

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE DISTANCE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract. The present study examined the relation between students' preferred mode of learning (online, face-to-face, and hybrid) and their opinions about the effectiveness of an online distance learning English language course under the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. The students favoring online distance learning constituted a significantly smaller proportion of the group versus those in favor of face-to-face instruction ($p = 0.004$). A significant relation was established between the students' preferred mode of education and their opinions about the course effectiveness ($p < 0.001$). The students whose preferred form of education was compatible with online distance learning rated the course effectiveness at 93%, those favoring face-to-face education at 58%, and the supporters of hybrid education at 81%. Students' comments and suggestions for the teaching practice in the post epidemic time are discussed.

Keywords: distance online language teaching; learner preferences, face-to-face teaching, hybrid teaching; language skills and competences

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic endorsed online distance learning as a predominant mode of education throughout the globe, irrespective of teacher and learner opinions and preferences. Therefore, it was anticipated that many would be unhappy with the rapid shift towards a relatively uncommon form of teaching and learning. It could be hypothesized that those less familiar with modern technologies also referred to as "digital immigrants" would be more reluctant to face the challenges than technologically savvy individuals, aka "digital natives" (Prensky 2001, 1-6).

Paradoxically, the controversy of the situation created unique opportunities for investigating different aspects of the impact of this enforced form of education on the parties involved in the process. To address one of these issues, the present study set out to examine how students with preferences compatible and incompatible with distance online learning perceived the effectiveness of an English language course delivered remotely online during the pandemic.

Related research

In contemporary teaching methodology, learners take a central role. Learner-centered approaches (Blumberg & Pontiggia 2011; Brown 2003; Smart, Witt & Scott 2012) have been promoted versus more traditional teacher-centered methods. Moreover, individual learning styles are being recognized as an important factor for successful learning (Arp & Woodard 2006; Hamada, Rashad & Darwesh 2011). A number of studies have reported a significant positive relationship between learners' attitudes and a compatible learning style (Eastmond 2000; Fahy & Ally 2005; Manochehri & Young). With the advancements in technology, the interest in the relation between learning styles and students' attainment in e-learning environments has increased (Allen, Bourhis, Burrell & Mabry 2002). The findings are somewhat controversial as some studies have reported a positive relationship between learning styles and success in distance education (Fahy & Ally 2005; Irani, Telg, Scherler & Harrington 2003; Manochehri & Young 2006; Mehlenbacher, Miller, Covington, & Larsen 2000; Soles & Moller 2001), whereas others have found no significant association (Ahn & Ahn 2000; DeTure 2004; Neuhauser 2002).

Second/foreign language teaching is not an exception to the general educational trends. Modern technology has created ample opportunities for developing learners' language competence and skills through interactive tasks with positive outcomes (Brodahl, Hadjerrouit & Hansen 2011; Kessler, Bikowski & Boggs 2012; Yim & Warschaue, 2017). Although distance language courses had increased in popularity in recent years, it was not until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 that they partially or completely replaced face-to-face language teaching for this period of time. An international survey conducted by the European Center of Modern Languages (ECML), involving 1735 respondents found that 30% of language teaching was delivered remotely and 70% was "a mixture of remote and face-to-face teaching". The latter, also referred to as hybrid teaching, was rated by 53% of the respondents as less effective than distance and face-to-face teaching, whereas some saw an advantage in the combination of online work with face-to-face interaction.

The present study was inspired by the ECML webinars on the topic of language teaching in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The respondents in the ECML survey were language teachers and educators at different educational levels, including private language centers, testing experts, and others. To expand on the perspectives, this study explored the opinions of language learners as representatives of the other side of the process.

Methodology

Purpose. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the effectiveness of distance language learning in relation to students' preferred mode of education: face-to-face, hybrid, and online distance learning. Understanding students' attitudes towards the newfangled modes of education can help teachers and educational

authorities make decisions that are not based on assumptions, but on facts which reflect students' needs and aspirations.

Participants. The study included 71 first year students enrolled in the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics at Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski", aged 19 to 23, mean age 20 ± 1.37 years. Of them, 36 (51%) were male and 35 (49%) female. At the beginning of the semester, the students' English proficiency was assessed at level B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages. The students' academic majors included Business Information Technology, Software Technology and Design and Software Engineering.

The online distance learning English language course. All participants took a required English language course through online distance learning during the winter trimester of 2021 at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lessons covered topics relevant to the needs and interests of the target group of students with an integrated approach to developing learners' language skills in listening, reading, speaking and writing. The teaching methodology followed principles of Task-Based Learning and Teaching (TBLT) which has been widely accepted as the main framework for technology-based language courses (Chapelle 2014; Ellis, 2003; González-Lloret 2015; Hinkelman 2018; Roessingh 2014). The course was delivered through Google cloud, selected among other options for its ease of use and variety applications, including: Gmail, Google Drive, Google Docs, Google Sites, Google Sheets. YouTube was also used for uploading and sharing of instructional videos and those made by the students as part of their course projects.

The assessment methods combined a variety of tools with an emphasis on performance-based tasks and digital portfolios in Google Drive. The assessment followed pre-determined criteria (Brown & Abeywickrama 2010; Schrock & Coscarelli 1996) which were made known to the students at the start of the course. The students could track their progress, grades and special awards through an online register on Google Sheets.

The survey. At the end of the trimester, after the final grades were entered, the students were sent a link to an online survey and asked to complete it anonymously and honestly. The response rate was 70%, including 71 respondents out of 102 students who took the distance learning English language course. The survey included a background section about students' age, gender, major and preferred mode of learning (face-to-face, hybrid, and online distance learning). The term *hybrid* was briefly explained as a "format that combines elements of face-to-face and distance online teaching". The questions eliciting students' opinions about the course covered the receptive skills (listening and reading), the productive skills (speaking and writing), and the overall efficacy of the course. The effectiveness was measured on a scale of 0 to 4, with increasing numbers marking higher levels of effectiveness. Students were also asked to provide short comments about the advantages and disadvantages of distance language learning.

Statistical analysis. The data analysis was performed using the statistical software IBM SPSS version 27 (2020).

The effectiveness of the course was described through the means and standard deviations ($\pm$ SD). Those parameters were compared between the three groups of students (face-to-face, hybrid, and distance online learning) through one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), followed by Tukey's post-hoc multiple comparisons test. The Chi-square test and Fisher's exact test were used for categorical data. All statistical tests were two-tailed and statistical significance was marked as follows: significant (*) at $p < 0.05$, very significant (**) at $p < 0.01$; and highly significant (***) at $p < 0.001$.

Results

Distribution of the participants by preferred mode of education. Face-to-face education was preferred by 31 (44%) of the participants; hybrid by 26 (36%), and online by 14 (20%). The students with preference for online distance learning constituted a significantly smaller proportion than the students with preference for face-to-face education ($p = 0.004$) and those with preference for a hybrid form of education ($p = 0.039$). The distribution of the participants by gender and preferred mode of education revealed a significant gender difference ($p = 0.048$) as 56% of the male students expressed preference for face-to-face education vs. 31% of the female. In contrast, 14% of the male students preferred online education

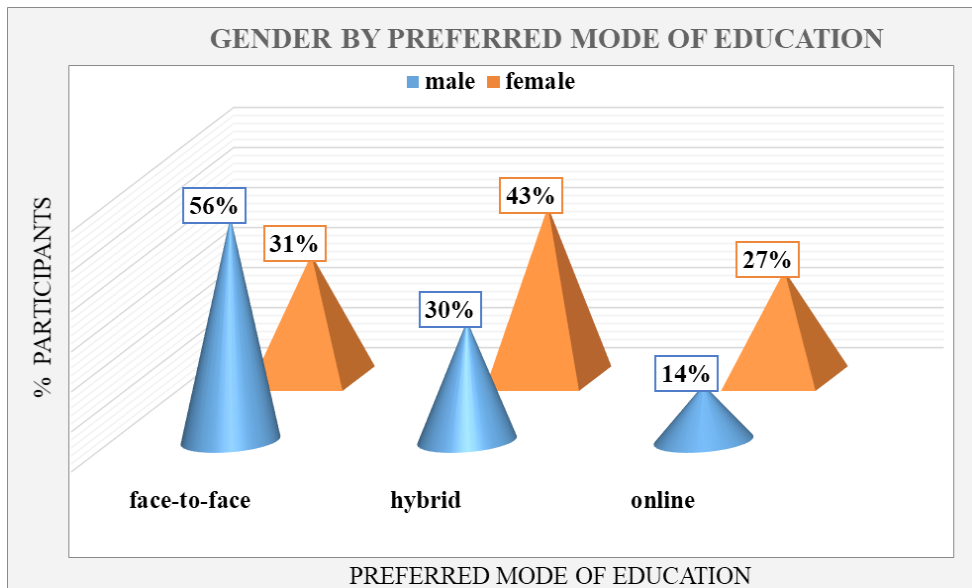
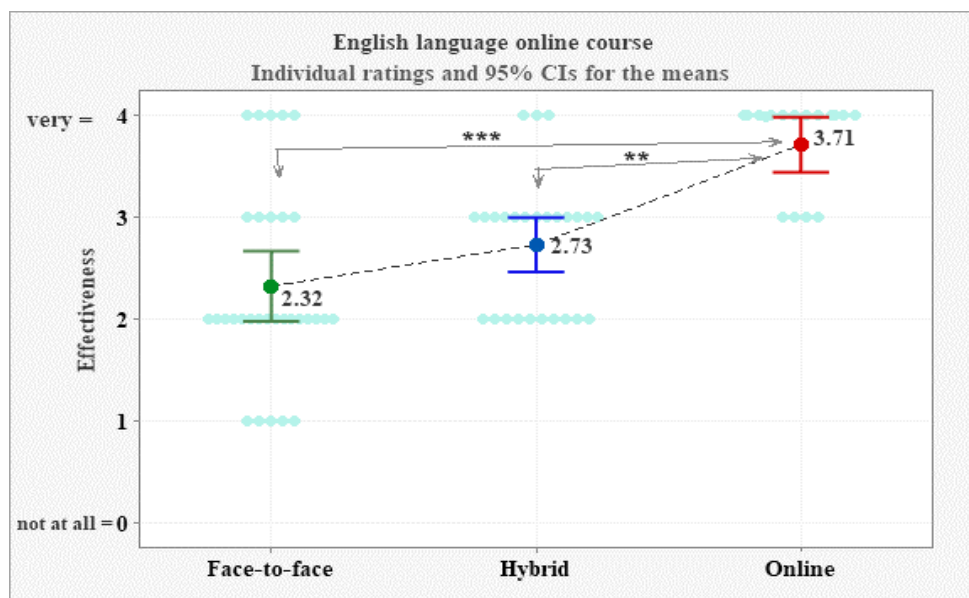


Figure 1: Participants' distribution by gender and preferred mode of education

vs. 27% of the female students. The hybrid mode of education was also favored more by female students (43%) vs. 30% by their male counterparts (Fig. 1).

Effectiveness of the distance learning online English language course

Overall effectiveness. The participants' evaluations of the overall effectiveness of the course were significantly associated with their preferred mode of education, $F(2,69) = 15.60$, $p < 0.001$. The highest mean rating of 3.71 ± 0.46 was given by the supporters of online distance education, with a significant difference from that of the fans of face-to-face instruction (2.73 ± 0.66 , $p < 0.00$), and from the supporters of hybrid education (2.32 ± 0.94 , $p = 0.001$). The individual scores of the supporters of online distance education ranged between 3 and 4, with the majority being 4s. In contrast, in the group with preference for face-to-face education the individual ratings varied between 1 and 4, with the majority being 2s. Midway between the two were the individual scores given by the students in the hybrid group, ranging between 2 and 4, with the majority being 3s (Fig. 2).



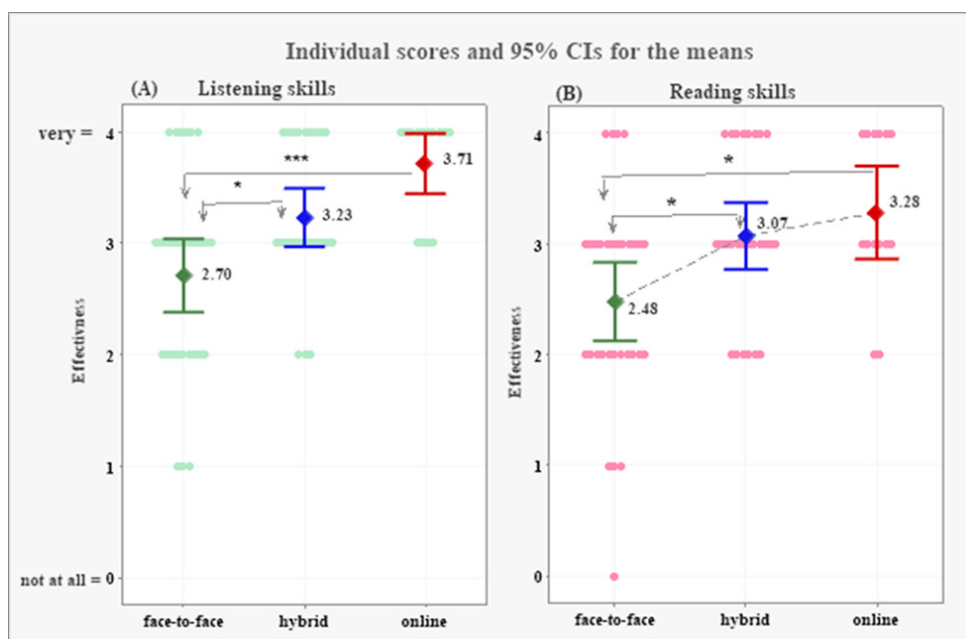
** - $p < 0.01$; *** - $p < 0.001$

Figure 2: Course effectiveness vs. students' preferred mode of education

Effectiveness for developing students' receptive skills. Students' opinions about the effectiveness of the course for the development of their listening skills in English were significantly associated with their preferred mode of education, $F(2, 69) =$

9.38, $p < 0.001$ (Fig. 3, A). The most positive ratings were given by the students with preference for online education (3.71 ± 0.46), with a significant difference from the supporters of face-to face instruction (2.70 ± 0.90 , $p < 0.001$). The students with preference for hybrid education also expressed significantly more positive opinions (3.23 ± 0.54) vs. the face-to-face supporters ($p = 0.028$). The opinions of the supporters of online distance education and those for a hybrid form of education were not significantly different, $p = 0.13$. The individual ratings of the online fans ranged between 3 and 4, with the majority being 4s. The face-to-face supporters showed a greater disparity in opinions, with ratings between 1 and 4, the majority being 2s and 3s. The ratings of the supporters of hybrid education ranged between 2 and 4, the majority being 3s and 4s.

The course effectiveness regarding the reading skill was also significantly associated with the students' preferences, $F(2,69) = 5.72$, $p = 0.005$ (Fig. 3, B). The fans of online distance education held the most positive opinions (3.28 ± 0.72) which were significantly different from those of the supporters of face-to-face education (2.48 ± 0.96), $p = 0.012$. The group with preference for a hybrid form of education had a more positive opinion (3.08 ± 0.74) than the fans of face-to-face education, $p = 0.027$. The ratings of the students with preference for online-education vs. those for



* - $p < 0.05$; *** - $p < 0.001$

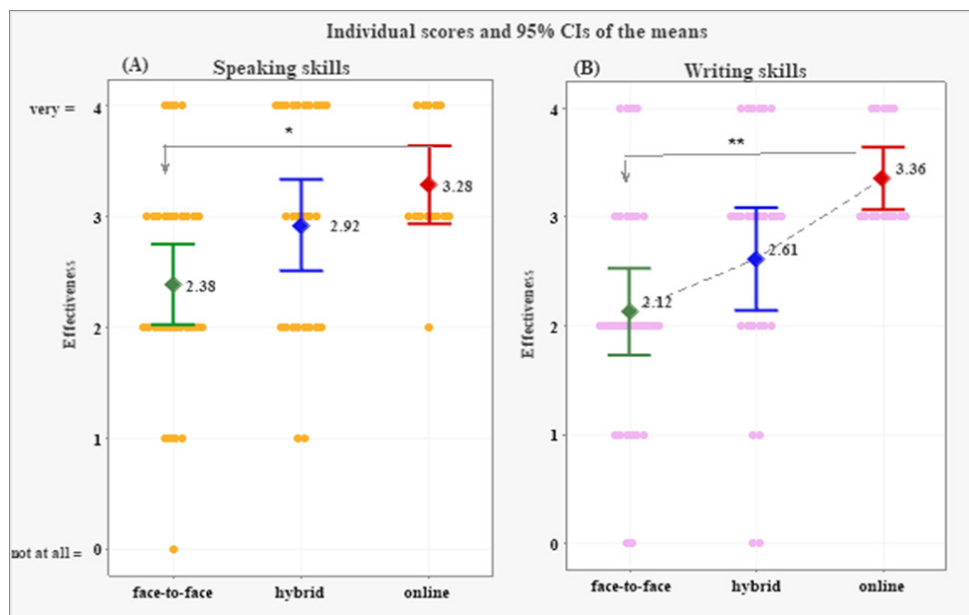
Figure 3: Course effectiveness for listening skill (A) and reading (B)

a hybrid form of education did not differ significantly ($p = 0.737$). The individual ratings for the reading skill showed very similar distributions to the ones for the listening skill, with an even greater disparity in the face-to-face group.

Effectiveness for developing students' productive skill. The students' ratings regarding the course utility for the speaking skill were significantly associated with their preferred mode of education $F(2,69) = 5.02$, $p = 0.009$. The highest mean rating was observed in the group in favor of online distance education (3.28 ± 0.61), with a significant difference from the fans of face-to-face education (2.38 ± 0.98 , $p = 0.011$).

Midway were the supporters of hybrid education (2.92 ± 1.01), whose opinions did not differ significantly from the other two groups: vs. online distance $p = 0.479$; vs. hybrid $p = 0.088$.

The students' opinions about the effectiveness of the course for their speaking skills varied, showing a wider range of individual ratings as compared to the receptive skills. (Fig. 4, A). The course efficacy for the writing skill was also significantly influenced by the students' preferred mode of education, $F(2, 69) = 6.87$, $p = 0.002$. The highest mean rating was observed in the group in favor of online distance education (3.36 ± 0.49), with a significant difference from that of the supporters of



* - $p < 0.05$; ** - $p < 0.01$

Figure 4: Course effectiveness for speaking (A) and writing (B)

face-to-face education (2.12 ± 1.08 , $p = 0.001$). No significant difference was found between the online and hybrid education supporters (2.61 ± 1.16 , $p = 0.085$) and between the face-to-face and hybrid education fans ($p = 0.188$). The individual ratings of the face-to-face and hybrid education supporters ranged between 0 and 4, whereas in the group with preference for online education the scores were within a narrow range, between 3 and 4 (Fig. 3, B).

Discussion and conclusion

The participants in this study fit into the definition of digital natives (Prensky 2001) - young people with advanced technological skills, majoring in academic disciplines entirely or closely related to information technology. Therefore, it was anticipated that the majority would be happy with the online distance form of learning. Surprisingly, 44% expressed preference for face-to-face education and only 20% were in favor of online distance learning. In-between were 36% who opted for a hybrid form of education. Another emerging trend was that the majority of the students with preference for face-to-face education were male, whereas the majority with preference for online distance learning were female. This finding is a reminder that assumptions could be misleading and should be verified and supported by data. A discrepancy in the perceptions of the parties involved in the educational process can negatively affect the learning outcomes. Surveying students' preferences, expectations, and needs at the start of a program can promote better understanding and planning.

The other trends in the study were anticipated in view of related research which showed a significant positive relationship between learners' attitudes and a compatible learning style (e.g. Eastmond 2000). The students whose preferred form of education was compatible with online distance learning had significantly more positive perceptions of the effectiveness of the online distance English language course as compared to those favoring face-to-face and hybrid education. Expressed in percentages, they rated the overall effectiveness of the course at 93%, for listening at 93%, for writing at 84%, and for reading and speaking at 82% (Fig. 5). Their comments described online distance learning as *convenient*, *flexible*, and *accessible*. They liked the opportunity to “*share screens*” and the “*easily accessible materials*”. Several students appreciated the challenge to enrich their vocabulary through *interactive games* and creating *YouTube video presentations*. For the majority of the fans of online distance learning, this form of learning provided *more language practice with less anxiety*.

In contrast, the students favoring face-to-face education expressed less favorable opinions, rating the overall course effectiveness at 58%, listening at 68%, reading at 62%, speaking at 60%, and writing at 53%. Their comments consistently mentioned that *communication is essential* in language learning and *it is best carried out in face-to-face classroom environments*.

Midway between the online and face-to-face fans were the students with preference for a hybrid form of education (Fig. 5). Their comments were similar to those of the teachers in the ECML survey. They viewed the hybrid form of teaching as an opportunity to supplement face-to-face instruction with assignments and projects which could be done remotely online.

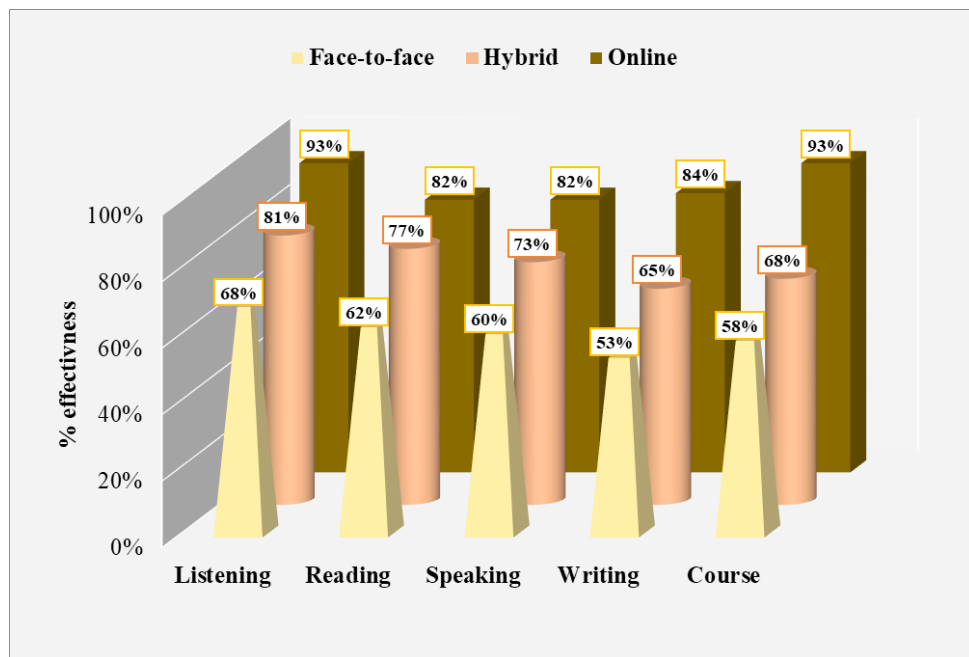


Figure 5: Effectiveness of the online distance learning English language course expressed in percentages

When interpreting the results of the present study, we must take into account the fact that the students' ratings of the effectiveness of the course were not correlated with their learning gains. For this purpose, assessment of target language competences before and after the course would be necessary. Considering the controversial findings of previous studies, some of which observed a positive relationship between learning styles and success in distance education (e.g. Fahy & Ally 2005; Irani, Telg, Scherler & Harrington 2003; Manochehri & Young 2006) versus others which found no significant association (e.g. DeTure 2004; Neuhauser 2002), several hypotheses are plausible. It can be anticipated that students with favorable attitudes towards online distance learning may have better learning gains than students with less favorable attitudes. It is also possible that students'

preferences would not have an impact on the learning gains. Another possibility is that the students with less favorable attitudes towards online distance learning may attain better learning outcomes than students with preferences compatible with the mode of education due to an increased effort to overcome the challenges and still do well.

Therefore, making an extrapolation that students' contentment with the educational mode and process will translate into excellent performance will not be valid in all situations. The most important insight from the present study is that learners have different learning styles, and although it is not possible to accommodate all of them, learning about them through surveys and informal discussions can help achieve a more balanced learner-centered approach. The COVID-19 pandemic enforced a way of teaching and learning which was not welcome by many. However, it also allowed us to discover new tools, forms, and approaches which can be implemented in the teaching practice in the post epidemic time. For example, some of the positive aspects of online distance language learning could be transferred to face-to-face instruction. Increased and effective use of instructional technologies in the classroom may provide authentic contexts for language practice and stimulate learner autonomy. Another possible option, especially for higher education courses, is the development of hybrid forms of education, based on solid methodological principles and not haphazardly put together as was the case under the extreme circumstances of the pandemic. Such formats may integrate face-to-face instruction with more creative team and individual projects which can be completed remotely through continuous consultation and supervision by the instructor and then presented in class.

The opportunities are many and so are the challenges, but they are worth taking if our goal is to engage the learners through interactive, meaningful, and learner-centered activities irrespective of the mode of instruction.

NOTES

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