

Learners’ Attitude towards Online Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic with Focus on ESP

Olivia Chirobocea-Tudor

“Ovidius” University of Constanta, Faculty of Letters, Romania

olivia.ch31@gmail.com

Abstract

This article presents the results of a study that analyzed ESP learners’ perception of the shift to online classes during the academic year 2020-2021, forced under the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results emphasize a general positive attitude towards the online format, with some of the frustrations encountered by other similar studies. Most of the negative aspects indicated by the respondents can be mitigated in time and adjustments can be made to rise to the challenge of adapting ESP classes to the online medium, a format that may represent the future of education.

Key words: ESP, online teaching, pandemic

J.E.L. classification: Z13

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us all into an experimental academic year 2020-2021 and even though some had more or less experience with online education, nobody was prepared for the sudden transition from face-to-face classes to fully online classes literally overnight. Online education is not a new concept, hybrid learning had been used for many years before 2020, dedicated platforms such as Moodle had also been in use for a long time gaining more and more supporters. However, such tools were only a supplement for the regular in-person classes and no such large-scale use of online platforms for synchronous instruction was implemented, with the exception of certain institutions that had distance learning programs in online format. However, there can be little comparison between the planned classes that occurred in this format before 2020 and what happened after because the pandemic took us to uncharted territories which worked only as a “reminder that learning never occurs in a vacuum” (Le Cor and Couterut, 2020) as the circumstances surrounding this abrupt and en-masse shift influenced the success of the experiment to a considerable extent.

ESP teachers were thrown into this experiment too, each trying to make use of the tools and knowledge they had acquired from their previous experience. Whether the online format is more favorable to ESP or not remains to be determined. Personally, I felt the online format gave me more opportunities to use certain tools than the regular classroom format provided in spite of the commonly encountered disadvantages such as students’ difficulty to focus, engagement and motivation issue alongside others. Despite the extraordinary toll this experiment took on all of us, it was in fact a rare opportunity to test this method on a large scale and see what works and what does not. When we return fully to the in-person classes, the online option will definitely remain a serious contender for various situations in which the face-to-face classes cannot be held, at least temporarily. Therefore, it is important to analyze the results and make adjustments for the future use of this format with better preparation for better outcomes.

2. Literature review

This pandemic year has provided a fertile ground for experimentation in the education domain, with negative as well as positive experiences, and many ESP practitioners took advantage and studied the aspects of online classes for future reference and further research. A study about learners' perception of online classes in general conducted by Nur Agung et al. in 2020 found that enthusiasm about online learning was not high and the learners' preference was for simple platforms such as WhatsApp and Google Classroom, which did not require the best internet connection and could be installed on simpler phones (p. 231). The study concludes that “The students are not accustomed to online learning. Level of IT literacy, limited visualization, the absence of direct classroom communication, and poor internet connection led to unsuccessful teaching and learning.” (p. 233) and that “most English students are not ready for this rapid shift in terms of teaching and learning style” (p. 234), their most common problems being connectivity, accessibility to learning platforms and compatibility of formats.

However, other studies come to more positive conclusions in terms of online classes, especially those that involved ESP learners. Thus, a 2021 study on Ukrainian learners found that teacher's involvement, preparation and capacity for engagement, as well as material availability, are crucial in keeping the learners motivated in online classes (Avsheniuk et al., 2021). Another study, involving Macedonian ESP learners and the use of the Google Classroom platform, shows that students see the inability to focus while being online as the greatest disadvantage of the format, while motivation and the teacher's capacity to create challenging tasks are the main drivers that keep learners engaged in online classes (Kirovska-Simjanoska, 2021). A 2020 study on Argentinian ESP learners found that students generally have a positive attitude towards online classes because of convenience and because the format might help in their career, but they also understand that in-person classes are important for the valuable interaction, both with teachers and classmates (Waicekawsky, 2020). Băcă's 2020 study on Romanian ESP learners questions their perceptions at the very beginning of the pandemic, when the sudden shift intertwined with the psychological impact of the uncertainty felt during the first lockdown for which nobody was prepared, and finds that the main challenges such as access and connectivity as well as distractions and the difficulty to focus in online classes, combined with the psychological impact of the entire situation, made most students reject the distance of online classes when interaction was more needed than ever (Băcă, 2020).

Older studies analyze the learners' perceptions about online classes and find somewhat similar results, namely that avoiding travel is the main driver but lack of interaction with peers is a problem (Horspool and Lange, 2012). A more recent multinational study about distance education finds that motivation is a main issue in online classes and most learners prefer synchronous instruction, therefore they opted for MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses) rather than asynchronous courses on online platforms (Fidalgo et al., 2020). These two studies were performed for carefully planned classes in times when the word *pandemic* was the stuff of movies. However, even for the nerve-wrecking abrupt transition imposed by lockdowns, the trend is rather clear and the opinions mostly consistent regardless of country, namely that infrastructure is a problem, together with motivation and the lack of interaction with teachers and peers, while convenience and the lack of travel or scheduling issues are seen as advantages. The learners generally have a positive attitude towards online classes as long as they include engaging and motivating activities, which are issues emphasized by most studies.

3. Research methodology

The survey was accomplished by means of a Google Forms questionnaire containing eleven multiple choice questions, where the respondents were asked to choose from a predetermined list of answers (nine single-answer questions and two multiple-answer ones) and two open-ended questions, where the respondents were asked to give their opinion. The participants were 1st and 2nd year Romanian students enrolled in five programs at the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, namely biology, ecology, agriculture and horticulture, as well as the part-time education agriculture program. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, they all attended the ESP

classes, as well as the other disciplines, in the fully online format during the academic year 2020-2021. For ESP, the Webex platform was used for synchronous instruction, just as it was scheduled in the timetable. Additionally, the Google Classroom platform was used for dissemination of materials and homework, as well as further communication between students and teacher.

Since all communication with the students was remote, using the two platforms mentioned, as well as messenger services (mainly WhatsApp discussion groups), the questionnaire was also distributed and filled out online, contributing to the entire online experience. This may have some implications, namely of control over who participates, whether the students who filled out the questionnaire were actually present during the ESP classes or not, whether they were aware of the conditions during these classes and how they unfolded. In this regard, I included below data regarding the number of students that were present (logged in / camera on) and the number of students who filled out the questionnaire, for comparison.

Table no. 1. Information about the participants

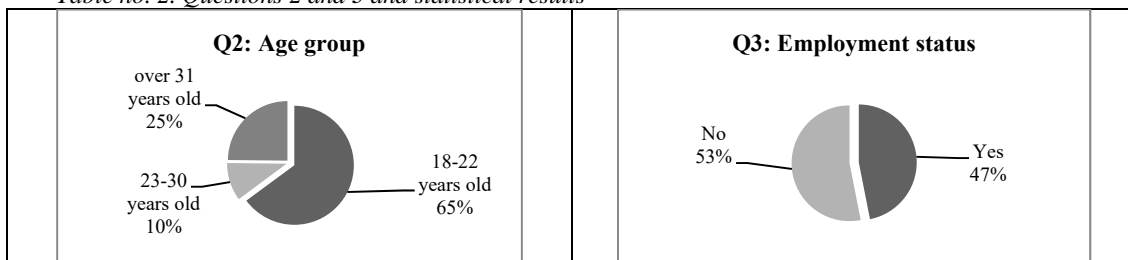
Program	Average no. of students that normally attended the online ESP class	Average no. of students that attended the online ESP class with their cameras on	No. of students that filled out the questionnaire
Biology 1 st year	18	13	15
Biology 2 nd year	20	10	22
Ecology 1 st year	18	9	11
Ecology 2 nd year	10	7	8
Agriculture 1 st year	10	7	20
Agriculture 2 nd year	10	9	14
Horticulture 1 st year	6	5	6
Horticulture 2 nd year	5	4	9
Agriculture (part-time) 1 st year	20	12	27
Agriculture (part-time) 2 nd year	19	10	13
Total	136 (on average)	86 (on average)	145

Source: Processed by the author

4. Findings

Of the eleven questions mentioned above, three are related to basic information regarding age group, employment and program they are enrolled in. The first question, related to the number of participants per program was discussed in the previous section and it displayed a proportional participation compared to class attendance (Table no. 1). The other two questions, regarding age and employment, displayed the results shown below in Table no. 2. A simple correlation between age and employment status shows the expected results, namely that the younger respondents are mostly unemployed and this status changes as the age increases. Thus, while only 27 out of 94 are employed in the 18-22 age group (28% employed), for the other two age groups put together only 10 out of 51 are unemployed (80% employed). This will reflect later in the next questions.

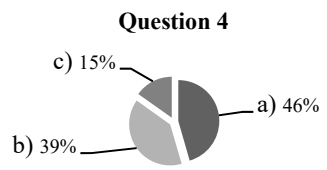
Table no. 2. Questions 2 and 3 and statistical results



Source: Question and chart processed by the author

Question 4 (Table no. 3) deals with online classes in general, irrespective of discipline, and the results are rather surprising, the proportion of those who found the online format more difficult (46%) being close to the proportion of those who found it easier (39%) to follow than the regular face-to-face classes. A small percentage (15%) sensed no difference in the degree of difficulty to follow online classes compared to the regular format. However, per age group the results are rather surprising, with a greater percentage of the respondents in the over 30 group finding online classes easier to follow (58.3%) or sensing no difference (22.2%) compared to a greater percentage of the respondents in the 18-22 age group that find online classes more difficult to follow (56.3%) and only 11.7% sense no difference. In the other age group, 23-30, the results are equally shared with 40% finding online classes easier to follow, 40% more difficult to follow and 20% sensing no difference.

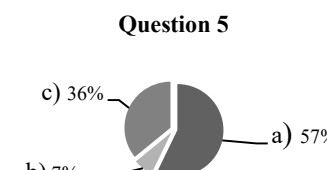
Table no. 3. Question 4 and statistical results

<p>Q4. In general, online classes seem to me:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) More difficult to follow than in-person classes b) Easier to follow than in-person classes c) I sense no difference between online and in-person classes in terms of difficulty to follow 	<p style="text-align: center;">Question 4</p>  <p>A pie chart titled 'Question 4' showing the distribution of responses. The largest slice is 'a) 46%' (dark grey), followed by 'b) 39%' (light grey), and 'c) 15%' (white).</p>
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Source: Question and chart processed by the author

Question 5 (Table no. 4) moves beyond the general, requiring an opinion specifically about the online ESP class compared to other disciplines that held online classes, and the results are again surprising in that a considerable majority (57%) found it easier to follow the ESP class online than other disciplines. The percentage that found it more difficult (36%) is comparable to the one that found online classes in general more difficult to follow in the previous question (39%).

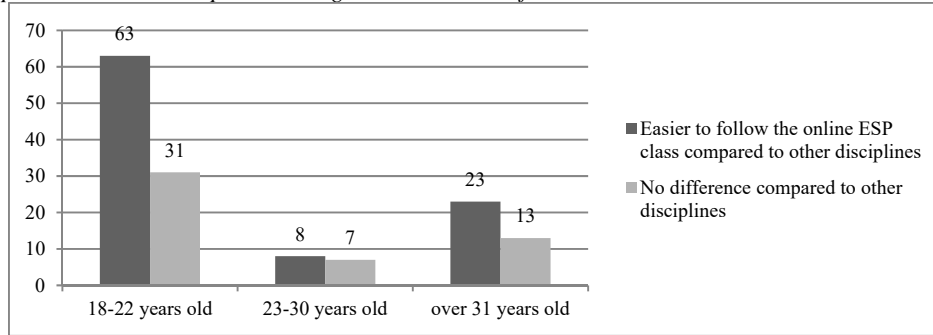
Table no. 4. Question 5 and statistical results

<p>Q5. Compared to other disciplines that held online classes, the online ESP class is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Easier to follow compared to other disciplines b) More difficult to follow compared to other disciplines c) The same as other disciplines 	<p style="text-align: center;">Question 5</p>  <p>A pie chart titled 'Question 5' showing the distribution of responses. The largest slice is 'a) 57%' (dark grey), followed by 'c) 36%' (light grey), and 'b) 7%' (white).</p>
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Source: Question and chart processed by the author

In terms of age correlations specifically related to the ESP class, things are a bit different compared to the results analyzed for the previous question about online classes in general. This time, it is the younger respondents that find the discipline comparatively easier to follow than other disciplines, although the other ages share similar results, as shown in Graph no. 1. Most respondents chose either easier to follow or sensing no difference, with only 10% choosing more difficult to follow from all age groups put together.

Graph no. 1. Relationship between age and easiness to follow online ESP classes



Source: Graph processed by the author

Questions 6 and 7 delve a little deeper into elements that make the ESP class easier or more difficult in the online format than in the regular format. For Question 6 (Table no. 5), the clear winner (61%) in terms of advantages was the “screen share” function of the Webex platform that was constantly used in class and that facilitated understanding for students with lower levels of proficiency, but not only. Scientific language is difficult in general and this helped everyone with regular problems such as correct spelling. Two other elements considered advantages of the online format shared relatively close percentages: the lack of personal exposure felt in a classroom, which gave some the courage to contribute with more input in class (20%) and the fact that beginners felt the online format was more helpful than the regular one (12%). An interesting, and expected result, in terms of the former percentage is that timidity clearly relates to age because 19 out of the 29 who chose “Lack of personal exposure” as an advantage are young people (18-22 years old).

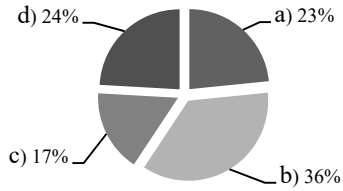
Table no. 5. Question 6 and statistical results

<p>Q6. What is the most advantageous element of the online ESP class?</p> <p>a) Lack of personal exposure; I had more courage to contribute in class than I would have in a regular classroom</p> <p>b) The “screen share” function of the platform, which makes the material more accessible; the fact that the teacher writes with us the activities</p> <p>c) Being a beginner in terms of language proficiency, I found it easier to understand the explanations in the online format</p> <p>d) The specialized language is more difficult in a foreign language, that is why it is easier for me to understand it in the online format rather than in a regular class</p> <p>e) Other issues</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Question 6</p> <p style="text-align: center;">d) 5% e) 2% c) 12% a) 20% b) 61%</p>
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Source: Question and chart processed by the author

In terms of disadvantages (Question 7 – Table no. 6), the results were rather equally shared among the four options given, with one of them jumping a little higher, namely the one related to the impersonal medium and distance felt in the online format, which does not encourage communication for 36% of the respondents. Of the 24% (35 respondents) that chose option d) Other issues, most of them proceeded to write their opinion in the next section, which was given for this purpose. Ten respondents simply did not write anything, while most of the rest (14) stated that there is no disadvantage to the ESP class held online. There were also other opinions such as “the colleagues’ lack of interaction” (2), simply “online teaching”, which seems to be a disadvantage in itself for two respondents, or the possibility of technical problems (2).

Table no. 6. Question 7 and statistical results

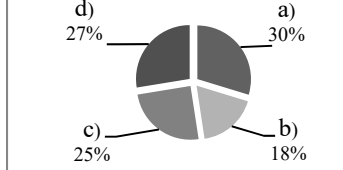
<p>Q7. What is the most disadvantageous element of the online ESP class?</p> <p>a) The specialized language is more difficult in a foreign language, that is why it is more difficult for me to understand it in the online format rather than in a regular classroom</p> <p>b) I am not tempted to contribute in class because of the distance of impersonal medium; other talk before me</p> <p>c) Being a beginner in terms of language proficiency, I found it more difficult to understand the explanations in the online format</p> <p>d) Other issues</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Question 7</p>  <table border="1"> <caption>Data for Question 7 Pie Chart</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Option</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>a)</td> <td>23%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b)</td> <td>36%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c)</td> <td>17%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d)</td> <td>24%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Option	Percentage	a)	23%	b)	36%	c)	17%	d)	24%
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a)	23%										
b)	36%										
c)	17%										
d)	24%										

Source: Question and chart processed by the author

In Questions 6 and 7, two options were deliberately identical to see what results they would trigger. Thus, the options “The specialized language is more difficult in a foreign language, that is why it is more difficult/easier for me to understand it in the online format rather than in a regular classroom” and “Being a beginner in terms of language proficiency, I found it more difficult/easier to understand the explanations in the online format” provided rather similar results. The difficulty of the specialized language makes it easier to understand in online format for 5% of the respondents and more difficult to understand for 23%. While those who judged themselves as having a lower level of proficiency found the specialized language easier (12%) or more difficult (17%) to understand in the online format in comparable percentages. However, if we are to compare the choices in Questions 6 and 7 with those in Question 5, only 18% of those who found it easier to follow the online ESP class declared themselves beginners.

Question 8 (Table no. 7) asks about the students’ preference in terms of returning to the regular format when the pandemic is over. The results were rather surprising again, in that the expectation was to see a large percentage of respondents looking forward to in-person classes and it seems the situation is not quite so. There were two options for “yes” and two options for “no”, and it appears that the “NOs” slightly exceeded the “YESes”. Whether the reasons are related to employment issues or simple convenience, there are more students that do not want to return (52%) to the regular format than those who do (48%).

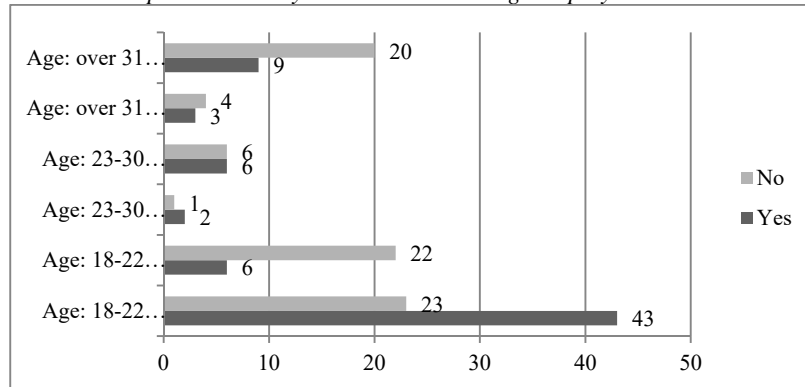
Table no. 7. Question 8 and statistical results

<p>Q8. I prefer to go back to the in-person ESP classes:</p> <p>a) Yes, 100%</p> <p>b) Yes, but I would also prefer maintaining an online component</p> <p>c) No, I prefer online classes because I am employed and this way I can attend classes from other locations</p> <p>d) No, I prefer 100% online classes (for other reasons: it is more convenient, I am not a resident etc.)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Question 8</p>  <table border="1"> <caption>Data for Question 8 Pie Chart</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Option</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>a)</td> <td>30%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b)</td> <td>18%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c)</td> <td>25%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d)</td> <td>27%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Option	Percentage	a)	30%	b)	18%	c)	25%	d)	27%
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Source: Question and chart processed by the author

A more detailed analysis of the responses to this question indicates that the positive and negative answers, regardless of reason, correlate with age and employment status, as illustrated in the graph below (Graph no. 2). Thus, the employed respondents generally preferred online classes, while the younger and unemployed respondents clearly prefer the regular classroom format.

Graph no. 2. Relationship between the yes/no answers and age/employment



Source: Graph processed by the author

As mentioned in the previous section, the Webex platform was used for synchronous classes and the Google Classroom platform for dissemination of materials and homework. The latter or something similar can be kept as a supplement even after the return to in-person classes, for the same purposes. Question 9 (Table no. 8) deals with this issue and it seems that most students (79%) found such a platform useful and necessary. An interesting remark here is that of those who answered *No*, most respondents were in the unemployed 18-22 age group (18 compared to 6 from all the other age and employment status groups).

Table no. 8. Question 9 and statistical results

<p>Q9. In the case of in-person ESP classes, do you think it is helpful to use an online platform in parallel?</p> <p>a) Yes, for the easier dissemination of class or extra materials, for homework and additional interaction with the teacher etc.</p> <p>b) No, I didn't notice any usefulness for such a platform in addition to the regular class</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Question 9</p> <p style="text-align: center;">a) 79% b) 21%</p>
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Source: Question and chart processed by the author

The purpose of the last two questions was to request general information about what the students found difficult or easy about the transition to the online format at the beginning and throughout the pandemic. For each question they were allowed to make two choices. In terms of disadvantages (Question 10 – Table no. 9), the clear winners are the technical problems (44.1%), which we all experienced at the time, and the lack of interaction and impersonal medium (46.2%), which again, we all experienced at the time not only in class, but also in life as most countries were imposing lockdowns and isolation was deeply felt in all aspects of life. These are followed, with equal percentages, by the intrusion in the personal space (22.8%) and the distraction (22.8%) caused by this shift of environment, from formal to informal, from the dedicated classroom to the private home space where other people reside and distracting activities may take place around the students trying to focus on online classes. An interesting result in this regard is that in terms of age, of those who chose “Intrusion in the personal space” as a disadvantage, most were young people in the 18-22 age group (20 out of 32 responders).

Table no. 9. Question 10 and statistical results

<p>Q10. In general, what did you find the most difficult in the transition from the regular format (face to face) to the online format? (2 choices)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Technical problems and the lack of infrastructure b) The fact that I am not very experienced in the online medium c) Intrusion in the personal space d) Difficulty to follow the class in the online medium, the modified teaching methods compared to the regular format e) The lack of interaction with the classmates and the teacher, the distance and impersonal medium f) I cannot focus, I am distracted by things and activities around me; the lack of the structure specific to classroom activities 	<table border="1"> <caption>Question 10 Data</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Option</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>a)</td> <td>44,1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b)</td> <td>9</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c)</td> <td>22,8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d)</td> <td>13,8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>e)</td> <td>46,2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>f)</td> <td>22,8</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Option	Percentage	a)	44,1	b)	9	c)	22,8	d)	13,8	e)	46,2	f)	22,8
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a)	44,1														
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e)	46,2														
f)	22,8														

Source: Question and chart processed by the author

In terms of advantages (Question 11 – Table no. 10), convenience is the winner by far (66.9%), namely not having to wake up early and go through the trouble of getting ready, maybe catching the bus and going to the university. This is followed by the quick access to materials (48.3%) which are easier to obtain and use in the electronic format. Attendance issues shared similar percentages, regardless of reason (25.5% for employment issues and 29% for other reasons), while the lowest percentage went to the various possibilities to communicate with the teacher (9.7%).

Table no. 10. Question 11 and statistical results

<p>Q11. In general, what did you find the easiest/most advantageous in the transition from the regular format (face to face) to the online format? (2 choices)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Convenience (not having to go to the university) b) I could attend the classes because I am employed c) The various possibilities to communicate with the teacher d) The quick access to the class materials, more convenient and easier to disseminate, read, fill in etc. in the electronic format e) I attended more classes that I would have in the regular format 	<table border="1"> <caption>Question 11 Data</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Option</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>a)</td> <td>66,9</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b)</td> <td>25,5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c)</td> <td>9,7</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d)</td> <td>48,3</td> </tr> <tr> <td>e)</td> <td>29</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Option	Percentage	a)	66,9	b)	25,5	c)	9,7	d)	48,3	e)	29
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Source: Question and chart processed by the author

5. Conclusions

The results are rather in line with those found by other similar studies, with certain distinctions or rather different data. Interesting results show that online classes are equally favored and disliked by an almost identical number of participants and that more younger than older learners find online classes more difficult to follow. A pleasant surprise is the large majority of respondents who indicated that the online ESP classes have been easier to follow and understand than other disciplines also taught online. This may be in part explained by a bias or a desire to please the teacher. However, the survey was purposefully anonymous to encourage honesty, therefore the explanation may lie elsewhere. Most language teachers, unlike other disciplines, are very focused on teaching methods and techniques, as their research proves it. A large majority of the ESP-targeted articles published everywhere in the world is focused on methodology, on teaching methods and course design, always looking for better ways to facilitate language learning.

The difficulty of the specialized language is also an issue for some learners and the online format was not helpful for them, while those with lower levels of English proficiency found that the online format made it both easy and difficult to learn the language in similar proportions. The truly interesting surprise came from the participants' desire to return to in-person classes which was not as overwhelming as expected. The opinions were somewhat equally shared between those who wanted to return to the regular classes and those who preferred the online format, for various reasons, with a slightly higher number for those preferring online classes (52%). These results, together with their clear preference for the future use of online platforms (79%) and the fact that many respondents found it easy to follow the online ESP classes only means that the future clearly

includes the online format to a considerable extent, much more than in pre-pandemic times. Certain issues that represented a disadvantage at the beginning, when the change truly occurred overnight, such as lack of infrastructure, connectivity, compatibility and digital literacy were fixed over time, but they remain tied to economic aspects. Others such as intrusion in the personal space and difficulty focusing may have attenuated over time as people got used to the format. However, important disadvantages such as the direct and much needed interaction with teachers and peers cannot be easily replaced by acceptable surrogates.

The experiment that has been the online academic year 2020-2021 must be regarded as an incredible learning opportunity for us as teachers because we have been faced with a unique situation that closed as well as opened many doors to new opportunities and this requires a challenging effort of adaptation to the new circumstances. What is clear from this and other similar studies is that online education is here to stay to a much larger extent than it was before 2020. When this possibility exists and was tested for over a year, it can no longer be easily rejected, only improved.

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