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Online foreign language learning in Higher Education during the COVID-era: A survey of Greek students' perspectives

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During the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, serious disruptions, including campus closures and a massive transfer to online 'emergency remote teaching' (ERT), have brought unparalleled repercussions to all tertiary academic fields, including foreign language (FL) teaching and learning. This paper presents the results of a survey conducted among Greek HE students. In total, 367 responses were collected from students who had attended university FL modules during the 2020 spring lockdown. Results revealed high attendance rates, which seem to relate to the novelty of the online learning experience and the participants' positive feelings towards transitioning to the online mode, while increased screen exposure and lack of interactive engagement appeared as the primary impediments. Issues of equity of access due to technological deficiencies were also raised. Ambivalent evaluations were recorded with regards to online FL learning courses, with students reporting the least progress in their speaking skills development. However, the teaching material used was overall positively evaluated, along with recorded gains in students' digital literacy. It is hoped that this study could shed light on the consequences of what has been the most challenging academic transition in recent decades and prepare for future contingency plans and emerging opportunities in FL teaching in HE.

Key words: Emergency-remote teaching, (online) foreign language teaching and learning, Covid-19, students, Greece.

1. Introduction

The advent of Information and Communication Technology tools in Higher Education (HE) has arguably revolutionised foreign language (FL) teaching methodologies and learning practices in traditional classrooms. Tailored to the 21st century increased demands for international academic collaboration along with multidisciplinary digital literacy, many FL university professionals have fostered the development of language skills incorporating various new technologies from the Web 3.0 and 4.0 environment, including multimedia and multilingual online tools, synchronous and asynchronous communication technologies, online corpora, wikis, internet dictionaries, infographics,

learning management systems, social media and virtual reality games (Bárcena, et al., 2014; Dashtestani & Stojković, 2015; Li, 2017; Macia, et al., 2006; Muñoz-Luna & Tallefer, 2018; Németh & Tseligka, 2018; Kalogerou, 2018).

However, two years ago, it would have been hard to foresee the pivotal role technology would play at such a massive scale in HE. With the advent of the COVID-19 crisis in early 2020, nearly 90% of European Universities were forced to suspend face-to-face teaching opting for distance education with the use of synchronous and asynchronous platforms (Gaebel, 2020). The transformation was broadscale and surprisingly rapid, in an effort to minimise the implications effected upon student learning due to mass student displacements, access inequity/inequality issues and health threats for staff and students (World Bank Group, 2020).

In response to the above, HE language educators were also compelled to abruptly transfer their courses from traditional in-person delivery to a distance online format, or, as has become known, “emergency remote teaching” (ERT) (Hodges, et al., 2020). In this fully digital venue, language teachers had to deliver lessons, interact with and assess students remotely in virtual classrooms (Zhang, 2020), often experiencing increased levels of stress and negative emotions of anger, sadness and loneliness (MacIntyre et al., 2020). Yet, despite the transient nature of ERT, as most universities have returned to a fully face-to-face or a hybrid blended learning mode, it is imperative to record and analyse how it was implemented across different educational systems in order to fully comprehend its repercussions, prepare for future contingency plans and, most importantly, explore emerging opportunities for an optimum integration of technology in HE language teaching and learning.

The present research study focuses on emergency remote teaching of FL courses in Greek universities, one of the few studies to be conducted in Greek tertiary settings, gauging students’ perceptions on the implementation of ERT in FL learning in higher education.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. *The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on FL teaching and learning in university settings*

As already noted, the surge of the pandemic led almost all tertiary education institutions around the world to switch rapidly to online education. Courses, including FL ones, originally designed to be delivered onsite had to be transferred to online platforms embedding computer-mediated resources within a minimum time of preparation. Real-time video conferencing with Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and Zoom applications, extensive use of Moodle or similar CMS platforms, adapted teaching materials with audio/video resources, embedded digital scaffolding and online assessments were among the primary tools employed in FL during the COVID-19 online teaching period (Chen, 2021; Jansem, 2021; Kalogerou, 2021; Maican & Cocoradă, 2021; Ritonga et al., 2021).

It needs to be noted that this type of emergency remote teaching (ERT) in crisis-prompted settings differs significantly from typical distance online FL classes. The former, as Hodges et al. (2020) highlight, has as its main aim “not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional support in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis”. On the contrary, the latter is well-planned and carefully designed to be delivered in an online mode from the very beginning (ibid). Thus, planned online distance FL learning is carried out in multimodal environments with abundant technological tools and specific affordances that call for new pedagogies and modes of learning, new patterns of communication and novel types of assessment (White, 2014). With specific reference to distance and blended learning in languages for specific purposes, Arnó-Macià (2012) reviews a wide range of IT-implemented projects, pointing to their ubiquitous implementation as a result of their flexibility, low cost, ease of access, high student achievement and customised learning material, tailor-made to the

students' specific language learning needs. Most notably, the effectiveness of such projects depends upon an underlying sound pedagogical rationale, technological robustness and a thorough training of teachers and learners (ibid.). Arguably, the unforeseen and rapid emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic could hardly allow enough time to proceed with such a judicious and careful preparation of an online distance FL learning environment, as the one described in previous studies. In that sense, ERT efforts in educational settings during the pandemic should be evaluated with those challenges in mind, i.e., the unique and urgent context and the risk of jeopardising an entire semester at minimum.

Studies so far have unveiled varied results regarding the impact of ERT on university FL teaching and learning since the beginning of the pandemic. On the one hand, students have reported positive feelings towards online language learning, even amidst these adverse circumstances, mainly due to the convenience, high practicality and easiness of online tools, more so in cases when there were no serious technological disruptions (Jansem, 2021). Remarkably, some students favoured the interactive online platforms because they resembled to some extent the social media platforms they are so familiar with when communicating online with their peers (e.g. video calling and exchanging text messages) (ibid.). Furthermore, recent research reveals that the affordability of online resources was quite positively accepted by Chinese university language learners, expanding the breadth and depth of their learning experiences and providing a less stressful environment for peer interaction, especially when messages could be exchanged anonymously thus overcoming public speaking anxiety (Huang et al., 2020). Similar findings have been noted by Kamal, et al. (2021, p. 7317) whose study indicated that "the absence of harsh teacher's control and the fact that students have fewer opportunities to compare their academic results with classmates' learning outcomes...may contribute to the improvement of student's self-esteem" in distance FL learning and teaching. Despite the recorded decline in the efficiency of distance learning of English during the pandemic, the research confirmed its overall higher value compared to face-to-face learning (ibid.).

Conversely, it has been demonstrated that students displayed quite low self-management skills (Huang, et al., 2020), particularly at the early stages of ERT, when they frequently resorted to their instructors for problem-solving and guidance (Chen, 2021). The lack of social contact, spontaneous in-class discussions, collaboration and lively participation, particularly with peers, emerged also as a major flaw that undermined the language learning quality (Huang et al., 2020; Jansem, 2021; Kalogerou, 2021; Ritonga et al., 2021), especially when students kept their cameras switched off, impeding the speed of online interactions (Klimova, 2021). Many students reported decreased concentration as a serious disadvantage of ERT, further compromised by the lack of printed materials that did not allow for note-taking and active learning engagement (ibid.). Online learning productivity was further depleted due to some students' poor technological skills and their financial difficulties to afford internet network fees (Jansem, 2021). Technical issues have also been noted in a study with university learners of Arabic, where the low voice and sound quality as well as the weak or intermittent internet connection diminished significantly the learning process (Ritonga et al., 2021). The participants further identified the absence of feedback and adequate explanation on behalf of the instructors as an important obstacle while the majority assessed negatively the learning outcomes in all four language skills, i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing (ibid.). Congruently, English language learners and teachers in Kalogerou's (2021) research found the online courses during the pandemic less exciting, less interesting and less engaging, compared to onsite classes.

2.1. FL teaching and learning in the Greek Higher Education (HE) Area

The Greek HE area presents an interesting case to be studied, typified by rather conflicting educational practices, including the FL learning field. Greek LsAP instructors are highly qualified, since a doctorate has become a formal requirement for holding a language teaching position in Greek HE (Government Gazette 195/issue A/6-9-2011), and often embrace innovative instructional methodologies in their

courses (Eumeridou, 2019; Nikolarea, 2019; Tseligka, 2019; Tzoannopoulou, 2016); yet, they could be easily disheartened due to lack of sufficient university support, training, professional development prospects and an absence of a holistic foreign language policy in HE (Tseligka, 2016).

With respect to the use of technology in FL teaching, a study conducted a decade ago by Dogoriti and Pange (2012) indicated that a significant number (39%) of Greek ESP instructors at the time were quite hesitant to integrate ICT tools in their courses, favouring primarily the use of conventional coursebooks or less-interactive web-based language-learning resources (i.e. employing primarily tools such as word processors, power-point presentations, and emails to contact students). In view of the positive attitudes that the majority of the respondents noted towards the future integration of technology in enhancing ESP teaching in HE, the study reported that more teacher-friendly tools would appeal to the instructors (i.e. an online platform), provided that such a solution would be easy-to-use, less time-consuming and allow for comprehensible input to be presented in a practical manner. Unsurprisingly, a more recent study (Constantinou & Papadema-Sophocleous, 2020) recorded the significant advancements in the field, with the majority of ESP practitioners ($\approx 80\%$) in Greek and Cypriot HE having now embraced the use of technology in their courses. However, it is underlined that ESP instructors still resort to the affordances of basic computer tools for their ESP course delivery, including word processor, internet browsers, projectors, e-learning platforms and emails, with “tools like social media, blogs, websites, games, wikis, chat tools or smartphones...not listed as popular [ones]” (ibid. 23). Similarly, there seems to be only a handful of studies analysing the implementation of modern web tools and online learning methodologies in LsAP in Greek HE, attesting most probably to the scant integration of advanced technological applications in many Greek academic settings (Arvanitis, 2019, 2020; Krystalli & Arvanitis, 2018; Mamakou & Grigoriadou, 2010; Perifanou & Mikros, 2009; Tangas, 2006, Tseligka, 2019).

Furthermore, despite their increased English language proficiency, Greek students are often reported to lack academic study skills and opt to be performance-oriented (i.e. achieving a good mark) rather than to fulfil specific learning goals (Katsara, 2018). A more recent study has also foregrounded the increased multilingual profile of Greek university students, with more than half of them speaking two FLs, strongly motivated to invest time and effort in FL learning; yet, financial difficulties appear to cause significant hindrances in attaining this goal (Hovhannisyan & Sougari, 2018). As regards LsAP courses at a university level, the majority of these modules are compulsory, aiming to cover the needs of all students. However, the appalling shortages in staff do not allow splitting classes into smaller groups, thus resulting in large-size audiences of more than 50-100 students per class, seriously undermining the desired learning outcomes (Tseligka, 2016).

3. The study

3.1. Research questions

In view of the above context, the present study was designed to address mainly the following research questions:

- 1) Did Greek students attend FL courses during the COVID-19 pandemic? Which factors are related to their attendance?
- 2) How did students evaluate online FL learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

3.2. Methodology: the questionnaire and data analysis

An online questionnaire was structured with the use of Google forms and was administered to the seven (7) largest Greek universities¹ with the assistance of fellow LsAP instructors affiliated with the corresponding institutions, who forwarded the survey to their students via registered email lists and online platforms (e.g. Moodle). The survey was conducted from May 15th 2020 until June 8th 2020, when lectures usually end in most Greek university departments.

The questionnaire was written in English as it was simultaneously distributed to many other European universities. For the purposes of this paper, responses only from students of the Greek institutions are considered. The questionnaire was divided into three main sections (see Appendix). The first one included questions about the participants' basic demographic data (gender, age, nationality) as well as their field and year of study. The second section focused primarily on the period prior to the transition to ERT, asking students whether they were obliged to relocate because of the pandemic and the emotions they experienced in view of this unparalleled emergency situation. The questionnaire also sought information about the students' pre-pandemic online-learning experience. The last part comprised several questions (primarily multiple-choice type) recording participants' attendance rate in online courses, their evaluative perspectives, possible hindrances and difficulties of both synchronous and asynchronous platforms, as well as potential benefits out of the whole process. An open-ended question in the end left space for garnering students' overall comments and views regarding the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on their FL learning experience. The questionnaire was originally pretested with a small group of Greek students in one of the researcher's courses to check for response latency and question clarity. It was anonymous, no personal data of respondents were disclosed, and the respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Collected data were analysed through SPSS.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Demographics and profile of participants

The self-selected sample of participants consisted of 367 students (N = 367), who had attended at least one online FL course (either for general or specific academic purposes) in any of the above-mentioned Greek universities during the spring semester 2019-20. Almost 3/4 (68.4%) of our respondents were female students, which is not surprising considering that females have been recorded to hold a more positive attitude towards foreign language learning (Cochran et al., 2010). More than half (61%) were of a younger age (18-20 years old), followed by 25% who were 21-23 years old and 14% who were older than 24. The dominant nationality was Greek (N= 334, 91%). Responses were somehow divided between 1st year students (42.5%) and those attending the 2nd ≥ year of study (53.7%). This is because most LAP/LSP courses are compulsory and integrated in the first years of studies in Greek HE, while Languages for General Purposes (LGP) courses are optional and offered later in the curriculum (Tseligka, 2016). The major fields of study of the respondents varied among Sciences (24%), Health Sciences (19%), Social Sciences (14%), Language Studies (13%), Computer Science (12%) and Education Studies (10%), while the rest 8% studied in other Departments. Finally, more than half of the participants (61%) studied at the University of Ioannina, 11% were students at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 10% at the University of the Peloponnese, 7% at the University of Thessaly and 5% responses were received from the University of Patras and 5% from the University of Macedonia respectively, while the rest did not specify which institution they attended. Thus, it was not possible to confirm whether any responses were received from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA). This could be explained by the fact that in NKUA foreign languages are

¹ The National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, University of Patras, University of Ioannina, University of Thessaly, University of Macedonia and University of Peloponnese.

primarily taught at the Foreign Language Teaching Center² –an autonomous academic unit, where languages are taught outside the degree curriculum for a specified tuition fee. However, for the purposes of this study, the researcher solicited data from students attending free FL academic modules integrated in their course curriculum and not any extra-curricular paid courses.

4.2. Research question 1: Did Greek students attend FL courses during the COVID-19 pandemic? Which factors are related to their attendance?

Our data suggest that the majority of the students (80.1%) attended a very high percentage of the online FL courses (75% ≥), despite the remarkable previous lack of experience in online distance learning (85%). Interestingly enough, those with no previous exposure to online learning displayed an increased participation (75% ≥), compared to students who answered ‘Yes’ (i.e. that they already had some experience in the past), as depicted in the following table.

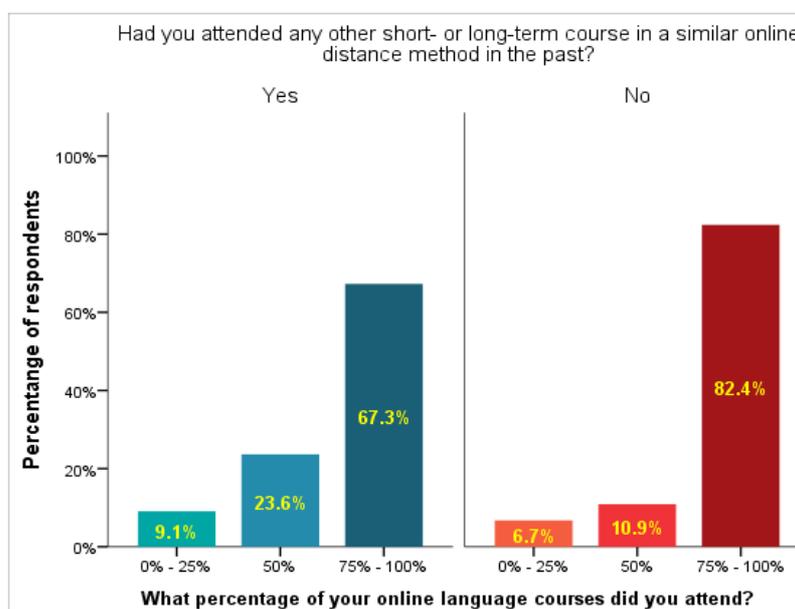


Table 1: Previous experience in online distance learning & FL course attendance

It might be the case that the novelty of online education and its unexplored features increased the motivation of novice users to engage in online learning, as supported also by Wells' et al. study (2010, p.813) which highlights the “perceived novelty [as] a salient affective belief that plays a significant role in the adoption of IT innovations”.

As was expected, most of the students whose permanent residence was in a different city (82%) decided to return to their hometown upon announcement of suspension of face-to-face classes. However, no significant difference in attendance of online FL classes emerged between those who went back to their hometown and those who stayed in the city/town where they studied. Specifically, of those who went back home, 82% attended a very high percentage of their online classes (75% ≥). The corresponding percentage for those who continued to stay away from home was 79%.

Yet, despite the high attendance, upon announcement that FL classes would be transferred to an online mode, a number of students (36.5%) reported experiencing at least one negative emotion, such

² NKUA Foreign Language Teaching Center:

https://en.uoa.gr/about_us/services_units/foreign_language_teaching_center/

as worry and disappointment and a little less than 1/3 (28.9%) expressed positive feelings of excitement and relief. For the purposes of the data analysis, we grouped students' responses as follows (see Table 2 below):

Negative emotions: those who selected any of the answers 'worried', 'scared' and/or 'disappointed'

Positive emotions: those who selected any of the answers 'excited' and/or 'relieved'

Mixed emotions: those who selected at least one negative AND one positive emotion

Indifferent: those who answered 'indifferent'

I didn't know what to expect: those who answered 'I didn't know what to expect'.

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
How did you feel when you heard that face-to-face (f2f) university lessons were going to be delivered online for the rest of the semester?		
Negative Emotions	134	36.5
Positive Emotions	106	28.9
Mixed emotions	77	21.0
I didn't know what to expect	40	10.9
Indifferent	10	2.7

Table 2: Students' affective responses to announcement of transfer online FL classes

Overall, we could note that students reported both negative and positive emotions with respect to the transfer to the online mode, while 1/5 of the respondents (21%) reported mixed feelings, which was a rather reasonable reaction considering the unprecedented nature of the situation at the time, as illustrated in the following comments: *"It is definitely an interesting experience which I wouldn't mind to choose on my own if I had the option. However, sometimes it's hard not to have a f2f contact with the students and the instructors, but there are solutions to this"*, *"I am not Able to say, but f2f lessons can help more students learn sth, although learning from home is more accessible"*. The presence of such ambivalent stances has also been documented in similar studies, as *"the pandemic is a traumatic event and online learning is a complex process, in which the chances to succeed or fail are present, but uncertain. Thus, mixed feelings represent a typical position"* (Maican & Cocoradă, 2021, p.15). In order to test whether students' affective responses were related to their attendance of online classes, a one – way independent samples analysis of variance was performed in order to evaluate the differences (Table 3).

	Attendance of online distance courses			F(3,363)
	N	M	SD	
Emotions after transition to online learning				3.26*
Negative Emotions	134	4.13	1.04	
Positive Emotions	106	4.43	.82	
Mixed emotions	77	4.18	.94	
I didn't know what to expect	40	3.83	1.04	
Indifferent	10	4.20	1.23	

* $p < .05$.

Table 3: One-way ANOVA for the attendance of students' online courses in relation to their affective responses about the transfer of FL classes to an online mode

The results show that there are statistically significant differences between the several emotions from the transition to online learning as regards the attendance of online FL courses [$F(3,363) = 3.26, p = .012$]. The post-hoc comparison, using the Tukey method, showed that those with positive emotions had higher attendance compared to those who did not know what to expect ($p = .007$). It seems that those students who were mostly unprepared and discouraged by the new reality were mostly deterred from attending online courses, compared to those who managed to embrace with more positive thinking the new teaching and learning reality.

When prompted to identify the most significant reasons that deterred students from online attendance, long screen exposure (32.1%) and the lack of engaging interaction (24.2%) emerged as the main demotivating factors, as depicted in Table 4 below.

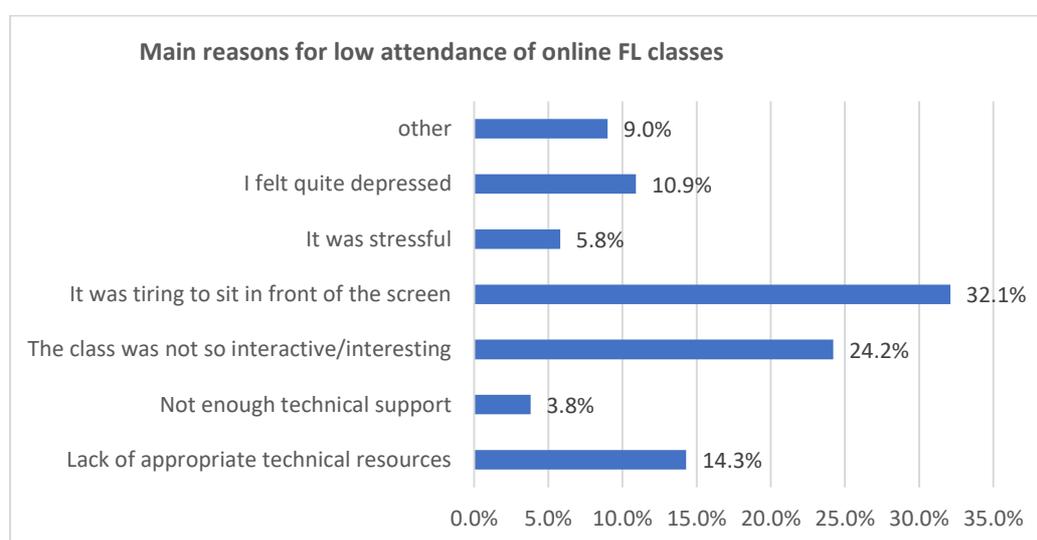


Table 4: Main reasons for low attendance of online FL classes

This is not surprising as H.E. instruction was exclusively delivered online at the time – including both theoretical and lab sessions – imposing arguably a heavy strain on students. This is precisely foregrounded in one respondent's comment: *"the lack of face-to-face lessons and immediate interaction between the teacher and the students is the major disadvantage that made difficult, boring and awkward the teaching process for both sides"*. Similar studies have illustrated that the increased screen exposure compounded with physical inactivity during home confinement in the spring of March 2020 severely disrupted undergraduates' sleeping patterns (Majumdar *et al.*, 2020), which could have most likely impacted their academic performance. Accordingly, Alexiou & Michalopoulou (2022) found that the more hours Greek students spent on online learning, the more dissatisfying their learning experience was.

Furthermore, the decreased interaction either between learners-teachers or among learner groups has been confirmed as a major trigger of negative emotions in online learning during the pandemic in the Greek context (Alexiou & Michalopoulou, 2022; Kalogerou, 2021; Kamarianos *et al.*, 2020), and particularly in the case of low-achieving students (Maican & Cocoradă, 2021). Frequent comments by our respondents (*"It is really difficult for all the students to sit in front of the computer so many hours the day and not be able to participate and talk during the online courses"*, *"f2f interaction is the best way to learn a foreign language and this is something that can not be offered in Online Lessons"*)

underlined the difficulties caused by the lack of peer in-class interaction in FL learning. An independent sample T- test was performed to examine whether those who found the online course interactive/interesting showed higher attendance of online courses compared to those that did not rate the courses as such (Table 5).

Independent samples t-test scores and values of descriptive statistics

Measure	Was the course interactive/interesting?				95% CI for the mean difference	t	Df
	Yes		No				
	M	SD	M	SD			
Attendance of online distance courses	4.37	.89	3.93	1.04	-.64, -.24	-4.35***	365

Table 5: Students' attendance of online FL classes in relation to their perception of course as interactive/interesting

The results of the t-test independent samples showed that the mean attendance of online distance courses differed statistically between those who found the course interactive/interesting ($M = 4.37$, $SD = .89$) and those who did not find the course interactive/interesting ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.04$) [$t(365) = -4.35$, $p < .001$], with the former displaying a higher rate of attendance than the latter –a finding verified by similar studies (Maican & Cocoradă, 2021; Kalogerou, 2021). It could be the case that the urgent nature of ERT, especially during its initial stages, called for a more directive approach, where instructors undertook a more leading role, guiding students through this rapid transition to a fully online environment at the expense of more interactive activities. Apparently, such a compromise was necessary at the time, even at the expense of lively classroom discussions, which are conducive to learners' increased language learning progress (Huang *et al.*, 2020). Also, the possible lack of instructors' training and previous experience with the pedagogic methods and principles of FL courses delivered fully online, as recorded in another survey (Zamborová *et al.*, 2021), may have also contributed to the decreased interaction opportunities in online FL classes during the pandemic.

On a separate note, a significant number of participants ($N=104$) stated that their attendance was hindered, among others, due to the lack of access to the appropriate technological affordances and lack of adequate technical support –a finding in line with previous studies (Jansem, 2021; Ritonga *et al.*, 2021). An independent sample T- test was performed to examine the relationship between the technical difficulties encountered and the students' attendance rate. It showed that the mean attendance of online distance courses did not differ between those with ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.00$) and those without ($M = 4.22$, $SD = .97$) technical difficulties during online learning [$t(365) = -.64$, $p = .523$]. Yet, this number of students should by no means be overlooked, particularly as there were also frequent observations by the respondents underscoring these technical issues: *"Many students cannot afford the appropriate materials to participate in online class (e.g Internet access, microphone etc.)"*, *"Due to equipment problems, the students will waste time answering the questions, resulting in lower classroom efficiency"*, *"There are some people who do not have pc or desktops in their home or even they do, they not have a Wi-Fi connection (the circumstances forced them to acquire it anyway). What I want to say is that many of our people did not have the time to prepare themselves for this big transition to distance courses due to financial problems. ... For example they used their mobile phones to connect -sometimes with no success- or used MB because of the lack of Wi-Fi connection"*. Such comments raise profound concerns about equity of access to education since lack of resources directly impact student performance and overall pedagogical design (Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2020). Considering that technology is predicted to be even more widely embraced in HE in the following years, special

provision needs to be made for disadvantaged students to avoid deepening the digital divide in education.

The above findings were further verified by our study because when students were asked what should be done to improve potential future delivery of online FL learning lessons, nearly 1/3 (30%) of the respondents emphasised the need for an increased technical support and availability of resources to learners and instructors, while another 30% stressed the integration of a variety of digital tools to make FL learning more effective.

4.3. Research question 2: How did students evaluate online FL learning?

Upon completion of the courses, 1/4 of the respondents evaluated the classes as interesting (25%) and easy (14%) while at the same time they found the lessons tiring (20%) and boring (13%). As was previously discussed, excessive screen exposure emerged as a major cause of fatigue and dissatisfaction for many students, as exemplified by these comments: *“Online Lessons are really exhausting. It is not possible and easy for the students to spend 5-7 hours, alone in their room, in front of a computer screen doing online lessons and then study for hours again in front of a pc”, “I believe that it would be better if the online courses lasted as long as the scheduled time because it is tiring after two hours”*.

For the purposes of the data analysis, we grouped students' responses as follows (see Table 6 below):
Positive evaluation: those who selected any of the answers 'interesting', 'easy' and/or 'exciting'
Negative evaluation: those who selected any of the answers 'tiring', 'boring' and/or 'time-consuming'
Mixed evaluation: those who selected at least one positive AND one negative evaluation
Same as before: those who answered 'same as before'.

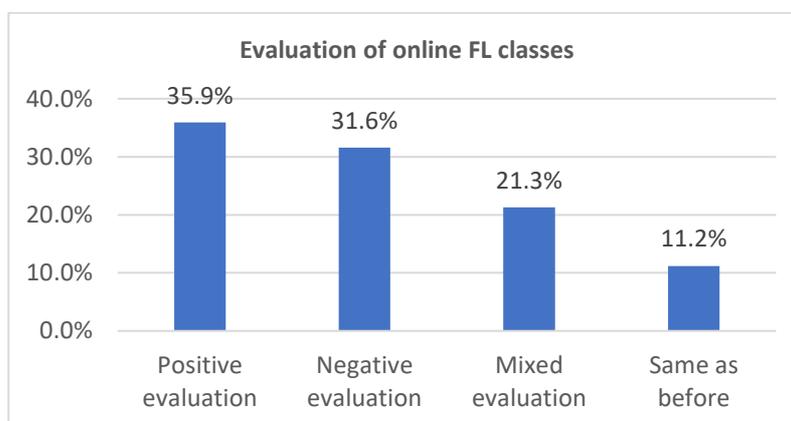


Table 6: Evaluation of online FL classes

Despite the fact that almost 1/3 of the students (31.6%) were unsatisfied with the online FL lessons, a slightly higher percentage (35.9%) provided a positive assessment, even under these emergency circumstances, while 1/5 of the respondents displayed mixed evaluations, in parallel with their mixed emotions towards the transition to online distance learning presented earlier. Typical is the following comment by one student: *“Despite all the anxiety and worries about the covid pandemic, it was an interesting and much more excited way to get into such classes. Finally, all of our teachers tried their best in order to make us feel relaxed in such difficult days we are still facing, and also explore the whole world of online courses”*.

Among the most frequently employed digital tools (whether for asynchronous or synchronous use) MS Teams, Google apps (e.g. google drive, google docs), Skype, Zoom, Vidyo, Moodle, WebEx, Padlet, Kahoot and Reverso were recorded as the most popular ones. No major differences were found in the

evaluation between the online applications for asynchronous vs synchronous use, although the latter were considered slightly more interesting, providing more opportunities for language learning according to some students (Table 7).

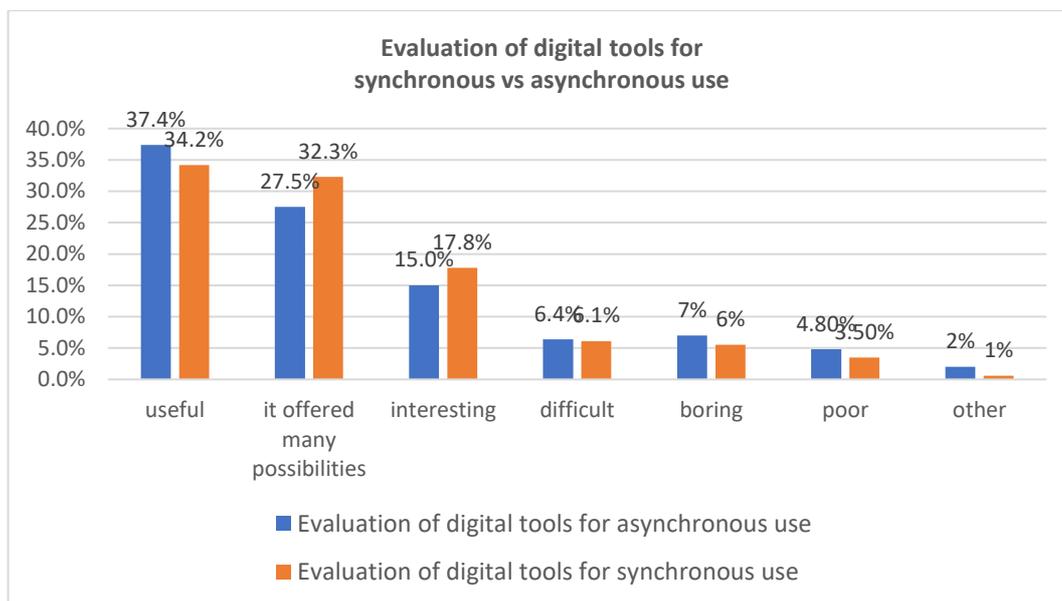


Table 7: Evaluation of digital tools for asynchronous vs synchronous use

With regards to the teaching and learning material employed during ERT, it seems that it appealed to a few more than half of the respondents, who evaluated it primarily as ‘useful’ (27%), ‘interesting’ (21%) and ‘rich in variety’ (18%), as displayed in the results below (Table 8).

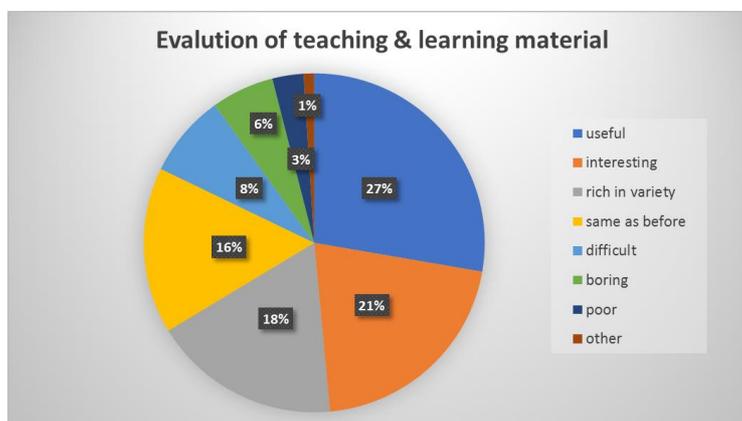


Table 8: Evaluation of online FL material

Considering the little time that language educators had to adapt the available teaching resources and digitally modify LsAP lessons, their effort can be evaluated as praiseworthy at the very least, in view of such positive evaluations (“*The tutor did her best to provide us with every material she had and she also tried to make the lesson enjoyable*”). In view of the relevant literature that underlines the importance of suitable digital teaching resources for an effective online course delivery, especially for the millennial generation (Fansuri *et al.*, 2020, Gacs *et al.*, 2020), a Chi-square χ^2 test was performed to check the relation between the evaluations of the teaching/learning material and the evaluations of the transition to online distance learning in the online FL class. A statistically significant relation was found between the tested variables [$\chi^2(9) = 129.07, p < .001, V = .342$]. Those with positive evaluation

of the teaching/learning material in the online foreign language class had a positive evaluation of transition to remote online distance learning experience in the foreign language classes ($n = 110$, 83.3%) (Table 9).

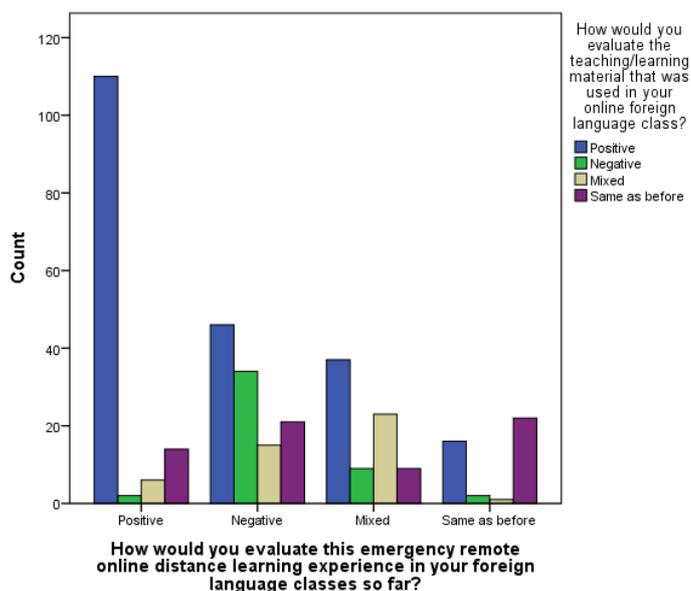


Table 9 Evaluation of transition to online FL learning in relation to evaluation of teaching/learning material

Informal discussions between the researcher and EAP/ESP colleagues from the surveyed universities revealed that many of them did not use printed coursebooks during ERT (since these were mostly unavailable for students at the time) but integrated more authentic and multimodal material (e.g. videos, TED talks, online exercises) that seem to have appealed to the students. A broadscale survey by Zamborová *et al.* (2021) among more than 700 FL instructors in European university language centres also confirmed teachers' commitment, dedication, flexibility and adaptability to the online mode of teaching and its affordances during the pandemic, despite the lack of available technological support and training.

Finally, students' responses regarding the benefits of language learning online indicated that the majority mostly valued the digital skills developed through these online applications as well as the overall experience (with 22% and 26% respectively), as presented in Table 10 below.

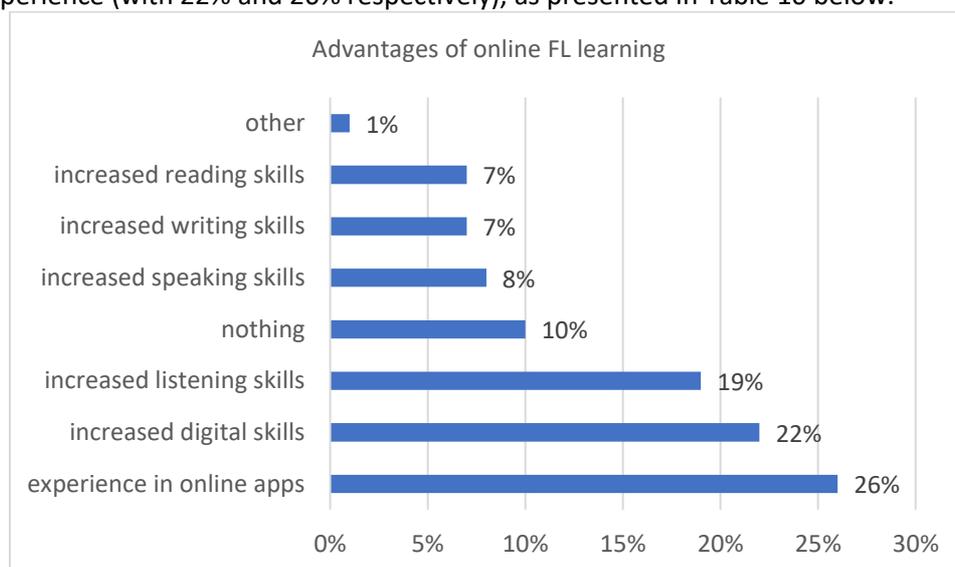


Table 10 Advantages of language learning online

As one student characteristically noted, *“I believe that the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent transition to everything digital provided an interesting and much needed opportunity to better explore how useful computers and software can be in the domain of learning”*. This finding concurs with a relevant study where international students of English as a Second Language at a university in Cyprus reported benefits in technological literacy (Hassan *et al.*, 2021). This is quite significant considering that students’ digital competence in higher education settings remains at a basic to a medium level (Zhao *et al.*, 2021). Hence, a unique opportunity emerges here for HE institutions to capitalise on the technological competencies students gained during the pandemic and aim to further equip them with advanced digital skills in order to fully exploit e-learning opportunities.

When evaluating advancements specifically in language learning skills, only listening emerged as moderately improved by 19% of the participants, while performance in all the other skills (i.e. speaking, reading, writing) appeared not to be seriously enhanced since less than 10% recorded gains in that respect. Taking into consideration that these online ‘video-lectures’ (i.e. with the use of a video-conferencing system such as Zoom, Skype, MsTeams, etc.) were mostly teacher-directed (as mentioned beforehand), it seems that learners experienced more opportunities to practise their listening skills, since they primarily had to listen to and comprehend their instructors’ course delivery.

The lack of a balanced integration and practice of all four skills was also verified when students were asked about the major disadvantages of online FL learning, where the productive skills, i.e. speaking (33%) and writing (20%), appeared to be more hampered compared to receptive skills, i.e. reading (11%) and listening (15%). Particularly the lack of interpersonal speaking activities is usually one of the most challenging factors in online language education and was equally confirmed in other studies (Gacs *et al.*, 2020, Ritonga *et al.*, 2021, Zamborová *et al.*, 2021), even more so when catering to large-size audiences as the ones in Greek HE. From personal experience, I should note that it was hardly manageable trying to practise academic FL speaking skills with student groups where the registered number of online attendants was 100-150≥ –an observation illustrated in the following student comment: *“I attended both foreign language courses and university courses during the pandemic...it was harder for the foreign language courses, we could not really practise our speaking skills...”*.

5. Conclusion

The present study discussed the disruptions in LsAP learning and teaching in Greek HE in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak, forcing an unexpected transition to online remote teaching. Findings suggest high attendance rates, related to the novelty of the online delivery mode and the participants’ positive feelings towards this transitioning, while prolonged screen exposure and lack of interactive engagement appeared as the main hindrances to course attendance. Students’ technical deficiencies appear to raise issues of equity. Mixed emotions towards online FL learning courses were also recorded, with students reporting the least progress in their speaking skills development. However, the teaching material used was overall positively evaluated, along with recorded gains in students’ technological competencies.

With the HE reality in a transition stage, the main implication of the above findings concurs with Gacs’ *et al.* (2020, p.390) view, that “attention to instruction in F2F, online and hybrid formats will undoubtedly continue to be a necessity, with special attention to adaptability, flexibility, and quality instruction remaining at the centre”. Hence, it is strongly suggested that expertise in IT skills should become part of LsAP instructors’ skill set in terms of their professional development (Hodges, *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, they should try to integrate innovative technologies with careful preparation, diversity of tools and appropriate educational methodology after this crisis-prompted situation is resolved. As an example, breakout rooms, which allow for pairing-up of students in small groups, have been found to facilitate more active learner-to-learner interaction, provide more opportunities for

speaking skills practice and make the course more interesting and active (Gruber and Bauer, 2020). This might be of great use for the large audiences of Greek LsAP classes. At the same time, technology-enhanced blended learning might promote a more student-centred approach with increased involvement, participation and responsibility (Šafranĳ, 2013), a mode that appears to be more preferred than the exclusive use of e-learning (Maican & Cocoradă, 2021).

It will, certainly, take time to mend both the health as well as the social, psychological, and educational wounds in the post-Covid era. Technology, as a modern Asclepeion, might be conducive to this process by offering innovative solutions, resource variety, individualised material and multiple modalities, stimulating motivation and autonomous learning. What is more, “there is an opportunity in the moment for genuine equity-focused innovation, policymaking, provision and pedagogy” (Czerniewicz, *et al.*, 2020, p.963). To this end, it is imperative to secure effective educational training for all stakeholders involved (teachers, students, administration support), as well as a robust technological infrastructure that will leave no one behind.

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APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on foreign language teaching & learning in Higher Education

Section 1

Background information

- 1) Gender
 - Female
 - Male
 - Prefer not to say
- 2) Age
 - 18-20
 - 21-23
 - 24+
- 3) Nationality : _____
- 4) Are you a(n):
 - undergraduate student?
 - postgraduate student?
 - other: _____
- 5) Were you on an Erasmus+ exchange programme when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country you were studying at?
 - Yes
 - No
- 6) When the COVID-19 pandemic started, which COUNTRY and which UNIVERSITY were you studying at?

- 7) What academic field do you study (e.g. Medicine, Physics, Fine Arts, Chemical Engineering, Primary Education, etc.)?

- 8) What YEAR are you in your studies?
 - 1st
 - 2nd
 - 3rd
 - 4th
 - 5th
 - 6th
 - Other: _____

Section 2

BEFORE transition to Emergency Online DISTANCE Teaching/Learning

- 9) BEFORE THE TRANSITION to online DISTANCE LEARNING, were you studying in your hometown or in a city/town different from your hometown?
 - I was studying in my hometown
 - I was studying in a city/town different from my hometown
 - Other: _____
- 10) IF YOU WERE STUDYING IN A CITY/TOWN different from your hometown, what did you do as soon as the suspension of face-to-face (f2f) classes was announced?
 - I went back to my hometown
 - I stayed in the city/town where I studied
 - Other: _____
- 11) How did you feel when you heard that COVID-19 PANDEMIC had hit the country you were studying at? (you can TICK more than one answers)
 - Worried



- Scared
 - Disappointed
 - Indifferent
 - I didn't know what to expect
 - Other: _____
- 12) How did you feel when you heard that face-to-face (f2f) UNIVERSITY LESSONS were going to be delivered online for the rest of the semester? (You can tick more than one answers)
- Worried
 - Scared
 - Disappointed
 - Excited
 - Relieved
 - Indifferent
 - I didn't know what to expect
 - Other: _____
- 13) Before this transition to online DISTANCE learning, had you attended any other short- or long-term course in a similar ONLINE DISTANCE METHOD in the past?
- Yes
 - No
 - Other: _____

Section 3

AFTER transition to Emergency Online DISTANCE Teaching/Learning

- 14) Which FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSE did you attend online during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Medical English, Business German, English for Engineering, French for Arts, Italian for Beginners, etc.)?
- _____
- 15) What percentage of the online DISTANCE COURSES did you attend?
- Almost 0%
 - Up to 25%
 - Around 50%
 - More than 75%
 - Almost 100%
- 16) What were the main reasons that you DID NOT ATTEND some or all of the ONLINE DISTANCE COURSES (you can TICK more than one answers)?
- I didn't have the appropriate technical resources (i.e. lack of pc, slow Internet connection, lack of mic, etc.)
 - There wasn't enough technical support to help me join and attend the online classes
 - The class was not so interactive/interesting after it started being delivered online
 - It was tiring to sit in front of the screen for a long time
 - It was stressful to attend online courses
 - I felt quite depressed because of the COVID-19 situation, and I was in no mood to attend any courses in general
 - Other: _____
- 17) How would you evaluate this emergency remote online DISTANCE learning experience in your FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES so far? (you can TICK more than one answers)
- Easy
 - Interesting
 - Exciting
 - Boring
 - Tiring
 - Time-consuming
 - Same as before
 - Other: _____
- 18) What has been the MOST DIFFICULT aspect of this emergency remote teaching/learning in your FOREIGN LANGUAGE course? (you can TICK more than one answers)
- technical difficulties (i.e. bad connection, lack of sound/mic, etc.)
 - carrying out online exercises (lacking the appropriate digital expertise)

- sitting in front of the screen for a long time
 - lack of f2f interaction with other STUDENTS
 - lack of f2f interaction with the INSTRUCTOR
 - lack of supplementary paper-based material (i.e. printed books)
 - too much homework
 - too many participants in the online class
 - inappropriate teaching material due to the little time allocated to INSTRUCTORS to prepare for the new situation
 - lack of adequate time for STUDENTS to adjust to the new situation
 - other: _____
- 19) How would you evaluate the teaching/learning material that was used in your online FOREIGN LANGUAGE class? (you can TICK more than one answers)
- Interesting
 - Useful
 - Rich in variety (multimodal, numerous resources)
 - Boring
 - Difficult/demanding
 - Poor
 - Same as before
 - Other: _____
- 20) Out of all the platforms/applications that were used in your ONLINE DISTANCE sessions, which ones did you find most appealing and useful? (e.g. MsTeams, padlet, google forms, Kahoot, etc.)
- _____
- 21) How would you assess the platform that was used for ASYNCHRONOUS teaching/learning in your situation (i.e. moodle, etc.)? (You can tick more than one answers)
- Interesting
 - Useful
 - It offered many possibilities (i.e. chat, video, rich material to be uploaded)
 - Boring
 - Difficult/demanding
 - Poor
 - Same as before
 - Other: _____
- 22) How would you assess the platform that was used for SYNCRHONOUS teaching/learning in your situation (i.e. MS Teams, big blue button, zoom, Skype for Business, etc.)? (You can tick more than one answers)
- Interesting
 - Useful
 - It offered many possibilities (i.e. chat, video, rich material to be uploaded)
 - Boring
 - Difficult/demanding
 - Poor
 - Same as before
 - Other: _____
- 23) What do you think you have EARNED out of this TRANSITION to online DISTANCE learning method in your FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSES? (You can tick more than one answers).
- increased digital skills
 - experience in using various online applications for language learning
 - increased listening skills
 - increased reading skills
 - increased writing skills
 - increased speaking skills
 - nothing at all
 - other: _____
- 24) Which do you think has been the major DISADVANTAGES out of this TRANSITION to the online distance learning method in your FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSES? (You can tick more than one answers)
- inadequate practice of listening skills

- inadequate practice of reading skills
 - inadequate practice of writing skills
 - inadequate practice of speaking skills
 - nothing at all
 - other: _____
- 25) In the FUTURE, if such a need for ONLINE LESSONS emerges again, what do you think should be done to improve the delivery of FOREIGN LANGUAGE LESSONS in Higher Education?
- increased technical support and resources to learners and instructors
 - more educational training to students and instructors so as to adapt f2f to online delivery of FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES
 - more time should be allocated to preparing appropriate FOREIGN language teaching/learning material
 - a variety of digital tools should be integrated to make FOREIGN language learning more effective
 - other: _____
- 26) Do you have any final comments to make regarding the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on FOREIGN language courses delivered in Higher Education?
- _____

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