VETERINARY STUDENTS' PREFERENCES FOR AN INTEGRATED ESL EXPERIENCE

Zh. Gundasheva*, N. Naydenova

Department of Social Sciences and Business Language Training, Faculty of Economics,
Trakia University, Stara Zagora

ABSTRACT

A survey with veterinary students on their preferences for an integrated foreign language learning experience was launched in April 2021. Students were asked to select the options they find valid and suitable for the improvement of their academic performance in ESL. The methodology included analysis of the relations between demographic characteristics, learning styles, individual vs. group learning, autonomous preparation, communicative and integrated vs traditional methods and approaches, learner and teacher roles, content and language-integrated learning and intercultural aspects of their education. The results were processed with a statistical software which compared the means established between the different sections. Significant correlations between the demographic characteristics and the items related to autonomous learning and intercultural aspects were found. Other correlations between the confidence of learners and their motivation to communicate in English were also exemplified. The discussion explains the variations in the individual answers and includes an analysis of the selections and the open questions. The conclusions inferred from the learners' input draw a pertinent picture of the aspects of ESL experience addressed by learners studying under mixed teaching media and suggest some improvements for a better integrated language learning.

Key words: learner preferences, ESL, survey, mixed media

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most salient question in this paper will be to draw the outlines of an integrated foreign language course. It is a course which combines learning language through a planned and structured interesting and useful selection of tasks and activities that aim to train the learner in a focused and purposeful way. And this has been the point of learning a language – to develop communication skills and prepare the group for reacting adequately and using the language fluently in a number of everyday situations. The other stages of teaching a language course may besummarized as mainstream and transitional.

*Correspondence to: *Zhenya Gundasheva, University Campus, Trakia University, Stara Zagora, 6000, tel.: 0878104450, email: jenia.gundasheva@trakia-uni.bg*

Mainstream will include the classroom experience with less digitalization and more teacher-focused learning, where students learn to follow and memorize and rarely have the chance for individual or group interaction with either their peers, or their instructor in the foreign language. Mainstream classes are held in larger groups (20+) and tend to have a lower level of participant motivation and achieve standard results. The transitional stage has been abruptly introduced as an experimental form of digital learning environment during the synchronous and asynchronous online education since 2020 as an alternative to face-to-face teaching. The teaching methods rely on online platforms, conference talks, digital resources and reformulated learning content which has been changing its approaches to adapt to the realities of this indirect teaching

experience. These stages may also be defined as pre-online (mainstream), online (transitional) and post-online (integrated).

Preference is the affiliation which students have for a certain type of behavior or activity that is enacted during the learning process. It is the likelihood for more successful learning by expecting an adaptation of pedagogical methods and approaches to the current and future realities of the educational process.

Related work
Pedagogical methods in foreign language teaching have been changing from predominantly teacher-based, to learner-based to AI-assisted personalized learning. In recent years the various approaches based on enhancing communication through the use of technology include the following innovations.

Blended learning, defined by Bonk and Graham (2006) as "face-to-face instruction that combines elements of computer-mediated instruction" (1). This type of learning currently involves the use of massive open online courses (MOOCs) or digital platforms such as Moodle and Blackboard combined with in-person instruction. This approach has been largely used in the transitional stage of teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic in Bulgaria. Its broad scope covers new tools from the technology-enhanced repertoire and negotiations between learners and teachers in the process of reaching the best solution for the personalization of their education.

Flipped classrooms, where instruction is inverted and instead of lectures students are stimulated to share and discuss their impressions of the lesson content assigned for processing at home. Some of the most widely used resources for flipped classrooms are drawn from Khan Academy which allows learners of various ages and backgrounds to access and process information in a free video-lecture form. The videos are used and recommended for and by students of veterinary science also at Trakia University, and respondents of the survey actually associated online learning with watching recordings and using resources in their subjects from this website.

Problem or task-based learning, where students participate in the tackling of challenges and their relation to the real world and integrate their linguistic knowledge to the specific situations that are given at task. Task-based learning asks students to perform goal-oriented activities which demand real purpose, sequence and grading (2).

Gamification in ESL is relatively a novelty concept, being applied for its positive, game-structured elements in a community or class of students who will enjoy the more ludic organization of the teaching process with educational objectives (3). Gamification can have a motivation-enhancing effect that involves six principal perspectives applicable to foreign language learning: trait, behavioristic learning, cognitive, self-determination, interest, and emotion, explained in the work of Sailer, Hense, Mandl and Kelvers (2013). (4)

There are several alternative terms, associated with virtual learning environment or the more recent *technology-enhanced learning*. *Online learning environments* are defined as a place where individuals may use learning resources to create meaningful information (5). The same authors also add that such environment may be autonomous, pedagogically reasoned and providing synchronous or asynchronous communication between learners and teachers who may participate in the learning process at any time or place without the need to be physically together. *Digital learning environment* and *digital learning* are more related to the spread of knowledge with the support of ICT in the everyday life and teaching practices of learners at secondary and tertiary level (6). *E-learning* as a more general term combines online learning, web-based learning and computer-based learning.

The advent of massive online open courses (MOOCs) changed the landscape in a significant way by opening the way to interactive e-platforms, video lectures, learning resources and accessibility of learning. The majority of courses - 75% according to recent estimates (7), are offered in English which creates a foreign language environment that is used by various learners of the language. The covid-19 situation enhanced these practices and accelerated the

technology for teaching and learning (TL). Naydenova et al. (2012) (8) have emphasized the possibilities of the digital classroom that could change the interaction between the stakeholders. Teachers and students, as participants in the learning process have expressed their preferences for specific methods or learning styles. In his study of preferences of ESL learners Willing (1987) (9) identified how differences in cognitive learning styles affected learners' preferences in the following six different areas:

- preferences for particular kinds of classroom activities;
- preferences for particular types of teacher behaviour;
- preferences for particular grouping arrangements;
- preferences for particular aspects of language which need emphasis;
- preferences for particular sensory modes, such as visual, auditory, or tactile learning; and
- preferences for particular modes of learning on one's own outside class.

This taxonomy has been largely applied to this research as well when creating the framework of questions that are included in the survey. Teaching with respect to learning styles can be seen as a method. It is also a perspective into how some receptive skills are mastered with greater ease than others. Even though the individual student is being molded into a more passive recipient of knowledge, in an English class they find themselves far more stimulated to express themselves, to engage in discussions and to apply background knowledge into the tasks given and coordinated by the teacher.

Artificial intelligence is an inviting prospect in the field of education for many reasons. According to a UNESCO report in 2020: "AI will play a pivotal role in helping to realize the promise of personalized learning — the ability to tailor the delivery, the content and the pace of learning to the specific needs of each individual student. The ability to ingest data from multiple data sources, interrogate that data and to derive Insights — using tools such as predictive analytics and machine learning — is what makes AI such an exciting advancement in education technology." (10) The future use of AI for

integrating methods and skills in the ESL classroom could involve processing of information and adaptation of the software requirements to personalized learning. AI could be a solution and may become a fast and reliable smart tool for digitalizing that experience. Some of the possible actions for using an AI in a language course could be:

- Use artificial intelligence tools to adapt a course to learner's preferences and customize a course through addressing the needs and defining the focus and areas of language study.
- Incorporate vocabulary, grammatical structures and stylistic correction resources to create a corpus of learner's work, input and errors, then use that corpus to analyze written production, creating assignments and tasks.
- Use the suggestions deduced from the corpus to analyze the statistics for the learner's progress in a given area, investigate the population of learners taught through AI and reach more learners who interact meaningfully for an integrated learning experience.

The incorporation of methods that may enhance the ability of students to learn better can be facilitated by the choices that students are allowed to make consciously about their educational process. In this respect their motivation will increase and they will be able to receive a personalized form of training that meets and responds to their interests. It could also involve psychological factors of the mainstream classroom that will either ameliorate or exacerbate the performance of learners (11).

MATERIALS AND METHODS
An online Likert scale questionnaire was prepared to test the preferences for English learning of students in Veterinary Medicine at Trakia University. It was distributed in April 2021 and followed a year of transitional teaching experience that is still questionable in terms of methodology and structured practice.

A survey was motivated by the interest in diagnosing the elements and factors of integrated learning experience. It was substantiated by items related to preferences already elicited from various language learners. Some of the items

were based on the personal experience of learners who shared their feedback in class. Others were suggestions that proposed an opportunity to express a reasonable wish to introduce changes to the teaching practices which will inevitably become more common in the near future.

The survey included demographic information, items related to learning styles, teaching methods and approaches, roles of teachers and students, autonomous learning, individual vs. group learning, CLIL and intercultural aspects. The number of students who filled out the form online was 61, most of whom studying English for Veterinary Science in their first and second year at the university. The results were then processed using an ANOVA statistical software and correlations between the different items were determined. This paper will include a more focused analysis of the correlations between teacher's and students' roles and methods and approaches.

RESULTS

Students who have a family member who is fluent at English report a statistically significant preference to expecting the teacher to correct their mistakes at all times. Perhaps this is reflected in the ways the foreign language is being used with immediate feedback from the family circle, which also adds a competitive edge and expectation to merge the figure of the language teacher with the role of the family member as an authority in the learning process.

The students who are planning on working or studying in a foreign country reveal a statistically significant difference in learning the language better when they are in contact with students from other countries during or outside class, compared to those who are not planning on travelling abroad. There is also a direct correlation between them and those who feel uneasy or embarrassed to talk to native speakers or speakers of foreign languages in English.

Students report that they would feel more autonomous if they could exercise their own judgment on negotiating the importance and relevance of the learning content. They also feel that the support of their autonomy would lead to a more creative, free and successful performance

and individual expression. Their wish to increase their competences in the foreign language and to reflect on their progress should be stimulated in class and individually so that their input may be recognized and acknowledged accordingly.

There is also an interesting significant correlation between the age of respondents and the autonomy of learning. The respondents at the age of 25+ are more inclined to learn more foreign languages, while the group between 19 and 25 years are more pragmatically oriented to language learning. The older ones are less confident in their success, compared to the younger ones who also tend to be more unrealistic about their expectations.

In **Figure 2** the mean values for the methods and approaches section are all above 3.00, which indicates that respondents consider the items as meaningful. The items related to using the internet are expectedly regarded as high. Another item, which refers to the psychological and attitudinal base of teaching is treating students with respect and attention and it attracted the highest score compared to all other items. The choices that mark a lower impact on learning are switching to entire online teaching and making presentations or speeches as part of the lesson.

The items describing the role of the teacher can be subdivided into three groups: (1) items 50-53 – aspects of control that refer to the teacher's influence on classroom activities; (2) items 54-56 – the importance of designing materials on the classroom experience; (3) 58 – teacher's responsibility on student's growth. **Table 1** shows the significant dependences between the teacher's role and the proposed methods and approaches.

The highest number of dependences are visible for items 52 (I learn better without a teacher) and 59 (The teacher is the only authority in class) which stand at the two most distant poles of the teacher's role in the learning process. Students who have selected that computer apps are faster and better than traditional teaching have also given preference to less teacher involvement. The other results address the significantly important dependences between the role of the teacher as a guide and mentor (53) and the use of authentic materials (45), imitating communication patterns and models (35), reading and hearing translations in class (46), and

most notably – when learners are treated with respect and understanding (49).

***Table 1.** Significant correlations between teacher's role and teaching methods*

	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49
50			0,49	0,64				0,46				0,45		0,44	0,40	0,46		0,49
51	0,37				0,39	0,48	0,36	0,34	0,35	0,60		0,40	0,33					
52	0,36				0,36	0,50	0,51	0,33	0,39	0,69	0,43	0,37	0,44				0,31	
53			0,44	0,50					0,41		0,40			0,51	0,46	0,57		0,58
54	0,38	0,33	0,42	0,61					0,43			0,35		0,56	0,57	0,58		0,50
55	0,33	0,51				0,42	0,39	0,33		0,51		0,44					0,33	
56					0,36				0,33				0,48	0,32	0,47			0,55
57	0,53		0,40	0,49	0,33						0,34	0,46		0,33		0,32		0,42
58	0,47	0,33				0,46				0,50	0,32	0,42						
59	0,53	0,54	0,37	0,48	0,48	0,41		0,31	0,31	0,37		0,44			0,33			

Legend to Table 1: (Methods and approaches) 32-I learn better through games and role plays, 33-I learn better when I am stimulated to work on group projects, 34-I am motivated to learn when I participate more in discussions, 35-I learn better through imitating communication patterns and models, 36-I learn better when I use interactive online learning platforms, 37-I prefer to have all exercises online, 38-I prefer to use an online dictionary for self-study, 39-I prefer to use less electronic equipment when I study, 40-I learn better when I use internet resources on various subjects, 41-I think computer apps are faster and better than traditional teaching, 42-I would like to learn more about large databases of words and expressions in multilingual corpora, 43-I learn better if I do a lot of grammar exercises, 44-I learn better when I use the language integrated with new concepts and structures without focusing specifically on grammar rules, 45-I learn better when my communication skills are activated with authentic situations and materials, 46-I learn better when I read and hear the translation of texts in class, 47-I learn better through active spoken communication, 48-I learn better when I prepare a speech or a presentation and deliver it in class, 49-I learn better when I am treated with respect and understanding; (Teacher's role) 50-I learn better when the teacher controls the class activities, 51- I learn better when there is less teacher-centered learning, 52-I learn better without a teacher, 53-The teacher should be a guide and mentor, 54-The teacher should prepare interesting and stimulating activities, 55-The teacher should follow the textbook and the curriculum regardless of the interests and needs of learners, 56-The teacher should adapt her teaching to learners' needs and abilities, 57-The teacher should correct my mistakes at all times, 58-The teacher is responsible for my growth, 59-The teacher is the only authority in class.

Table 2 shows the significant correlations between student's roles and methods and approaches. Here students have expressed an interest in learning through larger databases of multilingual corpora (42) – a digital resource that they perhaps are curious to discover, and most salient – the psychological need to be treated at all times with respect and understanding (49).

The role of the student that has revealed a highest value in correlation terms is 60 – Students should be more responsible for their own learning. The students who recognize themselves as independent and responsible learners are more likely to prefer the selection of authentic materials and situations in their courses.

***Table 2.** Significant correlations between student's role and teaching methods*

	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49
60	0,43		0,36	0,49	0,41				0,62		0,45	0,46		0,68	0,51	0,52	0,32	0,69
61	0,35		0,43	0,32		0,31			0,35		0,44	0,53		0,45		0,41		0,67
62									0,32		0,33		0,36	0,45		0,35		0,35
63	0,31				0,33	0,32	0,55			0,49	0,35		0,35					0,32
64			0,44		0,40		0,36	0,31	0,33		0,33		0,48	0,39	0,35	0,45	0,49	0,38
65			0,38		0,40			0,40	0,42		0,32	0,39	0,43	0,44	0,37			0,38
66			0,55	0,49	0,33				0,66		0,54	0,41		0,69		0,55	0,39	0,56
67	0,31		0,50	0,68					0,40		0,36			0,69	0,43	0,57		0,69

Legend to Table 2: 32-49 – as in Table 1; (Student's role) 60 -Students should be more responsible for their learning, 61-Students must be more active and participate more, 62-Students can be passive, but still learn from the teaching process, 63-Students should be more independent, 64-Students should be more creative and proactive, 65-Students should be evaluated fairly according to their input and effort, 66-Students should participate in conferences and forums, 67-Students must use the university resources to do something for themselves

DISCUSSION

The digital environment has the ability to mimic the communicative situations where the foreign language is used with increased imitative effect, increased communicative patterns from authentic materials for written and audible communication to understand and convey information and to relate to the interlocutor. The choice that teachers make when they personalize an activity is always justified by the usefulness of this activity for a group of students, especially when this group is very heterogenous. The preferences of students could be due to their previous training with success and failure defined by other authority figures – parents, teachers, peers, role models. And their "failures" – denounced by the same persons leading to lower expectations and less fulfilment.

The mean value of students who claim that they don't require a teacher in **Figure 4** is the lowest of all possible means. The number of students who think that the teacher is the only authority in the classroom is however surprisingly high.

Despite all efforts to diminish the effects of teacher-centered education in the language classroom, it turns out that students still experience the reflex of expecting the actions of the teacher to rule and guide them as a group. Students feel more secure when there is an authority figure in the classroom, which varies with the age and fluency level of individuals. Learning per se is seen as a guided activity, whether it is performed as a group in collaboration (very low results on the individual-group learning), or as an individual, competitive action (the common case). The integrated classroom experience could combine a competitive element in games and plays and thus reinforce the stimulus for excelling and performing at one's best, giving and receiving a behaviorist reward for committing to a certain learning ritual, specific for the classroom and the teacher. The questionnaire actually emphasizes the communication routines of language learning, and gives less credit to individual personality traits of teachers and students.
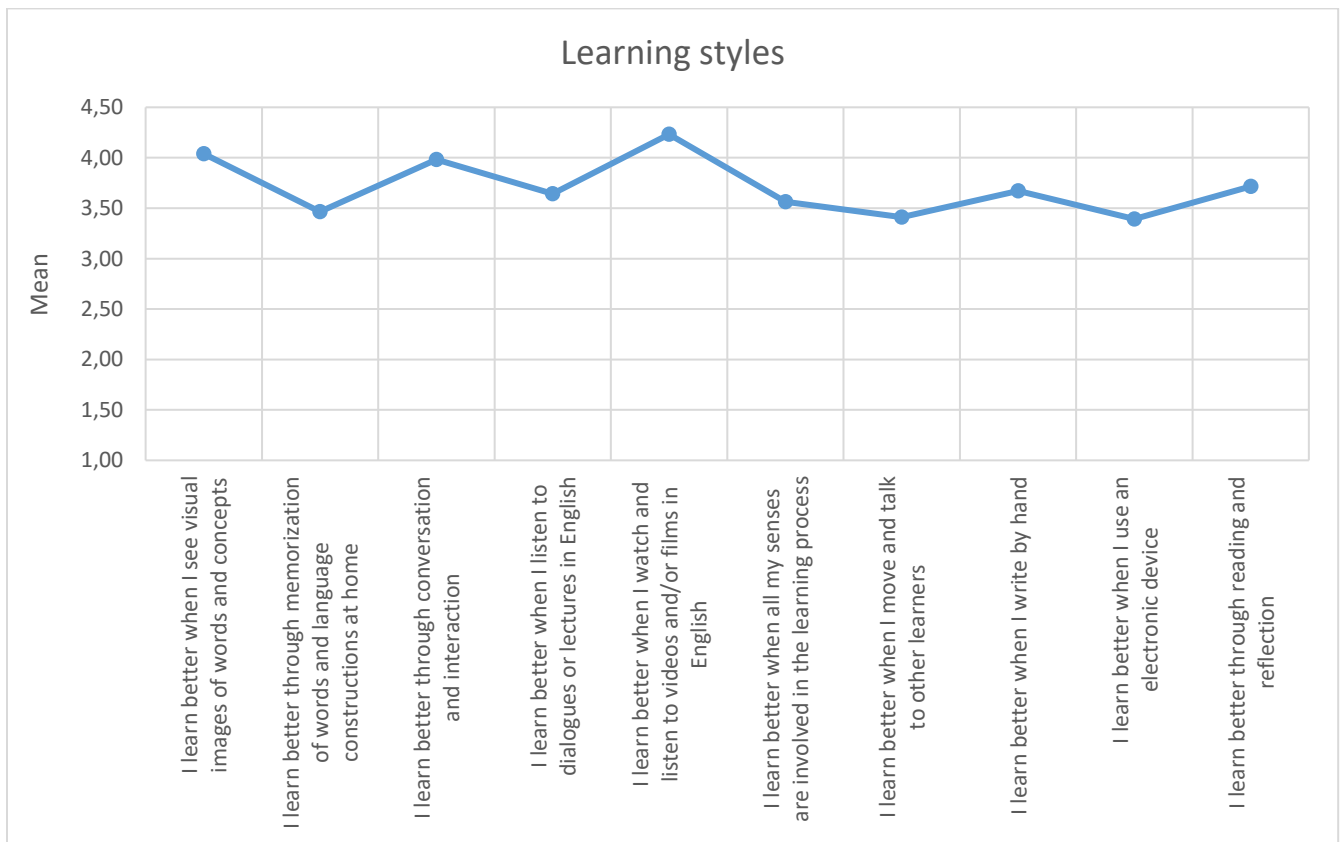

Figure 1. Statistical means with respect to the group of items under Learning Styles
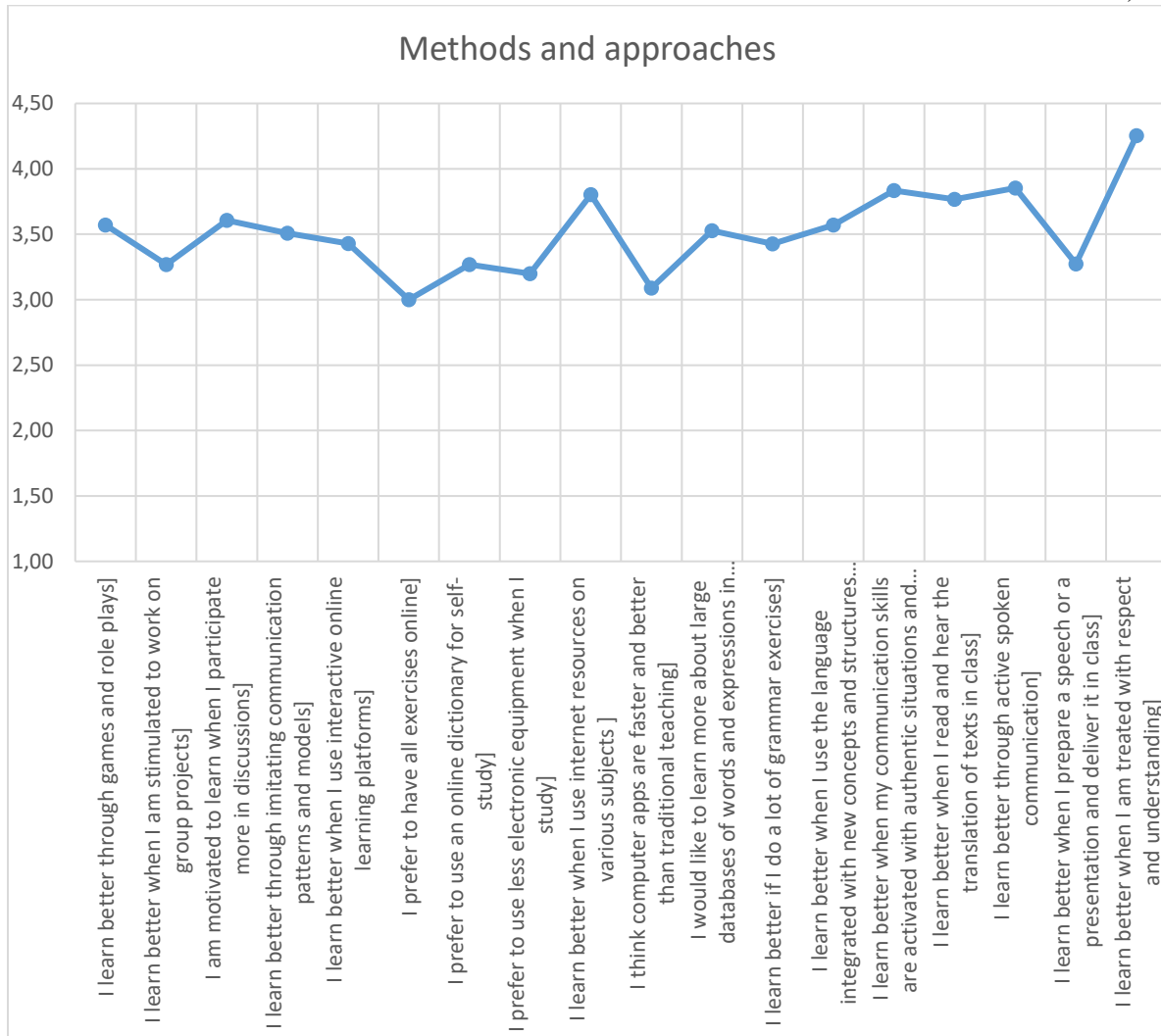
Figure 2. Statistical means with respect to the group of items under Methods and Approaches

What comes up as an interesting change is the shift from the expectation and trust in the teacher and the sense of independence and confidence that learners can learn without one. Online education has reaffirmed the hypothesis that learners may become more independent when teachers shift the focus of the classroom from seeing the teacher as a main supplier of information and guidance to relying on learners' judgment to progress at their own speed, be addressed as individuals and be respected for their choices in learning. That is, online resources can serve as a substitute for drill work and create a niche for teachers to bridge the way from teacher-dependent to teacher-independent, from reliance on a particular course book to carefully designed courses with materials that match the interests and needs of students. The nature of digital resources offers an immense corpus of authentic materials

available online. Most students are exposed to such content in English and are used to manipulating it – understanding the gist, scanning/ reading the pages, listening and watching audio/video recordings of native speakers.

The function, role and action of the teacher in the virtual classroom as evidenced by the transitional stage of online learning have changed. The survey shows that students rely on the internet and digital learning apps more than traditional teaching **(Figure 1 and 2).** Changes from in-person to online format accelerated the digital transformation and tested digital literacy of teachers, students and the administration. Students who are more independent require less instruction and are happier with digital tools for asynchronous learning that served as an experiment aiming to become a lasting alternative.

The fast pace of technology development that improves daily will inevitably lead to a more efficient selection and manipulation of data, especially in language learning. The expanding and updating options of learning software at present reflects the natural behaviour of learners who are quickly acquiring digital knowledge and expertise. Platforms, such as Google Meet and Zoom characterize the quick transitional change from mainstream classroom teaching to integrated learning that is better adapted to our human needs. The use of such alternatives saves time, travel costs, it is more efficient, leaves more time for preparation and focused writing, allows better planning and more participants. The problems are related to the risk of "absenteeism" and non-attendance, or hidden attendance and attempts for cheating the system.

The envisioned change consists in the independent organization of time, requires more discipline and effort, and does not rely on chance and random factors (except disruptions in the internet connection), greater trust in students and their honesty and genuine interest in learning a foreign language. An integrated language learning experience will use more AI to design and conduct courses by making them a convincing simulacre of the real experience. This study proves that the preferences given by students note a palpable need for change that will place once again the learning process at its centre, assisted by stakeholders and a mixture of digital and human environment. The skills that will be ever more important in integrated learning are searching for information, interpreting, selecting, summarizing, sifting the important facts, drawing conclusions, formulating opinions, writing and expressing oneself with clarity and precision, analyzing, constructing a persuasive argument, being critical of a piece of writing. The very fundamental idea of the change is based on active participation, internal and external motivation, and independence and responsibility. In a study based on needs analysis of veterinary students in Bulgaria and Slovakia, it was discovered that the preferences for teaching English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) are motivated by the sense that students may be more proactive and show more autonomy in a personalized digital environment. (12)

What students prefer is to feel more immersed in enjoyable, useful activities, to make progress in, or do something with the language in non-threatening, stimulating environment. By following students' heartfelt affection for communication and their natural curiosity, a more positive and natural response can be evoked.
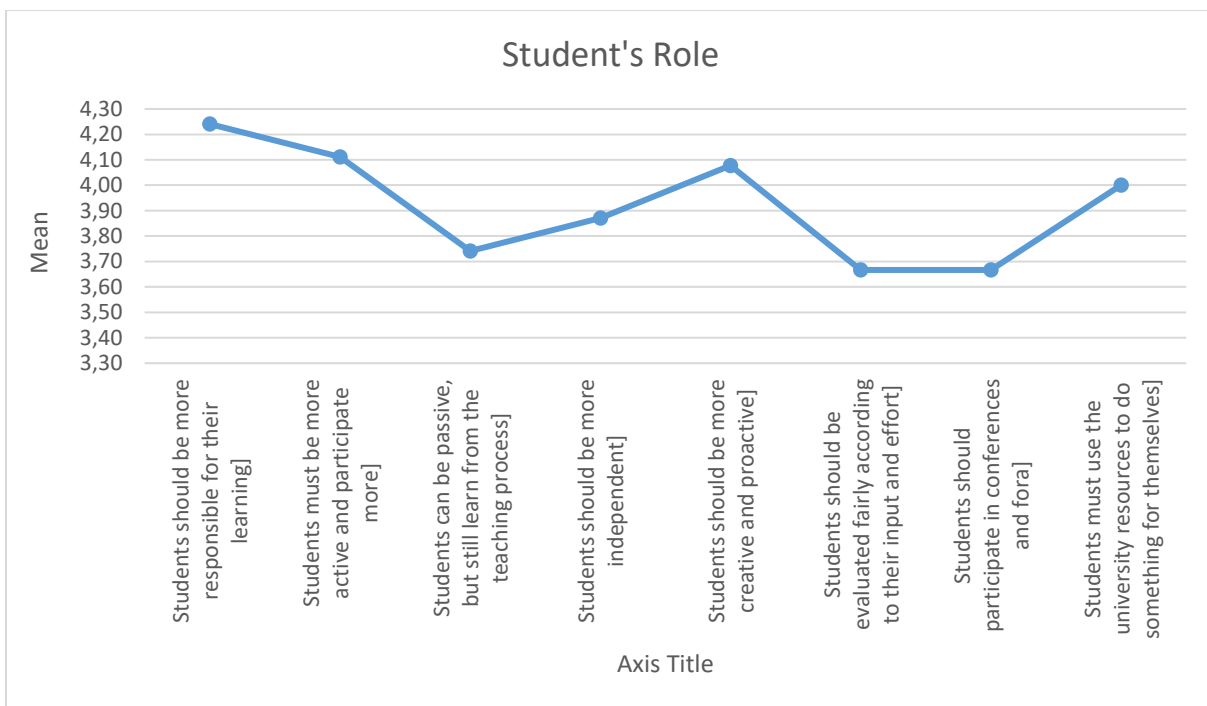

Figure 3. Statistical means with respect to the items under Student's Role
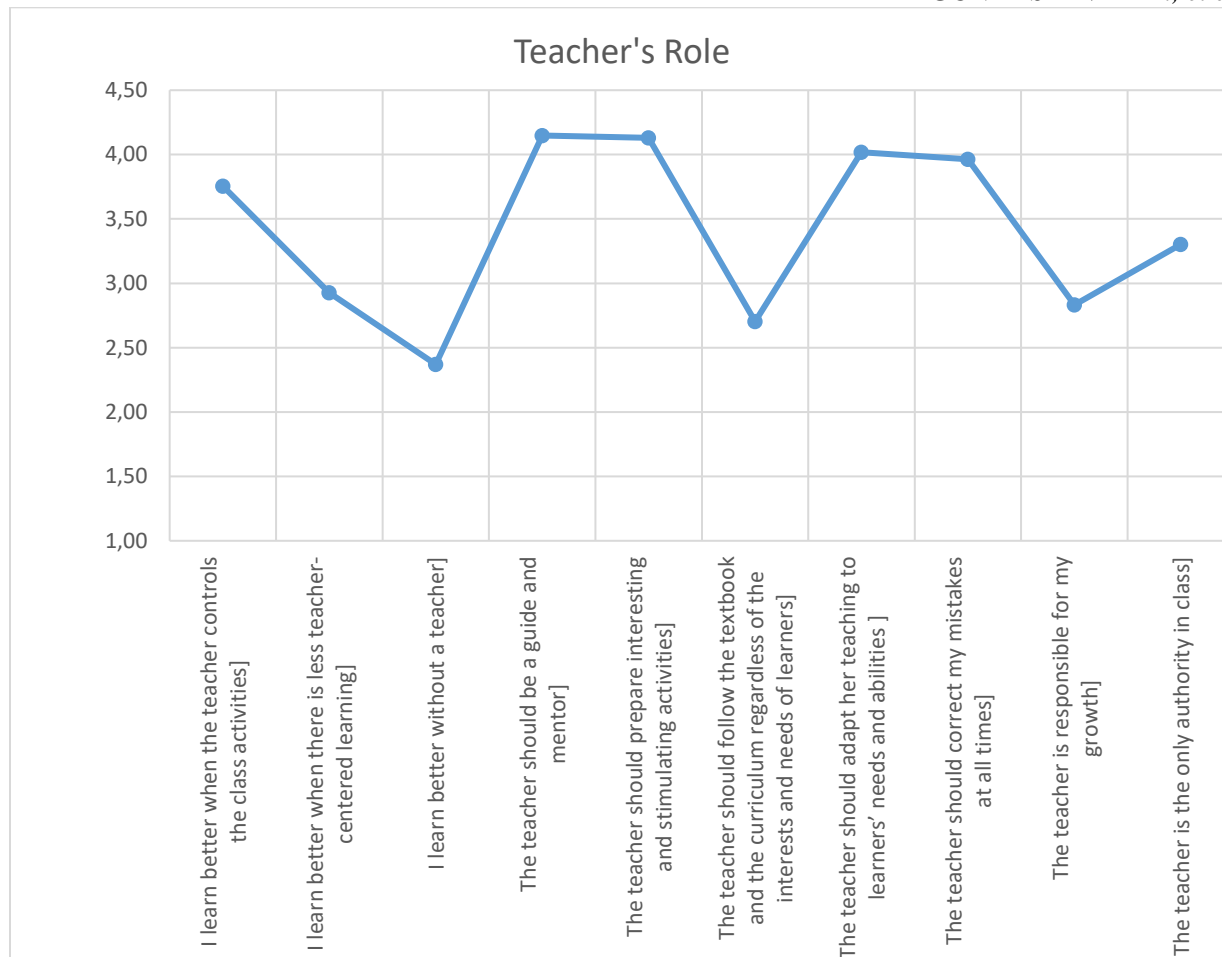
Figure 4. Statistical means with respect to the items under Teacher's Role

CONCLUSION

The current methods applied in teaching are motivated by, based on and implemented on expected results. The choices students make out of the available options for teaching actually allow them to analyze their own experience and think about the opportunities enhanced by technology. The items in the questionnaire reflected some of the methods used in mainstream teaching and some which are considered more digital, with a tendency to become more current. They did indeed become more used in experimental ways during the lockdown and showed that current generations will seek a different, more adequate form of teaching instead of classic instruction. The results showed that foreign language teaching has become a more fluid, flexible and positive field of study largely due to the unlimited resources available online and offline. In order to achieve a

more integrated experience we can adapt the medium and the teaching-learning methods, increase the degree of autonomous learning with respect to age, motivation and individual development. The role of the teacher tends to involve more guidance and mentorship, facilitation, monitoring, observation and skills in designing course materials, but also psychological and humane qualities that would greatly influence learners in their growth and training.

REFERENCES

1. Bonk, C.J. & Graham, C.R., The handbook of blended learning environments: Global perspectives, local designs. *San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer*, 2006
2. Rodríguez-Bonces, Mónica, & Rodríguez-Bonces, Jeisson, Task-based language learning: old approach, new style. a new

lesson to learn. *Profile issues in teachers` professional development*, 12(2):165-178, 2010. Retrieved July 31, 2021, from http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1657-07902010000200011&lng=en&tlng=en.

3. Figueroa, J., Using gamification to enhance second language learning. In: *Digital Education Review,* 21:32-54, 2015

4. Sailer, M., Hense, J.,Mandl, H.,Klevers, M., Psychological perspectives on motivation through gamification. *Interaction Design and Architecture(s) Journal - IxD&A*, 19:28-37, 2013

5. Kuzu, E.B. and Ceylan, B., Typographic properties of online learning environments for adults. – *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 9:879-883, 2010.

6. Dado, E. and Behesti, R., Digital learning environments for joint master in science programmes in building and construction in Europe: experimenting with tools and technologies. *Proceedings of the World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology*, 37:440-447, 2009.

7. Uchidiuno, Judith; Ogan, Amy; Koedinger, Kenneth R.; Yarzebinski, Evelyn; Hammer, Jessica, Browser language preferences as a metric for identifying ESL speakers in MOOCs. *Proceedings of the Third (2016) ACM Conference on Learning @ Scale. L@S '16. New York: ACM.* pp. 277–280, 2016

8. Naydenova, N., L. Georgieva, Zl. Asenova, T. Taneva Vazmozhnosti za digitalizirane na uchebnoto sadarzhanie po chuzhdoezikovo obuchenie vav VUZ (translated from the Bulgarian: Possibilities for digitalization of educational content in foreign language teaching at university). Proceedings from the *Jubilee International Congress "Science, Education, Technologies – 40 years Bulgaria – a Cosmic Country*. House of the Scientist – BAS, Varna, 267-274, 2012.

9. Willing, K. Learning Styles in Adult Migrant Education. Sydney: *NSW Adult Migrant Education Service*, 1987

10. Duggan, S., AI in Education: Change at the Speed of Learning. UNESCO IITE Policy Brief. 2020

11. Taneva, T. Psihologicheskiyat mikroklimat v uchilishte I efektivnost na obrazovatelniya protses. (translated from the Bulgarian: Psychological microclimate in schools and efficiency of the educational process) *Proceedings from First Balkan Conference "Education – global identity and cultural diversity",* Trakia University, Stara Zagora, ISBN: 954-314-004-9, c.107-113, 2003

12. Gundasheva Zh., Spasova L., Dvorska O., Petrillova M., Designing an innovative EAP/ESAP course for students of veterinary medicine based on a comparative needs analysis survey, *Proceedings from the 5th International Conference on Education and Design (ICED-2016)* South East European University Skopje & Tetovo, Macedonia, 2016.