WHAT DO STUDENTS LIKE ABOUT ONLINE TOOLS? AN EXPLORATION OF STUDENT PREFERENCES AND THE UNDERLYING REASONS

Boglarka Kiss Kulenović, Dalia Suša Vugec, Višnja Kabalin Borenić, Romana Pezić

Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia

ORCID iDs:	Boglarka Kiss Kulenović	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7473-5112
	Dalia Suša Vugec	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4702-6000
	Višnja Kabalin Borenić	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2514-5359
	Romana Pezić	https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2792-976X

Abstract. *In this paper, we present the results of a quantitative survey on online learning carried out among 153 first-year students at the Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb in the academic year 2021/22. The classes were taught synchronously and interactively over 20 weeks using the Google Classroom learning management system (LMS). At the end of the period, students were asked to evaluate ten online tools and activities based on their perceived usefulness on 6-point Likert scales. Data on gender, general English proficiency and Business English grade were also obtained. The information collected was submitted for descriptive statistical analysis and correlation analysis. The paper presents the perceived usefulness of selected online tools and discusses the perceptions of usefulness across different sample subgroups. The defining features of online tools that influence student preferences are considered as well. Finally, the authors make suggestions and recommendations on how online tools can be beneficially incorporated into in-person classes and discuss some added benefits of using online tools, such as a possibility of tailoring teaching content to specific students' needs.*

Key words: *online learning, online teaching tools, ESP, tertiary education, student reactions*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the academic year 2020/21, classes at the Faculty of Economics and Business (FEB) were taught exclusively online and synchronously. We decided to use online tools with this cohort of first-year students aiming to recreate the dynamics of in-person classes in an online setting and provide students with sufficient opportunities to respond (ORT). At the end of this period, we wanted to assess the efficiency of our teaching, identify student preferences and create a reasonably thorough record of our experiences with the tools. We were also interested in blending online tools into our in-person classes. Our study responds to Nguyen's call to determine "the most efficient and effective learning pathways for different learners in particular courses" (Nguyen, 2015, 315).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The efficiency of online courses contrasted with that of traditional ones has long been of interest to researchers. According to Nguyen (2015), traditional and online courses do not differ greatly in terms of effectiveness. Still, traditional courses tend to achieve better results in synchronous activities (Nguyen, 2015) while the online model facilitates flexibility. Research, however, shows that the online learning environment can have profoundly negative effects on student engagement and success. Online classes, if not organized purposefully, may generate a feeling of social isolation which has an adverse effect on student motivation (Amador and Mederer, 2013) and engagement (Martin et al., 2020).

The literature suggests that online classes can be engaging if student-to-instructor and student-to-student interaction is established through participation, community building and regular communication (Martin et al., 2020). When students feel engaged and relevant, i.e. their contributions are acknowledged, effective learning can take place (O'Shea et al., 2015). Moreover, O'Shea and colleagues (2015) claim that universities need to provide online classes where students do not feel like 'second-class citizens' when compared to traditional students. Additionally, community-building and close student-to-student, real-time interaction lead to higher motivation and cognition (Agbejule, 2021; Amador and Mederer, 2013; Baker, 2010; Kadiresan, 2021; Lin et al., 2017). In a survey of 256 students in three Finnish universities, Agbejule (2021) found that students generally preferred face-to-face instruction while they cited "the feeling of being involved as the main motivation for online learning" (p. 17). Amador and Mederer (2013) emphasize the significance of creating a dynamic, intellectual learning community in online classes. They warn against the trend of forming large online learning groups to achieve cost-savings as such groups are demotivating and alienate students.

Other researchers point out the vital role of the instructor in creating a learning-conducive environment. Kabalin Borenić et al. (2022) observed that the instructor's role becomes vital in online classes since students view their teachers as guardians and conductors of their learning experience. This is confirmed by Riapina & Utkina (2022) who observed "that representatives of the digital generation expect to be given constant support from their teachers" (p. 284). This is especially true for students with disabilities (SWD) whose motivation and progress are underpinned by instructor feedback and support (Cook et al., 2023). Kadiresan (2021) highlights the importance of instructor behaviour for ensuring student motivation and engagement. This includes enthusiasm and interactions with students. Baker (2010) distinguishes between instructor immediacy and presence. Instructor immediacy involves instructors' behaviours (both verbal and non-verbal) which create an impression of psychological and/or physical proximity between teachers and students. This is very hard to achieve in an online setting. Instructor presence in the online format, however, includes "the virtual 'visibility' of the instructor as perceived by the learner" (p. 5). Instructor presence is a significant individual predictor of student affective learning, motivation and cognition. It is easier to accomplish online than instructor immediacy (Baker, 2010). Establishing a relationship with instructors appears to be a consistently important consideration for students (Kabalin Borenić et al., 2022). The teaching process should develop through a two-way communication: firstly, instructors need to create OTR, which are prompts designed to elicit a response from individuals or groups (Haydon et al., 2012). Next, instructors need to provide positive and constructive feedback which is a recognized motivating force in online settings (Baker, 2010; Johnson, 2017; Kadiresan et al., 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

The data for the study was collected through an anonymous and voluntary Google Form poll administered using the Google Classroom Learning Management System (LMS) after 20 weeks of online classes (1 April 2022). Student data (gender, self-assessed level of general English according to CEFR and the grade in Business English) was collected through an English-language poll with multiple-choice questions. Statements about 10 online tools were evaluated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not beneficial) to 6 (very useful). As our topic was not controversial, we used a Likert scale without a neutral mid-point to obtain clear and unambiguous answers.

3.1. Participants

The poll was administered to a convenience sample of 153 students (M=58; F=95), which made up around 10% of the total population of approximately 1,500 first-year students at the FEB. All the participants were native speakers of Croatian. Most students (N=117 or 77%) estimated their general English proficiency to be at B2 level or higher, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (C2 = 8.5%, C1 = 20.9%, B2 = 47.1%, B1 = 20.3%, and A2 = 3.3%). These estimates are confirmed by earlier proficiency testing in a comparable sample of FEB students which showed that 78% were at B2 level or higher (Sladoljev-Agejev & Kabalin Borenić, 2018). In terms of Business English (BE) grades, the results were as follows: 10 excellent (grade 5), 34 very good (grade 4), 47 good (grade 3), 17 satisfactory (grade 2) and 45 had no grade yet. We found a positive and moderate (r=0.436) correlation between students' self-assessed general English proficiency and their BE grade, suggesting that highly proficient students do not necessarily receive a high BE grade and that a weaker knowledge of general English does not necessarily translate into a low BE grade.

3.2. The teaching environment and types of activities

The participants attended online classes in large groups of up to 100 students who had never met before. The classes were conducted in Google Classroom, an LMS that both students and instructors found easy to use. This is in line with research that reports positive feedback on Google's LMS (Lindh, et al, 2016; Herrick, 2009; Railean, 2012 cited in Kakoulli Constantinou, 2018). When in class, students were required to have a functioning microphone and keep their cameras on the whole time. Most students had good internet connection, access to necessary equipment and a secluded space in which to listen to and participate in classes.

The online tools and activities included in the poll were the following:

- *Individual synchronous Google Docs assignments*. A worksheet prepared in Google Docs was assigned through Google Classroom to the whole group. Each student was sent an individual copy. Students worked on the worksheet during class and the instructor observed their progress, providing feedback, comments and corrections to the whole group and/or to students individually.
- *Google Meet polls*. Students were sent short multiple-choice poll questions throughout classes to stimulate interest and check active presence.
- *Edpuzzle video assignment*. Short videos with questions and teacher's comments were assigned. After answering each question, the software instantaneously provided

feedback and a score. The students were not able to progress in the video until they had answered each question but they had the option of replaying sections of the video to find the correct answers or redoing the assignment to get a higher score.

- *Attendance quizzes*. After classes, students were sent short Google Form quizzes covering the material dealt with in class. Students were expected to get 40% of the score for their attendance to be counted.
- *Replying to teacher's questions in the chat section of Google Meet*. In order to recreate traditional classroom interaction, students were encouraged to react to what was said in class, ask and answer questions and provide comments in writing. It allowed a large number of students to participate at the same time without disrupting the flow of the class.
- *Online team projects (meetings, presentations)*. Students were put into teams in which they had to produce a role-played meeting or a presentation and record it or present it live during a video call.
- *Asynchronous Google Docs teamwork*. Several students were assigned a shared Google Docs file and asked to complete the task over a period of time, collaborating asynchronously until a given deadline.
- *Revision quizzes*. Every three to four weeks, students were required to complete Google Form quizzes of around fifty questions to help revise the topics that were covered up to that point. The students were given ample time and were free to use any resources to complete the task.
- *Synchronous Google Docs teamwork*. Several students were assigned a shared Google Docs file and were required to work in the file during class. The teacher observed their progress and commented on the work.
- *Group activities in Google Meet breakout rooms*. Students were randomly placed in breakout rooms in teams of 4 to 6. They were required to carry out a task-based activity which required teamwork. The teacher briefly visited each breakout room to check on progress.

3.3. Data analysis

The obtained data was statistically analyzed by applying several methods of descriptive and inferential statistics. Upon entering and coding the data in MS Excel, data analysis was carried out using open-source statistical software JASP. The descriptive statistical analysis included mode, median, mean and standard deviation statistics. Pearson's Correlations were used to create a correlation matrix between all observed variables. In addition to analyzing the whole sample, a group analysis was also performed with regards to gender, BE grade and English proficiency level. In order to test the normality of the distributions and the assumption of the homogeneity of variance, Shapiro-Wilk and Levene's tests were applied. According to these tests, neither the assumption of normality of the data distribution nor the assumption of the homogeneity of variance was tenable, which led to the use of nonparametric tests. Mann-Whitney U test was used for testing the statistical significance of the differences in the results obtained from male and female students, and Kruskal-Wallis test was used to test the statistical significance of the differences between BE grade and self-assessed proficiency groups.

4. FINDINGS

The data collected revealed how our students perceived the online tools used in the 20 weeks of online classes. It also provided a more detailed insight into how groups defined by gender, self-assessed English proficiency and BE grade rated the ten different tools and activities.

4.1. Perceived usefulness in the whole sample

Our students found that individual synchronous Google Docs assignments were the most useful activity (M 4.8 ± SD 1.3). It was graded as very useful (Mode 6) by most of the respondents. A close second were Google Meet polls (M 4.7 ± SD 1.3; Mode 6). Students' answers suggest that Edpuzzle video tasks (M 4.5 ± SD 1.5; Mode 6) and attendance quizzes (M 4.3 ± 1.4) were considered to be rather useful as well.

Somewhat less positively reviewed were five online tools and activities (Google Meet chat, team presentations and meetings, asynchronous teamwork in Google Docs, revision quizzes and synchronous teamwork in Google Docs) with mean scores ranging from 3.9 to 3.8. Only one tool - Breakout rooms (M 3.3 ± SD 1.6) - was generally not perceived as useful by the respondents. Table 1 below shows the ranking by perceived usefulness in the overall sample (possible grades were: 1 - not beneficial at all; 2 - not useful; 3 - not very useful; 4 - somewhat useful; 5 - useful; 6 - very useful).

Table 1 Perceived usefulness results – whole sample (N=153)

Activity	Mean	St. deviation	Mode
Individual synchronous Google Docs assignments	4.804	1.252	6
Google Meet polls	4.706	1.307	6
Edpuzzle	4.458	1.509	6
Attendance quizzes	4.275	1.387	4
Chat	3.869	1.098	5
Online team projects	3.843	1.518	3
Asynchronous teamwork in Google Docs	3.830	1.490	4
Revision quizzes	3.817	1.048	4
Synchronous teamwork in Google Docs	3.810	1.546	4
Breakout rooms	3.288	1.621	3

4.2. Perceived usefulness by groups

A comparison of the perceived usefulness scores for certain online tools and activities by gender, self-assessed proficiency and grade for BE 1 also provided valuable insights.

4.2.1. Gender

When it comes to gender (Table 2), female respondents rated the usefulness of nine out of ten online tools and activities higher than their male counterparts. In six cases, this difference was statistically significant. There was no statistically significant difference in the scores for usefulness of synchronous and asynchronous teamwork in Google Docs, and for the highest rated of all activities: individual synchronous Google Docs assignments.

Table 2 Perceived usefulness results by gender

Activity	Male (N=58)		Female (N=95)		p-value
	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.	
Individual synchronous Google Docs assignments	4.586	1.325	4.937	1.192	0.107
Google Meet polls	4.431	1.339	4.874	1.265	0.033[**]
Edpuzzle	3.983	1.681	4.747	1.321	0.006[*]
Attendance quizzes	4.017	1.481	4.432	1.310	0.088[***]
Chat	3.672	1.130	3.989	1.067	0.081[***]
Online team projects	3.552	1.416	4.021	1.557	0.058[***]
Asynchronous teamwork in Google Docs	3.741	1.562	3.884	1.450	0.639
Revision quizzes	3.500	1.203	4.011	0.893	0.013[**]
Synchronous teamwork in Google Docs	3.741	1.562	3.853	1.543	0.773
Breakout rooms	3.603	1.622	3.095	1.598	0.044[**]

Note. Mann-Whitney U test: [*]statistically significant at 1% level; [**]statistically significant at 5% level; [***]statistically significant at 10% level

4.2.2. Business English grade

A comparison of usefulness scores for selected online tools and activities by respondents' grade in BE showed a revealing pattern. Generally, the respondents with the highest (5) and the lowest (2) passing grade shared a similarly positive attitude to five online tools and activities. The exceptions to this general rule are individual synchronous Google Docs assignments, chat, and synchronous teamwork in Google Docs, which were most positively rated by the respondents who received grade 3 in BE. Unsurprisingly, as many as eight activities received the lowest score for usefulness from the respondents who had no grade in BE at the time of the poll. Kruskall-Wallis test results (Table 3) revealed that there are statistically significant differences between groups for individual synchronous Google Docs assignments (at 1% level of significance), Google Meet polls, Edpuzzle, attendance quizzes, chats, revision quizzes, breakout sessions (at 5% level of significance), and synchronous Google Docs teamwork (at 10% level of significance).

4.2.3. Self-assessed proficiency

The study also collected data on students' self-assessed general English proficiency. As many as six tools were rated highest by the most proficient students (C2 and C1), and lowest by the least proficient students (A2 and B1). A further three tools were the most appreciated by the least proficient students (A2) and the least appreciated by more advanced students (B1 and C2). However, the results of group analysis performed with the help of Kruskall-Wallis test revealed that there are no statistically significant differences between groups for any of the observed tasks (Table 4).

Table 3 Perceived usefulness results by BE grade

Task	No grade yet (N=45)		Grade 2 (N=17)		Grade 3 (N=47)		Grade 4 (N=34)		Grade 5 (N=10)		p-value
	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	
Indiv. GDoc	4.200	1.140	4.941	1.197	5.106	1.272	5.059	1.254	5.000	0.943	$< .001^*$
GM polls	4.178	1.284	5.000	1.118	4.787	1.382	4.941	1.254	5.400	0.843	0.010^{**}
Edpuzzle	4.111	1.385	5.000	1.323	4.553	1.626	4.265	1.582	5.300	1.059	0.030^{**}
Attendance quizzes	3.800	1.272	4.706	1.448	4.277	1.542	4.412	1.184	5.200	1.033	0.012^{**}
Chat	3.467	1.079	3.941	1.088	4.149	0.978	3.912	1.215	4.100	0.994	0.037^{**}
Online team projects	3.533	1.342	4.412	1.228	3.787	1.680	3.824	1.623	4.600	1.265	0.151
Asynch GD	3.667	1.168	4.529	1.179	3.915	1.572	3.471	1.813	4.200	1.398	0.114
Revision quiz	3.556	0.813	4.000	1.118	4.021	1.011	3.618	1.280	4.400	0.843	0.023^{**}
Synch GD	3.556	1.341	4.176	1.590	4.234	1.492	3.500	1.762	3.400	1.506	0.091^{***}
Breakout	3.467	1.424	3.000	1.581	3.574	1.704	2.618	1.615	3.900	1.663	0.036^{**}

Note. Kruskal-Wallis test: *statistically significant at 1% level; **statistically significant at 5% level; ***statistically significant at 10% level

Table 4 Perceived usefulness results by self-assessed proficiency

	A2: Elementary English (N=5)		B1: Intermediate English (N=31)		B2: Upper Intermediate English (N=72)		C1: Advanced English (N=32)		C2: Proficiency English (N=13)		p-value
	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	
Indiv. GDoc	4.400	1.140	4.774	1.203	4.708	1.238	4.969	1.356	5.154	1.281	0.413
GM polls	5.000	1.000	4.323	1.275	4.750	1.422	4.781	1.211	5.077	0.954	0.331
Edpuzzle	4.400	1.517	4.258	1.483	4.514	1.529	4.594	1.521	4.308	1.601	0.831
Attendance quizzes	4.400	1.517	4.226	1.477	4.250	1.330	4.250	1.524	4.538	1.266	0.974
Chat	3.600	1.140	3.968	1.048	3.875	1.125	3.719	1.224	4.077	0.760	0.884
Online team projects	4.400	1.517	3.742	1.237	3.750	1.536	4.094	1.614	3.769	1.878	0.728
Asynch GD	4.200	1.095	3.935	1.315	3.861	1.513	3.938	1.605	3.000	1.528	0.387
Revision quiz	3.800	1.095	3.613	1.054	3.903	0.995	3.969	0.999	3.462	1.391	0.485
Synch GD	3.400	0.894	4.032	1.449	3.667	1.492	3.875	1.879	4.077	1.441	0.647
Breakout	3.800	1.483	3.581	1.501	3.097	1.637	3.531	1.685	2.846	1.676	0.380

Note. Kruskal-Wallis test

4.3. Correlation analysis

The results of the correlation analysis also indicate numerous significant positive relationships between the perceived usefulness of various tools, suggesting that students who find one online tool useful, also tend to appreciate other tools.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Rating of tools and activities

Students were asked to rate 10 types of online tasks by usefulness on a Likert scale of 1-6, where 1 means "not useful at all" and 6 is "very useful." The average usefulness rates ranged from 3.3 to 4.8. We ranked the tasks from the most to the least useful.

Students rated individual synchronous Google Docs tasks most positively. An important feature of these tasks is immediate individualized feedback and constructive comments given to students while working on the task. This kind of interaction between students and the instructor simulated in-person teaching most closely and fostered a perception of instructor presence (Baker, 2010). While positive and constructive feedback is important in all class settings, it is essential in an online setting to keep students motivated (Baker, 2010; Kadiresan, 2021; Johnson, 2017).

The following tasks were Google Meet polls, Edpuzzle tasks and attendance quizzes. They were rated above 4.3 points and also had the feature of instant or very quick feedback, but in these cases the feedback was not individualized. Despite that, the swift and timely feedback reinforced the perception of instructor presence (Baker, 2010). In addition, these tasks are considered to be relatively easy and quick to do, as they were mainly made up of multiple-choice questions. Google Meet polls helped students stay focused in class while Edpuzzle tasks provided additional complementary input in an attractive video format. Attendance quizzes allowed the students to quickly revise and organize the newly acquired information after classes.

A somewhat less positively rated group of tasks received around 3.8 points. The reasons for the lower scores may fall under two headings: time consuming and team activities. Chat tops this part of the list. Despite its similarity to the more popular Meet polls, Chat probably received a lower score because it requires more autonomous activity and a longer attention span in class. Revision quizzes also required students to invest more time and effort in completing them, making them less popular. On the upside, they provided relatively quick feedback and helped students to review the material before tests.

The next group of tasks were both time consuming and required team activity and coordination. To prepare for team presentations and meetings, students had to coordinate their work with classmates and focus on the task over an extended period of time. This was made more challenging by the fact that students had not met each other before, so there were no pre-existing personal relationships that would make coordination easier. In addition, team presentations and meetings were graded exercises and students found them more stressful. Another cause for stress and dissatisfaction in some students might have been the fact that their individual effort or extra input was not individually rewarded, and that some students who had put in less effort could benefit from their work. The problems relating to teamwork also affected the asynchronous and synchronous teamwork tasks assigned in Google Docs. There were a few additional issues that might have caused students to feel these tools were not as useful as others. Firstly, it might have been technologically challenging to work in Google Docs as a group. Some students might have felt reluctant to utilize the possibilities provided by the programme. Students who were insecure may not have participated sufficiently, while others might have felt weary about correcting their peers, especially given that there was no personal relationship to rely on.

Breakout rooms seemed to be an ideal vehicle to deliver task-based learning in online groups. Such tasks can create opportunities for high quality student-to-student interactions

and thus encourage the development of social bonds among learners and ultimately lead to higher student motivation (Amador & Mederer, 2013). Anecdotal evidence shows that Breakout rooms can be successfully used in smaller classes. However, in our experience working in Breakout rooms was the least appreciated task by a large margin (3.3) because it combined the least favored features of the other nine tasks: lack of immediate and personalized feedback, the need for teamwork and prolonged engagement. Mini-meetings set up in Breakout rooms were unsupervised and thus did not give the impression of instructor presence (Baker, 2010). The lack of supervision may have also allowed students an opportunity to relax or focus their attention on issues other than the class material. When it comes to teamwork, our students did not feel comfortable using this tool in the randomly selected, one-off teams created by the LMS. Talking to other students who they had never met before on a video call caused feelings of anxiety and discomfort. Furthermore, the realization that they may never be placed on the same team again demotivated students from engaging with each other. As a result, there was little or no communication in Breakout rooms. Consequently, our observation is in line with Amador and Mederer's (2013) finding that large online classes are alienating for students because they hinder the formation of meaningful student-to-student relationships.

We also investigated how different groups within our sample expressed their appreciation for specific tools. We noted certain patterns when looking at gender, self-assessed proficiency and BE grade.

When it comes to gender, female students appreciated almost all types of tools more than male students. The only tool that differs from this pattern is Breakout rooms, which was appreciated by male students significantly more than female students. These findings suggest that female students' learning habits are different from male students', which is in line with studies showing that female students habitually spend more time doing homework (Gershenson & Holt, 2105; Mau & Lyn, 2010) and that they use more learning strategies than their male counterparts (Karlak & Bagarić Medve, 2016). Females are also significantly more motivated (Karlak & Bagarić Medve, 2016) and autonomous (Varol & Yilmaz, 2010). All in all, female students seem to appreciate regular preparation for classes and exams through various exercises, while male students rely less on these tools for their success in BE. The difference in attitude to Breakout rooms also suggests that male students appreciated the opportunity to virtually connect with their classmates during classes.

When taking students' grades from the first semester (BE 1) into account, an interesting pattern emerges. Students who received either the highest grade (5) or the lowest passing grade (2) agreed about the usefulness of 5 out of 10 tools (Edpuzzle videos, Google Meet polls, attendance quizzes, preparing online meetings / presentations in teams and asynchronous teamwork in Google Docs). We found it intriguing that half of the tools surveyed were similarly rated by students at the two opposing ends of the grading scale. It may be that students with the highest grade achieved success due to their persistent effort and hard work and appreciated the tasks that made this success possible. Students with the lowest passing grade generally had weaker English skills but achieved a passing grade through hard work. The two groups, therefore, seem to share the highest levels of commitment and determination.

Three further tools (individual synchronous Google Doc assignments, chat and synchronous teamwork) received the highest rating from students who had grade 3 in BE. These results suggest that moderate achievers appreciated tasks that provide immediate feedback and guidance either from the instructor or classmates. This confirms Nguyen's

(2015) opinion that individualized online content is crucial for students' progress in online and blended environments.

Students who had not passed BE 1 consistently rated 8 out of 10 tools the lowest. It is no surprise that low achievers found most tools less useful than students with better grades. These students had either failed BE 1 or did not feel confident enough to take the exam in the previous semester. Their lack of success can be attributed to an insufficient amount of time and effort invested in their progress. We could argue that they are indifferent to the opportunity to improve their knowledge of BE and therefore they do not appreciate any of the tools available to them.

The study also collected data on students' self-assessed general English proficiency, which does not necessarily reflect BE proficiency. Although the results were not statistically significant, there is a pattern revealing that six tools (individual synchronous Google Doc assignments, Google Meet polls, Edpuzzle, attendance quizzes, chat and synchronous teamwork) are rated the highest by the most proficient students (C2 and C1) and the lowest by the least proficient students (A2 and B1), which may be explained by the relative complexity of these tasks.

6. CONCLUSION

The research results provide insight into students' perceptions of usefulness of 10 tools after 20 weeks of online classes. The analysis revealed that our first-year business students have clear preferences for some tools, which could be explained by the defining features of those tools. These insights enabled us to formulate some guidelines for future blended classes.

6.1. The perceived usefulness of online tools

Firstly, tools and activities which allow quick and individualised feedback with a high level of supervision are the most popular with students. This is because they contribute to a perception of instructor presence, which has been highlighted in literature as a motivating and engaging factor. In our research, individual synchronous Google Docs tasks fully satisfied these criteria. Secondly, tools with quick but not individual feedback - Google Meet polls, Edpuzzle tasks and attendance quizzes - were also popular, although somewhat less so. Thirdly, students generally preferred autonomous work over teamwork, which may reflect their social anxiety and their desire to get full credit for their work. Not surprisingly, lower achieving students appreciated teamwork more, as it gave them an opportunity to rely on others. Next, tasks which required more time and effort (e.g. team presentations/meetings and revision quizzes) were not rated as very useful. Finally, although our students were adept at using computers, it still seems that they preferred technologically less demanding tasks. Instructors also need to be aware that some types of activities are better received by certain groups as defined by gender, general proficiency or achievement. For example, female students are more appreciative of opportunities to practice. At the same time, more proficient students seem not to appreciate teamwork as they feel forced to take initiative and guide their less proficient classmates.

6.2. The incorporation of online tools into in-person classes

The global experience of being forced to teach online resulted in some positive outcomes. The community of educators quickly familiarized themselves with numerous online tools and improved their general teaching capabilities. The authors also became experienced in using online tools, some of which have become valuable additions to our tool-set. Blended instruction is now within easy reach and, for many of us, it is welcome. In our new environment, both students and educators expect more flexibility and new learning possibilities (Lockee, 2021). Including virtual tools in our in-person classes can help fulfill these expectations.

While there are many virtual tools that can potentially be incorporated into in-person classes, the following are the ones we have continued using as in-class activities in brick-and-mortar classrooms: polls, quizzes and Kahoot!. These tools foster inclusivity in the classroom by offering additional opportunities to respond. They are also useful for checking understanding and attendance quickly, while including a motivating element of competition.

Our tool-set of post-class activities has been substantially enriched by the addition of online tools. For instance, we use Google Form quizzes, Google Docs tasks and Kahoot! to give feedback quickly and efficiently, while Edpuzzle video assignments also provide additional input. These asynchronous teaching tools allow students to work at different speeds and to access various aids to complete the tasks. Using varied materials allows instructors to "build in options that provide multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement, by intentionally using digital tools and instructional strategies to reduce barriers of learning" (Rao, 2021). Finally, peer-learning, although not fully embraced by the students, can be facilitated through the functionalities of Google Docs and video conferences. Video recordings of student activities can be used for further feedback or for the grading process. Online tools can additionally enrich the learning experience by making international cooperation much easier and cheaper.

7.3. Institutional aspect of successful blended instruction

Our final point concerns the need for continued investment in education to keep benefiting from the achievements of the forced transition to online teaching during the pandemic. The quick and relatively seamless transition in the time of crisis was only possible because both institutions and instructors were willing to invest in themselves to make the transition possible. In order to unlock the potential of online teaching, both technology and expertise need to be kept up-to-date.

It is important to raise awareness that online teaching is not an instant solution to institutions' financial woes. One of the dangers of online teaching is that schools might feel tempted to create large classes and thus achieve cost savings. Research, however, shows that such classes are demotivating and inefficient and would not result in a positive outcome for students (Amador & Mederer, 2013; Kabalin Borenić et al., 2022).

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