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Learners' Perceptions of Language Remote Teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper investigated the learners' perception and satisfaction of a distance learning course conducted by the French and Italian lecturers as foreign languages in a Malaysian university, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, from April to July 2020. The study aims to improve online and blended learning and teaching since distance learning is still being implemented because of the pandemic. A distance course perception and satisfaction survey were administered to collect the data. Descriptive statistics of the learners' scores (based on a five-point Likert scale) highlighted that students appreciated the course structure/design and the learner-teacher and learner-learner interactions, while the general level of satisfaction for the online course as a whole remained moderate. It also underlined the negative influence of emergency remote teaching (ERT) on the learners' psychology, affecting students' perceptions and task value. The French and Italian lecturers acknowledged the results of this paper and made the necessary changes to enhance the quality of distance teaching, especially by improving the interpersonal online interactions and encouraging students to become independent learners.

Keywords: French Language; Italian Language; COVID-19; Emergency Remote Teaching; Perceptions

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Introduction

Blended (hybrid) learning has been defined as a specific teaching modality of distance learning combined with face-to-face/traditional learning (Graham, 2006; Thorne, 2002). Distance learning has often been integrated into hybrid courses and met the educational needs of completing the curricula. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions have been forced to invest in designing and immediately using entirely new distance learning courses to continue their educational programs from 2019 to 2020. Thus, online learning has become the mainstay of teaching modality for secondary and higher education by suddenly replacing hybrid and face-to-face courses. As some researchers have defined, emergency remote teaching (ERT) is more than well-planned, high-quality distance learning. Hodges et al. (2020) argued that since ERT is due to crisis circumstances, its nature is temporary and aims to provide fast and reliable access to instruction until the end of the emergency when the previous format of instruction will be put in place again. They claimed that acknowledging this situation is of the utmost importance to avoid the temptation to compare this online learning to face-to-face learning, which has not been planned and designed well in advance. In a study on the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning, Olasile and Emrah (2020:2) stated that "effective online learning is a byproduct of cautious design and planning of instruction with the application of organized models for designing and development of instruction". Consequently, many academics questioned the quality of their online teaching, caused by extreme circumstances and was far from real online learning.

This study analyzed learners' perception and satisfaction of the full distance foreign language learning (DFLL) that the lecturers put in place in a Malaysian Higher Education context in the Bachelors of French and Italian as Foreign Languages (FFL, IFL) during the second semester of the academic year 2019/2020 (April/July). Thus, this research aimed to improve distance learning in the academic year 2020/2021 and the post-pandemic blended teaching and learning by considering the students' opinions based on their personal experience and pedagogical needs.

This study will address the following research questions: 1) What was the learners' perception of the online course? Were learners satisfied with the distance course experience? 2) How did the students feel about the specific four e-learning dimensions (distance course categories), structure/design, interactions, task value, and students' preference regarding online versus traditional face-to-face courses? Were there any connections in the evaluation of the category items? 3) Did the learners' perceptions and satisfaction vary depending on individual characteristic factors?

Educational context: The emergency remote teaching experience of the Bachelor of French and Italian as foreign languages

In the educational context, students are offered different disciplines (language, linguistics, translation, civilization, literature, administration, business) in content and language integrated learning context, and each discipline has its curriculum set by each foreign language division, for example, FFL and FFL in this case. The ERT set up by the lecturers of French and Italian shares some common aspects despite the differences mentioned above.

Lecturers of FFL and IFL had to set up their courses on the institutional platform Spectrum, often recurring to email services and WhatsApp when poor internet connection made it difficult to access online platforms. Lecturers had to work following their experience and knowledge of the students' needs. Some lecturers did not have continuous internet access. Others were ill-disposed towards distance learning in the same way some students were, finding themselves in a situation that had been imposed on them. If synchronous lessons meant that there must be learner-lecturer interaction, then all lecturers were available during the planned lesson time and throughout the day. If the meaning were restricted to face-to-face online live webcam interaction, 25% of the lessons would be conducted in synchronous live-streamed modality, via Zoom or GoogleMeet, and 75% in asynchronous modality.

According to Connolly and Stansfield (2006), the asynchronous lessons correspond to the first generation of e-learning modality, where traditional materials were repurposed to an online format, while the synchronous ones would be typical of the second and third e-learning

generations (Popovici & Mironov, 2015: 1515). The emergency in which lecturers found themselves forced them to produce materials that were a combination of traditional materials repurposed to an online format and new material which made use of learning apps and other technological tools. Many students started their courses with little autonomy in the learning process.

Furthermore, despite the wide experience in learning English as a Foreign Language, language learning strategies were underdeveloped and acknowledged by studies conducted at school and higher education levels. Azman et al. (2012: 40-41) identified the problems students within the Malaysian education system face in terms of learning English: a focus on national assessment fails to produce autonomous students, "whereby learners assume the part of empty vessels to be filled up by the teachers alone" (Naginder, 2006: 22), expecting teachers to feed them what they are supposed to know. The problems mentioned above demanded that lecturers simplify content and assessment.

Literature Review

Learners' perception and satisfaction research

The literature on student perceptions regarding implementation, content, interactions, and exam assessment of the distance teaching-learning environment (TLE; Entwistle, 2011) is ample. For instance, Bauk (2015) gave details of thirty master's and Ph.D. learners' perception and satisfaction of the distance TLE, particularly of four e-learning dimensions: interface (accessibility to the technological environment), communication (interactions learners/teachers), instructional (teaching) materials and self-evaluation (outcomes, self-efficacy, and task value). The findings stated that teaching materials took the highest position in the students' positive perception, followed by communication, interface, and self-evaluation. Interestingly, most of the responders of Bauk's study preferred traditional assessment to online assessment.

In particular, in their research study of digital learning, both blended and distance, Charlier et al. (2015: 382) claimed that existing research in educational technology, cognitive

psychology as well as adult and university education provides a relevant and methodological framework to understand how individual characteristics, digital environment and interactions between students and environment can lead to quality learning. Furthermore, TLE features influence the students' learning styles and quality of outcomes (Charlier et al., 2015: 385) as well as learners' perceptions and satisfaction.

Among the personality (psychological-affective) features influencing (e)learning and its perceptions, the learning attitude consists of affective, cognitive, and behavioral components which are closely aligned with each other and create a stable perception of a given object or concept (Lee Watson & Kim, 2016: 274). Self-efficacy is a specific learning attitude, "a judgment of one's capability to accomplish a certain level of performance" (Bandura, 2002: 94), affecting the learning process (Sitzmann & Ely, 2011), academic motivation and achievement (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). Task value (TV) is another learning attitude, more precisely, the students' judgment of how interesting, important, and useful a course is to them (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Moreover, the TV looks into the students' perception of the "cost of a task, as a factor to predict the learners' decision to follow the task further or not" (Ghasemi & Dowlatabadi, 2018: 665). TV "is connected to closer or more remote aims, beyond one's immediate pleasure" (Cocoradă & Maican, 2021: 4). TV has a positive influence on "many important outcomes, such as cognitive engagement, choice of future learning activities, and academic achievement" (Artino, 2009: 149). Furthermore, teachers' behavior is likely to influence foreign language learning (FLL) since negative perceptions of the teacher's role increase students' anxiety. (Cocoradă & Maican, 2021). Effectiveness is a final learning attitude: "Effectiveness is the indicator of the result obtained to the achievement's programs by the ratio, it is a reflection from the performance that someone did, to indicate whether the outcome what someone did well (Mihaiu et al., 2010)" (Rifiyanti, 2020: 33).

Regarding the social actors' presence in a distance TLE, collaborative social interaction is investigated in Transitional Distance (TD) theory. In a study concerning the interactions in a fully English as a Foreign Language distance learning context, Kara (2020: 1-2) said that TD is an interactionist theory focusing on the psychological and communicative relationship between learners' peers and learner and teacher (constructive dialogues), and between learner, the

structure (level of openness/flexibility of the course or program, relationship learners/educational material) and learning autonomy (degree of learners' ability to determine their learning goals, experiences and evaluation). Based on the findings reported by the author, perceived satisfaction was higher when the teacher had a positive attitude towards interaction and lowered if there was a lack of teacher encouragement and moderation for learner-learner interaction, meaning that learner-learner interaction played a significant role. Interestingly, Daewele et al. (2019) underlined teachers' major role in students' enjoyment compared to students' peer relationships.

Learners' perception and satisfaction researches during COVID-19 pandemic

Various studies during the COVID pandemic have dealt with students' feelings and perceptions. The researchers have selected the most meaningful ones for this research and compared the results of students' feelings and perceptions.

Recent studies on distance learning showed students' negative perceptions (Rohman et al., 2020) and caused psychological distress (Bao & Hasan, 2020). However, a study focused on the students' perception of knowledge, accessibility, effectiveness and difficulties in an online English course during the COVID-19 pandemic at the Institut Bisnis & Informatika Kosgoro 1957 (Indonesia), Rifiyanti (2020: 33) revealed the learners' effectiveness perception. She revealed that 63% of the students agreed that learning the target foreign language (FL) online was an effective solution. In observation of 207 Romanian students' behavior, perceptions, and emotions during the pandemic, Cocoradǎ and Maican (2021) concluded that the students were unhappy with individualized teacher feedback, which was prompt in a physical environment but delayed when fully online. Even though the students expressed enjoyment of DFLL, they preferred blended learning over full online classes due to poor internet connection, task overload, and limited interaction with teachers and fellow students.

Research on the influence of individual characteristics on learners' perceptions

Finally, most research in this field has been focused on the relationships between individual characteristics like independent demographic variables (age, gender, ethnicity), educational profile (degree, technological knowledge, distance learning experience), language competence (native, FL), cognitive skills and personality (psycho-affective variables) on the one hand, and the other hand, students' conception of learning, perceptions and satisfaction of the TLE (Meyer, 1991). For instance, in their study involving students from the University College in Malaysia, Azliza et al. (2012) have shown the positive relationship between the learners' perceptions of e-learning implementation and gender, years of study, faculty and technology usage variables. Altugan (2015) found that students' cultural features influence FLL motivation since they can lessen identification with the target FL and culture. The learners' educational profile influences TV and TD: Kara (2020) showed that TV (Perceived learning in the author's words) and instructional TD are influenced by the learner's previous digital knowledge. Popovici and Mironov's (2015: 1516-1517) study of students' perceptions of e-learning, technology and expertise found it important for the successful development of academic programs since the attitude of the end user toward the application of information technology is one of the most effective factors. More generally, for the same TLE, a positive student perception leads to a positive learning approach and perceived effects on learning (Charlier et al.: 391). In a study conducted on the degree of the openness of teaching, Jézégou (2005: 103) stated that openness is related to the level of the digital environment flexibility and empowerment: a digital TLE should give learners freedom of choice so that they can exercise control over their training and their learning. However, these results contradicted other ones. For instance, Cocoradă and Maican (2021) found that learners' perception of DFLL during the pandemic did not depend on their gender, type of study or achievement level.

Therefore, this paper also aims to verify whether students' characteristics affect their ERT experience (see 4.3).

Methods and Sample

Data Collection and Analysis

A DFLL course perception and satisfaction survey were used for collecting the data. A pilot survey was conducted to ensure the coherence and the relevance of the items and questions: five external students who had attended a DFLL during the COVID-19 pandemic were asked to complete the survey and write comments, which were used to develop the questionnaire further. The online questionnaire was designed with Google Forms, which was already familiar to students. By submitting the survey, learners granted their permission for the data generated to be used for research purposes. The final version of the survey is an adaptation of Young and Norgard's (2006) questionnaire on learners' DFLL perceptions. The survey covered four categories, five items for each one: student perception of the course structure/design (category 1), course TD (online learner interpersonal collaboration with peers and lecturers; category 2), course TV (content and assessment; category 3), learner preference regarding remote versus physical (face-to-face) courses, learner DFLL autonomy and satisfaction (category 4).

Learners were asked to anonymously assess 20 items based on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Students were also asked questions at the end of each section and provided comments and suggestions on their DFLL experience. During the last week of distance learning (June 2020), FFL and IFL students received a WhatsApp link to complete the survey. Learner participation was voluntary.

A few statistical tests were run through SPSS between each independent variable (IV) and dependent variables (DVs), as well as between the DVs, together with a descriptive statistical analysis of the students' scores based on the means and the standard deviation (SD). Each test had a minimum level of significance of $p \leq 0.05$ (two-tailed). Three groups of IVs, six learners' factors in total, were correlated with the DVs: sociocultural (ethnicity; gender), linguistic background (number of languages known; mastery of the target FL; MUET (Malaysian University Entrance Test), English as an FL certificate results, educational background (previous or non-previous online learning experience). Data analysis was performed through One-Way ANOVA

tests, Paired Sample t-test (for descriptive statistics in analyzing the mean and SD variances) and linear correlation tests (Pearson, r; Eta Squared coefficient test, eta^2) between DVs and IVs, as well as between and within the DVs. Lastly, the Independent t (t value) test was used to correlate the two learner dichotomous nominal variables of gender and previous or non-previous distance learning experience with the DVs.

Sample

The 78 students of FFL and IFL programs completed the DFLL course perception survey: 50% (N=39) were enrolled in FFL and 50% in IFL undergraduate programs, in the first year (44.9%, N=35), second (29.5%, N=23), third (19.2%, N=15) or fourth (6.4%, N=5).
In terms of students' educational backgrounds, most of them had no previous experience with distance learning (70.5%, n=55).

As for the students' sociocultural information, learners were mainly females (87.2%, N=68) and Malay (62.8%, N=49), followed by Chinese (21.8%), Kadazandusun and Indian (5.1% each) and other ethnicities (5.2% in total).

Regarding the students' linguistic backgrounds, Table 1 shows that learners spoke more than two languages (between three and eight native and FLs) and that only over half (55.1%, N=43) spoke four or five languages due to Malaysia being a multilingual and multi-ethnic country, with around 140 different historical languages (Coluzzi, 2017: 210). Moreover, given that most of the students were enrolled in the first or the second year (74.4%, N=58), they rated their mastery of the target FL above all as low intermediate (A2) or intermediate (B1) level (82.1%, N=64). Finally, 87.2% (N=68) of them stated that they obtained band 3 or 4 (out of 6 levels in total) in the MUET certificate, and this finding is in line with the national educational policy ensuring that only learners with necessary qualifications in English are enrolled in Malaysian public universities.

Table 1. Student linguistic information (N=78)

Languages Known	Mastery of FFL/IFL	MUET
Three Languages: 23%	Beginner: 15.4%	Band 2: 1.3%
Four Languages: 25.6%	Low-Intermediate: 44.9%	Band 3: 35.9%
Five Languages: 29.5%	Intermediate: 37.2%	Band 4: 51.3%
Six Languages: 15.5%	Upper-Intermediate: 2.5%	Band 5: 11.5%
Seven/Eight Languages: 6.4%	Advanced: 0%	Band 6: 0%

Findings

Overall findings on learners' perceptions and satisfaction of the DFLL as a whole

Figure 1 displays moderate scores between the four sections with a different mean of 0.39, a general overall mean of 3.59 and a similar Likert distribution (SD; Difference SD=1.14). However, the results revealed that the students particularly appreciated course structure/design and interpersonal interactions (TD), while the general level of satisfaction for the DFLL was lower. A series of paired sample t-tests showed that the more relevant variances in terms of means were between Structure, TD, and TV. Meanwhile, satisfaction (Satisfaction/Structure, t=-5.45; Satisfaction/TD, t=-5,27; Satisfaction/TV, t=-3.06; p=0.00, df=77): that confirms the generally lower final DFLL satisfaction. A Pearson correlation test corroborated the relevance of TD appreciation by learners (TD/TV, r=0.48; TD/Structure, r=0.42; TD/Satisfaction, r=0.35; p=0.00). TD was linearly linked with the other three sections: appreciation of TV, course structure/design and DFLL satisfaction increased when interpersonal relationships were given a higher value. In the same way, course satisfaction was higher with a higher TV (r=0.35, p=0.00).

Figure 1. Overall findings of students' perceptions and satisfaction with FFL and IFL online
courses
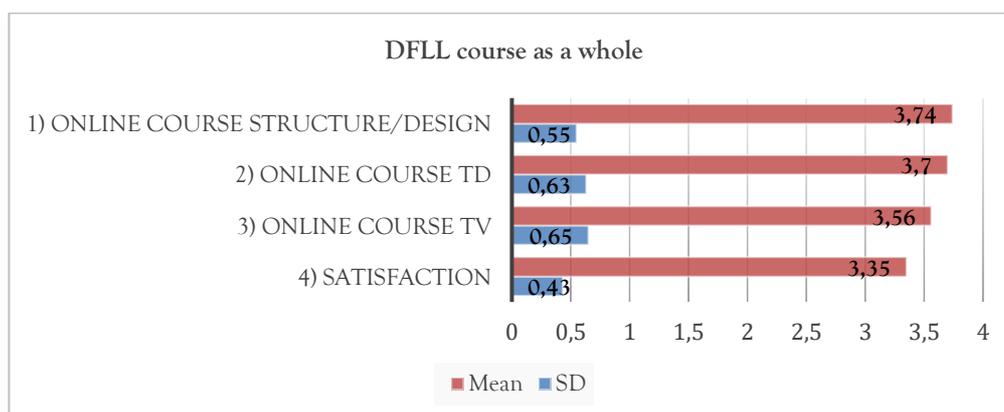
In response to research question 1, despite a general low DFLL final satisfaction, the learners with the highest level of general appreciation perceived the DFLL as interesting and useful (TV) and valued the interpersonal collaboration with peers and teachers (TD) positively.

To respond to research question 2, the next stages of this study (see § 4.2.1/4.2.4) summarize the learners' responses within the four perception and satisfaction survey categories based on learners' scores (means, SD and frequencies) and statements.

Findings on learners' perceptions and satisfaction of the specific DFLL dimensions (distance course categories)

Learners' perceptions and satisfaction of online course structure/design. As shown in Figure 2, the students stated their preference for a balance of synchronous (live online webcam interaction) and asynchronous (online tasks and assignments without live webcam interaction) lesson modality (item 4, 80% of agreement), while only 34.7% preferred a course structured with mainly synchronous lessons (item 3 has the lowest mean). Indeed, paired sample t-tests confirmed that one of the most relevant variances in terms of means was between items 3 and 4 (t=-5.53, df=77, p=0.00). Learners found the tools (apps, platforms, etc.) used by their lecturers suitable for the tasks assigned (item 5, 87% of agreement).

Respondents moderately agreed that they preferred online courses to follow a consistent

structure that did not change from one course to another (item 1, 59% of agreement) and that lecturers used the same tools (item 2, 69.5%; item 1/item 2: r=0.50, p=0.00). A consistent course structure makes students feel more comfortable and self-confident during their DFLL.

Figure 2. Student perceptions of FFL and IFL online course structure/design
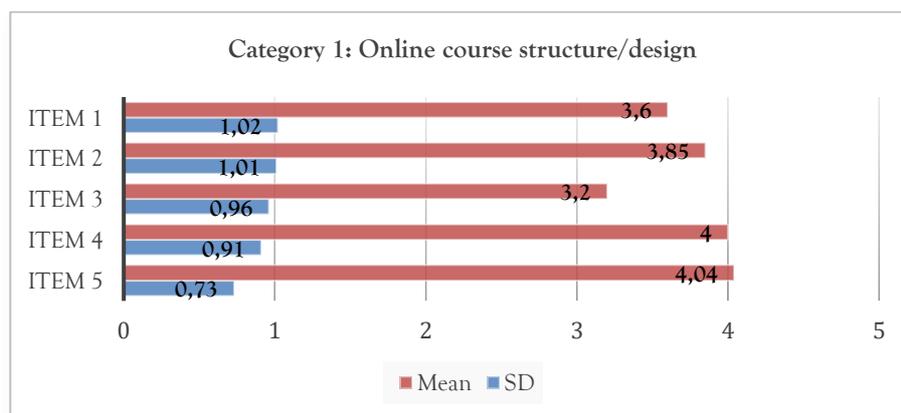

When asked about the advantages and disadvantages of the tools used by the lecturers, most students underlined problems relating to internet connectivity ("Disadvantages: I have to purchase more data, which I cannot afford, I cannot understand the lessons well, I feel pressured").

Learners' perceptions and satisfaction of online course Transactional Distance (interactions). Figure 3 indicated that learners appreciated mainly the interactions with lecturers (item 8, 81.3% of agreement: I had numerous interactions with the instructor during the class) and that lecturers replied to their questions in a timely fashion (item 9, 83.4% of agreement) and students received enough feedback when they needed it (item 10, nearly 79%). If Pearson tests showed positive correlations within the whole category (r between 0.28 and 0.59, p=0.00/0.01), the highest relationship involved items 9 and 10 (r=0.59, p=0.00).

When considering interactions with fellow students, over 69% of the respondents found that the courses facilitated interaction in course content and assignments during the lesson (item 6). However, only 43.3 % found it easy to interact with fellow students in synchronous lessons (item 7). The score difference between items 6 and 7 (t=5.09, df=77, p=0.00), seemingly contradictory, can be explained by the fact that students may find it difficult to relate with each

other in synchronous webcam learning situations but feel more at ease when communicating via other tools (i.e., by WhatsApp). This result confirms: (1) the learners' general disapproval of a course structured mainly on synchronous webcam lessons. At the same time, it can hint at a lack of proper design and planning of the course itself, which did not provide the balance requested and did not succeed in promoting interaction in synchronous webcam lessons; (2) the learners' preference for learner-teacher as compared to learner-learner interaction (item 7/item 9, t=-6.56; item 7/item 10, t=-5.57; df=77, p=0.00). As said before, and in line with the literature review, the teachers' role in promoting learner-learner interaction was probably lacking, hampering effective communication among students in synchronous lessons.

Figure 3. Student perceptions of FFL and IFL online course TD
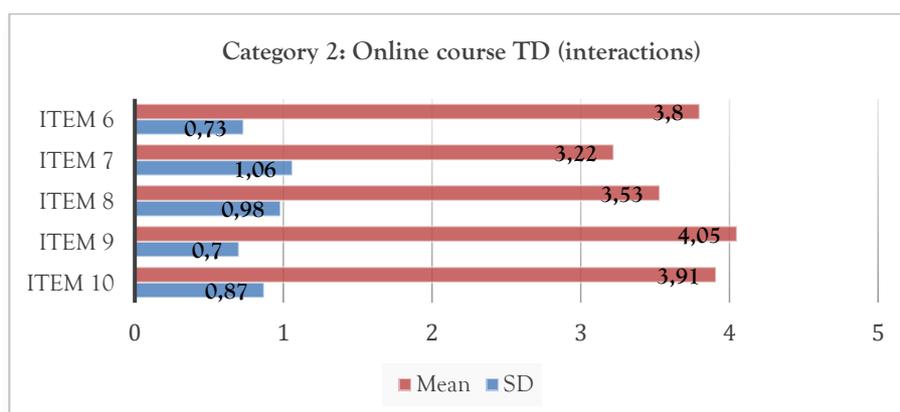

Many students' comments supported the perception that communication had a key function in a TLE. Other comments expressed the difficulties experienced in the interaction in an online environment (the lack of "physical touch", the limited communication in the FL) and the consequences (it is "challenging to understand", "it makes me feel bad about it").

Learners' perceptions and satisfaction of online course Task Value (content and assessment). Over 70% of the respondents found that free access to materials made it easier to accomplish assignments, tasks and exams (item 15), while only 46% agreed the exams were well-balanced in terms of number and time allocated (item 14; t-test, item 14/item 15: t=4.98, df=77, p=0.00).

Pearson findings highlighted correlations within the whole category, and the highest ones concerned items 11, 12 and 13 (r between 0.41 and 0.51, p=0.00; similar moderate-high scores, with levels of agreement between 55% and 59%): the higher the respondents perceived that the assignments in their DFLL helped them to master course content (item 12), the higher they found the teaching material to be adequate with the course goals (content and aim of the lesson: item 11) and that the exams provided an accurate assessment of knowledge of course content (item 13).

Figure 4. Student perceptions of FFL and IFL online course TV
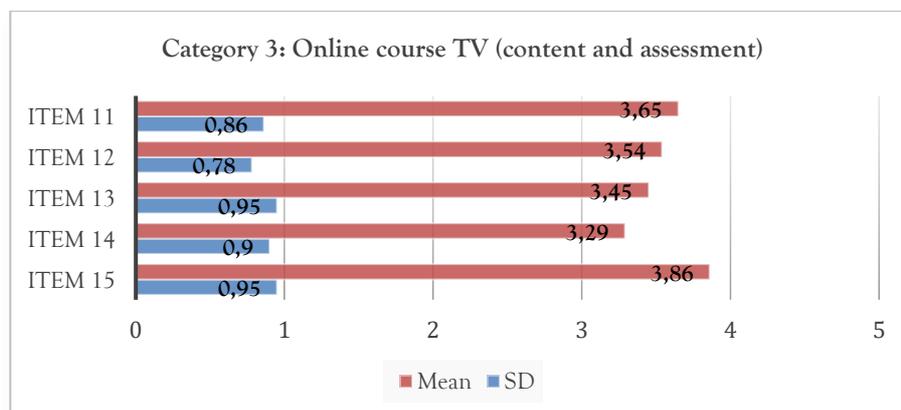
However, the answers to the open question on how learners coped with difficulties draw attention to feelings of exhaustion and frustration, which can negatively affect learner self-efficacy. The comments underline comprehension difficulties, inability to participate fully, excessive workload, difficulties connected with time management and feeling mentally drained and frustrated.

Learners' Satisfaction, Online vs. face-to-face courses. Figure 5 shows that students found online courses more difficult content-wise than traditional face-to-face courses (item 17, 73.1% of agreement), even if 82% had the perception that the courses helped them to become more independent learners (item 20).

Only 34.6% expressed their DFLL satisfaction (item 18), and 43.6% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Similarly, as for effectiveness, which concerns students' perception

of improving their competence in the target language (item 19), over 43% felt it had satisfactorily increased, and 42.3% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (item18/item 19: r=0.35, p=0.00).

More relevant variances in terms of means involved item 16 (item 16/item 17, t=-8.50; item 16/item 18, t=-9.21; item 16/item 19, t= -8.11; item 16/item 20, t=-14.85; df=77, p=0.00). Item 16 yielded the lowest appreciation, given that a moderate majority of students, 59%, responded that they did not learn more in DFLL compared to traditional face-to-face courses. However, the students who were more satisfied with the DFLL than with the class-based course (item 16) perceived a consistently higher satisfaction with the overall distance course (item 18; Item 16/item 18: r=0.64, high correlation strength, p=0.00). More interestingly, the higher the perceived difficulty of the DFLL (item 17), the lower the appreciation of its efficacy (item 16) and, likewise, the overall satisfaction with the online experience (item 18; Pearson test: item 17/item 16, r=-0.61; item 17/item 18, r=-0.54; p=0.00).

Figure 5. Student satisfaction of FFL and IFL online courses
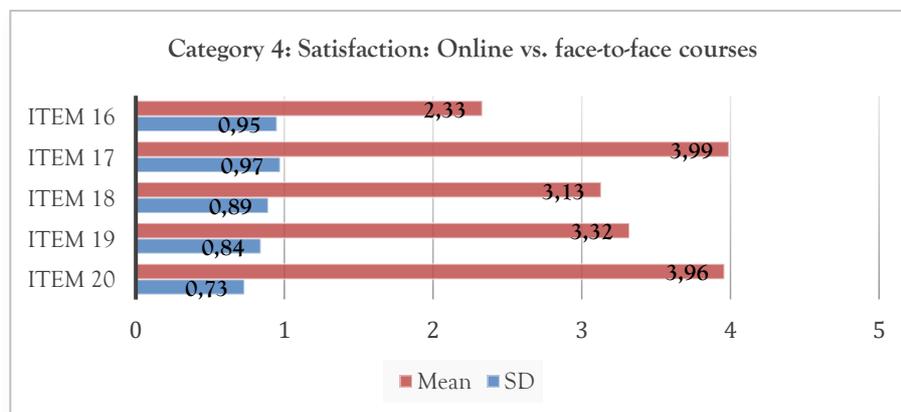
The students' comments when comparing traditional lessons to DFLL highlighted insufficient time to carry out tasks, feeling lazy and inactive compared to when they are "physically learning", lack of focus due to the home environment, and the possibility of turning off the microphone and webcam and doing other tasks. A few students suggested resuming face-to-face classes as soon as possible to avoid further stress and difficulties or postponing or even canceling the semester.

In response to research question 2, findings showed a general high correlation regarding learners' evaluation of the items. Further comments will be exposed in the discussion section. The next stage of this study looked into individual variables and their effect on learners' perceptions and satisfactions (research question 3).

Correlations with learners' characteristics

Among individual characteristics, only for TD (category 2), the tests showed significant differences regarding learners' language background. TD appreciation increased by increasing the number of languages known (F=3.01, df=5, 72, η_p^2=0.17, eta^2=0.52; p<0.05): this is especially evident between trilingual and quadrilingual and pentalingual learners, that is to say, the majority of the respondents (61 learners, 78% in total: trilingual, N=18, M=3.30, SD=0.65; quadrilingual, N=20, M=3.84, SD=0.52; pentalingual, N=23, M=3.80, SD=0.72).

Discussion

Four main aspects of the DFLL student experience

(1) DFLL uniformity and balance; learner autonomy. The students' preference for uniform course structure/design and use of the same tools is consistent with the findings of Bauk (2015) and Young and Norgard (2006: 113). Additionally, learners agreed to a balance between synchronous and asynchronous lessons. A discrepancy appeared between the request for synchronous lessons and the poor internet connection experienced by many respondents. Another reason to favor a more balanced offer of synchronous/asynchronous lessons can be related to the learners' degree of autonomy. Along with the research results in some Malaysian universities (see § 1), these findings could hint at the lack of student autonomy in online learning, which can cause even more stress in an ERT environment. Even though most learners stated they acquired greater autonomy in distance learning practices, the need for more synchronous lessons can also be explained by the evidence that synchronous lessons facilitate guidance in the learning process.

(2) Effective communication. The previous considerations are further underlined by the students' appreciation of the communication with their lecturers, which is consistent with the findings of the papers of Cocoradă and Maican (2021), Kara (2020), Daewele et al. (2019) and Bauk (2015). Lecturers offered quality guidance when requested, thus solving the apparent contradiction of the need for more (than 25%) synchronous lessons and the difficulties perceived by the students in face-to-face online lessons. Indeed, the overall findings (see § 4.1) showed that learners were satisfied with TD. The qualitative findings revealed that many students considered face-to-face communication more valuable and effective. At the same time, the lecturers-researchers observed that shy students benefited from synchronous lessons in terms of TD, even if most of them kept their webcams off during most of the online courses. In a study by Chun (1994), the author used computer distance learning to improve language learners' interactive competence through intense collaboration and student participation during synchronous distance classes. As seen in Chun's findings, some students who were often shy and quiet in face-to-face learning contexts found that they had more chances to generate and initiate different kinds of discourse, and were more involved during DFLL, often becoming the most active learners. Interestingly, the analysis within the TD category has also highlighted that students were not at ease when relating with their peers in synchronous webcam lessons. The cause could be traced back to poor planning or the medium's characteristics, which affected each student differently, facilitating or hindering communication often in a different fashion from the classroom experience (see Chun's studies above).

(3) Low DFLL overall satisfaction. The overall perceived satisfaction with the DFLL is connected to the general appreciation of the distance classes in design, content and exam assessment, and the learner-teacher relationship appreciation. Indeed, in line with Kara's findings, the present study confirmed that students showing a higher perception of the learner-teacher relationship (questions 6, 7 and 8) yielded a higher level of satisfaction with the DFLL (final satisfaction mean of these students: means between 4 and 4.20): more generally, this result would confirm that TD plays a significant role in the distance learning perception and

satisfaction. However, the survey results and qualitative findings suggested three reasons for the overall moderate-low level of satisfaction, which is in line with Rohman et al.'s (2020) findings of an online course due to the COVID-19 pandemic. First, findings within the category (which highlighted a strong connection in the students' evaluation of the items) showed that students who found DFLL particularly difficult stated that they did not improve more than in traditional face-to-face courses. This condition would negatively influence the perceived satisfaction, TV and effectiveness. Second, the perceived pressure from the demands of the assignments and assessment often generated feelings of frustration and uneasiness, which influenced perceptions and satisfaction. Finally, following Jézégou's research (see **§ 2.3**), this study proved that the low degree of openness of teaching the IFL and FFL online courses also negatively influenced satisfaction and perceptions, for instance, self-efficacy and TV.

(4) ERT as the major psychological-social influence on learners' perception and satisfaction. In response to research question 3, consistently with Cocoradă and Maican's (2021) findings, but unlike other studies (see **§ 2.3**), individual characteristics did not play an important role in learners' perceptions and satisfaction. The study referred to a blended learning context before the pandemic, substantially different from an ERT environment. This paper confirmed what research in the field stated about the role of ERT. ERT accounts for some of the critical issues underlined by this paper and for some significant differences with the findings of previous studies on distance and blended language learning courses freely chosen by students and lecturers. The survey showed that the Likert score of three stood out in most answers, highlighting a general situation of uncertainty. Students pointed out their fears and difficulties from the beginning of the DFLL when some students even suggested postponing or canceling the semester (see **§ 4.2.4**). Stressful psychological-emotional situations, or psychological distress (Bao & Hasan, 2020), are related to the fear of not being able to cope with online learning and failing the semester, together with the fear of family members contracting the COVID-19 have influenced the whole DFLL experience. Furthermore, the survey indicated that the difficulties had not been overcome at the end of the course. Charlier et al. (see **§ 2.3**) stated that a positive perception of learning leads to a positive learning approach. In this study, a general moderate score of students'

perception and satisfaction might have negatively influenced their learning approach regarding TV, motivation and self-efficacy.

Conclusion and Implications

As a consequence of the global evolution of COVID-19, lecturers-researchers have acknowledged the results of this paper and made the necessary changes to improve the quality of distance teaching in the first semester of 2020/2021 and of any future blended learning course. Indeed, the first semester of 2020/2021 saw a significant improvement in course design and planning.

First, study programs and pedagogical materials were simplified through red programs and materials, with fewer tasks, reduced class time and more breaks during the lesson. Secondly, the number of synchronous live-streamed lessons increased from the previous 25% to 80% and above to respond to the need for interpersonal interaction in an online environment since video conferencing, as stated by Blum (2020), can resemble real life, where information and views can be exchanged, and voices can be heard. Zoom was chosen as the main platform for two main reasons to favor pair or group work in the break-out rooms and to allow the lecturers to monitor individual students during the activities.

Third, even if students' learning autonomy improved from the previous semester, it must be constantly fostered and supported. Indeed, any future blended learning course should consider students' constant monitoring and continuous feedback in synchronous and asynchronous lessons. Consequently, the teachers' intervention has granted the students' continuous monitoring through the Zoom break-out rooms and synchronous communication with the students on WhatsApp throughout the day.

Fourth, unlike the previous semester, the lectures could integrate their materials with new online resources, which the students could access autonomously. Most of these activities can be carried out individually, are interactive and introduce a playful aspect that increases students' motivation.

Fifth, in the light of the results, obtained (dissatisfaction with the examination modalities and the exam timing allocated: see 4.2.3) and since the university granted lecturers the freedom to choose the type of assessment most suitable for their students, the lecturers-researchers of this study decided to propose continuous and alternative assessment. The continuous assessment was based on the students' coursework and small individual or collective tasks, while the alternative assessment was based on individual and collaborative projects. These projects focused on topics developed during the semester and were conveyed through various means, including video projects, recordings, presentations, and podcasts.

The research highlighted the negative influence of ERT on students' psychological/emotional welfare and showed that there are key issues that must be solved, related, for example, to family problems, poor internet connection and lack of appropriate devices. Nevertheless, self-confidence in lecturers and learners seems to have increased. During the first semester of 2020/2021, students were more willing to show their faces on webcams and seemed to find participation in a DFLL easier than before. Teachers improved their skills and found ways to avoid the negative effect of 2019/2020 ERT, designing a learning environment in which students could cope with the course and achieve their goals. Finally, during the lockdown, some lecturers took advantage of the various webinars offered by international educational institutions. This training was effective in helping lecturers build up their confidence in the practice of distance learning.

In the future, it would be interesting to explore the role of educators during ERT. Finally, the negative effects caused by ERT suggest the need to investigate learners' emotions, which influence the affective filter with direct consequences on learning in terms of motivation, TV, and self-efficacy and might contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the role of the affective filter in an ERT context.

List of abbreviations

(D)FLL: (Distance) Foreign Language Learning
DV(s): Dependent Variable(s)

ERT: Emergency Remote Teaching

FFL: French as a Foreign Language

FL: Foreign Language

IFL: Italian as a Foreign Language

IV(s): Independent Variable(s)

MUET: Malaysian University Entrance Test

SD: Standard Deviation

TD: Transitional Distance

TLE: Teaching-Learning Environment

TV: Task Value

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