

Rethinking Teaching Foreign Languages and Culture at Israeli Universities: From Pandemics to Emergencies situation

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Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of teaching and learning a foreign language in times of social crisis and emergencies situations, such as a pandemic, (like Covid-19) and its academic outcomes, showing the necessity, to re-think the way of teaching, in adapting the university education system to the challenges in this area nowadays. For this purpose, we provided a conceptual model and new information regarding sustainable foreign language learning using technological means. The study was based on the reports of 140 students at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, who replied to e-mailed questionnaires. We utilized a mixed research approach, gathering qualitative and quantitative statistical data using a questionnaire developed by the authors, including an open-ended questionnaire that completed students' data and information also about their emotions and the difficulties they faced.

Keywords: e-learning, sustainable, foreign language, well-being

Introduction

As a trans-national catastrophe that goes beyond cultural or geographic borders, the COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected all sectors of society and every aspect of human life (Assunção Flores & Gago, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Raaper & Brown, 2020; Sanz-Labrador et al.; 2021Wargadinata et al., 2020). Since the World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration of a universal pandemic, countries around the world have adopted an emergency plan, including the implementation of several restrictive measures aimed to reduce social gatherings and promote social distancing, including a national lockdown. Many commercial activities were closed, including all leisure centers: gyms, swimming pools, theaters, cinemas, restaurants, etc. The restrictions also encompassed the educational systems, from primary schools to universities and colleges, forcing educators to change their syllabi and modify them to conform with online teaching and requiring students of all ages to adapt to the new situation. Thus, the new form of online education presented a challenge for both students and teachers. According to research conducted in Israel in June 2020, social distancing and emergency online teaching impacted 2.3 million pupils at all levels of education, including 320.000 students in all higher education institutions (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020).

Several studies on the use of e-learning technologies in higher educational institutions have been implemented over the years, increasing substantially since the onset of COVID-19. Much of the focus has been on the challenges faced by both students and educators. In addition, the lockdowns resulting from the pandemic, which aroused feelings of isolation, brought major attention to the subject of "well-being" and the search for a model for sustainable healthy online learning.

Thus, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of learning a foreign language online within the framework of an academic setting during a pandemic, and emergencies crisis providing more information regarding sustainable foreign language learning by technological means.

Literature Review

Several studies on e-learning, particularly on its role in a changing world, were published before the onset of COVID-19. They focus on the many ethical, social and cultural challenges e-learning presents, which require that education be adapted to new communication technologies and that educators find ways to provide sustainable education. Scholars have emphasized how e-learning has drawn significant attention not only from educational institutions, but also from educational software developers and business organizations, due to its potential educational and cost benefits.

As researchers such as G. Sureshu Babu (2018) and Maican & Cocorada (2021) have indicated, the commercialization of e-learning has made higher education easily accessible to many people across the globe, facilitating the smooth flow of information at a cheaper cost by offering convenient ways to increase knowledge, education and literacy levels. This has provided the students with the option of saving both money and time, making higher education more accessible than before. Thus, these researchers consider e-learning as one of the best ways to offer equal education opportunities, minimizing social and economic differences. According to Smedley (2010), e-learning provides the institutions and their students with significant flexibility of time and place of delivery, which is an important advantage for working students. Another aspect of e-learning that has captured the attention of researchers is the adaptation of education to our fast-changing age of technology. Fry (2001), for example, analyzed how technology-based e-learning uses such tools as the Internet and other important technologies to produce teaching materials, teach students, and regulate the courses in an organization. However, until COVID-19, these studies were mainly theoretical, especially regarding the implementation and impact of e-learning in higher education. Most universities, it seems, never considered e-learning as an option, preferring the traditional frontal teaching, particularly in the humanities. When COVID-19 began spreading, all the educational institutions were required to change their way of teaching, and teachers found themselves having to grapple with a form of teaching that was completely new to them. These new challenges inspired many researchers worldwide to study and analyze this phenomenon, focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education around the world. In 2020, the International Association of Universities (IAU) published the first of three global surveys presenting an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on higher education. This was part of a more extensive set of activities carried out by IAU, intended to provide updated information on the ramifications of COVID-19 on universities and other higher education institutions. The survey described the challenges and opportunities presented by emergency distance education, taking into consideration the field of study, technical infrastructure and accessibility, distance learning competencies, and pedagogies (Marioni et al., 2020). However, the IAU survey did not examine the impact of distance education on the teacher-student relationship and the challenges of teaching and learning online, especially in foreign languages classes, nor did it analyze the students' feelings and motivations during their online studying. The challenges and opportunities presented by online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic were the focus of a study conducted by Donitsa-Schmidt and Ramot (2020), focusing on Israeli academic institutions. In their work, Donitsa-Schmidt and Ramot pointed out the necessity of rethinking teaching in higher education in Israel by investing in transformative-oriented professional development and changing regularities in space and time, including teachers' traditional role. An additional challenge presented by online studying is the well-being factor, which has been further analyzed by several scholars, who examined how the pandemic affected both students and teachers emotionally and psychologically (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021). Well-being has always been considered an important component of sustainable education, perhaps among the most important, even before COVID-19: "It includes the subjective feeling of success, satisfaction, and happiness, with challenges of life and responsibility at the workplace, sense of accomplishment, utility, belonging, no distress, discontentment or worry. The thought of well-being denotes good mental health, proficiency, and contentment" (Kaur & Singh, 2019). According to several scholars, poor mental well-being can harm students' achievements (Engels et al., 2004). For this reason, in recent years, the analysis of students' well-being has become extremely important for universities and educators, especially in times of a pandemic and social changes (Crawford & Johns, 2018). With the classes switching from frontal teaching to Zoom, the concept of well-being has been further investigated and revised. In their 2021 paper, Al Kumaim and colleagues presented a new conceptual model based on the factors that influence and even improve students' sustainable well-being. Their model is based on several well-known theories, such as the self-determination theory [SDT] (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and other theoretical concepts from the relevant literature review. SDT focuses mainly on how human behavior is self-motivated and self-determined, specifically on three different psychological and personal needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Fulfilling these three needs enhances mental health and self-motivation; in contrast, when these elements are unsatisfied, an individual's motivation and well-being are weakened (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory is shared by many scholars and psychologists, who argue that students and teachers must attempt to fulfill these three needs to be intrinsically motivated and sustain their personal growth and well-being (Waddell & Burton, 2006). Teacher well-being is manifested in a sense of personal and professional satisfaction, purposefulness, and fulfillment that develops with the collaboration of peers and children (Acton & Glasgow, 2015) and is seen as closely related to students' perceptions of well-being. This facet also explains why several studies have been conducted regarding the importance of teachers' well-being in recent years (Galton & MacBeath, 2008; Lovewell Kathryn, 2013). Relational factors affecting well-being, including the quality of staff and student interactions and professional working relationships, have been identified as essential by many studies (Brown, 2012; Engels et al., 2004; Hastings & Bham, 2003; Konu et al., 2010; McCallum & Price, 2010; Roloff Rothman, 2011; Ross et al., 2012; Spilt et al., 2011) and are premised on the understanding that connectedness and belonging in the workplace are central to maintaining feelings of well-being (Soini et al., 2010).

External factors, such as policy initiatives, work intensification, and school culture, further mediate the possibilities for managing emotions, establishing autonomy, developing self-efficacy, and establishing positive working relationships, contributing to a working climate that values each individual's well-being (Doecke & Kostogriz, 2010). While developing their model, which included well-being as a determining component of sustainable and healthy online learning, Al Kumaim and colleagues went even further, proposing a conceptual model that is comprised of three integrated contexts: the personal factor, the technical factor, and the socio-environmental factor (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021). According to this paper, students' well-being will be enhanced only if these factors are integrated, since self-determination alone is not sufficient if it is not supported by proper technology that will allow students to learn online correctly, such as digital literacy, an appealing design of the online learning content, and mobile interactive learning. The support of what Al Kumaim and colleagues defined as the socio-environment, such as the student's family and university, is also imperative to a positive sense of well-being. Though the conceptual model suggested by Al Kumaim and colleagues includes elements that are indispensable for a sustainable online learning education, these still must be empirically measured. The research on which their model is based was conducted on a limited population, i.e., a few universities in Malaysia. Further research, examining a wider population range in different countries, might suggest different results. This is also true for our current research, which is a case study based on Ben Gurion University in Israel, and specifically on teaching foreign languages during COVID-19. One of the reasons that we have chosen to focus our investigation on the instruction of foreign languages is the dire lack of information on the subject. Maican and Cocorada (2021) concentrated on university students' behaviors by analyzing feelings and perceptions associated with online foreign language learning during the pandemic and their correlations, using a mixed approach. Utilizing a Foreign Language Enjoyment scale and tools developed by the researchers, they examined the influence of emotions as related to foreign languages studies. In their paper, Maican and Cocorada presented students' attitudes regarding their preferences for online resources used by the teachers during COVID-19, offering insight on how studies at the universities could improve people's lives and increase sustainable development, and introducing the concept of sustainable learning. Nevertheless, their research does not offer a discussion of foreign language studies within an interdisciplinary curriculum. This important aspect was considered in the work of Achenson et al., who suggested the importance of modifying the curriculum by introducing intercultural communication into the foreign language classroom. This action, they found, can support the development of increasingly favorable attitudes toward other cultures and speakers of other languages.

2. Methodology

In this research we chose a mixed approach, gathering qualitative and quantitative statistical data by using a google form questionnaire with open-ended questions, in order to collect statistical and personal data from students. The online questionnaire also included open questions that students were required to answer and interviews that were conducted with students via Zoom. We chose to add open-ended questions because we believed that the answers would complete our data and give us more information about their experience and well-being while learning online during COVID 19. We also added Deci and Ryan's SDT as a parameter in the formulation of our questions, as we believed this was imperative to our research.

2.1 Research Context

This study was conducted at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, which had about 400 students studying a foreign language in the academic year 2020-2021. The study of foreign languages at Ben Gurion University is obligatory in specific departments and units, such as Art History, Management and Tourism, Archeology, and European Political Studies. These study programs require the study of a language as part of their curricula in order to encourage students not only to learn a foreign language but also to gain some knowledge of the culture and history of the people who speak this language. During much of the pandemic, all the courses were taught using Zoom. Extensive technical support was offered through user manuals, videos, and lectures about teaching online, using gamification, and evaluating students. However, it is important to emphasize that Ben Gurion University provided the technical infrastructure and pedagogical framework for distance education even before the onset of COVID-19, and the Moodle platform was already being used to upload documents, teaching materials, assignments, and homework. The Moodle platform, and before that Highlearn, was adopted over the last few years by all the university professors. This platform is very useful, particularly for teachers and students of foreign languages. The option to add material, and especially the links to several websites that enhance student interaction, is very useful, as it allows students to work on their pronunciation, listen to the language, and practice on their own outside the class. In addition, Moodle allows teachers to add short stories, articles, songs, pictures, and videos, offering students a glimpse into the history and culture of the language they are studying. In sum, teaching and studying using technological means were not completely new to the students and teachers. However, the sudden move to virtual online classes exclusively affected both students and teachers.

2.3 Language of completion

The survey was bilingual, and respondents could reply in either English or Hebrew. Most respondents replied in Hebrew. The respondents who answered in English were mainly Italian students and were enrolled in either the undergraduate or Ph.D. programs.

2.4 Sample Description:

The research population was comprised of 140 students, 91% of them enrolled in an undergraduate program. Among the participants, 65% were female and 35% male. The average was 27.76, with 14.5% of the students younger than 24. The foreign languages studied by the participants were Spanish (25%), Italian (17%), German (10%), Portuguese (8%), Arabic (6%), French (6%), Russian (4%), Chinese (2%), Greek (2%), Ladino (2%), Turkish (2%) and Yiddish (2%).

Ten percent of the students studied more than one foreign language. The amount of time the students spent studying one or more foreign languages in class was varied: 24% studied for 2 hours per week, 65% for 4 hours per week, 6% for 6 hours per week, and 5% spent 8 hours a week studying a foreign language. The students' mother-tongue languages were Hebrew (85%), Russian (6%), Arabic (5%), English (3%), and Spanish (1%). Of the students who participated in the study, 60% combined working and studying.

2.5 Procedure

The proposed research was approved by the university's Research Ethics Committee, and data was collected between April and June 2021. All the students were recruited via email. The students received an email from the university's Unit of Foreign Languages along with the questionnaire, which they submitted anonymously. In addition, we also interviewed several students individually, using Zoom. The questionnaire was divided into three main sections. Each section included several questions regarding personal information, how students studied using Zoom, and how they felt during the virtual classes. In order to interpret the motivating factors, we used The Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The qualitative data was collected in the same questionnaire as the open-ended questions. We applied the categorization method for interpreting the open-ended questions (Shkedi, 2005), and developed a data-driven category, i.e., categories and themes. The construction of the theoretical categories consisted of organizing the data into categories and identifying the characteristics of each category that illustrated the participants' experience of e-learning through Zoom during the pandemic. The quantitative data were analyzed using Excel spreadsheets.

2.6 Research Tools

The questionnaire included questions regarding personal information, such as age, gender, study program, year of study, and the foreign language that they studied. The following tools were also used after being adapted to the research requirements by the authors:

1. Three closed questions and two open-ended questions focusing on the student's motivation to learn a foreign language and their goals, based on Self-Determination and Intrinsic Motivation Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).
2. Thirteen open-ended questions about distance learning and emotions during the virtual classes throughout the pandemic period.

In addition, students could add other information they found pertinent, and all responses were provided in writing.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 E-learning and Students' Experience

This section consists of several questions regarding 1. how students learn via Zoom. 2. if virtual classes affect their motivations, 3. if the study of a foreign language can also be a means to learn about culture and society. The students were asked to answer each question using a 1-5 scale. Where (1) means strongly disagree, (2) somewhat disagree, (3) somewhat agree, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree. From their answers regarding their experience studying via Zoom, most of the students agreed that this enhanced their understanding of the classes and stated that they actively participated in the classes and collaborated with other students (Table 1). Our data showed that many students preferred to study via Zoom for various reasons: it was more comfortable, cheaper, and allowed them free access to online resources posted by the teachers. As all the lessons were recorded, this enabled them to replay the recorded lessons at their convenience and listen to the teacher's explanations as much as needed. This is an extremely important tool that we should always use when teaching, not only in e-learning. Before COVID-19, recorded lessons have only been used for e-learning, and frontal classes were never recorded. However, as the students wrote in their replies to the open-ended questions, recorded lessons are a great asset when attempting to learn a foreign language:

- *I find online studying to be completely superior to frontal studying. All sessions are recorded, so missed information is much easier to find. All other students are on mute, so a person who will not shut his mouth is no longer an issue. Finding a decent seat in the classroom is not an issue, so you can always see the board. etc.*
- *I like the recording a lot, it gives me the option to listen further to the language and practice orally by repeating words and sentences.*

In addition, students appreciated what e-learning was able to offer them, such as the option to integrate online resources with games (Kahoot, Mentimeter, and others), videos, and polls taken during the classes, motivating them (particularly the shiny students) to participate in the classes. Students also liked the lower cost, geographic flexibility, and technical skills offered by e-learning.

While e-learning was implemented mainly due to the emergency situation, in this paper, we chose to stress the advantages of using digital platforms by focusing on the positive effect of e-learning on student motivation. We found, for example, that e-learning allows the teacher to provide authentic cultural information by exposing the students to authentic language experiences through videos, podcasts, and other tools that can be found on the Internet. It is also possible that the positive attitudes reported by the students may be associated with the fact that most belong to the millennial generation and their considerable interest in technology. We also learned from the open-ended questions that studying via Zoom classes allowed students to better manage their time and be more productive. This was especially true for the working students and those who were not living in Beer-Sheva (see Table 2 and Table 3). However, not all the students were satisfied with the e-learning. Some, for example, found it difficult because they felt lonely or had experienced technical problems.

- *It's not possible to learn a language through a computer, it is impossible to understand the nuances, and when the studies depend on the quality of the Internet it seems almost impossible.*
- *I am felt lonely being at home by myself. I missed seeing and talking to people a lot, in particular my classmates.*

In addition to the quantitative data, the students' answers also revealed their emotions and how their well-being had been affected by learning via Zoom during the lockdown.

3.2 Students' Emotions Regarding E-learning

Students reported mixed feelings of negative and positive emotions during the lockdown and online studying (See Table 4).

Negative Emotions

The students reported that negative feelings were generated by the lack of interaction with other students and the teacher. Furthermore, many of them reported feelings such as stress, frustration, lack of concentration, problems maintaining attention, and feeling that they are not understood or listened to: *It was frustrating, it is better to learn language face-to-face.*

Besides the affective motives, the emergency situation that we all found ourselves in, along with the universities' decision to teach using e-learning platforms, aroused feelings of isolation. This situation directly affected the motivation and well-being of the students: *I don't like the idea of staying at home in pajamas and learning from the room by means of the computer.*

Positive Emotions

Alongside to the negative emotions, our data shows that students also had positive emotions. They felt joy during the classes and could think about something else instead of the pandemic crisis.

- *I liked the Zoom classes, it helps me to be more concentrated in the class and to successfully understand.*
- *During the pandemic crisis learning about other languages and cultures help me to distract myself from reality.*
- *Learning Italian through songs helps me to disconnect from reality, and to connect with other cultures and people, even if the meeting was virtual.*

Sometimes the feelings were ambiguous, both negative and positive: *I felt that it was hard to concentrate, but our teacher is very clear and explained everything very well.*

- *I think the learning was not good. The teacher is excellent and successful, but to learn a language, you must have a dialogue and create an interaction with the teacher and the other students, such interaction can only be created in a classroom study environment and not in a Zoom (session).*

3.3 Learning a Foreign Language and Motivation

The quantitative data showed that students chose to study a foreign language for various reasons.

By applying the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to our study, we have conceptualized the different motivations described by the students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to our students' reports, we found that they are more motivated to pursue an activity that fulfills multiple goals, which is fundamentally a matter of needs. The students' reasons for studying a foreign language can be sorted into sub-categories, such as enjoyment, acquiring academic skills, acquiring tools for their studies, learning a parent's or grandparent's language, or as a tool for travel or work. Students also mentioned their interest in learning about a different culture through language, viewing the language as a fundamental tool to understanding other cultures.

- *I learned Italian because I need this language for my research, and I am curious about the language and culture.*
- *I dreamt of knowing better the Spanish language and being able to communicate with others.*

Interestingly, the "communication" factor, i.e. the students' desire to communicate properly with others and understand them, featured prominently in their reported reasons for studying a foreign language.

Other reasons for students choosing to study a foreign language were correlated with their intrinsic (i.e. doing it for its own sake) and extrinsic (to achieve an instrumental end) motivation. Some students were motivated by external reasons, such as getting a better job or being able to travel abroad for work or study.

Intrinsic motivations:

- *I learned Italian and Arabic because I like to learn languages.*
- *I chose French because I have a special interest in this language.*
- *I chose to learn Spanish because I love the language. It is interesting.*
- *I learn Portuguese. Why? Because I can be another person when I speak a different language.*

and extrinsic motivations:

- *I study Arabic because it's an important tool when I will be looking for a job, especially because I want to work in government offices.*
- *I studied Italian because I want to travel to Italy and know its culture and society better.*

In this study, we found that one quite common motivation for studying a foreign language was the students' wish to learn the language of their family members, usually that of their grandparents or even great-grandparents:

- *My grandfather is very old, he will die soon and I want to know where he came from. I know that he will be happy to talk to me and share his memories in his mother tongue.*
- *My grandfather came to Israel with the Jewish Brigade, where he also served, he is my hero, I know that for him it is very important that I learn his mother language and the culture from where he came.*
- *I chose to learn Yiddish because I wanted to understand my family history better.*
- *I learn Spanish to be able to talk with my family in Argentina.*

In addition to the family, our data also shows that students were influenced by an affective and social goal to make connections with friends who speak other languages:

- *I liked knowing languages, and I have family in France. I always wanted to learn French to be able to speak with them, since they don't know Hebrew or English.*
- *I want to talk with my friends in their language and I am interested in meeting new friends, knowing their language will help me to communicate with them.*

In general, these students had very good listening comprehension skills, a moderate to extensive vocabulary, and proficient reading skills, though they often tended to struggle with speaking and writing. That is also one of the reasons that we feel teachers should review their syllabus and methodology when teaching foreign languages, as we will discuss in the following.

3. 4 Foreign Language: Sustainable E-learning

One of the foci of our research was students' attitudes towards sustainable e-learning, which we examined by evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with the diverse views expressed by many scholars regarding the pros and cons of e-learning, our results confirmed several of the advantages and benefits highlighted in the works of Babu (2018), Smedley (2010), and Maican, and Cocorada (2021), for example. One particular and oft-mentioned advantage was the saving of both time and money. The disadvantages that were mentioned by the students who participated in our study, such as loneliness and lack of interaction with other students and with the teacher, have also been documented in previous research. (Ionescu et al., 2020; Pownall et al., 2022) One important aspect that clearly emerged from our findings is that the use of technology and digital media in e-learning has both positive and negative components. Contrary to frontal classes, e-learning is based mainly on technology, and virtual classes are more focused on real-world issues, texts, events, and problem-solving tasks.

Technology introduces a new dimension to the study process, incorporating the use of social media and communication apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Voice Thread, and others. Digital media allows students to manipulate learning

materials and language at their own pace according to individual needs. They can examine reports, authentic documents, and web pages to find information that can be synthesized and discussed later, and collaborate electronically with youth from around the world (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). These are all aspects that make technology a positive and important component of a sustainable e-learning education, fulfilling the needs of students who live at present in a society that is constantly changing. However, to achieve this, teachers must possess digital literacy. Digital literacy consists mainly of the ability to understand and use information in several formats, paying more attention to critical thinking when communicating using technology skills (Paul, 1997). The lack of digital literacy is a negative factor and is strictly related to the concept of sustainable e-learning, which is based mainly on computer technology. The term "sustainable" has several interpretations, based both on our results and on the literature review, particularly the conceptual model elaborated by Al Kumaim and colleagues, we can define sustainable e-learning of foreign languages as a situation in which the system (technological platforms and different media) and programs fulfill both the students aim to learn a foreign language and the teachers' goal to provide the students with all the tools required to foster language proficiency. This also includes the additional role of teachers to help students reduce their feelings of social isolation which, as we saw in our findings, affect students' well-being and emotions. This may be achieved by creating a friendly online atmosphere and assigning tasks that require students to collaborate, interacting while working together on shared projects, thus increasing their motivation to study. As the Self-Determination Theory shows, and our findings confirmed, strongly motivated students may find it easier to achieve their educational goals. The role of teachers within the study context raises some interesting points and questions, such as the efficacy of maintaining the same syllabus and methodology used in frontal classes as opposed to adapting the curriculum and making it more appropriate for sustainable online learning. As Moeller and Catalano (2015) observed, e-learning has completely changed the role of the teacher. While the teacher was considered an authority figure or expert who delivers knowledge, e-learning has changed the teacher's role to being a facilitator and guide, who provides support to the student's learning process. Therefore, upon making a move to e-learning, both the syllabus and the teaching methodology should be revised. Teachers should be trained to use relevant technologies, including social media, and should adapt their programs to the e-learning platform using an appealing design for online learning content to further motivate the students and facilitate their learning (Al Kumaim et al., 2021). This should include, for example, the use of platforms that provide visual (documentaries, short movies) and audio (songs, poems) content and PowerPoint presentations (for pictures, paintings, and other cultural elements). This will facilitate the students' learning of a new vocabulary and allow them to use the new language orally, rather than just in writing, as required by the university curricula at present. However, it is important to highlight that a sustainable e-learning education should, first and foremost, be accessible to any person who wants to learn, along with the conditions and tools to do so properly. For this reason, all the various stakeholders who wish to provide sustainable education, such as the Council of Higher Education, universities, and families, must work together to give students the proper learning environment, including an adapted curriculum. As we learned from the statements regarding students' motivation to study a foreign language, universities should place more emphasis on their students' needs and adapt the study curricula and programs to match the multicultural and transitional society in which we are living.

The importance of studying foreign languages has consistently been underestimated by Israeli universities, where language studies are not an independent and autonomous academic discipline but rather are seen as a means used to support other humanistic disciplines. Foreign languages are perceived only as useful within the context of other studies, such as translating or reading academic material.

This is a narrow perspective, which does not consider the immeasurable importance of language. Language includes culture, history, society, and all disciplines that are connected and intrinsic to one another. As stated by Moeller and Catalano (2015), studying a foreign language allows the individual to communicate effectively and creatively and participate in real-life situations through the language of the authentic culture itself. Learning another language provides access to a perspective other than one's own, increases the ability to see connections across the content area, and promotes an interdisciplinary perspective while gaining intercultural understandings. Therefore, in a changing multilingual and multicultural world, knowledge and even proficiency in a foreign language can facilitate a broader worldview and allow individuals to understand other cultures as one of the most important vehicles for practical human-to-human interactions. In our study, we found that one of the main motivations for students to study a foreign language was the interaction and ability to communicate and to understand a different culture and its people. However, teachers changing and adapting their classes programs will not be enough for a sustainable e-learning experience if the universities do not offer proper tools to implement this.

Thus, universities should not only provide students with free access to the Internet and easy access to all online material, but should ensure that each student has access to a computer. We noticed that some of our students did not have a computer in their home, while others had old computers that did not allow them to study properly. In addition, not all the students or teachers know how to use all the technological media and data programs. This emerged in some of the students' responses, which revealed their feeling that teachers were not proficient in the necessary technology during the virtual classes. Finally, it is also imperative that the family or people who live with students support or facilitate their at-home e-learning.

CONCLUSION

This work has aimed to investigate university students' responses, including their difficulties and emotions while e-learning a foreign language during lockdowns and the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to provide new information regarding sustainable foreign language learning through technology. Our study has some limitations. First, it was performed among a specific group, i.e., students who study foreign languages at Ben Gurion University, and thus was limited in scope. Second, it was conducted from the onset of the pandemic until June 2021, when we finalized the compilation of the research data. Third, at the time of the investigation, studies on e-learning and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic were just beginning, because everything happened quickly and unexpectedly. Accordingly, scholars found themselves working in a new field of research that needed, and still needs, further empirical investigation, possibly using different theories, techniques, and more quantitative data that might be used to compare results with other universities and worldwide. Nevertheless, our findings have been very useful, as they not only illustrated our students' attitudes and needs during this time, but also gave us the opportunity to elaborate on what we consider is required to maintain a sustainable e-learning methodology and curricula for learning and teaching a foreign language in a society that is constantly in transition.

Upon analyzing students' responses, including their difficulties and emotions regarding e-learning a foreign language during this trying period, we found that their feelings were ambiguous. Yet despite some negative feelings, due to the stress and fear of the pandemic and their loneliness, our qualitative and quantitative data demonstrated that almost all the students who participated in the study learned how to cope with the situation and were able to manage their Zoom-based studies.

Our findings regarding the students' feelings and conflicting emotions are also reflected in several studies conducted by other scholars among different populations and countries, as suggested by literature reviews on the subject. The results of our research, particularly the section discussing the students' new experience of studying a foreign language online during the lockdown, demonstrated the necessity of revising the programs and using a different methodology. The biggest challenge, we feel, is to learn to properly utilize the available technology and social media to facilitate e-learning. Furthermore, existing teaching programs should be adapted to students' needs. The questionnaire we sent was very useful in this respect, because it clarified what changes we should implement while teaching a foreign language, particularly the methodological component. We also found that students viewed learning a foreign language as more than just reading and comprehension, but rather saw this as a way to learn about different societies, cultures, and histories, and communicate with others. In addition, some mentioned the use of the foreign language they were studying for working or studying abroad later on, or studying at institutions where knowledge of multiple languages is required.

Regarding e-learning, the conceptual model proposed by Al Kumaim et al. (2021) emphasizes factors that are determinants for sustainable and healthy online learning. Our study also found that personal factors, such as self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985), digital literacy, and social environment, were and are definitive elements for predicting better learning and satisfaction, which are extremely important for students' well-being. In addition to these factors, we believe that for sustainable e-learning to occur, the technological platform and various programs should correspond with the students' aim to study a foreign language and the teachers' goal to give students the tools required to foster language proficiency. This should include also the additional role of the teachers to manage the classroom environment appropriately, by both constructing the virtual class in a manner that will encourage students to use different online platforms, and helping students reduce their feelings of social isolation, which affects their well-being and emotions.

TABLES :

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Regarding E-learning via Zoom

Questions	Mean (1-5)	SD	Tab
-Do you think that studying a language through Zoom might improve your learning in better understanding?	3.09	1.34	le
-Do you feel that you learn enough through Zoom?	3.39	1.27	2:
-Do you collaborate with other students?	3.41	1.33	Des
-Did you actively participate in class?	3.75	1.32	crip
-Due to the present situation from 1 -5, are your goal to learn a foreign language changing?	3.09	1.09	tive
-Do you think studying a foreign language enables you to understand its culture as well?	4.31	0.92	Stat

arding Students' Experiences E-Learning Foreign Languages

Questions	Mean (1-5)	SD
Studying online is [Cheaper]	2.31	1.54
Studying online is [More comfortable]	3.58	1.37
Studying online is [Expensive]	1.55	1.00
Studying online is [uncomfortable]	2.32	1.40

Table 3: Students' Preference Regarding E-learning

Questions	Mean (1-5)	SD
Do you prefer to study by.... [Zoom]	3.20	1.33
Do you prefer to study by.... [Home or workplace]	3.06	1.70
Do you prefer to study by.... [Hybrid learning]	2.40	1.37

Table 4. Students' Emotions Regarding E-learning

Questions	Mean (1-5)	S.D.
How do you feel during the virtual class? [Stress]	2.27	1.35
-How do you feel during the virtual class? Fear]	2.18	1.33
-How do you feel during the virtual class? [Anxiety]	1.69	1.08
-How do you feel during the virtual class? [Happy]	2.12	1.32
-How do you feel during the virtual class? Frustration]	3.01	1.22
-How do you feel during the virtual class? [Uncomfortable]	1.60	1.09
-How do you feel during the virtual class? [Worry about the situation]	2.66	1.29
-How do you feel during the virtual class? Interest in the course	2.34	1.30
-How do you feel during the virtual class?	1.85	1.22
-I can listen to lessons whenever I want	4.10	1.32

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