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ENGINEERING AND MANAGEMENT STUDENTS' VIEWS ON ONLINE AND FACE-TO-FACE EAP TEACHING

Abstract

This article presents a study that investigated students' attitudes toward both online and face-to-face English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes. The study was conducted with students of mechanical engineering and engineering management after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions that allowed face-to-face teaching to resume. The study aimed to determine students' preferences for online or face-to-face classes and the reasons behind their opinions. It also aimed to compare the difficulty and interest level of EAP classes with other courses and gather qualitative feedback on how online EAP classes could be improved. The study was primarily quantitative, but it had a qualitative segment, too. The results indicated that students generally prefer face-to-face to online classes, although only marginally. Participants appreciated the ability to work from home and revisit recorded lessons in online classes, while face-to-face classes were valued for better communication with the instructor and collaboration with peers. English was viewed as better suited to online teaching than other courses, but students were hesitant to participate openly during classes. Most respondents suggested more active participation from students and mandatory attendance as ways of improving the online teaching process.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Following the easing of restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which had caused a number of difficulties in the teaching process and forced educators worldwide to resort to online methods, higher education institutions, among others, were faced with a task of reintroducing face-to-face teaching. With that in mind, this study reports on mechanical engineering and engineering management students' views on online and face-to-face English classes after the return of in-person teaching mid-semester in April 2022, approximately two years since the start of the lockdown. In this specific case, it meant that the first- and second-year students, who up until that point had only had online classes, would finally enter the classrooms for the first time. The fact that these students would finish their academic year with two months of face-to-face teaching, following almost three and a half semesters of online classes for some, or a semester and a half for others, provided an ideal opportunity for conducting a survey that would allow students to express their opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of online English for academic purposes (EAP) classes in comparison with face-to-face teaching. This paper presents the results of one such survey conducted after the end of the 2022 Spring semester, in which students were primarily asked to share their experience with online classes and assess the positive and negative aspects of studying English in such a manner. The questionnaire was distributed to first- and second-year students of both study programmes, who had just finished attending their respective English courses and were preparing to sit the exams.

The present study is predominantly quantitative in character and its main research aims are threefold:

(1) The first aim of the study was to determine students' predilections when it comes to choosing between online and face-to-face classes. They were also asked to provide the reasons behind their opinions, and state which method of teaching they would prefer in the future (face-to-face, online, or hybrid).
(2) The second aim was to compare EAP classes to the other courses that students attend (mechanical engineering and engineering management courses) and see whether they found them easier and more interesting to follow or not.
(3) The last research aim dealt more with the qualitative side of the study, and it was related to the final, open-ended, question in the survey, which asked students to give their thoughts on how online EAP classes could be improved from their perspective.

As can be seen from the above research aims, throughout the study the focus was exclusively on students' opinions of and attitudes toward both online and face-to-face EAP classes, while trying to avoid any excessive input from the instructor's side.

2. EAP FOR MECHANICAL ENGINEERING AND ENGINEERING MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

Before looking at previous research, let us briefly describe the subtype of English for specific purposes (ESP) being discussed here. Simply put, ESP is the teaching and learning of English for any intent that can be specified, and it "distinguishes itself from more general language study through a focus on particular, purposeful uses of language" (Hyland, 2022: 203). In line with Jordan (1997: 3), ESP can be divided into English for occupational, vocational, or professional purposes (EOP/EVP/EPP) and English for academic purposes (EAP). The difference between the two can best be described by comparing, in our case, an engineer or a manager to a student of engineering or management. Under EOP/EVP/EPP, for example, a mechanical engineer or an engineering manager will study English for purposes such as engineering etiquette or business communication, while students who take an EAP course will pay more attention to reading textbooks, listening to lectures, and improving their overall language proficiency. The syllabuses in question fall under the latter subtype of ESP, which can further be divided into English for general academic purposes (EGAP) and English for specific academic purposes (ESAP). According to Hyland (2006: 9), EGAP deals mostly with study skills, abilities, and language forms needed by university students studying English regardless of their specific discipline. It can include questioning and note-taking, summary writing tasks, giving presentations and so forth. Contrary to this broad generalization, ESAP courses include the skills and language needed for a particular academic field (e.g., mechanical engineering and its disciplinary culture), where the specificities of separate fields are viewed beyond the similarities between them (Hyland, 2006: 9). Given the current situation at the faculty and the various constraints (allocated hours, different levels of knowledge among students, position of courses in the curriculum), the English courses taught at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, University of Niš represent a combination of the two EAP subcategories, with an inclination toward ESAP. This inclination primarily stems from one of the reasons in favour of ESAP provided by Hyland (2006: 11-12):

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> The argument that weak students need to control core forms before getting on to specific, and presumably more difficult, features of language is not supported by research in second language acquisition. Students do not learn in a step-by-step fashion according to some externally imposed sequence but acquire features of the language as they need them, rather than in the order that teachers present them. So while students may need to attend more to sentence-level features at lower proficiencies, there is no need to ignore specific language uses at any stage.

Bearing in mind the importance of the English language in the development of both future mechanical engineers' and engineering managers' professional identity (Tasić, 2010) and the available teaching and material resources, ESAP is the subtype of ESP that most closely describes the courses related to this study.

In practice, students of mechanical engineering (ME) take two English courses (two hours a week for each in the range of A2 to B2, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) categorization of the textbooks used), while students of engineering management (EM) have four English courses (four hours a week each, ranging from A2 to C2). It is particularly important to note that there is no division of students into subgroups on the basis of their knowledge of English. In the present case, all students in a generation used the same textbooks and additional materials for both online and face-to-face classes, naturally, adapted to the utilized medium. The main difference, as far as teaching methods were concerned, was based on the limitations of online classes regarding student pair and group work. As a result of this, and given the size of the classes, both speaking and writing exercises were mainly done individually, although students were encouraged to discuss topics with each other, as if they were in an actual classroom. Also, since students were not required to have their cameras on all the time, again due to the size of the groups, they could not see each other, which rendered them unable to rely on nonverbal communication during classes. One final major difference between the two modes of teaching was that the instructor was more in charge of writing exercises in online classes, because it was their job to complete these tasks on-screen for other students as their peers were reading out the answers. The main reason for this was that there were students who followed classes on their smartphones and were unable to complete such exercises efficiently. As mentioned before, up until April 2022, all research participants had only had online English classes, with ME and first-year EM students having had approximately a semester and a half, and second-year EM students three and a half semesters of continuous online EAP teaching. Classes were held over the Microsoft Teams platform, in groups that initially counted more than 50 students each, but later dropped to around 20–30 as the semester progressed. These numbers increased drastically once again when students started having their classes face to face. With all of this in mind, the main aim of the present study is to find out what students think of different methods (face-to-face, online, or hybrid) in which such teaching can be conducted, and how these courses can be improved for their benefit.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

As for the previous research related to said aim, there are a number of studies conducted with similar objectives that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. It is worth noting that introducing online components into EAP teaching began before the recent pandemic (e.g., Arnó-Macià & Rueda-Ramos, 2011; Asoodar et al., 2014; Safont & Esteve, 2004) and that EAP teachers have been more and more exposed to different digital tools (see Dhillon & Murray, 2021), but the pandemic definitely put them in the centre of EAP practice. It should also be noted that the unexpected shift from face-to-face contexts to remote learning, which happened

during the pandemic, is fundamentally different from planned online learning (Moser et al., 2021), and can better be described as "crisis-prompted remote teaching" (Gacs et al., 2020). Taking a contrastive approach, Doghonadze et al. (2021) investigated the views of 466 EFL students in Georgia and Italy on face-to-face, hybrid, and online English teaching in universities from 2019 to 2021, with the aim to provide practical recommendations for effective planning and implementation of EFL teaching during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the results showed that students were satisfied with online studies during the pandemic, and grades and quality of learning did not seem to decrease significantly in Georgian universities. However, Italian teachers and students reported a slight decrease in grades and learning quality. Azizi (2020) compared the effectiveness of an online EAP course with a face-to-face course in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension and found that while the two modes of instruction did not differ in their effectiveness regarding the vocabulary and reading comprehension components, the participants in the face-to-face instruction group outperformed those in the virtual one in the case of grammar. Jadallah and Farrah (2022) examined Palestinian university professors' and students' perspectives on teaching EFL online during the lockdown. They concluded that both professors and students agree that there are certain advantages to online classes, such as saving time and effort, recording lectures for later use, and promoting higher critical thinking when using technology. Nevertheless, the two groups of respondents also identified a number of challenges that eventually led to a rather negative attitude toward online teaching compared with face-to-face classes. Contrary to this, Prodanović and Gavranović (2021) reported that almost two thirds of interviewed undergraduate students majoring in English expressed a positive attitude toward online teaching. There was a consistent mean value for all examined aspects of teaching (e.g., organization, methods, testing, etc.), and students were either satisfied or dissatisfied with all of them. The main positive comments in open-ended questions were related to the easy accessibility of online classes to students who were already employed or to those who did not live in the city where the university is located.

Within the Serbian teaching context, Đorđević et al. (2020) conducted an online questionnaire which evaluated students' views on technical, contextual, psychological aspects of online classes, and motivation. The results of the study revealed high motivation and positive assessment of online classes. The advantages of online classes included flexible attendance and a positive atmosphere, while poor internet connection and disruptions were disadvantages. Respondents favoured hybrid courses combining online and face-to-face teaching. The results are mostly consistent with the results assessing online classes in both the university and the high-school context in Serbia (e.g., Radojković Ilić, 2022; Vučetić et al., 2020). A study by Topalov et al. (2023) investigated anxiety levels among ESP students in response to different digital classroom modalities: video, audio, and text-based interaction. A survey of 184 students indicated higher anxiety during camera-based

interactions, moderately lower anxiety when using microphones, suggesting visual and audio cues' overwhelming nature contributes to these findings.

Even before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kirovska-Simjanoska (2019) examined the advantages and disadvantages of in-person and digital learning environments in an ESP classroom. The students who participated in the research were all given the same materials and tasks but were expected to complete these either online or in-class. The author's main intention was to identify students' preferred way of learning. The study demonstrated that students favoured online activities more, and that their perception of the digital environment changed during the research period. The author concluded that this preference was mainly related to their learning styles and specific types of tasks. Yet, it was also noted that students still acknowledged the advantage of having an instructor in a classroom and recognized the value of face-to-face social interactions. Overall, students considered the performed online activities as both effective and efficient in the context of ESP courses.

Similar approaches to investigating the sudden changes in the teaching process during the pandemic are also found within other areas. For instance, Gopal et al. (2021) examined the factors influencing students' satisfaction and performance in online classes during the pandemic. The data were collected from 544 respondents studying business and hotel management courses in universities in India. The results indicate that the quality of the instructor, course design, prompt feedback, and student expectations had a positive impact on satisfaction, which in turn had a positive effect on performance. The findings suggest that the teacher is the most significant factor affecting student satisfaction, followed by student expectations, feedback, and effective course design. The pandemic experience has also had an impact on blended courses as well (see Kathpalia et al., 2020; Mali & Lim, 2021). Elalouf et al. (2022) focused on the Structured Query Language (SQL) learners' perception and performance in both online and face-to-face teaching methods, primarily with regard to the role of the instructor, lesson delivery clarity and understanding, and the shift in learning mode. The authors also evaluated the performance of online and face-to-face students in their final examinations. Both sets of learners agreed that their lecturers provided satisfactory instruction, with online students emphasizing the effectiveness of learning, clear understanding, independence, and extra time, while in-person students praised the tools of the lecturers yet were dissatisfied with their dependence on them. In the end, it was determined that online learners performed better in written examinations, whereas face-to-face learners were more successful in oral ones. Alturki et al. (2022) went a step further in analysing students' perception of e-learning by proposing a model for predicting their satisfaction with online classes. The authors first determined that students were mainly satisfied with the efficiency of online course delivery, however, they still preferred in-person classes due to the presence of a teacher. They agreed that certain investments in e-learning are needed and that teachers required

new digital skills in order to deliver their teaching content online in the best possible fashion.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Instrument and procedure

The questionnaire (provided in the appendix in its entirety) was designed to assess students' opinions on the effectiveness of online and face-to-face teaching in their EAP courses. It consisted of 25 questions that covered different aspects of demographic and language learning information as well as the target questions. These were mostly closed-ended questions, with four of them offering students the "other" option for their replies, while the only fully open-ended question was the last one, which elicited students' opinions on how these courses could be improved. The first set of questions (Q1–4) focused on students' basic demographic data, including gender, year of birth, year of study, and study programme. These questions helped contextualize the collected data and identify potential patterns or trends related to these factors. The next set of questions (Q5–7) examined students' experiences with learning English, such as when they started learning the language and whether they had ever taken private English lessons. It also included students' self-assessment of their knowledge of English. The main set of questions (Q8–25) examined students' experiences with online and face-to-face classes and their attitudes toward these. Among other things, the questionnaire asked whether students had attended online classes before the COVID-19 pandemic and whether they preferred to follow EAP lessons face to face or online, what their preferences and opinions on these two teaching methods were, and so on. They were also asked to compare English to other courses and to reflect on specific skills and certain technical elements of their participation. The questionnaire was filled in online, using an electronic Google Forms document in Serbian. The appendix contains its translated version.

4.2. Participants

As mentioned above, the participants were second-year students of mechanical engineering (ME) and first- and second-year students of engineering management (EM) from the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, University of Niš. The study included 87 participants (mean age=20.9, SD=1.07), consisting of 53 females (60.9%), 33 males (37.9%), and 1 participant who identified as other (1.2%). A total of 67 participants (77%) were EM students, while 20 (23%) were ME students. Regarding the onset of learning English, 29 participants (33.3%) began during

preschool or before, 51 (58.6%) started in the first grade of primary school, 5 (5.7%) in the third grade, and 2 (2.3%) in the fifth grade. In terms of private English lessons, 32 participants (36.8%) reported having taken them at some point, while 55 (63.2%) reported not having taken any. Only 16 participants (18.4%) reported attending online English classes before the COVID-19 pandemic, while 71 (81.6%) did not. As for their self-assessed English proficiency (in line with the CEFR), 29 (33.3%) of them claimed to be on the A1 and A2 levels, 27 (31.1%) of them selected the descriptors related to the B1 and B2 levels, and the remaining 31 (35.6%) participants associated their knowledge with the C1 and C2 levels.

5. SURVEY RESULTS

As chi-squared tests revealed no significant differences between separate groups (e.g., students belonging to different study programmes, or to different proficiency levels); frequencies are reported for the whole examined population and per groups of questions. The closest to significance in terms of chi-squared test was the difference in responding to the question "Has your opinion on face-to-face English classes changed since you started having online classes?" between the mechanical engineering and engineering management students, χ^2 (2, N=87) = 4.908, p=.09.

Regarding the four basic language skills (Q10), the majority of students found that listening exercises were the easiest to do online, while only 16 out of 87 deemed that the same could be said for writing exercises, with speaking and reading exercises somewhere in between (Graph 1).
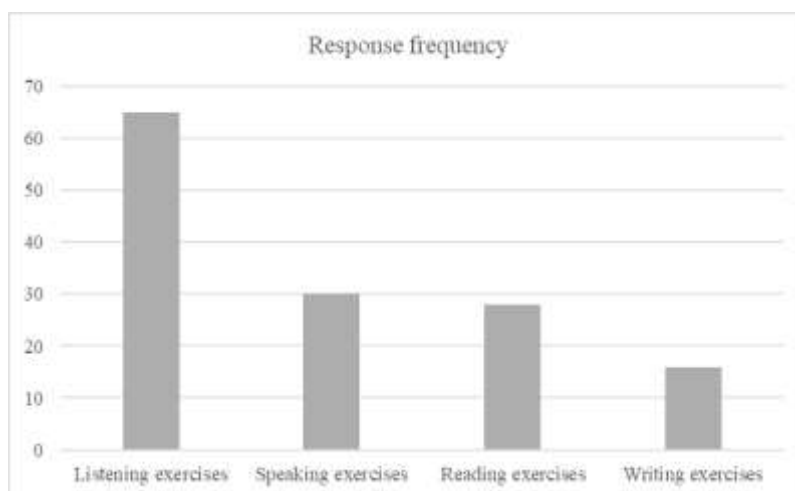
Graph 1. Easiest exercise type per four basic language skills

The next group of questions (Q11–13) was used to compare online and face-to-face classes and pinpoint the major advantages and disadvantages of both

methods of teaching English. The two, by far, most pronounced advantages of online classes according to the survey participants were the ability to work from home and the option of watching recorded classes later. Only one student did not select any of the provided replies. Interestingly, the most important advantage of face-to-face classes in students' opinion was the chance to work with their peers in a classroom. This was not as distinct from the other benefits as was the case with online classes, and it was closely followed by easier communication with the professor, greater opportunities for discussion, and easier completion of tasks, which were all chosen by around half of the students. One student also added nonverbal communication as an advantage of face-to-face classes, an option that was not offered upfront. Finally, students recognized the difficulty to maintain focus throughout the class as the most significant disadvantage of online classes, some two thirds of them choosing that option, while around half of participants also checked the lack of possibility of working with other students and feeling as though they were not actually in class. Only three students stated that there were no disadvantages to listening to online EAP classes.

As mentioned above, participation in classes started dropping after a certain period, primarily due to more lenient attendance requirements during the pandemic and the increasing lockdown fatigue among students. Asked what the main reasons for this might be (Q15), 35 students said that they participated in classes without any problems. Around a quarter of students stated that the main reasons were that regular attendance was not a prerequisite for sitting the exam, or that they had technical problems, such as poor internet connection. Fewer than 10 students selected each of the other offered reasons.

When it came to their general impressions of online EAP classes (Q9), participants had mixed opinions on whether it was easier to follow EAP lessons in a classroom or online, as 42.5% of them (37 participants) reported finding it easier to follow lessons face-to-face, while 29.9% (26 participants) found it easier to follow them online. A total of 24 participants (27.6%) reported no difference in difficulty between the two teaching formats. As for their incentive to participate in classes (Q14), 33.3% (29 participants) felt freer to participate face-to-face, while 28.8% (25 participants) felt freer to do so online, with 37.9% (33 participants) reporting no difference in their willingness to participate between the two formats. When considering future English classes (Q17), 43.7% (38 participants) would prefer to take face-to-face classes, while 35.6% (31 participants) would prefer to take online classes, and 20.7% (18 participants) reported no preference. As for any changes in opinion on face-to-face English classes since the start of online classes (Q18), 56.3% (49 participants) reported no change in opinion. However, 33 participants (37.9%) reported a positive change in their opinion of face-to-face classes, while only 5.8% (5 participants) reported a negative change. Finally, when considering the combination of teaching methods (Q19), 52.9% (46 participants) believed that combining online and face-to-face methods would give better results, while 47.1% (41 participants) did not believe that it would.

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The second key research aim was related to comparing online English classes with other undergraduate courses attended by these students (mostly mechanical engineering and engineering management courses). When asked to compare these (Q20), the majority of participants (57 participants, 65.5%) found it easier to follow online English classes, while 6 participants (6.9%) found it harder and 24 (27.6%) found it the same. Similarly, when asked about the level of interest in online English classes compared to online classes in other courses (Q21), the majority of participants (47 of them, 54%) found it more interesting, while 10 (11.5%) found it less interesting and 30 (34.5%) found it the same. Additionally (Q16), 43 participants (49.4%) believed that EAP teaching is more suitable for online methods compared with other courses, while 16 participants (18.4%) did not think so. A total of 28 participants (32.2%) believed that there is no difference between EAP and other courses in terms of suitability for online teaching.

Finally, the last group of questions (Q22–24) before the final one dealt with certain technical aspects of online classes that students had been having issues with. In terms of the devices used to follow online classes (Q22), out of the 87 participants, the majority reported using a laptop computer most often (58 participants, 66.7%), followed by smartphones (20 participants, 23%), desktop computers (7 participants, 8%), and tablets (2 participants, 2.3%). In terms of the use of cameras during class (Q23), 68 participants (78.2%) did not think that students should have their cameras on during class, while 19 participants (21.8%) believed that students should have their cameras on. A total of 48 participants (55.2%) thought that professors and teaching assistants should have their cameras on all the time during class, while 39 participants (44.8%) did not think that this was necessary (Q24). The final question (Q25) was open-ended and related to students' suggestions for improving online EAP classes in the future. Some of the more prominent answers to it will be analysed more closely in the following section.

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6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Before discussing the presented survey results in more detail, one point should be raised in advance. As we have seen, chi-squared tests revealed no significant differences between separate groups. It was particularly expected that different levels of knowledge of English might yield certain diversity in results, yet this was not eventually the case. The reason for this might lie in the ways in which students self-assessed their knowledge. Namely, the offered options were based on the CEFR definitions for each level from A1 to C2, and these might have been misunderstood by the survey participants, leading them to rate their own knowledge as higher than objectively true. This assumption can be corroborated by their success in final exams, where on average their self-assessment did not match the earned grades, especially in the C1–C2 range. However, since this was an anonymous survey, such a claim cannot be made with absolute certainty.

With regard to the first research aim, participants mostly provided mixed opinions on what type of EAP classes they preferred. Not one option received more than 50% of replies from all surveyed groups, with face-to-face classes barely edging out online classes when it came to ease of following and freedom to participate, which could perhaps be accredited to lockdown fatigue among students. In both cases, however, a substantial number of participants expressed no preference between the two modes of teaching, and more than half of them did not change their opinion on face-to-face classes after the end of online instruction. Similarly, their takes on whether hybrid teaching, which would combine online and face-to-face methods, would provide better results were practically split down the middle. Such results might be a consequence of good balance between face-to-face and online lessons, where students found both modes of teaching similar enough not to be able to choose their preference. This would mean that they were equally satisfied (or dissatisfied) with certain aspects of teaching, which would lead to an absence of strong favourites overall among the surveyed population. Another reason could be that students are not especially interested in these courses, and that the type of classes they have to attend does not really concern them. Foreign languages at non-philological faculties can be regarded by students as secondary in importance to their main courses, and the fact that the curriculum at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering is designed in such a way that English courses are located in the first and second year, makes it even more difficult for students to perceive the actual value of EAP for their future careers (Tasić & Stamenković, 2013).

Nevertheless, there were certain aspects of online classes, still related to the first research aim, which provided more clear-cut responses from participants. As mentioned above, there were some significant differences between the two modes of teaching when it came to the ways in which various exercises and tasks were completed, and these were duly recognized by students as well. Some three quarters of them found listening exercises to be the easiest to do online, while less than a fifth stated the same for writing exercises. Due to the nature of online classes, writing exercises became a more tedious affair, with the language instructor completing them on-screen while students read out their answers, and this could very well be the main reason for such responses to this question. Another more distinct conclusion can be drawn from students' replies to the questions related to the advantages and disadvantages of online classes. It is obvious that students found their increased freedom in following classes online as the most important advantage, with the ability to work from home and the option of watching recorded classes later being chosen by more than three quarters of participants. These answers clearly show that, in comparison with face-to-face classes, students primarily valued the opportunity to organize their own time however they saw fit. Yet, this result is contrasted by students' opinions on the main disadvantages of online classes, where this freedom to make their own scheduling decisions was firmly coupled with being unable to maintain focus during class, missing the possibility to work with other students, and even feeling as though not present in class at all. The perceived

freedom to follow classes as they desired thus coincided with a growing feeling of estrangement from their peers. It is no surprise, then, that the chance to work with their peers in a classroom was chosen as the most important advantage of face-to-face classes.

As for the second research aim – comparing online English classes to other courses, students were more united in their assessment, and two thirds of them found English classes to be easier to follow than other courses. The majority of them also declared that English classes were more, or at least similarly, interesting when compared to their mechanical engineering and engineering management courses. Only 6 and 10 participants deemed English classes more difficult and less interesting, respectively. One reason for this could be found in the suitability of EAP teaching for online platforms, which almost half of the surveyed students believed to be true. Yet, in talking to students during classes, one other reason emerged. Thanks to the more interactive nature of these English courses, students felt more welcome to participate in the teaching process as they were constantly invited to engage in discussion, unlike in some other classes, where professors would merely give presentations on different topics and less time would be allocated for student involvement. The methods employed in their EAP classes offered students the opportunity to become deeply immersed in the subject matter, as much as it was possible in this digital environment.

The third research aim was qualitative in character, and it was related to the final, open-ended, question that asked students to give recommendations on how they would improve online EAP classes in the future. Out of 87 participants, 33 had nothing to add, either not answering the question at all or simply stating that they were fully satisfied with the way in which their classes were held. The remaining responses can be divided into two groups, where the larger group contains the replies that recommended increased participation by all students and mandatory attendance, while the other one consists of a number of different comments and suggestions. Some of the more intriguing replies from the latter group will now be presented.

One of the survey participants recommended dividing students into separate groups based on their level of knowledge and said that he prepared very quickly for the exam and obtained a high grade, while some of his peers studied much longer and barely managed to pass the exam. This is, unfortunately, true and, as already mentioned, there are currently no mechanisms to divide students into separate groups and allow them to follow lessons that are best suited to their actual level of knowledge. Judging by the present situation, this problem will most certainly persist. Another student said that it would perhaps be helpful to "involve people from English-speaking areas, or other lecturers in our profession, whose mother tongue is English." This is an excellent recommendation, albeit one that is not so easily accomplishable in practice, and it need not be limited to online classes. Having native English teachers or experts in the fields of mechanical engineering and

engineering management who would talk to students in English would definitely be beneficial for them. Hopefully, this will become more feasible in the future.

Several recommendations also implied adding different materials to online classes, such as documentary or feature films that would be discussed in class, other video content, more writing exercises and essays, and a greater use of interactive tasks that could be completed directly online. Finally, a number of students expressed their considerable dissatisfaction with online teaching methods, claiming that nothing can replace face-to-face classes. One student put that sentiment into words in the following manner:

> I don't believe that students' knowledge of English will improve through online teaching, and I hope that that won't be the practice in the future. The world is going toward digitization and that is natural and normal, but some things should remain the way they are. During online classes in these years when the coronavirus was at its peak, I didn't feel like a student, but more like an online course participant.

Even though a lot of their peers did not share the same opinion, feedback from such students can certainly contribute to rethinking and developing future language courses in such a way so that everyone can find them constructive and engaging.

Having said that, and notwithstanding the fact that the survey was designed primarily with different modes of teaching in mind, the presented results could perhaps serve as a stepping stone to wider implications with regard to teaching EAP courses specifically. In our case, the focus of the syllabuses in the two study programmes differs: mechanical engineering students are more oriented toward scientific terminology and technical documentation, while engineering management students spend more time in honing their oral skills (e.g., giving presentations, debating, doing role-playing exercises, etc.). In attempting to adapt face-to-face courses to both online and hybrid modes of teaching with the aim of acknowledging these different focal points, one has to be well-versed in the pedagogical aspects of new technology and its digital platforms. Hamam (2023) provides a useful guide on how to implement these, paying special attention to the techniques that proved successful in increasing engagement and interaction, which was one of the major problems in both online and face-to-face classes in the present study. Also, as Lawrence et al. (2020) note, more technology does not simply lead to a better teaching process; teacher training, adequate technical support and a clear pedagogical vision are all crucial components. Certain practical applications of theoretical frameworks and models such as Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) (Hudson, 2023) or Digitally Enhanced Learning (DEL) (Chan & Wilson, 2020) have showed the ways in which different-aim EAP courses can be effectively and efficiently adapted to new modes of teaching. Nevertheless, reaching such conclusions here based merely on the conducted survey is not actually viable.

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7. CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to provide an insight into the students' perspective on the advantages and disadvantages of online and face-to-face EAP classes. The participants were first- and second-year mechanical engineering and engineering management students from the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, University of Niš. During the academic year 2021/2022, these students switched from online to face-to-face classes in the middle of the Spring semester. This created an ideal opportunity to scrutinize their opinions on the two modes of teaching. The first research aim led to the conclusion that students generally prefer face-to-face to online classes, even though only marginally. Moreover, there were no significant differences between any of the groups that participated in this survey, for example, students belonging to different study programmes or having different proficiency levels. Participants stated that working from home and having the ability to revisit recorded classes were the major advantages of online classes, while face-to-face classes were mainly appreciated for working together with other students and having better communication with the instructor. However, online classes also left students feeling disinterested and detached.

The second research aim showed that students think that English is better suited to online teaching than their other courses and compare it favourably to them both in terms of being easier and more interesting to follow. Still, most of them did not believe that they should have their cameras turned on and participate more openly in such classes.

Lastly, the third research aim yielded responses related to improving the online teaching process from the students' perspective, where most of the replies suggested more active participation from students and mandatory attendance, with more than a third of participants stating that they were satisfied with the way their online EAP classes were taught.

When it comes to possible future research directions, one potential line of research could be a mixed-methods study exploring factors that contribute to student preferences for online or face-to-face EAP classes. This study could include investigating the challenges that students face in online EAP classes and the strategies they use to overcome them, as well as the impact of cameras being turned on during online classes on student engagement and participation. Additionally, another study could aim to identify specific features of online and face-to-face EAP classes that students value most, and how these preferences vary across academic disciplines, adding a comparative level to the current approach. The results of such studies could inform the development of instructional strategies that can partly adapt to student preferences, promote student involvement and motivation, and address the main challenges of online EAP classes.

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Appendix

Survey questionnaire

1. Gender:
    1. Female
    2. Male
    3. Other

2. Year of birth:
    _____

3. Year of study:
    1. First
    2. Second

4. Study programme:
    1. Mechanical Engineering
    2. Engineering Management

5. When did you start learning English? (You can add the exact moment under 'other')
    1. Preschool
    2. First grade of primary school
    3. Third grade of primary school
    4. Fifth grade of primary school
    5. Secondary school
    6. I have not studied English before
    Other: _____

6. Have you ever taken any private English lessons?
    1. Yes
    2. No

7. How would you rate your knowledge of English? Choose the most precise answer.
    1. I can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases
    2. I can understand and use simple sentences and describe things in simple terms
    3. I can understand the main points of familiar matters regularly encountered and describe things by giving reasons and explanations for them
    4. I can understand the main ideas of complex texts and talk about different things quite easily
    5. I can understand very complex texts and speak fluently without many problems
    6. I can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read and express myself without any problems at all

8. Have you ever attended online English classes (before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic)?
    1. Yes
    2. No

9. Generally speaking (your general impression), is it easier for you to follow EAP lessons face to face or online?
    1. Face to face
    2. Online
    3. No difference

10. Observed through the four basic language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – which type of exercise is the easiest to do online in your opinion? (Check all the types that are easier to do online)
    1. Listening exercises
    2. Speaking exercises
    3. Reading exercises
    4. Writing exercises

11. What, in your opinion, are the main advantages of online English classes compared to face-to-face classes? (You can tick more than one advantage and add anything you want under 'other')
    1. Greater focus on teaching material
    2. Easier completion of exercises
    3. Greater opportunities for discussion
    4. Working from home
    5. Easier communication with the professor
    6. Better discipline in class
    7. The possibility of subsequently watching classes
    Other: _____

12. What, in your opinion, are the main advantages of face-to-face English classes compared to online classes? (You can tick more than one advantage and add anything you want under 'other')
    1. Greater focus on teaching material
    2. Easier completion of exercises
    3. Greater opportunities for discussion
    4. Working in a classroom with other students
    5. Easier communication with the professor
    6. Better discipline in class
    Other: _____

13. What, in your opinion, are the main disadvantages of online EAP classes? (You can tick more than one disadvantage and add anything you want under 'other')
    1. It is difficult to maintain focus throughout the class
    2. I am not motivated to participate
    3. I can't follow and do exercises easily
    4. I don't feel like I'm in class
    5. Lack of possibility of direct joint work with other students
    Other: _____

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14. Do you feel freer to participate in online or face-to-face classes (raising your hand for an exercise or conversation)?
    1.   I am freer online
    2.   I am freer face to face
    3.   No difference

15. What are your main reasons for not participating in online classes?
    1.   I am not interested
    2.   The level of teaching is too high for me
    3.   The level of teaching is too low for me
    4.   Attendance is not a prerequisite for sitting the exam
    5.   Technical difficulties (e.g., bad internet connection)
    6.   I participate in classes without any problems

16. Do you think that English classes are more suitable for the online method compared to other subjects?
    1.   Yes
    2.   No
    3.   No difference

17. In the future, would you prefer to take English classes online or face to face?
    1.   Online
    2.   Face to face
    3.   It's all the same

18. Has your opinion on face-to-face English classes changed since you started having online classes?
    1.   Yes, for the better
    2.   Yes, for the worse
    3.   No

19. Do you think that combining teaching methods, online + face to face, would give better results?
    1.   Yes
    2.   No

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20. In comparison with online classes in your other subjects, is following English classes online:
    1.   Easier
    2.   Harder
    3.   The same

21. In comparison with online classes in your other subjects, is following English classes online:
    1.   More interesting
    2.   Less interesting
    3.   The same

22. What type of device did you most often use to follow online classes:
    1.   Desktop computer
    2.   Laptop computer
    3.   Smart phone
    4.   Tablet

23. Do you think that students should have their cameras on during class (or at least when they are actively participating in class)?
    1.   Yes
    2.   No

24. Do you think that professors and teaching assistants should have their cameras on all the time during class?
    1.   Yes
    2.   No

25. What, in your opinion, would be crucial for the improvement of online English classes?
    _____