The future of language education in the light of Covid – lesson learned and ways forward

Collecting learners' voices

The main objective of the "future of language education in the light of Covid" initiative was to investigate the impact of the Covid emergency on language education and to identify what lessons there might be for the future of language education in 'normal' times. This involved researching the impact of the pandemic, particularly during periods of lockdown, on language education by collecting information about the views and experiences of language teachers, learners and institutions. This was done by means of international surveys run by the ECML secretariat. Further information on the initiative can be found on the website .

The surveys

The first language teachers' survey was launched in February 2021 and ran for a month. 1,735 individual responses were received from some forty European countries. A webinar, a report on the results of this survey and PowerPoint slides are available here. A list of the top ten 'burning issues' mentioned by teacher respondents can be found here.

During the meeting of the enlarged Bureau to be held on 19th October, the main focus will be on the initial findings of follow-up surveys run in Spring 2022. These surveys were aimed separately at language learners and at their teachers. The team steering the initiative wanted to hear from learners specifically about their own experiences of and feelings about language learning during the Covid restrictions. The aim was to gain some factual insight into what had helped learners to learn during the Covid emergency, what might have hindered their learning and what elements of their learning experiences during the restrictions they would like to see continue in future.

Although it is the most difficult sector to reach by direct means, it was decided to focus on learners in the secondary school sector. While the views and experiences of primary school learners can be handled through the medium of parents and teachers and those in the tertiary sector can be approached directly, eliciting the voices of secondary level learners in a systematic manner poses significant challenges.

The first step was to run a pilot survey to test whether the innovative techniques designed to capture the desired data were feasible and effective. The pilot survey confirmed that they were. The main survey was then launched in May-June 2022.

Methodology of the survey of language learners

It was decided that the survey should access the unfiltered voices of learners by means of a pack of classroom resources for teachers. These resources were designed to allow a learning environment to be created where the issues relating to language learning under Covid conditions could be discussed or debated at class or group level, different points of view could be freely aired and conclusions could be drawn. The activities suggested also provided learners with the means to express majority and minority views in the class or group. In case other language teachers wish to use it to stimulate classroom discussion, a scaled-down stand-alone version of the unit used is available on the website here.

Following these class activities, learners were asked to complete an 11-question learner survey to record the views of the group. The survey's simple demographic section was followed by open text questions with high word limits. These enabled the learners involved to write whatever they wanted. These open text items focused mainly on three levels of priority, for example: (a) 'this helped me/us most', (b) 'and this helped me/us', (c) 'and this also helped'. Responses were only required for the first level(a), the others being optional. Parallel questions asked what had not helped. In both cases, there were questions both about the general circumstances of learning and specifically about language learning.

The outcomes of learners' deliberations in class contained in the longer responses in the survey questionnaires expressing the learners' views, opinions and concerns, were compiled into a corpus together with all other open text responses in the questionnaire. The data were then analysed using statistical methods and critical discourse analysis of the open text responses, supported through corpus analysis for confirmation or for modification. To ensure validity and true representativeness of samples selected from the responses, the corpus was processed using a semantic tagging procedure.

Initial findings

The key test was – could we find valid answers to these questions?

> **For teachers** - what are the burning issues brought about by your Covid experiences? Has anything changed since and if so, what? Can you build on your experiences during Covid? Do you have pointers for the future?
>
> **For learners** – what helped or hindered you? What worked well and should be maintained? What didn't and should be discarded in your view? Do you have pointers for the future?

The top 10 'burning issues' from the teachers' perspective are reported on here.

Following the agreed guideline: "let the learners speak for themselves", the following conclusions are based on responses from some 1,300 secondary school students from 9 European countries at CEFR levels B1 to B2+.

The impact on learners' wellbeing

About two thirds of the learners reported suffering from some form of social discomfort and stress arising from one or more factors, such as the socially distanced classroom, distance delivery, the wearing of masks, timetabling restrictions leading to lack of time, isolation, and resulting demotivation; whilst a quarter of all respondents reported more severe forms including some statements that were deemed potentially clinically relevant by a doctor.

These findings need to be compared to data for the entire population in order to fully estimate the extent and gravity of these events and to answer the question: 'To what extent are these problems restricted to school environments? Are they indicative of a general Covid-related malaise in the population? And were they, at least partially, already in existence but unobserved, before Covid struck?' There are some indications that Covid acted as a lens that magnified and accelerated pre-existing conditions.

Some examples from the learners' voices data:

- Response 122090499 to the question: **"what did you dislike the most during the pandemic?"** reported: "*when being given an assignment in some internet classroom (like Google Classroom), it was sometimes hard to understand the topic without being given an additional explanation, questions couldn't be asked etc. - the amount of work given in the Google classroom was often too excessive (more than we would get during normal classes) - the deadline given to hand in the assignments was sometimes unrealistically set (we didn't have enough time to do it).*"

- Response 122157015: "*having work to do all the time, even at the weekend - already lost the pleasure of movement and activities, there seemed to be no difference between the weekdays and the weekend. Much prefer learning face(-to-face[1] as difficult to concentrate and a lot of distractions at home. Some though liked the more personalised contact with the a teacher, and the fact that she started each session with letting everyone express how they were feeling. Workload too heavy, and did not like hours on end of online sessions.*"

---

[1]On principle learners' responses are never corrected or edited

- Individual student 122059052 added: "*I felt sad, isolated and lonely. My eyesight got worse and I need glasses. I missed all my friends. Sometimes I didn't understand what the teacher wanted me to do. At school I just ask the teacher and my friends and it's clear*."

Most tellingly, a few students were moved to coin new words to describe the unprecedented Covid challenges: "*the idea of unliberty*" (122142969).

The team were concerned to receive statements such as: "*We also disliked the cerfew, wearing masks and feeling worse because of the extensive use of computers and lack of human contact (sicknesses, headaches, sore eyes, depression)*." (122059717).

Positive aspects of language learning during the pandemic

Learners were asked to comment and talk about what had worked well for them in their language learning during the pandemic. In response to the question: **"*Which language learning activities, tasks and exercises helped you to learn and would be helpful in the future?*"** learners provided a range of positive responses.

A typical response was: "*You had to be well organized and make your own plan how and when to do things. I had to take responsibility for my work*" (122059502). Another said: "*We did quite a lot of group work and presentations. We learnt to use power point, Canva and other apps to create our presentations and we also improved our presentation skills and to work as part of a team*" (121677824). Or again: "*Watching videos with subtitles, writing summaries, groupwork, uploaded videos in e-classrooms, pair-work*" (122159566). One even went so far as to say: "Websites like this" (122058541) referring to the ECML website in the Covid initiative.

Statistically, the top learner responses to the above question, put into ranking order, were:

1. **Video** (clips rather than films)
2. **A mix** of teaching approaches and activities
3. **Language games** (age related)
4. **Collaborative learning**, working in groups (level & age related)
5. **Useful exercises** - often with detailed examples
6. **Applications –** specific or relevant to language learning (Kahoot was most often mentioned)
7. **Skills work** – exemplified
8. **Autonomous vs collaborative learning** approaches, benefits, enjoyment of this
9. **Flexibility**
   a. Flexibility of teaching approaches
   b. Flexibility of times (most quoted: it was vital to be in class together with, perhaps, one day a week remote from home).

Negative aspects of language learning during the pandemic

In answer to the question: "***Our point of view after our discussion about language learning during the pandemic and afterwards – this is the opinion of most people in the class*** * (maximum 1000 words)": a learner summarised the majority point of view of her/his class as follows:

"*We felt really isolated from classmates and teachers when we were in quarantines. We could not go out to play with them or go to school to meet them. We were sad. Some classmates did not see each other for more than a month as some of us do not have their own cellphones. We also missed each other because in school we learn a lot from each other and help each other when we do not know something regarding homework or things that we do in lessons. Though we sometimes preferred distant learning because it is less stressful than classroom learning we are more happy being in school. When we were learning at home other things*

distracted us from learning, for example we rather watched TV, played video games or played with our toys than learn so our knowledge today is not as good as it could be. If we could, we would work from home one day a week" (122159743).

Comments were also invited from minority viewpoints in the class or group:

"We had a different opinion on statements 1 (With remote learning I don't feel as motivated and don't work as hard as in face-to-face lessons. I do better when I'm in normal lessons.), 5 (My teachers / my family were really supportive and helpful during lockdowns.) and 7 (I think my grades were not fair and did not really reflect the effort I made when working remotely)." (122089940)

"During the pandemic and it was time for free time because there was a lot of homework work, you had little time for breakfast in the morning..." (122090625)

The burning issue

One point-of-view received almost unanimous support from secondary school language learners, namely that **they want to be and learn in school** rather remotely. This was mentioned repeatedly: irrespective of the question, the issue was raised nevertheless.

Some examples:

- *"In our opinion remote learning wasn't a positive expereince, there were many technical difficulties with computers, often low quality of sound, students not concentrated..."* (122107168)
- *"We did not like distant learning. It is better to be at school."* (122092244)
- *"It was harder than at school"* (122090734)
- *"We concluded that none of us wishes to participate in that kind of learning in the future. Although there were some pros, as we mentioned above, we soon got fed up with them and wished we had normal lessons. The school is not only about learning content, it is also learning about social interactions and having fun with our friends. Remote learning cannot give you that. It's a type of learning that you can participate in for a short period of time. It is not human friendly on the long run, as it causes health problems such as depression, obesity and addiction from technology. A lot of kids who were physically active before the remote learning are now not active anymore in their sports. This cannot be good."* (122059717)

And many, many more such as: *"we were distracted by phone, tv, family, food, my friends, grandparents, home pets, people driving by house..."* (122058521), or *"my phone was ringing all the time, my dog, my mom."* (122058522).

Looking to the future: what would learners like to see change?

- *"Our class would like to share this message with other language learners in Europe. We would like to change that we could make more power-points and work more in groups. And that we could write on our tablets (iPads) instead of notebooks."* (121819029)
- *"We would like to write less and talk more. We wish we could spend more time working in groups and working on projects. And also we don't want to have too much online classes."* (122117361)
- *"Some said they wouldn't change anything. Some would like more explanations of learning material, more videos, more handouts and apps. More fun and relaxed classes."* (122144079)
- *"Our message for the future: introduce mor visual and listening materials. Check what young people are interested in before writing our books."* (122056819)

Conclusion

More analysis work remains to be done on the information collected from learners. In addition, the related questionnaires to the teachers who had set up the class discussions duplicated certain questions that were asked in the 2021 survey. The teachers' responses need to be correlated with the large amount of data gathered in 2021 in order to establish whether and if so how the views of teachers evolved between February 2021 and May 2022.

A detailed report on all the survey findings will be included in the publication about the initiative planned for early 2023. In the meantime, an informal selection by Frank Heyworth of comments made by learners and by teachers in their respective responses to the survey questionnaires can be found [here](). These selections aimed to provide an overview of learners' and teachers' opinions and were not based on statistical analysis.

Peter Brown, Bernd Rüschoff and Richard Rossner, September 2022