University students' perceptions of online instructional modalities in EFL courses and online classes in general

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Abstract

This paper deals with students' perceptions and preferences regarding online instruction in two EFL (English as a Foreign Language) courses after five semesters of the COVID-19 pandemic at a higher-education institution (HEI) in Croatia. A brief overview is provided of recent studies on students' experiences with various instructional practices implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic in the general higher education context as well as the specific context of EFL. Our paper reports on a survey performed at the end of May 2022 among students (N=121) who attended two EFL courses at a HEI in the northwestern part of Croatia. Based on the results of our survey students' preferences for, respectively, fully on-site (face-to-face) teaching, fully online (synchronous or asynchronous) teaching, and a (hybrid) combination of on-site and online teaching were analyzed. Most of the surveyed students indicated satisfaction with the hybrid and fully online teaching in those two EFL courses. Advantages of online teaching of EFL as well as different problems and obstacles were also reported by the students. Our survey revealed that, if given a choice, most of the students would prefer fully online or some combination of online and on-site (face-to-face) delivery of their EFL courses.

Keywords: *higher education, online instruction, EFL, perceptions, survey*

1. Introduction

After the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic several large national and international surveys were performed that investigated various obstacles to online learning, as well as students' satisfaction with the online delivery of teaching at higher education institutions. A survey conducted in the USA (in the period from May to June 2020; N=22,519 for undergraduate and N=7,690 for graduate students) revealed that the most influential obstacles to transitioning to online learning were lack of motivation for online learning, lack of interaction with other students, inability to learn effectively in an online format and distracting home environments or lack of access to appropriate study spaces [9]. A survey performed in 41 European countries from April to May 2020 [4] uncovered that even though the surveyed students (N=9,132) stated that their study workload with *online* learning was larger after *on-site* (face to face) classes were cancelled, the average rating of their satisfaction with online teaching was still in the range from M=2.89 (for online seminars and practical classes) to M=3.13 (for online lectures) on a 1-5 point scale (1=not at all satisfied; 5=extremely satisfied). In a more global study (performed from May to June 2020; N=30,383) [1]) similar students' ratings on a 1 to 5 point scale were found for real-time video conferencing (M=3.30) and video recordings of lecturing (M=3.26). Finally, a national survey (N=4,273) performed in Croatia [5] later into the COVID-19 pandemic (in September 2021) uncovered that students' satisfaction with online teaching was considerable and that the majority of the surveyed students (70%) stated that they would prefer either fully online teaching or a combination of online and on-site (e.g. *hybrid*) teaching in the forthcoming 2021/2022 academic year.

The previously mentioned large-scale surveys motivated the study that is presented in this paper, which deals with students' satisfaction with and preferences for, respectively, *fully online* and *hybrid* (partly on-site and partly online) delivery of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses in higher education.

2. English as a Foreign Language teaching during the pandemic

Numerous research papers were published regarding EFL and English as a Second Language (EL2) teaching at higher education institutions from diverse parts of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the studies dealt with evaluation, satisfaction with and attitudes toward online teaching, reporting rather mixed results. For instance, one study from the Czech Republic [8] indicated that most of the students preferred printed materials and *face to face* classes in comparison with *online* language classes. On the other hand, a study conducted in Indonesia revealed high positive evaluations of various aspects of an English language course delivered with the use of a learning management system [7]. A

Portuguese study that included various English language classes determined that the satisfaction with their online delivery measured on a 1 to 5 point scale increased from "slightly above average" (M=3.71) after the lockdown in the period from March to May 2020 to an "overall high level of satisfaction" (M=3.94) after another lockdown in the period from January to April 2021 [6]. A comprehensive study conducted in China among students who participated in online EFL instruction during COVID-19 pandemic [3] indicated numerous elements that may contribute to the effective use of online teaching and generally more positive than negative average students' evaluations of most of those elements. Various moderating factors that may have an impact on the effectiveness of online EFL instruction were also investigated. For example, a South Korean study examined the influence of social presence on the evaluation of learner-teacher and learner-learner interactions, as well as on expected course outcomes [2]. It must be noted that the study that is presented in this paper complements the aforementioned previous empirical investigations of EFL teaching during the pandemic.

4. Research questions and methodology

The main goals of the study are related to the investigation of (1) higher education students' satisfaction with fully online and hybrid (partly on-site and partly online) delivery of EFL courses, (2) potential advantages and problems/obstacles in online teaching of EFL, and (3) students' preferences for fully on-site, hybrid or fully online delivery of EFL courses at one higher education institution.

4.1 Research questions
The following research questions were defined for our study:

RQ1. What is the interest of students enrolled in EFL courses in the online delivery of teaching of their EFL course?

RQ2. How satisfied were the students with fully online and hybrid – partly online and partly on-site – modes of delivery of EFL courses?

RQ3. What advantages and problems/obstacles are most frequently perceived by the students regarding the online delivery of EFL courses?

RQ4. How do students evaluate EFL lectures and exercises performed in different modalities of delivery: on-site, online synchronous and online asynchronous?

RQ5. What would be the preferred mode of EFL teaching delivery if the students were given a choice between fully on-site, hybrid or fully online mode at the beginning of a semester?

4.2 Methodology

The respondents in our study (N=121) were students of two EFL courses at a higher education institution in the northwestern part of Croatia. Both courses were delivered during the summer semester of the 2021/2022 academic year as a combination of fully on-site, hybrid (partly on-site and partly online) and fully online teaching in a period of 14 consecutive weeks. Other methods of e-learning used in the courses included: video streaming of lectures / exercises delivered in the classroom, only online synchronous videoconferencing, and asynchronous assignments for lectures / exercises. The survey with items that addressed the research questions was administered in a paper-and-pencil form during the 14th week of the summer semester (e.g. in June 2022).

5. Results of data analyses

5.1 Students' preferences for different instruction modalities in EFL teaching

The preferred teaching delivery mode by the students (N=121) in our study was investigated with the survey question "Which mode of teaching in this course do you prefer (choose only one of the answers)?" As can be concluded from the data presented in Figure 1, only 27% of the respondents preferred *fully on-site* teaching in the classroom, and as many as 73% of them preferred some modality of *hybrid* or *fully online* teaching. The most preferred modality of *hybrid teaching* were synchronous online lecturing and exercises performed on-site in the classroom (29%), followed by *fully online* teaching and predominantly synchronous lectures (16%), hybrid teaching (online lecturing and the rest on-site) with predominantly asynchronous lecturing (16%), and fully online teaching that is predominantly asynchronous. These results indicate a very high interest in the online delivery of EFL instruction with respect to the students who were enrolled in the two courses in our study.
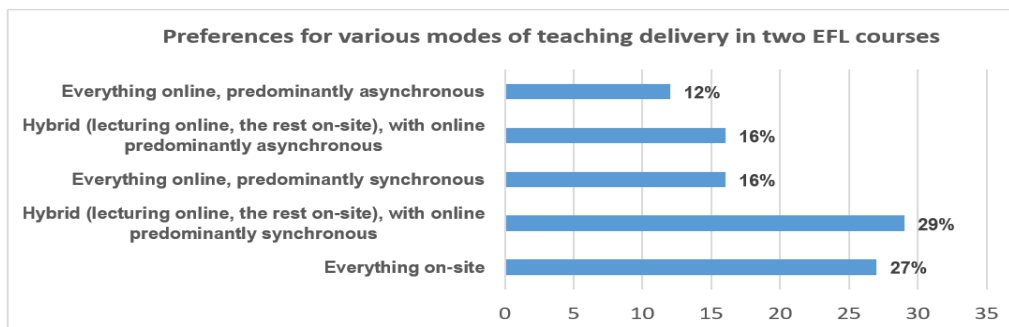
Fig. 1 Students' preferences for different modes of teaching delivery in two EFL courses (N=121)

5.2 Students' satisfaction with fully online and hybrid EFL teaching

The responses to the survey questions "To what degree are you satisfied with the performed hybrid mode of teaching in this course?" and "To what degree are you satisfied with the part of teaching that was performed at a distance (online teaching) in this course?" are displayed in Figure 2. The results of data analysis indicate that only 4-5% of the students were *unsatisfied* (e.g. "Mostly dissatisfied" or "Totally dissatisfied") with hybrid or fully online teaching. As many as 85% of students responded with "Totally satisfied" or "Mostly satisfied" in relation to hybrid teaching and 84% of them provided the same responses regarding fully online instruction. These results at least partly explain the students' preference for online teaching of the two EFL courses that was revealed by the data presented in Figure1.
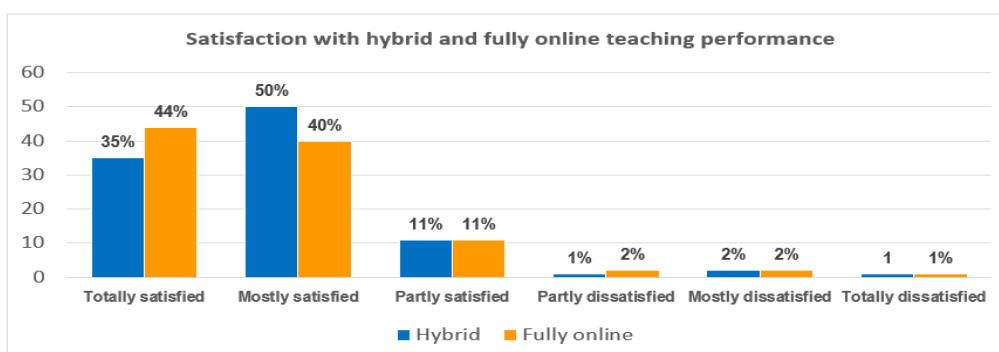

Fig. 2 Students' satisfaction with online modes of teaching delivery in two EFL courses (N=121)

5.3 Advantages and problems/obstacles in online teaching of EFL

To investigate the possible advantages of online teaching of EFL courses during the pandemic the following survey question was used in our survey (N=121): "What do you consider to be the greatest advantage of online teaching of this course?" According to the students' responses, the greatest advantages were (percentage of responses is given in brackets): the students were able to do everything from home and did not have to come to college (68%); the students were mostly able to choose the time to learn (13%); the students were able to manage the process of learning by themselves (11%); it was more interesting for the students to learn from home than in the classroom (4%); and the teachers had improved the learning materials (4%). In addition, to further identify the potential advantages of online teaching of EFL courses the following statement was also included in the survey: "Online teaching of this course was more interesting to me than live (face to face) teaching". Possible responses to this survey item were "Totally disagree", "Mostly disagree", "Partly disagree", "Partly agree", "Mostly agree" and "Totally agree". It must be noted that 70% of the respondents expressed some level of agreement with the statement that online teaching was more interesting than the face to face modality.

Potential problems in online teaching of EFL courses were investigated with the survey question "What do you consider as a greatest problem in online teaching of this course?" The most frequent problems with online learning reported by the students were predominantly associated with: (a) more difficulty in the communication with the teacher, with 46% of students reporting this as a problem; (b) online teaching being generally boring, as was indicated by 26% of students; and (c) the need to have equipment for participating in online instruction, which was stated by 25% of the students (it must be emphasized that the respondents were asked to select more than one problem from a predefined list). Interestingly, only 7% of the respondents reported their not being instructed on how to learn in the online environment as a problem, and also only 4% of them indicated the possible problem of teaching not being adapted to online delivery.

The potential obstacles to online delivery of teaching of EFL courses were also investigated with the question "What were the obstacles that you have most frequently encountered having in mind online teaching (both synchronous and asynchronous) of this course?" (more than one answer was allowed). The most frequent obstacles were lack of motivation for online learning, which was reported by as many as 55% of the respondents, followed by lack of interaction with other students, which was specified by 24% of the respondents. A distracting environment for learning at home and the inability to learn effectively in the online environment were also frequently experienced obstacles in relation to online teaching.

5.4 Comparative evaluation of on-site and online EFL lectures and exercises

To compare the delivery formats (on-site, online synchronous and online asynchronous) of lectures and exercises of two EFL courses the respondents were asked to evaluate lectures and exercises using a 1 ("Poor") to 5 ("Best") point Likert type scale. Their evaluation of lectures (on-site, online synchronous and online asynchronous) is presented in Figure 3.
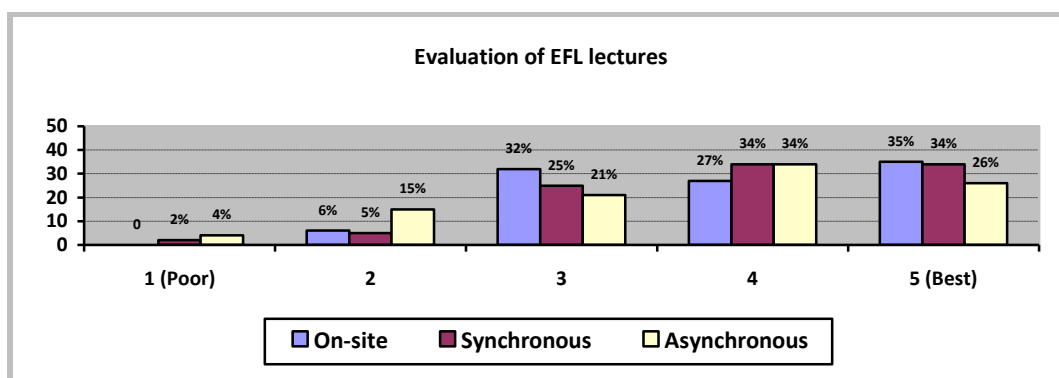

Fig. 3 Students' evaluations of lectures in EFL courses (rating scale: 1-Poor to 5-Best; N=121)

The data presented in Figure 3 indicate that on-site, synchronous online and asynchronous lectures of two EFL courses (with a total number of 121 enrolled students) received a similar and rather favourable evaluation. In fact, from 60% to 68% of students rated the three formats of the delivery of lectures with the highest values (4 and 5). Similar findings were obtained regarding the delivery of on-site, synchronous online and asynchronous exercises in two EFL courses (N=121; not shown in a graphic representation), which also received a rather favourable evaluation, with 73% of students providing evaluations 4 and 5 for on-site exercises, 70% of students providing such evaluations for online synchronous exercises, and 61% of students favourably evaluating online asynchronous exercises.

5.5 Students' preference for flexibility in choice of delivery modes of EFL teaching

To further investigate the students' interest for flexibility in course delivery, the following question was also included in the survey (N=121): "If you had been given a choice at the beginning of the summer semester of the 2021/2022 academic year, how would you have mostly preferred (provide an approximate estimate) that the teaching in this course be delivered to you?". From the data on students' responses that are presented in Figure 4 it can be concluded that only 24% of the students would have preferred fully on-site (in college) delivery of teaching in their EFL courses, while 50% of the students would have preferred some ratio of hybrid or combined on-site and online teaching (from 1/3 online and 2/3 on-site to 2/3 online and 1/3 on-site). Also, as many as 26% of the students would have preferred fully online teaching delivery.
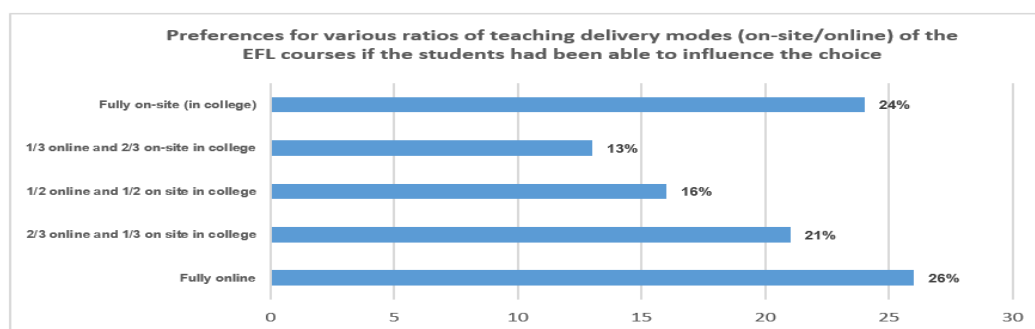

Fig. 4 Students' preferences for various ratios of teaching delivery modes in case they had been given a choice regarding the teaching mode at the beginning of the summer semester of the 2021/2022 academic year (N=121)

As can be concluded from the data presented in the previous section and its Figure 3, the three different formats of delivery of lectures and exercises of the EFL courses received rather similar students' evaluations. These data are important for interpretation of the students' responses regarding their preferences for different instruction modalities in EFL teaching: fully on-site, hybrid (with synchronous or asynchronous lecturing and the rest on-site) and fully online teaching (synchronous or asynchronous) that are presented in Figure 1. It can be concluded that the quality of various formats of delivery of lectures and exercises (on-site, hybrid or fully online) was very similar and therefore probably did not influence students' preference for specific instruction modalities that are shown in Figure 4.

4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has initiated a continuous positive change in students' perceptions of academic online teaching delivery and an increased interest for various modalities and ratios (fully online or hybrid) of teaching delivery in general, as well as in the specific disciplines of EFL and EL2. The results of our study are summarized as answers to the previously defined research questions (RQ1 to RQ5).

In response to the **first research question** (RQ1) the data presented in Figure 1 indicate a predominant preference for *online* teaching of EFL, with 28% of students interested in fully online teaching (of both lectures and exercises; synchronous or asynchronous) and 45% of students interested in hybrid teaching (with synchronous or asynchronous, but fully online lectures, and on-site exercises). Having in mind the **second research question** (RQ2) the data displayed in Figure 2 reveal a rather high level of satisfaction with both fully online and hybrid (partly online and partly on-site) teaching of EFL courses. With respect to the **third research question** (RQ3) it can be concluded that the greatest perceived advantages of fully online and hybrid teaching modes were that the students could do everything from home and did not have to come to college, while they also perceived online delivery of EFL teaching as more interesting. The greatest problems/obstacles were related to difficulty in communication with the teacher, lack of interaction with other students, lack motivation for online learning, and more time needed for performing asynchronous online activities. As a response to the **fourth research question** (RQ4), it can be concluded that the evaluation of both EFL lectures and exercises in all modalities was favourably evaluated by most (i.e. 60% to 73%) of the students. The response to the **fifth research question** (RQ5) is that most of the students would have preferred hybrid teaching delivery of EFL if given a choice. Also, some form of online teaching delivery (fully online or hybrid) of EFL would have been preferred by 76% of the students, while only 24% would have preferred fully on-site teaching.

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