for the first time (asynchronous), followed by video conferencing (synchronous), which was also used for the first time by 37.5% of respondents. 17.2% said they used digital audio recordings for the first time, 21.9% mentioned using chats, 15.6% used forums, 29.7% used screen recordings and 26.6% said they had already worked with all these tools before the

pandemic. Other options, such as WhatsApp, Moodle, social media posts, live Instagram videos, Google Slides, ActivInspire (digital whiteboard), were selected by only one Brazilian respondent in each case.

The analysis of the answers to the question: 'how did you adapt to these changes?' showed that out of the 64 responses, only 10 respondents expressed a positive view of the process of adapting to online teaching. Meanwhile, 15 respondents expressed a negative view of this adaptation process, motivated by the lack of training and institutional support for it. Most of the respondents who expressed negative views about online teaching had never taught in this format before (56.3%), and 37.5% claimed to lack preparation for this adaptation.

Of the 64 Brazilian respondents, 19 mentioned the need for more qualification, training and support. However, only three of them specified that in their opinion this should be provided by the institution, perhaps indicating that they resented the fact that they had to look for training and solutions for online teaching on their own by means of tutorials, online courses and publications.

The analysis of the answers to the question: 'what is the genre (chat, forum, video conferences, audio conferences, webinars, etc.) that you have used the most to teach online and why?' showed that of the 64 Brazilian respondents, 33 used videoconferences. 11 of them chose this resource due to its advantages (interaction, dynamism, variety of functionalities), and five used video conferences because of the institutional policy. Furthermore, 10 respondents said they used online chat to answer students' questions, or because it is the easiest and simplest way to communicate with students, due to the fact that many students do not have access to a data package that allows them to use video conferences, for example. Four respondents stated they used online forums, combined with other tools, 10 respondents said they used different tools (whether synchronous or asynchronous) to teach online, and nine respondents stated that they used recorded videos because they provide students with greater flexibility in terms of schedules and activities.

The analysis of the answers to the question 'how do you intend to use some of these activities or genres in the future after social isolation is lifted?' showed that 38 respondents intended to continue using online tools to supplement their face-to-face/in-person classes, namely Google-based tools. Seven of these said they expected to continue using "Google Classroom" and "Google Forms" in blended/hybrid approaches after the pandemic. Perceptions about blended/hybrid teaching were mixed: 6 respondents showed some resistance towards it, arguing that they did not intend to use online tools again after the lockdown ended because of a perceived lack of support and preparation on the part of the institutions in which they worked. Meanwhile, 6 other teachers expressed their eagerness to blend their classes after the pandemic.

International Teachers

The participants from the international group were 12 teachers of Spanish, French, Cypriot, Costa Rican and Taiwanese nationality. This means that 3 continents were represented in the sample: Asia, America, and Europe. All participants in this group were working in higher education institutions, 70% of which were public while the remaining 30% were private.

Most participants in this group (seven out of 12) had been working in their institution for less than 5 years, one participant had between 5 and 10 years of experience in that institution, 2 participants had worked there for between 11 and 15 years and the 2 remaining participants had worked in their current institution for over 16 years.

In addition, four participants were currently teaching fully online, six participants were partially teaching in an online modality and two participants were not teaching online at all. Regarding their experience with online teaching, five participants had over one year of experience teaching online, whereas the remaining seven international teachers had only months or even weeks of experience with online teaching. Furthermore, 10 participants had had previous experiences teaching online, whereas for two of them this was their first online teaching experience. Among them, eight teachers felt 'well prepared' and four teachers felt 'somewhat prepared'. None of them felt 'unprepared'. Most of the participants (80%) were teaching in a blended mode, using a combination of synchronous and asynchronous activities. When asked about how online/blended teaching had affected their methodology, 80% of respondents said they provide specific instructions for each online/blended

activity, eight of them said that they could now better organize their materials even though their workload had increased. Meanwhile, five responded that gave an introduction to each unit and three provided a template for each activity.

When asked about how they had adapted to those changes, only one international teacher showed a negative reaction to online teaching, which had caused this participant to abandon this teaching modality. The rest of the participants displayed a more positive attitude towards online teaching and said they had attended training sessions and specific courses on online/blended teaching. In addition, they had explored new apps that had helped them enrich their teaching.

As for the most frequently used apps and tools for online/blended teaching among the international teachers who participated in the study, 70% used Moodle, 70% used Microsoft Teams, 20% used Blackboard Collaborate and Google Classroom, 40% used Google Meet and Zoom, and 1% used Adobe Connect. Additional tools mentioned by participants included Kahoot, Mentimeter, Jamboard, and Mural.co, which were said to be used to make their lessons more engaging and dynamic.

Brazilian Teachers Focus Group Interview

The aim of the focus group interview was to expand the responses to the questionnaire. Most Brazilian teachers expressed a concern for interaction in the online mode, highlighting the fact that not all students had their cameras and microphones on during the lessons, thus making interaction (and evaluation) challenging for teachers. Brazilian teachers working in private language schools and other educational contexts reported feeling pressured to migrate to the online teaching mode without due preparation or institutional support for that transition. Also, teachers working in public institutions feared the reduction of government financial support to public education resulting from the transition to the online mode.

International Teachers Focus Group Interview: Spain, France, and Cyprus

The participants from the international group who took part in the focus group interview reported having had some negative experiences connected to either some of the students' inability to use their computers' cameras and/or microphones during the online lessons or their unwillingness to switch on those devices. In those cases, the classes were said to feel like a monologue rather than the interactive, participatory, dynamic classes they are/were used to when their classes are/were taught in face-to-face/in-person formats. An additional challenge reported by one of the interviewees had to do with the fact that when his lessons were streamed live in a dual mode[3], the students following the class from home would only have access to the audio without the teacher's image or body language, which caused some comprehension difficulties and challenged interaction.

Changes in teaching methodologies were also discussed during the focus group interview. Participants reported having had to adjust their teaching to the new teaching modalities (online, blended or dual) and one of them highlighted the fact that his classes had to be more structured now so that students would not feel lost, which was positive in a way but also reduced the room for spontaneity and creativity. The respondent from Cyprus claimed that methodologies had not changed (they were still task-based, project-based, and student-centered), it was only the medium (online) that had changed, though that medium imposed new challenges, especially in terms of how to enable interaction (limited to break-out rooms in Zoom, mostly) and carry out exams.

As for the workload, all but one focus group participant felt that their workload had increased due to the hybrid/dual/online teaching modalities brought about by the pandemic. The reason why one participant felt that her workload had actually decreased was that students worked autonomously and did not ask for help when they encountered any problems, preferring to try and solve them by themselves instead. One of the participants reported feelings of excitement about the opportunity to put into practice during this pandemic the online teaching training she had received, in spite of the difficulties caused by the lack of technical support provided by her institution.

[3] The dual mode, used by some institutions to reduce the number of in-person students,was used by some teachers whereby they would be in class teaching some students face-to-face while other students would be online following the streaming in such a way that half of the students would be online while the other half would face-to-face, in a rotating system.

As far as the tools are concerned, the interviewees reported having experimented with and used some new tools during the pandemic, many of which they plan to continue using after the pandemic. These tools, most of which were videoconferencing tools, included Moodle and its adaptations to different institutions, Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate, as well as other tools like Kahoot, Mentimeter, Jamboard and Mural.co.

Though most of the international respondents in the second focus group interview showed overall positive attitudes towards online teaching and the changes brought about by the pandemic, as well as to the pivot to remote/online teaching modalities, fears were expressed with regard to the impact of the pandemic on teacher education and the profession, as well as on the value given to languages in general and foreign language teaching in particular. In other words, teachers were concerned about the fact that politicians might take advantage of the changes brought about by the pandemic and use the switch to remote/online learning modalities as an excuse to cut down the amount of teaching jobs while worsening the conditions of teachers, who could even be replaced by teaching assistants in charge of moderating online discussions. An additional point raised by the teachers, maybe to counterbalance the aforementioned argument, was that it would be extremely difficult to replace the teachers in the classroom, as the quality of the teacher-teacher and teacher-students interactions is considered to be higher in face-to-face/in-person contexts than in remote/online learning contexts. Furthermore, international teachers reported that, in general, students found it easier to stay focused and to follow the lessons when they were face-to-face, in addition to the experience being more enjoyable. This was considered to be so because when students follow the lessons online they have many distractions, they might experience technical difficulties and they miss the direct contact with and closeness to their classmates and their teacher.

Discussion

The results in the Brazilian case showed that most respondents had a negative attitude towards the move to emergency remote/online education, since they had no choice and had to adapt to it too quickly, revealing lack of preparation by teachers and students besides the lack of support and investment in training from educational institutions. The greater speed with which private schools switched to remote/online teaching when compared to public institutions in Brazil is evidence of the market forces behind this movement. This was expressed in our data in what concerns the fear expressed by some teachers regarding cuts in investments in public education and the migration of investments from teaching jobs to technologies. Meanwhile, the international teachers seemed to have more positive attitudes towards remote/online teaching, even though they also pointed out some negative aspects, connected to the lack of institutional support and the concern politicians might make this emergency teaching the norm rather than the exception to reduce the amount of teaching jobs offered while worsening the teaching conditions.

On the other hand, an enormous effort on the part of the teachers was perceived to adapt to the new modality / reality / "virtuality". In this sense, and according to Castells' (2020) suggestion that the pandemic came to consolidate what had already started in our daily practices with online tools, studies on hybrid/blended language teaching in Brazil as well as teacher training for the integration of ICT into language education suggest that blended approaches in Brazil and beyond are here to stay. Nevertheless, more teacher education and institutional support are required to prepare teachers for this new reality while counteracting the negative experiences of teachers when teaching online during the pandemic.

Regarding how the data in this study may relate to the global context, the UNESCO/IAU Global Survey Report published by Marinoni et al. (2020) is worth mentioning. In this report, 424 replies to a survey that included 109 countries were analyzed. In the survey, Africa and Europe were overrepresented while the Americas and Asia were underrepresented. The analysis shows that most institutions were affected by the pandemic, though Africa was affected to a greater extent, with 77% of institutions closed across the continent, as opposed to nearly 20% in other regions. In the case of the current study, all the Brazilian public institutions closed, at least for a few months, until they were able to switch to remote/online teaching. Meanwhile, most of the other institutions where the international teachers in this study worked did not close, placing Brazil somewhat in the middle between Europe and Africa in terms of the effects of the pandemic on closing institutions.

Another finding of the aforementioned report that may be seen in relation to data in our study is the fact that almost half of the survey respondents reported having government support to mitigate the disruption caused by the pandemic. Meanwhile, this scenario was somewhat different in the case of the Brazilian respondents, who feared that the government would take advantage of the need to go online to reduce salaries and investment in public education.

In terms of the effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning processes, the report shows that two thirds of the institutions replaced face-to-face/in-person classes with online/distance learning. The main challenge found in this transition had to do with infrastructure and pedagogies for this mode of teaching/learning. In this sense, the data from the aforementioned report mirror the one analyzed in the present study.

Though this study did not follow a mixed-methods design, unlike Maican and Cocorada's (2021), nor did it follow the same validation testing procedure found in Crisol et al.'s (2020), these studies have a common view. This shared perspective is connected to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Program for 2030, which establishes principles for sustainable action that take up the form of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Regarding the fourth of those goals, "Quality and inclusive education", the pandemic has affected the delivery of education worldwide to a point that education (in the case of the present study, foreign language education), may become only available to a privileged few. Moreover, as put forward by Maican and Cocorada (2021), online foreign language learning during the pandemic represents a way to adapt to the restrictions imposed worldwide. Despite Castell's (2020) analysis of the "new normal", comparing Spain to Latin America, results of the present study, whose largest populations came from Brazil and Spain, respectively, suggest that Spanish (and international) teachers felt more prepared than Brazilians for the pivot to emergency remote/online teaching.

Conclusion

The emergency nature of the actions taken by educational institutions should be highlighted. Given the almost immediate presentation of "contingency/emergency plans" for the pandemic, the lack of time to adjust to those drastic changes may have provoked an adverse reaction in Brazilian teachers and students.

Overall, the analysis of the questionnaire data showed that the vast majority of teachers used different digital technologies to teach online, both synchronously and asynchronously, but felt unprepared (mostly the Brazilians) to work in this modality because of the lack of institutional support and training for this modality. The analysis of the focus group interviews suggests that most Brazilian and some international teachers displayed negative attitudes towards emergency remote/online teaching due to the lack of preparation and institutional support for this modality and also because of concerns for the political implications of online education in the case of Brazil and some other countries, which could result in the precariousness of the teacher profession.

Overall, the analysis of the data suggests that after the pandemic and with due preparation and support, some of the digital technologies and approaches experimented with during emergency remote/online teaching will be incorporated into pedagogical practices in blended/hybrid approaches, which represent a real trend and possibility for language teaching in the post-pandemic context.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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APPENDIX A

DISTANCE TEACHING QUESTIONNAIRE

Distance/Remote Language Teaching Questionnaire
Distance/Remote Language Teaching
Questionnaire
Dear teacher,
The exceptional situation we are experiencing today has prompted many educators and institutions to implement online/remote/blended learning activities. We would like to know your experience lived in this unusual situation, as well as investigate the development of new teaching practices and so we kindly ask that you answer the questions below, which should take less than 10 minutes. We greatly appreciate your participation.
* *Required*
Before you answer the questions...
Before you answer the questions, please check/tick the "informed consent" box below.

1. *INFORMED CONSENT* * (Check all that apply.)
   INFORMED CONSENT: In answering this questionnaire, I authorize its authors to use my personal information for research purposes, in a confidential manner, for the protection of personal data and the guarantee of digital rights.

2. *Level you teach (check option)* * (Mark only one oval.)
   - ☐ Public primary education
   - ☐ Private primary education
   - ☐ Public secondary education
   - ☐ Private secondary education
   - ☐ Public higher education
   - ☐ Private higher education
   - ☐ Free courses
   - ☐ Other:_____
3. *Region/City or town where you work:* *
   _____
4. *Number of years you have worked at this educational institution* * (Mark only one oval.)
   - ☐ Less than 5
   - ☐ 5-10
   - ☐ 11-15
   - ☐ 16-20
   - ☐ More than 20
   - ☐ Other:
5. *Are you involved in online/remote/blended teaching at the moment?* * (Mark only one oval.)
   - ☐ Yes, totally.
   - ☐ Yes, partially.
   - ☐ No.
   - ☐ Other:
6. *How long have you been teaching or implementing activities in the online/remote/blended format?*
   _____
7. *Had you taught in the online/remote/blended format before?* * (Mark only one oval.)
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
8. *How do you feel about this experience?* * (Mark only one oval.)
   - ☐ Well prepared
   - ☐ Somehow Prepared
   - ☐ Unprepared

9. Are you teaching synchronously (e.g. video conference: students attend virtual classes at the same time you teach) or asynchronously (recorded videos and online materials that students can access at any time)? Select the option (s). * (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ Synchronously
- ☐ Asynchronously
- ☐ Both
- ☐ Other:_____

10. How has your teaching methodology changed? Select the option (s). * (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ Now I can better organize the materials
- ☐ I provide an introduction for each unit or class explaining how to use the materials
- ☐ I provide specific instructions for each activity
- ☐ I provide a template for all activities
- ☐ My workload has increased because of having to prepare online content
- ☐ Other:_____

11. How have you adapted to these changes? *

_____

12. What platform or application have you used to teach online? Select the option(s). * (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ Moodle
- ☐ WebEX
- ☐ Blackboard Collaborate
- ☐ Google Classroom
- ☐ Google Meet
- ☐ Zoom
- ☐ Microsoft Teams
- ☐ Other:_____

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCRIPT

1. Request authorization from participants to record the session;
2. Explain to the participants that our intention is to elaborate a little more on their answers from the questionnaire used in the quantitative data analysis so as gain qualitative insight into the data;
3. Present the quantitative data to the participants and ask them to answer/discuss the following questions:

Question 1: How do you feel about this experience (teaching online)?
Question 2: How has your teaching methodology changed?
Question 3: How did you adapt to these changes?
Question 4: How do you intend to use the activities and tools you used during the pandemic in the future after social isolation is lifted?

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Assessment under Covid-19: Exploring Undergraduate Students' Attitudes towards Their Online Thesis Proposal Presentations vs. Face-to-face

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This study conducted in an EFL setting investigates students' perception of the thesis proposal presentation in an online format due to safety concerns during the Covid-19 pandemic. Fifty-five students aged 20-22 years old, level B2-C1 in English, in their fourth year of a Business Informatics Bachelor's programme at HSE University, Moscow, were surveyed regarding their end-of-course assessment experience, which involved a Skype online presentation, rather than the usual face-to-face presentation. Data were collected using a researcher-made questionnaire consisted of 3 sections and 12 items. A mixed-method approach using quantitative and qualitative data was employed. The findings indicate that emergency transition to the new format did not affect students' satisfaction or results of the presentation. Overall, students were more than satisfied with the online format, and the results were similar, if not better, than in previous years. To minimise the disadvantages of this format, recommendations for teachers and students were offered. This study might offer new insight on the most appropriate and beneficial oral testing system for students and staff.

Keywords: Covid-19, higher education, online education, thesis proposal, online oral assessment

Introduction

At the end of their final year at the university, undergraduate students of the Business and Management Department at HSE University, Moscow, Russia, submit their Bachelor's thesis proposal, which should be written in English, according to the HSE internal educational regulations. English is an important component of any HSE University educational program as undergraduate students are expected to complete at least one professional course in English per year as part of their individual curriculum for the third and fourth years of study. The ability to read professional literature, communicate with foreign professors, write and study in English is one of the key requirements for HSE University students. Additionally, presenting a thesis proposal in English allows assessment of both subject knowledge and linguistic ability, in line with Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology where content and language are taught and tested together.

Through the written paper and oral presentation of the thesis proposals, the undergraduates are assessed on their ability to use English in an academic and professional environment, namely, to plan, report, and present research in public.

The written part of the thesis proposal and its oral presentation are two interconnected, but separate aspects of the academic activity, which demonstrate different academic skills and are graded separately for "talking and writing are two very different modes of communication that mediate the world differently" (Schoultz, Säljö & Wyndhamn, 2001, p. 213). If a well-written paper is poorly presented, the cumulative grade goes down. Therefore, in order to get high grades, the presentation, which introduces the transition from writing to talking about the research, should be well structured, properly rehearsed, and delivered with confidence.

By the end of the first semester of 2019-2020 academic year, the written part of thesis proposals had been graded, and the students were preparing for their oral presentation accompanied by PowerPoint slides, which is

a 20-minute presentation on campus with two examiners – a teacher from their academic English course and a teacher from the Business and Management Department.

However, the second semester of 2019-20 has been defined by Mohmmed et al. (2020) as 'emergency remote teaching' as it was prepared at very short notice. In March 2020, the HSE University, like many other universities in Russia and worldwide, had to move its courses online in order to promote social distancing during the Covid 19 pandemic. That meant the assessments had to be moved online as well. Along with all the other exams, the delivery mode of the thesis proposal presentation shifted online. In spring and summer 2020, many universities offered students in their final year the opportunity to undertake an online assessment on a 'help not hinder' basis to ensure they can graduate on time with quality assured degree (UNESCO, 2020)[1]. A well-known telecommunication application, Skype (www.skype.com), that provides video and voice calls between computers, tablets, and mobile devices, was used to administer the video-conferencing version of the presentation because it is freely accessible and it meets the basic requirements for holding and assessing the oral presentations.

Thus, almost overnight, virtual instruction became not just a possible option but also a vital necessity that posed many challenges for both the faculty and students. Teachers had to redesign their courses and assessment to suit the new format of teaching, and the students had to get accustomed to a different mode of learning, which initially could have caused some difficulties.

The aim of this research is to explore undergraduate student attitudes towards their thesis proposal presentation transitioned from face-to-face into online format due to safety concerns. The researchers also hope to highlight some aspects of the online format of presentations that could be improved in the future for use in the university setting.

More specifically, the current study explores the following research questions.

1. What are the students' attitudes towards the online presentation?
2. To what extent are students satisfied with their presentation considering the transition into the new format?
3. Is there any significant correlation between students' attitudes towards the online presentation, their overall satisfaction with their presentation and exam results?
4. What are the positive and negative sides of the online thesis proposal presentation from the students' perspective? How can it be improved in the future?

Literature Review

Oral Assessment in Higher Education

Assessment in higher education permits instructors to make decisions about individuals' progress or the efficiency of programs regarding student learning, the curriculum, and instruction (Nitko, 2004; Reynolds, Livingston, & Wilson, 2006) and finds ways to assure and enhance the quality of the educational provision.

'Oral assessment' is defined as any assessment of student learning that is conducted by word of mouth (Joughin, 2010)[2]. It can be exclusively oral, or it can be combined with other modes of communication, depending on the nature of the assessment task. Oral assessment may involve not only a student who speaks but also assessors posing questions orally, with varying degrees of spoken interaction as the assessment proceeds.

Oral assessment is applicable to almost any kind of learning outcome. It is particularly useful in relation to students' problem-solving abilities, where they need to apply their knowledge in new situations (Van de Watering et al., 2008). Singh (2011, p.256) argues that oral assessment "enables the learner to identify with,

[1] UNESCO. (2020). *Exams and assessments in Covid-19 crisis: Fairness at the centre.* https://en.unesco.org/news/exams-and-assessments-covid-19-crisis-fairness-centre

[2] Joughin, G. (2010). A short guide to oral assessment. Leeds Met Press in association with University of Wollongong

interact with and therefore understand the material better because of the continual interaction and discussion with their peers and the assessors."

Kehm (2001, p.27) describes one of the strengths of oral assessment as its ability "to distinguish superficial from real knowledge through in-depth questioning." Unlike a written exam, assessors can ask the student to elaborate on an answer with carefully graded questions until they have reached the limit of what the student knows as according to Joughin and Collom (2003, p.2), "the opportunity in oral assessment to probe understanding through follow-up questions can encourage deep approaches to learning."

When students are subjected to questions and probing of their understanding, they must rely on their own work, thereby reducing the possibility of plagiarism. As Tinkler and Jackson (2004, p.104)[3] points out, "although the presentation serves different purposes [...] it should serve to examine that the candidate has actually undertaken the work presented in the thesis: that is, it should authenticate the thesis."

Shifting Towards an Online Mode of Assessment

Video-conferencing applications are now commonly used for teaching purposes. However, there is little research into the effect of the video-conferencing mode on oral assessment with the exceptions of Kim and Craig (2012), Okada et al. (2015), Nakatsuhara et al. (2017), Akimov and Malin (2020).

Kim and Craig (2012) studied two modes of oral interviews, including face-to-face and video conference. Their findings indicated no significant difference either in performance between test modes or in terms of comfort, computer familiarity, environment, non-verbal linguistic cues, and speaking opportunity, which evidenced the comparability of the video conference and face-to-face interviews.

The findings of Nakatsuharaet et al. (2017) were consistent with the previous research, though some minor differences were observed in test-takers' functional output and the behavior of examiners who served as both raters and interlocutors.

The key benefits of the video-conferencing mode identified from the perspective of assessors and students, according to Okada et al. (2015), were a reliable examination, credible technology, authentic assessment, interactive e-viva, low cost, a scalable process, and practical testing in terms of time, effort and money. Thereby, based on the findings received from the previous research, the video-conferencing version of oral assessment could be used as a relevant substitution to the face-to-face mode of assessment.

Akimov and Malin (2020) described a case study of an online oral examination of postgraduate finance students. According to their research, online oral assessment tests more in-depth knowledge, develops communication skills and the ability to think rapidly, eliminates cheating in assessment, which is a serious concern for courses delivered online.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of video-conferencing and other online teaching tools was an option, which added value to the teaching-learning process. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the significance of technology for university education increased dramatically. Since 2020, it has become a primary means of remote delivering classes to students. Numerous recent studies have attempted to evaluate the impact of emergency transition into the online mode of teaching on pedagogical approaches and the learners' perceptions(Ajmal et al., 2020; Alfiras, Bojiah, & Yassin, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; Karim & Hasan, 2020).

Crawford et al. (2020), in their research, found that many universities around the world have responded to the current crisis through rapid redesign of their curriculum to satisfy the remote teaching needs. They also pointed out that there "might be some issues in implementing online learning relating to the availability of the right hardware and software, networks, and storage capacity" (Crawford et al., 2020, p.11).

[3] Tinkler, P., & Jackson, C. (2004). *The doctoral examination process: A handbook for students, examiners and supervisors: A Handbook for Students, Examiners and Supervisors.* McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Teachers are expected to implement new practical strategies to conduct engaging and effective online classes, which is difficult to achieve without students' interaction. The more students interact with each other in the online classroom, the more motivated for learning they are because they learn not only from their teachers but also from their peers (Ajmal et al., 2020).

The findings of the research conducted in Saudi Arabia in a period of an unplanned shift from traditional learning to emergency e-learning (Karim & Hasan, 2020) are comparable to previous findings of Kim and Craig (2012), Okada et al. (2015), and Nakatsuhara et al. (2017). Exploring undergraduate medical students' preferences regarding the effectiveness of emergency online learning, Karim and Hasan (2020) indicated that the majority of students were satisfied with virtual classes and found them more convenient compared to face-to-face classes; the students felt more confident and believed that remote learning could replace face-to-face mode of learning. That means the curriculum designers should consider the pedagogical practices and student preferences while designing the courses.

However, other authors (Alfiras, Bojiah, & Yassin, 2020) question the usefulness of such an approach. They found that remote classes were more effective when teaching theoretical courses and less effective when teaching practice-oriented courses aimed at training social skills, for example, on a Human Resources Management programme. They believe that a distant mode of teaching and learning might be warranted for a pandemic period only, and faculty, staff, and students should return back to campus and resume face-to-face classes as soon as the university receives approval from state and local government public health authorities.

Overall, these studies highlight the need for further observation and analysis of the current situation in higher education. However, much of the research up to now has been focused on the new pedagogical concepts and modes of delivery of educational content as well as students' and teachers' perceptions in response to Covid-19 lockdown rather than remote assessment practices and especially remote oral assessment in an EFL setting.

The Use of Skype in the EFL Classroom

Skype is a well-known communication platform recognized by many EFL practitioners for remote teaching of foreign languages (Develotte, Guichon, & Vincent, 2010; Eaton, 2010; O'Dowd, 2011; Taillefer& Munoz-Luna, 2014; Kotula, 2016; Yen, Hou, & Chang, 2017; Fedorova, Rasskazova, &Muzafarova, 2018; Dabic, Grkavac, Stojanov, &Suzić, 2019). In this section of the literature review, Skype is considered as a triple-action tool, which is used to promote intercultural experiences for EFL learners, to reinforce the technology skills of language instructors, and to create an interactive environment for online teaching and learning.

The studies by O'Dowd (2011), Taillefer& Munoz-Luna (2014), Fedorova et al. (2018) and Dabic et al. (2019) consider Skype to be a good tool for promoting intercultural experiences for EFL learners as it provides barrier-free communication with people all over the world. "By connecting classrooms and students from all the continents, at the same time, Skype in the Classroom connects different races, religions, socioeconomic classes and cultures as well" (Dabic et al., 2019). As geographical boundaries disappear in the virtual world, there is an opportunity to choose a teacher/learner from anywhere in the world (Fedorova et al., 2018) or to develop speaking skills with peers from other countries by participating in the Skype-mate Language Project (Taillefer& Munoz-Luna, 2014).

Eaton (2010) and Develotte et al. (2010) believe that due to its simplicity, Skype is an excellent tool to help EFL teachers build their technology skills. "Skype is an effective way to experiment while minimizing the risk of things going wrong. […] For teachers who are reluctant to use technology due to lack of skills or confidence or high levels of anxiety, getting started with simpler tools may be an effective way for them to explore and incorporate new technologies" (Eaton, 2010 p.1). Develotte at al. (2010) posits that EFL teachers should have some skills of using video-conferencing platforms as a part of their professional repertoire, as "they will increasingly be required to exploit the multimodal potentialities of online communication in their teaching" (p. 293).

Skype is also an effective tool to teach languages, as it incorporates a high level of verbal interaction between users (Yen et al., 2017). The research conducted by Dabic et al. (2019) has proven many benefits of using Skype in the classroom. Students improved their speaking and listening skills, built up their vocabulary, their level of

anxiety reduced, and they practised better pronunciation patterns. Collaboration through Skype motivated them to learn more as they practised English in real communication. Due to its multimodal nature (video, audio, text, webcam image, still image), teaching with Skype can achieve interactivity, which qualitatively contributes to comprehension through visual and verbal representations (Develotte et al., 2010).

The use of Skype in educational contexts has been expanding as numerous lessons, and online conferences took place via this application during the coronavirus pandemic. The number of daily active users of Skype has increased to 40 million people from 23 million before the pandemic, which is a 70% increase (Thorp-Lancaster, 2020)[4].

What made many EFL teachers choose Skype for their distant classes? The most obvious advantages of Skype mentioned above are the free unlimited calls anywhere in the world (compared to 40 minutes of free calls via Zoom), Skype can be operated on computers, mobile phones, tablets, a web browser, and it is available for all operating systems.

With the updated version released in 2020, Skype became faster to load, more reliable, and interactive. Now it is even easier to use: no sign-up is required. To start a meeting, a user can create a meeting link and share the link with participants. If participants do not have Skype installed, it will open in their browser. The number of the potential participants invited in one call has been increased to 50[5].

Some useful features for oral assessment in teaching EFL include recording the call and saving it for later review and note-taking, which allows the participants to be engaged in an online meeting without any distractions. The recording is stored in the cloud for up to 30 days. Secondly, the participants can easily share presentations, work materials, or designs in their conference call to provide a collaborative environment for the work revision. Thirdly, if the teacher is working from home, they can choose the pre-installed backgrounds or upload their own to maintain privacy in their home. Finally, the participants may enable live captions and subtitles and read the words that are spoken during an audio or video call or even translate conversations in real-time with a built-in voice translator in up to ten different languages, which may be helpful in some cases of miscomprehension.

With all these interactive features, Skype can help the instructors and learners to create a sense of presence, which is defined by Jonassen et al. as “the degree of salience of the other person in the mediated interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationship” (Jonassen et al. 2005, p.266). Webcamming creates a sense of presence, establishes a connection between the participants, and enhances the teacher’s influence on the learners (Develotte et al., 2010). The basic difference between teaching in the classroom and teaching online lies in the separation of the instructor from the learners and learners from each other (Lehman &Conceição, 2010). This separation often leads to a feeling of isolation on the part of the participants and has been a major cause of learner dissatisfaction in the distant learning environment (Palloff& Pratt, 2010). However, the specific nature of contact with the interlocutors (the lack of a possibility to interact in a common space) is argued by Kotula (2016) as one of the limitations of Skype.

Overall, Skype has been recognised as a valuable classroom asset in many studies. In our research, it has been used for the assessment of thesis proposal presentations delivered by undergraduate students and in this particular context; however, Skype has not yet been described and analysed in past studies.

Since the beginning of the quarantine in Moscow almost coincided with appointed dates for the thesis proposal presentation, the administration staff had a very limited time (about two weeks) to organise the transition from face-to-face into an online format. We hypothesized that the students would not be sufficiently prepared for the new format and would experience a number of difficulties during the exam, which would result in a low level of satisfaction with their performance. Therefore, the present study fills this gap in research related to the use of video-conferencing in EFL oral assessment.

[4] Thorp-Lancaster, D. 30 Mar 2020 Retrieved from https://www.windowscentral.com/skype-sees-bump-40-million-daily-users-big-increase-calling-minutes

[5] Call up to 50 people at once with Skype! (2019, April 04). Skype. Retrieved from https://www.skype.com/en/blogs/2019-04-group-video-calling/

Methodology

Participants

Fifty-five students (26 male and 29 female) in their fourth year of a Business Informatics Bachelor's programme at HSE University, Moscow, participated in the research based on convenience sampling. Their English proficiency was tested at B2-C1 according to the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR). The age of the participants was between 20 and 22 years old. Following their online thesis proposal presentation, all the students agreed to fill out the questionnaire.

Instruments

A mixed-method approach using quantitative and qualitative data was employed. We designed a questionnaire in Google forms (given in Appendix 1). The pilot study was conducted to check the clarity of the questions and to identify potential problems. After that, the questionnaire was distributed online among the undergraduate students. The participants were required to provide their informed consent before they started the survey. Respondents were anonymous throughout. To improve the response rate, the instructors sent reminder emails to students to encourage them to fill in the online survey.

The questionnaire consisted of 3 sections and 12 items. In section 1 (items 1-8), we asked the respondents to rate their experience based on eight aspects of the online presentation to measure their attitude according to a five-point Likert scale (1=very poor, 2=poor, 3=okay, 4=good, 5=excellent). In section 2 (item 9), we investigated a self-reported satisfaction with the online presentation according to a 5-point scale, where 5 means *completely satisfied* and 1 means *completely unsatisfied*. In section 3 (items 10-12), we asked the respondents to answer three open-ended questions to elicit extra information about the advantages and disadvantages of an online thesis proposal presentation.

Data Analysis

Data were quantitatively analysed by means of IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 21.0. Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to assess the interdependence of data. The open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively with the use of the Microsoft Excel package.

To analyse responses and interpret qualitative data, thematic analysis has been used to determine common perspectives among participants. The authors implemented an inductive approach by identifying themes in semantic content, which ensures the analysis process was driven by the collected data rather than any analytic preconceptions. The reliability and validity of the results for a given data sample were ensured by using proprietary software products and methodology for the thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Procedure

The thesis proposal presentations took place in March 2020 in the form of an online video call session with two examiners. One of the examiners was a teacher from the academic English course, and their assessment was mostly focused on such aspects as grammar accuracy, the range of vocabulary, pronunciation, presentation skills, etc. The second examiner was a teacher from the Business and Management Department; their assessment was focused on the presentation content and structure of the thesis proposal. The use of two examiners increased the inter-rater reliability.

Prior to the oral exam, the undergraduates had to familiarise themselves with the format and requirements of the thesis proposal presentation and ensure that the internet connection, required software (Skype), and peripherals worked properly. At the scheduled time, they joined the video call with the examiners, authenticated themselves by showing a student ID card, and delivered their presentation accompanied by slides, sharing their screen with the examiners. The examiners asked some followed-up questions about different aspects of the thesis proposal. Each session lasted for 15 minutes.

To ensure the consistency and fairness of assessment, a rubric (given in Appendix 2) with explicit criteria was used by both examiners. The examiners discussed the grades, calculated the arithmetic mean, and sent the final grades to the students.

Results

The students' feedback on the online questionnaire provided the data regarding the quantity and quality of undergraduate students' perception of the online format of the thesis proposal presentation.

Quantitative Data Analysis

For further quantitative analysis, three variables were taken into consideration. Mean values were calculated and compared to find out if there is any correlation between them.

Analysis Related to Students' Attitudes towards Online Presentation (RQ 1)
Descriptive statistics of students' responses about their attitudes towards online presentation are summarized in the following table.

Table 1

Students' Attitudes towards Online Presentation

Satisfaction parameters	*Very poor(1)*	*Poor (2)*	*Okay (3)*	*Good (4)*	*Excellent (5)*	*Total*	*Mean*	*D*	*Std*
Transition into online format	***0% 0***	***0% 0***	***16% 9***	***16% 9***	***68% 37***	***100% 55***	***4.51***	***0.58***	***0.76***
Exam administration	0% 0	7% 4	20% 11	38% 21	35% 19	100% 55	4.00	0.84	0.91
Skype as a tool	5% 3	7% 4	44% 24	31% 17	13% 7	100% 55	3.38	0.96	0.98
Network connectivity	2% 1	10% 6	20% 11	33% 18	35% 19	100% 55	3.87	1.13	1.06
Length (15 min)	2% 1	2% 1	18% 10	22% 12	56% 31	100% 55	4.29	0.90	0.95
The level of students' comfort	5% 3	13% 7	20% 11	31% 17	31% 17	100% 55	3.69	1.41	1.19
The quality of assessment	2% 1	3% 2	18% 10	36% 20	41% 22	100% 55	4.09	0.88	0.94
Students' satisfaction with their results	7% 4	7% 4	14% 8	30% 16	42% 23	100% 55	3.91	1.50	1.23

Overall, students reported being satisfied with their online thesis proposal presentation experience, with an average satisfaction score (Sat1) of 3.97. They were most satisfied with the shift of the exam to an online format (4.51) and least satisfied with Skype as a medium for the presentation (3.38). In addition, students also rated timing of presentation (4.29), the quality of assessment (4.09), administration of oral exam (4.0), satisfaction with their results (3.91), network connectivity (3.87), and the level of comfort during the video call presentation (3.69).

Analysis Related to Students' Self-reported Satisfaction with the Online Presentation (RQ2)
On average, regardless of challenges due to the distant format of presentation, students seem to be satisfied with the new type of assessment experience. Their self-reported satisfaction (Sat 2) with their thesis proposal presentation scored 4.2.

Table 2

Students' Self-reported Satisfaction with the Online Presentation

Satisfaction parameters	*Completely unsatisfied (1)*	*Unsatisfied (2)*	*Neutral (3)*	*Satisfied (4)*	*Completely satisfied (5)*	*Total*	*Mean*	*D*	*Std*
Self-reported satisfaction with the online presentation	2% 1	5% 3	10% 6	40% 22	43% 23	100% 55	4.2	0.89	0.95

Correlation between students' attitudes, self-reported satisfaction and grades for the online presentation (RQ3)

To answer the third research question, we first presented the result of analysis related to students' grades for the online presentation. The majority of students (75%) successfully presented their thesis proposals and received high grades; 18% generally addressed the task but with some limitations; 7% of the students did not address the requirements of the task in many aspects. The mean value of the grades students received for their presentations (Exam results) is 4.07.

Table 3

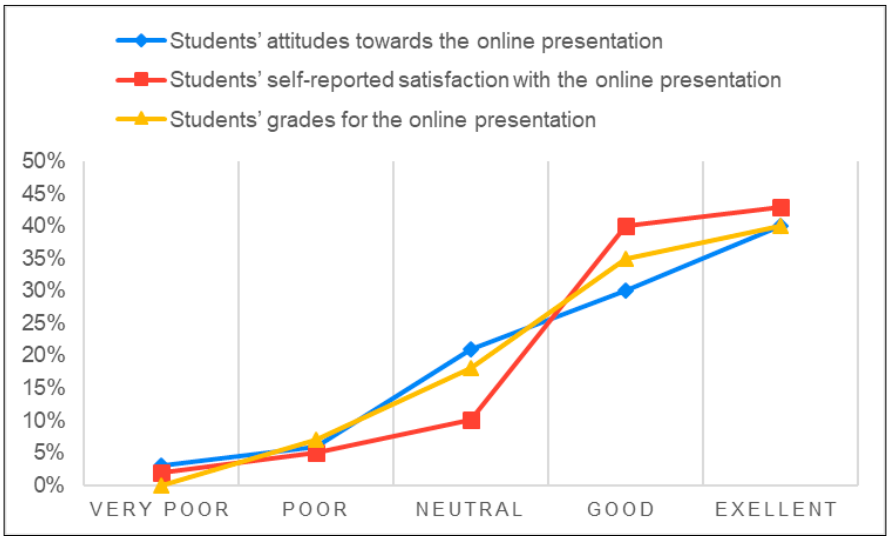
Students' Grades for the Online Presentation

Level of achievement	*Very poor (1)*	*Poor (2)*	*Acceptable (3)*	*Good (4)*	*Excellent (5)*	*Total*	*Mean*	*D*	*Std*
The number of students	0% 0	7% 4	18% 10	35% 19	40% 22	100% 55	4.07	0.87	0.94

Figure 1 shows students' satisfaction levels are high. Even challenging experiences scored fairly average in some aspects, were given a high overall score: Students' attitudes towards the online presentation 3.97, students' self-reported satisfaction with the online presentation 4.2, and students' grades for the online presentation 4.07. The lines representing students' attitudes and students' grades are very similar, intersecting at some points and deviating by minor values.

Figure 1

Correlation between Students' Attitudes, Self-reported Satisfaction and Grades for the Online Presentation



Further data analysis performed by Spearman rank-order correlation demonstrated that there is no association between the grades students received for their presentations and their overall satisfaction with their online thesis proposal presentation.

Table 4

Spearman Rank-order Correlation

	Correlation			***t-Statistic***			***Probability***		
	Exam results	***Sat 1***	***Sat 2***	***Exam results***	***Sat 1***	***Sat 2***	***Exam results***	***Sat 1***	***Sat 2***
Students' grades	1.000000			-----			-----		
Students' attitudes	0.116628	1.000000		0.854898	-----		0.3965	-----	
Students' self-reported satisfaction	0.105461	0.058827	1.000000	0.772075	0.429012	-----	0.4435	0.6697	-----

Qualitative Data Analysis

In the third part of the questionnaire, we asked the participants to state the negative and positive sides of the online thesis proposal presentation. We also asked them to state their suggestions for improving the online presentation.

Table 5

Percentage of Students' Responses to Advantages, Disadvantages, and Suggestions for Improving the Online Presentation

Advantages (mean percentage of data)	***Disadvantages (mean percentage of data)***	***Suggestions (mean percentage of data)***
100%	43%	78%

The findings from the quantitative analysis of fifty-five comments (some of them included more than one key point) illustrate that all the students expressed their opinions about the advantages of online presentation (Table 5). More than half of respondents did not cite any disadvantages because they did not find any, and 78% of them had some suggestions for improving the online presentation.

The Advantages of Online Presentation

Participants' comments about the positive side of online presentation were analysed using an inductive approach allowing the data to determine seven themes.

Table 6

Thematic Framework for Students' Positive Comments about Online Presentations

Theme name	***How many times it was mentioned***
Theme 1 Less stressful	20
Theme 2 Time saving	15
Theme 3 Home environment	12
Theme 4 Time management	11
Theme 5 Safety (no risk of catching a virus)	6
Theme 6 Friendly examiners	4
Theme 7 Innovative format	3

Table 6 summarises frequencies of the themes in the first data set. Most commonly identified advantage was that online exams were less stressful than face-to-face ones. Comments included:

"I wasn't as nervous as if I presented in front of my groupmates and examiners face-to-face." (Student 1)

"Staying at home and speaking via Skype is definitely less stressful." (Student 2)

The second most frequently mentioned advantage was that participating online is more time saving compared to face-to-face presentation.

"You don't need to spend time on commuting or waiting for your turn in the university atrium." (Student 3)

"I have more time to prepare for the exam, that is why I felt more confident during my presentation" (Student 4).

"You don't have to wait for your turn since everyone has a specific time slot" (Student 5)

Another beneficial factor noted by the respondents was the opportunity to stay at home, which allowed them to feel more relaxed and not be distracted.

"At home, I could better focus on my own presentation rather than hearing other peoples' rambling discussion of their performances." (Student 6)

Time management of the online format of presentation was perceived as an advantage.

"Fifteen minutes is just enough for a student to present their proposal." (Student 7)

"The exam was held according to the schedule without any delays or technical troubles." (Student 8)

Other positive factors mentioned by the respondents include safety, the friendliness of the examiners, and the innovative approach to the oral exam.

"There was no contact with other people; because of the coronavirus, this point was crucial." (Student 8)

"The examiners were very friendly! The questions were comprehensible and to the point." (Student 9)

"I liked this format. The same as at university, but I didn't spend time on transport. A very good idea and innovative format"! (Student 10)

Reasons for positive student feedback originate from the general understanding that today's tech-savvy generation finds it easy to adapt to new learning modalities. For them the online format of presentation might not be a challenge but a new experience.

The disadvantages of online presentation

Respondents were also questioned to report on negative aspects of the online thesis proposal presentation. Table 7 illustrates these findings and summarises frequencies of the themes in the second data set.

Table 7

Thematic Framework for Students' Negative Comments about Online Presentations

Theme name	***How many times it was mentioned***
Theme 1 Anxiety about technical issues	12
Theme 2 Psychological issues	10
Theme 3Technical issues	7
Theme 4 Schedule shifts	6
Theme 5 No feedback from the examiners	5

Almost half of the respondents (twenty-one students) reported nothing negative about the online presentation, which means they quite smoothly and naturally transitioned their presentation skills into the online format without having any negative experiences.

> *"The online format of the exam was even better than the face-to-face exam which I am used to." (Student 11)*

However, some aspects require closer consideration such as comments on the additional pressure felt regarding potential technical issues which was the most frequently mentioned disadvantage. Comments included:

> *"To the usual stress about the exam, some additional factors were added, such as anxiety about technical problems and the inability to establish eye contact with the examiners." (Student 12)*
>
> *"I worried that there would be technical difficulties and there were some." (Student 13)*
>
> *"I didn't know how well the examiners could hear me. I feel more comfortable presenting face-to-face rather than online." (Student 14)*

However, only seven reports cited actual technical problems during their presentation.

> *"I had a problem with screen sharing. Sometimes, I couldn't hear the examiner well." (Student 15)*
>
> *"I don't use Skype, so I had to spend some time in order to understand how it works." (Student 16)*
>
> *"I couldn't hear the examiners' questions well, because the network quality was poor." (Student 17)*

A few students mentioned that online communication with the examiners was more stressful for them due to such psychological issues as lack of non-verbal communication, eye contact, and the inability to establish emotional contact with the examiners.

> *"I was stressed because using Skype you are not able to establish eye contact with the examiners." (Student 18)*
>
> *"At the end of the exam, the examiners were exhausted and in a bad mood, which put me under even more pressure." (Student 19)*

Some students complained about the changes in the schedule during the online event.

> *"My exam started six minutes late and the examiners were hurrying me. As a result, I became even more nervous." (Student 20)*
>
> *"Because of some shifts in the exam schedule, my exam started later than I expected." (Student 21)*

After face-to-face presentations, the students can receive feedback from the examiners in the form of verbal and non-verbal cues (Murray, 2015), which is not so obvious in an online format. Students mentioned that having no feedback from the examiners was disconcerting.

> *"I would prefer to receive feedback on my presentation and understand the examiners' reaction to my answer, which I could not observe on Skype." (Student 22)*

Participants' suggestions for improving the online presentation

Based on the experience gained from their online exam the respondents offered a number of tips concerning the exam platform, administration, and their expectations of the examiners' behaviors that could improve the quality of experience in the future (Table 8).

Forty-three comments were available for analyses; twelve respondents did not have any suggestions, because they were fully satisfied with the procedures and the format.

Table 8

Thematic Framework for Students' Suggestions about Online Presentations

Theme name	***How many times it was mentioned***
Theme 1	
Use of an alternative conferencing platform	18
Zoom	12
Discord	5
MS Teams	1
Theme 2	
To conduct a brief orientation session with the examiners just before the exam	8
Theme 3	
To make an online spreadsheet for signing up for the online exam	6
Theme 4	
To increase the examination time up to 20 minutes	5
Theme 5	
To provide all the students with the feedback about their performance	5
Theme 6	
To keep the web cameras turned on during the online presentation	4
Theme 7	
To have a warm-up conversation at the beginning of the online presentation	3

The most frequently mentioned suggestion was to substitute Skype for some other conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Discord, or MS Teams. Given that Skype offers all the communication features needed for the oral assessment, it could be that other platforms are more popular and technically more secure for the younger generation. The second frequently mentioned suggestion was that an online session with the examiners explaining the entire procedure just before the exam could considerably reduce stress levels.

Other suggestions indicated by an equal number of respondents included: allowing students to sign up online at a time of their choice, ensuring availability and punctuality; highlighting those who had already presented their proposals, to avoid confusion with the schedule; increasing the examination time to 20 minutes per student instead of 15 minutes; keeping examiners' webcams on; providing examiner feedback to *all* the students with the feedback about their performance; having a warm-up conversation between a student and the examiners to relax students and help them speak more naturally. As they are based on students' experiences, all the suggestions are valuable and should be taken into consideration when planning online presentations in the future.

Discussion

The main findings of this research report are that undergraduate students rated their experience of online orals examinations positively in terms of Sat 1 (3.97), Sat 2 (4.2), and rated satisfaction with exam results (3.91). Contrary to expectations, the initial hypothesis of the research: the urgency of the transition into online format resulted in the low level of students' satisfaction with their performance at the online presentation was not confirmed. This finding is consistent with that of Okada et al. (2015), whereby students reported positive attitudes towards their experience of an online oral exam, considering it more beneficial for their performance in comparison to the face-to-face alternative. It seems possible that these results are due to the fact that the Business Informatics Bachelor's programme is aimed at training professionals in the field of ICT in business, and the undergraduates were quite advanced in many technical issues, that is why the forced transition to online format did not greatly affect their perception of the online presentation and made it possible to cope with the challenges of the new assessment format.

Another finding, which matches earlier studies (Joughin, 2010), is the good performance in online oral assessment with the mean grade of 4.07. It suggests that students were well prepared for this kind of assessment, which ultimately led to better results. As Joughin (2010, p.5) observes, "assessors often express surprise at how well their students perform in oral assessments – it may be that oral assessment can be particularly good for

probing the upper limits of a student's knowledge." The change of format did not produce a negative effect on the students' performance.

One unanticipated finding was that Skype as a medium for the presentation was rated 3.38, and many students suggested replacing it with other video-conferencing platforms even though it provides all necessary features for holding and assessing the online oral exam such as screen sharing, meeting recording, cloud storing, a whiteboard, file sharing, and joining via call. A possible explanation for this might be the fact that Skype, being launched in 2003, currently has many competitors with the same functions, which are more familiar to the younger generation.

The results reported herein should be considered in the light of some limitations. The first limitation is the number of participants; the second one concerns the data obtained about the students' perception, based on their own reference frames and expectations. Even though this study uses a relatively small sample size, the findings show both instructors and students what may be useful to consider in online oral examining in the future. It is also important to mention that satisfaction is a personal evaluation, "even two people with similar backgrounds can experience and evaluate their service differently" (Study portals, 2019, p.10)[6]. However, students are typically satisfied when they feel supported by their instructors and when their learning experience is diverse and motivating. Students' opinions are important in creating an overview of the performance assessment procedures universities provide and indicate where improvements are required.

In order to make balanced decisions, it is important to observe the situation as a whole and consider the online assessment procedures from both perspectives – students and instructors, that is why further research could be focused on studying the instructors' satisfaction with the online exam. However, some steps to minimise any possible disadvantages of this format can be taken based on the results of the present research.

Recommendations for the Instructors

The instructors are recommended to provide students with detailed guidelines about different aspects of online presentation in advance concerning the format, requirements, assessment criteria, and equipment. It is important to make sure that all the students are treated fairly and given equal opportunities to display their knowledge and receive equal feedback in terms of the quality, quantity, and timing of feedback. The examiners should record the students' presentations for an unbiased assessment or in case of appeal. Skype allows the recording and storing of audio or video. After the exam, a separate short individual session should be scheduled with each student to provide them with feedback on their presentation.

To reduce anxiety, the chairperson should make introductions, so they feel comfortable in this challenging situation. Examiners should be asked to keep their video cameras on throughout the exam to maintain a connection between the participants, provide a feeling of presence, and improve the quality of the pedagogical relationship.

An administration staff member should be invited to assist the examination board with managing time, resolving queuing/schedule issues, monitoring all the sessions in real-time, and provide technical assistance to examiners and students if required. In the case of an internet malfunction, they should provide the students and examiners with alternative scenarios or make another appointment.

Administration and teaching staff should consider the potential of other video conferencing platforms for the remote online presentation and choose the most appropriate one for their circumstances, and provide relevant teacher training on the chosen platform if needed.

Recommendations for Students

In order to successfully go through the online exam presentation and make the most of this opportunity, the following advice might be useful. It is wise to consult the guidelines on the format and requirements of the oral

[6] Studyportals. (2019). *Global Student Satisfaction Report: a 2019 Global Overview*. https://www.studyportals.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Global-Student-Satisfaction-Report-A-2019-global-overview.pdf

presentation and know what to prepare for it in advance: which software or apps should be installed and if they work properly. A trial call to a groupmate or a family member will help a participant to make sure that the microphone, speakers, or headset are operable. A laptop, computer, or mobile phone should be charged, and the internet connection should be fast enough to take the online exam. A check of the equipment before the online event is essential for students as it could help to reduce stress due to potential technical problems that may occur during the presentation.

To reduce the level of anxiety during the presentation, the students are recommended to rehearse it in an online format in front of other people. Although the 'trial run' cannot fully prepare or protect the candidate from what Wellington (2010, p.138) calls 'unpredictable moments,' it can help to build students' confidence about the online event and make them aware of how they sound, look, and how it feels to speak through the microphone and in front of the camera.

Conclusion

The present study extends the prior results, and in light of students' positive comments, the findings of our research confirm that the online format of the thesis proposal presentation can be effectively used in an EFL setting not only in response to Covid-19 lockdown. The extraordinary pandemic situation has created large disruptions in education systems all over the world, but it has stimulated innovation in teaching and assessment procedures. According to the research of the International Association of Universities (2020)[7] in many higher education institutions, the move to distance learning has been an opportunity to expand flexible learning modalities, setting the stage for a permanent shift towards online learning. The transition to the online mode of exams could contribute to this process and support the continuity of learning in the future regardless of the circumstances.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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Appendix 1

A survey on undergraduate satisfaction with the online thesis proposal presentation

Rate your level of satisfaction with the following aspects of your online presentation

	Very poor	***Poor***	***Okay***	***Good***	***Excellent***
Rate the idea of the thesis proposal presentation transition to an online format due to the threat of the coronavirus	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Rate the administration of the online thesis proposal presentation. How well were you informed about the new format and procedures?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Rate Skype as a tool for the thesis proposal presentation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Rate network connectivity during the online exam	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Rate timing (15 min per student)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Rate the level of comfort while presenting your thesis proposal presentation online	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Rate the quality of the assessment of your presentation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Rate how you feel about the results of your online presentation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

1. Rate your overall satisfaction with your online thesis proposal presentation

Completely unsatisfied	***Unsatisfied***	***Neutral***	***Satisfied***	***Completely satisfied***
1	***2***	***3***	***4***	***5***
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

In addition, answer three open-ended questions:

1. What are the positive sides of the online thesis proposal presentation?
2. What are the negative sides of the online thesis proposal presentation?
3. What suggestions do you have to improve various aspects of online thesis proposal presentation?

Appendix 2

Oral presentation rubric

	***Excellent* (5)**	***Good* (4)**	***Acceptable* (3)**	***Poor* (2)**	***Very poor* (1)**
Organization and structure	The presentation content, structure and style deliver the message effectively. The speaker demonstrates full understanding of the research done. Presentation and academic discourse etiquette is observed.	The research content is presented with some imperfections. The speaker demonstrates understanding of the research done. There are certain deviations from presentation etiquette and academic discourse conventions.	The presentation does not fully reflect the research content. The speaker demonstrates poor understanding of the research done. There are quite a few deviations from presentation etiquette and academic discourse conventions.	The presentation does not reflect the research content. The speaker does not demonstrate understanding of the research done. Presentation etiquette and academic discourse conventions are not observed.	The student provides little of the information required or fails to complete the assignment.
Language	The lexical and grammatical resources are adequate. Functional clichés are employed. There are no any lexical, grammatical and pronunciation inaccuracies. Terms are generally used correctly.	The lexical and grammatical resources are adequate. Functional clichés are employed. There are minor lexical, grammatical and pronunciation inaccuracies which do not impede communication. Terms are generally used correctly.	The lexical and grammatical resources are not quite relevant. Functional clichés are virtually not used. There are no more than 3 cases of term misuse.	Numerous pronunciation, lexical, and grammatical inaccuracies impede communication. Functional clichés are either absent or used incorrectly. There are more than 3 instances of term misuse.	Mistakes in usage are pervasive, distort meaning and prevent effective communication. The student's language is basically incomprehensible.
Delivery	Natural, confident delivery that does not just convey the message but enhances it; excellent use of volume, pace etc.	Clear voice, generally effective delivery; minimal distracting gestures, etc., but somewhat monotone.	Low voice, occasionally inaudible; some distracting filler words and gestures; articulation mostly, but not always, clear.	Mumbles the words, audience members in the back can't hear well enough; too many filler words; distracting gestures;	Constant hesitations and problems with pronunciation cause communication breakdown.
Mechanics	The slides are clear, well-designed and not overloaded with information. The slides fully reflect the presentation message. There are no factual mistakes on the slides.	The slides are relevant and designed well enough. There are minor imperfections regarding font, color, images, and visual effects.	The slides are irrelevant, overloaded with text or not informative, not meeting academic presentation conventions.	Presentation etiquette is not observed. The student attempts to read off the paper and/ or slides. The slides are irrelevant, uninformative or absent.	Used no visuals.
Timing	The timing is observed and balanced in accordance with the presentation.	The timing is observed and balanced in accordance with the presentation.	The timing is observed but imbalanced.	The timing is poor, e.g., only the introduction was presented.	The timing is not observed.

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An Appraisal Look into Shielded Online Education in Covid Era: Resilience Revisited

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Education has been regarded as the backbone of human advancement in all areas of activities as the ultimate goal of education is to develop better citizens. Online Education has been known as the alternate approach to learning. The outbreak of Covid-19 virus has infected all nations in the world and debilitated all areas of human activities, hence, education was not an exception. The dominancy of online education in Iran experienced a breakthrough during Covid pandemic and like other activities, it witnessed a fragile stance, and, in a nutshell, reality was far from ideality. The present study aimed at depicting the adversities exerted during the implementation of Online Education in Covid pandemic era and the term Shielded Online Education could vividly justify online programs in higher education. Learners showed an astonishing accomplishment attending shielded fashion of online education in Iran in such a way that a new definition to the notion of resilience could be introduced. A resilience questionnaire before and after an online course in the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021 was conducted with 60 junior undergraduate EFL learners majoring at Translation in Islamic Azad University Tehran. The Resilience Questionnaire was collected from control group and the experimental one. The data obtained went through quantitative data analysis confirmed that shielded online courses outperformed significantly in enhancing the learners' resiliency in Covid era and what was gained was far beyond what was expected. The education stakeholders, policymakers, teachers and syllabus designers could benefit from the findings of the present study which in turn could shed light on the ins-and-outs of the maneuverability aspects of better enactments of online courses through online education.

***Keywords*:** shielded online education, Covid pandemic, resilience

Introduction

The societies in the world experienced a devastating period in 2020 due to Covid-19 pandemic hence the field of education was not an exception. It is taken for granted that learning agenda is a dynamic process and it never stops and could never be stopped. Covid virus has been a fatal issue which hindered the education realm to a great extent, but the dynamic nature of the education agenda could not tolerate any halt in between. The advent of distance learning with the help of computer sciences has long been the focus of attention for scholars and specialists in education. The emergence of Covid pandemic made stakeholders and policy makers in education field focus on online learning as the best and last resort to the popped-up pandemic. As scholars believe that the notion of online education has been on the fringe for so many years, hence, Covid outbreak made it the mainstream trend in education (Chakraborty et al., 2020). Much like other countries, Iran followed the same prescription, and the internet and telecommunication infrastructure were employed to run and survive the educational system and to turn the Covid challenge and threat into a brand new opportunity in order to dodge the situation imposed in the most proper fashion. Of course, the confusion and the anxiety prevailed in Iran both medically and educationally (Fardin, 2020) along with the great concern to control the pandemic due to the geographical extent of Iran (Abdi, 2020) and the wide distances among provinces had exacerbated the situation. There have been three semesters up to now that online education is prevalent in Iran academic and educational zone. The present study was conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021.

The notion of adversity and adversity quotient as a real ingredient of individuals in 21st century was first proposed by Stoltz (1997). To Stoltz, the world is replete with bunch of adversities and different individuals may respond differently once encountering an adversity. The point is that adversities could not be predicted or forecasted in advance and in any form. The adversity quotient (AQ) was also his exclusive proposal and drew the attention of many scholars and practitioners. According to Stoltz, AQ is the power of facing adversities and difficulties and it encompasses three categories of climbers, campers and quitters. The adversities such as the outbreak of Covid-19 might have had great influence on the trends of lives by many people around the world and one could barely find those equipped with AQ who turn obstacles into opportunities. Educational systems replaced traditional methods for online education (Liguori and Winkler, 2020). The emergence of online education as an inevitable must in academic and educational realm was once touched by learners and even some instructors as quitters. The prolonged process of exploring the Covid vaccine made most educators welcome online education as the Hopson's Choice and follow the guidelines. The second academic semester which was also announced to be held in online fashion somehow convinced most educators as online education could be the best and last resort to the Covid pandemic in academic realm. So, the population of the quitters hopefully shrunk and there were two categories of climbers and campers left. Unbelievably, the population of the climbers were many times as much as the campers and the researchers in the present study found the reason behind such contamination of academic population towards the resilience and accepting climber position rooted in the advantages of utilizing shielded Covid online education in academic realm and in the present paper, the researchers would justify such findings using data collection and statistical analysis as follows.

Literature Review

The importance of education is so dynamic and high by nature that it should not be delayed due to any deficiencies such as the pandemic infectious diseases as SARS or Covid-19. The distance mode of learning is a justifiable substitute in order to make up for the notion in emergencies. The significance of distance learning and online education provide room for the geographically isolation of the classroom elements and the instructors may conduct classes far from the presence of learners and the construct of distance may affect learners not to be able to establish proper connection to the agenda (Suen & Parkes, 1996, cited in Lee & Chan, 2007).Such deprivation from social interactions and socio-cultural factors might in turn hinder the process of learning to take place properly (Lee & Chan, 2007). The routine classroom settings afford active interactions between teachers and learners in an ongoing fashion, hence in distance and online classrooms such interactions and involvements of the learners in the learning process are absent. It is worth mentioning that the active interaction mentioned above was of all kinds. Even tea-time or leisure times are significant in the face-to-face learning environments. Cracking jokes or establishing rapport work. Sense of humor in the academic world might signals creativity and supportive course of actions. Of course, online fashion of education through which learners lack active presence in real classrooms might be regarded as humor hindrances and barriers (Heidari-Shahreza, 2020). Of course, it is educationally taken for granted that online learning would be different from emergency remote teaching, while online education would be more sustainable and is preferred once the instructional activities render more hybrid, provided that the challenges imposed during Covid pandemic be well explored and transformed into opportunities (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Chen and Martin (2007) believe that different learners may interpret behavioral reflection such as humor differently and might display different attitude. The attitudes and feedback of learners to the contexts might become out of the control of the online teachers, but what signify are the contextual factors which make humor stances understandable (Mireault & Reddy, 2016). Of course, the teachers are equipped with the proper knowledge and experience to manage the online classes and the deformation or the reconstruction of the learning environments might least affect their management and control of the scene, i.e., the teachers get involved in a new fashion of practice as online fashion. It is as if in online classes, the education system is not altered fundamentally, but re-wired and re-engineered to adapt to new academic style which is immersed in technology and smart devices.

As the shortcomings, learners in distant and online learning are deprived of active interactions with peers and other classmates which might act as dampers and hindrances to learners' motivation and enthusiasm (Hutton, 1998), and that is the reason why learners in online classes demand a higher degree of initiatives and mental or psychological resilience above and beyond those required in routine traditional classes (Reeves, 2000; Essadek & Rabeyron, 2020; Savage et al., 2020). Henceforth, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) might be the

core momentum in distance or online education as it has got the remarkable vantage points as needed. The prevalence of information and the feasibility of having access to myriad of information through CALL courseware (Wang, Chen, & Zhang. 2021) embedded into regular routine educational environments and settings in order to maximize the uptakes of different learners with different tastes at a real-time fashion would empower learners to challenge online classes and even teachers. Of course, there exists an underlying gentle shift of power in establishing online courses as Shneiderman (1993) stresses that new communication technologies provide new challenges in educational environments as learners are empowered in remarkable ways. Like any other mutual interactions, new communication technologies offer the power shift in human interactions as Rumble (1995, cited in Sumner, 2000, p.278) asserts technologies as the excuse in the "distribution of power" in any fixed long-practiced interactions by individuals. This issue could be depicted concerning the idea that knowledge is power and through being immersed in the oceans of information, the balance of power distribution is agitated and in most cases such as online education, the power balance equation would experience a new equilibrium. It is as if the authoritative role of teachers in online classes would be lost or shrunk as a result of the power loss they experience.

Along the advantages of the online courses, distance and online education suffer largely from the high rate of drop-outs (Kember, 2003). Peters (1992) asserts that the definition for drop-outs encompasses those who also attend online classes but "does not sit examination" (p.235). There might exist many problems resulting in online education drop-outs, but more significantly the radical reason behind such phenomenon might be rooted greatly in the physical isolation and dispersed attendance experienced by the online educators (Lee & Chan, 2007). Considering academic online education during Covid pandemic in Iran, many instructors witnessed and complained such lack of having a sense of belonging to university and academic atmosphere from the learners' sides. Scholars believe that such perception of not belonging to scholarly community (Wang, Bergin, & Bergin. 2014) would result in vanishing the motivation and enthusiasms of learners in perusing their academic progress. Such dissatisfaction or confusion from the learners' side might be rooted in the mismatch in online teaching by professors experiencing a great shift of transition from accustomed knowledge dissemination into online fashion of teaching (Maggio, Daley, Pratt, and Torre. 2018.; Chakraborty, Mittal, Gupta, Yadav, and Arora, 2020).

The social context in online education seems to be ignored as policy makers put more emphasis on the dominancy of online education for the sake of surviving the situation and for the academic world to dodge the Covid pandemic in no time. The truth is that reality is far from ideality. What happens in practice has a long way to be documented and turned into body of knowledge for further study. The environmental effect of the classroom settings is part of the social factors affecting learning process. In academic settings Learners wear formal cloths and attend formal educational settings in routine classes. The academic atmosphere learners inhibit and enjoy on a span of time during academic semester could be regarded as part of learners' social identity (Pierce, 1996), the notion ignored during Covid pandemic online education. Learners put on their casual cloths and attend online classes in the most informal manners and positions as possible which may in turn affect the social identity of their presence in online education. Such notion might be considered as the lack of feedback from peers, lack of motivations, and negative emotions (Patricia, 2020). Having the slightest feedback from peers and experiencing lack of motivation or even negative emotions that come from the solitude fashion of learning may hinder the process of learning in online education from actively taking place what was prescribed and expected.

There has been a plethora of research in education realm which delve into the great shift of attention from teacher-centered to learner-centered education, spotlighting the notion of autonomy. The studies conducted in Asian countries in this regard have been numerous such as those in Japan (Mitchell, 2017), Iran (Papi, 2010), Pakistan (Islam et al. 2013), and China (Liu and Huang, 2011) which all confirmed the notion of autonomy to play a pivotal role in recent years. The notion of autonomy was also followed in distance and online education (Tullis & Camey, 2007). Henceforth, the emergence of Covid pandemic has revisited the notion of autonomy with a new definition to what Holec (1981) proposed autonomy as, "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (cited in Thanasoulas, 2000). The Covid pandemic draw a new sub-branch of autonomy in online Covid pandemic education where the blind learners should become capable of taking charge of their own learning process to be taken place in time and be followed in an idiosyncratic pattern judged by the learners to be suitable to certain knowledge dissemination taking place in real-time fashion in online classes. The educational settings in Covid pandemic seem to be distorted to the extent that rarely the established formula deem to work

and render applicable. Ribeiro (2020) highlighted that this digital transformation of instructional delivery in Covid era came with new challenges and attitudinal medications and the truth is that education system is highly susceptible to external dangers (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). There are no vivid clear-cut clue works for all the Covid online educational settings and there seems to exist a sense of uncertainty theme prevalent in the body of the online settings.

What exacerbates the insecurities (Kinzie, 2010) experienced by online and distance educators lies in the lack of prompt feedback from the professors, the lecturers and the peers in comparison to the regular face-to-face classes because some of the problems prevail in routine classes are simply rectified by the clues provided by peers and classmates, and some are left untouched to be rectified by the instructors. Professors are recommended to provide some flexibility to students attending online courses (Mahmood, 2020). The implication of various technology-based applications has smoothen the process but has not yet compensated for the absence of peer feedback as scholars believe that: “there was still no affordable way for them to participate in synchronous interactions which were flexible as to time,fluency and the numberand composition of participating groups.”(Kötter, Shield, & Rodine, 1999 cited in Hauck & Haezewindt, 1999, p. 47)

Lack of flexibility (David, 2011) could be regarded as one of the underpinning hindrances to online education. To be honest, most teachers and instructors might suffer from the technological infrastructures needed to establish a proper ground to hold online classes in Covid pandemic satisfactorily. In a study conducted just before the Covid-19 pandemic, Lembani, Gunter, Breines, and Dalu (2020) found that a digital divide between urban and rural areas exists, and students in rural areas often do not have adequate access to digital data bases and information or communication technology. Grishchenko (2020) also pinpointed that sustained access to digital technologies is an important prerequisite for online education and economically disadvantaged individuals like those living in rural areas often suffer from their limited or lack of access to digital technologies. Considering the scenario and incapability of learners to adapt themselves to the online education prerequisites, some instructors might follow certain policies just followed in routine classes and the moment learners could not respond or not have the secure connection to respond to the proposed item by the instructor might lead to losing some point and receiving some negative marks from the instructors. Such behaviors and hasty feedbacks might lead online learners to lose their enthusiasm and in turn de-motivate them to a large extent. So, flexibility should be applied and dominated from both sides of teachers and learners in order to establish a mutual understanding of the attended situations of online education in Covid pandemic. Of course, if there exists any prompt visual feedback, the scenario would be different and the teachers would show proper understanding of the occasion in due time.

Covid Online versus NON-Covid Online Teaching & Learning Circumstances

Online fashion of holding classes is not the issue raised merely due to the Covid pandemic situation, but the emergence of the online classes and courses might go back to the introduction of computer software into educational realm. Hence, the construct of online classrooms has experienced a great shift due to Covid pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic provided both teachers and learners with the opportunity to introduce digital learning (Dhawan, 2020), the opportunity to be motivated to enhance digital competency and to remain relevant in modernity (Omotayo and Haliru 2020). Just like any other breakthrough in the world such as World War II, two courses of actions regarding online classes could be considered as Online courses before Covid and Online courses during Covid pandemic, to put it into a proper fashion as: Ante-Covid and On-Covid Online courses circumstances. The advent of online courses was inaugurated once the distances between the specialists’ locations or institutes and foundations and the people who were in need of obtaining certain knowledge were so far. There was no financial briefing or economic justification for asking the specialists to take the burden and travel so long and, for instance, spend two days for just conducting a 4-hour course.What prevails in the afore-mentioned scenario bests depicts the shift of online courses before and during Covid pandemic. In Ante-Covid circumstances, people enrolled in a course get together in a learning environment by an institute or a learning center, then they attend an online course together in the presence of an absent instructor whose presence was available through the monitor screen and the internet-based communication. In Ante-Covid online courses, classes were conducted regularly in the axis of two notions of TIME and PLACE, i.e., the two notions of time and place were followed and observed. Only the presence of the instructors was online in the Ante-Covid online classes. The point is that the learning environment was attended, observed and established. The learners could enjoy the sense of a real classroom with the same discipline as the regular one. The question-

and-answer atmosphere was also established through online classes and the real-time classroom standards was compatible with those of the ordinary classes and courses. The notion of presence in the place of education as one of the significant factors in learning process was observed and available then.

In On-Covid pandemic online courses, the notion of PLACE is ignored and left untouched. Learners would experience a learning process even in their bedrooms or workplaces as the classrooms. What exacerbates the situation is that learners would have the slightest idea what could be the trend of the course just because the immediate or ongoing feedback from peers is omitted or vanished in On-Covid online classrooms (Patricia, 2020). That is not the case for the teachers as they are placed in virtual classrooms and the instructors and teachers observe the classroom settings because they could slightly sense such a class by looking at screens before them and noting the enrolments and the list of the attendees in their classes, but what is happening at the other side of the online lines? It is shielded for both sides. Do learners really enjoy and usurp the presence and attendance of their peers? Do they have or could they enjoy any panel discussion? The students might have had acceptable performance for not losing the academic year; hence the radical issues need more investigations (Hasan and Bao, 2020). Of course, in some courses and in rare cases, panel discussions could be available, but such availability is established at the expense of loosing time, energy, the internet connections and a lot more. Here it means the respected feasibility is highly required in order to have online panel discussions or follow any peer correction agendas. In reality, the probability estimate of such utopia is near zero. The dark side of the issue is that no one raise or care or at least spotlight the notion of PLACE as the missing point in boosting the running online education in On-Covid pandemic era for the stake holders or specialists and policy makers in order to pinpoint the issues in their minds and conduct studies in order to eradicate or smoothen the learning process in such a way that learners get involved in the sense of attending realistic virtual online classrooms just the same as the real classrooms with certain established rules and regulations. It is as if "six of one" and "half a dozen" both imply one single concept of "six"; hence the cumulative uptake due to the impression of enjoying adjacency by individuals is dodged once individuals attend online courses in solidarity.

Weak Version vs. Strong Version Shielded Online Education

Shielded online education could be considered in two important versions: Weak Version and Strong Version. Weak version of shielded online classes refers to the condition of the figurative protective shield in front of the learners' face and s/he experiences a sense of being guarded against virus in the first place as everybody else, but more importantly s/he senses the position of being guarded against any interference by the teachers or instructors on the other side of the line in the online classrooms. The weak version is best experienced by learners and most teachers may neglect such sense and consider it as a routine position of the settings in the online classrooms just because there are not any other kinds of interactions present in such online settings. Of course, learners might not wear protective shields while attending the online classes and the bright glass of their electronic devices such as laptops, smart phones, computer devices or tablets would act as the shield between the instructors and the learners as the attendees of the online classrooms. Such absence of direct eye contact could be regarded as the proper shield on the side of the learners to compensate for any shortcomings from their own sides. Such notion might be best justified by the shield to cover the online learners' anxiety and distress they suffer while attending online classes (Essadek & Rabeyron, 2020; Islam et al., 2020).

The strong version of shielded online education is the figurative protective shield being worn by the instructors. Of course no one of the professors wear a protective shield while teaching online classes but here again the shield or the display screen and camera lens could be regarded as the figurative shield which impedes the prompt contamination or formation of knowledge bridge to take place and the instructors would not have a prompt online feedback from the learners' side to check and ascertain promptly whether they follow the instructions provided by the instructors regarding the subject matters for the learners in online classes. Of course, instructors and teachers may use innovative tools and techniques for the students in order to keep the teaching-learning process on the right track (Arora, Chakraborty, Bhatia, & Mittal, 2020). The online classroom settings are so much alike talking to a bunch of learners each seated in a far place physically and such attention-collecting act of the instructors may fade due to such dispersed imagined positions of the learners' in the online classrooms. Such issue exacerbates once the instructors activate the learners' microphones and the ambient noise ascertain the presence of each learner in different location. Locations such as the workplaces, behind the rolls, in the malls and markets, at homes, outdoors, etc., all of which confirm in the minds of the instructors the concern that the important notion of learning environment is not observed by online learners.

Shielded Covid Online Education and Adversity Notion in Practice

The notion of adversity and adversity quotient was proposed by Stoltz (1997) and it embraced educational settings as there might exist opportunities within and inside any adversity experienced by learners. Individuals facing adversities in life such as adversities in academic life might put on different position as climbers, campers and quitters. The significant characteristic of adversities is the unpredictability in the nature of adversities. Covid pandemic and the online education could be best regarded as the twenty-first century biggest educational adversity. As proposed in the present paper that the idea of shielded Covid online education has got a new definition with new dimensions and pitfalls. Of course, the obstacles and opportunities in Covid online education are not fixed to be predictable for each learner. The related literature in Covid educational realm is high yet demanding and unorganized to the extent that various categorization could be applied to the issue at hand. What signifies here is that the rule of thumb is applicable both in space and on Earth. That is to say, the rules and regulations are fixed and applicable even to Covid pandemic era, hence the input data might seem bewildering and vague due to lack of literature in this regard. One of the demanding issues in this vein is the learners with special educational needs having learning difficulties, such as hearing impairment, visual impairment and mobility disabilities, which in turn require additional training with careful support and precise supervision. The capability to cater such educational needs could be regarded as a real educational adversity for parents and caregivers at home or regarded as a real threat and hindering issue in the learning process of such group of learners (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021).

Adversity and Resilience in Mutual Bilateral Interactions

Stoltz (1997, 2000) asserts that adversities are essential unpredicted part of individuals' lives and declares that without adversities, there is no story to tell. What signifies in the notion of adversities proposed by Stoltz is that the maneuverability of individuals in facing the adversities is of great importance. Adversity and resilience are the two sides of a single coin. In better words, resilience is the positive adaptation to adversities. The golden phrase in Stoltz (1997) definition of adversities is the title of his work as adversity and adversity quotient is the key in turning obstacles and challenges into opportunities. That is the philosophy behind any change in the world that individuals should be ready at any time and any place to welcome any adversities and view them as new opportunities which were formerly regarded and deemed as obstacles. Such stance of view is not a brand new one, but the wording is reengineered and rewired to match and render applicable to new Covid era's circumstances (Bao, 2020). Regarding distance and online education, Morgan and O'Reilly (1999) urge learners to view such model in artificial realistic world as "opportunities" model, rather than a "deficit" model (p.23).

In Covid pandemic, the world faced an unpredicted stop-point to any activities in the run and encountered an adverse halt abruptly. The dynamic academic and educational world was also affected and led to a near-static deposition. As the fatal Covid virus was not controllable in a short timespan due to biomedical significance, the policy makers in educational realm decided unanimously to resort to online programs in order to keep the educational zone in track. Like any other systems in strict-measure-periods, educational and academic realm also faced some adversities in implementing the new trend of educational practice worldwide. Of course, "normalizing the new normal" (Carroll and Conboy 2020) has been the great concern of educational systems at a global scale. In Asian countries such as Iran the trouble was doubled just because the great body of higher education demanded a giant capacity to hold five million classes online in a single session of a day. Of course, in normalizing the new normal globally, universities in Iran could successfully meet the required standards and conquered the adversities imposed by Covid pandemic in a gentle fashion.

The present paper aimed at touching the resilience level of the convenient sample of 60 undergraduates studying at Islamic Azad University in Tehran. The 60 undergraduates experiencing the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021 in Covid pandemic era were asked to answer the Resilience Questionnaire before and after their course content in the semester, i.e., the first and the last session of the afore-mentioned semester. The online courses opened a new horizon before undergraduates as, by the help of the teachers, learners could turn obstacles into learning opportunities. The shielded online courses provided learners with brand new opportunities which were rarely found in traditional face-to-face practice. The notion of face-to-face anxiety, readiness, stress, losing face and prompt feedback could be some of them. The researchers of the present study encountered astonishing findings that the shielded online courses outperformed the traditional face-to-face

courses and decided to share these findings through the present paper. To conduct the study, the following research question was proposed.

Research Question

Does online fashion of education in Covid pandemic era have any statistically significant impact on enhancing the resiliency of EFL learners in confronting the embedded adversities?

Methodology

Participants

The subjects participating in the present study were selected through convenient sampling and the they were 60 junior undergraduates studying at Islamic Azad University in Tehran. The age range was between 19 and 33 and they all had experienced routine academic sessions in university before Covid pandemic. The Oxford Placement Test (Appendix A) was administered for observing language proficiency and homogeneity of the 60

upper intermediate level subjects of the study. The study was conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021 and the participants were all majoring at English Translation Discipline. As the convenient sampling was utilized, and the participants were all at upper-intermediate level of language proficiency, randomization had no place in the present study. The participants were informed about the aims, scope and objectives of the present research and the confidentiality of their personal information were assured. The 60 participants were randomly divided into two groups: an experimental and a control group, and there were 30 students in the experimental group and 30 students in the control group. The language of the questionnaire was English and as the language proficiency level was intermediate, the participant had no difficulty to take the questionnaire and there was no need to translate the test items.

Design

The quantitative design was applied to the present study, and in order to fulfill the aims of the present study, non-probability sampling or continent sampling was utilized and the readily available 60 upper intermediate EFL learners in the junior level majoring in English translation discipline were asked to take part in the study. The researchers employed the descriptive research design to determine the inter-relationship of the dependent and independent variables. The present study which considered the educational challenges imposed to teaching and learning agenda due to the online classes conducted in Covid-19 pandemic era had the dependent variable as the shielded fashion of online education in Covid era, meanwhile, the independent variable in the present study was the resiliency level of EFL junior undergraduates tested through resilience scale questionnaire. Given the great resistance endured by both teachers and learners, some good vantage points were noticed, examined, and highlighted by the researchers of the present study which were rooted in the underlying question aimed at delving into the impact of shielded Covid pandemic online classes on enhancing and improving the resiliency level of EFL learners in Iran.

Instruments

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

OPT was used in the first session of the research time span in order to ascertain homogenous groups of participants for the study. In order to check the reliability of the Oxford Placement Test, it was piloted with thirty EFL learners of the same age and proficiency level attending Islamic Azad University majoring at English translation discipline. The reliability of the OPT through Cronbach's alpha analysis was performed, the result (r=0.82) indicated that the test was reliable.

Resilience Scale Questionnaire (RSQ)

The instrument utilized in the present study was the Resilience Questionnaire (Appendix B). The Resilience Questionnaire or Resilience Scale (RS) was designed and developed by Wagnild and Young (1993) and is known as one of the best tools for measuring resilience which is considered as the amalgamation of positive personal

attributes of individuals' adaptation in facing adversities. The resilience questionnaire items were developed through data collection process obtained from several systematic interviews with 24 women who displayed healthy socio-emotional functioning followed by a great loss. Wagnild and Young (1993) identified and categorized five personal attributes leading to resilience: equanimity (encompassing individuals' life background and experiences), perseverance (confronting and resisting odds), self-reliance (the individuals' knowledge of self-strength, weak points and limitations), meaningfulness (individuals' targets and aims in life) and existential aloneness (the uniqueness and individualist shareable approach to the experiences of individuals). The Resilience Questionnaire or Scale is a 25-item questionnaire with a seven-point Likert scale with higher scores showing stronger resilience. No reversed score items were allowed and in the psychometric measurement the mean score was 147.91. Scores above 146 should be considered high (Wagnild & Young 1993). The RS has been translated and converted in loyalty to the contents into at least 36 languages (Wagnild 2013). Although the content validity was subjective, Wagnild and Young (1993) hypothesized the obtained data would fit a five-factor model. According to Wagnild (2013) alpha coefficients ranges within 0.85 and 0.94.In Wagnild and Young (1993) the coefficient alpha was 0.91.

Verification of Scale

Concerning the reliability index of the instruments utilized in the present study, the following table (Table-1) was systematically provided to verify the reliability of the instruments of the present study. Research authorities such as Kline (2000) believes that the criteria concerning internal consistency of .90 should be regarded as an excellent fit, from .90 to .70 as a good fit, and between .70 and .60 should be regarded as an acceptable fit.

Table 1

Verification of Scale

	Oxford Placement Test (OPT)	***Resilience Questionnaire***
Alpha	.82	.92
Mean	15.53	23.21
SD	6.38	6.25
# of items	100	25

Needless to highlight that the calculated values for the Resilience Questionnaire as the main instrument utilized in the present study exceeded the threshold to be considered as good fit. This means that the resilience scale as the sole instrument utilized in the pre-test and post-test phases of the present study was reliable. Validity of the Instruments was also confirmed prior to the implementation of the treatment and was brought into attention in instrument section. The instrument held validation by content and face-to-face validity methods. For validity, the instruments were also checked for any misconception by the experts and scholars in the field.

Research Procedure

The procedure for obtaining the required data of the study in order to delve into the research question concerning the impact of shielded online education in Covid pandemic era on improving the resiliency level of EFL learners in Iran followed a very gentle procedure as the convenient sampling design was applied and the readily 60 EFL learners majoring in English discipline were asked to take the RS questionnaire in the first session of the second semester in academic year 2020-2021 and the data were collected as the pre-test data. The participants were junior undergraduates who held sufficient language proficiency level to take part in the study and there was no need to provide them with the translated version of the resilience scale questionnaire. 60 participants in the present study were also asked to take the same resilience questionnaire at the final session of the class at the end of the semester and it was considered as the post-test phase of the study. The classes were held once a week for 90 minutes for 16 sessions. The control group enjoyed routine face-to-face conventional class with the same teacher and the same course book as the experimental group, while the experimental group attended online education fashion of teaching and no presence was allowed to the group members.

Data Analysis

To answer the research question contending whether online education in Covid pandemic era has statistically significant impact on enhancing the resiliency level of EFL learners in Iran, quantitative data were gathered through the instrument of questionnaire. The data collected through quantitative observations of the 60 EFL learners in the target groups were analyzed using the SPSS21 software through descriptive statistics and paired-samples T-Test statistical procedure was used, but as using T-Test requires checking the normality assumptions, at first, these assumptions were checked (Bachman, 2005) to indicate a numeric summary of occurrence of the observed behaviors and the obtained scores in target group, also to examine whether they differed significantly.

Results

Normality Assumption - The normality of the data was measured by calculating the ratios of Skewness and Kurtosis on their respective standard errors. Based on the results display in Table 2, it could be concluded that the data collected in pretest and posttest phases of administering resilience questionnaire scale enjoyed a normal distribution.The ratios were all lower than the absolute value of 1.96.

Table 2

Testing Normality Assumption

Group		***N***	***Skewness***	***Kurtosis***
			Ratio	***Ratio***
Experimental Control	Pre-RSQ	30	-0.50	-1.27
	Post-RSQ	30	-0.81	-1.42
	Pre-RSQ	30	-0.56	1.17
	Post-RSQ	30	-0.87	1.49

Pre-test and Post-test of Resilience Scale Questionnaire

The paired samples *t*-test was applied to answer the research question comparing the pretest and posttest resilience questionnaire measures in the experimental and control groups. A paired-samples t-test is used since data collection was performed from the experimental and control groups on two different occasions (pretest and posttest of the study). Table 3. represents the results of descriptive statistics for the resilience questionnaire scores in the Experimental and Control groups of 60 junior undergraduates of EFL learners.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Pretest and Posttest of Resilience Questionnaire Scale

Test		***N***	***Mean***	***SD***	***Std. Error Mean***
Pretest	Exp.	30	31.82	4.418	.835
	Ctrl.	30	31.93	5.043	1.052
posttest	Exp.	30	37.23	4.237	.801
	Ctrl.	30	32.71	5.368	1.119

Table 3 shows that there are 30 participants in the experimental group and 30 participants in the control group. The mean score of the experimental group in the pretest is 31.82, while it is 37.23 in the posttest which means that they have made improvement. The mean score of the control group in the pretest is 31.93, while in the posttest it is 32.71, which also means that they also made improvement but as the values indicate, the improvement in the experimental group is more than that in the control group.

To investigate whether the post test scores of the two groups differed from each other significantly or not, an independent samples t-test was run to see whether the apparent difference between the two groups is statistically significant or not. Table 5 shows the result of the independent samples t-test.

Table 4

Independent Samples T-test on Exp. And Ctrl Groups' Pretest and Posttest

		t-test for Equality of Means							
		Mean Difference	*Std. Error Mean*	*95% Confidence Interval of the Difference*		*t*	*df*	*Sig.*	*Sig. (2-tailed)*
				Lower	*Upper*				
Pre Test	EqualValue assumed	-.348	1.332	-3.018	2.307	-.271	29	.473	.810
	EqualValue not assumed	-.348	1.341	-3.061	2.350	-.269			.812
Post Test	EqualValue assumed	2.863	1.353	.084	5.494	-2.071	29	.238	.047
	EqualValue not assumed	2.863	1.372	.007	5.572	-2.039			.049

The significance values for both pretest and posttest are 0.473 and 0.238 respectively, which are both higher than 0.05; therefore, the researchers consider the first line in Table above which refers to equal variances assumed. So, it can be concluded that the groups were similar at the beginning of the research and there was not a significant difference between them in their pretests, because the sig (2-tailed) value is larger than 0.05 in pretest scores (0.81 > 0.05) and the magnitude of the mean difference is small (0.348). However, there was a significant difference between the control and the experimental groups on their posttest score (sig. 0.047 < 0.5 and the mean difference is 2.86.). Thus, the null hypothesis of 'shielded online education in Covid era does not have any effects on junior Iranian EFL learner undergraduates' resilience level' was rejected. Thus, it can be concluded that shielded online education in Covid era had statistically significant effect on the EFL undergraduate learners' resilience level, and learners in the experimental group outperformed the participants in the control group and since the homogeneity of both groups was determined and shown, the statistical difference between the two groups concerning the enhancement of resiliency level can be attributed to the effect of the shielded online education in Covid era.

Discussion

The notion of distance learning and online education by implementing the computer software and applications has always been the focus of attention by scholars and specialists in the field of Education and such notions were looked upon as the alternative choices to regular and routine classes. The emergence of Covid-19 virus and the dispersion of such highly infectious virus urged the education stakeholders and policy makers to spotlight online education as the last and best resort and the proper remedy to be established and made dominant in educational realm in the Covid era. Scholars such as Beaunoyer, Dupéré, and Guitton (2020) opined that the digital and online learning agenda and the adaptation problems and deficiencies existed before the Covid era, but the Covid pandemic has exacerbated and spotlighted it. The feasibility of online education in Covid era has not yet been touched upon thoroughly because the educational and academic world is still suffering the adverse effects of Covid pandemic. Human resources along with the internet infrastructure might deem the two prominent agendas in this regard. Teachers' and learners' behavioral pattern have changed dramatically and unnoticeably (Chakraborty, et. al. 2020).

In routine conventional ordinary face-to-face education, teachers would do their best to engage learners in the process of the learning which is taking place. Engagements of the learners inside and outside the classroom would be regarded as signs of academic success (Harper & Quaye, 2009). The notion of engagement in its three important dimensions as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) rendered a big deficiency in online education in Covid era. The reason behind such absence could be rooted in the lack of the proper channel of interaction mutually and respectfully (Willms, Friesen, & Milton,

2009; Liguori and Winkler, 2020) between teachers and learners in online classes and courses. In most cases such deficiency might result in frustration and de-motivation (Dzakoiria, 2004) on the learners' side which in turn would lead to greater undeniable social losses in the society.

The online education has a lot in common with flipped classrooms to some extents in such a way that in both approaches, the learners take full charge of their own progress, and the notion of autonomy is brought into public attention once more (Khosravani, Khoshsima, & Mohamadian, 2020; Abdi, 2020). The vantage point is that in Covid online education, the learners are pushed and guided indirectly to become autonomous unintentionally. The dominancy of the online educational programs (Tsai, 2019) for the sake of compensating for the dynamicity of education has shifted the attention gently from the process of education towards the product of better achievements and uptakes in Covid pandemic era in which turn has urged learners more autonomous. Whatever the cause could be, the results and outcomes are welcomed by the education stakeholders and policy makers. Scalars such as AliSalimi and Karimabadi (2021) believe that technology-integrated or tech-driven learning model (Carroll and Conboy, 2020) with the emphasis on enhancing the capacity of learner engagement should be greatly considered and focused by syllabus designers and materials developers in the new approach to learning in the third millennium.

The shielded online education might have provided the proper ground for learners on the other side of the internet and smart devices with the stress-free learning occasions to accept and enjoy the freedom of loosing threatening characteristics of the instructors and teachers, notions such as the eye contact, the active pursuing questions by the teachers, follow-up questions, frustrations by the nature of the materials for instance mathematics or algebra, and a lot more in order to make use of, or in some rare cases, abuse of the learning environment bestowed by the Covid pandemic and establish a sense of self-achievements and academic success in adverse pandemic situation. This is exactly the definition of resilience provided by Stoltz (1997) but in new Covid version as a revisited definition. The online education in Covid pandemic has exerted a scenario for the learners, a scenario with rearranged values and interconnectedness which at first sight deems big challenges and adversities. Empirical studies conducted in Bangladesh (Khan et al., 2020), China (Jiang, 2020), France (Essadek & Rabeyron, 2020), Greece (Kaparounaki et al., 2020), UK (Savage et al., 2020), and USA (Copeland et al., 2021) highlighted a common notion of mental disorders of varying severity experienced by large proportion of students during Covid-19 pandemic online education. The learners get involved in the imposed learning situation. Little by little and turn the imposed inadvertent engagements and challenges into brand new learning opportunities in his/her educational progress. Such courses of actions could best depict new trend of thoughts in defining resiliency notion in educational realm.

Conclusion

The present study aimed at investigating the challenges embracing online education in the Covid pandemic and the reflections teachers and learners display on the pivot of learning and learners' role in accomplishing the educational targets. The other side of the coin in the present paper was the notion of resiliency issues. Covid pandemic as the global adversity affected the educational realm is the focus of academic debates as the behaviors to such great adversity is out of control of the policy makers just because individuals might perform diversely in different occasions. Resilience is the capacity to change and to welcome change as there is always resistance to change generally. Through resiliency, all challenges turn into opportunities if individuals accept and view adversities and challenges from positive vantage points. Even bearing such vantage points is also required to read between the lines of the present study. The Covid pandemic and the challenges imposed to all areas of activities especially educational and academic realm are still vague and untouched. What is clear is that online education in a shielded fashion was the last and best resort in the status quo. Each and every point pinpointed here could be view in two layers of fighting the issues or making use of the opportunities the adversities provide. Any negative or contrary-to-the-norm occurrences could bear positive opportunities inside.

The opportunities provided through shielded online education widen new horizons and new platforms for researchers and stakeholders. Of course, the focus of the present paper was on the educational challenges encountered in Covid era through online education and the knowhow to turn them into learning opportunities. Such documentations which are rooted in experiences should not be left alone, and after the Covid nightmare is over, academic and educational centers along with policy makers and stake holders should propose a mixed

method approach in a blended fashion within regular routine educational environments and settings in order to maximize the uptakes of different learners with different tastes. The researchers in the present study do believe that reality is far from ideality, hence they aimed at depicting the hidden irritating and debilitating challenges underlying shielded online education in Covid pandemic and in the long run, spotlight the sunny side of the challenges so that the resiliency of the successful participants in Covid era could be brought into attention and in turn the findings and the trend of thoughts could shed light on the frameworks and blueprints of education by stakeholders, policy makers, syllabus designers, materials developers, academicians, specialists and learners involved directly or indirectly in education fields.

Concluding Remark

The findings and spotlighted issues in the present research could be valuable for policy makers, stakeholders, specialists in education and anyone involved in the field of education. Of course, the Covid era is not over yet and there is a long way ahead as the side effects may pop up inadvertently in the axis of time and space anytime anywhere. The final concluding remark bears that the population studied in the present study were all junior undergraduates; hence, each semester, young novice learners commence their study at universities in different discipline. The researchers do believe that if the subjects of the present study were new beginners and freshmen at university who had the slightest idea on the academic settings and atmosphere in higher education, the results could be challenging in nature, and it is sensed that the need to delve into the challenges of freshmen students in Covid era is demanding and needs thorough investigation.

The researchers of the present study do hope that the other aspects of the shielded online education in Covid era, the notions such as learners with special educational needs having learning difficulties, such as hearing or visual impairment and mobility disabilities roughly touched in the present study could be examined and introduced to the ongoing trend of online education in order to empower and reinforce the educational body in action and in turn meet the needs of the practitioners in due time.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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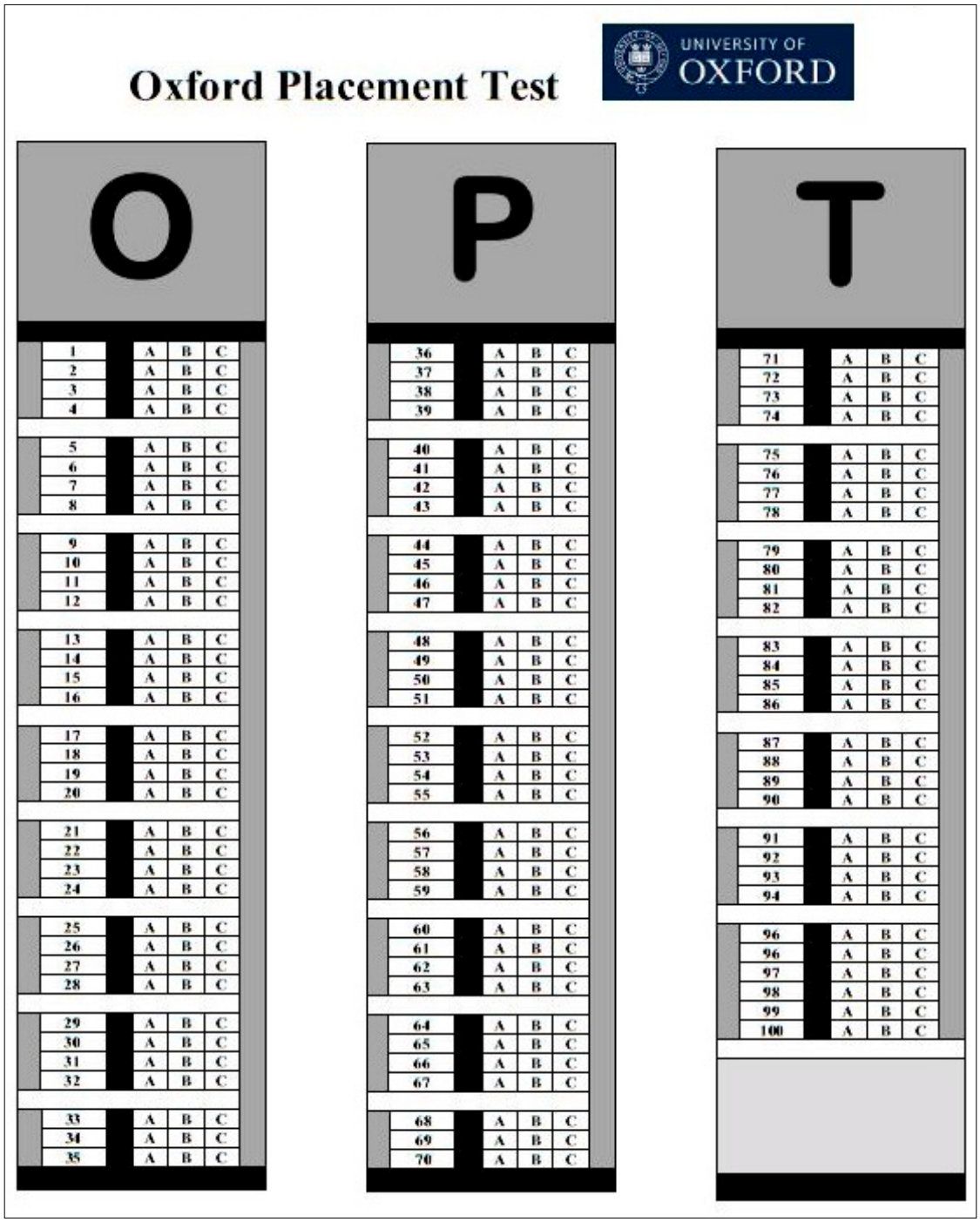
Appendix A



Appendix B

The Resilience Scale™ (RS™)

Please read the following statements. To the right of each you will find seven numbers, ranging from "1" (Strongly Disagree) on the left to "7" (Strongly Agree) on the right. Click the circle below the number which best indicates your feelings about that statement. For example, if you strongly disagree with a statement, click "1". If you are neutral, click "4", and if you strongly agree, click "7", etc.

	Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
1. When I make plans, I follow through with them.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
2. I usually manage one way or another.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
3. I am able to depend on myself more than anyone else.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
4. Keeping interested in things is important to me.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
5. I can be on my own if I have to.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
6. I feel proud that I have accomplished things in life.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
7. I usually take things in stride.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
8. I am friends with myself.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
9. I feel that I can handle many things at a time.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
10. I am determined.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
11. I seldom wonder what the point of it all is.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
12. I take things one day at a time.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
13. I can get through difficult times because I've experienced difficulty before.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
14. I have self-discipline.	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 ☐	6 ☐	7 ☐
15. I keep interested in things.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

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From On-site to Online Class: The Role of Mediation in Online Teaching Simulation

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This paper presents the findings of a pilot study that explored the relationship between mediation and teaching simulation activities during a postgraduate course for CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). A controversial factor of the experiment was the overall lockdown that happened in Spain during the Spring through Summer of 2020. These extenuating circumstances compelled the lecturers to innovate by transforming a traditional on-site classroom practice into an online training opportunity. There were forty-two participants in the English language training for the content teacher's course. This pilot project was taught at the Catholic University of Valencia. The pilot study's outcomes were the display of feasibility of the curricular adaptation by providing (1) CLIL teaching simulation planning, (2) teaching simulation assessment sheet and (3) questionnaire responses, all of them closely related to mediation and online education. The analysis of the data collected through the study outcomes yielded positive effects of the methodology used. Therefore, the initial results suggest the possibility of this curricular update. We recommend developing the connection between mediation, online instruction and CLIL teacher training opportunities by applying the lessons learned in an authentic school setting.

Keywords: mediation, online teaching training, teacher training, CLIL, teaching simulation, Covid-19

Introduction

Since the beginning of civilisation, the concept of mediation has existed as a feasible solution to solve problems in many different fields. Additionally, life in a globalised world requires language mediation to reach agreements, understandings and sensitivities within our plurilingual and multicultural societies. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) promotes cultural awareness and communication skills, placing emphasis on observing or enhancing our language capacity. The CEFR Companion 2018 version (Council of Europe, 2018) considers that mediation or mediating communication should facilitate understanding and accomplish a successful communication between speakers with different cultural, linguistic or intellectual backgrounds.

One cannot deny the importance of mediation as an integral part of Vygotsky's theory: its connection as an explanatory self-dialogue, teacher and peer mediation is expandible and adaptable to the technology-based mediation process (Guerrero Nieto, 2007). Moreover, the FL educator's role involves mediation for internationalisation (Räsänen, 2011) and the conceptual mediation of language between the student and the unknown curricular content (Ball et al., 2016). Precisely the last idea is so natural for CLIL or Content and Language Integrated Learning classrooms that we will advocate for the nexus of knowledge development via L2 and mediation throughout this study.

It should be noted that numerous experts highlight the didactic, methodological, instrumental and innovative role of CLIL[1] (Coyle et al., 2010; Marsh, 2002). This method aims at achieving an equally relevant position of

[1] Eurydice (2006). *Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) at school in Europe.* Education Information Network in the European Union (Eurydice).

both language and content training while teaching a curricular subject at school. Even though the CLIL approach has at times been questioned on the grounds of the specific value assigned to content and L2 (Cenoz et al., 2014) or certain linguistic or socio-political limitations related to the imperialistic role of certain foreign languages (Ravelo, 2014), we strongly support its use.

Consequently, the search for a reliable method to reinforce educational mediation, knowledge and foreign language at school successfully led to the Content and Language Integrated Learning approach. Additionally, several studies analysed CLIL implementation in different countries and detected its positive results on pupils` English as a Foreign Language (EFL) outcomes (Brevik & Moe, 2012; Delliou & Zafiri, 2016) or even self-confidence to use foreign language (Simons et al., 2019). There is also a specific recognition on the part of teachers, for whom content training in English is beneficial for students` communicative and content skills. However, some educators expressed their concerns about limited subject knowledge of content areas (McDougald, 2015). Other drawbacks listed include students` low English level, absence of teaching materials, lack of institutional and companion support and not being competent enough in the subject matter (Pladevall-Ballester, 2015).

In the 1990s, CLIL was promptly accepted by many European countries and first launched in Finland (Hanesová, 2015). Its adaptation brought the necessity to combine financial and institutional support and specific teacher training (Banegas, 2012; Nikula et al., 2016; Wolff, 2012). CLIL teachers' professional development's primary goal is to promote L2, CLIL methodological updates and boost their communicative and mediation competences. Such skills as reframing, summarising, relaying information, explaining data, collaborating to construct meaning or cooperation and interaction strategies are closely related to the CEFR Companion indications (Council of Europe, 2018). Each aspect of communicative preparation is essential for an educator-mediator and crucial for creating a specific CLIL teacher training course.

During this postgraduate programme, the development of communication and mediation are at the heart of training as both play an essential role in regulating interaction and knowledge transfer due to the Covid-19 pandemic. According to a recent study of such factors as satisfaction, functional performance and learning expectations (Özgen & Reyhan, 2020), the sudden switch from an in-person to a long-distance learning education format, caused by pandemic restrictions, is not the only challenge facing university students. It is necessary to create a new learning culture that is tailored to online or mobile training platforms. Moreover, current pedagogical mediation challenges (Cerdas-Montano et al., 2020) may be the initial point of reference for creating communication and mediation essentials while teaching online. Having established these priorities, the researchers address the following questions:

(RQ1) What are the key issues affecting the development of CLIL teachers' communicative and mediation competences?

(RQ2) How can we adapt English for content instructors` course tasks to online training?

(RQ3) How can teachers adapt the CLIL didactic unit, lesson or activity to online teaching? How can mediation help address this?

The paper has been organised as follows. Primarily, we confirm the need for professional, communicative development for future CLIL educators-mediators. Secondly, we explain how the pilot study was carried out by comprising a list of materials and methods (participants and setting, training process outline, assessment and measurement instruments). In the end, we summarise and discuss the research findings necessary to form definitive conclusions.

Literature Review

Mediation

In the last decades, the complex process of L2 testing, learning and teaching has extended towards more communicative approaches. Hence, there is a change in the traditional terminology from the four skills to the four types of activity: reception, interaction, production and mediation (Lado, 1961).

In this respect, the CEFR emphasises the importance of mediation and its social dimension «in both receptive and productive modes since the oral and written activities of mediation make communication possible between learners who are unable, for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly» [2] (p. 4). It means language is transformed into a tool to enhance communication and reciprocal comprehension (Swain, 2006; Wood et al., 1976). Language users consciously apply and adapt a wide range of strategies to better understand, including numerous activities varying from data collection and explanation to creating a positive multicultural space.

The recent trend to consider learners as social agents means recognising the «social nature of language and language use, the interaction between the social and the individual in the process of learning» (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 27). Also, CLIL's approach implies that purposeful and collaborative tasks in the classroom should focus on a meaningful outcome.

Within our online training scenarios, there are several features that differ from on-site interaction. In our research, we have considered the following ones:

- in a face-to-face situation, speaking interaction provides immediate feedback or reaction. Although it is possible that countless resources can be shared in the online interaction, it is also true that not all learners have access to a camera, microphone, or the necessary Wi-Fi connection to engage in a simple conversation.

- another aspect related to online sessions is the loneliness of learners who usually work individually in an environment that might involve external distractions or disruptions. Due to these circumstances, we consider mediation necessary to meet effective communication and education targets.

CLIL teacher training

Education in the 21st century is not about performing well on academic tests at school but instead about completing the significant commitments on key transformative competences such as creating new values or innovating, reconciling tensions or interconnecting and taking responsibility or evaluating personal actions [3] (Raitskaya & Tikhonova, 2019). In line with this, effective and quality acquisition of an additional or foreign language may be accomplished through various language exposure opportunities, Content and Language Integrated Learning being such a meaningful education spotlight (Marsh et al., 2020).

Purposely applied to the field of CLIL teacher training, the definition of CLIL suggested by Marsh et al.[4] (2011, p. 1) denominates it as «a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of content and language to promote both content and language mastery to pre-defined levels». The designation is clear as for most parts of CLIL: it highlights the dual nature of the methodology where both parts, subject and L2, are to be advanced, relying upon pre-characterised abilities in two school subjects, the language and the specific subject (Wolff, 2012).

Many content subject teachers (usually not EFL teachers) are responsible for content educational tasks in L2 in Spanish state-run and private state-funded schools. The only requirement to access this position is to provide an official certificate of a foreign language's B2/C1 level. Nevertheless, as McDougald (2015) and Pladevall-Ballester (2015) pointed out above, content teachers observe the language level might not be the unique factor in meeting academic goals. The CEFR moves beyond the traditional language skills, opening to a more complex vision that includes mediation and interaction to offer complete language learning and language use integration (Piccardo et al., 2019).

[2] North, B., & Piccardo, E. (2016). Developing illustrative descriptors of aspects of mediation for the CEFR. *Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe.* Rm. Coe. Int/Common-European-Framework-of-Reference-for-Languages-Learning-Teaching/168073ff31.

[3] OECD. (2019). *Future of Education and Skills 2030 Conceptual learning framework: Transformative competences for 2030*. https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/transformative-competencies/Transformative_Competencies_for_2030_concept_note.pdf

[4] Marsh, D., Mehisto, P., Wolff, D., & Frigols Martín, M. J. (2011). *European Framework for CLIL Teacher Education. A Framework for the Professional Development of CLIL Teachers.* European Centre for Modern Languages. https://ebuah.uah.es/dspace/bitstream/handle/10017/14881/CLIL-Framework_Marsh.pdf?sequence=1

Our proposal, detailed in this pilot study, deals with the use of mediation activities in the development of an online teaching simulation, based on CLIL principles to communicate effectively, remarking how «the competence of the communication is at the heart» of teaching and learning (Vyushkina, 2018, p. 216).

The goal of this pilot study is to verify the feasibility of a curriculum activity adaptation empirically. Widely used in health research and social studies (Kim, 2011; Lancaster et al., 2004), pilot studies' importance as small-scale testing provides valuable insights into monitoring, applying, and improving new education practices (Baker-Henningham et al., 2009). A pilot study-based development of new methodologies represents a unique opportunity to enhance pre-established curriculum design and adjust some of its activities to the new situation of Covid-19 training.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

A pilot study was conducted at the Catholic University of Valencia facilities and through an online platform from February 2020 to May 2020. A total of 42 in-service and pre-service teachers enrolled in the English language for content instructors training course based on CLIL methodology (24 ECTS, postgraduate qualification) agreed to participate in the research. Two university lecturers in charge of teaching two groups (26 and 16 participants) ran the programme and simultaneously performed the research. A permanent collaboration of these university research and teaching staff members in other academic projects or innovative initiatives helped better understand the project aims, protocol, and approach.

Training Process Outline

The English language course for content instructors is a specific course to prepare schoolteachers for imparting a subject in an additional foreign language. Two types of skills are being trained: the expert competency of the effective CLIL method use and the linguistic capacity of classroom application at the B2 level of English, as per the CEFR. The on-site course structure comprises three separate but interrelated modules. These parts include Module 1-Methodology, Module 2-Assessment and Module 3-Materials and resources for plurilingual education. All course materials, calendars and assessment systems were accessible on the Moodle platform and were used throughout the training process of 18 weeks.

The course was intended to be finished without any mode switch. In contrast, due to the event of a major obstacle, Covid-19 lockdown in Spain, our institution had to split it up into two modalities: on-campus (February 3 – March 18) and online (March 23 - May 18). Details of the on-site and online training course framework can be found below:

- phase 1, interactive lecturing combining presentations and seminars narrated in English offered user-friendly input information on the theoretical and practical method foundations.

- phase 2, teaching skills development and practical hands-on activities to apply the information previously taught.

It is worth mentioning the fact that the initial course planning established mainly face-to-face assignment deliveries such as individual didactic unit structure presentation, materials and resources design for the same unit, collaborative presentations on selected theoretical topics or teaching simulation activities.

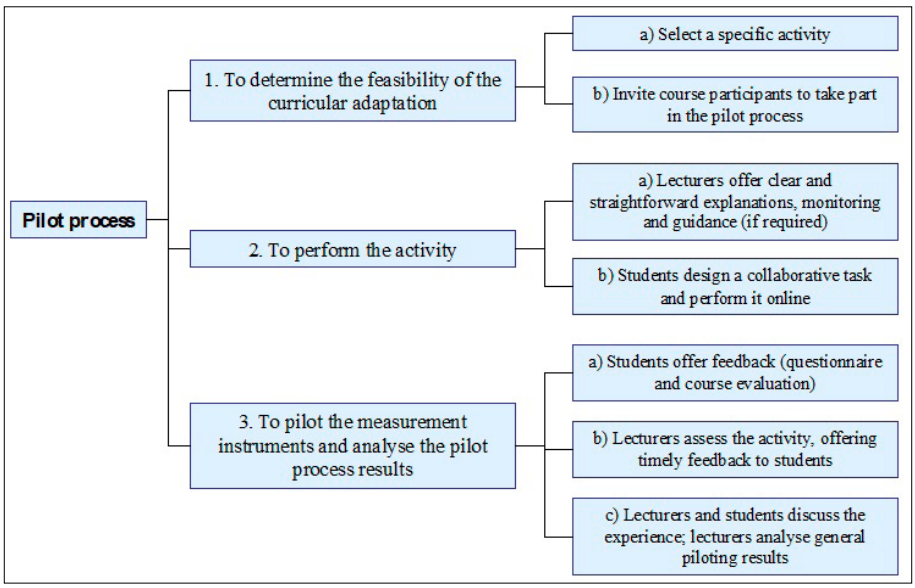
In the course framework, special attention is paid to an in-class teaching simulation. This activity's primary goal is to guide a small group of three or four CLIL teachers-in-training from different content backgrounds towards a progressive creation of a cooperative lesson plan. Instead of using a computer simulation programme, we encourage educators to carry out practical activities, implement real-life classroom management techniques and imitate a real-life training situation by teaching colleagues from other groups. This genuine scenario makes students explore L2 and content interaction, encouraging a wholesome reflection on our trainees' professional development.

Methods

The following figure provides an overview of the sequencing and methodology used.

Figure 1

Pilot Study Chart



As illustrated in Figure 1, we motivate our qualitative study method for tackling the research questions listed in the introductory section. The process's design consists of three interconnected components: investigation purpose, activity implementation, and outcomes` estimations. For this research, (1) we first detected the necessity to adapt the training curriculum and then chose teaching simulation to perform during the course participants' investigation. Throughout the training, (2) future CLIL students participated in a collaborative lesson design and demonstration adjusted to an online environment. Finally, (3) to assess study results, the trainees responded to a questionnaire, discussed their experience and both lecturers reviewed the overall pilot study results.

Assessment and Measurement Instruments

For the teaching simulation assessment, we considered it appropriate to have student participation. There is no doubt that peer assessment promotes students` involvement and implication, giving them the chance to reflect on performance quality. Accordingly, participants prepared their rubric, applying it to their teaching simulation lesson. Each group had to think about three points to assess, varying from materials and resources to mediation. Once the lesson had been designed, the group chose the most significant aspects for the rubric, created the assessment sheet and shared it with their colleagues before starting their online teaching simulation. Thus, while bearing in mind this rubric, course participants from other groups could fill in the assessment document during the activity. The lecturer collected evaluation data and encouraged learners to congratulate the best online teaching simulation creators on keeping the assessment process.

Also, a questionnaire was designed to observe how the pandemic situation had affected the course design. For example, the respondents commented on suggestions to develop communicative competences, mediation, plurilingual and pluricultural competences for teaching in English in our current situation or the main challenges your students might face in the case of offering online training at school in the future (communication difficulties, technological challenges, motivation or learning issues among others).

Results

The implementation of the pilot study provides empirical findings that might be described in line with the subsequent subdivision: (1) an example of a teaching simulation lesson supported by the mediation focus; (2) an example of an assessment rubric to evaluate the teaching simulation proposed; (3) a questionnaire focused on the teaching simulation and a group discussion evaluating experimental study outcomes.

Outcome 1. Teaching Simulation

Motivated by the need for content and language integration, we now introduce an example of a CLIL teaching simulation task elaborated by a group of course trainees. The online cross-curricular lesson design's main emphasis was on knowledge, L2 and mediation via clear and straightforward planning. Table 1 below shows a sequence of stages varying from introduction to a questionnaire where the mediation of texts and concepts occurred.

The lesson plan presented the topic for an online teaching scenario and was executed during the English language for content instructors' course (UCV Moodle platform, Blackboard Collaborate tool). To underpin collective mediation activities, we created a particular option for small group work.

The teaching simulation was performed in the following way. Lesson authors divided the structure into four parts; each part was created and taught by its author. Such a realistic setting helped future content instructors deal with every aspect of online CLIL teaching and mediation.

Outcome 2. Teaching Simulation Rubric

This study phase generally accompanies the execution process providing information on the teaching simulation effectiveness as perceived by learners. The Healthy eating teaching simulation authors designated the specific lesson aspects (materials, content, language, performance, assessment, feedback and mediation) for being measured by other participants, as illustrated in Table 2. After each teaching simulation activity, this assessment sheet was handed out to participants to ask their opinion about the training. As we have already explained, the students had previously prepared the rubric and it was branded as a questionnaire to maintain data privacy.

Table 1

Teaching Simulation Planning

Topic: Healthy eating
Cross-curricular online lesson plan for secondary school pupils
Authors: four secondary school / vocational training teachers (cooking, occupational training, computing, marketing & economy teachers)
[All materials and resources presented below were carefully designed, produced and organised by the group members under the supervision of the course lecturer]

Activities planned	*Mediation done by learners [according to the categories established by CEFR 2018 & Piccardo et al. (2019)]*
0. Introduction A short video presenting the lesson plan: food vocabulary, food groups, frequency of consumption of each type of food	Mediating a text: processing a text in speech
1. Vocabulary 1.1. Video presentation of the lesson vocabulary (6 mins): images, written word, pronunciation	Mediating a text: processing a text in speech & visuals; translating; note-taking
1.2. Short visual vocabulary presentation (visual presentation, 9 slides on Genial.ly): food groups	Mediating a text: processing a text in speech & visuals; translating; note-taking
1.3. It's time to play Vocabulary game 1, general food vocabulary (leariningapp.org) Memory card game for reviewing vocabulary taught	Mediating concepts: collaborating in small groups; managing interaction; collaboration to construct meaning

2. Activate 2.1. Short video reminding food groups and introducing nutrition value of different types of food	Mediating a text: processing a text in speech & visuals
2.2. 3,2,1, start! Vocabulary game 2, food groups (leariningapp.org) Extra: a short video presenting and explaining correct answers	Mediating concepts: collaborating in small groups; managing interaction; collaboration to construct meaning. Mediating a text: processing a text in speech & visuals
3. Practice 3.0. Short video presentation, general information about the food pyramid	Mediating a text: processing a text in speech & visuals; translating; note-taking
3.1 Create your food pyramid (a pyramid template available)	Mediating a text: expressing a personal response to a creative task
3.2. What is in the NAOS (Strategy for Nutrition, Physical Activity and the Prevention of Obesity) pyramid? Online matching game: different types of food and various types of consumption (daily, weekly and occasional)	Mediating concepts: collaborating in small groups; managing interaction; collaboration to construct meaning
3.3. More information about NAOS pyramid – recommended food consumption (6 slides, Genial.ly)	Mediating a text: processing a text in speech & visuals
3.4. Writing task Compare the Naos Pyramid with the pyramid that you have created in the previous exercise and write your conclusions (75 words, a template is available)	Mediating concepts: collaborating in small groups; managing interaction; collaboration to construct meaning. Mediating a text: processing a text in writing
4. Check 4.1. Final quiz (Kahoot game) Extra: a short video presenting and explaining correct answers	Mediating a text: processing a text in speech & visuals; translating
5. Questionnaire Healthy food lesson questionnaire (Google Forms, 6 questions about the lesson structure, content, design and organisation, technical issues, timing and usefulness of the activities).	Mediating a text: processing a text in writing

Table 2

Teaching Simulation Assessment Sheet

MATERIAL	1	2	3	4	5
Are the materials used appropriately to the age of the student?				X	X
Are the materials suitable for students' interests and needs?				X	X
Are the materials stimulating for learning?				X	X
CONTENT	1	2	3	4	5
Is there any specific content for children with specific needs?				X	
Is the content meaningful for their daily life?				X	X
Is there a clear structure for the content?				X	X
LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES	1	2	3	4	5
Do the activities allow interaction?					X
Is the language used appropriately for the level of the student?					X
Has fluency been worked on?					X
Do the students spontaneously use the second language for learning?				X	
PERFORMANCE	1	2	3	4	5
Is it a dynamic performance?					X
Is it a performance with a coherent structure?				X	X
Has it been inclusive for all the students?				X	

ASSESSMENT	1	2	3	4	5
Is the assessment adapted to the content?			X		
Is the student an active agent in his/her assessment?		X			
Have the activities been appropriate for the students?					X
Could another teacher carry out the class?					X
FEEDBACK	1	2	3	4	5
Has the teacher allowed the students to express feedback?		X			
Has the feedback been constructive?		X			
Have the teacher's corrections helped the student's reflection?			X		
MEDIATION	1	2	3	4	5
Is there a specific mediation activity?					X
Are there any oral mediation activities?					X
Are there any written mediation tasks?				X	

Outcome 3. Questionnaire

The evaluation of the teaching simulation experience related to the mediation and online training was conducted by questionnaire. According to the data available, 35 respondents to the poll expressed their opinions by answering the following three open-ended questions:

1. What are the main challenges you and your students might face in the case of offering online training and mediation? The participants consider that the most critical challenges are associated with «lack of knowledge» or «lack of attention». The solutions involve good access to new technology, training courses and mediation activities due to the lack of necessary or optimum teaching conditions.
2. Can you suggest an example of a task or activity designed for your lesson plans that you might adapt to the online CLIL teaching and mediation? All learners could offer an example requested (mediation of texts or concepts embedded in various content and language tasks).
3. Suggestions to develop communicative competences, mediation, plurilingual and pluricultural competences for teaching in English in the current pandemics' situation.

Responses to this question included videos, games or other educational material available online.

Discussion

In designing our pilot study, we strongly relied on existing work from several distinct areas. The concept and importance of mediation in second language acquisition, content learning and teacher training have been visualised before in the literature (Council of Europe, 2018; North & Piccardo[2]; Vyushkina, 2018, among others). Continuing with this rationale, we developed a curricular adaptation for combining a CLIL postgraduate course with special instruction on mediation. Instead of addressing mediation from the mentoring point of view (Orland-Barak, 2014) or assessing the mediation role of L2 teachers (Azadi et al., 2018), we fostered it through the training of trainers. Finally, the online teaching simulation process was the practical choice for the overall lockdown situation in Spain.

To our knowledge, this research represents the first attempt to implement mediation within a curricular setting and raise awareness of its further applied use in content and language teacher training. Fulfilling this complex type of postgraduate instruction during the overall lockdown in Spain compelled lecturers to transform a traditional on-site classroom practice into an online training opportunity. Furthermore, the pilot study has demonstrated the feasibility of the curricular adaptation proposed. In the current experiment, 42 future content and L2 teachers took an active part in a new activity – an online teaching simulation with a particular focus on mediation. However, further research is needed to employ this approach in other cultural, educational and technological settings.

Our pilot data verified the viability of the initial design of the experiment, consisting of three major points: to determine the feasibility of the curricular adaptation (1), to perform the collaborative lesson planning activity (2) and to pilot the measurement instruments and analyse the pilot process results (3). We are dealing with a creative training process on the university level and that makes us present empirical evidence, including the lesson plan, rubric and questionnaire.

The stages of this pilot study exhibit the techniques and proceedings of an exploration venture. While higher education course design contemplates utilising various plans, we include pilot testing of a specific training activity where general education principles, specific learning and assessment tools and overall quality standards apply. Thus, this experience can contribute to teacher training and content and L2 education, reinforcing the pedagogical value of mediation and online professional training.

Conclusion

The choice to direct a pilot study before introducing a significant curricular design modification might be a troublesome one for lecturers, course coordinators and academic directors. The current Covid-19 situation offered a unique opportunity of piloting new training approaches supported by the capacity-building framework, communicative competence development and mediation. Hence, at this stage, it appears that our pilot study has helped to address the initial research questions whose conclusions are summarised in the following manner:

(RQ1) Regarding the major challenges influencing CLIL educators' communicative and mediation competences, we observe mainly technical or methodological constraints at the beginning of the training process. Theoretical and practical preparation enables learners to overcome these difficulties, although we also reckon the on-site educational programmes might be more flexible for the online process.

(RQ2) One way of adapting course tasks to online training is a progressive modification of the assignments: from on-site to online. In general, learners remarked very positive opinions on the effectiveness of this process. Thus, we recommend involving the students in the process.

(RQ3) Adapting on-site to online teaching is a challenge that should often involve mediated communicative activities to enhance reciprocal comprehension.

Based on our information, this study is the first encounter with the theme of Covid-19 curricular adaptation from on-site to online teaching with new patterns to meet quality teacher preparation and mediation. Our study has allowed us to implement an activity that, although had been thought to be on-site, had to be carried out online and prove its feasibility successfully, according to the results obtained from the assessment sheet and feedback.

The analysis of the responses obtained shows how the project has achieved its goals of fostering mediated competence to replace the on-site sessions. Regarding the qualitative data obtained from the questionnaire and rubric, it is clear that the participants generated positive feedback. The most significant achievements we would like to highlight are the involvement of all the participants in their teamwork and linguistic enhancement. The Moodle platform and BlackBoard Collaborate use let them create several groups to work independently inside the session. Furthermore, the learners were able to prepare their teaching simulations with the help of Google classroom, which encouraged them to share different learning tips.

Despite certain study limitations (a small number of participants, a necessity to design more detailed questionnaires), we recommend developing a practical guide for CLIL mediation instruction and using online teaching simulation in further training options. The lessons learned in this pilot study can be applied for creating content and language practice workshops, including continuous professional development programmes.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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Language Education in Emergencies: A Systematic Review

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In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, education systems around the globe suspended on-site classes and transitioned instruction to various remote environments, creating a distinctive context for teaching and learning. This systematic review brings together the available research in language education within the current emergency setting to examine the state of affairs, as well as the situation's inherent challenges and opportunities for language learners and teachers. A total of 38 studies were collected to reflect the current trend, with 16 of these in-depth reviewed. Research focusing on learners was dominant. Most research was conducted at the tertiary level. The studies highlighted digital tools that are capable of engaging language learners in an interactive learning experience, though they are unable to replace face-to-face instruction. Outside-of-class support such as extra channels of communication, self-access language learning (SALL) materials, and advising in language learning (ALL) were all found to complement remote learning. It is recommended that teachers try to retain their teaching principles and put them into practice regardless of the abrupt transition. Teachers' wellbeing can be promoted when teachers accept the changes and see them as opportunities.

Keywords: Covid-19, emergency remote teaching, language education, online learning, systematic review

Introduction

Late 2019 saw the greatest challenge humankind has faced in its history: the outbreak of a novel coronavirus (Covid-19), which was shortly later characterised as a pandemic. At the time of writing, there have been 111 million confirmed cases, with the loss of 2.46 million lives. As well as health and economic crises, the pandemic has also caused the largest disruption to education systems in the world's history, affecting 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries[1]. Educational institutions were temporarily closed in an attempt to minimise the adverse impact of the pandemic, bringing about a transition in the mode of teaching delivery from on-site to remote instruction that, in most cases, relied heavily on digital resources. Various efforts and arrangements were made to support the continuity of education. Classroom teachers all over the world, despite the very limited experience with remote education, have been dedicated to maintaining access to learning for all students.

In language education, engaging learners in the sudden transition to remote teaching has been a challenging task (Gao & Zhang, 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2020; Moser et al., 2021; Thumvichit, 2021). The pandemic has created a distinctive context for the remote teaching of language (Moser et al., 2021). Though distance education has existed for centuries, implementing it without adequate time for preparation, warning, resources, and the implementation has been far from simple. The intersection between the Covid-19 crisis, the abrupt shift to remote education, and language education in particular can shed light on future research directions and practice in difficult times. This review is designed to create a reference point, generating fresh insights into language education in emergencies for educational leaders, teachers, students, and researchers. It is important to note that conducting a review of research in a developing disciplinary area is more complicated than conducting one in a "mature" disciplinary area (Li et al., 2020). Language education in emergencies is not

[1] United Nations (2020, August). Policy brief: Education during Covid-19 and beyond. United Nations.

yet well defined, and therefore conducting a review of this area requires careful thought and a clear scope to handle the complexity. This review covers a range of both L1 and L2 educational contexts.

The Abrupt Transition to Remote Teaching

Digital tools for teaching and learning are not new, but using them in restricted conditions (e.g., with resource constraints, time limitations, information asymmetry) poses unprecedented challenges. Teachers have struggled to find methods that can help them sustain education and keep their students engaged during the suspension of face-to-face classes. The difference between the types of distance and online education that we have been familiar with for a long time and the abrupt transition to remote teaching is that the former usually includes a sufficient preparation period. In contrast, the latter is a short-term and sudden solution to education during calamities such as natural disasters, wars, epidemics, and so on (Moser et al., 2021). The latter type of shift occurs 'when teachers and students are not accustomed to using online platforms and technology' (Russell, 2020, p. 339). Emergency remote teaching can take on various forms, including radio or television broadcasts, online platforms, and mailed learning materials. Emergency remote teaching will never share characteristics with planned distance education (Moser et al., 2021). While the function of distance education is to provide access to learning when learners and information sources are separated by time and/or distance (Nwezeh, 2011), emergency remote teaching is about creating short-term access to learning while constrained by a crisis, rather than (re)creating an instructional ecosystem[2]. Distance education is characterised by the flexibility it offers to students, including the choice of modality (e.g., fully online, 50% online, 25% online), place (on campus, at home), and pace (self-paced, class-paced). Emergency remote teaching, on the other hand, does not provide as much freedom as distance education does because it is constrained by national and institutional policies. For example, some teachers are asked by their institutions to record lessons and post them on the institutional platform so that students without access to the internet can study when the opportunity arises.

Forced remote teaching has considerably affected language teachers' ideas about education and language pedagogy (Gao & Zhang, 2020). Since language learning is by nature a discipline in which students are expected to interact with their teachers and peers, engaging students at a distance is inevitably challenging. Teachers' experiences may vary according to context. Resource-rich contexts allow a pleasant learning curve for obtaining technology skills and adjusting teaching approaches[3]. Conversely, in limited-resource contexts, teachers may find themselves struggling for alternative modes of communication and instruction. Although the interplay between the pandemic and language education has received a large amount of research attention, the research community still lacks sufficient knowledge to build an understanding of the overall picture of this event. We posit that emergency remote teaching deserves investigations in its own right, and that it should not be stereotyped as ordinary distance learning.

The Closures of Educational Institutions

Educational institution closures are a common response to crises. Previous discussions on the closures resulting from severe weather conditions or natural disasters provide some useful information relevant to the impact of the school closures caused by Covid-19. Like severe weather conditions and natural disasters, the pandemic took everyone by surprise, and hence disrupted scheduled classes. Closures due to natural factors are analogous to those due to the pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Many US studies reported that sudden closures of educational institutions have negatively affected student achievement (e.g., Goodman, 2014; Hansen, 2011; Sacerdote, 2012). Learning loss caused by Covid-19 may be predictable. In a similar previous case of the Ebola crisis, the estimated number of lost learning hours per child was enormous, especially in the epicenter countries. The follow-up impact also cannot be ignored. For example, there was a significant reduction in attendance after schools reopened, reaching levels as high as 25% in Liberia (UNDG, 2015).

However, in the context of Covid-19, education systems put remote education plans into action instantly rather than waiting to resume on-site instruction. Responding to a Gallup survey, over 80% of parents in the US said

[2] Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020, March 27). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. Educause.

[3] British Council (2020, July). Supporting remote English language teaching and learning. British Council.

that their children had access to learning during the pandemic[4]. The remote learning delivered during the Covid-19 lockdowns has helped to offset learning loss. This, however, does not imply that at-home learning can replace on-site learning at educational institutions. One reason is that delivering profound remote learning remains a daunting task. Promisingly, Education Next[5] reported on the results of a survey conducted by the American Enterprise Institute showing that only 20% of US district schools underperformed in relation to their benchmarks after switching to remote instruction. At the same time, students tend to spend much less time on their studies than they did before the lockdown. Some research efforts have addressed factors potentially related to such issues, for example student socioeconomic status[6] and lack of supporting plans (Lake & Dusseault, 2020). Based on data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys 6 (MICS6), Conto et al. (2020) concluded that missing school during the pandemic damaged children's learning of fundamental skills. Kuhfeld et al. (2020) conducted a prospective analysis based on data from 3rd-8th graders, projecting that students would return to schools with around 30% less progress in reading compared with that achieved in a normal school year.

Our primary aim is to document, analyze, and synthesise empirical literature on language education within the context of Covid-19. We intend to address the following review questions:

1. What are the trends in language education research within the Covid-19 context (which areas and educational contexts have been researched)?
2. What are the challenges and opportunities in emergency language learning?
3. What are the challenges and opportunities in emergency language teaching?

Methodology

Design

In this review, we adopted a systematic methodology to examine a corpus of empirical research on language education conducted in the context of Covid-19. Although various terms have been used to refer to scholarly reviews: "review", "narrative review", "meta-analysis", "systematic review", and so on, they are to some extent different from one another (Rose et al., 2018). "A confusion of indistinct and misapplied terms" may occur when a review does not fulfil the strict criteria of the selected methodology (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 91). A systematic review is defined as a review adhering to "a set of scientific methods that explicitly aim to limit systematic error (bias), mainly by attempting to identify, appraise and synthesise all relevant studies" (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006, p. 9), and is characterised by a methodical and replicable process, often involving an exhaustive literature search, the integration of search results, and the synthesis of evidence to address a question (Siddway et al., 2019). Macaro et al. (2017) proposed five features that can be used as indicators of a systematic review. Those features are as follows:

- Being conducted by more than one reviewer
- Using transparent procedures
- Including studies through an exhaustive and reliable search process
- Minimizing bias to the greatest possible degree
- Producing syntheses that contain vivid discussions about the reliability of the evidence

We adopted these features to ensure that the current review satisfied all of the criteria of a systematic review.

As far as individual bias is concerned, the authors of this review are a team of three scholars, all from the field of language education with different scholarly interests. The review process consisted of four stages: searching the literature, developing and applying criteria for inclusion and exclusion, grouping qualifying work into research areas and contexts, and conducting an in-depth review.

[4] Brenan, M. (2020, April). Over 8 in 10 parents now say child is learning remotely. Gallup.
[5] Malkus, N. (2020, June). School districts' remote-learning plans may widen student achievement gap. Education Next.
[6] Education Trust. (2020). Covid-19: Impact on education equity: Resources and responses. Education Trust.

Literature Search

The literature search was conducted on February 6th-8th, 2021, following approval from the Institutional Review Board on January 28th, 2021. Therefore, articles published during that short time window may not be included. The search was conducted via selected electronic databases: Academic Search Ultimate, Education Source, ERIC, SCOPUS, and Web of Science (Core Collection). These databases were chosen because of their accessibility and worldwide recognition. We also searched mainstream publishers' websites (e.g., De Gruyter, Sage, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online), on which articles commonly appear before being listed on abstract and citation databases. Different search strategies were applied to ensure that results were as conclusive as possible. In the initial stages, we followed Macaro et al. (2017) evaluating the retrieved abstracts and trying out various search terms. We decided to use broad terms rather than more specific terms, even though it required more screening work. The terms were "language", "additional language", "foreign language", "second language", "L1", "L2", "language teaching", and "language learning", in combination with "Covid-19", "pandemic", "crisis", "closure", "lockdown", and "emergency". Possible synonyms and other parts of speech were applied in addition to the main terms. The search period was limited to articles published between 2019 and 2021. Duplicates were removed by using EndNote.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The corpus then underwent a screening process in a straightforward manner, focusing only on actual research, not re-hashing calls for change (Rose et al., 2020). To be included in this review, the article needed to:

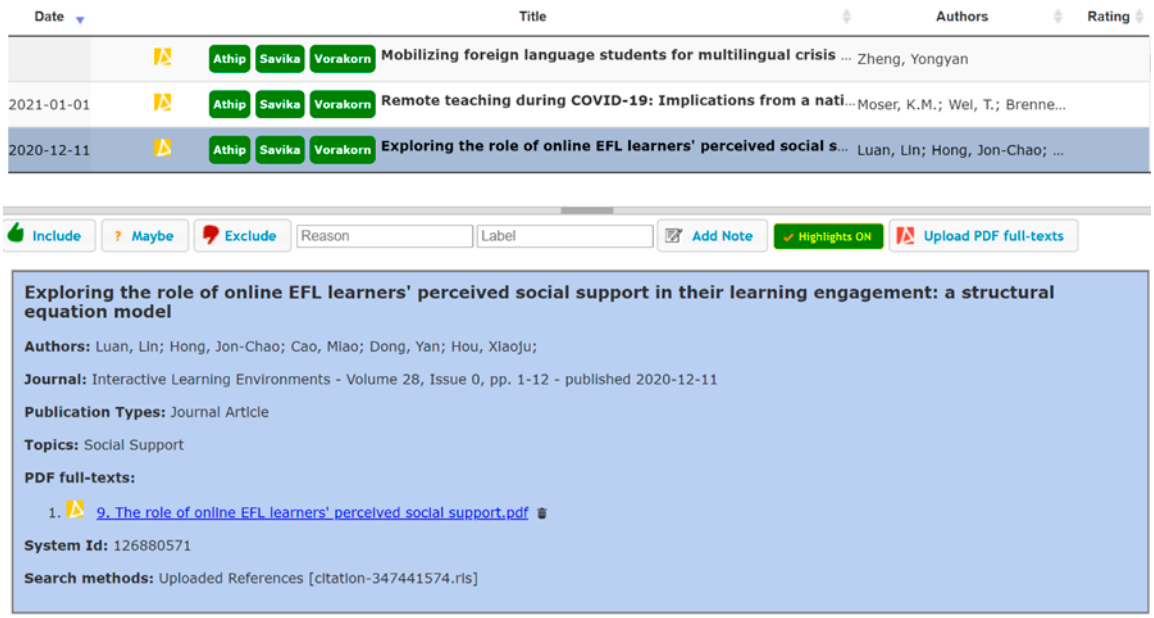
- Report empirical research
- Contribute to the effort to address the disruption in language learning brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic
- Be published in an academic journal
- Be written in English

Adapted from Svensson et al.'s (2008) categorisation of publications, the term "empirical research" in the current review refers to studies that include original data. These studies are often further categorised into qualitative, quantitative, and triangular based on their research methodologies. Empirical papers contain methodology sections describing how the data were collected. Conversely, non-empirical papers report on literature reviews, commentaries, researchers' own perspectives, and so on.

All of the criteria were accepted and understood by all authors. Throughout this process, Rayyon (Ouzzani et al., 2016)—a web application for systematic reviews—was used to enable collaboration among authors (see Figure 1). Two rounds of filtering were conducted. First, we worked together on titles and abstracts. Second, each of us worked independently, deciding whether to include or exclude each article. In the case of uncertainty, the article was saved for discussion. Any disagreements were resolved by discussion to the point of consensus. After this process, a total of 38 articles were compiled that met all of the criteria. It is worth mentioning that we identified many more relevant articles but many of them were excluded because they did not report empirical research.

Figure 1

Rayyan's User Interface



Data Analysis

To address the first review question, we categorised the articles (n = 38) into different areas of focus using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), as this method allows initial concepts to emerge from data. First, we established research focuses for each article based on its central purpose. This often required us to go through the whole document, rather than merely examining titles and abstracts. After considerable discussion, we agreed on three categories: *Learner*, *Teacher,* and *Impact of instruction.* An experienced scholar in language education who did not feature in the current review was invited to participate in an inter-rater reliability analysis. A short meeting with the external coder was held to clarify the boundaries of each category and explain the procedure. Following the coding, reliability among coders was examined using two standard indices of exact agreement: Cohen's Kappa coefficient (κ) (Cohen, 1960, as cited in McHugh, 2012) and percentage of agreement (PA). The calculation yielded a κ value of .83, which is considered "almost perfect" (Altman, 1999; Landis & Koch, 1977), and a PA of 89.5%. As the first review question also concerns research contexts, we recategorised the articles by context, meaning the educational setting in which the study was situated or the participants' educational stages, ranging from early childhood to tertiary education.

To address the review question 2 and 3, we performed an in-depth review of 16 selected articles (see Appendix). These articles were selected on the basis of relevance to the review questions and readability. A data extraction grid was used, as this allows closer examination of research contribution (Rose et al., 2018). We must note that the current review differs from many systematic reviews in that it does not pay close attention to a single subfield; instead, it reports on what research in emergent subfields has to offer to language education during Covid-19. In this sense, the relevant information synthesised here can be drawn upon in each research area for a deeper insight into the state of affairs in emergency language education.

Risk of Bias

Although a well-conducted systematic review is known for its minimisation of data search and selection bias, our systematic review was somewhat at such risk. First, our literature search was limited to databases that presented only published articles. We acknowledge that there were unpublished works available in other sources, such as conferences, research agencies, and websites. Missing these works may result in the "file drawer problem" (Greenwald, 1975, as cited in Dalton, 2012), meaning that some significant research-based

contributions to the discipline and answers to the review questions might not have been included. Second, our search might have missed recently published articles. That is, it is not atypical for new journal publications to be delayed in appearing in databases. Once published in journals, it may take a few weeks or so for them to be visible in databases. The third risk has to do with search inputs. We might have missed studies that did not contain any of our search terms in their titles and abstracts. Fourth, only written English literature was included, meaning that relevant publications in other languages were missed.

Discussion

Language education research contributes immensely to our collective efforts to minimise the disruption to language learning brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Thirty-three of the 38 studies were published in 2020 and the remainder in 2021. Thirty-six studies were conducted in L2 contexts, most of which were English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) (n = 29). Other languages in focus included Arabic, Indonesian, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Research Focuses and Educational Contexts

Unlike previous trend analyses of language education research (Abdel Latif, 2018; Stapleton & Shao, 2017; Thumvichit, 2020), our analysis did not yield a wide range of research categories because we committed to the broader focuses of research rather than specialised niches. The three research focuses that emerged from open coding covered the studies well. Figure 2 shows that *Learner* was the most common research focus in the Covid-19 setting (n = 17). This label covered studies that investigated learners' cognition, affect, and experiences in relation to emergency language learning. Similarly, *Teacher* (n = 13) referred to studies that investigated teachers' cognition, affect, and experiences in relation to teaching practices during Covid-19.

Impact of instruction, a research focus adapted from *Instructional effects* (Stapleton & Shao, 2017), covered studies that were dedicated to determining the impact of a particular instructional method, technique, approach, tool, or material on learners' target language performance (e.g., ability, skill, knowledge, proficiency). Although this type of study has dominated language teaching research for more than a decade (Stapleton & Shao, 2017), only eight studies in this area were identified in our review. The ultimate aim of these studies was to seek language teaching solutions for emergency remote education and probably future distance education. To be more precise, *Impact of instruction* studies measured learners' performance using a systematic procedure. Despite the sudden shift in teaching mode, some researchers did manage to carry out experimental research with a systematic assessment procedure (e.g., pre- and post-test, a series of exams).

Figure 2

Distribution by Research Focus (n = 38)

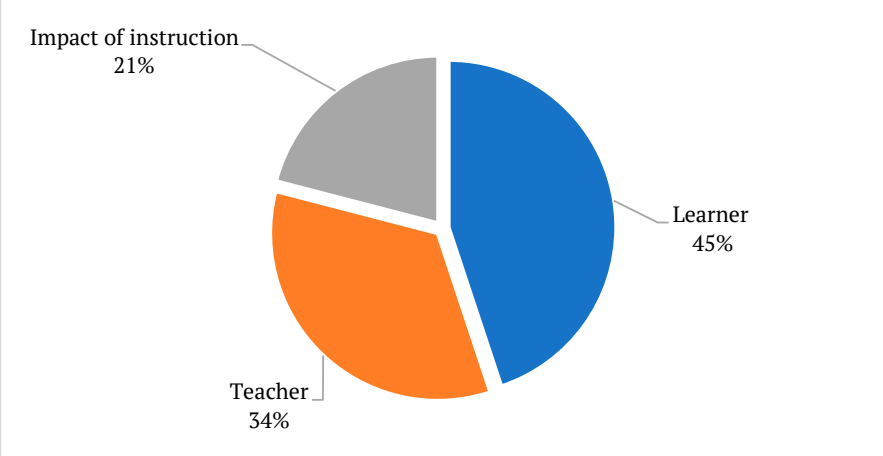
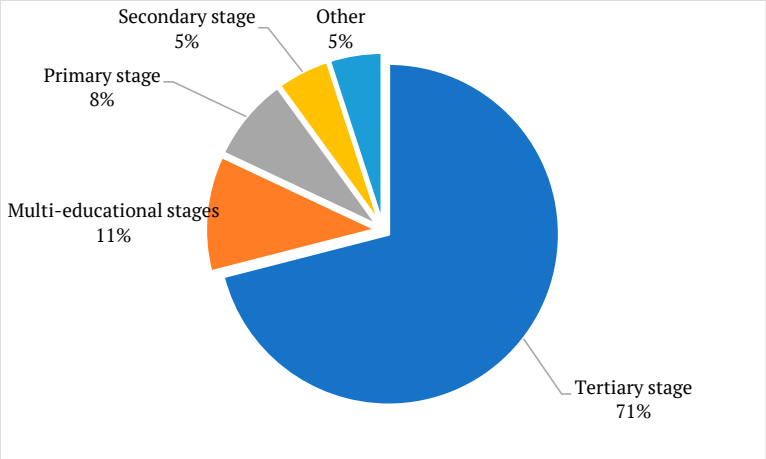


Figure 3 presents the educational contexts with which the studies were concerned. Over 70% of the studies focused on the tertiary level (n = 27), covering both undergraduate and graduate levels. Although many chose

this educational setting on the basis of convenience, some studies considered more than one stage (n = 4). An example of this is Moser et al.'s (2020) national-scale study involving language teachers from PreK-12 and post-secondary education in the USA. This study was the only one that included the pre-primary level. Only a small number of studies focused on primary (n = 2) and secondary (n = 3) education. This may be because, in most instances, researchers are faculty members at higher education institutions, and thus doing research activities in their own contexts was more viable, especially during these troubled times. On this issue, research collaboration with other education sectors may not be as common as it was. While almost all of the studies focused on the formal education context, Motteram et al.'s (2020) study was situated in a refugee camp in northern Jordan. The researchers referred to this context as "informal school", taught by Syrian teachers recruited by NGOs; thus this context is categorised as *Other*. Farrell and Stanclik's (2021) study was also considered *Other* because detailed information about the participant's context ("a prominent English language institution") was not disclosed in an effort to keep the identity of the participant confidential.

Figure 3

Distribution by Educational Context (n = 38)



Challenges and Opportunities for Learners

Learning Tools in Focus

Following the pandemic, several remote learning tools were put into operation. Amin and Sudari (2020) explored Indonesian EFL learners' preferences regarding the implementation of three main types of learning platforms: video conferencing apps, learning management systems (LMSs), and mobile messenger apps. Although digital platforms are yet to fully match face-to-face classrooms, each type of digital platform has its own learning benefits. Apart from widely used tools like video conferencing apps (e.g., Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, Zoom) and LMSs (e.g., Blackboard, Google Classroom, Moodle), mobile messaging apps can play a substantial role in facilitating language learning during lockdown. In Amin and Sudari's (2020) study, an instant messaging app like WhatsApp was preferred by students considering attention to the meaning of the language (meaning focus), opportunity for engagement with the language (learner fit), positive effects of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) activity (positive impact), and access to resources (practicality). These findings are confirmed by Ajmal et al.'s (2020) study investigating EFL learners' perceptions of LMSs and mobile messaging apps. They found that students were in favor of WhatsApp because of its practicality. While LMSs facilitate interaction and collaboration, mobile messaging apps are a great supplement to any remote learning circumstance, as they are highly accessible and do not require advanced knowledge to operate. Language learning affordances associated with social media, also discussed as social media language learning (SMLL), have recently become a topic of interest in CALL research (Reinhardt, 2020). In the context of forced remote teaching, social media has been another channel used by learners. Al-Shammari (2020) researched how students at a Kuwait international law school utilised social media to learn English. Increased use of social media to facilitate learning was reported, especially among graduate students. It was also found that students were more active when learning English through social media. In other words, WhatsApp, social media, and other standard digital platforms should not be underestimated. Most students are already familiar with their

functions, making adaptation to remote learning less painful. In cases in which classes are conducted asynchronously, these tools add extra channels for communication to compensate for the loss of face-to-face interaction. Teachers should stay connected with students throughout the lesson, especially during the closure of educational institutions.

One study of pre-service teachers was selected for review. The context of teacher education differs from that of traditional language learning in that it demands field-experience learning. In a normal situation, pre-service teachers are required to teach actual classes under the guidance of their supervisor. They may be given opportunities to observe classrooms before gaining field experience first hand. However, with the suspension of face-to-face instruction, support was needed in those areas on top of conventional remote learning. Kamhi-Stein et al. (2020) implemented Mursion, a mixed-reality simulation platform, and compared the experiences of MA TESOL pre-service teachers with teaching experience and those without teaching experience. This platform is designed to support pre-service teachers in practicing their instruction through the artificial representation of a variety of classroom events, making it an especially useful tool during the closure of educational institutions. Despite its benefits in improving pre-service teachers' confidence in teaching practice (Hudson et al., 2018), some issues related to its use have been raised, such as the awkward-looking avatars (Dalinger et al., 2020), the avatars' lack of natural physical movement (Hudson et al., 2018), and different gender treatment (Black et al., 2016). Kamhi-Stein et al. (2020) found that Mursion was perceived differently by the two groups. Those with teaching experience felt that the platform did not reflect reality, and thus considered their experience inauthentic. On the other hand, those with limited or no teaching experience reported that the platform helped them to develop the confidence needed for real classroom instruction. The researchers made it clear that the current version of the platform is yet to replace a face-to-face teaching practicum, but that during lockdown, virtual simulations allow pre-service teachers to practice instruction even without actual classes.

Self-Access Language Learning

The abrupt shift in learning mode and the growing tension of the Covid-19 situation prompted a demand for intervention. Advising in language learning (ALL), as a form of intervention, is known to have many benefits, including providing psychological support (Kato & Mynard, 2016), addressing learner needs (Mynard et al., 2018), and promoting learner autonomy (Carson & Mynard, 2012). Guban-Caisido (2020) examined the implementation of a language advising program as a response to the abrupt shift to self-access language learning (SALL) at a Philippine university. The context of Guban-Caisido's (2020) study is different from previously reviewed studies, in that synchronous online classes were replaced by SALL to avoid technical issues. Students were provided with take-home packages containing the course syllabus, materials, and links to video recordings uploaded to an LMS. They were expected to stay at home and study on their own.The ALL implemented here allowed students to reflect on their learning experience and identified students' needs and difficulties. In addition to that, ALL allowed students to reflect on their own learning in order to enhance their learning experience. That is, as the advisor encouraged students to reflect on their language learning experience, students frequently realised that they needed to consider other resources as complements to SALL.

Mideros (2020) explored how Spanish L2 learners in Trinidad and Tobago used supplementary learning resources in addition to their formal synchronous classes. The findings indicated that students tended to rely heavily on materials shared by teachers, such as presentation slides, extra exercises, and links to explanations on websites. We argue that providing students with self-study materials is important, but teachers should raise students' awareness of the availability of other resources. Teachers may overlook this aspect of online teaching because it often takes place outside of their synchronous classes. Research has suggested that computer-assisted instruction, if done systematically, has the potential to raise students' linguistic awareness and foster collaboration with other students, leading to the overall enhancement of learner autonomy (Benson, 2013).

Social Support

Given the difficulties and limitations in emergency language learning, learner engagement has been regarded as an important element in improving academic achievement in the target language (Luan et al., 2020). Engagement is substantially influenced by learners' interactions with their learning environment (Reschly et al., 2020). This link is receiving increasing attention from scholars, as its association with EFL learners' perceived social support creates space for research on the abrupt transition to remote learning. Luan et al. (2020) explored the interplay between learners' perceived social support and learner engagement in the

Chinese context.The findings showed that students who received support from their teachers and peers demonstrated higher engagement in online language classes. It is important to note that the learner engagement mentioned here largely refers to learning activities, including involvement in instructional content, and interpersonal exchange with teachers and peers. As the link between learner engagement and teacher support has already been established, such findings were further elaborated by Hew's (2016) study suggesting that learner engagement depends on the extent to which teachers are willing to communicate with students, their teaching enthusiasm, and the learning resources that they provide to facilitate remote learning. During the time of Covid-19, students as well as teachers need more support than before, and one thing that teachers can do is to reinforce positive engagement by guiding students through meaningful and motivational activities (Soffer & Cohen, 2019) or adding elements of interaction to the syllabus (Veletsianos et al., 2015).

Learning Styles and Emergency Language Learning

The relationship between learners' preferred learning styles and remote learning has also been a subject of study. To provide an evaluation of an online ESL course, Syahrin and Salih (2020) investigated whether the course content, activities, and functions of an LMS responded to students' learning styles. In this study, students' learning styles were identified first using Kolb's (1984) Learning Style Inventory. Since most participants were *Convergent* learners – learners who "draw from the learning modes of abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation" (Richmond & Cummings, 2005, p. 48) – online language lessons focusing on lectures or receptive skills (reading and listening) might not disrupt their language learning as much as one may expect. This work sparks our curiosity about which learning style is most suitable to the context of emergency language learning. Based on Richmond and Cummings's (2005) summary of Kolb's (1984) learning styles in online education, *Assimilative* learners seem most resilient during emergency language learning, as they tend to rely on abstract concepts and ideas rather than interaction.

Contributions to the Local Community

Zheng (2020) examines the multilingual translation efforts made by a group of foreign language university students. This study is one of a small number that address how language education contributes to the local community in times of crisis. It was situated in Shanghai, where multilingual public services are very much needed. In this study, student volunteers provided translation support in ten languages when communities had to deliver important messages regarding disease control and precautionary measures to foreign residents and visitors. Since the translation team was assembled hastily, it comprised a number of students, many of whom had limited experience with the target language. Therefore, they ran into some linguistic difficulties including accents, an inability to discuss the specificities of everyday life in the target language, and naturalness in translation. To overcome these difficulties, they sought help from competent users of the target language. Similar to emergency language teaching, multilingual emergency translation is characterised by a tension between rising demands for translators and inadequate resources. This study suggests that even in times of crisis, there is room for language education to contribute to local communities.

Challenges and Opportunities for Teachers

Dealing with Changes

Farrell and Stanclik (2021) report on a case study of an early-career EFL teacher at an English language institution in North America in terms of philosophy, principles, theory, practice, and the space beyond practice. The participating teacher's reflections on each of these five elements highlighted the connections between his stated principles and actual practices. Here we will focus our discussion on those practices shaped by his principles and the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the abrupt transition to online teaching, he retained almost all of his principles and put them into practice. They were observed through the following practices:

- Keeping to lesson plans
- Providing feedback
- Correcting errors
- Incorporating students' cultural knowledge into activities
- Clearly stating instructions
- Making himself available for students
- Engaging in informal interaction with students
- Making sure students were still on task
- Featuring group activities

These practices are worth sharing because they can be implemented even in emergency teaching. Teachers may not have to compromise their principles in order to deliver online instruction effectively. The challenges posed by unprecedented crises can be embraced as opportunities to (re)discover oneself as a language teacher. By encouraging language teachers to reflect on their practice, an evidence-based practice study like this one can greatly benefit its participants and other teachers, in that they can use the information revealed to help themselves make pedagogical decisions "rather than following hunches not based on any concrete evidence" (Farrell & Stanclik, 2021, p. 12).

Insights into the nature of the abrupt transition to remote teaching can shed light on current and future practices. The transition brought several changes that language teachers needed to confront. Moser et al. (2020) launched a national survey to better understand changes in practices and perceptions of PreK-12 and post-secondary language teachers from 45 US states. As one may expect, the vast majority of participants had no online teaching experience, and consequently had to put in more time, work, and effort to deal with the changes than those with prior experience even though training sessions on using digital platforms for teaching were provided. Although teachers with prior experience did not have to make substantial changes in course design and adjustment, lack of significant differences in practice indicated that all teachers were new to emergency remote teaching. Despite embracing effective principles of remote language teaching, teachers reported that their students' academic outcomes were lower. The reason is that much of their attention was devoted to students' basic needs, meaning that teachers played a role in supporting the non-academic side of students' lives during the pandemic. The findings suggested that PreK-12 teachers were more vulnerable than post-secondary teachers and needed serious training and support. The researchers explained that PreK-12 teachers faced equity issues that were not typical in post-secondary education, including lack of technology and unsupervised students without family support. Therefore, they had to take on usual tasks such as delivering paperwork packets and meeting with individual students. Moser et al. (2020) concluded that all teachers, especially PreK-12 teachers, needed more support to enact remote teaching and achieve desirable outcomes.

Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020) explored the challenges and opportunities of virtual teaching experienced by EFL teacher candidates in Chile. Despite the school closure, some in-field teacher training programs continued. Participating student teachers sent to different schools found themselves in a variety of situations, as influenced by schools' policies. The findings indicated that the most challenging aspect of emergency language teaching was the absence of interaction with students, which may have hindered their professional development (Flores & Gago, 2020). This study uncovered two important components that could not be developed: social development (e.g., collaboration with colleagues and mentors) and personal development (e.g., managing feelings about being a teacher) (Bell, 1994). However, student teachers were given an opportunity to learn to use different digital platforms and to design their own teaching strategies to engage their students without seeing them in person.

Factors Influencing Technology Integration

It is inarguable that the success of emergency remote education has relied considerably on teachers' integration of technology into instruction, which can be influenced by various factors. Cheung (2021) conducted a case study of a secondary school ESL teacher in Hong Kong who taught synchronously via a video conferencing app, with the view to identifying the factors influencing technology integration. The abrupt transition to synchronous online learning environments resulted in fewer opportunities to interact with students and monitor their understanding. It was also found that pedagogical beliefs, the context, and professional development were largely mediated by the pedagogical use of technology. For example, an implicit belief in the grammar-translation method as the best way to help students pass the form-focused exam is likely to remain in online teaching mode. This could prevent teachers from exploring the other useful functions of video conferencing apps, such as Breakout Rooms in Zoom and Assignments in Microsoft Teams.The level of technology integration could also be influenced by the way in which educational institutions react to the call for the transition to online teaching. For example, the participating teacher in Cheung's (2021) study noted that her school was passively reacting to the call and was not seriously interested in developing an online teaching community over the long term. This indirectly affected her technology integration, despite the fact that she had all of the necessary resources. Training courses play a crucial role in elevating the level of technology integration, but only if they offer hands-on experience and if teachers are not overly busy with other workloads.

Carvalho (2020) addressed factors surrounding the infrequent use of digital resources in teaching Portuguese as a Non-Native Language (PNNL). The findings showed that attending Information Communication Technology (ICT) training sessions did not encourage the use of digital resources for PNNL teaching purposes. Although age was not found to be a factor justifying the infrequent use of technology, younger teachers tended to be more confident in using technology than those who had been in the profession longer. Fuad et al. (2020) added that many senior teachers found it difficult to integrate digital technologies into language teaching because of their lack of previous exposure to ICT. Confidence plays a vital role in promoting the integration of technologies, and teachers' confidence can be built through training sessions that focus on technology and education. Training should be organised in such a way that it helps teachers to recognise the intellectual benefits of digital resources beyond this temporary necessity.

Teacher Development

Motteram et al. (2020) explored the challenges and possibilities in using WhatsApp to support language teacher development in a Zataari refugee camp in Jordan. Syrian teachers were recruited to teach at a support school that aimed to help relocated Syrian children catch up with the Jordanian education system and continue onto higher education. In this study, the chat history of a group of English teachers was analysed to monitor any teacher development activities carried out through WhatsApp. The findings showed that a great number of messages were concerned with language development, meaning that teachers' language knowledge and skills were being developed through the app. For example, one of the teachers expanded his linguistic knowledge by asking his fellow teachers about the word "yeah". Teachers also reflected on their training sessions, discussing cultural issues and sharing pedagogical strategies. This does not, however, suggest that teacher development should be completely online from now on, but it does indicate that an everyday app like WhatsApp can provide a great deal of support. Whether or not there are disruptions in the future, teacher development should take advantage of the support provided by digital tools.

Stress and Coping Strategies

For language teachers, few days go by without some kind of stress or difficulty (MacIntyre et al., 2019). L2 teachers face the emotional challenges of L2 teaching, such as doubting their own L2 ability, managing the diverse proficiency levels of learners, and keeping up with demanding pedagogical methods (Gkonou et al., 2020; Gkonou & Miller, 2017). The pandemic brought them even more stress, making their work and life even more difficult to navigate. MacIntyre et al. (2020) examined stress as a result of the pandemic, along with the coping strategies of language teachers from various countries. The findings indicated that workload was the most common cause of stress, followed by the health of family members. The most used coping strategy was acceptance – acknowledging the reality and trying to live with it – followed by advance planning, both of which were considered approach strategies. It is encouraging to learn that avoidant strategies like disengagement, substance abuse, and denial were least common, because these strategies often lead to undesirable outcomes (e.g., anxiety, anger, loneliness, sadness). Approach strategies, on the other hand, are likely to produce desirable outcomes (e.g., happiness, health, resilience, wellbeing). Where possible, language teachers should resist avoidant coping mechanisms and be more realistic and optimistic. Since it is not known how much longer the "new teaching normal" will last or whether the "old normal" will even return, teachers need to embrace the changes that the pandemic has introduced into education instead of fleeing from them and waiting for everything to return to normal.

Conclusion

This systematic review brings together the available language education research within the context of Covid-19 to gain a thorough understanding of the state of affairs, as well as the situation's inherent challenges and opportunities for language learners and teachers. Since the outbreak, the research community has been active in contributing to the collective effort to find solutions for the current emergency education demand. Since much of the research was undertaken in the tertiary setting, we would like to call for more research on other educational stages, especially PreK-12, whose teachers and learners are more prone to issues such as inequity. The sudden, disruptive transition to remote education represents fresh challenges and opportunities to (re)discover and (re)invent teaching and learning. The digital tools that have been implemented in emergencies like this are capable of engaging language learners in an interactive learning experience, though they are yet to replace the face-to-face environment. Technology is, however, not the only determinant of

academic achievement. SALL, ALL, and other forms of outside-of-class support should be considered supplements to regular remote classes and used to stay connected with learners and provide timely support. In addition to maintaining access to learning, language education can take on the important task of providing multilingual services to aid Covid-19 prevention for foreigners. As the severity of the situation varies from case to case, there is plenty of room for research and innovation that will create novel alternatives and solutions for emergency language learning.

Language teachers may have been forced into the transition without adequate preparation, but they do not need to abandon their beliefs about what effective teaching should be. Educators should hold on to their pedagogical principles and try to put them into practice regardless of teaching delivery mode. Teacher development should also continue. Everyday mobile messaging apps can serve as a springboard to the more versatile learning tools. With their wellbeing as paramount, teachers should accept the changes and take them as opportunities to learn and explore new possibilities. Although it is hoped that the current pandemic will end as soon as possible and a crisis of this kind will never happen again, remote teaching should no longer be considered a temporary practice. Educators should take the lead to establish a community of practice for remote teaching as it can, in fact, be a viable solution for many normal educational scenarios. In closing, we acknowledge and appreciate every contribution that has been made to addressing the disruption and maintaining access to learning, including those that are not mentioned in this review.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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APPENDIX A

Selected Studies

Autor	*Title*	*Focus*	*Context*	*Region*
Ajmal et al. (2020)	Covid-19 and online English language teaching: Students' response and feedback.	Learner	101 tertiary students-EFL	Pakistan
Al-Shammari (2020)	Social media and English language learning during Covid-19: KILAW students' use, attitude, and prospective	Learner	116 tertiary students from a law school-EFL	Kuwait
Carvalho (2020)	Conditioning factors in the integration of technology in the teaching of Portuguese non-native language: A post-Covid 19 reflection for the current training of teachers	Teacher	101 teachers-PNNL	Portugal
Cheung (2021)	Language teaching during a pandemic: A case study of Zoom use by a secondary ESL teacher in Hong Kong	Teacher	1 secondary school teacher-ESL	Hong Kong
Farrell and Stanclik (2021).	"Covid-19 is an opportunity to rediscover ourselves": Reflections of a novice EFL teacher in Central America	Teacher	1 teacher-EFL	North America
Guban-Caisido (2020)	Language advising as psychosocial intervention for first time self-access language learners in the time of Covid-19: Lessons from the Philippines	Learner	10 tertiary students from A1 level Italian classes	Philippines
Kamhi-Stein et al. (2020)	The future is now: Implementing mixed-reality learning environments as a tool for language teacher preparation	Learner	8 tertiary students-MA TESOL (case 1) 6 tertiary students-MA TESOL (case 2)	USA
Luan (2020)	Exploring the role of online EFL learners' perceived social support in their learning engagement: a structural equation model	Learner	615 tertiary students-EFL	China
Amin and Sundari (2020)	EFL students' preferences on digital platforms during emergency remote teaching: Video conference, LMS, or messenger application?	Learner	140 tertiary students-EFL	Indonesia
MacIntyre et al. (2020)	Language teachers' coping strategies during the Covid-19 conversion to online teaching: Correlations with stress, wellbeing and negative emotions	Teacher	634 language teachers-L1 and L2	International
Mideros (2020)	Out-of-class learning of Spanish during Covid-19: A case study in Trinidad and Tobago	Learner	15 students and 8 teachers-Spanish L2	Trinidad and Tobago
Moser et al. (2021)	Remote teaching during Covid-19: Implications from a national survey of language educators	Teacher	377 foreign language PreK-12 and post-secondary teachers	USA
Motteram et al. (2020)	WhatsApp supported language teacher development: A case study in the Zataari refugee camp	Teacher	18 English Teacher-EFL	Jordan
Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020)	Online teaching placement during the Covid-19 pandemic in Chile: challenges and opportunities	Learner	27 pre-service teachers-EFL	Chile
Syahrin and Salih (2020)	An ESL online classroom experience in Oman during Covid-19	Learner	32 tertiary students-ESL	Oman
Zheng (2020)	Mobilizing foreign language students for multilingual crisis translation in Shanghai	Learner	7 tertiary students-multilingual L2	China

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University and School Collaborations during a Pandemic. Sustaining Educational Opportunity and Reinventing Education: A Book Review

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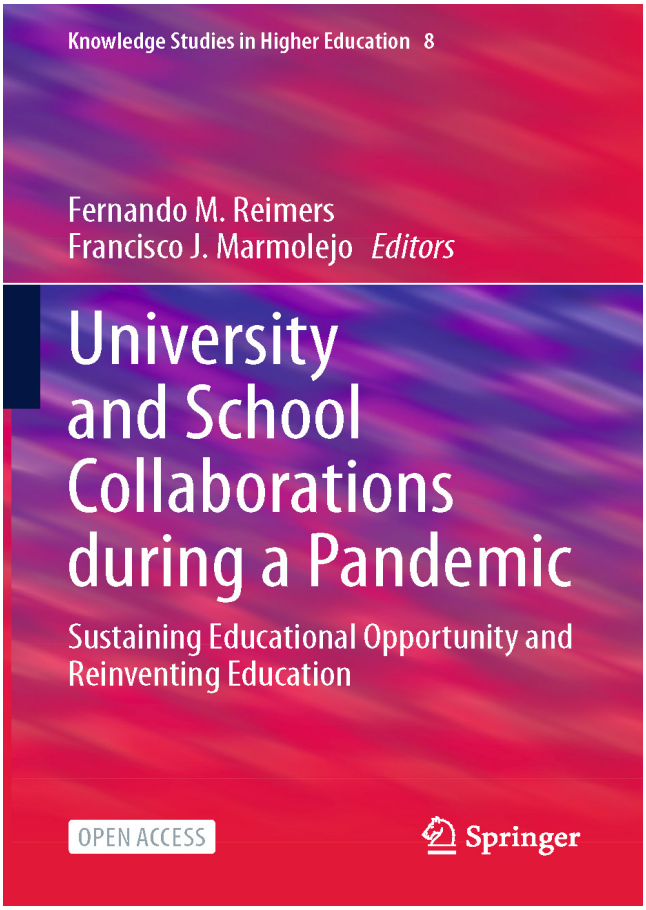
Fernando M. Reimers, Francisco J. Marmolejo (Eds.). (2022), *University and school collaborations during a pandemic. Sustaining Educational Opportunity and Reinventing Education*. Springer.



The sphere of education got the hardest hit ever due to the Pandemic Crisis 2020 which is still on, generating mindboggling challengers for the educators worldwide. Each particular school and higher education institution had to cope with the unexpected circumstances single-handedly and fast. The experience of the universities maintaining the studying process not only in house but also in elementary and secondary schools under their supervision is collected in the monograph called *University and School Collaborations during a Pandemic. Sustaining Educational Opportunity and Reinventing Education,* edited by Fernando M. Reimers and Francisco J. Marmolejo (2022).

The monograph is the book aimed at investigating and accumulating expertise of 20 universities from all over the world volunteering to share the results of their case studies of coping with the pandemic crisis in education, covering the sustainability of the educational process, curriculum programs realization, teaching skills development, digital tutorial programs creation, as well as collaboration with parents and authorities. Overall, the book is a comprehensive an applicable read with 22 chapters designed to come up with useful collectible advice on the activities resilience in the times of crisis.

The book can be useful not only for educators, teaching and schooling managers, but also such stakeholders as state officials, authorities and parents.

The authors employ a consciousness-raising approach as regards various ways of arranging online studies at all the levels of a comprehensive educational system – from elementary school to postdoctoral students' guidance.

Chapter 1 of the book headlined *Leading Learning During a Time of Crisis. Higher Education Responses to the Global Pandemic of 2020* written by Fernando M. Reimers and Francisco Marmolejo is a lead-in article providing an insight into the world universities' expertise of dealing with the multi-focal crisis, which struck all the spheres of life so unexpectedly and overwhelmingly. It is a study of the universities' capacity in transitioning to online teaching-learning format as well as the readiness of the universities to render support to elementary and secondary schools.

This chapter is entirely devoted to the analysis of accumulative expertise of 20 universities worldwide – including countries with different economic background – from developing to developed ones as well as those with rapidly growing economies. It briefly considers the capacity of universities to collaborate with the communities in solving the urgent challenges of the pandemic time. According to the researchers' estimates, 1.712 million learners worldwide were impacted by the school and university closure. This way the educators had to deal with the most severe emergency ever, making students rely on online learning, radio, television, mobile applications and printed materials.

Firstly chaotic, with the time the process of online learning appeared to be well-managed in schools and fairly adapted to the new reality with the help of universities' instruction and guidance.

The researchers identified 20 universities around the world volunteering to collaborate with elementary and secondary schools. To this end, a special questionnaire was developed for the universities under consideration, monitoring their cooperative activities with schools under the charge.

This way, in-depth case studies were worked out by the universities of Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, India, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Portugal, Qatar, Russia, Spain, Turkey, the USA and Vietnam.

64% of the respondents turned to direct support of their universities to elementary and secondary education institutions in order to instruct, render help and expertise, come up with learning resources to provide continuity of studying. They have developed partnerships with schools and teaching staff this way.

This chapter is an especially valuable one for it provides a questionnaire the universities participating had to fill in and respond with. On the basis of this questionnaire the necessary data were accumulated, analyzed and processed to measure the engagement of universities into the assistance of schools.

Chapter 2 called *Fundação Getulio Vargas' Efforts to Improve Basic Education Before, During, and After the Pandemic* written by a group of Brazilian authors Claudia Costin, João Lins, José Henrique Paim, Marieta de Moraes Ferreira, Raquel de Oliveira, Teresa Pontual, and Vinicius Farias Santose is a case study of the activities of the only Brazilian university taking part in the accumulative research. Already at the very initial stage of the pandemic FGV High School established the necessary partnerships and provided digital materials and programs to educational institutions across Brazil, benefiting 3.5 million students. To spread online content and teaching materials free of charge they created 2 monitoring centers, arranging teaching programs for educators, seminars and webinars for policymakers throughout the pandemic. As well as FDG leveraged its resources directed at educating professionals and secondary school students.

What is particularly remarkable in this aspect is that the pandemic boosted collaboration of different departments of the university in working out solutions and programs for basic education continuity, which is of major importance since Brazil is the biggest country of Latin America.

Chapter 3 under the heading *Pontifcia Universidad Católica Support for the School System During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Chile* authored by Ernesto Treviño, Magdalena Claro, and Lorena Medina considers the expertise of the neighboring Chile and one of its leading universities in supporting the local school system. As we may judge here has appeared an array of obstacles – firstly, school system if highly atomized in this country, secondly, two-thirds of schools are private-subsidized. It ultimately complicated the ability to reach all of them as well as deliver assistance. Nevertheless, with this purpose separate faculties started providing consultancy on educational issues, as well as there were multi-focal partnerships arranged of several universities in order to settle the oncoming challenges.

Chapter 4 headlined *Desafío TEP– Positive Educational Trajectories. A Public-Private Alliance to Strengthen Public Education During the Pandemic,* written by Juan PabloValenzuela and Simon Rodriguez describes the experience of another Chilean university, the biggest and the oldest in the country, of mitigating the problem of school exclusion during the pandemic. What's more, this university mostly concentrated its efforts on public schooling, including elementary and secondary, on par with support rendering to government in working out the necessary programs and consulting.

Chapter 5 called *Reimagine Elementary and SecondaryLearning During the Pandemic: Tsinghua University* by *Deyu Woody Wang, Weihang Cheng, Yun Jin, and Manwen Ivy Guo* includes information about the Chinese Tsighua university. It is defining, discussing and rationalizing the benefits provided by the university to the elementary and secondary learning during the hard times. The challenges were enthusiastically treated by the faculty, since technologies inspire reforms in education. With this purpose they worked out a new tuition form with the introduction of new teaching and tutorial positions implying different obligations and sphere of responsibility – namely, learning buddies, lecturers, podcasters, mentors, organizing volunteers. This way no one was left behind.

Chapter 6 headlined *A Covid-19 Response with Years in the Making: The Contribution of EAFIT University to Basic and Secondary Education in Colombia During the Pandemic* authored by Claudia María Zea Restrepo, Diego E. Leal-Fonseca, María-Antonia Arango Salinas, and Laura Hernandez-Velez reports on one of the Columbian private universities involvement into providing consultancy to 96 certified Secretaries of Education, appointed by the governmental bodies across the country. On top of it, as a research institution working out computer-based courses for more than a decade, EAFIT university appeared to be helpful in granting educational resources to schools.

Chapter 7 called *Coping with Covid-19: Forging Creative Pathways to Supporteducational Continuity Amidst the Pandemic* and written by *Vidya Yeravdekar and Nidhi Piplani Kapur* describes the actions and changes triggered by the pandemic to be introduced not only in the university under consideration, but also in schools of different levels both in urban and rural areas.

The main problems, as described by the researchers, were teachers and administrators training and connectivity. Thus, the university under consideration invested heavily into the staff capacity building, ensuring at the same time strong partnerships with students and parents with special attention to their physical and mental health.

Chapter 8 entitled *Case Study on Distance Learning for K-12 Education in Japan: The NagasakiTakaoka Model* written by Masaki Umejima, Cherry H. Y. Wong, Jiro Kokuryo, Jun Murai,David Farber, Keiko Okawa, and Kan Suzuki provides the description of an outstanding case study of a Japanese university, establishing strong tights with the government and schools in the pandemic. The uniqueness of the case is in the policy of Japanese universities at large - they have been accruing expertise in online learning practices since the emergence of the Internet. The distance learning model the university worked out for schools was successfully applied in the pandemic. The main principle they worked out is flexibility, since tailored solution can't be good for all.

Three chapters of the monograph provide a kind of accumulative experience of three universities of Mexico, namely, *Chapter 9 Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de*

Puebla (BUAP). A Transversal Model to Support Educational Continuity authored by Fostering Resilience, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship Rodolfo Zepeda and Roberto Quintero covers the practice of this university of turning to online studies, which was a brand new experience for them. On par with it, they had to turn to the commitment to grant at least one digital course to each of their students – from upper secondary level to senior students and even faculty members, providing relevant academic, technical and administrative conditions.

Chapter 10 entitled *Academic Continuity During the Covid-19 Global Health Emergency:Education 4.0 and the Flexible-Digital Model of Tecnologico de Monterrey University in Mexico Supporting Secondary Education* written by Arturo Molina, Beatriz Villegas, César Pavel Ochoa, and Jhonattan Miranda describes the creation and overwhelming usage of an innovative Flexible-Digital Model to help support education continuity process in secondary schools of Mexico with the support of the university under consideration - from secondary school to university level, including post graduates. Tecnologico de Monterrey University in Mexico had a substantial base of online studying programs created in the previous few years.

To highlight the ultimate role of technology in this process there were 2 case studies conducted. The university comprising different level institutions successfully showed its preparedness for the sudden changes, turning to online resources. Luckily, this university appeared to be a rare exemption, as it had been specializing on designing and delivering digital education programs for 30 years running.

Chapter 11 of the monograph society – *University of Guadalajara: Transforming and Innovating Through Stronger Collaboration Between Higher and Upper-Secondary Education During the Pandemic* authored by Carlos Iván Moreno, Cesar Barba Delgadillo, Miguel Ángel Sigala and Ernesto Herrera Cárdenas speculates on the university's efforts on stronger collaboration and building tights with higher secondary education extending their assistance to schools. In sum, the initial panic of the coming challenges turned into the synergy of mutually advantageous cooperation and innovative educational model. Still there are a lot of grounded complaints that very few people get a higher education in Mexico these days.

This way we come to the conclusion that all the three universities in Mexico include upper-secondary system, but still there is a shortage of teamwork between universities and schools, This type of communication needs a new level, resilience and upgrading with the view of the job market and employment opportunities.

Chapter 12 headlined *University as State Agent or Social Actor: Al Akhawayn University and Social Responsibility* written by Mohammed Dahbi and Hassane Darhmaoui contains both a case study and a call for action. Their experience in Morocco is not much different from what was happening in the world, with just one minor detail. The university in question is established as a state institution but acts autonomously, which is a great benefit. This particular feature allows it to use the full potential of their sophisticated faculty and staff to contribute to the development of the society – which they consider to be the major responsibility of any educational institution. From the start of the pandemic the university serves as a helping hand for educating not only students, but also school children online as well as illiterate adults. It is performed online through placing video and audio presentations with assignments and feedback from the tutor. The university calls for providing other universities with autonomy for them to be able to use the utmost of their potential for bureaucracy not to interfere with the educational process.

Chapter 13 entitled *Taking a Strength-Based Approach: Bringing Student Homes into Schools during a Pandemic* composed by Jodie Hunter, Roberta Hunter, John Tupouniua, and Generosa Leach gives an outline of the work carried out in terms of school children learning mathematics under the supervision of university in the pandemic. In this context, New Zealand is portrayed as a country with tangible peoples distinction – the indigenous population does not always have due access to educational tools since they represent both lower socioeconomic as well as culturally and ethnically diverse groups. This way, the situation of home digital learning created for these students and their families an additional positive opportunity - to attend classes of mathematics without leaving home and get tutorial guidance through their studies. Many teachers perceived these synchronous lessons as an exclusive relationship creating process.

In *Chapter* under the heading *14 Supporting Schools in Times of Crisis: A Case of Partnerships and Networking with Schools the Institute of Education at the University of Lisbon* written by Estela Costa, Monica Baptista, and Nuno Dorotea, the authors dwell on Lisbon Institute's experience of collaboration with school clusters (1700 students), together coping with the maladies of the pandemic. The institute faced the necessity to manage two main problems – namely, to arrange longer-term projects with the purpose to improve students' learning through digital technologies as well as to enhance the teachers' capacity-building. The researchers came to the conclusion, that to make the process of online learning more successful, there should be first of all due support to the teachers provided in mastering online techniques and programs for them to acquire new skills but not merely upload students with extra paper work.

The Institute didn't not only come up with this research and training activities in undergraduate and graduate programs, but also established meaningful partnerships with various stakeholders of diverse levels of the education system.

Chapter 15 headlined *Educational Continuity During the Covid-19 Pandemic at Qatar Foundation's MultiverCity* authored by Buthaina Ali Al Nuaimi, Hend Zainal, and Francisco Marmolejo appears to describe a most substantial support coverage of the country's educational system from preschools to doctoral higher education by the Qatar Foundation (QF) providing multifocal development of the country in all the spheres. Apart from education, the foundation is a helping hand in supporting innovation, health, culture, and community development. This case study examines the created synergies between Higher Education and Pre-University Education in the conditions of continuity and resilience during the pandemic all over Qatar. The Foundation provided online delivery of all the programs for learners, innovative professional development programs for

teachers to back them up in new circumstances. The Foundation also initiated several international conferences to discuss the experience perspectives at the global level. The transition to digital education appeared to be rewarding since the Foundation has been cementing the links between all the education stakeholders for the past 25 years.

Chapter 16 under the headline *Supporting Elementary and Secondary Education During the Pandemic: A Case Study from the National Research University Higher School of Economics* written by Kosaretsky Sergey and Likhatskikh Elena, describes their experience during the pandemic of rendering support and even providing online university lessons and lectures to elementary and secondary schools of Russia. Bearing the responsibility for the well-being of the community, HSE took the effort of monitoring the situation in schools, leading supportive discussion, training school personnel, providing online instruction, helping students, parents and teachers in the lockdown, arranging online learning to guarantee the continuity of remote learning. As a result, the researchers concluded, that such challenges require an interdisciplinary approach.

Chapter 17 called *Community Building in Times of Pandemic: University Camilo José Cela, Spain* authored by Miguel Ángel Pérez Nieto, Nieves Segovia Bonet, Ignacio Sell Trujillo, and Carlota Tovar Pérez gives an overview of the unique experience of students participating in the educational process as teacher assistants to primary and secondary teachers. This collaboration is the most outstanding due to the number of students and schools involved and the efficiency of its implementation.

The greatest merit of the Spanish case is in the humanitarian aid provided to Syrian and Kenyan refugees in the form of educational support by the Spanish students and educators. Apart from classes, training and psycho-emotional assistance that volunteers from the bachelor's degree granted to children and families in social exclusion, Spanish teachers also provided educational methodologies and resources to refugee teachers.

Chapter 18 entitled *University-K-12 Collaboration During the Pandemic: The Case of Turkey* is preparedby Derin Atay. As the researcher claims, the shift from traditional to online learning was especially complicated for elementary and secondary schools. In this context, the Faculty of Educational Science of Bahçeşehir University of Turkey arranged systematic academic and psychological support not only to the students of the university under consideration, but also offered online training sessions and web seminars to the teachers of schools. Furthermore, they prepared a course of successful lectures for parents how to deal with stress, anxiety and exhaustion in the hard times. The collaboration proved to be highly fruitful and needs continuity.

The following two articles are fully devoted to the description of the situation in two higher institutions of the United States of America. *Thus, Chapter 19* headlined *Arizona State University: A Learning Enterprise Supporting P-12 Education in the Covid-19 Pandemic* by Carole G. Basile tells us that this university responded to the new reality quickly and effectively in rendering assistance to schools and concentrating its endeavors on the three main aspects of facing the challenges. Having worked out a solid base for online education the university provided support and curation to its feeder schools, continuously instructing the staff and granting free educational resources to the learners.

Chapter 20 under the title *MIT Full STEAM Ahead: Bringing Project-Based, Collaborative Learning to Remote Learning Environments* written by an extended group of American researchers- Claudia Urrea, Kirky Delong, Joe Diaz, Eric Klopfer, Meredith Thompson, Aditi Wagh, Jenny Gardony, Emma Anderson, and Rohan Kundargi appears to be the most informative and illustrative chapter of the monograph, equipped with an array of tables, bar charts, pie charts and pictures illustrating the students' performance.

The case is based on the initiative launched by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in response to the pandemic to support remote collaborative school learning and concentrates on the description of the learning packages usage, which were accessible on online platforms and available to learners all over the world. The learning packages covered various spheres of studies- from music to mathematics. As researchers claim, during the time of their usage, over 150.000 learners worldwide got access to the programs and materials.

Chapter 21 headlined *Initiatives to Promote School-Based Mental Health Support by Department of Educational Sciences, University of Education Under Vietnam National University* is composed by Hoang Phuong Hanh, Tran Thanh Nam, and Le Anh Vinh. This is an exceptional case study here in the book since the biggest and most

reputable university of Vietnam, on par with online studies, concentrated its expertise on delivering psychological help and promoting mental health services to different groups engaged into the educational process – students and their parents, school staff, university educators and decision makers. The experiment was a great success as highly evaluated by all the stakeholders. The university under the consideration is ready to work on the resilience of the initiative and mobilize the resources to their full potential. The detailed description of the activities undertaken makes this chapter exceptionally valuable.

Chapter 22 called *Conclusions: What Innovations Resulted from University–School Collaborations During the Covid-19 Pandemic*?- summarized by the editors of the book - Fernando M. Reimers and Francisco Marmolejo is the last chapter of the monograph containing a detailed study of all the previous chapters. It points out the positive aspects the universities reached through their cooperation with schools, stakeholders and authorities in solving mutual problems of continuity with the due maintenance of educational programs sustainability in the pandemic.

As we can see, most of the case studies speculate on the aspects of education continuity online, support arrangement, extra educational opportunities for all which appeared to be crucial in the time of Pandemic. As the study shows, different countries and institutions had a different capacity, previous experience, resources and funding for combating the challenges and reaching their objectives. Nonetheless, they did their utmost and all their endeavor bore fruit.

Nevertheless, we find it our responsibility to highlight the most remarkable chapters with the cases, which are worthy looking up to. Firstly, it is the case of Chapter 5 of China, coming up with a clue of appointing different types of tutoring personnel in the universities and school in the emergence situations. Secondly, Chapter 13 – namely, the case of providing support to indigenous families in terms of studies. Thirdly, Chapter 17 gives a great tip of engaging students into the educational process of schools as teachers and assistants, which is rather novice speaking about online practice. Fourthly, Chapter 20 describing the case of online learning packages delivered to 150.000 students. The fifth remarkable case is Chapter 21 – with Vietnam university providing help with mental and psychological health of students of all levels, on par with all the stakeholders engaged.

Adding up to its acuteness, the book contains a number of valuable data and tips on coping with various educational challenges in the circumstances of any possible lockdown or emergency. The book is an excellent-quality, multi-faceted and up-to-date research that provides a detailed valuable analysis of 20 case studies of the world's universities and their experience of advantageous collaboration with schools in the times of global hardships.

In sum, the book is a precious and irreplaceable for the time being research on learning processes continuity during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

Thanking our reviewers, 2021

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