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CercleS survey: impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on foreign language teaching in Higher Education

Abstract: The pandemic may well have totally changed the way foreign languages are now being taught. In March 2020 language centres (LCs) in universities needed to adjust abruptly to online teaching with minimal resources or training for teachers. Research on the topic of the impact of the pandemic on teaching started from Day 1 and to date there have been contradictions about whether online learning is effective. The CercleS survey aims to study teachers' reflections on teaching during the pandemic and on the future of foreign language instruction in Higher Education (HE). Data were collected between March 30 and May 5, 2021, and the answers reflect the voices of 725 teachers from CercleS national associations. The findings indicate that the teachers moved flexibly into the online mode of teaching despite limitations in technological resources and the absence of training: 32.4% of the respondents declared no hardware was provided by their institution for working from home and 40.6% were not relieved from other duties. However, 66% of the teachers reported that the learning outcomes were met by modifying specific assessment criteria. Simultaneous group dynamics seemed difficult to achieve in the online format in comparison to face-to-face interactions in the traditional classroom. The acquisition of language skills, mainly speaking, was a challenge. Generally, the respondents see the benefits of a blended/hybrid mode of instruction. Implications for teaching practices and stakeholders are as follows: develop guidelines defining criteria for different formats of delivery in language education, develop workshops for teachers, negotiate conditions needed to carry out efficient and sustainable language teaching with university executive boards, offer training for sustainable online and hybrid teaching and maintain,

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and develop international collaboration between LCs in HE (e.g. virtual exchange, staff exchange, virtual international classrooms).

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; language centres; online teaching/learning; teachers

1 Introduction

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a major change in the work of language centres (LCs) in Higher Education (HE) in Europe, forcing the teaching to move online. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that teaching and learning in LCs did not stop; in fact, staff promptly and conscientiously trained in preparation for the challenges of online teaching in support of their students. This was particularly remarkable, considering most of the activities offered in LCs are co-curricular or extra-curricular. Therefore, there is a need to explore what happened, how the LCs reacted to the challenges and how they learned from the experience, and to reflect on what worked, what support LCs needed and might still need. CercleS, Confédération Européenne des Centres de Langues de l'Enseignement Supérieur, is the main European umbrella organization that promotes networking and supports LCs in HE in their work. Volunteers from CercleS member institutions formed a working group that conducted a study, in the form of a survey, on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on language teaching in higher education. The analysis of its results is the main scope of this paper.

The working group was responsible for designing the survey, analysing and communicating its results and developing follow-up activities. The tasks were shared amongst the group, which in itself is a reflection of the collaborative nature of the CercleS community. The working group met for the first time in October 2020 to discuss the main aims of the study and the writing of the survey. The working group was composed of five CercleS LC members.[1] The working pattern was soon identified as follows: the group met, discussed the next steps, the individuals worked independently on a set task and then met again to discuss the work done and the next steps. This work format seemed to work well and respected the workload of each group member. The meetings were held monthly. The aim of the survey was to identify the conditions and forms of delivery of language teaching

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and learning in HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. This first step was considered essential in order to achieve further aims, namely define criteria for the different formats of language teaching and learning, create a policy paper on the future of language teaching and learning in HE, and inform future planning of CercleS training and professional development events.

2 Literature review

The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced policy at all educational institutions tremendously. It has had an impact how teaching has been provided to learners in a new mode – the online/remote/distance learning that has become an international trend and is steadily increasing (Hvorecký et al. 2021; Jones 2020; Kamal et al. 2021; Kim and Asbury 2020). Online/remote/distance learning is characterized by high training efficiency and data availability as well as a steady information transfer speed regardless of the user's geographic location (Kamal et al. 2021). However, the teachers needed to adjust to the situation abruptly, mostly with a lack of training, technical equipment or mental preparedness. The same applies to students who might have seemed happy at home at first, but after several months' isolation, were longing to return to school at least partially, especially in June 2020 or April 2021 after the second wave of COVID-19 in Europe. It is still too early to assess the effect of online teaching and learning. Some studies already indicate that students learning online, via Microsoft Teams for example, are satisfied with this type of learning (Gohiya and Ashish 2020). However, the findings of other studies seem to indicate the contrary, resulting mainly from participants' digital illiteracy, worsened quality of education, technology costs (Dhawan 2020), lack of face-to-face interaction with the instructor, delayed response time, and absence of traditional classroom socialization (Adnan and Anwar 2020).

Furthermore, research suggests that teachers' top priority (84%) was the mental health and well-being of returning students, especially since they might need to relearn social skills (Jones 2020). In contrast, students report that lack of communication with the teacher might have been the biggest difficulty they encountered in online learning, especially during foreign language classes (Kamal et al. 2021). It has to be noted too that students who had already had experience of online learning before the pandemic showed a lower level of anxiety and disappointment in their learning than those who experienced online learning for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kamal et al. 2021; Primdahl et al. 2021). In point of fact, Kamal et al.'s (2021) research on 103 students aged 20–23 from Russia and United Arab Emirates confirmed the effectiveness of online learning before the pandemic in comparison to in-class learning. Kamal et al. found an

improvement in physical and mental health during the study process as well as in students' cognitive abilities and academic performance, noting in particular the following: 1) increase in the amount of leisure time, 2) ability to take breaks more often, 3) more comfortable learning environment, and 4) no need to spend time travelling to the university. Interestingly, students reported the absence of a severe control from the teacher as a positive characteristic of online learning. In addition, research shows that students were able to retain 25–60% more material when learning online compared to only 8–10% in an in-person classroom. This is mostly due to students' ability to learn faster online, since e-learning requires 40–60% less time than in a traditional classroom setting because they can learn at their own pace, going back and re-reading, skipping, or accelerating through concepts as they choose (Almarzooq et al. 2020). However, during the pandemic, the respondents' increased anxiety over the lack of a usual daily routine and real-life communication as well as possible deterioration in financial situations were detected (Kim and Asbury 2020). All in all, despite the harsh circumstances related to the difficult time, the research confirms the effectiveness of online learning.

Looking at the teachers' perspectives during the pandemic, the study identified themes such as uncertainty, finding a way in this uncertain situation and combining home duties with work in favour of preserving their own well-being and that of their pupils, worry concerning vulnerable students, importance of relationships, questions about their identity as teachers, and reflections on their new circumstances and finding nevertheless some silver lining (Kim and Asbury 2020). To capitalise on the positives of online learning, even during stressful and uncertain times, the solution seems to be in providing structure, predictability and routine to learners. These solutions require a lot of effort on the part of teachers, but it is very useful for learners to be as close as possible to their former daily routine before the pandemic (Primdahl et al. 2021).

Generally, relying on online teaching has radicalised educational processes overnight (World Economic Forum 2021). During the COVID-19 emergency, teachers had to react flexibly, innovatively, and empathetically as well as critically to all changes and attempt to run their classes efficiently to ensure a quality education for their students, despite the delayed interactions often experienced with learning platforms.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design and sample

The first draft of the survey was ready in December 2020. The questions covered the following points: information about the respondents (origin, role in the LC, kind of

contract), changes in professional practice, lessons learnt from the pandemic, and the hopes, aspirations and challenges for the future of language teaching in HE. Given that the aim was to receive a high number of responses (at least 1,000), most of the questions were aimed at collecting quantitative data. However, some further information was required in order to recognise the different experiences in each European country and the cultural, linguistic, institutional, personal and contract differences of each individual respondent. The respondents were, therefore, asked to comment further on certain questions. After some consideration, Microsoft Forms was considered the most appropriate tool, for its user-friendly features and for its universal accessibility. After the first draft had been reviewed by the working group, it became apparent that one survey was not sufficient to give a true representation of what had happened in LCs. It was decided to have one survey for the teaching staff and another for managers. The aim of this distinction was to recognise the different challenges and experiences the two groups had encountered. The two surveys were not only able to acknowledge the different challenges and learning journeys but provided more clarity in the next steps for CercleS to support LCs' staff.

Once the working group was satisfied with the content of the surveys, the latter were piloted with a small sample of respondents. The feedback was very valuable and ranged from linguistic suggestions to make the questions clearer, to the inclusion of other questions. The feedback from the trial respondents also indicated that the survey was too long, but no decision was made to shorten it, as its completeness would have been jeopardized. It was therefore decided to warn the respondents in the introduction to the survey that it would take approximately 20 mins to complete.

The survey was officially released on 30 March 2021 and kept open until 5 May 2021 to account for the fact that the Easter holidays fell at different times during the month of April in European institutions. The results from the teachers' survey were analysed first and then those of the managers' survey. The working group divided itself into two subgroups, each analysing a different group of questions. A Microsoft Teams group was created to allow collaboration. The analysis was discussed at each working group meeting. The subdivision and collaboration allowed a fair analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, of the questions, as different viewpoints could be represented. This paper focusses on the answers given in the teachers' survey.

The sample: the questionnaire was sent to 365 CercleS institutional members and 23 CercleS associate members for further dissemination among their teaching and management staff. The response rate was 725 answers from the teachers and 183 from the managers. All data were anonymised, and no data were excluded. All data were collected and stored securely in accordance with the Data Protection Act

(https://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/data-protection-guidance/). Responses were gained from all institutional members and almost all associate members, and the range of respondents is well distributed. Top respondents in descending order by country are the following for the teacher's survey: the UK, Italy, Germany, Spain and Switzerland and for the managers' survey: the UK, Germany, Spain and Italy.

3.2 Teachers' survey questionnaire

The main topic of the survey was the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and its effect on the future of language education. In the questionnaire, 25% of the questions were open-text. The focus was on teaching during the emergency situation in HE. The surveys collected responses from teachers and managers in LCs; however, for the scope of this article, we concentrate on the teachers' answers only. The teachers' survey represents voices from a Europe-wide range audience.

The survey included 31 questions divided into sections: demographic information (5 questions), changes in professional practice (14 questions), lessons learnt during the pandemic (7 questions), the future of language teaching and learning in HE (5 questions). As mentioned above, the approximate time for filling out the questionnaire was 15–20 min.

4 Results

The real value comes from the international variety of the responses, which makes the survey truly European and representing the CercleS community. All national associations of university LCs members of CercleS were represented in the answers, and respondents also came from members of staff in other national associations, namely Cyprus, Greece, Hong Kong, Israel, Romania, and Russia – see Figure 1.

Statistically, with a probability of 99% (confidence level), this result of the survey is valid with a margin of error (confidence interval = accuracy) of +/−5% for the entire population. The Z-value, which is 2.58 based on the confidence level, is constant and represents the usual mean or denotes the number of standard deviations that lie between the chosen value and the population average. Standard deviation is 0.5, which indicates how densely the data cluster around the mean. A value of 50% (worst case) ensures that the sample size is large enough.

The demographic information indicates that of the 725 teachers, 66.3% worked in LCs, whereas 14.9% worked in departments with a degree programme and 16.8% worked in both LCs and language degree courses. Of the respondents, 86.3% were language teachers, lecturers or teaching fellows, and 45.4% had a full-time
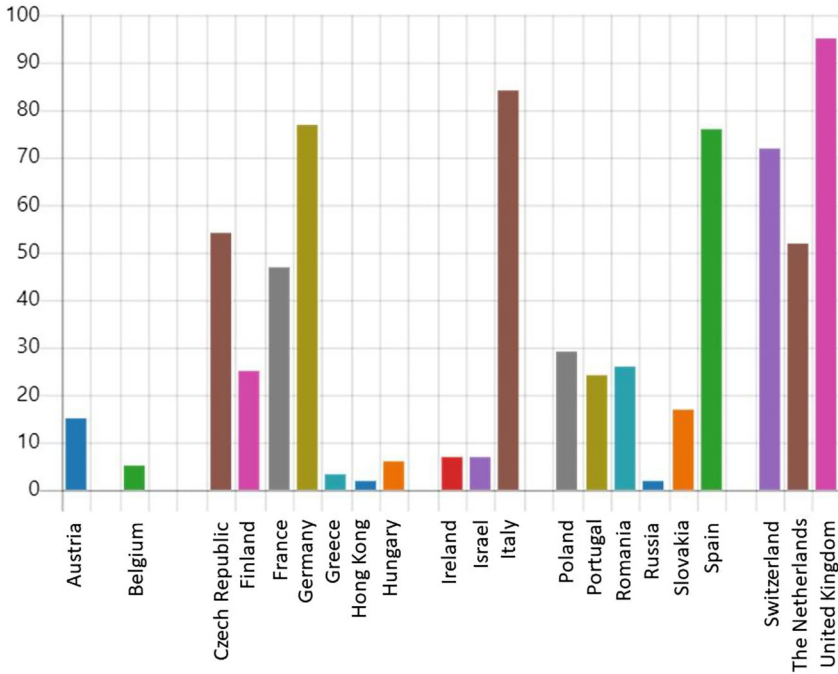
Figure 1: Representation of countries where participants work.

permanent contract, while 21% had a part-time permanent contract. 48.7% of respondents started working differently due to the pandemic in mid-March 2020, 33.8% as early as March 2020.

The changes in professional practice were also analysed. It was noted that 60.2% of the respondents moved to online remote teaching during March 2020. However, as seen in Figure 2, 32.4% were not provided with hardware (computer, camera, microphone, chair, etc.) for working at home by their university and/or their management and 40.6% were not relieved from other duties. Only 24.8% of the respondents received encouragement and professional recognition. When it came to receiving support from the immediate team, support meetings (37.3%) followed by peer support (36.6%) were identified as very useful. However, 8.3% teachers received no support at all.

When asked about challenges with certain aspects of the pandemic, in Figure 3 the respondents ranked them as coping with an increased workload and with stress and uncertainties as well as a lack of knowledge about online teaching. Interestingly, the least mentioned challenge was the fear of losing their job.
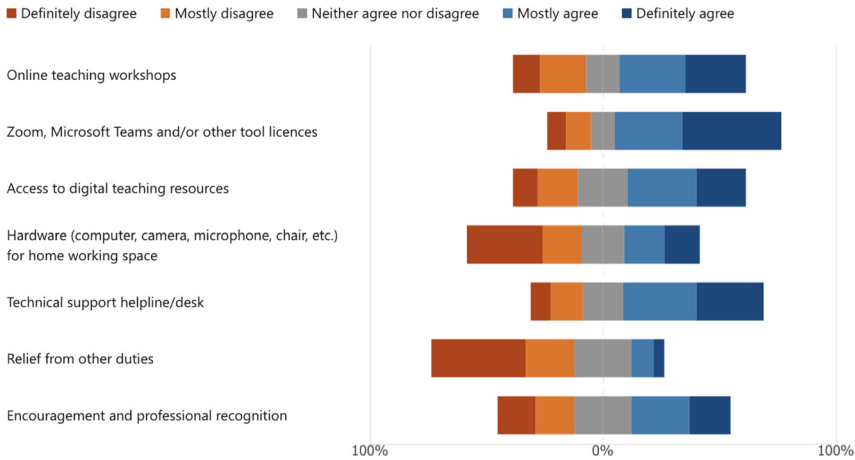
■ Definitely disagree   ■ Mostly disagree   ■ Neither agree nor disagree   ■ Mostly agree   ■ Definitely agree

Figure 2: Reflection on whether the respondents' university and/or their management provided them with adequate training and ongoing support.
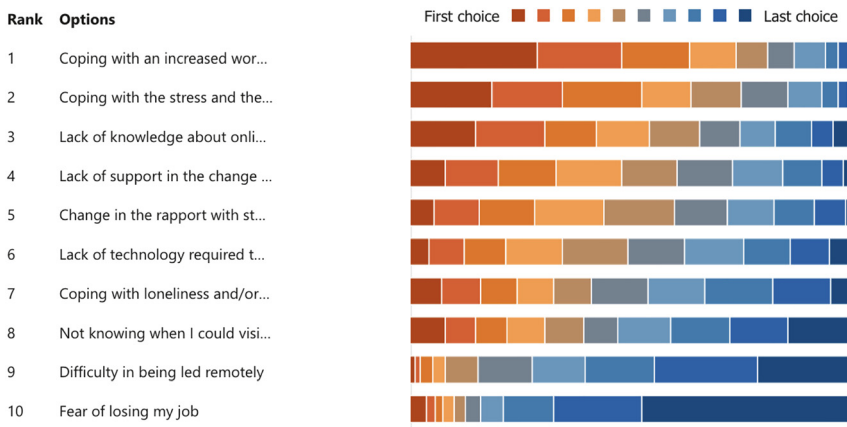
Figure 3: Challenges during pandemic.

As regards the useful resources demonstrated in Figure 4, the respondents ranked them as follows: online support spontaneously organised by peers, online support on remote teaching set up by the departments, and the IT support organised centrally by universities. Generalist webinars and online courses as well as health and well-being practices (for instance, exercise and mindfulness) were not considered very useful. Most of the respondents (66.3%) reported that the learning outcomes in their courses were achieved. This might have been because

"the pedagogical aspects of a course were changed so the goals could be met" or because "courses were already organised around blended learning and autonomous self-study activities, so the lockdown and the pandemic had not really changed teaching."

The survey looked at the lessons learnt from the move to online teaching and asked respondents to think about online remote synchronous teaching in comparison to face-to-face (F2F) teaching. Respondents agreed that teaching takes more time (73%), and yet only 10% of those asked reported that students showed more satisfaction. When it came to working in groups, 70% of the teachers reported that breakout rooms are effective for peer work and group work; however, 67% said that group dynamics were more difficult and 49% said that group dynamics were less diverse when teaching online. When it came to assessment, 65.2% of the respondents said they altered the assessment format and 31.2% indicated that the criteria were changed, but only 30.4% reported that the validity of the assessment was compromised by the changes and only 32.7% said that reliability was. When reflecting on how language skills were impacted by the newly acquired mode of delivery, as shown in Figure 5, speaking skills were most affected (33.3%) followed by writing (16.2%). Reading (67.3%) and listening (49.4%) were detected as neither positively or negatively affected.
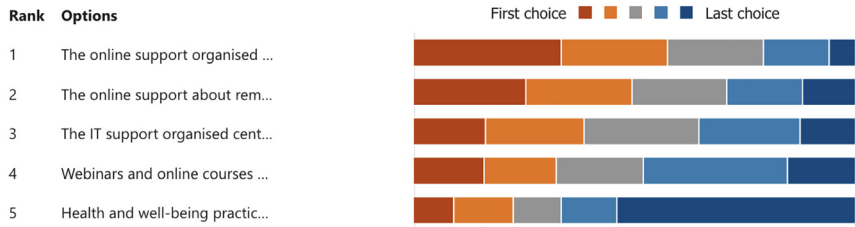

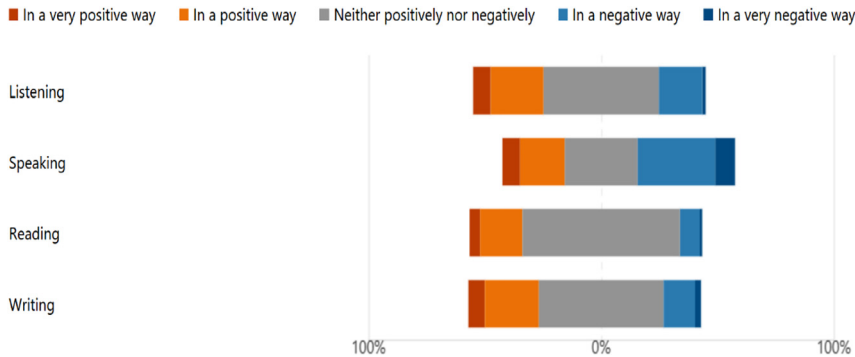**Figure 4:** The most useful resources during pandemic.

Figure 5: Impact on language skills by newly acquired form of delivery.

With regard to the learning outcomes, 28.5% of the answers indicated that students showed more commitment during the forced online learning than before the pandemic. This was also confirmed by 37.5% of the respondents who said that the students showed more commitment to self-study tasks than before the pandemic, and 38.6% said that the learning outcomes were as high as before the pandemic.

In response to the future of language teaching and learning, 64% of the teachers saw it positively. The respondents were also asked to give more details about their thoughts concerning the future of language learning, and 685 comments were received. The following ideas (ranked by frequency) were mentioned: language skills will be important in the future and LCs will be challenged to diversify their services and adapt to new realities and students' needs (even if some scepticism was noticed in some responses). The acquisition of new teaching skills was positive, as it was considered helpful to cope with future challenges also present in F2F settings. Blended/hybrid learning was considered positively and was seen as helpful for coping with future challenges (i.e. inclusion and students' motivation). Most respondents expect a combination of forms of delivery in their teaching practice, and they saw this change positively in the survey. The extra workload with little support was mentioned as a concern, together with a fear of losing their job, due to cuts and closing down of departments (although it has to be noted that these concerns were mainly mentioned by respondents working in France and the UK). Reflecting on the changes the respondents would like to see in their department, more than half were in favour of changes in the form of delivery; however, one third would prefer to go back to pre-COVID-19 teaching. The following comments are useful to understand the respondents' position better.

In relation to the offer of remote synchronous teaching and F2F teaching depending on the nature/content of course:

> "Some courses would benefit from a hybrid format, if the content necessitates that (e.g. inviting special guest speakers from abroad; having multiple speakers in a class, communicating with students from further afield)" (France).

> "for speaking skills and presentations skills, remote synchronous teaching is less stressful for shy students and easier to organize" (France).

In relation to the offer of courses in hybrid mode:

> "What a waste of time, energy and expertise it would be to go back to how teaching was done pre-covid! Teaching offer should be more diverse, flexible and build on all the tremendous efforts and digital resources made the past year" (GB).

> "Although I would welcome the idea of introducing hybrid courses, I think enough time needs to be allowed to prepare for this. I can imagine that it would involve almost as much work as it did to transform our classroom teaching into the digital format" (Germany).

In relation to a return to pre-Covid teaching:

> "I look forward to going back to f2f teaching safely" (GB).

The following comment from one of the respondents sums up the general tone of the surveyed group:

> "COVID-19 has shown three things: 1) there are many new teaching formats possible that we used, even with current technology; 2) there are even more approaches imaginable – both online and F2F – if we have the technology, the framework and the courage to try them. The pandemic for its all sad effects, gave us a chance to take a step back and realize this; 3) nothing beats physical encounters. With all the new opportunities that we may have discovered, we should never hope for remote teaching or remote collaboration to become the rule" (Germany).

5 Discussion and limitations

The results of this survey generated mixed feelings about the impact of online teaching in foreign language learning. On the one hand, the findings show that the teachers during the first wave of the pandemic moved flexibly into the online mode of teaching despite the limited technological resources provided by their institutions and absence of training, which has been confirmed by other studies. For example, Peñarrubia-Lozano et al. (2021) report that although teachers were able to exploit many online resources, less attention was paid to training teachers to deal with teaching-learning processes,especially its methodology. In fact, as Gao and Zhang (2020) maintain in their study, the teachers acquired their ICT skills by identifying their students' immediate foreign language needs and through online teaching practice. As our survey revealed, 32.4% of the participants were not provided with hardware for working online from their home by their university and/or their management and 40.6% teachers were not relieved from other duties. This obviously had a negative effect on teachers' satisfaction with their working environment and, thus, their motivation to teach online and see the perceived usefulness of online teaching (cf. Huang 2021). In addition, such dissatisfaction is associated with the feelings of anxiety and distress (cf. Maican and Cocoradă 2021). Indeed, Younesi (2021) emphasizes that new methodologies should be implemented for online language courses.

The results clearly illustrate that foreign language teachers are good practitioners, reacting flexibly to the new learning environment and meeting students' learning needs, since 66% of the teachers reported that the learning outcomes in their language courses had been met by modifying specific assessment criteria. This is again in line with the results of Gao and Zhang (2020), whose teachers were also able to react flexibly to students' learning needs by integrating both online and traditional F2F methods.

The results of our survey indicate, nevertheless, that the face-to-face group dynamics experienced in traditional foreign language classes seem to be difficult to achieve online. The key drawbacks are social distancing (Jansem 2021) and delayed response time (Adnan and Anwar 2020). As Huang et al. (2020) state, mutual collaboration and interaction between the teacher and his/her students and between the students themselves can contribute to personal development and teamwork. In addition, delayed response time and interactions hindered the development of speaking skills. This was also confirmed in this survey as one of the greatest weaknesses of online foreign language teaching since it has a negative impact on the development of overall language competence (cf. Frydrychova Klimova 2014). Moreover, despite students' efforts to complete the tasks on their own, the results show that more attention should be paid to supporting active engagement in their online studies (cf. Sugino 2021).

Overall, the participants of this survey were in favour of the blended/hybrid mode of instruction, i.e. a combination of traditional, F2F foreign language classes and online learning. Again, this is in line with the findings of other studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (such as Maican and Cocoradă 2021). As these authors (2021: 17) maintain, "*sustainable online learning of foreign language can be defined as the active and enjoyable learning of foreign languages by means of blended systems which can be adaptively used in possibly challenging situations in the future to foster language proficiency.*"

One of the limitations of this survey is the fact that it was aimed at HE institutions, specifically language centres in universities. Furthermore, the respondents were language teachers who are institutional members of CercleS. Although both conditions were considered important in distinguishing this study from others, the selective group of respondents and the fact that participation in the survey was voluntary could have influenced the answers. Importantly, it was noted that a relatively high percentage of respondents neither agreed or disagreed on the statements they were asked to comment upon (see for instance Figure 5): it might be too early to define the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on language learning and teaching in HE. Furthermore, the surveys were aimed at teachers and managers in LCs, but students' opinions were not sought.

6 Pedagogical implications

The following points were identified by the working group with regard to implications for teaching practice and stakeholder management:
– Develop guidelines defining criteria for different formats of delivery in language education.
– Organise workshops for teachers informed by the findings of the surveys.
– Negotiate with the university executive boards the necessary conditions in which to carry out efficient and sustainable language teaching (strategic and personnel planning, technical support).
– Offer training for sustainable online and hybrid teaching.
– Develop and maintain international collaboration among LCs in HE (e.g. virtual exchange, staff exchange, virtual international classroom, etc.).

7 Conclusion

The CercleS survey on the impact of the COVID-19 on foreign language teaching in HE is a timely addition to other studies related to the same topic and adds a further testimony of the seismic changes in education occurring at the time of the pandemic. The high number of responses received and the generous contributions in the open-text questions indicate that the respondents desired to share their experiences and opinions. Some respondents spontaneously contributed in their first language in the open-text answers (some responses were given in French, German and Spanish), even though the questionnaire was available only in English, which indicates a wish to be clearly understood and heard. The responses in the survey indicate how, despite the practical and emotional difficulties, teaching staff showed commitment and dedication to their work and to their students. Furthermore, despite the sudden change in teaching practice and the uneven digital training offered to staff, the emergency measures seem to have worked and students have not been unduly hindered in their learning path. It is evident that, together with the desire to return to normality, there is also the desire to capitalise on the lessons learnt. Now that the 'emergency teaching' period is over, it is necessary to clarify further what exactly has been learnt, what there is still to learn, and how teachers can evaluate effectively and, as a consequence, choose effectively different methods of delivery in teaching for the benefit of their students. Last but not least, it is necessary to 'officialise' and emphasise the outstanding work that has been accomplished in LCs. In short, the survey has highlighted the importance of supporting LCs in the provision of

pedagogically sound and relevant language teaching, in promoting language learning activities in HE and in encouraging cooperation between LCs. It looks as if for CercleS the work has only just begun.[2]

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