

Learning and Teaching Languages for Specific Purposes in a Digital Environment

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English, German and Italian are taught as languages for specific purposes at the Polytechnic of Šibenik. In the past year, teachers have faced the challenges of holding online classes and evaluating students' knowledge and achievements online due to the covid-19 pandemic. The past period was equally challenging for students. More than ever before, students and teachers had to use their digital skills for using various online tools in both learning and assessment of the acquired knowledge. Knowledge of languages for specific purposes offers key language skills as listening, speaking, reading, and writing for specific purposes related to the study programme a student has chosen. The authors of this paper conducted a survey and interviews among students and teachers of the Polytechnic of Šibenik. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the teachers' and students' experiences with the new digital learning environment and enhance teaching and learning languages for specific purposes.

Keywords: language for specific purposes, digital environment, English, German, Italian

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, we can witness the rapid development of information and communication technologies that require a certain amount of knowledge in their use.

Since March 11, 2020, when the epidemic of COVID-19 caused by the SARS-Cov-2 virus was officially declared in the Republic of Croatia by the Ministry of Health (2020), at the proposal of the Croatian Institute of Public Health, lectures at higher education institutions took place live and online alternately.

Although modern IT was used in "standard" foreign language lectures and communication, online lectures have presented a challenge to both professors and students. In a discussion among colleagues the authors agreed and sympathized with a statement by Kolbylarek et al. (2021, p. 74) who state that: "Remote learning is somewhat reminiscent of clumsy attempts at coping with an uncomfortable situation and attempts at obtaining the best possible results, despite worsening working conditions".

The online survey conducted among students of the Polytechnic of Šibenik shows how they managed to follow online lectures and in what way they were able to acquire necessary language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The survey also shows student satisfaction with online lectures.

Interviews among language teachers of the Polytechnic were conducted to get insight into online teaching strategies during the pandemic.

2. Methodology

The authors read various recent articles and research papers on the topic of remote language teaching during the covid-19 pandemic to improve their online English, German and Italian language lessons. One of the first facts they agreed upon was the fact that some students might struggle with or be adversely affected by online learning. According to Kavaliauskienė & Anusienė (2009, p. 34) teachers must acknowledge the fact that not all learners enjoy using digital technology in learning due to diverse personalities of learners.

The purpose of the survey is to provide feedback information on the quality of online lectures and language exercises of foreign languages for specific purposes at the Polytechnic of Šibenik. Another target is to find out whether student and teacher motivation is compromised in an online learning environment and how students assess their acquired knowledge and skills.

The online questionnaire was created in Google Forms and consisted of 6 questions. The survey was anonymous, conducted in Croatian language and for the purpose of this paper questions and answers were translated into English. The conducted research was done via an online poll from June 28, 2021, until July 2, 2021. Types of questions used in the questionnaire were:

- multiple choice (respondents were provided with multiple answers options and had to choose only one or in some cases more than one),
- linear scale (respondents had to assess on a scale from 1 to 5; 1 being poor or insufficient and 5 being excellent) and
- short answers (respondents were asked to write down short comments, opinions and/or suggestions).

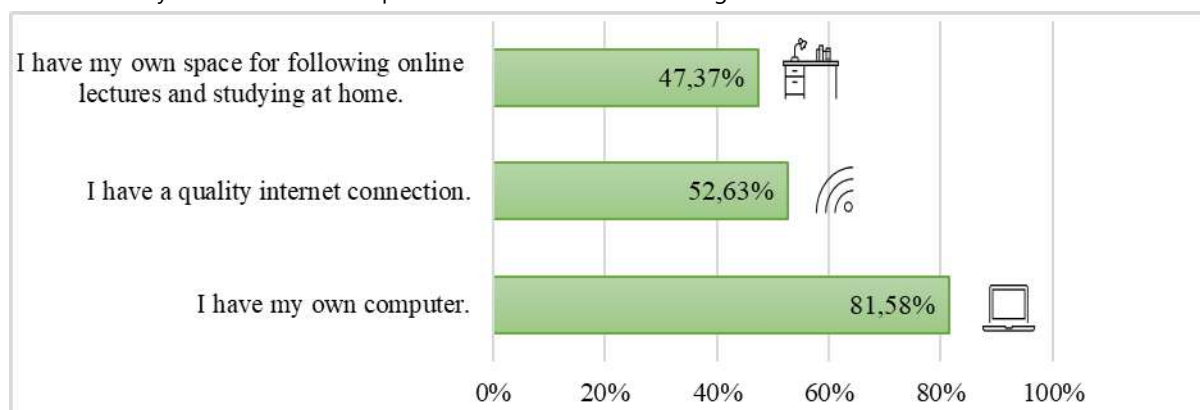
Language teachers at the Polytechnic of Šibenik conducted multiple discussions on language teaching and interviewed each other on the topic during the covid-19 pandemic. They shared their experiences and tried to conclude via qualitative analysis how to most effectively train their students the four language skills, and how to achieve the learning outcomes set by their institution's syllabuses.

3. Results and analysis of questionnaire on student online learning experience

The first three questions were concerned with: the study respondents attended, the level of the attended study and their status as a student at the Polytechnic of Šibenik. A total of 76 students responded to the questionnaire: 9 students of Traffic studies, 14 students of IT management, 21 students of Administrative law and 32 students of Tourism management. 72.4% were 1st year students and 26.3% were 2nd year students. Although foreign language for specific purposes courses at the Polytechnic of Šibenik are conducted in the first two years of undergraduate study, one third-year student also participated in the survey. As for their status at the Polytechnic of Šibenik, 61.8% of the respondents were full time students and 38.2% were part-time students.

The respondents could tick three predefined answers showing whether they had satisfactory conditions at home for following online lectures, as this is seen as one of the preconditions for efficient remote learning. The chart below shows their responses.

Chart 1: Survey results of students' preconditions for online learning



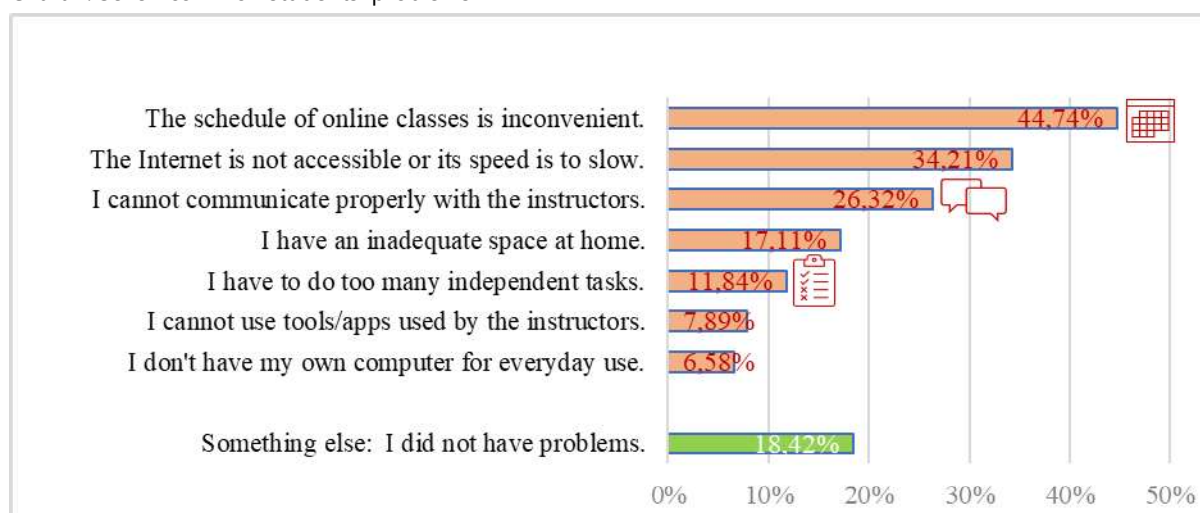
Source: Authors' survey

Less than half of the respondents had their own space to follow online lectures and study. Half of the students had a quality internet connection. Most students had their own computer. It is evident that a slight majority of students had adequate technical preconditions to follow online lectures.

Question 2: What difficulties did you experience during online classes?

Aware of the fact that students experienced various difficulties while following online lectures, the survey aimed at how these difficulties manifested themselves. Respondents were offered seven most frequent problems they might have encountered, but they were also given the opportunity to add an answer not provided in the questionnaire.

Chart 2: Seven common students' problems



Source: The authors

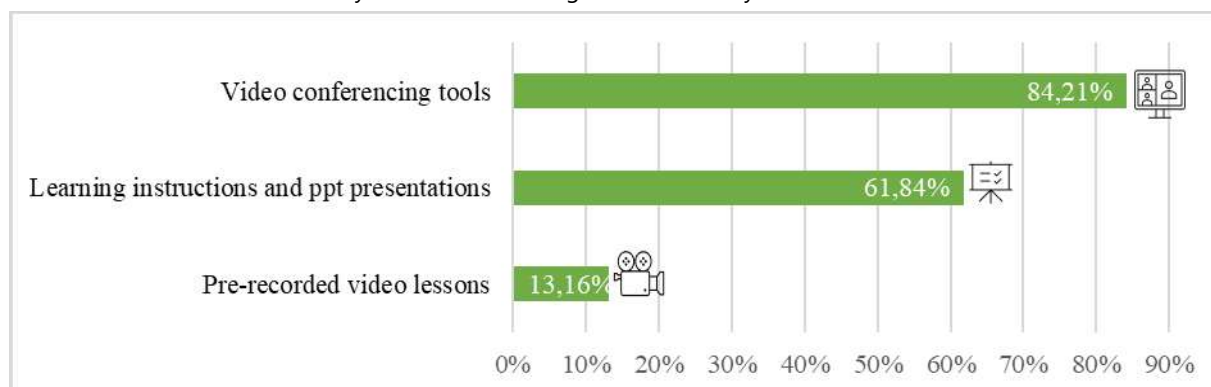
The questionees could choose more than one answer. Almost half of the students (~45%) had difficulties with the schedule of online lectures, although the professors' efforts were to have the lectures based on the usual schedule of live lectures at the Polytechnic. One third of respondents (~34%) had some sort of problem connected to data flow. One quarter of students (~26%) had problems in communication with their instructors. About 7.89% of questionees had software related problems and 6.58% of questionees did not have a personal computer or laptop computer. Less than 20.00% of the respondents claimed that they did not

have any kind of problem while following online lectures.

Question 3: How did online English lectures take place?

As the instructors held their online lectures and exercises in three ways, the intention of the survey was to acquire information about the frequency of three common online teaching methods as shown in the chart below:

Chart 3: Three most common ways of remote learning used at the Polytechnic of Šibenik



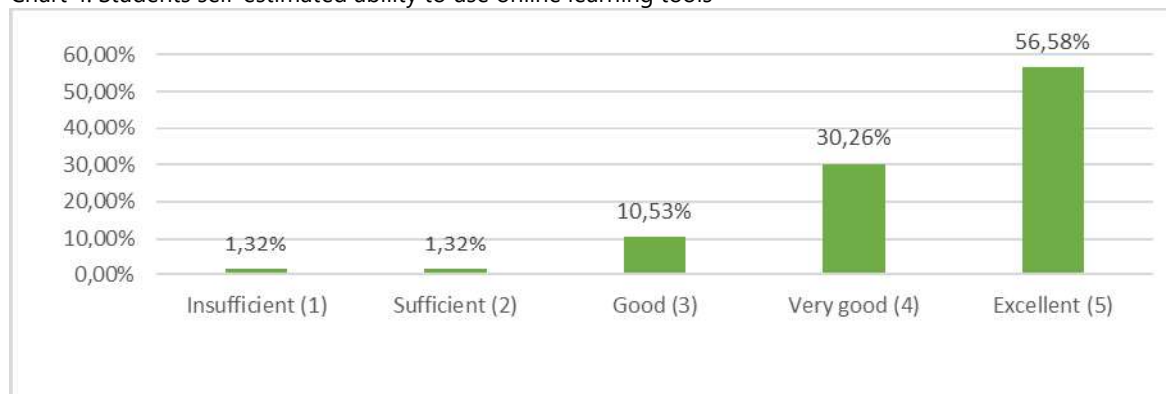
Source: The authors

Online lectures and exercises took place via online conferencing tools such as Microsoft Teams, Webex or Zoom. The e-learning Platform of the Polytechnic was used to instruct students collectively. Instructions with assignments and interactive materials were also uploaded on the e-learning platform. It is necessary to state that most of the times professors would publish certain materials on the e-learning platform after synchronous online lectures. Pre-recorded videos were used only occasionally as lecture materials and were primarily intended at students who were not able to participate in the live online lectures and language exercises.

Question 4: How would you rate your ability to use online learning tools?

Certain prerequisites are required for adequate following and participating in online lectures, and among other things, it is a certain level of knowledge of the work in various tools and applications used by the instructors to conduct online lectures. The questionees were asked to self-assess the level of their personal abilities and knowledge in using online learning tools. Their self-assessment of abilities in using online learning tools was very high, as can be seen in the chart below:

Chart 4: Students self-estimated ability to use online learning tools



Source: The authors

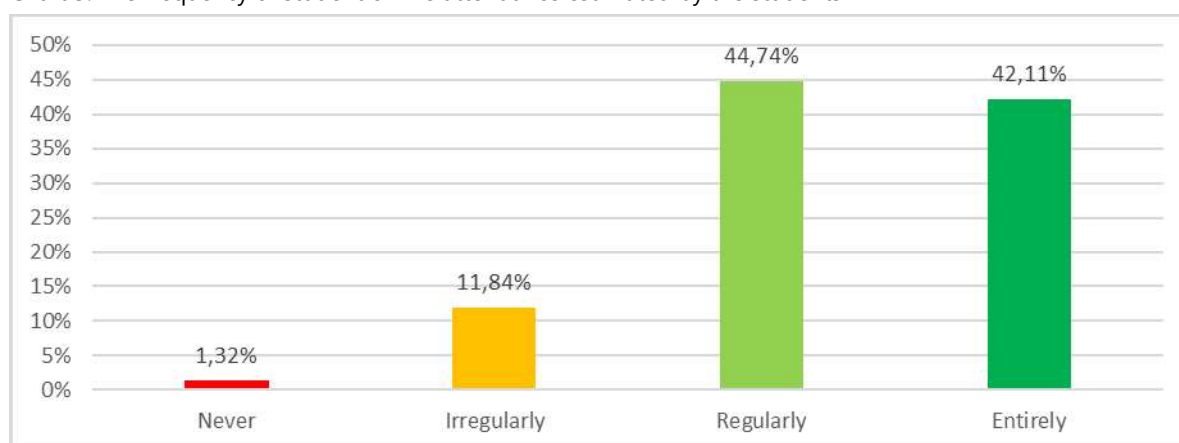
More than half of the respondents, on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being insufficient and 5

being excellent), rated themselves as excellent and almost one third believe that they are very good in using online learning tools and applications. One of ten respondents find their abilities and knowledge to be good, and only two of them (2,6%) admit that they do not have the necessary skills.

Question 5: How frequently did you follow online classes?

Regularly following online lectures is just as important as attending lectures at the Polytechnic. Students were instructed to follow and participate in online lectures as often as possible. As can be seen from the table below, a large majority of students (86.85%) reported that they had attended online classes either regularly or entirely, a minority of questionees (13.16%) responded that they had followed online lectures irregularly or not never.

Chart 5: The frequency of student online attendance estimated by the students

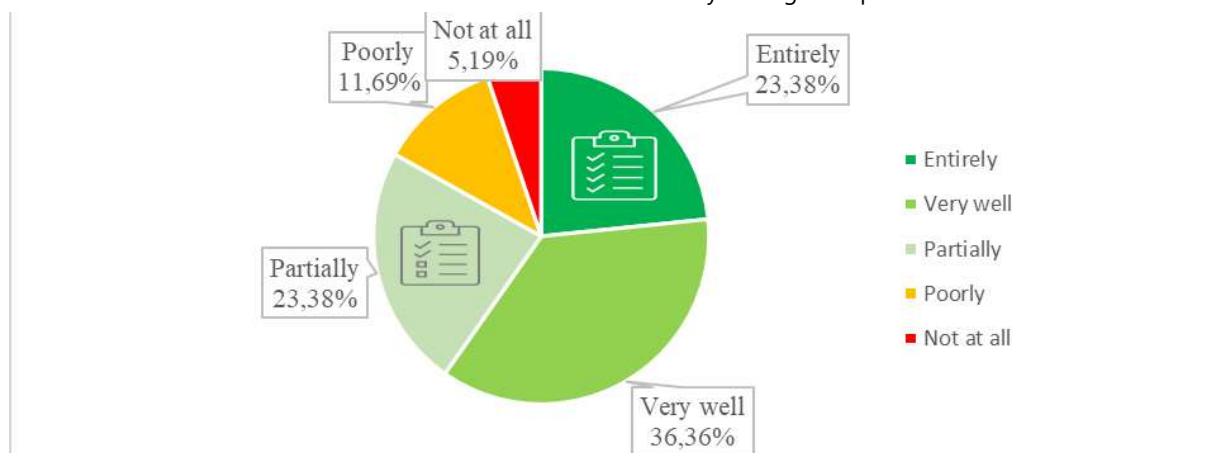


Source: The authors

Question 6: How well have you understood the material covered during the online lectures?

When asked to assess their understanding of the learning material covered in the online lectures, students generally stated that they understood it very well. Almost one of four students believe that they fully understood the material covered in the lectures.

Chart 6: Student estimation on how much of the online content they managed to process



Source: The authors

More than 36% of the respondents state that their understanding of the lecturing material is very good. About 25.3% state that they have understood the materials partially. Just a smaller number of students (16.8%) state that they have understood the material poorly or not at all.

4. Analysis of interviews and discussions conducted with teachers of English, German and Italian for specific purposes

At the Polytechnic of Šibenik, languages for specific purposes are taught in English, German and Italian. Language teachers at the Polytechnic conducted multiple discussions on language teaching and interviewed each other on the topic of online teaching during the covid-19 pandemic. They all agreed that listening, speaking and reading were skills that could easily be trained live online. Writing seemed to be a more challenging skill for synchronous online lessons, which is why written exercises were mostly left for assignments announced on the online learning platform of the Polytechnic.

Due to experienced online fatigue reported by students, teachers had to shorten learning materials and to introduce more variety in learning materials instead. All the language teachers reported a significant increase in preparation time for online classes. While preparation is key for success, there are already wonderful resources available online. It is however a truth generally acknowledged that even intrinsically motivated language learners start online courses but do rarely finish them if left alone. Students need their language instructor for motivation, but also as facilitators of communication among students. According to Jae (2019, p. 6) the use of closed caption videos in college education can effectively aid instructors in transferring knowledge to students. Interactive captioned video material for the German language is available by Deutsche Welle (2018), which claims to be Germany's international broadcaster and one of the most successful and relevant international media outlets.

Image 1: Screenshot of subtitled learning material in German



Source: (www.dw.com), D. (2021). New roommates (1) | Meine Wohnung | DW Learn German. Retrieved 20 July 2021, from <https://learn german.dw.com/en/new-roommates-1/l-37425763/e-37425787>

Similar interactive materials were used also for Italian (and English lessons at the Polytechnic. The language teachers agreed on the fact that they succeeded in achieving the outcomes set by the syllabuses of their institution.

5. Conclusion

A digital online environment is an interesting but challenging environment for teaching and learning English, German and Italian for specific purposes. One future target set by the authors is to create interactive and captioned video material with their students. Students and language teachers at the Polytechnic of Šibenik selected three activities for successful online learning:

1. Synchronous online language tuition via video conferencing tools is the type of lesson preferred among students and language teachers. It is important to let the students discuss or read aloud about current topics related to their syllabus or give a volun-

- tary short online presentation. A one slide presentation with a two-minute time limit leaves opportunity to have multiple but diverse presentations by different students.
2. Assignments with detailed instructions are essential for acquiring writing skills. Many students like to work together on a single document, which is easily achievable by opening a single shared online document.
 3. Language teachers should motivate learners to record their own voice and use their recordings for the development of interactive learning material or presentations.
- Nowadays there are many online tools that allow us to conduct online lectures and classes as well as communicating remotely. Despite certain shortcomings of online teaching, the overall impact on the educational process is positive, either in online lectures or in the lecture hall. Digitization of educational content enhances the perception of the same among today's young generations who already adopt a large amount of information electronically.

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