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## **DEVELOPING STUDENT AGENCY THROUGH ONLINE DIDACTIC STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION. SMALL GROUPS VERSUS LARGE GROUPS**

**ABSTRACT:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and students were relocated in the digital space. In this study, we focus on two groups of students and two types of courses: electives on *Romanian as a Foreign Language* in Germany and seminars on *the Grammatical Structure of the English Grammar* in Romania. We analyse the role that student agency plays in the online teaching process. For this purpose, we applied a survey to analyse the effectiveness of the didactic strategies used with small groups in comparison with large groups. The findings of this study show that remote instruction at the university level during seminars/elective courses for small groups can be as efficient as on-site instruction for the learning process and, implicitly, for student agency development. Regarding large groups, the study shows that remote instruction can, at times, be even more efficient than face-to-face teaching, especially regarding student agency development.

**Key words:** COVID-19 pandemic, foreign languages, remote academic instruction, teaching strategies, student agency.

## РАЗВИЈАЊЕ СТУДЕНТСКОГ КРИТИЧКОГ МИШЉЕЊА УЗ ПОМОЋ ОНЛАЈН ДИДАКТИЧКИХ СТРАТЕГИЈА У ВИСОКОМ ОБРАЗОВАЊУ. МАЛЕ ГРУПЕ НАСПРАМ ВЕЛИКИХ ГРУПА

*АПСТРАКТ:* Наставници и студенти су се током пандемије вируса Ковид-19 преместили у дигитални простор. У овом раду фокусирамо се на две групе студената и две врсте курсева: изборни предмет *Румунски језик као страни језик* у Немачкој и предмет *Граматичка структура енглеског језика* у Румунији. Анализирамо улогу коју студентско критичко мишљење има у наставном процесу онлајн. У ту сврху применили смо анкету за анализу ефикасности дидактичких стратегија које се користе у малим групама у поређењу са великим групама. Резултати ове студије показују да настава на даљину на универзитетском нивоу током предавања изборних курсева за мале групе може бити једнако ефикасна. Што се тиче великих група, студија показује да настава на даљину понекад може бити и ефикаснија од наставе лицем у лице.

*Кључне речи:* пандемија Ковид-19, страни језици, академска настава на даљину, стратегије наставе, студентско активно учешће.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, for some time, remote teaching became the only form of instruction available everywhere around the world, relocating teachers and students in the digital space and transforming the academic instruction. In this transition and adaptation process, instructors had a common goal: to adapt to the online environment, to make the learning process useful for the acquisition of information regarding a particular topic, while focusing also on its utility in the students' academic and professional lives, and to develop transversal skills for the students. As such, the academic instruction in higher education aims at equipping students with specialised knowledge and skills and at preparing them for real-life scenarios, developing student agency and contributing to the personal development of students as responsible learners and practitioners (see also Klemenčič 2015).

In this study, we analyse the didactic strategies used to develop student agency in the context of *Romanian as a foreign language* classes at Regensburg University, Germany and English grammar classes at The Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania. The timespan is October 2020-January 2021. We base our analysis on the observation of strategies used with small groups in comparison with large groups, highlighting similarities and differences and the students' perception of the teaching act and their attitude towards digital instruction. At the same time, we focus on the digital environment and on digital

communication as the common backbone for remote learning both for electives in which Romanian is a second language, and for seminars focusing on the grammatical structure of the English language.

We embarked on this study because we were interested in analysing how two local academic contexts functioned in the digital world. We focused on the role played by interactive, dynamic, synchronous, and asynchronous activities in developing student agency in small groups versus large groups. We aimed at scrutinising students' perception of our online courses. We also wanted to compare the perception of the groups involved: small groups versus large groups.

This kind of study constitutes a form of feedback for the language instructors, giving them the opportunity to validate or invalidate the didactic strategies used and their role in developing student agency.

Our main research questions are the following:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of remote instruction when working with small and/or big groups?
- How did students perceive the transition to online instruction?
- What is the connection between students' profile and the development of student agency?
- How can student agency be achieved through online strategies in small groups vs. large groups?
- How does the relationship instructor – student change/shift in small groups vs. large groups?

## 2. DEVELOPING STUDENT AGENCY

Student agency is “a process of students' self-reflective and intentional actions and interactions during studentship, which encompasses variable notions of agentic possibility (“power”) and agentic orientation (“will”)” (Klemenčič 2015: 13). In higher education, student agency is activated and developed through didactic strategies that guide students, offer them a voice, and engage them in a dialogic relationship with all the agents involved in the learning process. It constitutes a central factor, especially in the foreign language classroom, and, even more so, in the remote learning setting. We associate student agency with learning through activities that are meaningful and relevant to learners. As Lindgren and McDaniel argue (2012: 346):

“Personal relevance may also make it easier for a learner to situate new learning within existing knowledge structures by making connections to previous experience. The overall result is learning that

is more flexible and adaptive because it was conceived under the conditions of specific personal needs and aspirations.”

Within this framework, student agency refers to the students’ critical analysis of the content taught, offering the cognitive space for acquiring information and embedding this information in a network of domain-specific content, but also connecting this information to their own purposes and contributing to making students autonomous learners. Hence, the concept also refers to “the ability to manage one’s learning” (Zeiser et al. 2018: 1) and to the active role played by students in the learning process. Student agency is part of student engagement, and it is “students’ constructive contribution into the flow of the instruction they receive”, it is their attempt to personalise and enrich “what is to be learned and the conditions and circumstances under which it is to be learned” (Reeve, Tseng 2011: 258). Student agency is concerned with the quality of engagement with the environment (see Klemenčič 2015). In our case, we are concerned with an educational environment that includes the teacher and students, video conferencing platforms, various learning apps and strategies. To this, we add that “the concept of student agency varies across cultures” (OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030). The different sociocultural backgrounds play a crucial role in the process as agency “refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” and “all action is socioculturally mediated, both in its production and in its interpretation” (Ahearn 2001: 112).

Student agency can be developed in numerous ways. Some basic factors that can be applied to higher education as well are time, resources, a flexible curriculum, students’ involvement in the decision-making process, asking open-ended questions, making the students enjoy learning, encouraging playing and discovering, the teacher as a facilitator, rethinking assessment (Qureshi 2020).

A factor that facilitates the development of student agency is the use of new technologies. This happens because new technologies involve collaboration (see Díaz 2017), sharing, playing, competition, challenge. They emulate real life scenarios through various technology-based projects and problem-solving activities as “teachers “empowered with technology” could make the classes as interesting and as attractive as what happens in the world beyond the walls of the classroom” (Negoescu, Boștină-Bratu 2016: 27). In this way, students learn better because they take part in a game of discovery, receiving challenges and, thus, learning inductively: “students grappling with these challenges quickly recognize the need for facts, skills, and conceptual understanding, at which point the teacher provides instruction or helps students learn on their own” (Prince and Felder 2007: 14).

Using new technologies, students can also co-construct knowledge together with their peers and instructors as “a variety of technologies may be used to support cooperative/collaborative learning” (Resta and Laferriere 2007: 65). In this scenario, the teaching process is agency-oriented and student-centred, the teacher taking the role of facilitator, offering students scaffolded instruction, “asking questions, exploring options, suggesting alternatives, and encouraging them to develop criteria to make informed choices” (Grasha 1994: 143).

In order to develop student agency, emphasis should also be placed on developing their critical thinking skills in searching, selecting, and acquiring information in multiple ways, depending on the students’ learning styles, preferences, and interests. Thus, the final aim in agency-focused teaching contexts is to develop autonomous, effective, and motivated learners.

Student agency and engagement highly depend on all these factors involved in the learning environment. To these we add: prior knowledge about the subject matter, the relationship with the teacher and the dynamics of the classroom, the novelty and relevance of the course content, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, the connection between the course and the students’ academic life and future professional life, the design of the educational system.

### 3. LEARNING CONTEXT AND SURVEYED LEARNERS

There are various factors in the learning context, and they have an impact on developing student agency. These factors also constituted trigger points for us in choosing the two types of courses under focus. For space limitations, we will only analyse a selection of these factors in this study.

The first factor is represented by the type of course under focus. In this study, we compare a seminar on *the Grammatical structure of the English Language* with 2 elective courses on Romanian, namely, *Romanian as a foreign language* and a course dedicated to Secondos<sup>1</sup>, on *Romanian Culture and Civilization*. We chose these two types of courses because both Romanian and English represent the second language for the target groups. This entitles us to state that the linguistic biographies of the two types of students are the same as they went through similar acquisition processes. Moreover, *combining*

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<sup>1</sup> Students who have been in contact with Romanian as a second language (one of their parents is Romanian, but they left the country when they were children and they do not use Romanian at home). Hence, they have some knowledge of the Romanian language: their receptive skills are intermediate, but their productive skills are at beginner level.

*Romanian/English* with their mother tongues better their academic performance and offers them more job opportunities. As these students want to use the languages under focus in order to obtain certain jobs, this aspect constitutes the link between the two groups, and it is our starting point in analysing to what extent the student agency strategies employed are dependent on the type of students.

Another reason determining us to focus on these two types of courses concerns the status of English and Romanian in these two specific contexts, the two types of courses analysed in this study involving a lingua franca: teaching the *Grammatical Structure of the English Language* implies a lingua franca at a macro-level, whereas teaching *Romanian as a foreign language* and *Romanian culture and civilization* implies a lingua franca at a micro-level. In both situations, there is both a challenging factor and a motivating factor. For *Romanian as a foreign language* and *Romanian culture and civilization*, the difficult aspect is represented by the fact that Romanian is a minority language and students are not exposed to the language very often. However, they are passionate about the language. Some are even enrolled in programmes which are strongly related to the Romanian sociocultural context and the Romanian language. Others are enrolled in programmes such as international relations, aiming at jobs such as diplomats, social workers, interpreters. In both cases, they are motivated to learn Romanian so that they can be functional and efficient at the workplace. Regarding English, the language functions as the global lingua franca and it is a dominant language, being widely recognised and being useful both for professional and for personal life. Hence, regardless of their field of study, students are eager to learn and/or improve this language. However, developing student agency for *the Grammatical Structure of the English Language* course/seminar constitutes a challenge to the instructor because many students are not keen on knowing the theoretical explanations for language phenomena, some are not aware of what philology field entails and the new job prospects connected to this field (a few examples include developing artificial languages and systems - Google translate, AI-powered writing assistance - Grammarly, annotation).

The second aspect to take into consideration is the curriculum as the two types of courses analysed have a different curriculum and we investigate the way in which this influences the development of student agency. In Germany, the curriculum is dynamic, courses are optional and there is the possibility to combine various types of courses. In contrast to the German context, in Romania, the curriculum is fixed: students at the Faculty of Letters get to choose a programme including two languages: a major language and literature programme combined

with a minor language and literature programme. For example: French-English. There are compulsory courses, elective courses (they choose 1 course out of 3/4 offered), and optional courses.

The target group is an important factor in any educational context.

The two courses on Romanian had participants from various backgrounds and fields: Political Studies, South-East Studies, European Studies, Education and Didactics, German Studies, Romance Studies (French, Italian, Spanish), Journalism, Psychology. This survey has 16 respondents: 11 females, 3 males and 2 respondents which identified as 'other'. Their ages range from 19 to 49, all of them German citizens. Out of these students, 14 live in an urban area, 2 in a rural area.

The seminar on the English language targets first year students at the Faculty of Letters having English as their minor and majoring in one of the following languages: Korean, Chinese, Finnish, French, German, Japanese, Italian, Comparative Literature, Hungarian, Norwegian, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Ukrainian. According to the official figures, there are approximately 234 students distributed among 60 students for each seminar group. This survey has 81 respondents: 72 females and 8 males, most of them being 18 and 19 years old, 79 of them Romanian citizens, 2 Erasmus students (Kazakhstan and Portugal). Hence, this was a very homogenous group. Out of these students, 60 live in an urban area, 21 in a rural area.

Observing the two groups, we notice that the respondents enrolled in the Romanian courses have very heterogeneous educational backgrounds (Social sciences, Language and Linguistics, Law, Biology, and English, European Studies, Psychology), whereas the Romanian students studying English are all Philology students. This is due to the two contexts involved (dynamic versus fixed curriculum) and this affects the development of student agency, as both categories of students have, in the end, the same tasks, namely, to connect information or knowledge to their own purposes and to contribute to becoming autonomous learners. The emphasis is placed on student engagement, and the central element is their constant contribution brought into the instruction they receive.

#### 4. DIDACTIC STRATEGIES

Foregrounding the idea that in the learning environment we deal with different purposes and contexts and students are diverse and subjected to continuous change, learning in different ways or reacting differently to the

resources used, the subject matter and the level of difficulty (see Fry et. al., 2009:8), we will analyse the strategies used in small groups in opposition to the ones used in large groups.

#### *4.1 Didactic strategies used with small groups*

The participants in a small group setting benefit from more directed and personalised didactic strategies that are more difficult to implement with large groups of students. As such, we spent more time for warm-up activities and for building rapport. Both strategies were implemented spontaneously and naturally, sometimes by merely asking questions in the foreign language under focus. As “asking and answering questions and responding are paramount in small group settings” (Griffths 2019: 81), we engaged in questions and short answer sequences on a regular basis by asking general questions, thus contributing to building a relaxing atmosphere and setting the mood for the foreign language class. We also spent more time on warm-up activities meant to introduce the topic of the course and create expectations. Moreover, we managed to use personalised activities: we included examples with the students’ names when teaching various language structures and, at times, we made direct reference to students. In this way, our students were entertained and engaged, more willing to contribute. Small groups also allow individual feedback and more email exchanges with the language instructor. The syllabus was more open and flexible as students were given the opportunity to have a voice and make choices in terms of content. This led to an authentic conversation, a great focus was placed on authentic experience, and, by way of consequence, made the students more interested in the courses and constantly built on student agency.

#### *4.2 Didactic strategies used with large groups*

Working online with large groups of students represents a challenge for the language instructor. To develop students’ agency and promote student engagement, there were some strategies that we used throughout the semester. Some of them are teaching techniques, while some others are meant to establish human connection, which is so important and harder to achieve in this context. A few examples include:

- Creating a Facebook group besides the education platform that we use. The purpose of this group was to share thoughts, funny posts related to the content discussed in the classroom and to create a relaxed atmosphere.



- Editing together a collaborative notebook based on the content discussed during the seminar and on some extra reading that students had to do on their own.
- The use of various online interactive games and apps which we used during the seminar and the students could use after the seminar as well. These online apps contained the key to the exercises as well, hence they constitute good practice and reinforcement material.
- Giving the students a mid-term project for which they received 1 point of their final grade. The project had three sections, each representing a strategy used with the purposes of developing student agency. Below we illustrate the 3 sections and the didactic reasons behind them:

In Section 1, students received four chapters from the specialised literature, and they had to read one of the four chapters, write a summary of three/four main ideas that they found interesting and provide examples. They had to write approximately 250 words. They were told not to copy-paste information, but to paraphrase the ideas and come up with their own examples. This section illustrates one important strategy for developing student agency: it gave them the freedom to choose the reading material. It also required our students to process information, select what they consider relevant and interesting, and summarise the important information - this kind of activity ensures the development of critical thinking skills, it raises awareness of the field per se and gives the instructor the opportunity to check if what he/she considers relevant corresponds to what students consider relevant.

In the second section, students had to provide two (contextualised) examples of grammatical aspects that were previously analysed at the course and seminar. They also had to include a short analysis for each example. These examples had to be extracted from online sources: from images (that they saw on Facebook/Instagram/online) or songs, short videos, movies, or trailers. They had to provide the name of the multimedia element and the source. If it was a video/song, they had to mention the exact time when the structure(s) occurred. They were also asked to specify the sources. In terms of didactic reasoning behind this section, this exercise showed the students that the subject under focus is connected to aspects pertaining to daily life, something they need in order to be functional in English on a personal and professional level.

In the last section, based on the content discussed up to that point in the course and the seminar and using as examples the exercises that we solved together, they had to design a short grammar exercise for Philology students. The level had to be at least intermediate, and the exercise had to contain clear

instructions, two items - which showed creative and up-to-date sentences and an answer key to the exercise. This activity gave them the role of teacher/experts, building further on student agency.

- Handouts and quizzes with additional exercises. For the handouts, students received a key and they had to correct their own work and for the quizzes, we used Google form quizzes and the answers were included in the form. This kind of practice ensures the consolidation of information, and it gives autonomy and a greater sense of responsibility to the students.

- Asking the students to provide feedback on the classes and then picking up on that during the semester. For example, in the survey that we applied in the middle of the semester, one student said that for them it would be important not to be judged if they did not start their video because they might have a special context within the family and that it should not be interpreted as a lack of respect. In response to this, the language instructor posted a message on the Facebook group in order to appeal to their empathy and to explain why starting the video is important for our class, without mentioning the reason behind the post.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the answers to our research questions we used procedures that implement qualitative and quantitative components, gathering relevant data from the students' answers.

We applied the same questionnaire to the two groups of students (see Annex 1). The questionnaire was applied in the first semester (winter semester) of the academic year 2020-2021. It contains 4 main sections: *General Information*, *Our course/seminar*, *The seminar and the online learning environment*, *Students' attitude*. Students were allowed to answer in the language that they wanted, ensuring in this way that the linguistic barrier would not infringe upon their expressing exactly what they want to express.

The first section of the questionnaire, *General information*, comprises details related to age, gender, residency, field of study, year/semester of study, their language level, motivation, self-evaluation, future job plans and the relation with the language under focus. This section contains an open question regarding students' motivation for studying Romanian, respectively English, and a Likert scale question, requiring the students to rate to what extent the instructors managed to adapt to the online teaching.

The second section, *Our Course/Seminar*, asks the students to give some relevant information about their prior knowledge about the field/seminar/course,

their expectations, and their detailed feedback on the course/seminar, as well as regarding the problematic aspects of the seminar/course. Most importantly, this section embodies the core questions of our questionnaire: Is the content of the course useful? Which content do you find useful? Is the course essential for your field of study?

The section *The course/seminar and the online learning environment* is composed mainly of open questions: *What do you like/dislike about the course in the online environment?; What role do you have in this course?; Do you consider that all courses and seminars are suitable for online teaching / remote teaching?; What motivates you during the course?*

Finally, the last part, *Students' Attitudes*, subsumes details related to the usage of the camera and the students' engagement during the class since the teacher or the students have or do not have the camera on. This part also offers information related to the number of the students taking part in the classes and the advantages and disadvantages of the online medium.

## 6. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The questionnaire applied to our students provided us with valuable information that explains students' attitude towards our course and the learning environment and the way in which student agency was developed through participating in the course/seminar activities, the use of various apps and online resources and the various didactic strategies.

### *6.1 The Nexus between students' profile and the development of student agency*

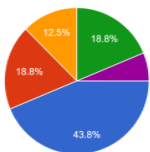
The section GENERAL INFORMATION focused on obtaining demographic information about our students, focusing on four aspects which explain our students' engagement with the course and constituting the pillar for designing our courses in order to develop student agency during our courses: our students' perception of their language level, the reasons why they study the language under focus, the job they would like to have in the future and the role played by the foreign language in their future jobs.

When asked to rank their knowledge of the language under focus, the Philology group provided surprising answers. Even though these students minor in English, and this means that they will be certified teachers and translators when they graduate, about half of them considered that they were advanced and proficient in English, whereas 37% of the students self-evaluated their English

level as intermediate, and roughly 10% considered that they are elementary level, and even beginners. The small group of students which studied Romanian offered a heterogeneous picture: the vast majority declared being beginners, followed by advanced and elementary, then intermediate and a very small percentage perceiving their Romanian language level as proficient (see fig. 1 below).

### Students studying Romanian

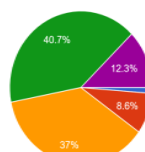
Rank your language competence in Romanian  
16 responses



● Beginner Level  
● Elementary Level  
● Intermediate Level  
● Advanced Level  
● Proficient

### Students studying English

Rank your language competence in English.  
81 responses



● Beginner Level  
● Elementary Level  
● Intermediate Level  
● Advanced Level  
● Proficient

Fig. 1. General information

When asked why they study the Romanian language, most of the students mentioned elements pertaining to intrinsic motivation (passion/curiosity/personal interests). There are also some who provided answers which reveal extrinsic motivation. There are also answers that include both sides of motivation. A selection of the answers is presented below. For authenticity reasons, we transcribe the answers verbatim, exactly in the language in which they were produced:

*“Because it's part of a module from the study.”*

*“I want to learn more about Romanian varieties / linguistic and personal reasons.”*

*“Interesse und Teil des Studiums.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“Because I am studying DaZ German as a second language. And many pupils in “Regensburg also speak Rumanian.”*

*“Aus Interesse, Verwandte in Rumänien.”<sup>3</sup>*

*“Personal interest, family background and scientific needs.”*

*“im Rahmen des Secondos-Programms und um im Urlaub dort besser zurecht zu kommen.”<sup>4</sup>*

*“Because i am interested in the Romanian language and culture.”*

<sup>2</sup> Personal interests and part of the study programme.

<sup>3</sup> Personal interests and kinship in Romania.

<sup>4</sup> It is part of the study programme and also because I want to get by in Romania when on holidays.

*“Because I wanted to use the great opportunity that Uni Regensburg offers for learning about eastern european countries and languages. Because I already speak Italian at an intermediate level I had anticipated that Romanian would be the easiest one to learn for me from the languages offered for the additional certificates.”*

*“Am făcut serviciul social în România anu 2014, organizația de trimitere m-a trimis în România. Așa am învățat românește practicând. Acum trei ani în urmă am început sa fiu interpret amator pentru autoritățile germane competente la așa-numita lege "ProstSchG" și am înțeles că existe o mare necesitate de consiliere specializată sau asistența socială pe limbă română în Germania în scop de a implementa participarea și drepturile omului pentru grupa persoanelor respective.”<sup>5</sup>*

*“Deci studiez limba română pentru că am o relație biografică și emoțională cu aceasta limbă, și pentru că vreau să ridic nivelul meu de limba putând oferi din resursele mele pentru binele unei societăți migratoare.”<sup>6</sup>*

*“It's a beautiful language, linguistically interesting, comparing to Latin, other Romance languages and various influences. Romania as country is fascinating”*

*“Weil die die Sprache schön finde, und es für mein Studienfach hilfreich ist”<sup>7</sup>*

*“Because i am half Romanian.”*

When asked why they had chosen to study English language and literature at the Faculty of Letters, as can be seen from the students' answers below, there were students who stated that they have a passion for the English language. There were also students who stated that they want to have a job in which knowledge of the English language is needed. Many declared they had chosen this language because it is a language that they are familiar with. However, the vast majority provided answers which show that they are interested in acquiring/improving

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<sup>5</sup> I did social service in Romania in 2014, the sending organization sent me to Romania. I learned Romanian by practicing. Three years ago, I started to be an amateur interpreter for the German authorities competent in the so-called "ProstSchG" law and I understood that there is a great need for specialized counselling or Romanian-language social assistance in Germany in order to implement participation and human rights for Romanians.

<sup>6</sup> So I study Romanian because I have a biographical and emotional relationship with this language, and because I want to improve my language level, thus offering my resources in the service of a migrant society.

<sup>7</sup> Because I like the language and I find it useful for my field of study.

language competence, but not primarily philology content and skills. This shows that the development of student agency is essential in the learning process as many students are not aware of the potential and the complexity of studying philology, most of them expect courses and seminars that would only improve their English level, their translation skills, their ability to use the language in the academic/professional environment. A selection of their answers can be seen below. We transcribe them verbatim, exactly as they were produced by the students, with their typos, syntax, or any other kind of errors, in order to respect language in use:

*“I study English because it is easier to me for me to understand and to be connected with all kind of culture.”*

*“Because it's a foreign language I like and I'm familiar with.”*

*“Because I want to practice more this language, for me, for my knowledge. I want to improve it because in high school I didn't do that.”*

*“I have been studying it since I was a kid, so I will keep learning more about it and eventually becoming proficient.”*

*“Because I know the language, i have been studying English since i'm 12 and i want to know more about this language, because is important to know one of the international language.”*

Another open question that is relevant for developing student agency during our courses is connected to the type of job students envisage for the future. In this respect, students who studied Romanian, mentioned jobs which are not necessarily directly connected to the Romanian language or interdisciplinary studies jobs. In relation to this, the role of Romanian was highlighted in their answers in the following ways:

- *Cultural and linguistic knowledge is always gold*
- *mehr Möglichkeiten zur Weiterbildung<sup>8</sup>*
- *perhaps being German teacher (Auslandsschuldienst)*
- *for example I would to be able to read romanian sources*

Most of the students enrolled at the *Grammatical Structure of the English language* seminar declared wanting to have English Philology related jobs. Some examples include teacher (but only 7 students mentioned English teacher), translator, interpreter, writer, jobs that involve literature and art. Some wrote that they would like to have a job involving English as a foreign language or jobs

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<sup>8</sup> More opportunities for further development.

unrelated to philology (e.g., flight attendant, tourism, IT companies, corporations). When asked how they thought English would help them in their future jobs, they signalled aspects connected to English being a global language:

- *Almost everyone speaks English. It just brings about opportunities.*
- *Being bilingual is becoming more and more required by companies*
- *Knowing more foreign languages constitutes an advantage in every job.*

*English is a language spoken all over the world, and those who know it are able to interact with people from different cultures and countries. I believe this is vital in the context of globalization.*

### 6.2 Students' perception on the course/seminar

The second section of the survey focuses on the English grammar seminar, respectively, the Romanian course. Students in Germany appear to have made more informed choices when they enrolled in their study programme. As such, when asked about their information prior to their enrolment, 68.8% of the students declared having been informed both about the field of study and about the courses taught at their faculty, only 12.5% declared having been informed about the field of study, but not about the courses taught at their faculty and 18.5% declared not having been informed neither about the field of study, nor about the courses. In contrast to the students in Germany, only 30.9% of the Romanian students declared having been informed both about the field of study and about the courses taught at their faculty, a very large number of students declared having been informed about the field of study, but not about the courses taught at their faculty (63%) and an insignificant percentage declared having been informed about both (see fig. 2 below).

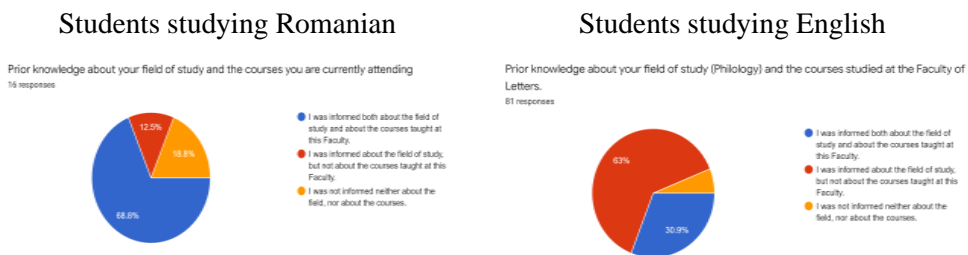


Fig. 2. Prior information about the Programme

Students were also asked if the course had met their expectations and they were asked to motivate their answers. 15 students in Germany answered positively to this question and only one provided the following answer: “partly yes, partly no, it depends on themes and group dynamic (especially this is difficult to handle in an online course”. Regarding the students in Romania, 56 students answered positively, 3 negatively, 6 partially positively, the rest did not answer this question, or they did not have any expectations. We also select 3 answers from the Romanian students’ input. We transcribe them verbatim:

- *I find the course very interesting. I had no idea that there are so many things about English grammar that I need to know.*
- *I had a much more simplified schedule on my mind, but I am definitely not disappointed. It is very difficult for me to be honest, since I thought I knew a lot about grammar but turns out, I don't at all. It challenges me and gives greater knowledge about it.*
- *don't think that the information we are learning is that useful. I personally feel like it is way too detailed. Thinking back on the times I was attending English classes to prepare for the Cambridge Proficiency C2 exam, I never had to study grammar so in-depth in order to be able to write good essays and do well on the other parts of the exam. Subsequently, I don't think the teacher who was preparing us for the exam knew it either, and her students had great results despite that. However, I understand that we are 'Philology' students and that means that we should be skilled in Grammar, as well as that the teacher of this course has to follow a specific curricula, even if it gets too in-depth at times.*

These answers reflect the students’ opinions in general as there are students who are passionate about the subject and find it easy to understand and operate with grammar, there are also some who enjoy the course, but consider it to be challenging, and there are also students who are not keen on learning the theoretical aspects behind the language structures.

When addressed the question ‘What does the participation in the course give you (in terms of new skills)?’, a selection of answers provided by the German students includes: *Erlernen einer neuen Sprache*<sup>9</sup>; *I can learn a new language and a new culture. It is just wonderful!, O fluentă mai mare, scris și oral*<sup>10</sup>. The

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<sup>9</sup> Learning a new language.

<sup>10</sup> More fluency.



students in Romania cover aspects related to the language skills and transversal skills. A few examples include: *Communication skills and time management skills; I think that now I can explain better certain grammatical issues; Language and grammar skills. It also taught me how to use technology better.; Critical-thinking skills [...]; I have increased my digital skills; Self-awareness that i have to study more.*

When asked if they consider the course essential for their field of study, 68.8% of the students in Germany answered negatively, 18.8% chose ‘maybe’ and 12.5% answer ‘yes’. In contrast, 77.8% of the Romanian students answered positively, 21% chose ‘maybe’ and only one student said ‘no’.

### 6.3 The course/seminar and online learning

The third section of the questionnaire focuses on the connection between the seminar/course and the online learning environment. In this study, we addressed only one aspect of this section: our students’ motivation during the course/seminar. As can be seen from figure 3 below, the top three elements that students in Germany value are the relation with the teacher, the activities, the topics chosen by the teacher.

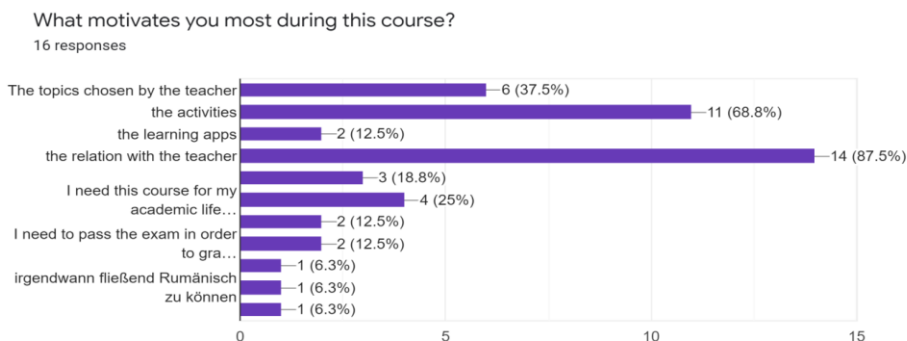


Fig. 3. Motivation – Romanian course

Figure 4 shows us that the top three motivational elements for the students in Romania are the fact that this course helps them develop other skills as well (for example, digital skills, communication skills, public speaking skills etc.); the activities and learning apps used during the seminar.

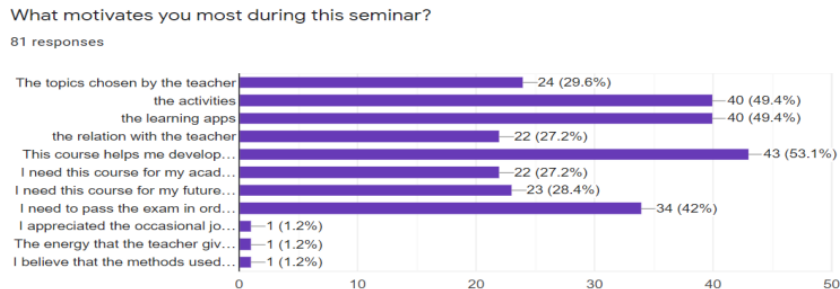


Fig. 4. Motivation – English Seminar

### 6.4 Students' attitudes

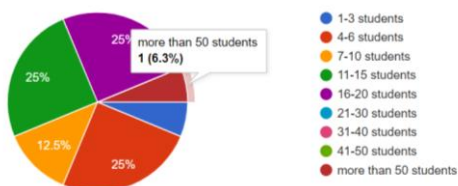
In the section focusing on our students' attitudes, we noticed a very interesting aspect regarding the choice of starting the video during the course/seminar. In the first part, students were given the following statement: "Seeing my colleagues' videos rather than a name on a screen motivates me to engage more". 75% of the students in Germany totally agreed and agreed with the statement, 25% of the students disagreed with it. 54.3% of the students in Romania totally agreed and agreed, 21% agreed to some extent, and 26.2% totally disagreed and disagreed. However, the second part of this section shows that many students in both groups considered that if the teacher had the camera off, the course would not be so engaging (93.8% of the students in Germany, 79% of the students in Romania). In the last part, we observe that half of the students in both groups acknowledge the importance of starting the video during all forms of academic instruction; the other half considers it important for seminars and electives, but not for lectures, only 3 students from the Romanian group consider that having the video on during lectures is important.

When asked what they like about being part of a small group for a course/seminar, students in both groups mentioned the relationship between the teacher and the students, the larger amount of time dedicated to speaking and to individual questions, more focus on the needs of the students, the discussions, the atmosphere, the fact that students are more active, and they are part of a team. When asked what they like about being part of a large group, students in both groups mentioned having the possibility not to get involved, if not interested, the advantage offered by anonymity; the vast number of opinions presented, the lack of pressure. Some also declared that they do not like being part of large groups. One

student says “You're not in the spotlight too often. And you can rely on others to know what/ when you don't (or have better chances to be overlooked in this case)”.

In terms of the usual number of students during elective courses and seminars in Germany and in Romania, the figures show that there is a stark difference between the two educational contexts (see fig. 5 below).

### Students in Germany



### Students in Romania

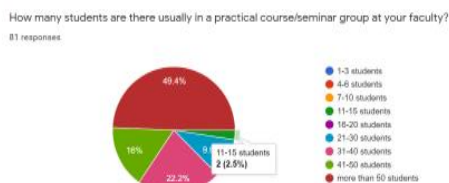


Fig. 5 Students enrolled in electives

## 7. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

As the factors involved in developing student agency are complex and varied, we could not include all of them in this current study. When designing the questionnaire, we did not intend to write a comprehensive study on the topic of student agency as this is a pilot study which opens new areas of investigation.

The most important pedagogical implication of our findings is that remote learning is characterised by a shift as the emphasis is placed on the learner and the instructor takes the role of a facilitator even more than in a face-to-face context. This creates the perfect learning environment for developing student agency. Students are required to perform tasks which are rarely performed in a face-to-face scenario: writing on a digital whiteboard, share screening, group discussions, etc. In this way, the relation between the teacher and the students is transformed and becomes more student-oriented, the latter being more autonomous and having a more active role. Besides a more efficient time-management, many students value several benefits of remote teaching: their learning process takes place in the space that they choose, being behind the screen creates the illusion of being safe and offers them the possibility to use online dictionaries, search for information, double check spelling, etc. This strategy is part of the complex process of building student agency in which both teachers and students are involved and continuously swap roles.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

Our study shows that developing student agency online is more difficult than in face-to-face interaction, and even more difficult in large groups in comparison with small groups. Nonetheless, there are some factors that are helpful both in large groups and in small groups, developing student agency and activating the students and even making them interested in the subject matter, especially when the subject matter is more difficult to grasp or more abstract in nature: the rapport with the teacher and the atmosphere; the activities, tasks and apps used, starting the video during the class. It is unquestionably easier to work with small groups, but our study shows that remote learning can be efficient at university level for seminars/elective courses both for small groups and for large groups. Moreover, remote learning can, at times, be even more efficient than face-to-face teaching for large groups using new technologies.

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РАЗВИЈАЊЕ СТУДЕНТСКОГ КРИТИЧКОГ МИШЉЕЊА УЗ ПОМОЋ ОНЛАЈН  
ДИДАКТИЧКИХ СТРАТЕГИЈА У ВИСОКОМ ОБРАЗОВАЊУ. МАЛЕ ГРУПЕ  
НАСПРАМ ВЕЛИКИХ ГРУПА

*Резиме*

Пандемија вируса Ковид-19 донела је нове приступе у настави језика и отворила просторе дигиталном образовању. Креирање курсева у дигиталном простору умногоме зависи и од земаља које су укључене у овај простор, од курсева који се предају, али и од циљних група. Професори су били приморани да садржај предмета прилагоде новом окружењу и начину рада, иако многи од њих нису били спремни за то. Циљ рада је анализа рада одабраних фокус група, једне у Немачкој, са предметом *Румунски језик као страни*, и друге фокус групе у Румунији, са предметом *Граматичка структура енглеског језика*. Ауторке су анализирале могућност развијања студентског критичког мишљења уз помоћ дидактичких стратегија у онлајн окружењу. За потребе овог истраживања урађена је анкета која се бавила испитивањем ставова и анализом ефикасности дидактичких стратегија – мале групе у поређењу са великим групама. Резултати ове студије показују да настава на даљину, на универзитетском нивоу током часова изборних предмета (мале групе) може бити једнако ефикасна као и настава у учионици. Што се тиче великих група, студија показује да настава на даљину понекад може бити и ефикаснија од наставе у учионици, посебно у погледу развоја студентских мишљења и ставова.

*Кључне речи:* пандемија вируса Ковид-19, страни језици, академска настава на даљину, стратегије наставе, студентско активно учешће.

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