

*Student Points of View – Pedagogical,
Psychological, Social and Technical Issues*

SPORTS STUDENTS' SATISFACTION WITH THEIR FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDIES DURING THE OUTBREAK OF COVID-19

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Abstract. Satisfaction is one of the major factors for increasing a person's motivation to get engaged in an activity. This survey aimed at revealing the differences in the degree of sports students' satisfaction with their foreign language studies based on blended learning (a classroom-based education combined with the distance studies platform www.virtual.nsa.bg) and the online learning during the pandemic COVID-19. The research was done among 89 bachelor's degree sports students at the National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski", Sofia in the period 2018 – 2020. The analysis is based on the data received from the Questionnaire for assessment of the satisfaction with foreign language studies and the pedagogical observation carried out during the lockdown. The results revealed that there were statistically significant differences regarding students' satisfaction with their teamwork ($Z=-2,108$, $p=.035$) and the overall satisfaction they got from their foreign language studies ($Z=1.897$, $p=.48$) in favor of the blended form of education. There were no statistically reliable differences along the rest of the indicators. In conclusion, we may say that comparing the online studies and the blended education, we cannot find great differences concerning the students' degree of activity, and results from their final exams. The only difference observed regards the students' attendance of the classes which was in favor of the online education.

Keywords: language acquisition, satisfaction, lock down, online education

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak is presenting major challenges to societies across Europe and around the world, with direct and complex impacts on higher education institutions and systems. (Rumbley, 2020; Pan, 2020; Iancheva, 2020)

As the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has spread across the globe, universities were crucially affected at their core: the students. In order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, learning activities that were previously done by the face to face method in classrooms have rapidly switched to the online learning system.

The concept of social and physical distancing required a total lockdown. Thus, both lecturers and students were expected to remain at home and still carry out their duties and responsibilities. Creative and innovative, lecturers were required to keep teaching in order to provide students with proper education and achieve the educational goals set at the beginning of the academic year.

Although the combination of online and a classroom-based foreign language study was not something new for the NSA students, this was the first time they had to struggle with learning grammar and vocabulary only online by following their lecturers' instructions.

With this sudden shift away from the classroom in many parts of the world, some are wondering whether the adoption of online learning will continue to persist post-pandemic, and how such a shift would impact the worldwide education market.

One way to evaluate the success of online education and whether it can replace, and to what extent, the face to face method of study is by establishing the level of students' satisfaction with distance foreign language learning.

Students' satisfaction can be defined as a short-term attitude resulting from an evaluation of students' educational experience (Weerasinghe, Lalitha, Fernando, 2017). While performing a certain activity, students form their attitude towards it. Satisfaction is one of the basic attitudes which combine specific feelings and emotions formed on the basis of cognitive assessments and experiences in the process of the activity implementation (Tosheva & Doncheva, 2017). Students' satisfaction influences not only the degree to which they enjoy their time at universities, but also their efficiency. Their grades, course participation, relationships with lecturers and attendance are all, to a certain extent, reliant on how much they appreciated their time at university and how engaged they were. "Not only is students' satisfaction vital for promoting life at the institution, but it can also yield an important impact on a university's standing in global rankings"¹⁾.

The contemporary methods suppose implementation of a blended form of education – a combination of traditional teaching and the use of web-based platforms. A lot of surveys have been carried out to establish the benefits and drawbacks of this form of education. It has been proven that cognitive factors such as learning, performance, and achievement in distance education classes are comparable to those observed in traditional classes (Sooner, 1999; Schoech, 2000).

In some cases, perceptions and satisfaction levels of instructors and students of distant education do not show the same consistency (Doncheva, 2014). In order to reveal whether sports students' satisfaction with the recently introduced blended foreign language studies at the National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski" was gratifying, a research was carried out in 2017 (Tosheva & Doncheva, 2017). **The aim** of that survey was to establish the peculiarities of the motivation and satisfaction

of master's degree sports students studying in this blended environment. The results showed that the implementation of the interactive system was a premise for stimulation of the active attitude and integrity of the students and for a low level of foreign language anxiety.

The results obtained from that survey served as a motivation for some of the lecturers to explore bachelors' degree sports students' satisfaction with the newly created foreign language materials and the novel form of education. The ongoing research was further modified so that it could assess the results from the online based form of education in the emergency situation caused by the pandemic COVID-19. The work hypothesis was that students' satisfaction and motivation would not change to a great extent during the second semester of academic year 2019/2020 since they were already used to the blended form of education during the first semester.

Methods

The research was done among 89 first and third-year sports students (47 men and 42 women) aged between 19 and 21 years. All of them study English as a foreign language once a week (for an hour and a half) throughout the academic year. They major in different kinds of sports such as football, rhythmic gymnastics, basketball, tennis, volleyball, artistic gymnastics, wrestling, badminton, and handball.

The survey aimed at revealing the degree of bachelors' degree students' satisfaction with their foreign language studies based on blended learning – a classroom-based education combined with the distance studies platform www.virtual.nsa.bg. This survey was a continuation of a prior pilot research conducted with master's degree sports students (Tosheva & Doncheva, 2017) and was supposed to cover two academic years 2018/2019 and 2019/2020. However, the outbreak of the pandemic COVID-19 significantly affected higher education and caused a sudden shift to online learning. This led to a slight modification in the initially planned design of the research. The first testing was done at the end of academic year 2018/2019 with 50 bachelor's degree students (23 men and 27 women). The second testing was carried out at the end of academic year 2019/2020 among 39 bachelor's degree students (24 men and 15 women) but they had to report about their satisfaction with their studies during the first and second semester separately. During the first semester their foreign language education was based on blended learning and during the second semester – only on online learning.

All participants' informed consent was obtained in order to take part in the survey.

The Questionnaire for assessment of the satisfaction with foreign language studies used in this survey was designed especially for sports students (Tosheva & Doncheva, 2017). Theoretically, it is based on the perception that

satisfaction is a major disposition for performing a certain activity. The questionnaire is consistent with the group character of foreign language education at NSA "Vassil Levski", the lecturers' role in applying interactive educational techniques and combining classroom-based education with teaching in a virtual classroom, and students' goals related to English language acquisition. It consists of 15 items organized in 4 dimensions: satisfaction with the educational material and the instructions provided by the lecturer (4 items); satisfaction with the teamwork (3 items); satisfaction with the achieved individual aims of the education (3 items); satisfaction with the lecturer's personal attitude (4 items). There is one item which is meant to assess the overall satisfaction with the language studies. The internal consistency of the items is very high – $\alpha=.83$.

The *pedagogical observation* made during the lockdown caused by the pandemic COVID-19 aimed at revealing the students' attitude to the assignments given and their overall activity in the educational process, their level of attendance in the online classes, as well as the exam results achieved at the end of this academic year compared to those achieved by the students in the previous year.

The software package used to analyze the data was SPSS 21. Both comparative and variation analyses were applied.

Results and discussion

The results from the variation analysis of the data obtained by the students at the end of academic year 2018/2019 revealed very high scores along all indicators (Table 1). Moreover, the highest values were reported as regards students' satisfaction with the lecturer's personal attitude as well as with the type of educational material selected for their education and the way the lecturer explained this material.

This is a very important finding which justifies lecturers' efforts to create an innovative teaching system which combines a classroom-based education with online learning. The use of the distant studies platform www.virtual.nsa.bg proved to be a very useful tool for increasing students' participation motivation and became an attractive option for expanding the educational opportunities available. The students have the possibility to go online and catch up with the material they have missed or get access to additional instructions related to the vocabulary or grammatical categories taught. The majority of them achieved the educational goals they had set to a very high extent.

As regards teamwork, lecturers should think of implementing more interactive activities in their classes aimed at students' group work and assignment of team projects because the results obtained for this indicator were the lowest.

As a whole, we should point out that along all indicators the values were close to the maximum ones and there were no registered answers with the least possible

value for satisfaction – 1. This is indicative for the very high level of efficiency of the foreign language classes provided at the National Sports Academy.

Table 1. Mean values of the indicators for satisfaction (academic year 2018/2019)

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Educational material and instructions	50	3.75	7.00	6.32	.738
Teamwork	50	2.67	7.00	5.57	1.08
Achieved aims	50	4.00	7.00	5.83	.87
Lecturer's attitude	50	4.25	7.00	6.61	.69
Overall satisfaction	50	3	7.00	6.44	.76

The comparative analysis along the factor “gender” was made with the nonparametric test of Mann Whitney which compares the outcomes between two independent groups of subjects (Table 2). The effect size was interpreted with the use of Cohen’s conventions (1988) according to which a correlation coefficient of .10 is thought to represent a weak or small association; a correlation coefficient of .30 is considered a moderate correlation; and a correlation coefficient of .50 or larger is thought to represent a strong or large correlation.

Table 2. Comparative analysis along the factor “gender”

	Educational material and instructions	Teamwork	Achieved aims	Lecturer's attitude	Overall satisfaction
Mann-Whitney U	242.000	282.000	180.500	221.500	258.500
Wilcoxon W	518.000	558.000	456.500	497.500	534.500
Z	-1.355	-.561	-2.555	-1.935	-1.147
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.175	.575	.011	.048	.251

* $\alpha=0.05$

The results from the comparative analysis revealed statistically significant differences as regards students’ satisfaction with the goals they achieved from their education ($U=180.5$, $p=.011$, $r=.36$) and their lecturer’s attitude towards them during the educational process ($U=221.5$, $p=.048$, $r=.27$).

In order to establish the degree and nature of these differences between the male and female students, we applied a differential variation analysis. The results showed that the women reported higher satisfaction along all indicators (Table 3). It turns out that most of them felt they had learnt a lot and were pleased with the results they had achieved. The men were more satisfied with their lecturer’s attitude than with their own efforts to reach the results they were willing to obtain.

Table 3. Mean values of the satisfaction indicators according to students' gender

	Men	Women
Educational material and instructions	6.17	6.44
Teamwork	5.34	5.76
Achieved aims	5.47	6.13
Lecturer's attitude	6.35	6.82
Overall satisfaction	6.26	6.59

These differences could be partially explained with the different emotionality displayed by men and women (Kring & Gordon, 1998). Women are generally perceived as expressing emotions more frequently than men while men are suggested to exhibit restrictive emotionality (Jansz, 2000). They tend to inhibit the expression of certain emotions and are, on average, more unwilling to self-disclose intimate feelings (Brody & Hall, 2008). That is why the male students might have assessed their satisfaction with the foreign language studies less emotionally and more objectively. On the other hand, the female students' higher values along all the items in the questionnaire could be due to their more ardent attitude to their lecturer and to everything related to their development including the educational goals they set to themselves.

Another interesting finding is that the men gave the lowest values to the items associated with the teamwork done throughout the year. These figures, however, are higher than the ones obtained from the pilot research conducted in 2017 (Tosheva & Doncheva, 2017) where the male students reported the highest satisfaction along this dimension. Still the values were lower ($M=5.28$) than the ones received in this study ($M=5.34$).

The results from the comparative analysis along the factor "year of studies" did not reveal any statistically significant differences between the first and third-year students' satisfaction with their foreign language education during the academic year 2018/2019. This means that the teaching materials the lecturers had selected for each group of students were suitable for their level of competence and the teaching approach was identical and equally successful.

The second part of the research was carried out in May 2020. We performed the variation analysis of the obtained data for the first and second semester separately in order to reveal whether there were any differences between students' satisfaction with blended and online education.

The results from the variation analysis of the data about the first semester (Table 4) revealed that the values along all dimensions were higher compared to the ones of the master's degree students. This could be explained by the fact that bachelor's degree students attend more classes throughout the year, and hence, they are more aware of their development and feel more confident and satisfied with their overall progress. However, the distribution of the answers along all items was similar to that of the replies given by the master's degree students. The indicators "lecturer's

personal attitude” and “educational material and the lecturer’s instructions” received the highest scores, followed by “achieved aims” and “teamwork”. The overall satisfaction of both masters’ degree students and bachelor’s degree students was almost the same [M=6.44 (MA students); M=6.46 (BA students)]. We should point out that the lowest values the bachelor’s degree students reported for each item were higher than the lowest values given by their counterparts in the previous year (see Table 1). This means that the lecturers are becoming more adept at combining the two forms of education. Again, there was no answer with the lowest possible value – 1.

Table 4. Mean values of the indicators for satisfaction
(first semester 2019/2020)

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Educational material and instructions	39	5.25	7.00	6.53	.52
Teamwork	39	3.00	7.00	5.54	.98
Achieved aims	39	4.00	7.00	6.08	.88
Lecturer’s attitude	39	5.00	7.00	6.64	.52
Overall satisfaction	39	5	7	6.46	.79

The results from the variation analysis about the second semester of the academic 2019/2020 where the educational process relied only on online classes revealed similar dependencies (Table 5). The bachelor’s degree sport students were mostly satisfied with their lecturer’s attitude and the types of materials used in the English language course. However, the answers they gave for all the items included in the questionnaire showed lower values compared to those reported for the first semester.

Table 5. Mean values of the indicators for satisfaction
(second semester 2019/2020)

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Educational material and instructions	39	4.00	7.00	6.35	.75
Teamwork	39	1.00	7.00	5.16	1.34
Achieved aims	39	3.33	7.00	5.96	1.02
Lecturer’s attitude	39	4.00	7.00	6.56	.70
Overall satisfaction	39	4	7	6.31	.92

The comparative analysis of the data obtained for the two semesters (Table 6) was made with Wilcoxon signed-rank test – a non-parametric statistical hypothesis test used to compare two related samples (two paired groups). It revealed that there were statistically significant differences regarding students’ satisfaction with their teamwork

($Z=-2.108$, $p=.035$) and the overall satisfaction they got from their foreign language studies ($Z=1.897$, $p=.48$) in favor of the blended form of education during the first semester. There were no statistically reliable differences along the rest of the indicators. The mean values of the researched variables for the first and second semester allow us to conclude that the students' satisfaction with their education during the second semester of the academic year 2019/2020 was generally lower than that during the first semester (Table 7). We can observe lower values along all five dimensions of the test.

Table 6. Comparative analysis of the level of satisfaction – first and second semester

	Educational material and instructions	Teamwork	Achieved aims	Lecturer's attitude	Overall satisfaction
Z	-1.880	-2.108	-1.016	-1.190	-1.897
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.060	.035	.309	.234	.048

* $\alpha=0.05$

The decrease in teamwork satisfaction is logical and could be explained with the imposed situation of isolation during the lockdown in the period March-May 2020. The students were forced to not leave their homes and had to struggle with the learning material by themselves, especially at the beginning of the emergency situation. Half of the researched students practice team sports. They are used to working in a team and rely on each other's assistance. This could explain their low level of satisfaction with the group work done online. The representatives of the individual sports, on the other hand, are used to receiving instructions and guidelines from their coaches. This means they also depend on efficient cooperation with another people and equally suffered the lack of an adequate face to face communication.

Table 7. Mean values for students' satisfaction during the two semesters of the academic 2019/2020

	First semester	Second semester
Educational material and instructions	6.53	6.35
Teamwork	5.55	5.16
Achieved aims	6.08	5.96
Lecturer's attitude	6.65	6.56
Overall satisfaction	6.46	6.31

There were no statistically significant differences according to the factors "gender" and "year of study".

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 and the beginning of the online studies, both students and lecturers had to adapt very quickly to the new situation. The already existing stress was doubled – first because of the threat of the virus and second because of the unknown and absolutely new way of teaching and learning.

As lecturers, we decided to focus our pedagogical observation on two main indicators: students' course participation, or in our case assignments submission and online classes attendance, and the results from the exams.

A recent study conducted in April 2020 among 500 students from different schools, colleges, and universities of different states of India showed that 51.4% of students were stressed due to the threat of coronavirus and 69.8% of students were stressed about their studies (Raj, Utsav, Fatima, Ambree, 2020).

Our observations absolutely coincided with the results from the above-mentioned study. The percentage of the students who submitted their assignments within the given deadlines during the first two weeks of the lockdown and the online studies was lower (62%) in comparison with the classroom attendance during the first semester (over 85%). This proves the students needed some time to adapt to the new requirements. Another reason for the chaotic and unstructured situation at the beginning of the pandemic COVID-19 could be the anxiety the students felt because of the social distancing and the unknown. The students' activity was the highest in April. The percentage of the submitted papers increased to over 89%. This can be explained with the fact that being athletes, students want to prove themselves and to 'win' over the situation. Their adaptability is well known. That is why this finding was not surprising. Over the last two weeks of the second semester, the course participation decreased again (80%) which means that students got used to the online studies, returned towards their normal attitude, and started perceiving the situation as something familiar and not so challenging.

The other aspect that was affected by the online learning was final examinations. The on-site exams had to be replaced with a suitable alternative which was not possible for all the subjects taught. This raised many issues about how to ensure that different assessment methods would be fair and objective (The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities, 2020).

The exam in foreign language consists of two parts: a test and an oral exam. The difference in the year exams results at the end of 2019 and these of 2020 is statistically insignificant. This confirms our hypothesis that that students' satisfaction and motivation would not change to a great extent during the second semester of academic year 2019/2020 since they were already used to the blended form of education during the first semester. Part of the foreign language lecturers normally use the distance studies platform <http://www.virtual.nsa.bg> for students' final written exams. So, the students had to take their year exams in the same way they were already used to. The oral exam was carried out via Skype, which in fact was very similar to the face to face method of examination.

The pedagogical observation regarding the difference in the students' attendance of the classroom-based lessons and the online classes revealed that 71% of the students attended all the lessons included in the web-based learning during the pandemics compared to 50% in the first semester. The percentage of those who attended half of the classes significantly reduced during the second semester (12% in the first semester; 5% in the second semester). This means that the overall attendance significantly increased during the online education.

In conclusion, we may say that comparing the online studies and the blended education, we cannot find great differences concerning the students' degree of activity, and results from their final exams. Their attendance rose in the second semester which proved the convenience of the computer-based learning and its accessibility. However, their overall satisfaction with their foreign language learning dropped, meaning that the face to face education is still the preferable form of studies.

Conclusion

The pandemic COVID-19 could profoundly change education for the better (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2020; Li & Lalany, 2020). The change required a lot of adaptation on behalf of teachers and students, but it is thought to have been carried out successfully. Throughout history, the sector has been conservative and resistant to change. Now students are just a finger-click away from the vast knowledge of Google — so much greater than that of any individual teacher. Coronavirus has given schools Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Classroom (Baker, 2020). The technology turns the computer screen into a classroom, where students and lecturers see each other and can communicate with each other in truly collaborative online learning.

An effective online instruction is dependent on several factors with equal significance. On the basis of the findings of this research, we can make several recommendations. First of all, foreign language lecturers should work in the direction of creating a very well-designed course content. They will have to create user-friendly electronic textbooks and think of providing various new online educational materials. Sports students need to feel as part of a group, so more team assignments should be developed in order to maintain their satisfaction with foreign language studies on a higher level. Moreover, the motivated interaction between teachers and learners requires a well-prepared and fully supported instructors. Situations like the one we experienced because of the pandemic COVID-19 could make communities more resilient in developing stronger tools for dealing with mental distress (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2020). Lecturers might turn out to be more resistant to the new changes in their work environment and might need more time to adapt. However, the challenges they are facing will surely lead to a totally new approach to their teaching which can be seen as a welcome change and an opportunity for personal development and growth. And last but not

least, we believe that the rapid advancement of technology will inevitably lead to the creation of a sense of online learning community which will assist university education in future emergency situations.

NOTES

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