Student reactions to online learning and online teaching tools used in a Business English course during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract: In this paper, we are presenting the results of a quantitative survey on online learning carried out in the academic year 2021/22 among 185 first-year students at the Faculty of Economics and Business, University of XXXX. The classes were taught synchronously, with an emphasis on in-class student participation and regular submission of assignments. The online tools were part of the Google Classroom LMS.

The survey concerned students' reactions to online learning in a Business English class over the course of 20 weeks. It consisted of two parts: one administered at the point of entry into the program, the other at the end of online teaching, when Covid-19 restrictions were lifted. The survey contained questions regarding 4 main areas: general information about students, general preferences about online learning, motivation and self-discipline questions, and opinions about online tools and activities.

Analysing the differences between the two polls, we were able to identify changes in students' preferences and attitudes after the 20 weeks of online classes. The article reflects on these changes and their implications for motivation, students' adjustment to online classes, student-student relationships versus student-instructor relationships and students' expectations towards professors in online classes. The article also discusses students' reactions to specific online activities used at the university.

Although it is obvious that students greatly preferred in-person classes, and online activities failed to boost their motivation and self-discipline, the conclusions drawn from the two surveys can point towards a better understanding of the suitability of online teaching for younger university students.

Key words: Covid-19, engagement, LMS, motivation, online tasks, online teaching, quantitative survey

1 Introduction

The first idea for this research came to us in March of 2021. This was the second year of the coronavirus pandemic and from the start of the pandemic (March 2020) the classes were taught exclusively online and synchronously at the Faculty of Economics and Business (FEB), University of XXXX. We were working with students that we had never met in person before. Online tools seemed to be successful in recreating most of the situations that could occur in in-person classes, but we were not exactly sure if our classes were as efficient as we had wanted

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them to be and we could not estimate students' reactions to teaching methods through the computer screen.

2 Literature review

Online teaching has been a rising phenomenon since before the Covid-19 pandemic and world-wide lockdowns simply accelerated the trend. Generally speaking, research carried out before 2020 dealt with several topics related to online teaching and learning. Zawacki-Richter et al. (2009) in their article reviewing research on distance education between 2000 and 2008 classified the studies into "three broad meta-levels of distance education research": macro, meso and micro levels. altogether 15 distinct research areas (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2009). For the purpose of this article, we will only focus on the micro level research, which concerns teachers' interactions with students and classroom management – these topics being the most relevant for our own research. According to Zawacki-Richter et al. (2009) micro level studies dealt with three main areas (1) instructional design including pedagogical approaches, (2) interaction and communication in learning communities including the development of online communities, and (3) characteristics of adult learners including their socio-economic backgrounds, learning styles and dispositions (Zawacki-Richter et al, 2009). Research output on online teaching between 2009 and 2018 further increased. According to a systematic review of 619 articles in 12 journals in this time period by Martin et al. (2020), the main topics of research explored engagement and learner characteristics. Less frequently studied topics included evaluation and quality assurance, course technologies, learner outcome and course assessment among others.

The topics of engagement and learner characteristics and learner outcomes are of special importance for our research.

2.1 Engagement

O'Shea et al. (2015) discuss online students' engagement in their learning process and environment and provide insights into how these students could be better supported as effective learning can only occur if students are engaged in their coursework. O'Shea and colleagues find that universities need to create a learning experience for online students where they feel important and relevant as opposed to "second class citizens" to traditional students.

Amador and Mederer's (2013) article discusses two types of strategies to engage students in the online classroom – jigsaw groups and problem-based learning. While these strategies are commonly used in face-to-face teaching, Amador and Mederer found that they can be effectively used in online learning to facilitate higher quality student-to-student interaction and to create social bonds among

online learners. The article concludes with highlighting the importance of creating a vibrant, intellectual learning community in online classes, as opposed to the trend of achieving cost-savings through increasing the size of online groups. This is due to the fact that large groups with little student-to-student interaction create an alienating and isolated learning environment, which, ultimately, fails to motivate students.

2.2 Learner characteristics and learner outcomes

Studies aiming to identify learner characteristics which make students more likely to benefit from online learning, have found that younger students who do not work or work less than 20 hours a week tend to prefer traditional courses. They "enjoyed face-to-face interaction with other students and their professor and were more motivated in those courses than were students over the age of 30" (Stewart et al., 2010).

Some authors focus on the effectiveness of online courses compared to traditional courses. Nguyen's (2015) review focuses on the effectiveness of online learning compared to traditional learning and the factors that influence the effectiveness of online courses. Overall, it seems that there is no great difference between traditional and online courses when it comes to effectiveness. In some areas traditional courses tend to do better, in others the online format is more successful. "There are better learning outcomes in the traditional format for activities that have to be done simultaneously and better outcomes in the mediated distance format for activities that can be done at various times" (Nguyen, 2015, 312). Furthermore, mature students tend to do better in online courses compared to undergraduate students. Nguyen concludes his research by suggesting that the way forward in the development of education would be a blended approach, where traditional teaching could be combined with individualised online content "to determine the most efficient and effective learning pathways for different learners in particular courses" (Nguyen, 2015, 315).

2.3 Post-pandemic research

The pandemic forced a transition to online learning globally, and this kickstarted a new wave of research into online teaching. A study conducted by Kadiresan et al. (2021) found that student participation and the role of instructors (providing feedback, interactions between students and the teacher, showing enthusiasm for their material) were the two main factors for student motivation and engagement. Agbejule et al. (2021) found that most students preferred face-to-face instruction, and that these students identified "the feeling of being involved as the main motivation for online learning" (p. 17).

The forced and sudden transition to online teaching and its effects on both staff and students also attracted a lot of attention. Johnson et al. (2020) reports that when institutions transitioned to emergency online teaching both administrators and faculty invested time and effort into learning how to teach online, adding that even those who had previous online teaching experience started using new tools and methods. Assignment types and assessment criteria were changed due to the new mode of delivery.

The impact of lockdowns and online learning on students' and faculty's mental health is also the topic of numerous studies. Research carried out in the US and in India, for example, found that the pandemic resulted in psychological problems including anxiety, stress, and depression in most students (Chaturvedi K, et al. 2021; Wang X. et al. 2020). Students in the US reported increased levels of stress due to concerns about their academic performance in the online setting, uncertainty caused by the pandemic, health concerns, financial concerns and social isolation (Wang X. et al. 2020).

A comprehensive national survey into students' reactions to the pandemic in Croatia reveals a pervading sense of social isolation and a significant perceived worsening of mental health (52%), in particular the feeling of anxiety, concentration problems and depression. First-year students, moreover, quoted lack of in-person contact with colleagues (48%), online classes (39%) and lack of motivation caused by uncertainty (39%) as the biggest challenges. (Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2021)

3 Method

The study consisted of two phases and it concerned students' reactions to online learning in two consecutive Business English courses over 20 weeks. One questionnaire (Entry poll) was administered at the point of entry into the program (5 October 2021), when students first started their Business English 1 course. The other (Exit poll) was administered when the same students were taking Business English 2 and our institution was at the point of switching back to in-person classes (1 April 2022).

3.1 Instruments

The anonymous polls were conducted through Google Forms. The language of the polls was English and all questions were closed: multiple choice, check boxes and statements referring to beliefs, attitudes, or behaviour items evaluated on a Likert scale (1–6). We chose to use an even Likert scale as our topics were not controversial and we wanted our respondents to express their opinion clearly and unambiguously, which is possible if there is no neutral mid-point on the Likert

scale. The individual questions will be discussed in more detail in the findings section of the paper.

3.1.1 Entry poll

The entry poll comprised 13 questions, divided into two sections, and collected information on students' general preferences about online learning, motivation and self-discipline questions and their opinions on online tools and activities that they had been exposed to in their respective high schools. Since the entry poll was administered at the beginning of the first semester of the first year of study, we also included a question about students' expectations for online learning at university level.

3.1.2 Exit poll

The exit poll comprised 25 questions grouped into four sections. The first section collected general information about students (gender, grade for Business English 1 and self-assessed level of general English according to CEFR). The next group of questions concerned students' experiences with online learning. The third section contained five statements regarding responsibility for learning, invested effort and self-discipline and the students were asked to evaluate them on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (don't agree at all) to 6 (totally agree). The final section concerned ten online tools and activities which students had to rate on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not beneficial at all) to 6 (very useful).

3.2 Participants

Phase one of our research included 185 first-year students of business whereas 153 students took part in phase two. All of them were native speakers of Croatian. We used a convenience sample from a population of approximately 1, 500 first-year students who enrolled in Business Studies at FEB in 2021/22. Since each new generation is routinely divided into equal, alphabetically ordered groups of approximately 100 students, the authors simply invited the students assigned to their teaching groups to anonymously complete the entry poll posted in their respective Google Classrooms.

Among the participants who completed the exit poll (N=153) there were 58 males and 95 females. As expected, the majority ($N = 117$ or 77%) stated they were at B2 level or higher according to the Common European Framework of Reference (C2 = 8.5%, C1 = 20.9%, B2 = 47.1%, B1 = 20.3%, and A2 = 3.3%). These self-assessed general proficiency data closely resembled the results of proficiency testing in a comparable sample of FEB students where 78% of students were found to be at B2 level or higher (Sladoljev-Agejev, T. & Kabalin Borenić, V., 2018). The

participants' Business English grades received at the end of the first semester were as follows: 10 excellent (grade 5), 34 very good (grade 4), 47 good (grade 3), 17 satisfactory (grade 2) and 45 had not taken or passed the exam when the exit poll was conducted. In the case of this particular sample the correlation between the Business English 1 grade and students' self-assessed general English proficiency was positive and moderate ($r = 0.436$), suggesting that good general English knowledge does not warrant a high Business English 1 grade.

As regards the participants' high school experiences concerning online teaching and learning, the entry poll revealed that the majority were familiar with a limited number of tools. When it comes to participants' expectations for online classes at university, the majority were moderately optimistic or confident. Most of them (41.8%) expected that it would be similar to their experiences in high school, sometimes OK and sometimes not very good. As many as 33% were confident and expected that their previous experience with online classes would help them do better at university. Some respondents enjoyed online classes in high school and expected to enjoy them at university as well (10.8%), whereas a certain number of students (8.1%) found online classes in high school to be ineffective and boring and expected that online classes at university would be no different.

4 Data analysis

The collected data was statistically analysed by employing several methods of descriptive and inferential statistics for both the entry and exit survey results. Alongside MS Excel, data analysis was performed using an open-source statistical software JASP. First, all the responses were coded, followed by the descriptive statistics analysis which included mode, median, mean and standard deviation statistics. Aiming to test the normality of the distributions and the assumption of the homogeneity of variance, the Shapiro-Wilk and Levene's tests were used. According to the conducted tests, both the assumption of normality of the data distribution and the assumption of the homogeneity of variance were not tenable. Therefore, Mann-Whitney U test was used for further analysis of the collected data in order to test the statistical significance of the noted differences in the means of the entry vs. exit survey. Additionally, Pearson's Correlations were used to create correlation matrix between all observed variables for the data collected in the exit survey.

5 Findings

The participants were polled on their experiences with and reactions to online learning in both phases of our research, which makes it possible to compare the answers.

5.1 A comparison of data collected at entry and exit point

5.1.1 Experiences with online learning

Although our students generally preferred in-person classes to online classes both at entry point (84.3%) and after twenty weeks of online classes at university (73.2%), we noted a statistically significant increase in preference for online classes (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1: *Statistically significant differences in student reactions to online learning at entry and exit points*

		N	Mode	Median	Mean	SD
Prefer off-line classes	Entry	185	2.000	2.000	1.843**	0.365
	Exit	153	2.000	2.000	1.732**	0.444
No travel = benefit	Entry	185	1.000	1.000	0.524*	0.501
	Exit	153	1.000	1.000	0.830*	0.377
No crowds = benefit	Entry	185	0.000	0.000	0.368**	0.483
	Exit	153	0.000	0.000	0.484**	0.501
Miss interaction with students	Entry	185	1.000	1.000	0.914**	0.282
	Exit	153	1.000	1.000	0.824**	0.382
Do not miss in-person classes	Entry	185	0.000	0.000	0.016*	0.127
	Exit	153	0.000	0.000	0.092*	0.289
Online is more efficient	Entry	185	3.000	3.000	3.200**	1.591
	Exit	153	3.000	4.000	3.614**	1.615

*statistically significant at 1% level

**statistically significant at 5% level

The perceived benefits of online classes were explored using a multiple answer question which provided the choices listed in Tab. 2.

Tab. 2: *Benefits of online classes ordered by frequency of selection at entry and exit points.*

Possible answers (select 1–3)	Entry poll Rank (%)	Exit poll Rank (%)
I can manage my own time better.	1 (68.1%)	2 (69.3%)
I didn't/don't have to travel to school/faculty.	2 (51.9%)	1 (83%)
I can be in my own room; more peaceful than in a crowd.	3 (37.3%)	3 (48.4%)
It was easier to get better grades.	4 (22.7%)	4 (20,3%)
I don't like anything about online learning.	5 (10.8%)	5 (6.5%)

Both in phase one and phase two of our research, students mostly appreciated the fact that online classes allowed for better time management, and that they did not have to travel to school. Interestingly, only about a fifth of respondents in both research phases thought that the online mode made it easier to get better grades. All in all, the ranking of benefits at entry and exit point did not differ much (Tab. 2), but we noted a statistically significant increase in the number of

participants who appreciated not wasting time and money on travel, and of those who valued the solitude and privacy of their room (Tab. 1).

We tried to establish what the participants missed about in-person classes using a multiple answer question with the choices listed in Tab. 3.

Tab. 3: *What students missed about in-person classes (ordered by frequency of selection) at entry and exit points.*

Possible answers (select 1–3)	Entry poll Rank (%)	Exit poll Rank (%)
Interaction with other students.	1 (91.4%)	1 (82.4%)
I could make a more personal connection with professors.	2 (60.5%)	2 (63.4%)
I can concentrate much better in in-person classes.	3 (57.3%)	3 (61.4%)
It was easier to get better grades.	4 (10.3%)	4 (13.1%)
I didn't miss in-person classes at all.	5 (1.6%)	5 (9.2%)
Professors explain the material much better in person.*	(48.1%)	

*Has not been included in the Exit poll and, consequently, does not enter into comparison.

The ranking of the benefits of in-person classes did not change from phase one to phase two of our study. Both at entering university and after twenty weeks of online classes, the majority of participants missed personal interaction both with other students (entry: 91.4%; exit; 82.4%) and with teachers (entry: 60.5%; exit: 63.4%). However, the number of respondents who missed personal interaction with other students decreased significantly. Moreover, we found a significant increase in the number of respondents who did not miss in-person classes at all (Tab. 1). Finally, there is something to be said about the perceived benefits of personal interaction with teachers in physical classrooms. Although the difference was not significant, a higher percentage of respondents missed a more personal connection with professors at exit phase. Next, almost a half of the respondents in phase one stated that professors explained the material better in person. (This particular benefit of in-person classes was not included in phase two for obvious reasons.)

As regards the ability to concentrate in online classes, about three quarters of our respondents indicated that it was hard for them to concentrate. Moreover, the percentage slightly increased in the second phase (entry: 74.1%; exit: 77.8%), but the difference was not statistically significant.

To explore the reasons for problems with concentration we used a multiple-choice question with five answers. Both in phase one and phase two, the respondents most frequently stated that they get distracted both by technology (their phone and online content on their computer) and by persons or activities (family members and/or noises) in their physical surroundings (entry: 34.1%; exit: 39.9%). In both phases of our research, the respondents were more frequently distracted by

technology (entry: 22.2%; exit: 25.5%) than by persons or events in their physical environment (entry: 8.6%; exit: 5.2%). Finally, a considerable, but decreasing percentage of students stated that the problem with concentration did not derive from any distractors, but that they simply found online classes boring (entry: 18.4%; exit: 15%).

In order to establish whether our respondents considered online learning as more or less efficient than traditional classes, we asked them to evaluate a statement ("Doing online assignments and projects takes less time and energy than doing things in person.") on a 6-point rating scale where 3 should be interpreted as somewhat disagree and 4 as somewhat agree. Our respondents expressed only very slight agreement with the proposition both at the entry and exit phases but the level of agreement increased significantly in the exit phase (Tab. 1).

5.0.1 Self-perceived effect of online learning on students' self-regulation and motivational characteristics

Concerning our respondents' self-assessed levels of responsibility, invested effort and self-discipline at the beginning of online classes at university and after twenty weeks, a descriptive analysis revealed a negative trend (Tab. 4).

Tab. 4: *Change in students' self-assessed levels of responsibility, invested effort and self-discipline at entry and exit points.*

		N	Mode	Median	Mean	SD
I have become more responsible.	Entry	185	3.000	3.000	3.232*	1.397
	Exit	153	1.000	3.000	2.791*	1.550
I work harder and make better progress.	Entry	185	3.000	3.000	2.995**	1.337
	Exit	153	2.000	2.000	2.667**	1.357
Teacher should assign more responsibility to us.	Entry	185	2.000	2.000	2.405	1.213
	Exit	153	3.000	2.000	2.510	1.278
I have become more self-disciplined.	Entry	185	4.000	3.000	3.308*	1.417
	Exit	153	2.000	3.000	2.850*	1.512

*statistically significant at 1% level

**statistically significant at 5% level

Specifically, we recorded a statistically significant decrease in agreement with three statements reflecting the respondents' reactions to the online learning environment: "I have become more responsible for my learning since we switched to online classes."; "I work harder and make better progress in online classes."; and "Online classes helped me to become more self-disciplined." While the levels of agreement with the three statements ranged between mild disagreement and negligible agreement (2.995 and 3.308) in the entry phase, the scores obtained in the exit phase demonstrated significantly lower levels of responsibility, effort and self-discipline. Finally, the question designed to establish the respondents'

preferences when it comes to learner autonomy and initiative revealed that our respondents preferred to be led. In both research phases they disagreed with the proposition that "Teachers should devote less time to teaching online and assign more responsibilities and tasks to students."

5.1 Usefulness of specific online activities and tasks

The data collected only in the exit phase of our research also provided insight into students' perception of usefulness of specific online activities and tasks.

5.1.1 Rating of online activities and tasks according to perceived usefulness

Over twenty weeks of online classes at university we used numerous online tools and activities, ten of which were included in our exit poll to determine how useful our students found them. Students could rate these tools on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not beneficial at all) to 6 (very useful). The results of the descriptive analysis (ordered to reflect the ranking from the most appreciated to the least appreciated activity) are presented in Tab. 5.

The analysis revealed that our students found most useful working online on tasks in a Google doc while the teacher observed their progress and provided comments and corrections, whether in writing to the respective student or speaking for the benefit of the whole class (M 4.804 $\pm$ SD 1.252). Most of the respondents found this activity to be very useful (Mode 6). Google Meet polls (M 4.706 $\pm$ SD 1.307) came very close in the respondents' estimate of usefulness (Mode 6). Two more activities were considered, on average, as rather useful: Edpuzzle tasks (M 4.458 $\pm$ SD 1.509; Mode 6) and attendance quizzes (M 4.275 $\pm$ 1.387) assigned using Google Forms. As many as five other online tools and activities (Google Meet chat, team presentations and meetings, asynchronous teamwork in Google Docs, homework/revision quizzes and synchronous teamwork in Google Docs) were almost equally appreciated by the respondents, with means ranging between 3.869 and 3.810. Finally, the respondents rated meeting with smaller groups of colleagues using Breakout rooms as not very useful (Mode 3). A more detailed presentation of these findings, however, is outside of the scope of this article.

5.1.2 Correlation analysis

The correlation analysis included items reflecting respondents' self-assessed levels of responsibility, invested effort and self-discipline, as well as students' ratings of the usefulness of 10 online tools and activities. The most interesting and statistically significant correlations are presented below.

Tab. 5: *Ranking of ten online activities and tasks according to perceived usefulness.*

Online activity	N	Mode	Median	Mean	SD
Individual Google Docs – teacher comments live	153	6.000	5.000	4.840	1.252
Google Meet polls	153	6.000	5.000	4.706	1.307
Edpuzzle videos	153	6.000	5.000	4.458	1.509
Attendance quizzes	153	4.000	4.000	4.275	1.387
Chat	153	5.000	4.000	3.869	1.098
Team presentations and meetings	153	3.000	4.000	3.843	1.518
Asynchronous teamwork in Google Docs	153	4.000	4.000	3.830	1.490
Homework/revision quizzes	153	4.000	4.000	3.817	1.048
Synchronous teamwork in Google Docs	153	4.000	4.000	3.810	1.546
Breakout rooms	153	3.000	3.000	3.288	1.621

The analysis revealed strong positive and statistically significant correlations between becoming more responsible, more self-disciplined and working harder, achieving better progress. There was a moderate positive and significant correlation between the perceive efficiency of online learning and working harder, achieving better progress. The opinion that doing online assignments is more time- and effort-efficient had a weak positive and significant correlation with the perceived increase in self-discipline and the belief that teachers should transfer more responsibility to students (Tab. 6).

Tab. 6: *Correlations between self-regulation and motivation items.*

		I'm more responsible	I work harder	I'm more efficient	I'm more self-disciplined
I work harder, I progress	Pearson's r	0.714	—		
	p-value	$< .001$	—		
I'm more efficient	Pearson's r	0.204	0.349	—	
	p-value	0.011	$< .001$	—	
I'm more self-disciplined	Pearson's r	0.626	0.658	0.278	—
	p-value	$< .001$	$< .001$	$< .001$	—
Teacher should assign more	Pearson's r	0.147	0.205	0.271	0.224
	p-value	0.069	0.011	$< .001$	0.005

There were no significant correlations between the self-regulation and motivation items and the perceived usefulness of any of the online activities and tasks. Finally, the results of the correlation analysis demonstrated numerous significant and positive relationships between various activities, suggesting that students who find one type of online activity useful tend also to appreciate other online activities (Tab. 7).

Tab. 7: *Correlations between the perceived usefulness scores for different types of online activities and taks.*

		Breakout rooms	Chat	Ind GDoc	Sync team	Async team	Edpuzzle	Present.	Polls	Attend quiz
Chat	Pearson's r	0.261	—							
	p-value	0.001	—							
Individual GDoc	Pearson's r	0.236	0.565	—						
	p-value	0.003	<.001	—						
Sync team GD	Pearson's r	0.371	0.353	0.358	—					
	p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	—					
Async team GD	Pearson's r	0.429	0.28	0.388	0.603	—				
	p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	—				
Edpuzzle	Pearson's r	0.156	0.469	0.396	0.322	0.418	—			
	p-value	0.055	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	—			
Present. Meeting	Pearson's r	0.395	0.216	0.226	0.298	0.477	0.391	—		
	p-value	<.001	0.007	0.005	<.001	<.001	<.001	—		
Polls	Pearson's r	0.146	0.55	0.407	0.288	0.258	0.536	0.325	—	
	p-value	0.072	<.001	<.001	<.001	0.001	<.001	<.001	—	
Attend. quizzes	Pearson's r	0.146	0.352	0.304	0.248	0.284	0.534	0.402	0.567	—
	p-value	0.072	<.001	<.001	0.002	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	—
Hw & rev. quizzes	Pearson's r	0.295	0.408	0.399	0.291	0.384	0.561	0.47	0.503	0.623
	p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001

6 Discussion

The two polls that were carried out among a group of 200 first-year students of business resulted in 185 responses for the first poll and 153 for the second poll. The results point to a number of relevant findings and observations about online learning and online activities.

Our first main finding is that our first-year students prefer in-person teaching and that was not surprising. A similar preference for in-person teaching was identified by Agbejule et al. (2021) in students attending three Finnish universities which also abruptly transferred to online teaching due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our second main finding is, however, that our students have generally started to adjust to online learning. They typically appreciated the fact that they had a chance to self-manage their time, especially as they no longer had to travel to attend classes. We also noted a slight but statistically significant rise in the perceived efficiency of online learning. Although students mostly missed personal connections with other students and professors, interactions with other students became significantly less important in the exit poll. A preference for being able to stay away from crowded places was significantly more pronounced at the end of the time period. We also noted a significant increase in the number of students

who did not miss in-person classes at all, especially among male students. Finally, the correlations analysis suggests that students who reported increased levels of effort and self-discipline, also reported finding online classes more efficient and a willingness to rely less on the instructor.

There are a number of reasons that can explain this. Firstly, students' experience with online learning in high school may have been of varying standards since online teaching was introduced abruptly and without adequate and systematic support. The fact that by this time the authors had had a chance to become adept at conducting classes online and that Business English classes were exclusively held through a single LMS allowed for consistency and transparency of the learning process. Google Classroom, the LMS of choice in our Business English classes, also provided ample opportunities for students-teacher interactions both synchronously (in classes taught in real-time through Google Meet) and asynchronously (commenting on tasks and posts in Google Classroom, emailing teachers, etc.). Several studies have found that student motivation, cognition and engagement rise in online courses when there is opportunity for real-time interaction with instructors and classmates (Baker, 2010; Kadiresan et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2017).

Secondly, by the academic year 2021–22 students simply became more experienced with online education. The same trend is described in Steward et al. (2010). That study found that students who gain experience in learning online in one course or programme, will become more successful in consecutive online courses. This finding is consistent with Muilenburg & Berge's (2005) finding that people who had taken just one online course feel much more confident about online learning and perceive much fewer barriers to online learning than others who had no prior experience with online learning.

Thirdly, the preference for attending online and avoiding crowded places may have had two root causes: fear of contracting Covid-19 and anxiety over transferring to a new environment (from high school to university). Some of our out-of-town students also appreciated the financial benefits of remote learning.

Next, students' lowered interest in connecting socially with other students can be explained by the fact that first-year students had not yet had a chance to build personal connections with their classmates. This finding, however, contradicts the observation made in O'Shea et al. (2015) where the survey respondents regretted not being able to connect socially with their peers and named these connections in learning to be "a 'need' or essential to their learning experience" (O'Shea et al., 2015, p. 14). Amador and Mederer's (2013) finding that large online classes do not allow for meaningful social connections between students, however, supports our observation.

Our third main finding is that students' expectations increased towards professors as conductors and guardians of their learning process. Namely, we noted a statistically significant drop in students' self-discipline and perceived responsibility for their progress.

Given that students seemed to be slowly becoming more adjusted to the online environment we were hoping to find that the freedom and flexibility provided by online learning would result in a rise in students' self-discipline, willingness to take responsibility and invest effort. Our expectations were not met. The finding, however, is in line with Baker's (2010) observation that instructor presence – "the virtual 'visibility' of the instructor as perceived by the learner" (p. 5) – is a significant individual predictor of student affective learning, motivation and cognition. Therefore our hopes that the flexibility and freedom afforded by online learning would be a strong motivating factor for our students might have been misplaced.

Another explanation for this negative trend may be inferred from our experience in the academic year 2020–2021. Then we abruptly switched to online teaching amid the Covid-19 crisis and after a devastating earthquake in Zagreb. Unlike the current sample, those students had had 20 weeks of teaching in person before the crises. They communicated more actively with professors and among themselves as well. They also seemed more eager and committed to overcoming the challenges they faced. Possibly this was due to the fact that we all believed online classes were only a temporary measure. The generation of 2021–2022 must have been feeling much more insecure about their future and this possibly made them temporarily apathetic and less likely to take initiative. An additional reason might be students' isolation from classmates, which disrupted traditional lines of information that form organically in groups. These lines of information in traditional classes can supplement information from the teacher, thus making traditional students less reliant on the teacher for direction.

Our fourth main finding is that two areas did not significantly change. Firstly, problems with concentration in online classes due to environmental factors persisted. Secondly, establishing relationships with teachers stayed equally important in the two phases of the research. A possible explanation could be that students find student-teacher relationships more important for the learning process than student-student relationships. One of the reasons for this might have to do with the importance of instructor immediacy (Baker, 2010), i.e., "nonverbal and verbal behaviors, which reduce the psychological and/or physical distance between teachers and students" (Christophel & Gorham, 1995, p. 292). Furthermore, Nguyen (2015) observed that undergraduate students tend to respond better to in-person teaching while mature students do better in online courses. Our students were not only undergraduates, but they were first-year students just starting out their undergraduate studies.

The fifth group of findings concerns the perceived usefulness of different online tools and activities. The average usefulness rates revealed that students appreciate instant and individualised feedback the most. They graded the most positively individual Google Doc tasks which were assigned during synchronous classes and were done while the teacher provided constructive comments and feedback. The importance of instructors' positive and constructive feedback in motivating students in online settings and helping them progress is commonly acknowledged in the literature (Baker, 2010; Johnson, 2017; Kadiresan et al., 2021). The second most popular group of tasks was characterised by the shared feature of instant or very quick, but not individualised feedback: Google Meet polls, Edpuzzle tasks and attendance quizzes. In this sense they reinforce the perception of instructor presence (Baker, 2010). The third group of tasks might have been perceived as more challenging. Chat requires autonomous activity over a long period of time. Team presentations and meetings involve group coordination and long-term consistent effort. Additionally, some students may feel that their individual effort is diminished or insufficiently appreciated as part of a group. Asynchronous and synchronous teamwork in Google Doc suffer from the same problems related to group work. Homework quizzes provide an opportunity to revise larger chunks of the material but are quite demanding in both time and effort.

Finally, Breakout rooms are an interesting case and are worth discussing in more detail. Activities involving Breakout rooms were the least appreciated by a large margin. In theory, this type of activity should provide a perfect opportunity for implementing problem-based learning in online groups. According to Amador and Mederer (2013), problem-based learning could facilitate higher quality student-to-student interaction, create social bonds among online learners and, ultimately, motivate them. Unfortunately, our students did not respond well to this tool. They reported feeling anxious and uncomfortable about having to communicate on a video call with other students who they did not know. As a result, very little communication occurred in these unsupervised mini-meetings. Our finding contradicts anecdotal evidence from instructors from other countries, whose groups greatly enjoyed Breakout rooms. This contradiction could be explained by the fact that our groups were exceptionally large (up to 100 students) and students had no realistic expectation of repeatedly meeting the same people in Breakout rooms, which made forming relationships impossible. This observation is confirmed by Amador and Mederer's (2013) finding that in large online classes where there is not a chance of creating meaningful student-to-student interactions, the learning environment becomes alienating and isolated.

7 Conclusion

We present the results of a quantitative survey on online learning carried out among 185 first-year students at the Faculty of Economics and Business, Univer-

sity of XXXX. The classes were taught in a synchronous manner, with an emphasis on in-class student participation and regular submission of homework assignments. The survey concerned students' reactions to online learning in a Business English class over the course of 20 weeks. Although in-person learning remained students' preferred learning method, we can conclude that the time period spent in online classes resulted in students becoming more adjusted to online learning. They seem to have learned to appreciate the benefits of consistent and interactive usage of an LMS, the time-saving effects of online classes and the opportunity to stay away from crowds and unknown environments. Interestingly, while students had a diminished interest in forming relationships with other students in online classes, they continued to place a high value on connecting with instructors. This finding is in line with instructor presence as a proven significant predictor of student affective learning, motivation and cognition (Baker, 2010). Closely linked to this observation is a heightened expectation of students towards instructors as guardians and overseers of their learning process. This went hand-in-hand with a fall in students' self-discipline and perceived responsibility for their progress. When it comes to online activities, our findings showed that, on top of an increased level of supervision, students appreciate instant and individualised feedback the most. Furthermore, they appreciate less complex tasks and autonomy over teamwork.

Our findings emphasise the importance of student engagement achieved through using interactive activities, feedback, real-time communication and transparent and structured application of learning management systems. Although in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, transferring to online classes was a rational solution, it is now clear that online classes cannot replace in-person teaching, at least when it comes to younger adults in large groups. This does not and should not exclude the possibility of beneficially integrating online activities into in-person classes.

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