THE UNFORESEEN ADVANTAGES OF
REMOTE ESL/EFL CLASSES

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Abstract:
Teaching ESL/EFL in a rather small, developing country has its challenges – most of the schools do not have proper IT equipment and the students are taught in the same way as students were over 20 years ago. With technology on the rise, the need for a technology-aided teaching process has become evident. Students expect certain technology-based activities during the teaching process. But, unfortunately, such activities cannot be implemented with the existing conditions. With the rise of the Covid-19, remote teaching became the sole teaching model in multiple countries, North Macedonia not being the exception. As teaching remotely slowly became the norm, students, some for the first time ever, took part in technology-aided activities and thoroughly enjoyed them. Although the pandemic has brought many disadvantages to education, one unforeseen advantage arose – students in North Macedonia engaged in online games and different activities that made ESL/EFL more interesting and exciting for them. This paper aimed to research students' opinion on ESL/EFL classes during the pandemic. A questionnaire was administered to two classes of year 2 students from a local high school in Bitola, North Macedonia. The results showed that students find online classes interesting, due to the online activities that they find engaging and that they would appreciate more such activities during real-life teaching.

Keywords: ESL/EFL, Covid-19, remote teaching, North Macedonia

1. Introduction

As Covid-19 continued to spread drastically in the spring of 2020, a significant number of educational institutions shut down and turned to remote teaching. Different governments put into place different legislative in regard to online classes and organized the teaching process in a different manner. As different as these approaches were, what all governments had in common was the concern for the students' and teachers' wellbeing and health in the wake of the most tragic pandemic in recent history.

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Various initiatives were launched in the wake of Covid-19 spread. Ali (Ali, 2020) states that at the beginning of this remote teaching process, schools and teachers were faced with ambiguity and disagreement as to what to teach, how to teach, whether or not the workload for students has to be considered and how to enable all students equal access to education in these challenging times.

According to the statement of the Director General Audrey Azoulay, as cited in Karalis (Karalis et al., 2020) *"We are entering uncharted territory and working with countries to find hi-tech, low-tech and no-tech solutions to assure the continuity of learning"*. Similar to different other aspects of life as people knew it, Covid-19 has significantly impacted students, teachers, and educational organizations around the globe (Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020).

Developed western counties faced numerous challenges. However, the challenges were most present in the developing countries whose poverty issues did not allow all students to access this new remote teaching system. To battle this, many charity donations were put in place and governments tried to aid the ones in need in order to provide both devices as well as internet access for all.

Upon researching the transition from real-life teaching to remote learning in Georgia, Basialia (Basialia, 2020) found that the quick shift left a lasting impression and could help institutions transition more smoothly in the future.

A recent study published in May 2020, conducted in Greece by said Karalis and Raikou found that the whole process of remote teaching had an overall significant negative effect on students' motivation and emotions. Their study found that the majority of the students (77,3%) had negative emotions as stress and anxiety to do with the process of education and its very shift from real-life to online. Some older studies also found that prolonged school closures and home confinement might have the negative effects on children's physical and mental health (Brazendale, K. et al., 2017).

It was not just students' emotion that were impaired. Classroom socialization also suffered due to the pandemic. As students only communicate with peers and classmates online without seeing them in person, the real-time sharing of ideas is impaired and thus, knowledge and information are negatively influenced by the digital learning world (Britt, 2006).

Regardless of their emotions and thoughts, both teachers and students had to adapt promptly in order to be able to continue the teaching and learning processes as painlessly as possible. For some, this transition was easier, for others, though, not so much.

1.1. Remote teaching in North Macedonia

As the pandemic continued to spread in the first quarter of 2020, alongside other countries, North Macedonia also made the difficult decision to close all the public and private schools and slowly start implementing more strict rules as to containing the virus and flattening the curve. As of mid-March of 2020, all schools were officially closed and both teachers and students had to adapt to the new online studying system.

After a few weeks of chaotic ambiguity as to how to teach and what to do, a firm online teaching curriculum was established. The process was being built during the summer holiday, too and the new term and school year started one month later than usual, with a brand-new national platform and an executive decision to unify the use of Microsoft Teams in all primary schools and high schools across the country.

Many were concerned with the outcomes of the whole online teaching system. Students appeared less motivated, according to teachers, and cheating on tests became more prominent as time went by. But although there seemed to be many disadvantages, there was one significant advantage that many did not anticipate: the online learning enabled teachers to use a wide variety of online tools that made the classes much more interesting and engaging.

Real-life classrooms in many developing countries lack the proper IT equipment to enable the employment of such activities in traditional teaching, North Macedonia not being the exception. Many of the schools have little to no projectors, smartboards and computers and up until the pandemic, many did not have wi-fi or any other form of internet access.

Thus, implementing many of the engaging online activities such as Kahoot and Nearpod quizzes, collaborative boards via Google Jamboard and student-centered apps such as AnswerGarden and Slido was impossible due to the lack of IT equipment.

2. Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, the questionnaire method for data collection was employed. The research model was the qualitative method as the answers from the questionnaire were obtained through a series of closed-ended questions with multiple choice answer. This resulted in data that is numerical in nature and can be mathematically analyzed and summarized.

An online questionnaire, made using Google Forms[ii] was used for the survey. Respondents were asked to choose among several options to do with the ESL/EFL teaching process.

The questionnaire itself was consisted of 5 questions that were designed to capture students' opinions to do with remote ESL/EFL teaching. The questionnaire was administered online, via MS Teams[iii], which is the designated platform for online teaching in North Macedonia. The questionnaire was sent to two classes of year 2 students in the local high school of Taki Daskalot – Bitola where the author herself teaches English as a second language. It is important to know that the students in the said classes have been studying online since March of 2020, as the government in North Macedonia has closed all the schools due to the pandemic with Covid-19.

The two classes have a total of 51 students. 47 out of those 51 responded to the given online questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent on December 14th of 2020 and was

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[ii] Google Forms. https://docs.google.com/forms/u/0/. Accessed on January 4th, 2021.
[iii] Microsoft Teams. https://teams.microsoft.com/ . Accessed on January 4th, 2021.

accepting responses up to December 19th of 2020. The main aim of this research was to determine whether the obvious lack of proper IT technology in the real-life classrooms affects the students and whether or not they enjoy online ESL/EFL classes more due to the employment of different apps and online activities such as Kahoot, Nearpod, Google Jamboard, AnswerGarden, Slido etc.

The research was based on the hypothesis that *Students enjoy online ESL/EFL classes more than traditional ones due to the engaging online activities that cannot be implemented in the real-life classroom.*

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The author hereby declares that there is no conflict of interest to report.

3. Results and Discussion

The questionnaire administered for the purpose of this paper confirmed the initial hypothesis that students do enjoy the use of interesting and engaging online tools during their ESL/EFL classes. The questionnaire, send out to two classes of year 2 high school students in December of 2020 was answered by a total of 47 respondents – the majority of the students in the specific classes. These students, all attending gymnasium in Bitola have been part of the remote teaching program since March of 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic started to spread significantly in North Macedonia. As of December 2020, they have been taught remotely for 6 months.

The students were asked to answer a set of 5 questions in a brief questionnaire administered using Google Forms. The questionnaire was completely anonymous, as to keeping confidential any incriminating data for the underage students taking part.

The first question looked into the sex of the students, in order to insure sex-inclusivity and greater objectiveness. Out of the 47 respondents, 28 or 59,6% stated they were *female* while 19 or 40,6% stated they were *male.* Another option was added – *prefer not to say* – in order to aid inclusivity. (Graph 1)
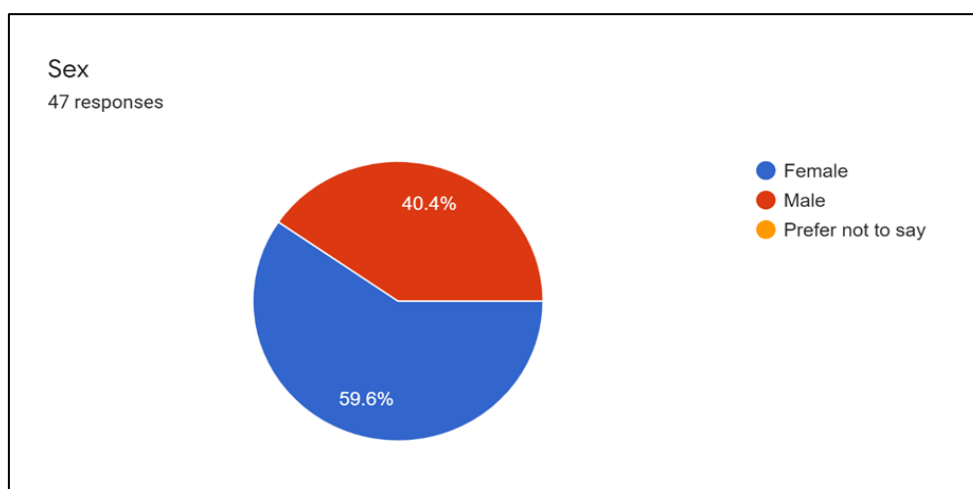

Graph 1: Respondents' sex

After the initial question, the respondents i.e. students were asked whether or not they thought real-life, traditional classes lack the use of technology. All of the 47 respondents answered the question. Interestingly, no one answered "*no*" which goes to show that students do indeed find the traditional teaching technologically lacking. The majority of the students (30 or 63.8%) stated that they think real-life teaching *sometimes* lacks IT use while the rest – 17 or 36.2% stated that they think traditional teaching lacks technology use. (Graph 2)
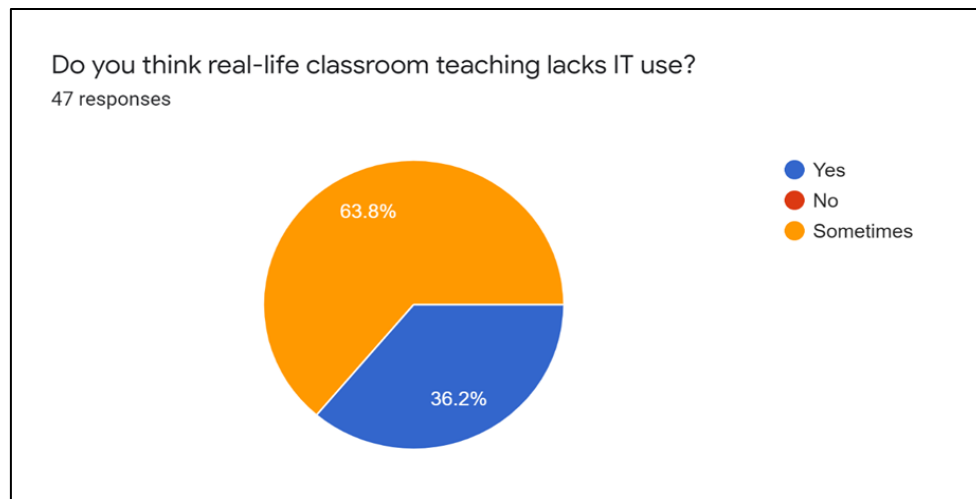
Graph 2: Lack of IT use in real-life teaching

The respondents i.e. students were then asked if they find online ESL/EFL classes more interesting because of the online activities often used. This question was too, answered by all of the 47 respondents who for the most part (26 or 55,3%), claimed that they *sometimes* find online classes more interesting due to the technology employed. 20 respondents or 42,6% stated that, *yes*, they do find online ESL/EFL classes more interesting while just 1 student answered "*no*".

This further shows that students find online classes interesting, and sometimes even more interesting than traditional ones just because a wide variety of engaging online tools are used. Even during classes, the author has noticed an improvement of motivation when some of the online tools that require active participation are used. During remote ESL/EFL classes, the author has noticed that students particularly enjoy apps such as Kahoot or Google Jamboard. (Graph 3)
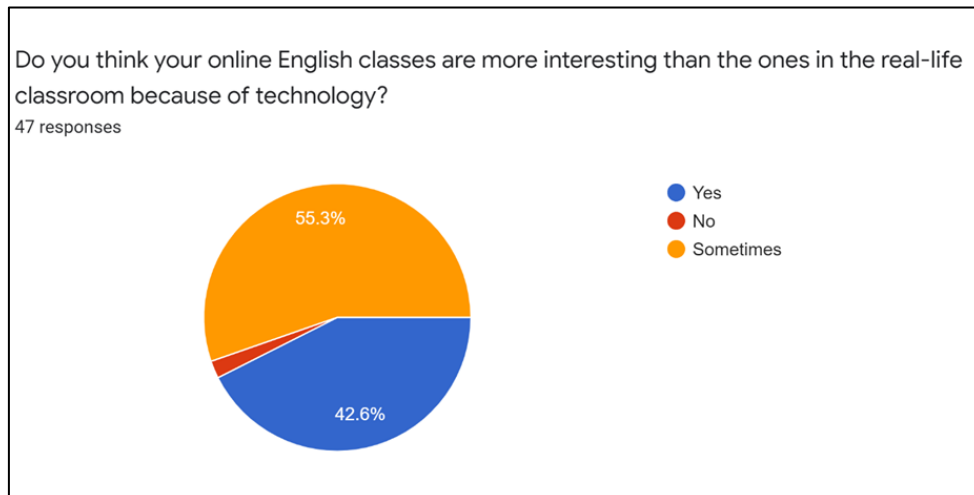
Graph 3: Are online classes more interesting than the traditional ones?

The respondents were then asked if they would appreciate a wider use of different online tools and activities during real-life ESL/EFL classes. The results were impressively in favor of more online activities during traditional ESL/EFL classes. 84,8% or 39 out of 46 respondents that answered this question, answered that *yes*, they would appreciate more such activities while the rest, 7 or 15,2% stated that they are "*not sure*". Not one of the respondents answered negatively.

Thus, we can confidently say that students would appreciate such activities in their ESL/EFL classroom. (Graph 4)
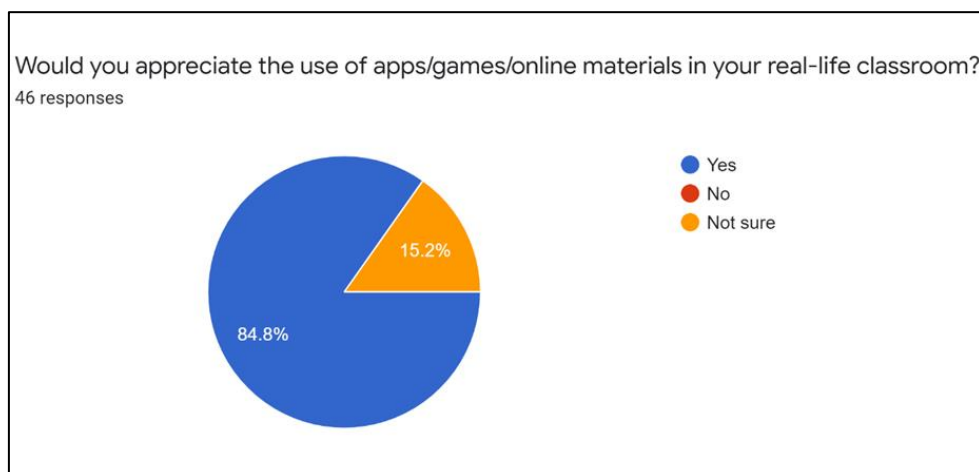
Graph 4: Opinions on use of technology in real-life classes

The last question of the online questionnaire was meant to denote the online tools and activities students find most interesting. In this question, the students were provided with a list of items which they could check. They could mark more than one answer. The question was answered by all of the 47 respondents who had to choose from the activities that they had worked on during their remote ESL/EFL classes.

With 33 votes, Nearpod quizzes were voted the most popular. Kahoot and Google Jamboard followed closely with 31 and 29 votes respectively. Video watching was also

deemed popular with 26 votes alongside AnswerGarden with 20 votes. Out of the selected few, Slido received the least number of votes – 10. (Graph 5)
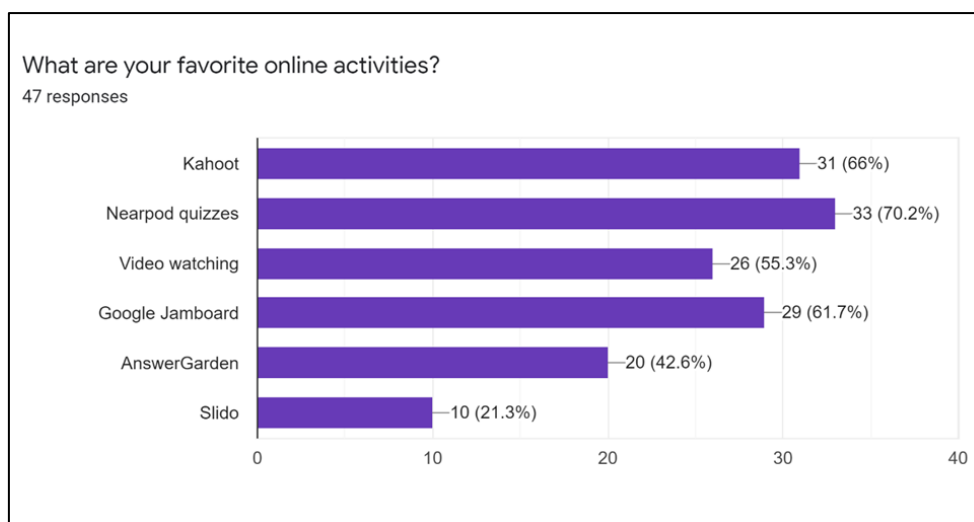
Graph 5: Favorite online activities

4. Conclusion

As the world struggled to survive during the worst pandemic in recent history, schools around the world turned to remote teaching. Though many found it lacking in terms of socializing, motivation and overall learning potential, there was one advantage that was unforeseen: ESL/EFL students in developing countries, many for the first time ever, took part in many engaging online activities that made their learning process that much more interesting.

Considering the fact that many schools in North Macedonia do not have proper IT equipment that will enable the employment of such activities during real-life classes, students were thrilled to be introduced to tools and activities such as Kahoot, Nearpod, Google Jamboard, etc.

This in turn increased their motivation, and, as this research showed, they thoroughly enjoyed online ESL/EFL classes, sometimes even more than real-life classes. In the questionnaire administered for the purpose of this paper, students answer that they would appreciate the implementation of these online activities during their real-life English classes and stated that they find the traditional real-life teaching structure technologically lacking.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Elena Shalevska, Department of English language and literature; Faculty of Education, Bitola, North Macedonia. Elena Shalevska is an English language lecturer. As a novice researcher, Shalevska conducts research within the field of Linguistics and

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