

# Overcoming Psychological Barriers: Online Teaching as a Black Swan of Education

## Superar las barreras psicológicas: la enseñanza en línea bajo la lógica del cisne negro en la educación

Oleksandra Halchenko

*Universidad de Estambul, Turquía*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0369-8518>

e-mail: [alexandra.halchenko@gmail.com](mailto:alexandra.halchenko@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

The black swan event in education systems of the whole world has generated a surge in the demand for web based teaching and learning. Starting as inevitability, online education turned into an emergence of numerous educational platforms, tools and methods. The saying presuming that black swans did not exist-has become reinterpreted to rare events that are beyond the realm of normal. The general understanding that online education as a whole does not exist —has become reinterpreted to the most up-to-date and commonly used way of teaching. Getting used to an absolutely digital way of delivery is a long process, which requires supporting our learners throughout this journey of digitalization. This paper explores which lesson conducting patterns, such as various activities and games, can help overcome psychological barriers related to the lack of interpersonal communication and one-on-one support in online teaching. It also addresses how university students can benefit from the online delivery of ESL courses and examines the strategies that make the students more successful in a new normal. This paper raises questions how to best support English preparatory program university students in a way that they can take the most out of e-learning. This study was designed to analyze the psychological determinants of the learners' behavior relevant to online learning. The number of psychological challenges that the students are facing in online medium of communication, and how these issues can be addressed. This study, based on the students being surveyed, focused on English Preparatory Program university students, who are currently combining faculty courses and English language course. The research study was conducted through the questionnaire and sent to the students via Google Forms. The students got open ended and Yes/No questions pertaining to the online environment, and structure of the course in terms of benefits, pitfalls and suggestions to take into consideration, when learning in a new reality. All the questions were answered anonymously.

*Keywords:* psycholinguistics; black swan event; e-learning; gamification; lyrics training.

### RESUMEN

El acontecimiento del cisne negro en los sistemas educativos de todo el mundo ha generado un aumento de la demanda de enseñanza y aprendizaje basados en la web. La educación en línea, que comenzó como algo inevitable, se convirtió en la aparición de numerosas plataformas, herramientas y métodos educativos. El dicho que presumía que los cisnes negros no existían se ha reinterpretado como eventos raros que están más allá de lo normal. La idea generalizada de que la educación en línea en su conjunto no existe -se ha reinterpretado como la forma de enseñar más actual y comúnmente utilizada. Acostumbrarse a una forma de impartir clases absolutamente digital es un proceso largo, que requiere apoyar a nuestros alumnos a lo largo de este viaje de digitalización. Este artículo explora qué patrones de conducción de las lecciones, como diversas actividades y juegos, pueden ayudar a superar las barreras psicológicas relacionadas con la falta de comunicación interpersonal y de apoyo individual en la enseñanza en línea. También aborda cómo los estudiantes universitarios pueden beneficiarse de la impartición de cursos de inglés en línea y examina las estrategias que hacen que los estudiantes

tengan más éxito en una nueva normalidad. Este trabajo plantea la cuestión de cómo apoyar mejor a los estudiantes universitarios del programa de preparación de inglés de manera que puedan sacar el máximo provecho del aprendizaje en línea. Este estudio fue diseñado para analizar los determinantes psicológicos del comportamiento de los alumnos relevantes para el aprendizaje en línea. El número de desafíos psicológicos a los que se enfrentan los estudiantes en el medio de comunicación en línea, y cómo se pueden abordar estas cuestiones. Este estudio, basado en los estudiantes encuestados, se centró en los estudiantes universitarios del Programa Preparatorio de Inglés, que actualmente combinan los cursos de la facultad y el curso de inglés. El estudio de investigación se realizó a través del cuestionario y se envió a los estudiantes a través de Google Forms. Los estudiantes recibieron preguntas abiertas y de tipo Sí/No, relativas al entorno online, y a la estructura del curso en términos de beneficios, escollos y sugerencias a tener en cuenta, a la hora de aprender en una nueva realidad. Todas las preguntas se respondieron de forma anónima.

*Palabras clave:* psicolingüística; evento del cisne negro; e-learning; gamificación; formación de letras.

## INTRODUCTION

I begin by posing the following question: Is the demand for online teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic the so-called black swan event or a kind of challenge we now will face all the time - a new normal. My answer is in the poem that I wrote to illustrate my point of view:

*The Black Swan is gliding down the river.  
Whatever was there – already not here.  
What catches your eye at the end of the day.  
Is made for a change.  
It is meant for a stay.*

The Black Swan Theory was postulated by Nassim Nicholas Taleb and is used to describe the impact of the events that come as a surprise in societal aspects. (Nassim Nicholas Taleb, 2008) The event is unprecedented and generally has a major effect or is shocking in nature. The history of the Black Swan Theory or the Theory of Black Swan Events dates back to a Latin expression of the 2nd-century by Roman poet Juvenal, when he would characterize something as: “Rara avis in terris nigroque simillima cygno”. This Latin expression translates to “a rare bird in the lands and very much like a black swan”.

Originally when this phrase was first used, it was thought that black swans did not exist. A worldwide transfer to online teaching, because of Covid-19 pandemic, can be considered a black swan of education. A compulsory shift to online classrooms spurs interest from affected educators and stakeholders to make changes to the current practices in order to avoid stagnation in the education system. Online setting language acquisition differs from face-to-face classroom, as a result, the factors affecting online language learning can be added to the general factors affecting language learning.

An in-depth analysis of the psychological determinants of the learners’ conduct patterns relevant to online learning. Continuing efforts were made to investigate how overcoming the psychological barriers during an online course can lead to the ultimate success of English language acquisition. In this brief paper, an attempt will be made to elaborate on some of the positive practices of second language acquisition in an online setting and investigate, namely the psycholinguistic approach. To this end, the lesson activities that help the students feel less stressed and get the most out of online learning experience — are in the focus of attention.

The above objectives yielded three research questions: 1) What are the positive practices of online ESL courses? 2) Which of these practices, in the opinion of the participants, define a “powerful” online learning environment? 3) How to boost the students’ motivation and keep their attention for longer?

In addition to the literature study and empirical exploration, I conducted a survey containing 14 open ended questions and 2 Yes/No questions pertaining to the online environment, the structure of the course in terms of benefits, pitfalls and suggestions to take into consideration, when learning in a new reality. The screening was conducted among English Preparatory Program students combining their ESL course with faculty courses. The questionnaire was sent via Google Forms and all the collected data was described in a pie chart. A total number of respondents — 10; with 50 % of males and the other 50% of females, respectively. Their ages vary from 20 to 30 years old.

### **PSYCHOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE OR HOW DO WE TEACH IT NOW?**

Psycholinguistics or psychology of language is the study of the interrelation between linguistic factors and psychological aspects (Maftoon and Shakouri, 2012). The use of language and speech as a window to the nature and structure of the human mind is called psycholinguistics. (Scovel, 2002) Psycholinguistics approach views learning as a cognitive individual process happening within the individual and then moves to the social dimension. Theories of cognition account for its representation, processing and acquisition. Online language acquisition requires some other factors to be taken into consideration. Producing and comprehending in the target language becomes even more challenging with all the possible distractors, such as electricity cut off or poor connection.

According to the 50% of the survey respondents, internet disconnection was one of the biggest pitfalls of an online course. Figure 1 Sore eyes syndrome may result in poor attention span — it explains why 25 % of the students consider online lessons to be less memorable Figure 1. Factors affecting language learning, such as intelligence, aptitude, learning style, personality, motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic) are largely beyond the control of the learner. The factors affecting online language learning are also out of the learner's control. However, it is possible to benefit tremendously from online language learning. Making lemonade out of lemons is a vital 21st century skill that we all have to master.

The needs of the students with different learning styles can be addressed. When visual learners' needs are satisfied equally in online and face-to-face settings, auditory learners can even benefit more. There is no classroom noise distracting them since the noise-cancelling headphones do the job. On the contrary, kinesthetic learners, where a physical action is required, such as role-play or miming might lag behind. Trying to engage all types of learners is required. Asking students to create videos can help encourage kinesthetic learners. Since video shooting is a physical action, the information will be memorized better.

One more famous psycholinguistic approach to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is Socio-cultural approach. The studies of SLA from the socio-cultural perspective are gleaned from the work of Vigotsky (Vigotsky, 1978). The three main themes are: mediation, social learning and genetic analysis. Mediation depicts how tools and signs affect human action and influence the way people perceive the world. Social learning is made intelligible by the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) metaphor. The ZPD is determined as “the distance between the actual developmental level, as defined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006).

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Figure 1  
Figure 1

Educational platform Zoom has a feature of Breakout Rooms, which allows breaking into groups for smaller, focused discussions, and creating so-called ‘Mastermind Groups’.

Mastermind groups are peer-to-peer mentoring groups used to help class members solve their problems with input and get advice from the other class members. According to the survey, 33% of respondents consider breakout rooms to be a useful tool for input clarification and collaboration with more capable peers. Additionally, the same amount of respondents reckon it to be partly helpful. Figure 11 Since the lack of communication and interaction is considered to be the biggest disadvantage of online language learning, Breakout Rooms are a big part of positive practices. Language development resulting from the interaction of expert-novice (also known as the scaffolding metaphor) has also been an interest of research in socio-cultural theory. An assistance provided by a more capable learner is called scaffolding. It enables the learner to do activities he would not have been able to do without such assistance (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006).

Speaking practice in Breakout Rooms engaged the students and provided an opportunity to ask questions from peers and instructors. Some students are reluctant to ask questions in plenary; Breakout Rooms create a more relaxed atmosphere for the students to do so. Figure 4 Creating WhatsApp groups for the students in order to keep them up to date and answer their questions in the post-lesson phase worked very well. Figure 10 The feeling that the student can always keep in touch with his peers and instructor reduced stress and improves overall performance.

### **GAMIFICATION, LYRICSTRAINING AND SUGGESTOPEDIA AS EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION BOOSTERS**

One of the main psychological factors of major influence on the learning outcomes is motivation. A haft of respondents mentioned motivation as one of the parts of conventional setting that has been lost in online learning. Figure 6 Gamification not only uses game elements and game design techniques in non-game contexts (Werbach & Hunter, 2012), but also empowers and engages the learner with motivational skills towards a learning approach and sustaining a relaxed atmosphere. Motivation is a fundamental factor in the teaching and learning of L2. Integration of technology in an online setting helps to keep the students’ attention and bring an element of entertainment, which results in better outcomes. Gamification is used as a part of stimuli in the teaching and learning process. It gives the opportunity for real time feedback and can be accessed online or downloaded as an application. Educational games like Kahoot, Quizzes, Quizlet are considered beneficial by the students. Figure 12 Kahoot and similar games improve classroom dynamics, creating a safer, more positive learning environment. Numerous studies reported that classes using Kahoot — had increased attendance, engagement and motivation. I personally allocate some time for it at the end of the class. Surprisingly, the students stay till the end.

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Figure 11

Figure 4

Figure 10

Figure 6

Figure 12

The concept of Gamification is basically new, and according to Werbach and Hunter (2012), is the use of game elements and game design techniques in non-game contexts. It is based in the success of the gaming industry, social media, and decades of research in human psychology.

Basically, any task, assignment, process, or theoretical context can be gamified. Gamification not only uses game elements and game design techniques in non-game contexts (Werbach & Hunter, 2012), but also empowers and engages the learner with motivational skills towards a learning approach and sustaining a relax atmosphere. This personality factor as Brown (1994) addresses is fundamental in the teaching and learning of L2. This article covers aspects regarding language, second language learning methodology and approaches, an overview of the integration of technology towards L2 instruction, Gamification as a concept, motivational theory, educational implications for integrating the strategy effectively, and current applications used. It also calls for a necessity of empirical evidence and research in regard to the strategy.

One of the main factors that helps to release stress in an online setting and keep the students motivated is the environment. According to the respondents, an ability to create a friendly environment is one of the features of a successful online teacher. Figure 5 Suggestopedia method, developed by Georgy Lazanov — a psychiatrist in Bulgaria in 1975, enables the students to learn a foreign language at an accelerated pace by tapping mental powers and overcoming psychological barriers. According to this method, humans can be directed to do something by giving them a relaxed atmosphere and an open and peaceful mind. These will stimulate nerves to easily respond and store the information for longer.

The classroom is the place that should be associated with comfort and joy. An online classroom is no different and bringing a relaxed atmosphere to an online setting is even more important. Based on my observations and experience, being lenient in case of the students' poor connection and repeating yourself if needed — are the usual practices of a new normal.

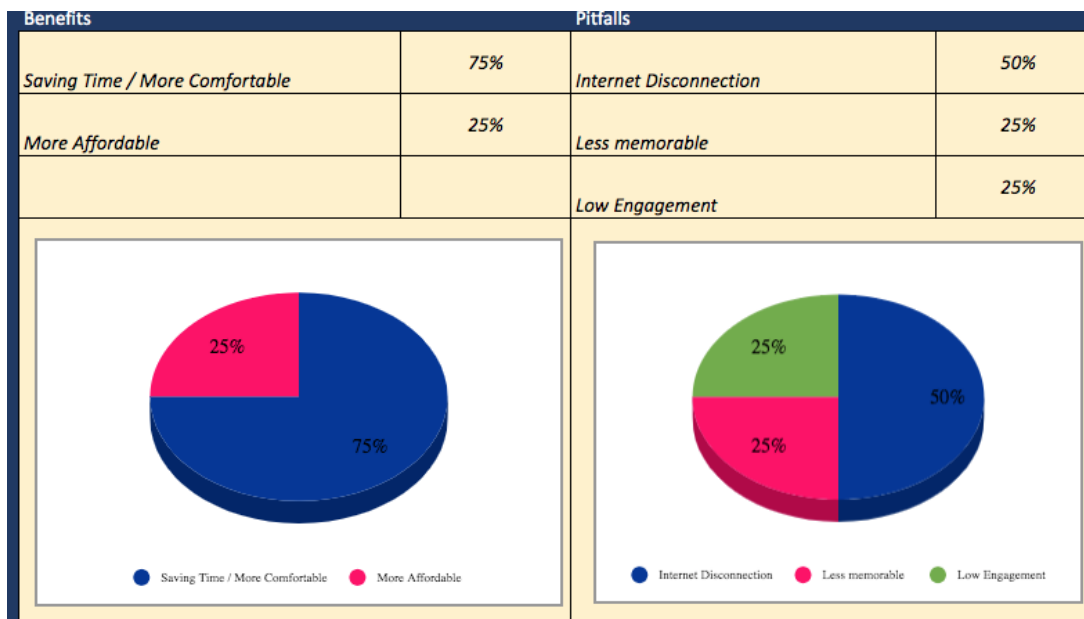
As educators, we have to bear in mind that our goal is to reduce the students' stress at any cost. Error correction is better to be done in Breakout Rooms. If students make some mistakes, the teacher corrects it carefully to keep a positive atmosphere. It is required from the students to keep their cameras on at all times, but there might be some days when for some reason the student has two options: either not attending the class or turning on the camera. And I would prefer the second one.

LyricsTraining is one more way to bring motivation to online classrooms. It promotes interactive listening comprehension through pop culture and exposes users to phonological and dialectal variation in an implicit manner (Fiori, 2021). Captions assist explicitly with grapheme-sound associations while singing along implicitly reinforces prosodic features of the language being studied (Fiori, 2021). By singing along language learners are compelled to match the linguistic patterns inherent to the language. Furthermore, music can enrich students' lexis, their syntax (contextualized usage of grammatical structures), and exposes learners to dialectal variation and English-Speaking cultures.

LyricsTraining application is very user-friendly and offers all possible music genres to satisfy different tastes. My recommendation — ask the learners to choose the songs since tastes differ, and to be really engaged the students should be familiar with the song and love it.

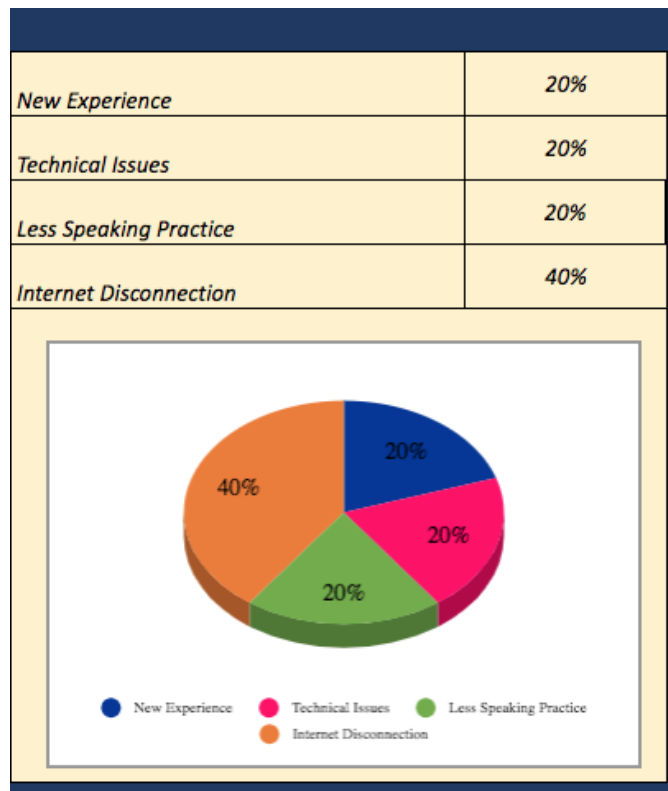
**SURVEY RESULTS**

**Figure 1:** What were the benefits and pitfalls of an online class?



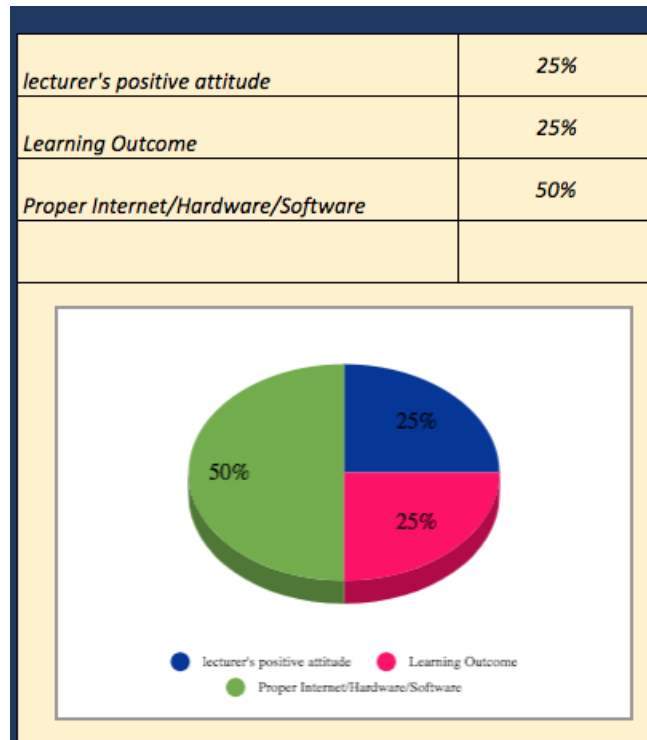
*Own elaboration*

**Figure 2:** What obstacles have you encountered during online courses?



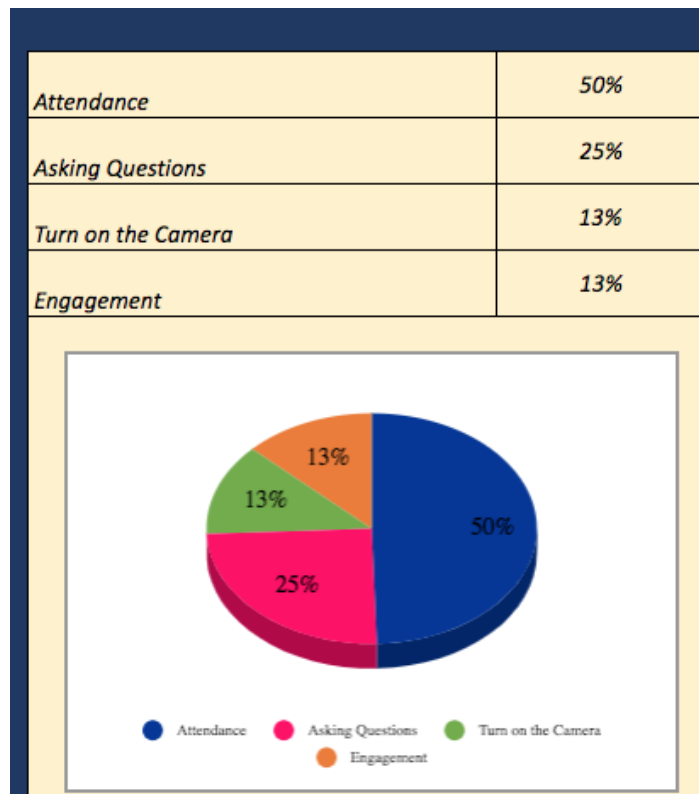
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**Figure 3:** What helped you to overcome the obstacles?



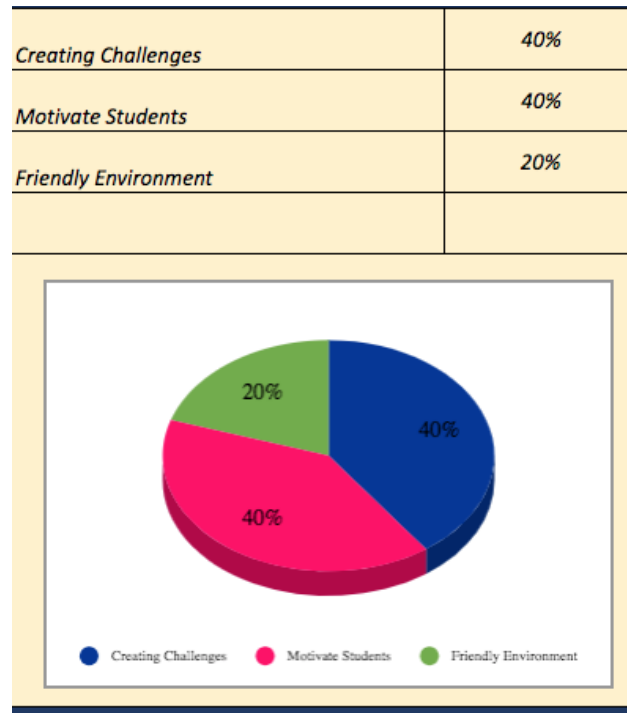
*Own elaboration*

**Figure 4:** What are the features of a successful online student?



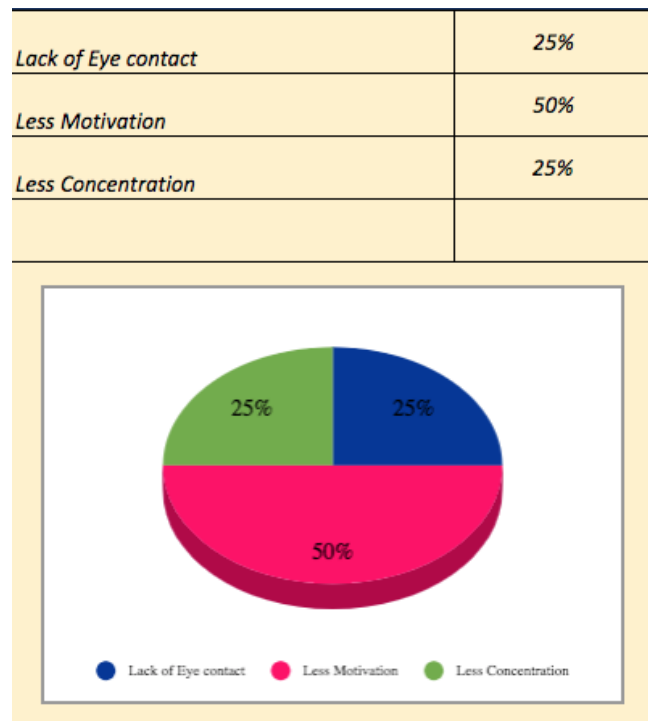
*Own elaboration*

**Figure 5:** What are the features of a successful online teacher?



*Own elaboration*

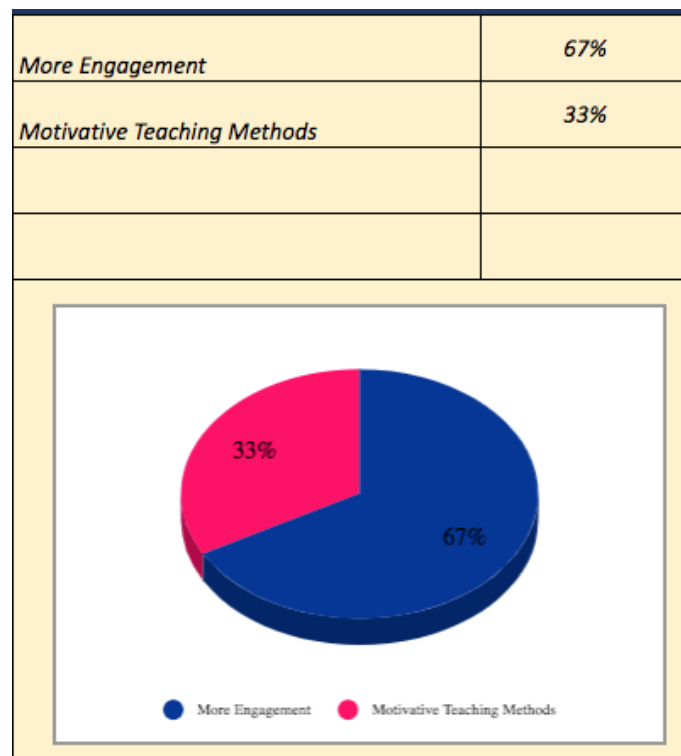
**Figure 6:** What are the pieces of conventional classroom settings that are lost in an online one?



*Own elaboration*

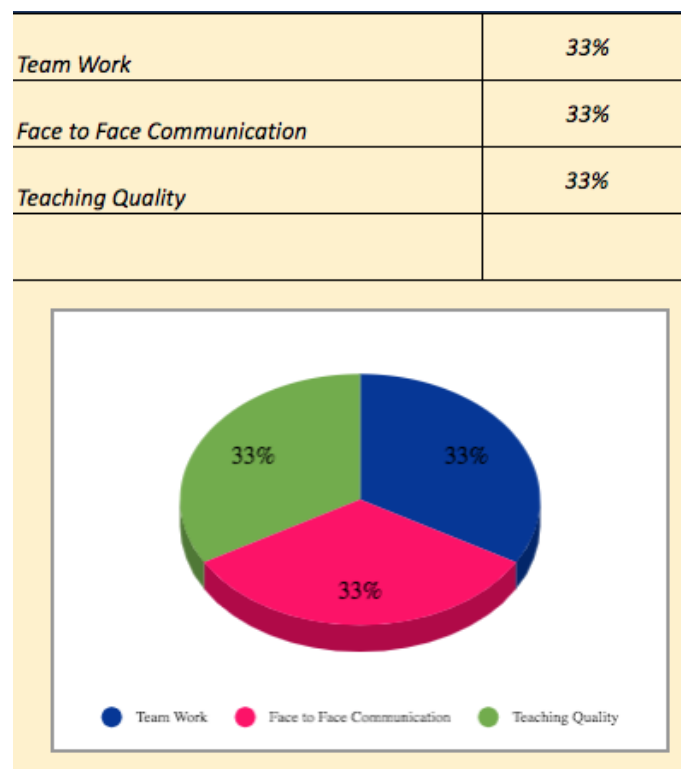


**Figure 7:** What recommendation would you give to an online lecturer?



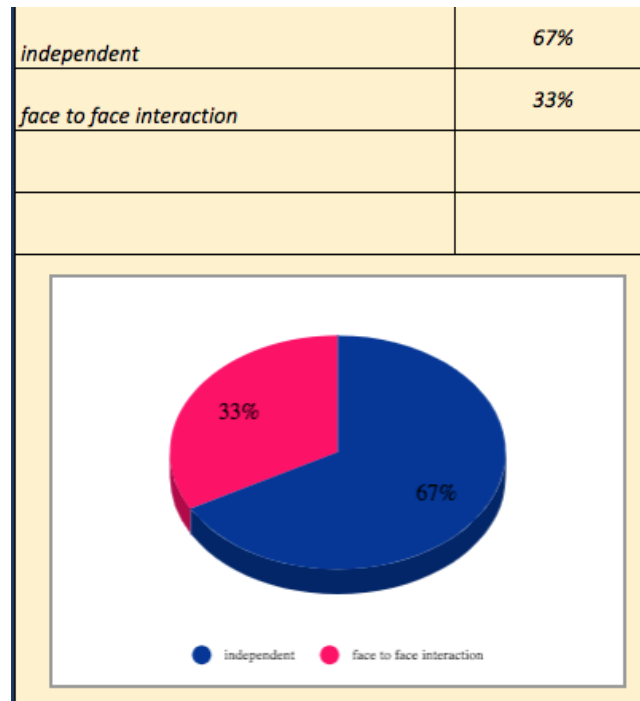
*Own elaboration*

**Figure 8:** What helped you feel that you belong to the group during an online course?



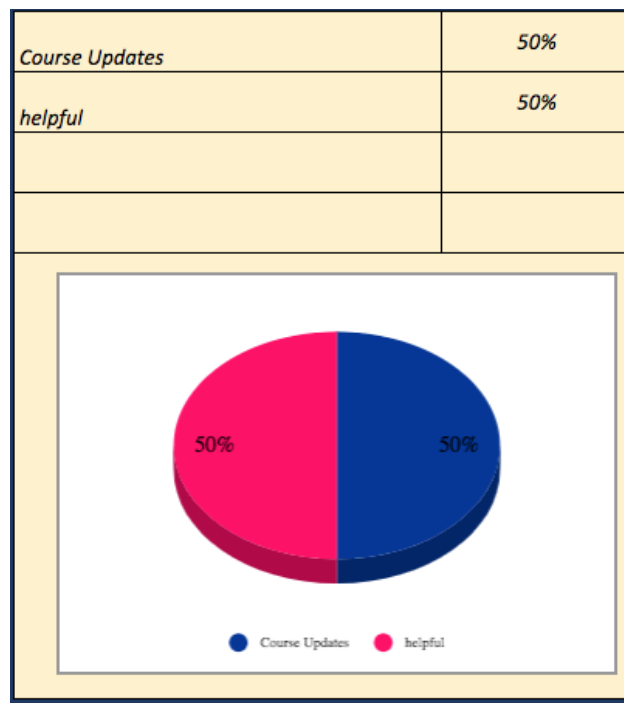
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**Figure 9:** Do you need face to face interaction with your peers and instructor to succeed or are you someone who can thrive in an independent study environment?



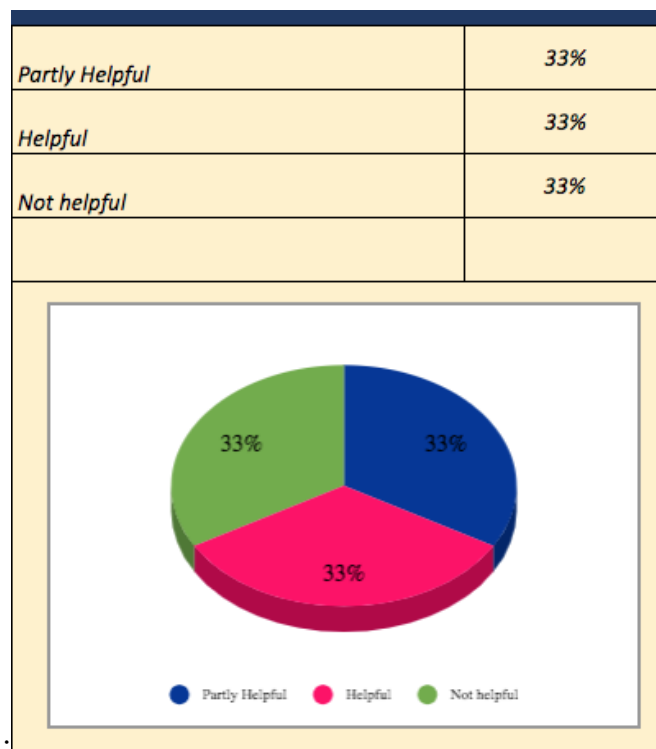
*Own elaboration*

**Figure 10:** How did being a member of a WhatsApp group helped you feel that you belong to the community of your peers?



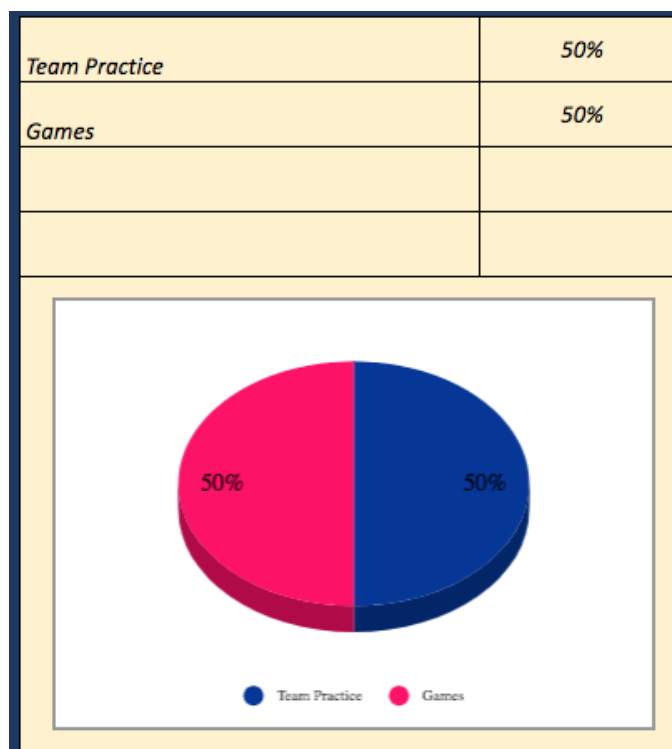
*Own elaboration*

**Figure 11:** Do you consider Breakout Rooms a peer-to-peer mentoring which can solve your problems with the session input and get advice from the other group members?



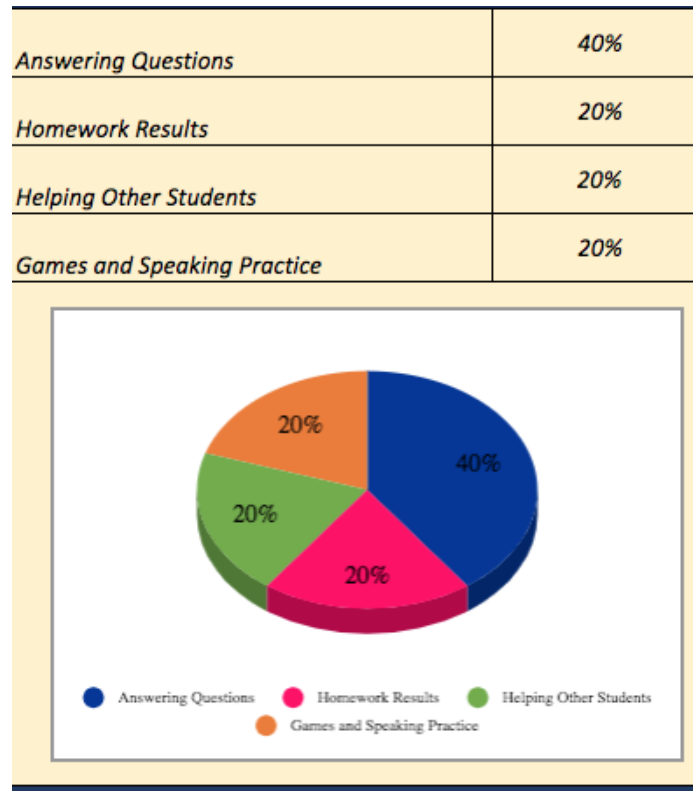
*Own elaboration*

**Figure 12:** Which in-class activities make you feel that you are learning?



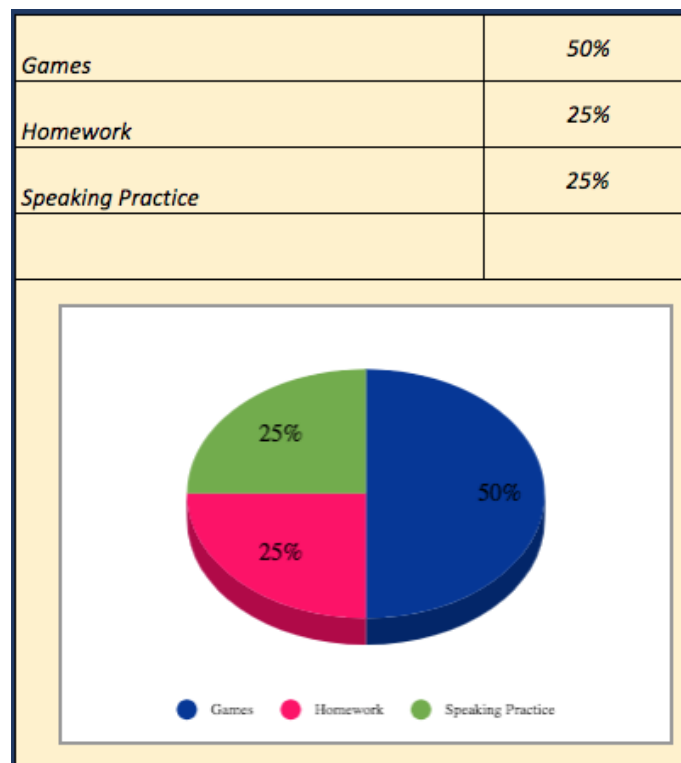
*Own elaboration*

**Figure 13:** Which in-class activities give you a sense of achievement?



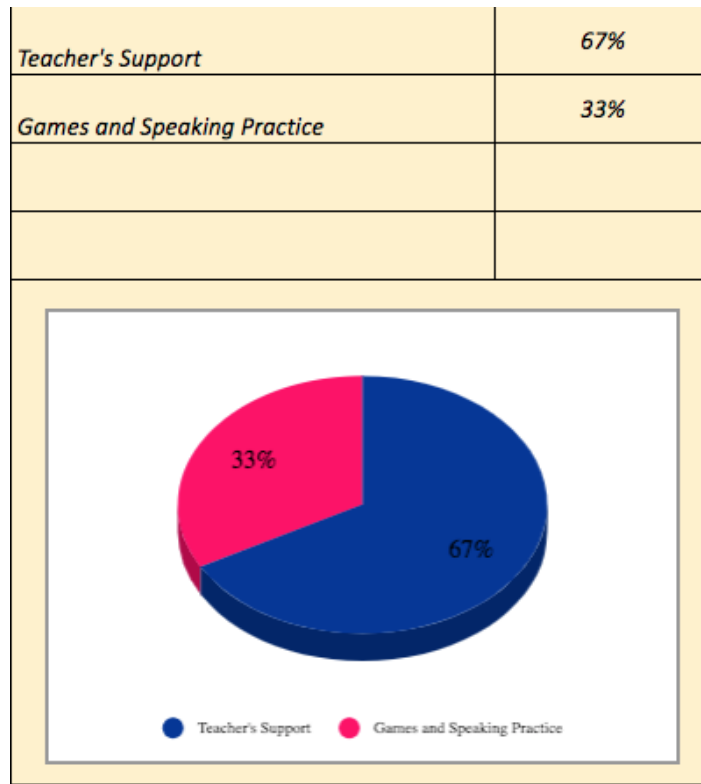
*Own elaboration*

**Figure 14:** Which in-class activities make you feel engaged?



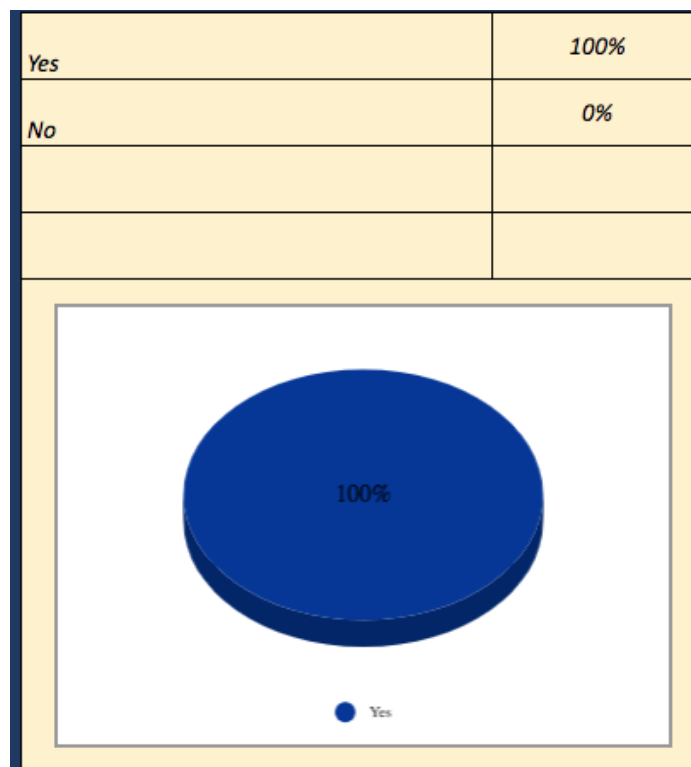
*Own elaboration*

**Figure 15:** Which in-class or post-class activities can help you tolerate lack of one-on-one support?



*Own elaboration*

**Figure 16:** Would you take an online course in the future? Why or why not?



*Own elaboration*

## DISCUSSION

Clean economy is replacing fossil fuels with renewable sources. What about ‘clean education’? The questions have been raised: Do we need to demolish the old education models and teaching methods? Should we start looking in the direction of a Hybrid classroom? (Which means face-to-face and online teaching combined).

## CONCLUSION

As a real black swan event, a shift to online teaching offered surprisingly excellent ways for students to broaden their educational opportunities and achieve more in every demanding realm of education. The students have learnt to be self-motivated, independent, responsible learners.

To conclude, a black swan even in education requires to do things differently. Similar to the economic model, which is based on pursuing efficiency, education models have to be reviewed and challenged. The key principles of resilience in nature should be taken into consideration. We have two kidneys for a reason. Online teaching should be considered a black swan of education that will only strengthen its position. Interaction and communication are the key factors in the success of an online course. We have to use educational platforms features actively and correctly — in order to promote the best practices for our learners’ effective language acquisition.

A complete shift of language learning to online setting is as a black swan event reckoned to be improbable before and is normalized after the fact. As a real black swan event, it offered surprisingly excellent ways for students to broaden their educational opportunities and achieve more in the ever -demanding realm of education. All of the respondents answered that they would like to take an online course in the future. Figure 16 Students embarking on the path of education through online learning have learned to be self-motivated, independent, and responsible learners. Figure 9 They got more awareness of their learning styles and realized that learning is an ongoing process and cannot be limited by the walls of the classroom.

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Figure 16  
Figure 9