ANALYSIS OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS' EVALUATION DATA REGARDING THE SHIFT TO eLEARNING. A CASE IN POINT: THE ENGLISH MORPHOLOGY SEMINARS

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ABSTRACT. *Analysis of First Year Students' Evaluation Data Regarding the Shift to eLearning. A Case in Point: The English Morphology Seminars.* In the remote learning setting of the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, students suddenly had access to the academic context only in a digital format. As such, content, academic instruction, peers and instructors were all part of an impromptu teaching-learning process. This study explores the relation between students and technology before/during and after the second semester. We also look at the students' perception of a particular form of academic instruction, namely a seminar, and a particular topic, English Morphology. In order to obtain a valid analysis, we also present our students' academic profile, their perception and attitude towards their fields of study (Philology) and towards the ideal (online) language instructor.

Keywords: Higher Education, English Grammar, eLearning, students' perception

REZUMAT. *O analiză a evaluărilor studenților din anul I privind tranziția la predarea online. Cazul seminarului de morfologie*. În contextul predării online din semestrul al doilea al anului universitar 2019-2020, studenții au avut acces la mediul academic doar în format digital. Astfel, conținutul, predarea, colegii și profesorii au fost parte a unui proces de predare-învățare adaptat brusc la cerințele din spațiul digital. Acest studiu analizează raportarea studenților la tehnologie înainte, în timpul și după terminarea semestrului II. Vom analiza, de asemenea, percepția studenților asupra unei anumite forme de predare universitară (seminar) și a unui anumit subiect (Morfologie engleză). Pentru a obține o analiză validă, vom prezenta și profilul academic al studenților, percepția și atitudinea lor asupra domeniului de studiu (Filologie) și a profesorului ideal (față-în-față sau online).

Cuvinte cheie: Învățământ superior, gramatică engleză, predare online, percepția studenților

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Introductory remarks

The sudden shift from a face-to-face teaching-learning environment to an entirely online medium of instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about challenges for the two main participants in the context of higher university: instructors and students. The syllabus, the teaching methods, the students' engagement and participation were assiduously and spontaneously reshaped to suit a new medium of instruction.

At Babeş-Bolyai University, depending on the students' profile, their fields of study and the digital literacy of the course/seminar leader, every instructor chose the digital platforms, tools and the teaching method that they considered appropriate in the given context. This sometimes produced a heterogenous medium of instruction at the level of the same institution, comprising a multitude of platforms and digital learning tools being used by the instructors. Thus, students had to conform with the different sets of rules and various digital platforms and assignments proposed by the instructors.

By its very nature, the courses and seminars in the higher education medium of instruction are heterogeneous in the sense that instructors are autonomous in choosing the topic, designing the curriculum and the teaching methods. In the context of the pandemic, this heterogeneity was doubled by a vast array of online platforms and approaches, which proved to be challenging for our students, especially the ones enrolled in their first year of study. For this reason and because the online medium of instruction constitutes a demand of nowadays society, we embarked in this study with the aim of analysing the first year students' perception of the shift from face-to-face interactions to online interactions combined with the autonomy of each course and seminar and their perspective on the (online) English Morphology seminar, which is an essential component of their curriculum.

1. Theoretical Considerations

Students' attitudes towards the academic content, the didactic approach and the use of digital tools in the learning process are determined by their profile. This is, in its turn, directly and constantly shaped and reshaped by the rapid evolution of new technologies and the new societal demands because "globalization and technology have substantially changed the ways that we work, teach and learn" (Boothe, 2019: 187).

Our students' profile can be described in relation to their online patterns of behaviour. Students engage in dynamic and interactive activities, perform multimodal exposures on various social networks, connect with other peers and build networks (see Stern, 2007: 98). On social networks, they are multimodal

content creators, constructing and reconstructing self and other representations. They produce and consume images, videos and auto-biographical content. What is more, they engage in activities which involve self-expression and communication through visual, audio-visual elements and metadata tags (hashtags) or text combined with these elements, rather than text alone.

Adapting fast to the constant updates of the affordances of the online environment, they have taken up various online roles: bloggers, vloggers, influencers. They sometimes make a transition from self-representation to self-branding (see Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020). Therefore, specialised literature has sketched students' profile in relation to their online behaviour on social media and this constitutes a fundamental aspect of their daily routine and has shaped their behaviour in both their (online and face-to-face) personal and professional/ academic encounters. As our students are both producers and consumers of content, they have developed this behaviour in the academic environment as well and they have become 'consumers' of education, manifesting a 'consumption behaviour' (Rosén, Billore, 2019: 100). To all these, we add the fact that students are increasingly interested in having an active role in the educational process, being aware of "the highly competitive global situation regarding education, skill development and employment opportunities" (Rosén, Billore, 2019: 100).

2. Hypotheses and Motivation of the Study

Given the complex and complicated learning scenario caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, but also by our students' profile, needs and interests, our aim is to analyse a concatenation formed of our students' relation to new technologies, their level e-literacy and the role of the English Morphology seminar in the curriculum and in the formation of a (relevant) academic and professional identity for our students. Observing our students throughout a semester, we had several postulates and we verified them through an online survey. We consider that the validation or invalidation of these hypotheses contributes to a better understanding of our students' profile and an improvement of the teaching act. Thus, we postulated that:

(1) Not many first-year students know what 'Philology' entails before enrolling in the field of study.
(2) Students perceive digital literacy mainly as sweeping practices on social media.
(3) Video conferences are perceived as being the most efficient for online teaching.
(4) Students perceive a very high improvement of their digital literacy after the remote learning performed during the second semester.

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3. Description of the Learning Context

In this study, we explore our students' attitudes towards the content of a seminar and the use of digital tools in the learning process in the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020.

The context of this study is the sudden shift from a face-to-face medium of instruction to an online environment because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the students under focus were first year students enrolled at the Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. All the students have English Language and Literature as their major field of study and their minor is represented by the language and literature of another foreign language (Chinese, Korean, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Hungarian, Romanian, Russian, Spanish) or the field of Comparative Literature. We decided to target this group of students because English represents a preferred line of study at the Faculty of Letters. Moreover, we chose first year students because they represent the group who has recently performed a transition from a pre-university medium of instruction to higher education, being a more vulnerable group. As such, out of roughly 150 students enrolled at the beginning of the academic year, about 120 students remained after the second semester. We mention that there were 74 regular participants at the seminar under focus (we counted the students with at least 3 attendances).

We focus on the English Morphology seminar because it represents one of the fundamental academic contents for a student in Philology and we decided not to include the course as well because the seminar is the academic format which is more student-oriented. The English Morphology Seminar is a compulsory seminar, consisting of seven meetings as the students have the seminar once every two weeks. The topics covered during the seminar are following: the noun (the number), the adjective (semantic and syntactic classifications of the adjective, the comparison of adjectives, order of the adjectives), the adverb, sequence of tenses and past tense. The first meeting was conducted face-to-face and the other six took place online.

As the seminar took place online, the students were members of a Facebook group: *English Morphology Seminars_English Major_2019-2020*. The group was created with the purpose of communication with the students and of providing the gateway to the seminar content (PowerPoints, handouts, sites, pdf books) which was stored in the Google Drive. Moreover, the Facebook group offered our students a medium for expressing their opinions, addressing their questions, posting their comments and making suggestions. In this way, our students were provided with a familiar digital space and they were part of a *community of learners* (see Cotoc, 2019: 60; Cotoc, 2019: 310)

4. Analysis of Evaluation Data

A very good source of feedback from the students is a survey because students can express their opinions in an anonymous and confidential manner, thus providing useful feedback for the instructor. As such, a month after the semester was over, we sent a survey to our students and some of our hypotheses were supported by their answers, whereas others were invalidated. Out of the 74 regular participants, we had 46 respondents: 40 female respondents and 6 male respondents, 39 with the age 18-21, 6 with the age 21-25, and one participant aged 40-50. They are students in Cluj-Napoca, but they come from all over Romania.

Our survey addressed many problematic aspects encountered by the students in the second semester, it contained closed questions and open-ended questions and it was structured in five sections:

- In section I, students were asked to introduce general information about themselves and their general perception about their field of study (Philology) and future jobs;
- section 2 narrows down the focus to the English Morphology seminar;
- sections 3, 4 and 5 investigate the students' relation to the new technologies before the pandemic, during the second semester and after the second semester;
- the last section addresses the students' perception of the ideal online language instructor.

The first section (General information) offers us a valuable insight into the reasons why our students related to our seminar and the approach used in a particular way as it addresses the students' reasons for choosing to study English Language and Literature, their perception on the Philology field and their future plans.

When asked about the reasons why they chose to study at the Faculty of Letters, the first three reasons were: passion for reading (33 students), a passion for humanities in general (30 students) and good job opportunities (17 students). Unfortunately, there were also 4 students who stated that it was a random choice.

When addressed the question 'Why did you choose English as your major?', the top four reasons were:

- It is the most useful foreign language (18 students);
- It was the only foreign language that I knew (quite) well (17 students);
- I am passionate about English literature and English linguistics (17 students).
- I am passionate about English literature (16 students).

As in the last two years we noticed that many students are surprised by the fact that they have to study theoretical and abstract aspects about the English grammar, we wanted to find out their perception on the Philology field. Hence, we asked them if they knew what the Philology field entails and the kind of courses and seminars taught at the Faculty of Letters when they enrolled. Surprisingly enough, the vast majority of the students (28 students) declared that they knew about the field / had some knowledge about the field, but they did not know what courses and seminars are taught at the Faculty of Letters in Cluj-Napoca; 17 students declared that they didn't know much about the field, 3 of them declared not knowing anything about the field. Only 7 students declared having been fully informed about their choice when they enrolled at the Faculty, selecting the answer 'Yes, I knew everything about the content of this field of study and the courses and seminars in the curriculum'. These answers show that many students were not properly informed when they chose their fields of study and this is quite surprising as this information is only a click away nowadays. Nonetheless, it is encouraging to see that after a semester, they declared planning to have a job in this field/a related field. For instance:

- teacher (18 students)
- translator (15 students)
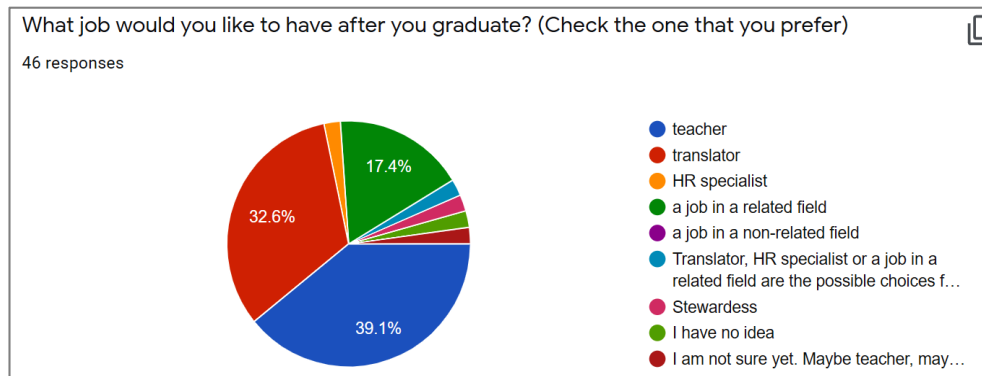- a job in a related field (8 students) (see fig. 1 below).

Fig. 1

The second section (The English Morphology seminar) offered us insight into what triggers our students' interest in relation to the English grammar. The seminar focuses on theoretical explanations for complex grammar aspects (the plural of the nouns, the adjective, the adverb, sequence of tenses) and this kind of discipline can be difficult to grasp for the first year students, especially nowadays

when many students are mainly interested in practical aspects, not in theoretical ones. Hence, unsurprisingly, the students stated that they liked the theoretical aspects covered during the seminar (only 17 students) and the grammar exercises (only 17 students), but what they actually enjoyed were the apps and the activities through which they discovered the theoretical explanations (the gamification process in which we involved them).

Regarding the problematic aspects related to the format of the seminar, most of the students reported that they did not have good time management and that they did not know how to organise the tasks efficiently, that the deadlines were tight and there was too much content. Some of them also found problematic the fact that the seminar was two-folded (Zoom meeting and online survey as a follow-up activity). Hence, we consider that the problematic aspects were a consequence of the fact that students are not autonomous learners when they are in the first year, they still need instructional scaffolding and a lot of guidance from the part of the language instructor, not being yet adapted to the requirements of the academic environment.

In terms of useful tools and resources, our students chose the following: the interactive apps (32 students), the Zoom sessions (31 students), followed closely by Google form quizzes (28 students), the handouts and PowerPoint presentations (24 students), the Facebook group (19 students). They didn't find very useful the hyperlinks to other sites, the pdf books uploaded in the Google drive or the videos which contained presentations of the main aspects discussed during the seminar or feedback to their work. One possible explanation for this could be that all these 3 resources require them to perform an independent learning activity (watch the video / read and select the relevant points) and this is a more time-consuming process which requires them to select what is relevant on their own.

Regardless of the problems encountered, the students found the seminar useful and very useful (43 students). They also perceive the seminar as essential for any student majoring in English Language and Literature and the reasons they selected are the following:

- Any future graduate who specialises in English Language and Literature should have knowledge of the theoretical aspects of the English grammar and should be able to explain complex language phenomena (36 students).
- At the end of their studies, students are certified English teachers and English Morphology is essential for this purpose (22 students).
- Regardless of the job that students will have in the future, this type of seminar is helpful to master the explanations behind complex language phenomena (19 students).
- Through the content of this seminar, students develop transversal skills (19 students).

The students also declared that the participation in the seminar not only helped them gain grammar and vocabulary knowledge, but also improved and developed a great variety of skills: writing, listening and communication skills, digital skills, time management skills, discipline, attention to details.

The third, fourth and fifth section (Your relation to technology before/ during the second semester and after the second semester) offers us insight into the students' perception on the transition from the on-site medium of instruction to the online environment. As can be seen in fig. 2 below, the students perceive some improvement of their digital skills after a semester online, but not an astounding improvement. Moreover, when asked explicitly if they think the online learning improved their digital literacy, almost half of them answered positively, 16 chose 'maybe' and 10 students answered negatively.
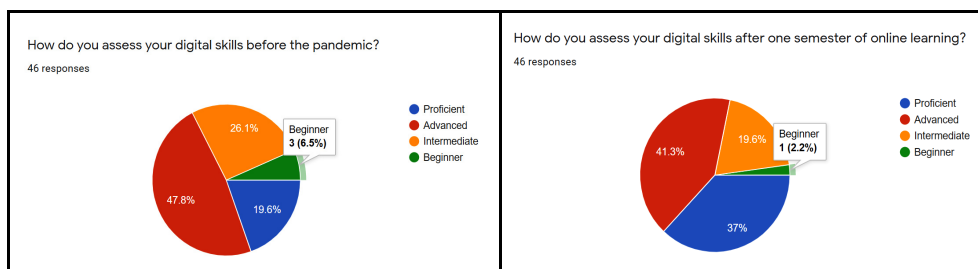

Fig. 2

When asked to define what digital skills are, we noticed that many of their answers include references to social media and smartphones. Moreover, even though there are some students who mention more advanced digital skills, most of the answers cover basic digital literacy (for e.g: using a video conference platform, PowerPoint, Microsoft Office) and social media literacy. This can be seen by a selection of their answers:

- *Digital skills could mean the range of abilities to use digital devices, communication.*
- *In my opinion, digital skills refer to the capability of using technological devices for satisfying the basic needs of an individual living in the 21st century (knowing how to use the basic programs such as a word document, PowerPoint and so on), as well as having the knowledge of working any program you are presented with (such as skype or zoom in our case).*
- *To be able to use digital devices without any difficulties with using apps like Microsoft office, Facebook etc.*

- *The ability to use the internet, computers, smartphones etc. efficiently.*
- *The proper use of technology while studying.*
- *Social Media*
- *The ability to use digital devices as a laptop or a computer or communication applications like facebook or zoom.*

Students' use of technology during the teaching-learning process in highschool is similar to their use of technology in the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021. With a few exceptions, the most prevalent use of technology that they mention is represented by pdf books, Microsoft Office, email, online dictionaries, electronic libraries and Facebook/WhatsApp groups. Even so, most of them declared that the integration of new technologies motivated them in the learning process.

When asked to select the technologies used by their instructors during the pandemic, the students chose a plethora of technologies: video conferencing tools (Skype, Zoom, Microsoft teams); Edmodo, Facebook groups, Google classroom, email, word files, Google drive, personal blogs (see fig. 3 below).
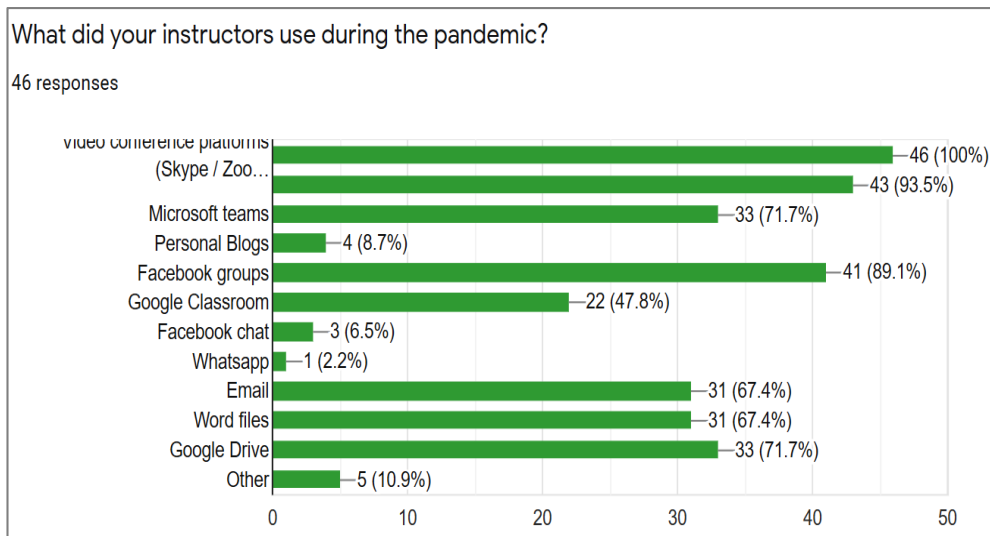

What did your instructors use during the pandemic?

46 responses

Category	Value
Video conference platforms (Skype / Zoo...	46 (100%)
	43 (93.5%)
Microsoft teams	33 (71.7%)
Personal Blogs	4 (8.7%)
Facebook groups	41 (89.1%)
Google Classroom	22 (47.8%)
Facebook chat	3 (6.5%)
Whatsapp	1 (2.2%)
Email	31 (67.4%)
Word files	31 (67.4%)
Google Drive	33 (71.7%)
Other	5 (10.9%)

Fig. 3

Given the fact that the respondents were all part of the same group (first year students, English Major), we witness a very heterogeneous teaching-learning

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environment and we would expect students to declare that they experienced a lot of difficulty during the semester, but the vast majority of them declared that they did not have any technical problem. There were a few who declared not having a stable internet connection and a few who declared that they could not hear the instructor and the colleagues properly during the video conferences.

Among the most useful technologies used during our seminar, the ranking provided by our students is the following: Zoom meetings, online quiz, the handouts, different learning apps. Moreover, when asked to select their preferred teaching-learning formats, students ranked them as follows:

1. synchronous (Zoom meeting)
2. asynchronous (Google form quizzes)
3. asynchronous (interactive activities)
4. asynchronous (google drive files)
5. asynchronous (videos on YouTube/Loom).

This ranking might indicate a preference for a learning environment which resembles the on-site learning environment.

Regarding our seminar, 33 students considered that the seminar improved their digital literacy (see fig. 4 below). The vast majority of the students also suggested that, even in a face-to-face setting, the English Morphology Seminar should embed the following: YouTube videos and Facebook.
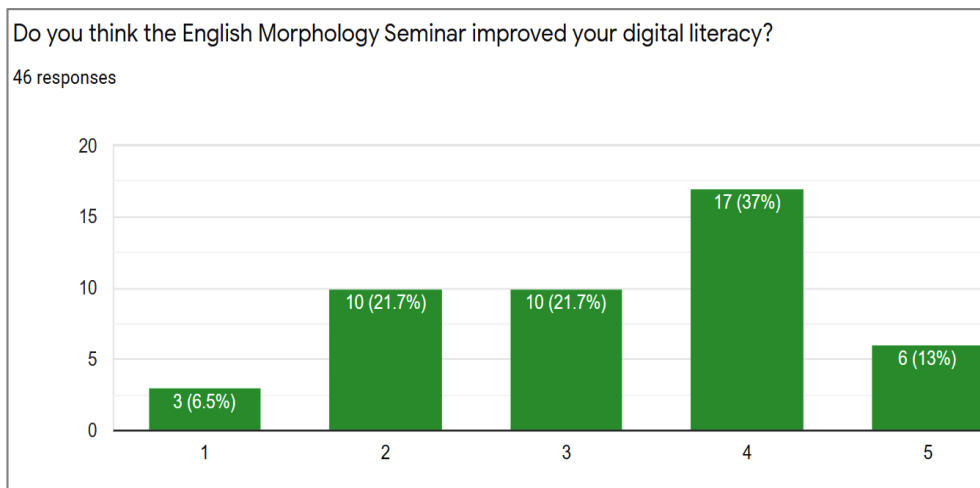

Do you think the English Morphology Seminar improved your digital literacy?
46 responses

Fig. 4

When asked if they are eager to use the new technologies in the new academic year, only half of them answered positively, the other half was represented by the students that remained neutral (15 students) and by those that answered negatively (only 5 students).

Another interesting aspect in our survey was revealed by the following question: "After the experience of the second semester, do you consider that all courses and seminars are suitable for online teaching / remote teaching?". Most of the students answered 'no' to this question and among the reasons for this choice were the following:
- Teachers not having digital skills:
  ○ *I do believe they can all be taught online per-se, but not all the teachers are equipped to do so.*
- The content of some courses. For instance, many students mentioned the subjects below [emphasis ours]:
  ○ ***Chinese***, *because it is **too complicated** to be taught online.*
  ○ ***Literature*** *courses and seminars would have been a lot better face-to-face. I feel like we would have had the chance to discuss more and maybe even debate certain topics. I really missed the energy that I used to feel during those courses.*
  ○ ***Secondary languages*** *that we learn from the start such as modern languages, asian languages etc.*
- External factors (family)

When asked the question 'Would you like to continue using new technologies in the learning process after the pandemic or do you prefer a more traditional setting?', 28 students chose 'A combination of the two elements (new technologies and traditional format)', 9 students were firm in stating that they would definitely prefer a more traditional setting and 9 students would definitely like to continue using new technologies.

The last part of the survey (The ideal online language instructor) showed that the most important aspects for our students are collaboration and flexibility. Not all students perceive the instructors' digital literacy as paramount, half of them declaring that instructors should have a high level of digital literacy, but the other half considering that minimal digital literacy is enough. In contrast with digital literacy or being up-to-date with the latest research in their field, most first year students value instructors' flexibility and openness to collaborate with the students both in an online context and on-site (see fig. 5 below). This shows that first year students are learners which need a lot of support as they are new to the academic environment.
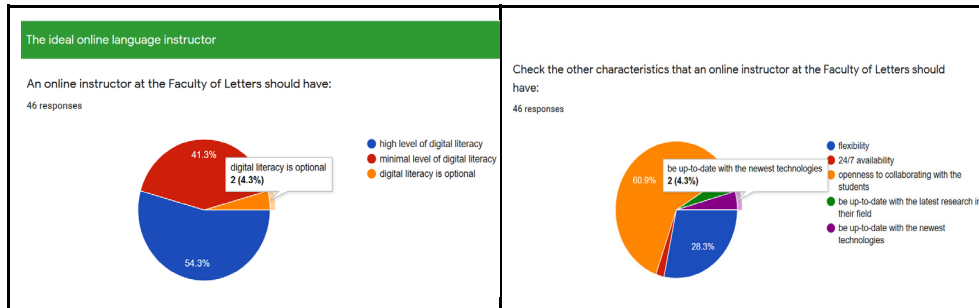
Fig. 5

5. Discussion of Results

Research hypothesis 1 (Not many first year students know what 'Philology' entails before enrolling in the field of study) was invalidated by our students' answers, the survey revealing that many of the first year students know what philology is, but what prevails is their lack of information about the subjects that are being taught at the institution where they will be enrolled as students.

Research hypothesis 2 (Students perceive digital literacy mainly as sweeping practices on social media) was only partially validated by our students' answers as many of their answers included social media practices, but many students also mentioned Microsoft Office (word, PowerPoint presentations, pdf documents) and video conferences. This shows that their perception of digital literacy is biased because it is directly influenced by their interests, needs and their own level of digital literacy.

Research hypothesis 3 (Video conferences are perceived as being the most efficient for online teaching) was validated by our students' answers as most of the students declared a preference for the video conferencing.

Research hypothesis 4 (Students perceive a very high improvement of their digital literacy after the remote learning performed during the second semester) was invalidated as the students did perceive an improvement, but they did not perceive they improved their digital skills to a great extent, as we expected.

6. Conclusions

The second semester of the academic year 2019-2020 marked an abrupt transition from an on-site medium of instruction to an online format. Firstly, the instructors adapted the content of their discipline to the new

teaching context using the new technologies that fitted their own level of digital literacy and that they considered appropriate for the content of their discipline. On the other hand, students had to adapt to the requirements and use new technologies in order to have access to the academic instruction and content.

The relation to new technologies was one of the key factors in this first step of reinvention of the teaching-learning process. In this process, students' perception represents a key element in the effective teaching-learning process. This study offered us valuable insight in this respect, exploring the relation between students and technology before/during and after the second semester and also the students' opinion on their fields of study (philology) and the English morphology seminar. Thus, our study showed that our students enrol at the Faculty of Letters without being fully aware of the academic path they will undertake. This might be an explanation for the fact that first year students need a lot of guidance and support in the transition from pre-university level to university level and even more so in the online medium. Moreover, digital literacy is important to our first-year students in philology, but it functions only as a tool to have access to the instructors, peers and the content of their courses and seminars. Their perception on courses and seminars is also influenced by the way in which content is delivered to them, by their general interests and their current online patterns of behaviour.

This study is based on the answers provided by a part of the participants in the English Morphology seminar and we consider that it can constitute the basis for other investigations either with a larger number of respondents or with students who have a different academic profile (another major, a different field of study or even a different year of study).

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