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EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING OF FRENCH AND ITALIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract:
Although online teaching had already been an educational standard at higher education institutions throughout the globe even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, its history in Croatia was quite short. Its implementation depended on the educational policy of a concrete institution and the readiness of individual teachers to grapple with digital technology. The aim of this research, conducted in 2021 among Croatian university students, is to document and survey students' perceptions about the features of French and Italian teaching in the context of emergency remote teaching. The correlations between the evaluation of students' online teaching experience and their level of use of digital technology in foreign language learning, language proficiency level, digital competence and activity during the classes were examined. Also, the correlations between the features of online teaching and students' level of digital technology use in foreign language learning, their language proficiency level, digital competence, the duration of language learning and their grades were examined. The results obtained for the French and Italian subsamples were compared. The contribution of this research is manifested through its practical implications for the improvement of the quality of foreign languages online teaching.

Keywords: emergency remote teaching, French as a foreign language, Italian as a foreign language, higher education

1. Introduction

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities around the globe introduced remote teaching "overnight" to ensure the continuity of teaching. The quick transition from the "real" to the virtual classroom faced teachers and students with new possibilities and challenges, ranging from getting familiarized with new technologies and digital tools to adjusting the syllabus to remote teaching in a short time. The *"new educational normal"*

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caused the emergence of a new form of teaching called the "*emergency remote teaching (ERT)*". The term ERT gained prominence in the spring of 2020 due to academic interruptions at the global level caused by COVID-19, when the whole world was first faced with ERT, i.e., only distance teaching, for which most participants had not been prepared. The term was introduced in 2020 by Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust and Bond. It implies a teaching mode whereby the teaching that would otherwise be done in the traditional face-to-face or hybrid mode transitions to a fully online environment due to an emergency situation.

It should be mentioned that, in extraordinary circumstances, ERT has been practiced around the globe for decades (e.g., Gordon et al., 2010; Houston, 2016; Lorenzo, 2008). Such extraordinary circumstances have been the closure of schools during wars or political conflicts, e.g., in Afghanistan or South Africa (Nae, 2020, p. 19), natural disasters, epidemics and similar. All these have been the instances of ERT at a local, i.e., national level.

The specifics of ERT are the spatial and temporal distance between students and teachers during the education process. In different contexts, ERT can be implemented differently. Teaching can be delivered online, i.e., it can be based on digital technology, while materials can be delivered by regular mail to those students who have limited access to the internet or computers (Rusell, 2020). ERT is currently being implemented in Ukraine due to the ongoing war conflict. It can be assumed that this type of teaching, whose goal is to ensure the continuity of teaching in crisis circumstances until such circumstances cease to exist, will always be needed somewhere.

Emergency remote teaching is different from online learning which is carefully designed for the virtual environment. Hodges et al. (2020) stress the differences between ERT and regular online education, clarifying the distinct purposes, contexts, processes, and outcomes involved in the two types of teaching despite the perceived overlap. After the interruption of the traditional face-to-face teaching in the spring of 2020, ERT tried to create classroom setting via digital technology use, enabling students to learn via the computer, i.e., in an online format (Moser et al., 2021), in such a way that they log in at a certain time in the virtual classroom environment to follow the classes and participate in class activities. While emergency remote teaching (ERT) reflects the traditional face-to-face classroom teaching and students are required to attend it due to emergency circumstances, online learning is planned and prepared for the virtual environment, it is much more flexible and students get to choose their online courses freely. Except that, online courses, which are considered to be the main mode of education, are prepared long and carefully in advance, usually from six to up to nine months before they are delivered (Hodges et al., 2020). This preparation takes into account the specifics of the online environment, and it has the full support of the institution and the respective resources, including systematic design, trial, implementation and review by a team– academics, instructional designers, educational technologists and programmers (Mavridi, 2020b, p. 4).

The closure of universities highlighted the importance of having a good infrastructure and it opened up the question of the readiness for online teaching delivery.

The level of digitalization and broadband internet access is uneven among the European Union countries. Therefore, the turn to digital required efforts in certain countries to find ways how to organize teaching delivery. Education institutions were oriented to whatever available technologies existed: from online platforms, to applications, software, and digital content (Grek & Landri, 2021). In this context, Williamson et al. (2020) have pointed out the topic of data inequality and the fact that not all students have sufficient access to data infrastructure or the required data literacy level. It has been established that there are various ways in which young people access and use the internet and other new technologies as well that a significant minority has been fully excluded. Therefore, after the closure of schools because of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, education institutions and teachers tried to find ways and digital tools how to connect to their students. ERT has thus radically changed the spatial and temporal relations of teaching and learning.

With respect to the higher education in Croatia, each university adjusted to the sudden situation in 2020 in its own way. In the absence of clearly structured instructions for online teaching at the level of higher education, teachers coordinated among themselves and supported each other. As much as a challenge, the pandemic thus also became an opportunity for greater implementation of digital technology in education, and for accelerated development of distance learning.

2. Literature Review

According to Hodges et al. (2020), "*online learning carries a stigma of being lower quality than face-to-face learning, despite research showing otherwise*." Along with lower costs and increased time efficacy, online learning has brought many other advantages, among which student-centricity, self-paced learning, the availability of various sources for languages learning, and interaction via web platforms (Mohammadi et al., 2011). However, the conducted research (e.g., Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Hunt, 2015; Tratnik, Urh & Jereb, 2019; Butz et al., 2015; Miller, 2020) has also established that there are potential dangers of online teaching, such as poor teacher-student and student-student interaction, the feeling of isolation, demotivation and the fear of technology.

All of these features have also been inherited by the teaching in the ERT context, about which several studies have been conducted all around the globe in the past two years. They have analyzed the opportunities and challenges of ERT in the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic by examining the general consequences of the closure of schools, the mode of teaching delivery and the way of knowledge acquisition, taking into account both students' and teachers' perspectives (e.g., Dizon, 2021; Moser et al., 2021; Darwish, Ai Batsaki & Terro, 2021; Ferri et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Nae, 2020; Ananga, 2020; Huber & Helm, 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Mavridi 2020a, 2020b). Students and teachers faced numerous obstacles due to the existing limitations related to technological, pedagogical and social challenges (Ferri et al., 2020, p. 6). The technological challenges are connected with the unreliability of the internet connection and users' lack of necessary electronic devices. The pedagogical challenges are principally associated

with the teachers' and students' lack of digital skills and the necessity to additionally train them, the lack of structured content versus the abundance of online resources, students' lack of interactivity and motivation, and the lack of interaction and institutional support. The social challenges are mainly related to the lack of interaction between teachers and students as well as among students, the lack of physical spaces to receive lessons at home and the lack of support from parents who frequently worked remotely in the same spaces. (Ferri et al., 2020). These challenges relate to the noticed disadvantages of ERT during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study has documented this specific teaching situation from the perspective of students at higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia, more precisely students who had been learning the French and Italian languages during the pandemic and social distancing. In the continuation of this paper, emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 crisis will be abbreviated and referred to as the "online teaching".

3. Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study was to document and investigate students' perceptions about the features of the French and Italian language teaching in the context of ERT in Croatian higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research intended to provide answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: Is the students' experience with the French and Italian language teaching in the ERT context positive or negative?

RQ2: Is there a correlation between the evaluation of the online teaching experience and the level of digital technology use for foreign languages learning, language proficiency level, digital competence and activity in the classes?

RQ3: Is there a correlation between the features of online teaching and the level of digital technology use for foreign languages learning, language proficiency level, digital competence, the duration of language learning and the grades?

The above research questions also examined whether there are differences between the two subsamples, i.e., the subsample of the students learning the French language, and the subsample of students learning the Italian language.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

Participants in this study were students from philological and non-philological study programs of the University of Dubrovnik, University of Split, University of Zadar and the University of Zagreb who had been learning French 106 (51.5%), and Italian 100 (48.5%). Study participants were mostly female (85.4%). There was no statistically significant difference in the ratio of the female participants in the two subsamples (*hi2* = 0.050, $p > .05$). The average age of the participants was 22 years ($M = 21.83$, SD +/- 3.42). The subsamples showed no statistically important differences ($t = 1.080$, $p > .05$). Students

from various study programs participated in this research, however, the majority were students of humanities (53.4% vs. all other students 46.6%).

The participants self-assessed their language proficiency level in French, i.e., Italian language, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (A1–Elementary user; A2–Pre-intermediate user; B1–Intermediate user; B2–Upper-intermediate user; C1–Advanced user; C2–Proficient user). In the French language subsample, 36.8% of the participants were at level A1, 28.3% at level A2, 17.9% at level B1, 16% at level B2, 0.9% at level C1 and 0% at level C2. In the Italian language subsample, 31.1% of the participants were at level A1, 23.8% at level A2, 23.8% at level B1, 18.9% at level B2, 1.9% at level C1 and 0.5% at level C2. No statistically significant difference between the two subsamples was determined ($hi^2 = 10.48$, $p = .063$), although the materiality level approaches the 5% risk criterion.

The self-assessment of the students' digital competence, according to the European Commission's Digital Competence Framework (Carretero, Vuorikari & Punie, 2017), was similar in both subsamples, i.e., most students assessed their digital competence as level three ($hi2 = 1.941$, $p > .05$), which relates to advanced users who are able to filter digital content, align the use of appropriate collaboration tools and evaluate. In the French language subsample, 11.3% of the participants were at digital competence level one, 30.2% at level two, 47.2% at level three and 11.3% at level four. In the Italian language subsample, 11.0% of the participants were at digital competence level one, 34.0% at level two, 49.0% at level three and 6.0% at level four.

4.2. Data Collection & Instruments

This research, conducted in May in 2021, was anonymous and student participation was voluntary. The questionnaire was designed by the authors for the needs of this research that was conducted by using two versions of the questionnaire, i.e., the questionnaire for the students who had been learning the French language and the questionnaire for the students who had been learning the Italian language. Both versions of the questionnaire were essentially the same, they differed only regarding the name of the language. The questionnaire was compiled in Google Forms in the Croatian language and it was distributed electronically.

In the questionnaire, along with general data such as sex and age, language proficiency and digital competence, students stated precise information about the duration of their learning of the French/Italian language. The students also stated their final grades in the French/Italian language obtained in their higher education. By selecting one of the offered answers (Only online; Hybrid–partly in the classroom, partly online; In the classroom), they stated the precise mode of teaching of the French/Italian language at their higher education institution during the academic year 2020/2021. They also defined their way of participation in online teaching (Synchronous teaching–teaching via a videoconference link at the time scheduled for the classes; Synchronous teaching–communication by correspondence at the time scheduled for the classes (without an audio or video link), or Asynchronous teaching–communication by correspondence outside of the time scheduled for the classes). They stated the platforms

for online teaching and meetings that had been used in the French/Italian language teaching, and then they stated precisely for which activities certain platforms had been used. They answered the question of whether they had already attended online classes within a course/school subject even before the COVID-19 pandemic. These items were presented in the binary format (yes or no). They evaluated their activities during online teaching on a scale from 1–I'm not active at all, to 5–I'm extremely active. The students evaluated their online teaching experience by using the usual grading scale from 1–Fully negative experience, to 5–Fully positive experience. To examine the correlation between the features of online teaching and the digital technology use in the learning of French and Italian, the Digital Technology Use in Foreign Language Learning Scale (DTUFLLS) was used, which had been previously designed by the authors (Violić-Koprivec & Režić Tolj, 2022). The participants also answered two open-type questions: "What aspects have you perceived as the biggest advantage in the online teaching of the French/Italian language?" and "What aspects have you perceived as the biggest disadvantage in the online teaching of the French/Italian language?" Then, on a Likert scale from 1–It does not relate to me at all, to 5–It fully relates to me, they expressed their level of agreement with 18 items designed for the purposes of this study, which examined the students' perceptions about the features of online teaching of French and Italian language in the ERT context.

5. Results

5.1. Duration of Learning and Grades in French/Italian Language

The duration of foreign language learning was considerably different for the two subsamples, i.e., for the French and Italian language learners (t = -5.45, p < .001). The Italian language had been learned considerably longer than the French language (M = 5.98, SD +/- 3.91), i.e., an average of five years, while the French language had been learned for an average of three years (M = 3.34, SD +/- 2.93).

The participants stated the final grade obtained in their higher education (Figure 1). With regard to the grade in the respective foreign language, a statically significant difference was found between the groups learning French, i.e., Italian (hi^2 = 13.04, p < .05). By comparing both groups, it was evident that the Italian group showed a greater proportion of the participants graded "Very good" compared to the French group (32% vs. 23.6%) as well as a greater proportion of the participants graded "Excellent" (52% vs. 43.4%).

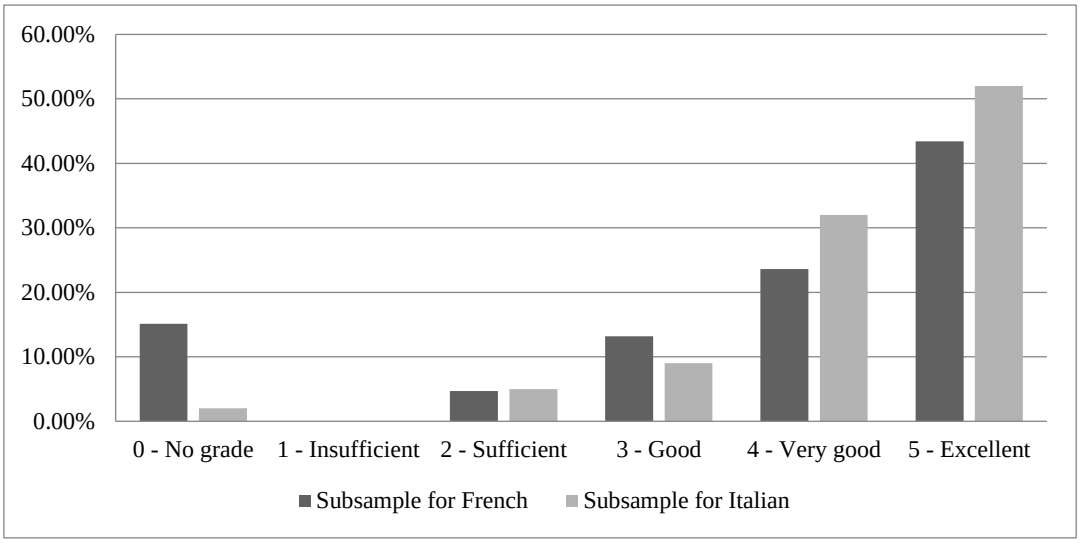

Figure 1: Final grade in the French/Italian language

5.2 Teaching Delivery and Platforms Used

According to the results of the conducted study, the teaching of the French and Italian language in the academic year 2020/2021 was delivered mostly online, while a small proportion of the participants had a hybrid mode of teaching–partly online, and partly in the classroom. None of the participants had only classroom face-to-face teaching. The subsamples did not differ in the way how teaching was delivered ($hi^2 = 0.61$, $p > .05$). Both subsamples had mostly fully online teaching delivery, and just a small proportion of the participants had hybrid teaching delivery (Table 1).

Table 1: Mode of teaching delivery and participation in online teaching–comparison of the subsamples

Mode	Category	Subsample for French (*N*=106)	Subsample for Italian (*N*=100)	Hi^2
Mode of teaching delivery	Only online	88.7%	85.0%	0.61
	Hybrid	11.3%	15.0%	
	In the classroom	0%	0%	
Mode of participation in online teaching	Synchronous teaching by videoconference	98.1%	97.0%	2.40
	Synchronous teaching by correspondence	0.0%	2.0%	
	Asynchronous teaching	1.9%	1.0%	

Note: #p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

A statistically significant difference between the subsamples in the mode of participation in online teaching was not found ($hi^2 = 2.40$, $p > .05$). The great majority of the participants from both subsamples participated in synchronous teaching via a videoconference link at the time of the scheduled classes. Only a minor proportion of the participants in the subsample for the Italian language had synchronous teaching by correspondence at the time of the scheduled classes, while a low proportion of asynchronous teaching was also recorded in both subsamples (Table 1).

The platform used most often to participate in online teaching was Zoom, followed by MS Teams, then by Merlin (Croatian university e-learning platform), and, to a somewhat lower degree, Google Classroom. Other platforms were used in the proportion of 11% or less. Several platforms were often used in combination e.g., Zoom and Merlin, Merlin and Tau, Merlin and MS Teams, Zoom and MS Teams and Merlin (Table 2).

Table 2: Platforms used and activities facilitated by platforms – comparison of the subsamples

Variable	Category	Subsample for French (*N*=106)	Subsample for Italian (*N*=100)	Hi^2
Platforms	Merlin	38.7%	26.0%	3.77*
	Google Classroom	11.3%	42.0%	25.04***
	MS Teams	39.6%	26.0%	4.32*
	Skype	0.9%	0.0%	0.95
	Zoom	43.4%	34.0%	1.91
	Google Meet	0.9%	22.0%	23.0***
	Jitsi	6.6%	0.0%	6.84**
	Tau	17.0%	0.0%	18.61***
	Omega	4.7%	0.0%	4.83*
Activities	Teaching material	94.3%	89.0%	1.94
	Homework	84.9%	83.0%	0.14
	Examination	67.0%	89.0%	14.38***
	Forum participation	15.1%	11.0%	0.76
	Teaching via videoconference	95.3%	93.0%	0.49

Note: #p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

With respect to the platforms used for the teaching delivery, a significant statistical difference between the subsamples was determined. In the subsample for the French language, the platforms Merlin, MS Teams, Jitsi, Tau and Omega were statistically significantly more used. In the subsample for the Italian language, the platform Google Classroom was more used. The mentioned platforms facilitate various activities. According to the study results, they were mostly used for teaching via videoconference, downloading teaching materials, submitting homework and for examination, and were significantly less used for forum participation (Table 2).

With respect to the use of the platforms for online learning, there was no statistically significant difference between the two subsamples in the number of students who used online learning platforms for participation in classes via videoconference, downloading teaching materials, submitting homework and forum participation (Table 2). Most participants used these platforms to download teaching materials, to do homework, i.e., to participate in the classes via videoconference, and a smaller proportion used them for forum participation. The only statistically significant difference between the two subsamples was determined with respect to examination: online examination was more frequent in the Italian than in the French subsample (Table 2).

One should point out that, before the pandemic, only a very small proportion of the participants –a mere 11.7%–had any experience with online teaching, i.e., 9.4% in the

French language subsample, and 14% in the Italian language subsample. The difference between the subsamples was not statistically significant ($hi^2 = 1.04$, $p > .05$).

5.3. Student Activity in Online Teaching of French and Italian

Students self-assessed their activity during the online teaching of the French and Italian language. The results of both subsamples (French language $M = 4.03$, SD+/- 0.77; Italian language $M = 3.87$, SD +/- 0.79) is in the higher theoretical range of the scale, which means that the participants self-assessed themselves as mostly active. A statistically significant difference between the subsamples was not found ($t = 1.46$, $p > .05$).

5.4. Evaluation of the Experience of Online Teaching of French and Italian

The evaluation of online teaching experience is slightly higher than the theoretical range of the scale for both subsamples. For the French language subsample, the average experience evaluation was $M = 3.09$, SD +/- 1.36, and for the Italian language subsample, it was $M = 4.05$, SD +/-0.83. By comparing the two subsamples, a statistically significant difference ($t = -6.13$, $p < .001$) was found in the evaluation of online teaching experience (satisfaction). Consequently, the students who had been learning Italian evaluated their online teaching experience statistically significantly more positively than the students who had been learning French.

In the subsample for the French language, the evaluation of the online teaching experience was not statistically significantly correlated with the language proficiency level, ($rho = -.04$, $p > .05$), digital competence level ($rho = .05$, $p > .05$), digital technology use ($r = .10$, $p > .05$), or students' activity during the classes ($r = .17$, $p > .05$).

In the subsample for the Italian language somewhat different results were obtained. The evaluation of the online teaching experience was not statistically significantly correlated with the language proficiency level ($rho = -.05$, $p > .05$) or digital competence level ($rho = .02$, $p > .05$). However, a statistically significant correlation between the evaluation of online teaching experience and digital technology use was found ($r = .39$, $p < .01$). Namely, the students who used digital technology in Italian learning more also showed a more positive experience with Italian online teaching. Also, in the Italian language subsample, a statistically significant correlation between the evaluation of the online teaching experience with the students' activity in online teaching was established ($r = .57$, $p < .01$). The students who were more active in online teaching also stated having a more positive experience with the Italian language online teaching.

5.5. Features of Online Teaching

Students' perceptions about the features of online teaching of French and Italian in the ERT context were surveyed by using a questionnaire containing 18 items and designed for the purposes of this study. The results are shown below (Table 3).

Table 3: Features of online teaching (N = 206)

Features of online teaching	M +/-SD	Actual range
1. I find online teaching of French/Italian interesting.	3.86 +/- 0.99	1.00 – 5.00
2. Technical difficulties (e.g., poor internet connection, inadequate IT equipment, etc.) distract me from following the classes/doing my assignments.	3.14 +/- 1.23	
3. I find following the classes via videoconference tiresome.	3.36 +/- 1.30	
4. I believe that the teacher gives interesting lectures.	4.47 +/- 0.80	
5. I have been successfully mastering the content of the course.	3.99 +/- 0.80	
6. I find doing my assignments demanding.	2.46 +/- 1.02	
7. Learning via online teaching is a pleasant experience for me.	3.40 +/- 1.18	
8. I'm satisfied with French/Italian online teaching.	4.02 +/- 0.98	
9. I don't find online classes boring.	3.39 +/- 1.16	
10. I find it easy to be active.	3.64 +/- 1.11	
11. I can have a high-quality communication with my teacher.	4.13 +/- 0.94	
12. I feel better in online teaching of French/Italian now than at the beginning of the academic year.	3.72 +/- 1.20	
13. I believe that the examination is objective.	4.00 +/- 0.98	
14. I like the atmosphere during French/Italian online teaching via videoconference.	3.91 +/- 1.02	
15. I find it difficult to maintain interaction with my colleagues.	2.79 +/- 1.35	
16. Physical distance from my colleagues and teachers makes me relaxed.	2.82 +/- 1.26	
17. I'm afraid of technical difficulties (e.g., interruption in the internet connection, etc.).	2.82 +/- 1.39	
18. I'm afraid that I won't know how to use digital technology.	1.75 +/- 1.00	

The highest agreement level was recorded for the following items, in the stated order: 4, 11, 8 and 13. All of these items can be put under a common denominator, which is the teacher. This shows that the teachers did a very good job in adjusting their courses to the ERT context. Quite a high level of agreement was recorded for another set of items, in the stated order: 5, 14, 1 and 12. It can be concluded that the participants probably became more relaxed in online teaching with the passing of time also because they found the classes to be interesting, liked the atmosphere or thought that they were successfully mastering the content of the course. Having in mind quite a low level of agreement with item 18, it is evident that the participants' level of fear of digital technology was low, however, they were simultaneously more worried about possible technical difficulties.

Parametric statistical analysis was used to compare the subsamples for the French and Italian language, and it was determined that the subsamples did not show a statistically significant difference in any of the items about the features of online teaching tested, except the perception of objectivity of examination (t = -2.67, p < .01). The participants from the Italian language subsample (M = 4.18, SD +/- 0.88) deemed examination to be more objective than the participants from the French language subsample (M = 3.82, SD +/- 1.04).

5.6. Correlation between the Features of Online Teaching and the Level of Digital Technology Use in Foreign Language Learning, Language Proficiency Level and Digital Competence in the Subsamples

The previous research that the authors conducted by means of the Digital Technology Use in Foreign Language Learning Scale (DTUFLLS) showed that students who had been learning French and Italian used digital technology equally ($t = 1.02$, $p > .05$). The resulting mean for the entire sample ($M = 3.94$), as well as for the subsamples for the French ($M = 3.99$) and Italian language ($M = 3.88$) was above the theoretical median of the scale, which indicated a higher level of digital technology use in the French and Italian language teaching. (Violić-Koprivec & Režić Tolj, 2022, p. 85).

The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was used to test the correlation of the variables in the subsamples. The analysis by the Digital Technology Use in Foreign Language Learning Scale (DTUFLLS) showed a statistically significant correlation for fourteen out of eighteen features of online teaching (Table 4). Both subsamples showed a correlation relating to the same seven items (1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 12 and 16). In the subsample for the French language, there was a statistically significant correlation with respect to eight items (except the already mentioned items, also for item 6). In the subsample for the Italian language, a statistically significant correlation was established with respect to thirteen items (except the already mentioned items, also for the following items: 2, 9, 10, 11, 14 and 15).

A higher level of digital technology use in the French and Italian language learning was consistently correlated in both subsamples with a higher interest in online teaching, more success in mastering the content of the course, a pleasant experience of online teaching, a higher satisfaction with online teaching, a progressively better feeling in online teaching as the academic year progressed, and less tiredness in following the classes via videoconference. Both subsamples showed a correlation between the higher level of digital technology use and the feeling of being relaxed because of the physical distance between the teachers and students. Consequently, the students who believe that physical distance makes them more relaxed tend to use digital technology more, however, this correlation is of a low level.

On the other hand, only the French subsample showed a negative correlation between DTUFLLS and the perception of the difficulty of the required assignments. In other words, in the French subsample, students who believed that the assignments they were required to do were demanding also used digital technology in learning less.

Only in the subsample for the Italian language, a correlation was found between DTUFLLS and the lack of boredom in online teaching, the ease of maintaining activity in the classes, students' belief that they can have high-quality communication with their teacher, and a higher evaluation of the atmosphere during the Italian language teaching by videoconference. Also, only the subsample for the Italian language showed a negative correlation between DTUFLLS and the difficulty in maintaining interactions with colleagues, which means that students who had difficulties in maintaining interaction with their colleagues also used digital technology in learning less. There was no correlation between digital technology use in online learning and the quality of the

teacher's lectures, the objectivity of examination, the fear of technical difficulties in online learning, or the students' fear that they will not know how to use digital technology.

Table 4: Correlation between the features of online teaching and the Digital Technology Use in Foreign Language Learning Scale (DTUFLLS), language proficiency level and digital competence for the subsamples

Features of online teaching	Subsample for French (*N* = 106)			Subsample for Italian (*N* = 100)		
	DTUFLLS	Language proficiency	Digital competence	DTUFLLS	Language proficiency	Digital competence
	r	r	r	r	r	r
1.	.38**	-.317**	.105	.44**	-.058	.059
2.	-.14	.101	-.087	-.23*	-.020	-.115
3.	-.36**	.233*	.091	-.27**	.064	.111
4.	.02	-.273**	.068	.14	-.251*	-.026
5.	.25**	-.110	.084	.25*	.056	.130
6.	-.23*	.156	.037	-.18	.102	-.007
7.	.45**	-.147	-.135	.44**	0.33	-.049
8.	.29**	-.281**	-.055	.38**	-.030	.013
9.	.19	-.267**	-.036	.23*	-.134	-.108
10.	.04	-.061	.072	.27**	.057	-.006
11.	.04	-.015	.120	.25*	-.053	-.027
12.	.30**	-.147	-.074	.36**	.014	-.046
13.	.12	-.277**	-.042	.09	-.142	.119
14.	.14	-.146	-.057	.24*	-.094	.043
15.	.02	-.162	.084	-.26**	-.100	-.150
16.	.24*	-.218*	-.124	.21*	.021	-.042
17.	.01	.219*	-.101	-.05	.075	-.059
18.	-.04	.294**	-.456**	-.08	-.013	-.081

Note: **p <. 01, *p <. 05

The correlation between the students' perceptions about the features of online teaching and their self-assessment of the language proficiency level and digital competence was tested (Table 4). The analysis of the correlation between the features of online teaching and the language proficiency level in both subsamples showed a negative correlation of the language proficiency level with item 4 (subsample for the French language $r = -.27$, $p < .01$; subsample for the Italian language $r = -.25$, $p < .05$). This indicates that the higher a student's language proficiency level was, the lower value such student tended to assign to the quality of online lectures given by the teacher. Except for this correlation, the subsample for the Italian language did not show any statistically significant correlation with any other variables of online teaching that were examined. In the subsample for the French language, except with the already mentioned item 4, a correlation with several other items was also obtained. A statistically negative correlation was established for items 1, 8, 9, 13 and 16, which means that students with a higher language proficiency level found online teaching less interesting, they were less satisfied with online teaching and were bored during classes, they less believed that examination was objective, and physical distance did not make them relaxed. A statistically significant positive

correlation was found for items 3, 17 and 18, which means that the students with a higher language proficiency level found it more tiresome to follow classes via videoconference, and that they had a greater fear of digital technology use.

The analysis of the correlations between the features of online teaching and digital competence showed only one statistically significant correlation in the subsample for the French language, and this related to the correlation between digital competence and the student's fear about not knowing how to use digital technology. The correlation obtained is negative, meaning that the students with lower digital competence levels had a greater fear that they would not know how to use digital technology (Table 4).

5.7. Correlation between the Features of Online Teaching, the Duration of Language Learning and Grades

The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to determine the correlation between the features of online teaching, the duration of language learning and the grades. The duration of language learning was statistically significantly correlated with a small number of items (only 3). In the subsample for the French language, a statistically significant negative correlation with item 7 (r = -.22, p < .05) and item 13 (r = -.23, p < .05) was found. Consequently, students who had been learning French longer tended to less evaluate that French online teaching was a pleasant experience, and they tended less to believe that examination was objective. The subsample for the Italian language, however, showed a positive correlation only with item 5 (r = .20, p < .05). It can thus be concluded that, with the duration of learning of the Italian language, the students' perception that they were successfully mastering the content of the course increased.

With respect to the correlation between the features of online teaching and the grades, both subsamples showed a positive correlation with respect to item 5 (for the French subsample r = .28, p < .01, and for the Italian subsample r = .37, p < .01). It can thus be concluded that the students who had better grades had the perception that they were more successful in mastering the content of the course. Only in the French subsample, a positive correlation between the grades and item 1 was found (r = .23, p < .05). Consequently, the students with higher grades showed a greater tendency to find the French classes interesting. Except that, the French subsample showed a negative correlation between the grades and item 2 (r = -.24, p < .05), i.e., students with higher grades felt less distracted in following the classes in the case of technical difficulties. Only in the Italian subsample, a negative correlation between the grades and item 6 was found (r = -.24, p < .05), i.e., students with higher grades in Italian tended to think that doing assignments was not so demanding.

5.8. Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Teaching

The answers provided by the participants to two open-type questions, i.e., "Please state the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching." from the general part of the questionnaire provided help to better understand and interpret their experience. A categorization of the answers was made, and they were put into three categories, i.e., categories relating to technical prerequisites, psychosocial challenges and pedagogical

challenges. The technical prerequisites were as a category mentioned both as an advantage as well as a disadvantage. It is therefore to be concluded that they very much impact how online teaching is perceived. Except for inadequate computer equipment and issues with the space where the classes were followed, the most common remark regarding the technical prerequisites was an unstable or bad internet connection causing difficulties in following the French and Italian classes, especially when it came to understanding and acquiring the correct pronunciation (e.g., *"The biggest problem is that, because of a bad internet connection or bad electronic devices, communication often becomes difficult, and a lot of things may be misheard or misunderstood, which is a problem in learning a foreign language."*). The online teaching experience of the students who had good technical preconditions (a good computer, a good internet connection) was very positive, so that they mentioned the following advantage relating to listening skills: *"The teacher can very well hear us pronouncing the words and can correct us, which would be impossible in a big lecture hall with many students present. Students can also hear the teacher better. We are able to repeat aloud after her because our microphones are turned off and we are not distracting anybody, which would be impossible in the lecture hall."* As an advantage of online teaching, students also stated the comfort of working from home, the time and finance saving, especially for those who were studying outside of their place of permanent residence.

As the advantage of online teaching some students also highlighted that they were relaxed in online teaching, and some pointed it out as a disadvantage. This probably depended on their work habits, learning strategies acquired, responsibility, and on other individual factors. Consequently, some stated: *"Online teaching is calmer than the traditional face-to-face classroom teaching so that it is sometimes easier to concentrate (e.g., it happens less that people interrupt other people while speaking, there is less casual chatter)"*, *"Maybe we feel more relaxed when we're at home and we can express ourselves more freely."* Others saw precisely that as a disadvantage because they lacked self-discipline. As a disadvantage, the participants often mentioned the lack of or a quick loss of concentration, as well as a lack of social aspect. These aspects can be categorized into the psychosocial challenges group (Tannert, S., Gröschner, A., 2021). The participants referred to an increase in their workload in terms of receiving more homework and seminar assignments, poor interaction during the classes and insufficient attention to practicing language speaking skills. They also referred to a quicker and easier availability of materials and information, digital content, new applications and modes of learning, flexibility and simplicity, lower fear, feeling more relaxed and technical benefits. Some students also noted the following benefits: *"Being able to do more independent work and research, to study even beyond the curriculum and syllabus."*, *"It is easier for me to read and speak French when there is no social contact with my peers (because my French is poor, and I'm unsure about my pronunciation)."* These statements can be categorized into the pedagogical challenges group. One should mention that some students commented that they did not see any differences between classroom face-to-face teaching and emergency remote teaching: *"The advantage is that, during lectures, I personally feel as if I were in the classroom. And this is perfect for me, because I enjoy the lectures equally as when I'm in the classroom."*

6. Discussion

This research documents that the French and Italian language teaching at four Croatian universities was delivered mostly online (86.9%) during the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Quite a small proportion (11.7%) of the participants had the chance to be included in online teaching even before the pandemic, so this was a new experience for the vast majority of them. The use of a lot of online platforms, applications and tools for teaching delivery can be noticed, which means that the institutions and teachers managed by themselves, and that they chose such solutions that best suited them.

The first research question of this study has been answered by the results that show that the students have evaluated their experience with French and Italian teaching in the ERT context mainly positively. The subsamples show an equal perception of online teaching. Students expressed the biggest level of agreement with the items related to the teachers and their work. The importance of the role of the teacher in the ERT context is evident. This importance has been also pointed out by Ushida (2005, p. 68), who, in her research of the attitudes of students in French and Spanish online courses, determined that the biggest source of satisfaction with online teaching was the teacher. She concluded (referring to the results of Wudthayagorn from 2000) that, if students liked the teacher, they enjoyed the classes, they were satisfied with their foreign language learning experience, and had a positive attitude toward the study of the target language, regardless of the instructional format. In both subsamples, the participants self-assessed themselves as mostly active during online classes. It has also been determined that the participants gradually became more relaxed in online classes. Online teaching was a new experience for most students, and with time they gained experience and routine, which impacted them positively. This is in line with the results of the already mentioned Ushida's research (2005, p. 65) about the French and Spanish online courses, which determined that students' attitudes toward online teaching became more and more positive over time.

The answer to the second research question has been provided by the finding that, in both subsamples, the evaluation of the online teaching experience is not correlated with the language proficiency level or with the digital competence level. With respect to the correlation between the evaluation of the online teaching experience, the digital technology use and the students' activity during the classes, different results have been obtained for the two subsamples. In the French language subsample, the evaluation did not depend either on the digital technology use, or on the students' activity during classes. However, in the Italian language subsample, the evaluation of the online teaching experience depended on the digital technology use as well as on the students' activity during the classes, meaning that the students who used digital technology in learning Italian more, as well as those students who were more active during the online classes, evaluated their online teaching experience more positively. It is very important to develop a feeling of satisfaction with online teaching in students. This can be done by preparing such content that is relevant to online learning and by designing such activities that will enhance student engagement (Azizah & Ustufiarrizqi, 2021). The students who

had been learning the Italian language were more satisfied with online teaching than the students who had been learning the French language. This is evident by taking into account two pieces of data obtained, i.e., the data on the duration of foreign language learning and the data on the final grade. Students learn the Italian language longer than the French language. The students who had been learning the Italian language longer had a growing perception that they were successfully mastering the content of the course. Exactly the opposite has been determined for the French subsample: the students who had been learning the French language longer had a growing perception that online teaching was a less pleasant experience. The second piece of data, i.e., the data about the final grades, shows that the final grades in Italian were higher than the grades in French. This means that the students who had been learning the Italian language achieved better results, and such better results can be interpreted as being a consequence of their greater satisfaction with the teaching process. The participants showed a low level of fear of digital technology. However, at the same time they were more worried about possible technical difficulties, which, according to the participants' answers, were quite common, having in mind that not all students disposed with an adequate technical support in terms of computer equipment, nor is the broadband internet access equally available in all parts of Croatia.

To answer to the third research question, additional analyses were carried out, and it was determined that the level of digital technology use in foreign language learning considerably impacts the students' opinion about online teaching. It has been determined for both subsamples that students who used digital technology in the French and Italian language learning more had a more positive perception about the features of online teaching. Individual subsamples show a series of correlations, which indicates that it is important to encourage students to use digital technology in foreign languages learning, because a higher level of digital technology use positively impacts the students' perception of the features of online teaching. For the Italian language subsample, the analysis of the correlation between the perceptions about the features of online teaching and the language proficiency level has demonstrated it not to be of importance. Namely, a statistically important correlation has been determined for one item only, which indicated that the students with a higher language proficiency level evaluated online teaching by their teachers as not being of such high quality. The same has been determined for the French subsample. However, in the French subsample, a series of statistically significant correlations (9/18) has been determined, which indicates that the perception of the quality of the French language online teaching was considerably impacted by the language proficiency level of the respective students. Namely, students with a higher language proficiency level were more critical of online teaching and less satisfied with it. It is to be assumed that the students with a higher language proficiency level were those who had been learning the French language longer. They, as it has been stated, deemed online teaching to be a less pleasant experience. However, the question remains whether the same results would be obtained for the traditional face-to-face classroom teaching, as well as whether such students are less satisfied because of their higher language proficiency level, or whether it is because they are used to the traditional

face-to-face and/or hybrid teaching. The analysis of the correlation between the perceptions about the features of online teaching and the digital competence level has shown a correlation only for one item, and only in the subsample for the French language (indicating that the students with a lower digital competence level had a greater fear that they would not know how to use digital technology). Therefore, it can be concluded that, for an easier navigation and a positive perception of online teaching, it is insufficient to just have a high general digital competence, which the participants stated in their self-assessments. It is also necessary to have specific knowledge of how to use digital technology in foreign language learning.

7. Conclusion

As Hodges et. al. (2020) have already pointed out, the ERT context of teaching is a "*temporary solution to an immediate problem*". The implementation of ERT in the French and Italian language teaching in Croatian higher education has proved to be a good solution in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. However, it has also been an experience full of challenges for both language teachers and students. It is, therefore, necessary to document and analyze this unique and so far, globally unrecorded situation in the history of higher education. By analyzing and reflecting on the experiences and challenges that all the ERT participants have faced, we should also review and redefine foreign languages teaching methods in the online environment for generation Z students. The experiences of the ERT should be implemented in online pedagogy.

Lessons learned should prepare us to be ready to answer similar challenges in the future (Ferri et al., 2020). Since ERT is a relatively new concept and a new field of research in glottodidactics, the intention of this paper is to make a contribution by covering only a part of the possible topics. The aim is to gain a better insight into this both an important and interesting topic by using the knowledge acquired about the positive features of ERT and by avoiding such features of online teaching that do not contribute to its quality. The limitations of this study relate to a relatively small number of participants per subsample and only two foreign languages included in the research. To gain a better insight into this topic, the same research should be done on a larger sample and/or including students learning other foreign languages.

Conflict of interest statement
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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