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Teaching ESP online during the pandemic – a teachers' perspective

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Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and educators have been forced to introduce digital solutions within a very short time, which influenced the educational perspective significantly, and required adapting to the new conditions, not only in what concerns teaching methods but also in terms of teaching content. Contrary to the commonly held opinion that teaching at tertiary level has not changed considerably, since it concerns adults who are already autonomous, the new teaching challenges have had an impact on tertiary education as well. Moreover, university teachers needed to face this new reality without prior preparation. The aim of this paper is to present the current pandemic-driven situation from the perspective of ESP teachers from various European countries by revealing not only some of the challenges posed by the pandemic, but also certain good practices which may become a guide for other ESP teachers. The methodology applied to inquiring this research question was a qualitative-quantitative online survey distributed among ESP teachers in European countries. The results show that online teaching during the pandemic was challenging for most respondents, at the same time offering them the opportunity to develop professionally by improving their technical skills and learning how to use online platforms, apps and tools.

Keywords: online teaching, ESP, COVID-19 pandemic, teaching at tertiary level, ICT, digital tools.

1. Introduction

As a result of the direct danger caused by the dynamic widespread of COVID-19 in 2020, schools of different types, including universities were closed for almost a year, changing the approach to education and ultimately the teacher-learner relationship. The unexpected SARS-CoV-2 virus outbreak contributed to accelerating the speed of introducing online teaching, which became the form of instruction in almost all universities worldwide, thus enabling the activity in universities to continue (UNESCO 2020). At the same time, recent research suggests that online learning increased retention, and the

quality of information mapping in students has become more complex (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020). This assumption leads to the prediction that remote classes will remain part of the new, post-COVID reality.

An additional aspect increasing the effects of the current transformation is the shortage of teachers, which has grown even larger, after numerous teachers opted for earlier retirement due to the pandemic threat (Randstad 2020). Many teachers decided to retire early rather than face the possibility of infection after schools reopened, which has also affected the continuity of various educational establishments, creating an additional problem of extra hours for the remaining teaching staff.

In view of the current situation, the aim of this paper is to provide the teachers' perspective on online teaching in the COVID-19 era by presenting not only some of the challenges posed by the pandemic, but also good practices which may become a guide for other teachers. The focus of the paper is on ESP teachers, who constitute a very heterogeneous group in terms of age and working experience. At the same time, during the pre-pandemic period they had presumably already faced challenges in the form of a lack of materials and the constant need to update subject-content knowledge and cooperate with subject experts. During the time of COVID-19 restrictions, access to the above mentioned resources decreased considerably.

2. Literature review

Although online teaching has already been the subject of extended research (Wang et al. 2010; Makokha & Mutisya 2016; Queiros & de Villiers 2016; Malik et al. 2018), there are very few papers dealing with the teachers' perspective, not to mention ESP teachers specifically. Due the situation generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the immediate intensification of the use of online learning, we decided to focus our attention on possible changes in the approach to online teaching.

2.1. Remote learning and teaching

The current pandemic and the rapid shift to online learning have also changed the approach to online learning, which is visible, for example, in the division Hodges et al. (2020) suggested, into adequately planned online learning experiences, and courses taught online as a response to a crisis situation. The researchers went even further in referring to online education during this pandemic as "emergency remote teaching", which emphasises the contrast with quality, or effective online learning. In the light of the new situation, which has led to the transformation of the education system, the same research focuses on the possibility of total replacement of traditional teaching with online teaching, discussing both the positive and negative effects of this shift.

According to Allo's research (2020), students had a positive attitude towards e-learning, considering it helpful and useful during the crisis generated by the pandemic. Similarly, the results of the research carried out by Muthuprasad et al. (2021), involving

undergraduates from different universities of the National Agricultural Research System (NARS) in India, indicated that the majority of the 307 respondents (70%) expressed their positive attitude to online classes for maintaining the curriculum during the pandemic. Moreover, the interviewees appreciated the flexibility and convenience of online classes. On the other hand, most students also reported that online classes could be more challenging than the traditional classroom because of the technological constraints, delayed feedback and inability of the instructor to handle the available technologies effectively.

The study conducted by Elumalai et al. (2020) aimed to explore the quality of e-learning in higher education from the students' perspective. The relevant data was collected from higher educational institutions in India and Saudi Arabia. The findings revealed that there is a need for improvement in certain areas to enhance the quality of e-learning. Interestingly, the results collected by Coman et al. (2020) in a study conducted on 762 students from two of the largest universities in Romania revealed that higher education institutions in Romania were not prepared for the quick shift to online learning. Among the major problems the respondents indicated were the teachers' lack of technical skills, a teaching style improperly adapted to the online environment, causing a lack of interaction and communication between students and teachers, as well as many technical problems. In view of the new challenges teachers have faced, many researchers have devoted their studies to analysing the tools that are currently used in online learning.

2.2. Teachers' readiness

According to Howard et al. (2021), very little research has focused on exploring teachers' readiness to shift their teaching from face-to-face to fully online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They argued the short timeframe for the transition to online teaching and learning resulted in limited time for teachers to properly prepare for this shift. Therefore, the institution had an important responsibility to provide support and common guidelines regarding the institution's expectations for online learning and teaching, in order to compensate for teachers' levels of readiness. Ataiants & Podgornova (2021) investigated online learning readiness and competence among students and teachers of the University of Ryazan based on their perceptions on the importance of, and the confidence level in online learning. The results of the study showed that technical and organizational issues related to distance learning were identified, among which were technical difficulties and resources available to both professors and their students, such as reliability of the Internet connection, the available bandwidth, and the availability of noise-free physical environment.

2.3. Teachers' competences in online teaching

Even before the current pandemic, study outcomes generally suggested the need to improve teachers' competencies in online teaching, particularly in the field of teaching methods and learner support methods. Similar results were provided in earlier research by Asunka (2008) and Madani et al. (2019), which stressed the importance of adapting

the curriculum to e-learning as a new trend in education. They underline the connection between e-learning and essential attributes, such as reading, writing, logic, and numerical skills, which are desirable outcomes for students to succeed in a competitive environment. The greatest concerns that teachers expressed referred to the clarity of online instructions, the ability to motivate students properly and to maintain clear interaction with students, and management burdens for teachers.

2.4. Online tools

Almost overnight transition to distant learning triggered discussions on the use of online teaching tools, whose implementation depends on the instructors' awareness and attitudes (Moore 2014). In a study by Chang et al. (2018), educators expressed their preference for Quizlet, ClassMarker, and Educaplay due to their usability in assessing learners' knowledge and in supporting instructors in providing appropriate feedback. Recent findings by Taghizadeh & Ejtehadi (2021) revealed that the use of technology and the application of available tools and resources were the main challenges educators faced when teaching online.

3. Methods

The study was conducted based on a questionnaire. The results were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively, depending on the type of question asked. The questionnaire was distributed online to teachers of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at several universities in 10 European countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain). It was distributed online in January 2021 and was completed by 55 respondents from 18 universities, as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Names of universities and numbers of respondents

No.	Name of university	Country	No. of respondents
1	Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (UAM)	Poland	5
2	Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași	Romania	2
3	Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca (UBB)	Romania	10
4	Bergamo University	Italy	2
5	Charles University, Prague	Czech Republic	3
6	Dimitrie Cantemir University, Târgu Mureș	Romania	1
7	George Emil Palade University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science, and Technology of Târgu Mureș (UMFST)	Romania	4

8	Grigore T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Iași, (UMF Iași)	Romania	2
9	Iuliu Hațieganu University of Medicine and Pharmacy Cluj-Napoca (UMF Cluj)	Romania	6
10	Medical University, Plovdiv	Bulgaria	3
11	Nicolae Testemițanu State University of Medicine and Pharmacy (SUMPH), Chișinău	Republic of Moldova	6
12	Szeged University	Hungary	1
13	Technical University of Cluj-Napoca	Romania	2
14	University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Cluj-Napoca	Romania	1
15	University of Art and Design, Cluj-Napoca	Romania	1
16	University of Ljubljana	Slovenia	1
17	University of Murcia	Spain	2
18	University of Zagreb	Croatia	2

The questionnaire (see Appendix A) included 13 questions referring to the respondents' experience of teaching online or using online tools in their ESP teaching before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and the lockdown imposed in March 2020, which forcefully shifted teaching and learning from classes to the online environment. There were ten closed questions (1 and 10), 10 semi-closed questions (2-9, 11-12) – with options to choose from, but also the possibility to add other answers, – and one open question (13). The questions were aimed at obtaining a pool of information, based on the respondents' experience of teaching online during the pandemic, which could benefit other teachers in their online work with students.

The respondents were also asked what ESP subject they taught and the answers varied greatly. They mentioned 15 different ESP subjects: Business English (8 respondents), EMP (English for Medicine and Pharmacy or Medical English – 20), Technical English (4), English for Art (1), for Computers and Engineering (3), for European Studies (1), for Geography (2), for History (1), for Law (3) and Public Administration (1), for Physical Education (2), for Psychology (2), for Social Sciences (2), for Theology (2), and for Tourism (2). Eight respondents mentioned only English as the subject they taught, and 2 only EAP (English for Academic Purposes). Therefore, we consider that having 55 participants in the study from 18 European universities and who teach 15 different ESP subjects increases the relevance of the research outcomes.

In our study, we started from the presumption that the sudden shift to online education in March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was highly challenging for ESP teachers and had an impact on the way they taught and assessed their students. We aimed to identify the prevalent challenges they faced, based on the prediction that they consisted mostly in the lack of experience of using video-conferencing platforms and e-learning tools in their teaching, but also in technical difficulties that might have arisen during

online classes. To make responses more relevant and get a clearer view of differences between classroom and online teaching, we also enquired about ESP teachers' experience with video-conferencing platforms and e-learning tools before March 2020, what platforms and tools they used during the pandemic and which they preferred. We also asked about changes in the way student assessment was conducted during the exclusively online classes as compared to classroom assessment before the pandemic, as we expected significant changes in this area as well, which would have probably impacted negatively on the objectivity of assessment. Another aspect we focused on was the possible benefits of e-learning in teaching ESP, and we expected answers to this question to provide new insights into the matter. Lastly, in the open question, we asked respondents to summarise their experience of online teaching in the form of recommendations for their peers, as we considered that their experience might become a source of inspiration for other ESP teachers.

Data analysis was not performed using specific statistical methods, as the Google Form used for data collection generated graphs and charts that presented the responses to the closed and semi-closed questions statistically. We analysed those graphs and charts and extracted the most relevant information to be presented and discussed in this paper. The responses to the open question were analysed individually and compared in order to extract some practical suggestions for good practices in the online class that might benefit other ESP teachers. To maximise the potential benefits of the respondents' recommendations we listed their answers to this question in Appendix B.

4. Results

The results of the study were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively, as 10 of the 13 questions allowed respondents to add their own answers rather than just choose from the available options, and as the last one was an open question.

4.1. Challenges of online teaching

When asked to what extent teaching online after March 2020 had been challenging for them in comparison with onsite teaching (Question 1), almost half of the respondents (49.1%) chose the answer "moderately". Only 9.1% of the teachers thought they had been "extremely" challenged, while 27.3% of them considered they had been challenged "very much". On the other hand, 12.7% of the teachers opted for "slightly" challenged, and only one responded (1.8%) did not feel challenged at all by the sudden shift to online teaching. Therefore, we can conclude that most respondents (49.1%) considered the online teaching experience during the pandemic to have been moderately challenging, 36% of them found it very challenging, and only 15% felt they had faced little or no challenge at all with regard to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

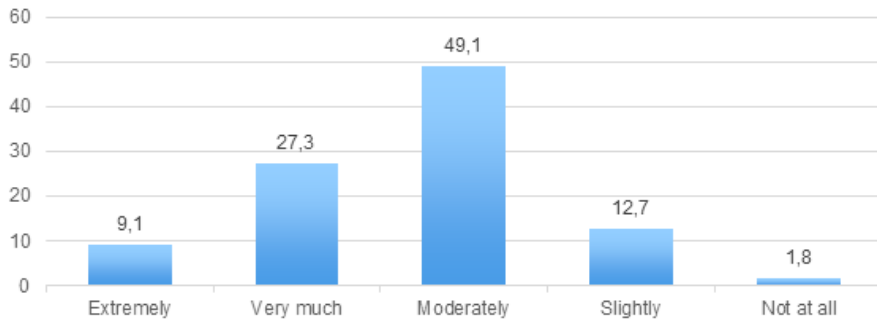


Figure 1. How challenging teaching online since March 2020 was for ESP teachers (n=55)

When justifying their answers to the first question (in response to Question 2), most respondents chose answers c. (Students sometimes encounter technical difficulties.) – 65.5%, f. (I've had to create materials for the online classes, due to the lack of ready-made ESP e-learning materials.) – 61.8%, g. (Sometimes students haven't participated actively in the online classes.) – 60%, and h. (Online teaching is more time-consuming than face-to-face teaching.) – 54.5%. A significant number of teachers (38.2%) chose answer b. (I've had some technical problems during the online classes (e.g. poor Internet connection).), while 36.4% of them selected answers d. (Teaching online was completely new to me.) and i. (I've had to submit additional documents required by the university.). Ten respondents (18.2%) selected answer a. (I haven't had the necessary electronic equipment.), which is quite a significant number, considering the paramount importance of this aspect in teaching online. Less teachers (5 and 4 respectively) chose answers e. (Using online platforms has been quite difficult for me.) – 9.1%, and j. (I've been affected by a COVID-19 related issues (e.g. I/someone close to me was quarantined/infected with SARS-CoV-2).) – 7.3%. Other reasons they listed as challenges were the following:

“Fair online testing may be a problem.” (R7¹)

“The lack of non-verbal student feedback, i.e. being unable to figure out if they understand the topic or not; the lack of physical interaction with my students and colleagues.” (R19)

“We started the second term [i.e. in March 2020] on one platform, and when the new academic year started, it was mandatory to use another platform. It did not help that all students from the faculty worked on a third platform for all other courses except English.” (R20)

“The psychological pressure due to the imposed restrictions.” (R33)

“It took a lot of time and effort to search for new platforms and learn how to use them in class. It took a lot of time and energy to channel my face-to-face classes into online classes.” (R34)

“A foreign language should be learnt and tested in the class, for an objective and qualitative evaluation.” (R39)

One respondent mentioned a positive aspect rather than a challenge. However, we consider it worth citing, as it shows how helpful a certain e-learning platform can be for

¹ R = respondent.

teachers: “Zoom proved to be a very versatile tool, since mid-March, for me, enabling me to work in a very interactive way with students.” (R13)

Another respondent explained what was different about online teaching for them: “It was interesting, I have to plan my classes in a different way. I work a lot for onsite and for online classes, the differences between them is the way of teaching and the resources used.” (R41)

To sum up, technical difficulties (for both students and teachers), creating materials adapted to the online teaching and learning environment, the lack of students’ active participation in the online classes (at times), and the fact that online teaching requires more time on the part of the teacher were considered to have been the most challenging aspects of online teaching for the respondents. Among the particular reasons respondents provided we noted the considerable time and effort required to adapt to the new teaching situation, the psychological pressure due to the highly stressful circumstances, the difficulty in carrying out objective evaluation, changing the teaching platform after one semester, and the impossibility of obtaining immediate, non-verbal feedback from the students.

4.2. Video-conferencing platforms, and e-learning apps and tools

The respondents’ answers to Question 3 revealed that the majority (n=28; 50.9%) had not used any video-conferencing platforms before March 2020, 14 of them (25.5%) had used Zoom, 10 teachers (18.2%) had used Skype, 6 of them (10.9%) were familiar with Google Meet and 4 respondents (7.3%) had utilised Microsoft Teams. Other platforms (or services) that some of the respondents listed (n=1; 1.8% in each case) were Discord, Blackboard collaborate (former Illuminate), Edmodo, Facebook groups, and Webex. Therefore, we can conclude that while more than half of the respondents (50.9%) had not been familiar with any video-conferencing platforms before March 2020, many of them (45.5%; n=25) had some experience mostly with Zoom, but also with Skype, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams. Other platforms were mentioned only once, therefore they seem to have been less used by ESP teachers before March 2020.

As regards e-learning tools or apps that the respondents had used in their teaching before March 2020 (Question 4), the prevalent answer was again negative (n=25; 45.5%); 15 teachers (27.3%) had used Kahoot, 13 of them (23.6%) selected Quizlet, and 8 of them chose Quizziz (14.5%). Only 2 respondents (3.6%) had used OneNote before the pandemic and only one (1.8%) chose Jamboard as answer. Other learning tools or apps that the respondents listed were: Edmodo (n=4; 7.3%), Mentimeter (n=2; 3.6%), Hot Potatoes (and other forms of testing available on Moodle), Wikispace, Google Drive, Hour of Code games, voice and writing tools (e.g. VoiceThread, blogger), Memrise, Duolingo, Linguee, Google Classroom, Google Suite for Education, blogging. Thus, before the pandemic, the most popular e-learning tools among ESP teachers appear to have been Kahoot, followed by Quizlet and Quizziz. OneNote, Jamboard and Mentimeter were much less used at the time, but other tools were listed as well, which are worth noting.

Questions 5 referred to the use of video-conferencing platforms after March 2020. Most respondents (n=37; 67.3%) chose Microsoft Teams, and the second most utilised

platform was Zoom (n=30; 55.5%). Google Meet was used by 13 (23.6%) of the teachers, Blackboard (and Blackboard Collaborate, in one case) by 5 of them (9.1%), and Skype by 2 teachers (3.6%). One respondent mentioned using Edmodo and another one added that, apart from using Zoom, they “participated only in other (MS Teams, Google Meet, and some other)”, but “did not like them” (R13). This is an interesting aspect to note, as it might be the case that, once one gets familiar with using a certain platform, and as long as it suits one’s needs, one could be less inclined to like using other platforms for teaching or training. Also, we can infer that after March 2020 the video-conferencing platform of choice was definitely Microsoft Teams, followed by Zoom and Google Meet. Blackboard, Skype and Edmodo were also mentioned, but not commonly used.

When asked what video-conferencing platform they would chose for their online classes (Question 6), if possible, the answers were consistent with the ones given to the previous question: the large majority (n=25) would choose Microsoft Teams, then Zoom (n=19) and Google Meet (n=7). One teacher opted for Discord and another one for using both Moodle and Zoom. One respondent stated that there was not a single choice in their case and explained: “I wouldn’t. The choice of the platform depends on the kind of class I teach.” (R7) Another teacher would choose “one that we would have a bit of training with, and time to test it.” (R20)

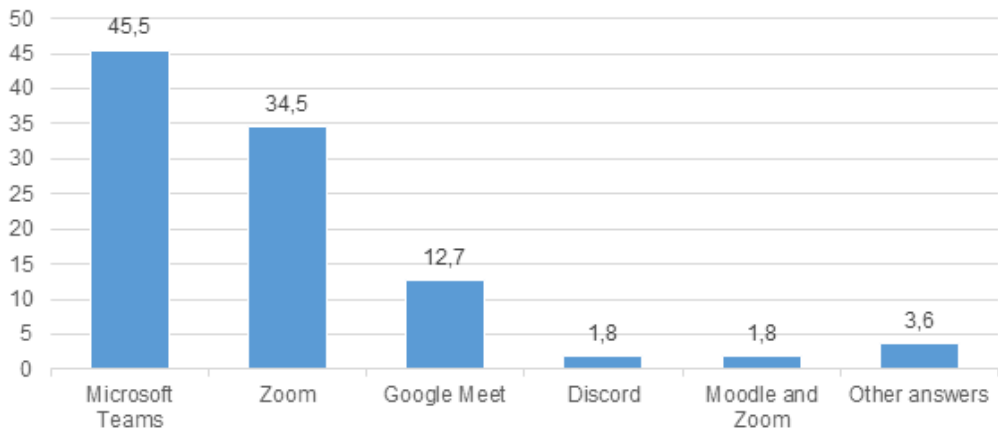


Figure 2. The video-conferencing platforms respondents would choose for teaching online (n=55)

However, comparing the answers to Questions 5 and 6, we can note that less teachers would choose the same platform they used for their online teaching if they were given this choice. This may mean that some of them were either not satisfied with the platform they needed to work on, or they had the experience of using other platforms that perhaps suited their needs better.

In Question 7, respondents chose or added the reason(s) for choosing the preferred platform(s) for online teaching. The prevalent reason (n=42; 76.4%) was that of the platform being user-friendly (answer a.). The other three reasons provided in the question were chosen by a similar number of teachers (close to half of the respondents): 26 of

them (47.3%) selected answer d. (The video and audio calls are of very good quality.), 25 (45.5%) opted for b. (You can see all/more participants in the meeting on the screen.), and 23 (41.8%) chose answer c. (It has breakout rooms.). Other reasons the respondents stated were the following:

“I’m used to it.” [Microsoft Teams] (R1)

“Zoom has also some technical weaknesses, but not too disturbing.” (R13)

“The more you know about the platform, the better you can use all its features.” (R20)

“Moodle for overall structure & organisation, Zoom for audio-video, both equally user-friendly.” (R21)

“It was purchased and adopted as the main platform by the university.” [Microsoft Teams] (R28)

“You can use the vote option for asking questions.” [Zoom] (R41)

“In my opinion, these platforms are similar and they tend to borrow useful features from one another.” (R53)

It is reassuring to observe that the large majority of the respondents consider the platforms they use for online teaching to be user-friendly, with useful features and good quality functions.

Question 8 referred to the e-learning tools or apps that ESP teachers preferred using in their online classes. Kahoot was the most frequent answer (n=18; 32.7%), closely followed by Quizlet (n=17; 30.9%), and Quizziz (n=13; 23.6%). Only 8 teachers (14.5%) opted for OneNote, and 4 (7.3%) chose Google Jamboard. Many other preferred tools were added: Mentimeter, Padlet, Wordwall, screen capture technology (Snagit), Canva, EdPuzzle, Google Forms and Sheets (for collaborative writing), Google Docs, Pear Deck, AnswerGarden, Padlet, BlinkLearning, BookWidgets, LearningApps, Nearpod, iSLCollective, TED Talks, Assignments within Microsoft Teams, the Voting Function in Zoom, Socrative, MS Teams Forms, Moodle, the MS Teams or Zoom chat. Two of the respondents stated that they had no preferences. One on them also explained their answer: “I have no preferences. What I use depends on what is available to students.” (R7) Thus, we can note the variety of e-learning tools that respondents preferred using in their online classes and remark that the prevalent choices were similar to those in Question 4 (e-learning tools respondents had used before March 2020), namely Kahoot, Quizlet and Quizziz.

In Question 9, teachers were asked about the online tools they used in order to check students’ work during ESP classes. Of the five options listed, the “Meeting chat” was the preferred choice (n=26; 47.3%), followed by a “Shared Google Docs file” (n=25; 45.5%). Less teachers, but still a significant number of them (n=17; 30.9%) selected “An online polling tool”, while 13 respondents (23.6%) chose the “Interactive whiteboard available on the platform used in class”, and only 5 teachers (9.1%) opted for OneNote. Other answers that were added are: the Notebook in Teams, shared MS Office docs (work in cloud); Annotation; MS Teams or Blackboard Assignments; (MS or Google) Forms; document sharing; AnswerGarden, Padlet; various submission documents/ assessments; students sharing their screens; Nearpod; Moodle Tests. Other answers, which include explanations, are listed as follows:

“Our own Faculty’s online platform.” (R32)

“None, as my groups are very small (up to 10) and can be done in short, intense interactive communication with all.” (R13)

“I corrected their submitted (via email/university platform) homework in Word or in PDF and sent it back to them.” (R34)

“Screen sharing, you can share an iPad and use it as a whiteboard to support your class.” (R41)

“I ask students to upload various handouts in designated folders in Teams. They can be directly edited on the platform.” (R53)

In conclusion, when checking students’ work in online classes, respondents used prevalently features and tools available on the video-conferencing platform they worked on (meeting chat, interactive whiteboard, OneNote, Notebook, Forms, etc.), but also shared online files (Google Docs) or online polling tools. We note, once more, the variety of e-learning means teachers employed for the purpose stated above.

4.3. Students’ assessment

In this study, we also aimed to find out what means ESP teachers have used for assessing their students. Therefore, Questions 10 and 11 referred to assessment.

The majority of the respondents (54.5%, n=30) considered that teaching online affected moderately the way they assessed their students (Question 10). An important percentage of them (30.9%; n=17) felt the assessment was influenced “very much” by the online teaching environment, while only 3 of the teachers (5.5%) chose the answer “extremely”. A similar percentage of them (7.3%; n=4) thought assessment was slightly affected by this new manner of teaching, and only one respondent (1.8%) believed that online teaching had no influence on students’ assessment. Thus, in most cases (90.9%), ESP teachers considered that students’ assessment was influenced at least moderately by the online teaching environment, and only 9.1% of them felt there was only a slight influence or none at all.

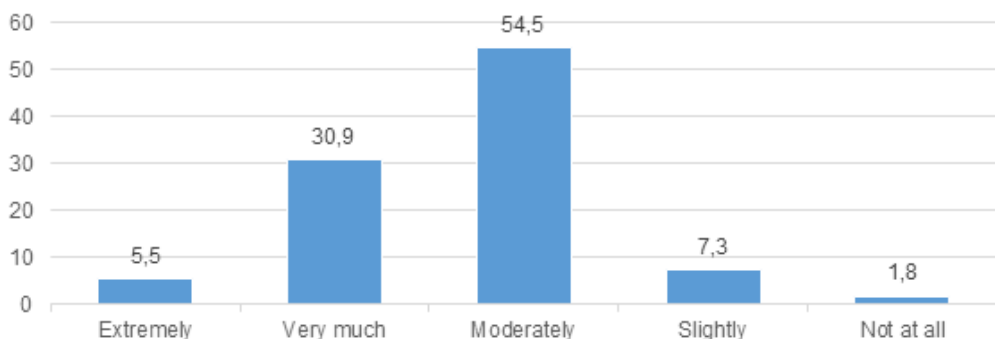


Figure 3. Extent to which online teaching affected the way respondents assessed their students (n=55)

In Question 11 we asked about the differences between the manner of assessing students before and after March 2020 (onsite and online). Most respondents (43.6%; n=24) chose answer a. (The ongoing assessment has been based on online tests, such as quizzes.). A similar percentage of them selected answers c. (The final oral assessment included elements that are specific to regular, in-person written assessment.) – 32.7% (n=18), and b. (The final assessment included only an oral test.) – 30.9% (n=17). Eleven respondents added their own ideas related to what they did differently in assessing their students online. Ongoing assessment and an oral final evaluation seemed to be the preferred methods of online assessment, replacing the traditional summative assessment:

“I gave up written tests in favour of continuous assessment and an oral test.” (R1)

“The final assessment was based on portfolio and oral presentations.” (R16)

“I would typically assess them with a pen-and-paper test. This time they had to prepare an essay and then had an oral exam.” (R20)

“More assessment of students’ month-to-month (applied) work, both individual and in tandems.” (R13)

Other respondents mentioned essays (R41), projects (R44), carrying out “a more complex assessment” (R23), or replacing the final oral test with an online quiz (R21). An interesting answer referred to replacing testing knowledge with problem solving abilities in the written assessment: “The written examination does not test knowledge but rather the ability to solve specific problems.” (R3)

We can conclude that, in the respondents’ experience, online assessment shifted focus from summative to ongoing assessment based on online tests, essays, or projects. Also, the final written examination was mostly replaced by an oral test or sometimes by a quiz. All in all, online students’ assessment, as reflected in the results of this study, seems to have become, in general, “more complex”.

4.4. Benefits of e-learning

In Question 12, teachers were asked about the benefits of e-learning when teaching ESP online, according to their experience. Out of the five options provided as possible answers, the large majority of the respondents selected answers d. (Acquisition of new technical skills) – 81.8% (n=45), and e. (Comfort. It enables teaching without leaving house.) – 70.9% (n=39). Also, most respondents chose the first answer (a. Multimodality (i.e. application of multiple literacies within one medium)) – 58.2% (n=32). Less ESP teachers selected as benefits answers c. (Individual monitoring of students’ progress) – 29.1% (n=16), and b. (Better classroom management) – 16.4% (n=9).

Six respondents provided their own answer to this question. One of them highlighted the advantage of an individual approach to teaching, which leads to better instruction: “Almost effortless additional individual contacts with students, if needed, and thereafter their stronger improvements.” (R13) Two teachers appreciated the opportunity to build a stronger relationship with their students:

“A more personal relationship between teacher and students.” (R21)

“Better connection with the students through the platform messaging board.” (R27)

Other two of them referred to the benefit of learning and practising new things:

“I have learnt that I am very flexible and I am not afraid of learning and discovering new methods. Some students really liked this type of learning.” (R34)

“The opportunity for learning new things and practicing them every day.” (R51)

However, not all the respondents found benefits in teaching online: “Unfortunately I have not noticed any productive benefits through online teaching.” (R39)

In conclusion, most respondents considered that they benefited from online teaching mostly in terms of gaining news skills. On the other hand, the majority of them appreciated the comfort teaching from home entails. Other benefits were listed, among which the individual approach to teaching and the opportunity to build stronger relationships with students and to learn new things.

4.5. Recommendations for ESP teachers

The last question (13) in the survey was designed as an open-question so that ESP teachers could share their experience of teaching online with the aim of helping other teachers who might learn from the respondents' experience. We included all the relevant answers in Appendix B, as we considered it important for readers to have access to all the suggestions the respondents offered them.

The recommendations were very diverse, and referred (among other things) to preparation (which requires more time than for onsite classes), experimenting with different platforms and tools, but using constantly a few selected and tested tools and apps, using tutorials to become familiar with online tools, being open and patient, empathic and flexible, enjoying the experience of online teaching, discussing (technical) problems with the students, experimenting and using multiple sources from the Internet, being aware that more preparation is needed than for onsite classes (planning the lessons carefully), constantly updating teaching techniques and materials, giving clear instructions, alternating skills and types of activities, using a lot of group work and games to engage and motivate students.

Some recommendations were surprisingly thorough, as the ones offered by respondent 8 (see Appendix B), who provided useful tips on how to use the Chat Box, Breakout Rooms, EdPuzzle, video and audio materials, etc., but without overwhelming the students, and suggested doing “regular review activities and quizzes”.

Other suggestions for ESP teachers included sharing good practices, being creative, changing the approach to assessment (for example by using project-based assessment), doing “more with less”, offering choices to students and asking for feedback, establishing rules of communication, always having a plan B, making classes interactive and diverse, being enthusiastic, considering individual student needs, using computer-aided assessment tools.

Some respondents highlighted the importance of the human element in online teaching:

“Mindful teaching - pedagogy rather than exploitation of tools.” (R27)

“... keep the human element at the core of the teaching process.” (R35)

“Create a friendly and supportive atmosphere, interact with your students, and, simply, try to convey your enthusiasm :)” (R49)

Nine of the respondents offered no recommendations, and one of them also gave a reason for this choice: “I have no specific recommendations. The MS TEAMS online tools are sufficient.” (R6)

We can conclude that the respondents’ recommendations are varied and complex and can hardly be summarised in this section. Therefore, we listed them in Appendix B, for readers to be able to select from them the suggestions that suit them the most.

5. Discussion

The present research looked into the new reality of online ESP teaching. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, online teaching was applied mainly as a supplementary solution to the face-to-face teaching, introduced by aware and trained teachers (Protopsaltis & Baum 2019), whereas due to the COVID-19 pandemic it has become the only option for many unexperienced and unprepared teachers. The new situation forced both teachers and students to participate in the new and for many unknown format of teaching and learning, and also required a certain flexibility and teachers’ willingness to use new tools. On the other hand, the pandemic has contributed to a breakthrough in distant learning, creating a new environment for those who had never experienced it, while the encountered challenges have stimulated the introduction of new innovative solutions.

The findings of this study revealed that, while most ESP teachers who participated in the survey found online teaching starting with March 2020 challenging, they also acknowledged the benefits of this form of education and offered insightful recommendations to their peers.

One of the expected challenges confirmed in the study was that the majority of the respondents had not used video-conferencing platforms and e-learning tools or apps before March 2020. Also, technical difficulties encountered when working online, which presumably affected the efficiency of the interaction in the virtual classroom, were listed as the most significant challenges ESP teachers faced, which is in line with the results of the research conducted by Ataiants & Podgornova (2021).

Interestingly, the study results show that the video-conferencing platforms the respondents would choose for their online classes, if given the opportunity, are broadly the same platforms they had already used before March 2020. This might indicate that not only had the teachers become familiar with those platforms, but the latter most probably also satisfied their teaching needs. Similarly, the study revealed that the e-learning tools respondents preferred using, both before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, were Kahoot, Quizlet and Quizziz, which suggests they might be the most

popular e-learning tools among ESP teachers. Quizlet was also mentioned in the study conducted by Chang et al. (2018), as the surveyed educators' preferred online teaching tool. Therefore, we can infer that our study confirms the effectiveness and usability of this tool in the online language class.

Another finding that drew our attention was that most respondents mentioned using the meeting chat or a shared Google Doc file to check their students' work in the online class. As this task is perhaps one of the most challenging for teachers to do online, all the other means that respondents listed are worth considering.

Regarding the students' online assessment, the ESP teachers surveyed favoured quizzes, essays, projects and various oral activities for the ongoing assessment, and mainly oral tests for the final evaluation. Also, a very large majority of them (almost 91%) considered that the online teaching environment influenced at least moderately the way they assessed their students, which is in accordance with the conclusions shared in the survey conducted by Muthuprasad et al. (2021).

As benefits of e-learning when teaching ESP online, most of the respondents appreciated the acquisition of new technical skills and the comfort of teaching from their home, but also multimodality. The opportunity to learn and practice new things and the possibility of establishing better connections with the students and of having an individual approach to teaching were also mentioned.

The recommendations for other ESP teachers provided in the last part of the survey, though very diverse, contain a few common elements such as careful preparation and planning, daring to experiment with new platforms, tools and apps, communicating clearly, engaging students with alternating activities, including short videos, games and quizzes, without neglecting the human element in teaching online. We consider this part particularly valuable, as readers can learn from the respondents' experience of online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, and might apply some of the suggestions in their own teaching, given that, as one of the respondents stated, "online teaching is here to stay" (R38).

6. Conclusions

We believe that the results of the present study reveal, at least partly, some of the challenges that ESP teachers have faced after the abrupt transition to online teaching in March 2020. Also, they offer valuable insights into preferred platforms and tools the respondents used for online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, and into the way they assessed their students in the online environment.

Moreover, some of the answers that respondents provided could serve as sources of inspiration for other teachers, such as the preferred online tools and apps which were mentioned in the answers to Question 8 and which could be worth exploring, as well as all the answers to the last question, in which the respondents kindly offered various thought-provoking recommendations to their peers.

Also, the fact that the respondents were all ESP teachers from 10 European countries and 18 universities increases the relevance of the study. Another strong point is the fact

that most of the questions in the survey (10 out of 13) were semi-closed, and there was one open question as well, which offered the respondents the opportunity to share their experience of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and offer suggestions to their fellow teachers through the present paper.

The limitations of the study consist in the rather low number of completed questionnaires (n=55), and the (self-imposed) constraint of not including too many questions, or a larger number of open questions in the survey, in order to keep it user-friendly. Though the results of this study are both informative and encouraging, further research in the area of ESP teaching online would be necessary in order to learn more about specific challenges and possible solutions to make online teaching less stressful and demanding and more natural and satisfying.

Appendix A

Online ESP teaching Questionnaire

Name of the university where you work; City; Country:

ESP subject you teach:

1. To what extent has teaching online since March 2020 been challenging for you in comparison with onsite teaching?
a. Extremely b. Very much c. Moderately d. Slightly e. Not at all
2. Please choose one or more reasons for justifying your answer to Question 1 (if you answer was other than “Not at all”).
 - a. I haven’t had the necessary electronic equipment.
 - b. I’ve had some technical problems during the online classes (e.g. poor Internet connection).
 - c. Students have sometimes encountered technical difficulties.
 - d. Teaching online was completely new to me.
 - e. Using online platforms has been quite difficult for me.
 - f. I’ve had to create materials for the online classes (due to the lack of ready-made ESP e-learning materials).
 - g. Sometimes students haven’t participated actively in the online classes.
 - h. Online teaching is more time-consuming than face-to-face teaching.
 - i. I’ve had to submit additional documents required by the university.
 - j. I’ve been affected by a COVID-19 related issues (e.g. I/someone close to me was quarantined/infected with SARS-CoV-2).
 - k. Other reasons (please specify):
3. Did you use any video-conferencing platforms before March 2020?
 - a. Yes. I used:
 - a) Microsoft Teams b) Zoom c) Google Meet d) others (please specify):
 - b. No
4. Did you use any e-learning tools/apps before March 2020?
 - a. Yes. I used:

- a) Quizizz b) Quizlet c) Kahoot d) OneNote e) Google Jamboard d) others (please specify):
- b. No
5. What video-conferencing platform(s) have you used in your online teaching since March 2020?
- a. Microsoft Teams b. Zoom c. Google Meet d. other (please specify):
6. If you could choose one video-conferencing platform for your online classes, which one would you choose?
- a. Microsoft Teams b. Zoom c. Google Meet d. other (please specify):
7. Why do you prefer the platform you chose in Question 6? (multiple answers are possible)
- a. It is user-friendly.
b. You can see all/more participants in the meeting on the screen.
c. It has breakout rooms.
d. The video and audio calls are of very good quality.
e. Other reasons (please specify):
8. What e-learning tools/apps do you prefer using in your online classes?
- a. Quizizz
b. Quizlet
c. Kahoot
d. OneNote
e. Google Jamboard
f. Others (please specify):
9. What online tools do you use to check students' work during ESP classes?
- a. An online polling tool (e.g., Socrative, Mentimeter, Kahoot)
b. Interactive whiteboard (available on the distance learning platform I use in class)
c. OneNote
d. Meeting chat
e. Shared Google Docs file
f. Others (please specify):
10. To what extent has online teaching affected the way you assess your students?
- a. Extremely b. Very much c. Moderately d. Slightly e. Not at all
11. What has been different in the way you assessed your students after March 2020 as compared with onsite assessment?
- a. The ongoing assessment has been based on online tests (e.g. quizzes).
b. The final assessment included only an oral test.
c. The final oral assessment included elements that are specific to regular, in-person written assessment.
d. Others (please specify):
12. What benefits of e-learning have you noticed when teaching ESP online?
- a. Multimodality (i.e. application of multiple literacies within one medium)
b. Better classroom management
c. Individual monitoring of students' progress
d. Acquisition of new technical skills
e. Comfort. It enables teaching without leaving house.
f. Others (please specify):
13. What recommendations do you have for teaching ESP online that you could share with other teachers?

Appendix B

Respondents' answers to question 13

"I assign a lot of homework, so it's a good idea to find the format for homework that will be easy to check." (R1)

"Be open to new possibilities, try out different tools/techniques and find the most suitable one(s) to your students and yourself; be patient, it takes practice; openly discuss problems with students because they're usually better informed in terms of using modern technology and are glad to contribute with advice or some practical ideas." (R2)

"Do not try to transfer traditional classes to the Internet. These are two different ways of teaching and assessment." (R3)

"To use multiple sources that the Internet gives us, to enrich lessons (of course in balanced quantity)." (R4)

"More preparation than in traditional classes since there are no prepared ESP online materials." (R5)

"I have no specific recommendations. The MS TEAMS online tools are sufficient." (R6)

"Teaching ESP online is good for developing business skills like telephoning, teleconferencing or writing emails as it all looks natural." (R7)

"Do not be afraid to use the Chat Box – it works well for students who are reluctant to speak in front of the others – and be sure to give students chance/time to write, do not rush on after a few seconds as they may still be contributing.

Then for small group work, engage the students through the use of Breakout Rooms – but with very clear instructions about any activities first and ensuring the students have all the materials they will need, and timing, before they go in. Breakout Rooms work well for small group discussions but also for collaborative working on tasks such as a controlled grammar or vocabulary gap-fill ones. Students discuss answers together and negotiate and come to a decision about the correct answers.

Use video, audio, online quizzes etc. to vary the pace of the lesson but do not overwhelm the students with different media. And think about using apps such as EdPuzzle to integrate quizzes into video content to ensure a more structured video experience, along with scaffolded activities based around the video (rather than just saying "And now watch this video").

Reduce the amount of new information in each lesson and, when using PPT, do not overload slides with text or visuals.

Do regular review activities and quizzes to identify areas which still need work. After lessons, retrospectively assess the success of materials and be prepared to adapt and make changes for their next use. Remember that not everything that works in the classroom will be suitable online even if it is a preferred activity of a teacher.

Finally, be sure to be comfortable with the technology so that the lesson runs smoothly." (R8)

"Try different platforms as it is a very subjective preference (unless your institution requires a specific one)." (R9)

"Teachers should be fully familiar with the online tools before using them; there are loads of tutorials and they should not be afraid to experiment!" (R10)

"I would advise them to take their time to prepare and be braver in experiments in the online platforms." (R11)

"One of the advantages of teaching ESP online is the availability and easy access to various online resources, so every teacher should constantly update his or her repertoire of teaching tools and techniques and create interesting digital content and language integrated learning materials." (R12)

“I will not reject it, I will continue to use (also) zoom, so sort of blended principles, regardless the circumstances, if permitted by my university/department in the future.” (R13)

“Clarity when giving tasks; alternate skills and types of activities; take into account the different learning styles of the students.” (R14)

“Adopt an incremental approach to technology integration & use so as to avoid work overload; build up a multi-annual plan so as to be able to recycle and repurpose learning/ teaching materials; integrate teaching and research so as to be able to monitor efficiency and recalibrate/ fine tune teaching approach. Be patient and enjoy!” (R16)

“Discussing more topics during one class with our students to keep them more focused; using group work as much as possible because it also allows the students to get to know one another.” (R19)

“Share your good practices...” (R20)

“Use games in class, the students are motivated to be more active.” (R23)

“Use better technical equipment, explore all the options /features of the application used, make good use of the online medium, find more effective ways to get students involved in the online activities.” (R24)

“Balance activities / skills (attention span tends to be shorter online and class work is more difficult to control); step out of comfort zones and try new apps available online, be creative (don't stick to old materials / techniques). Completely change assessment, if you still use traditional testing – I only use project-based assessment.” (R25)

“Mindful teaching – pedagogy rather than exploitation of tools, offering choices (in learning and assessment) and doing more with less.” (R27)

“Get your students' feedback on which aspects of your teaching work better than others. Ensure participation of all students by keeping track of their contribution to classes. Encourage your students to keep their cameras on during classes.” (R28)

“Sharing info from the world wide web.”(R29)

“95% of knowhow is already there so don't be afraid to try new tools, ask colleagues for help and have fun teaching :)” (R30)

“Don't be afraid of online teaching! It takes a bit of planning so it can be time-consuming, but it also offers a lot of opportunities to communicate and interact. Explore various options and online tools and try to adapt them to your teaching situation. Redesign teaching materials to fit the online environment. Store and organize materials so that students can easily access them. Constantly ask your students for feedback and take it into account when planning future classes. Try to organize various activities and see what works best. Give students clear instructions and encourage them to ask for clarification. Establish some rules of communication, for instance students can use the “raise your hand” button in MS Teams to indicate not only that they want to say something but that they finished a task or are ready to move on, etc. Always have a plan B in case technical issues occur. Don't expect all classes to turn out great or to be enjoyed by all students. Try to make your classes as interactive and diverse as possible in order to maintain the students' interest and motivation.” (R31)

“Become familiar with the platform/tools you are using and adapt both teaching and assessment to the online medium.” (R32)

“Just hang in there (sorry, no recommendations).” (R33)

“Do not be afraid of trying out new methods.” (R34)

“Stick to just a few-2 or 3-platforms and tools and keep the human element at the core of the teaching process.” (R35)

“Using video and short films makes teaching/learning English a nice and funny experience.” (R36)

“Share your knowledge and experience with other colleagues to help each other and achieve good results while teaching online.” (R37)

“Online teaching has helped me grow professionally speaking and, above all, as a human being in the sense that my lessons were also opportunities to get to know my students a bit better (i.e. their fears, etc.) and to explore the human side of teaching, a side beyond marks, planning, etc. Online teaching is here to stay, let’s embrace this opportunity!” (R38)

“Teachers have to keep up with the time and do their best to make the teaching-learning process evolve smoothly and flawlessly. No matter the situation and different challenges, teachers have to be ready to adapt themselves fast to the new conditions and to help students get knowledge in the best way possible.” (R40)

“We should adapt the assessment process to the online classes.” (R41)

“Always be open to new technologies, tools, modes, etc. Always check if your students cooperate.” (R42)

“The assessment should focus on projects that need to be presented orally and not on one final written test.” (R44)

“Try to collaborate with other English teachers so you can share experience and useful information!” (R45)

“Experience.” (R46)

“I would recommend a focus on a number of carefully selected tools and apps, used constantly, tested before implementing them in (synchronous) classes. Additionally, keeping an open mind with regard to the opportunities and affordances brought about by the use of technology!” (R47)

“Sharing PP presentations, using Moodle platform for quizzes and self-study.” (R48)

“Create a friendly and supportive atmosphere, interact with your students, and, simply, try to convey your enthusiasm :)” (R49)

“Don’t overload the students :-)” (R50)

“Good and detailed planning from the onset of course and clear communication with students; empathy and flexibility in tackling challenges.” (R51)

“Trying to adapt online methods of teaching and evaluation to individual students’ needs.” (R52)

“I find the apps that allow for frequent and brief revision very practical.” (R53)

“I have noticed they enjoy quizzes and interactive games, as well as being challenged to answer, some more than others, certainly.” (R54)

“Familiarize yourself with computer-aided assessment tools. Praise even small improvements regularly.” (R55)

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