



Assessing attitudes of university students toward online classes of Icelandic as a foreign and second language during COVID-19

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Abstract. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the on-campus teaching mode at local universities in Iceland changed to distance teaching and synchronous classes online. This rapid and unexpected change also affected the learners. Although videoconferencing was used as the main point of reference, this method turned out to be less suitable for synchronous online classes with instant feedback. Therefore, a new format of synchronous classes online was adopted. This enabled the teacher and the learners to interact with each other during the online classes. The present article describes a case study of international and foreign students attending regular online classes of Icelandic as a foreign and second language (L2) at a local university in Reykjavik during fall 2020. Attitudes of 26 students toward a changed teaching mode were examined. Data were collected using an online questionnaire at the end of the course and answers analysed based on responses to 72 questions in ten different themes that guided the construction of ten research questions. The results suggest that the teacher's approach to online class organisation could be improved to achieve a better wellbeing among students and create a more effective online teaching environment.

Keywords: L2 Icelandic, immigrant students, international students, online teaching, COVID-19.

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1. Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Face-to-Face (F2F) mode of teaching at local universities in Iceland changed and synchronous classes taught live and online (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020, p. 1) were adopted. Universities in Iceland had to follow policies on gathering limits, which resulted in the cancellation of on-campus classes and adopting synchronous classes online. Due to such a rapid change, teachers could only use those tools that were readily available for them at their home institutes. Some tools, e.g. the Synchronous Meeting Tool (SMT) *Microsoft Teams* in our case, were originally developed for videoconferencing and online business meetings but not for teaching during live sessions. However, the traditional videoconferencing approach once used in virtual learning and teaching environments (Hampel & Hauck, 2004) no longer supported collaborative work with immediate feedback during synchronous online classes as it lacks many features including immediate feedback and group work, which are otherwise usually present in on-campus classes. Although videoconferencing was very popular in distance learning at the beginning of the 21st century, this method only enabled learning at a distance with an instructor and a learner in different localisations (Zähler, Fauverge, & Wong, 2000, p. 190), often in an asynchronous way and without immediate feedback. Due to the increased demand for suitable tools with better functionalities during the pandemic, many software companies upgraded their tools allowing teachers to use them in synchronous classes online. This situation, nonetheless, represented a challenge for both teachers and students because they had to apply different approaches to teaching and learning. Another challenge was the lack of F2F contact in online classes with the teacher and other peers (Cheung, 2021, p. 1), or the different conditions each student lived in, which could have resulted in communication hindrances or isolation. The aim of the article is to present a case study investigating students' attitudes towards change in the fully online teaching mode of delivery they were exposed to during the pandemic and the challenges they faced in the online classes during fall 2020.

2. Learners' perceptions of the online mode of the language classes

Thirty-six participants from 14 different countries attended a university course of L2 Icelandic for beginners. The course was designed to teach a mixed class of both exchange students and local foreign students permanently living in the country. Twenty-six (72%) students responded to the survey: 17 female, eight male, and one other gender, aged 20-44. However, 23 students perceived their level of Icelandic

as beginner, two as advanced, and one as proficient, thus forming a mixed class of students with different previous knowledge of Icelandic. All participants were situated in Iceland but attended weekly classes during live sessions using what earlier would have been termed as a videoconferencing tool but is now referred to as an SMT tool.

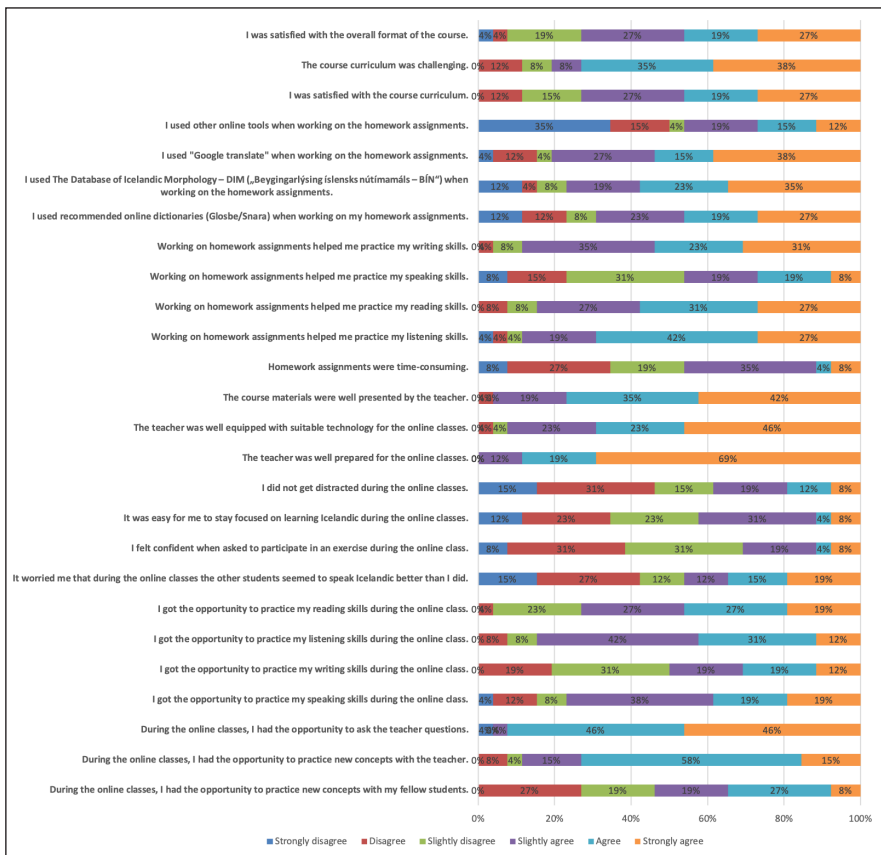
An online survey was used for collecting data from volunteering students of the L2 Icelandic course. It consisted of 72 questions to collect quantitative data, six of these questions were about the participants' background, and 65 were Likert-scale questions on ten different topics concerning the online classes, and one open-ended question for collecting qualitative data on students' suggestions or further remarks. The questions were tailor-made for the actual course and mode of teaching in order to capture a realistic picture of the situation. The questions in the survey came with a Likert-scale of six options ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. These survey questions were constructed around ten different themes that guided the research questions of this study. Results summarising these ten themes are presented in the next section.

3. Results and discussion

Due to space, only selected answers from the survey are presented in [Figure 1](#). Regarding language practice opportunities with the teacher and other peers (1), 46% reported lack of practice with other peers. However, 73% could practise with the teacher and 92% used the opportunity to ask the teacher questions. Regarding practising of different language skills within and outside of the synchronous online classes (2), students could practise speaking (38%), writing (31%), listening (43%), and reading (46%), but they felt that it was not sufficient due to a perceived slower mode of the online course when compared to their previous experience with on-campus teaching, i.e. the students thought that less exercises and teaching materials were provided during the synchronous classes online. Regarding feelings involved in active participation (3), however, 39% of students did not feel confident to actively participate in exercises during their classes and 34% felt worried that other students would speak Icelandic better than themselves. Regarding the ease or difficulty in focusing on learning (4), 46% reported that they were somehow distracted by other elements in their local environment during the sessions, and 35% reported it was difficult for them to stay focused on learning during the online classes. Regarding teacher perception (5), 88% of the study participants indicated that the teacher was well prepared. Regarding the course material (6), 77% of students agreed that the pedagogical resources relied upon were presented well

by the teacher. Regarding homework assignments (7), 35% of students reported that homework assignments were not time consuming and that they helped them with practising speaking (27%), writing (54%), listening (69%), and reading (59%). Regarding using other online tools during homework assignments (8), 46% used online dictionaries for Icelandic (Glosbe, Snara), 58% used the DIM – The Database of Icelandic Morphology website – 53% used Google Translate, and 27% reported using other online tools. Regarding their satisfaction with the course curriculum (9), 73% agreed that it was challenging and 46% were satisfied with it. Regarding their overall satisfaction with the online format of the course (10), 46% were satisfied with it.

Figure 1. Selected data from the online survey³



3. For a bigger version of the figure, see [supplementary materials](#)

In the open-ended question, students reported that the course felt fast and that practising the language outside of the class with local speakers was restricted due to the COVID-19 regulations on gatherings. Although the class was divided into two groups with different levels, beginner and intermediate, some students still felt that their group could have been divided into two further smaller groups with different language levels. A reoccurring comment was that they wished for “[m]ore practice of Icelandic conversations between the students”. There were no specific comments about the online tool used for teaching.

4. Conclusions

Due to lack of space, the results were not presented in full but the collected data suggest that it was important for the study participants that the teacher was (1) well prepared for each online lesson, (2) could operate with the online tool without any problems, and (3) that the course was well organised. The students perceived *Microsoft Teams* as a suitable remote learning solution.

Regarding language practice opportunities during the synchronous online classes, the students perceived that they could only partly practise all four language skills. Students also felt that they had sufficient opportunities to practise speaking only with the teacher but wished for more peer-to-peer speaking opportunities. At the same time, students felt worried about speaking Icelandic in the presence of other peers during the online classes. Therefore, as Moser, Wei, and Brenner (2021) also suggest, teachers should develop appropriate interaction activities for synchronous online classes. Because it was a group of students with mixed levels of Icelandic in each of the two groups, they felt it could have been divided into further smaller groups to satisfy their different language needs.

5. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/3w7bmjmvz3zht03nm2k93q72cmdx2ixa>

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