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In-Person vs Distance – Perceptions of Foreign Language Teaching in Slovenian Primary Schools

Abstract

Global research studies on distance education in foreign language learning focus primarily on secondary schools or higher education. The paper examines primary school foreign language teachers' (n=119) perceptions of distance teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to face-to-face education. The purpose of the study was to investigate the quality, achieved learning outcomes, advantages and obstacles faced by FL teachers in remote teaching. Based on the e-questionnaire, our study indicated that distance FL teaching was more challenging and stressful than classroom teaching because primary school students were not responsive to technology and needed parental guidance. Primary school students rely on cognitive and socio-emotional support from the FL teacher.

Keywords: *classroom, remote teaching, foreign language, primary school.*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the consequent transition to distance learning, has disrupted schooling almost everywhere in the world. Instead of being in traditional in-person classrooms, teachers had to improvise quick solutions (Anderson, 2021) in a short space of time, to adapt their teaching to a virtual environment, quickly learn

to use different digital tools, and, at the same time, maintain the quality of teaching. Students also had to deal with a new way of learning (e.g., take-home materials, online platforms, hybrid instruction), learning organisation, and self-discipline. Distance education also significantly impacted parents who had to offer support daily, especially to primary school students, often while working from home.

The COVID-19 epidemic presented a further challenge in (second/foreign) language education. Teachers had to decide how to deliver language instruction to students most effectively, including findings from previous distance education studies in language teaching and learning (Bollinger, 2017; Graham, 2019). Anderson (2021, p. 19) noted that fewer than 5% of the global studies on remote teaching had addressed K-12 education in general (primary and secondary schools). Our synthesis of research focused on studies that examine remote teaching in (second/foreign) language education in primary schools. Some studies refer to online foreign language (FL) teaching, including the sample of students or their teachers in lower and upper secondary schools (Mäkipää, Hahl, & Luodonpää-Manni, 2021) or universities (Echauri Galván et al., 2021). The studies indicated that the FL teachers were able to move flexibly into the online mode of teaching, despite limitations in technological resources and the absence of training (Zamborová, Stefanutti, & Klimová, 2021), had difficulty providing quality instruction (Marshall, Shannon, & Love, 2020), and a period of online teaching was stressful for them (Gregersen, Mercer, & MacIntyre, 2021). On the other hand, FL students preferred in-person classes to distance learning because they could socially interact with both classmates and other teachers. University students perceived distance education as a good opportunity for foreign language learning, but they did not see it as being as efficient as language learning in traditional classrooms or abroad. Furthermore, the students coped well with technology, and they used it as a bridge to cross the gap between relationships with peers and teachers. However, there were significant differences in foreign language anxiety scores between students in traditional and distance learning foreign language classes. Students in traditional foreign language classes were less anxious than those in distance learning foreign language classes (Bollinger, 2017).

However, there is not much scientific research on distance FL teaching and learning in primary education. Primary school learners display individual differences in terms of developmental characteristics, needs, motivations and learning styles (Pinter, 2006). Therefore, language teachers should adapt their approaches to primary language learners' needs to achieve their teaching and learning objectives.

Contemporary (language) teachers should master professional, pedagogical, psychological, methodological, and digital competences because these not only

contribute to the development of students' knowledge but also enhance their thinking, innovation, and creativity, and prepare them for life in the modern, global society. Many learning strategies support FL learning at the primary level, such as holistic, active, constructive, experiential, and task-based learning (Harmer, 2009). The 21st-century methodology often enhances digital (Bergmann & Sams, 2015) and experimental learning, as well as learning through discovery, cooperation, and communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2014); so that the student's language acquisition occurs naturally and spontaneously while interacting with other people (Brown, 2007). These strategies should serve students (Wali, 2009) and be used according to the students' learning situation, since primary school learners have individual learning characteristics.

In Slovenia, during the COVID-19 pandemic, all teachers were forced to go online (first during the spring of 2019/20 and then in the 2020/21 school year). All phases of the lessons had to be adapted. Significant changes were required in the planning of activities and the implementation, testing and assessment of students' knowledge, and providing feedback. Consequently, some studies referred to distance education (Rupnik Vec et al., 2020). These studies analysed principals', teachers', students', or parents' attitudes and perceptions on distance teaching and learning at different school levels (primary, lower and upper secondary school teachers). The findings showed that students faced difficulties during their online learning (e.g., lack of motivation, reduced social contact, attention problems). They also experienced the most learning difficulties in maths, science and (foreign) languages, where most of them needed direct guidance from teachers.

Studies, including online FL learning in the Slovenian primary setting are scarce. The existing ones mostly describe the anecdotal, effective FL teaching practices (Štefanič Guštin, 2020), but do not introduce empirical, statistical analysis of distance FL teaching and learning in the primary school setting. For example, Štefanič Guštin (2020) describes how she created an online platform on Padlet for her young FL learners (6–9 years old). She uploaded instructions for work, using clear directions for parents and students. Furthermore, presentations of different topics were in the form of short video clips. Searching for suitable online videos was time-consuming. Therefore, she created videos of her own. After returning to face-to-face teaching, it was confirmed that online learning brought some results, but it was not as efficient as expected and hoped.

Although the studies provided several recommendations on distance learning and teaching, (language) teachers had to deal with many different issues (e.g., organisation, approaches, material, (formative) assessment). Similar problems were reported in other studies (Katić et al., 2021; Mäkipää et al., 2021).

Research Methodology

Purpose

The present paper examines how primary school FL teachers coped with online education during the COVID-19 pandemic and introduces their perceptions of both in-person classroom and distance FL teaching in the primary school setting; focusing on the quality of distance FL teaching and the achievement of FL learning objectives/outcomes. It also examines the benefits and obstacles that teachers faced in remote teaching.

Sample

The sample consists of 119 Slovenian teachers. 63 (52.9%) are primary school teachers who have completed an in-service teacher training program for specialising in teaching a foreign language to young learners, and 56 (47.1%) are foreign language teachers who have completed a master's course in a foreign language.

Data collection and analysis

The data was collected using an online questionnaire distributed on social network groups for primary and foreign language education personnel. The questionnaire included closed- and open-ended questions. The data was processed with the statistical software SPSS. The statistical methods of descriptive statistics and related samples of the non-parametric test (Wilcoxon) were used.

Research questions

To achieve the research objectives, the following research questions were posed: How do teachers assess the quality of distance FL teaching? What was, according to the teachers' opinion, the amount/ratio of achieved FL learning objectives/outcomes in the in-class versus distance teaching? What portion of FL teaching outcomes were achieved in distance teaching compared to face-to-face classroom education?

Results

We were interested in teachers' perceptions of the quality of distance FL teaching compared to classroom FL teaching. There were four options to choose from. However, the option „better than in the classroom" was not selected by the teachers.

Table 1. Teachers' perceptions of the quality of remote foreign language (FL)
and in-person teaching

Learning process Quality	f	f%
Significantly lower than in the classroom	21	17.6
Lower than in the classroom	86	72.3
Same as in the classroom	12	10.1
Total	119	100.0

The results indicate that most teachers (72. 3%) rated the quality of remote foreign language teaching lower than in the classroom. Almost 18% of teachers considered the quality of distance learning to be significantly lower than in the classroom. One-tenth of the teachers reported no difference between the quality of in-classroom and remote teaching.

Next, Wilcoxon's test was used to compare the differences in the achievement of the learning objectives/outcomes in FL teaching between in-classroom and distance teaching. Teachers assessed the achieved FL outcomes on a 4-level rating scale, ranging from 1 – a quarter of the outcomes to 4 – all outcomes. Table 2 shows the comparison of the amounts of achieved objectives/outcomes between both teaching approaches.

Table 2. The amount of FL outcomes achieved/realised –
in-class vs distance learning.

	N	%	Mean Rank
Less	98	82.4	50.13 *
More	1	0.8	37.00
Same	20	16.8	-
Total	119	100	
* $p < 0.05$			

The results show that the scope of the achieved FL outcomes from distance teaching was lower than the outcomes achieved in the classroom. Around 82.4% of teachers self-assessed that they achieved fewer FL outcomes in distance education than they usually achieve in the classroom. However, just under a fifth (16.8%) of teachers felt that, regardless of how FL was taught, they achieved the same range of FL objectives/outcomes as planned.

To gain more insight, the proportions of the FL outcomes achieved have been broken down according to the way the foreign language was taught, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The number of teaching objectives realised in-class vs distance learning

Portion	Classroom		Distance teaching	
	f	f%	f	f%
About a quarter of	2	1.7	24	20.2
About half of	20	16.8	39	32.8
About three quarters of	27	22.7	46	38.7
All of	70	58.8	10	8.4
Total	119	100.0	119	100.0

The values in Table 3 confirm the findings of the analysis on the achievement of FL outcomes. In distance learning, teachers achieved up to two-thirds of the FL outcomes, while, in the classroom, most of the set FL outcomes have been achieved.

In practice, effective foreign language teaching occurs when teachers achieve between 75% and 100% of all outcomes. Therefore, we have combined the proportions of the achieved FL outcomes (three quarters and all objectives) as the highest efficiency score. As evident in Table 3, in 81.5%, the highest efficiency of foreign language teaching was achieved in the classroom, while at a distance in less than half of the cases (47,1%).

In an open-ended question, only some teachers listed the most common obstacles they faced in their remote teaching. The method of grouping similar answers was used. The teachers' answers were categorised according to the frequency of each difficulty highlighted by the teachers. The most common difficulty teachers highlighted was establishing contacts (17) with primary school students, having technical problems. The poor motivation of students (12), organisation of online teaching (10) so that students learnt a FL and were active as in the school, time and effort for the development of resources and lesson plans (10), lack of personal contacts (7), poor parental support (7), providing feedback to students (7), achievement of learning objectives/outcomes (6), using some learning strategies (4) and less exposure to a FL (3) were the most common issues teachers faced with online FL teaching.

The teachers' authentic answers are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Categorised teachers' answers regarding their difficulties with distance teaching in primary FL classes

Rang	Category	Teachers' answers	f (No.)
1	Establishing contacts with students, limited technology services	*Due to the technical issues (inaccessibility or poor internet connection, disruptions) video conferencing has taken a lot of energy from me; Some students did not have the conditions for successful work from home (they did not have a computer, were not motivated, their parents didn't help them, as some of them were poorly educated. Primary school students are not computer literate, e.g., in using computers, internet, PowerPoint presentations.*	17
2	Poor motivation of students, passivity	*The passivity of students with learning difficulties; students were exhausted, tired, uninterested, failed in performing tasks, had attention problems; Some students found it difficult to learn and solve tasks on their own.*	12
3	Organisation	*I struggled with how to organise lessons so that students are as active as in the school; how to organise interesting, interactive lessons because at first, I did not know how to use some online tools; which content to introduce and which part to omit; working in groups/pairs.*	10
4	Time and effort for the development of resources and lesson plans	*I spent a lot of time searching and developing my own resources, materials, online apps, and making my own videos; It requires a lot of extra work from the teacher.*	10
5	Lack of a personal connection	*I missed personal contact with my primary school students; the situation was not natural, so impersonal.*	7
6	Poor parental support and their excessive demands	*Many parents had a home office and didn't have time to support their children. These students are not independent, they do not know how to use computers, open PPT presentations, etc; Due to (excessive) requests from parents, some students were under a lot of stress.*	7
7	Problems providing feedback	*It was difficult to correct the mistakes of the students; Problems giving direct feedback.*	7
8	Difficulties in achieving the learning objectives/outcomes	*Not all learning objectives could be realised; It is difficult to achieve certain learning objectives in distance learning, so they have been moved to in-class lessons, and now it has been difficult to achieve them all.*	6
9	Implementation of some learning strategies	*It was difficult to involve movement, active games, pair/group work, cooperative learning. The use of a FL was constantly a challenge, because I could not help myself with facial expressions, gestures, or body language. At school, I constantly help myself with the use of the TPR method (total physical response).*	4

Rang	Category	Teachers' answers	f (No.)
10	Less exposure to a foreign language	*Students were less exposed to a FL, which is reflected in their comprehension, especially in the 1. and 2. grade; In distance learning, students did not hear enough of the FL. Students who normally have a low understanding of a FL are increasingly underperforming in distance learning.*	3

Despite the many difficulties in remote education, teachers also recognised some positive effects. In open-ended answers they mentioned: more freedom for students in the organisation of learning; more individual, student-teacher contacts; students with different learning abilities could take as much time as needed to solve a task and provide feedback; involving more student-centred and creative tasks. Parents had a better insight into the contents discussed during the FL lessons (e.g.*, I sent instructions to parents and students and added learning objectives and links to resources for their independent work*); transparent insight into submitted tasks (tasks are collected in one e-file).

Discussion and Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic affected, among other things, FL education. FL teachers had to learn to organise education and interaction in an adapted way. We investigated how primary FL teachers coped with remote learning compared to face-to-face education. Our research questions concerned the quality of distance learning and the ratio of achieved FL learning outcomes in in-class versus distance education.

The results showed that the quality of distance FL learning was considered lower than in the classroom or even significantly lower, which is quite worrying, as more than three-quarters of primary FL teachers rated the quality of distance FL learning as significantly low. Similar findings were confirmed by other surveys (Mäkipää et al., 2021) where students perceived FL distance education to be less efficient than learning in traditional classrooms and rated distance learning as more demanding than classroom instruction because they missed teachers' explanations. Marshall, Shannon and Love (2020) also pointed out that teachers had difficulty providing quality and optimal online instruction, and lacked the necessary time to do the job well. The interviewed teachers in the present study worked with primary school students who have not been responsive to technology, and

who needed teachers and parental guidance. In a face-to-face primary school context, teachers demonstrate the tasks before having the students complete them, giving them a concrete model accompanied by verbal and visual instruction. They try to involve students in hand-on-manipulative activities, which can include developing language skills, all senses, active learning, etc. Students use concrete materials; technology usually supports visual in-class presentations (e.g., animated videos, songs). As a facilitator of learning, the teacher had to try to include the abilities and characteristics of primary school for students within a media-based learning process. Students had to carry out the tasks at home with support from parents. If the parents were responsive and interacted with the teachers, the tasks were carried out. However, this was less successful with the students and parents where there were limited technology services, they did not know how to handle the technology or, they did not know how to deal with the learning approaches and tasks. In these instances, the teachers found it difficult to carry out adequate support and evaluate the student's knowledge. Therefore, the FL teaching quality was not implemented optimally. Tomasik, Helbling, and Moser (2021, p. 572) also found that primary school pupils learned over twice as fast when attending school in person compared to the distance setup. Primary school learners need to rely on cognitive, motivational, and socio-emotional scaffolding during instruction as students' capabilities for self-regulated learning might not yet be fully developed. The learning gains of students, especially the ones with learning difficulties, slows down and has potential long-term repercussions for future development.

In addition, the teachers stated that, in remote teaching, they only achieved up to two-thirds of the FL outcomes, while in the classroom, most of the set FL outcomes are usually achieved. They explained that the obstacles they faced included limited technology services, organisation of online classes, students' passivity and attention problems, implementation of some learning strategies, and poor parental support, which consequently affected the students' achievements. Based on some other studies (Rupnik Vec et al., 2020), the Slovenian school authority realised that these were the barriers faced by teachers at (primary) schools. Therefore, many additional in-service teacher training sessions on the use of up-to-date ICT technologies and technological-pedagogical competences were organised to ensure that the online FL lessons can be carried out effectively. Moreover, the Slovenian National Institute of Education in its online classroom (https://www.zrss.si/stiki-s-prakso/podpora-pouku-na-daljavo/) offered recommendations and some (video) examples of effective FL teaching practices which can serve as ideas for conducting quality distance FL education. The institute also organised (weekly,

monthly) video conferences whereby different difficulties of remote teaching with FL practitioners were discussed, and some recommendations were mediated. One of the recommendations focused on the formative assessment of students' performance and suggested modifying specific assessment criteria. In addition, the Slovenian National Institute of Education provided digitalised curricula on its official web page. In the Syllabus for Foreign Languages at the primary level learning, objectives/outcomes, which should be achieved in distance learning, are marked in green (all others, achieved in the classroom are in black). For FL education, most outcomes are marked in green because it was believed that almost all aspects of FL communication skills could be developed and achieved at a distance. The FL teachers' stance confirmed that this was not the case.

Our study indicated that distance FL teaching was more challenging and stressful than classroom teaching. The FL teachers felt it difficult to motivate, monitor, supervise and provide feedback to primary school students in their task performance, which also affected the FL outcomes, compared to in-class education. Zamborová, Stefanutti, and Klimová (2021) in their study, found that 66% of the teachers reported that the learning outcomes were met by modifying specific assessment criteria.

However, FL teachers also noted some positive effects of remote education; specifically, in individual student-teacher contacts and instances involving creative student-centred tasks. It highlights the key role of the teacher, as in the study of Pituła and Grzyb (2021), in their adaptation to remote teaching. It confirms that no digital tool can replace the teacher, especially in primary schools, where the teacher enhances student active learning and reflection, monitors, scaffolds, and provides feedback through carefully selected activities to achieve set learning outcomes (Pinter, 2006). If necessary, due to unpredictable situations, the teacher may change or adjust teaching strategies and learning objectives. It is the human ability that no technical device can replace. FL teachers of primary school students have some autonomy in implementing the FL curriculum and selecting teaching strategies and materials. They adapt their lessons to the interests, strengths, needs and abilities of individual students.

Nevertheless, further investigations are needed to examine how primary school students of FL and their parents have perceived the quality of FL distance learning. Secondly, the generalisability of results is limited due to a relatively small teacher sample. However, we assume that other FL educational contexts face similar challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the issue globally to improve FL teaching and learning and prepare teachers, students and parents for the challenges of the post-pandemic era.

Acknowledgements

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