

The Peculiarities of Teaching Professional Terminology in English, German, Russian and Latvian to Sport Science Students in Virtual and In-Person Environments

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Submitted: September 26, 2023; Accepted: June 20, 2024

Abstract

The evolution of technologies resulted in the transfer of teaching from the traditional classroom to the online environment in tertiary education, including language teaching. The present study investigates the advantages and limitations of learning sports terminology by sport science students online and face-to-face. A questionnaire to ascertain students' experiences was distributed to 36 students from different study years, who studied English, German, Russian or Latvian. It was found that both online and face-to-face studies of sport terminology in foreign languages had their advantages and disadvantages from students' perspectives. Students cited flexibility, access to online materials and choice of learning environment as the main advantages, which is consistent with the findings of other studies of online foreign language studies. The disadvantages relate to technical problems, the studies feeling less personal, difficulty in understanding new material and limited availability of the teacher. The conclusion is that synchronous online live classes would work best if supplemented by continuous support from the teaching personnel, regular offline meetings or classes and access to online resources used for studies outside the online lessons.

Keywords: sport terminology; online learning; face-to-face learning; language learning; tertiary education

Introduction

Restrictions imposed during Covid-19 led to switching from in-person to online teaching. In spring 2020, neither the teachers nor students were prepared for online studies,

as has been outlined by multiple researchers (see for instance Al Lili et al., 2020; Klimova, 2021); however, the teachers gradually adopted their materials and teaching methods to the new setting. Likewise, the students acquired new learning and technological skills required for studying in virtual environments. This study investigates the advantages and disadvantages of studying foreign languages for specific purposes online and in person, taking as their case study the teaching of foreign languages to sport students in one tertiary education institution in Latvia, the Latvian Academy of Sport Education.

Online studies have been introduced in Latvia as part of the measures designed to curb the spread of Covid-19 in spring 2020, with higher education institutions offering all teaching online from the spring of 2020 until the spring of 2021, with students returning to the classroom in part or being offered hybrid studies from fall 2021 onwards. Different universities adopted various solutions to enable the return of students to the classroom without compromising the health and safety of students and teachers, therefore in many cases students continued to study online. This was the case with the teaching of foreign languages for special purposes at the LASE, with students being taught online from March 2020 until May 2022, enabling both teachers and students to gain unique experience of online studies. In May 2022, the first in-person foreign language classes were conducted at the LASE. In the face of energy crisis that overtook the world in 2022, the possibility of tertiary education going online again was introduced. Under these circumstances, it is important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of virtual and in-person studies from students' perspectives. The present study considers the feedback of students who have experienced the study of sports terminology in virtual and classroom settings. The objectives of this study is to compare the advantages and limitations of learning sports terminology by sport science students online and face-to-face and to find out the challenges and opportunities offered by each approach. These new contexts offer substantial opportunities for introducing new approaches and materials for lectures, seminars, discussions, as well as testing practices. However, given the advantages of online studies for both students and teachers, it is likely that online and hybrid education will play an increasingly prominent role, so it is essential to recognize and mitigate the possible negative aspects of distance studies early on.

The present study focuses on the experience of the undergraduate students of sport science who studied foreign languages for special purposes between the second and the fourth year of study at the LASE. The LASE offers the mandatory language courses "Special Terminology and Communication" to second-year students (62 study hours in a single academic year) and "Special Sport Terminology" to fourth-year students (22 study hours, taught in the first semester); both courses provide an opportunity to study English and German languages (the students select the language themselves). The LASE also offers "Professional Communication" courses in foreign languages to sport students in their second and third years of study; this course is divided into three parts, each taught in a single semester and consisting of 20 study hours. These courses provide an opportunity for the students to master and perfect English, German, Russian or Latvian languages (the option to study Latvian is available only to foreign students).

In the second-year mandatory course "Special Terminology and Communication" students work on the themes related to the sports that are taught at the LASE as practical

courses: gymnastics, track and field athletics, winter sports, sport games and swimming. In the fourth-year mandatory course “Special Sport Terminology” students acquire materials on the themes related to their professional qualifications: sports teacher, coach in a specific sport, recreation specialist and sport manager. Each student has two qualifications, and the themes taught in the language course are selected according to the student’s qualifications. The choice course “Professional Communication” concentrates on general sport themes, including Olympic Games, competitions, the training process, sports in culture and other sport-related themes that are of interest to the students.

In all courses, students work with sport-related texts, audio and video materials in the foreign language, do exercises based on the text, targeting professional sports terminology. Additionally, material on grammar is introduced according to the students’ level of the foreign language. Discussions play an important part of the study courses. The principal objective of all the foreign language courses is to develop professional communication skills in a foreign language, including reading, writing, listening and speaking skills in sports-related fields (Malahova & Ropa, 2021). Assessment is based on written tests of sports terminology and grammar, individual tasks (essays and reports in sports areas related to students’ sports and professional sport qualifications) and spoken presentations.

Materials and Methods

The study encompasses theoretical and practical parts. In the theoretical part, the authors critically analyze the literature on the online learning of foreign languages as compared to learning foreign languages in person. In the practical part, the authors analyze the results of survey distributed among students of sport science who completed a course in sport terminology in a foreign language studying both online and in person.

The foreign language courses focusing on sports terminology and communication for sport purposes offered by the Latvian Academy of Sport Education were different in some respects from other online language courses, such as the distance course on English grammar offered at the University of Latvia in 2020 that is analyzed by Apse and Farneste (2021). At the LASE, all classes were conducted live, in real time, so that there were limited options for students to integrate the studies in their work and life. Also, the option of doing exercises repeatedly was not always available. Recording classes was not practiced regularly, as it would require permission from all the participants, so that students only had access to the materials sent by the teacher. In this way, the online studies of foreign language for special purposes courses were similar to in-person courses. A previous study by Ropa and Malahova focused on the acquisition of one foreign language only, the English language (2023). The present study expands on the previous findings of Ropa and Malahova (2023) by considering other foreign languages taught at the LASE – German, Russian and Latvian (the latter taught as a foreign language to non-Latvian students arriving from abroad).

To ascertain the LASE sport students’ experience, a survey was conducted by means of an anonymous questionnaire distributed in October 2022. The questionnaire was distributed only to those students who have studied foreign language(s) for special purposes (sports

terminology and communication) online between spring 2020 and May 2022 and who have returned to study foreign language(s) in person from September 2022.

The survey consists of 9 questions, both general about the overall assessment of the students' progress, as well as questions designed to measure the students' progress in specific language areas and skills. First, there were 7 multiple choice questions, including one question where students have to give evaluation on Likert scale 1-5 (strongly agree to strongly disagree). The last two questions were open-ended, where students were offered to make their own suggestions to the course, comment on what worked well, etc.

Results and Discussion

The survey was answered by 36 students from different study years. All students had both online and face-to-face classes. More than half of the students (61.1%) were second year students, who studied either the mandatory course "Special Terminology and Communication" or both the mandatory and the optional course "Professional Communication." 30.6% of the students were in the third year of study (see Figure 1).

The students participating in the survey have been studying one or, sometimes, two, of the four languages taught at the LASE: English, German, Russian or Latvian (see Figure 2). Thus, it is possible for local students to study English or German as the mandatory course in their second year and to choose Russian as an optional course, whereas foreign students who studied Latvian as a foreign language might have to study "Special Terminology and Communication" in English. In the case a respondent was studying two languages, he or she was asked to note in the second question only the language he or she has studied both online and in person.

Next, students were asked to evaluate improvement of their language skills after the course in the foreign language they studied. Students had to give general evaluation, using a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "did not improve" and 5 being "improved considerably." The majority of students noted that their language skills have improved to a various degree (3 and 4 were the most frequently selected options, chosen by 44.4% and 41.7% of the respondents, respectively).

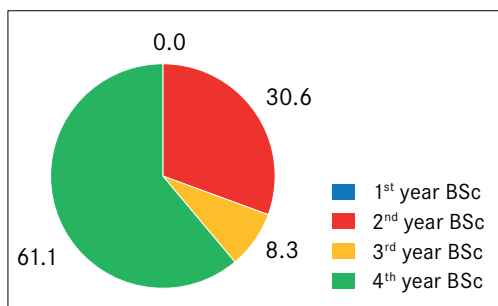


Figure 1. Year of study of the respondents

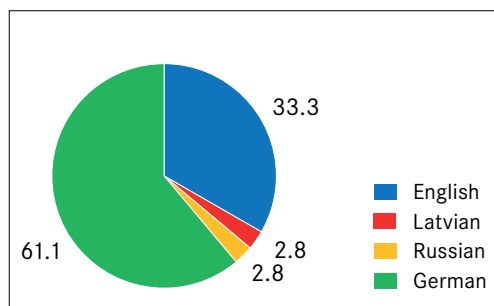


Figure 2. Foreign language studied at the LASE

No student signaled zero improvement, but 2 students (5.6%) selected 2, showing a little improvement, whereas 3 students (8.3% of the population) selected 5 (see Figure 3).

The difference of study environment, virtual or in-person, led to diverse results depending on the language skills and fields studied, as reported by the students answering the questionnaire. The students were asked to evaluate their improvement in the areas of new sport terminology acquisition, working with texts about sport, sport-related discussion and knowledge of grammar. As explained above, both mandatory and choice study courses provided by the LASE target these areas of study in developing the students' language skills. Reading and listening skills are enhanced in the course of vocabulary study, speaking skills are targeted in the discussion, while work with text and grammar focus involves both reading and writing skills. The respondents were required to assess their progress on a scale from 1 to 3, with 1 signaling no improvement, 2 signaling a little improvement and 3 signaling significant improvement (see Figure 4).

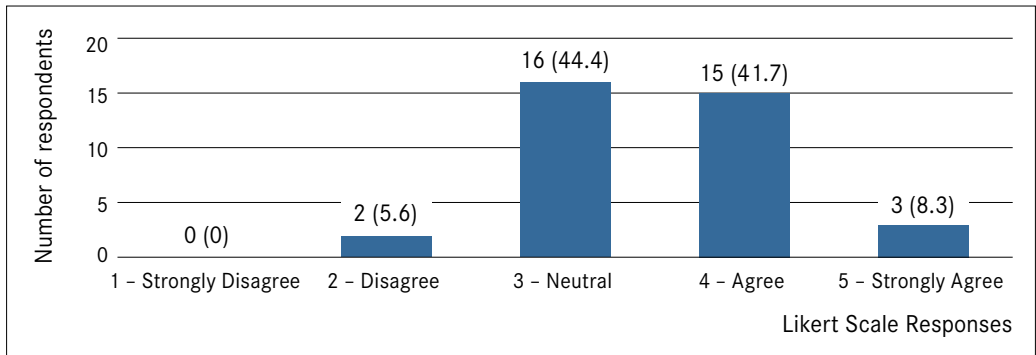


Figure 3. Students' assessment of their improvement using a Likert scale of 1-5

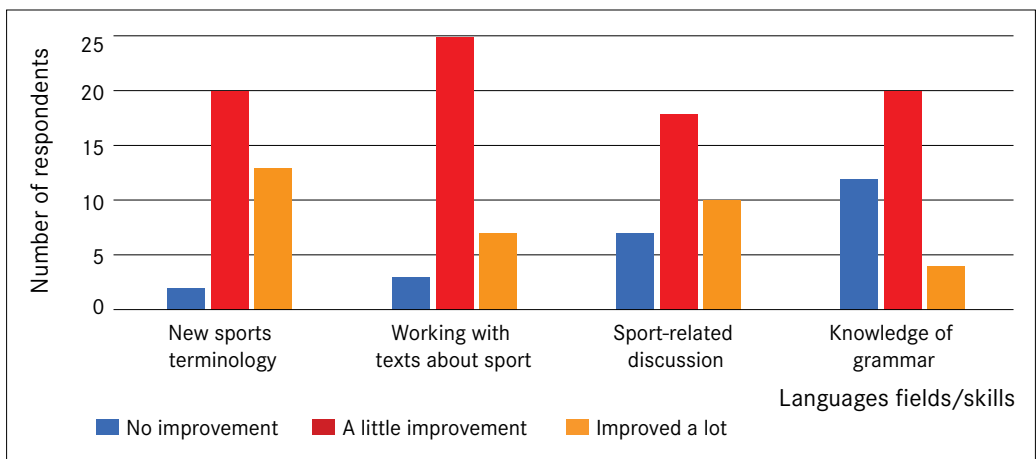


Figure 4. Students' self-evaluation of improvement in selected language areas during online studies

The first question asked the respondents to evaluate their improvement in the four fields or skills, namely, working with sports terminology, working with sport-related texts, discussing sport-related themes and grammar in virtual environment. The responses show that the respondents believed they have considerably improved their knowledge in the field of sports terminology, with the fewest answers signaling no improvement (option 1). Conversely, the knowledge of grammar was the least affected by online studies as compared to the other areas of language study. Overall, the most frequently selected option for all areas was 2, signaling a little improvement, which is consistent with the fact that mandatory and choice study modules alike are relatively short and are mostly designed to refresh the students' existing knowledge of foreign languages, introduce new and specific sport terminology and develop students' competences in the field of sport. They are not designed as comprehensive language courses, with the exception of the Latvian language course, which is an introductory course for foreign students.

The following question asked the students to assess their progress in the same area during in-person studies. Assessment was based on the same scale as in the previous question, 1 – no improvement, 2 – a little improvement, and 3 – improved a lot. Here, it is evident that improvement in the mastery of new sport terminology was comparable with online studies, students evaluating their progress positively in both cases. Again, the knowledge of grammar was the one which has received the most negative (no improvement) evaluation, but more answered that their grammar knowledge has improved a little was higher during in-person studies, whereas in the case of distance studies comparatively more students answered that their knowledge of grammar improved a lot. Still, as in answering the question about progress during distance studies, students most often selected option 2 (a little improvement) for all the four study areas (see Figure 5). However, a comparison of the evaluation of sport-related discussion over distance studies and in person shows that in-person studies facilitated the improvement of discussion skills more than distance studies. This is unsurprising, given the fact that oral discussion is harder to conduct online, due to the number of students in a group, whereas putting students into breakout rooms is time-consuming and may cause technical disruptions, an issue targeted in the subsequent two questions about the advantages and disadvantages of online studies of foreign languages for specific purposes.

The higher level of improvement in the knowledge of sport related vocabulary as a result of both online and in-person study can be attributed to several factors. First, mandatory and choice courses in special terminology and professional communication are built around the acquisition of new professional vocabulary in the field of sport. Second, the use of multimedia, such as videos, but also interactive quizzes (Kahoot! and others) as well as creative language games, used during online and in-person classes, was likely to enhance the learners' improvement.

When asked about the relative advantages and disadvantages of online studies, the most frequently cited advantage was flexibility (noted by 80.6% of the respondents), and the main disadvantage was technical problems (mentioned by 70% of the respondents).

The other frequently cited advantages relate to the possibility to do quizzes tests online (61.1%), as well as the use of online resources, such as videos, online libraries

and databases (58.3%). Two other frequently cited advantages are less stress and the choice of the learning environment (students could study from home, from the dormitory, from their working place on their own or with their course mates), both cited by 47.2% of the students (see Figure 6). All these advantages (flexibility, continuous access to online resources, reduced stress and choice of the learning environment) are noted also by other researchers, and they were noted both by scholars examining online studies under Covid-19 circumstances (Apse & Farneste, 2021; Klimova, 2021) and before the pandemic (Lin & Warschauer, 2015).

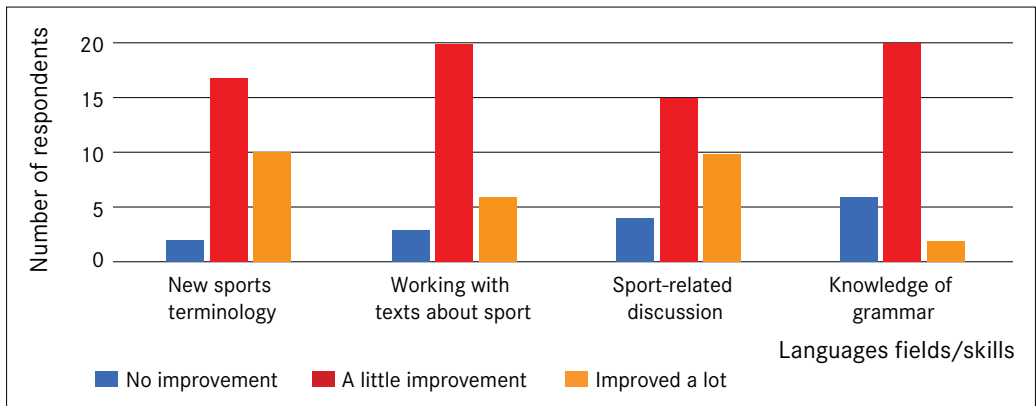


Figure 5. **Students' self-evaluation of improvement in selected language areas during in-person studies**

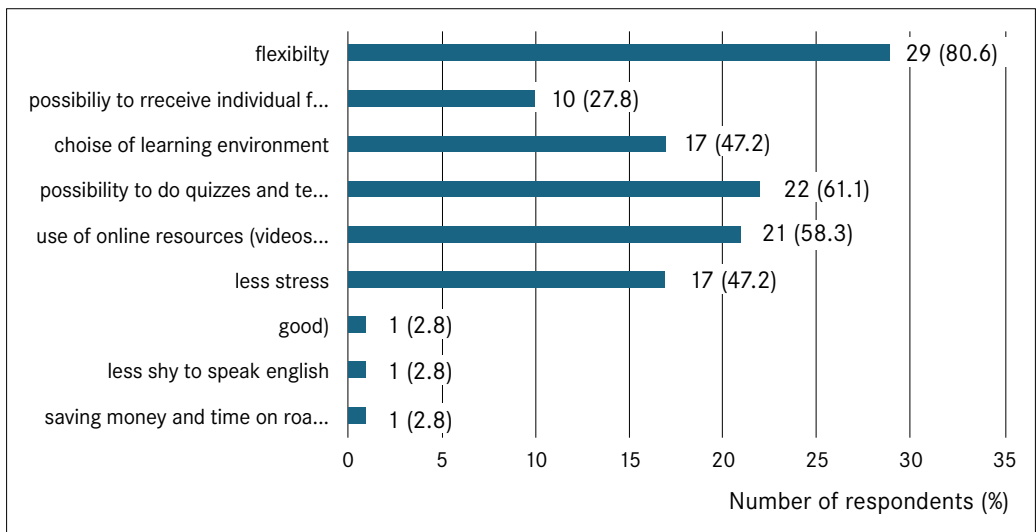


Figure 6. **Main advantages of studying foreign languages online**

As to the disadvantages, apart from the technical problems, which was a problem to 70% of the students, 40% of the respondents stated that online studies were less personal. Two more disadvantages, mentioned by the same proportion of respondents (23%), were the difficulty of understanding material and limited access to the teacher outside of the classes either online or in person (see Figure 7). These disadvantages could be related, as limited access to teacher could lead to the students feeling more isolated, with less support from the teacher.

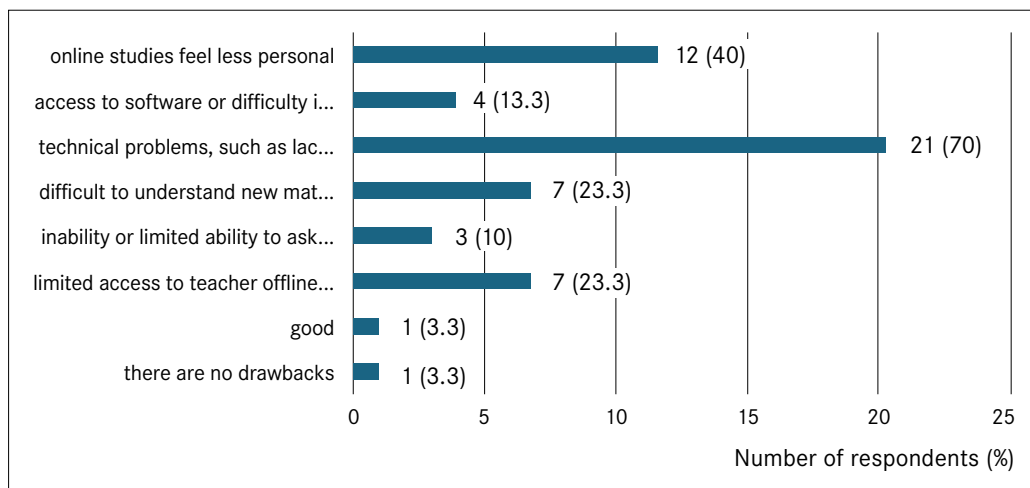


Figure 7. **Main disadvantages of studying foreign languages online**

All the above disadvantages are also mentioned in scholarship, and various solutions are offered. Apse and Farneste suggest providing online classes at the beginning of the course and at regular intervals during the course in the case of self-paced studies (2021). In the case of the LASE foreign language courses, all of which were taught in real time, it may account for the fact that limited access to the teacher and difficulty in comprehending material was cited by less than a quarter of the respondents (23% for each of the options), but the problem still existed. To ensure that students feel more supported in their learning process, additional ways must be found, such as regular online consultations, and, when possible, in-person meetings. Moreover, giving feedback to students quickly, preferably on the same day, is one way of making learners feel better and ensure individualized access (Demir & Sönmez, 2021; Sanalan & Taslibeyaz, 2020).

The final two questions were open-ended, inviting students to write their own suggestions for improving online and in-person studies of foreign language courses. A detailed analysis and discussion of the students' answers to these two questions goes beyond the scope of the present study and will be addressed in a further study.

Thus, the main advantage mentioned in literature is individual flexibility (Arrosagay et al., 2019; Klausner 2021), with other advantages being learning at one's pace, possibility to integrate studies in one's working and personal life, creating the environment that will

be comfortable and conducive to learning, and the option of revising the materials and returning to the same exercise repeatedly (Klausner, 2021). The main disadvantages include additional investment in IT, technical problems, lack of personal contact with the teacher and other learners and materials that are not adapted to the online media (Apse & Farneste, 2021). Likewise, the issue of appropriate mobile applications remains topical, as students and teachers often use mobile phones as well as laptops for learning, but certain tasks, activities and materials are harder to access on a mobile phone than on a laptop (Bernacki et al, 2020). The above advantages and disadvantages exist to various extents in secondary, tertiary and vocational education, as is shown in the discussion of previous scholarship below and partially confirmed by the findings of the present study.

Moreover, are often perceived by learners as “more modern,” providing new study materials and methods, such as multimedia tools for vocabulary acquisition. The use of virtual environments can be welcomed by students of both genders, as Kravalis et al. contend that Generation Z females and males often feel more confident in virtual environments than the representatives of the previous generations (2022). This may lead to students being more advanced than their teachers in the use of digital technologies, which teachers had to master under the stress caused by the pandemic (Dimock, 2021; Sanalan & Taslibeyaz, 2020). “Edutainment,” or the use of games, videos and other entertaining content in foreign language teaching is highlighted as critical by researchers (Demir & Sönmez, 2021).

Previous studies of foreign language courses conducted online during Covid-19 pandemic have emphasized the existence of both challenges, most of which are related to a rapid transition to a new learning environment (online), and opportunities. One Latvian study of English grammar courses at tertiary level found that students found the new mode of learning satisfactory due to the reasons outlined above (flexibility, work and life balance, possibility to revise material) (Apse & Farneste, 2021). The drawbacks mentioned by Apse and Farneste relate the students’ perceived lack of feedback and support from the teaching staff (2021). The authors also recommend holding at least some classes online in real time, even if the course is to be delivered by distance. This study was based on a self-paced language course, thus different from live classes taught at the LASE.

Another study conducted during Covid-19 pandemic took place at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic. It found that students prefer printed materials, the possibility to take notes and that students report little or no improvement as a result of online studies. On the other hand, the study concluded that both teachers and learners were ready to study online, yet the presence and contribution of a tutor was irreplaceable (Klimova, 2021).

Conclusions

Previous studies of foreign language studies during Covid-19 focused on general language courses, whereas this study outlines the experience of sport students learning foreign languages for special purposes, which constitutes the originality of the present study. Also, the courses conducted at the LASE were all online, whereas other tertiary institutions offer

distance foreign language courses that are self-paced and include no or few live online classes, making the present study different from other studies of teaching foreign languages over distance. The switch to online or partially online study mode entailed the modification of the course materials, methods and, sometimes, even contents of the course, driving the teachers to adopt innovative approaches to teaching professional sports terminology and developing the students' communication skills.

Both online and face-to-face studies of sport terminology in foreign languages have their advantages and disadvantages from students' perspectives. The results of the survey show particular areas where more attention needs to be paid in developing and delivering study courses.

Students' responses highlight several important advantages of learning languages online, such as flexibility, choice of learning environment and access to study materials outside of the class. These advantages are counterbalanced by technical problems, the sense that online studies are less personal, lack of contact with the teacher and difficulty in understanding new material. All of these problems may be related, and they can be solved if tertiary education institutions offered continuous support to students and teachers in the use of the IT technologies, as well as ensuring that teachers and students could meet in person and offline. Likewise, the provision of online learning materials outside of the online classroom could constitute a significant aid to students struggling with mastering new materials. Thus, the extended use of virtual study spaces and libraries, where students could access the tasks and theoretical materials (texts, videos, quizzes, etc.) could facilitate students' independent work outside of the online classes, even if the learning process is disrupted due to technical issues. Moreover, access to the teacher and teacher's rapid feedback outside of the scheduled classes is vital, so that students would feel supported in their learning process.

The conclusions reached in this research correspond to those made by scholars studying online education prior to and in the course of Covid-19. The differences in the findings among individual studies, and the differences between the results of previous studies and of this study can be attributed to the peculiarities of the study process (asynchronous, self-paced study as opposed to live online classes), the degree to which the material was adapted to the online setting, the study goals set for courses as well as the personalities of the teachers and students, the degree to which the teachers and students were psychologically and materially prepared for switching to the new mode of study and the support provided by their institutions. Indeed, one early study found that students' satisfaction from online and in-person classes were equal, given appropriately designed study materials (Driscoll, 2012), but, since this study was devoted to a course in sociology rather than language, it may not provide a full parallel to the present study on language learning. This is confirmed by comparing our findings to the conclusions made by our scholars comparing students' progress in online and face-to-face studies, which likewise found that speaking skills were harder to develop online (Ekmekçi, 2015). Overall, students found online foreign language courses attractive, with specific disadvantages that could be offset by the introduction of regular in-person classes. Increasing availability of online study materials, in-person classes

and tutorials and technical support from the teaching institution would be necessary for improving students' experience in studying foreign language for specific purposes (sports terminology and professional communication) in tertiary education.

The present study used a small database limited by the number of undergraduate students in sport science who have experienced both online and in-person learning of foreign languages for specific purposes (professional communication and special terminology). This database can be expanded through comparative studies looking at the teaching of foreign languages for specific purposes online and in person in other countries, for instance, research into sport students' feedback from other countries where foreign languages are taught to foreign students at the tertiary level, e.g., in Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, and Estonia. This would provide a greater database of students' responses, but different study methods used at other institutions need to be considered. At the LASE, all distance classes were conducted online in real time, whereas another possibility is an asynchronous self-paced course, which would provide different opportunities and challenges for learners.

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