

Elements of High-Quality Teaching in Learner Autonomy Development: a Case of Undergraduate Online Linguistic Courses



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ABSTRACT:

The proposed study addresses two research questions: a) what characterises high-quality teaching of English linguistics in a virtual learning environment and b) whether teacher-designed learner autonomy development is reflected in student-led progress tracking and perceived academic achievement by undergraduate pre-service EFL teachers in the specific conditions and context of two semesters constrained by the Covid-19 pandemics. Our understanding of learner autonomy and its development as a shared teacher–student responsibility is primarily informed by the conceptual frameworks of caring teaching and dialogic pedagogy. We employed a mixed-method research design drawing primarily on the quantitative data collected via three online questionnaires throughout the academic year 2020/2021 in combination with action research strategies. The gathered data focused on students' engagement with learning and the difficulties encountered in the learning process including the state of their well-being and perceived achievement. One of the most salient trends we observed in our data samples was a consistent acknowledgement of personal responsibility for learning outcomes. However, unconstrained learner autonomy without ongoing teacher participation and overt teacher reliance on the students' intrinsic motivation was judged by most respondents as ineffective and/or causing learning difficulties.

ABSTRAKT:

Předkládaná studie se zabývá dvěma výzkumnými otázkami: a) co charakterizuje vysoce kvalitní výuku anglické lingvistiky ve virtuálním vzdělávacím prostředí a b) zdali je rozvoj studentské autonomie formovaný učitelem reflektován studenty v jejich výukovém pokroku a ve vnímání akademického úspěchu u bakalářských studentů oboru anglický jazyk v kontextu dvou semestrů omezených pandemií Covid-19. Naše chápání studentské autonomie a jejího rozvoje jako sdílené odpovědnosti studenta a učitele se především opírá o koncepční rámec pečující výuky a dialogické pedagogiky. Byl zvolen smíšený výzkumný design za využití dat ze tří online průzkumů uskutečněných v průběhu akademického roku 2020/2021 v kombinaci se strategiemi akčního výzkumu. Shromážděná data se zaměřovala na zapojení studentů do výuky a na obtíže spojené s výukovým procesem včetně duševní pohody a vnímání úspěchu. Jeden z nejvýraznějších pozorovaných trendů v našich datech bylo soustavné uvědomování si osobní odpovědnosti za výukové výsledky. Naproti tomu byly neomezená studentská autonomie bez participace učitele a předpoklad studentské vnitřní motivace ze strany učitele hodnoceny většinou respondentů jako neefektivní nebo působící výukové potíže.

KEY WORDS / KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

linguistics, high-quality teaching, learner autonomy, caring teaching, dialogic pedagogy
lingvistika, vysoce kvalitní výuka, studentská autonomie, pečující výuka, dialogická pedagogika



1 INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The claim that “solitude is a good place to visit, but a poor place to stay”, a saying that is attributed to the American humourist H. W. Shaw, would succinctly summarise the reality that most educators and students have been confronted with in the past two academic years. It seems particularly fitting for novice university students who were completing their grammar school studies and commencing their university courses under multiple pandemic lockdowns, almost completely deprived of the social and psychological benefits of embarking on a more independent young adult’s life. It was in these circumstances that we connected with our first-year students, doubly aware of the responsibility that our academic role was bestowing on us, as we were not only to teach in a virtual setting, but also to represent the community of the invisible, intangible university and the English department. The principal reason behind the alterations that we made to our selected linguistic courses in their online version as described below stemmed mainly from this new reality and the need to offer our students a caring environment.

White (2003, p. 319) proposes that “educators who are interested in promoting more caring approaches to instruction need an ethic that can help them to deconstruct the dichotomous split between relational and principled approaches”. In the specific context of higher education, we can state that the relational approaches focus dominantly on building and maintaining positive relationships with students, while the principled approaches prioritise academic content and the cultivation of cognitive skills. In our view, the split can be practically reconciled by consciously assisting students in developing greater academic autonomy and, concurrently, emphasising the role of personal responsibility for study outcomes. Moreover, recent findings on general pedagogical principles that are applicable in the online environment (Graham et al., 2001; De Wever et al., 2006; Garrison, 2011) were consulted and, where possible, incorporated.

To delimit learner autonomy as an educational goal, Holec (1981, p. 3) formulates it as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. Little (1991, p. 4) elaborates on the notion by defining autonomy as a capacity “for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action”. We also agree with Little (*ibid.*) that it is an elusive goal, as there has been no clear consensus on the pedagogical measures that would ensure its development. If we wish to keep abreast of the flux of changes constantly shaping our knowledge (see also changingness in Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990, p. 304), we need to take the present learners’ perceived needs and learning purposes as our starting point. To be able to do so, teachers need to enter an ongoing dialogue with students that promotes the transfer of responsibility for learning and the shift in the traditional power relationship towards the students (for our reflection of the learning strategies of millennials see Discussion below).

Therefore, we conceptually turn to the theory of dialogic pedagogy that was originally established and developed by Freire (1970/1993; Freire & Shor, 1987). This theoretical approach to pedagogy is viewed by its author not as an isolated teaching method but rather as an epistemological relation between a cognitive object, i.e., what is to be known, and two cognitive subjects, i.e., the student and teacher (Freire

& Shor, 1987). Knowing is therefore a social activity (Skidmore & Murakami, 2016). Freire (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 100) further defines dialogue itself as the “sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study”. The transformative power of dialogue in terms of the classroom social relationships should also be emphasised, as it is not “a mere technique to achieve some cognitive results” (*ibid.*, p. 98). In the online environment, maintaining these social relationships is one of the most vulnerable aspects of classroom discourse.

In our proposed research context, apart from its clear communicative value, the teacher–student dialogue is also represented by the learning opportunities offered by the teachers and their acceptance and realisation by the students. The acceptance of these opportunities, or the lack thereof, has been highly relevant for our teaching reflection and the consequent alterations to our classroom activities and strategies. In this manner, the fundamental characteristics of dialogic pedagogy that postulates dialogue as free (participation without coercion), inclusive (every voice is valued), participatory (every voice contributes to the dialogical process), ongoing (as long-lasting as the given educational process itself), and transformative (it creates potential for “new realities”) were being fulfilled (Fernandez-Balboa & Marshall, 1994, p. 174). Moreover, we agree with Benne (1990) and Fernandez-Balboa and Marshall (1994) that a “validating community” for learning is “adequate only if its members are capable of providing negative and positive ‘feedback’ to each other in a context of caring and acceptance” (Benne, 1990, p. 57). These principles guided our efforts to achieve a smooth transition from face-to-face to online classes.

As academic workload is one of the greatest stressors for university students (Murff, 2005), we attempted to alleviate the amount of stress and display trust in our students’ integrity. This seemed doubly relevant in the disruptive educational environment that all educational institutions started facing in March 2020 when emergency remote teaching was imposed due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, apart from the instruction process itself where the principled approach is given priority, we applied the relational approach mainly in terms of granting students sufficient space for individual decision-making about the amount and structure of academic workload in class and, partially, in the exam format. We continually offered post-class recordings of our lectures and seminars to our students so that they could make decisions about the amount of study time they needed to invest in the learning process. Moreover, after the teaching reflection of our winter semester, students were offered support in co-designing and maintaining their progress tracking and, consequently, in constructing a more positive self-image and perception of achievement.

Any group of students is seldom equally motivated and invested in the educational process, as individuals set different goals for themselves. This was significantly reflected in the structuring of the levels of difficulty of selected study tasks and materials, homework, and the exam itself. We adopt the principle of equity proposed by Bottani and Benadusi (2006) that differentiates degrees of fairness in equality and inequality and includes criteria such as freedom and responsibility (see also Freire, 1976, 1985; Little, 1991). Such criteria were emphasised by setting voluntary extra practice activities and a weekly assessment of can-do statements that the students





were at liberty to incorporate in their learning strategy or disregard without further teacher control.

In light of the changes brought about by the pandemic, our educational priorities were set to reinforce primarily three neuro-didactic areas of learner development based on Jensen's (1998) findings: sense of control, belonging and inquiry. As stress is a physiological response to a perceived lack of control over a relevant situation, reinforcing the students' sense of control might considerably lower the levels of unwanted stress (Zoladz & Diamond, 2008; Godoy et al., 2018). In a virtual learning environment, particularly for novice university students, building a sense of belonging might prove highly challenging and, if unsuccessful, jeopardise their academic functioning. We envisioned strengthening reciprocity and peer identification (Lessard & Juvonen, 2018; Maunder & Monks, 2019) through elements of peer teaching in selected revision activities. As concerns the sense of inquiry, it has been observed that curiosity is linked with positive personal and academic outcomes (Cain, 2019; Clark et al., 2019). Therefore, fostering natural curiosity by offering resources and tasks that students are at liberty to engage with seemed a beneficial online learning practice. The practical implications of the focus on these three neuro-didactic areas were applied in the form of specific pre- and post-class suggestions (such as simple relaxation techniques, extra activities available online, elements of gamified learning), in-class activities and longer-term learning strategies and revision techniques (e.g., links to online articles of special interest and quizzes) that were implemented to different degrees by both the teachers and students. The above modifications to the respective syllabi were also in line with the findings defining the specific learning preferences of millennials, particularly their need to be co-decision makers in the learning process (McGlynn, 2005).

Within the framework of caring teaching and caring literacy pedagogy (Noddings, 1984; Langer, 2000), the initiative in carrying out the emotional labour of caring in teaching (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006) rested primarily with us, teachers. However, the responsibility for the process and outcomes was equally shared with our students. Emotional labour involves what Hochschild (1990) refers to as modifying emotional expressions by enhancing or suppressing our feelings. When we modify or manage our emotions in the classroom to achieve educational goals, we as teachers perform emotional labour (Hargreaves, 1999). Thus, caring for persons, i.e., our focus on cultivating a sense of control and belonging, and caring for ideas (Noddings, 1984), i.e., our focus on cultivating a sense of inquiry, became the superimposed notions of our pandemic action strategy.

To elaborate, caring pedagogy displays elements of high-quality teaching mainly in its striving for continuous improvement with the help of systematic evaluation of the educational process by teachers and students alike. For the purposes of the present study, we employed three online surveys that were complemented by the results of two official semestral student evaluations focusing on the quality of teaching at our faculty. We agree with Ramsden (1992) that high-quality teaching is fundamentally a question of a high degree of the quality of student learning. Such high-quality learning can be characterised by strategies that support seeking meaning in the study material as opposed to rote learning and mere reproduction (Martens & Prosser, 1998). We, therefore, define the elements of high-quality teaching and learning in

accordance with Martens & Prosser (1998) as follows: students' knowledge is related to their experience, it is clearly structured and comprises contextualised information, whose retention is long-term. The course design and assessment strategies foster independent student inquiry, are aimed at finding meaningful connections in the study material and are closely related to the explicitly declared study goals.



2 METHOD

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN, CONTEXT AND AIMS

The current study was conducted solely in an online format at an English department in the academic year 2020/2021. It consisted of two major stages that took place in the winter and summer semesters, respectively, and in which four linguistic courses were delivered. The overall aim was firstly to secure the first-year students' smooth transition to a new university virtual learning environment and secondly, to examine what constitutes high-quality teaching in the new educational context forced upon all of us by the global health crisis. Specifically, the purpose of the present research was to find out whether teacher-designed learner autonomy development is reflected in student-led progress tracking and perceived academic achievement. The core of our observations, action strategy and consequent cognitive and socio-emotional development in our students' academic practice comprised *setting* personally meaningful educational *goals* and the *appraisal* of the extent of their *achievement*.

We employed a mixed-method research design drawing primarily on quantitative data collected via three online questionnaires in combination with action research strategies (Altrichter et al., 1993; Janík, 2004), particularly the systematic reflection of teaching situations throughout the winter semester with the aim of improving our pedagogical practice in the following summer semester. We believe that combining the emic (student/insider) and etic (teacher/outsider) perspective (Heigham & Croker, 2009) yields more wholesome changes to the syllabi of the linguistic courses in question.

To take a more detailed look at the individual stages of our research, we need to return to March 2020 when emergency remote teaching was imposed on all the educational institutions in our country including universities due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent restrictions. In the process of coming to terms with the unprecedented reality and developing new skills, often by trial and error, we gradually started implementing tentative classroom strategies that would transfer elements of high-quality in-class teaching to the digital environment in the winter semester of 2020. To verify the effectiveness of our endeavours, we collected the first set of data at the end of the winter semester in January 2021 to be able to reflect on our teaching. Based on the findings (see Results I) several modifications and changes to the courses' structure were planned and implemented throughout the summer semester. At this later stage, we conducted a mid-term and end-term student feedback surveys whose focus was student well-being, assessment of different types of study tasks and study progress tracking.



Research stages		
Winter Semester	Courses taught:	Introduction to Linguistics + Phonetics and Phonology I
	Questionnaires:	End-term student feedback (Q1)
Teaching Reflection > Action Strategy		
Summer Semester	Courses taught:	Lexicology + Phonetics and Phonology II
	Questionnaires:	Mid-term (Q2a/b) + End-term student feedback (Q3)

TABLE 1: Research stages and courses taught in the academic year 2020/2021.

2.2 PARTICIPANTS

Our sample consists of first-year students pursuing a bachelor's degree in English language and literature. The total numbers of respondents in the online surveys varied for specific courses based on three factors: the number of enrolled students, format of the questionnaire administration for each course — joint/separate, and answer submission status — compulsory/optional. All participants study English as their first major in combination with one of the following: German, Czech, Russian, Art, Social sciences, IT, Music, Mathematics, Pedagogy or French. The average age was 20.2 and the sample was dominated by women. In the first survey aimed at Phonetics and Phonology I (henceforth PhoPho I) and Introduction to Linguistics (henceforth IntroL), i.e., end-term student feedback for the winter semester (see Q1 in Table 1 above), there were 122 participants (75% female and 25% male). In the second survey, i.e., mid-term feedback for the summer semester (see Q2a/b in Table 1 above), 117 respondents participated in the Phonetics and Phonology II (henceforth PhoPho II) feedback (72% female and 28% male) and 167 in the Lexicology (henceforth Lexi) feedback (86% female and 14% male). The last joint questionnaire, i.e., end-term for the summer semester in Lexi and PhoPho II (see Q3 in Table 1 above), was completed by 153 respondents (75% female and 25% male).

2.3 TEACHERS AND THE ONLINE LINGUISTIC COURSES

Both teachers, who are also the authors of this paper, have been lecturing in English linguistics for 15 years. The first teacher/first author taught a six-week-long course (IntroL) in the winter semester followed by a twelve-week-long course (Lexi) in the summer semester. The second teacher/second author was responsible for PhoPho I and PhoPho II that were taught for 12 weeks in the winter and summer semester, respectively. She ran both courses with the help of her colleague, a doctoral student, who mainly participated in creating online games.

The classes, both lectures and seminars, followed the university schedule originally designed for in-class teaching. Both researchers employed the educational platform Zoom for distance teaching and Google Classroom or Moodle for the sharing of study materials and out-of-class online communication with students. Attendance was not obligatory, and while in class, students were encouraged to switch on their cameras, however, it was not insisted upon in accordance with the fundamental premise of dialogic pedagogy, i.e., the right to speak but also to remain silent (see

Fernandez-Balboa & Marshall, 1994). The four above-mentioned courses constituted the core of linguistic training in the first year of the Bachelor study programme, the other first-year linguistic courses that were not included in the research were Morphology I and II. While PhoPho I was a pre-requisite for PhoPho II, disallowing the students who failed to pass the PhoPho I credit test to enrol in PhoPho II, there was no such condition in effect for the enrolment for IntroL and Lexi.



2.4 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data were amassed via three online questionnaires (Q1, Q2a/b, Q3) administered in Google Forms at three different periods during the academic year 2020/2021: at the end of the winter semester (February 2021 – Q1), in the middle (beginning of April 2021 – Q2a/b) and at the end of the summer semester (June 2021 – Q3). The structure of the questionnaires was primarily designed to be user-friendly, as we needed the same group of respondents to take part in the online feedback repeatedly and we did not wish to overwhelm them. The majority of questions offered multiple choice with the option to tick one or more answers. Only a small proportion of questions were open-ended, typically asking for further comments. Although these were not obligatory, most students seized the opportunity and expressed their opinion in the comments section.

As far as the questionnaires' content is concerned, the formulations of selected questions were somewhat modified or added in Q2a/b and Q3 to better incorporate the findings based on Q1 and/or to reflect the specificity of individual courses taught in the summer semester. For instance, in Q1 we found out that the major issue our students struggled with was a lack of self-discipline and motivation (see Results I below). Firstly, this finding led us to include new activities in the summer courses addressing the perceived difficulty and secondly, we focused more heavily on the development of learner autonomy which was reflected in employing lesson-specific can-do statements in Q2a/b and Q3 (see Interim teaching reflection below). Their purpose was to help the respondents monitor their progress more efficiently in PhoPho II and Lexi. Naturally, these statements differed in each course, which was resolved by conducting two separate mid-term questionnaires, i.e., Q2a/b (see Table 1 above). Another example of the surveys' modification while preserving their relatedness is a question examining the degree of perceived stress by students in Q1, which was reiterated in a modified form in Q3. The modified formulation focused on a potential improvement of the students' mental state. The key themes — effectiveness of the employed teaching techniques, teacher care for the respondents' well-being and teacher reflection of learner autonomy — intersect all the questionnaires.

Offering a more detailed description, Q1 (entitled *Feedback on distance learning_winter semester*) was devised jointly for PhoPho I and IntroL and contained three multiple choice questions — what the students found most effective in the online classes, how they felt during distance learning, and what they considered most difficult, while the last question invited the respondents to comment on whether they missed anything in the course structure, class content or teacher approach. Q2a (entitled *Lexicology mid-term review*) scrutinized the participants' greatest strengths and



weaknesses in the context of every week's new knowledge and skills using can-do statements. This course-specific part also occurred in Q2b (entitled *Phonetics and phonology II mid-term review*). In addition, both Q2a and Q2b comprised three identical open questions inquiring about the reasons for having been (un)successful and whether there was anything specific the teachers could have done to help the students improve. Q3 (entitled *Feedback on distance learning_summer semester*) was again conducted jointly for PhoPho II and Lexi. The introductory question related to Q1, as it further examined the theme of well-being and the degree of perceived stress during the lockdown. The following section was formulated separately for Lexi and PhoPho II; it aimed at exploring the can-do statements covering the second half of the summer semester and the elements that the respondents found most and least effective in the online courses. The survey was completed by a comments section that was identical for both linguistic courses.

The response rate ranged from 80% to almost 100%. It turned out to be the lowest for Q1 (80%) and highest for 2Qa and 2Qb (98% and 94%, respectively); in Q3 there was a moderate decrease to 86%. The mid-term review became one of the course requirements for Lexi (Q2a) and was transformed into an obligatory task for PhoPho II (2Qb), which partly accounts for the exceptional response rate. Moreover, before Q1 was launched the students were informed by the researchers about the purpose of the online surveys and they were constantly reminded to submit their replies and thus reflect on their first-hand experience with virtual classes. The questionnaire results were downloaded from the Google forms to Excel sheets in which all the analyses were carried out. The analyses were descriptive using frequency tables and percentages. The data retrieved from the open-response items were grouped together, coded, and their categorisation was established. Alternatively, if it was not possible to create clearly defined categories, as the replies were too complex and/or displaying a high degree of variation, we identified relevant key words in the data and produced concise descriptions of the comments.

3 RESULTS I

In this section, we refer exclusively to the data gained from the first questionnaire (see Q1 in Table 1 above). The first question regarding the effectiveness of online classes in selected linguistic disciplines offered eight options, four related to both PhoPho I and IntroL and four only to PhoPho I. Moreover, there was space to express individual comments. The respondents were encouraged to tick more than one option and the total number of choices was not limited based on the assumption that there would be more factors contributing to the perceived efficacy, which proved to be right. Most respondents (64%) selected three, four or five options. Around 20% ticked six, seven or even all eight factors, and 16% of the participants considered one or two options sufficient to state what helped them most to gain relevant skills and knowledge in the online courses. The selected replies are considered equally weighted in relevance, as there was no instruction to mark the options in order of importance.

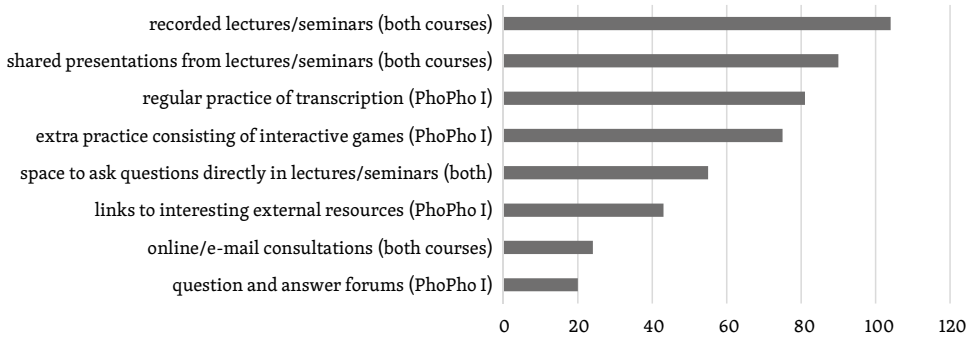


FIGURE 1: Actions, strategies, and materials that the respondents found most useful in the online linguistic courses. The participants (N=122) could tick more options.

As we can see clearly from Figure 1, the participants most appreciated the availability of recorded lectures and seminars together with shared presentations in both courses. For approximately half of the respondents, two kinds of practice were considered beneficial within PhoPho I – transcription and interactive games. Posing questions to the teacher in the written form turned out to be viewed as least effective. Apart from the pre-designed options, several respondents added their own ideas. Three participants named a specific textbook that helped them improve their transcription skills, one appreciated a mock-test provided in IntroL, and another one expressed their preference for obligatory homework in both courses as “it forced him/her to study regularly, and he/she did not have to study during the examination period” (S81).

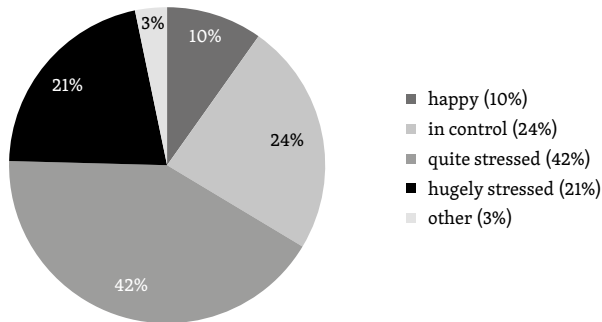


FIGURE 2: Emotional states evoked by distance learning (N=122).

Scrutinising the perceived emotional burden accompanying distance learning (cf. Figure 2), the most common experience was feeling quite stressed (42%), followed by feelings of being in control (24%). For one fifth of the respondents, the online studies proved to be hugely stressful and only a minority of the respondents (10%) enjoyed the shift to the online mode. The remaining 3% included four individual comments specifying their emotions or shedding light on the process of coping with the new educational reality.

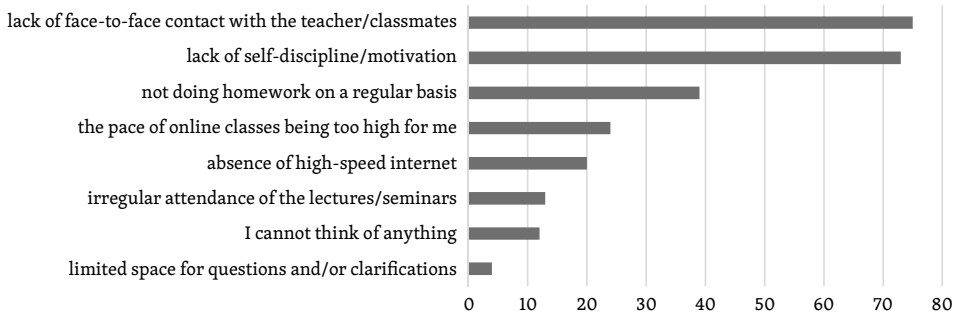


FIGURE 3: Factors contributing to the perceived difficulty of the online linguistic courses. The participants (N=122) could tick more options.

The third examined area focused on the perceived difficulty of the online courses. As we can see in Figure 3 above, the respondents considered the lack of face-to-face contact, lack of self-discipline and absence of regular homework preparation vital factors contributing to the experienced difficulties. The other two factors that had a negative effect on the learning process were the perceived high pace of online classes and technical problems that might have made the access to online lectures and/or seminars difficult or even impossible. Similarly to question one, the respondents were encouraged to tick one or more options. Out of eight possibilities related to both courses, the participants most frequently opted for the combination of two factors (38%), or they chose only one factor (30%). The single factor turned out to be either a lack of face-to-face contact, lack of self-discipline, not doing homework or there were no external adverse circumstances identified. The remaining respondents selected three (22%), four (7%), or five options (3%), respectively. Five students added their own factors — the early morning times of the classes were mentioned twice, the eye discomfort as a consequence of long screen exposure was stated once, while the last two comments were of a general nature.

In the last open section, the respondents were invited to share their views on the elements they missed in the assessed courses. They could draw parallels with other courses at the faculty and express their ideas about what might have improved their distance learning. The responses were classified into five categories presented in Figure 4 below. The data show that 86% of all respondents did not feel any relevant educational aspect was absent. A more detailed categorization revealed that 41% solely stated they did not miss anything, typically using the phrases *I can't think of anything* or *Nothing comes to my mind*. In the second category including overt praise (24%), the participants claimed that there was nothing they missed and added appreciative feedback such as *favourite course*, *best*, *perfect*, *satisfied*, *lovely*, *taught well*, *amazing job* or expressed gratitude. The third category (21%) differed in offering specific reason(s) as to why the courses were positively evaluated, for instance for its *good organization*, *careful preparation*, *providing useful handouts*, *recording lectures* but also for *good communication*, *offering help when necessary* and *sharing really good energy*. The next category (11%) contained critical remarks regarding both the organization (request

for more groupwork), content (more extra practice), teaching materials (more worksheets on transcription, more information in presentations) and choice of a teaching platform (demand on consistency within the department). These individualised comments about what was and was not absent in the target courses became an important source for the teachers' reflections and decisions made in the following semester.

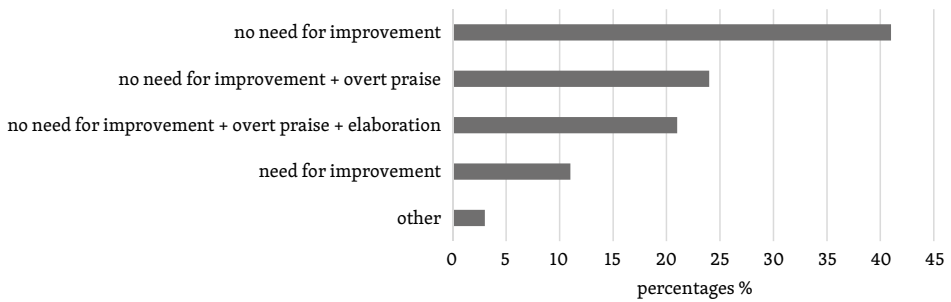


FIGURE 4: Comments on the perceived quality of teaching in the online linguistic courses in the winter semester. The total number of respondents was N=122. The presented values express percentages.

4 INTERIM TEACHING REFLECTION

The research findings from the first online survey revealed overall student contentment with the delivery of both linguistic courses in question (IntroL and PhoPho I). This was further confirmed by the results retrieved from the official faculty student evaluation of courses taught in the winter semester. The overall evaluative results averaging at 95.8% for PhoPho I and 91.7% for IntroL and the individual comments were in line with our Q1 findings.

What the respondents found most beneficial despite the amount of stress affecting their well-being was the availability of the recordings and shared materials. The other teaching elements that helped them engage in the learning process were hands-on activities, either those training transcription or those involving a gaming element. Understandably, all the positively perceived elements remained incorporated in the course structure of the upcoming summer semester, especially the constant accessibility of the class recordings and handouts. It is possible that these elements in particular had a comforting effect on the students, or their preference might simply reflect the learning strategies of millennials (see Discussion below).

Regarding the emotional state, almost all hugely stressed respondents identified lack of self-discipline as a source of learning difficulties. In other categories the reasons appeared to be more varied. In addition, the option *I cannot think of anything, I do not feel there were any objective obstacles for me* occurred only in the participants who were either in control or happy/relaxed about the online teaching/learning. Both revealed tendencies need further examination so that potential correlations, for instance the one between a lack of self-discipline/motivation and the degree of perceived stress, could be verified.



To conclude stage one of our research, both researchers designed an action strategy in preparation for the summer semester. Specifically, they complemented their syllabi according to the students' suggestions in the areas where specific activities were felt to be absent, such as providing a greater number of practical examples in presentations, adjusting the pace of online classes to immediate needs, providing more out-of-class practice, or including more group work. Most importantly, the lecturers rose to the challenge of addressing the learner-related factors that are likely to hinder the learning process, such as a lack of self-discipline and absence of homework completion on a regular basis by introducing weekly obligatory tasks in combination with optional extra practice in PhoPho II and three-task-level homework and key concepts revision in Lexi. In this manner we envisioned to harmonise both course structures and content in the summer semester (PhoPho II and Lexi) with the declared and implied student needs and nivelise universally significant differences between the courses.

5 RESULTS II

In this section we present the analyses of Q2a, Q2b and Q3 with the exception of the can-do statements segment in *Lexicology mid-term review* (Q2a), which turned out to be exceedingly complex for the scope of this paper. A separate study is planned to scrutinize the progress made in English lexicology over the summer semester. We begin with *Phonetics and phonology II mid-term review* (Q2b), proceed with a concise summary of the reactions to open questions (both Q2a and Q2b) and conclude with the findings based on the last survey *Feedback on distance learning_summer semester* (Q3). The most salient parts of all the datasets (Q1–Q3) are compared throughout this section.

5.1 SUMMER SEMESTER MID-TERM REVIEW

In the PhoPho II mid-term feedback (Q2b), seven can-do statements which best summarise the new skills and knowledge acquired in the first six weeks of the PhoPho II course, e.g., *I can explain and illustrate what prominence contrast is and how it works on the word and sentence level* or *I can identify stress shift in a sentence*, were matched with one of the following self-evaluating reactions: *I've mastered that, I'm quite confident — but I need to check a couple of things*, *Kind of — I need to study more* and *I'm lost*. The same procedure was adopted for the corresponding part in Q3, however with a different number and character of the can-do statements. There were nine statements, and they reflected the themes taught in the second half of the online course. The responses for each statement were averaged and the results can be seen in Figure 5. In both time periods almost half of the respondents expressed reasonable confidence (48.3% and 42.6%) about the course content followed by 28.3% and 24.6% with lesser confidence and a need to study more. Interestingly, a similar pattern observed in the first two reactions was reversed in the third — the sense of mastering phonetic topics increased by 10% at the end of the course from 19.9% to 29.8%. The number of respondents who were unable to keep abreast with the content of the course turned out to be very low (around 3%).

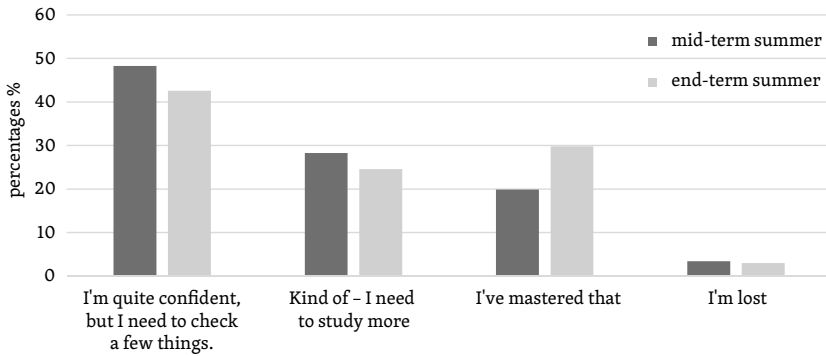


FIGURE 5: Self-evaluation of PhoPho II in the middle and at the end of the summer semester using a series of can-do statements.

In the following two open-response questions, the respondents were instructed to ponder over the reasons of having been (un)successful in mastering the target features (Q2a/b). Starting with the positive experience in PhoPho II (Q2a), one key word dominated otherwise diverse responses: *practice*. Expressly, the participants identified regular and intensive *revision* in various forms (e.g., optional extra practice, handouts, homework, games, quizzes) as a source of confidence growth. The perceived success was associated with a number of other factors that occurred several times in the dataset: cognitive aspects such as easier memorization facilitated by paying attention in class and/or by the fact that the studied topics were interesting, applicable and/or well-explained. Turning to the reasons behind feeling unsuccessful, the respondents frequently mentioned a lack of time and insufficient practice of certain (not all) features, as illustrated by: *I don't feel completely lost anywhere; I always try to remember at least something from each area (S4); I'm unsuccessful in certain areas because I feel like there is too much new information and if I'm not catching up I have to revisit the lectures (S106)*. In addition, some respondents listed the areas they found truly difficult and/or confusing, which constituted constructive feedback for the lecturer.

In Lexi (Q2a) the dominantly occurring key words in the two evaluative open questions were sufficient *practice* / *in-class revision*, *personal interest* in a specific topic, or *previous knowledge/familiarity* as factors in the successful mastery of the skills and knowledge required by the Lexi course. An illustrative sample answer follows:

My first attempt at taking the winter semester exams taught me a lot, so now I am just sitting in front of my computer and peacefully listening. No phones, no food. Now, as I have a clear understanding that lexicology is a tough class, I do not wait until the exam period to start studying and revising — I'm doing it now. And surprisingly it works. (S96)

Concerning the justification of an unsuccessful mastery of specific content areas, the most frequent key words include lack of *revision*, need for *memorising*, high level



of *abstraction*, or confusing *overlapping terms*. Perhaps the most representative sample answer that summarises the most frequently mentioned reason for the lack of learning success was formulated as follows: *The main problem would definitely be my indolence to do anything which is not required from me. Hence I do not learn continuously and will be annoyed at myself at the start of the examination period that I have not done so* (S35). Closer reading of the responses reveals a significant pattern. Majority of respondents commenting on their weaknesses or failures referred to personal responsibility for their learning outcomes. Almost no comments related failure directly to teacher instruction as illustrated in: *Honestly, classes are being taught perfectly, it's just lack of self-motivation to study or do anything at all. Paying attention while being at home for 24/7 is nearly impossible* (S120).

Lastly, in both mid-term questionnaires Q2a/b the respondents were invited to comment on the perceived satisfaction and/or any teaching elements absent in the online linguistic courses. Similarly to Q1 (see Results I), the data were analysed and classified into five categories separately for PhoPho II and Lexi and the results are shown in Figure 6 below. Identically to Q1, more than 80% of the respondents did not require any improvement in the courses' structure and content (86% in PhoPho II and 80% in Lexi). The appraisal phrases included *fully satisfied, perfect teacher, I like it the way it is, great job, helpful, awesome*. Those who elaborated on the reasons for their contentment mentioned similar positive aspects as in Q1: *great structure, beneficial homework, extra practice, recordings*. What occurred newly, compared to Q1, was the explicit acknowledgement of the respondents' responsibility for the learning outcomes in almost 20% of the sample (17% in PhoPho II and 18% in Lexi) as illustrated for instance in the following responses:

The teacher has already been doing everything possible for me to improve, now it's my turn to use it meaningfully. (S5 Lexi)

Lectures and handouts are comprehensible and there is nothing I would change. It is rather about my discipline and self-study. (S34 PhoPho II)

I feel that I am provided with everything I need, I just have to practice on my own. (S76 PhoPho II)

From the suggestions about what would improve the upcoming classes in the second half of the summer semester these ideas emerged: in Lexi, a slower tempo of the teacher's oral presentation, more revision including quizzes/games, teacher-provided feedback and securing a smoother interaction in breakout rooms. In PhoPho II, the respondents missed more frequent transcription practice and interaction in groups. In addition, the course was described as interesting, yet demanding and a slower pace would have been appreciated. In the context of the whole questionnaire (Q2a/b), it is of relevance that the above-mentioned critical remarks were highly infrequent.

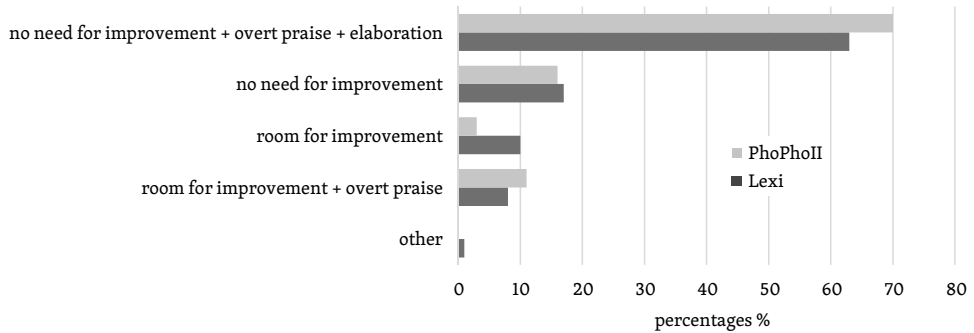


FIGURE 6: Comments classified according to perceived student satisfaction with the online linguistic courses in the middle of the summer semester (N=117 for PhoPho II and N=167 for Lexi). The values express percentages.

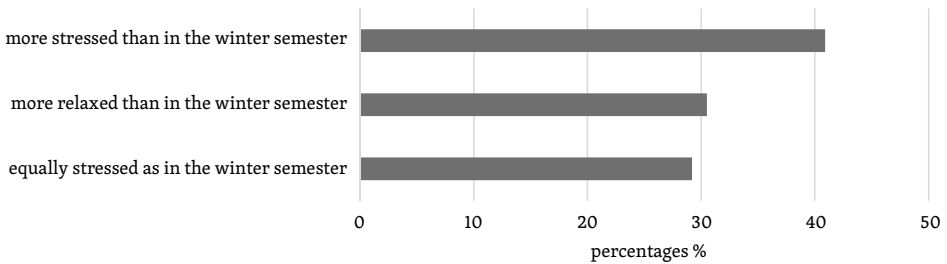


FIGURE 7: The comparison of the overall well-being in the summer and winter semester (N=154).

5.2 SUMMER SEMESTER END-TERM REVIEW

The first domain that was scrutinised in the end-term review (Q3) comprised the comparison of students’ well-being in both semesters. As the results in Figure 7 suggest almost 41% suffered from more stress in the summer, 30% experienced less stress and almost the same number of respondents (29%) felt equally stressed throughout the academic year.

Next, the effectiveness of online classes was examined. The respondents were instructed to select up to three most and least beneficial activities in Lexi and PhoPho II. As Figures 8–11 clearly demonstrate, the respondents chose the options in the category *most effective* more frequently than in *least effective*. In other words, the course actions, strategies, and materials were associated with effectiveness rather than a lack thereof, which may indicate overall satisfaction with the target courses. In Lexi, recordings and shared materials ranked the highest as in Q1 (see Results I above), followed by the newly added three-task-level home assignment. The least effective activities turned out to be weekly can-do statements tracking achievement, lexicographic project, and weekly vocabulary for revision.

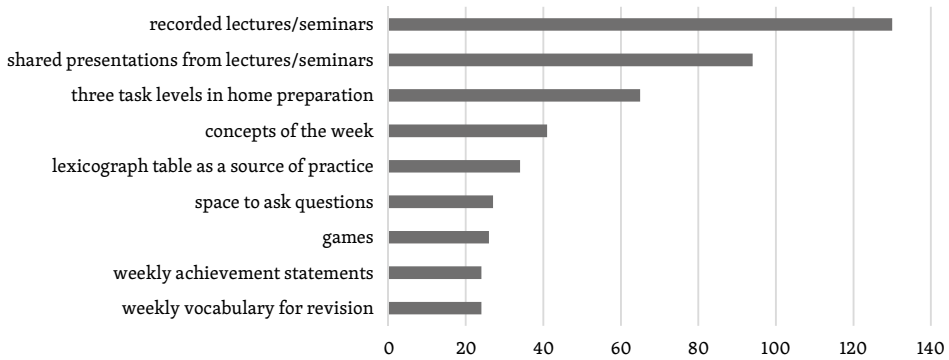


FIGURE 8: Actions, strategies, and materials that the respondents found most effective in Lexi in the summer semester. The participants (N=150) could tick up to three options.

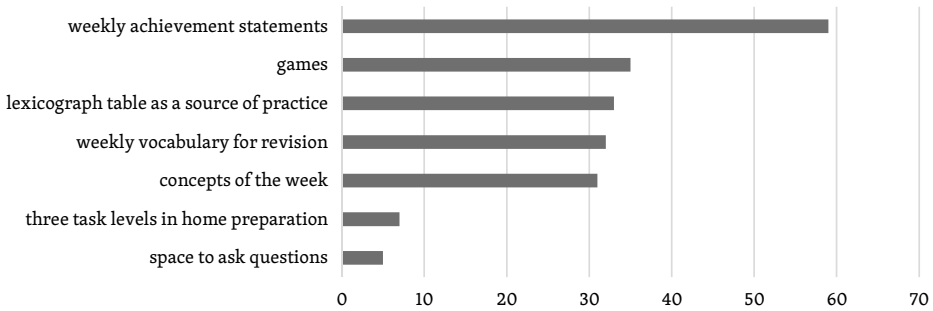


FIGURE 9: Actions, strategies, and materials that the respondents found least effective in Lexi in the summer semester. The participants (N=150) could tick up to three options.

Surprisingly, in PhoPho II the two most highly appreciated techniques (sharing materials and providing recordings) in Q1 were preceded by a newly incorporated obligatory task, as we can observe in Figure 10. This prioritisation can be further illustrated by one of the final comments that justifies the significance of this new type of task: (...) *the weekly reminders in the form of obligatory tasks assured me and gave me the motivation to study and improve myself* (S10). Interestingly, the relatively tedious practice of transcribing was found effective for the same number of students as interactive games. There turned out to be only four activities that were considered least effective in PhoPhoII, mainly the Q&A forum in Moodle and external links to blogs and websites (see Figure 11 below).

Finally, in the last optional section of Q3, the respondents were encouraged to leave comments and/or suggestions for the target courses. The prevailing emotion in the 33 submitted comments is that of gratefulness; the participants expressed their gratitude for the lecturers' attitude, effort put into course design and level of organisation.

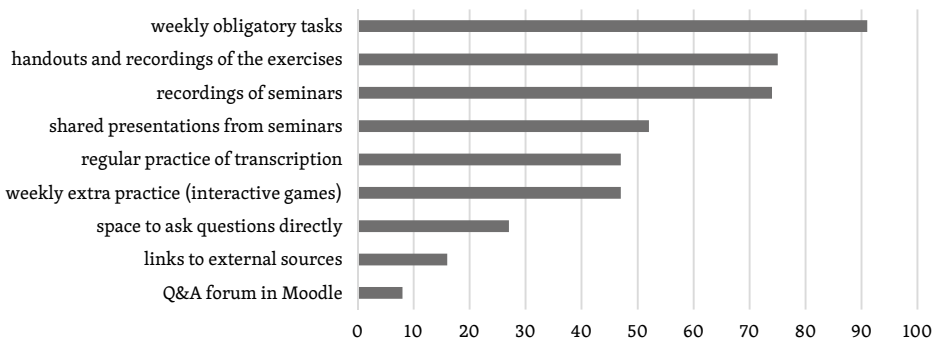


FIGURE 10: Actions, strategies, and materials that the respondents found most effective in PhoPho II in the summer semester. The participants (N=117) could tick up to three options.

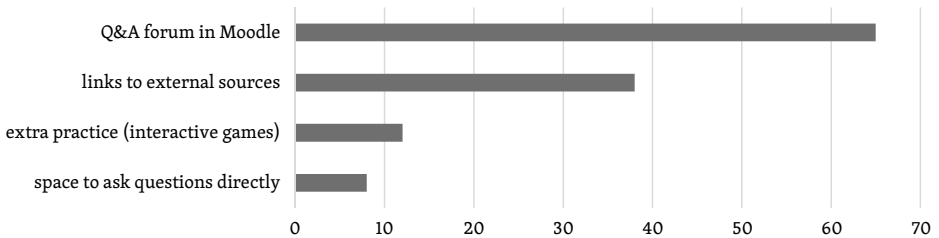


FIGURE 11: Actions, strategies, and materials that the respondents found least effective in PhoPho II in the summer semester. The participants (N=117) could tick three options.

6 DISCUSSION

In line with the previous findings (see Results I and Interim teaching reflection above), the results from the summer semester questionnaires (Q2a/b and Q3) confirmed students' high level of satisfaction with the online courses including the modified and novel elements (more than 80%). The official faculty student evaluation proved even deeper contentment with both PhoPho II (96.6%) and Lexi (94%).

Taking a closer look at the research findings, in PhoPho II the inclusion of regular obligatory tasks was most highly appreciated. We arrive at the conclusion that the addition of immediate online feedback that generated spontaneous discussion and, hopefully, triggered the learning process played a decisive role. According to several comments, the effectiveness consisted in making the students revise, which lead to tangible learning outcomes: *It always forces me to study the particular area and it's a perfect way how to check if I've studied it properly. I also like the evaluation at the end (S3); They push me to revise the handout or find something I am not sure about (S6).* In a similar vein, the three-task-level home preparation employed in Lexi proved to be beneficial: *The course was very well structured and I think it was a great idea to structure the test according to the three levels (S38).* Drawing on the written comments



and observations, these two specific activities seem to have enhanced the level of self-discipline.

Contrastingly, the Lexi activities that were judged as the least effective, i.e., weekly can-do statements, lexicographic project, and weekly vocabulary for revision placed considerably greater demands on student self-discipline. Thus, the potential reason for the above-mentioned effectiveness rating might lie in the degree of teacher participation and the extent of the feedback. While the sharing of post-class recordings and materials together with three-task-level homework with direct in-class feedback display explicit teacher presence, the three learning activities mentioned as least effective comprise no teacher participation or feedback. These activities were offered to students to support their individual progress tracking and exam preparation, yet no explicit follow-up was modelled by the teacher. Moreover, it is challenging to relate long-term progress tracking, such as weekly achievement statements incorporating lesson objectives or weekly new vocabulary for revision retrieved from optional extra activities, with tangible learning outcomes. As the exam tasks were designed according to the structure and content of the weekly homework, it might be considerably easier to appreciate the immediate effectiveness of such type of learning activities. To compare, the least effective techniques in PhoPho II were the Q&A forums and selected external links that provided minimal or no teacher participation.

Moreover, throughout the comments sections (Q1-Q3) almost no criticism was identified in relation to the type and content of instruction, as the majority was consistently expressing full satisfaction. The pedagogical implication this finding might lead to is that teachers might help alleviate student stress by making regular revision obligatory (e.g., in the form of Google forms with multiple choice questions). In other words, moderate and context sensitive curtailing of the adult learner autonomy with a view of avoiding the impression that learner freedom equals teacher benevolence rather than personal responsibility might prove to be beneficial in the long-term perspective.

Reflecting on the learning strategies of millennials, McGlynn (2005) lists several key characteristics of these learners, one of the main ones being the need and expectation to be co-decision makers in the learning process. Laskaris (2005) emphasises that millennials value information based on its relevance for their lives, expect teaching practices to be justified to them and require more freedom in task completion and classroom participation. What seems to be emphasised by both McGlynn (2005) and Laskaris (2005) is the importance of teachers' personal engagement with the students and the display of interest due to their upbringing where full parental attention was the norm.

Recent research (Price, 2009; Novotney, 2010) also points out three building stones of a successful instruction of millennials, i.e., using variety and multimedia, promoting relaxed in-class atmosphere, and justifying the relevance of the learning materials. In summary, Laskaris (2005) and Price (2009) refer to the so called new five Rs that can make teaching practices successful with the millennials, i.e., research-based methods, relevance, rationale, relaxed atmosphere, and rapport. In terms of our teaching strategies, which were being flexibly adjusted based on our findings from and teacher reflection of student feedback, we have catered to these

needs with varying degrees. Furthermore, our understanding of high-quality teaching has implicitly included these criteria, specifically in incorporating the following in our course design: using a variety of multimedia, gamified learning, flexible delivery (online instruction and post-class recordings), and a clearly documented standard of performance (can-do statements, varied difficulty level in homework and final assessment).

Ultimately, we as teachers have benefited greatly from this unique opportunity the pandemic has presented us with by learning how to successfully deal with the transition from face-to-face to online instruction. As we are currently tackling the reversed challenge of transitioning from the online environment back to classroom teaching, we make use of our newly gained experience by maintaining the elements of high-quality online teaching almost at its full scope (such as combining classroom presence and post-class online tasks).

Concerning the challenges that our research outcomes brought to our attention, we feel at least one needs to be addressed at this point. Student autonomy does not seem to be a ready-made disposition that an individual adult student either possesses or lacks. It is rather a skill that needs to be continuously honed and systematically fostered, however, not a priori expected. The potential mistake teachers can make, and we ourselves were not able to avoid, is assuming students' autonomy to be present already in the process of acquiring and developing it in their newly defined role as university students. In the specific conditions of online instruction during the pandemic, our capacity as guides to methodically support the development of personal autonomy strategies in our students was highly limited. Instead, we provided learning opportunities to exercise autonomy that we had not helped develop in the first place.

Particularly in the first year of study, we strongly suggest that teachers create conditions for students to experience some form of an informal academic rite of passage that would provide them with space to process the abrupt change of educational culture that often arises when transitioning from a grammar-school student to a university student status. The symbolic rite of passage can range from an informal discussion focusing on the student needs and expectations to guided discovery activities leading students to perceive and embrace the cultural differences and using them to their advantage in the process of developing their new identities. These identities should ideally be constructed around a greater sense of personal responsibility for learning outcomes and an improved ability to overcome the challenges that greater academic freedom engenders.

7 CONCLUSION

In summary, most decisions concerning our teaching strategies and lesson planning were guided by striving to make our students feel our presence in their learning process over the distance of our different physical locations. The obtained results suggest that in the areas where students felt explicit teacher presence, particularly as facilitators during in-class discussions and in the form of specifically





designed classroom activities and strategies (e.g., post-class availability of class recordings) and direct feedback, they perceived their learning process as successful, the activities as effective and levels of stress decreased. Consequently, as far as our data indicate, unconstrained learner autonomy without some form of ongoing teacher participation was judged by most respondents as considerably less effective or causing learning difficulties. Thus, it would seem that the extent of teacher reliance on student intrinsic motivation needs to be flexibly adjusted based on long-term observation of classroom behaviour and learning outcomes in order to stay constructive and efficient.

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