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# **A COMPARISON OF ONLINE AND FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM- A FOCUS ON TEACHING GERMAN LITERATURE AND HISTORY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The trend of online teaching and learning has a great impact on every sector of education across the globe. The foreign language education is similarly affected by the increasing tendency of online education. The present study compares the performance of the students during face-to-face learning and online learning with focus on teaching German as a foreign language. It specially aims on teaching literature and history to the university students of German language. It further introduces effective strategies to be used during teaching foreign language literature and history online. The data were collected from 30 undergraduates at the university of Kelaniya, who follow the four-year honors degree program in German for the Bachelor of Arts degree. Quantitative data were collected through the assignment marks of each student during the both sessions, whereas the qualitative data were collected through class room observations. The results show an increasement of the performance of students during / after the online lessons. And proves the effectiveness of the teaching strategies used by the lecturer to teach the foreign language literature and history online. It concludes that, although there are few minor drawbacks of online learning, it is the most suitable mode of instruction to teach a foreign language and it is even successful in teaching subjects as literature and history in a foreign language.

Key words: Online Learning; Face-to-Face Learning; Foreign Language Teaching; German as a Foreign Language

## **INTRODUCTION**

The foreign language education is strongly affected by the increasing trend of online education. The study areas of literature and history are considered main components of teaching German as a foreign language at University of Kelaniya Sri Lanka. The aim of the research is to identify the effectiveness of online teaching in a foreign language classroom with the focus on teaching literature and history to University students of German as a foreign language. Further the study introduces effective strategies used by the lecturer to make the mode of instruction successful.

During teaching German language at the University of Kelaniya, it was observed that some students had hardships whereas some were interested in following the courses of literature and history in a foreign language. Therefore, the research was conducted to discuss the following issues:

1. How efficient is online learning over traditional learning with special focus on teaching literature and history to small groups of foreign language learners at universities?
2. What are the effective online teaching strategies for literature and

history teaching in a foreign language classroom?

The study was limited only to University students, who studied German as a foreign language for their Bachelor of Arts degree, which was a limitation of the study.

## ***LITERATURE REVIEW***

Gao and Zang (2020) in their research “Teacher Learning in Difficult Times: Examining Foreign Language Teachers’ Cognitions About Online Teaching to Tide Over COVID-19” examine the cognition of foreign language teachers about online teaching in the phase of absence of normal teaching methods. It shows, that the teachers are having clear perception about features, advantages and constraints of online foreign language learning. They improve their knowledge on information technology by recognizing learners needs, online teaching practices and the need of bringing traditional classroom methods into the online classroom. Teachers are required to design online courses for language teaching but they lack of experience or have no experience in this field of online teaching. Complete online courses have more and different issues than in hybrid and traditional classrooms. Thus, the teachers should develop their teaching methods and techniques with regard to the online teaching. (Hess, 2011)

The study “Online Foreign Language Teaching” by Ivanovska and Kasaposka-Chadlovskaa (2020) aims on analyzing students experience during covid 19 pandemic at some Macedonian higher educational institutions. It focuses on students’ opinions on organizing online classes, usage of electronic platforms, different types of activities done in the classroom, content of the lecture, motivation to follow the virtual classes,

advantages and difficulties in online classes with regard to traditional classroom sessions. The study concludes, that more of them still prefer the traditional classroom. Therefore, the range of methods and techniques used in language teaching online should be changed to overcome these challenges. Spodark (2013) in “French in Cyberspace: An Online French Course for Undergraduates” discusses about a development of a French language online course “French in Cyberspace” for undergraduates at Hollins University. Here he emphasizes the preference and practicability of the online courses and argues about the “no significant difference” concept, which equalize the face-to-face and online courses in many of other research. He further states that the techno constructivist advantages offered by the online courses gives unique importance and benefits for the active language learners. It describes the course in detail and provide the design for the construction and conduction of the course. Moreover, he explains the online learning experiences and suggests the web resources for online activities, where they can improve their language skills.

Roddy et al. (2017) in his research “Applying Best Practice Online Learning, Teaching, and Support to Intensive Online Environments: An Integrative Review” explore best known practices for online lectures and how these practices can be applied for intensive online courses. Intensive online learning requires additional skills of students, instructors and technologies. Easy access for the university courses from any country of the world offers the ability to overcome the geographical barriers. Online instructions need different delivery and feedback methods. It is obvious that, turning the traditional methods to online methods is easier than designing online courses. It requires to be carefully planned and demands technological development.

Monica Manzolino (2016) in her research "Teaching Literature through Online Discussion in Theory and Practice" focuses on teaching literature to university students by using online discussions. Integrating discussions in the online lessons is important as it helps to modify the receptive attitude of the students and helps to develop the basic competencies reading, interpreting and criticizing literary texts. The students are more relaxed in the online session's atmosphere, as there is no connection to the social environment. Therefore, it can cause positive integration. The use of website learning literature is emphasized here to support the university designed courses. It further shows how to improve close reading skills using a forum in the website.

Britanny Gildert in his study "Online Learning Revealing the Benefits and Challenges" whose results are consistent with the present research, explores the benefits of high school students in online learning and examines the challenges and disadvantages of the system. Maria-Anca Maican and Elena Cocoradă (2021) in their research "Online Foreign Language Learning in Higher Education and Its Correlates during the COVID-19 Pandemic" talk about the behaviors, emotions and perception of the university students during online foreign language learning in the phase of corona pandemic. They emphasized the enhancement of social relationships and interest among the students with the usage of breakout rooms and video conferences. Further the teacher should pay more attention to the low-achieving students. And the high-achieving students with low task value should be engaged in personalized learning.

Lan Lancashire in his research "Teaching Literature and Language Online" explains the benefits and challenges of teaching language and literature online with different digital tools and give explanations about online course

design and assessment, which can be adopted to online, face-to-face and blended learning courses. According to its results, the online courses made students motivated and the access to education increased. He identifies a drawback of online teaching as the work load is heavy than face-to-face learning.

Art Tsang, Amos Paran, Wilfred W.F. Lau in their study "The language and non-language benefits of literature in foreign language education: An exploratory study of learners' views" discuss about the benefits of literature learning in foreign language education. The research "Current Trends in Online Language Learning" by Robert Blake focuses on application of online learning to language education through computer assisted learning and proves that, the proper integration of these new formats can develop the second language skills.

Krishnan et al in their research "Challenges of Learning English in 21st Century Online vs. Traditional During Covid-19" (2020) mention that the free online resources are easily accessible than carrying books to learn the English language, as it is hard to learn language merely through books, which further has aimed on learning English via online resources and traditional method. The students recognized the free online resources as valuable tools, which help in improving reading, writing and vocabulary skills. It further improves motivation of the students, their critical and analytical thinking skills, the social interaction with the teacher and among the participants. John F. Lyons in his research "Teaching History online" introduces suitable lesson plans, online tools to create interactive and interesting environment to teach history online.

However, teaching history online focused on foreign language education remains sparse which also needs a special attention.

## **METHODOLOGY**

30 Undergraduates at University of Kelaniya, who follow the four-year special degree program in German for their Bachelor of Arts Degree were selected to collect data. The first group, who are the third years consisted of 24 students and the group 2, who are the final years consisted of 6 students (total amount of final years of German as a foreign language). The performance of group 1 was tested for the German history course unit and the group 2 was tested for the German literature course unit. The researcher had the role of lecturer and taught German history for the 3rd year students and literature for the 4th year students.

The research was planned to compare the efficiency of the students before online lessons and during/after the online lessons.

The student performance and the observations were used to get the results for the research

The quantitative data were collected through assignment marks of the students. Three assignment marks of each student during the face-to-face sessions and three from the online teaching sessions were selected. These marks were used to calculate the average mark of each student. After that the grade related to the average mark was used to show the results. The marks were given out of 100. The mark ranges are: 85-100= A+, 70-84= A, 65-69= A-, 60-64= B+, 55-59= B.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

The assignment marks of the students before and after the online sessions are analyzed to get the results

*Table 1: Results of Group 1 for literature*

Student	Face-to-Face sessions	Online sessions
A	A	A
B	A	A+
C	A-	A
D	B+	A
E	B+	A-
F	B	A-

The above table shows the results of the students from group one for the literature course unit of teaching German as a foreign language. This is the whole number of students in the third-year special degree program, who follows German as a foreign language for their Bachelor of Arts honors degree. The highest-grade A+ is not seen in the face-to-face sessions, whereas one student has received the A+ in the online sessions. Two students have obtained grade A in the face-to-face sessions and the number has

increased to three in the online sessions. One person has obtained A- in face-to-face sessions and two persons have obtained A- in the online sessions. Two B+ grades and one B grade is recognized in the face-to-face sessions, which have been disappeared after the online sessions. Further the lower grades B and B+ has turned out to A- in the online sessions, which is an improvement of the results.

Figure 1: Student Performance in German Literature

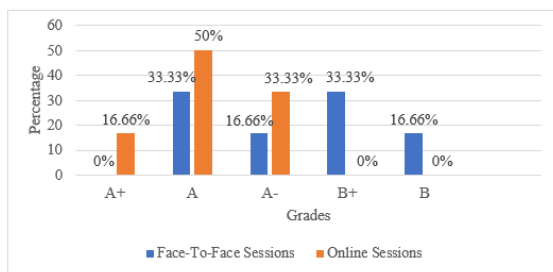


Figure 1 shows the percentage of the marks of group one for the German literature course unit. According to the figure 1 the percentage of increase of grade A+ during online sessions is 100%, whereas the percentage of increase of grade A and A- are 50% and 100% respectively. The lowest grades obtained during the face-to-face sessions, which are B+ and B are not recognized during the online sessions and the percentage of decrease of the grades are 200% and 100% respectively. A total increase of the performance can be seen during the online lessons

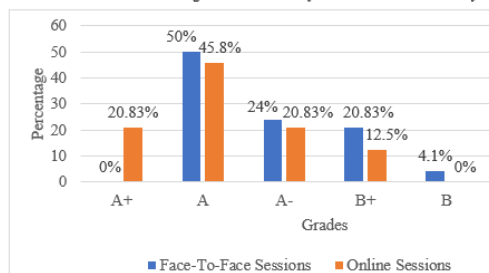
Table 2: Results of group 2 for German history

Student	Face-to-Face sessions	Online sessions
1	A-	A
2	A	A+
3	A-	A-
4	B+	A-
5	A-	A
6	A	A
7	A	A
8	B+	B+
9	A	A
10	B+	A-
11	A	A+
12	A	A+
13	A	A+
14	A	A
15	B	A-
16	B+	B+

17	A	A+
18	B+	A-
19	A	A
20	A	A
21	A	A
22	A-	B+
23	A-	A
24	A-	A

The above table shows the results of the students from group 2 for the German history course unit. This is the whole number of students in the second-year special degree program, who follows German as a foreign language for their Bachelor of Arts honors degree. The highest-grade A+ is not seen in the face-to-face sessions, whereas five students have received the A+ in the online sessions. Twelve students have obtained grade A in the face-to-face sessions and the number has decreased to eleven in the online sessions. Six students have obtained A- in face-to-face sessions and five students have obtained A- in the online sessions. The number of B+ grades are five in the face-to-face sessions, which turned out to be three in the online sessions. The lowest grade B in the face-to-face sessions, which was obtained by one student has disappeared during/after the online session. Thus, the number of lowest two grades have been decreased or disappeared in the online sessions and the highest grade has an increase in the online sessions.

Figure 2: Student Performance in German history



According to the figure 2 the grade A+ is not recognized during the face-to-face sessions, whereas its percentage has increased to 20.83% during online lessons. A slight decrease of grade A is recognized during the online sessions, which is a decrease of 8.4%. The percentage of decrease of A- is 16.66%, whereas the grade B+ has a decrease of 37,5%. The lowest grade obtained during the face-to-face sessions is B and it is not recognized during the online sessions. The percentage of decrease is 100%. Although a huge difference cannot be observed during the both sessions, an increasement of the highest grade and the absence of the lowest grade shows an increasement of the performance of the students during the German history lessons

- **Strategies used by the lecturer during teaching literature online**

Innovative strategies used by the lecturer play an important role in promoting the language skills of the learners of a foreign language. Following are some strategies, which were used by the lecturer for the success of online literature teaching sessions.

1. **Student Centered Learning**

Student centered learning offers tools for knowledge production and management, it supplies interactive activities and makes personalized learning possible. (Seppälä & Yajima, 2017). To make the student-centered learning effective here the lecturer doesn't give all interpretations of the literary texts. He/ she asks the students to read out the texts by themselves and the lecturer gives the interpretation for one text and the following text should be interpreted by the students. First, they should present the meaning of the texts with their own words in German and the next step is to give the interpretation of the text. To develop the students' literary skills, the teacher asks questions from each and every student, which improves their communication skills at the same time. Every

interpretation is accepted by the lecturer, if the reasoning is logical. In the next stage, they are asked their opinion and experience related to the idea of the text. At some instances, they were allowed in breakout rooms, where they discuss about the particular text. Here they are practiced to analyze literary texts, by asking questions.

2. **Summarizing the texts**

Summarizing is considered an important academic skill of university level students. Teachers use this skill to evaluate students' comprehension of different materials and even concepts. In this era of technology, a vast knowledge is received, which should be interpreted and produced again and again. (Corbei, 2000). Therefore, summarizing skills should be improved in the area of foreign language education. (Cumming et al., 1989)

In the online foreign language literature classroom, the students were asked to read a particular text, page or a stanza of a poem and collect the most important facts in this literary work. After that, they should write it as a summarization. Here they should not use the same words to explain what they say. They should write the summarization with their own words, which helps to improve their language ability. The lecturer prefers using synonyms for the words mentioned in the literary text.

3. **Break out rooms**

Breakout rooms is the most preferred method among teachers in online teaching. It helps making the sessions interactive. It engages students in different activities, which offer them motivational skills. In the online literature classroom, the students are allowed in breakout rooms. They were asked to interpret a paragraph, a part of a text or some interesting lines in the literary text. They screen share the text and discuss inside the group. Here the students must talk exclusively in German. The lecturer monitors the breakout room sessions time to time. At the end of the

breakout sessions, the students are allowed to the main session and asked to bring up their interpretations in regard to the text or selected line in the literary text.

#### **4. Spaced Repetition method**

It is obvious that vocabulary learning is important in language learning. But the teachers are not aware of how, where to start the vocabulary teaching and which methods can be used to teach vocabulary to the learners of second and foreign languages (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). This is one of the major challenges, which literature teachers face, when teaching vocabulary in the literary texts. The teacher made use of spaced repetition method in the online foreign language literature classroom. Here the teacher repeats the new words, which are found in the texts to make students memorize the vocabulary. The teacher keeps space in between the time, when she repeats the words. He/ she repeats the words several times in different context in the same day or repeat it in the following days or weeks. As an example, instead of repeating the word 10 times at the same time, the word is repeated keeping an interval like an hour or one day.

#### **5. Usage of audio- visual media**

Based on the communicative skills, which should be developed in learning a foreign language, videos are known to be the best audio-visual media, which help teachers in reaching their target. Visual presentations help in learning languages, when they are used on correct time/ correct place in the classroom. Learners normally use both eyes and ears for learning. From these, the eyes are known to be basic in learning. In the field of foreign language learning, videos are interesting, stimulating and challenging. They offer a wide range of communicative situations, which are interesting and important for the language learner. (Johnson, 1946). In literature, the same audio-visual media can be used innovatively in related to the

literary text. When there is a film related to the novel or short story, which the students study or any video related to the poem, which is studied in the classroom, these can be shown to the students. According to the scenes in the novel the film can be shown. This makes the students remember the situation more clearly. This method is much easier as the lessons are done online. In the traditional classroom, the teacher should face some difficulties in showing audio visual media. These problems include internet issues, technical issues and the absence of a computer. Although these problems are not always recognized in the traditional classroom, these happen time to time.

#### **6. Speaking activities**

According to Brown (1994) speaking is a process of receiving, producing and processing information. It depends on the context, in which it happens, participants, their experience, environment and their need. Burkart (1998) states that, speaking requires further knowledge of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. It is the usage of correct words with correct pronunciation and order. Among the four skills to be completed in language learning, speaking is crucial. (Kareema, 2020) The success of this is measured in terms of ability to have a conversation. (Rahayu, 2015). In the online foreign language literature classroom, the students were engaged in speaking activities. Asking questions randomly from the students. In the groups, they discuss in the target language, and after that, every member of the group is asked to present a part of, what they discussed inside the breakout rooms. In every stage, their experience and opinion were asked, if it is possible according to the context.

#### **• Strategies used by the lecturer during teaching history online**

Following are some strategies, which were used by the lecturer for the success of online history teaching sessions.



### 1. **Student centered Learning**

Using less traditional methods to teach history for the students is now having an increasing tendency among teachers. (La Roche & Maloy, 2010). In the foreign language virtual history classroom, the teacher uploads the texts related to the topic and relevant questions to the online management system, where students of the relevant course have the access. The students should read, understand the texts and prepare for the questions, which should be answered by every student during the lecture. Simple questions related to the topic and the opinion of them towards the topic are expected from these questions. Additional video links articles related to each historical situation are together uploaded with the texts to explore additional information.

### 2. **Summarizing the texts**

Summarization takes place in the classroom. After the students answer the questions in the classroom, the teacher explains the texts thoroughly adding more information. Some texts are given to the students to summarize with the own words. At some instances, the students are allowed into breakout rooms, where they summarize the text together by discussing.

### 3. **Break out rooms**

Due to the increasing tendency of using breakout room sessions in the virtual online classroom and the interest of students towards the group activities, the students are allowed in the break out rooms for different activities. These include giving a video related to a historical situation to explain the events with their own words and to summarize a text.

### 4. **Spaced Repetition method**

Ebbinghaus (1885) stated that the rate of tendency to forget information increases with time. And if the data/information is repeatedly revised the tendency to forget them is low. Based on cognitive psychology Nakata (2008)

introduced two principals. First one is that, recalling results in better retention than just presenting the target object and the second one is that recalling with a delay is more successful than recalling it immediately after the lesson. (Chukharev-Hudilainen & Klepikova, 2014). According to this, the spaced repetition method is used in the virtual history class room as in the virtual literature classroom to improve the vocabulary skills of the students. The difficult words found in the text is repeated with a delay. Apart from this, synonyms are taught. And here even the spaced repetition method is used to mention the synonyms.

### 5. **Usage of audio- visual media**

Moving from the traditional methods used to teach history, the teacher uses here videos, short movies, pictures and maps related to the historical situation. They are shown to students to make the situation, which they talk about clearer, to engage them in speaking activities, and to make the lesson interesting and interactive. Here they are asked to present a summary of the important details which they identified in the videos. This improved their ability to summarize as well as the ability of speaking skills in the target language. It is easy to show the videos and other audio visual media online, than sitting in the traditional classroom, as there are few issues to be considered in the online lessons than in the face-to-face traditional classroom. In the traditional classroom the barriers like time, place and absence of internet are the most common difficulties faced by the teacher.

### 6. **Communication skills**

Throughout the virtual foreign language history classroom, the speaking skills are promoted. Everyone is asked questions spontaneously or they are engaged in speaking activities in the break out rooms or individually. At the end of the break out rooms, the students should share their outcomings with all of the students in the online classroom.

- **Observations**

The observations with regard to the online, face to face sessions and used strategies are as follows:

1. In the traditional classroom, the students were almost bored as the above mentioned some methods are not successful, when used in the face-to- face classroom. There were some issues in the traditional classroom, when showing videos. Absence of internet in some classrooms, issues in laptops and speakers, and the time barriers, which cause place barriers. Classroom are allocated according to timeslots. When time is over, the class cannot be continued as another class is waiting to enter the classroom. This interrupted the activities they were doing in the classroom. Everyone didn't get the chance to speak in the face- to- face sessions. But in the virtual classroom the students were not bored anymore during the literature and history lessons, as they can talk, bring up ideas, have much time to do group activities and can get use of audio-visual media without above mentioned issues. As the students are allowed to bring the interpretations and explanations, their literary skills and speaking skills developed in the virtual foreign language history and literature class rooms.

2. Self-directed learning was one of the main observations, which were observed among students. In the traditional classroom, they used to listen to the teacher than engaging in activities by themselves. In the virtual classroom the lesson/ text and questions were sent previously, which should be answered by the students by exploring information by themselves. In the activities, they were asked their opinion and experiences. Therefore, they are now familiar with self-directed learning, which they used even more in improving their language and history knowledge.

3. The breakout sessions made the lecture more interesting and interactive. As the students should speak exclusively in the target language, the communication skills developed. They interacted with each other, exchanged their ideas, learnt from others, which helped them to promote their own language, analytical and literal skills.

4. The repetition method used by the lecturer was more successful than in the face-to-face sessions, because the student's memory power was higher than in the face-to-face lessons, as there is no transport stress and other time and place related limitations. Therefore, the students could concentrate more on the lessons than in the face-to- face sessions

5. Showing audio- visual media related to the lessons online were easier than in the face-to-face sessions due to different barriers like time, place, internet issues.

6. The improvement of the communication skills was noticed immensely. The students had more time to talk and bring up their own ideas in the online class room. Some students were shy in the face-to- face classroom to talk in front of the classroom. And some other students have very low voices, which is not loud enough to hear. In the online classrooms the students with low voices didn't have difficulties and the shyness of the students to speak in front of the class was even decreased.

7. Some students were not able to participate to the lectures regularly, as there were power cuts and internet connection problems. During power point presentations, some documents couldn't be shared through mobile phones. Therefore, they had to send the documents per email to the teacher. And the teacher shared instead of the student. Such issues wasted time. And sudden internet issues and technical issues in the zoom platform caused the teacher/ students to leave the

lecture. Some students pretended to have internet issues and technical issues and avoided the lectures.

8. Students are used to be taught in the traditional classroom with the eye contact of the teacher. After sudden absence of the eye contact between the teacher and the student, some students complained, that it is hard to comprehend, what the lecturer explains at some instances, as there is no eye contact with the lecturer.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The present research is helpful for many foreign language teachers/ lecturers, who mainly focus on literature and history in the virtual classroom. It is a common belief, that literature is hard to be taught online. In contrast to this opinion, the study shows the positive results of the online teaching and introduces effective strategies to be used during teaching literature and history in a foreign language classroom. Teaching history is even thought to be done by using teacher centered material and methods. In contrast to that, the research introduced some methods to be used during the virtual sessions, to make the sessions interactive and more interesting. Related study is to be done in the future to identify the areas of interest and disinterest of the students during the online sessions, which also focuses on teaching German as a foreign language. A webinar is to be held to disseminate the findings of the present research, where the language learners of the University of Kelaniya participate.

At the beginning of the research according to the student performance, it was understood, that there were only advantages for the students, when they learn online. But after talking with the students, the minor draw backs were found. It was clear that some strategies were not at all possible during the face-to-face sessions as the time and place is

limited. According to the observations the strategies used during the online sessions played a main role to make this mode of instruction successful.

Considering all the facts, it is concluded that although there are minor draw backs during the online sessions, the online learning is more suitable for foreign language teaching. Further the results obtained by the students during the both sessions and the observations during the online sessions proved the effectiveness of teaching literature and history online in a foreign language classroom to small group of university students. The strategies used by the lecturer had a positive influence on the success of the mode of instruction.

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