



THE ATTITUDE OF STUDENTS FROM THE NATIONAL SPORTS ACADEMY “V. LEVSKI” TO SPECIALIZED ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING ONLINE

T. Hristakieva*

Department of Language Learning and Information Technologies, National Sports Academy
“V. Levski”, Sofia, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

Foreign language learning at the National Sports Academy “V. Levski”, Sofia is specialized in the fields of sport, physical education and rehabilitation. The present study was organized with first and second year students from the three faculties of the Academy. The aim of the study was to find out about students’ problems and preferences with reference to the specialized English language courses conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The methods include an enquiry and statistical analysis. The acquired results show that students are satisfied with the course of study and part of them would like to have online language learning in the future. The conclusions drawn are that online education could be used as an additional element of the specialized foreign language courses at the Academy.

Key words: language learning, online education

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning online has become widely accepted in the last two years as a result of the COVID - 19 pandemic, which has affected all spheres of social life, including education. There was an initial period of doubt and embarrassment in the early spring of 2020, among students, teachers, lecturers and administrative staff in the system of education. However, it was quickly overcome and Bulgarian schools and higher education institutions managed to adapt to the emergency situation and to complete their work successfully in the new conditions. Online learning has been defined as a form of distance learning using a mobile phone, laptop or another electronic device and internet access, providing teachers and learners with an opportunity to exchange information and knowledge in a specific field (1-2). Online learning could be synchronous - when the teacher and learners interact at the same time from different places, and asynchronous -

when the teacher sends assignments, materials and instructions for students to work at their own pace and time. Together with the many advantages - time management, access to a variety of resources etc., there are challenges to face – internet connection and technical devices to be provided, special skills to be acquired by teachers and learners, etc. (1-2). Students’ attitude to online learning, their willingness and motivation to participate in the online courses are also important considerations (3). Research results on the problems during the first year of online education have shown that the major challenges university students and lecturers had to face could be divided into two main groups – technical problems and educational issues. Technical problems included deficiencies in internet connection, problems with the use of the educational platform supported by the respective higher institution, no regular access to a PC or other electronic devices mainly on the part of the students, inadequate computer or other technical skills, etc. With reference to educational issues, no matter that working online was found innovative, useful and convenient, students expressed their preference for face-to-face

*Correspondence to: *Tatiana Hristakieva, Department of Language Learning and Information Technologies, National Sports Academy “V. Levski”, Sofia, Bulgaria, hristakieva@yahoo.com, phone 0886941778*

education, since online learning could not provide normal personal contact with their colleagues and lecturers (4-6). In this connection, blended learning was considered as a suitable form of education in the emergency conditions. Blended learning as a new form of integration of traditional classroom and online education has become very popular in foreign language teaching. As a number of authors have suggested (7-9), it involves a careful selection of suitable materials, face-to-face and online approaches and techniques, aiming at the desired learning results. Language learning at the National Sports Academy “V. Levski” is specialized in the field of sport, physical education and kinezitherapy. Its main objective is to prepare students to use a foreign language for their future professional development. This is a difficult task, because of the variety of sports with specific terminology and also, physical education, health and fitness issues, which have to be covered in a limited number of language classes in the Bachelor’s and the Master’s courses of study at the Academy. Lecturers have to prepare their own teaching materials to suit the students’ needs. An interactive approach is used in the language courses, and students are expected to have a more active role in language learning, taking part in games, preparing materials, giving presentations on specific topics, etc., as it has been widely accepted that students’ active participation in the process of learning is the key to language acquisition (10-12). It is not always easy to make students take an active part in the lesson. There could be various reasons for that – inadequate skills and knowledge, lack of confidence to use the language, fear of being “humiliated” in public., etc. (13). The lecturer’s task is to find the ways to overcome the problems. It is important to try to learn more about students’ interests and needs in order to offer appropriate language materials and techniques.

AIMS AND METHODS

The present study was organized with a group of first and second year students from the three faculties of the National Sports Academy “V. Levski”, Sofia. The aim of the study was to find out about students’ problems and preferences with reference to the specialized English language courses in the 2020-2021 academic year. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the greater part of the education courses at the Academy in the year 2020-2021

were conducted online. The English language course work, which was the subject of our study, was organized in the following way: course materials were presented on the platform of the National Sport Academy, written tasks and their feedback were exchanged via e-mail, and oral communication and discussions were organized in Skype sessions for the students’ groups. The subjects of the study were 65 students, 20 - men and 45 – women, aged 19-21. The greater part of the subjects - 50, 8% were students from the Faculty of Public Health, Health Care and Tourism, 32, 3% of the subjects were students from the Faculty of Sport and 16, 9% - from the Faculty of Pedagogy. The study was organized at the end of the second term of the 2020-2021 academic year. A questionnaire with 12 questions, 10 close ended and 2 open ended, was prepared for the research. It has to be noted here, that the respondents have given more than one answer on some of the questions. The methods of the research included enquiry and alternative statistical analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the results shows that to the first question, whether the students were satisfied with the English language course in an online environment, 80% of the subjects in the enquiry answered that they were very satisfied, and 13, 8% answered that they were satisfied, 6,2 % were not very satisfied, nobody stated that they were not satisfied (**Figure 1**). In other words, the vast majority of students in the enquiry were satisfied with the English language course conducted online

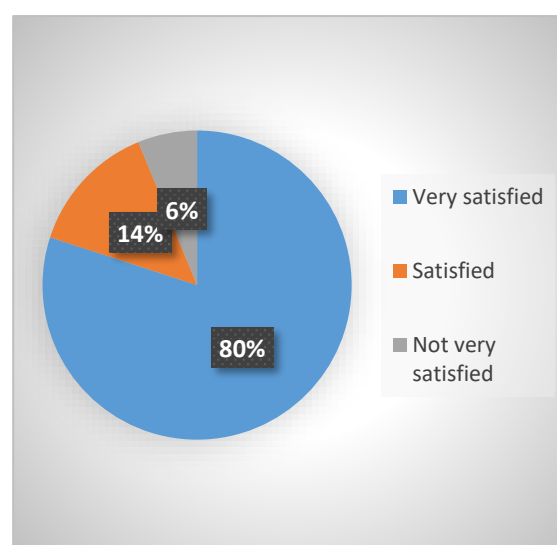


Figure 1. Students’ satisfaction with online language learning.

To the second question – which activities they found useful, most of the respondents pointed several items in the enquiry: work with specialized sport materials (69,2%), grammar exercises (56,9%), oral communication (66,2%), written tasks (53,8%). These results show that students have a critical attitude to their own language performance and an ambition for improvement of their language skills and specialized language knowledge. On the third question, whether the students received adequate feedback on their work online, 89% have answered positively. This is a good result, showing that students received the necessary feedback information concerning their educational needs, no matter that there was no face-to-face communication between them and the lecturer, most of it was provided in the oral sessions on Skype and via e-mail correspondence of the lecturer with each of the students. The following three questions were more related to the “technical provision” of the online course. To the first question, whether they have constant access to internet connection for the online English language course, 90,8% answered positively, and 9,2 % answered negatively. Consequently, the majority of the students had internet access, in order to work and complete their language education online. The following question – about the type of technical appliance students used for their education – 49, 2% pointed a mobile phone, 47,7% used a laptop and less than 4 % referred to their desktop computer. These results reveal students’ preference for more convenient and easily accessible technical appliances, which can be used at all times, at home and away. On the third question, about the most common technical problems related to the online language courses, the subjects of the enquiry have given more than one answer (**Figure 2**). Thus 38,5% of the respondents noted bad internet connection as one of the serious problems in their educational courses, and 32, 3% mentioned problems, such as computer or other appliance breakdowns. Another 46, 2 % of the subjects stated that they had difficulties to attend online classes regularly due to personal or professional obligations. These figures have to remind lecturers that, when working online, they should always be prepared for unexpected situations with a “backup plan”, offering individual materials and help, or postponing the seminar for another time.

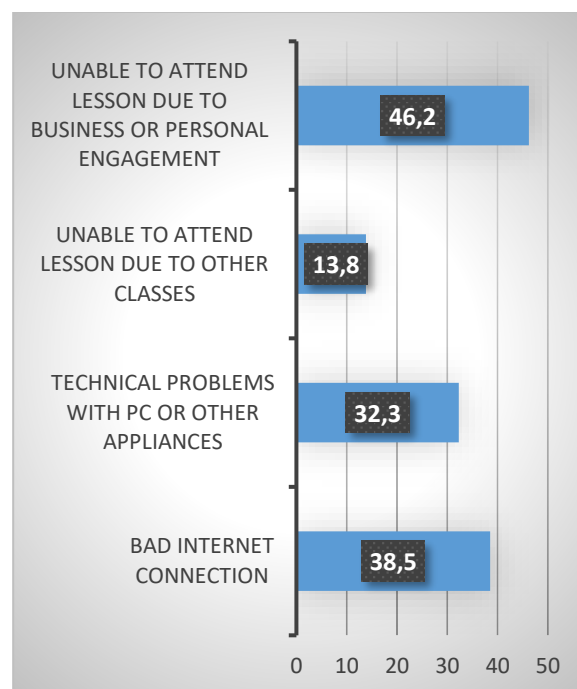


Figure 2. Common problems in online language learning.

The next question about what should be improved in the online language course content and organization was open ended. Most of the subjects (36) expressed their satisfaction with the content and organization of the English language course and stated they had no remarks for improvement. A small group expressed their preference for face-to-face classroom education (6), and for more time for conversation and discussions during the lessons (3). Still others stated they needed more specialized materials in their field (5), greater variety of tasks (3) and more grammar exercises (2) to work on. The acquired results on students’ evaluation of the content and organization of the specialized language courses are generally positive, however, they point to the fact that there should be a constant aim for improvement and variety, and an effort to address the individual language needs and interests of the learners. In this connection, students should be involved in more individual and group tasks to prepare and present online. Finally, to the question which form of learning they prefer for their language courses, half of the subjects (52,3%) answered that they would like to study online, another big group (32,3%) stated they would like to have face-to-face classroom education and a smaller group (15,4%) chose the blended form of learning – part of it online and part of it face-to-face in class (**Figure 3**).

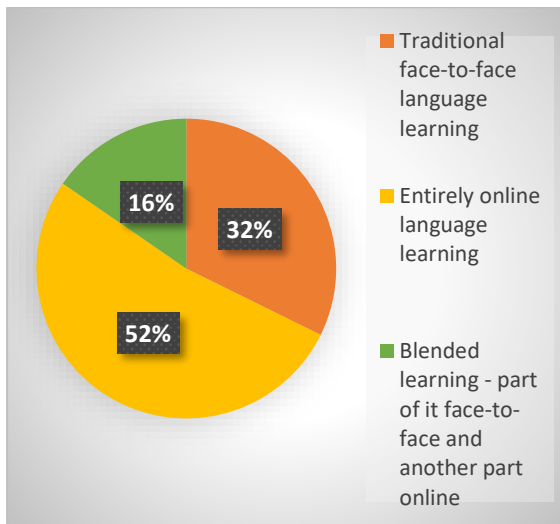


Figure 3. Preferable form of language learning.

The results from this last question show that after a year of practice, the acceptance and approval of online education among students has increased in comparison to the results from a study conducted a year ago - in the spring of 2020 with another group of students from the Academy (14). It is interesting to note, that there is a stable number of students supporting entirely face-to-face education, which remains the same in the results from both studies – about 32%. Obviously the opinion about face-to-face education as the best option for language learning is shared by a great number of students. However, it is also recognized that modern technologies and online education can be very useful as an additional form to support the learning process.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the enquiry results show that sport and kinezitherapy students are satisfied with the specialized English language courses conducted online in the academic year 2020-2021, no matter the problems faced in the course of study. In the second place, positive attitude to online education has increased among sport students. Although it cannot replace face-to-face classroom education, online learning can be successfully used as part of the specialized language courses at the Academy or when need arises.

REFERENCES

1. Shivangi Dhawan, Online Learning: A Panacea in the Time of COVID-19 Crisis, *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, Vol. 49(1) 5–22, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239520934018>, visited 07.06.2021.
2. Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P., Guàrdia, L., Koole, M., Online University Teaching During and After the Covid-19 Crisis: Refocusing Teacher Presence and Learning Activity, *Postdigital Science and Education* 2:923–945, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00155-y>, visited 07.06.2021.
3. Aguilera-Hermida, A.P., College students' use and acceptance of emergency online learning due to COVID-19, *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100011>, visited 07.06.2021.
4. Getova, A., Mileva, E., Angelova-Igova, B., Online Education during Pandemic, According to Students from Two Bulgarian Universities, *Pedagogy. Bulgarian Journal of Education, Research and Practice*, pp. 211-219, Vol. 92, Number 7s, 2020.
5. Doncheva, L., Spasova, I., Georgiev, M., Sport' Students' Satisfaction with Their Foreign Language Studies during the Outbreak of COVID-19, *Pedagogy. Bulgarian Journal of Education, Research and Practice*, pp. 268-280, Vol. 92, Number 7s, 2020.
6. Gautam., P., Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Learning, October, 10 2020, <https://elearningindustry.com/advantages-and-disadvantages-online-learning>, visited 7.06.2021.
7. Garrison, R., Vaughan, N. , Blended Learning in Higher Education. Framework, Principles and Guidelines, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2008.
8. Slavova, V., Effectiveness of Foreign Language Blended Course. A Case Study of Sport Students at National Sports Academy“V. Levski”, *Research in Kineziology*, Vol. 45, №1, pp.95-98, 2017.
9. Slavova, V., Hristakieva, T., Marinova, N., Study of Students' Satisfaction in Blended Foreign Language Environment, International Scientific Congress “Applied Sport Sciences” Balkan Scientific Congress, “Physical Education, Sport, Health” 15-16 Nov. 2019, Proceeding Book, pp. 423-426, 2019.
10. Brown, H.D., Teaching by Principles. An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy, Prentice-Hall, Inc., USA, 1994.
11. Harmer, J., The Practice of English Language Teaching, fourth edition, Pearson Education Limited, 2013.

12. Doncheva, L., Interactive Teaching Methods in the Second Language Acquisition by Sports Students, GISAP Philological Sciences, 2014.
13. Zhelyazkova, Z., Challenges of the Application of Linguistic Knowledge in the Speech Practice of the English Language, *HRISTAKIEVA T. Trakia Journal of Sciences*, No 3, pp 189-193, 2020.
14. Hristakieva, T., Kinezitherapy Students' Attitude to Foreign Language Learning in Pandemic Conditions, *Pedagogy*, Volume 92, Number 7s, pp. 252-259, 2020.