Student Satisfaction and Learning Outcomes
during Online Course Delivery - A Case Study

Baca Eleonora
"Ovidius" University of Constanta, Faculty of Letters, Romania
eleonorabaca@yahoo.com

Abstract

The paper presents the results of a study on students' satisfaction concerning online teaching in general and ESP (English for Special Purposes) in particular, considering the implications of an unprecedented shift in education, a turn from the traditional face-to -face system to an emergency remote online learning, imposed by the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania. The results reveal a general positive attitude towards the efforts made by the teaching staff during online teaching; therefore, we are confident that the less encouraging aspects revealed by the study can be adjusted in time and improved to better suit and serve the needs of our students.

Key words: student satisfaction, learning environment, COVID-19, emergency remote online learning, ESP**.**
J.E.L. classification: Z13

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2020, disrupted and affected educational activities all over the world and hundreds of millions of students and educators were redirected to the only available option online learning (synchronous or asynchronous). Emergency remote teaching replaced traditional face to face learning overnight, in order to slow down the transmission of the virus and to continue the educational process during extensive periods of lockdown in Romania and all over the world. This newly adopted system raised adaptation concerns for instructors, as well as numerous worries about the quality of students' learning.

Under these circumstances, various changes in roles occurred- from lecturers and providers of content, teachers transformed into guides, facilitators and designers of students' learning experiences, from a solitary perspective in a classical classroom setting (indicated by teachers' position at teachers' desk), they become members of a learning team, radically changing the teacher-learner power structure. At the same time, students change from passive receivers of readymade knowledge to builders of their own knowledge. Instead of simple memorising of facts, they evolve and turn into problem solvers and approach the proposed issues from a multiple perspective. While refining and redefining their searches, students have the opportunity to discover their own answers. Group interaction is significantly increased while the group members become more cooperative and collaborative. Learning is revealed to students as a fluid concept while they work with the same tools as their instructors and become self-motivated in the learning process as they turn into managers of their own time. The observation of the instructors' expert knowledge is replaced by expertise on knowledge use.

As in the second half of 2021, online learning continued and there are serious concerns that this will continue in 2022 as well, discussions about its quality have taken centre stage. Our present study starts from the presumption that online learning satisfaction is one of the main indicators for the success of online learning and constitutes a fundamental step in students' motivation to pursue their studies. In various situations, the transfer from face to face to online teaching was at first a very fast and unprepared reaction, it represented a special challenge for those academic institutions that did not have implemented online courses and even for those who had some experience in this field, technical difficulties such as extended platforms to accommodate all classes or better

equipment, connectivity problems still occurred. The necessity to quickly train all staff and to adapt internal procedures, also proved to be a real challenge.

2. Literature review

Active learning involves discussion, collaboration, materials, hands on exercises and live lectures, it is important to set clear expectations for students, while the tone needs to be set for a supportive online community. Students' progress needs to be tracked and a good balance between formative and summative assessment needs to be created and maintained. Student satisfaction influences on the one hand students' involvement in their own educational journey (grades course participation, attendance), their relationships with professors and colleagues, and to a certain extent- their employability. On the other hand, new student recruitment efforts are in tight correlation to this factor.

Measuring student satisfaction can prove a useful instrument for academic institutions in order to highlight areas of improvement and strong points. Students' learning experience is a complex system which is influenced by various factors, going beyond the narrow forms of teacher assessments. Apart from finding out the degree of satisfaction, identifying and understanding the factors that contribute to this satisfaction is of equal importance. Our purpose in this study is to pinpoint different aspects of the educational experience, determining actions that need to be taken in order to preserve high levels of satisfaction and to improve students' learning outcome.

Online learning satisfaction is determined by numerous factors: the learning content, course design, if it fulfils, the students' learning needs, it also involves a social fulfilment component. In a research carried out in 2021, the majority of respondents pointed out that ESP classes were among the easiest to understand compared to other online disciplines. The explanation of this preference, in the author's opinion, coming from the fact that the majority of language teachers are interested in innovative teaching methods and techniques as well as in course design (Chirobocea-Tudor, 2021, p.260).

Digital technologies can become friends and enemies, weapons and tools, cure or poison, according to the manner in which we choose to use them. Theorists of this trend have warned us against the danger of digital technologies as being a cause of disorientation (Stiegler, 2008, p.66), or that they might impact our cognitive processes is in a negative way, affecting our concentration (Carr, 2010, p.107). Being able to access and process vast amounts of information in a short period of time, has had a strong impact on our consumer (of information) behaviour patterns and on our learning habits. In various cases reading has transformed into surfing/ browsing, more superficial forms of action; knowing about the topic has replaced learning about it. While knowledge and information seemed to have found two separate ways to enter our cognitive processes, in this respect, online teaching goes in the same direction with a democratic access to huge quantities of raw information flowing in a democratising manner all around us. In 2016 universities were invited to turn into producers of digital knowledge and shift from simple producers of education, as a vital requirement for their survival (Stiegler, 2016), this seems to be the right moment, more than ever.

The emotional involvement of students in the courses should not be neglected, as it is part of the complex network of factors that lead to satisfaction and better learning outcomes. As student academic life is intertwined with an emotional journey in which various categories are present, personal projects, academic projects, temporarity, spatiality, sociality, embodiment and discourse (Beard, 2007, p.250). This "emergency remote online learning" is an experience from which it is a lot to be learned and a better preparation for future situations to be effected.

Student satisfaction is correlated in previous studies with students' readiness to learn online (Joosten, Cusatis, 2020), with the quality of the social connexions and interactions they are able to establish with their instructors and peers (McFarland, Hamilton, 2005, p.30), as well as with the course content and the course design. Apart from these, we consider that students' personal abilities, attitudes and personal motivations, interests, and personal background could also bring an important contribution to their own success or preference for this type of activity.

Exploring the theories of motivation offer an insight into the complex of factors affecting satisfaction, as motivation precedes and determines satisfaction. The theory of self-efficacy places in its centre the idea that specific beliefs affect the way we think and act, determining our level of

motivation, emotional reactions and guide our choices in important decisional moments. The greater our perceived self-efficacy, the higher goals we will set, and as a result, the dedication and the final results will be higher. This theory is centred around a need for competence, relatedness and autonomy/self-determination. Competence is defined as being able to understand the means through which one's competence can be reached and being able to adopt the necessary actions (Badura, 1982).

Self-determination theory, in which education creates in students a motivation and an interest in learning, as well as a considerable amount of confidence in their capability to understand and build knowledge. Students feel intrinsically motivated and consequently this results in a high-quality type of learning and a deep understanding of the conceptual framework. This individual process of growth and adaptation leading to appropriate educational goals (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000).

Hence an accomplishment of basic needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy can lead to an increased level of motivation and performance in the learning process and increase the level of satisfaction afterwards. If properly organised and used, e-learning has the potential of being an impressive tool in this complex process.

3. Research methodology

The sample of this study consisted of 63 students (34 women and 29 men), enrolled in the 1st year at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, at "Ovidius" University of Constanța.Their ages range from 18 to 21. The students were interviewed during the first semester of the academic year 2021-2022.

The study is based on a specially designed Microsoft Forms Questionnaire. The survey contains 14 closed-ended questions and 1 opened-ended question, which were grouped in two categories. The first group of questions investigates students' opinions on the quality of online teaching in general and its impact on their learning outcome. The second group of questions focuses on students' opinion on the quality of the ESP course they attended weekly and its impact on their professional skills. The answers are anonymous and students were offered the possibility to avoid answering uncomfortable questions in the survey.

4. Findings

Of the 15 questions mentioned above, the first three are targeted at examining students' perception on the ESP course they attended weekly. Almost 94% of the respondents considered that the instructor proved a thorough knowledge of the proposed subject content. When asked about the opportunities provided by the course to clarify their questions, 90% answered that they were offered this opportunity and that they felt encouraged to ask such questions.

Questions 4 and 3 move beyond instructor's skills and knowledge of the given topics, investigating the way the subject content of the course was communicated effectively by the professor and the subject was presented as interestingly as possible, 92% of the respondents agreed, 3% were neutral and 5% disagreed.

Questions 6 and 7 offer a deeper perspective on students' perception concerning the improvement of their professional communication skills and confidence in their abilities to learn and improve their professional skills. As we can see from the above table, in the case of Question 6. The result indicated a high level of confidence. While in the case of Question 7, the number of students being convinced that they can learn and continue improving their skills is in a slight decline, see Figure no. 1.

*Table no 1- questions 6 and 7 and statistical results*
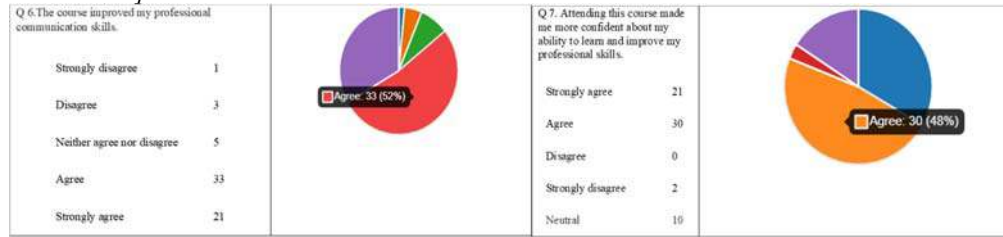
Source: Question and chart processed by the author

The second group of questions was dedicated to investigating a larger set of elements dealing with students' opinions and beliefs about their learning goals, the overall quality of the training programme, their relationship with other students, and their feeling of engagement during the attendance of online courses. Students were also asked questions concerning the opportunity of having a better management of their learning skills during online classes, the access and use of information and the possibility to better track and monitor their academic progress.

Question 8 asked students if they feel more motivated to achieve their learning goals, and the number of 79% students who agreed to this question traces an optimistic future in terms of students' academic retention. Coupled with the number of students who gave positive feedback to question 9 ("Overall, I'm satisfied with the quality of this training")- 92% of the students agreed, 7% were neutral and 1% disagreed.

From our experience in previous year, we noticed several students making suggestions in terms of their social connectivity with other fellow students, especially during first year of study. Question 11 investigates their opportunities to socialise and collaborate with their fellows. Despite the fact that online connexions offer more multitasking options and theoretically facilitates communication, as you can see in Figure no. 2, only 30 students, meaning less than 48% of the respondents agreed.

*Figure no. 2- question 11 and statistical results*
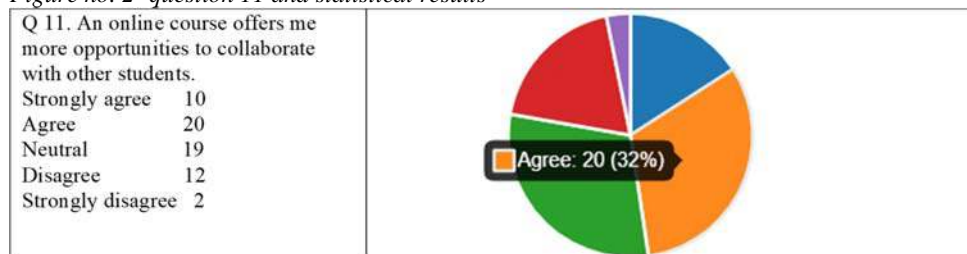
Source: Question and chart processed by the author

A surprise was generated by the results of Question 13 ("My online experience has increased my opportunities to access and use information"), in this case considering the free use of various platforms and the multitude of online available materials, we would expect a 100% agreement. However, things are different, as only 70% of the respondents agreed, while 22% chose to be neutral and 2% disagreed.

Another issue worth being investigated in more detail comes from the answers provided at Question 14, ("I can monitor my academic progress more easily in online courses"). Here 65% of the respondents agreed, whereas 22% were neutral and 13% expressed their disagreement. Which leads us to the idea that for some students a traditional face to face type of evaluation would be a better indicator of their progress.

Figure no. 2- question 14 and statistical results

Q 14. I can monitor my academic progress more easily in online courses.	
Strongly agree	12
Agree	29
Neutral	14
Disagree	5
Strongly disagree	3
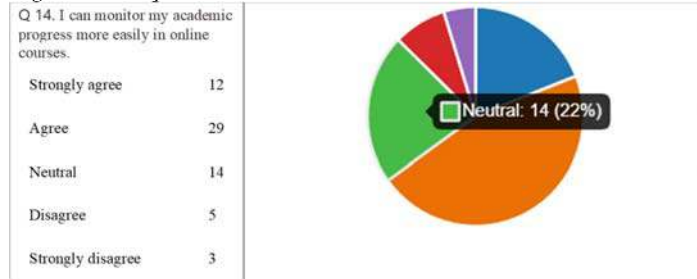
Source: Question and chart processed by the author

Question 15 offered students the opportunity to express their own suggestions concerning the improvements they would bring to online courses. It was an optional answer like all the other questions comprised in the present questionnaire. Surprisingly, most of the respondents chose to express their satisfaction with online courses, given the present circumstances, while some answers suggested a return to traditional formats ("Face-to-face format is more interactive") or that students should give up their shyness and overcome their fears of giving a wrong answer or asking an irrelevant question ("More courage from students in creating dialogues together"- as one student put it).

5. Conclusions

A relevant aspect to be highlighted is the fact that students appreciate the effort of university staff to overcome the difficulties of such a challenging semester by adapting their methods and digital platforms, by remaining hopeful and encouraging students to express their fears and by being interested in students' progress and their state of wellbeing, whereas offering support and meeting their learning needs has been a priority. A large part of the negative impact on learning resigned from unclear and delayed information about what students can expect from in terms of the type of teaching (face to face or online) and examination methods being used.

First year students experienced a lack of social life and collaboration and a period of continuous postponement of social contacts- "maybe next semester...", "maybe next year...". Due to the evolution of the pandemic situation procedures were unclear, decisions were delayed or taken very abruptly. This situation created frustration, tensions and dissatisfaction, despite instructors' and staff's supportive attitude, quick response, and supportive tone, problems still reside and turn into heavy emotional burdens accumulating on students' shoulders. As our study revealed, continuing with an online or hybrid format for ESP classes can be an option for the future to a considerable extent. While other aspects such as social interaction with instructors and peers can be a challenge for the development of future platforms.

Apart from the problems and negative aspects connected to this period of closure and separation, we are in front of an educational experiment carried out on an unprecedented scale which opens new directions and perspectives to investigate- the emotional impact on students of this period of online classes, student retention in difficult times, the possibility to test and improve existing systems so that they function perfectly in the future and the possibility of being rejected or ignored be reduced to minimum.

6. References

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