

Students' perception of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Based on the chain of events brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 was the year of online education and in many parts of the world, including Romania, this is still the norm in most higher education institutions. After a full academic year of distance learning, 131 undergraduate business students filled in a questionnaire about how they perceived the entire process and what they thought about their Business English course in particular. Results showed that the teaching, learning and evaluation experience was relatively positive, although direct interaction with teachers and peers have suffered the most in the process. Encouragingly, about 43% would like to continue with a hybrid system in the future, which is no doubt due to the flexibility the online system provides. However, further research is needed in terms of establishing the long-term effects of online education on university (language) courses.

Keywords: higher education, students' perception, online education, Business English, pandemic

Introduction

With the global onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, a series of health-related measures meant to protect citizens all over the world were enforced in a matter of days. At the time, with the limited information available, it was difficult to predict their longevity and, even more so, their impact. Education, which naturally relied on physical interaction among large groups of students, had to be conducted online. In fact, online education has become the global “*panacea for the crisis*” (Dhawan, 2020, p. 7, emphasis in the original). After the initial shock, everyone started wondering what the effects would be on the teachers and students, whether the prolonged distance-learning activities would affect their emotional well-being together with their exam results. Now, with two months left before 2021 comes to an end, answers to these concerns and many more are still pending, simply because the pandemic is not yet over.

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Online education is certainly not new, but it had not been implemented on such a large scale in the Romanian public school system up until March 2020. Even now, a large number of students do not have access to the resources and infrastructure needed to participate in synchronous online education activities. At university level, things are looking better from this viewpoint, but constant monitoring of students' perception of the current situation is important in order to be able for teachers to make the necessary adjustments where possible. Had the crisis only lasted for a couple of months, allowing all the activities to revert back to normal, e-learning would have likely remained at experimental level in most cases. Clearly, we are now past that point, and one of the most important duties of an educational institution and its staff is to make sure that the teaching-learning process is conducted in good conditions.

This study was prompted by the desire to analyse and improve the undergraduate students' experience with online education (and particularly with the Business English course) during the COVID-19 pandemic at a public university, since a one-year-later review of the activities would prove beneficial to both them and their teachers in the attempt to move forward during this extremely unpredictable period and would also provide valuable examples of best practices.

To this end, the three main research questions on which the study is based are the following:

- a) What is the students' perception of the fully online education process that took place during the 2020-2021 academic year, in terms of their general level of satisfaction with e-learning, alongside the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the online system?
- b) How do they rate the Business English course (in terms of the teaching/input delivery, learning and evaluation components) when it is conducted remotely?
- c) Based on the experience of the 2020-2021 academic year, how would students want the education process to be conducted in the future?

Before presenting the results of the study and their implications, the literature review is included below, complete with different views on what online education involves and recent examples of similar studies on students' perception of the online process during the pandemic.

1. Literature Review

The term 'online education' is often used interchangeably with 'e-learning,' 'online learning' or 'distance education,' but it must first be pointed out that for the purposes of this article it could be defined as the use of the internet, videoconferencing and educational platforms to interact with the

teacher, other learners and content, to acquire knowledge and to be evaluated and graded based on the learning output, all while being physically removed from the educational institution.

Before it became a global necessity, online education was seen as an enticing opportunity by both education institutions and students. “Within higher education, the impact has been especially dramatic. [...] Centers supporting online learning are an increasingly common part of university infrastructure, as are specialized learning management systems such as Moodle, Canvas, and Blackboard” (Miller, 2014, pp. ix-x). It has also been argued that “the arrival of online learning is part of the modern transformation of higher education” (Bach *et al.*, 2007, p. 5) and, indeed, the global tendency seems to be towards an increase in the number of students opting for distance learning. This is not surprising since, in a globalised world, more and more people are trying to maximise their learning opportunities by taking advantage of the remote-learning opportunities made available through technology. But Arbaugh (2010) draws attention to the fact that, among other things, disciplinary influences should be considered when talking about online learning effectiveness. Thus, it is important to analyse the overall effectiveness of online education, alongside its particularities when looking at different course types. Quality assurance is an issue that has long been discussed in relation to online courses, as traditional face-to-face education used to be preferred over distance learning when it came to employment opportunities.

In terms of the level of learner motivation, it is difficult to say whether it is negatively influenced by the lack of direct interaction, since the perceived benefits of online education at the level of each individual might overcome the downsides, thus leading to stronger motivation, and vice versa. Maggie Hartnett (2016) discusses the issue of ‘motivation to learn,’ showing that it might benefit from the technologies used in online education. Some would go as far as to say that, when done correctly, “online education can be better than traditional classes” (Lehman and Chamberlin, 2009, p. 2). However, making the transition from face-to-face to online learning requires significant financial investment, including proper training for both teachers and students (Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Given the abrupt start of the pandemic, there was simply no time for that, so teachers were faced with transitioning the old curriculum and evaluation activities online, without the proper resources to adapt them to the new communication channel. At the same time, students were faced with modifying their entire learning strategy, as input was now delivered indirectly and they could no longer rely on interactions with peers to help them get through the educational activities:

Learners following an online course face a particular challenge in that the medium is still a relatively new mode of learning and thus, unlike learners taking a course within the traditional

classroom context, they do not have a lifetime of online learning to draw upon. They have no previous experience upon which to base their understanding of the challenges that lie ahead, the way the learning and interaction will work and the new roles they will be expected to take on (Bennett *et al.*, 2007, p. 75).

Interaction seems to be a common theme in the online education research literature (Balula and Moreira, 2014; Juwah, 2006; Hartnett, 2016; Lehman and Chamberlain, 2009; Palloff and Pratt, 2001), since it is clearly affected by the change in the communication channel and sits at the basis of effective communication and information transfer. Consequently, it is not uncommon for participants to shift their behaviour completely, or for certain personality types to thrive in the online environment, while others to suffer from the lack of direct interaction (Palloff and Pratt, 2007). This is true for any online course that students enrol in, but it is particularly significant in the current situation, since the switch to online activities was very swift and they were presented with no other viable option. Consequently, it is essential that teachers and educational institutions obtain their feedback and work together to improve the experience. Balula and Moreira (2014) propose a comprehensive model for the evaluation of e-teaching in higher education, providing questionnaire samples to be used when researching teachers', students' or coordinators' perspective, but we now obviously need to factor in the variables connected to the pandemic as well.

Several studies on the university students' perspective of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have been published in the last year or so, which shows the teachers' preoccupation for the quality of instruction provided during these difficult times. Almahasees *et al.* (2021) investigated both the faculty and students' perceptions of online learning in Jordan four months into the pandemic, concluding that even if this was useful given the circumstances, it was still less effective than face-to-face learning and teaching. Laili and Nashir (2021) distributed a questionnaire to 103 undergraduate students enrolled in an Intensive English class in Indonesia, concluding that most students prefer face-to-face interaction due to issues such as lower motivation levels, unstable signal and high cost of internet access or difficulties in participating to conversations. Baczek *et al.* (2021) conducted a survey of eight hundred four Polish Medical students' perception after eight weeks of distance education, drawing attention that even though the experience was rated as enjoyable by 73% of respondents and e-learning can be a powerful tool in their case, a well-planned strategy is important in the successful implementation of online learning. However, this also shows that, for a limited time at least, online education can be efficient even in fields like medicine, where direct interaction is essential.

Another interesting study, attempting to measure critical aspects of online learning in higher education such as instructor characteristics, social presence, instructional design and trust, was conducted by distributing a questionnaire to 300 students from different universities in the UAE. It concluded that learners' trust in online courses was the most important aspect in implementing e-learning successfully (Nassuora, 2020). Yet another study focussed on the hierarchy of factors identified in the literature as being critical for online learning from the students' perspective. They were, in the order of importance to students: Basic Online Modality, Instructional Support, Teaching Presence, Social Online Comfort, Interactive Online Modality and Social Presence. The authors concluded that, given proper institutional support, most students may be interested in more hybrid and online classes in the future (Van Wart *et al.*, 2020).

Al-Mawee *et al.* (2021) investigated 420 undergraduate and graduate students' preferences and experiences of distance learning at West Michigan University. Overall, online instruction was rated positively, but, unsurprisingly, the lack of interaction among students and instructors remains a source of discontent, together with the perceived negative effect on academic success.

The above-mentioned quantitative research definitely emphasizes that there is common ground in the students' perception of online learning during the pandemic, but one must nevertheless acknowledge the fact that study results vary according to measures adopted at national level, the specifics of the learning institutions and a host of other factors ranging from teachers' implementation of the activities to the individual resources and needs of the students.

2. Methodology

This case study aims to discuss students' perception of effectiveness of the online education process (both in general and with specific reference to the Business English course) conducted at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Iași during the 2020-2021 academic year, based on the results of a survey carried out in October 2021. What had started as a temporary solution to pandemic restrictions in the spring 2020 semester became a reality for the entire 2020-2021 academic year and is currently still being implemented at the beginning of the 2021 fall semester. Thus, starting with October 1, 2020, all activities have been conducted online using the Microsoft Teams™ platform, with part of the evaluation process done through Moodle. Remote learning had never been attempted on such a large scale, so finding out how the beneficiaries of the education process perceived it is of great importance, especially since this would allow the teacher to make the necessary changes in order to improve the day-to-day learning activities.

The survey was conducted by distributing an online questionnaire (using Google Forms) to 131 second-year undergraduate students, with the purpose to find out more about their online teaching-learning experience in the previous academic year and in the hopes of improving these activities in the future, specifically since they have just entered our second year of full online education. The respondents' age range and their gender were not considered relevant for the purposes of this study. All respondents are students enrolled in the three-year long, full-time Economic Sciences undergraduate programme.

The questionnaire consisted of 13 questions, with 5 general questions about their overall online experience and 8 that were specific to the Business English course. It was conducted in the students' native language, Romanian, specifically to encourage them to provide their own answers to the survey questions which allowed it, since it is less likely for respondents to answer open-ended questions when they do not feel confident in their foreign language skills.

Below may be found the results of the study, as revealed by the analysis of the 131 responses to the questionnaire.

3. Results

The results illustrate the students' opinions on both the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the sudden switch to online education, and also on the way the teaching, learning and evaluation activities unfolded during the Business English lectures and seminars.

For the first question, students were asked to rate the entire online educational process during the 2020-2021 academic year on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was 'unsatisfactory' and 5 was 'excellent'. Out of the 131 respondents, 65 (49.6%) rated it with a score of 4 out of 5, 32 (24.4%) rated it with 3 out of 5, 24 respondents (18.8%) gave the maximum score, 8 (6.1%) rated it with 2 out of 5 and 2 respondents (1.5%) answered that the online educational process was unsatisfactory.

For the second question, the same 1 to 5 scale was used and students were asked to rate the teaching component of the Business English course. Seventy-one (54.2%) of the respondents gave this the maximum score, 46 (35.1%) rated it with a 4 out of 5, 13 (9.9%) rated the teaching component with a 3 out of 5, and only 1 respondent (0.8%) rated it with 2 out of 5. No one considered that the teaching component was unsatisfactory.

The third question was designed to provide more details about the teaching component of the Business English course. Students had to check one of the five boxes corresponding to the Likert

scale ('total disagreement,' 'partial disagreement,' 'neutral,' 'partial agreement' and 'total agreement') next to the four proposed statements:

- *Information transfer from teacher to student was done with ease.* (76 respondents totally agreed with this statement, 43 agreed partially, 9 neither agreed nor disagreed and 3 partially disagreed, with 0 respondents disagreeing completely)
- *Classes took place at a normal pace, with no technical issues and significant interruptions.* (72 students totally agreed, 41 partially agreed, 10 neither agreed nor disagreed, 5 partially agreed, while 3 completely disagreed)
- *The professors always switched on their webcam during classes.* (91 respondents completely agreed with this statement, 24 partially agreed, 7 neither agreed nor disagreed, 6 partially disagreed and 3 totally disagreed)
- *Teacher-student interaction was according to expectations.* (65 students totally agreed with this statement, 35 partially agreed, 25 neither agreed nor disagreed while 6 partially disagreed. No respondent disagreed completely with this statement.)

Question 4 asked respondents to rate the learning component of the Business English course on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was 'unsatisfactory' and 5 was 'excellent'. 53 respondents (40.5%) rated this with a 4 out of 5, 44 (33.6%) gave it a score of 5 out of 5, 28 (21.4%) gave it a 3 out of 5, 4 students (3.1%) rated it with 2 out of 5 and 2 students (1.5%) gave it a 1 out of 5.

The next question asked them to specify which of the following five statements they agreed with in relation to the same component: learning. The four statements and the student answers (using the Likert five-point scale ranging from 'total disagreement' to 'total agreement') are listed below:

- *I had more time and flexibility for individual study.* (49 students strongly agreed with this statement, 48 partially agreed, 28 neither agreed nor disagreed, 4 partially disagreed and 1 strongly disagreed)
- *I missed the interaction and advice from my colleagues.* (46 students totally agreed, 32 partially agreed, 24 neither agreed nor disagreed, 14 partially disagreed, 15 completely disagreed)
- *I needed further explanations in order to prepare for the exam.* (5 students strongly agreed with this, 21 partially agreed, 36 neither agreed nor disagreed, 28 partially disagreed and 41 totally disagreed)
- *The home environment was not conducive to focusing and learning.* (18 respondents completely agreed, 27 partially agreed, 25 neither agreed nor disagreed, 21 partially disagreed and 40 totally disagreed)

Question six referred to the evaluation and grading component of their Business English course. Eighty-four respondents (64.1%) rated this with a 5 out of 5, 33 (25.2%) gave this a 4 out of 5, 12 students (9.2%) rated this with a 3 out of 5, and only 1 student (0.8%) rated this question with a score of 2 out of 5 and a score of 1 out of 5 respectively.

The next question again required them to provide more details about the evaluation and grading process, proposing the following four statements:

- *Evaluation and grading were according to expectations.* (81 respondents totally agreed with this, 36 partially agreed, 9 neither agreed nor disagreed, 4 partially disagreed, while 1 student completely disagreed)
- *Evaluation results were correct and relevant.* (90 respondents strongly agreed, 32 agreed partially, 8 neither agreed nor disagreed and 1 partially disagreed, with 0 students disagreeing completely with this statement)
- *I came across a lot of technical difficulties during the online assessment process.* (7 students totally agreed, 25 partially agreed, 17 neither agreed nor disagreed, 30 partially disagreed and 52 totally disagreed)
- *There were sufficient evaluation tools.* (82 respondents totally agreed, 38 partially agreed, 7 neither agreed nor disagreed, 2 partially disagreed and 2 totally disagreed)

Question 8 was about the Business English teacher's involvement and support during online classes. Ninety-two (70.2%) respondents thought it had been excellent, giving it a score of 5 out of five, 26 (19.8%) gave it a score of 4 out of 4, 11 (8.4%) rated this with a 3, and two students (1.5%) gave this a score of 2.

The following question focussed on student-student interaction during the Business English classes (for example, during group activities). Thirty-nine respondents (29.8%) rated this component with a 4 out of 5, thirty-eight (29%) gave this a score of 3 out of 5, 27 students (20.6%) rated this component with the maximum score, 19 (15.5%) gave it a score of 2 out of 5, and 8 respondents (6.1%) rated peer interaction with the minimum score (1 out of 5, considering it unsatisfactory).

Items nine and ten were dedicated to the advantages and disadvantages of the online educational process in general. Both questions proposed five statements (checking multiple boxes was allowed), with the option of adding in additional ones by respondents.

For question nine, about the advantages of online education, the five statements and the results were the following:

- *I can access the platform from anywhere (including from my workplace).* One hundred and six students (80.9%) agreed with this statement.

- *Access to the teaching-learning information was significantly simplified.* Eighty respondents (61.1%) agreed with this statement.
- *The evaluation process is more comfortable and accessible to everyone.* Eighty-three students (63.3%) agreed.
- *I have saved time and energy by not having to be physically present on-site.* Ninety-eight students (74.8%) agreed with this statement.
- *I have acquired new skills for working online.* Seventy-two respondents (55%) agreed with this statement.

One student (0.8%) added that online education has helped some students save rent money, while another respondent added that this has allowed for spending more time studying.

At question ten, about the disadvantages of online education, respondents had to choose from the following statements:

- *Frequent technical issues and/or lack of necessary devices to participate in online classes.* Sixty-two students (47.3%) agreed with this disadvantage.
- *Teacher-student interaction was insufficient.* Forty-one students (31.3%) chose this disadvantage.
- *Interaction with peers was insufficient.* One hundred and one respondents (77.1%) agreed with this statement.
- *Institutional support was unsatisfactory.* Twenty students (15.3%) agreed.
- *The evaluation and grading process was not relevant.* Eight students (6.1%) agreed with this statement.

Three students (2.3%) identified no disadvantages to the online education process, one respondent (0.8%) complained about things not feeling the same as with on-site activities, one other respondent added that there may be technical issues during the exam and since they cannot be communicated and dealt with in real time, students have to retake the test. Another respondent complained about not being able to participate in the discussion during lectures, since there are about eighty people present and this meant that most of the times students will not participate actively at all. Finally, one respondent commented that the first year went surprisingly well and the faculty did a good job.

The eleventh question asked respondents whether they would like to continue with online education exclusively in the future, whether they preferred a hybrid system (for instance, one that would allow for lectures and/or the exams to be conducted online and the seminars to be held on-site) or whether they wanted to go back to the traditional on-site activities. Respondents also had the option to type in their own response. Fifty-seven students (43.5%) chose the hybrid system, while forty

students (30.5%) preferred the return to on-site education. One respondent (0.8%) argued that conducting online evaluation with the rest of the activities held on-site would be the worst idea, since the hybrid system is not appropriate; also, any decision concerning the way activities are conducted should be made and communicated in due time. Another respondent argued that on-site activities should be resumed unless the health of the staff and students is put at risk. However, he or she thinks that online activities were of good quality.

The last question was about the devices students used in order to access the teaching-learning activities. One hundred and thirty respondents (99.2%) used their personal computer, with 77 (58.8%) also using their mobile phone, while only one student (0.8%) used a tablet.

4. Discussion, Study Limitations and Further Research

Overall, the results of this study were consistent with those from the other studies mentioned in the literature review section of this paper. Given the circumstances, the fact that just under 50% of the respondents rated online education with a score of 4 out of 5 shows that, provided with the right tools and proper support at institutional level, distance learning is very much doable in the long run, especially when practical, hands-on activities are not the main focus (like they would be in the case of medical students, for example). Among the advantages of distance learning, students have emphasized the flexibility of being able to access the platform from anywhere (which is also suggested by the large number of students using their mobile phones to log in on the platform), the chance to save time and money and the ease of access to relevant information, while the main disadvantage remains, by far, the lack of direct interaction with peers and/or teachers. Technical issues were also a concern, especially when they interfered with the evaluation process.

In terms of the Business English course, even though the teaching and evaluation components seems to have gone well, it is difficult to determine at this point what the long-term effects are on language use and acquisition. Moreover, when it came to the student learning part, even though the online system allowed for more flexibility and teachers continued to offer help throughout the course, the lack of interaction with peers and the kind of support and advice they would provide each other has been shown to affect the overall online experience.

The results for the last question show that, on the one hand, online learning is best done using a personal computer, but on the other hand mobile devices can also work as a back-up or if the student attempts to multitask and attend online classes while at work or on the go. This contributes, of course,

to the perceived flexibility of distance education activities, but it may also have affected the overall quality of the process, resulting in more difficulty to perform tasks and/or poorer evaluation results.

This study only provides a limited perspective on the Business English course and the overall online activities at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Iași, as the number of students who participated in the survey was rather small. Moreover, the fact that it combined general questions about the online learning process with specific ones related to the English course could have affected students' perspective on the specific challenges they faced with the latter. Also, there was no question on how the online activities might have affected student motivation, which could have contributed to a clearer image of their thoughts on distance education. More specific information about the students' area of specialisation within the Economic Sciences field could have helped with the interpretation of the results as well. Nevertheless, students' perception of online ESP language courses in higher education is a topic definitely worth exploring further, as it provides great insight on what may become the future ways of conducting teaching and learning at university level. This would be helpful for both teachers trying to adapt the curriculum to the new challenges but also for decision-makers at higher levels, since online education has not been previously legislated in our country.

Conclusions

Based on the results of this study, students' perception of online education and Business English courses in higher education during the 2020-2021 academic year was overall positive. They appreciated the flexibility of the system and the quality of the process (in terms of teaching, learning and evaluation) does not seem to have been affected significantly. However, even though the results show that a significant percentage of students wishes to continue with a hybrid system in the future, we cannot overlook the fact that e-learning has very much been intended as a temporary and emergency-induced solution to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not provided us with enough information on its long-term impact. Much like Wallace (2003) concludes her review of research on interactions among teachers and students in online learning in higher education, there is still a lot more to be done in the future. Even now, it seems that "conceptions of distance education are only slowly moving away from a metaphor of 'delivering education' toward a richer and more nuanced understanding of what online environments are offering for teaching and learning" (Wallace, 2003, p. 275). Moreover, a lot more research needs to be done with a view to understanding how the pandemic has affected online education and whether it can be further implemented on a large scale.

At the same time, this has provided us with a good starting point and, as is always the case with change, it brought forth both the teachers and students' power to adapt and make the most of every situation, which is particularly valuable during these challenging times.

Disclaimer: This case study and the corresponding questionnaire have not been ordered or endorsed by any academic institution, including the one mentioned in this article. The students' answers were completely anonymous and the results of the study are only discussed in relation to the purpose of this article.

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