Chapter 12
Student Attitudes Towards Online Classes and Foreign Language Learning in the Aftermath of the COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims at identifying and analyzing undergraduate university students' attitudes and perceptions of online English classes taken during two periods of COVID-19 lockdowns, based on the findings of two questionnaires applied immediately after the students returned to campus and resumed face-to-face classes. Students' perceptions were explored considering the following domains: the physical conditions of online classes and factors which may affect the quality of the online classes; the features of the online classes, English language learning and skills development during the online sessions, and students' attitudes towards the use of technology in language learning. Results indicate that students manifested a positive opinion on online classes while, at the same time, they also perceived the importance of face-to-face classes in learning languages. This chapter also provides some recommendations and research directions aiming at promoting the debate on the assets and liabilities of virtual classes, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to contribute to a global effort to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a Policy Brief (OECD, 2020a) describing OECD Member Countries' "initiatives to address the different needs of vulnerable students during the COVID-19 pandemic" (p.2). This document clearly showed a very engaged and committed Portuguese

government in the sense that several appropriate measures and policies were implemented to ensure that the pandemic did not hold back less-favored students.

More specifically, Portugal developed initiatives to provide "equitable and inclusive access to digital learning resources" (p. 3) through (a) partnerships with national educational media and free online learning resources to reach all learners, (b) the distribution of free electronic devices and learning material, (c) the continuity of physical educational services for the most vulnerable, (d) supporting parental engagement, (e) the distribution of information and provision of online resources in different languages, (f) creating tools to discuss COVID-19 with vulnerable students and their families, (g) offering equitable and inclusive access to extra services for vulnerable students, such as financial support and free school meals, and (h) ensuring support to and by teachers through resources for teachers and teachers' initiatives and networks to support the learning and the inclusion of the most vulnerable.

Another OECD document (OECD, 2020b) aimed at contributing to the increase of adult learning opportunities through a more inclusive online learning experience in the post-crisis period. To do so, this document highlighted some of the central issues the pandemic brought about regarding the limitations of learning online such as the need for adequate basic digital skills, internet access and computer equipment, as well as the challenges of teachers who were used to face-to-face classroom instruction. To put it briefly, this document suggested that while "developing basic digital skills will be instrumental to the mainstreaming of online learning" (p. 2), "unequal access to the Internet risks exacerbating existing inequalities in education and training" (p. 3). Moreover, it added that "training teachers to deliver online courses effectively is important to raise the quality of online courses" (p. 3).

As far as university education is concerned, a brief OECD Policy Brief (2020c) identified several alternative plans employed by many countries which reinforced the use of online educational platforms while schools and universities were closed (p. 2). Although this document acknowledged that "tertiary education institutions are largely used to delivering online courses and have a rich bank of online materials" (p. 2), it provided a list of further measures to be taken such as (a) to use existing online distance learning platforms (text, video lectures, etc.); (b) to develop new online teaching platforms (virtual classrooms); (c) partner with private educational platforms; (d) to collaborate internationally to mutualize existing online educational resources; (e) to use all electronic means as appropriate; and (f) to provide teachers with digital learning opportunities.

It is unequivocal that these documents identify guidelines and initiatives which aim at contributing to the implementation of safe conditions for successful online education during and after the pandemic. However, given that most of the issues referred to by those guidelines and documents have been dealt with at length, it is crucial at this point to examine emerging knowledge regarding the impact of the pandemic on education and the conditions of the virtual educational environments. More precisely, this chapter aims at contributing to the discussion regarding online classes in the context of foreign language teaching and learning, based on a thorough identification and description of Portuguese university undergraduate English language students' perceptions of and attitudes towards learning English through distance education during and after the pandemic. For all intents and purposes, the findings of this study may point out relevant data which could foster the development of policies and practices aiming at the implementation of safe and healthy virtual, face-to-face or hybrid foreign language learning educational contexts.

12.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Although the COVID-19 pandemic affected all modes of social processes and interactions in general, and education in particular, research into online learning had already highlighted the principles and practices required to incorporate blended learning, in schools and in higher education. Garrison and Vaughn (2008) examined the principles and practices of blended learning and provided several practical examples and support structures which are necessary when integrating online and face-to-face learning. Similarly, Tucker, Wycoff and Green (2017) analyzed all aspects inherent to the development of a blended learning program, highlighting the roles and perspectives of the stakeholders involved as well as the methodological models and classroom-based practical aspects. More recently, Martin-García's (2020) edited collection of articles provided novel ways of approaching technological resources in education and teaching methodologies based on blended learning instructional design. Likewise, Allan, Campbell and Crough (2019) reported on several learning and teaching practices based on a Blended Learning Model in the STEM areas of study (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). Finally, Jones and Sharma (2021) described the objectives, scope, methodology and findings of a longitudinal research project which aimed at identifying the effects of a blended learning program on students' academic performance. One of the main conclusions of this study was that, in general, students' academic performance in blended learning was higher than that in face-to-face traditional classes.

Teachers' practices and students' attitudes to and perceptions of online learning under the pandemic influence have been recently given more attention through studies which attempted to identify some of the hindrances to online education. Sugianto and Ulfah (2020) examined Indonesian English teachers' intercultural competence and the challenges and opportunities of intercultural language teaching in an online setting. As far as students are concerned, Bahian *et al* (2020) analyzed Filipino students' capacities for online learning, their online learning barriers, such as personal, technical, institutional, and community barriers, their demographic and technological characteristics. The authors concluded that students came across a wide range of obstacles in order to adapt to online learning. Similarly, Adnan and Anwar (2020) examined Pakistani undergraduate and graduate university students' attitudes towards distance learning during the pandemic. This study identified a series of difficulties students had to face such as lack of access to the internet due to technical or financial reasons, as well as the absence of face-to-face interactions with the instructors and traditional classroom socialization. Regarding the consequences to teaching and learning foreign languages, Bozavli (2021) examined Turkish students' perceptions of distance foreign language learning. This study concluded that students displayed low motivation for online classes and possessed insufficient digital literacy skills. All in all, students believed successful language learning was only possible through face-to-face classes.

Nonetheless, after a prolonged period of online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic all over the world, researchers have been able to gather data regarding the practices and outcomes of distance teaching and learning involving most relevant stakeholders, namely, teachers and students, in all educational contexts and levels. English as a foreign language (EFL) learning has been no exception so, over the past couple of years there has been a growing body of research on students' attitudes and perceptions of distance learning, as well as the challenges and advantages in adapting to an e-learning paradigm (Barzani & Rayan Jalal Jamil, 2021; Benmansour, 2021; Evisen et al., 2020; Farrah & Al-Bakry, 2020; Ketmuni, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020; Rahim & Chandran, 2021; Zboun & Farrah, 2021). These studies have thoughtfully examined EFL students' attitudes in diverse international contexts (e.g., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq, Algeria, Thailand). However, due to the lack of studies which focus

on English language students' attitudes and perceptions of online classes in an European context, and the need for a more thorough perception of the major changes and consequences of a sudden change of educational paradigm in the foreign language classroom, this chapter hopes to fill this void by investigating the attitudes of Portuguese students of English towards participating in virtual classes during two lockdown periods and their readiness for virtual classes in a post-crisis time. Furthermore, it attempts to widen the scope of previous studies on English language students' perceptions of virtual classes by examining different perspectives of online and face-to-face education, such as the features and conditions of online classes, the circumstances which influence the quality of the online classes, the students' perceived development of language skills and their attitudes towards the use of technology.

12.3 METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

As a result of the measures taken to contain the pandemic, students at the University of Evora, Portugal, went through two periods of lockdown. The first period occurred during the academic year 2019/2020 and went from March 16, 2020 (3rd week of classes of the 2nd semester) until May 22, 2020, the end of the academic year, with a total of 10 weeks of online classes. The second period of lockdown took place during the academic year 2020/2021, going from January 04, 2021 (12th week of classes of the 1st semester) until April 19, 2021 (during 5 weeks of the 2nd semester), with a total of 7 weeks of online classes. Basically, there was almost a full semester of face-to-face classes (1st semester, 2020/2021) between the two lockdowns, with only the final assessment weeks at the end of the semester done online.

Data analyzed in this study was collected through questionnaires (N=86, n=38 applied after the 1st lockdown—Questionnaire 1, and n=48 applied after the 2nd lockdown—Questionnaire 2) completed during the first week of classes after students returned from each lockdown. Although the vast majority of the students replied to both questionnaires, due to possible dropouts from the academic year 2019/2021 to 2020/2021, this study followed a quasi-longitudinal approach as it combined the availability of cross-sectional data with some of the benefits of longitudinal perceptions.

Some demographic data regarding the participants was also obtained, such as students' age, gender, and English language subjects taken online during the lockdowns. Regarding this, most respondents of Questionnaire 1 were female (81.6%, n=31), 19 (31.6%, n=12) or 20 years old (36.8%, n=14) who took B2 (English Language II, 60.5%, n=23) and B2+/C1 (English Language IV, 42.1%, n=16) English classes during the first lockdown; in Questionnaire 2, most respondents were also female (77.1%, n=37), 20 (35.4%, n=17) or 21 (33.3%, n=16) years of age, who also took B2 (English Language IV, 58.3%, n=28) and B2+/C1 (English Language VI, 22.9%, n=11; and English Language and Linguistics II, 22.9%, n=11) English classes during the second lockdown.

The questionnaires applied mainly assessed the following: (a) physical conditions of online classes and factors which may affect the quality of the online classes; (b) features of the online classes; (c) English language learning and skills development; and (d) attitudes towards the use of technology in language learning. After thorough data analysis, the following are the main results obtained.

12.4 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

12.4.1 Physical Conditions of Online Classes and Factors Which May Affect the Quality of the Online Classes

As for the physical conditions of online classes and factors which may affect the quality of the online classes during the lockdowns, the questionnaires asked students regarding the location of online classes, how many people were in the premises, the hardware and software used, if there was single or shared use of hardware, the students' familiarity with the software used, the quality of access to the internet during the online classes, and the students' familiarity with online classes.

Results of Questionnaire 1 showed that most of the students stayed at their parents' home during the 1st lockdown (97.4%, n=37), mostly in a household with 3 or 4 people (86.8%, n=33). A laptop computer was the most used hardware (89.5%, n=34), with some use of a mobile phone as well (29%, n= 11). Other hardware used included tablet/iPad (10.5%, n=4), webcam (7.9%, n=3) and desktop computer (7.9%, n=3). In most cases, the student did not have to share the hardware used (89.5%, n=34). According to the students' perceptions, all subjects referred to using the ZOOM platform in their virtual classes, with some use of Moodle (39.5%, n=15) as well. To a lesser extent, emails (29%, n=11) and WhatsApp (15.8%, n=6) were also employed. Curiously, most students were not familiar with the software used during the 1st lockdown (63.2%, n=24). As for the quality of the internet connection during the virtual classes, most students referred that the internet access was clear and strong (79%, n=30). Finally, almost every respondent (94.7%, n=36) answered that they had no virtual classes before the 1st lockdown period.

Data from Questionnaire 2 are somewhat similar. Most students stayed at their parents' home during the 2nd lockdown (85.4%, n=41), usually in a household with 3 or 4 people in total (66.7%, n= 32). Students were also asked if they stayed in a different place than that during the 1st lockdown to which 79.2% (n=38) replied negatively. The most used hardware for the virtual classes was a laptop computer (83.3%, n=40), followed by a mobile phone (35.4%, n=17); some students also made use of a desktop computer (20.8%, n= 10), a webcam (12.5%, n=6) and a tablet/iPad (8.3%, n=4). The majority of the students did not have to share the hardware used (87.5%, n=42). Moreover, ZOOM was the preferred software used in the virtual classes as referred to by 100% of the students; Moodle (41.7%, n= 20), email (20.8%, n=10) and WhatsApp (10.4%, n=5) were also some of the software identified. Most students reported being familiar with the software used in classes (93.8%, n=45) while the remaining students (6.3%, n=3) stated they were familiar with some, but not all of them. The internet connection during the virtual classes was clear and strong to 62.5% (n=30) of the students. At last, 89.6% of the students said they were familiar with online classes as they had experienced them during the 1st lockdown.

Based on the results from both questionnaires, it can be inferred that the students stayed with their families in both lockdowns but had no problems of having access to the hardware used during the virtual classes, mainly laptop computers with some use of mobile phones as well. Interestingly, Ketmuni (2021) concluded that Thai EFL undergraduate students also preferred to use computers more than mobile phones in their virtual classes during the pandemic due to the small screen and the limitations of the keyboard and battery of mobiles. The software used for the online English classes was ZOOM. Benmansour (2021) recently analysed Algerian EFL students' motivation towards the use of ZOOM as a learning approach and concluded that students welcomed the use of this software in their virtual classes. From the beginning of the 1st lockdown, the Portuguese government established a pool of public universities with free access to the ZOOM platform and the University of Évora provided its teaching staff with widespread

support to help them get acquainted with this online videoconferencing program. It is interesting to note, though, that a diverse number of students identified other software used in classes. Those answers might have to do with the frequency of use of such software (e.g., Moodle, email, WhatsApp) in the different language subjects attended by the students. Predictably, students became fully familiar with the virtual classes and aware of the software usually used, possibly increasing their willingness to attend virtual English classes in the future. Finally, although there was a slight decrease in the reported quality of the internet connection from the 1st to the 2nd period of lockdown, the overall perception was that it was clear and strong. These findings seem to contradict several studies which examined some technical problems with virtual classes and found out that students complained about internet speed (Mahyoob, 2020), poor or unstable internet connections (Barzani & Rayan Jalal Jamil, 2021; Rahim & Chandran, 2021; Zboun & Farrah, 2021), as well as low quality of sound and picture (Farrah & Al-Bakry, 2020). This is a key aspect of virtual classes as the excellence of the connection will strongly affect their effectiveness. Likewise, the superior quality of the internet services will certainly help foster students' favorable attitudes toward having virtual English classes in the future.

12.4.2 Features of the Online Classes

Regarding the features of the online classes, students were asked about the following issues: weekly hours attended; level of satisfaction and motivation with the online classes; mode of online teaching, e.g., synchronous, flipped, pre-recorded lectures; use of webcam during online classes; students' opinion on online classes based on a set of adjectives provided; and preference for mode of classes, e.g., online, or face-to-face.

The results from Questionnaire 1 indicated that most students (84.2%, n=32) attended the scheduled weekly hours (4h) of the English language classes. As for their satisfaction with the online classes, in a rank from 1 (lowest level) to 5 (highest level), most students selected levels 3 or 4 (79%, n=30), identifying a slightly-above average satisfaction (mean=3.71) with the virtual English classes. Similarly, as far as their level of motivation during the online classes is concerned, most students showed average motivation (55.3%, n=21, of the students identified level 3 of motivation; mean=3.10). When asked if they kept their webcam on during the classes, most students replied positively (65.8%, n=25). Most of those who had their cameras off referred that they did so because it was not necessary nor required by the teacher. Curiously, some students stated that they had their webcams off "Because I was on my pyjamas all day and I didn't want the teacher to see me", "Because my webcam was broken", "I don't have webcam", or even "Because if I did my network would fail and because I was in my pyjamas all day". Students also referred that the virtual classes were mostly synchronous (65.8%, n=25), with some flipped sessions, as materials were sometimes provided in advance with further interactive class time (21%, n=8). When asked to identify the characteristics of the online English classes, most students displayed a highly positive attitude towards them by saying that they were 'challenging' (55.3%, n=21), 'interesting' (50%, n=19), 'fun' (36.8%, n=14), 'practical' (31.6%, n=12), 'useful' (29%, n=11), among other qualities. However, a few students thought the classes were 'boring' (21%, n=8) or 'hard' (15.8%, n=6). Finally, while half of the students stated that they preferred to have only face-to-face classes in the following academic year (50%, n=19), a similar number of students referred that they wanted to have hybrid classes (42.1%, n=16), half of those choosing to have an equal number of face-to-face and online classes.

During the 2nd lockdown, almost every student (97.9%, n=47) followed the original face-to-face weekly English class schedule, usually attending 4 hours a week of virtual classes (83.3%, n= 40; students who

took two subjects, 6.3%, n=3, attended 8 hours of weekly classes). Concerning the students' satisfaction with the online classes, most responses fell into levels 4 and 5 (81.3%, n=39), revealing an overall high level of satisfaction (mean=3.94). In terms of their motivation, results showed they had an average motivation (52.1%, n=25, of the respondents identified level 3 of motivation; mean=3.17). Questionnaire 2 also asked students to compare their level of motivation to attend English classes during both periods of lockdown. Curiously, 41.7% (n=20) replied they felt less motivated in the 2nd lockdown. Other results showed 31.3% of the students (n=15) were more motivated in the 2nd lockdown while 25% (n=12) felt the same level of motivation. Furthermore, when asked about the use of webcams in the virtual classes, only one student replied negatively, due to the lack of this hardware. Students also identified the types of virtual classes attended: 60.4% (n=29) said the classes were synchronous, while 50% (n=24) stated they used a flipped approach (materials provided in advance together with interactive class time). Regarding the choice of adjectives to define the virtual English classes during the 2nd lockdown, 56.3% (n=27) of the students referred that the classes were 'positive', followed closely by those who said classes were 'interesting' (50%, n=24). Adjectives such as 'fun' (41.7%, n=20), 'practical' (39.6%, n=19), 'challenging' (35.4%, n=17), and 'useful' (29.2%, n=14) were also chosen by the students, reflecting an overall encouraging reaction to online classes. It is also interesting to note that the adjectives that suggested a negative perception of the virtual classes, such as 'hard' (6.3%, n=3), 'ineffective' (6.3%, n=3) and 'boring' (8.3%, n=4), were the least chosen. Lastly, 52.1% (n=25) of the students stated they preferred to have face-to-face English classes while only 27.1% (n=13) chose to have hybrid classes, out of which 11 preferred an equal amount of face-to-face and online classes. It is worth noting that only 4.2% (n=2) chose to have only online classes and that 16.7% (n=8) left this question blank.

Findings from the two questionnaires showed that there was no major change in the regular schedule and number of weekly hours when classes became virtual, indicating that students were determined to keep the regular structure of classes. Moreover, students showed a relatively high level of satisfaction during both periods of virtual classes. However, their motivation was slightly lower than their satisfaction as they displayed an average level of motivation in both lockdowns. It is noteworthy that when asked to compare their motivation in both periods of online classes, most of the respondents suggested that they felt less motivated in the 2nd lockdown. This might be explained by the fact that students may have felt tired of the whole pandemic situation which deeply affected the quality of their private as well as social life. The differences in the students' identification of the modes of the English classes during the two lockdowns (e.g., synchronous and flipped) may be explained by the different frequency of these types of classes, indicating that although both synchronous and flipped classes were provided, the former was the most frequent. All in all, they reacted positively to the online classes in both lockdowns, as suggested by their choice of adjectives to qualify them: interesting, fun, practical, challenging, useful, positive, among others. Furthermore, a marked increase in the number of students who turned their webcam on from the 1st to the 2nd lockdown suggests that students may have become aware of the importance of fully participating in class by attempting to give the online classes the same or, at least, similar features of the face-to-face classes. Finally, half of the students in both lockdowns showed preference for in-person classes. Curiously, there was a significant decrease in their preference for hybrid classes from the 1st to the 2nd lockdown. At the same time, there was a substantial number of blank answers in Questionnaire 2. A possible explanation is that after the 2nd lockdown, students may have started to doubt the relevance or effectiveness of virtual classes. Different findings have been reported in other studies. Farrah & Al-Bakry (2020) found out that EFL students in Palestinian universities displayed an overall positive attitude towards virtual learning. Contrastingly, Evisen et al. (2020) investigated the attitudes of EFL students

in Turkey towards online learning and concluded that although a considerable number of learners believed online learning was advantageous, the majority did not like their online experience and preferred to attend traditional face-to-face classes once the pandemic is over. Likewise, Barzani & Rayan Jalal Jamil (2021) identified an overwhelming negative attitude towards online education among the Kurdish EFL students who participated in their study, also showing preference for on-campus classes. Mahyoob (2020) identified similar findings when EFL learners in Saudi Arabia stated that they were not satisfied with online learning. Finally, Zboun & Farrah (2021) also found out that the students who participated in their study preferred face-to-face classes. As suggested by Ushida (2005), "not all students can take advantage of [a virtual] learning environment and may find it difficult to manage their own learning" (p.69). Therefore, course developers and teachers must take into consideration a wide range of learning approaches and contexts in order to cater for learners' preferences and likes.

12.4.3 English Language Learning and Skills Development

Students were also inquired about their English language learning and skills development through the following set of topics: their perception of language skills developed during online classes; the level of work/study dedication compared to face-to-face classes; their satisfaction with the final assessment of the subject; and the negative and positive aspects of online English classes.

As for the students' perceptions of the language skills developed during the online classes of the 1st lockdown, listening comprehension (63.2%, n=24) and oral interaction (63.2%, n=24) were identified by most of them, followed closely by speaking (oral production) (55.3%, n=21), vocabulary (47.4%, n=17), grammar (44.7%, n=17) and writing (44.7%, n=17). Most students also said they worked as hard in the online classes as in the regular face-to-face classes (55.3%, n=21). Moreover, the vast majority (89.5%, n=34) believed the final assessment of the subject(s) taken during the 1st lockdown period was a fair one. However, two of those students who had a negative view of the final assessment (7.9%, n=3) provided the following reason: "I felt like my skills were not fully recognized" and "Some corrections weren't right and when I explained it to the teacher my grade was lowered". Interestingly, as a comment to question 24—some of the problems/negative aspects of the virtual English classes—one student remarked the following about the grading of the activities: "The teacher not always knew who was answering the questions. So, sometimes the grades were unfair because of that". Finally, a couple of open-ended questions asked students to provide a series of negative and positive aspects of the virtual English classes.

In terms of the negative aspects of online classes, a considerable number of students (47.4%, n=18) referred to internet problems such as slow or poor connection which also reflected on the quality of the ZOOM platform causing trouble to understand the teacher or delaying classes. Another aspect which was mentioned by some students (13.2%, n=5) was the lack of motivation or laziness during the online classes leading to fewer students attending classes. One student suggested that "The main problem (…) could be the lack of motivation of some students on turning the computer on and wanting to pay attention. It wasn't my case, but I felt it a lot. Sometimes we were about ten in a class of thirty." Other students (10.5%, n=4) said online classes were more stressful or exhausting than face-to face classes. In a similar comparative perspective, several other students mentioned some differences between the two modes of classes, emphasizing that online classes were more difficult (7.9%, n=3), with less interaction or conversation among students and with the teacher (10.5%, n=4), less appealing ("it didn't feel the same as face-to-face classes"), with fewer students attending classes. Other features of online classes mentioned were that they were more time-consuming, more confusing, harder to follow and less effective

than face-to-face classes. Finally, a few negative aspects were pointed out based on the students' individual perceptions of the classes and the new procedures. For example, there were too many unnecessary worksheets; it was difficult to follow the activities ("if someone talked at the same time, no one would understand"); there were lots of distractions (7.9%, n=3) (e.g., around the house, social media); they were boring ("lack of variation of activities"); there were problems of class schedules and organization at the beginning; the noises ("the noises that the other students made in their homes were not helpful to listen well to the teacher"; "when someone had his microphone on and made a lot of noise I couldn't hear the classes"); the different and unfamiliar environment; and the different methodology, were some of the negative issues raised by the students.

On the other hand, several positive aspects related to the online classes were suggested, many of those by comparing them with face-to-face classes. The most referred to aspect (18.7% of the students, n=7) was the increase in the students' autonomy. One respondent stated that "the autonomous part of having online classes is a positive aspect, for those who really are interested (it) is a strong way to put effort in studies and organize our time." Another aspect provided by some students (10.5%, n=4) was the fact that virtual classes were valuable in the sense that they allowed students to continue their studies even though the pandemic prevented them from attending classes at the university. In terms of other differences between online and face-to-face classes, some students suggested that online classes are more flexible, less rigid or strict and are easier to concentrate. Others mentioned virtual classes also allow for more communication, participation and interaction among students and teachers, they are safer and it is more comfortable to be at home than in the classroom. Some students used adjectives to qualify virtual classes such as 'fun', 'interesting', 'innovative', and 'light'. Language development was another aspect mentioned by some students (18.7%, n=7) as they affirmed that they were able to develop their speaking (oral production) and writing skills, as well as vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

After the 2nd lockdown, respondents to the questionnaire answered a similar set of questions. Firstly, they identified the language skills which they were able to develop during the virtual classes. Listening comprehension was the most chosen one (79.2%, n=38), followed by pronunciation (66.7%, n=32). More than half of the respondents also chose oral interaction (58.3%, n=28) and reading (56.3%, n=27). A slightly lower number of students picked speaking (oral production) (47.9%, n=23) and vocabulary (39.6%, n=19). At the bottom of the list was written interaction, chosen by only 16.7% of the students (n=8). Next, most students stated they worked as hard in the online classes during the 2nd lockdown as in the regular face-to-face classes (47.9%, n=23) although a relatively high number of students said they worked harder in the regular face-to-face classes than in the virtual classes of the 2nd lockdown (37.5%, n=18). Unlike Questionnaire 1, students were not asked about their final evaluation in Questionnaire 2 as the 2nd lockdown period ended somewhere in the middle of the term. However, respondents to this questionnaire were asked to compare their perception of the online English classes with other subjects taken virtually during the 2nd lockdown. Students' opinions were pretty much divided as half of them (n=24) said it was easier to fulfill the learning objectives of the English language classes while 41.7% (n=20) said that all subjects had the same level of difficulty in terms of fulfilling their learning objectives. Moreover, students replied to a question which asked them to indicate their choice of mode of English classes (face-to-face, online, hybrid) in the future at the university. Half of the students (n=24) chose to have only face-to-face English classes. A smaller percentage of students, though, chose to have hybrid classes (35.4%, n=17); among them, most chose to have an equal amount of face-to-face and online classes (20.8%, n=10), a few preferred more face-to face than online classes (12.5%, n=6), while only one student wanted to have more online than face-to-face classes. Those who chose to have only

virtual English classes in the future were just 4.2% (n=2). Finally, Questionnaire 2 also included two open-ended questions requiring students to point out some negative and positive aspects of the virtual classes in the 2nd lockdown.

The most often mentioned negative aspect of the online English classes was the faulty internet connection, identified by 35.4% of the students (n=17). Another issue brought up by some students (14.6%, n=7) was the lack of effective class interaction. One student identified both problems when he stated the following: "I struggled with the internet connection, and I was eager to have regular face-to-face classes. I believe that interaction in an actual classroom is essential to learn and improve." Lack of motivation was another aspect suggested by some students (10.4%, n=5). Other relevant issues included dealing with distractions while being at home ("It is significantly more difficult to focus on a virtual class than on an in-person class"), no sense of routine ("The only problem that comes to mind is routine. Since I would wake up and just enter class, there is no real sense of routine: like taking a shower, dressing up and commuting to the university"), lack of participation of some students, more difficult to understand the pronunciation than in face-to-face classes, no physical interaction with peers and teachers, and the fact that students were already tired with the whole pandemic and lockdown situation.

As far as the positive characteristics of the virtual English classes are concerned, students' remarks were mostly based on qualitative modifiers (20 occurrences) such as 'fun', 'interesting', 'productive', 'practical', 'useful', 'valuable', 'interactive' and 'different'. Some students also referred that the online classes were more interactive than face-to-face ones. Moreover, time management was put forward by a number of students (16.7%, n=8), for example, that they had more time to spend at home, to study, or to do exercises. One student's remarks seem to take in these issues: "There were a lot of positive aspects. Time management was the easiest thing to do. The classes were very fun and interactive." Similarly, being at the comfort of home was also pointed out as positive by some students (10.4%, n=5). The development of language skills, such as listening, speaking/oral production, writing, and vocabulary was mentioned by 12.5% of the participants (n=6). Several other topics were presented such as flexibility of class content, easy access to class, interesting activities, the use of ZOOM's whiteboard as a tool to enhance students' participation and interaction, and the maintenance of classes during the pandemic. Finally, another interesting aspect had to do with the fact that the students were more prepared for the online classes than in the 1st lockdown, as suggested by a student: "Some of the positive aspects were that this time we were more prepared to interact via online than we were before."

The development of most language skills during the virtual English classes were pointed out by students in both questionnaires. Clearly, the development of specific language skills has to do with the syllabus of the subject taken, which were different in the two periods of online classes. However, it is important to highlight that the overall oral skills, such as listening comprehension, pronunciation, oral interaction and speaking (oral production), were on top of the list. Although reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar were also identified by the students, there seems to be a widespread perception that the virtual classes were able to develop mostly their oral skills. Curiously, Evisen et al. (2020) concluded that students did not think online classes fostered the acquisition of speaking and writing skills although those classes were effective for grammar and vocabulary development. Interestingly, most students in this study felt the amount of work required to attend the virtual classes did not differ from that required in face-to-face classes, although a fair number of students believed they worked more in face-to-face sessions. Regarding the negative aspects of the online English classes, problems with the internet came on top of the list (see also Benmansour, 2021, Evisen et al., 2020, and Zboun & Farrah, 2021, for similar results). Not as quite often, though, lack of motivation and less interaction among students and teachers were also mentioned

by the students (for similar results see Benmansour, 2021, Evisen et al., 2020, Farrah & Al-Bakry, 2020, and Zboun and Farrah, 2021). Several other negative issues were identified in both questionnaires, but they seemed to reflect individual reactions to and perceptions of the features of virtual classes. Other studies identified some negative perceptions of students towards online classes similar to those found in this study, such as online classes being more stressful (Barzani & Rayan Jala Jamil, 2021) and more boring than face-to-face classes (Evisen et al., 2020, and Zboun and Farrah, 2021). As for the positive aspects identified in the two questionnaires, several issues were pointed out quite a few times such as the effectiveness of the virtual classes through the development of a number of language skills, the increase in students' autonomy (see also Benmansour, 2021, and Evisen et al., 2020), as well as class content and time flexibility (see also Benmansour, 2021, and Evisen et al., 2020). Interestingly, students were able to identify positive aspects of the virtual classes more often than negative ones. Finally, like their choice of virtual or face-to-face classes, half of the students chose to have only face-to-face classes in the future. However, one-third of the respondents suggested that classes should be hybrid, mostly offering an equal number of virtual and in-person classes. It is possible to conclude that the experience of attending virtual classes during the pandemic may have allowed students to consider the incorporation of this mode of English classes in their language training at the university.

12.4.4 Attitudes Towards the Use of Technology in Language Learning

Students' attitudes towards the use of technology in language learning were identified through their level of agreement with 8 sentences based on a 6-point Likert scale.

In Questionnaire 1, students reacted positively to the use of technology in language learning. Responding to a 6-point Likert scale of agreement/disagreement (1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree), students somewhat agreed with the following statements: 'I'm confident using technology as a language learning resource' (mean=4.74); 'I really like using technology and the internet in language learning' (mean=4.42); 'Technology is as important as pens and books in language learning' (4.34); and 'The virtual English classes helped me become more autonomous' (mean=4.18). Moreover, students somewhat disagreed with the following assertions: 'Technology makes language learning more time-consuming' (mean=3.50); 'I don't believe the quality of language learning is improved by the use of technology' (mean=3.45); and 'Technology makes language learning more difficult' (mean=3.37). Conversely, students displayed a less positive view of the use of technology in online classes when they tended to somewhat disagree with the statement that said that 'Learning language virtually is as effective as face-to-face classes' (mean=3.16).

Quite similar to the responses to the Likert scale in Questionnaire 1, students who replied to Questionnaire 2 also reacted positively to the use of technology in language learning as they somewhat agreed with the following statements: 'I'm confident using technology as a language learning resource' (mean=4.75); 'I really like using technology and the internet in language learning' (mean=4.60); 'Technology is as important as pens and books in language learning' (4.23); and 'The virtual English classes helped me become more autonomous' (mean=4.06). Also, students somewhat disagreed with the following assertions: 'Technology makes language learning more time-consuming' (mean=3.40); 'I don't believe the quality of language learning is improved by the use of technology' (mean=3.38). In the same line, students tended to disagree with the statement 'Technology makes language learning more difficult' (mean=2.83). Nevertheless, respondents somewhat disagreed with the statement 'Learning language virtually is as effective as face-to-face classes' (mean=3.23).

Students' opinion on the use of technology in learning English were consistent in both questionnaires. In essence, the statements with a favorable approach to technology in language education were placed at the top. However, the statement which suggested that learning languages virtually is as effective as face-to-face classes was placed at the bottom of the list. Further analysis would be necessary to explain if the students' reactions in terms of agreeing or disagreeing with this proposal meant they believed virtual classes are more or less effective than in-person classes.

12.5 SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed at providing a brief though fundamental review of university students of English as a foreign language regarding their perceptions of online classes during and after the pandemic. Based on the results of the questionnaires, this study hopes to provide some useful suggestions regarding foreign language learning and teaching aiming at the development of policies and practices towards the implementation of safe and healthy virtual, face-to-face and hybrid educational contexts which engage learners in successful activities enhancing the acquisition of foreign language skills.

First and foremost, central and local governments should invest in providing wide coverage of internet access as it is a vital factor in effective distance learning practices. Moreover, government and academic authorities should strive to maintain students' access to a safe and healthy household environment with easy access to hardware and software so as to reduce inequalities in education. At the same time, schools and higher education institutions should supply adequate spaces with available hardware platforms and software applications in case students choose to attend virtual classes in blended learning programs on campus. More specifically, governments, professional organizations and universities should provide in-service and pre-service teacher training in the area of blended learning, in order to provide language teachers with the latest research on the theory and practices on the use of technology in language learning and teaching aiming at raising the quality of online courses. It is believed that the above-mentioned areas of intervention will directly foster safe and healthy practices and procedures which allow both students and teachers to thrive in a new educational environment.

12.6 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic has opened doors to eventual paradigms shifts in education, in general, and in language learning and teaching, in particular. Recently, the Portuguese Ministry of Education has stimulated an intense public discussion about some of the inevitable consequences of the lockdowns in Portuguese basic schools, secondary schools, and universities during the pandemic. As for higher education institutions, it has been suggested that a profound transformation should be carried out, more specifically, one that promotes a blended learning approach which emphasizes theoretical classes online while face-to-face sessions will aim at developing students' practical and critical thinking skills, the development of projects and learning autonomy. In other words, the Portuguese online experience during the Covid-19 pandemic strengthened the idea that the universities should adapt their curricula to meet the new demands of a rapidly changing society.

Although the findings of this study apply to a specific category and context, that of undergraduate students of English at a Portuguese higher education institution, it is vital to examine learners' percep-

tions of online and face-to-face classes, during and after the pandemic, in other educational environments, such as primary and secondary education in public and private institutions, as well as in private language schools. Besides learners' perspectives, it is necessary to examine teachers' attitudes and practices regarding online learning and teaching, most importantly, teachers' views about online teaching and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other stakeholders should also be called upon to contribute to this debate. Knowledge of learners' and teachers' perspectives on distance learning and their experiences during the pandemic will certainly assist materials writers and language education policy makers in adapting and devising engaging syllabi, developing up-to-date textbooks and practical documents and guidelines to foster the implementation of safe and effective distance learning practices, in the face of a similar pandemic situation or in Covid-19-free times.

12.7 CONCLUSION

This study attempted to identify university English language students' attitudes towards learning English during the pandemic and their views on attending virtual classes afterwards. As the pandemic has changed the procedures and perceptions of English language teaching and learning, it is imperative to examine learners' practices and opinions on distance learning, among other central issues to this domain, so as to envisage a resulting paradigm shift in language teaching in post-Covid-19 pandemic times and contexts.

From the findings of the questionnaires applied to the students after they experienced online classes during two periods of lockdown, it is evident that students worked under favorable conditions along the virtual classes. First, they stayed at a safe and healthy environment as the vast majority were at home with their families during the lockdowns and had no difficulties in accessing the required hardware, mainly laptops and mobile phones. Moreover, students became familiar with the software used, mainly the ZOOM videoconferencing platform. The use of other software applications, such as Moodle, email and WhatsApp may indicate teachers were aware of some of the methodological possibilities to teach virtual classes. Also, students' manifest familiarity with the software used in classes may help them adopt a favorable attitude towards attending online classes in the future. However, problems with the internet connection were reported, even though students mostly referred that the internet was clear and strong during classes.

All in all, students expressed above-average satisfaction and average motivation during the online classes, mostly describing them as 'challenging', 'interesting', 'fun', among other positive adjectives. Despite these prevailing favorable perceptions of online learning, about half of the students showed preference for face-to-face classes. Significantly, though, the number of students who demonstrated some inclination towards online classes decreased from the 1st to the 2nd lockdown.

Several positive aspects of the virtual classes taken during the lockdowns were mentioned by the students. Primarily, several students acknowledged the development of language skills, as well as the increase in their autonomy as language learners. Paradoxically, while some students highlighted a boost in students' participation and interaction, others reported a decrease in interaction during the virtual classes. Such conflicting views might be explained by individual learning styles which may be either stimulated or deterred in virtual classes.

In addition, it is relevant to note that a significant negative aspect mentioned was the lack of motivation during the online classes. In fairness, the whole pandemic situation was quite stressful and demand-

ing so it would be unrealistic not to expect some resistance and lack of motivation to carry on with the academic tasks in adverse conditions.

Finally, even though students displayed favorable attitudes towards the use of technology in language learning, half of the participants in the study indicated their preference for face-to-face classes after the Covid-19 pandemic. Undoubtedly, the students who took part in this study demonstrated an overall positive attitude towards virtual classes. However, it must be noted that the virtual classes under analysis took place in quite exceptional times and both students and teachers were prompted to respond to the enormous challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic at very short notice. The effort spared by students was considerable and it is quite remarkable that the general response to the virtual classes was an encouraging one.

With hindsight, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic all stakeholders involved in language learning and teaching should consider students' twofold perspective on virtual learning. On the one hand, the manifestation of a positive opinion of online classes while, on the other hand, a general perception of the importance of face-to-face classes in learning languages. In view of this, the implementation of blended teaching/learning practices might be particularly suitable in educational environments attempting to provide safe and healthy conditions for language learning and development.

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