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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING CHALLENGES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A MEANS ANALYSIS

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Abstract

There was a widespread e-learning phenomenon during COVID-19 in 2020. Unfortunately, in a country like Bangladesh at the beginning a huge number of students were out of the reach of internet and unfamiliar with online learning. The purpose of this study is to explore how English as a foreign language (EFL) learning at the tertiary level in Bangladesh was impacted by the sudden shift to online learning. This study evaluates the attitudes, opinion, beliefs of first year university students towards online language classes during COVID-19. Participants from eight universities of Dhaka responded to a Google questionnaire after an online instruction session via messenger room. It also reviews research published since the onset of the pandemic, with a specific focus on English language teaching in EFL contexts, to analyze the challenges faced by Bangladeshi learners since the shift to e-learning. One of the prominent challenges observed was student's lack of motivation, which upon further review was found to be linked to other contributing factors, such as lack of technical support, unfamiliar learning environments, and lack of self-confidence. However, this study found several unexpected positive outcomes from the digital transformation, including the flexibility of planning personal study period, rewatching the lecture video etc. The current research can contribute as a ground work for offering blended approach in teaching language after the pandemic. It also can contribute to knowledge of online English teaching in other EFL contexts.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, EFL, Challenges, Language, Learning, Means Analysis.

1. Introduction

It has been more than one year since the curse of Covid 19 swept over the world. Fear of the virus lurks in the minds of people of all ages and classes. Masks and hand sanitizers have become one of the most basic necessities in human life. Even though schools and universities have been closed for months due to lockdowns, students have continued to receive their education. Students all over the world attend classes online. Bangladesh is not different

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in this regard. Bangladeshi universities, colleges, and schools are also doing the same. But online language classes pose more problems than face-to-face classes. To learn a language, students need to learn four major skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). In Bangladesh, in the first semester, universities offer their students English Fundamentals/Basic English and English Composition courses that ground the essentials of academic writing in them. Additionally, this student group faces challenges adjusting to university culture. Therefore, students need a positive teacher-student relationship and a lot of interaction with their peers and teachers, despite the challenges of virtual classes. Further, in a developing country like Bangladesh, network issues, lack of resources and some other problems make online language learning more difficult. The purpose of this research is to investigate the challenges faced by first-year university students during the pandemic. This study highlights suggestions that can guide the design of composition courses and pedagogical practices for teaching language using blended approach and emergency remote teaching in the future.

2. E - Learning in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, first-level readiness for e-learning seemed encouraging before the pandemic. The government took initiatives at the policy level and built practical and physical support for introducing online education in the country. This was at every level of education from primary through tertiary. Bangladesh's government has undertaken various initiatives for making the people technology-aware and developing country-wide internet connectivity to enable transition into a tech-savvy nation. To enhance research and higher training for IT teachers, all 4547 Union Council Offices are now under an Internet network, with one ‘digital center' in each (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2015). The government of Bangladesh initiated a pilot study with the support of BRAC under TQI-SEP (Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Project) to provide e-Learning for secondary school students in Bangladesh. Bangladesh Open University (BOU) has developed the necessary infrastructure for e-Learning and has been conducting its teaching-learning activities via the internet, intranet/extranet, audio and/or video tape, satellite TV, and CD-ROM since 1992. A few other non-government institutes like the Jago Foundation run online schools in the country. Currently, the Jago Foundation operates 10 online schools in 10 districts. Throughout covid’s evolution, these initiatives together created the conditions necessary to transform the entire education system into a digital

one; users experienced problems due to a lack of knowledge about devices, slow internet connections, and high costs.

3. Means Analysis

An influential strand in the development of needs analysis is the attempt to adapt language courses to local situations; in other words, to accommodate what are often referred to as 'constraints', e.g., cultural attitudes, resources, materials, equipment, methods. This approach has been called means analyses (Holliday and Cooke 1982), and involves a study of local situations, e.g., teachers, teaching methods, students, facilities, etc., to see how a language course may be implemented. Means analysis can be conducted as part of a needs analysis or separately. Further, a needs analysis is conducted for the purpose of evaluating learners' and teachers' attitudes, opinions and beliefs towards a proposed or intended change or innovation, and a means analysis is conducted to determine the setting in which a course will be conducted (Evans and John 1998). In a situation like COVID, a means analysis is an appropriate tool for understanding the learning challenges posed by a shift from face-to-face to e-learning.

4. Emergency Remote or E-Learning during Covid -19

Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) is a temporary arrangement during an emergency situation (Barbour et al., 2020). Like any other public institutions, educational institutions need to react to the crises and must develop alternative ways to provide students with immediate access to education that would otherwise be presented face-to-face. Hodges et al. (2020) refers to ERT as "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances". Around the world, educational institutions had to shift to emergency e-learning for almost two years during the Covid-19 period. Studies were undertaken to discover the realities that students and teachers faced in implementing emergency e-learning during this period. Sarakaya (2021) found that in Turkish primary schools, students' writing skills did not significantly improve through ERT because of lack of motivation, lack of technology tools, lack of timely and necessary feedback and corrections, and lack of parents' assistance. However, Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) in the editorial of Education Journal of Distance Education found it is "unfair to put online distance education and emergency remote teaching in the same equation". They stated that Covid 19 is an emergence period, and as a result there should be more emphasis on the learners than the learning, and "it is more important to build support communities, and share knowledge and experiences in

order to provide efficient and meaningful learning processes". These learning processes, of course, should not aim at purely learning, but rather, be directed towards therapy, empathy, and care" (iv).

5. EFL Learning and E-Learning Platform

A recent study undertaken by Satriani and Ermanto (2022) aimed to identify major gaps and the needs of Moodle e-learning in the learning process of intensive reading classes, with Indonesian students, and found that 90% of students encountered obstacles during the learning process. The principal obstacle that students had was difficulties in understanding the learning material. Soong (2012) found, in another study with university students from Taiwan, that e-learning does not benefit EFL students as expected. He also claimed that technology and machines could never successfully facilitate learning as a teacher does. According to Harmer (2000), the most crucial element of any teaching activity is the teacher. Technology can never replace a teacher. While Har (2022), in his study, examined how ESL (English as a Second Language) undergraduate students organized emergency remote learning at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University during the COVID-19 pandemic. In his exploratory research, one hundred university students from five English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes participated. Result showed that learners found game-based classroom activities were useful for assisting them in overcoming ESL academic writing difficulties. According to the study, online learning should be designed in a way to increase instructor-student and student-student interaction as well as students' engagement.

Online classes may frequently get boring. Findings of the study of Derakhson et.al (2021) with 208 English major students in Iran revealed that teachers' long, monotonous monologues, lack of student participation, logistical problems, and carelessly chosen repetitive tasks were the main sources of boredom. However, in such cases making the class livelier through more teacher-student interaction, improving inter-personal relationships, and solving technological problems could be probable solutions. In another study with 30 students of Mulawarman University it was observed that students have started to get bored with online learning after the first two weeks of learning from home. Mood or mood changes occur due to too many assignments and are considered ineffective by students (Irawan, Dwisona, Lestari 2020).Whereas, in their study Guskaroska, Speltz, Zawadzki and Kurt (2021) examined

university students' perspectives in a composition course during the emergency period of COVID -19 and observed that in online classes, students required to be more autonomous than the traditional face to class: students need to take charge of their learning, follow the syllabus, and find ways to solve learning problems resulting from the lack of traditional, face-to-face education. They also noticed that during online composition class the students suffered from cognitive challenges like a lack of motivation concentration and fatigue. Their findings revealed that this boredom resulted from a lack of classroom interaction, which is typical of in-person learning.

Based on the literature above, a general idea about the EFL learning challenges can be formed. However, yet no study has been conducted to find out Bangladeshi teachers' and adult students' readiness for e-learning; teaching materials, availability of equipment, impact of social isolation on students etc. In this study, we investigated the challenges that first-semester university students faced in learning EFL. The present study was designed to answer the following research questions: a) what are the 1st semester university students' concerns and challenges with online language classes during Covid-19? b) What are the benefits of online language learning course during COVID-19? C) What are the ways to resolve the problem?

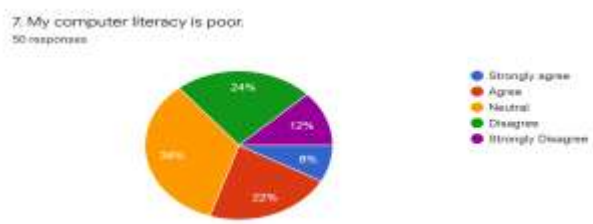
6. Methodology

Through a formal questionnaire, 100 students from eight different universities in Dhaka city participated in this study. All respondents were first year students from different majors, including Business Administration, Computer Science and Engineering, Child Development, Finance, Physics, English, Statistics, Economics, and the Film and Media Department. A Google form was used to collect data since all university campuses were closed due to the pandemic. The electronic survey was distributed online to the students via email. Participants have taken part in the survey voluntarily. The participants got three days (72 hrs.) for filling the questionnaire. Prior to completing the survey questionnaire, a brief instruction was shared to each participant via messenger room. The questionnaire contained 20 questions, including both closed and open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were formed to elicit knowledge, feelings, and opinion-based data. Descriptive and content analysis methods were used together in the data analysis. Data collected from closed questions were transformed into percentages (%) and later illustrations were used for presenting the data. Whereas data gathered from open-ended

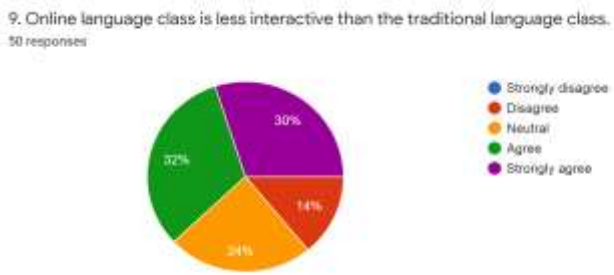
questions were arranged under codes and later presented according to the themes. The stages specified by Dey (1993) were followed while analyzing the content. These stages in question are description, classification, and association. The open-ended questions were answered both in English and in Bangla, because all of the respondents are Bangla speakers.

7. Results

Within the framework of means analysis, the questionnaire questions were set to know students' feelings, adaptability and motivation towards online language classes. Questions no. 1,2,3,6 and 7 were used for this purpose. In response to the question no. 1 (Do you like learning language via online?), 50% respondents said "yes", 40% said "no" and 10% of them chose the option 'not sure'. Question no. 2 enquired, "Do you face challenges in online language classes during the pandemic? In response 82% students replied that they faced challenges in online language classes. Only 8 % of students replied that they did not encounter any challenges and 10% of the students replied that they were not sure. In their responses towards question no.3(How often do you face challenges during online language classes?), 24% students answered 'always', 70% answered 'sometimes' while 6% students answered as never. According to the responses to question no.6 (Had you faced challenges switching from traditional learning to computer-based learning?), 74% of students answered "yes", 18% answered "no", and 8% answered "not sure". Question no. 7 was designed to assess students' self-assessment of their computer literacy. In response to the statement (Question no.7) "My computer literacy is very poor" it was found that only 8% of students strongly agreed and 22% of students agreed with the statement. But 34% of students were neutral whereas 24% of students disagreed and 12% of students strongly disagreed with the same statement. Therefore, this part of the data revealed that though students were positively motivated for online language classes due to their poor knowledge of computer literacy they found the language classes challenging.



It is believed that positive emotions (emotional expression of social presence), arising from positive student–student, student–content, and student–teacher communications and interactions, result in a substantial benefit to L2 learning. Interaction enhances students' role of social presence which might influence their purpose of meaning negotiation and actual learning behaviors, and even the level of their actual academic achievement in the target language (Lil 2022). Similarly, a means analysis examines how students interact in a classroom. The questions no.5, 8,9,10, 11, and 12 were designed to gather data regarding this issue. Question no. 5 was 'Is distance learning affecting teacher student relationships?'In response 70% students answered in affirmative, 8% students chose 'no' and 22% students chose 'not sure'. In language learning, the relationship between content and student is crucial. Keeping this fact in mind, students were asked whether they think screen learning is enough to learn four major language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening), only 12% of students answered in affirmative, 62% of students answered in negative and 26% of students were not sure about the matter. In the next question students were asked whether "Online language class is less interactive than the traditional language class". In their response it was found that 30% of students strongly agreed with the statement; 32% of students agreed, 24% of students were neutral and 14% of students disagreed and no one strongly disagreed.



By question no. 10 students' response was invited against a statement 'Enough online class activities arranged by the teacher could eliminate the learner's hesitation and enhance learners' speaking and listening skill'. Interestingly it was found that 4% of students strongly agreed with the statement. 34% of students agreed. 24% of students were neutral. 30% of students disagreed and 8% of students strongly disagreed with the statement. In the next question (question no 11), students were asked if their classmates actively participate in class activities and discussion.

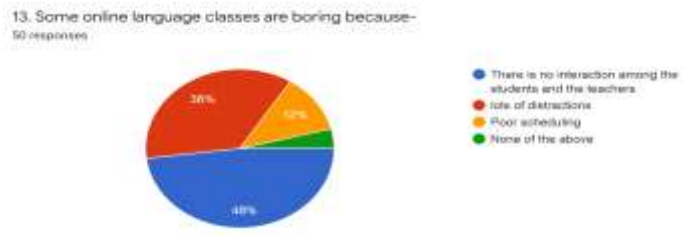
Only 28% of students answered in the affirmative whereas 54% of students answered in the negative. 28% of students were not sure about the matter. So, it was found that students in online classes were less interactive and did not participate actively in classroom activities, nor did they believe that teachers' initiatives could affect classroom interaction.

Question 12 asks students "In the future, what kind of problems (about language) will students face most often as a result of having less interaction with teachers and students?" They were asked to rank and arrange the following problems in order of intensity, with 1 being the most challenging and 5 being the least intense. Table-1 shows that students thought that lack of speaking skill and lack of listening skill would be the most intense problem whereas lack of concentration and lack of motivation and confidence were considered third and fourth by them.

	1	2	3	4	5
Lack of speaking skill	50%	10%	34%	4%	2%
Lack of listening skill	34%	26%	34%	2%	2%
Lack of concentration	20%	22%	46%	4%	6%
Lack of motivation and confidence	18%	20%	42%	10%	8%
Lack of discipline and morality	14%	16%	38%	20%	10%

Table 1. **Certain problems caused by lack if interaction in long use in future.**

It is also true that students felt not all online language classes were interesting. Question no. 13 investigated why online language classes seemed boring. In response 48% of students said that the classes were tedious because there was no interaction between the students and the teachers. 36% of students thought that the classes were boring because there were lots of distractions and 12% of students marked ‘Poor scheduling’



One of the major concerns of a means analysis is teachers' readiness to teach classes. In response to a question 'Do you think the language teachers have computer literacy? Did your teachers face problems taking the course? (Question no.14), 22% of the students reported that some teachers didn't have enough computer literacy, 10% students answered in affirmative but the rest 68% of the respondents ignored the question. In response to the second part of the same question, a few students (N=7) mentioned that their teachers had difficulty sharing materials such as videos from YouTube, recorded lectures, Google worksheets, etc. Other students (N=5) reported that their teachers found problems in operating breakout rooms for practicing role play and pair activities. Some (N=3) pupils complained that they were unable to understand their teacher's words because of poor internet connection during class.

Responses towards the question no. 4 (Do you have previous experience in attending online classes? What are the problems you faced in online classes during the pandemic?) were arranged under the codes presented in the table below. However, in response to the first part of this question 72 teachers found problem in operating % students replied "no", 20% replied "yes", and 8% responded that they had insufficient experiences about online classes before the pandemic situation. Because of the pandemic situation, first-year university students were forced to switch to online courses without any preparation. With regard to their challenges of online classes participants stressed mostly on troubleshooting technological issues (N=90) and lack of interactions with teachers (N=32) and inability to communicate with peers (N=58). One student said, "My biggest concern is the communication aspect. It's difficult to write emails for everything, but I know our teacher answers our emails." A few participants also discussed the lack of in-person interaction with their peers. One student complained, "Not having the opportunity to meet with professors or any friends in person and not having a physical person to ask for help!" Lack of motivation was a common challenge (N=69) as reported by the respondent

students. Several of them expressed frustration with being confined into their houses because of lock down and fear of infection. However, some other students (N=25) told that it seemed very difficult to stay focused on the screen for a long time. Poor concentration made class seem boring to them.

Among other challenges reported by participants, fear for misunderstanding assignments (N=45) and inability to ask questions immediately (N=26) were most common. To tell about lack of uninterrupted internet connection one student said, "The internet connection of my residential area is very poor. Within an hour-long class, I have to reconnect my device three or four times. Electricity supply was also frequently unavailable. At that time, I need using package data that is too expensive." Another student said, "Teachers ask us to keep camera open during the class but if I keep camera open because of poor internet network I cannot listen anything". Some other students (N= 20) stated that while the class is going on, it was very common to loosen internet connection at any of the end (either the teachers' or the students') that created a chance to miss important information about the task going on in the class. It gave them a feeling of fear of misunderstanding the tasks and assignments. Poor learning conditions at home though mentioned by few students (N=8), was an unignorable challenge. About this issue one student said, "While trying to get feedback from a classmate, other students may be distracted, or everyone can say something at the same time . . . There are times when I cannot occupy an entire room during class. It happened that I was attending the class sitting on the dining table, my mother was cutting vegetable sitting on a chair beside me and on the floor my younger brother was playing with toys."

Challenges of the online learning	**Responses**	
	Number (N)	**Percent**
Troubleshooting technological issues	90	90%
Lack of interactions with teachers	32	32%
Lack of self-discipline		
Social isolation/inability to communicate with peers	58	58%
Poor learning conditions at home	8	8%
Fear of misunderstanding assignments	45	45%
Learning how to manage time and deadlines independently	25	25%
Inability to immediately ask questions/ clarify expectations.	26	26%
Receiving writing feedback from peers	74	74%
Lack of motivation	69	69%
Difficulties to stay focused on the screen	25	25%
	Total= 100	

Table-2: **Challenges faced by students during online learning**

Table -3 presents an overview of students' perceived benefits from online class. Majority of students (N=68) mentioned the flexibility and possibility of rewatching videos as an obvious benefit of online learning. One student stated, "I like the flexible schedule. I could rewatch videos if I missed something whenever I wish and as many times as I wish." This flexibility is relevant for students because rewatching videos shows their motivation for learning and resolving problems. Face-to-face classes provide students with only one opportunity to listen to the lecture, and if they have questions, they must wait for the teacher's schedule. But because of the online class they needed to be responsible for their own time management and self-paced learning. A few of them (N=6) pointed out that the sudden transition from face-to-face class to online class has increased their ability to organize their time.

According to some respondents (N=45), taking online classes allows them to remain at home, reducing their commute time and expenses. Other benefits included acquiring updated computer skills mentioned by many (N=40). According to one student, "I learned a lot, including a new computer program." A few students (N= 13) found online classes beneficial because it improved their proficiency for virtual communications. One student commented, "Now I am very visible on social media and our teachers are available for virtual communication. They also provide feedback on the smaller Assignments via email or WhatsApp".

Benefits of the online learning	**Responses**	
	Number (N)	**Percent**
Access to online material	25	25%
Ability to stay at home	45	45%
Ability to record a meeting/ Ability to rewatch lecture video	68	68%
Comfortable surrounding	5	5%
Learning on you own pace	6	6%
Flexibility in managing time and completing assignments.	15	15%
Fewer social distractions	4	4%
Acquiring new computer skills	40	40%
Availability for virtual communication	13	13%
	Total= 100	

Table-3: Student perceptions and Benefits of Online learning.

Table 4 presents a summary of students' preferences and recommendations for future online language classes. A number of students (N= 16) said online course allowed them greater

flexibility in the ways they completed coursework so they wanted to have the same in future. Students (N=14) also gave preference to enhance their knowledge about computers so that in similar conditions like Covid -19 they might shift to online class without wasting time. Side by side students (N=4) wanted to have troubleshooting technological issues resolved.

Students (N=8) gave importance to the increase in students-teacher and student-student interactions. Frequent online meeting, online peer -review session may be adopted for this purpose. However, students (N=10) expressed their wish to go back to face to face classes as they found it more beneficial and worth coping with.

Students' preferences and recommendations	Responses
Enhancing the knowledge about computers	14%
More interactions among the teacher and the students	8%
Continue to provide accessible course content	16%
Starting the traditional education system	10%
Solving the Technical issues	4%

Table-4: Perceptions of Students and Recommendations of online classes for Future

8. Discussion

The present study evaluates Bangladeshi first semester university students' opinion and belief towards online language classes during the COVID-19 outbreak. The survey revealed the most prevalent challenges students faced during their language courses in terms of available resources, teaching material and methods, communication with peers and teachers, availability of technical support, etc. Results show that students had only limited experience with online learning and the only reason for moving to online classes was due to an emergency situation. The first year of university life is more or less challenging to all freshers. The reason for this is that they have to adjust to a new environment and to a new, advanced curriculum. Nevertheless, data showed students were positively motivated for online language classes. Results from this study revealed many challenges such as 'troubleshooting technological issues', 'lack of interaction with teacher', inability to communicate with peers', and 'inability to respond quickly' (shown in Table -2). In addition, 'poor learning conditions at home' has been the most rated challenge for almost all the students. Moreover, the "lack of self-discipline" was a challenge for students because online

learning entails more autonomy on the part of the student since there is no physical space to attend to and no instructor to report to face-to-face. Because of this, they feared misunderstanding assignments. Participants of this study found it difficult to receive writing feedback from their peers. In fact, students might struggle during their learning due to these challenges, and they need to be equipped with proper training to avoid such issues.

In this study, students' perceptions of teachers' computer literacy and ability to operate virtual platforms are a noteworthy observation. Data revealed that a majority of students found their teachers were not sufficiently skilled to handle online classes.

The findings revealed that a number students found in themselves lack of motivation for online classes. This is resulted from a lack of classroom interaction, which is typical of in-person learning. Students also reported that fear of the infection and staying at home for a longer period were the reasons for lack of motivation. Several other studies also found student boredom or lack of motivation during the COVID period (e.g., Irawan et al., 2020; Derakhshan et al., 2021). They mentioned students were familiar only with face-to-face class prior to the COVID period where there were opportunities for direct interactions with teachers and peers.

Additionally, students identified a few potential consequences that may occur in future due to lack of interaction inside the class. Students commented that they may suffer from lack of proficiency in listening and speaking skills because of it. It may also hamper their concentration, motivation and confidence in using English (Table-3).

Further students pointed out few benefits of online classes which include ‘ability to stay at home, ‘flexibility in managing time and completing assignment’ and ‘ability to rewatch lecture video’. Moreover, during the COVID period one particularly significant type of skill acquisition occurred that is related to technological literacy. In this study, 87% of students expressed that they acquired new computer skill, and 67% of students stated that attending virtual classes equipped them with handling virtual communication using various online platforms.

9. Recommendations

Listed below are some recommendations directly from the respondents to the study. These recommendations support a learner-centered approach to teaching language via online platforms:

The first recommendation is to increase communication with students, both inside and outside of the class room. Instruction should be given in simple and straight forward sentences so that students may not have any fear of making mistakes in understanding assignments.

Next, both teachers and students should receive proper training. In addition, other technical issues such as poor internet connections and a lack of devices should be dealt with before beginning online language courses.

Further, instructors are encouraged to provide opportunities for student collaboration. Students must get adequate feedback from their teachers and peers. During COVID-19, some students may live alone with very little social interaction. Class activities—such as collaborative peer review sessions, presentations can serve as an opportunity to facilitate students' social needs while also improving their learning experience.

10. Conclusion

This study was conducted to identify the benefits and challenges of online language learning during the COVID-19 from the perspective of Bangladeshi first-year university students. Results revealed that students agreed on both the advantages and challenges of online learning. The ability to record meetings was the most important factor, followed by the ability to stay at home with a comfortable setting. On the other hand, technical problems were the most rated challenge for students, in addition to lack of interaction with teachers and peers. One of the limitations of this study was its small sample size. The study sample was collected from around Dhaka. If the whole country could be covered it might have given clearer insight. In this study, only students' perceptions were collected; if teachers could have been included, there will be more insightful findings. Despite its limitations, this study presented a way to explore students' perceptions towards online language learning during a time of crisis, which may be interesting for further research. As a result of this study, we have developed recommendations that can be used to facilitate online teaching, particularly in university language courses, during emergency periods or to plan any new online course for similar students.

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