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STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND PREFERENCES TO ONLINE TEACHING DURING THE PANDEMIC COVID -19 PERIOD (A STUDY CONDUCTED AT SEEU)

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine students' attitudes and preferences to online teaching in an ESL classroom during the Covid-19 pandemic period. Effective communication plays a vital role in students' productivity and the teacher's role is to motivate students to participate in an online environment. Quantitative research was conducted among first year university students from SEEU: Albanians, Macedonians and Turks, age 18-21, enrolled in intermediate and upper-intermediate English course. The results revealed that most of the university students were satisfied with the online teaching and were motivated to communicate online during the online lectures.

Keywords: *Communication, Effective communication, Online classes, Online learning, Motivation, Productivity*

1. Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic period, SEEU implemented a 'Hybrid' mode of learning and teaching that proved to be effective for both students and teachers. The communication between students and teachers was held both in the traditional and an online setting while all lectures resumed on campus with the 'Hybrid' mode available all the time. The University continued delivering high quality education taking into consideration all the health measure protocols recommended, keeping in mind the health and safety of the students, staff and the wider community. During the last week of the semester the physical presence of the students was considered very important because this period was used for the end-of-term examinations. Students who could not attend the exams with physical attendance were asked to provide and submit evidence to the teacher.

The communication in an online environment and in the 'Hybrid' mode of learning requires more planning and thought than just communicating with students in a traditional classroom. In a traditional environment the teachers are given a chance to

communicate spontaneously and use facial expressions and body language and these help them connect and deliver their message to the students. In an online environment the communication is more difficult and it has its own disadvantages. It is up to the teachers to decide how to establish effective and appropriate communication, and how to interact effectively with the students online. Communication plays a vital process in exchanging ideas, experiences, knowledge and information. Effective communication during online classes can help students stay connected and build a sense of community. Teachers should motivate students to communicate in an online environment by offering interesting topics for discussion as well as to make students more productive in gaining knowledge, and to have a meaningful learning experience in order to develop critical thinking skills.

Since this shift from online to traditional learning is very new to most students and teachers, teachers should develop effective interaction with the students, establishing timely and appropriate communications.

2. Literature review

2.1 Students' attitudes and preferences in an online environment

The purpose of this study is to examine students' attitudes and the preferences students have regarding the online learning and teaching processes at SEEU. Understanding the students' preferences and their perceptions of online teaching, learning and communication can help higher educational institutions improve the course instruction as well as increase enrollment (Museus and Chang, 2009, p.95-105). However, the literature on perceptions that university students have of online education remains inconclusive (Allen and Seaman, 2010). Furthermore, although there is a growth of online education and adoption in higher educational institutions, it is still not known if students actually prefer to study online. Many questions remain unanswered for educators regarding the validity of learning in the online environment, the impact isolation has on students, as well as the development of new educational platforms (Nong, 2013).

One of the vital points in these communication processes is to examine student preferences, not taking it just as information but also seeking deeper understanding about the students' preferences in the online environment. Institutions need to develop strategies to increase the learning outcomes and online enrollment by creating a deeper understanding of students' needs and their perceptions for building effective interaction in the online environment (Chang, 2000). Institutions can create an ideal online learning environment by determining students' preferences of learning (Howard and Moore, 2002).

Taking into consideration the different methods that are used to deliver online education, asynchronous (students access materials at different times) or synchronous (class held in real time), the advancement of this new way of teaching and learning

requires deeper examination about the preferences students have regarding online or onsite modes of teaching or both at the same time (the 'Hybrid' mode). Kesim and Agaoglu (2007, p.66-75) state “ as studies exploring concepts necessary for establishing meaningful learning in an open and distance education grow in number, so will our understanding of open and distance education”.

2.2 Effective communication between teachers and students in the online environment

An effective communication process is closely linked to interpersonal skills like talking, listening, watching, interviewing, analyzing, interpretation and evaluation. The message should be clearly defined in order to serve the purpose and the possible objectives may be used to make change, encourage action, create awareness, to convey some idea or build future perspective (Velentzas and Borni, 2014, p.117-131). In the online mode, the teachers need to possess effective communication skills as well as the ability to interact in a nice and spontaneous manner. Teachers must have highly developed oral and writing skills in order to interact effectively with their supervisors, students, mentors and collaborators. Communication skills are important in all aspects of the teaching cycle. Advanced communication skills are particularly important for success in higher educational institutions (Ihmeideh et al., 2010, p.1).

According to Majod et al. (2010) and Moore (2007), the teaching and learning process will not take place without communication. It is up to the teacher to create a positive teaching environment and teachers with excellent communication skills possess the ability to influence others and to utilize positive communication strategies (Guerrero and Floyd, 2006). Teachers need to guide students during the learning process, using the three steps in the evaluation process (Lambrechts et al., 2013). Firstly, teachers need to make the evaluation criteria during the online teaching explicit and explain clearly what is expected from the students as well as be transparent about the assessment. Secondly, give adequate feedback regarding written work and discussions online, so that students can learn from the evaluation. In the third step, the teacher should give input to the students about the learning process.

Some studies point out the significance of communication between teachers and students. “Verbal interactions between teacher and students are meaningful for student learning and intrinsic motivation and the results from this study showed that teaching skills should be fostered to improve teachers in asking questions and providing feedback (Jurik et al.,2014). Other studies showed that psychological need satisfaction has a significant and positive impact on student intrinsic motivation (Duta et al., 2015). According to Payne et al. (2007, p.128) the more reflective and critical the students are, the more likely they are to show higher academic success. An empirical study by Yip (2012) supports the idea that academic performances of the students are closely linked to the different learning and study strategies which affect the efficiency and self-effectiveness of the students (Muliro, 2017).

3. Institutional transformation: creating a productive online community of learning

During the pandemic period from March 2020 until June 2020, South East European University respected the protocols and continued lectures online using the Google classroom management system and Google Meet for lectures online. This resulted in a transformation from a strictly traditional environment to an online environment that in many ways raised the question: what is next, onsite or online lectures?

The university management decided to hold the training sessions onsite during the summer semester and the lectures in the next semester continued to be held onsite at both campuses in Tetovo and Skopje. However, during this period, a 'Hybrid' mode of teaching was introduced and the students were allowed to choose how they would attend the lectures (online or onsite). Taking into consideration the situation with Covid-19 in North Macedonia, the lectures from November 8 until December 7 2020 were held online. After this period a survey was conducted with 800 students and 2/3 of the students explained that they would like to attend the lectures in a traditional classroom.

The productivity of the institution is very important and it depends on the degree of performance, the quality and the effectiveness of the institution. The accomplishment of the desired results very much are determined by the students, teachers, administrators, and technical support (Glomo-Narzoles, 2012). According to the theorists, there are factors that influence the institution's productivity. For Hellriegel et al. (1998) it is important that the institution promotes the involvement of the employees; for Arakawa and Greenberg (2007), promoting constructive leadership is important (Glomo-Narzoles, 2012). Nevertheless, a successful institution of higher institution is one that achieves excellence in teaching, study and community involvement (Okello, 2015).

Several studies showed a significant correlation between institutional productivity and communication performance. Pavitt (2000) pointed out the communication and productivity between the colleagues. Madlock (2008) pointed out the importance of communication, leadership, performance and satisfaction of the employees. Internal communication leads to the success of a higher educational institution and plays a very important role that affects the productivity of employees and the overall quality and performance of the organization (Welch and Jackson, 2007). Higher educational institutions need to establish quality ethics and ensure productivity in all circumstances, in both good or in challenging times.

The quality of education in an online environment requires implementing motivational strategies as well as effective communication and productivity. Higher educational institutions should offer different options for students and stimulate them to communicate and interact during the Covid period whether traditionally onsite, online or in a 'Hybrid' mode. Education is one of the key factors that influence social

and the economic growth, which is why educators should strive to make changes in the educational system. Higher institutions should motivate their employees and promote productivity in the triple functions of teaching, study and community involvement.

4. Online learning and communication

Most authors define online learning as a way to access learning experience using technology (Benson, 2002; Conrad, 2002). Many scholars discuss the connectivity, mobility and interactivity of online learning (Ally, 2004). Hiltz and Turoff (2005) make a clear statement that online learning is a modern form of distance learning, an updated edition. However, many authors believe that there is relationship between distance education and online learning but are uncertain of how to define these descriptive narratives (Moore et al., 2011).

During the pandemic Covid period digital media took the primary place and it improved the teaching and learning experiences as well as became a common practice between university students and teachers. This rapid growth of technology changed the climate at higher educational institutions; traditional learning environments are bound by location and presence of the teacher, whereas online teaching and learning environments are unbound and dynamic. Online learning environments involve a variety of communications and are often characterized by student-centered, active learning techniques (Keengwe and Kidd, 2010). There are many positive learning outcomes of online learning such as: student engagement in the online environment, enhanced understanding, a stronger sense of community among students and reduced withdrawal or failure (Nguyen, 2015).

Technology has become an essential way to handle education and it will continue as an integral part of higher education (Croxtton, 2014). Online education has many benefits because it offers versatility in communication, accessibility and convenience. The ease of online learning offers convenience and enables direct communication between teacher and peers in a cyber-class (Fedynich, 2013).

One of the varieties that online learning offers is the willingness of students to participate in mixed learning environments, either asynchronously or synchronously. It gives a chance to students to participate in real time and use different technological tools: participation can take place in chat rooms, or via discussion forums, so even students that are quiet or are introverts can actively participate online. According to Kupczynski et al. (2008) student participation has increased in the asynchronous environment, as there is time to “post messages, read, respond to messages, reflect on responses, revise interpretations, modify assumptions and perceptions....” but in face-to-face environment this is often not the case (Fedynich, 2013).

As student populations grow, universities understood the trend towards online education as well as the fact that online learning is very cost-effective and efficient even before online learning came to be possible (Steen, 2008). More students prefer

to enroll and take courses online, as this decreases the student's and the university's opportunity cost of education (Dziuban et al., 2005). According to (Cavanaugh, 2009), online courses have little or no cost to educational facilities, transportation and associated staff. The benefit of online education lies in the wide range of online courses available, and universities can have budget cuts in many private and public sectors.

When taking into consideration the positive climate that the online environment offers to both students and teachers there are also disadvantages that should be considered. Several studies that were carried out—Boling et al., (2012)—found that online learning was considered individualized learning and that it limits real interaction. Students felt isolated from their teachers and peers as well as from the content of the course. The lectures were based mostly on text reading and writing assignments completed. Furthermore, this way of online tasks limited students' ability to think creatively as well as to develop a higher level of cognitive skills.

The problems that the online environment has caused are not engaging students in conversation and rendering the online atmosphere impersonal. Murphy et al. (2001) explained the problems in the online mode: low engagement and interactivity, along with other problems caused by lack of immediacy and non-verbal clues. One of the flaws that online education has faced is the process of evaluation. The study of Brown and Liedholm (2002) found out that the results of the ACT test of the students in microeconomics in the online format were worse compared to the conventional format. Studies have shown differential outcomes in terms of active student involvement and time devoted to class. Other drawbacks of online communication are the technological aspects. Sometimes there is a poor internet connection that limits students' active communication in the online environment. Internet constraints can cause dissatisfaction and poor engagement of students during the online classes.

Creating a positive atmosphere in the online environment is often hard and it takes dedication, patience and using different technological tools and media to actively engage students in the online mode. On the other hand, traditional classrooms are bound by the presence of the teacher and the location, whereas online communication is unbound and dynamic and can take place any time.

5. Motivation in an online environment

Motivation is one of the most important factors in the online environment. Active learners are motivated to participate online in challenging activities, enjoy deep learning, performance and creativity (Schunk and Zimmerman, 2012). Taking in consideration the contemporary view, motivation is closely linked to individualized learning, as well as the cognitive and affective processes of individuals as personal traits, such as thoughts, beliefs and ideas. Findings and results of comparative studies between online and on-campus students have shown that online students are more

intrinsically motivated than their on- campus counterparts at both undergraduate and postgraduate level (Rovai et al., 2007).

Motivation cannot be seen as an outcome of the learning process and students cannot be motivated in any setting or time, often in various ways (Turner and Patrick, 2008). Effective communication can lead to deeper motivation even for the introverted students, who appear to be more interested in online than in a conventional setting, Hung et al. (2010). Similarly, active students use the discussion forums for open online communication with their peers and teachers. Students can be stimulated by interesting topics for discussion, interactive materials, videos, Ted Ed talks and all the other available online resources. Efficiency of communication in an online environment can lead to overcoming constraints of online communication (Hung et al., 2010). Actively engaging the students in the online environment should be the main goal for teachers. The teacher should stimulate students to ask questions, chat online and develop discussions about interesting topics with their peers.

According to the study by Kinash et al. (2015), student attendance doesn't decrease online and it is not important if the lectures are online or onsite because it does not affect student achievement. Bangert (2016) identified four factors that are related to student satisfaction in online courses, including interaction, time spent on task, engaged learning, cooperation between classmates and communication between students and faculty (Gray and DiLoreto, 2016). Student engagement in the online community is seen as one of the major factors that influence motivation. The effective factors that affect students are their attitude towards online learning, their effort, and their confidence. Students who are motivated to learn are those who are engaged in the online activities and use the online lectures to express their opinions and share experiences with their classmates as well as to stimulate online discussion. Measuring student engagement can help the teacher to adapt the instructional practices according to motivation, participation and attitude of the students toward the course (Mandernach, 2011).

Productivity and active engagement in the online environment is a major challenge for the teachers. The teacher's role in the online setting is to prepare students as well as facilitate the online process by stimulating students to think critically. They also need to help students become more self-directed, self-efficient and collaborative online. In this way students should be able to use the online discussion on Google Meet as well as the discussion forums and share their views and perspectives with their peers, both in spoken and written forms.

6. Findings and results

The purpose of this research is to examine the perceptions and challenges that students have towards communicative language teaching in an online environment. This study was conducted at the Language Center as well as the Faculty of Languages,

Cultures, and Communications at South East European University in Skopje with 41 students, aged between 18-20, enrolled in their first year of study and coming from culturally different ethnical groups (mostly Albanian, Turkish and Macedonian). The reason why the study was conducted at this particular Center and at the Faculty of Languages, Cultures, and Communication is because they represent a central part of every SEEU student's academic career, where students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds promote a multilingual approach to learning, stressing both the importance of local and international languages. The Language Center offers classes in English starting from the basic skills up (Levels 1-4) to English for Specific Purposes in fields such as law, computer sciences, public administration and business administration.

This particular research was carried out during the fall 2020 semester with students of mixed classes that attended Levels 2, 3 and 4 and their major fields of study were International Communications, Business Administration, Business and Economics, and Computer Sciences. In order to measure the quantitative results a Likert scale quantitative questionnaire was prepared on Google forms and distributed electronically to students and teachers during class as well as outside the class. A total number of 41 students responded to the questionnaire and their answers certainly reflect their very positive attitudes towards online learning. In the questionnaire, students had to answer questions related to communicative language practice in class, their satisfaction with online learning, as well as whether it would be better for them to continue their classes online or in a traditional model.

Communicative language teaching (CLT), or the 'communicative approach,' is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes the use of language interaction (student-teacher, student-student) both in class and outside of class. In CLT the teacher is a facilitator and guide who coordinates and leads group activities Littlewood (1981) and helps students engage and communicate, especially those students who come from different background settings.

Based on the survey results, 29.3% of the students are very satisfied and the same percentage are neutral with taking the courses online; 22% are satisfied; 7.3 are unsatisfied; and 12.2% are very unsatisfied. Most of the students (53.7%) prefer online to classroom teaching (46,3%). 12.2% of the students strongly agreed that they learn better in online courses than in traditional settings; 51.2% are neutral; 19.5% strongly disagree; and 12.2% disagree. According to the survey, 22% strongly agree that online classes positively affected the communication between them and the teacher; 51.2% are neutral; 9.8 disagree. Most of the students disagree (29.3%) that communication was harder during the online classes; 26.8% strongly disagree; 24% agree; and 19.5% are neutral.

Students strongly disagree (24.4%) and the same percentage are neutral that they felt isolated during the online class period; 12.2% disagree. but a majority

agrees (34.1%). Regarding the material that was taught during the online classes, 80% of the students declared that they didn't encounter difficulties in understanding; only 9.8% had problems. 65.9% of the students didn't have any difficulties with the material when they shifted from a traditional to an online environment, stating that their understanding had not changed; 12.2% declared that it got worse; and 22% of the students believed they experienced an improvement in learning.

36.6% of the students considered that their productivity was raised during the online classes and 63.4% said that it was not raised. 74% of the students said that the teacher had an understanding of the difficulties students faced during the online classes and was cooperative online; 14.6% were neutral; 9.8% disagreed. Students were satisfied with the teacher and how the material was presented online (86%); 12.2% were neutral; 2.4% disagreed. 51.2 % of the students were neutral about the material online compared to the material taught in traditional classes; 14.6% agreed; and 19.5% disagreed.

44% of the students were motivated to participate in discussions online; 40% were neutral; and only 9.8% were not motivated. 44% of the students prefer the traditional mode compared to online (19%); 57% liked the 'Hybrid' mode; 24.4% were neutral; and 12.2% did not like the 'Hybrid' mode. Most of the students (50%) are satisfied with the online communication; 31.7% were neutral; and 9.8% were not satisfied.

Taking into consideration the online communication and interaction between the students and the teacher, 34% of the students declared that the communication could be improved during the online classes; 51.2% were neutral; and 7.3% of the students disagreed. Productivity was raised during the online classes: 59% of the students agreed; 29.3 were neutral; and 12.2% strongly disagreed.

SEEU has continued its educational courses online successfully—a majority of the students agreed (87.8%). The survey has shown that SEEU has completed the online program successfully and the online learning model appeals to a large number of students because it offers flexibility in participation, easy access and convenience in place and time. However, students encountered difficulties regarding the interpersonal aspects of online communication. Often students felt isolated (34%), overshadowed by other students in online communication or reluctant to share their opinion online. Another issue was the engagement and interactivity during online sessions: most of the students said that they didn't have any problems with understanding the material online (80%), but 63% of the students said that online communication had not raised their productivity. Students were satisfied with the teacher and how she communicated with them online (73% of the students) and 53.7% of the students were in favor of continuing with the online teaching mode.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, while some students were satisfied with taking their courses online (44%), 57% were satisfied with the 'Hybrid' mode and 44% with the traditional model. It can be concluded that most of the students are still neutral: 51.2% of the students think that online classes positively affect the communication between the students and the teacher; the same percentage are neutral that the material presented online is more interesting than the one presented in traditional classroom; and the same percentage of students are neutral and think that communication can be improved in online teaching mode. However, the majority of the students are neutral when it comes to choosing between online or traditional modes: 44% are for traditional, 19% are for online, but 39% are neutral.

Secondly, 66% of the students explained that their understanding of the material hasn't changed during the online teaching sessions, and only 22% said that it has improved; 12.2% said that it got worse. A majority of the students agree that online learning had a positive impact on the interactivity between them and the teacher because the teacher motivated them to communicate and have online discussions; 44% of the students were stimulated and shared positive experiences in asynchronous online discussions. However, students agreed that some reasons—technical issues, poor internet connection, having no concentration at home—decreased their online productivity and made them feel alone and isolated. Third, most of the students (60%) felt encouraged to participate and their productivity rose while taking online classes and their understanding of the material became better.

SEEU made a significant step in adapting to an online teaching mode, exploring different ways of teaching, including the blended learning mode ('hybrid' teaching). Students were able to choose their preferred mode during the Covid period and in that way we can conclude that the university successfully implemented the 'hybrid' mode, giving equal chances to students to come to the university or to stay at home and attend online. 87.8% of the students said that they were satisfied and would like to continue their classes in a hybrid mode.

Teachers should keep motivating students and help them to engage and to interact during the classes. They should also try to keep in touch with their students, as well as to reach students individually if they notice there is a sudden decrease in performance. In this study the results showed that a majority of students would like to raise their productivity online and that online communication will become their preferred method of learning in the future. The implication for higher educational institutions is that they should shift their focus and invest in online educational programs and online learning can assist students in achieving their goals. The survey results show that student preferences are one of the major factors that determine the needs of the society and students are the major driving force in educational reforms.

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APPENDIX 1:

Communicative preferences in online classes questionnaire

The aim of this questionnaire is to examine how effective was the communication between the students and the teachers during the online classes and their attitudes toward online teaching.

1. How satisfied are you with taking your courses online? *

- (1) Very satisfied
- (2) Satisfied
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Unsatisfied
- (5) Very unsatisfied

2. Which do you prefer taking, classroom or online classes? *

- (1) Classroom-traditional mode
- (2) Online

3. I am learning better in an online classes than in traditional classes *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

4. I think the online classes positively affected communication between me and the teacher *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

5. Interacting with the instructor was harder in online classes *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

6. I feel more isolated in online classes *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

7. I didn't understand the material and had difficulties in understanding in online classes *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

8. Has your understanding of the material changed when shifted from traditional to online classes? *

- (1) It has not changed
- (2) It has gotten worse
- (3) It has improved

9. Do you think that online classes and communication raised students productivity? *

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

10. Was the teacher cooperative, understanding the difficulties that students are facing? *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

11. The teacher explained the material and students understood everything clearly during the online classes? *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

12. The material that the teacher presented online were more interesting than those presented in traditional classroom? *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

13. The teacher motivated students to communicate online via discussions on various topics *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

14. I like more the traditional classes *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

15. I like more the online classes *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

16. I was satisfied with online communication and learning *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

17. I like the *HYBRID* mode (both traditional and online classes) *

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neutral

- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

18. In your opinion, communication can be improved between students and their teachers through online classes *

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

19. What problems have you faced during the online teaching? *

20. According to your experience, do you think your productivity as a student has increased? *

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

21. Do you agree that SEEU has continued its educational program online successfully? *

- Yes
- No



ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

ГОДИШЕН ЗБОРНИК 2021