

*Student Points of View – Pedagogical,
Psychological, Social and Technical Issues*

KINEZITHERAPY STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN PANDEMIC CONDITIONS

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Abstract. The research was organized with second year students from the National Sports Academy "V. Levski" specializing in kinezitherapy in the second semester of 2019 – 2020. The aim of the research was to find out about students' needs and interests in foreign language learning for their professional development. Due to the emergency situation of COVID-19 pandemic, the specialized English course was completed online, so the enquiry form also included questions on students' preferences of the form of language learning- online, classroom or blended. The acquired results show that the majority of the students need to improve their communication skills and their knowledge in specialized terminology, and that they prefer to have the greater part of their foreign language course in the traditional form of classroom education, and only a small part of it - online.

Keywords: classroom education; online learning; communication

Introduction

Foreign language learning in higher education offers a variety of options – classroom education, distance learning, blended learning. Each of these forms of learning has its advantages and disadvantages. Classroom education is the traditional form of learning a foreign language. Its greatest advantage is the direct contact between teacher/lecturer and students. According to the post-method understanding of foreign language teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Shopov, 2013), the teacher/ lecturer has to choose the most appropriate learning methods and techniques, according to the specific needs of the group of learners. In this respect, interactive techniques, such as team work, games, brainstorming, presentations, project work, etc., can be very useful (Panichkova, 2010; Doncheva, 2014). They provide opportunities for active participation on the part of the learners and create a natural environment for language acquisition through the exchange of information and ideas in the target language. Information technologies offer conditions for greater autonomy of the students using the form of distance learning. They can study online in the most appropriate place and time, at their own pace, according to their own needs to improve specific language

skills (Gjurova et al., 2007). Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and the various web-based language learning resources provide good opportunities for learning vocabulary and grammar, and for improving language skills. There are also educational computer games, offering variety to the learners in a useful and pleasant way (Paunova-Hubenova, 2019). One of the drawbacks of distance learning is the lack of direct live contact with other students in the group, which could have a demoralizing effect on the learners. Blended learning is a relatively new form of language learning, incorporating elements of classroom and online education. It has been defined as “the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). As the authors suggest, this is not an arbitrary mixture of approaches and techniques, rather a set of well-matched interrelated elements of traditional classroom and online education, working together in synchrony for the achievement of the designated learning goals.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a big challenge for the survival and normal work of people and institutions around the world. Likewise, this emergency situation placed before the students and the academic staff of the National Sports Academy “Vassil Levski”, the challenge to organize their work in the form of distance learning. The greater part of the lectures and seminars during the second semester of the academic year 2019 – 2020 were conducted online – establishing connections, sending materials and giving assignments, discussing problems, checking and evaluating students’ work and knowledge.

Foreign language learning for students from the three faculties of the National Sports Academy – the Faculty of Sport, the Faculty of Pedagogy and the Faculty of Public Health, Health Care and Tourism, is specialized in the respective areas of study. The English language course for students of the Bachelor’s programme in kinezitherapy is focused on learning terminology in the field of medicine, health care and patient recovery after traumas and diseases. The course upgrades the acquired English language skills from students’ secondary education, providing materials and knowledge on basic terminology in the area.

Objectives

The aim of this study is to establish how kinezitherapy students from The National Sports Academy “V. Levski” evaluate the need to use a foreign language in the course of their education, the sources of information they use, the language skills they need to improve, whether they would like to do team work with colleagues on a given language task, and their attitude to distance learning in the COVID 19 pandemic situation, compared to the traditional classroom form of language learning.

Methods

The subjects of the study are 37 students from the English language course for kinezitherapists, 26 – women and 11 – men, at an average age of 20. The majority of the subjects in the study – 65%, graduated from secondary schools special-

ized in foreign languages or natural sciences, 21% – from professional secondary schools, 3% – from secondary sport schools and 11% – from other kinds of secondary schools.

The study was conducted at the end of the second semester of the 2019 – 2020 academic year. A questionnaire with 10 close ended questions was created for the purpose of the study.

The methods of the study include: enquiry, alternative statistical analysis and Pearson's chi-squared test (χ^2) of the enquiry data.

Results and analysis

The analysis of the results shows that to the question how often the kinezi-therapy students – subjects to the enquiry, need to use English for the purposes of their education, 18.9 % have replied that they use it very often, 35.1 % use it often, 40.5% use it rarely, and only 5.4% – very rarely. Consequently, more than half of the students often use English in the process of learning, because it is necessary for their education and professional development.

To the second question, which language skills they need to improve, 73,0% of the subjects have answered that they needed to improve their oral communication skills and 29,7% – to improve their writing skills (13.5% of the subjects have pointed, that they needed to improve their listening skills and 13.5% – their reading skills (Figure 1). It has to be noted that to the present and the following two questions, students have pointed more than one answers.

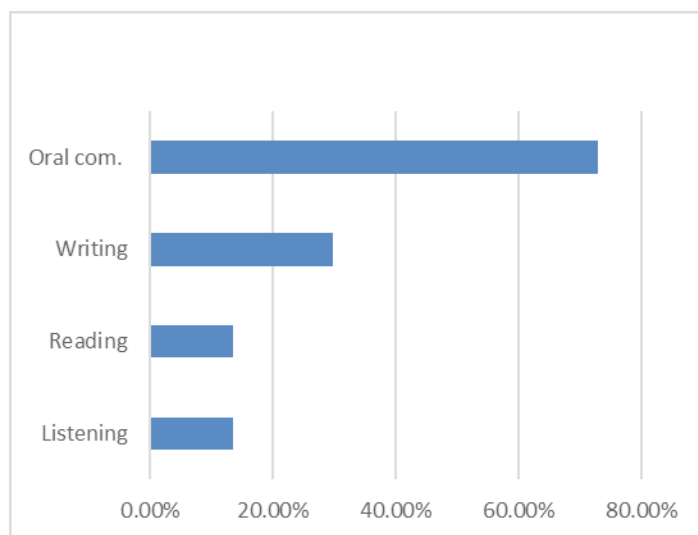


Figure 1. Skills students need to improve

To the third question – what sources of specialized information in English they use most often, 81,1% of the subjects of the enquiry have pointed the Internet, 29,7% have pointed specialized literature, another 29,7% have chosen – television, 10,8% have chosen newspapers and magazines and only 8,1% do not use specialized sources in English at all. These results are in confirmation to the contemporary trends among students to use the Internet as a basic source of information. It is important to note that almost one third of the subjects use specialized books for their education, maybe as a more reliable source of information and knowledge acquisition. The fact that a relatively small percent of the kinezitherapy students from the enquiry do not use English sources at all, also deserves attention. The majority of the students obviously rely on their foreign language knowledge and skills in connection to their education (Figure 2).

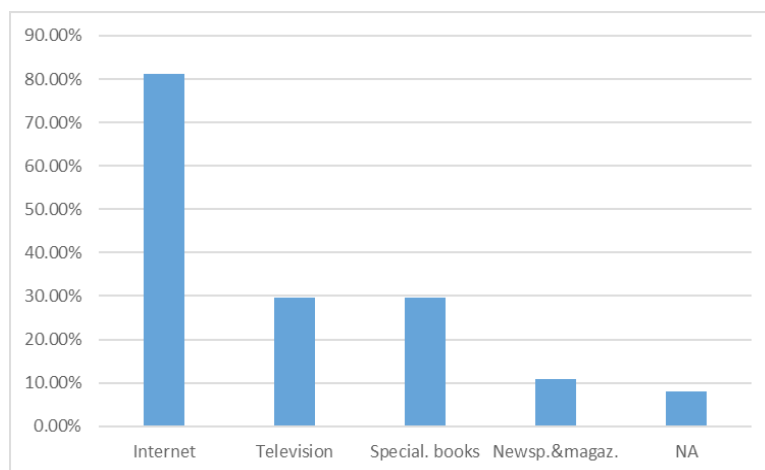


Figure 2. Sources of specialized information

To the question which activities they find most useful when learning English, the greatest percent of the subjects – 73,0% have pointed *reading texts in the area of medicine and kinezitherapy*. The activity chosen as the second best by 67.6 % of the respondents is *discussions on topics related to medicine and kinezitherapy*. The following activities are *grammar exercises* and *writing tasks* on topics in the field of medicine and kinezitherapy – both activities have been chosen by 37,8 % of the respondents. Listening exercises have been chosen by 32,4% of the respondents. From these results, we can draw the conclusion that students have made pragmatic choices. Reading skills for extracting information from specialized sources and oral skills for discussions in the field of medicine and kinezitheapy have been nominated as most important with reference to their future professional development. It is interesting to note, that four of the participants in the enquiry have pointed all

activities as equally important. One of the respondents has even given a written comment, explaining that all activities are important because they are complementary to each other and the information acquired in this way remains in the long term memory of the learners.

To the question whether they consider it useful to work in a team with other colleagues on a given task, 37.8% of the respondents answer positively, 27,0% are also willing to participate in that kind of activity, 29.7% would prefer not to work with other colleagues, 5.4% of the respondents are negative. We can conclude that more than half of the respondents have a positive attitude to working in a team with colleagues on a given task, which is a pre-condition for the introduction of interactive techniques and team work in the language classes. Pearson's chi-squared test (χ^2), at $p \leq .05$, was applied on the criteria of sex and type of graduated secondary school for the question related to students' interest in team work with colleagues, but there were no differences recorded.

The results from the next two questions are of special interest, because they are devoted to the evaluation of distance learning, organized during the second semester of the academic year 2019 – 2020, due to the emergency situation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To the question how they would like the English course to be conducted in the future – 32,4% have chosen the traditional classroom form of learning, 13,5% have pointed distance learning, and 54.1% have chosen blended learning, part of which is supposed to be in the classroom and another part – online. It is noteworthy that the option of organizing the language course only in the form of distance learning has received the smallest group of supporters. The subjects of the enquiry obviously recognize the fact that, although in our contemporary reality

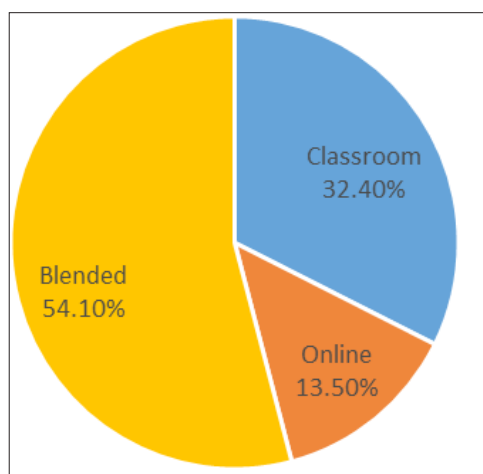


Figure 3. Preferences in the forms of the English course

online learning can be very useful, it cannot replace face-to-face classroom learning. That is why blended learning, combining the two forms – face-to-face and online, is accepted as the best option by the majority of the respondents (Figure 3).

To the following question clarifying the point – whether it would be better to have the specialized English course entirely online – again 13,5% answer positively, 18,9% are inclined to have the greater part of the lessons online, however 48,6% consider, that only a small part of the lessons can be conducted online, and 18,9 % of the respondents are against distance learning. Consequently, around 70% of the students in the enquiry have chosen the form of blended learning where face-to-face classroom learning comprises the greater part of the lessons, and online learning is included only in a small part, as an additional form of the English course. It has to be mentioned here, that most of the respondents sent back e-mails at the end of the online course, expressing their satisfaction and gratitude of our work online in the emergency situation of COVID-19 pandemic. The reasons for their choice are obviously related to the natural human need of direct, face-to-face communication with colleagues from the groups. The willingness of the greater part of the respondents to work on tasks in a team is another confirmation of their perceived need of real communication – exchange of ideas, opinions and experience, of performing activities together with other colleagues. Pearson's chi-squared test (χ^2), at $p \leq .05$, was applied on the criteria of sex and type of graduated secondary school for the questions related to students' preferable form of studying English – classroom, online or blended learning. However, there were no differences recorded.

Discussion

The analysis of the results from the enquiry has led to the following conclusions. The greater part of the students in the enquiry often use English in the process of their education and learning, mainly by using information from internet sites, and also from specialized television programs. This is a logical choice in our contemporary environment of online communication. At the same time, one third of the respondents refer to printed medical literature, probably in search of more specialized knowledge, which maybe is significant of their deeper interests in the field.

As to the skills they need to improve, the greater part of the respondents answered that they needed to improve mainly their oral communication skills, and in the second place – their writing skills, i.e. language production. The development of language production skills requires more time and an appropriate environment for communication and exchange of information. The fact that most students have a positive attitude to team work with colleagues comes as another confirmation of these speculations. Obviously, the respondents need more opportunities for direct communication with colleagues on the specialized topics of the education program. In this respect, introducing more interactive activities in the English language class

is quite appropriate. Pair and group work on tasks has long been recognized as a useful technique in language learning, especially with larger mixed-ability groups, “since they maximize student participation” (Harmer, 2007).

We have to note that the use of distance learning alone has received a very small number of supporters among the respondents. This circumstance evidently comes from the human need of direct communication in a natural face-to-face environment. According to the results from the enquiry, distance learning, although in unison with contemporary online information and communication technologies, cannot replace face-to-face classroom learning. Consequently, blended learning combining the two forms - distance and classroom learning, is accepted as the best option for the majority of the respondents in the enquiry. Foreign language teachers at the Academy already have some very positive experience in blended learning with groups of students specializing in Sport and Physical Education (Slavova, 2017).

The conclusions, which could be drawn from the analysis of the enquiry results are the following:

1. Students have a positive attitude to studying a foreign language in connection with their professional development.

2. The greater part of the students would like to improve their oral communicative and writing skills, and to learn specialized terminology in English in the field of medicine and kinezitherapy.

3. Students have a positive attitude to more active participation in specialized language learning and the introduction of team work and interactive techniques in the specialized language course will be useful for their better language acquisition.

4. Students have a positive attitude to blended foreign language learning, where classroom learning comprises the greater part of the course, and only a small part of the specialized language course is completed online.

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