ONLINE LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH CLASS: A CASE STUDY OF SLOVAK AND ROMANIAN STUDENTS

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Abstract: *THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC FORCED UNIVERSITIES TO MOVE FULLY OR PARTIALLY ONLINE AND TO USE ONLINE PLATFORMS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING. THIS STUDY EXPLORES STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON ONLINE LEARNING COMPARED TO FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING AT THE ROMANIAN AND SLOVAK UNIVERSITIES. A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS WAS CONDUCTED ON 118 STUDENTS. THE STUDY FOUND THAT THE MAJORITY OF STUDENTS EXPRESSED THEIR SATISFACTION WITH ONLINE LEARNING. THEY CONSIDERED THEIR ONLINE ENGLISH COURSES WELL-STRUCTURED AND CLEAR. MOREOVER, THEY PERCEIVED THEY COULD LEARN ENGLISH MORE EFFECTIVELY ONLINE BECAUSE THE CLASSES WERE MORE INTERACTIVE AND THE ONLINE PLATFORMS PROVIDED PLENTY OF OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE ALL SKILLS: LISTENING, READING, WRITING AND SPEAKING. MOST OF THEM APPRECIATED THEIR ENGLISH ONLINE CLASSES DUE TO THE VARIABILITY OF LEARNING MATERIALS, METHODS AND ACTIVITIES, THE COMFORT, THE NOVELTY AND ATTRACTIVITY, THE SUPPORT OF LEARNER'S INDEPENDENCE AND OF SPEAKING CONFIDENCE. CONCERNING FACE-TO-FACE CLASSES, THEY PREDOMINANTLY APPRECIATED THE EFFICIENCY, FEWER DISTRACTIONS, BETTER INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION, FEWER HEALTH ISSUES CAUSED BY THE SEDENTARY LIFESTYLE, MORE SOCIAL CONTACT, LOSS OF TECHNICAL ISSUES, FAMILIARITY AND BETTER MOTIVATION.*

Keywords: STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS, ONLINE LEARNING, FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING, CONNECTION, ACTIVE LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of higher education, all Romanian and Slovak universities have delivered education face-to-face in the presence of a lecturer offering knowledge to students in a classroom, using traditional methods and resources such as textbooks, chats, whiteboards, video- projectors, flipcharts etc. Nowadays, there is no denying that digital learning is a valuable asset opening education up to many more people. Higher education faculty members found themselves in the situation to deliver courses online, being or not prepared for doing it, having or not the tools for this type of teaching. Education is one of the least digitized in Slovakia and Romania taking into account that a variety of powerful new platforms and technologies have emerged, grounded in cloud computing, enormous datasets, and artificial intelligence. The concept of traditional education has recently changed radically, so being present in a classroom is not the only learning option. We are now entering a new era of online education, and this alternative has proven to be valid and beneficial for many students.

In this article, we seek to highlight students' perceptions of online learning experiences determining how their performance and achievement, course satisfaction and engagement vary between the two universities, considering their sense of learning achievement, satisfaction with the support they receive, technical proficiency, intellectual and emotional stimulation, and sense of learning community. The student perspective is highly significant when novel teaching approaches are applied and new technologies are introduced. Online learning, however, is not a simple application of IT in education but a way to expand learning possibilities with enormous effort and commitment from students and teachers and this survey questionnaire is helpful to provide the students' personal experiences and perception of this type of learning.

Literature review

Various studies have been conducted to assess the effectiveness and acceptance of online learning and to show to what extent, when well integrated and adapted, it can cater for students' needs.

Heather Kauffmann (2015) explored factors predictive of student success and satisfaction with online learning and notes that online learning programs lead to outcomes that are comparable to those of face-to-face programs.

Judith V. Boettcher and Rita-Marie Conrad (2016) recommend that successful online learning depends upon the formation of an online learning community, and this is only possible if there is regular online interaction between teachers and students.

Ruchan Uz and Adem Uzun (2018) made a study of 167 undergraduate students on a programming language course compared blended learning with a traditional learning environment and found that, for the purpose of developing self-regulated learning skills, blended instruction was more effective than traditional instruction.

As suggested by Chiu and Hew (2018, in Chui, Lin and Lonka, 2021) online learning poses challenges to students' self-motivation capabilities. Motivation is one of the heavily investigated issues in education but little attention has been paid to its development in online environment. Student engagement, which is energized by motivation as explained by self-determination theory (SDT), is a prerequisite for learning. Self-determination theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), is a macro-level theory of human motivation that aims to explain the dynamics of human need, motivation, and well-being within a social context.

Chiu, Lin and Lonka (2021) also compared nine empirical studies in China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Singapore and the USA, focusing on student remote learning and teacher remote teaching during the recent pandemic. The most prominent topics seem to be motivation, socialization, and self-directedness during online teaching and learning.

Methodology

The purpose of this research study is to explore students' perceptions of online learning usage, frequency, and overall satisfaction at the Žilina University of Slovakia and the "Constantin Brancusi" University of Romania.

The target population is represented by 118 students from the Žilina University of Slovakia and the "Constantin Brancusi" University of Targu-Jiu, out of which 60.5% are males and 39.5% are females. The environment framework includes the MS Teams, Moodle, Google Meet, Zoom platforms, Skype and emails. Some of the most significant features of the online platforms are assignments, screen sharing, whiteboard, raise your hand, custom background, breakout rooms, access to persistent chat, collaborating and sharing files, and access to class materials.

An empirical analysis was used to conduct this research which consisted of a survey that was developed based on a review of literature in the field of online learning. This quantitative research study used a survey questionnaire to obtain feedback from students on their perceptions of the use and satisfaction with online learning through e-learning platforms. The research was a Google form survey having as a tool a questionnaire and using SPSS 26 Statistics program for analyzing data.

The size of the analyzed sample was 118 students, distributed by the following specializations: Rescue Services, Security Management, Crisis Management, Security and Protection of Critical Infrastructure, Pharmacy Assistant, Physical Education and Sport, and Kinesitherapy. Category responses ranged from *strongly disagree, disagree,* to *neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree.*

The survey had two goals: (1) to see if students are more interested in online learning than in face-to-face learning, and (2) to see if their performance and achievement, course satisfaction and engagement vary between the two universities.

Data Collection Method

Data was collected online by filling a questionnaire on Google forms. The participants in the study received information about the purpose of the survey and approved the participation to the study.

The Research Instrument

The questionnaire included items corresponding to the nineteen research questions. The fourth research statements were about institution, field of study, gender, age and for statement fifth to nineteenth, a 5 point scale was used (5=*strongly agree*, 4=*agree*, 3=*neither agree nor disagree*, 2= disagree, 1- *strongly disagree*).

The survey developed for the study was designed to collect quantitative data for analysis. The 118 students, distributed by 7 specializations expressed their opinions concerning online learning. This descriptive survey research study sought to answer the following research statements through the collection of convenience sampling of students:

Research statement 1: I am a student of…
Research statement 2: My field of study is…
Research statement 3: I am male/female/prefer not to say.
Research statement 4: My age…
Research statement 5: Which online platforms and tools do you use for your online English classes?
Research statement 6: Participating in online learning improved my ICT skills.
Research statement 7: Online platforms are easy to handle.
Research statement 8: Online English course is well-structured and clear.

Research statement 9: I can learn the English language more effectively by having online sessions because it is more interactive.

Research statement 10: I believe I can learn English only through printed materials and the face-to-face teacher's explanations.

Research statement 11: Online platforms provide plenty of opportunities to practice all skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking.

Research statement 12: My motivation is very low when I study online.

Research statement 13: I am able to concentrate harder on my learning when having face-to-face English class because there'll be less distraction than if I was at home.

Research statement 14: My mobile devices (laptop, tablet, smartphone) helped me in learning the English language.

Research statement 15: The learning outcomes are the same in online learning as in face-to-face learning.

Research statement 16: Online learning has a number of tools such as videos, PDFs, podcasts and studying English with all these tools helps a lot.

Research statement 17: Overall, I am satisfied with online learning.

Research statement 18: Facing the choice between traditional and online English classes, I would choose online classes.

Research statement 19: Briefly explain why you prefer online or traditional English classes.

Results and discussion

The centralized data, in absolute value and in values expressed as a percentage, are presented in figures 1-19.

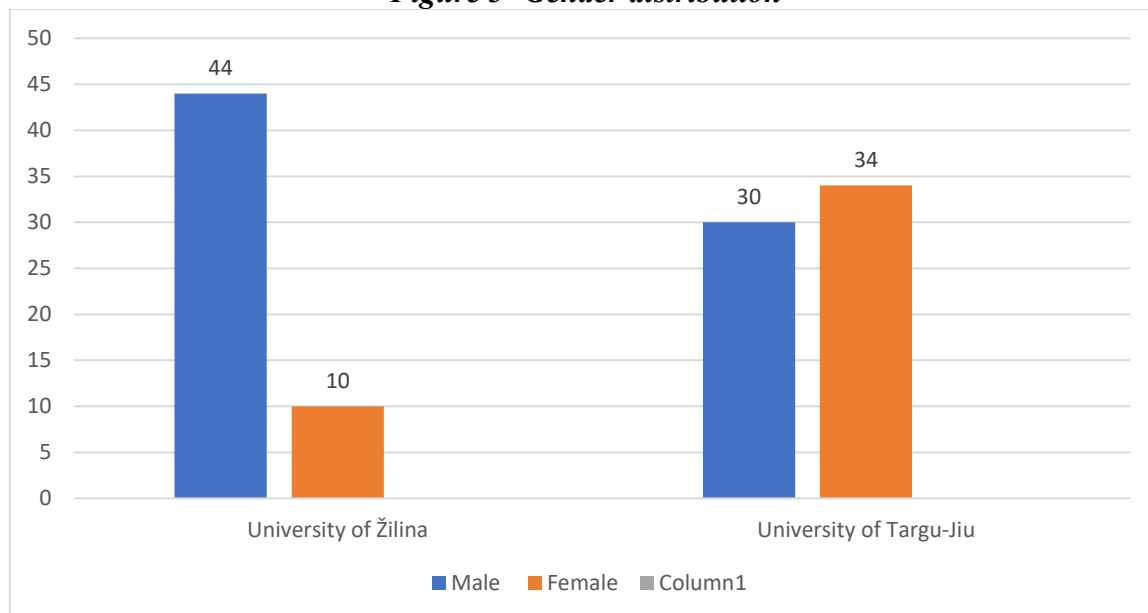### *Figure 1 Distribution of students based on their affiliation*
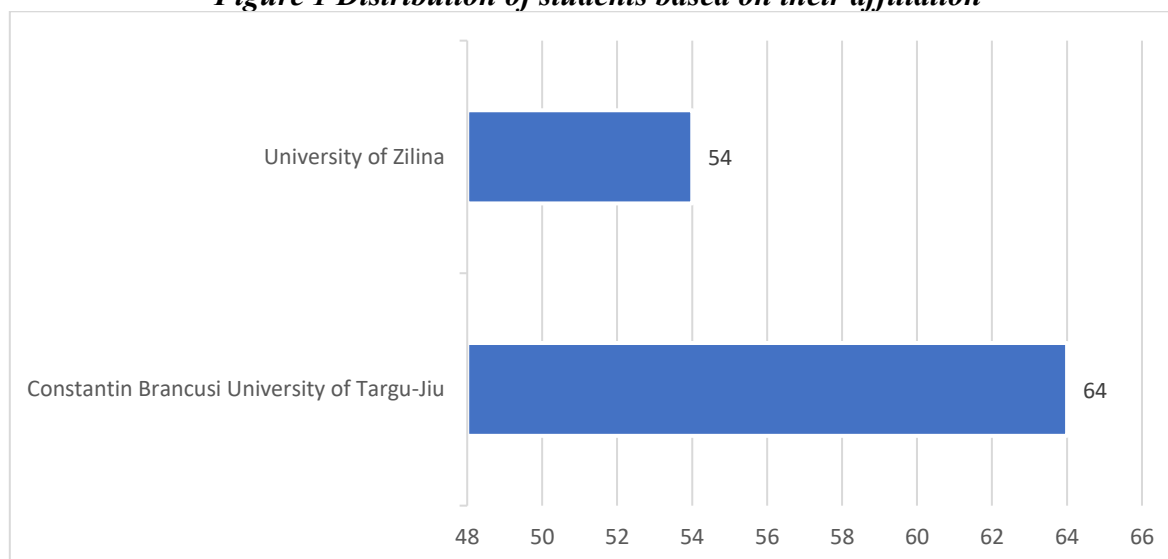
As we can see in Figure 1, 64 of 118 respondents were from "Constantin Brancusi" University of Targu-Jiu and 54 from University of Zilina.

### Figure 2 Distribution of students based on their field of study
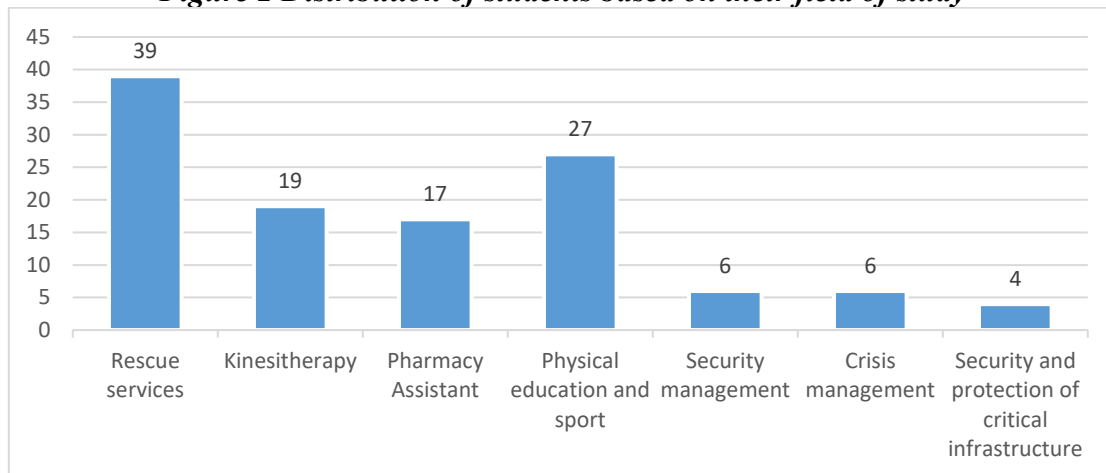
As Figure 2 demonstrates, 118 students were distributed by the following specialisations: 39 students from Rescue Services, 6 students from Security Management, 6 students from Crisis Management, 4 students from Security and Protection of Critical Infrastructure, 17 students from Pharmacy Assistant, 27 students from Physical Education and Sport, and 19 students from Kinesitherapy. The distribution of their specializations was uneven, caused by differences in the numbers of students in their respective study groups. However, we consider their specialisation only a descriptive variable.

Figure 3- Gender distribution

The data in Figure 3 indicate that 39.5% of respondents were female and 60.5% were male. This distribution is based on higher interest of male students in the examined study programs. There were no students prefering not to say their gender.

Figure 4- Respondents' age distribution at both universities
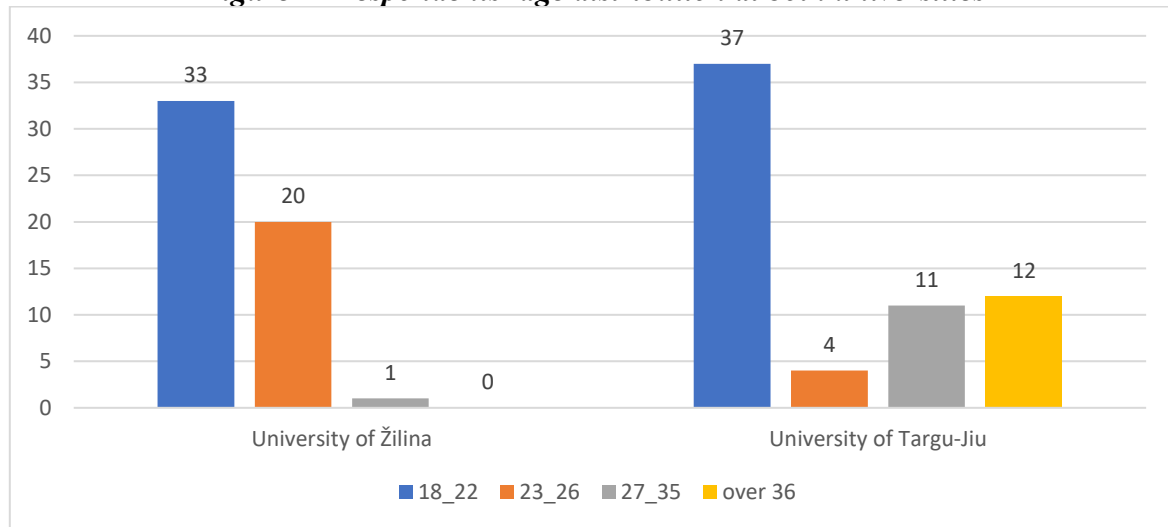
Even if the highest number of students falls into the age category 18 to 22 years old, the age distribution is uneven. At the Romanian University, there are 12 students over 36, full-time students of this age are a rarity at Slovak universities.
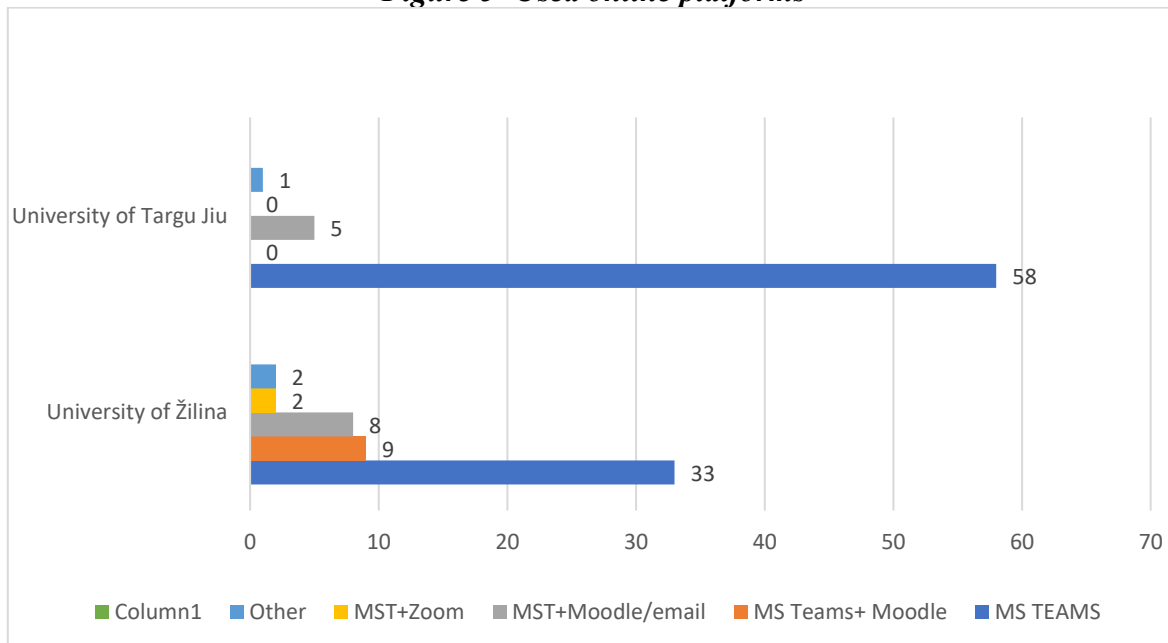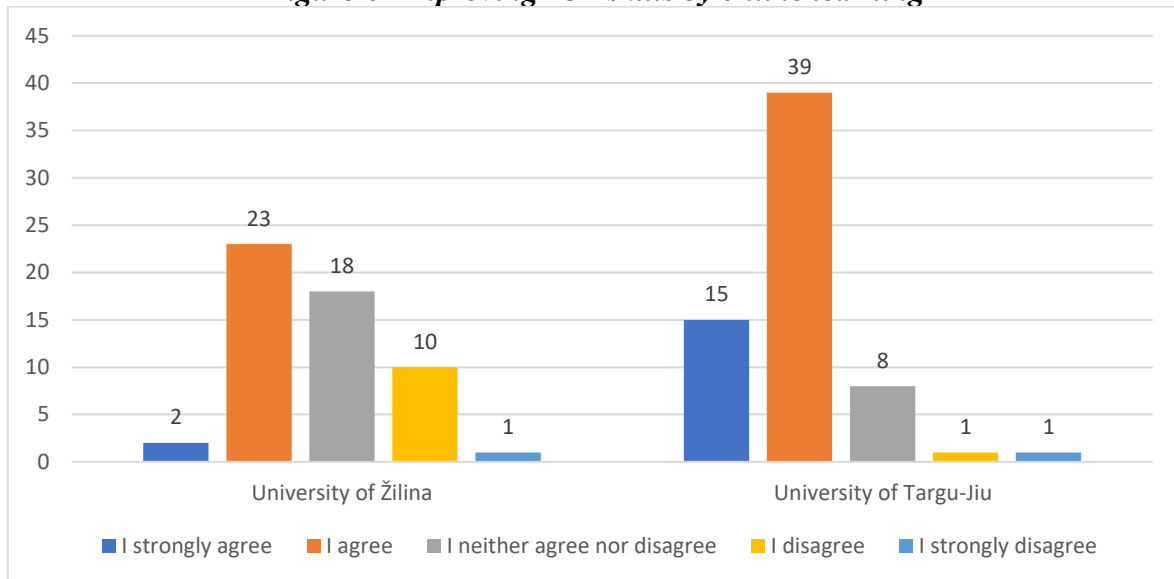
Figure 5- Used online platforms

Figure 5 provides information about the platforms used by the students. MS Teams is the most popular platform used by 58 Romanian students and 33 Slovakian students. Less students used MS Teams combined with other platforms such as Moodle or Zoom.

Figure 6- Improving ICT skills by online learning

The satisfaction rate seems to be higher with Romanian students, 39 agree that learning online improved their ICT skills compared to 23 Slovak students. 18 Slovak students neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, as Figure 6 shows, compared to 8 Romanian students.
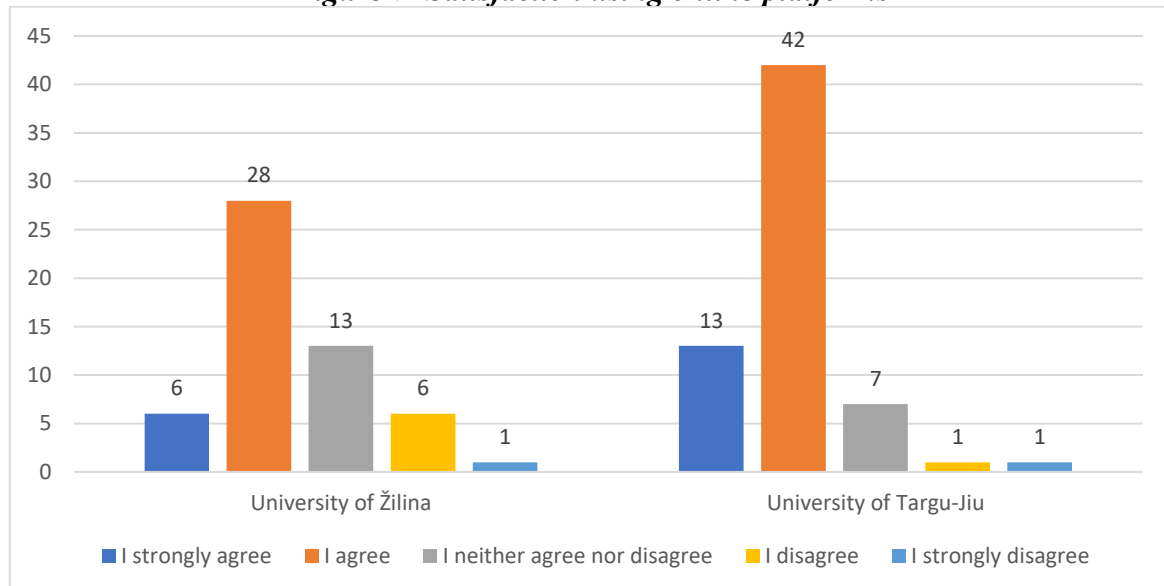
Figure 7- Satisfaction using online platforms

Figure 7 presents the students' satisfaction by using online platforms. 42 Romanian students and only 28 Slovak students agreed that they were comfortable using electronic communication equipment while 13 Romanian students and 6 Slovak students strongly agree. Romanian students were more satisfied with the online platforms.

Figure 8- The online English course is well-structured and clear
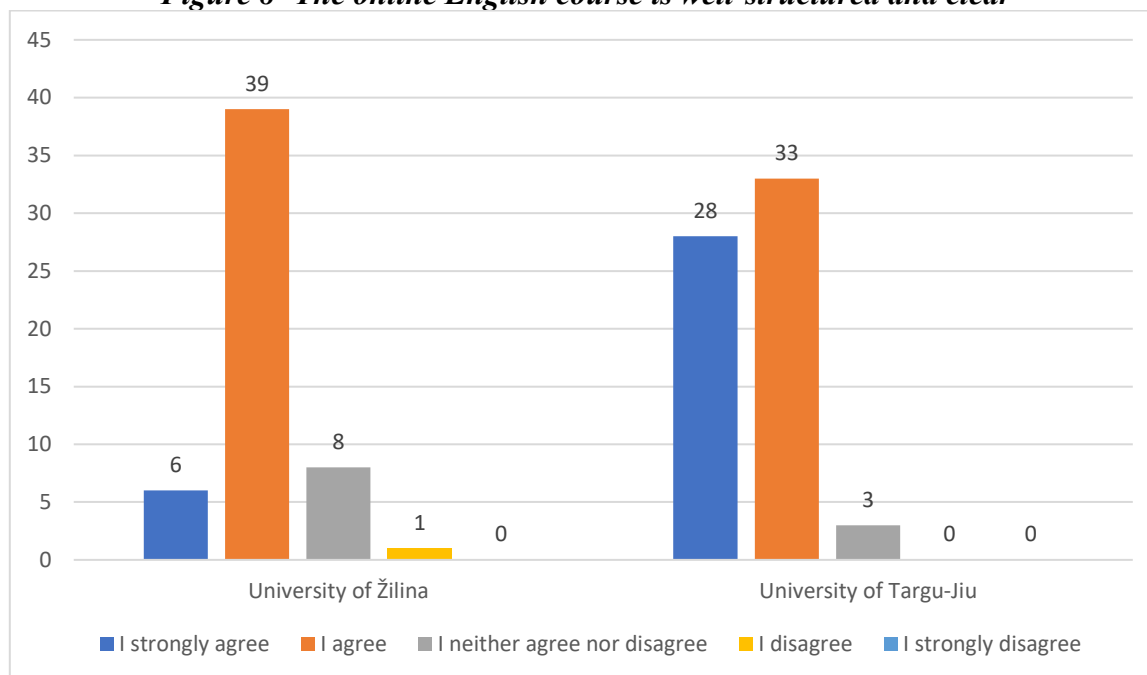
The above results indicate that 33 students out of 118 from the "Constantin Brancusi" University of Targu-Jiu and 39 students from the University of Žilina agreed that the online English course was well-structured. 28 Romanian students and 6 Slovak students strongly agreed that the English course was clear.

Figure 9- I can learn the English language more effectively by having online sessions because it is more interactive.
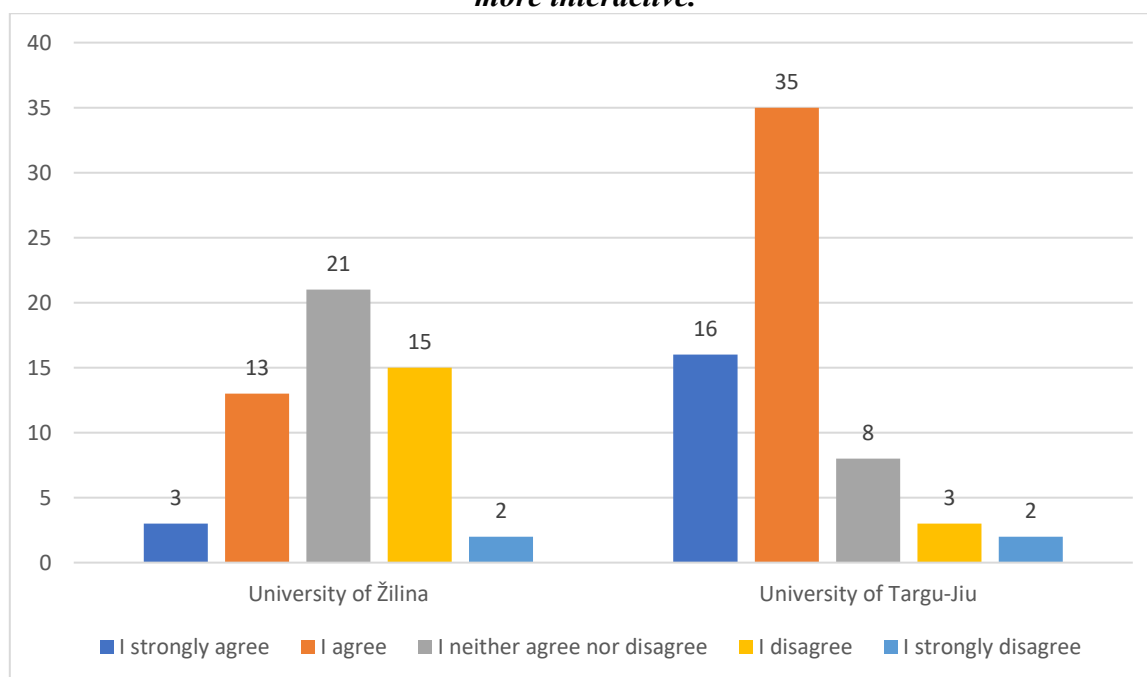
Figure 9 describes the perceived effectiveness of online sessions. 48 students (35 students from the "Constantin Brancusi" University of Targu-Jiu and 13 students from the University of Žilina) out of 118 agreed that English language online classes are more efficient because of their interactive nature. There is a striking difference in the perceived degree of interactivity between the two universities. The Slovak students are less satisfied than Romanian students with online sessions in terms of interactivity.

Figure 10- I believe I can learn English only through printed materials and the face-to-face teacher's explanations.
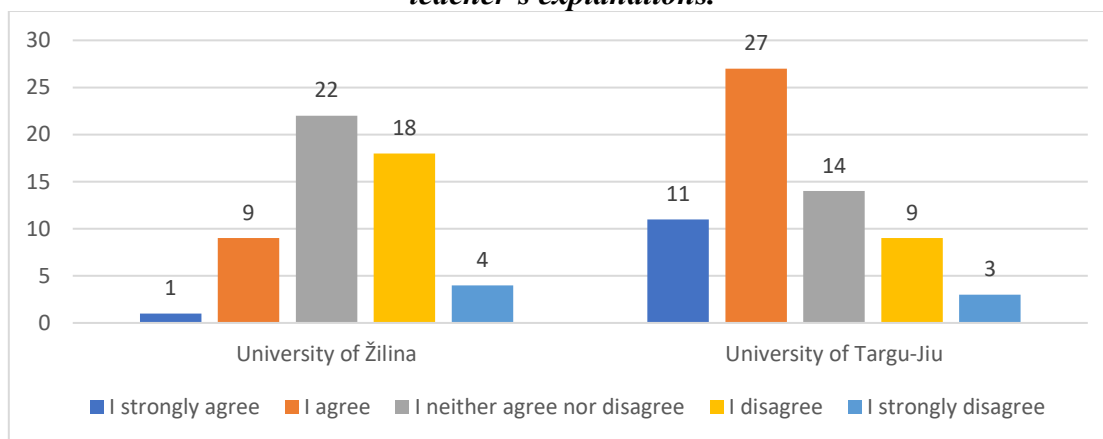

As for Figure 10, *I believe I can learn English only through the printed materials and F2F teacher's explanation*, 36 out of 118 agreed (27 students from the "Constantin Brancusi" University of Targu-Jiu and 9 students from the University of Žilina). 36 students neither agreed nor disagreed that they can learn English through materials and the F2F teacher's explanation. 18 Slovak students disagreed with the statement above, compared to 9 Romanian students.

Figure 11- Online platforms provide plenty of opportunities to practice all skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking.
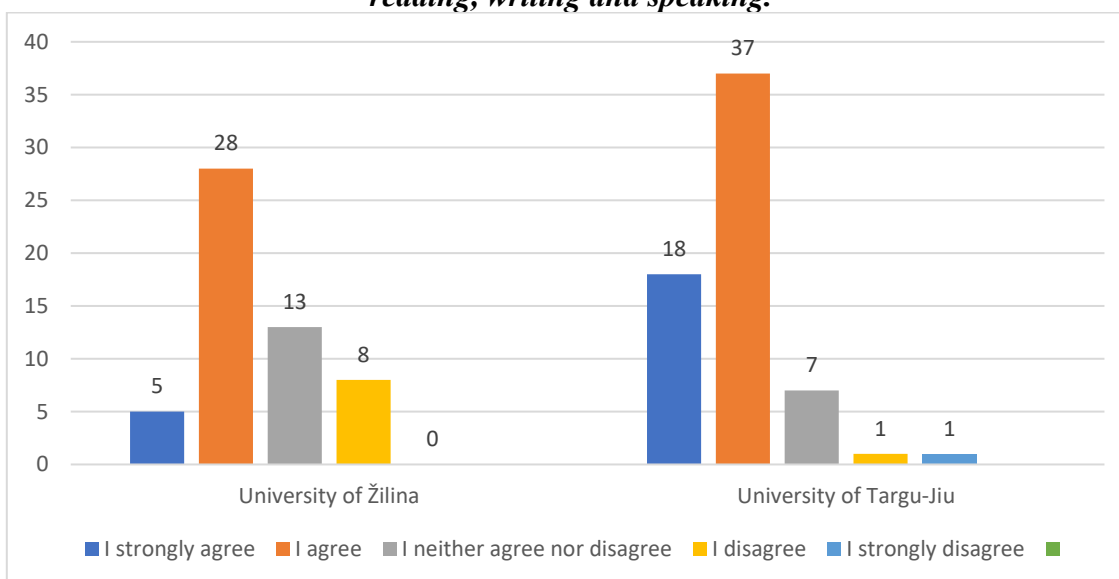
For statement 11- *Online platforms provide plenty of opportunities to practice all skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking*, 65 students agreed on this issue. The results here are highly similar for both universities.

Figure 12- My motivation is very low when I study online.
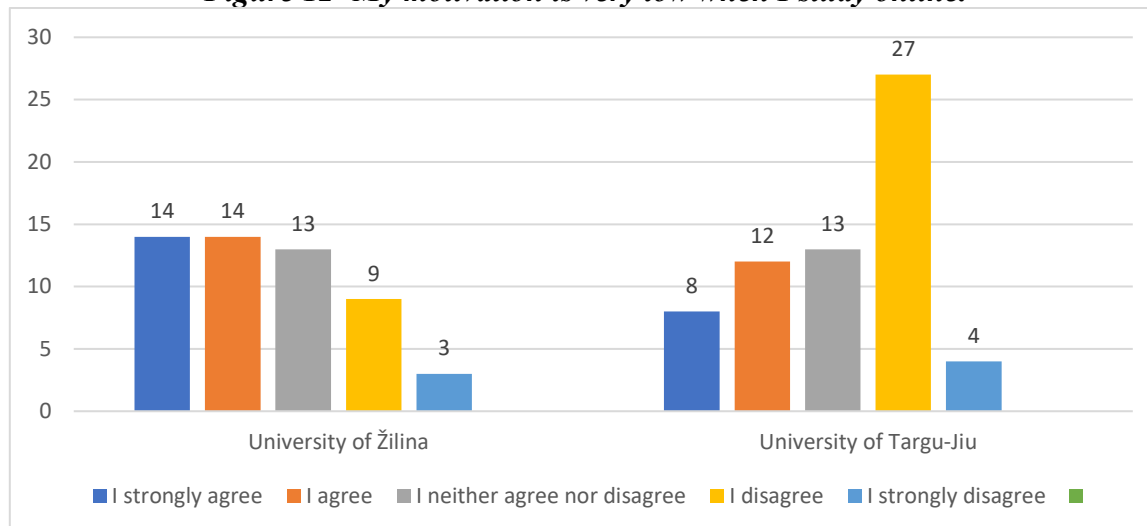
The responses to the statement: *My motivation is very low when I study online* provided different results. The perceived motivation during online studying seems to be much higher with Romanian than with Slovak students. 27 Romanian students disagree that their motivation is very low when they study online compared to 9 Slovak students. We can observe that 13 students from each universities neither agree nor disagree.

Figure 13- I am able to concentrate harder on my learning when having face-to-face English class because there'll be less distraction than if I was at home.
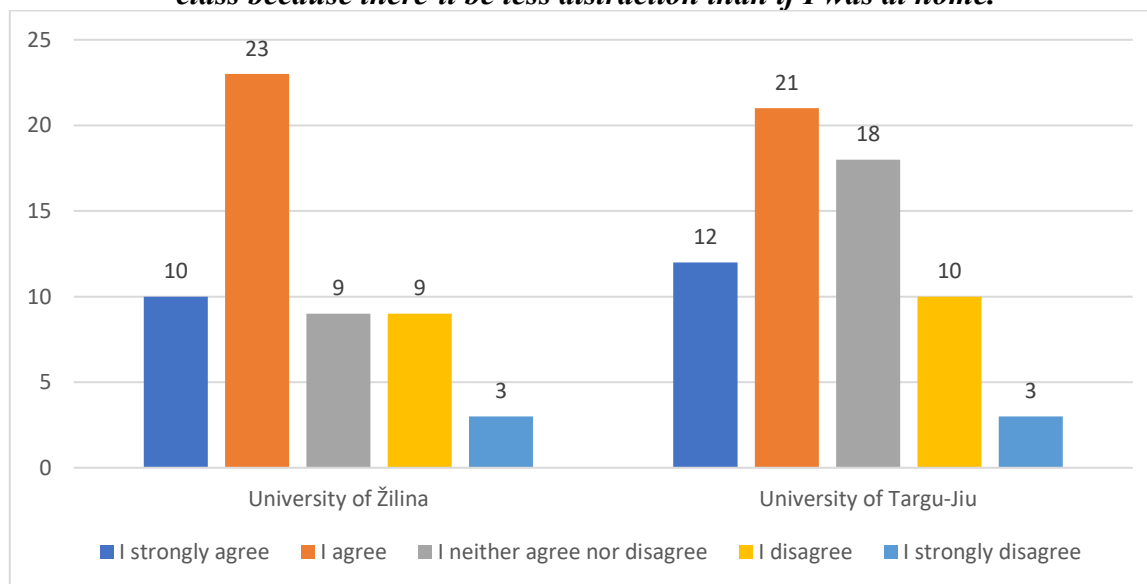
As Figure 13 demonstrates, 44 students (21 Romanian students and 23 Slovak students) agreed on concentrating harder on their learning when having face-to-face English class because there is less

distraction than at home. 27 students altogether neither agreed nor disagreed, 19 disagreed and 6 strongly disagreed. *Where* and *how* we study can be a source of distraction as well because background noises such as television, family members, pets running in the house, or siblings listening to loud music can be a significant obstacle in online learning.

Figure 14- My mobile devices (laptop, tablet, smartphone) helped me in learning the English language.
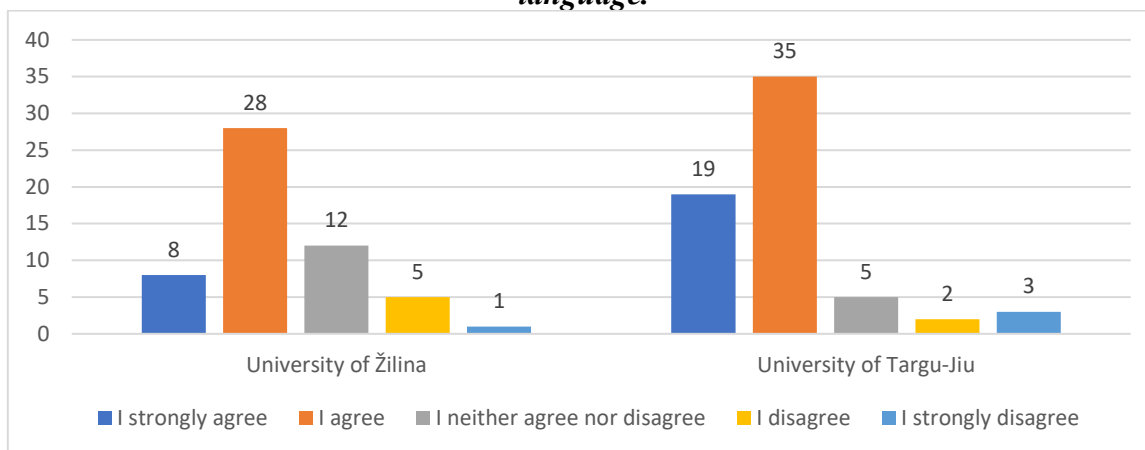
The results of the statement above are highly similar at both universities. As we can observe in Figure 14, 63 students appreciated the role of mobile devices in learning English. There are more students from the Romanian university agreeing on the issue. Only 7 students from both universities disagreed.

Figure 15- The learning outcomes are the same in online learning as in face-to-face learning.
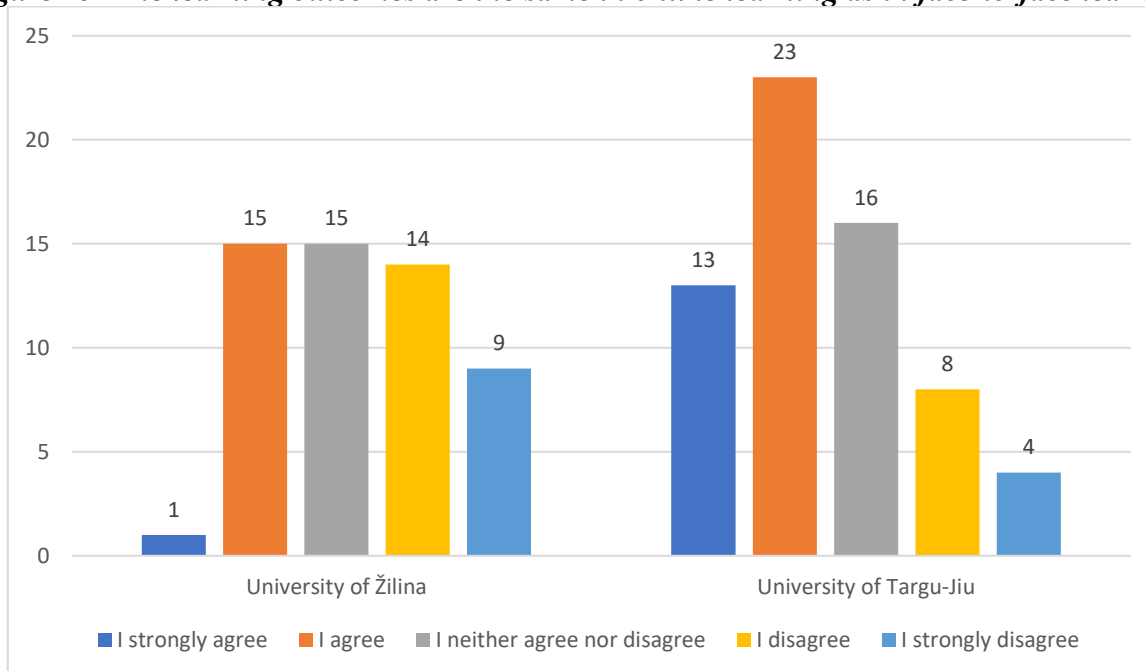
The responses to the statement 15: *The learning outcomes are the same in online learning as in F2F learning*, differ significantly. 38 students (23 from the Romanian university and 15 from the

Slovak university) agreed that the learning outcomes were the same in online and F2F formats. On the other hand, 13 students strongly disagreed from both universities. The disagreement rates also differed based on university, 25.93% with Slovak compared to 12.05% with Romanian students. The percentage for *neither agree nor disagree* is almost the same for both universities, 27.7% for the Slovak students and 25% for the Romanian students.

Figure 16- Online learning has a number of tools such as videos, PDFs, podcasts and studying English with all these tools helps a lot.
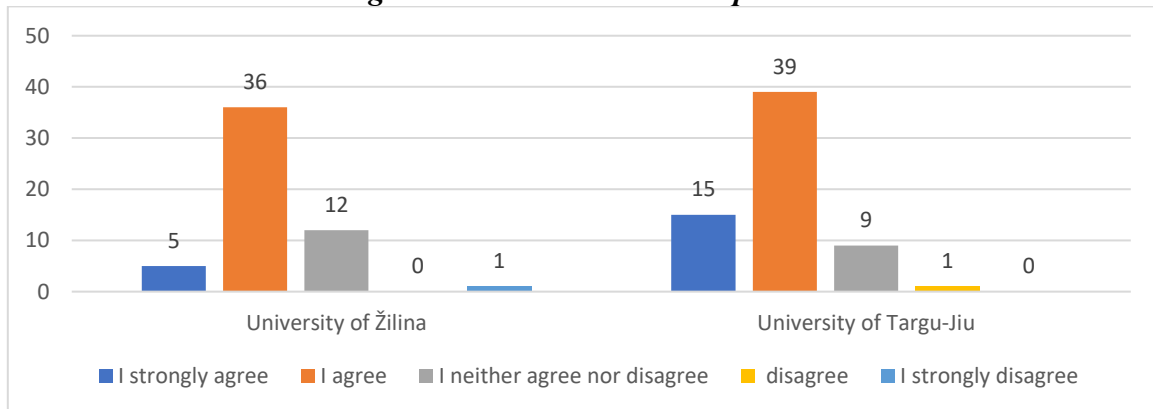

As Figure 16 demonstrates, 75 students from both universities representing 63.56% acknowledged the benefits of using online English tools – videos, podcasts, etc. The results were highly similar for both universities.

*Figure 17- Overall, I am satisfied with online learning.*
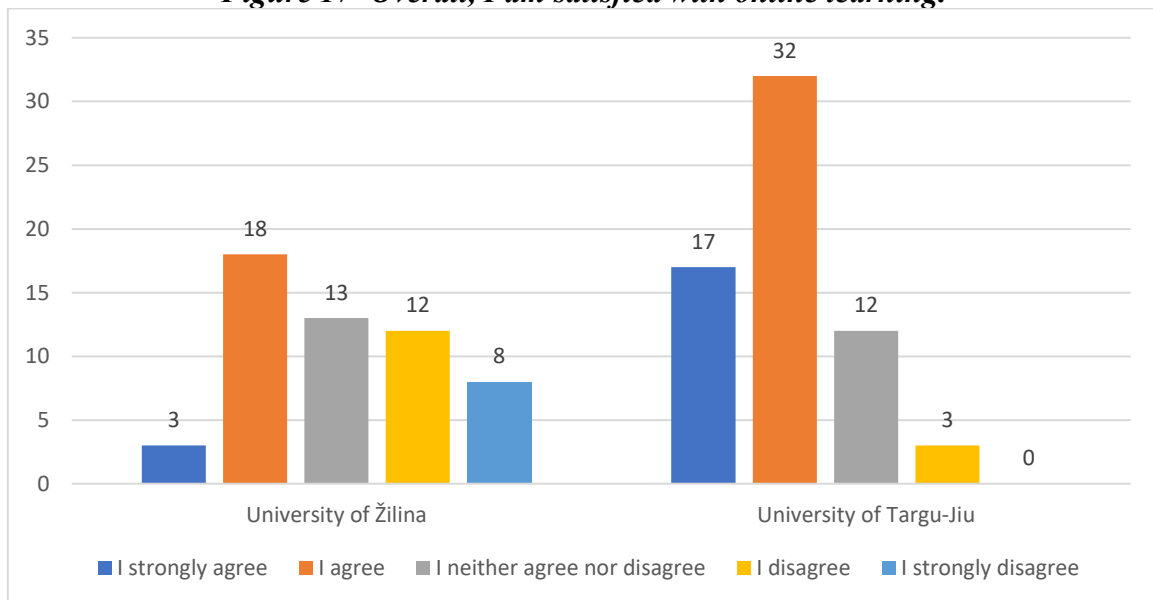
The responses to the statement *Overall, I am satisfied with online learning* differed significantly depending on the university. 18 Slovak students compared to 32 Romanian students were satisfied with online learning. 12 Slovak students and only 3 Romanian students expressed their dissatisfaction and only 8 Slovak students strongly disagreed with the statement.

Figure 18- Facing the choice between traditional and online English classes, I would choose online classes.
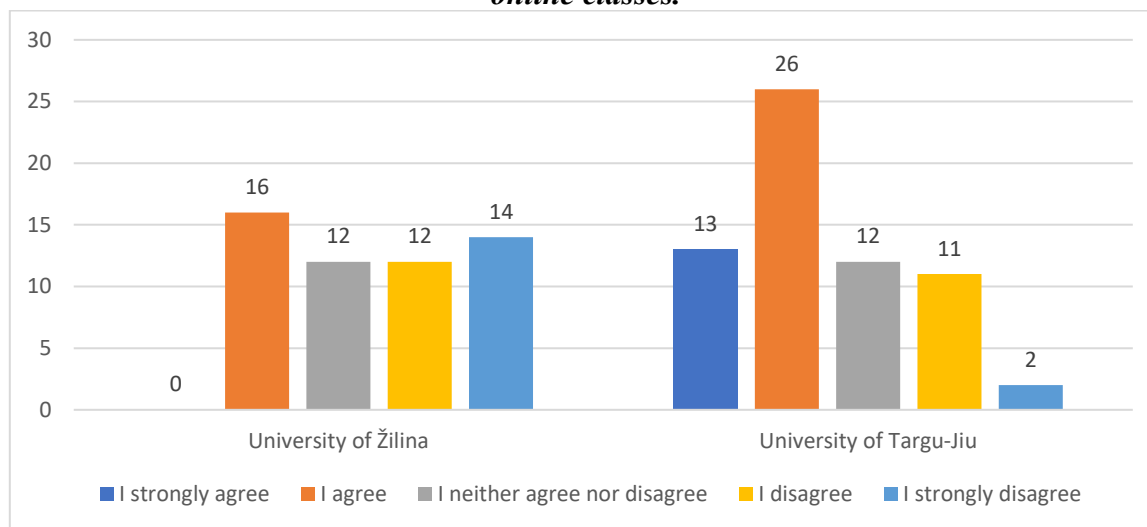
As Figure 18 shows, 16 Slovak students and 26 Romanian students prefer online to F2F classes. The same number of students from both universities neither agree nor disagree (12) with the statement and almost the same number disagree with the statement (12 Slovak students and 11 Romanian students).

Figure 19- Briefly explain why you prefer online or traditional English classes
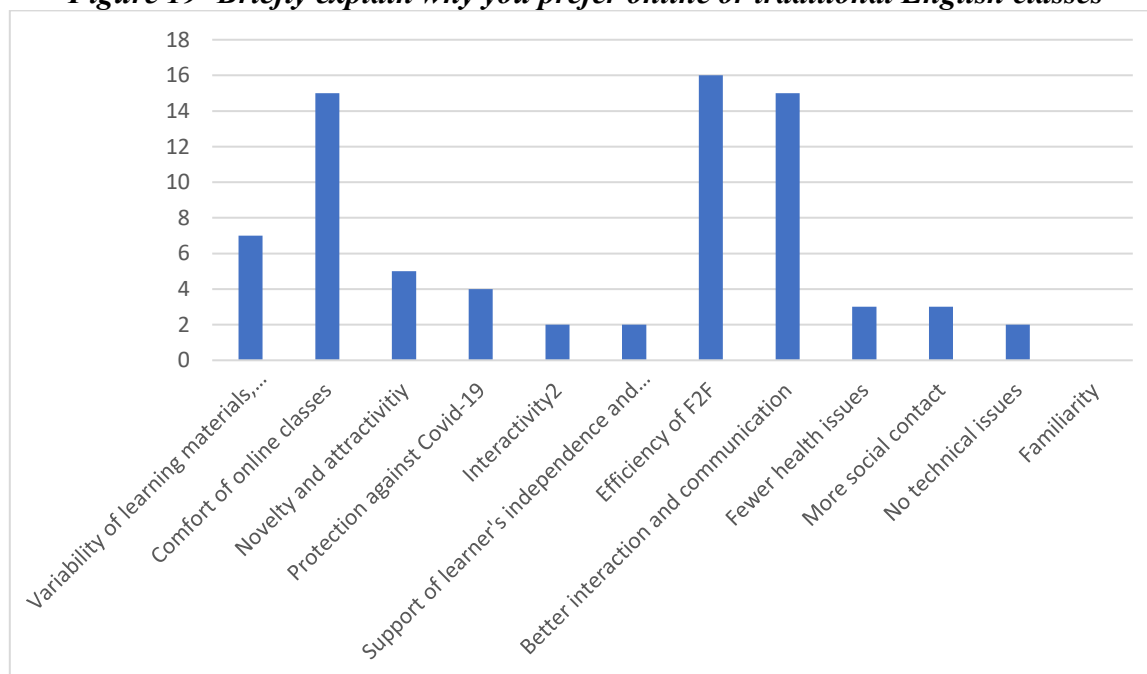
The question no. 19 - *Briefly explain why you prefer online or traditional English classes* aimed to collect students' ideas on various beneficial features of online or F2F classes.

This open question was fully or partially answered by 89 respondents (42 students from the Romanian university and 47 from the Slovak university). The responses were grouped based on the aspects of online or F2F classes the students appreciated.

In terms of online classes, they perceive these particular advantages: variability of learning materials, methods and activities, comfort and practical nature of online classes, novelty and attractivity, protection against Covid-19, interactivity, support of learner´s independence and support of speaking confidence.

Concerning F2F classes, they mostly appreciated: the efficiency of F2F classes, fewer distractions, better interaction and communication, fewer health issues caused by sedentary lifestyle, more social contact, no technical issues, familiarity and better motivation.

3 students stated they equally liked both educations forms and 1 student´s response was *I don´t know.*

The majority of respondents expressed that they were qualified, confident and comfortable using the electronic devices and the platforms during their online learning sessions. 50% of the Romanian students and 33.33% of the Slovak students were satisfied using online learning.

Overall, the results indicate that 40.60% of the Romanian students and 29.62% of the Slovak students would choose online learning to F2F classes.

57,81% of the Romanian students and 51,85% of the Slovak students agreed to the wide variety of opportunities to practice all skills when using online platforms.

Concentration was the problem demonstrating the negative aspects of online learning due to home distraction. 37.29% of the students from both universities agreed on concentrating harder on their learning when having face-to-face English class.

The most prominent differences between the two universities were related to the user-friendly character of online tools, the interactive nature of online classes, the students' motivation,the identical character of learning outcomes and the overall satisfaction. All the mentioned aspects were stronger with Romanian than Slovak students. We can thus conclude that the Slovak students were less satisfied with online English classes. One of the reasons might be the age distribution as Romanian students are generally older (17.19 % of students are aged 36 and older) and we assume that life experience enhances autonomous learning – highly needed with online learning.

The above results indicate that 33 students out of 118 from the "Constantin Brancusi" University of Targu-Jiu and 39 students from the University of Žilina agreed that the online English course was well-structured.

CONCLUSION

Results indicated students have a positive reception to the online rather than traditional classrooms with fewer remarks such as lack of concentration. The introduction of new e-learning tools will undoubtedly have more impact on the learning outcomes only if we reconsider the suitable educational approach, the delivery mode, content redesign, and students' assessment system.

The 118 students of the "Constantin Brancusi" University of Targu-Jiu and the University of Žilina have responded to the survey by filling out a google form questionnaire with 19 statements. The results demonstrate the students' satisfaction with online learning, but more for the Romanian students.

The reasons for online education were related to the following: online classes are highly interactive, comfortable, more practical and accessible, suitable for less communicative students, more attractive due to the new technology. For those who prefer traditional lessons, the inconvenience of remote education was the lack of social interaction.

We thus assume that the age of the students, their somewhat autonomous learning, and the interactive nature of online learning may have indeed contributed to their satisfaction.

This study paves the way to understand that technology must be taken seriously and used as a solution and tool for how educational institutions will support learning and research in the future.

Garrison (2017) states that student assessment in problem-based inquiry learning contexts is more challenging than assessing traditional educational outcomes in terms of content acquisition because it encourages students to take increased responsibility and develop metacognitive awareness.

Student feedback is highly significant for improving online courses. Students could be periodically asked for their opinions in a discussion: "How is it going?", "What did you like most?", "Which activities were more interesting for you? or by filling in an online survey at the end of the course. This feedback can take many forms such as oral, written, informal, formal, descriptive, evaluative, peer and self-assessed feedback, all of them measuring student performance.

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