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Online Language Learning in Virtual
Classrooms – an Analysis of Student
Perceptions

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This research study is dedicated to all of my best friends.

List of terminology

Accredited school: school recognized by the government as private educational associations – meaning that they can operate as a business in the state (Derwin, 2020).

Breakout rooms: isolated sessions of audio and video that are split off the main room meeting (Zoom Help Center, 2021, Joining & Starting Section).

Cloud computing: the delivery of computing services – including servers, storage, databases, networking, software, analytics, and intelligence – over the Internet (“the cloud”) to offer faster innovation, flexible resources, and economies of scale (Microsoft Azure, 2021).

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: an international standard for describing language ability. It describes language ability on a six-point scale, from A1 for beginners, up to C2 for those who have mastered a language (Cambridge Assessment, 2021).

Intrinsic motivation: motivation that "occurs when we act without any obvious external rewards. We simply enjoy an activity or see it as an opportunity to explore, learn, and actualize our potentials" (Cherry, 2019, *What Is Intrinsic Motivation?* Section).

Lingua franca: language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2020).

Online whiteboard: learning space where both teachers and students can write and interact with students in real time via the internet” (Asher, 2020, OLL Section).

List of abbreviations

CAGR: Compound Annual Growth Rate

CEFR: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

FLL: Foreign Language Learning

OLL: Online Language Learning

TLL: Traditional Language Learning

Abstract

This study addresses the success that the online language learning (OLL) instruction method achieved thanks to the usage and creation of virtual systems. It will also develop the importance of this type of teaching, its benefits and drawbacks, and the remarkable change that it caused on the industry of teaching, financially and ethically. The main goals were to find out if the success that OLL is experiencing is also present in the level of enjoyment and effectiveness of this instruction method especially, after being estimated that this market will be worth 21.2 billion USD by 2027 with a CAGR of about 20%. The method of this study was divided in two parts: an investigative study, to get a better understanding of how OLL private schools operated, followed by a questionnaire study, to examine the perception of these OLL students that are already enrolled in programs. The first study had as the participant the author and the second study surveyed a total of 15 OLL students. The results showed that 50% of these OLL private companies do not address their accreditation status; meaning, that these schools may not offer certifications that are accepted in other institutions or internationally. In addition, the majority of the surveyed students (60.00%) indicated that they only enjoy learning online sometimes, as most of the participants are taking OLL classes for professional and academic purposes and not for enjoyment or leisure purposes. Finally, it was also demonstrated that OLL is an effective instruction method, despite the lack of physicality and the differences that OLL might have with TLL. Therefore, it can be determined that OLL is an effective instruction method; however, research must be done before enrolling in an OLL programs to find out about their accreditation status.

Keywords: online language learning (OLL); traditional language learning (TLL); foreign language learning (FLL); virtual system; teaching

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1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Introduction

Currently, language learning has become part of the school curriculum in countries around the world, to the point where it has become one of the core subjects similar to mathematics and science; however, it has not always been like this. The origin of modern language education lies in the 17th century with the study and the teaching of the Latin, since in most of the Western World, Latin was considered the language of nobility, education, commerce, government, and religion for centuries. Therefore, Latin was recognized as the language of diplomacy and the lingua franca of Europe until the 16th century (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2020; De Neuville, 2020). One of the first courses for learning Latin that was complete and that covered the entire school curriculum – was *Opera Didactica Omnia* (1657). This course-book was written by John Amos Comenius, one of the first theorist to write about the methods for teaching languages and how the process of learning a language works. The author stated in *Opera Didactica Omnia* that the schoolroom should have models of artifacts or at least, pictures of them (De Neuville, 2020). Untill this day, multiple studies have confirmed that visual aids in foreign language teaching (FLT) are essential to guarantee the effectiveness of the learning process as they present the students with an explanation and/or information that they may not have understood if it was presented to them in a written or spoken way. Foreign language learners normally face difficulty while processing auditory information; therefore, providing a model is great supplementary material since it adds authenticity to the language input and erases the ambiguity caused (Zewary, 2011; Echevarria et al., 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Hence, what is essential for a foreign language learning (FLL) classroom, besides a prepared professor and a structured study guide, is the accessibility

to visual aids. Normally, what a person would visualize as an FLL schoolroom is a physical classroom setting; however, in today's day and age, it is very easy to create a classroom setting and to find easy access to visual aids with only the need of internet connection.

Thanks to the development of technology, FLL has been able to expand its industry to the cloud-computing market and create the online language learning (OLL) instruction method. Since the early 2000s, the OLL market has progressively grown in the private sector, especially as people were slowly getting more comfortable with education over the internet (Manegre & Sabiri, 2020; Meticulous Research, 2020). From the beginning, the success of OLL has been driven primarily by various reasons and specifically by globalization. Globalization affects many aspects of society, including language. This process has boosted the need of cross-border communication as it increased the intercommunication of language, especially of the English language (Poggensee, 2016; Meticulous Research, 2020). According to Language Magazine (2020), English is estimated to dominate the OLL market in 2020 and reports from that same year have showed that the English Language is the most demanded language to learn online in 2020, especially in China (Blanco, 2020; Zhang, 2019). Other factors that have been driven by globalization and that helped the growth and the success of the OLL market are the growing e-learning market and the penetration of artificial intelligence in e-learning. Nonetheless, there has been a newer and unexpected factor that gave the biggest boost to the success of OLL: the COVID-19 pandemic (Meticulous Research, 2020). In 2020, when COVID-19 was labeled a global pandemic, and cases were progressively increasing, the authorities of each nation were forced to impose a lockdown for the state's safety. In the educational field, lockdown consisted of the closure of

schools; affecting at least 290.5 million students and forcing the professionals on the field to come up with a new schedule and study guide within a week. This situation made online learning become the go-to option in all fields of education, as it ensured people's safety during the pandemic and it demonstrated its effectiveness as a teaching method (ProProfs, 2020; Simon, 2021). Consequently, OLL was slowly becoming the best option for people that are interested in learning languages. Overall, foreign language learning has been in demand for centuries and it has been increasing for the past years. Thanks to the advancement in technology and the creation of OLL, the access to this type of education has been easier and more affordable, which guaranteed the success of the OLL market.

This study is a continuation of Manegre and Sabiri (2020) study on OLL teacher's perceptions and its purpose is to present an analysis on the perspective of the students who are attending classes and learning a language of these online teaching institutions. In the theoretical background, the study focuses on the emergence of the OLL market, as well as developing the importance of this type of teaching, its effectiveness, its benefits and drawbacks, and the remarkable change it caused on the industry of teaching, both financially and ethically. Furthermore, in the method section, the study will present an investigation on how these different OLL companies operate, which includes a questionnaire study to find out the perceptions of the OLL students. As the analysis on student's perceptions follows the same methodology as the Manegre and Sabiri (2020) study, the main goals are the same: to find out the level of enjoyment and the level of effectiveness of these OLL classes – but this time, of students.

1.2. Online Language Learning (OLL)

According to Stern 2020, “[o]nline learning is education that takes place over the internet.” That is to say, an education that is not taken in a traditional classroom setting but across distance with the help of internet connection. It can also refer to the mix of more traditional methods such as correspondence courses and teleconferencing. This type of education is what is known as *e-learning* or *distance learning*, terms that had gained popularity within the past decade thanks to the continuous development of technology. By 2017, there were a total of 6.6 million students registered in online learning (Stern, 2020; Simon, 2021). However, due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning has become a well-known schooling method amongst students worldwide in all fields, reaching a total of 400 million students in 2020 (Simon, 2021). Nonetheless, this online instruction has had an increasing demand in the language learning environment a couple of years before the pandemic occurred (Manegre & Sabiri, 2020).

Online language learning (OLL) is the type of education that takes place over the internet that allows students to improve or learn a specific foreign language. However, OLL can refer to three different types of education: a web-facilitated class, a blended or hybrid course, or a fully online course (Blake, 2011). A Web-facilitated class is a face-to-face course in traditional classroom settings that has some technology-mediated components that are needed for the class; for instance, university students that need to use specific software in order to take an exam (e.g., Moodle Learning Platform). A blended or a hybrid course is the type of OLL that depends highly on web-technology to mediate learning; however, the face-to-face contact is not removed, but reduced, as students have meetings in person in specific instances (e.g., beginning or end of the semester). A fully online course singularly depends on technology to mediate the teaching-learning

environment (MGH Institute of Health Professions, 2020). Nonetheless, this study will mainly focus on fully online courses of OLL.

1.3. Virtual Classroom Software

The creation of distance learning started in 1892 when the University of Chicago designed the first independent department of correspondence education, which was based on distance learning. The type of distance learning that UChicago established worked via mail; the students sent their work to the teachers and the teachers would send it back corrected (Crotty, 2012; Essa, 2020; Michael, 2012). Years later, in 1960 when the internet was not created yet, the University of Illinois created an Intranet for its students. This new network consisted of a system of linked computer terminals that allowed students to access course materials and listen to already recorded lectures. (Tom, 2019). These two new methodologies were the start of a new type of learning method that revolutionized the industry of teaching: asynchronous learning. This learning method consisted of the ability to access content when it best suits the student's schedule with no need to have real-time interaction (TBS, 2021). Even though these two programs were extremely beneficial for students that were not able to attend face-to-face classes, it had one big disadvantage; it lacked interaction. Classroom interaction plays a big role in learning, especially in language learning, as studies have proven that it helps the student: organize their thoughts; reflect on their understanding, and find gaps in their reasoning (Okita, 2012). Therefore, the new goal for distance learning was to attain synchronous learning, the type of learning that happens virtually in real time (TBS, 2021).

Over the years, after the development in technology and the creation of the internet, it has become possible to achieve synchronous distance learning thanks to the creation of a new tool: the *virtual classroom software*. Virtual classrooms or virtual learning

environments are online learning environments that offer synchronous classes in which students and teachers interact via the technical tools provided by the software (Berry, 2019; G2 Team, 2020). These are often used by educational institutions to host real-time distance classes while providing interaction between teachers and classmates. In the language learning industry, virtual systems have revolutionized the phenomenon of distance learning. These have given students the opportunity to connect with a native-speaking teacher as well as offering the benefits of learning remotely and the functionality of a traditional classroom setting (G2 Team, 2020; Manegre & Sabiri, 2020).

1.3.1. Features of Virtual Classroom Software

In the OLL market, there are several different virtual classrooms that offer features that some might not provide; however, there are some features that must be offered in order to be categorized as a virtual system. According to Xenos (2018), virtual classroom system features are divided in two groups: the common features and the advanced features, see Table 1 below. Common features are technological features and practices that make a virtual system simulate a traditional classroom setting, and these features include video, sound and text that are essential to achieve bonding, interaction, and interactivity among the participants. Whereas advanced features are those that offer features and practices beyond the traditional classroom (Berry, 2019; Manegre & Sabiri, 2020; Xenos 2018).

Table 1. *Common and advanced features and practices in virtual classrooms* (Xenos, 2018, Experiences from Using Virtual Classrooms Section).

<i>Common features</i>	<i>Advanced features</i>
Video and sound	Retrospective assignments
Chat	Breakout rooms
Students' feedback	Anonymous polling
Whiteboard	Shared whiteboard
Slide presentations	Shared documents and annotating
Discussion administration	Application sharing

As it has been mentioned, there are numerous virtual classroom systems on the market, such as ProProfs, Vedamo, LearnCube, Electa Live or Blackboard Collaborate; nonetheless, some OLL companies still create their own virtual system such as most universities before the medical emergency created by the COVID-19 pandemic (ProProfs, 2020; Meticulous Research, 2020). However, as it will be later discussed, platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Adobe Connect made OLL companies opt for these virtual systems as they offer numerous features that are available for free or at very affordable prices (Darshan, 2020).

1.4. Benefits of OLL

Besides the ability to simulate a traditional classroom setting, OLL Virtual Classrooms offers a big number of benefits that a traditional learning does not have. Some of those, are the following (Manegre & Sabiri, 2020; Raes et al., 2019; Gupta, 2021):

- Location. Students that are enrolled in OLL courses have the ability to attend the classes from any part of the world as long as they have a stable internet connection.
- Free choice of professor. The students of OLL are able to choose their professor considering different aspects such as accent or common interests.

- Schedule flexibility. OLL companies provide a wide range of class hours at different hours of the day on all days of the week to give every student the opportunity of attending classes and learning through interaction – especially, for those students who work, are permanently ill or are abroad.
- Variety of courses. Different OLL companies offer different types of courses, but what primarily distinguishes it from traditional learning courses, is that these offer a customized learning experience, from individual classes to group classes.
- Uncommon or less taught language learning. A lot of OLL companies on the market provide the teaching of a variety of languages that are not easily found in physical language institutions.
- Inclusivity and equality in learning. OLL has the ability to reach interdisciplinary groups from various locations, which makes the students familiar with different cultures and ethnicities.
- Low-cost. According to the University of Potomac (2020), OLL is more affordable than traditional classes as it can cost 80 times less than traditional degrees.

1.4.1. Mental Health Benefits

Amongst the benefits mentioned above, there are some researchers that chose to focus on the benefits that online language learning has on mental health, and there are some studies that prove the statement. However, before considering the studies, it should be mentioned that Slegers et al., (2008), conducted a study focusing on the influence that using computers and the Internet have on the learner's mental health. The results had shown that the usage of these did neither positively nor negatively affect their psychological

well-being or mood; meaning that the fact that OLL happens online does not have any type of involvement on mental health.

Many of the studies that proved a positive impact on students' mental health are focused on the times of the 2020-21 global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted people's routines and healthy lifestyles, which has caused great anxiety and sadness to many people. This brought a lot of attention to OLL as it helped people interact by ensuring their safety, as well as keeping them from reading anxiety-inducing news reports. Also, besides allowing the students to create new routines, OLL proved to be extremely beneficial for professional development, travelling and connecting with people from around the world. Therefore, the authors point out that OLL has been quite beneficial for the mental health of people that decided to enroll in the programs during the pandemic (High Focus Centers, 2021; Jenkins, 2021; Wiley, 2021).

Furthermore, Narushima et al., (2012), have also proved in their study that older adult learners showed positive psychological well-being despite any illnesses that they might suffer. Older retired adults choose to learn new languages for leisure purposes, which means that they do not have the pressure of doing it for academic or professional reasons. What distinguishes them primarily from the average learner is that they are driven by intrinsic motivation. Undoubtedly, if someone decides to enroll to OLL for pure enjoyment, the learner will show positive improvement in their mental health (Sims et al., 2016; Waliyadin, 2019).

Therefore, it cannot be concluded that OLL has a positive impact on the learner's psychological well-being in general, since the studies conducted on the matter were very specific – they either included older adults as participants or they focused on the

circumstances caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. However, if the students approach language learning for leisure purposes while being driven by intrinsic motivation, it can be acknowledged that there is a high chance that OLL will improve the learner's mental health.

1.5. Disadvantages of OLL

Apart from the numerous advantages mentioned above, OLL does have a number of important disadvantages (Ciccarelli, 2020; Misir et al., 2018; Raes et al., 2019; TechSmith, 2021), which are as follows:

- Isolation. The lack of regular face-to-face interaction can cause a feeling of isolation amongst the students. This makes it more challenging for the teacher to create a community.
- Content reformatting. The quality of teaching is highly dependent on the knowledge and competence that the teacher has of using technologies. This means that teachers have to constantly learn how to use the new updates.
- Maintaining student's focus. When learning is given in an online environment, it can be quite difficult to focus for long periods of time, and it is harder for the teacher to maintain the student's focus. This is why this type of instruction requires changes in the pedagogical methods to adapt to this new technology.
- Technical issues. Because this instruction method relies on the Internet, there are many aspects that should be considered beforehand, which can be: having a stable internet connection, having a web camera and microphone, having access to a reliable computer, or computer maintenance.

On that account, because of the potential for isolation, content reformatting, the challenge of maintaining the student's focus, and the possible technical issues that a student may

suffer, OLL is not always the best option for everyone. Hence, it is very important for people to consider the advantages and disadvantages of OLL before enrolling to a program. Fortunately, most OLL companies offer free trials for students interested in starting an OLL program, which helps the learner get a firsthand experience of the benefits and drawbacks.

1.6. Effectiveness of OLL

OLL is a type of education that differs from traditional language learning (TLL) in several aspects, especially in the lack of physicality that online learning provides, see Table 2 below. Hence, no matter the differences that this instruction method might have with TLL, many studies have proven that the OLL teaching method is at least as effective as TLL (Jabeen & Thomas, 2015; Nguyen, 2015; Bahasoan et al., 2020).

Table 2. *Comparison of Online Learning vs. Traditional Learning* (Ciccarelli, 2020, Comparison Section).

<i>Online Learning</i>	<i>Traditional Learning</i>
Learn anywhere with an internet connection	Learn in-person in a physical setting
Access content anytime you choose	Adhere to a schedule
Limited socialization and sense of community	Interact with teachers and other students in the classroom
Virtual interaction with course content	Hands-on learning
Employs contemporary technology that comes naturally to students	Conducted in person using means that most educators are familiar with

Although OLL is not the best learning method for everyone, it can be the best option for busy students who are not able to attend classes with an inflexible schedule, such as those who work, are permanently ill or are abroad.

1.7. OLL and its impact on the economy

As it has been mentioned in the introduction, the OLL market has received a significant boost during the last two years, and it has caused notable changes in the Global Language

Learning Market. In 2019, the Global Online Language Learning Market was worth 5.9 billion USD and in 2020, it was worth 6.4 billion USD. It is estimated that in 2021, the market will be worth 12.5 billion USD, and 21.2 billion USD by 2027 with a CAGR of about 20% (Meticulous Research, 2020; Valuates Reports, 2020). These are quite outstanding numbers considering that a big percentage of these OLL companies do not have accreditation; meaning that they are not recognized by the government as private educational associations. A non-accredited school cannot offer certification that is recognized by other international institutions, which means that these OLL companies are making an unbelievable amount of money without actually offering any type of accepted certificate (e.g., CEFR certificate). This factor will be later discussed in detail in both the method and discussion sections.

1.7.1. OLL in Asia

The increasing globalization has made English the lingua franca of the world, and it is estimated it will dominate the majority of the overall online language learning markets, which makes “only one fourth of all English users worldwide to be native speakers” (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 1; Language Magazine, 2020). This demand to learn the English language has grown internationally; however, the majority of the demand for English native teachers is found in China. In Asian countries, learning English is necessary to be able to succeed in the academic and professional field. This foreign language is a subject that students have been studying for years; however, most of them have learned what is known as Mute English. This is a term that is particularly coined in relation to China, and it is the ability to understand written English but not spoken English (Manegre & Sabiri, 2020). This has been a huge obstacle to Chinese students, especially since English is a main subject in the China’s National Entrance Examinations: the *Zhongkao* and the

Gaokao. The Zhongkao is the Senior High School Entrance Examination, and it has an average pass rate of 50%. However, the Gaokao is the Collage Entrance Examination, and its pass rate varies from 9.48% to 30.5% – depending on the province (Patrick, 2020; Xinhua, 2017; Wikipedia, 2021). This pass rate has made Chinese students’ parents to prepare their children for these exams, especially the Gaokao, which is considered to be one of the toughest exams in the world (Ma, 2019). Therefore, in China there has been a huge demand for professors that are native English speakers and OLL seemed to be the best option. Online learning can be considered the most accessible and popular form of distance education. Besides that, it gives the student the opportunity to have direct contact with a native speaking teacher, which can be very appealing to situations that countries like China suffer (Manegre & Sabiri, 2020; Stern, 2020). Consequently, this huge demand for English native speakers helped the OLL industry to grow significantly, especially, from 2016 to 2017, as “there was a 298% growth from 19.4 billion USD to 76.7 billion USD in the English Education market” (Daxueconsulting, 2018, *China’s English education rising rapidly* Section).

1.7.2. OLL in Europe

The perception that Europe has on language learning differs quite a bit from other countries since FLL is one of the core subjects in educational institutions, and children are forced to learn at least one foreign language during their school years (Manegre & Sabiri, 2020). Similar to China, in Europe, English is the most popular language learned and linguistic diversity is highly encouraged in the professional and academic fields. For this reason, Europe has one of the highest FLL rates: 80% in 24 countries and 100% in Luxemburg, Malta and Liechtenstein (Civinini, 2018). Thanks to the importance given to FLL in Europe, learners do not suffer from Mute English, and according to the Eurostat

(2021) statistics, 24.8 % of working-age adults know at least one foreign language at a proficient level; and more than 80 % of the adult working-age population with a tertiary level of education know at least one foreign language.

OLL has been present in Europe for quite some years, and it has been progressively growing each year. In 2017, 7% of people aged between 16- to 74-years old enrolled in an online program, and in 2019, the percentage increased to 8%. The biggest percentage came from Nordic countries, which were Norway with 21% and Sweden with 18%. Nevertheless, OLL in Europe has not received its biggest boost until the COVID-19 pandemic (Eurostat, 2021).

1.8. Objectives of the study

As it has been mentioned, the purpose of this study is to present an analysis on the level of enjoyment and the grade of effectiveness of the classes considering the perspective of the students who are attending classes and learning a language of these online teaching institutions. The main hypothesis is that this great success that OLL is experiencing is also seen in these two aspects mentioned. Therefore, the analyses will be conducted to answer the main research question, which is as follows: is the success of OLL also seen in the level of enjoyment and in the grade of effectiveness of the classes?

2. METHOD

This section is composed of two analyses: an investigative study and a questionnaire study; hence, the method section will be divided in two sections. The investigative study (1st analysis) was conducted to get a better understanding of how OLL private schools operated by using the personal experience. The questionnaire study (2nd analysis) was conducted to examine the perception of these OLL students that are already enrolled in programs.

2.1. 1st Analysis: The Investigative Study

2.1.1. Participant

This portion of the study involved an analysis of the student's perception through personal experience; therefore, the researcher was the principal investigator and there were no other participants.

2.1.2. Materials

The materials used for this analysis were the study guides of the following online language schools: Online Language Academy, Live-English, Lingoda and HLS Education Center. All of the online classes were conducted using Zoom; therefore, a computer with a stable internet connection and Microsoft Word were also required.

2.1.3. Procedure

The investigative study was conducted by booking the free trials that some schools offered. This analysis was divided in two sections: 2 schools were chosen for English private 1-to-1 classes and 2 schools were chosen for German group classes. These two languages were chosen to have different perspectives regarding the analysis – as English is a language that I have been studying for several years, and German is a language that I have never studied in depth before. Regarding the typology of classes, I only tested 1-to-1 private classes and small group classes of no more than 6 people – since I was already familiar with online classes of bigger groups due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, a total of 4 schools were chosen: Online Language Academy and Live-English for the English classes and Lingoda and HLS Education Center for the German classes.

2.2. 2nd Analysis: The Questionnaire Study

2.2.1. Participants

In this section, 15 OLL students were recruited from Facebook groups of OLL students and from an OLL teacher. The first 14 questions of the questionnaire were regarding the participant profiles, which were as follows:

- Most participants are female (60.00%); followed by male (33.33%); and the remaining (6.67%) preferred to not specify their gender.
- The general age range is 18-29 years old (53.33%), followed by the 30-39 years old (26.67%), and finally the 40-49 years old (20.00%) – leaving the two ranges above 50 years with 0% of participants.
- As for the highest level of education reached, the majority of the participants hold higher education certifications: bachelor's degree (40.00%); master's degree (33.33%); doctoral degree (13.33%). The remaining of the participants (13.33%) own a high school diploma.
- Regarding nationality: 66.67% of the participants have a European nationality; 20.00% an Asian nationality; 6.67% a North American nationality; and 6.67% a South American nationality.
- With respect to the place of residency: 66.67% of the participants reside in Europe; while 20.00% reside in Asia; and 13.33% in North America.

Inside the set of questions regarding the participant profile, 7 of them were concerning – specifically – languages:

- Regarding the native language: 26.67% of the participants have Spanish as their native language; 20.00% have Mandarin Chinese; 20.00% have English; 13.33% have Catalan; 6.67% have Moroccan; 6.67% have Italian; and 6.67% have Polish.

- Concerning the number of languages spoken: 6.67% speak only 1 language; 20.00% speak 2 languages; 46.67% speak 3 languages; 6.67% speak 4 languages; 6.67% speak 5 languages; and 13.33% speak more than five languages.
- As for the languages spoken/understood at B1 or higher level: 31.03% of the participants voted Spanish; 20.69% voted English; 13.79% voted French; 10.34% voted Mandarin Chinese; 6.90% voted German; and 17.24% voted other languages (Italian, Portuguese, Catalan, Irish, Gaelic and Italian).
- With respect to the language learned through OLL: 53.33% learn English; 20.00% learn German; 6.67% learn French; 6.67% learn Spanish; 6.67% learn Mandarin Chinese; and 6.67% learn Polish.
- Concerning the duration of their studies with an OLL: 33.33% have been learning for less than 6 months; 13.33% have been learning for more than 6 months; 26.67% have been learning for 1 year; 13.33% have been learning for 1-2 years; and 13.33% have been learning for more than 2 years.
- Regarding the duration of how long the participant has been learning a language in general: 7.14% have been learning for less than 6 months; 21.43% have been learning for more than 6 months; 7.14% have been learning for 1 year; 14.29% have been learning 1-2 years; and 50.00% have been learning for more than 2 years.

2.2.2. Materials

The materials used for this analysis were an online questionnaire using Qualtrics, a private questionnaire company, additionally, Microsoft Excel was used to analyze the results further.

2.2.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was adapted from the original questionnaire of Manegre and Sabir's (2020) study; however, it was modified to change the analysis from the teachers' perspective to the students' perspective, along with adding some new questions. Once the questionnaire was approved by the tutor, it was uploaded to the Internet. The questionnaire was uploaded to Qualtrics, which has safe data storage policies and is therefore, a safer private questionnaire company than some other competitors. The participants volunteered for the study and were found through the following sources: Facebook student groups of OLL private companies and through a contact who is an OLL private company teacher. The restrictions established for the participants of the questionnaire were only three: to be above or the age of 18; to be a student of an OLL private institution; and to give informed consent to be part of the study.

The questionnaire was sent to the participating teacher as a link, in order for her to send it to her students. It was also posted to the Facebook wall of these student groups after being approved by their administration. Attached to the link, there was a message explaining the purpose of the study along with a disclaimer that stated that by submitting the form, the participants acknowledge to participate in the project. They were informed that their identity will remain anonymous and that their answers will only be used for research purposes. Once 15 people completed the questionnaire, the survey was closed, and the data was collected.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Results of the Investigative Study

The results of the first analysis have been collected and distributed in a table. As Table 3 shows, a comparison analysis has been made of the four OLL companies, considering

different features. The first feature is the ease of use, and all of the companies offer a website and a system that are easy to use that help make interaction clear and understandable for the users. The second feature discusses the first impression that the website gives, and all OLL companies' website are well-designed and clearly organized, which makes it easy to identify your goals, as well as providing a complete FAQ. However, they did differ in one aspect: the color of the website. Online Language Academy and HLS Education Center use cool-dull colors for their website; whereas Live-English uses warm-bright colors, and Lingoda uses cool-bright colors. Regarding the class environment, all the companies offer 1-to-1 private classes, but only Live-English, Lingoda, and HLS Education Center offer group classes; Live-English without a set number of people, Lingoda with a minimum of three and a maximum of 5 people, and HLS Education Center with a minimum of three and a maximum of six people. Another feature analyzed was the type of virtual system used, and all of the OLL private companies offer classes with already popularly known virtual systems: Zoom and Skype. All of the companies offer classes using Zoom, but Online Language Academy and Live-English also offer classes using Skype. Moreover, concerning the features of the system that the OLL companies used during the classes, Online Language Academy and Live-English only used the features of screen-sharing, whiteboard, and the chat box. Whereas Lingoda and HLS Education Center used PowerPoint, screen-sharing, whiteboard, the chat box, and translator. Furthermore, the course pace, the schedule, and the professor depend on the student's choice in all of the OLL companies, as these provide classes during different hours of the day every day of the week from different professors. Another aspect to consider are the assessments, Online Language Academy and Live-English did not offer any type of assessment, but Lingoda and HLS Education Center makes an

evaluation of the student's level after every class. Moreover, Online Language Academy, Lingoda and HLS Education Center offered no assignments; whereas Live-English gives the option to the student to hand in assignments. Regarding the class duration, Online Language Academy and Live-English offer classes of 30min or 1 hour, and Lingoda and HLS Education Center only offer classes of 1 hour. One of the last aspects considered is the cost per lesson, and these were compared using the cost these have of 1 hour classes, which were as follows: Online Language Academy from € 10-12; Live-English from €13.35-17.85; Lingoda from €6-8; and HLS Education from €34.90-39.90 (these varied a lot, mainly, because some offered packs and others offered only individual classes). Finally, concerning exams, Online Language Academy does not offer any type of exam, Live-English gives the option to the student to take an exam, and Lingoda and HLS Education Center only offer certification exams. Therefore, Online Language Academy and Live English do not provide any type of certification, because these two companies are allegedly not accredited. Contrary, Lingoda and HLS Education Center provide CEFR certification as these are recognized, accredited companies.

Table 3. *Comparison and analysis of the OLL companies used for the study.*

Characteristics	Online Language Academy	Live-English	Lingoda	HLS Education Center
Ease of use	The website and system are easy to use, and interaction is clear and understandable	The website and system are easy to use, and interaction is clear and understandable	The website and system are easy to use, and interaction is clear and understandable	The website and system are easy to use, and interaction is clear and understandable
First impression of the website	Well-designed Cool-dull colors Clearly organized Complete FAQ Easy to identify your goal	Well-designed Warm-bright colors Clearly organized Complete FAQ Easy to identify your goal	Well-designed Cool-bright colors Clearly organized Complete FAQ Easy to identify your goal	Well-designed Cool-dull colors Clearly organized Complete FAQ Easy to identify your goal
Class-environment	Provide: Private 1-to-1 classes	Provide: Private 1-to-1 classes Group classes	Provide: Private 1-to-1 classes Small group classes of 3-5	Provide: Private 1-to-1 classes Group classes 3-6
Virtual system/s	Zoom or Skype	Zoom or Skype	Zoom	Zoom
Features of the system/s	Screen sharing Annotations on the screen using whiteboard Chat box	Screen sharing Annotations on the screen using whiteboard Chat box	PowerPoints Screen sharing Annotations on the screen using whiteboard Chat box Translator	PowerPoints Screen sharing Annotations on the screen using whiteboard Chat box Translator
Course pace	Student's choice	Student's choice	Student's choice	Student's choice

Assessments	No assessments	No assessments	Evaluation of the student after every class	Evaluation of the student after every class
Assignments	No assignments	Optional	No assignments	No assignments
Exams	No exams	Optional	Certification exams	Certification exams
CEFR certification exams	Do not provide certification	Do not provide certification	Provide certification	Provide certification
Schedule	Student's choice Provide different hours of every day of the week	Student's choice Provide different hours of every day of the week	Student's choice Provide different hours of every day of the week	Student's choice Provide different hours of every day of the week
Professors	Free choice of professors by: Accent	Free choice of professors by: Accent Common interests	Free choice of professors	Free choice of professors
Class duration	30 min or 1 hour	30 min or 1 hour	1 hour	1 hour
Cost per lesson	€ 10-12 (1 hour)	€ 13.35-17.85 (1 hour)	€ 6-8 (1 hour)	€ 34.90-39.90 (1 hour)
Certified school as displayed on their website	Does not have accreditation	Does not have accreditation	Has accreditation	Has accreditation

3.2. Results 2nd Analysis

As we can see in Figure 1 below, the OLL students that answered the questionnaire are learning in different types of online classes: a 14.81% are taking 1-to-1 online classes in a virtual classroom system owned by a company; a 14.81% are taking online 1-to-1 classes using other conferencing software such as Skype, Zoom or Teams; a 14.81% are taking online group classes using other conferencing software, such as Skype, Zoom or Teams; and a 11.12% are taking online group classes using a virtual classroom system owned by a company. Nevertheless, as we can see in the same figure, these participants are also learning in physical classroom settings, as the remaining percentages note that: 11.12% of the OLL surveyed students have learned in face-to-face individual learning tutoring classes; 22.22% have learned in a face-to-face small classroom of 25 students or less; 7.41% have learned in face-to-face medium size classrooms of 25-75 students; and 3.70% have learned in face-to-face large classrooms or auditorium lecturing of more than 75 students.

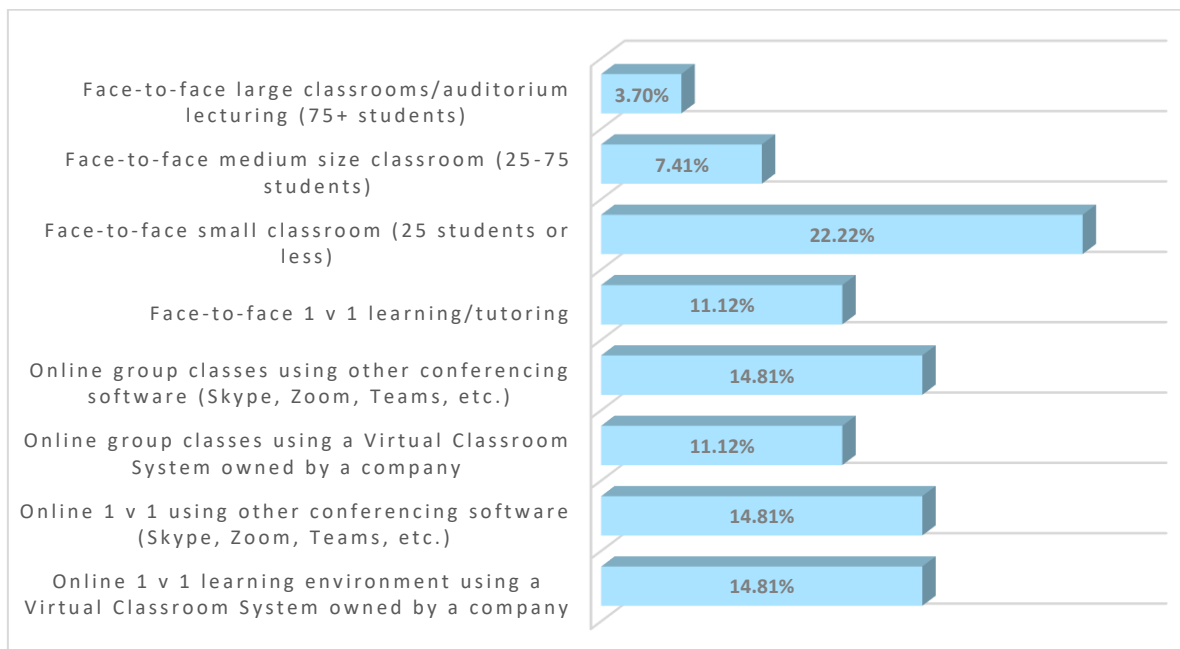


Figure 1. Which environments have you learned in?

In Figure 2, we can see that 53.33% of the participants have been students in a virtual classroom using videoconferencing and a company's virtual system, while a 40.00% did not, and a 6.67% only did momentary.

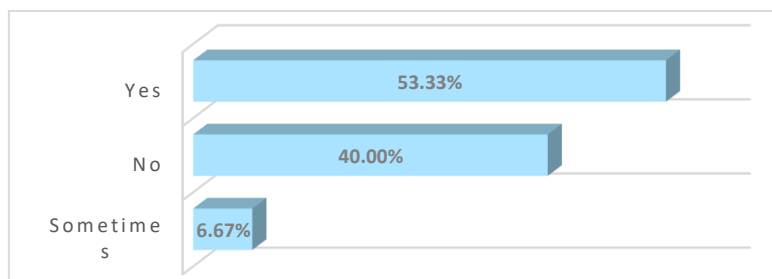


Figure 2. *Have you ever been a student in a virtual classroom using videoconferencing and a company's virtual system besides in language learning?*

In Figure 3, we can see that most of the participants prefer learning languages online or in face-to-face small classrooms, as: 34.78% prefer learning languages in face-to-face small classrooms of 25 students or less; 30.43% prefer face-to-face 1-to-1 learning or tutoring classes; 13.04% prefer online group classes using other conferencing software such as Skype, Zoom or Teams; 8.70% prefer online group classes using a virtual classroom software owned by a company; another 8.70% prefer online 1-to-1 classes using video conferencing software such as Skye, Zoom or Teams; and 4.35% prefer online 1-to-1 classes using virtual classroom system owned by a company. Furthermore, none of the participants would like to learn languages in face-to-face medium size classrooms of 25-75 students or face-to-face large classrooms or auditorium lecturing of more than 75 students.

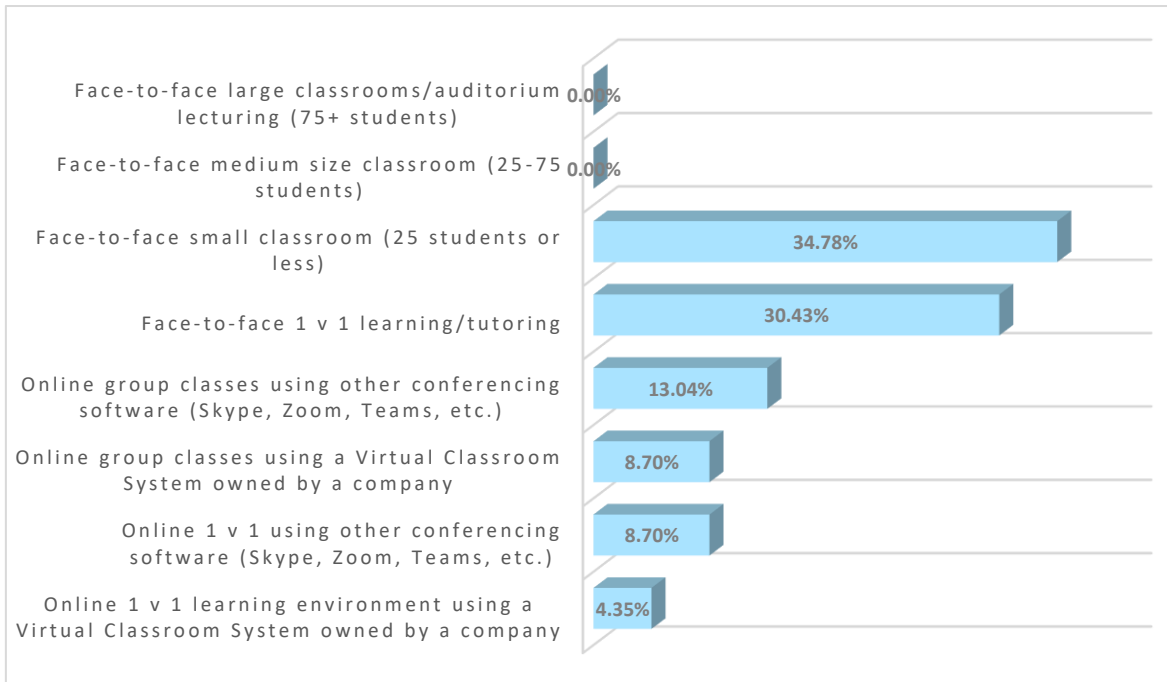


Figure 3. Which learning environments do you prefer for learning languages?

As we can see in Figure 4, 42.86% of the participants believe that the environments where they can get to know their teachers more personally are face-to-face individual learning or tutoring classes; 28.57% believe that the best environments are face-to-face small classrooms of 25 students or less; 10.71% believe that the best environments are online 1-to-1 classes using other conferencing software, such as Skype, Zoom or Teams; 7.14% believe that the best environments are online 1-to-1 classes using a virtual classroom system owned by a company; another 7.14% believe that the best environments are online group classes using other conferencing software, such as Skype, Zoom or Teams; and 3.57% believe that the best environments are face-to-face medium size classrooms of 25-75 students. None of the participants believe that face-to-face large classrooms or auditorium lecturing of more than 75 students or online group classes using a virtual classroom system owned by a company are the best environments to get to know the teacher more personally.

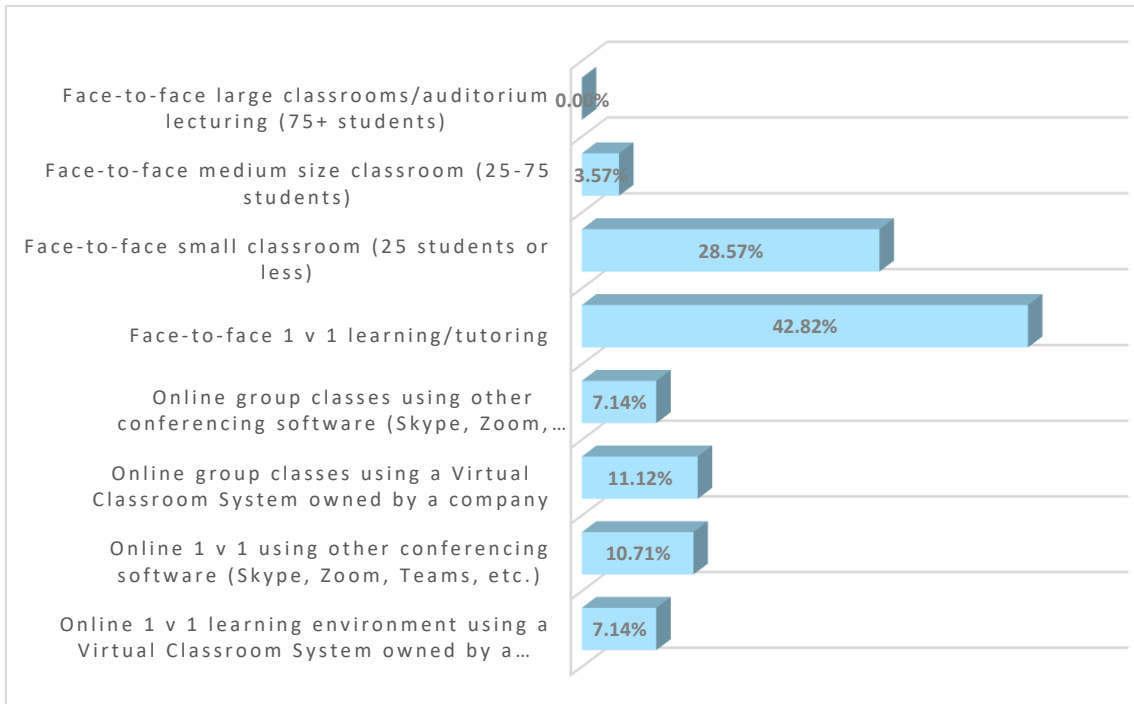


Figure 4. Which learning environments do you feel you get to know your teachers more personally?

Figure 5 shows how 40.00% of the participants believe that online language learning in a virtual classroom using videoconferencing and the company’s virtual system can teach the same content as in a classroom at the same rate; another 40.00% believe that it can teach the same content at a slower rate; and 20.00% believe that it can teach the same content as in a classroom at a faster rate.

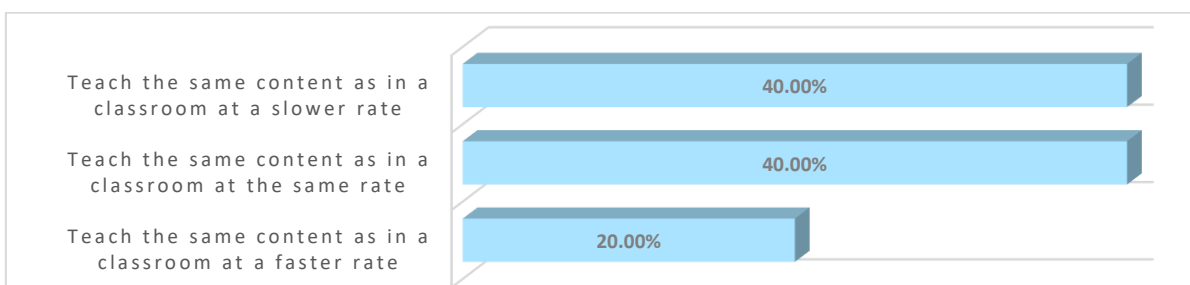


Figure 5. Online Language Learning in a virtual classroom using videoconferencing and the company's virtual system can:

As Figure 6 shows, 6.25% of the participants believe that Online Learning in a virtual classroom using videoconferencing and the company’s virtual system can replace classroom learning for all subjects; 37.50% believe that it can replace classroom learning

for most subjects, such as languages, mathematics, sciences, and social sciences, but not all subjects; 18.75% believe that it is best for language learning but not for other subjects; and 37.50% believe that it should be used only as supplementary material.

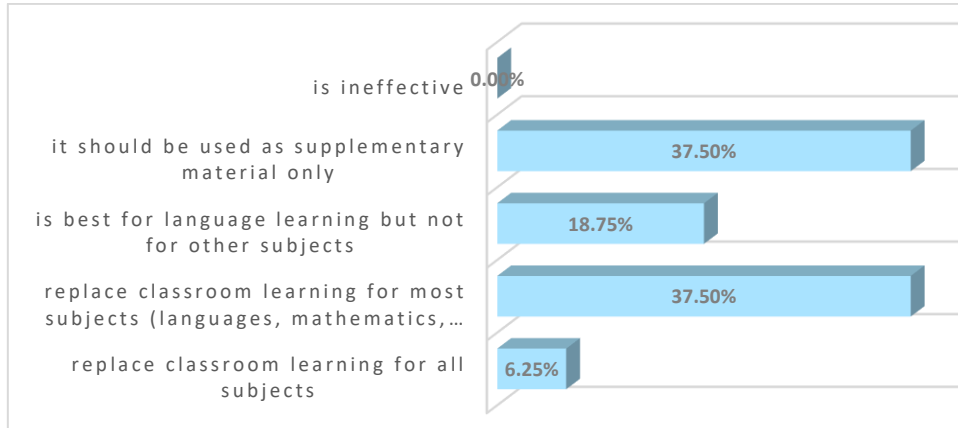


Figure 6. *Online Learning in a virtual classroom using videoconferencing and the company's virtual system can:*

As we can see displayed in Figure 7, 40.00% of the participants voted that they learn at the same rate in virtual classroom environments as in traditional face-to-face classroom environments; another 40.00% voted that they learn at a slower rate; and the remaining 20.00% voted that they learn at a faster rate.

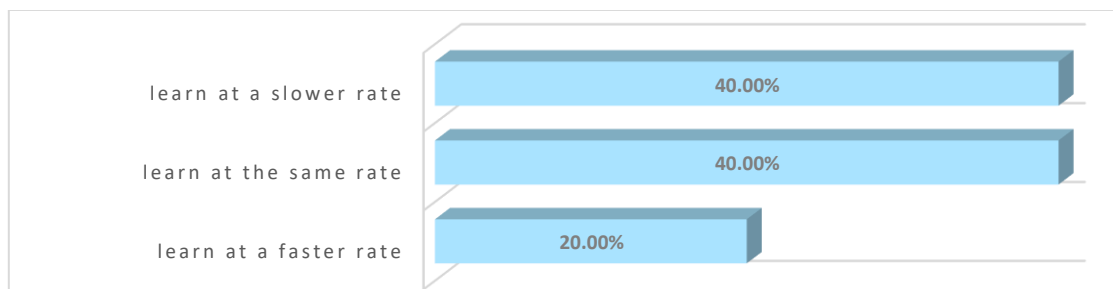


Figure 7. *In general, when you take classes in the virtual classroom environment you:*

Figure 8 shows that 20.00% of the participants enjoy learning online; another 20.00% of the participants do not enjoy learning online; and the remaining 60.00% enjoy learning online only sometimes.

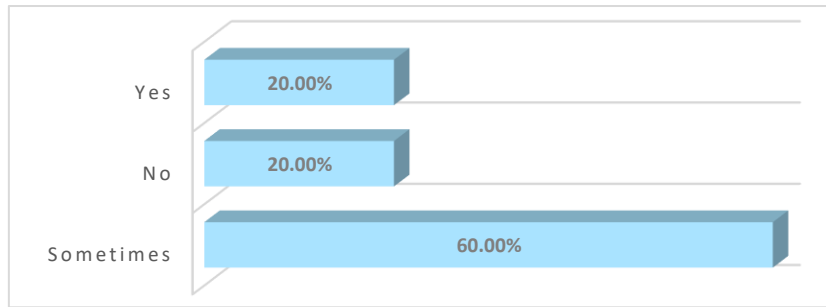


Figure 8. *Do you enjoy learning online?*

Figure 9 shows that 26.67% of the OLL surveyed students would recommend learning online through videoconferencing and virtual classroom systems to a friend or a colleague; 20.00% would not recommend it; and 53.33% would recommend it only sometimes.

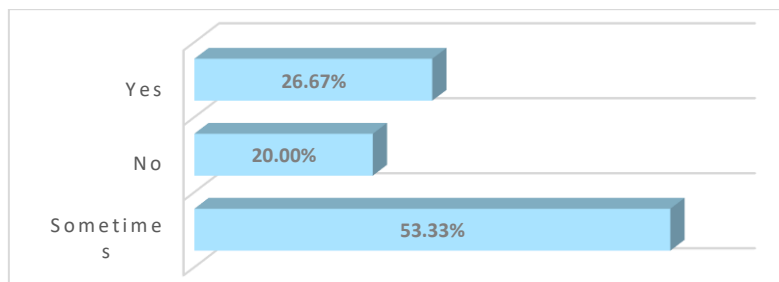


Figure 9. *Would you recommend learning online through videoconferencing and virtual classroom systems to a friend or a colleague?*

Gradable opinion questions

Regarding the statement “[u]sing the company’s virtual system technology in virtual classrooms help to better structure lessons”, as we can see in Figure 10: 6.67% strongly agree with the statement; 13.33% agree; 66.66% neither agree nor disagree; 6.67% disagree; and another 6.66% strongly disagree.

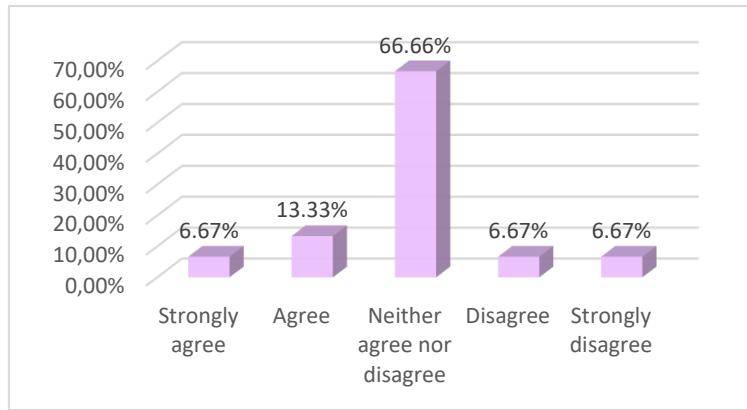


Figure 10. *Using the company's virtual system technology in virtual classrooms help to better structure lessons.*

Regarding the question “[d]o you participate more in virtual classrooms that use videoconferencing and the company’s virtual system than in traditional classrooms?”, as we can see in Figure 11: 6.67% strongly agree that they participate more in virtual classrooms than in traditional classrooms; 20.00% agree; 33.33% neither agree nor disagree; 20.00% disagree; and another 20.00% strongly disagree.

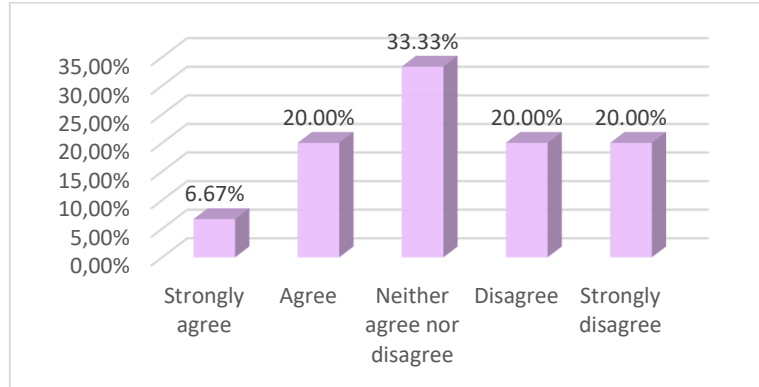


Figure 11. *Do you participate more in virtual classrooms that use videoconferencing and the company's virtual system than in traditional classrooms?*

Regarding the question “[d]oes participating in virtual classroom with videoconferencing and the company’s virtual system help the students strengthen their knowledge and feel more comfortable with technology overall?”, as we can see in Figure 12: 40.00% agree that participating helps the students strengthen their knowledge and feel

more comfortable with technology overall; 33.33% neither agree nor disagree; and a 26.67% disagree.

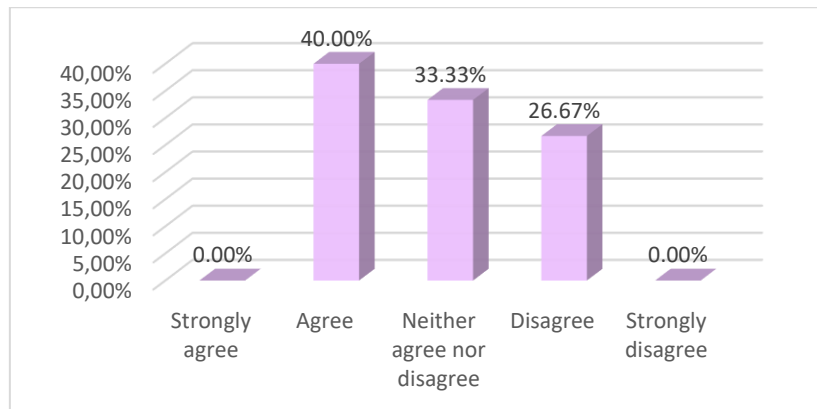


Figure 12. *Does participating in virtual classroom with videoconferencing and the company's virtual system help the students strengthen their knowledge and feel more comfortable with technology overall?*

Regarding the question “[d]o you think learning in a virtual classroom with videoconferencing and the company’s virtual system slow down your thinking, writing, and calculation skills?”, as we can see in Figure 13: 33.33% agree that it slows down the OLL student’s thinking, writing, and calculation skills; 40.00% neither agree nor disagree; and 26.67% disagree.

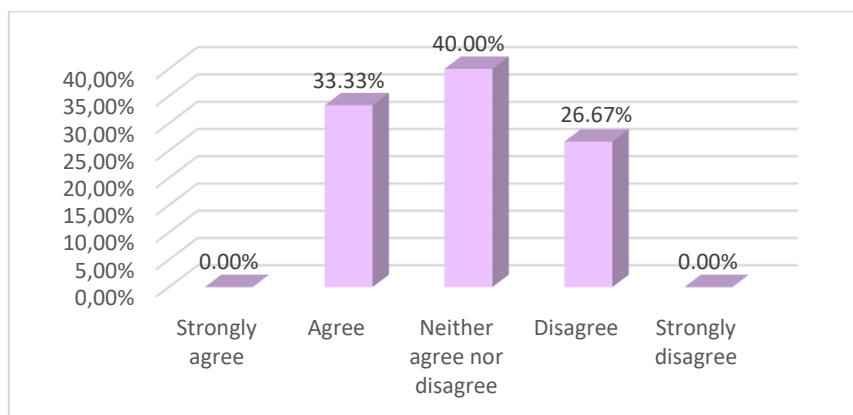


Figure 13. *Do you think learning in a virtual classroom with videoconferencing and the company's virtual system slow down your thinking, writing, and calculation skills?*

Regarding the statement “[o]nline learning in a virtual classroom with a certified teacher using videoconferencing and a company's virtual system is a better option for

school-age children than home-schooling”, as we can see in Figure 14: 6.67% strongly agree with the statement; 33.33% agree; 33.33% neither agree nor disagree; 13.33% disagree; and 13.33% strongly disagree.

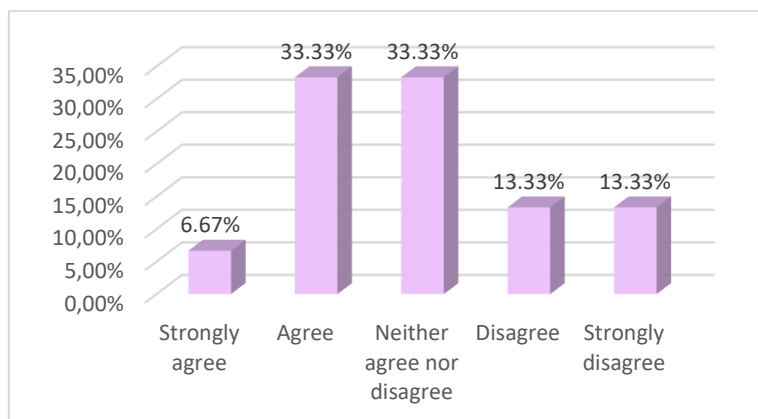


Figure 14. *Online learning in a virtual classroom with a certified teacher using videoconferencing and a company's virtual system is a better option for school-age children than home-schooling*

4. DISCUSSION

OLL is a new market that has revolutionized the sector of language education. It is quite a large and substantial market that is continuously growing, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic gave an unpredictable boost to its growth. A lot of factors have influenced the success of OLL, and it is undeniable that virtual classrooms have been a key element to it. These tools, which are newer than the existence of OLL, allowed online learning to adapt almost every feature of the traditional classroom setting followed by the addition of several advantages, such as the flexibility, the freedom to choose your professor or the guarantee of your safety during these COVID-19 times.

Several students of OLL private companies were surveyed to analyze their perceptions and, contrary to Manegre and Sabir’s (2020) study on teacher perceptions, the answers were very varied, especially regarding the enjoyment level. It is logical to think that the enjoyment level of teachers is higher, as teaching online is a profession that has been freely chosen, but that is not the case regarding students. As mentioned above,

OLL has been very popular in countries like China, where most students have to rely on these private companies, as these have the access to native speakers, in order to prepare themselves for the entrance examinations they have to go through. Therefore, just because these students freely decided to sign up for these OLL private companies, it does not mean that they do it willingly. Besides academic purposes, a lot of these students decided to enroll in this OLL education for professional development and training. This era where globalization plays a big roll, it forces almost all of the professionals to learn a language, principally English, the language considered as lingua franca of the world. Therefore, globalization has taken an essential role in the success of OLL and the usage of virtual classroom systems. Most students have taken the decision to migrate to online learning for conventional reasons rather than enjoyment purposes. Nevertheless, as I conducted an investigative study where I have exposed myself to be an OLL student for experimental/academic reasons, I agree that these online learning classes can be very enjoyable; consequently, the results showed accurate descriptions of student perceptions, as the majority agreed that they enjoy it sometimes.

At the end of the questionnaire, the students were asked – a non-compulsory question – to give their thoughts about the changes they would make to virtual classroom technology, or the virtual system used by the company. Some students state that they would not change anything about the virtual classroom technology, or the virtual system used by the company; nevertheless, some did state some changes. Most of these were concerned with the better quality of the image and internet connection; others with some specific features that the company's virtual system did not have; and finally, with the duration of the classes. Some of the features mentioned that the OLL student would change were the ability to automatically record the lessons and the possibility of creating private interaction groups just for the students. As seen in the theoretical background,

these features that the students asked for are found in popular virtual systems such as Teams and Zoom. This could possibly explain why in the first analysis, all of the companies chosen offered their classes mainly through Zoom, as it is a one of the most complete virtual systems that is out in the market for an affordable price or even for free, depending on the feature. That is to say, by the existence of cloud platforms such as Zoom, companies do not need to spend a huge amount of money to create their own virtual system, as it estimated that “[g]enerally, the price range to develop an app like Zoom starts from \$10,000-\$60,000 for each platform of iOS and Android” (Darshan, 2020). Also, as seen in results section, there was a narrow difference between the percentage of people who were preferring the options regarding virtual systems owned by a company rather than other more popular videoconferencing software. Therefore, by their feedback on the last bonus question, the students that are taking classes through a virtual system owned by the corresponding private company, may not know of the existence of videoconferencing software platforms such as Zoom, Skype or Teams – platforms that would fulfill their suggestions.

After conducting the investigative study, I was able to get an OLL student perspective and compare it to the traditional classroom setting. Surprisingly, OLL education offered a lot of features that traditional language learning lacked, as for example the ability to choose your professor by the type of accent you want to learn or by common interests. Furthermore, the companies used for the English classes offer classes where the student can freely choose the topic, as for example business vocabulary, medical vocabulary, or an interview preparation class. These types of classes are very useful in today’s society because, as mentioned before, globalization has made it necessary for professionals to achieve fluency in an international lingua franca. On the other hand, the companies used for the German classes followed a different type of methodology, but very similar

between the German ones; for example, Lingoda has what it is known as the Lingoda Method, which consisted of the full linguistic immersion to the language during the classes. This was based on making the student read and speak the language that is being learned (e.g., German in my case) to make the student comfortable with the languages. All the materials provided were in the language being learned; however, the teacher was fluent in English too, in order to be able to provide explanations to the students that had a low level of the language. Nonetheless, an aspect that all of the companies had in common is that they try to make the student as comfortable as possible by establishing a friendly relationship between them through explaining personal anecdotes or asking questions. This explains why a 17.85% of the participants believe that the environments where they can get to know their teachers more personally are online face-to-face classes (not considering the type of videoconferencing software).

Despite the numerous advantages, the answers of the questionnaire (second analysis) showed that a high percentage believe that this method of education makes the student learn at a slower rate and that it should only be used as supplementary material. One of the main disadvantages of online learning is that the student normally, learns from home, which can cause a hard time separating studies and personal time. Traditional language learning offers the ability of attending class in a physical classroom setting, and it is logical to think that most students would prefer to attend face-to-face classes for this reason, and it could possibly explain why the majority of the surveyed students would only recommend OLL sometimes. In addition, this could only explain why the second biggest majority of the participants (in question number 19 of the second analysis) believe that they get to know their teachers more personally through face-to-face small classrooms of 25 students or less rather than 1-to-1 private online classes. Nevertheless, all of the participants surveyed in the second analysis believe that this new method of

education is effective, as 0.00% voted that it is ineffective in question number 21. Another aspect to mention regarding the first analysis, is that only a 50% of the OLL private companies used for the investigative study were accredited, meaning that only 50% of these companies are recognized by the government of their corresponding country as private educational associations. This means that only a few of these OLL companies can operate as a business in the state and offer certificates that are accepted internationally. As it has been mentioned above, the OLL market estimated worth is 21.2 billion with a CAGR of about 20% by 2027, which is an incredible amount of money considering that allegedly 50% of the companies are not accredited and does not offer any kind of internationally accepted certification. One of the main differences between the classes of accredited companies and those who were not accredited, is that in non-accredited companies, the student was able to choose any topic to talk about and focused primarily on improving the speaking and conversational skills. Whereas the accredited companies already have a structured topic schedule where the student had no control and focused on improving all the skills concerning language. This makes CEFR accredited schools to have a more formal study structure; nevertheless, the student has the right to ask about anything regarding the language in the classes of accredited companies.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, part of the success that OLL achieved has been thanks to the tools used for their good performance, which are the virtual systems. Moreover, it has been concluded that OLL is an effective type of education, and it can be more convenient than traditional language learning or language learning in the private sector. Nonetheless, as it has been seen in the questionnaire study, this success is not as present in the level of enjoyment as students would still prefer face-to-face classes, since it gives the students the possibility to separate home from work/studies.

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7. APPENDIX A: Questions regarding participant profile

<i>Question</i>	<i>Type of Question</i>
1. What is your chronological age?	Forced-Choice
2. What is your highest level of education?	Forced-Choice
3. How would you describe your gender?	Forced-Choice
4. What is your nationality?	Forced-Choice
5. Where are you currently residing?	Forced-Choice
6. What is your native language?	Forced-Choice
7. How many languages do you speak?	Forced-Choice
8. Which languages do you speak/understand at a B1 or higher level (if applicable)?	Free Answer
9. Which languages do you speak/understand at A1 or A2 level (if applicable)?	Free Answer
10. What language/s are you learning through OLL?	Free Answer
11. How long (duration) have you been learning (the specific language) through OLL?	Forced-Choice
12. How long (duration) have you been learning (a specific language/s) in general?	Forced-Choice
13. Which environments have you learned in?	Forced-Choice
14. Have you ever been a student in a virtual classroom using videoconferencing and a company's virtual system besides in language learning?	Forced-Choice

8. APPENDIX B: Questions regarding opinions on OLL using virtual systems

<i>Question</i>	<i>Type of Question</i>
15. Which learning environments do you prefer for learning languages?	Forced-Choice
16. Which learning environments do you feel you get to know your teachers more personally?	Forced-Choice
17. Online Language Learning in a virtual classroom using videoconferencing and the company's virtual system can: teach the same content as in a classroom at a faster rate; teach the same content as in a classroom at the same rate; teach the same content as in a classroom at a slower rate; other.	Forced-Choice
18. Online Language Learning in a virtual classroom using videoconferencing the company's virtual system can: replace classroom learning for all subjects; replace classroom learning for most subjects (languages, mathematics, sciences, social sciences) but not for other subjects; is best for language learning but not for other subjects; should be used as supplementary material only; is ineffective	Forced-Choice
19. Which other subjects would you like to see taught using virtual classrooms with videoconferencing and the company's virtual system?	Forced-Choice
20. In general, when you take classes in the virtual classroom environment: you learn at a faster rate; learn at the same rate; learn at a slower rate; other.	Forced-Choice
21. Do you enjoy learning online?	Forced-Choice
22. Would you recommend learning online through videoconferencing and company's virtual system to a friend or a colleague?	Forced-Choice

9. APPENDIX C: Gradable opinion questions

<i>Question</i>	<i>Type of Question</i>
23. Does using the company's virtual system technology in virtual classrooms help to better structure the lessons?	Forced-Choice
24. Do you participate more in virtual classrooms that use videoconferencing and the company's virtual system than in traditional classrooms?	Forced-Choice
25. Does participating in a virtual classroom with videoconferencing and the company's virtual system help the students strengthen their knowledge and feel more comfortable with technology overall?	Forced-Choice
26. Do you think learning in a virtual classroom with videoconferencing and the company's virtual system slow down your thinking, writing, and calculation skills?	Forced-Choice
27. Do you agree with this statement: Online learning in a virtual classroom with a certified teacher using videoconferencing and the company's virtual system is a better option for school-age children than home-schooling?	Forced-Choice
28. If you could change anything about the virtual classroom technology or digital whiteboards, what would you change?	Free Answer