

BLACKBOARD FACILITIES AND ACTIVITIES IN AN ENGLISH LINGUISTICS COURSE FOR PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE OUTBREAK OF COVID-19

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Abstract: The present study describes the organisation of an English Linguistics course for Professional Business Communication targeting students of modern languages with reference to the facilities utilised in Blackboard, the university learning platform, before, during and after the sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, it is shown how the teaching activities which had been previously performed in-person were modified in February 2020 to suit remote online teaching, and how this shaped the following editions of the course, which were delivered in dual-mode (2021/22) and in-person (2022/23 and 2023/24). The students’ perceptions of the activities were examined through two questionnaires: the first administered after the first remote online course and the second after the dual-mode courses. Overall, results show that the pandemic provided a chance to introduce activities and tools, such as wikis, forums and reflective journals, which were considered beneficial by students, as well as to use a wider range of Blackboard facilities.

Keywords: teaching English for professional business communication; learning during the Covid-19 pandemic; Virtual Learning Platforms; Blackboard facilities.

1. Introduction

As is well-known, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, in February 2020 there was a sudden switch to remote online teaching, where ‘remote’ indicates that teaching was accessible exclusively through the Internet, since students had “no access to face-to-face, classroom-based teaching” (Radić et al. 2021: 7). In the field of language teaching in higher education, the switch to remote online teaching spurred an intense wave of research. Radić et al. (2021), which provided detailed accounts on higher education responses to Covid-19 with reference to a variety of languages across the five continents, is a notable example of this research effort. Focused on the organisational and pedagogical changes made mainly by institutions, language departments, language centres and, more rarely, by individual lecturers and language practitioners, the case-studies in Radić et al. (2021) reported on how Virtual Online Environments (VLEs) – i.e. learning platforms such as Moodle and Blackboard – and/or communication tools, such as Zoom, MS Teams, Whatsapp and e-mails, were used to convey information to students, share teaching materials and multimedia resources as well as to support interaction.

Albeit more difficult to ensure in remote online teaching, in some studies interaction was considered to be a crucial component of this teaching mode: interestingly, some remote online language courses relied on learner-centred strategies such as the flipped-classroom (Atabekova et al. 2021; Zhang and Chen 2021; Radić 2021; Luporini; 2020 Schmied 2021) and project-based learning (Freddi 2021; Zhang and Chen 2021).

Studies also explored advantages and disadvantages of remote online language teaching by examining the responses to this teaching mode by students (Chodzkiene et al. 2021; Dong 2020; Freddi 2021; Ghaffari 2021, Kashef 2021; Luporini 2020; Rafiei and Amirian 2021; Radić 2021) and teachers (Alolaywi 2021; Dong 2020; Kashef 2021; Ghaffari 2021; Luporini 2020; Radić 2021), obtained through questionnaires and/or interviews and focus-groups. The results of the surveys are to be carefully interpreted with reference to the socio-cultural and teaching contexts in which the various learning experiences took place. For example, Chodzkiene et al. (2021), who examined language students’ reactions to remote online learning at Vilnius university, where VLEs had already been used for a number of years, reported that the students considered classes to be more appealing thanks to the use of technology. On the contrary, Dong (2020), who analysed the responses of Bangladeshi software engineering students to a remote online English Medium of Instruction course, reported that students found online *classes* more boring and less interactive as compared to in-person ones.

Beside dealing with specific issues related to remote online teaching, many studies offered a much welcomed insight into higher education programmes, contents, delivery modes and students’ assessment in a variety of learning settings and showed how courses were adapted to online environments. With reference to English, examples are in the fields of English for Specific Purposes (Chodzkiene et al. 2021; Freddi 2021), English for Academic Purposes (Zhang and Chen 2021), English as a Medium of Instruction (Chodzkiene et al. 2021;

Schmied 2021), History of the English language (Schmied 2021) as well as English Linguistics (Luporini 2020; Freddi 2021; Mayrink et al. 2021).

The present study intends, firstly, to contribute to research on remote online teaching, by illustrating the organisation of a course of English Linguistics for Professional Business Communication and by showing how it was affected by the pandemic. Secondly, it aims to analyse the students' perceptions of the proposed activities, so as to identify their advantages and disadvantages.

The teaching approach which informs the course is expounded in Section 2. Section 3, devoted to the Methodology, describes the context in which the course was taught (Section 3.1) and the instruments of analysis (Section 3.2). Section 4 is devoted to the first objective of the study: it describes the course contents, with reference to the teaching approach and the relevant literature (Section 4.1), the course delivery (Section 4.2) and the students' assessment (Section 4.3). Section 5 focuses on the second objective of the study: the questionnaires used to collect the students' perceptions are presented in Section 5.1, while Section 5.2 illustrates the results, which are discussed in Section 6. Section 7 concludes the study.

2. Research-based teaching: A review of the literature

The teaching approach which informed the English Linguistics course for Professional Business Communication may be linked to Healey and Jenkins' notions of *research-oriented* and *research-based* teaching (e.g. Jenkins and Healey 2005; Jenkins et al. 2007; Healey and Jenkins 2009a; Healey and Jenkins 2009b; Jenkins and Healey 2009; Healey and Jenkins 2021), which stressed the importance of integrating research in students' higher education. Specifically, the Authors identified four approaches through which teaching and research may be integrated, with reference to the parameters of students' involvement and type of content. The most traditional approach is *research-led* teaching: since knowledge is conveyed by the teacher, it has the students as audience; the content consists in disciplinary knowledge with no emphasis on research methodologies. *Research-oriented* teaching is also teacher-focused, but with an emphasis on the research methodologies as opposed to mere content knowledge. Instead, *research-tutored* and *research-based* teaching are student-focused: while the former consists in supervising students who engage in the discussion of published research with an emphasis on content, the latter is characterised by an emphasis on the research methodologies by which knowledge is produced in a given discipline as opposed to mere content knowledge.

Spronken-Smith et al. (2007) and Healey and Jenkins (2021) listed various terms related to research-based teaching, i.e. *i(e)nquiry*, *inquiry-based learning (IBL)*, *guided-inquiry*, *undergraduate research*, *discovery learning*, *teaching research links/nexus*, *inductive teaching and learning*, *problem-based learning (PBL)*. Although the terms are often interchangeable and their definitions sometimes overlap, they all contribute to a fuller understanding of these approaches, since they invariably point to aspects contributing to their student-centredness. For

example, one of the definitions of *inquiry*, which Healey and Jenkins (2021: 12) took from Roy et al. (2003) and was published on the website of McMaster University (Canada), neatly identifies the activities for which students take more responsibility in this approach as opposed to teacher-centred ones:

- Determining what they need to learn
- Identifying resources and how best to learn from them
- Using resources and reporting their learning
- Assessing their progress in learning.

Teaching practices implementing the above mentioned approaches may take a variety of forms. For example, Roy et al. (2003) stated that instructors may expect “less initiative and responsibility on the part of students” in beginning courses in inquiry (Roy et al. 2003). Similarly, Spronken-Smith et al. (2007: 3) maintained that “[i]nquiry-based learning can go from a rather structured and guided activity [...] through to independent research”. The activities illustrated in the case-studies reported in Healey and Jenkins (2021), which pertain to several disciplines, also have varying degrees of student involvement. They comprised, for example: engaging in class discussions led by a tutor; engaging in a project and keeping a learning journal; formulating hypotheses or research questions; collecting and analysing data; writing a research report; delivering information to the local community; organising and participating in a conference; writing contributions for a journal; interviewing staff about their research and views of the discipline.

Being rooted in data analysis, linguistics was regarded as an ideal candidate for research-based teaching and related approaches (Erlinda 2018; Filimonova 2020). Despite this, examples of research-based activities and courses in linguistics are scant in the literature. Chisholm and Godley (2013) examined the inquiry-based discussions of three high school Afro-American students who reflected on the dialects they spoke. Wyatt and Pasamar Márquez (2015) dealt with qualitative research in a ‘Starting Language Research’ course, while Voorhees and Vorobel (2021) showed the integration of undergraduate research in a ‘Language and Culture’ course serving as an introduction to Linguistics. Erlinda (2018) illustrated the research-based activities in a Pragmatics course, while Filimonova (2020) illustrated the *problem-based* component of an Introduction to Linguistics course. Beside illustrating the course organisation and contents, some studies in linguistics also provided an insight into the students’ perceptions of the proposed activities, relying, for example, on students’ reflective journals and interviews (Wyatt and Pasamar Márquez 2015), open-ended questionnaires (Erlinda 2018), end-of-year reflections and self-evaluations (Filimonova 2020).

The present study also has two objectives: firstly, reporting on course organisation and content and on how they were affected by the pandemic and, secondly, examining the students’ perceptions of the proposed activities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Context

The English Linguistics course for Professional Business Communication described in the present study targeted third year bachelor students specialising in Languages for Companies, a stream in the curriculum in Applied Foreign Languages within the Faculty of Linguistic Sciences and Foreign Literatures at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan. Students in this stream study two languages of their choice among Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Russian and Spanish for three years as well as disciplines related to linguistics and business. A compulsory internship in a company or other organisation (e.g. hotel, embassy, language school) completes the students' curriculum.

To become proficient in the languages of their choice, the students attend practical language classes (120 hours per year per language), where they are expected to develop their skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. Practical language classes are complemented by institutional linguistics courses (30 hours per year per language). As established by the Faculty, the phonological features and the lexico-grammar of the studied languages are tackled in the first and second year, respectively. In the third year, aspects related to the use of the languages in the business domain are dealt with.

The third year course, English Linguistics for Professional Business Communication, targets about 360 students a year. Given the high number of students, each year there are two editions of the course, in the 1st and in the 2nd second semester, i.e. from October to mid-December and from the end of February to mid-May. Each course lasts 10 weeks, three hours a week. Due to the spread of Covid-19, the second semester courses which were scheduled to start on 24/2/2020 were first delayed and then needed to be rapidly reorganised. As a result, the second edition of the course in the academic year 2019/20 (February-May 2020) took place remotely. In the academic year 2020/21 teachers had a choice on whether to teach their courses remotely or in dual-mode – with some students in class and others attending the synchronous classes at home. Considering the high number of students in the courses, it was opted for remote online teaching for the two editions of the course (October-December 2020; February-May 2021). In any case, the courses which had opted for dual-mode teaching had to be switched to remote online teaching due to national lockdowns. In 2021/22, university norms established that all courses should be in dual-mode, while in 2022/23 all courses took place in person only.

3.2. Instruments of analysis

The description of the course contents and organisation – the first objective of the present study – relies on personal accounts and examples of teaching materials devised by the Author. To reach the second objective – analysing the students' perceptions of the course activities – survey questionnaires were

created. The questionnaires were administered after the first edition of the remote online course (February-May 2020) and after the two editions of the dual-mode course (October-December 2021 and February-May 2022).

Survey questionnaires are the most frequently used method in Second Language Acquisition research to collect quantitative data (Dörnyei 2007: 101). The questions were *attitudinal*, i.e. devised “to find out what people think, covering attitudes, opinions, beliefs, interests, and values” (Dörnyei 2007: 102). The items, which were closed-ended, were presented to students in Likert-scale format. The questionnaires were created in Google Forms and all the students enrolled on the Blackboard courses were invited to submit their answers: the type of sampling was therefore *convenience* or *opportunity*. Being based on the convenience of the researcher with reference, for example, to time or availability of the respondents, this type of sampling is the most frequent one in Second Language Acquisition Research (Dörnyei 2007: 98). In the present case, the members of the study were included on the basis of their willingness to answer the questionnaires. Since the questionnaire items reflect the activities performed during the course, which are expounded in Section 4, the items are presented afterwards, in Section 5.1.

4. Description of the course

In the description of the course, ‘during the pandemic’ refers to the time from February 2020 to May 2022, when governmental restrictions and/or university measures aimed to limit the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were in place. ‘After the pandemic’ refers to the time after May 2022. Given the key role of VLEs during the pandemic, course delivery (Section 4.2) and students’ assessment (Section 4.3) are described with reference to the Blackboard facilities used.

4.1. Course contents, teaching approach and reference literature

The course aimed to provide students with the tools to analyse spoken and written business texts as well as to enhance the students’ learning skills and research skills. Table 1 illustrates the course topics.

Table 1. Course topics.

Constructs	
–	Business English as a Lingua Franca;
–	context of situation;
–	context of culture; cultural models.
Methodologies	
–	genre analysis;
–	conversation analysis;
–	politeness theory.

Business genres

- job application letters;
- sales promotion letters;
- for your information letters;
- e-mails;
- company websites;
- advertisements;
- phone calls;
- meetings;
- negotiations.

Before the pandemic, with reference to Section 2, the teaching approach adopted was *research-oriented*, since emphasis was put on research methodologies through which disciplinary knowledge was produced. With reference to the content above, different research methodologies in linguistics and in anthropology were synthetically presented: questionnaires, interviews, the analyses of sample texts and participant observation for Business English as a Lingua Franca (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Kankaanranta, 2008; Kankaanranta and Planken 2010; Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013); transcription, followed by Conversation Analysis (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974) or by corpus analysis (Carter and McCarthy 2006) for spoken discourse; genre analysis for sales promotion and job application letters (Bhatia 1993) as well as meetings and negotiations (Koester 2004); field observations (Hall and Reed Hall 1990) and surveys followed by statistical analysis for cultural differences (Hofstede et al. 2010).

Students were invited to reflect on the benefits they could gain from linguistics constructs and research methodologies and to apply them to texts provided by the teacher. Halliday and Hasan's (1989) model of the context of situation enables one to assess the degree of (in)formality which should be adopted when producing oral or written texts, while genre analysis (Bhatia 1993) may be relied on to work out the generic structure of unfamiliar texts and to produce texts which conform to that structure. The study of the basics of Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson 1987) increases awareness of the importance of creating and strengthening bonds with colleagues and business partners as well as of maintaining their freedom of action. The organisation of turn-taking in everyday conversation (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974) may be used as a yardstick against which to compare more structured interactions, which occur, for example, in meetings and negotiations. Cultural models (Hall and Reed Hall 1990; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010) may be used to interpret the findings of cross-cultural analyses (Cucchi 2019).

4.2. Course delivery and Blackboard facilities

Before the pandemic, Blackboard, the university learning platform, had been used in the course mainly to store content and publish announcements, as detailed in Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2. In class, content delivery was highly interactive: students were rarely offered ready-made theory, but were rather

invited to reflect on texts and on their experiences, through questions and activities in pairs, so as to facilitate comparison and the correction of mistakes.

4.2.1. Storing content: The ‘Materials’ facility

The ‘Materials’ facility, which enables the teacher to use Blackboard as a repository, was utilised to make class materials such as slides available to students long before the pandemic. The course content was divided into weekly folders to help students find and revise course contents.

4.2.2. Informing and directing students: The ‘E-mail’ and the ‘Announcements’ facilities

Before the outbreak of Covid-19, ‘E-mail’ – to send messages to all or selected students – and ‘Announcements’ – to publish notices which remain on display on Blackboard – were sometimes used to give tasks to students. In February 2020, immediately following the outbreak of the pandemic, the ‘Announcements’ facility, paired with simultaneous e-mail messaging, took a key role in the delivery of the course.

Initially, online sessions with a large number of students were not possible and the Faculty of Linguistic Sciences and Foreign Literatures suggested that video-recordings of lessons should be made available to the students through Blackboard. Since retaining the interaction between teacher and students and among students which had always characterised the course before the pandemic was deemed as crucial, it was instead decided to adopt a flipped classroom methodology, asking students to study content and perform tasks. The learner-centred and constructivist nature of the course was explained to the students in a welcome letter (Table 2) sent through Blackboard.

Table 2. Welcome letter.

<p>Dear Students,</p> <p>Welcome to the Lingua e Comunicazione Professionale course!</p> <p>To respond to the current necessities, we’ll start our course on BB. However, this shouldn’t and won’t prevent us from achieving our learning objectives.</p> <p>In this course, one of the main objectives is to learn how to reflect on the language being used in the workplace. Even in class, I always rely heavily on questions. Questions invite people – in this case you, the students – to consider a problem they may have never thought about, stimulate reflection and observations, and suggest comparing new knowledge with pre-existing knowledge. Building on students’ responses, it is possible to start building knowledge together. This is known as constructivism, “a theory – based on observation and scientific study – about how people learn. It says that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences”¹ .</p>
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¹ Go to this link if you want to know more about constructivism: <https://uh.edu/charter-school/about-us/about-constructivism/>.

Knowledge is not something static, but changes according to the responses of the people involved. This is why, even when we – the teachers – teach similar content every year – the classroom experience as a whole is different: people are different! And different people shape content in different ways – they ask different questions, they react differently to the same stimuli – according to their different needs, previous knowledge and experience.

At the heart of constructivism is interaction: knowledge is built by interacting, not only with the teachers, but also with other people – fellow students (peer-to-peer interaction), parents, friends – and with resources – for example material from the Internet. Interacting with people is in our case particularly important, since you are here to study languages: one of the main purposes of languages is to enable people to interact. And interacting is also one of the best ways to practise a language.

As for resources, exploiting the resources we have is of capital importance – think of the workplace: you will not be given a manual telling you what to do and how, but you'll have to make the best of what you have: you may ask colleagues, use records, observe what you see – and you'll slowly gain what you need to survive in the new environment. However, nowadays there are so many sources you can take knowledge from! Think about what is happening now, in relation with Coronavirus: scientific papers, various newspapers and magazines, experts and common people – at times with different interests – all voice their own perspectives. So, it's essential to distinguish among the various sources – by the way, something you'll have to do when writing your thesis – and develop your own critical thinking skills.

In our course, we'll try to translate the above principles into practice. I'll ask you to reflect on given topics and carry out tasks. You'll have to do some research and study something (interaction with resources) – when doing research, remember to pay attention to the reliability of the sources you collect information from. It would be important to compare your findings with a colleague (peer-to-peer interaction). You may interact with your partner by calling him/her, skyping – if you want to practise listening and speaking, or by texting, chatting or e-mailing, if you want to practise reading and writing. This way you'll build your knowledge in interaction and you'll practise English (yes, you should use English :)).

[...]

By the way, students' researching and studying a topic before classes and using class time to discuss the content is an established, although rather new, teaching methodology, called flipped classroom.

Enjoy!

The tasks were also explained through letters, which were sent to the students twice a week through the 'announcements' and 'e-mail' facilities. The letters contained short explanations about the various topics, instructions about the chapters to be studied in Cucchi (2016) and Cucchi and Murphy (2011) and indications about the tasks. Table 3 shows a brainstorming task, which was used to introduce spoken discourse.

Table 3. Task on spoken discourse.

The purpose of this task is to **activate observation** (this is known as **noticing**) or to start **relate the topic to your personal experience**. In class, this would correspond to the **initial phase**, before introducing a topic, when I ask questions such as: “Have you ever seen XXX? / Have you ever heard YYY?”

Remember: This must be done **before studying a topic (e.g. before attending a class, reading the book and the slides)**.

The aim is just for you to start paying more attention to the language you hear and read – be it English, Italian or any other language, many features are similar.

The questions you should try to answer with reference to what you hear – in English and in Italian – are:

In spoken texts: ‘which features are typical of spoken language?’

In written texts: ‘are there features which the writer has used to try to mimic spoken language?’

Underline the features which you think are typical of spoken discourse in the parts written in bold in the text below [...]

Fancy knowing more about the features of everyday conversations? You are lucky, ‘cos this is the thing we’ll focus on now!

Why are we doing this? There are many reasons, you know:

Traditionally, more emphasis was given to written language, so we are generally less aware of the specific features of spoken language in general and of everyday conversations in particular;

The language used in the workplace (for example in meetings) is much more similar to everyday conversation than we could expect;

We may want to write texts which have a conversational flavour (why? Start thinking about this).

But these features, where do they come from? They come from:

The fact that everyday conversation is unplanned, i.e. we don’t decide exactly what to say before saying it and/or we change it while we’re saying it;

The fact that we and our interlocutors are in the same setting, so we refer to the environment and interact with each other.

Right? Hope so!

Now, before dealing with these features of everyday conversation, start NOTICING them, in English and in Italian. How? Write them down when you hear or read them! In what types of texts?

In the lines written in bold in this text, in which I mimicked everyday conversation;

In the conversations you have with your relatives at home;

In the phone calls you have with your friends;

In the text messages you send and receive.

This isn’t the whole story, though. There is a zillion of other types of texts where you can find features of spoken language, for example, in:

a film in English, even one which contains conversations in the workplace;

a chat room where customers talk in English about products;

the posts in English of a company of your choice, on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram;

an ad in a magazine in English.

Choose one of the text types listed above in English and one in Italian and start, ok?

Enjoy!

4.2.3. Supporting peer-to-peer interaction and collaboration: the 'Wiki' and the 'Forum' facility

Wikis and forums are Blackboard facilities for asynchronous interaction and collaboration which were first used in this course in February 2020, when classes could not take place in person. Wikis enable students to cooperate when working on a common written text, thus creating a shared product. In this course, wikis were used to obtain a single text, resulting from the students who participated in the task, to be commented on and corrected in class.

It was found that most students were unfamiliar with wikis: they tended to post their individually produced texts, instead of creating a single text, collaboratively produced. For this reason and also considering that wikis may be a useful tool in their future professional lives, students were sent more detailed instructions on how to use wikis (Table 4).

Table 4. Wikis: instructions.

A wiki enables the collaborative production of a text. So, Student A goes to the wiki and performs the task. Student B goes to the wiki, reads what Student A has done. By clicking on EDIT, s/he may change the text produced by Student A, for example by adding details which Student A left out. Students C-D-E etc. do the same. When Student B-C-D etc. have doubts, they click on COMMENT and ask for clarifications. Other students are invited to answer and/or give their views. In this way, we'll all have the same text and we can make comments, corrections and/or clarifications. By the way, this is a procedure you can use in your future job, since you may have to work on a text (e.g. a brochure, a manual, a contract) with a business partner who is far apart, even in another country.

When the course started remotely in February 2020, it was planned that the tasks in wiki format would be discussed in class when back to in-person teaching. However, teaching continued remotely till the end of the course (May 2020), but synchronous sessions with a large number of students became possible through Blackboard Collaborate Ultra after a few weeks. Therefore, two-hour weekly sessions were scheduled, in which the texts in the wikis were shown, after being annotated by the teacher, and used as a starting point for correction and discussion. To produce an annotated text in a Word document, the teacher had to copy and paste the students' responses, which appeared in individual sections of the wiki, created by the students' through the 'Comment' function. Since this was rather time-consuming, in 2021/22 a minor adjustment to wiki use was made: students were given instructions to write their comments and/or doubts in the shared text (Table 5), which made copying and pasting the students' responses in a Word document much more convenient for the teacher.

Table 5. Revised instructions for producing wikis.

Click on 'Edit' and use a different colour to suggest different solutions and/or to record your doubts. Do not use the 'Comment' function.

Forums were occasionally used in the remote online course (February-May 2020), for example in a task requesting students to share their experiences of foreign cultures (Table 6). Compared to what happened in class before the pandemic, many more students shared their cultural experiences in the forum.

Table 6. Forum on cultures, part 1.

Go to the forum “Experiences with other cultures” and add a thread for each culture you are familiar with. Write a paragraph about the following:

Which foreign countries are you familiar with? Did you live in those countries, studied there, were there on holiday?

What did you find striking about the habits of the people in those cultures?

Since it was noticed that students were not familiar with the ‘Forum’ facility, the purpose of forums was clarified in a letter to the students (Table 7).

Table 7. The function of forums.

Forums enable people to communicate and compare ideas. You can add a new thread and reply to the threads by your colleagues. **Try engaging in a dialogue with your colleagues, replying to their threads.** You can make observations, add details, agree, disagree, agree in part, ask questions to each other. It’s a way you can share and compare ideas. It’s a **dialogue** among you.

After this clarification, students were invited to respond in the forum to their colleagues’ experiences of other cultures (Table 6), reacting to the threads as described in Table 8.

Table 8. Forum on cultures, part 2.

In the forum ‘Experience with other Cultures’, read the posts by your colleagues and find features which you think can be explained with reference to Hall’s or Hofstede’s model. **REPLY** to the post, by mentioning the specific parameter (e.g. space) or dimension (e.g. power distance) which you think may explain a specific feature. Make sure that each post has a reply. As usual in forums, try to engage in a **dialogue** with your colleagues and remember you can use **informal language**.

To give feedback to students on the task in Table 8, the teacher copied and pasted some of the students’ responses in a Word document. However, this process proved inconvenient since the students’ responses appeared in individual replies to threads. Therefore, in the following editions of the courses, students were asked to perform tasks which needed a correction, such as that exemplified in Table 8, exclusively through wikis in the version illustrated in Table 5.

4.2.4. Remote online teaching, teacher-student and peer-to-peer synchronous interaction: Blackboard Collaborate Ultra

As already mentioned in Section 4.2.2, a few weeks after in-person classes were suspended in February 2020, Blackboard synchronous sessions for large groups of students were made available. Synchronous sessions were delivered through Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. Students quickly adapted to online sessions and the discussions of the tasks in wiki format proved to be an effective way to clarify content on the basis of the students' needs.

Through Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, synchronous interaction with the teacher was high: although students usually kept their video-cameras off and rarely asked questions orally, they paradoxically participated more actively in online sessions, by asking questions and answering the teacher's elicitation questions through the chat facility, as compared to in-person classes in pre-pandemic time.

On the contrary, peer-to-peer synchronous interaction was very low: despite attempts to favour it by using the break-out group facility, which enables the teacher to divide students into separate 'rooms' so as to perform joint tasks, many students went off-line whenever this was done. It was therefore decided to drop this.

While online teacher-student interaction with students via chat had a major role in the course which took place remotely (2020/21), in dual-mode courses (2021/22) it was necessary to make a choice about whether to interact mainly with the students attending the synchronous lessons from home or with those in class and preference was given to the latter.

4.2.5. Recording lessons: Blackboard Collaborate Ultra

During the pandemic, university norms established that Blackboard Collaborate Ultra should be used to record the classes and make the recordings available for delayed watching.

4.3. Students' assessment and Blackboard facilities

Before the pandemic, students' knowledge and competences were tested through an oral exam. In order to enhance the students' research skills and their ability of applying the course content and methodologies to their own experience, the discussion of a research-based project, which is described in Section 4.3.2, had been introduced in 2017/18 as an obligatory part of the oral exam. The oral exam consisted of three questions: the discussion of a topic taken from the students' projects, chosen by the examiner, a theoretical question and a question in which students were asked to apply knowledge to a specific text excerpt chosen by the examiner. Each question was worth 10 points for a total of 30/30. The examiners were the teacher of the course and a number of collaborators (former Ph.D. students and secondary school teachers) in their role of *cultori della materia*².

² *Cultore della materia* are subject experts who act as teaching assistants.

During the pandemic, the university established that the format of exams could be changed. Envisaging the difficulty of testing a large number of students orally and online as well as a marked reduction in the collaborators' availability to work as examiners, possibly also due to greater management issues and a generally increased workload in the collaborators' jobs, the final oral exam was turned into a Blackboard test. The research-based project was made optional and the reflective journal, explained in Section 4.3.3, was introduced as an alternative to it. This format was retained in the following editions of the course.

4.3.1. Testing students' knowledge and competences: the 'Test' facility

Blackboard enables teachers to choose among various testing formats. It was decided to opt mainly for fill-in-the-blank items, with occasional multiple choice or true or false items. Fill-in the-blank items may be considered as a modified form of cloze-test (Balboni 2008: 112), in which a word every seven words is removed from a text in order to test the students' reading skills, since the students need to figure out what type of word is missing from the text. Although to a limited extent, through fill-in-the-blank items the students' writing skills are also tested, since they need to write words instead of recognising them. The test was composed of 20 items: a raw score of 20 was fixed to correspond to 30/30, while a raw score of 8 was made to correspond to 18/30. It was decided to count misspelled responses as wrong. A question could contain more than one item. Table 9 shows examples of test questions.

Table 9. Sample test questions.

Question 1

Describing the context of situation and analysing the mode of discourse used in a forum, the medium may be spoken, while the ____ is certainly graphic³.

Question 2

Steven: *So I have the document that was the proposal from Cubiks and I thank you for that, I have the document sent by Bridget last time and +*

Liselotte: *Mm mm.*

Steven: *+ and then Bridget you kindly sent us the brand excellence letter, so that is an example of communication, is that correct?*

Bridget: *That's right. We had the letter sent out by management that kicks off the project, I'll explain what is about... and then from the (inaudible).*

Steven: *Okay. Yes. Okay. And so that's very helpful, obviously that was the topic I would like to touch partly today which is the communication plan but before we jump into..I guess...the topics to be covered, why don't...why don't we all agree on what is...what is the agenda and what is the outcome today?*

This is the first move of a [a] in Business English as a Lingua Franca. In terms of tenor, Steven plays the role of the [b]. The underlined items are examples of [c].⁴

During the pandemic, students took the online test, which lasted 25 minutes, at home, while being watched via Microsoft Teams. To prevent cheating, the

³ The answer is 'channel'.

⁴ Answers are: [a] meeting, [b] chair, [c] response tokens.

questions were randomised, administered one by one, with no possibility of backtracking, and the lockdown browser was activated.

The system automatically calculates scores on the basis of the responses the examiner sets into it and students may be notified their score immediately after the test. However, in fill-in-the-blank items students may provide unexpected, but correct responses. For this reason, it was decided to make scores visible after a manual check of the responses marked by Blackboard as wrong. If these were found, the examiner simply changed the score of the item in an individual test or acted on the test format, by adding the unexpected answer, thus making the system recalculate the scores in all the tests. The test was taken by 359 students in 2019/20 and by 361 students in 2021/22.

4.3.2. *Research-based projects*

The rationale underlying research-based project is expounded in Section 2. Before the pandemic, the projects were illustrated to students at the beginning of the course: students were asked to collect texts, preferably authentic ones, in the organisations where they did their internships or in shops, hotels or companies and analyse them relying on one or more of the linguistic research methodologies and constructs they had learnt. Students could, for example, set out to find spoken features in spoken or written discourse, contrast texts produced in English in different countries with reference to culture, analyse the generic structure of texts or the politeness strategies used. Students could also focus on their experiences in other countries, or the ones of people they knew, illustrated through anecdotes or interviews and relate their findings to the cultural models they had studied. Students could choose whether to carry out their project individually or in pairs.

When projects were first introduced in 2017/18, the students were asked to choose three texts/experiences. From 2018/19, the texts/experiences were reduced to two and a questionnaire devised by the teacher on the use of languages in companies was added. When in-person classes were suspended in February 2020, reflective journals were introduced as an alternative to research-based projects, which had already been illustrated to the students attending the first edition of the course in 2019/20.

In 2017/18, paper copies of the research-based projects were taken by students to the oral exam. In 2018/19, the projects were collected through the Blackboard 'Journal' facility, which enables only the teacher to visualise the students' works. However, this proved inconvenient for the purpose of downloading and storing the projects, since it is necessary to open and download the students' works individually. Indeed, the Blackboard 'Journal' facility appears to be modelled on the *dialogue journal* (Hubbs and Brand 2005: 66), where the teacher and individual students maintain a dialogue throughout the course. From 2019/20, the 'Assignment' facility was used, which enables the teacher to download all the students' works in a single click. The works can be stored, corrected and assessed. In 2019/20, 103 students wrote a project, in 2021/22 the figure dropped to 76 students.

4.3.3. *Reflective journals*

As already mentioned in Section 4.3, following the outbreak of the pandemic, reflective journals were introduced in the course as an alternative to research-based projects since it was felt that, in times of lockdown or restricted mobility, it might be difficult for the students to collect the authentic texts needed for the projects. In reflective journals, students are given stimuli or situations and are asked to link them to their knowledge and experiences (Muncy 2014), with the objective of supporting students in creating links between theory and practice. Reflective journals are widely used in clinical education (e.g. Fortson & Sisk 2007; Lasater & Nielsen 2009; Ruiz-López et al. 2015; Jarvis & Baloyi 2020), teacher training (e.g. Matsuda & Key Matsuda 2001; Biria & Haghighi Irani 2015; Munalim 2021; Schulze & Ittner 2021) and English as a Foreign Language (e.g. Mynard 2008; Jafarigohar & Mortazavi 2013; Prikhodko 2014; Craig et al. 2016). Reflective journaling was found to impact positively on students' performance (Fritson et al. 2016; Jafarigohar & Mortazavi 2013), as well as on the memorisation of concepts (Bouldin et al 2006), critical thinking skills (Kessler and Lund 2004: 20) and self-reflection (Edgar et al. 2012; Lutz 2019). Ghaouar (2012) and Fang and Ren (2018) are examples of use of reflective journals in the teaching of linguistics.

In the course described in the present study, reflective journals took the form of weekly or bi-weekly entries, in which students were requested to record the tasks following the indications sent by the teacher, as well as their doubts, impressions, achievements and what they liked/disliked about the tasks, with the objective of keeping a record of the issues to be discussed in class as well as reflecting on their own learning habits. It was thought that keeping a record of the tasks and asking students to reflect on them might well enhance student engagement, badly needed at a time when in-person interaction was severely limited.

In order to help students overcome the sense of isolation that might result from lockdown or restricted mobility, it was suggested to students that they should opt for team journals, one of the forms pedagogic journaling can take (Hubbs and Brand 2005: 66). Some students asked for permission to compile a journal in threes and this was allowed. To collect the journals, the 'Assignment' facility was used. In 2019/20, 50 students submitted a reflective journal, in 2021/22 the figure increased to 63 students.

4.3.4. *Assessment of research-based projects and reflective journals*

During the pandemic, research-based projects and reflective journals were made optional and it was decided to award them up to three points, to be added to the students' test score. Students willing to submit their work for optional assessment were requested to follow the instructions provided in Table 10.

Table 10. Indications on projects and journals.

In your project/reflective journal, choose the topic you think you dealt with best. Put that topic first and explain the reasons why you chose it. Explain advantages and difficulties in compiling project/reflective journal in this time of lockdown or restricted mobility. If you worked in pairs, state your impressions about your collaboration.

Students obtained a score based on detailed assessment of a single task, chosen by them.

5. The students' perceptions

Students' perceptions of the activities held in the remote online course (February-May 2020) and in the dual-mode courses (2021/22) were collected through survey questionnaires.

5.1. The survey questionnaires

Each questionnaire had two parts. In the first part, students were asked to rate the activities which they performed in the remote online course or in the dual-mode course (Table 11), along a four-point Likert scale (*very useful, useful, not very useful, useless*). Students were told not to rate the activities which they did not perform.

Table 11. Questionnaire, part 1: Rating the activities.

Remote online course and dual-mode course

- attending the online/in-person sessions;
- watching the recorded sessions;
- writing in the wikis;
- writing the research-based project;
- keeping the reflective journal.

Remote online course only

- reading the directions in the letters which the teacher sent during the course;
- writing on the forums.

In the second part of the questionnaire, which was aimed to further explore the students' perceptions, students were asked to rate the statements in Table 12, regarding the activities which they had performed, along a five-point Likert scale (*strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree*).

Table 12. Questionnaire, part 2: Rating the statements on the activities.

<p>Remote online course and dual mode-course</p> <p>ATTENDING THE ONLINE/IN-PERSON SESSIONS</p> <p><i>Statements in the remote online course</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I didn't like the online sessions because the type of interaction is more limited as compared to a university classroom. - I found it easier to follow the online sessions because at home I was able concentrate better than I would have in a university classroom. <p><i>Statements in the dual-mode course</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The type of interaction you can have online is more artificial than in person. So I was happy to go back to class. - I chose to attend online because I can concentrate better at home than in a university classroom. - I chose to attend online because I can save a lot of time. <p>WATCHING THE RECORDED SESSIONS</p> <p><i>Statements in the remote online course</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I liked the fact that I could watch the recordings when I wanted to. <p><i>Statements in the dual mode course</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I attended the lessons (online or in person) and used the recordings if I had doubts. <p>WRITING IN THE WIKIS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I'm rather shy: I liked writing in the wikis because this allowed me to get feedback without having to speak in front of my fellow students and the teacher. <p>DOING A RESEARCH-BASED PROJECT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - helped me to understand more fully the topics I dealt with. <p>KEEPING A REFLECTIVE JOURNAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - helped me better organise my study. - helped me better monitor my progress. <p>Remote online course only</p> <p>READING THE LETTERS SENT BY THE TEACHER TO THE STUDENTS DURING THE COURSE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I liked having written directions/explanations more than the oral directions/explanations I would have been given in a university classroom. <p>WRITING ON THE FORUMS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I liked the forums because I was able to interact with my fellow students more than it would happen in a university classroom.
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5.2. Results from the questionnaires

Unfortunately, the response rate was rather low: the questionnaire was filled in total by 37 students in 2020 and by 60 students in 2022. In addition, the first and the second part of the questionnaire, as well as the various items, did not have the same number of respondents, since the respondents were instructed to

rate just the activities they participated in. Section 5.2.1 shows the students' ratings of the activities, collected through the first part of the questionnaire. Section 5.2.3 illustrates the students' comments to the activities, collected through the second part of the questionnaire. *Very useful* and *useful* ratings were summed, and so were *strongly agree* and *agree*, so as to represent positive feedback by students. *Not very useful* and *useless* as well as *disagree* and *strongly disagree* were also summed to represent negative feedback by students. For each response, percentages are shown and the raw number of respondents is provided.

5.2.1. Results from the first part of the questionnaires: ratings of the activities

Remote online course and dual mode-course

ATTENDING THE SESSIONS

Attending the online synchronous sessions was deemed important, i.e. *very useful* or *useful*, by the vast majority of the respondents both in the remote online course (83% N = 20; N of respondents = 24) and in the dual mode course (88%; N = 49; N of respondents = 56).

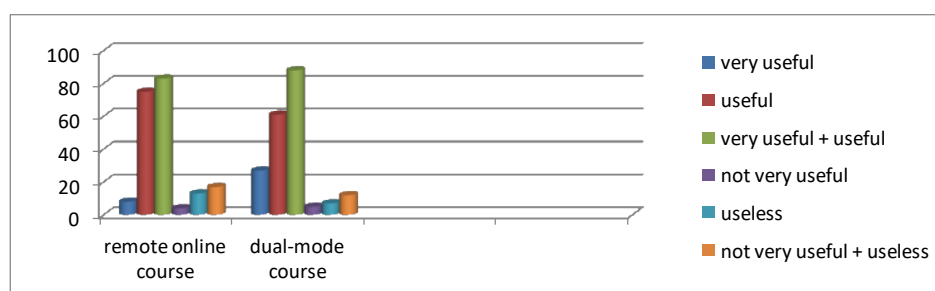


Figure 1. Attending the synchronous sessions

ATTENDING IN-PERSON CLASSES, which was an option for the dual-mode course only, was considered important by the majority of the dual-mode respondents (80%, N = 36; N of respondents = 45).

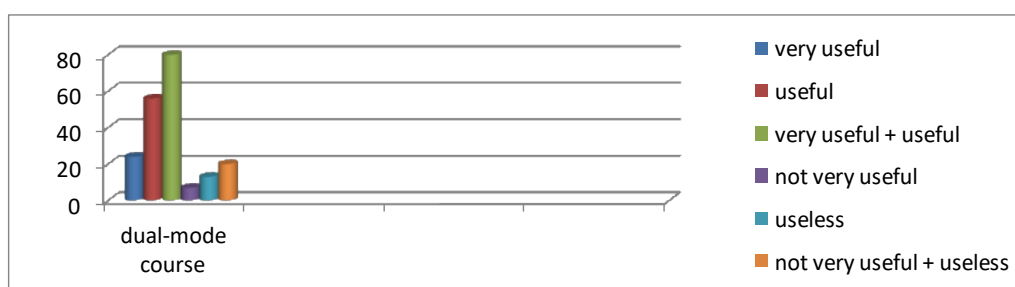


Figure 2. Attending in-person classes

Positive feedback was also given to WATCHING THE RECORDED SESSIONS both in the remote online course (83%, N = 20; N of respondents = 24) and in the dual-mode course (91%, N = 48; N of respondents = 53).

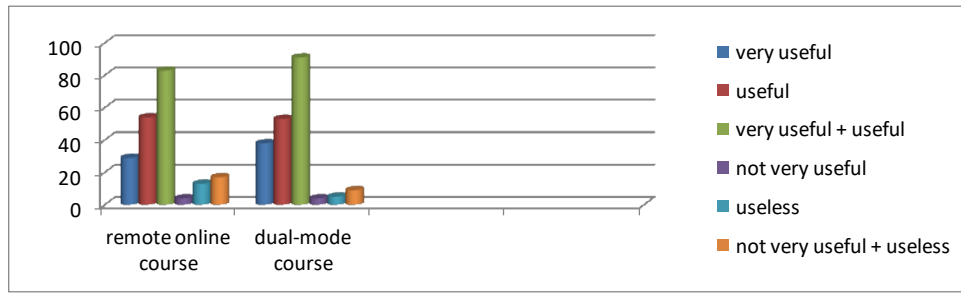


Figure 3. Watching the recorded sessions

WRITING IN THE WIKIS was regarded as important by most respondents, with the same percentage (70%) in the online course (N=16, N of respondents=23) and in the dual-mode course (N=28, N of respondents=40).

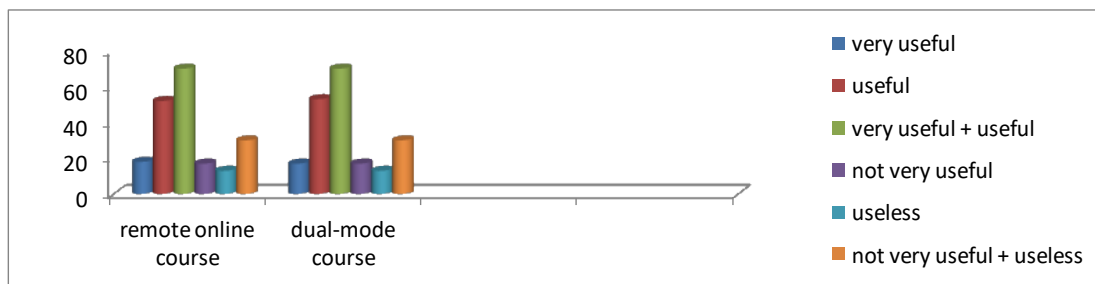


Figure 4. Writing in the wikis

DOING A RESEARCH-BASED PROJECT obtained similar feedback, with the same percentage of respondents (67%) considering it as positive both in the online (N=18, N of respondents=27) and in the dual-mode course (N=22, N of respondents=33).

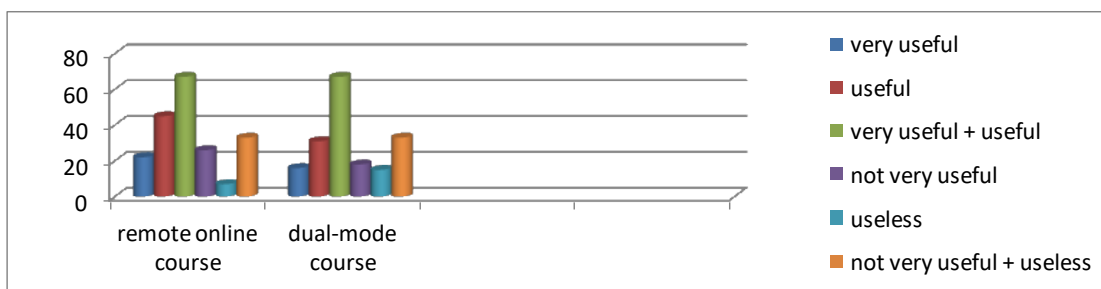


Figure 5. Doing a research-based project

While in the remote online course KEEPING A REFLECTIVE JOURNAL had the same percentage of positive responses (67%, N=14, N of respondents=21) as doing a project, the percentage of positive responses slightly decreased in the dual-mode course (62%; N=24, N of respondents=39).

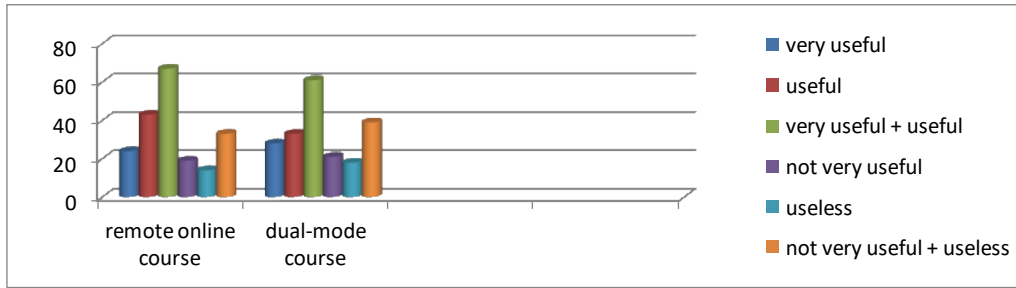


Figure 6. Keeping a reflective journal

Remote online course only

READING THE LETTERS SENT BY THE TEACHER TO THE STUDENTS DURING THE COURSE was rated as positive by most respondents (73%, N = 22; N of respondents = 30).

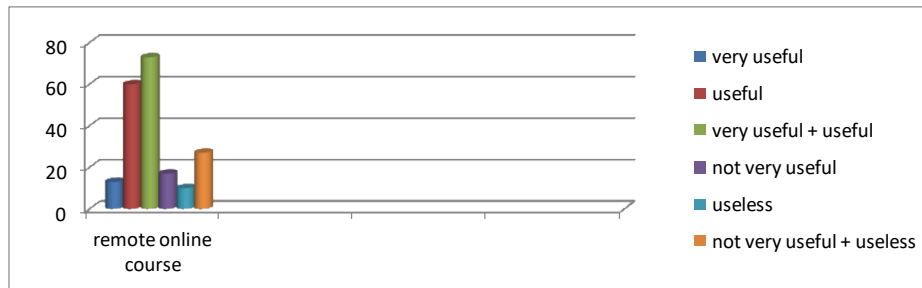


Figure 7. Reading the letters sent by the teacher to the students during the course

An even more positive feedback was obtained by WRITING ON THE FORUMS (77%, N = 17; N of respondents = 22).

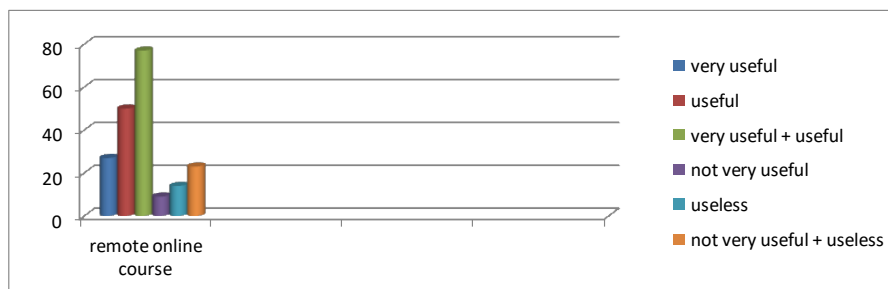


Figure 8. Writing on the forums

5.2.2. Results from the second part of the questionnaires: the respondents' comments to the activities

Remote online course and dual mode course

ATTENDING THE ONLINE/IN-PERSON SESSIONS

Regarding interaction, the highest percentage of the respondents who attended the remote online course (39%, N = 11; N of respondents = 28) claimed that they did not like the online sessions due to the fact that interaction was more limited as compared to university classes. However, an almost equal percentage (36%, N = 10) neither agreed nor disagreed, suggesting that, at least for some students, there was no difference, with reference to interaction, between online and in-person classes. 25% (N = 7) of the respondents manifested disagreement (*disagree* and *strongly disagree*) with the statement.

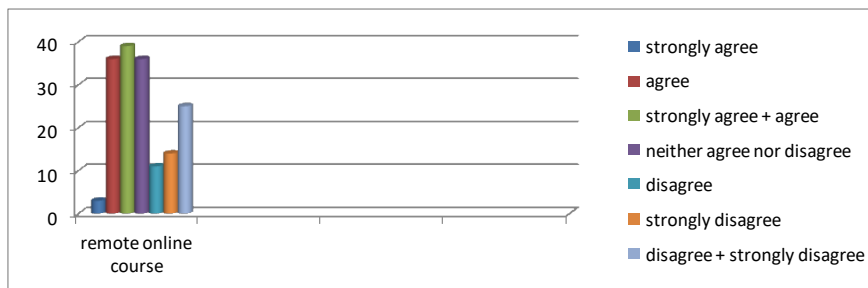


Figure 9. I didn't like the online sessions because the type of interaction is more limited as compared to a university classroom

More than half of the dual-mode respondents (57%, N = 28; N of respondents = 49) claimed that they were happy to resume in-person classes, since they considered them to be more interactive.

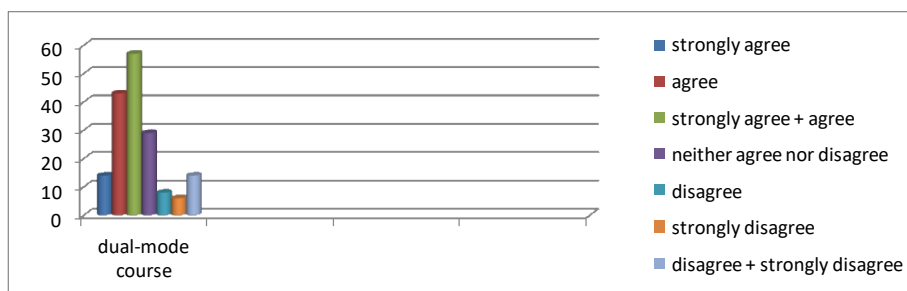


Figure 10. The type of interaction you can have online is more artificial than in person. So I was happy to go back to class

Regarding the students' ability to concentrate, almost half of the respondents (48% N = 13; N of respondents = 27) who attended the remote online course stated that they found it easier to concentrate in the online mode. However, a quite high percentage (37%, N = 10) neither agreed nor disagreed, thus implying that some students were able to concentrate online as easily as in person.

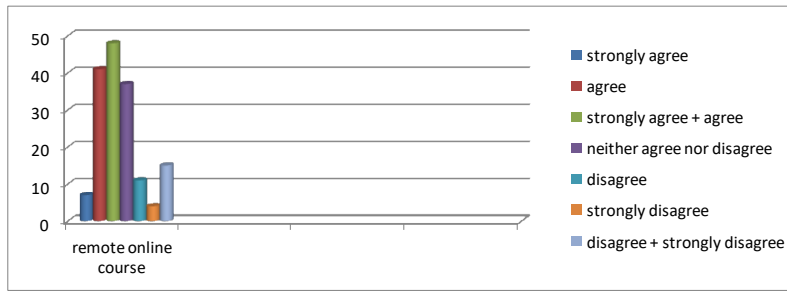


Figure 11. I found it easier to follow the online sessions because at home I was able concentrate better than I would have in a university classroom

40% (N = 22; N of respondents = 56) of the respondents of the dual-mode course claimed that their greater ability to concentrate at home was the reason why they chose to attend online. An almost similar percentage (38%, N = 21) neither agreed nor disagreed.

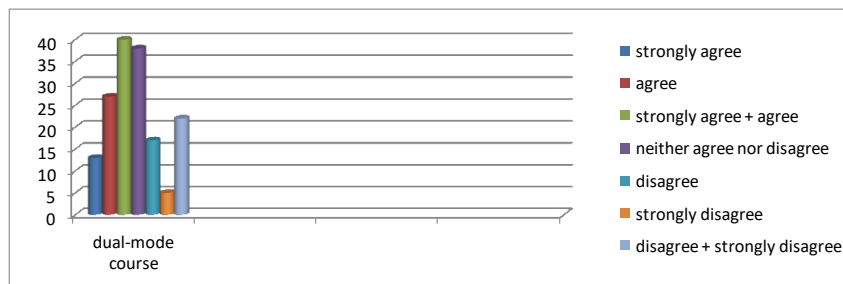


Figure 12. I chose to attend online because I can concentrate better at home than in a university classroom

Instead, the majority of the dual-mode respondents (84%, N = 48; N of respondents = 57) claimed that they attended online to save time.

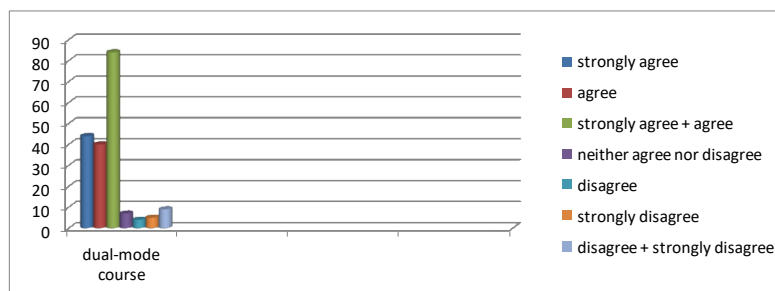


Figure 13. I chose to attend online because I can save a lot of time

WATCHING THE RECORDED ONLINE SESSIONS

The vast majority of the respondents of the remote online course (94%, N = 31; N of respondents = 33) claimed that they liked the fact that they could watch the recordings when convenient.

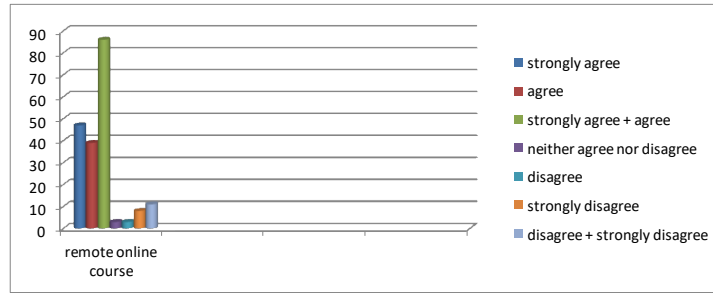


Figure 14. I liked the fact that I could watch the recorded sessions when I wanted to

The vast majority of the respondents of the dual-mode course (82%, N = 42; 51 respondents) claimed that they attended the classes, either online or in person, and they used the recordings if they had doubts.

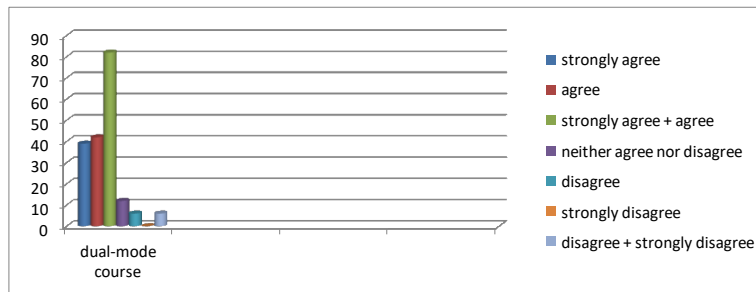


Figure 15. I attended the lessons (online or in person) and used the recordings if I had doubts

WRITING IN THE WIKIS

More than 40 percent of the respondents (46% in the online course, N = 12; N of respondents = 26; 43% in the dual-mode course, N = 17; N of respondents = 40) claimed that they liked wikis since they enabled them to get feedback without having to speak in front of fellow students and the teacher. However, a higher percentage of students neither agreed nor disagreed (50% in the online course, N = 13; 43% in the dual-mode course, N = 17).

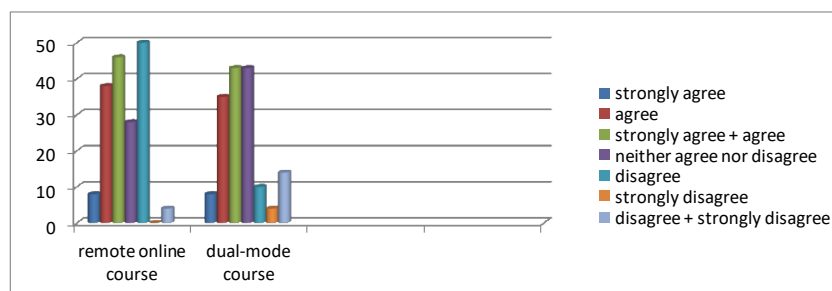


Figure 16. I'm rather shy: I liked writing in wikis because this allowed me to get feedback without having to speak in front of my fellow students and the teacher

DOING A RESEARCH-BASED PROJECT

Positive feedback came more from the respondents of the online course, where the majority of the respondents (70%, N = 19; N of respondents = 27), as opposed to 58% (N = 18; N of respondents = 31) of the respondents of the dual-mode course, claimed that doing the project helped them to understand the topics more fully.

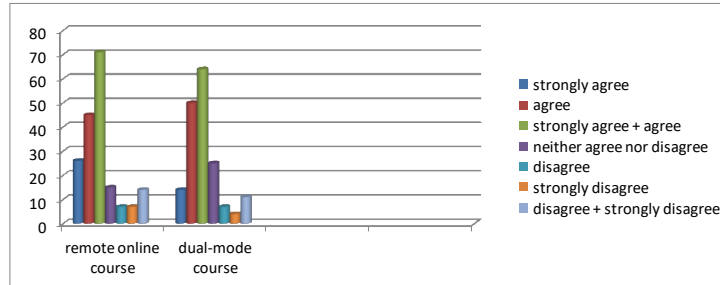


Figure 17. Doing a research-based project helped me to understand more fully the topics I dealt with

KEEPING A REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Positive feedback came more from the respondents of the dual-mode course, where 56% (N = 19; N of respondents = 34) of the students thought that the reflective journal supported them in the organisation of their study, as opposed to 48% (N = 12; N of respondents = 25) of the respondents of the online course.

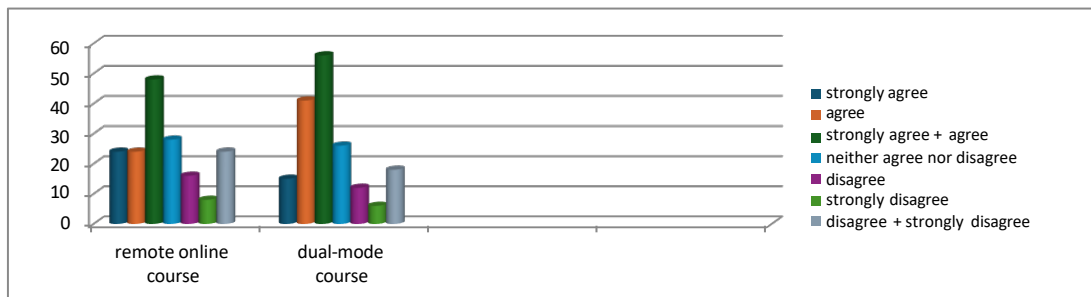


Figure 18. Keeping a reflective journal helped me to better organise my study

Similarly, 58% of the respondents of the dual-mode course (N = 21; N of respondents = 36) thought that the reflective journal helped them monitor their progress, as opposed to 48% of the respondents of the remote online course (N = 12; N of respondents = 25).

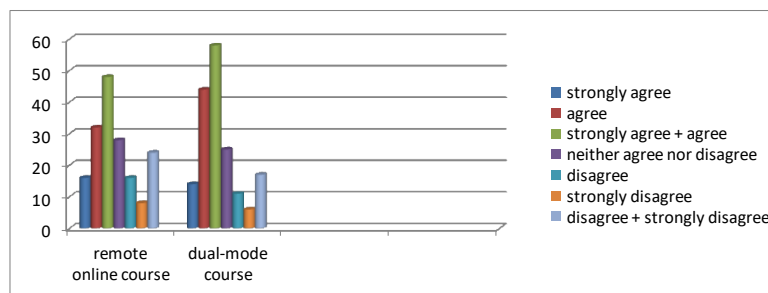


Figure 19. Keeping a diary helped me to better monitor my progress

Remote online course only

READING THE LETTERS SENT BY THE TEACHER TO THE STUDENTS DURING THE COURSE (remote course only)

Most respondents (72%, N = 23; N of respondents = 32) considered written directions/explanations by the teacher more useful than traditional oral explanations.

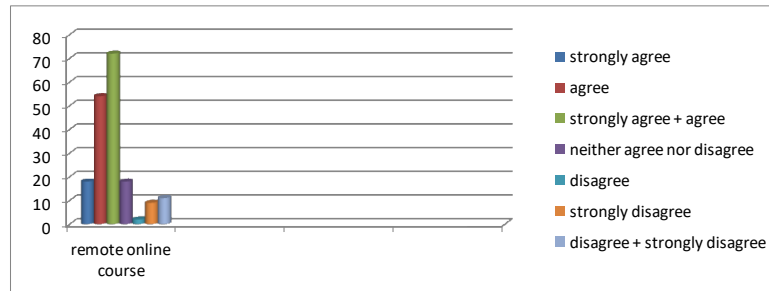


Figure 20. I liked having written directions/explanations more than the oral directions/explanations I would have been given in a university classroom

WRITING ON THE FORUMS (remote course only)

Slightly more than half of the respondents thought that interaction through the forums was more effective than in a university classroom (52%, N = 13; N of respondents = 25).

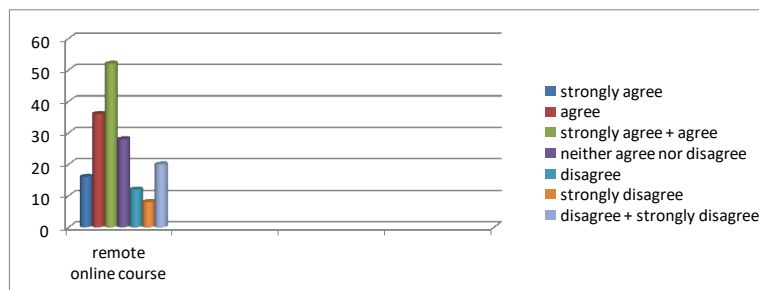


Figure 21. I liked the forums because I was able to interact with my fellow students more than it would happen in a university classroom

6. Discussion: Implications for the future editions of the course

So as to show the students' favourite activities, Table 13 illustrates the rankings of the activities in the remote online course and in the dual-mode course respectively, as emerged from the first part of the questionnaire. For all the items, the most frequent response was *useful*. In parentheses, the percentage of the combined figures of *useful* and *very useful* is provided to show positive feedback, as in Sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2.

Table 13. Ranking of the activities in the online and in the dual-mode course.

Ranking	Remote online course (February-May 2020)	Dual-mode courses (2021/22)
1	attending the online synchronous sessions (83%)	watching the recorded sessions (91%)
2	watching the recorded sessions (83%)	attending the synchronous sessions (88%)
3	writing on the forums (77%)	attending in person (80%)
4	reading the explanations and the directions provided by the teacher in the letters (73%)	writing in the wikis (70%)
5	writing in the wikis (70%)	doing a research-based project (67%)
6	doing a research-based project (67%)	keeping a reflective diary (62%)
7	keeping a reflective journal (67%)	/

As shown in Table 13, all the activities were considered important (i.e. *useful* or *very useful*) by more than 60% of the respondents both in the remote online course and in the dual-mode courses. This would suggest that all the activities should be retained in the future editions of the course.

Regarding online sessions, respondents did not always notice a marked difference, in terms of interaction and ability of concentrating, between online and in-person sessions. On the contrary, there was very high consensus that online sessions enabled respondents to save time. These factors would suggest that the course which was the object of the present study could be delivered in a blended mode. However, university norms established that classes should be in-person as from October 2022.

The fact that the vast majority of the respondents greatly appreciated the recordings of the sessions, since students were able to watch them at their convenience and to use them in case of doubts, would suggest that the practice of making the recordings of the sessions available to the students should be retained. In keeping with the Faculty regulations, in the 2022/23 academic year recordings were made available for one week following each session. However, the availability of classroom recordings may negatively impact on course attendance. University norms established that the recordings of the sessions were no longer compulsory from October 2023.

Wikis were retained in the in-person editions of the course, since they were found very convenient by the teacher to comment on students' responses and mistakes. In addition, more than 40% of the students liked the fact of getting feedback without having to speak in front of the class. To make the delivery of feedback easier for the teacher, students were given the instructions in Table 5.

However, while attendees participated in wikis in the in-person courses in the academic year 2022/23, in the two editions of the course in the academic year 2023/24 they only occasionally did so. Optional research-based projects and reflective journals were also retained in the in-person editions of the course since they were found by the teacher to be convenient for assessing the students' research-skills and their ability to apply linguistics content and methodologies to their experiences. Moreover, projects and journals were generally perceived by the students as supporting their study and understanding of the topics.

Letters to students, which were a distinctive feature of the first edition of the online course and substituted some of the frontal teaching, were occasionally used to sum up content and give directions, since students stated that they liked them more than traditional classroom explanations. On the contrary, since they were found impractical for use by the teacher in class for feedback and correction, forums were not used in the two editions of the in-person course held in the academic year 2022/23: tasks which needed a correction were carried out through wikis, while students were invited to talk about their experiences exclusively in class. In the two editions of the course held in the academic year 2023/24, attempts were made to invite students to talk about their experiences through a forum, since during the pandemic it was noted that many more students shared their cultural experiences in the forum compared to what happened in class before the pandemic, which was confirmed by the fact that more than half of the students stated that through the forums they were able to interact with their colleagues more than they would have done in a university classroom. However, participation in this task was scarce.

7. Concluding remarks

The present study offered an example of a course grounded in *research-oriented* and *research-based* approaches (Jenkins and Healey 2005; Jenkins et al. 2007; Healey and Jenkins 2009a; Healey and Jenkins 2009b; Jenkins and Healey 2009; Healey and Jenkins 2021) in the field of linguistics, which was underexplored in the literature.

Overall, this study showed that the pandemic stimulated pedagogical and technological innovation. As was the case in some courses which were held during the pandemic (e.g. Atabekova et al. 2021; Freddi 2021; Luporini 2020; Radić 2021, Schmied 2021; Zhang and Chen 2021), also the English Linguistics course for Professional Business Communication attempted to maintain its student-centred nature despite the fact of being delivered in remote online mode. In addition, as also emerged from the studies on remote online language teaching in Radić et al. (2021), the pandemic was a chance to extend and refine the use of VLEs facilities. In the course described in the present study, many of the VLEs facilities introduced during the pandemic continued to be used in in-person teaching. Wikis became a key feature of the course, since they were found to be an excellent tool to tailor the task discussion and correction to the students' needs. However, since scarce participation in wikis and forums was noted in the 2023/24 editions of the course, further research is needed to find out whether

students are unwilling to use interactive VLEs tools in in-person courses. The exam format consisting in a Blackboard online test, albeit administered in the university labs, was also retained, since it was considered convenient for assessing the large number of students attending this course. The Blackboard test continued to be optionally complemented by research-based projects and reflective journals and the 'Assignment' facility continued to be used for the collection of projects and journals.

Paradoxically, this study found that specific VLEs facilities encouraged the students to intervene online more frequently and extensively than in class, possibly because the online environment does not necessarily require them to speak in public. Not only, in keeping with Luporini's (2020) findings, did students in remote online courses use the chat facility to provide responses to the teacher's elicitations and to solve their doubts, but they actively participated in wikis and forums to share their views. On the contrary, VLEs features which would have enabled higher student involvement did not prove popular with the students: in keeping with Hopkyns' (2022) findings, students attending synchronous sessions avoided the use of video-cameras and microphones. In addition, they also tended to abandon break-out rooms.

Future studies may further assess which changes, among the ones which were introduced during the pandemic, were retained in university courses held after the pandemic. Clearly, decisions about which changes to keep do not depend merely on the decisions of single teachers, but also on university norms, which may also well be the object of future research.

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