A Study on Quality in Virtual Foreign Language Learning- A Student Perspective

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Abstract - The transformation of face-to-face learning to online learning as a result of the outbreak of COVID - 19 pandemic affected every sector of education. Foreign language education was similarly affected by the shift of teaching methods from face-to-face learning to online learning. The study aims on identifying the student perception of online learning in relation to face-to-face learning in a foreign language literature classroom. The sample group consisted of 29 undergraduates from the University of Kelaniya, who followed German as a foreign language for their four-year honours degree programme and participated in fully online sessions for one year. A mixed method was used to collect data for the research. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from the students through a questionnaire, which consisted of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The results of the study show that the students have experienced positive aspects of online learning such as flexibility, possibility of saving energy and time, improvement of target language skills, literary skills, vocabulary skills and concentration level during online sessions. Disadvantages experienced by the students were internet issues, power failures and lack of social relationships, which were unavoidable during online sessions. Even though majority of students believed in the effectiveness of online learning and had positive experiences, the unavoidable drawbacks hindered them from preferring fully online sessions. Therefore, to get the best outcome, mixed method - the so-called blended learning was more preferable to teach literature in a German-as-a-foreign-language classroom according to the student perspective.

Keywords - *Online learning, Face-to-face learning, Foreign language learning, Learning literature, Student perspective*

Introduction

Online learning, which became more popular after the outbreak of the COVID - 19 pandemic had a great impact on every sector of education. It had an influence on each and every small aspect of people's lives and in this sense, language learning is not excluded (Zboun & Farrah, 2021, p.71). Foreign language teaching and learning had different impacts of online learning on its

branches of study such as comprehension, history, literature and linguistics. It used computer-assisted learning for ages for the purpose of improving foreign language skills. Nevertheless, the total shift from traditional classrooms to virtual language learning classrooms caused benefits, issues as well as challenges for the students. "In the age of technological advancement, schools can now provide effective classroom teaching via the Web. This shift in the pedagogical medium is forcing academic institutions to rethink how they want to deliver their course content" (Paul & Jefferson, 2019, p.25). It paved the way for the students to gain good knowledge through limited flexibility in spite of busy schedules. And through a single internet connection it provides the facility to connect the classroom worldwide (Paul & Jefferson, 2019, p. 48).

Literature is one of the main components of language teaching and learning. Learning literature in a foreign language classroom improves language learners' reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Reading skills are being enhanced, as students read literary texts more often. It contains complex grammatical structures and vocabulary, which they internalize, when reading the texts several times. The structures, which were internalized by the students, are being used by the students when they write. Listening skills are being improved, while they listen to the lecturer when he/she explains the plot, literary techniques and other related explanations. The use of other audio-visual media during teaching literature helps students to improve their listening skills. Speaking skills are developed by continuous listening to the language as well as speaking activities given during literature lessons. Complex grammar and vocabulary in literary texts however help in the enhancement of speaking skills.

E-learning is not a new trend. It can be traced back to the 18th century and has been developing for 300 years. Its development is parallel to innovations in communication technology and distance learning. It was more common in the late 1800s and underwent a rapid growth in 1990. It is not considered a new phenomenon. With technology enhancement, the development of e-learning and later online learning took place. At the beginning, e-learning used parcel post, radio and television for teaching purposes (Kentnor, 2015, p.86).

In 1840 in England Isacc Pitman started teaching short handwriting by using parcel posts. He mailed post cards, where he wrote instructions to transcribe texts from the Bible into short hand. He also received parcels for correction (Verduin & Clark, 1991, p.14). Later in 1919, professors at the University of Wisconsin began an Amateur Wireless Station, which was known as WHA. It was first licensed as the radio station for educational broadcasting (Engel, 1936

as cited in Kentnor, 2015, p.105). In the 1920s, the use of new communication technology in Europe was popular. Radio became more reliable in countries where postal service or literary rates were low (Kentnor, 2015, p.46). In Latin America, radio broadcasting organizations were leaders of distance education, when printing and other "individual correspondence" was less emphasized. This is equally applied in current systems too (Greville & Rumble, 1986, p.91). Soon after some years of using radio broadcasting, television was used for more effective distance learning purposes. Even though television was used by people, it was not used for educational purposes until 1932. In 1932 and 1937 the first use of television for educational broadcasting took place at the University of Iowa (König & Hill, 1967). Later, specific channels were reserved for educational purposes by the Federal Communications Commission. By 1966, a total of 632 channels were reserved for education. Despite endeavours, the use of television for education distracted students, which led to the use of computer as a medium to deliver teaching for students (Kentnor, 2015, p.61).

   With the emergence of the computer as the medium for online educational purposes, online education programs were established in 1989 when the University of Phoenix started using one of the first online services. It was called "Compu Serve". Consequently in 1991, "www" emerged. University of Phoenix became one of the first universities to offer opportunities for online educational programs using the internet (Carlson & Carnevale, 2001, p.83). Alfred P. Sloan foundation developed asynchronous learning networks in 1992 for students who were unable to attend traditional classrooms. The same foundation started funding institutions to offer online education with the aim of improving the quality of online education (Kentnor, 2015, p.32).

   To create a balance between   traditional and online learning, solutions should be found for challenges and issues faced by students and teachers with regard to quality of online learning. According to quality measurement in research, an educational process is divided into 5 categories. They are context quality, structure quality, process quality, output quality or impact quality. There are different perspectives about quality. It is important to clarify various connotations of quality in different contexts. When assuring quality, there is no universal standard (Ehler, 2004, p.11). Quality assurance can be done from both student and teacher perspectives. The challenges and issues perceived by learners should be investigated in depth to receive a successful understanding of e-learning. Consequently, recommendations can be given to strengthen the system of online learning.

Research problem

University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka offers Bachelor of Arts general and honours degree programs in German as a foreign language. Under language teaching, literature is considered a channel to develop students' language skills. Before the outbreak of the COVID - 19 pandemic, the sessions were conducted in the traditional classroom, whereas fully online sessions were started after the outbreak of the COVID- 19 pandemic. This became a challenge for the students and teachers. Some of them were interested in the virtual language classrooms and some others had disinterest. To find solutions to this issue, this study was done. This study tries to identify and analyze the challenges, issues, interests and disinterests of students from a student perspective. The research questions are as follows:

- What is the most preferable mode of instruction for literature learners of German as a foreign language at the University of Kelaniya?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of learning German literature online from the perspective of the students?

Research objectives

The research was conducted to determine the most preferable mode of instruction among literature learners of German as a foreign language and to identify the advantages and disadvantages of online learning compared to traditional learning according to the perspectives of the students.

Limitations

The research was done to identify the most preferable mode of instruction among literature learners of German as a foreign language. The sample consisted of students from the University of Kelaniya, who studied German as a foreign language for their Bachelor of Arts Honours degree. As the students selected for the research sample were only from the University of Kelaniya, this was considered a limitation.

Literature review

Many studies have been conducted in the field of online learning comparing its effectiveness over face-to-face learning in a foreign language classroom. Exploring student experiences and satisfaction levels in online

learning is significant in accepting e-learning and enhancing the quality of online learning (Sampson et al., 2010, p . 8).

The study "Comparing Face-To-Face and Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education" discusses the overview of both modes of instruction critically. It identifies the weaknesses and strengths of both modes, which are similar to the results of the present study. It also discusses how both methods can be used effectively to get the best outcome. It focuses on a large group of students, which is contrary to this study, as the present study uses a small group of students. The results of the study suggested that teachers and instructors should take efforts to adopt blended learning for the benefit of students (Ananga & Biney, 201721).

Janmaimool & Nunsunanon in their research "Online vs. Face-to-Face Lecture Courses: Factors Impacting the Effectiveness of Online Learning" discuss the effectiveness of online learning over face-to-face learning and identify the factors which impact the effectiveness of online learning. Factors which affect online learning include interaction between learners, interaction between learners and the teacher, quality of online learning tools, ability to comprehend the instructions and "situational challenges". The results of the study show that face-to-face sessions are more effective than online sessions. The results of this study are not similar to that of the present study (Janmaimool & Nunsunanon, 2021).

The research "Moving from Face-to-Face to Online Teaching" explores creative instructional strategies, which can be used in delivering lessons online. Good instructional strategies help to face challenges successfully after the shift from face-to-face learning to online learning (Esani, 2010).

Due to the outbreak of the deadly COVID- 19 pandemic, the Macedonian educational process was interrupted. To continue educational activities, many higher educational institutes offered online learning opportunities similar to the situation of the following study. The study "Online Foreign Language Teaching" focuses on the experiences of students in virtual foreign language classrooms offered in Macedonian higher educational institutes. It explores student motivation, advantages and disadvantages of online learning sessions as well as difficulties faced by the students during online sessions as in the present study. Results show that even though the students participated in the sessions actively, they preferred face-to-face learning over online learning (Ivanovska et al., 2020). Further, the results of this study are not alignment with the results of present the study.

The study "An Insight into Online Foreign Language Learning and Teaching in the Era of COVID-19 Pandemic" explores the perception and attitudes of the students towards online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Faculty of Informatics and Management of University of Hardee Kralove in Czech Republic. According to this study, the perception of the students was measured based on different facts. These include language skills, use of learning material, student motivation to participate in online sessions, preparedness of the students as well as teachers, and effectiveness of foreign language learning virtually. The students believed that they have not improved on their knowledge or skills. Further the results emphasize the preference of the students for printed material. The reason for this is that they can easily write down notes and highlight words and phrases. A good level of preparedness was recognized among both the students and teachers. Even though the students were motivated, they experienced social distancing as a negative aspect of online learning, which is also obvious in the present study. It was clear that online learning is effective but cannot be replaced. The teacher during face-to-face sessions is irreplaceable. Therefore, educational institutes should provide "technical", "mental", and financial support during the challenging period (Klimova, 2021).

Methodology

The University of Kelaniya offers German for a three-year general degree as well as for a four-year honors degree program. Besides different course units including comprehension, history and linguistics in the German language, literature is taught in general and special degree programs starting from the second academic year. The sample for the present study consisted of 29 students from the fourth year (final year) at the University, who followed German as a subject for their Bachelor of Arts special degree. The group consisted of students from two entire academic years, who experienced online learning for at least one whole year for German literature lessons. Until the outbreak of the COVID - 19 pandemic, the students participated in face-to-face lectures at the University, which changed after the outbreak of the COVID - 19 pandemic. Hereafter students participated in fully online sessions, where they were taught all the course units virtually.

Under the German course unit GERM 43545- Contemporary German Literature, the German novel *Perfume- The Story of a Murderer*, which is a historical fiction as well as a thriller, is taught. Data for the study was collected after the participation of the students in this course unit. A mixed method was used, where qualitative and quantitative data were collected through a

questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of close-ended as well as open-ended questions, where students shared their opinion on different types of questions. The close-ended questions were used to collect quantitative data and the open-ended questions qualitative data. The questionnaire consisted of questions on students preferred method between online and face-to-face sessions, advantages and disadvantages of online learning, preferable teaching methods used during teaching German literature online and the question whether they are willing to go back to face-to-face sessions. The questionnaire was sent to the students through a google form link. Secondary data for the study were collected through printed and digital media.

Data analysis and Discussion

The primary data for the study were collected through a questionnaire. It consisted of seven close-ended and three open-ended questions. Content data analysis was used to analyze the data gathered via the questionnaire.

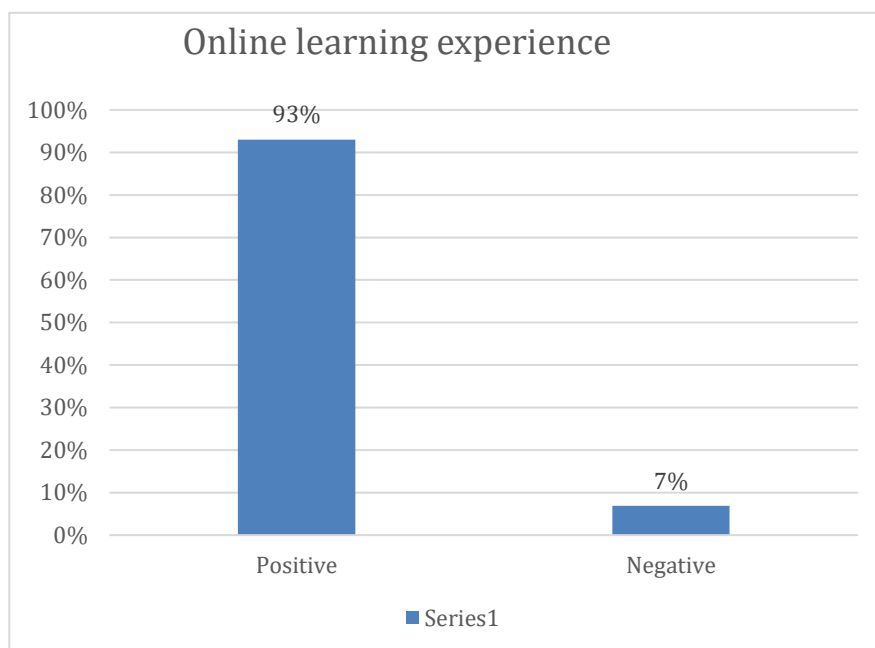Question 1: How is the experience of online learning at the University?

Figure 1: Online Learning Experience

Figure 1 shows the experience of the students during learning German literature online. 93% of the students had a positive experience with online

learning, whereas 7% of the students had negative experiences. When analyzing the feedback of the students who had positive experiences, they have concentrated more on lessons, enhanced language and literary skills, considered online learning as flexible, improved speaking skills, worked on new online platforms, managed to use new online tools, enhanced self-directed learning, had interest in breakout room activities, spared energy and time, and therefore enjoyed their time during online sessions. This shows that a significant majority had a positive experience in the virtual literature classroom.

Question 2: What are the advantages of online learning in the literature classroom?
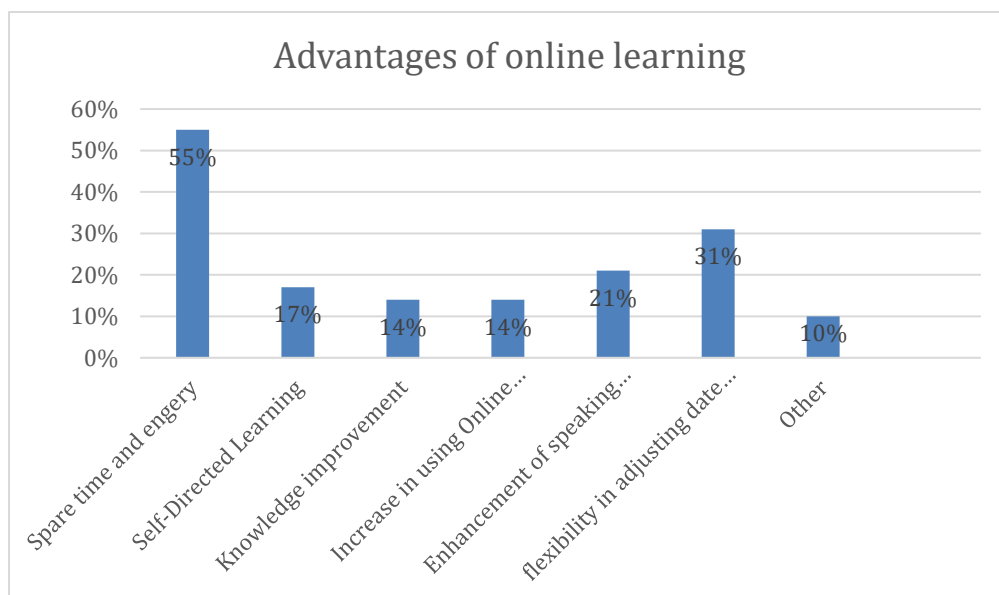

Figure 2: Advantages of Online Learning

The most common advantages as mentioned by the students can be seen in Figure 2. The majority agreed that they could spare time and energy. This was specially observed among students who participated in online sessions. A number of feedback reports even supported this advantage as they believed that they could save their time more during online sessions. Previously they had to allocate time for traveling, finding classrooms, accommodation and for other requirements. Nevertheless, during online sessions, they were at home or at any other comfortable place, from where they could participate in online sessions. This helped them in increasing the focus on lessons to a great extent. Some students added in their feedback that the saved time was used to do self-directed learning and they agreed that it helped to improve the focus on lessons. A less common

advantage was that they increased the use of online tools and platforms. They got to know about online tools, which they did not use before. For example, they were not familiar with Canva, Google Docs and Google Slides, and some had not heard about these tools. While doing group activities in breakout rooms, they could use these tools to work online within a group. It was easy for them to edit and add more information at the same time from different places of the country.
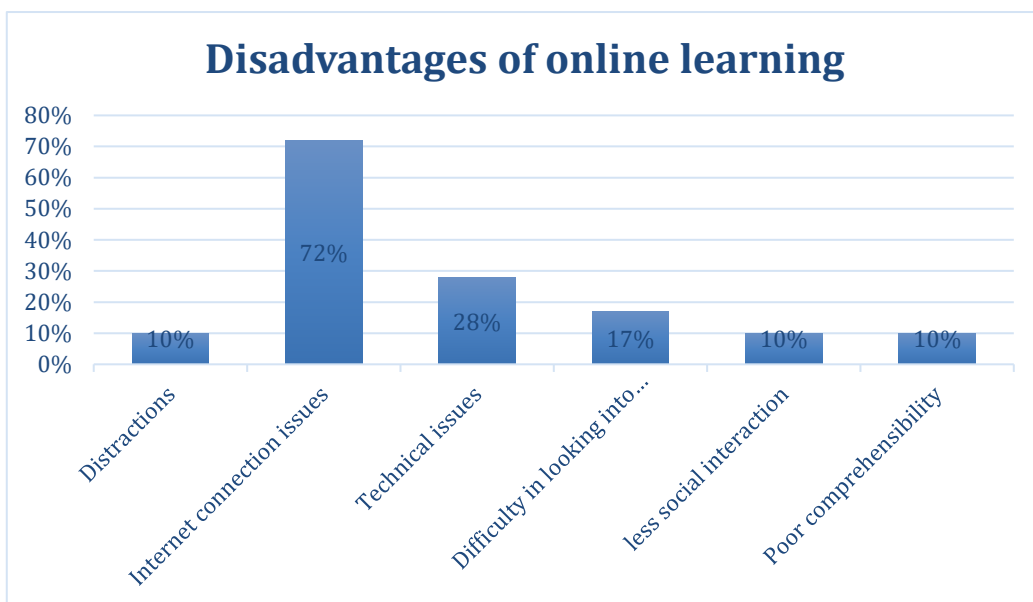
Question 3: What are the disadvantages?

Figure 3: Disadvantages of Online Learning

Among the disadvantages mentioned by the students, internet connection issues took the first place. The majority of the students had internet issues, which hindered their participation in online sessions. This led them to lose their interest in online learning. As they missed some sessions, they were not able to understand the subject content correctly. Other less common disadvantages were distractions, poor comprehensibility and less social relationship. They believed that they lose focus, as they do not have eye contact with the lecturer. Some of the students had family problems. This affected the learning process of those students. Some commented that social interaction was less compared to face-to-face sessions. They could not interact with their friends as they did during face-to-face sessions. Some believed that it is very important that the students meet with the lecturer in the face-to-face classroom to solve issues they faced.

Question 4: What is the difference between the virtual literature classroom compared to the face-to-face literature classroom?

When analyzing the answers of the students to the above question, both positive and negative aspects can be seen. When considering the positive aspects, students mentioned that they had more time during online sessions and therefore could work on literary texts more than during face-to-face sessions. Additional discussions could also be held. As virtual classrooms have less time limitations, missed sessions can be held easily. Students mentioned that they could analyze the literary text more inside breakout rooms, use the target language to share different opinions of the students and could present in the main session. This however helped the development of speaking skills as well as literary skills. One of the methods used to make the students remember the incidents of the novel and to increase their communication and listening skills was showing films during the sessions. This method was more successful during online sessions, as students and teachers had easy access to the internet. Students mentioned that the increased use of audio-visual media helped them to develop their language as well as literary skills.

Negative aspects regarding learning literature online were the same as the common disadvantages mentioned by the students. Due to internet connection issues, some students could not participate in lectures regularly, which made it hard for them to understand the content and this caused demotivation among students. Less interaction with friends to solve real-life problems too became a negative aspect.

Question 5: What is your preferred method to learn German literature online?

Figure 4: Preferable Methods to Learn German Literature

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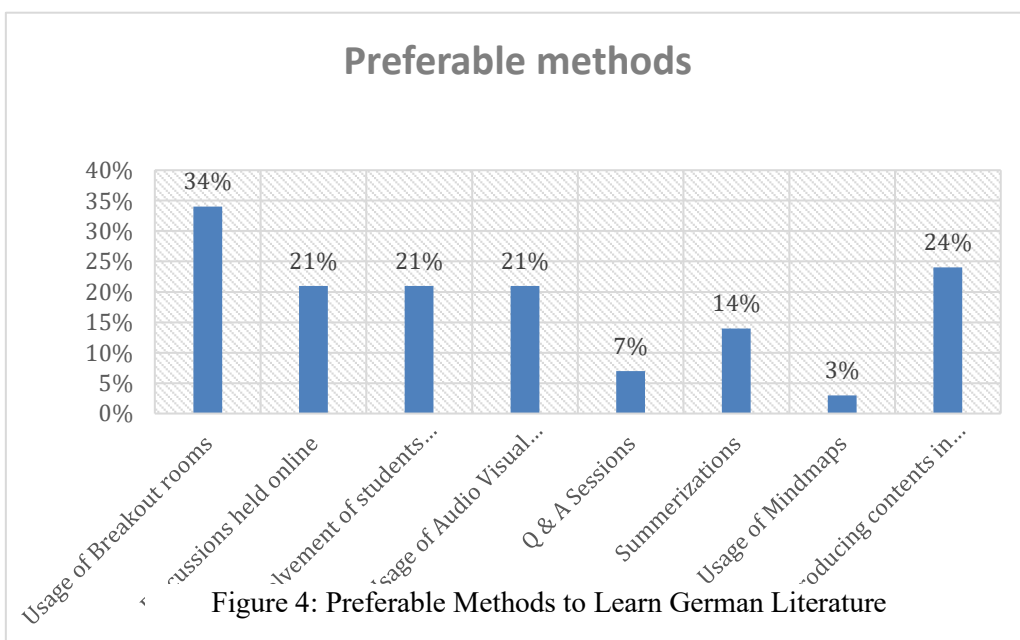
The most preferable method during online sessions to learn literature was the use of breakout rooms. According to the feedback, a considerable number of students mentioned that social interaction was less during online sessions. Breakout rooms became the solution to this problem. The students could improve their literary as well as language skills by working in breakout rooms. Other preferable methods include showing films and other related videos, involvement of students in interpretations, written and spoken summaries, and discussions held online and use of mind maps.

Question 6: Did you improve yourself during online literature sessions?
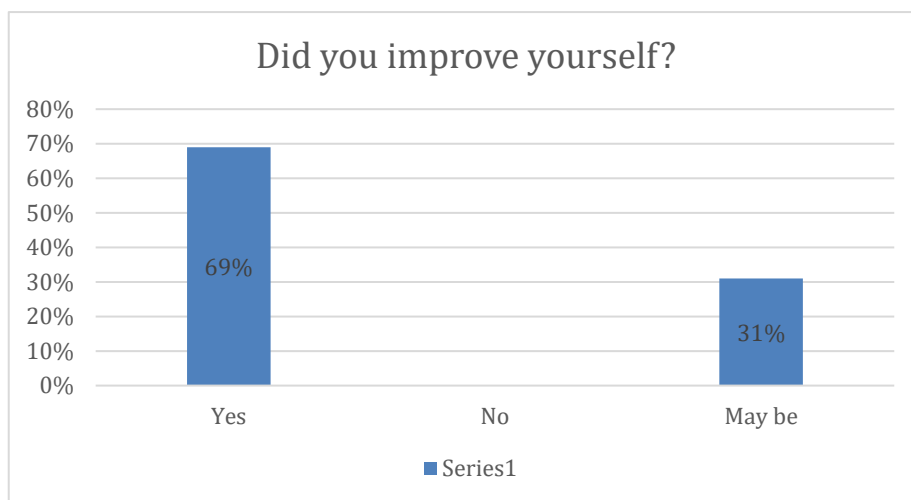

Figure 5: Improvement during Online Sessions

Figure 5 shows the opinion of students on the question of whether they have improved their literary and language skills during online literature sessions. Majority of the students said that they improved during online sessions and some students believed that there might be improvements about which they were not much sure. However, there were no students who believed they had not improved at all. This depicts that online learning has a positive effect on learners' knowledge improvement.

Question 7: What are your improvements?
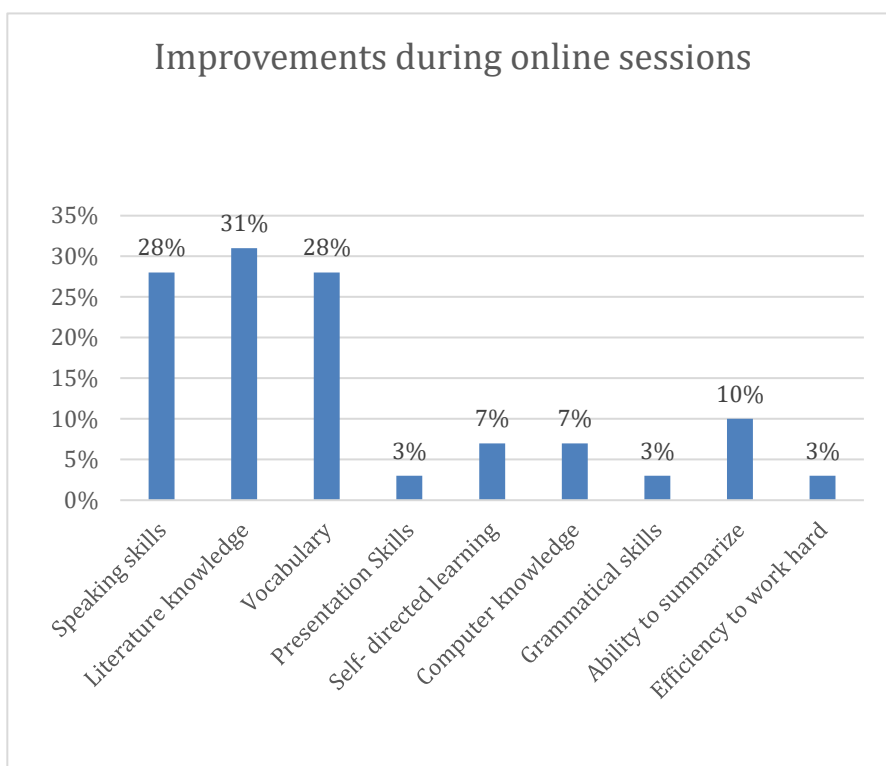

Improvements during online sessions

FIGURE 6: IMPROVEMENT AMONG STUDENTS

Figure 6 shows the improvements among the students. The majority believed that their analytical and critical skills had improved. The reason for this is that they had much time for discussions and they were engaged in more interpreting activities in the breakout rooms. Here they received a chance to exchange their ideas among themselves and could come to a common interpretation. The teacher even added his or her interpretation. Less time limitations during sessions play a great role here. Secondly, speaking skills and vocabulary have developed. Speaking skills developed as they were engaged in more speaking activities and everyone got a chance to speak during the session as time was not much limited as in the case of face-to-face sessions. Vocabulary improvement was also high and the students believed that as the concentration level is high due to low stress during online sessions and this helped in retaining vocabulary. Another special improvement seen among students was self- directed learning. During virtual literature sessions, students were less dependent on the teacher and found their own ways to study.

Question 8: What is missing in the virtual classroom when compared to face-to-face sessions?
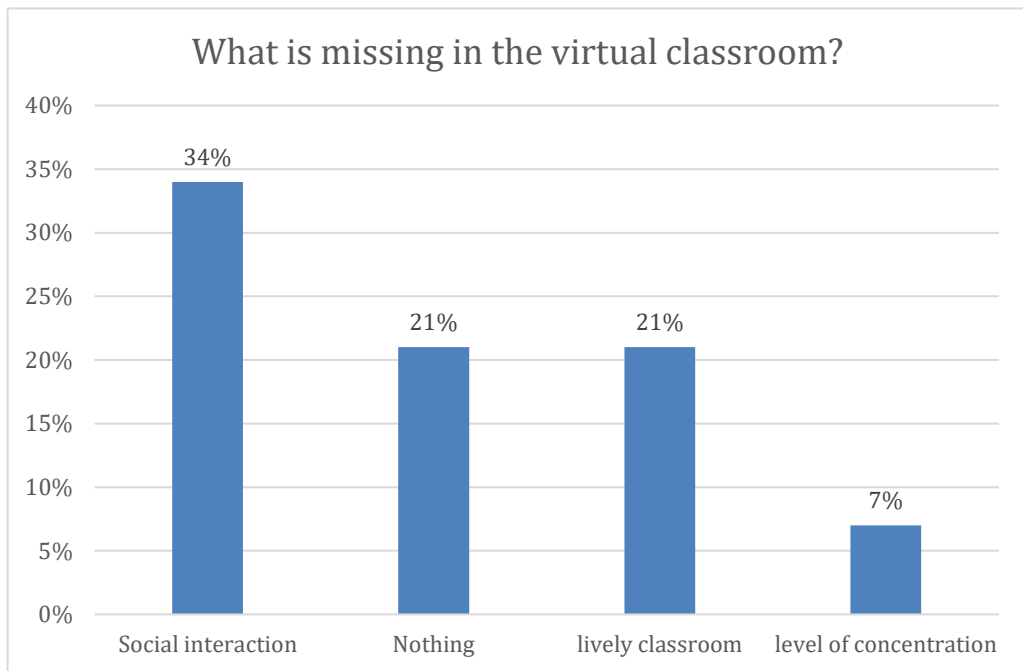

Figure 7: What do Students Miss?

Figure 7 shows what the students miss during online sessions when compared with face-to-face sessions. Most of the students believed that they cannot build good social relationships with the lecturer and friends. According to them, this is a disadvantage, as they cannot solve their problems by talking to their friends. As the social interaction with the lecturer is low, the lecturer does not understand whether the students have understood the content of the lesson correctly. Some other students miss the lively surrounding they had during face-to-face sessions. The rest of the students believed that their concentration level was low, as they have to take care of family issues, as they were at home with their parents. Some said that they miss nothing during online sessions, as the sessions were as effective as face-to-face sessions.

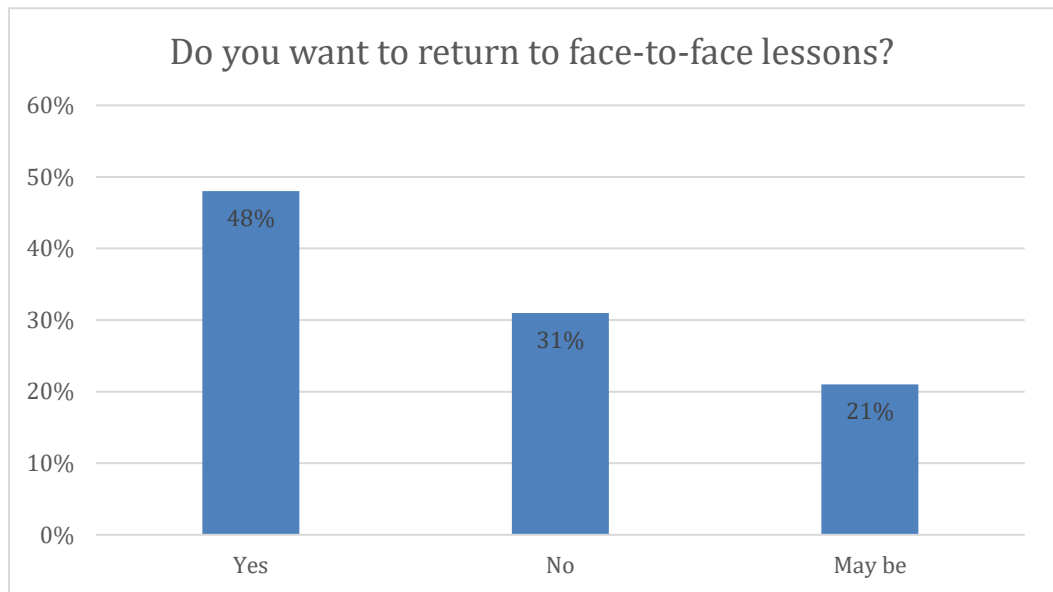Question 9: Do you want to return to the traditional classroom?

Figure 8: Returning to Face-to-face Sessions

Majority of the students wanted to return to face-to-face sessions. When analyzing their further feedback, it was obvious that they had different issues like internet issues, power failures and other technology related issues. The students who did not want to return to face-to-face sessions found online learning as the best option to learn German literature. Some of the students were not sure whether they wanted to return to face-to-face sessions in the near future.
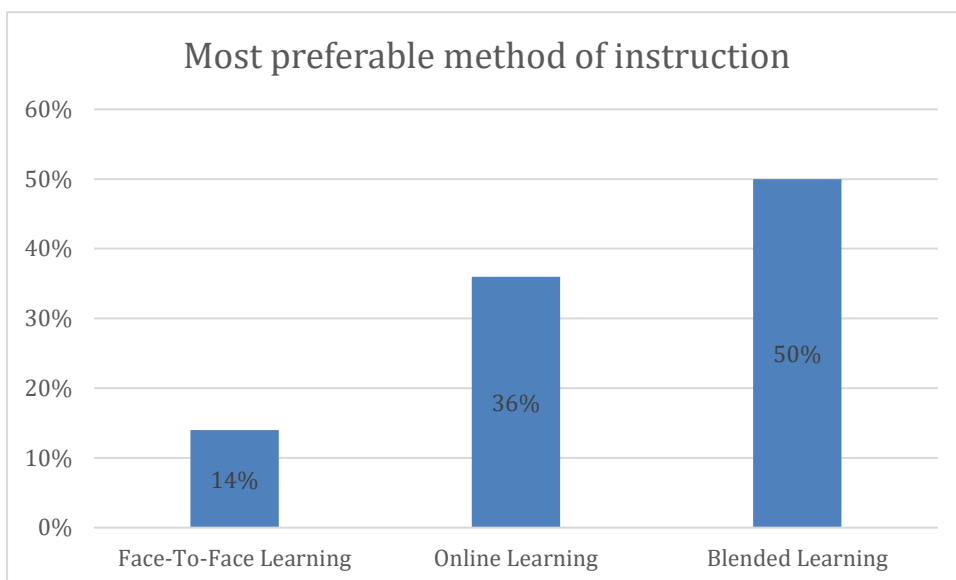
Question10: Additional feedback

Figure 9: Preferable Mode of Instruction

When analyzing the feedback of the students according to content analysis, three modes of instructions preferred by the students could be recognized. The percentage of these modes of instruction can be seen in Figure 10. The traditional classroom was preferred by only 14%, whereas fully virtual sessions were preferred by 36% and most of the students have voted for blended learning method, where both modes of instruction are combined. The reason for this is that they believed that although online learning is effective in learning German literature, few unavoidable drawbacks were recognized. To avoid these drawbacks both methods can be combined.

Summary

The results of the questionnaire show a positive attitude among students towards online learning. They value the advantages of online learning and the improvement of literary and language skills that happen during online sessions. At the same time, the students who have experienced positive experiences have experienced a few drawbacks time to time. Unstable internet connections, power failures and less social relationships were the most common drawbacks which hindered their participation. Therefore, the majority voted for the mixed method, where both modes of instruction are combined to get the best outcome.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to identify perspectives of the students on online learning and face-to-face learning in a foreign language literature classroom and to identify the advantages and disadvantages of learning German literature online. The sample group consisted of 29 students from the University of Kelaniya who follow the four-year German honours degree programme. A questionnaire was sent to them with relevant questions to identify their perspectives and feedback about their experience of online learning.

The study concludes that students enjoy the advantages of online learning. These advantages include flexibility, the ability to save time and energy, improvement of language and literary skills and a high concentration level. Their language knowledge has also improved, as they were often engaged in speaking activities. As time is not limited as in face-to-face sessions, the students were engaged in different activities like interpretation and summarizing. Other than that, audio-visual media were used more often, as access to the internet is easier during online sessions than during face-to-face sessions. This improved their language skills as well. On the other side, the students recognized the disadvantages of online learning, which were internet and technical issues, power failures and less social interaction.

The fact which is emphasized is that the students who found online learning effective too experienced negative effects of online learning. Therefore, the majority of students preferred the mixed method, where both methods are combined to get the best outcome. Even though students identified online learning as the best suitable method to learn literature in a foreign language classroom, some common drawbacks affect online learning negatively. Therefore, blended learning is recommended as the best mode of instruction.

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A Critical Analysis of the Role of Lexicographers as Translators in Bilingual Lexicography- A Study Based on Peter Percival's Tamil-English Dictionary

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Abstract – Indicating the meaning of words is the most important task of a lexicographer. The branch of Linguistics that deals with meaning is called semantics. It is necessary for a lexicographer to be familiar with semantic concepts in order to produce translation equivalents for a dictionary. The compiler of a bilingual dictionary should make adequate use of the cultural information in her/his/their description of meanings. An attempt is, therefore, made to study the problems that the compiler of a bilingual dictionary faces in presenting meaning. These problems can be categorized under the following topics: the lack of equivalence in the Target Language, culture-bound words, onomasiological gaps and sense discrimination in bilingual dictionaries. In all these problems, translation plays a vital role with different procedures. Therefore, the study analyses the problems in Bilingual-Lexicography based on the second re-printed version (2000) of Peter Percival's bilingual dictionary (Tamil-English) which was published by the Asian Educational Services, New Delhi. The findings of the study indicate that certain translation procedures including synonyms, descriptive equivalence, transliteration and cultural substitution were widely applied in composing the dictionary to produce equivalents for the easy reference of users. The words which were in use in the 19th century were included in the dictionary. According to the findings, the translation procedures handled by Peter Percival were brilliant. This study will the help reader to become familiar with Peter Percival's contribution to the field of Translation and to the people of Jaffna during his period. Further, this study is expected to enrich the understanding of researchers who focus on the role of lexicographers as translators in the compilation of bilingual lexicons particularly in the Tamil and English languages.

Keywords - *Bilingual- Dictionary, Lexicography, Procedures, Target language, Translators.*