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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ON-LINE ENGLISH CLASSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZENICA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has radically affected all aspects of people's lives around the globe, including higher education. Many countries enforced the shutdown of all non-essential economic activities, which led to the closure of universities and the abrupt transition to distance teaching and learning. The present paper investigates how this transition affected Zenica University EFL courses from the students' perspectives.

Key words: Covid-19 pandemic, higher education, students' perceptions, on-line EFL classes

Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic caused by a novel coronavirus is the gravest health crisis the world has experienced in a century. In the rush to eliminate pathways for spreading the vicious virus whose carriers can be asymptomatic, or with mild symptoms that can be confused for other illnesses, making it extremely hard to accurately detect infected people, responsible countries have decided to declare states of emergency. Emergency response measures such travel restrictions, closure of frontiers, workplaces, public buildings, schools and universities took place in many countries. "As of mid-April, 2020, 1.5 billion children and youth were affected by school closures in 195 countries, from pre-primary to higher education" (UNESCO, 2020). Table 1 depicts the proportion of higher education students affected out of the regional total tertiary student populations based on World Bank calculations (World Bank, 2020).

<i>Disaggregated by region and as proportion of total disrupted tertiary education students</i>			
<i>Region</i>	<i>Out-of-school tertiary education students</i>	<i>Total tertiary students</i>	<i>%</i>
East Asia and Pacific	72, 391, 442	73, 538, 139	98%
Europe and Central Asia	36, 948, 926	38, 030, 033	97%
Latin America and Caribbean	27, 007, 997	27, 111, 868	100%
Middle East and North Africa	14, 282, 666	14, 282, 666	100%
North America	20, 640, 820	20, 640, 820	100%
South Asia	40, 468, 782	40, 468, 782	100%
Sub-Saharan Africa	8, 399, 127	8, 533, 188	98%
Grand Total	220, 139, 760	222, 605, 496	99%

Table 1. Total affected tertiary education students by region, as of 8 April 2020

A vast number of different publications were published offering information about the impacts of Covid-19 on higher education worldwide. Some of them were compiled and published by the International Association of Universities (IAU), a non-governmental organization in official partnership with UNESCO. The publications include recommendations on how higher education institutions can respond to Covid-19 and support students affected by coronavirus. Key topics related to Covid-19 education response are covered by UNESCO Education Sector's Issue Notes that "provide evidence of good practices, practical tips and links to important reference to mitigate the short and long term impact of school closures" (IAU, 2020). Apart from publications intended for higher education institutions, many of them are addressed to governments and national authorities. Thus, UNESCO has issued a suite of support materials for governments and stakeholders entitled *Safe to learn during Covid-19* and OECD has released the paper *Education Responses to Covid-19* that proposes a framework and recommendations to help governments form and implement strategy for education responses to Covid-19. Furthermore, the United Nation's General Policy Brief *Education in the time of Covid-19 and beyond* has called for national authorities and the international community to work in partnership to propose education as one of the most important items on recovery agenda.

Of particular importance are the publications on how the Covid-19 pandemic affected higher education students. One of them focused on students in exchange programmes and was published as the IAU's joint paper *Covid-19 Impact on Higher Education: Institutional and Students' Perspectives* in collaboration with the Erasmus Student Network (ESN). The ESN undertook an on-line survey for students in exchange programmes that received 21 930 answers and the IAU launched a global on-line survey for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) around the world that collected 424 answers. Topics covered by both surveys included impact on student exchange, communication between HEIs and students, shift to on-line learning and student support. The data collected by ESN revealed that 42% of the students were grounded in their hosting country, that there was a not negligible percentage of HEIs where communication between HEIs and students was not efficient, and that 58% students, when asked who supported them during the pandemic, identified their host university, and only 44,6% identified their home university. The data also showed that students "faced mental health issues, such as the feeling of anxiety and isolation" (IAU&ESN, 2020).

A larger scale online survey that targeted not only exchange students but all higher education students across the world was conducted by researchers from the Faculty of Public Administration at the University of Ljubljana and their international partners. This on-line questionnaire that was based on and extended *The European Students' Union Survey* (2020) received 31 212 students' answers from more than 150 institutions and 100 countries in six continents. This comprehensive global study asked students "what their life looked like during the Covid-19 pandemic, including teaching and learning, social contact, as well as how they were coping with situation emotionally" (Aristovnik, et al. 2020). It provided "systematic insight into students' satisfaction and perception of different aspects of their lives during the pandemic, including their opinions on the immediate and distant future" (Aristovnik, 2020). The data showed

that students were primarily concerned about their future professional career and study issues, that they were anxious, frustrated and bored, that they received support from teaching staff and universities' public relations. It is worthwhile to note that greater satisfaction with the universities was expressed by "more hopeful and less bored students, students who were more satisfied with their academic work/life, social science students, students with more resources (with a scholarship and/or the ability to pay the overall costs of study) and those who were studying in Europe" (Aristovnik, 2020).

The students who showed above average satisfaction with most of the survey topics are those who responded from the United States (392 students). All the more, they were highly satisfied (among the top five countries) with lecturers' responses in terms of 1) *providing course assignments* (e.g. readings, homework, quizzes) *on a regular basis*, 2) *responding to questions in a timely manner*, and 3) *informing students on what exams will look like in the new situation*. The US students also showed high level of satisfaction with *sending presentations* and *written communications* as part of a reorganization of tutorials/seminars and practical classes and with *e-mail communication* as part of supervision/mentorships. However, they showed below average satisfaction when assessing *access to a quiet place to study* or *to a desk* and their *government response to the Covid-19 crisis*.

A total number of 309 students who responded from Bosnia and Herzegovina¹ also showed above average satisfaction with most of the survey topics, but their satisfaction level with lecturers' responses in terms of 1) *providing course assignments* (e.g. readings, homework, quizzes) *on a regular basis* (ranking 8th in the list of all countries), 2) *responding to questions in a timely manner* (ranking 18th), and 3) *informing students on what exams will look like in the new situation* (ranking 6th), was not as high as with the US students. It is the same with the satisfaction level regarding reorganization of tutorials/seminars and practical classes (*sending presentations* (ranking 19th) and *written communications* (ranking 10th)). Unlike the US students, the B&H students also showed above average satisfaction regarding *access to a quiet place to study to a desk* (ranking 13th) and *to a desk* (ranking 3th). Similarly to their US peers, the B&H students showed below average satisfaction when assessing their *government response to the Covid-19 crisis*.

The present study is a more narrowly oriented as it targets only students at one university and focuses on one aspect of a student's life during the Covid-19 pandemic. It explores students' perceptions of the on-line English language classes and remote teaching and learning during the summer semester of the 2019-2020 academic year at the University of Zenica. The students and teaching staff at our university were forced to stay at home and shift from face-to-face to online teaching and learning as of 12 March, 2020 when our country enforced a complete lockdown due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Within a relatively short amount of time they had to adapt to a completely different teaching methodology that required both of them to be digitally literate and to have access to the necessary infrastructure for on-line teaching and learning (quiet place to work, desk, PC/laptop, headphones and microphone, webcam, required software and programmes and

¹ The students who responded from Bosnia and Herzegovina are presumably those who study at the School of Economics and Business (University of Sarajevo) since this is the only HEI partner of the Faculty of Public Administration (University of Ljubljana) in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

good internet connection). The shift from on-site to on-line classes was not an easy task because the majority of study departments did not have already established digital learning platforms that could ease the abrupt transition to distance teaching and learning.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how this transition affected English language courses from the students' perspective in terms of syllabi, course materials, workload, communication and office hours. It also aims at getting insight into 1) students' readiness to abruptly shift to on-line teaching and learning, 2) worries and problems they encountered during distance learning, 3) their thoughts on advantages/disadvantages of on-line English classes and 4) their suggestions on how to improve them.

Materials and Methods

Study Participants and Procedure

The study participants were undergraduate students at four faculties of the University of Zenica (Faculty of Philosophy, Polytechnic Faculty, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Metallurgy and Materials Science) who attended the English language courses during the summer semester of the 2019-2020 academic year. The respondents in the targeted population were recruited by their lecturers and were promised points after completing a survey that was launched via the application Google Forms on 31 May 2020 and remained open until 10 June 2020. A total of 133 students responded of which 68 students at the Faculty of Philosophy (51.12%), 32 at the Polytechnic Faculty (24.06%), 30 at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (22.55%) and only 3 at the Faculty of Metallurgy and Materials Science (2.25%). The distribution of the participants by the year of study is as follows: 52 first-year students (39.09%), 31 second-year students (23.30%), 35 third-year students (26.31%) and 15 fourth-year students (11.27%).

Measures

The data were obtained through an on-line questionnaire composed of 21 mainly closed-ended questions. The students' perceptions of the English language course syllabi, course materials and workload referred to the following three statements and one question:

1. Professors/teaching assistants adapted their syllabi to the new circumstances
(I totally agree – I agree to some extent – I totally disagree)
2. Professors/teaching assistants sent useful and interesting course materials
(I totally agree – I agree to some extent – I totally disagree)
3. How often were you given online homework assignments?
(Several times a week – Once a week – Never)
4. Homework assignments/presentations deadlines were reasonable
(I totally agree – I agree to some extent – I totally disagree)

The students' perceptions and preferences regarding communication and office hours referred to the following four statements and three questions:

5. How often did you establish any form of communication with your professors/teaching assistants?

- (Several times a week – Once a week – Never)
6. What form of communication do you prefer?
(Via email – Via video meetings (Zoom/Skype) – Via Google classrooms)
 7. After sending an email to your professors/teaching assistants I expect to receive the response
(The same day – Within the next 1-2 day(s) – Within the next 3-7 days)
 8. Professors/teaching assistants responded to your emails
(The same day – Within the next 1-2 day(s) – Within the next 3-7 days)
 9. On-line office hours are useful
(I totally agree – I agree to some extent – I totally disagree)
 10. Did you ask your professors/teaching assistants to hold online office hours?
(Often – Sometimes – Never)
 11. Did you ask your professors/teaching assistants to give you additional explanations of some topics?
(Often – Sometimes – Never)

In order to get insight into students' readiness for on-line classes, worries and problems they encountered during on-line classes, their thoughts on advantages/disadvantages of on-line English teaching and learning and their suggestions on how to improve it, they needed to provide the answers to the following questions/statements:

12. I was ready for on-line classes
(I totally agree – I agree to some extent – I totally disagree)
13. I was able to stick to my study habits
(I totally agree – I agree to some extent – I totally disagree)
14. What made it difficult for you to attend on-line classes? ...
15. On-line classes suited me because I could better manage my study time
(I totally agree – I agree to some extent – I totally disagree)
16. On-line classes suited me because I received more feedback from professors/teaching assistants
(I totally agree – I agree to some extent – I totally disagree)
1. It would be desirable for on-line classes to be held during several weeks in normal circumstances as well
(I totally agree – I agree to some extent – I totally disagree)
2. What are disadvantages of on-line classes? ...
3. What are advantages of on-line classes? ...
4. It worries me ...
 - that I won't be able to fulfil all obligations
 - that I won't pass my exams
 - that I will fall behind my fellow students
 - other ...

5. If on-line classes had to be held during the next academic year, what suggestions would you have for its improvement? ...

The percentages of the answers to close-ended questions were calculated for all respondents. The answers to open-ended questions were thoroughly analyzed and the most frequently used phrases and terms were identified in order to be visually presented in the word cloud.

Results

English language course syllabi, course materials and workload

In our survey, students were asked whether their lecturers had adapted syllabi to the new circumstances, provided useful and interesting course materials, how often they had been sent homework assignments and whether homework assignments deadlines were adequate. The data obtained is given in Table 2.

Statement/question	totally agree		agree to some extent		totally disagree	
	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%
Professors/teaching assistants adapted their syllabi to the new circumstances	49	36.84	70	52.63	14	10.52
Professors/teaching assistants sent useful and interesting course materials	59	44.36	68	51.12	6	4.51
Homework assignments/presentations deadlines were reasonable	82	61.65	48	36.09	3	2.55
How often were you given online homework assignments?	several times a week		once a week		never	
	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%
	52	39.09	81	60.90	0	0

Table 2. *English language course syllabi, course materials and workload*

Communication and office hours

The closure of the university deprived lecturers and students of face-to-face communication and on-site office hours forcing them to completely turn to other channels of communication. The data in Table 3 reveals how often the students established any form of communication with their lecturers, what form of communication they preferred, whether the lecturers' responses to their emails were well-timed. It also shows whether they found on-line office hours useful, whether they asked their lecturers to hold online office hours and to provide them additional explanations for some topics.

Question/Statement	several times a week		once a week		never	
	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%
How often did you establish any form of communication with your	49	36.84	83	62.40	1	0.75

professors/teaching assistants?						
What form of communication do you prefer?	Via email		Via video meetings (Zoom/Skype)		via Google classrooms	
	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%
	36	27.06	44	33.08	53	39.94
After sending an email to your professors/teaching assistants I expect to receive the response	The same day		within the next 1-2 day(s)		within the next 3-7 days	
	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%
	39	29.32	87	65.41	7	5.26
Professors/teaching assistants responded to your emails	38	28.57	72	54.13	23	17.29
On-line office hours are useful	totally agree		agree to some extent		totally disagree	
	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%
	45	33.83	78	58.64	10	7.51

Table 3. *Communication and office hours*

Students' readiness, worries and problems during on-line classes

Due to the sudden physical closure of the faculty the transition from onsite to online lectures, seminars and tutorials had to be quick. Neither the lecturers or the students had time to actively prepare for a mandatory online teaching and learning process, and to anticipate possible problems. Therefore, some of the study goals were to examine how ready the students had been to manage remote teaching and learning, what major problems they encountered and what worried them most. The data we gathered regarding the students' readiness for online teaching and learning are presented in Table 4.

Statement	totally agree		agree to some extent		totally disagree	
	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%
I was ready for on-line classes	45	33.83	69	51.87	19	14.28
I was able to stick to my study habits	29	21.80	85	63.90	19	14.28

Table 4. *Students' readiness for on-line English classes*

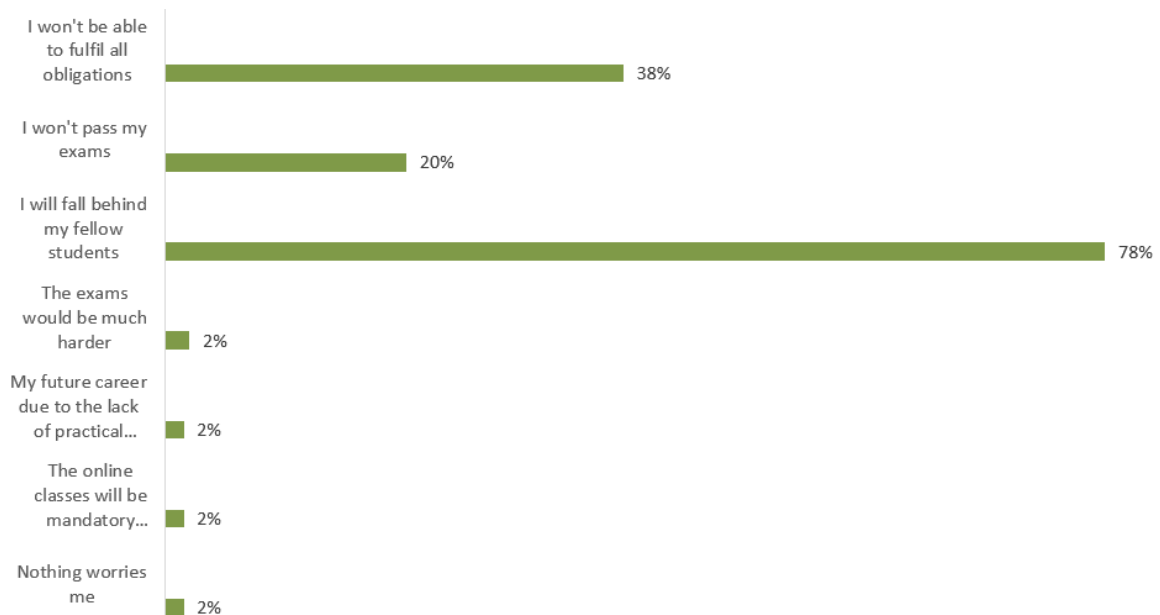
One of the major problems faced by our students during computer-based classes seems to be protection of their mental health. As shown in the word cloud visualization (Figure 1)², the most frequently occurring terms in students' responses were *mental health issues*, *health issues*, *technical issues*, *too much HAs (homework assignments)*, *too many other obligations*, *no quiet place to study*, *use of different applications*, *no video online lectures*, *not enough of feedback*, *loss of motivation*, *loss of a daily routine*, *having to share a PC/laptop with siblings*.

² The size of each phrase indicates its frequency.



Figure 1. Word cloud of the problems faced by students during on-line classes

When asked about their worries, apart from the offered answers (*I won't be able to fulfil all obligation, I won't pass my exam, I will fall behind my fellow students*), students were able to add their own answers. The responses we received are provided in Graph 1.



Graph 1. Students' worries

Students' thoughts on advantages/disadvantages of on-line classes and their suggestions

The data obtained regarding students' thoughts on virtual education during the Covid-19 pandemic are displayed in Table 5.

Statement	totally agree		agree to some extent		totally disagree	
	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%	<i>Ss</i>	%
On-line classes suited me because I could better manage my study time	24	18.04	79	59.39	30	22.55

On-line classes suited me because I received more feedback from professors/teaching assistants	28	21.05	71	53.38	34	25.56
It would be desirable for on-line classes to be held during several weeks in normal circumstances as well	34	25.56	52	39.09	47	35.33

Table 5. *Students' reflections on on-line classes*

Table 6 depicts the students' perceptions of advantages and disadvantages of the mandatory online teaching and learning.

Advantages of on-line classes	Disadvantages of on-line classes
Being able to attend classes without leaving home	Too much HAs
Flexibility in time management	Spending too much time in front of computer screen
Having more time for other obligations	Lack of practical classes
Availability of study materials	Not enough real-time video lectures
Having a lot of time for exploring the course topics on your own	Lack of social interaction among students
Getting individual feedback from lecturers	Not enough feedback
Teamwork	Lack of interaction between students and lecturers
Less financial costs	Unpreparedness of some lecturers
Much easier to concentrate	Technical issues (inadequate Internet connection)
A lot of interaction with lecturers	Tiring for eyes
Recorded lectures	Having to type all HAs
No pauses between lectures	A lot of stress
Being able to attend classes even when you are sick	Lack of quiet place to attend classes

Table 6. *Advantages and disadvantages of on-line classes*

In the last part of the questionnaire, the students were asked to write down some suggestions on how remote teaching and learning process could be improved. The students predominantly expressed the importance of *real-time online lectures, adherence to class timetable, more on-line quizzes and study materials, more on-line office hours and feedback, better communication between lecturers and students, recorded lectures, less homework assignments, adaptation of syllabi and assessment criteria and utilization of only one e-learning platform.*

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the students' perceptions of the on-line English language classes during the first wave of Covid-19 pandemic in the summer semester of the 2019-2020 academic year. Due to the closure of the university, teaching and learning processes had to be

abruptly shifted from classrooms to on-line environment, which led to the need of adapting teaching methodologies. When questioned about how the transition affected English language courses in terms of syllabi and course materials, 89% students agreed that the lecturers adapted their syllabi to the new circumstances and 95% students reported that the lecturers provided useful and interesting course materials. The data obtained lead to the conclusion that lecturers managed to adapt to a completely different teaching methodology and find solutions to continue teaching and learning process despite the difficulties raised by the pandemic.

In terms of workload, 39% students said that they were given online homework assignments *several times a week*, and 61% of them received them *once a week*. The majority of students (98%) agreed that homework assignment and presentation deadlines were reasonable, but they complained that there were too many. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that one of their suggestions on improving virtual teaching and learning was to reduce the amount of homework assignments. Some studies showed that a feeling of significantly large workload may be evoked by a lack of motivation and self-discipline students face while studying isolated at home (Bao, 2020). Whatever the reason may be, lecturers should make an effort to balance online teaching and self-learning through various homework assignments.

Regarding the communication between students and lecturers, and online office hours, 40% students answered that their preferred form of communication is the one via Google Classroom, 33% preferred video meetings via Zoom/Skype, and 27% of them opted for communication via email. As one of the problems, the students listed a lack of video online lectures and thus suggested that this type of virtual teaching should be mandatory. 65% students shared that after sending an email to the lecturers they expected to receive the response within the next 1-2 day(s) and 54% of them reported that their expectations in that regard had been met. These findings show that lecturers managed to provide timely responses. As expected, on-line office hours had been reported to be useful by a majority of students (92%), and therefore they proposed having more on-line office hours in case of future remote teaching and learning. This should be understood as an important signal for lecturers to include more on-line office hours.

In relation to students' readiness for on-line English classes, the worries and problems they faced during virtual teaching and learning, 86% students reported to have been ready for the shift to on-line classes and the same number of them responded to have been able to adhere to their study habits. They were mostly worried that they would fall behind their peers, that they would not be able to fulfill all obligations or pass their exams. Some expressed worries about their future professional career due to the fact that they had been deprived of the opportunity to spend time in schools to gain practical teaching experience and to apply theory in practice. Regarding the problems, the students reported not to have a quiet place to work and having to share a PC/laptop with their siblings. They also said that on some occasions they had encountered problems with the Internet connection and some other technical issues. However, the most frequently mentioned problem was the state of mental and physical health, which leads to the conclusion that the protection of students' overall health is of the utmost importance. In that regard, higher education

institutions, student organizations and health professionals should closely collaborate in order to offer students timely and efficient psychological support.

When it comes to the students' perceptions of advantages and disadvantages of the online teaching and learning, the most frequently mentioned advantages were *being able to attend classes without leaving home, flexibility in time management, having more time for other obligations, availability of study materials and having a lot of time for exploring the course topics on your own*. On the other hand, the most frequently mentioned disadvantages were *too much homework, spending too much time in front of computer screen, lack of practical classes, not enough real-time video lectures and lack of social interaction with fellow students*. Despite all these disadvantages, 65% students agreed that it would be desirable for on-line classes to be held also during several weeks of regular on-site teaching process.

As a final remark, it is important to emphasize the importance of making long term plans for implementing on-line teaching and learning more effectively not only during some crisis situations but also during regular on-site teaching and learning process in order to offer quality education and better learning opportunities to the future generations.

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PERCEPCIJA STUDENATA O ČASOVIMA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA PUTEM INTERNETA NA UNIVERZITETU U ZENICI TOKOM PANDEMIJE COVID-19

Sažetak

Pandemija Covid-19 je radikalno uticala na sve aspekte života ljudi širom svijeta, uključujući visoko obrazovanje. Mnoge zemlje su u potpunosti obustavile sve aktivnosti koje nisu neophodne za funkcionisanje privrede, što je dovelo do zatvaranja univerziteta i iznenadni prelazak na učenje na daljinu. Ovaj rad istražuje na koji način je ova promjena, iz perspektive studenata, uticala na časove engleskog jezika na Univerzitetu u Zenici.

Ključne riječi: *pandemija Covid-19, visoko obrazovanje, percepcija studenata, časovi engleskog jezika putem interneta*