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<https://doi.org/10.24833/2687-0126-2021-3-1-49-61>

EMERGENCY TRANSITION: HAVE TERTIARY LANGUAGE STUDENTS' NEEDS BEEN MET?

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The emergency transition of university education online posits a number of questions which are still to be answered. This paper aims to investigate whether language students' needs were met when instruction was delivered completely online. To understand this, parallel questionnaires based on the current research on the needs, engagement and motivation in online and distance learning environments were administered to language instructors (N=69) and their students (N=148) at a large university in Russia. The instructors self-evaluated related competences, and the students assessed the experience of distant online language learning. The data collected via the questionnaires was subject to statistical analysis. The results showed a discrepancy in the instructors' beliefs and students' perceptions. The instructors were confident about their ability to meet the language learners' needs, to provide individualisation, motivate and engage students, however, the students did not feel that happening. Open answers, which were analysed qualitatively, shed light on the reasons behind the mismatch in opinions. The students' need for communication and interaction was inhibited by the limitations of the medium and the transactional distance. These factors contributed to the reduction of engagement, motivation and concentration. The interviews with 20 university language instructors revealed the practices the instructors implemented to meet the students' needs, and identified the challenges they faced. Some implications for online language instructor training and development are discussed.

Key words: online language learning, learners' needs, engagement, motivation, individualisation

How to cite this article: Bogolepova S.V. (2021). Emergency Transition: Have Tertiary Language Students' Needs Been Met? *Professional Discourse & Communication*, 3(1), pp. 49-61. (in Russian). <https://doi.org/10.24833/2687-0126-2021-3-1-49-61>

1. INTRODUCTION

In March 2020 university education in Russia moved completely online. Language classes at HSE University (Higher School of Economics), a large university in Russia, underwent this transition, too. The transition to the new environment required both students and in-

structors to quickly master new skills and develop new learning strategies. This new mode of teaching was “crisis pedagogy” rather than full-fledged online instruction [Morreale, Thorpe & Westwick, 2020]. It raised questions about the effectiveness of language teaching in the new mode, students’ motivation and engagement in the new environment, and the students’ overall opinion of their online learning experience.

Student-centered teaching is an approach to account for students’ interests and needs. Content-wise, students are given a choice of the materials they use in a lesson, or these materials are selected by the teacher based on students’ interests and needs. The methods of instruction are based on students’ needs and learning preferences, students are involved in evaluation and assessment [Nunan, 2013; Benson, 2012]. Students have more control of their learning as “students’ motivation, confidence, and enthusiasm for learning are all adversely affected when teachers control the processes through and by which they learn” [Weimer, 2002, p. 23]. As a bonus, learning skills and habits of autonomous work are developed, students’ motivation and engagement are increased.

Online and distance education may be considered teacher-centered as they follow a predetermined sequence of tasks, rely more on teacher-selected materials and assessments. Synchronous online instruction is often characterised by a teacher-centered approach [Hampel, 2009] with the infamous “talking head” possibly taking up the significant part of class time. A number of studies suggest how online or distance learning can be made more student-centered, for example, through peer-grading [Rayens & Ellis, 2018], personal challenge and responsibility [McCombs, 2015], collaborative projects and peer assessment [Stickler & Hampel, 2015]. Personalisation is a way to tailor online instruction to learners’ needs by provision of individualised and personalised feedback, task selection, choice of learning pathways and learning topics, curriculum relevance [Alamri, Lowell, Watson, & Watson, 2020].

Recent research investigates students’ perceptions concerning the transition of language classes online [Patricia, 2020], as well as teachers’ coping strategies in this unexpected situation [MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2020]. However, no research has investigated the experience of the unexpected transition of university language classes to the online environment in terms of students’ needs, engagement and motivation.

In this article we analyse HSE university students’ perceptions whether their needs are met in online language instruction at the backdrop of the instructor’s self-evaluation. The comparison also touches upon the students’ opinion of their motivation and engagement in online language learning. By online learning we will mean a combination of synchronous classes delivered via videoconferencing applications, and asynchronous learning and communication via e-mail and / or online learning platforms. The implications for online language instructors’ training are discussed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research indicates a number of needs learners have when learning online or at distance. As online learning is a type of DCALL - Distance Computer Assisted Language Learning [Lamy, 2013] - the author will rely on research related to both distance and online learning.

Multiple studies emphasize communication as the major need of online and distant students, though the patterns of communication may vary. Alqurashi [2019] singles out learner-instructor interaction, learner-learner interaction and learner-content interaction. Learner-instructor interaction is a must in online and distance learning. Due to the lack of the subtitles of face-to-face communication, the tutor’s response and feedback in online learning environments become a necessity.

Effective online teachers sustain regular contact with their students [Murphy, Shelley, White & Baumann, 2011].

Learner-learner interaction is one more component of effective online or distance learning. The opportunity to socialize with other students is considered a significant factor in predicting satisfaction and learning [Joosten & Cusatis, 2020]. Social connection has been shown to be a necessary element of holistic student engagement [Bowden, Tickle & Naumann, 2019].

Learner-content interaction was found to be the most critical predictor of student satisfaction, and a significant predictor of perceived learning [Alqurashi, 2019]. However meaningful the content of a course may be, instructors need to “gently coerce a sustained exposure to material” [Rayens & Ellis, 2018, p.94] to keep students engaged and motivated. Both material delivery and relevance influence student engagement online [Muir, Milthorpe, Dymont, Freeman & Hopwood, 2019]. When it comes to higher education, structural influences such as curriculum and assessment have an impact on student engagement [Barnett & Coate, 2005].

In traditional offline classrooms, a positive classroom climate is important for student engagement and motivation [Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White & Salovey, 2012]. According to Kaufmann, Sellnow & Frisby [2016], there are certain dimensions of online learning climate: instructor’s behaviour, course content (structure and clarity), and students’ connectedness. These aspects have been mentioned above in relation to online students’ needs. Instructor planning, communication, and the active monitoring of student interaction all have the potential to establish a positive climate and rapport in order to engage students as part of a learning community [Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020].

Student engagement, mentioned in relation to a positive classroom climate, learner-learner and learner-instructor interaction, is a powerful factor that affects learning. Other influential engagement factors in online learning are effective self-study, an enriched education experience via the use of modern technologies, access to library resources, challenge and the use of critical thinking skills [Robinson & Hukking, 2008]. One more factor for engagement is the opportunity of active learning involving a deeper exploration of ideas and the application of knowledge in meaningful ways [Cole, Lennon & Weber, 2019].

When it comes to language learning online or at distance, similar needs and influences are in focus with the need for communication and interaction being even more acute as these aspects are the essence of language learning. Online language teaching integrates a variety of communication channels and modes, both synchronous and asynchronous [Stickler & Hampel, 2015]. To be in line with current thinking on language learning and acquisition, an online language course should provide opportunities for both meaning-focused input and output, deliberate language study and fluency development [Andrade, 2017].

Four tutor-related factors are thought to affect students’ learning motivation in online language learning [Xiao, 2012]. In Xiao’s study, teaching competence was found to be the most powerful motivational factor. Tutors’ personal characteristics such as commitment, empathy, acceptance, and egalitarianism were also highly rated by students. The motivating force of the student-teacher relationship was also acknowledged. In distance language learning it is manifested in a genuine concern for students and timely advice. Distance students value language teachers’ accessibility, ability to communicate the expectations, the provision of unambiguous, individualised and prompt feedback [Murphy, Shelley, White & Baumann, 2011].

The online environment gives multiple opportunities for the individualisation of language learning and the account for language learners’ needs. A variety of materials that can be found online can appeal to learners with various interests and needs. They may be differentiated to suit

learning styles and language levels. There is evidence of successful use of online tools for individualised writing instruction [Hsu & Liu, 2019], or the development of integrated skills [Blake, 2016]. Learners can be directed to some repositories for the selection of their own materials or to training sites for aspect training and skill automatisation. The teacher's role is one of a guide and counsellor for the student not to drown in the ocean of the resources of variable quality [DeCoito & Richardson, 2018].

The pandemic put tertiary education in a situation when the transition online was massive and fast. However, it still remains unclear how effective it was from the students' point of view, and if students' needs were met when languages were taught online. Therefore, this research aims to investigate tertiary language students' experience of the emergency transition and to identify if their learning and medium-related needs were met in the new environment.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

With the advent of the pandemic in March 2020, universities in Russia switched to online instruction. They combined synchronous teaching through video conferencing platforms and asynchronous communication via different means (e-mails, learning platforms and management systems) used in various proportions.

The study was held at a large university in Russia (HSE University, School of Foreign Languages). The participants of the study were 149 first to third year students and 69 instructors teaching modern languages at the Linguistics Department at HSE University.

The research was conducted in three stages. At the outset, a questionnaire was administered to language instructors with a response rate of 47%. They evaluated their abilities to move language classes online with relation to a number of aspects on the Likert scale, from very poor (1) to very good (4). The instructors were asked to self-evaluate their abilities to:

- use online resources for language teaching;
- plan online instruction;
- develop learning materials for online language instruction;
- organise synchronous group communication;
- organise asynchronous group communication;
- engage students when teaching languages online;
- organise pair and group work during synchronous sessions;
- provide access to materials for self-study;
- adapt resources to students' needs;
- provide the choice of learning materials;
- meet their students' individual needs;
- motivate learners when teaching languages online;
- spend the time at synchronous sessions effectively;
- apply an individual approach;
- give students feedback.

The questions were based on the aspects revealed through the review of the literature. The other questions inquired about the instructor's experience of language teaching in the online environment and the comparison of the effectiveness of online and traditional language instruction.

At the second stage, after a 2-months period of online instruction, a questionnaire was submitted to the students. The response rate was 19%. The multiple-choice questions were related to de-

mographic information and students' online learning experience. The Likert scale question stems included the characteristics of student-centered and individualised teaching parallel to the ones in the questionnaire for the instructors, e.g.:

My language instructor organises and monitors communication in-between synchronous sessions.

I get detailed constructive feedback on my performance from my language instructor.

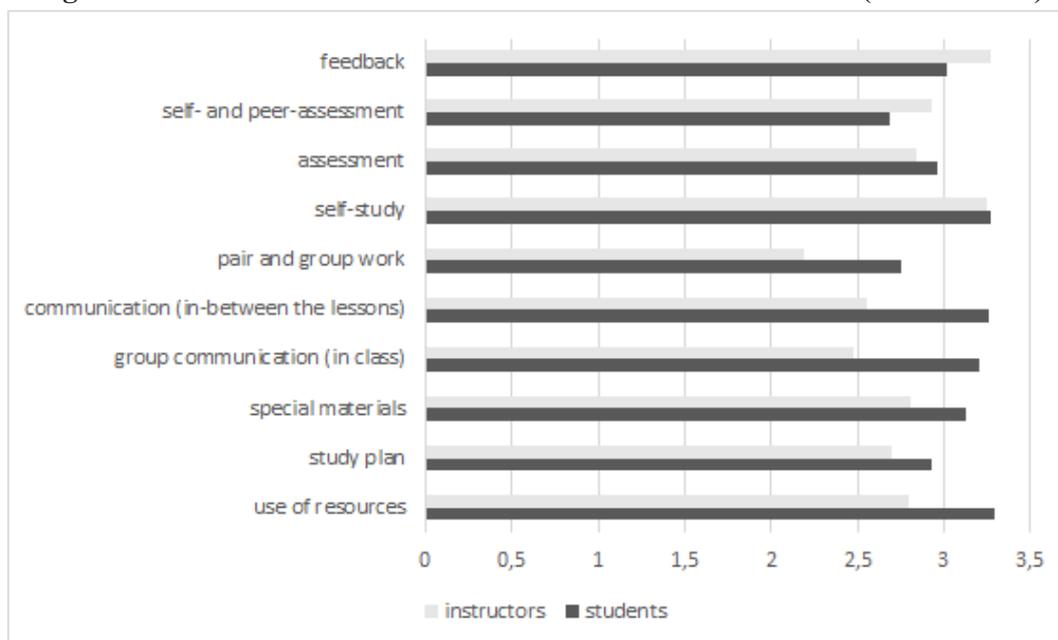
The students could add a comment explaining each answer. The comments were subject to qualitative thematic analysis, while the numerical data were analysed statistically. To understand if there is a correlation between the variables, pair correlations were calculated.

At the third stage, in December 2020, twenty language instructors were interviewed. The interview questions were related to the problematic areas revealed at the previous stage such as the account for the learners' needs, limited opportunities for interaction, reduced motivation and engagement. The answers were transcribed and analysed thematically.

4. STUDY AND RESULTS

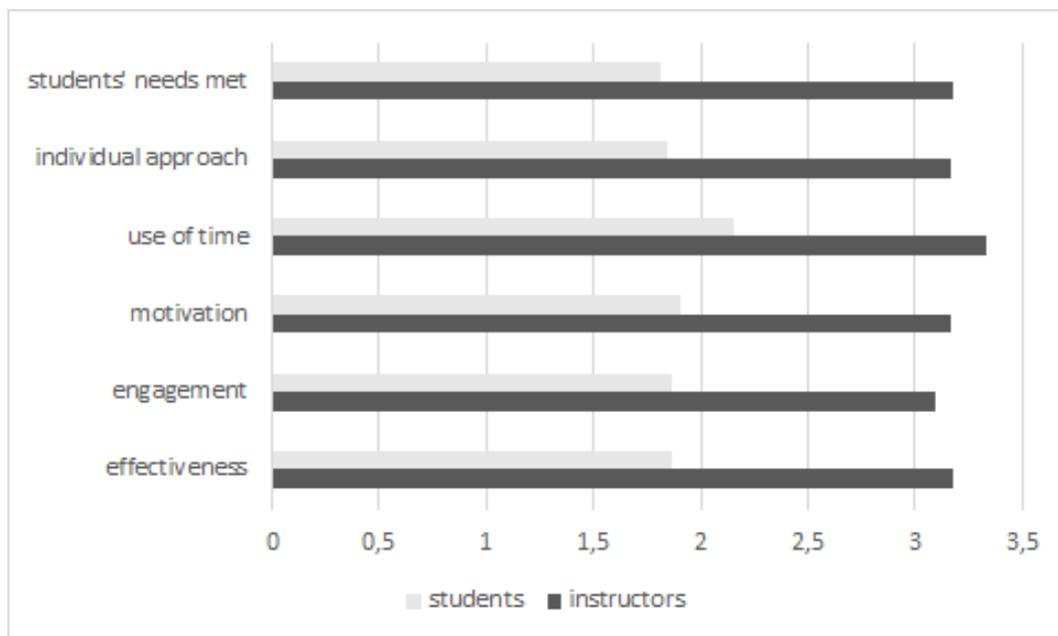
For the majority of aspects the students' perceptions and the instructors' self-evaluations coincided. As Figure 1 reflects, the students' evaluation was even more favourable than the self-evaluation of their instructors. The median values for both students' and instructors' answers equal 3, with standard deviations ranging from 0.795 to 1.191 (students) and 0.846 to 1.088 (instructors).

Figure 1. Students' evaluation and instructors' self-evaluation (mean values)



However, opinions differed on some aspects. As can be seen from Figure 2, students felt that their needs were not met in online language instruction, that their instructors implemented an individual approach, motivated or engaged them. They also felt that time at synchronous language classes was not used effectively, and the overall effectiveness of online language classes was low compared to offline instruction. The answers to these questions for the students and the instructors differed with less than 1% error.

Figure 2. Students' evaluation and instructors' self-evaluation of the aspects that evoke contradiction (mean values)



Correlational analysis showed that a moderate to strong correlation is present in the relationships among the variables related to individualised and student-centered teaching, and these variables have impact on the perceived effectiveness of learning. The strongest correlation is observed between motivation and engagement (see Table 1).

Table 1. Correlation between the aspects

	engage ment	effective ness	motivation	ind_ approach	needs
engagement	100.0%	72.3%	80.2%	77.4%	66.5%
effectiveness	72.3%	100.0%	70.4%	68.0%	67.2%
motivation	80.2%	70.4%	100.0%	74.1%	71.3%
ind_approach	77.4%	68.0%	74.1%	100.0%	71.4%
needs	66.5%	67.2%	71.3%	71.4%	100.0%

No significant correlation with prior experience of online learning was found for any of the variables, neither for the students nor for the instructors.

Overall, the instructors were more positive about the transition than the students were. Almost a third of the latter (32.1%) considered online language instruction only slightly inferior to the offline learning experience, while almost a half (44%) thought its quality was considerably lower. Conversely, 43.5% of the instructors were sure the instruction they provide in the online medium is only slightly worse compared to what they do in a regular classroom.

Thematic analysis of students' open answers allowed the researcher to shed light on the aspects that demonstrated the discrepancy in the students' perceptions and the instructors' self-evaluation. Figure 3 shows the most frequent lexemes.

Figure 3. The most frequent lexemes in students' open answers

In the students' open answers, the following issues to the fore (ranged in the order of frequency):

- instructors' competencies and actions;
- time invested in asynchronous work;
- use of time at synchronous classes;
- student-instructor interaction;
- reduced motivation and concentration.

The students feel that how effectively online language classes are conducted depends on the instructor. Some students mention that some instructors lack the necessary skills to organise online activities, conduct assessments, use the affordances of online platforms and available online instruments. The vocabulary games and discussions, regular in a traditional language classroom, were difficult to adapt to the online environment, and the instructors avoided them.

Time was mentioned in the open answers in relation to two broad categories. The students felt that studying in the online environment they invested more time compared to classroom learning as the number of assignments increased. Some students mentioned that the quality of the assignments decreased and the learners felt demotivated. Instructors' technological literacy and organisational skills affect whether time is effectively used at synchronous classes.

Some learners mentioned student-instructor interaction in relation to the inability to reach the instructor in-between synchronous sessions and not receiving timely feedback. At synchronous sessions it was inhibited by technological limitations and the students' inability to contribute to discussions. As synchronous platforms allow only consecutive contributions, student talking time was reduced. Some teachers avoided using breakout rooms for group and pairwork. Some mention the absence of a "live" contact with peers and instructors, which leads to reduced motivation and concentration.

Interviews with 20 language instructors revealed the ways in which the instructors meet their learners' individual needs, how they set up communication with the students, engage and motivate the learners. The instructors also spoke about the challenges they face when teaching online, and described the change in their students' attitudes and motivation. The summary of responses can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of instructors' interviews (N=20)

Aspect	Main themes
meeting students' needs	targeted detailed feedback (7*) variety of tasks, materials, interaction patterns (5) choice (4) peer teaching (2) student engagement (2) help with technical issues making people heard and accepted tasks for fast finishers
establishing communication	at synchronous sessions (9) corporate mail (4) messengers (2) learning platform (2) commentaries to works instructions and announcements
engaging and motivating students	variety (8) encouraging activity (8) account for opinion (5) materials (5) gamification (4) visualisation (3) assessment (2) atmosphere support pace
instructors' challenges	contact with students (13) technical difficulties (7) health (5) pace of synchronous classes (5) use of time (4) students' unfair practices (4) adaptation to format (3) organisation of activities (3)
perceived changes in students' attitudes and motivation	reduced student motivation and concentration (7) student motivation has not changed (7) marks are higher because students cheat in online tests (3) quality the same as in a live classroom (3) quality of students' works decreases

* - number of responses

The instructors mainly used targeted feedback as a tool to meet their learners' needs. One of them managed to adapt feedback to the environment: this instructor gave feedback via direct messages in Zoom, providing links to dictionaries or other sources if necessary. Some of them attempted to introduce a variety of tasks, materials, interaction patterns to meet their students' interests and to actively engage the learners. Some instructors gave the students a choice of what tasks to complete or in what way to do that. Variety, activity and account for students' opinion were also the major tools to engage and motivate the learners. Instructors select relevant, authentic and interesting materials and a few use online gamification platforms such as Kahoot to provide practice and engagement.

The instructors conceded that the main venue of communication were the synchronous sessions. Surprisingly, only a few used the corporate mail system for announcements and feedback, two used a Google classroom for the purpose. Only one instructor organised a chat room, where she asynchronously initialised discussions based on interesting materials and gave feedback on language.

The major challenge the instructors emphasise is the lack of contact with students at synchronous sessions. The instructors cannot rely on the students' reaction as the learners are reluctant to use their cameras. Without a face-to-face contact, it is difficult to establish rapport and translate empathy or interest. Like students, they are concerned by the pace of synchronous online sessions, the time spent on the resolution of technical or organisational issues, and the time needed to communicate a message successfully to the audience.

The instructors' opinions concerning the change in their students' attitudes and engagement in online language learning differed. Some of them noted that the students' motivation and concentration decreased compared to those in the offline environment, probably, due to the lack of academic atmosphere or time-management skills, while others saw no change. One instructor expressed the view that online widened the gap between those motivated for language learning and those un-eager to participate. The latter got the opportunity to hide behind the black screens and show no initiative.

5. DISCUSSION

When teaching in the online environment, instructors have to meet both students' individual needs and medium-related needs. Suddenly finding themselves in isolation, students had an acute need to communicate. Synchronous communication was inhibited by technical limitations; overloaded instructors were reluctant to sustain asynchronous communication. High quality and quantity interactions with their instructor are a powerful predictor of online student satisfaction [Alqurashi, 2019], and this lack of interaction may influence the perception of the effectiveness of online instruction. When an instructor can build rapport with and among students, they are able to mitigate the effects of loneliness on the students' experiences [Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020]. The loss of connection, both during synchronous sessions when students hid behind black squares or did not have the opportunity to contribute, and between these sessions, when the students could not reach the instructor, may have led to the loss of motivation. Reduced motivation may be explained by an opportunity to be passive at synchronous sessions or cheat in tests, and get away with it.

The transition moved language classes online, but no learning environment seems to have been created. The instructors tried to mimic online what they did in the classroom, which did not quite work. Apart from the instructor's presence, a learning environment may include a variety of materials fully accessible which learners can cover at their own pace, a plan with learning clearly mapped and logically sequenced [Muir, Milthorpe, Dymont, Freeman, & Hopwood, 2019]. Not only do these factors give a feeling of connection but also a sense of stability and predictability of the future, so much required at the time of pandemic. Some instructors used targeted feedback, variety and choice to meet their students' needs and interests, however, these practices were not spread beyond synchronous sessions.

The concept of individual needs brings us to the concept of individualisation, which is based on a number of assumptions about the differences in how people choose to learn: students have preferred ways of learning and sources of information, they value different teaching styles and have a variety of goals for language learning [Logan, 1990]. Personalised learning helps each student engage in the learning process in the most productive and meaningful way [Watson & Reigeluth, 2008]. The new medium required the instructors to find new ways to individualise and personalise language learning. Though the interviewed instructors attempted to do that by providing choice and variety of tasks, they barely used online resources for the practice of language material.

Being able to search, evaluate and re-purpose materials, develop new uses for online tools in a creative way are the skills language teachers working online need to possess [Compton, 2009]. Such skills allow instructors to design tasks that “enable students to interact and collaborate in multiple modes while not overloading them cognitively” [Hampel, 2009, p. 44]. However, these skills need development, and considerable time is necessary to redesign materials and to think of creative uses of online applications. Not always possessing the basic technical skills, the instructors were not able to develop “higher order” skills of technology use that can be used for individualisation and personalisation purposes.

Teaching online has specific features which language instructors at university need to be made aware of. Mid-career and senior faculty find online teaching especially challenging [Mansbach & Austin, 2018]. The ability to use technology in a principled manner is just one of the competencies distance and online teachers need to have. Online teachers need to know how to stimulate active participation and collaboration to maintain students’ interest in the subject matter and learning [Jones and Youngs, 2006]. Training should be conducted to make the transition to online smoother and more effective. As Hampel & Stickler [2005] rightfully suggest, training for online instructors should incorporate socialization techniques for online groups. Such simple techniques as icebreaker/introduction discussions and collaborative projects involving the use of online communication tools are beneficial for student engagement, as regular announcements or email reminders are an efficient way to keep in contact with the instructor [Martin, & Bolliger, 2018].

Such aspects as student engagement, class interaction, feedback are difficult to manage online because in online environments these functions are executed in a different manner [Reinders, 2012]. When teaching online instructors need to make up for the absence of non-verbal cues that constitute a significant part of face-to-face communication, so “tutors need to develop more skills and techniques in verbalising those aspects of their teaching that rely on non-verbal communication, in some cases unconsciously, in other contexts as well as in differentiated teaching, guiding and supporting students through the learning programme” [Murphy, Shelley, White & Baumann, 2011, p. 411].

Instructor competencies necessary for online language teaching include a variety of skills, so teacher training should not focus on technical skills only, but include planning, engagement, motivation and support aspects.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Students’ and instructors’ experience of online language learning is on the research agenda as it allows researchers to discover their perceptions and motivations and, therefore, increase the effectiveness of instruction [White, 2014]. This research analysed tertiary students’ and their instructors’ perceptions of the emergency of online learning with the accent on individualisation and accounting for learners’ needs. It has been shown that the students did not feel that their needs were met in the online environment or that learning was individualised, and these feelings negatively influenced the perception of the effectiveness of learning. The failure to establish necessary communication patterns or motivate the students may be explained by the lack of time, organisation, awareness and experience. Relevant training can help overcome this issue as online language teaching provides instruments and techniques for interaction, socialisation and individualisation.

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