

OPPORTUNITIES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE ONLINE TRAINING IN SPECIALIZED ENGLISH AS PERCEIVED BY STUDENTS AT THE MEDICAL UNIVERSITY “PROF. DR. PARASKEV STOYANOV” – VARNA

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The article examines the attitudes of students at the Medical University “Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov” – Varna towards their online training in Specialized English. To achieve our aim, we relied on an online questionnaire filled out in the Fall semester of 2020/2021 by almost all of the second-year students of Pharmacy and first-year students of Nursing at the Medical University – Varna. The survey was conducted using the Blackboard Platform of the university. The survey had a total of 13 closed-ended questions. Its results were interpreted via the descriptive statistical method. We were able to observe that the overall attitudes of both students of Pharmacy and students of Nursing towards their online training in Specialized English were positive: the opportunities perceived by students seemed to outweigh the possible disadvantages. We concluded that our students do not view the sudden transition to online education as detrimental to their training in Specialized English.

Keywords: Specialized English, online training

Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 State of Emergency declared in the spring of 2020 in Bulgaria, the shift to an almost-exclusively online education has provoked the interest of numerous researchers. Understanding students’ attitudes towards the newly imposed form of education has been the focal point for various articles (such as ДИМИТРОВ/Dimitrov 2020); however, most efforts have been aimed at painting a broad picture of those attitudes, i.e. at depicting attitudes towards online education as a whole. Leading Bulgarian institutions such as the University of Sofia (СУ ЦДО/ SU TDO 2020) and the Open Society Institute – Sofia (OSIS/ОСИС 2020) have drafted questionnaires to explore such general attitudes towards online

training. Even researchers at other Medical universities in the country (Килова/Kilova 2020: 210) tend to examine the process of education at such a specialized university in its entirety. Our interest is much more specific: it lies in shedding light on students' attitudes towards **online training in Specialized English in particular**.

Methodology

Due to the varying level of students' proficiency in English, the questionnaire was administered in Bulgarian. Students' level of command of general English varied from A1 to C2, and we did not wish to allow it to interfere with the accurateness of the given responses.

Since we conducted two separate surveys for the two groups, there was no need to collect demographic data: we had already insured the homogeneousness of each target group: all respondents in the first group were second-year students of Pharmacy at the Medical University "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov" – Varna, while all respondents in the second group were first-year students of Nursing at the same university. The two specialties were selected because all of the students in each of the specialties had the same instructor, and thus the significance of the factor of differing teaching methods was brought to a minimum

The survey was conducted online during the Fall semester of 2020/2021 using the Blackboard Platform of the Medical University "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov" – Varna. The survey results were interpreted via the descriptive statistical method.

Respondents

The respondents were divided into two groups based on their specialty: 1. Students of Pharmacy and 2. Students of Nursing. The students of both groups had already experienced online training in Specialized English (SE) – they all had online training since the beginning of the Fall semester of 2020/2021; however, only the first-group of students had also studied Specialized English online during the second half of the Spring semester of 2019/2020. Therefore, we have also tried to explore the possibility for varying accounts due to the different length of exposure to online training in SE.

The number of respondents is as follows: 1st group – 83 students, 2nd group – 48 students, for a total of 131 students. We did not plan a particular sampling size since almost all of the students took part in the survey: 83 out of 84 students of Pharmacy and 48 out of 53 out of students of Nursing.

Items and Responses

The survey had a total of 13 items. All were closed-ended questions since we wanted to draw information about a particular issue of a closed set (for ex. one out of the four basic skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing). We used a variety of closed-ended questions such as Likert-scale, dichotomous, multiple-choice. The questions were carefully worded in order to avoid bias due to ambiguous or misleading language (Young/Янг 2015: 178).

Item 1 checked the level of satisfaction with the online training in Specialized English. Respondents had to grade their satisfaction with the training in the Spring semester of 2019/2020 and/or the Fall semester of 2020/2021, using the 5 answer options of this Likert item: *Yes, Rather yes, Rather no, No, Don't know (DK)*.

Most of the first-group respondents, Students of Pharmacy (SP), gave a positive answer: 39 picked the answer *Yes*, and 25 – *Rather yes*. The answer *No* was preferred by 16 respondents. There were 3 blank answers.

Most of the second group of respondents, Students of Nursing (SN), also provided a positive reply: 33 answered *Yes*, and 8 – *Rather yes*. Only 3 picked *No* as their answer; a single respondent chose *DK*. Three left it blank.

The next four items (No 2 – 5) dealt with the development of certain skills. Respondents had to evaluate the degree to which their online training had helped them develop each of the four basic skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. We relied on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 designating the online training as absolutely not helpful, while 5 – outstandingly helpful.

Item 2 allowed the respondents of the SP group to express a diverse array of opinions regarding the helpfulness of their online training for their listening skills: 14 of them chose option “5”, 23 – option “4”, 24 – option “3”, 15 – option “2”, and 6 – option “1”. There was a single blank response.

The respondents of the SN group found their online training to be certainly helpful for the improvement of their listening skills: more than half of them picked the two highest options: option “5” was selected by 19 respondents, and “4” – by 12. The medium option, “3” was preferred by 12, with a single respondent opting for “2”, and only 2 – for “1”. Two of the responses were blank.

Regarding **Item 3**, the SP group was still characterized by a great diversity of opinion: 23 respondents picked option “5”, 31 – option “4”, 10 – option “3”, 10 – option “2”, and 8 – option “1”. There was one blank response.

The respondents of the SN group found their online training to be certainly helpful for the improvement of their reading skills as well: just like with the previous item, more than half of them picked the two highest options: option “5” was selected by 22 respondents, and “4” – by 12. The medium option, “3” was preferred by 9, with only 3 respondents opting for “2”, and a single one – for “1”. One response was left blank.

With **Item 4**, the first group preserved the trend of diversity of opinion: 12 respondents chose option “5”, 4 – option “4”, 23 – option “3”, 15 – option “2”, and 11 – option “1”. One response was left blank.

The SN group found their online training to be certainly helpful for the improvement of their speaking skills as well: more than half of them picked the two highest options: option “5” was selected by 15 respondents, and “4” – by 14. The medium option, “3” was preferred by 9, with 6 respondents opting for “2”, and 2 – for “1”. Two responses were blank.

As far as **Item 5** goes, the following responses were given by the SP group: 26 respondents chose option “5”, 27 – option “4”, 14 – option “3”, 10 – option “2”, and 5 – option “1”. Again, one response was left blank.

The second group found their online training to be certainly helpful for the improvement of their writing skills as well: more than half of them picked the two highest options: option “5” was selected by 23 respondents, and “4” – by 9. The medium option, “3” was preferred by 8, with 4 respondents opting for “2”, and 2 – for “1”. Two responses were blank.

The next couple of items, No 6 and 7, asked the respondents to offer their opinion regarding the single skill that their online training most or least helped them with.

Regarding **Item 6**, the SP group reported the following choices as the skill the online training was most helpful for: *Listening* was selected by 28, *Reading* – by 19, *Speaking* – by 7, and *Writing* – by 28. There was one blank response.

The SN group made the following selection: *Listening* was selected by 22, *Reading* – by 2, *Speaking* – by 18, and *Writing* – by 5. There was one blank response.

Regarding **Item 7**, the SP group reported the following choices as the skill the online training was least helpful for: *Listening* was selected by 14, *Speaking* – by 49, and *Writing* – by 20. *Reading* was not selected by any of the respondents.

The selection made by the SN group was as follows: *Listening* was selected by 9, *Speaking* – by 18, and *Writing* – by 20. *Reading* was not selected by any of the respondents. There was one blank response.

Item 8 asked respondents to pinpoint any technical challenges (whether with the hardware or internet connection) they had experienced in connection to their online training in SE. There were four possible answers: 1. I had a phone, but not a computer; 2. I didn't have a microphone or it didn't work; 3. I had no speakers or I had speakers but the sound quality was poor; and 4. the internet connection was not fast enough or good enough.

The first group reported having experienced various challenges (they could pick more than one): 52 had difficulties with their internet connection, 16 – with their microphone, and 6 – with their speakers. No one relied solely on his/her phone. Fifteen responses were left blank.

The SN group reported having experienced the following challenges (respondents could pick more than one): 8 did not own a computer, 24 had difficulties with their internet connection, 16 – with their microphone, 1 – with their speakers. Five responses were left blank.

The use of the Blackboard platform was specifically targeted by the next two items, No 9 and 10.

The first of the two, **Item 9**, asked respondents regarding any difficulties that they may have experienced with the platform. The binary options were *Yes* and *No*.

Out of the first group, 31 reported having any difficulties, while 51 – not having. One response was blank.

Out of the second group, 18 reported having any difficulties, while 29 – not having. One response was blank.

Item 10 asked about respondents whether they had experienced specific difficulties. The four options were as follows: 1. not being admitted into the virtual auditorium; 2. being thrown out of the virtual auditorium; 3. experiencing delays in sending chat messages; and 4. experiencing delays in receiving chat messages.

The SP group, 43 respondents claimed to have been removed from the virtual auditorium, 1 respondent – to have experienced delays in receiving chat messages. Thirty-nine responses were left blank.

Out of the SN group, only 29 respondents testified to having had any difficulties: 27 reported having being thrown out of the virtual auditorium and 2 – experiencing delays in receiving chat messages. Nineteen responses were blank.

The last three items dealt with recommendations that respondents wished to make.

Item 11 inquired about the degree to which students would recommend asynchronous (i.e. taking place outside of the synchronous auditorium¹) classes. The scale used was from 1 to 5, 1 denoting “do not recommend at all”, and 5 – “strongly recommend”.

The SP group’s answers were as follows: 1 was selected by 9 respondents, 2 – by 14, 3 – by 28, 4 – by 17, and 5 – by 13. There were two blank responses.

The second group’s responses were distributed in the following way: 1 was selected by 4 respondents, 2 – by 4, 3 – by 12, 4 – by 16, and 5 – by 10. There were two blank responses.

Item 12 asked about the extent to which students would recommend the use of social networks for the online training in SE. The same scale was employed as with the previous item: 1 denoting “do not recommend at all”, and 5 – “strongly recommend”.

The first group of respondents gave the following answers: 1 was selected by 16 respondents, 2 – by 10, 3 – by 23, 4 – by 22, and 5 – by 10. There were two blank responses.

¹ The issue of whether such asynchronous classes ought to supplement or replace the synchronous auditorium lies outside the scope of the current research, but it is certainly worth examining in the future.

Respondents of the second group answered in the following way: 1 was selected by 3 respondents, 2 – by 5, 3 – by 17, 4 – by 10, and 5 – by 12. There was one blank response.

Item 13 urged respondents to make suggestions regarding the usage of audio and video resources for the online training in SE. The students could recommend that the number of such recourses be increased, that the number be decreased, or that the number stays the same. Respondents could also claim to not having any recommendation regarding such usage.

The following responses were given by the SP group: 13 recommended that the number of resources be increased, 1 – that it be decreased, 24 – that it be kept as it is. Forty-three had no recommendations to offer. Two of the responses were blank.

The SN group gave the following answers: 14 recommended that the number of resources be increased, none – that it be decreased, 9 – that it be kept as it is. Twenty-three had no recommendations to offer. Two of the responses were blank.

Discussion

As evidenced by the responses to Item 1, the overall attitudes of both students of Pharmacy and students of Nursing towards their online training in Specialized English were positive. However, when we explored their satisfaction with the development of particular skills (Item 2 – 5), there were some marked differences in the actual degree of satisfaction. Both SP and SN groups were most satisfied with the effect of the online training on their reading and writing skills, and quite satisfied with the effect on their listening skills. Both groups were least satisfied with the effect on their speaking skills. Upon further examination of the issue (Items 6 and 7), we found that students believed the online training in SE helped them mostly with their listening and writing skills (SP group) and listening and speaking skills (SN group). Students were unanimous regarding online training being helpful for their reading skills (there was not a single student who believed that the training least helped them with their reading skills), yet differed somewhat in respect to the single skill online training was least successful in promoting: that skill was speaking for the SP group (followed by writing), and writing for the SN group (very closely followed by speaking). For both groups, most of

the technical challenges were related to the internet connection, some – to the microphone, and few – to the speakers. Very few SN students declared having to rely solely on their phone, whereas not having a computer did not present an issue for SP students (Item 8).

The news that is flattering for the Medical University “Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov” – Varna is that the university has obviously been successful in its selection of an online platform: the majority of SP and SN students did not experience technical difficulties with it (Item 9). Still, room for improvement can certainly be found, in particular regarding the issue of students being removed from the virtual auditorium, and to a much lesser extent – regarding the delay in receiving chat messages (Item 10).

Some specific recommendations that ought to be taken into consideration when planning the future course of online training in SE are the students’ preference for more asynchronous activities (Item 11) and the inclusion of social networks (Item 12). The current usage of audio and video resources appears to be satisfactory, with a greater preference among SN students and a slighter one among SP students for an increased number of such resources (Item 13).

Conclusion

We can conclude that our students do not view the sudden transition to online education as detrimental to their training in Specialized English. It is reassuring to see that regardless of the length of the online training period (whether it spans a single semester as in the case of students of Nursing or a couple of semesters as in the case of students of Pharmacy), students have similar attitudes towards it: the opportunities perceived by students seem to outweigh the possible disadvantages.

We are particularly glad to see the lack of a clear demarcation line between the improvement of students’ receptive and productive skills: the fact that is not only the reading and listening skills that are being enhanced, but speaking and writing as well, speaks of the active involvement of students. The greatest challenge for us as educators working online has probably been to ensure the active participation of students. This being overcome, the online future of Specialized English training does no longer seem to loom over us, but rather appears quite promising.

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