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The Impact of Support for Language Development in Online Classes at Gdansk University of Technology During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant disruption to education. To adapt to new conditions, academics immediately had to restructure their teaching programmes. Not all of them, however, had sufficient skills to be able to deliver effective online classes. Neither did the less qualified have enough time to increase their competencies by getting pre-emptive support coming from peers and technical staff, nor did they have an opportunity to self-direct their training. Yet, to achieve the best effect, to develop an e-learning environment in which they could deliver high-quality teaching that would meet various language needs of their students, they needed general and specific support mechanisms. The former relates to the technological aspect, that is the functionalities of available tools and the affordances they allow. The latter comes from the course structure, educational material, teachers and students. With strong support provided by certified peers, the English teachers at Gdansk University of Technology managed to engage their students in interactive, collaborative and active learning. The ideas shared in the paper are supported by qualitative and quantitative research conducted in 2020 and 2021.

K e y w o r d s: e-learning, support, active learning, language skills, COVID-19 pandemic

Cohort-Based Language Classes During the Pandemic and Beyond it – Key Factors in Learning Design

Online classes can be very effective if flexible support structures allowing course designers and tutors to meet the individual needs of each student have been designed. A cohort-based programme with synchronous and asynchronous interactions between and among the four pillars of the educational process – the tutor, students, technology and educational material (Mokwa-Tarnowska, 2013) – allows for novelty, versatility and personalisation. Well-structured, thought-out e-learning programmes delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic can be used to enhance traditional classes in a post-pandemic era. They can better satisfy varied needs of a mixed-ability group of university students whose competencies range from relatively basic to fairly advanced, who have different learning styles, preferences and goals. However, for online classes to be effective, their designers should introduce a wide variety of support mechanisms into every stage of learning design (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007: 75-76), taking into account the affordances (Gibson, 1979: 127) of the tools used. They should also adopt a learner-centred approach (Bremner, 2019) with personalised educational paths.

Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that school teachers have received some support from the national government and managers (Vu et al., 2020) and that it might be instructional, technology-oriented, or emotional (Pressley, 2021). However, its in-depth nature and mechanisms have not yet been analysed, nor has their impact on the effectiveness of online delivery in the case of university academics and lecturers been tested. The paper aims to show to what extent the online classes run by the Language Centre of Gdansk University of Technology during the first three semesters of the pandemic satisfied the needs of the students and how tutors with a different degree of expertise coped with the challenges of learning design and delivery. With strong pre-emptive and reactive support provided by their peers who were certified online tutors, the English teaching staff managed to offer online replacement of traditional classes immediately after the lockdown was introduced in March 2020. The ideas shared in the paper are supported by qualitative and quantitative research conducted at Gdansk University of Technology (GUT) in 2020 and 2021.

Support Mechanisms

Support (Simpson, 2012) coming from administration staff, tutors, peers, course materials and tools can be divided into general and specific (Herriot-Watt University, 1999: mod. 3: 7). The former relates to the technological aspect, e.g., how to enrol on the course, how to use software. The latter comes from the educational material and tools available on the course pages, tutors supervising coursework, and peers. Research shows that all specific support stimulates engagement and active participation, helps pace learning and meet course aims and objectives (Mokwa-Tarnowska, 2014; Meltzer & Hamman, 2004; Egbert, 2007). It can be pre-emptive and responsive.

Without general and specific support structures, an e-learning course can be very ineffective, and can discourage and demotivate learners, especially those who are not self-directed (Schraw, Crippen Hartley, 2006) and who need guidance, supervision, assistance, advice and help. For example, massive open online courses (MOOCs), whose some support systems are weak by definition, particularly tutor support, have a very high non-completion rate, which according to Clow (2013) and Jordan (Parr, 2013) on average amounts to 90% and 93.2% respectively. It can be higher, with the median around 60%, if students pay for certificates (Chuang & Ho, 2016; Handoko et al., 2019).

Support inherent in course materials, coming from the course website, the resources, activities and tools available on the course, results from premeditated delivery in the case of pre-emptive support, and active re-redesigning as regards responsive support. It fosters creativity in students (Mokwa-Tarnowska, 2017: 81-83), and encourages them to be active participants in the educational process, who construct meaning by formulating hypotheses, finding solutions and putting forward proposals. Self-assessment tasks, which are formative in character, allow learners to develop the ability to control and direct their learning. Through a conscious analysis of their skills and understanding of the subject matter, they gradually become more confident and more independent pursuers of their educational goals.

The evaluation of progress carried out by automated assessment tools provides students with constructive feedback (Al-Hattami, 2019; Du Toit, 2012; Ovando, 1994) by appraising and rewarding excellent performance as well as pinpointing problem areas. The analysis of the most frequently occurring mistakes spotted by the system, which shows how many times each student has approached every task, and what mistakes they have made in close-ended questions such as multiple-choice, cloze and matching, can result in tutors changing support structures by updating, rephrasing and extending the content or even redesigning it. Once

problem areas have been identified, e.g. inappropriate and incorrect use of the active and passive voice, conditionals, the gerund or the infinitive, new resources and activities with additional information, suggestions and advice as to what to revise can be added.

Tutor support accelerates the learning process in an online environment. Tutors, who are facilitators, supervisors and guides, provide vital information, answers and advice. Synchronous meetings and asynchronous interactions with them through text, images and audio files decrease the feeling of isolation that some online learners may experience.

Pre-emptive tutor support consists in clarifying the features of the course management system, its tools, the layout of the course, its granularity, navigation around the material, linear and non-linear educational paths, compulsory and optional coursework, types of tasks and assignments, assessment and communication channels. During the course, the tutor has different asynchronous and synchronous tools at their disposal to pre-emptively support their learners. They can provide encouragement, or point out some important issues that learners will have to concentrate on in the next phase of the course. Such text-based tools as email, discussion forum, instant messaging, chat, which are available in every course management system, allow various tutor-student interactions. Webinars and video-conferenced tutorials are a valuable addition, as they enhance e-learning by providing an authentic communicative context.

Responsive tutor support can be delivered before, during and after the course. By addressing queries prior to the course commencement or by meeting their prospective students at a kick-off workshop, the tutor learns a great deal about them. During-the-course tutor support takes different forms and responds to student needs when they arise. Questions and problems can range from strictly technical to purely linguistic. Automated assessment through testing and progress monitoring allows identifying problem areas and taking corrective action. After-the-course responsive support is very rare, and it obviously depends on learning design and tutors themselves. Continuous constructive tutor feedback stimulates engagement, which leads to reaching learning aims and objectives and intended learning outcomes.

Peer support, which comes from fellow students, is pre-emptive or responsive, whichever is available depends on how active student participation in the course is, on support structures included in learning design, and on how important for the tutor it is. Creating strong support groups is particularly beneficial if the tutor's presence is limited, like in the case of MOOCs.

Responsive peer support can be provided in various ways. During the course it can be offered through email communication, threaded discussion forums, collaborative and co-operative activities (Mokwa-Tarnowska, Roszak, & Kołodziejczak,

2018), video and text conferencing, and peer review of the instructional design of the courses and educational material already developed. Interactivity achieved through different communication channels is one of the factors which enhances interest and motivation (Kishabale, 2019; Sebastianelli, Swift, & Tamimi, 2015; Zorko, 2007). Not only is a communication-based activity in itself an excellent exercise that enables students to develop communicative, analytical, critical and reflective skills, but it is also a beneficial language practice – its execution through written communication gives students an additional chance to gain language competence.

Creating well-functioning support groups is an enormous challenge for an online language tutor. If they succeed, benefits can be substantial. Firstly, strong support groups reduce the feeling of isolation that Internet-based courses evoke in a significant number of inexperienced participants, which was seen in many e-learning environments during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kaisara & Bwalya, 2021; Abbasi, Ayoob, Malik & Memon, 2020; Aini, Budiarto, Putra & Rahardja, 2020). Students who feel uncomfortable sitting alone in front of a computer screen more eagerly contact other members of the cohort if they know that they will be supported by them. Support groups can operate like social networks (Poore, 2013: 82-91), where students continually share their thoughts, circulate information, link up with people from another town, city and country. Unlike them, however, in-class support groups rarely grow organically, and their existence can result from previous successful project collaboration and execution (Christudason, 2003). Secondly, if there are many participants, and tutor support is weak, which is determined by the nature of the course and tutor skills, both teaching and technological ones, peers can become a powerful source of advice and encouragement. Support groups can stimulate those who would otherwise drop out, lag behind or unwillingly participate in collaborative activities.

A very effective method of supporting students is peer review. For it to be successful, clear and precise guidelines with instructions for assessing must be provided by tutors. Constructive and positive feedback based on sharing ideas is a powerful tool in teaching and learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) from the constructivist point of view. Peer review increases awareness and makes students more conscious of what learning entails. It causes them to work harder to produce a thorough analysis of the project being reviewed. According to Gibbs (2010) metacognitive awareness is an important element of the educational process. His research shows that it even improves retention.

Research Design and Implementation

Since mid-March 2020 to mid-June 2021 the Language Centre at Gdansk University of Technology conducted online classes for both 1st and 2nd degree students of all the faculties. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic traditional teaching was replaced by Moodle-based e-learning, asynchronous in the case of the spring semester of the academic year 2020/2021 and integrated with synchronous meetings of increasing frequency as regards the following academic year. Within the first two weeks of the first pandemic semester all the teaching staff started developing online resources and activities. Only 7 out of 35 foreign language teachers were certified online tutors with varied experience, mostly in web-supported teaching. The other staff's online pedagogy skills and technological competence in online material production and delivery were non-existent, some had only basic ICT skills. With strong support, both general and specific, pre-emptive and responsive, coming from the certified teachers, who established the Centre's E-learning Unit four years before, they not only managed to deliver online education but were also able to provide varied programmes including a growing number of high quality educational material with online resources and activities.

In June 2020, at the end of the first semester of the three-semester pandemic online teaching, the students who participated in the classes run by the Language Centre were asked to complete online questionnaires with close-ended questions about their attitudes towards their e-learning experiences. As many as 1522 students completed the survey – the response rate was 79%. The analysis of the answers to selected questions is presented in this study. It is supported by findings collected during qualitative research, based on observation and answers to a survey with open-ended questions completed by 1064 GUT's students, conducted at the end of the third pandemic semester in June 2021 – the survey achieved a 66% response rate.

Research Questions and Methods

The qualitative and quantitative research presented in this paper aimed to investigate the nature of the online language classes delivered at GUT during the first three semesters of the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of student satisfaction with the adopted teaching approach, and the impact of the environment on an increase in students' hard and soft skills. The students' opinions and needs enumerated

in the answers to the open-ended questions have helped to uncover some ways to improve traditional language education offered by GUT. Two basic tools were used to produce a qualitative analysis: direct observation and a questionnaire. The quantitative research involved an online survey. The research questions targeted in both phases were as follows:

– What are the students' attitudes to online work during the pandemic?
– How effective can online learning which has replaced traditional classes be in terms of learning outcomes?
– How successful were the online environments created by beginner tutors and more advanced ones?
– How did the e-learning environments developed by more advanced tutors differ from the ones created by beginner tutors?
– To what extent did the online programmes satisfy the expectations of the BSc and MSc students who participated in them?

It can be assumed that the composition of each study group was homogeneous with respect to many factors: age, intellectual capacity, interest in science and engineering, and B2–C1 level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The only major difference was university study experience as both first-year and second-year undergraduate students as well as MSc students participated in the research, which could have had an impact on their perception of online learning. It might have been easier for the second years and master's students as they were well acquainted with university requirements, had participated in numerous activities before, and knew their peers.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire available on every Moodle course's website in the last module. The number of participants per language group ranged between 3 and 28. Every group had a separate Moodle course built using the same instructional design. The questionnaire aimed to evaluate the summer semester of the academic year 2019/2020 included five questions with answers on a five-point Likert-type scale (5: totally agree; 4: agree; 3: neither agree nor disagree; 2: disagree; 1: strongly disagree), and all of them finished with a request to justify the chosen answer. The one at the end of the academic year 2020/2021 consisted of six open-ended questions. The questionnaires were not authorised to collect sociodemographic information. They are considered reliable and valid – they included standardized questions that are frequently asked to evaluate online education, they produced generalizable results, which was seen across the whole sample, all the participants were given the same questions and were tested under the same conditions – through an end-of-semester Moodle activity. The questions were drafted and their scope was discussed by the Language Centre's Council, prior to the approval by the Director of the Language Centre.

The quantitative data collected during the research are presented as mean values or percentage, as appropriate. The comparison of groups (categorical data) was analysed with the χ^2 test. Most of the results were considered insignificant at $p>0.05$, but they gave a significant insight into online teaching. The statistical analyses were performed with RStudio.

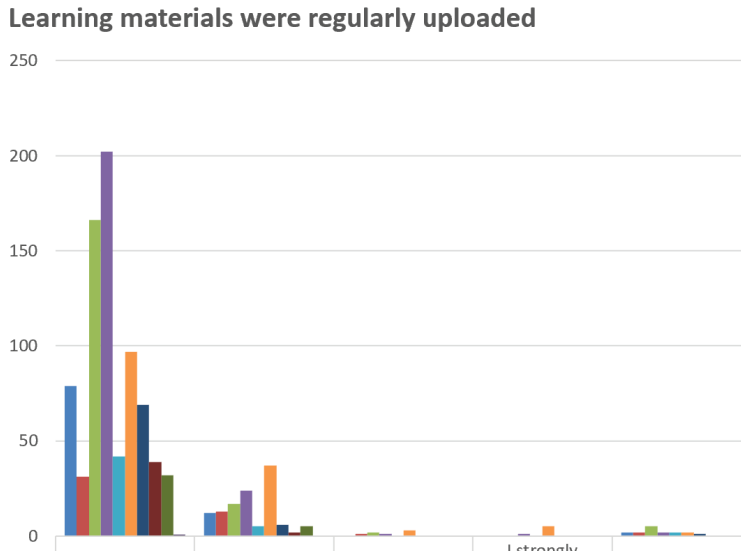
The qualitative data were analysed via inductive coding, which helped to conceptualise students' attitudes, their assessment of the language skills they had developed over the previous months. This approach resulted in defying possibly erroneous preconceptions imposed by deductive data analysis, and allowed dominant and significant themes inherent in raw data to emerge. It also aimed to establish clear, transparent and justifiable links between the aims and the findings. The trustworthiness of the findings was assessed by comparison with the findings from the previous research conducted at GUT. Initial categories were created from actual words and phrases used in specific answers. The categories were later combined under a superordinate category when the meanings were similar. Thus, codes were developed inductively from the data downloaded from Moodle (Saldaña, 2021).

The respondents were divided into two groups based on their lecturer's online teaching experience – students taught by beginner tutors and students taught by more advanced ones. This aimed to understand if and how the teaching staff's pedagogical and technological competence affected student learning. Beginner tutors had no previous experience in e-learning. They had used neither Moodle nor simple applications to develop educational materials before. Some of them did not even know how to access the university's Moodle. However, they had sufficient ICT skills to prepare text-based exercises, as well as use video and audio files. More advanced tutors had regularly enhanced their traditional classes with Moodle resources and activities, and web-based educational material before. The majority of them, 6 out of 7, had been certified online tutors prior to the onset of the pandemic, and one obtained a certificate during the pandemic in 2021, awarded by the Association of Academic E-learning, Poland.

Qualitative and Quantitative Research – Results and Discussion

The total number of survey participants in the first research phase in June 2020 amounted to 1522 first degree students. Their responses were not analysed according to their language competence, only the level of university degree was taken

into account. The research targeted the online environment that was created by the staff with a different degree of e-learning and e-teaching expertise to replace traditional classes, and not the subject matter. Second degree students had far more experience in using online components at that time because many of the language classes they had had before had been web-based. This could have influenced their attitudes, therefore their responses were not taken into account in the first phase of the research devoted to the analysis of e-learning.

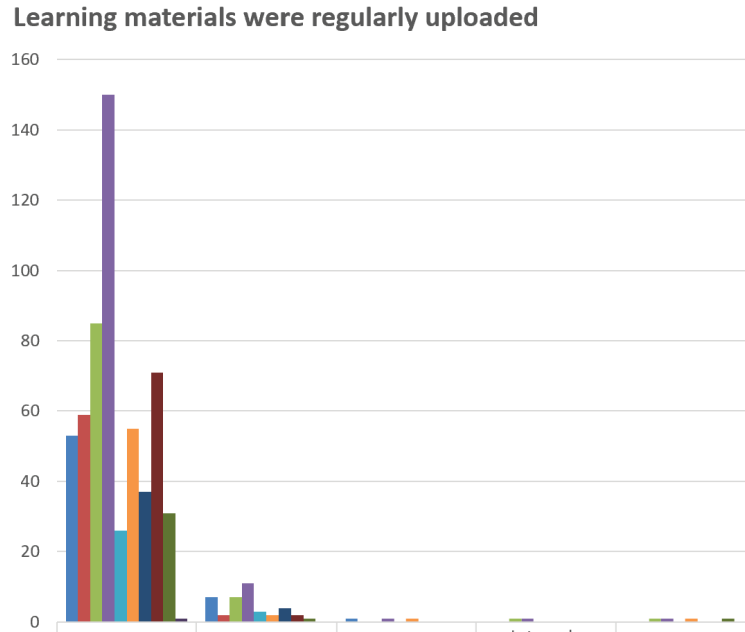


	I strongly agree	I agree	I disagree	I strongly disagree	No opinion
Architecture	79	12	0	0	2
Chemistry	31	13	1	0	2
Civil and Environ Eng	166	17	2	0	5
Electron, Telecom, Inform	202	24	1	1	2
Electrical and Control Eng	42	5	0	0	2
Management and Economics	97	37	3	5	2
Mechanical Engineering	69	6	0	0	1
Physics and Mathematics	39	2	0	0	0
Ocean Eng, Ship Techn	32	5	0	0	0
	83%	13%	1%	1%	1%

Figure 1. 1st Degree Students taught by beginner tutors – June 2020.

With strong support from the e-learning team under my supervision, from the very beginning of the pandemic the beginner teachers were able to design online material and develop regular, weekly modules with resources and activities based on the syllabus. Figures 1 and 2 show that no matter how advanced the tutors

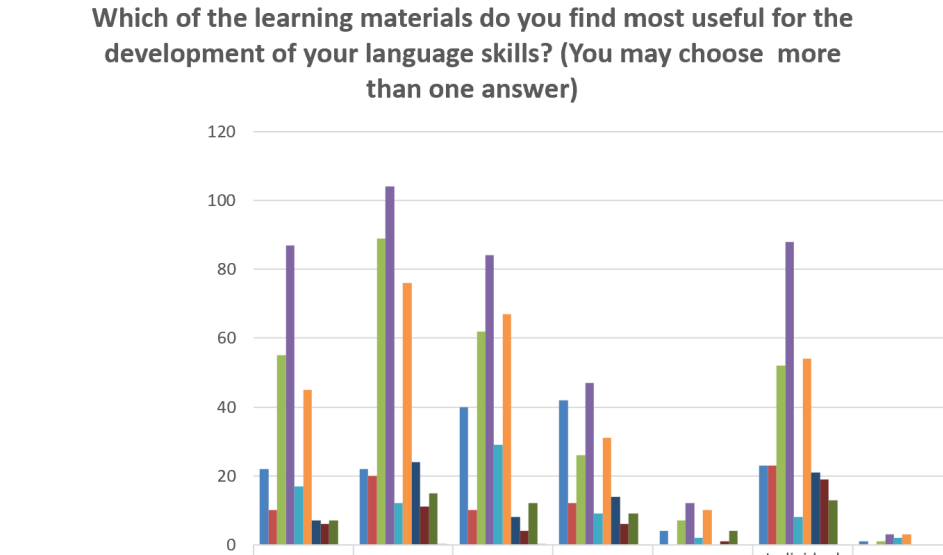
were, they succeeded in creating an online environment, which was confirmed by the substantial majority of the respondents, 96% taught by the beginner tutors and 98% by the more advanced ones. The difference between the responses in both groups is statistically insignificant ($p=0.054$, $p>0.05$). This shows that the pre-emptive and responsive support structures used to guide the staff were successful and all the lecturers quickly became online tutors who managed to proceed with their teaching duties when other GUT academics often failed to do so in the first period, as was reported by the students in the comments they added to their responses.



	I strongly agree	I agree	I disagree	I strongly disagree	No opinion
Architecture	53	7	1	0	0
Chemistry	59	2	0	0	0
Civil and Environ Eng	85	7	0	1	1
Electron, Telecom, Inform	150	11	1	1	1
Electrical and Control Eng	26	3	0	0	0
Management and Economics	55	2	1	0	1
Mechanical Engineering	37	4	0	0	0
Physics and Mathematics	71	2	0	0	0
Ocean Eng, Ship Techn	31	1	0	0	1
	92%	6%	0%	0%	1%

Figure 2. 1st Degree Students taught by more advanced tutors – June 2020.

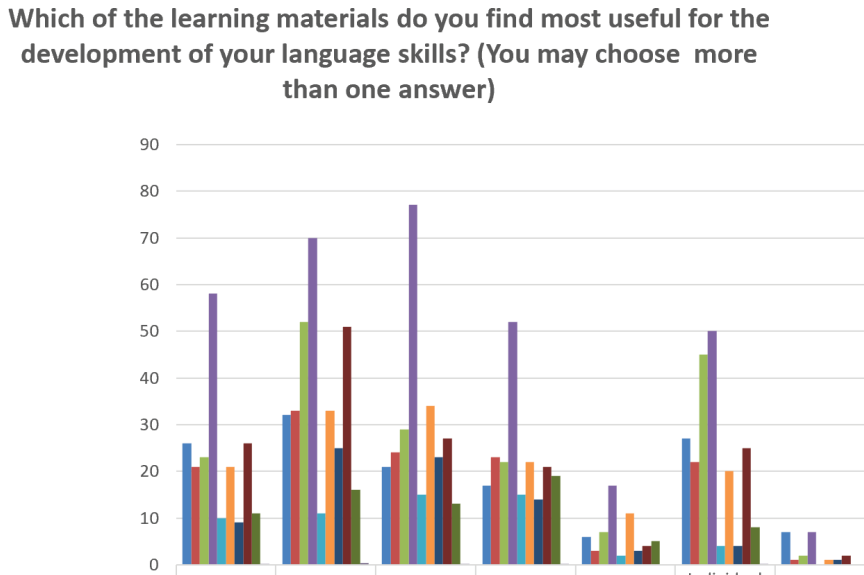
Based on the responses received (Figs. 3 and 4), it can be said that the tools to develop online materials were those which allowed preparing typical language tasks, i.e. reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar exercises, writing and listening practice. They ranged from the ones to upload resources in Moodle, i.e. *Label*, *URL*, *Page*, to the ones for doing activities, i.e. *Assignment* and *Quiz*. The last tool was initially used only by the more advanced tutors but gradually the number of the teaching staff who learnt how to set such tasks began to increase. As can be seen, the respondents' preferences in both groups are similar and do not depend on the tutor's online teaching skills. Following the monitoring activities that took place each semester, which I supervised as the Coordinator for



	Reading	Quizzes/tests	Video/audio materials	Forum discussions	Groupwork	Individual tasks sent via the platform	Giving peer feedback
Architecture	22	22	40	42	4	23	1
Chemistry	10	20	10	12	0	23	0
Civil and Environ Eng	55	89	62	26	7	52	1
Electron, Telecom, Inform	87	104	84	47	12	88	3
Electrical and Control Eng	17	12	29	9	2	8	2
Management and Economics	45	76	67	31	10	54	3
Mechanical Engineering	7	24	8	14	0	21	0
Physics and Mathematics	6	11	4	6	1	19	0
Ocean Eng, Ship Techn	7	15	12	9	4	13	0
	17%	25%	21%	13%	3%	20%	1%

Figure 3. 1st Degree Students taught by beginner tutors – June 2020.

E-learning at the Language Centre, it can be stated that even the more advanced tutors chose only the Moodle tools that allowed them to create a typical educational environment with basic interactions. Their students felt comfortable with what was familiar to them and they perceived quizzes (25%), listening exercises (21%) and writing tasks (16%) as having a major impact on the development of their language skills (Fig. 4). There are some differences between the respondents, e.g. the Electrical and Control Engineering students as well as the Ocean Engineering and Ship Technology ones chose forum discussions to be the most useful material, with video/audio materials being almost as frequently mentioned.



	Reading	Quizzes/tests	Video/audio materials	Forum discussions	Groupwork	Individual tasks sent via the platform	Giving peer feedback
Architecture	26	32	21	17	6	27	7
Chemistry	21	33	24	23	3	22	1
Civil and Environ Eng	23	52	29	22	7	45	2
Electron, Telecom, Inform	58	70	77	52	17	50	7
Electrical and Control Eng	10	11	15	15	2	4	0
Management and Economics	21	33	34	22	11	20	1
Mechanical Engineering	9	25	23	14	3	4	1
Physics and Mathematics	26	51	27	21	4	25	2
Ocean Eng, Ship Techn	11	16	13	19	5	8	0
	16%	25%	21%	16%	5%	16%	2%

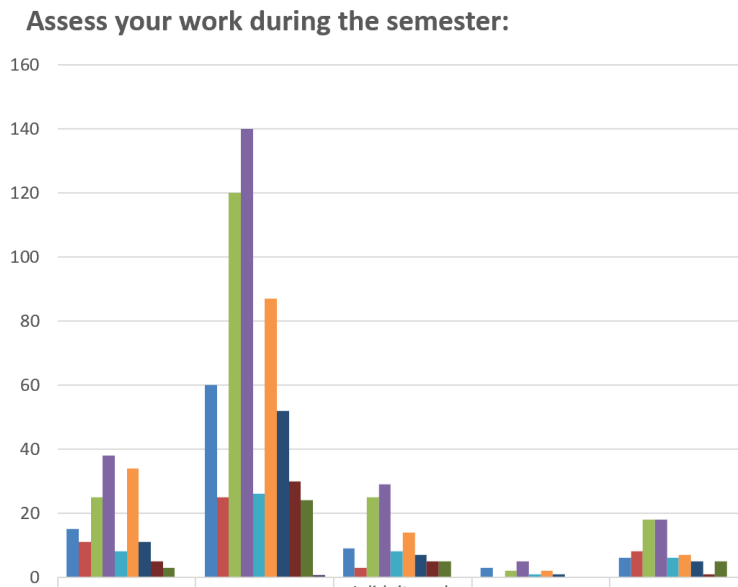
Figure 4. 1st Degree Students taught by more advanced tutors – June 2020.

The responses of the students taught by the less experienced tutors were almost identical – however, more students found writing tasks to be useful (20%), an increase of 4% compared to the more advanced tutors' groups (Fig. 3). 'Quizzes' was the most common answer – they were probably the most interactive activities on the courses developed by the inexperienced tutors. The Physics and Mathematics students as well as the Chemistry ones regarded individual tasks sent via the platform as the material that best developed their skills. The Architecture respondents were the only group to choose forum discussions as the most useful activities, which probably resulted from them being more advanced learners. The percentage of the Electrical and Control Engineering students who choose video/audio materials was the highest (37%), the differences between the other groups in this category are not substantial – they range around 20%.

Collaborative activities were not appreciated by the respondents, which can result from them being introduced at a later stage and not in significant numbers. Also, the students might not see them as a valuable addition to an online language course because, as research has shown, the collaborative skills of both undergraduate and postgraduate students are usually limited and require developing (Mokwa-Tarnowska, Roszak & Kołodziejczak, 2018). If they are insufficient, students tend to avoid group work. In the second semester of the pandemic period all the more advanced tutors introduced collaborative projects executed by different tools, e.g. the *wiki* tool in Moodle, *PiktoChart, Canva***,** *Genial.ly*, *Infogram* and *Venngage,* which most students engaged in. However, to appreciate the impact of untypical activities for language development, students must understand their value and the reasons for incorporating them into the curriculum. If they do not, they are unlikely to see their advantages even if they are substantial.

Figures 5 and 6 show how the respondents perceived their engagement and workload during the first semester of the pandemic period. Slightly more students from the groups supervised by the more experienced tutors than the other ones decided that they had worked regularly and intensively (82% – 504 students versus 79% – 716 students). The 3 percent difference is negligible. A *chi – square* test confirmed that the results were non-significant ($p = 0.857, p > .05$). It appears that both groups worked equally regularly and intensively regardless of how advanced in online learning design the tutors were.

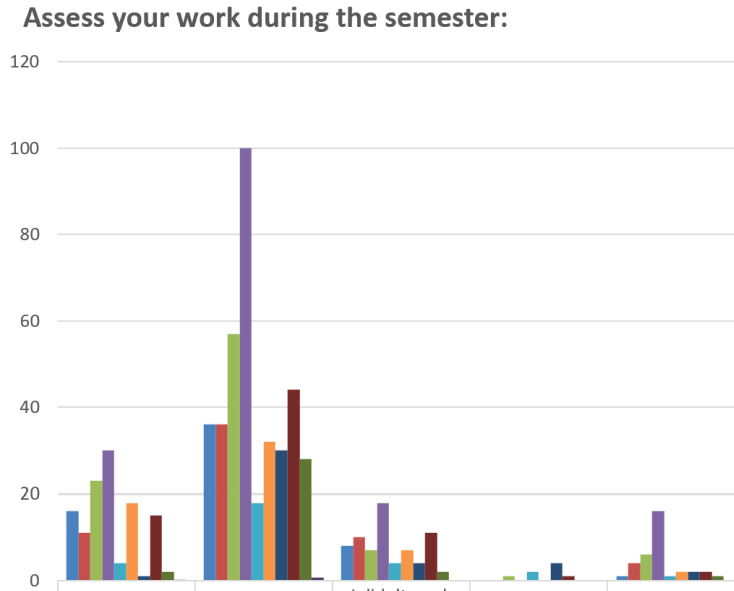
The first and the second most popular answer chosen by the students taught by the beginner tutors show that the staff managed to create an engaging environment, which means that they quickly developed online pedagogy skills and technological competence, both of which were indispensable to achieve a successful programme. The same applies to the students taught by the more advanced tutors.



	I worked regularly and really hard.	I worked regularly and hard enough.	I didn't work regularly and not hard enough.	I definitely worked too little.	No opinion.
Architecture	15	60	9	3	6
Chemistry	11	25	3	0	8
Civil and Environ Eng	25	120	25	2	18
Electron, Telecom, Inform	38	140	29	5	18
Electrical and Control Eng	8	26	8	1	6
Management and Economics	34	87	14	2	7
Mechanical Engineering	11	52	7	1	5
Physics and Mathematics	5	30	5	0	1
Ocean Eng, Ship Techn	3	24	5	0	5
	17%	62%	12%	2%	8%

Figure 5. 1st Degree Students taught by beginner tutors – June 2020.

Although the Ocean Engineering and Ship Technology, Physics and Mathematics, Electrical and Control Engineering as well as Civil and Environmental Engineering students taught by the beginner tutors chose: "I worked irregularly and not hard enough" as a second most popular answer, the percentages were not very high and were overbalanced by the ones showing a great deal of effort put into online learning (Fig. 5).



	I worked regularly and really hard.	I worked regularly and hard enough.	I didn't work regularly and not hard enough.	I definitely worked too little.	No opinion.
Architecture	16	36	8	0	1
Chemistry	11	36	10	0	4
Civil and Environ Eng	23	57	7	1	6
Electron, Telecom, Inform	30	100	18	0	16
Electrical and Control Eng	4	18	4	2	1
Management and Economics	18	32	7	0	2
Mechanical Engineering	1	30	4	4	2
Physics and Mathematics	15	44	11	1	2
Ocean Eng, Ship Techn	2	28	2	0	1
	20%	62%	12%	1%	6%

Figure 6. 1st Degree Students taught by more advanced tutors – June 2020.

The predominantly qualitative research conducted in June 2021 with a sample of 1064 respondents, 691 first degree students and 373 second degree ones, aimed to assess student satisfaction level with a hybrid environment created for them. As the participants had developed e-learning skills by the time and they were familiar with different types of resources and activities, it was interesting to analyse if the attitudes of the undergraduates and postgraduates towards high-impact educational material differed.

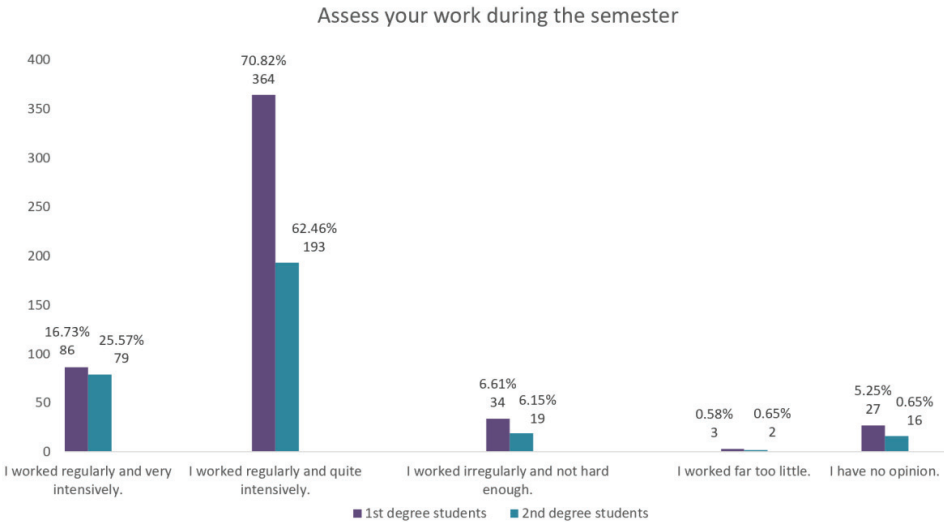


Figure 7. Students taught by less advanced tutors – June 2021.

As can be concluded from figures 7 and 8, the 1st degree students as well as the 2nd degree ones chose: "I worked regularly and quite intensively". This answer was the most frequent regardless of how advanced the tutor was. Slightly more postgraduate students taught by the more advanced tutors perceived their engagement to be higher, which is particularly seen in the percentage of the second choice responses. The chi-square statistic is 3.9161. The *p-value* is 0.048. The result is significant at $p < 0.05$. This could have resulted from them being encouraged to participate in more varied activities including collaborative projects of various kinds and peer review, which they had not done before.

In both conditions, "I worked regularly and very intensively" was the second most popular answer for all the students. Generally, the 2nd degree students appear to have worked harder regardless of how advanced their tutors were. In both cases the percentage of those who studied the most intensively was higher for the 2nd degree students (25.57% and 17.19%) in comparison with the first degree ones (16.73% and 14.12%).

When compared to the results of the first survey (Figs. 5 and 7), it must be emphasised that in the group taught by the less experienced tutors, more students in June 2021 than in the spring semester of the academic year 2019/2020 regarded themselves as hardworking (88% and 79% respectively). An increase in the number of those who worked regularly and intensively can also be seen in the case of the respondents in the group educated by the more advanced tutors – 88% versus 82%. Improved online teaching skills seem to have enabled creating a more engaging and effective educational environment (Figs. 6 and 8).

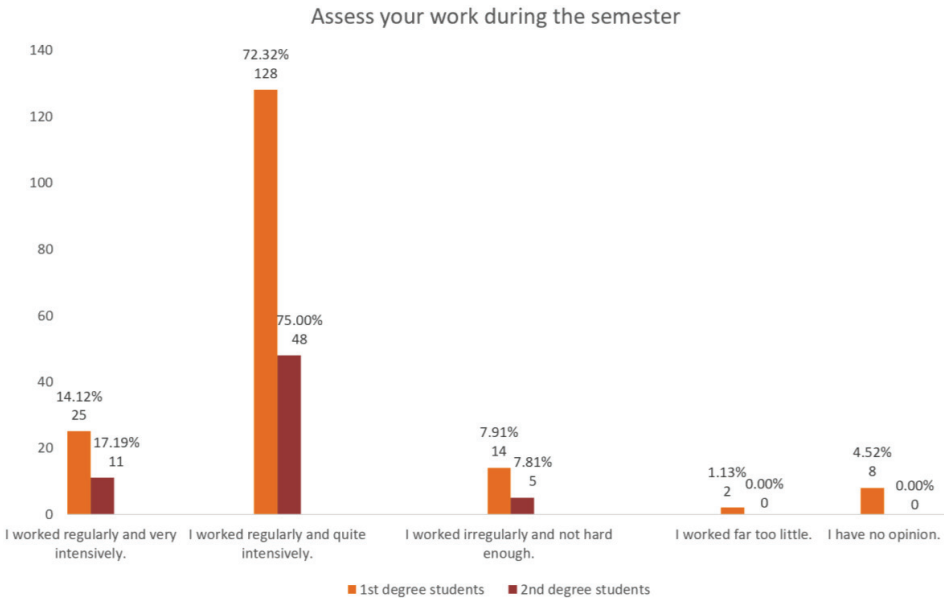


Figure 8. Students taught by more advanced tutors – June 2021.

A statistical comparison of the two groups shows that there is a statistically non-significant difference between them ($p=0.63$, $p > 0.05$). This indicates that the 1st degree students as well as the 2nd degree ones worked equally regularly and intensively when taught by the more advanced tutors. Similarly, a *chi – square* test showed that the difference between the undergraduates and postgraduates taught by the less advanced tutors was non-significant ($p=0.229$, $p>0.05$). In both cases they studied hard and regularly. This proves that all the teachers were eventually skilful enough to create a successful online environment. Their students focused more on the general quality of the course they were on rather than the technological aspect and the sophistication of the tools used. They were not accustomed to using a complex online programme, because there were none such, given all the ones run by their faculties.

The analysis of the answers to open-ended questions about the materials and tasks that have had the most considerable impact for language skills development has revealed that the students regarded synchronous activities during Zoom meetings as very beneficial – they were mentioned in the majority of comments. This attitude could have resulted from many factors. The most significant ones seem to be: an opportunity for synchronous tutor-student interactions, non-existent or very rare in the previous semesters as obligatory online meetings were introduced in the spring semester of 2020/2021, and online activities during such meetings,

which mimicked typical classes in a traditional setting and which the students felt comfortable with.

The students mainly described the language content from which they had benefitted the most. However, their comments have revealed certain general attitudes towards the learning design of the online courses they attended. First of all, students seek interactivity understood as tutor-student interactions – it can come from both synchronous components and asynchronous ones – discussions were mentioned as a favourite activity by the majority. Secondly, feedback is valued substantially, in whatever form – it can be summative, e.g. quiz result, and formative, e.g. teacher comments on assignments sent via the platform and posts in forum discussions. Thirdly, varied resources increase engagement if they relate to students' professional interests and latest advances, e.g. video talks, presentations and animations. Master's students prefer activities allowing opinion sharing during discussions, both synchronous and asynchronous ones, whereas undergraduates like their language skills being tested through online quizzes with question types such as multiple choice and matching. Moreover, if students are taught by experienced tutors, who can use their pedagogical skills and technological competence to a synergistic effect, they understand the added value of online interactions available due to the functionalities and affordances of online tools incorporated into learning design. If tutors are inexperienced or if their online teaching skills are limited, their students look for an online environment which mimics a traditional setting, and they can reject e-learning not understanding the benefits it offers. Finally, unsupported students or students inexperienced in online learning can feel fatigue and can express a sense of underachievement and underperformance, which can be seen in their complaints about heavy workloads, too much homework and time consuming activities.

Some online programmes were thought to be too intensive, packed with too many activities requiring too much effort. Some asynchronous tasks that replaced face-to-face meetings were identified as homework, and thus appeared to be excessively demanding. However, the estimated amount of work was within the specified workload indicated by the ECTS credits allocated to the subject. Some respondents mentioned that their Moodle-based language classes were far better that other seminars and lectures taught by their faculty. They were structured around a wide range of varied asynchronous activities and team tasks during Zoom meetings, which was considered an advantage but also a disadvantage by those students who preferred video-based tutorials and presentations, i.e. instructivist teaching methods.

Conclusion

Creating supportive virtual classrooms where students' needs, wants, abilities, interests, and goals are taken into account should be of utmost importance to course developers and tutors if they choose to develop e-learning programmes in the post-pandemic time. No matter what they study, online learners need strong support from the course website, i.e. the layout and structure of course materials, tutors and peers. Even highly motivated students who are interested in the subject matter can become discouraged when they feel unsupported, if they do not understand the nature of e-learning, and the impact of interactions available in an online setting. With synchronous and asynchronous activities, an e-learning programme can satisfy the needs of mixed-ability students with a wide range of interests and learning preferences.

A variety of activities including self-assessment tasks, e.g. educational quizzes with summative and formative feedback, synchronous and asynchronous discussions, online collaborative projects and peer review enable students to develop various skills, ranging from hard to soft ones. A wider range of online interactions than in a traditional classroom, available through the use of a number of tools, result in a motivating environment, which focuses on a simultaneous development of numerous skills.

All support mechanisms must raise student confidence, increase engagement as well as provide guidance and remedial action. Peer support can substantially enhance the feeling of being part of a community, which consists in teamwork skills and positive emotional bonds. Its lack was observed during the synchronous meetings which were part of the online language education offered in the spring semester of the academic year 2020/2021. The students did not want to interact with their peers – they barely knew each other due to pandemic restrictions, they preferred tutor-student interactions. Online student-student interactions available in Moodle were more frequent if tutors possessed more advanced online teaching skills and were able to engage their students in more versatile activities which triggered such interactions. However, many of the online language courses offered by GUT during the pandemic were of instructive rather than collaborative nature. A move towards a constructivist environment might be beneficial both for teachers and students. New opportunities that a paradigm shift in instructional design can provide is an area that has to be researched further.

It can be concluded that it is the tutors that play the most important role in providing flexible support structures of various complexity. Constant monitoring, quick identification of problem areas, fast remedial action and formative feedback result in the enhancement of the learning process, and in an increase in student

confidence, motivation and satisfaction, which was seen in the qualitative analysis. The results of the research are in line with what Rowntree (1997: 115) observed at the onset of the online education era – 'without tutorial support, the best materials in the world may prove disappointing (…), quite basic materials can be effective if learners are supported by sensitive and diligent tutors'. However, it has to be emphasised that tutors develop effective online courses if they are themselves supported. Without strong support coming from specialists in online pedagogy and technology, academics and teaching staff are unable to create and deliver online courses that have the potential to meet aims and objectives, and lead to intended learning outcomes.

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Iwona Mokwa-Tarnowska, Viviana Tarnowska

Wpływ wsparcia na jakość zajęć online z języków obcych na Politechnice Gdańskiej w czasie pandemii COVID-19

Strzeszczenie

Pandemia COVID-19 spowodowała znaczne zaburzenia w zaplanowanym procesie dydaktycznym. Aby zaadaptować się do nowych warunków, nauczyciele akademiccy musieli natychmiast zrestrukturyzować swoje programy nauczania. Nie wszyscy jednak posiadali wystarczające umiejętności do prowadzenia zajęć online. Nie było czasu na to, aby mniej wykwalifikowani mogli zwiększyć swoje kompetencje poprzez wsparcie wyprzedzające, ani na to, aby mogli samodzielnie pokierować swoim kształceniem. Żeby jednak być w stanie stworzyć zajęcia w środowisku internetowym, spełniające potrzeby studentów uczących się języka obcego, nauczyciele potrzebowali wsparcia zarówno ogólnego, jak i specyficznego. Pierwsze odnosi się do aspektu technologicznego, to znaczy jest związane z funkcjonalnościami dostępnych narzędzi i afordancjami, na jakie pozwalają. Drugie dostarczane jest przez strukturę kursu, materiał edukacyjny, nauczycieli i samych studentów. Dzięki intensywnemu wsparciu reaktywnemu, którego udzielili certyfikowani współpracownicy z Zespołu E-learningowego, wszyscy nauczyciele języków obcych Politechniki Gdańskiej byli w stanie stworzyć aktywizujące środowisko edukacyjne online. Wnioski zaprezentowane w artykule są wynikiem badań ilościowych i jakościowych przeprowadzonych na Politechnice Gdańskiej w latach 2020 i 2021.

Słowa kluczowe: e-learning, wsparcie, aktywne uczenie się, umiejętności językowe, pandemia COVID-19

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Влияние поддержки изучения иностранных языков на занятиях онлайн в Гданьском технологическом университете во время пандемии COVID-19

Аннотация

Пандемия COVID-19 привела к значительным нарушениям запланированного учебного процесса. Чтобы приспособиться к новым условиям, преподавателям пришлось немедленно перестроить свои учебные планы. Однако не все из них обладали достаточными навыками для проведения онлайн-занятий. У менее квалифицированных не было времени ни повышать свою квалификацию за счет упреждающей поддержки, ни иметь возможность направлять собственное обучение. Однако для того, чтобы иметь возможность создавать классы в онлайн-среде, отвечающие потребностям студентов, изучающих иностранный язык, преподавателям требовалась как общая, так и конкретная поддержка. Первая относится к технологическому аспекту, т. е. к функциональным возможностям доступных инструментов и предоставляемым ими возможностям. Вторая обеспечивается структурой курса, учебным материалом, преподавателями и самими студентами. Благодаря интенсивной реактивной поддержке, оказанной сертифицированными сотрудниками из команды Электронного Обучения, все преподаватели иностранных языков Гданьского технологического университета смогли создать активирующую образовательную онлайн-среду. Выводы, представленные в статье, являются результатом количественных и качественных исследований, проведенных в Гданьском технологическом университете в 2020 и 2021 годах.

Ключевые слова: электронное обучение, поддержка, активное обучение, языковые навыки, пандемия COVID-19

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El impacto del apoyo para el desarrollo del lenguaje en las clases en línea en la Universidad Tecnológica de Gdansk durante la pandemia de COVID-19

Resumen

La pandemia de COVID-19 ha causado interrupciones significativas en el proceso de enseñanza planificado. Para adaptarse a las nuevas condiciones, los académicos tuvieron que reestructurar inmediatamente sus planes de estudio. Sin embargo, no todos tenían las habilidades suficientes para impartir clases en línea. No hubo tiempo para que los menos cualificados aumentaran sus competencias a través del apoyo preventivo, ni para que pudieran dirigir su propio aprendizaje. Sin embargo, para poder crear clases en un entorno en línea que satisficiera las necesidades de los estudiantes que aprenden un idioma extranjero, los profesores necesitaban apoyo tanto general como específico. El primero se relaciona con el aspecto tecnológico, es decir, está relacionado con las funcionalidades de las herramientas disponibles y las posibilidades que permiten. El segundo lo proporciona la estructura del curso, el material didáctico, los profesores y los propios alum-

nos. Gracias al apoyo reactivo intensivo brindado por colaboradores certificados del Equipo de aprendizaje electrónico, todos los profesores de idiomas extranjeros de la Universidad Tecnológica de Gdańsk lograron involucrar a sus estudiantes en un aprendizaje interactivo, colaborativo y activo. Las conclusiones presentadas en el artículo son el resultado de una investigación cuantitativa y cualitativa realizada en la Universidad Tecnológica de Gdańsk en 2020 y 2021.

P a l a b r a s c l a v e: e-learning, apoyo, aprendizaje activo, habilidades lingüísticas, pandemia de COVID-19