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## **Teaching English for Legal Purposes (ELP) in the Era of the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Students' Perspectives**

**Abstract:** The emergence of coronavirus in early 2020 and its rapid spread led to the pandemic that has affected almost all aspects of our lives, including education, law<sup>1</sup> and the economy. After the first downtime and the initial shock it became clear that it was extremely important that learning continued; therefore, when schools and universities were closed and lockdowns introduced, online teaching became a priority. For the vast majority of teachers and students, however, it posed an enormous challenge as the situation required leaving their comfort zones, adapting to new conditions and / or acquiring new skills. Some of them were also forced to confront their prejudices towards this mode of instruction. This paper endeavours to provide some insights into the teaching English for Legal Purposes online in the times of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the course of Legal English carried out for Slovak judges, prosecutors and court staff in 2020 and 2021 provides a specific case background for the research. The study aimed to investigate how the course participants perceive learning Legal English online. The research particularly addresses the questions what their approach towards this mode of instruction was before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, what they like and dislike about online language learning, whether they find learning Legal English online more difficult than studying in a real classroom as well as whether online classes can be as effective and enjoyable as traditional ones. The study assumed both a quantitative and qualitative methodology encompassing a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The findings of the research show that an overwhelming majority of the respondents favourably evaluated the course and would definitely participate again in a similar format or recommend it to other learners.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, English for Legal Purposes, mode of instruction, online teaching

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1 M. Bulla, Legal Regulation of Remote Work in Slovakia and the Covid-19 Pandemic, "Eastern European Journal of Transnational Relations" 2021, vol. 5(2), pp. 7–22; H. Lorenz, E. Turhan, The Pandemic and Criminal Law – A Look at Theory and Practice in Germany, "Białystok Legal Studies" 2021, vol. 26(6), pp. 9–26.

## Introduction

The ability to communicate effectively with others in the legal profession is incredibly important, especially when working in a global setting. Therefore, there is the continuous need to provide effective, motivating and attractive instruction of English for Legal Purposes (ELP) and consequently to equip legal professionals with such linguistic competences, knowledge and skills that are most valuable for their work. The ELP instructor's task is not easy for various reasons<sup>2</sup>. One of the most compelling seems to be the language that needs to be taught/learned itself. The teachers have to teach the language, which is deeply affected by history<sup>3</sup>, ethics, philosophy, religion and the culture of a particular nation, so quite frequently they have to, as numerous scholars remark, understand legal culture<sup>4</sup>.

Long before the coronavirus pandemic, language teachers attempted to introduce technology into the process of instruction as a natural consequence of the fact that technological devices are present in almost every aspect of their students' daily lives. The research that investigates language learning with technology in and beyond the classroom is extensive<sup>5</sup>, encompassing computer-assisted language learning,

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blended learning, mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) and the online informal learning of English<sup>6</sup>. There is also considerable research to date that relates to using technology to instruct students of different specialisations, including English for Legal Purposes<sup>7</sup>. It needs to be highlighted here that despite the unquestionable role of modern technology and its benefits in language learning and the positive approach of language instructors, ESP teachers had as Li (2018:7) remarked “demonstrated slow adoption in using new technologies for various reasons, including lack of awareness and deficient computer literacy and ICT pedagogy”<sup>8</sup>. The students, as some research shows, doubted whether online or even blended-learning classes could be as effective as face-to-face ones<sup>9</sup>.

Due to the complexity of teaching/learning languages (or languages for specific purposes) online as well as due to the constraints imposed by the length of the paper, the author limits her efforts to giving readers a glimpse of the growing body of research<sup>10</sup> in the area of teaching/learning languages online under special conditions,

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6 *Ibidem*

7 E. Arnó-Macià, The role of technology in teaching languages for specific purposes courses, “Modern Language Journal” 2012, vol. 9, pp. 89–104; R. Muñoz-Luna, L. Taillefer, Integrating Information and Communication Technologies in English for Specific Purposes, Cham 2018; J. Rusanganwa, Multimedia as a means to enhance teaching technical vocabulary to physics undergraduates in Rwanda, “English for Specific Purposes” 2013, vol. 32, pp. 36–44.

8 L. Li, Integrating Technology in ESP: Pedagogical Principles and Practice, (in:) R. Munoz-Luna, L. Taillefer, (eds.), Integrating Information and Communication Technologies in English for Specific Purposes 2018, pp. 7–25.

9 H. Sierocka, The pains and gains of using blended learning in ESP classroom – finding a balance between the efficiency and the inevitability, “English for Specific Purposes World” 2020, vol. 60(22), [http://esp-world.info/Articles\\_60/PAINS\\_AND\\_GAINS.pdf](http://esp-world.info/Articles_60/PAINS_AND_GAINS.pdf).

10 G.D. Erlam, N. Garrett, N. Gasteiger, K. Lau, K. Hoare, S. Agarwal, A. Haxell, What really matters: experiences of emergency remote teaching in university teaching and learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic, “Frontiers” 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.639842>; A. Jansem, The feasibility of foreign language online instruction during the Covid-19 pandemic: A qualita-

like in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic. With the rapid spread of this “unpredictable” virus, it became clear that some views and prejudices needed to be challenged or at least modified. Thus, after the first shock, it became obvious how crucial it was for learning to continue, so when schools and universities were shut down and lockdowns were implemented, online instruction became a top focus.

It is noteworthy that an abundance of research tackles the issue of students’ perceptions, reflections or emotions towards this method of instruction, which due to these extraordinary circumstances became a forced mode of language learning/teaching. The analysis of the literature shows that most of the research presents negative emotions like boredom, stress, sadness, resignation or disappointment<sup>11</sup>. For example, the research conducted by Ibrahim et al. among 600 students from five private specialised educational institutions in Moscow (the Russian Federation) in 2021 revealed that during this forced language learning instruction the perception of online English learning as far as the three areas researched, i.e. the usefulness, comfort and acceptability of e-learning, decreased significantly in all the aspects<sup>12</sup>. Pawlak et al.<sup>13</sup>, on the other hand, studied which class mode (online versus physical classes) was more boring for teachers and learners. The research showed that the majority of teachers and students found online classes more boring than traditional ones. These are merely two examples of interesting research, but language learners’ emotions, perceptions and readiness for online language learning have unquestionably emerged as a popular topic within research on online learning/teaching today.

## 1. Purpose and Context of the Research

The main aim of the research was to examine the course participants’ perception of learning Legal English online in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic. The research mainly covered the following questions: How did they approach this mode of instruction prior to the coronavirus pandemic? What do they like and dislike about on-

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line language learning? Is it harder to learn Legal English online than in a traditional classroom? Can online courses be as effective and enjoyable as traditional ones?

The research was carried out in the years 2020–2021 among members of the Slovak judiciary and prosecutors who participated in the EU-funded project “Development of the system of specialized training of judges and judicial staff” (project code ITMS2014 +: 314021M248). The project aimed to provide training in Legal English to 222 members of the Judicial Academy of the Slovak Republic (JASR – Justičná Akadémia Slovenskej Republiky) in the form of 120-hour traditional face-to-face courses. After the resources were granted and the project was about to be implemented the pandemic started and lockdowns were introduced. The organisers, i.e. EUPC s.r.o (the EU project consultant) and JASR, were confronted with a serious dilemma under these unforeseen and difficult circumstances on how to proceed. There were two options to choose from: either to return the EU funds granted or implement the project by means of IT tools. It is important to point out that the sum of the EU funds was significant, and some efforts were made to obtain them, so the decision to return them would not be warmly welcomed by the stakeholders. On the other hand, it was difficult to predict how long the pandemic and lockdowns would last, so the launch and implementation of the project could not be postponed much as the EU funds were supposed to have been spent by 2021 at the latest. After many discussions and deliberations, the decision was taken to start and implement the project by means of distance learning tools, i.e. the Zoom software program developed by Zoom Video Communications. Interestingly enough, an overwhelming majority of those who enrolled in the project with the thought that they are going to learn Legal English in a traditional form took up the challenge and were eager to learn English for Legal Purposes online.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **2.1. Sample**

The sample for the whole study comprised 151 respondents (78 court clerks, 43 judges, 23 prosecutors, 2 trainee judges and 5 trainee prosecutors), which constitutes 68% of the total number of participating legal professionals (i.e. 222 people attended the course). The questionnaire was supported by semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 respondents from the sample group.

### **2.2. Research Instruments and Research Questions**

The research study assumed a qualitative and quantitative methodology including a questionnaire (Appendix A<sup>14</sup>) and semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) to

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14 Appendix A presents the translation of the original questionnaire, which was distributed by the course organisers in Slovak.

examine the main research problem, i.e. the perception of the legal professionals towards utilising online tools in their language education. The questionnaire, which used the Likert scale, was designed and conducted by the course organisers, i.e. JASR and EUPC, and distributed among all the course participants, whereas the interview was designed and conducted by the author of this paper. The interviewees were selected based on the practicality criterion as the organisers did not permit the author to contact all the participants. The author therefore conducted the interviews among the participants she was currently teaching. The statistical data were processed and visualised in Microsoft Excel 2017.

The main research question was as follows:

- *What is the course participants' perception of learning Legal English online in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic?*

The specific research questions included in the questionnaire and interview were as follows:

- *How do the participants evaluate the content focus of their language learning?*
- *How do the participants evaluate the language pace (intensity) of their language education?*
- *What were the respondents' attitudes towards online language learning before the pandemic?*
- *What do they like about online language learning?*
- *What don't they like about online language learning?*
- *Do they think that online learning can be as effective and enjoyable as face-to-face (F2F) classes?*
- *Do they think that online learning will replace F2F traditional teaching one day?*
- *What are their feelings/attitudes towards online learning overall?*
- *What mode of language learning will they choose when the pandemic is over?*
- *Do they think that learning Legal English might be more difficult online?*
- *Would they recommend language education in the distance form to their colleagues?*

The data essential to answering the research questions is both quantitative and qualitative in nature and were collected by means of the questionnaire (Appendix A) carried out among the JASR project participants. The questions included in the questionnaire were expanded and/or clarified during the interviews (Appendix B). The respondents' reflections were of a qualitative character. The data gathered were interpreted, and conclusions reached. Finally, further suggestions and recommendations were made.

### 3. Results of the Study

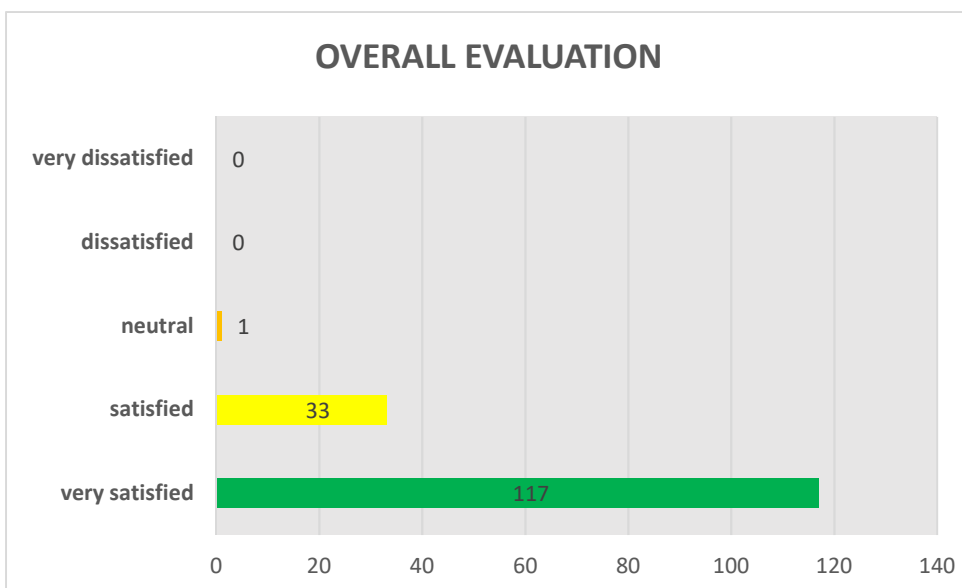
#### 3.1. The Questionnaire

The questionnaire (Appendix A), which was fairly general in character, was distributed by the organisers at the end of December 2020 after the groups had covered 60 teaching hours. The aim was mainly to check how the participants perceive this form of language education under these somewhat “forced” conditions.

##### *The overall evaluation of the course*

On the basis of the results obtained, it can be ascertained that the participants who replied to the questionnaire evaluated the Legal English course very positively. Of the total respondents, 117 (77%) were very satisfied with the course and 33 (22%) were satisfied (Fig. 1). Only one person (not even 1% of the research group) remained neutral. None of the respondents were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

Figure 1. The evaluation of the Legal English online course

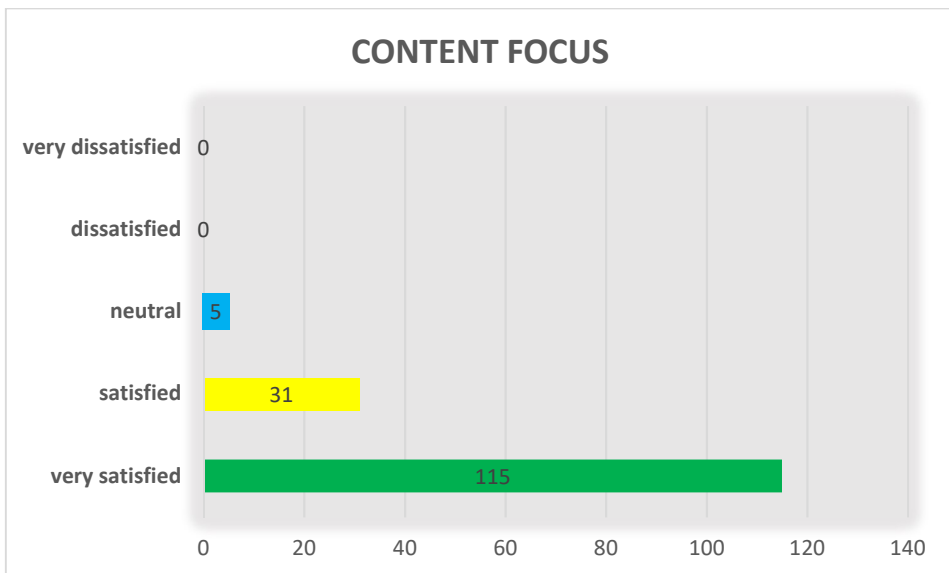


Source: the questionnaire distributed by the course organisers

### *The evaluation of the course content*

The respondents were also asked to evaluate the course content. As Fig.2 shows, an overwhelming majority of the participants who completed the questionnaire were either very satisfied (115) or satisfied (31) with the course content focus, which respectively constitutes 76% and 21% of the total number of those who completed the questionnaire. Only five respondents (i.e. 3% of the research group) took a neutral attitude, and interestingly enough there was no one among them who found the course content either unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory.

Figure 2. The evaluation of course content



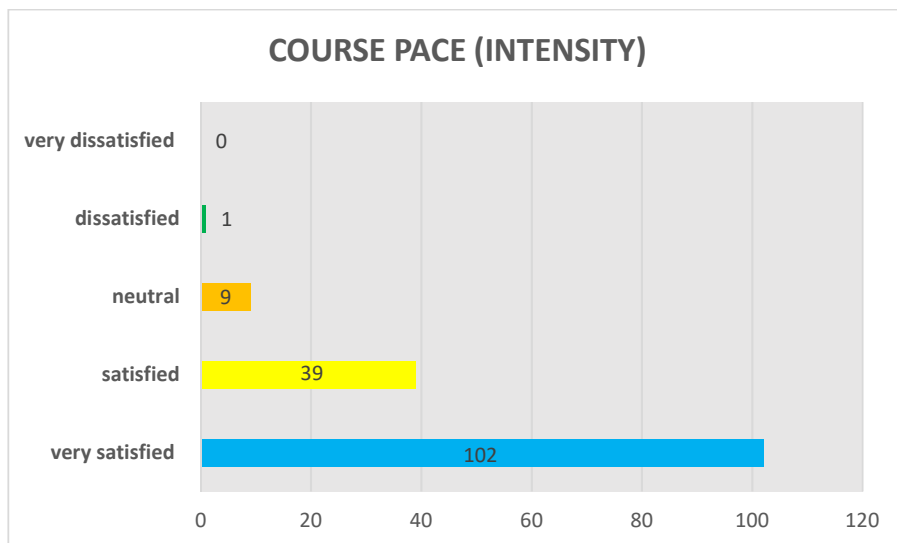
Source: the questionnaire distributed by the course organisers

### *The evaluation of course pace (intensity)*

As far as the course pace is concerned, the results presented below (Fig. 3) reveal that the course intensity was adequate. Some 102 of the respondents (67%) were very satisfied and 39 of them were satisfied (28%) with the course pace. Nine people (6%) could not say if it was satisfactory or not, and only one person (not even 1% of the research group) did not like the intensity of the course.



Figure 3. The evaluation of the course pace (intensity)

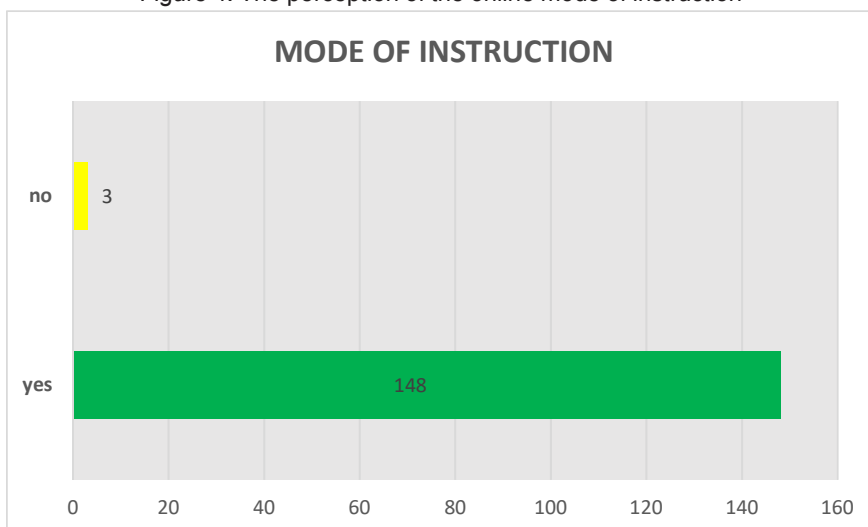


Source: the questionnaire distributed by the course organisers

#### *The evaluation of the online mode of instruction*

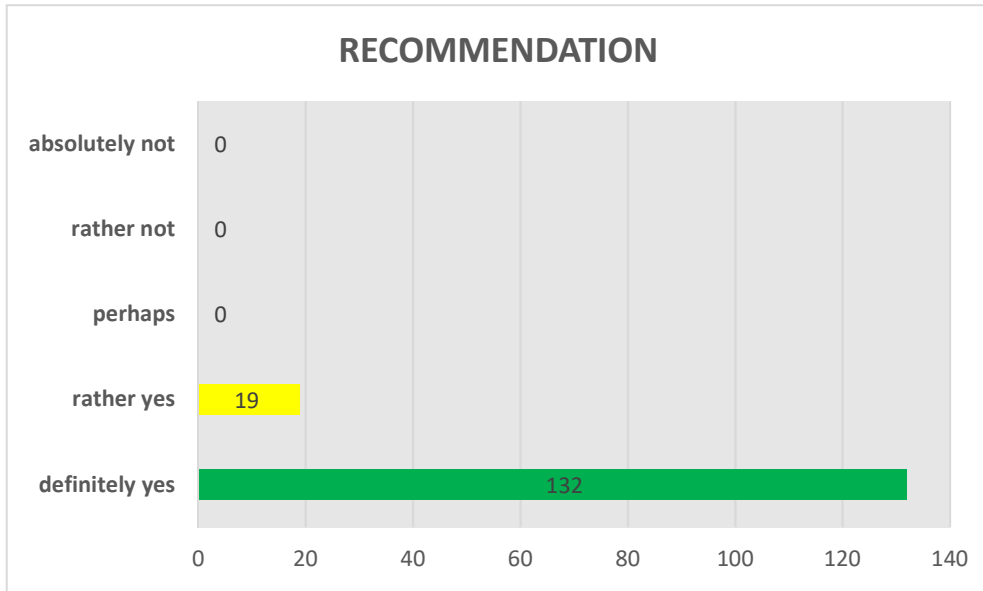
Another issue the course participants were asked about in the questionnaire was their perception of online tools in their language education and their willingness to recommend this mode of instruction to other learners of Legal English.

Figure 4. The perception of the online mode of instruction



Source: the questionnaire distributed by the course organisers

Figure 5. Recommendation of the online mode of instruction to peers



Source: the questionnaire distributed by the course organisers

As far as the perception of the online mode of instruction is concerned (Fig. 4), a massive majority of the respondents, i.e. 148 of them (98%), perceived this form of language education positively. Only three people (i.e. 2%) claimed the opposite. Also, as Fig. 5 depicts, all of the participants who completed the questionnaire would recommend distance learning to their colleagues. It is worth pointing out here that an overwhelming majority was completely convinced about that – 132 of the respondents, i.e. 87%, would definitely recommend this mode of instruction.

### 3.2. The Interviews

As the questionnaire was quite general, to gain a deeper insight as to how the research group perceive their language education in that form of instruction and under these specific conditions, 20 respondents out of the research group were interviewed. They were asked what they liked and did not like about the course, what they thought of this mode of instruction before and after the course, whether, as far as learning English for Legal Purposes is concerned, studying Legal English is more difficult online, and finally whether they were going to continue learning English for Legal Purposes via online tools.

#### *The attitude towards online language learning before the pandemic*

The results of the interview revealed that most of the interviewees (15 people, i.e. 75%) were sceptical and pessimistic about this mode of instruction before the course

started. They said that they could not imagine this would work and some also added that they were quite pessimistic about it or were even worried if they could learn anything. Six interviewees commented that they preferred face-to-face, i.e. traditional, classes. Only two people (10%) said that they had some experience with online training courses, and they had enjoyed them.

#### *Advantages and disadvantages of online language learning*

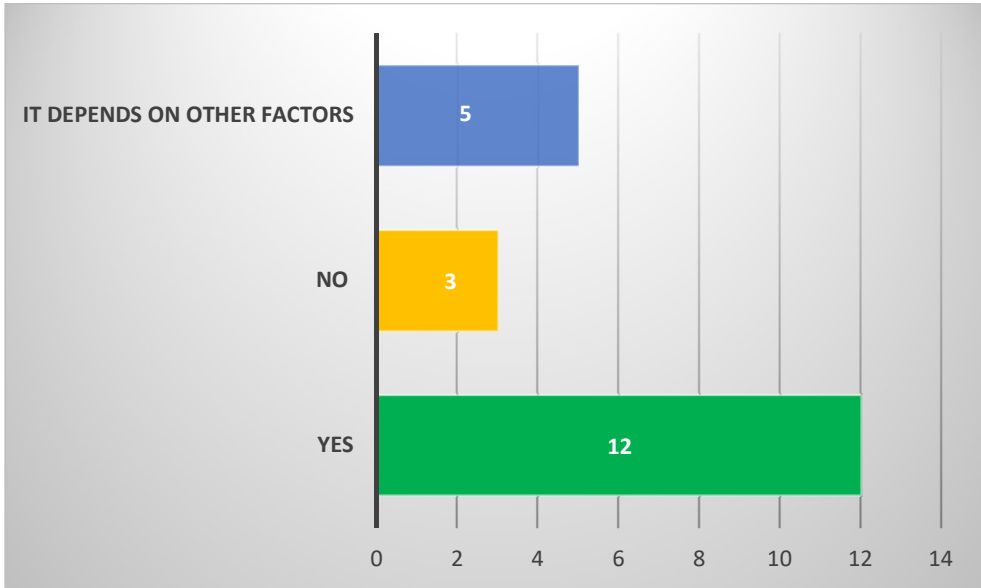
All of the interviewees valued the convenience of this form of instruction in terms of time management. They remarked that as they don't have to travel anywhere, and they can connect from anywhere, they can use their time more effectively. One person also added that because of online tools they can meet more people of their profession in Slovakia, which is an added value of the project apart from language learning.

As far as disadvantages are concerned, a majority of the interviewees (12 people, i.e. 60%) missed "human contact" and socialising. They would have loved to meet their peers in person, not see "only their faces". They also commented that no matter how advanced technology is, it cannot replace real face-to-face contact. Another aspect the interviewees complained a lot about concerned technical issues such as the quality of sound or the internet connection as well as technical limitations when someone was connected by a mobile phone (reading the whiteboard or sharing the screen). Some remarked that due to the technical issues online classes are slower than the traditional ones, which makes people more tired. Interestingly enough, there were two respondents who claimed that they cannot see any disadvantages, and some activities are even more fun and more effective than during face-to-face classes; therefore, they benefit more from online classes than traditional ones.

#### *Online vs. traditional classes*

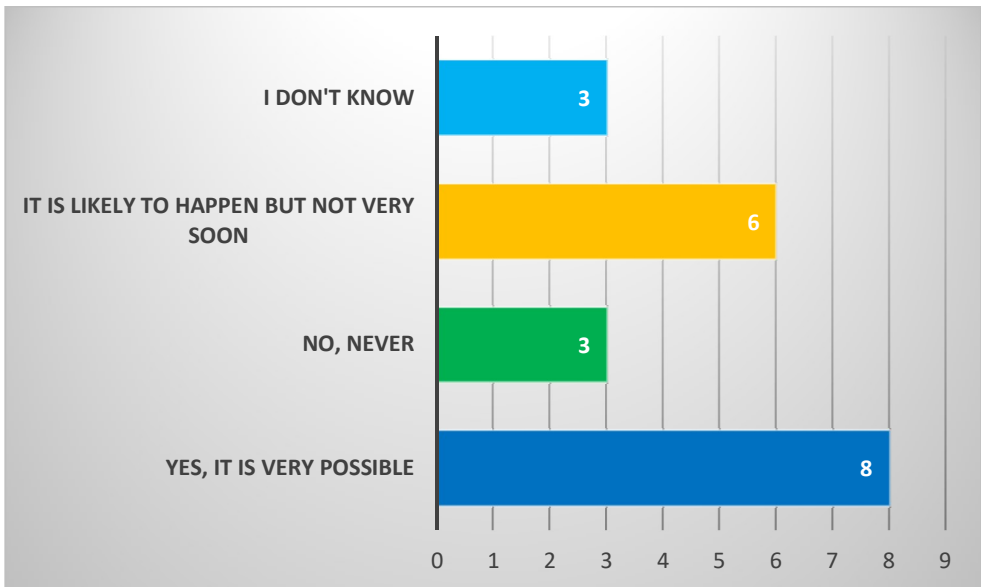
When asked if online learning is more effective and enjoyable than F2F classes, a majority of the interviewees (12 people (60%)) remarked that they found such classes more effective and enjoyable, three people disagreed, whereas five of them (25%) claimed that it depends not on the mode of instruction but on other factors such as the teacher, the materials, the classmates or the time of the day, etc. (Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Online vs. traditional classes (in terms of effectiveness and enjoyment)



Source: the author's own research

Figure 7. Online vs. traditional classes (in terms of the future of language education)

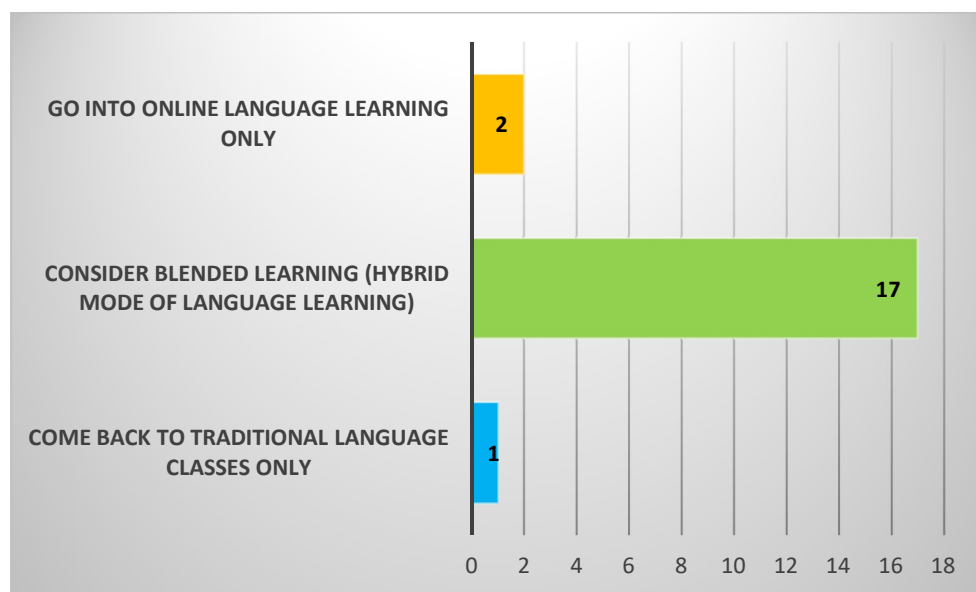


Source: the author's own research

As far as the future of online instruction is concerned, the results reveal (*Fig. 7*) that the interviewees are not uniform in their opinions. When asked whether online learning is going to replace the traditional mode of instruction, a majority of the interviewees stated that this is going to happen (14 people, i.e. 70%), although six of them claimed that this is not going to happen very soon. Three participants (15%) doubted that it will ever happen, and the other three did not know if it is going to happen.

When asked how they are going to continue their language education when the pandemic is over, the vast majority of them, i.e. 17 (85%), stated that they would opt for a hybrid mode of instruction, combining both face-to-face and distance learning methods. As *Fig. 8* illustrates, only two of the interviewees (10%) considered using only online language learning, and one participant (5%) would return to the traditional mode of instruction.

Figure 8. Online vs. traditional classes (in terms of continuing language education)

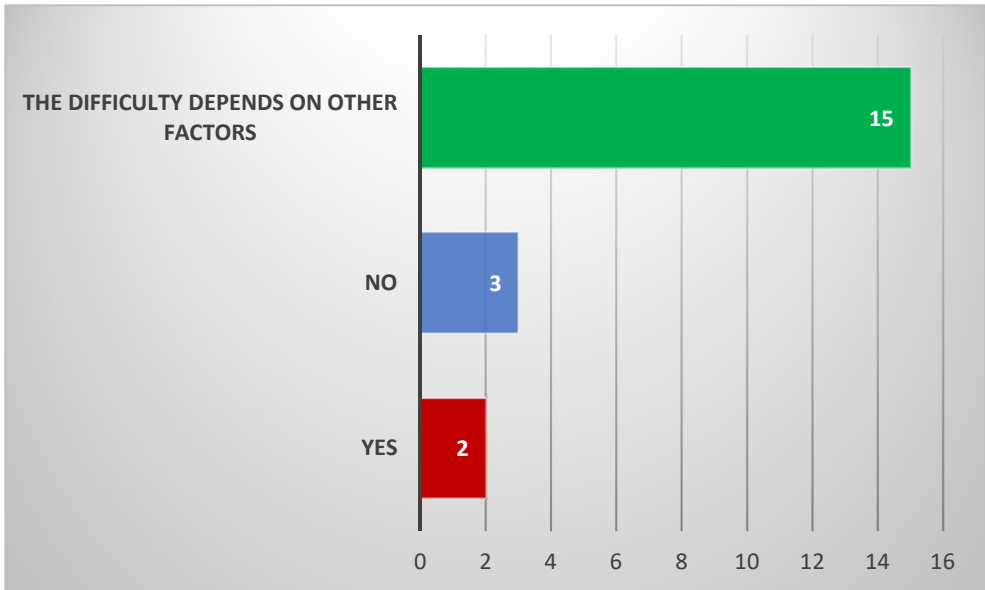


Source: the author's own research

The respondents were also asked whether learning English for Legal Purposes was more difficult online. The results obtained under this section of the study (*Fig. 9*) clearly indicate that the difficulty of learning English for Legal Purposes does not depend on the mode of instruction. Fifteen out of 20 interviewees (i.e. 75%) claimed that the difficulty depends on other factors such as the complexity of the topic and vocabulary, the materials or different systems of law. Only three people (i.e. 15%)

stated that it is not more difficult, whereas the remaining two (10%) believed the opposite.

Figure 9. Online vs. traditional classes (in terms of learning English for Legal Purposes)

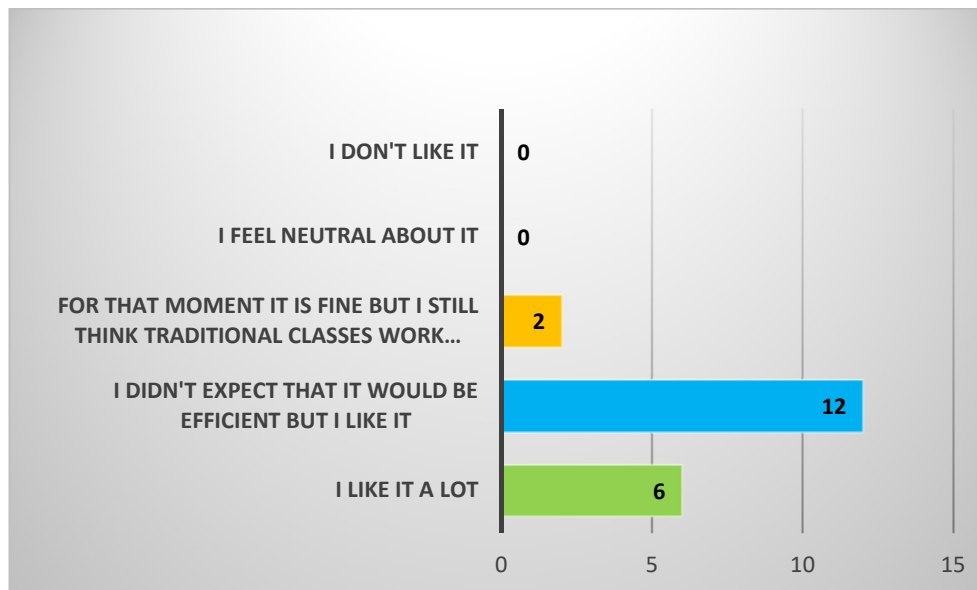


Source: the author's own research

#### *The attitude to online language learning after the course*

On the basis of the results obtained, it can be ascertained that an overwhelming majority of the interviewees liked the online course (Fig. 10). Six (i.e. 30%) of the respondents stated that they like it, and 12 of the 20 interviewees admitted that they did not expect that this mode of instruction would be efficient, but it was, and they liked it. Only two people expressed the opinion that under the special circumstances distance learning is fine but still thought that traditional classes would work better for them.

Figure 10. The attitude to online language learning after the course



Source: the author's own research

#### 4. Discussion

The first research aspect examined related to the evaluation of the online course of English for Legal Purposes. The results have shown a high degree of satisfaction among the course participants here. It was expressed both in the questionnaire completed by 151 respondents and supplemented by semi-structured interviews among 20 of them. They evaluated the course very positively, both in terms of course content and its intensity. Only one participant did not like the course intensity; the others were either satisfied or very satisfied. The course was indeed quite intensive as classes were held twice a week and lasted 90 minutes each, so for some learners who had never attended online classes, it might have been fairly demanding in terms of attention span. One commented: *I think when you have a 90-minute online meeting it is not that bad but I cannot imagine having an online summer school for example. Or for me even one-day seminars managed by Zoom are not as good as face-to-face seminars.* The results of the research (with a rather enthusiastic approach of the participants) are interesting, especially in the context of other studies conducted on forced, remote language learning where negative emotions like boredom, disappointment, sadness and resignation dominate.

In addition, one important comment needs to be made here. The fact that not all of the course participants responded to the questionnaire (151 out of 222, i.e. 68%) might pose a question why the remaining 71 (i.e. 22%) did not complete the questionnaire. Were they too busy to answer or was their enthusiasm not equal to those who did? The picture would definitely be more complete if all the participants had given their feedback.

Another research area approached, and the most complex, relates to the perception of IT tools utilised for learning/teaching English for Legal Purposes. The research outcomes indicate that despite initial fears, reluctance and scepticism all of them found this mode of instruction adequate for learning Legal English, and all of them would recommend it to other learners. In fact their comments were more than favourable:

- *It is an excellent way to improve language skills during this pandemic situation.*
- *I also have experience with other types of online seminars not only online language lessons (communication skills course, specific law topic course) and these were excellent too.*
- *I think that this kind of learning – online language learning – is not a problem for me because as mentioned above I am glad that I don't have to travel during my worktime to the different city.*
- *I couldn't imagine learning online, because I didn't have to try yet. After this experience, I can only recommend this method of teaching.*
- *Generally I think that online learning can be fun and efficient but it depends on the people.*
- *It is sure that demand for online teaching will rise also after the end of the pandemic.*

In addition, it is worth pointing out that the research group, i.e. judges and prosecutors, being aware of the complexity of their subject specialisation, do not find learning Legal English more difficult online. They remark that the difficulty is related to a number of other factors such as the teacher, the teaching materials, and the subject specialisation itself like various legal systems and legal cultures.

Interestingly enough, most of those interviewed (75%), when asked how they were going to continue their language education when the pandemic is over plan to exploit a hybrid mode of instruction, combining both face-to-face and distance learning methods, probably for the benefits online learning can give them like better time management and the possibly to connect from any place. They do notice some drawbacks of this mode of instruction like technical problems and lack of real face-to-face contact, which both however can be remedied with time – the first one with increasing the IT skills of users and better equipment, the latter with lifting the lock-down and social distance restrictions and coming back to “pre-Covid reality”.



## Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic, which started in early 2020 and continued throughout 2021, has affected almost all areas of our lives. It presented a significant challenge in the area of education, for the great majority of both teachers and students, since they had to adjust to novel circumstances and learn new abilities and skills, which often meant leaving their comfort zones and testing their preconceptions. The course participants who served as the research group in the above study are a good example.

The research project described in this paper aimed to investigate how members of the judiciary and prosecution in Slovakia attending the Legal English course online perceive this form of instruction and whether they found it effective and enjoyable. The qualitative and quantitative methodology presented in this study has revealed that the course participants expressed a high degree of satisfaction as far as the Legal English online course was concerned. Despite initial reluctance and scepticism they positively evaluated the course itself, both in terms of its content and pace. The study has also shown that they highly recommend this mode of instruction to their colleagues and other learners of English for Legal Purposes as they see numerous advantages of learning English by means of online tools. This even applies in the case of English for Legal Purposes, which due to the specificity of the topic may pose a considerable challenge. Moreover, the study also shows that it is worth dispelling some misconceptions, as most of the participants consider continuing their language education with the use of IT tools after the course, something they would probably not have thought of had it not been for the extraordinary circumstances they had to face.

Finally, it needs to be underscored that the author is aware that since 32% of the participants in the online course did not participate in the study the results of the research are more of an indicative character and the findings were limited to the one online course researched here. Undoubtedly, this is a field that needs further examination, especially in the context of its pedagogical effectiveness.

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## APPENDIX A

How do you evaluate the course in general? Choose one from the following:

I am...

- ✓ very satisfied
- ✓ satisfied
- ✓ neutral
- ✓ dissatisfied
- ✓ very dissatisfied

How do you evaluate the content of the course? Choose one from the following:

I am...

- ✓ very satisfied
- ✓ satisfied
- ✓ neutral
- ✓ dissatisfied
- ✓ very dissatisfied

How do you evaluate the pace (intensity) of the course? Choose one from the following:

✓ I am...

- ✓ very satisfied
- ✓ satisfied
- ✓ neutral
- ✓ dissatisfied
- ✓ very dissatisfied

Do you find this form of learning (by means of IT tools) suitable/adequate for you?

- ✓ yes
- ✓ no

Would you recommend distance language learning to your colleagues? Choose one from the following:

- ✓ definitely yes
- ✓ rather yes
- ✓ perhaps
- ✓ rather not
- ✓ absolutely not

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW

1. What was your attitude towards online language learning before the pandemic?
2. What do you like about online language learning?
3. What don't you like about online language learning?
4. Can online learning be as effective and enjoyable as F2F classes?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) It depends on other factors too (e.g. the teacher, the materials, the classmates, the time of the day, other)
5. Will online learning replace F2F traditional teaching one day?
  - a) Yes, it is very possible
  - b) No, never
  - c) It is likely to happen but not very soon
  - d) I don't know
6. When the pandemic is over, I will ...
  - a) come back to traditional language classes only. Why?
  - b) consider blended learning (hybrid mode of language learning). Why?
  - c) go into online language learning only. Why?
7. Thinking about learning online overall, which of the following best describes your feelings about it:
  - a) I like it a lot
  - b) I didn't expect that it would be efficient but I like it
  - c) For that moment it is fine but I still think traditional classes work better for me
  - d) I feel neutral about it
  - e) I don't like it
8. Learning Legal English might be more difficult online:
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) The difficulty does not depend on the mode of studying but on other factors (e.g. the topic, the vocabulary, the materials, the system of law etc.)
9. Additional comments to the questions above