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Student voice in distance foreign language course design and its practical implications in higher education

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The purpose of this research is to analyze whether university students would be willing to engage in distance foreign language (FL) course design, and if the knowledge of their preferences could be used to present guidelines for course designers. Student engagement is seen as crucial to graduates' achievement in HE, especially in online courses, yet there are no studies examining student voice in distance FL course design or curriculum delivery in the context of HE in Poland and very few international ones. The study identified five dimensions and feedback as the basic constructs to analyze students' preferences about learning design of distance foreign language courses. The research study design is quantitative with descriptive and correlational methods. Data were gathered from HE students (n = 626) studying in Poland. The results show statistically significant differences regarding students' gender, age, and academic level. The findings suggest that the learning paths in a FL distance course in HE should be created by taking into account the language skills students want to practice, gender identity, educational stage, learning communities, and age. The latter can influence students' willingness to co-design the course, the course content, and the type of interactions.

Keywords: student voice, distance course design, foreign language, higher education, Poland

Introduction

There has been an increased interest in informal and formal distance learning over the last decades in blended or online (a)synchronous modes (Dron & Anderson, 2016). The digitalization and promotion of digital and online tools have been key areas promoted in education in Europe in the past years (European Union, 2019), but they were rarely integrated into the formal education programs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hodges et al., 2020; Recio & Colella, 2020). It was the pandemic that enforced formal learning and teaching online on an unprecedented scale and moved everyone towards distance education (Pokhrel, et al. 2021), and all these changes have affected distance foreign language (FL) education in the world. Nonetheless, there is still the disconnect between the online and traditional class delivery (Kehrwald & Parker, 2019). Shifts in instructional approaches in distance learning need greater understanding since they are becoming a permanent feature of the educational landscape, hence the need for this research.

Student engagement is seen as critical to graduates' achievement in HE, especially in online courses (Muir et al., 2022; Yang, 2021). However, in order to be engaged, they need to be involved in and committed to learning (Kuh et al., 2010). In the case of distance courses, it is necessary to know what students' preferences are and which learning design is more effective for a given group (Koper & Bennett, 2008). Even though we are aware that students' learning needs and preferences are transforming at a rapid pace nowadays and this process needs to be reflected in course design, students are often deprived of agency and voice within university structures (Jagersma & Parsons, 2011). This is a precarious position, since we know that student voice may support course design, which itself is often the greatest problem in quality of teaching and learning in HE (Fink, 2003). In this light, the findings from Muszyńska and Huertas-Abril (2022a) show that most of the participants (67,7%) would like to take shared responsibility for course design. Therefore, in order for distance courses to meet the learners' expectations of being able to learn effectively in their own time and place, which seems to be the post-pandemic preference (Williams, 2022; Muthuprasad et al., 2021; Bączek et al., 2021), we should listen to and learn from students in order to build on the pandemic emergency remote teaching experience and provide practical implications for distance course designers in a post-pandemic world. In the report on student engagement guidelines in response to COVID-19, Huelne et al. (2023) suggest that flexible educational approaches work towards inclusivity in the access to learning.

Engaged students, actively involved in the learning process can grow into co-designers of their learning (McCulloch, 2009), and even more importantly the knowledge gained from them may guide artificial intelligence (AI) to personalize what and how to learn (Cawood, 2021) and in return AI can be making recommendations for students on a given distance course on which module to choose based on their preferences (Sun et al., 2020). Hence, a great deal of research on student engagement in online education (e.g., Muir et al., 2022; Redmond et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2017) but none of them takes students preferences into account prior to course design. The process of hearing students'



preferences cannot only depend on satisfaction questionnaires closing a module, as this will not aid the development of students becoming course co-creators, nor allow them to experience any changes that result from their feedback. Moreover, student post-course satisfaction is attributed to preference, which is not analogous (Koper, 2015). Satisfaction is about the distinction between expectations and experience (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982, as cited in Koper, 2015, p. 309). While, as Miller (2021) states, students' learning preferences, more than learning styles, denote learners' preferences for specific educational modalities, and underpin the way they approach learning (Bloemert et al., 2020), which seems a valid point when considering distance course design. Therefore, in this study it is claimed that learning design should depend on learner preferences and predestine what learning experiences the course participants wish to have, which learning design is effective for a given group of students (Koper & Bennett, 2008). Course designers should also consider learner strategies that support successful language learning and interaction (Andrade & Bunker, 2009), as they foster intercultural competence, learner autonomy, and digital literacy (Curry, 2021).

Since distance FL course design still needs to be identified (Maican & Cocaradă, 2021), and the concept of course co-creation is broad and encompasses various approaches (Bovill et al., 2016), in this research we reached out to students as consultants bearing in mind what Tuhkala et al. (2020) reported from their study on including student voice in HE curricula design in Finland. Their study showed that promoting student voice in the organization of HE curricula is a more complex phenomenon than has been argued by researchers, and the students involved in their study expressed fairly critical attitudes regarding their involvement in course creation. According to the authors of this article, there are no studies examining student voice in distance FL course design or curriculum delivery in the context of HE in Poland and very few international ones (Abdou & Florence, 2021; Ahmadi & Hasani, 2018). Taking the above into consideration, this study aims to analyze whether university students in Poland (n = 626) would be willing to engage in distance FL course design, and if the knowledge of their learning preferences would be sufficient to present implications for FL distance course designers. Conducive to achieving this objective and considering the literature review above, this research aims to establish whether students are willing to engage in distance FL course design and be willing to collaborate with other students in online FL courses, but also to analyze whether the knowledge of students' learning preferences is sufficient to present implications for FL distance course designers in a post-pandemic world, as there has been a substantial shift among students in their perceptions and expectations of online and face-to-face learning (Williams, 2022; Lockee, 2021). Hence, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. To what extent are students interested in getting involved in distance FL course design that meets their learning needs?

RQ2. Are there statistically significant differences in willingness to participate

in distance FL course design regarding students' gender, academic stage and/or age?

The large sample in this study allowed us to develop implications for distance FL course design in HE contexts. The findings of this study bridge the disconnect between distance learning and the traditional approaches to teaching and delivery.

Theoretical background

Foreign language learning in Higher Education in Poland

Currently, the model of FL learning at BA level in Poland comprises of 120 contact hours and prepares students towards the B2 language level of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018). Some universities run only face to face language classes, others, especially post COVID-19 pandemic, are initiating the use of distance, asynchronous courses for the majority of the hours with only a few contact hours with a teacher or fully synchronous. Moreover, it is relevant to highlight that Polish BAs which are not Philologies offer one FL to their students. The most frequently FL chosen by students is English, as this is the first foreign language taught in Poland from kindergarten and the lingua franca of today's world (Kuteeva, 2020). In the case of Master's (MA) degree, students in Poland are expected to achieve the B2+ level in a FL, develop intercultural communication skills and acquire FL skills for professional and research activities. Nevertheless, the number of hours devoted to FL learning in a MA course usually decreases to about 40 contact hours per two years, mainly due to the lack of academic teachers prepared to work with students in a FL on scientific contexts (Cisowska, 2018). For this reason, some of the universities offer choices for students to attend either a FL class or a lecture in a FL (e.g., Czestochowa University of Technology).

A number of universities in Poland that have started providing distance FL learning courses for students post the COVID-19 time usually provide them on Moodle with asynchronous instruction (e.g., the DSW University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław, Poland), or a university's online e-learning platform (e.g., Akademia WSB University). They follow the view of structuralism in FL learning and are based on practicing listening, speaking (limited and often not obligatory), reading, writing and grammar with very little or no peer interaction. Yet, research on distance education indicates that high levels of interaction among learners result in enthusiasm, greater contentment, and course success as a result (Efthymiou & Zarifis, 2021). Therefore, an understanding of students' needs and preferences in online learning environments is essential to address the above issues and enhance the excellence of the courses and student academic experience, as this may lead to greater satisfaction and lower drop-out rates.



Student voice in FL remote course design

The theory of student voice positions students' agency in analyses and revisions of education (Carey, 2013) and active citizens by challenging traditional power relations (Bahou, 2011; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006), but also sees them as curriculum co-creators (Ahmadi, 2021; Cook-Sather, 2010). Change grounded in purposeful engagement of student voice challenges traditional teaching and learning practices (Cook-Sather, 2006), benefits their motivation, commitment (Bovill et al., 2011), and has a beneficial effect on the completion of learning tasks and assignments (Pinto, 2020). Students' preferences in learning a FL are linked to learning strategies, motivation, self-beliefs and attitudes towards becoming confident and self-regulated learners (Habók & Magyar, 2020). Despite its benefits, Bovill (2013) states that there is need for more research on direct student engagement in course creation. Koper (2015, p. 308) says that "more knowledge about the preferences of learners is needed for a proper design of online and distance education, that is, being aware and taking care of dominant preferences in the appreciation for certain types of learning processes to keep students satisfied with the process and outcomes." Most studies tend to focus on disadvantaged student voice in relations to inclusion and power (Bergmark & Westman, 2018; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006), and mainly in primary and secondary education (Müller-Kuhn et al., 2021). However, there is recently a growing number of studies, such as the one on student participation in a HE curriculum development conducted by Brooman et al. (2015) where student voice was taken into account in the enhancement the process of curriculum redesign. The authors emphasize that multiple focus groups played an essential role in seeing and understanding the student perspective. Another study attempted to provide guidelines applicable to other HE settings on how universities can meaningfully involve students in shaping the curriculum. The guidelines come from the ESCalate-founded project focusing on involving students in curriculum design and delivery (Campbell et al., 2009). The authors of the report emphasize a strong impact of the student voice on staff but also on fellow students as a valuable reflective and formative learning tool. Furthermore, Tuhkala et al. (2021) administered a study in the context of HE in Finland that included student voice in BA and MA program curricula design in the context of computer science. The study aimed at establishing student-staff partnerships and reports on the challenges and tensions that HE institutions may face when trying to establish such approaches to curriculum development. The above-mentioned authors conclude that research literature on student involvement in curriculum development is still rare, however, already emerging (e.g., Chilvers et al., 2021; Ahmadi, 2021; Bell et al., 2019; Ryan, 2019; Redmond et al., 2018). In the research that presents guidelines for planning the instruction process in distance learning (Rao et al., 2015;) the focus is on the learning design or student post-course feedback, but not on student preferences and similarly in with reference to FL distance HE education Russell and Murphy-Judy (2021) in their book focus on the ADDIE (analysis, design, delivery, implementation, and evaluation) delivery model for online, blended or flipped online language learning, but again not student preferences explicitly. This makes our research



original and paramount and should add to the existing knowledge in the field of FL distance course design.



Method

Research design

The design of the study was developed under an approach of quantitative research, and a method that was both descriptive and correlational.

Participants

The participants in the study were selected using a convenience sample, which is a type of non-probabilistic sampling method. This means that the participants were selected based on their availability and accessibility, that is, through criterion referenced (purposive) sampling techniques (Mertens, 2014). Data were gathered from students (n = 626) from the University of Lower Silesia (ULS), in Poland. The mean age of the participants was 24.90 years old (SD = 6.948), with a range from 18 to 55 years, and 62.1% (n = 389) were female and 36.4% (n = 228) were male, while 1.4% (n = 9) preferred not to say their age. Regarding the nationalities of the participants, 93.3% (n = 584) were Polish, 2.9% (n = 18) were Ukrainian, 0.5% (n = 3) were from Belarus, 0.2% (n = 1) were from Germany and 0.2% (n = 1) were from Russia, while 3.0% (n = 19) preferred not to answer. Participants consisted of BA students (n = 482, 77.0%), Master's students (n = 108, 17.3%), PhD students (n = 24, 3.8%), and Postgraduate students (n = 12, 1.9%).

Instrument and data gathering

The instrument used for this research was the “Questionnaire to measure students’ perceptions of LMOOCs learning design” a questionnaire which was piloted in an earlier study (Muszyńska & Huertas-Abril, 2022a). The objective is to provide greater clarity and reliability for the developed research instrument when used with a different data set to achieve external validity, but also to show its limitations. This instrument is based on Reinders and Pegrum’s (2017) study, which set five categories to evaluate MALL learning design, and it consisted of three parts: (1) demographic information, (2) FL course design, and (3) feedback preferences.

Part 1 was used to obtain participants’ demographic information (gender, age, nationality, type of studies and university), while parts 2 and 3 were used to measure their perceptions of FL course design. Part 2 consisted of 17 items, corresponding to the 5 dimensions identified by Reinders and Pegrum’s (2017), and their conceptual meaning and number of items for each construct is shown in Figure 1. Responses in part 2 were scored on a 4-point Likert scale: “strongly disagree” (1), “disagree” (2), “agree” (3), and “strongly agree” (4).



Figure 1. Implications for distance foreign language course design (Source: Own elaboration)

Finally, part 3 addressed the type of feedback that participants prefer in the case of FL course design. Five options were given to the respondents: “teacher” (1), “student/s on the same course” (2), “automatic answer after completing an activity” (3), “automatic feedback followed by teacher feedback” (4), and “all of the above” (5).

To reduce potential difficulties in language comprehension when answering the questionnaire, it was administered in Polish and English in Spring 2020. Furthermore, and considering the lockdown derived from the COVID-19 outbreak, the questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms (<https://forms.gle/YNivTGcgYdWFEgee9>) taking advantage of the specific characteristics identified by Phellas et al. (2011).

Data analysis

Participants’ responses were analyzed using the statistical package IBM SPSS Statistics V24.0 for MacOS. Two steps were taken to test the instrument through the measurement model (individual item reliability, internal consistency, and convergent and discriminant validity) First, the normality of data distribution (mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis) was checked. The absolute values for skewness and kurtosis were within the acceptable range of 2, confirming that the data were normally distributed (Field, 2009).

Second, the internal reliability coefficient for the instrument was tested through Cronbach’s alpha. Cronbach’s alpha values were above 0.6, suggesting that the instrument was consistent (Kaur et al., 2021). More specifically Cronbach’s alpha value for the questions concerning FL course design was 0.666, and 0.641 for the whole scale.

To analyze students’ preferences regarding FL course design and feedback, mean comparisons between groups have been analyzed through ANOVA and parametric Student’s t test for independent samples. For this purpose, to

determine significant differences among participants in relation to their gender, the student's t-test for independent samples was applied. Regarding participants' educational level and age, one-way (parametric) ANOVA was performed to test whether one or more of three or more groups show significant different results. Statistical mean values were accepted whenever $p < 0.05$ (Sokal, & Rohlf, 1995).

Results

Figure 2 presents the participants' responses (in percentages) to all the questions of the questionnaire.

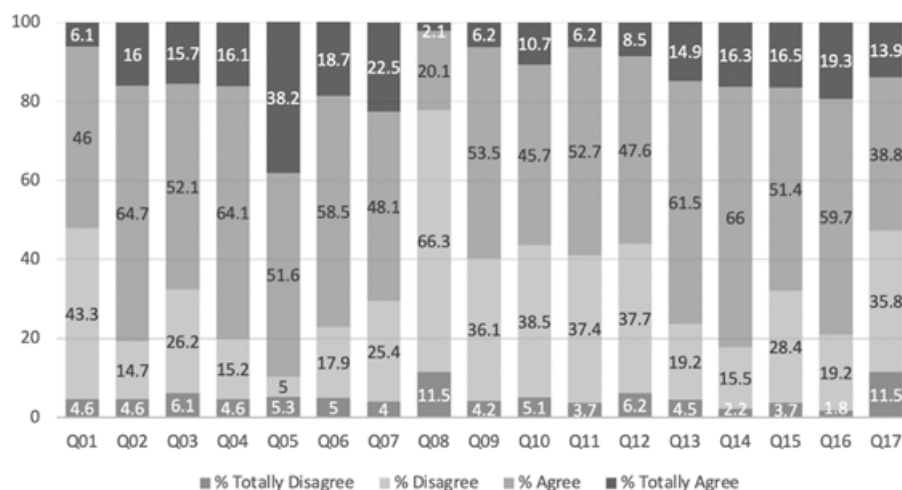


Figure 2. Participants' responses (in percentages) per question (Source: Own elaboration)

As shown in Figure 2, all the participants show a remarkable positive interest in FL course design, as the mode for all items is 3 ("Agree"), even though they would prefer to have the teachers' support as shown in Q02. The only exception is Q08 ("I think special focus should be put on reading and writing, rather than on listening and speaking in an online language course"), where written skills are considered important, but only if they are developed together the other language skills, emphasizing then the importance of the communicative approach.

Despite the general tendency that the mode shows, some considerations must be borne in mind. A total of 43.3% of the participants disagree with Q01 ("I would like to be involved in designing an online course that I would later use as part of my EFL class"), which is directly related to the preference of having their own teachers designing their courses (Q02, "I would prefer my teacher to design an online course that I would later use as part of my EFL class"). It is also noteworthy the importance given by the participants to real-life connections (Q05, "It is important that an online language course is linked to real-life issues") and developing all language skills (Q06, "I think all language skills should be practised equally in an online language course"), being the latter a justification to the levels of disagreement showed in Q07 ("I think special focus

should be put on listening and speaking, rather than on reading and writing in an online language course”) and specially in Q08, as explained before.

Moreover, the balance in terms of responses in Q09 (“In an online language course, I would like that the activities were open ended, where I had to think of an answer myself”) related to the preference toward open-ended question and Q10 (“In an online language course, I would prefer to have only multiple-choice questions”) about the preference toward multiple-choice questions shows personal preferences related to practice and assessment, being open-ended questions related to problem-solving skills (Q15, “I like doing creative tasks requiring problem-solving skills and being creative while using the foreign language”).

Regarding the preference or not for online lessons (Q17, ‘While studying at university, I would like to learn a foreign language online without having to attend classes’), there is a certain balance between participants who prefer only online lessons and participants who defend onsite lessons, being the former justified by the flexibility of ubiquitous, remote language learning, and the latter by the role of interaction with teachers and specially peers (related to Q02, “I would prefer my teacher to design an online course that I would later use as part of my EFL class”) in face-to-face lessons,

The distribution of participants’ responses (in percentages) grouped into the five dimensions of the questionnaire are shown on Figure 3, where can be visually confirmed that 3 (“Agree”) is the mode for all constructs.

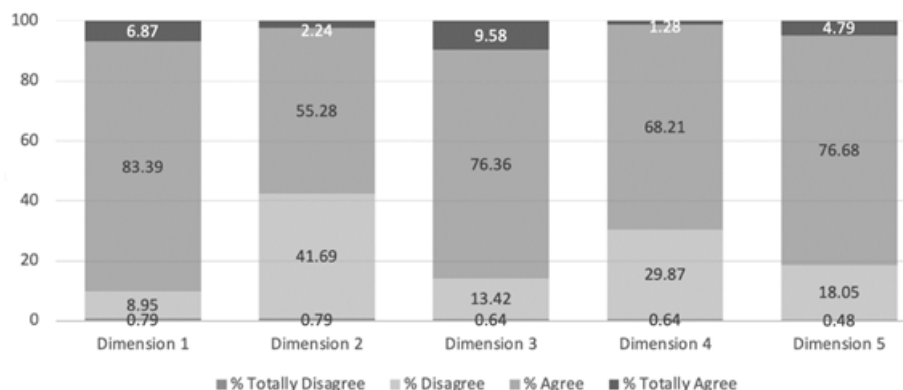


Figure 3. Participants’ responses (in percentages) per dimension (Source: Own elaboration)

Regarding feedback (Q18, “If you were learning a foreign language online, in your own time, who would you most like to receive feedback on your learning from?”), the results are shown separately as this item follows a different scale. As can be seen in Figure 4, the most preferred option is feedback only from the teacher (n = 194, 31.0%), while the least preferred option is feedback from other students on the same course (n =7, 1.1%).

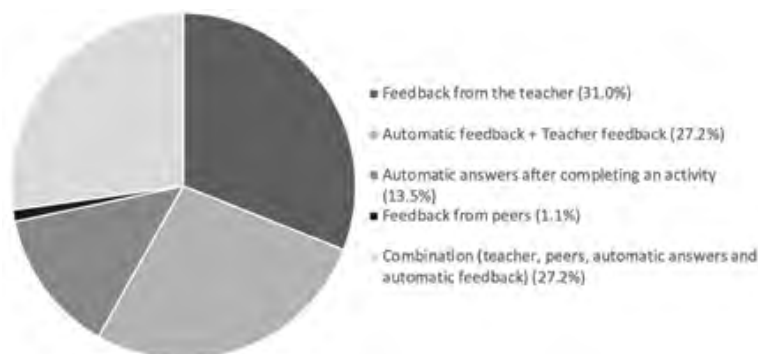


Figure 4. Participants' responses (in percentages) regarding preferred feedback (Source: Own elaboration)

Differences regarding gender

The researchers used Student's independent samples t-test to analyze whether there was any statistically significant difference among the participants' preferences regarding FL course design with regard to their gender (Table 1).

Table 1. Student's t-test for independent samples (gender)

Construct	Gender	N	M	SD	t	p*
Dimension 1	Male	228	2.81	.450	-.061	.952
	Female	389	2.81	.395		
Dimension 2	Male	228	2.71	.524	4.264	.000
	Female	389	2.53	.477		
Dimension 3	Male	228	2.87	.476	-1.774	.076
	Female	389	2.94	.445		
Dimension 4	Male	228	2.63	.397	-1.788	.074
	Female	389	2.69	.388		
Dimension 5	Male	228	2.73	.431	.370	.711
	Female	389	2.72	.426		
Preferred feedback	Male	228	3.29	1.619	1.317	.188
	Female	389	3.11	1.598		

(*) $p < 0.05$ is recognized as statistically significant (in bold).

As shown in Table 1, there are statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between groups only in Dimension 2 (general pedagogical approaches). Within this Dimension, it is relevant to mention that Q09 ("In an online language course, I would like that the activities were open ended, where I had to think of an answer myself") does not present statistically significant differences ($p = .062$), but in Q10 ("In an online language course, I would prefer to have only multiple-choice questions") women scored statistically significantly higher than men ($p = .003$) while in Q15 ("I like doing creative tasks requiring problem-solving skills

and being creative while using the foreign language”) men scored statistically significantly higher than women ($p = .000$). The other dimensions show non-statistically significant differences as constructs, and Dimension 1 (Affordances) presents the same score for both groups. The findings show that women scored higher in Dimensions 3 (L2/FL pedagogical approaches) and 4 (SLA principles), while men scored higher than women in Dimension 5 (Affective principles) and preferred feedback.

Within Dimension 4 (SLA principles), however, it must be highlighted that Q16 (‘When studying a foreign language, I prefer first being shown the meaning of vocabulary and grammar before I start working’) presented statistically significant differences ($p = .000$), being female participants those who score higher than their male counterparts. Similarly, two items of Dimension 5 present statistically significant differences: Q04 (‘I would like to be involved in a learning community composed of my university peers that are working on the same online course,’ $p = .028$), where men scored higher than women, and Q12 (‘I would prefer to follow an online language course on contents that are interesting for me rather than on contents connected to my field of specialisation or university courses,,” $p = .031$), where women scored higher than men.

Differences regarding educational stage

The researchers used one-way (parametric) ANOVA to explore out whether there were statistically significant differences among the participants’ preferences regarding distance FL course design and feedback with regard to their educational level (BA, MA, PhD and Postgraduate Studies). Figure 5 shows the means of the responses per dimension considering participants’ educational stage.

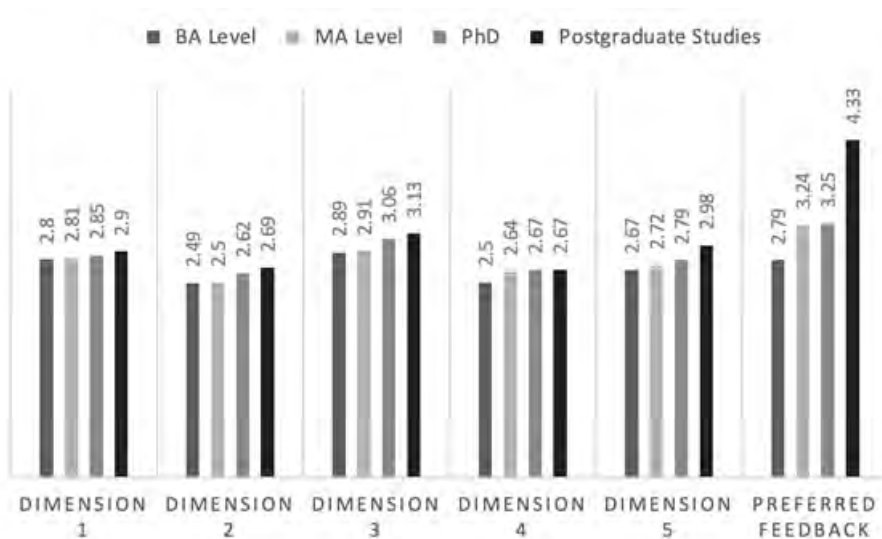


Figure 5. Means of responses per dimension considering participants’ educational stage (Source: Own elaboration)

The results obtained after conducting the ANOVA demonstrate that there are no statistically significant differences among students' attitudes in terms of their educational level for any of the Dimensions, being in all cases $p > 0.05$, and there are only statistically significant differences in the case of the feedback preferred ($p = 0.004$). Moreover, Dimension 5 (Affective principles) shows statistically significant differences between Masters students and Postgraduate students, but not for the whole Dimension. In all cases, despite the results not showing statistically significant differences, the higher the academic stage, the higher the score obtained for that group, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Nevertheless, five items from three different Dimensions: Q01 ("I would like to be involved in designing an online course that I would later use as part of my EFL class"), Q05 ("It is important that an online language course is linked to real-life issues") and Q17 ("While studying at university, I would like to learn a foreign language online without having to attend classes"), belonging to Dimension 1; Q10 ("In an online language course, I would prefer to have only multiple-choice questions") in Dimension 2; and Q11 ("I would like to follow an online language course that was part of my university course") in Dimension 5 present statistically significant differences as shown in Table 2. The results of the group with the highest score per item are underlined.

Table 2. ANOVA for items with statistically significant differences (Educational Stage)

Item	Means for homogeneous educational stage groups (Tukey's test at $p < .05$)				F	p*
	BA	MA	PhD	Postgraduate studies		
Q01	2.50	2.57	2.71	3.08	3.606	.013
Q05	3.19	3.26	3.63	3.50	3.054	.028
Q10	2.59	2.80	2.46	2.75	2.906	.034
Q11	2.63	2.52	2.58	3.08	2.877	.035
Q17	2.59	2.47	2.46	1.92	2.849	.037

(*) $p < 0.05$ is recognized as statistically significant (in bold).

Differences regarding age

The researchers used one-way (parametric) ANOVA to explore whether there were statistically significant differences among the participants' preferences regarding FL course design and feedback with regard to their age. For that purpose, three age groups were identified: (i) 18-24, (ii) 25-39, and (iii) 40 or older. The means of the responses per dimension considering participants' age range is shown in Figure 6.

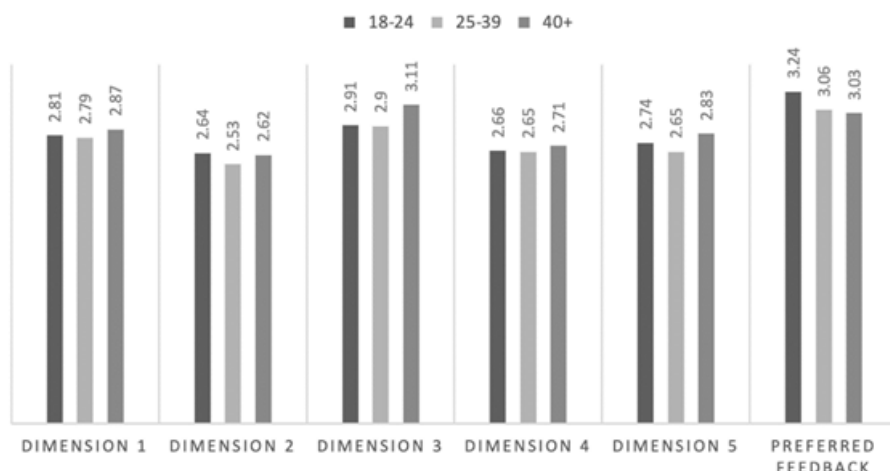


Figure 6. Means of the responses per dimension considering participants' age (Source: Own elaboration)

Results demonstrate that there are statistically significant differences among students' attitudes in terms of their age only for Dimension 3 (L2/FL pedagogical approaches), where the oldest age group scored higher than the other two groups ($p = .043$). For the other Dimensions and feedback preferred all cases are $p > 0.05$. Nevertheless, four items from three different Dimensions – Q02 (“I would prefer my teacher to design an online course that I would later use as part of my EFL class,” Dimension 1), Q15 (“I like doing creative tasks requiring problem-solving skills and being creative while using the foreign language,” Dimension 2), and Q04 (“I would like to be involved in a learning community composed of my university peers that are working on the same online course”) and Q12 (“I would prefer to follow an online language course on contents that are interesting for me rather than on contents connected to my field of specialisation or university courses”) in Dimension 5 – present statistically significant differences as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. ANOVA for items with statistically significant differences (Age)

Item	Means for homogeneous educational stage groups (Tukey's test at $p < .05$)			F	p*
	18-24	25-39	40+		
Q02	2.97	2.77	2.82	4.610	.010
Q04	2.96	2.2	2.70	3.808	.023
Q12	2.56	2.53	2.97	5.133	.006
Q15	2.87	2.70	2.67	3.634	.027

(*) $p < 0.05$ is recognized as statistically significant (in bold).

Discussion

The results obtained in this research present the benefits of inclusion of student voice in HE distance FL curriculum development and practical implications for course design.

In answer to RQ1 (*To what extent are students interested in getting involved in distance FL course design that meet their learning needs?*), all participants were willing to provide the researchers with data on their study preferences before the process of a course design starts (see Fig.2). A total of 52.1% of the participants expressed their interest in distance FL course design, although it is true that 80.7% of students prefer their teachers to help design the courses. These results are in line with Muszyńska and Huertas-Abril (2022a), and they can stem from the fact that university students are used to receiving pre-planned courses to work with, but not to being involved in their design.

For instance, in the area of acquiring language skills 79.0% of study participants prefer to be presented with the meaning of vocabulary and grammar before doing the activities, and most participants want to work on all language skills during distance learning (77.2%) or only on the listening and speaking (70.6%), but rather not exclusively on reading and writing (77.8%), which shows that there is a need for activities focused on listening and speaking. In this light, Gimeno-Sanz et al. (2018) emphasize that specific functionalities of FL courses are required to support synchronous oral interaction or organizing learner-driven speaking practice sessions. For this reason, a certain degree of cooperation between students is necessary, especially because the facilitation process in distance courses can be a shared responsibility among the teacher and students (McGee & Voeller, 2015).

Our findings suggest that in the case of learning communities, 67.8% of students would wish to work with students from other countries, but it is noteworthy that 80.2% of them would prefer to work only with their own university peers. This finding is age dependent: the preference for a learning community composed of university peers is statistically significant among the youngest students (18-24 years old). Corroborating this although without statistically significant differences, the oldest students (over 40 years old) showed more willingness to work with learners from other countries. Moreover, 56.1% of the study participants stated that the distance FL course content does not necessarily need to be related to their field of study, but to real-world examples (Hulene, et al., 2023). In any case, however, nearly all students (89.8%) expressed their interest in social interactions and peer-communication, as they believe it enhances the sense of community (Hulene, et al., 2023; Nikofores et al., 2018). This is important because learning communities may have a positive effect in developing students' communication skills, as well as in bridging the content studied and the real-life issues embedded to distance FL university course. This is in line with Desai et al. (2009) who found that pedagogical tools should be developed to enrich a sense of community. Similarly, Xing and Gao (2018, p. 390) found that using social media to collaborate with others helped the participants "to combat a sense of isolation, to get connected with others who shared similar philosophies and interests, and to learn from a diversity of



opinions and perspectives.” Nonetheless, the sense of community is not solely dependent on the media used, it is also based on personal and social factors (Aldosari et al., 2022).

There is no doubt that “detailed and timely” feedback is crucial in language learning (Chang & Lin, 2019). Our findings suggest that most of the participants favor teacher or teacher and automatic feedback (see Fig.4). This type of feedback may contrast with the idea that assessment should “involve students to self-regulate their work” (Carless et al., 2010, p. 397). Moreover, Chang and Lin (2019) found that students who engaged in mobile peer assessment technique learnt significantly more than those who learnt via teacher-only assessment. According to our results, only 1.1% would like to have feedback from other students on the same course. This is in line with the previous comparative study of students in Poland and Spain (Muszyńska & Huertas-Abril, 2022a). Despite evidence of its potential effectiveness (Li et al., 2022), peer assessment in higher education is still not as established as expected (Adachi et al., 2018). Finally, 27.2% of the participants would like to have different types of feedback (i.e., teacher, peers, automatic answers, automatic feedback). Basurto-Mendoza et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of using different types of assessment as it improves the quality of the process of learning, and allows students to diagnose their strengths and weaknesses, and to reflect on their learning.

In answer to RQ2 (*Are there statistically significant differences in willingness to participate in distance FL course design regarding students' gender, academic stage and/or age?*), significant differences between male and female participants were only found in Dimension 2 (general pedagogical approaches) as shown in Table 1, where men scored significantly higher than women, which contrasts with the previous study (Muszyńska & Huertas-Abril, 2022a). This may be due to the fact that in the previous study there were three times more female than male participants, and in this sample, there were about 0,75% more female than male participants, which seems a more representative sample. Although in the individual items that conform Dimension 2 (General pedagogical approaches) there are no statistically significant differences, female participants expressed their preference toward being involved themselves in the design of language courses and not having face-to-face lessons, while their male counterparts preferred that teachers design the courses, and these are directly related to real-life issues. It is also noteworthy to say that our findings related to gender show that, despite not presenting statistically significant differences, women scored higher in Dimensions 3 (L2/FL pedagogical approaches) and 4 (SLA principles). Regarding the individual items of Dimension 3, women reported a higher preference for including all language skills with a balanced distribution in online language courses, as well as for practicing grammar with automatically corrected exercises, while both men and women presented the same results about practicing reading and listening skills with open ended questions. In the case of Dimension 4, exactly the same results are found regarding giving greater importance to written skills than oral skills, while women tended to give greater importance to oral skills than men. It is also interesting to highlight that the results show that women prefer



more than men knowing the vocabulary and the grammar before doing tasks (Q16, “When studying a foreign language, I prefer first being shown the meaning of vocabulary and grammar before I start working,” in Dimension 4). These differences may be due to cultural differences, students’ native language, and gender identity, all of which influence learning styles (Guild & Garger, 1998).

Considering participants’ educational stage (see Fig.5), some statistically significant differences among students’ attitudes in terms of their educational level were found, as shown in Table 2, for postgraduate students who would like to be involved in designing a FL online course (Dimension 1, Affordances). This may be because postgraduate students in Poland are professionals who upgrade their qualifications and know their exact needs. In terms of the course being linked to real life issues, both postgraduate and PhD students scored the highest (Dimension 1). On the other hand, Master and postgraduate students would prefer to have only multiple-choice questions in an online FL course (Dimension 2, General pedagogical approaches). Only BA students would like to be able to learn a FL without having to attend classes (Dimension 1). It is interesting, however, that the higher the academic level, the higher score found for the different dimensions. This confirms previous findings, which have shown that academic levels are a determining factor concerning various learning-related issues, including motivational regulation strategies (Yun et al., 2020), engagement (Muenks et al., 2017), and self-regulation (Delen et al., 2014).

Finally, our results present statistically significant differences among students’ preferences in terms of their age only for Dimension 3 (L2/FL pedagogical approaches), where the oldest age group scored higher than the other two groups (see Table 3). Moreover, findings suggest that the youngest students (18-24 years old) prefer their teachers to design the courses, work with peers from the same university, and do tasks related to problem-solving skills and creativity. The oldest students (40+), however, prefer contents interesting for them (rather than those related to their fields of specialization) and are more willing to collaborate with language learners from other countries (see Fig.6). This contrasts with the findings by Tafazoli et al. (2018), who found that age was not related to the perspectives of English language learners regarding computer-assisted language learning (CALL).

Recommendations for educational practice

This section provides implications for distance FL course designers. In view of the results, the objective of this research was to see whether student voice should be considered in distance FL university course design to the advantage of students and try to generalize our findings so that they are potentially applicable to other HE contexts. With this in mind, Figure 7 shows the possible implications of hearing student voice in distance FL university course design.



Figure 7. Implications for distance foreign language course design (Source: Own elaboration)

The implications for distance FL course design include considering the culture and historical background of a given country and students' identity as they seem that it matters what type of cooperation between students is incorporated into the initial synchronous activities. Even though this needs to be further investigated, cultural differences, students' main language, and gender identity should all be taken into account when designing a distance course, as they may directly influence the learning context (Gündüz & Özcan, 2010).

Distance FL courses should provide opportunities to work on all the language competences, including, as the findings of this study show, opportunities for learners to select what language skills they may need to improve more. In this light, speaking, considered the essential skill in language learning (Al-Temimi, 2016), is one of the most challenging components of a distance course. This can be achieved by using video call software (Hashemifardnia et al., 2021) and building learning communities between students (Muszyńska & Huertas-Abril, 2022b). Moreover, different types of assessment need to be built into the course, and there should be a diversity of activities to choose from to build students' individual learning paths while working with the course individually and within their learning communities. Trying to integrate more open-ended and creative tasks rather than 'traditional' multiple choice activities, is another increment that might need to be developed over the course of the class, as it can also help develop students' soft skills as they "allow solutions to be grasped in an unconventional way" (Homolová & Štulajterová, 2022, p. 3). Providing multiple modalities on a course is most effective for learning retention (Miller, 2021). The above is in agreement with the findings of Redmond et al. (2018) of empowering learners by developing flexible, content-rich, and

interactive learning resources that lead to stronger student involvement on the course. Although syllabi, contents and competences are marked by the curriculum and educational programs, this adaptability is nowadays more and more accessible thanks to machine learning and artificial intelligence (Huang et al., 2023; Woo & Choi, 2021), which can be integrated in FL course design.

The results of this study presented in this article expand this view by presenting students' preferences and how they link to educational modalities which shows how students approach learning (Bloemert et al., 2020), and add more specific implications for course designers. The findings suggest that the learning paths in a FL distance course should be created by taking into account the language skills students want to practice, students' main language, gender identity, learning communities, and age. The latter can influence students' willingness to co-design the course, the course content, and the type of interactions. For instance, the older the students the higher willingness to interact with language learners from other countries. This informs us that creating learning communities, so important to all learners, could be formed among peers first and then followed by expanding out to students from other countries. Moreover, none of the above, apart from the type of feedback offered on a FL distance course, seem to be influenced by students' academic level, as the results of this study showed. Our findings support the idea that the incorporation of student voice in online courses needs to be done in small steps, by providing opportunities to learners to create their own learning paths and allow them to access and generate content appropriate for their context and learning preferences, taking the above into account. Working towards flexible educational approaches we also work towards inclusivity in access to learning.

Conclusion

Curriculum is a deeply personal thing whether it is for distance or face to face learning. Nevertheless, previous studies on student voice focused mostly on students' post-course feedback on individual courses, rather than on general preferences that could be applicable to other educational contexts (e.g., Bell et al., 2019; Chilvers et al. 2021; Tuhkala et al., 2021). As said in the introduction of this article, this does not support the development of students becoming course co-creators, nor allow them to experience any changes that result from their feedback. Therefore this paper emphasizes the potential role of student voice in FL distance course design in HE, provides implications for course designers, builds a greater understanding of instructional approaches in distance education and in this way bridges the disconnect between online learning and the traditional ways of teaching and delivery (Kehrwald & Parker, 2019). While the same data instrument was used in this study as in Muszyńska and Huertas-Abril (2022a) to provide greater clarity and reliability for the developed research instrument when used with a different data set and a distance FL course, not LMOOCs, to generalize the research results, it also showed its limitations. The questionnaire that was used to collect data depends on information reported by the learners via closed questions. In this study we saw that

it brought more reliable results when the sample that was larger and more gender balanced. Nonetheless, to further reduce bias, gain greater credibility of the results and understanding of the phenomena under study, future research studies should add open ended questions to the data collection instrument to use multiple methods to analyze data.

Despite the limitations of this study, hearing student voice in FL distance course design in HE has the potential of being an effective way to advance the design process and the quality of learning, as well as course delivery at HE institutions, while keeping the student engagement levels high and the drop-out rates low.

Ethical statement

There are no conflicts of interest associated with this study. In compliance with Ethical Standards, the instrument included informed consent, which was obtained from all individual participants, and all data were anonymized.

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