

# Online vs. In-Person Foreign Language Learning: Students' Perception

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**Online vs. In-Person Foreign Language Learning: Students' Perception**

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### **Abstract**

In the era of digitalization where technology is evolving every day and changing all aspects of our lives, education and learning are not excluded. This research investigates the shift to online learning with the focus on foreign language learning. The aim of this research was to compare online learning with in-person learning and to find out whether students were satisfied with this new format of learning. The research was conducted with an online electronic survey created with Google forms which was distributed to RIT students at Dubrovnik and Zagreb campus. There were 41 participants. The results showed that there is a gap between students' expectations and students' satisfaction. The biggest gap discovered was students' dissatisfaction with the atmosphere and interaction with other students. This research shows that there is an area for improvement and educational institutions and instructors need to find a way to adapt technology to support human learning.

*Keywords:* online learning, foreign language, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, students' satisfaction

## **Online vs. In-person Foreign Language Learning: Students' Perception**

### **Importance of multilingualism**

“Multilingual competence is at the heart of the vision of European Education Area” (European council, 2019). Foreign language knowledge is important for getting to know different cultures, for tourism sector and it can boost employment. Even though multilingualism is one of the founding principles of the European Union, in Europe speaking more than one language is still a privilege because only 1 in 5 Europeans can speak two languages other than their own (European Data Journalism Network, 2019). This varies from country to country and age group while gender does not play any significant role. 73% of European citizens aged from 25 to 34 can speak at least one foreign language and after the age of 34 this percentage starts to drop (European Data Journalism Network, 2019). This information can be looked at from a positive standpoint meaning that the younger generation is becoming more aware of the importance of multilingualism. With the shift to online learning due to the era of digitalization, schools and institutions have to find the best way to adapt technology to support human learning.

### **Shift to online learning**

Online learning has become a huge part of the educational system and with technology developing everyday online learning is more implemented. According to a survey by 2022 Online Education Trends, (Online Education Trends, 2022) 95% of online college graduates would recommend online learning, 70% of students said online education was better than or equal to in-person learning and 60% of remote learners said they would likely enroll in online classes again.

Online learning has gained increasing attention due to the shift from conventional media such as books and face-to-face lectures to computer-based media such as instructional videos, hypertexts, educational games and simulations (Clark and Mayer, 2016). Clark (2001) states

that it is not the instructional media or the computer-based media that cause learning, but the instructional methods cause the learning. The adaption to online learning is often discussed, but according to Mayer (2018) the shift from technology-centered approach to learner-centered approach is needed. Meaning how can technology adapt to support human learning rather than how can humans adapt to the latest technology.

There has also been a shift from behavioral activity to cognitive activity learning in the last 30 years. Researches show that learner's behavioral activity during learning such as highlighting or marking important parts of text are not the key to meaningful learning. The focus has shifted to cognitive activity and cognitive engagement. Online presentations where learners are cognitively active during class can result in meaningful instruction (Skuballa et al., 2018).

### **Distinguishing between online learning and emergency remote teaching**

It is important to distinguish online learning from emergency remote teaching. In the COVID-19 era majority of students were taking online classes. In the fall of 2020, 74% of college students took at least one college course online (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic is an example for ERT. Hodges et al. (2020) state that ERT is not a long-term solution, but it is a temporary shift to a different delivery method due to a crisis. Therefore, ERT does not aim to create a robust educational system, but rather to provide access to instruction in a way that is quick to set up and available during a crisis. This is where we can distinguish ERT from online learning. Hodges et al. (2020) state that online learning uses a systematic model and a careful design process which are absent in ERT. Online learning is often put in the same context as ERT and therefore it is perceived as lower quality. “There has been some stigma about online learning as being lower quality than face-to-face learning, despite research showing otherwise. It is conceivable that hurried moves transferring face-to-face delivery to an online format in the early months of the pandemic may have contributed to this perception” (Fierce Education Staff, 2022).

## **Computer Assisted Language Learning**

Computer assisted language learning (CALL) is a fundamental part of online language learning. The beginning of CALL dates back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Barson and Debski (as cited in Dina & Ciornei, 2013) divide CALL into three different phases: behavioristic CALL, communicative CALL and integrative CALL. Behavioristic CALL was implemented in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the computers were used for instructional materials. Students had repetitive access to their learning material which was essential for acquiring a language. This kind of approach is still used today. Communicative CALL became popular in the 1970s and the 1980s and the focus was based on communication. Some new programs were introduced for practicing language skills such as games and grammar and spelling check programs. The integrative CALL is the third and ongoing phase. According to Dina & Ciornei (2013) implementing CALL brings many advantages. It can increase language interaction between learners and teachers, being exposed to computer technology from early age can increase intellectual development and develop creativity. In the contrary the teacher's absence of control can stop students from developing creative abilities, entrepreneurial spirit and initiative. Computer assisted language learning is a term that is closely related to computer-mediated communication. Morse (2003) states that since the revolution Worldwide Web in 1994 universities have increasingly embraced computer-mediated communication learning and teaching. Both CALL and CMC integrate asynchronous and synchronous learning.

## **Asynchronous and synchronous learning**

Online learning includes both asynchronous and synchronous systems and it is important to differentiate these two approaches. Chen et al. (2007) define asynchronous system as one where learners work at their own places and at their own time and the most important aspect is that not all learners are present at the same time or in the same place. On the other hand, synchronous system is one where all learners are present at the same time, but not in the same place such as

text-chats and video conferencing. According to Morse (2003) asynchronous environment provides a lot of benefits as opposed to synchronous or face-to-face environments such as flexibility, participation quality and quantity, communication access and post-participation review. Participation is freed from time and geographic constraints and undesirable classroom behaviors are avoided. Another advantage is that learners can access a greater amount of information and they can upload their own. In contrary Morse (2003) also lists downsides to this system including technology frustrations, coordination of groups that have now previously worked together, delay frustration, skills deficits and cultural differences. According to Chen et al. (2007) asynchronous system is more accessible, but it lacks interactivity between instructors and learners. On the opposite side synchronous system allows more interactivity, but it creates a new set of difficulties. Chen et al. (2007) state that lack of “body language” doesn’t allow students to discern other learners’ behaviors. Other problem is students’ awareness of camera exposure which makes them feel unnatural and it distracts them from the learning material.

### **Method**

This research investigated students’ perception and satisfaction with online learning vs. in person learning of foreign languages at RIT Croatia. The aim was to identify if there is a gap between student’s expectations of online learning and students’ satisfaction with online learning. The instrument chosen was an electronic survey created with Google forms and it was distributed via RIT mailing list. The survey was divided into 2 sections including 18 questions in total. The first section of the survey consists of questions related to online language learning and the second section were demographic questions. The first section included 15 questions, there were 2 yes or no questions and 12 Likert scale questions. Participants had 12 statements to answer with a 5- point Likert scale with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. The last question was an open-ended question where participants could give their insights and

opinions on the topic. Survey questions were based from 2 previous researches and their questionnaires (Ningias, Indriani, 2021) and (Yang, Yang, 2021). Demographic questions included gender, year level and program.

The survey was sent out to all sophomore, junior and senior students at RIT Croatia. Since freshmen students don't take foreign language courses they were excluded from the research. Senior students don't take foreign language courses as well, but it was taken into consideration that they have taken them before and have experience on this topic. The survey was sent to both Dubrovnik and Zagreb students and to all study programs including: Hospitality and Tourism Management, Information Technology/Web and Mobile Computing, Global Business Management and New Media Design. There were 41 participants in total. The survey was conducted in English language. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were assured during the data collection process. Data was collected from April, 13, 2023 until April, 23, 2023.

## **Results**

The purpose of this research was to identify students' satisfaction and perception of online foreign language learning. Out of 41 participants 25 were female, 15 were male and 1 non-binary. There were 15 sophomore students, 12 junior students and 14 senior students. There were 14 students from Dubrovnik campus and 27 students from Zagreb campus.

This research was based on descriptive data analysis and quantitative data analysis. For Likert scale question mean and standard deviation were calculated. Figure 1 shows the level of agreement with the statement "I believe online language learning can be effective". 22% of students strongly agreed, 34.1% agreed, 17.1% were neutral, 19.5% disagreed and 7.3% strongly disagreed (M=3.44, SD=1.25).

The results of this research show that students are more comfortable speaking a foreign language in an online setting rather than in an in-person setting. 24.4% students strongly agreed



and 48.8 % of students agreed with the statement “I can deliver my speech confidently during an online class (M=3.82, SD=0.99). Figure 2. Shows that students are more comfortable speaking a foreign language in an online setting. Only 7.3% of students strongly agreed and 4.9% agreed with the statement “I feel **less** comfortable speaking a foreign language during an online class than during an in-person class”, 34.1 % were neutral, 34.1 % disagreed and 19.5 % strongly disagreed (M =2.46, SD=1.09). The low level of agreement with this statement shows students’ preference of speaking in an online classroom.

It is interesting that most students agreed that they felt less productive in an online classroom (43.9% strongly agreed, 26.8 % agreed) (M=3.90, SD=1.23), but despite of feeling less productive students agreed that they can keep a self- disciplined attitude during an online class (24.4 % strongly agreed, 22% agreed) (M=3.41, SD=1.22).

Students were the most agreeable on instructor related questions. The results from this research show that students are far more satisfied with the instructor-learner interaction rather than the learner-learner interaction. 75,6 % of students agreed (34.1% strongly agreed, 41.5 agreed) that the instructor manages to give quality and timely feedback in an online setting (M= 3.90, SD=1.16) and 78% of students agreed (46.3 % strongly agreed and 31.7% agreed) that the instructor allows chances for interaction and communication (M=4.02, SD=1.21). On the opposite students were dissatisfied with the atmosphere in the classroom and the learner- learner interaction. 48.8% of students disagreed with the statement that the atmosphere in the classroom makes them motivated to engage in online language learning (M= 2.71, SD=1.23) and 39% of students disagreed and 31.7% were neutral on the statement “I can be interactive with both the instructor and other learners in my online class” (M= 2.88, SD= 1.23). Figure 5 shows the overall student’s satisfaction with online language learning and most of them were neutral (29.3 % were neutral, 26.8% strongly agreed, 14.6% agreed) (M=3.29, SD=1.33).

## Discussion

The results of this research show that there is a gap between students' expectation and students' satisfaction. As previously noted, there was a higher level of agreement with the statement "I believe online language learning can be effective", but students were mostly neutral on the statement "Overall, I am satisfied with language learning in an online classroom". Another example that shows the gap is that even though students believed that online language learning can be effective, they were dissatisfied with the atmosphere, interaction and communication. The gap lies in the atmosphere and interaction and is mostly prevalent with the learner-learner interaction. The students were satisfied with their interaction with instructors, but agreed that the atmosphere doesn't engage them in foreign language learning. Regardless of the atmosphere they keep a self-disciplined attitude, but feel less productive. What is also interesting is that students mostly disagreed with the statement "I can use gestures during my speech in an online class" (29.3% disagreed, 17.1% strongly disagreed and only 2.4% strongly agreed) ( $M= 2.68$ ,  $SD= 1.13$ ). While on the statement "I can use facial expression during my speech in an online class" 43.9% students agreed ( $M=3.02$ ,  $SD= 1.29$ ). One of the trends was that students are far more comfortable speaking a foreign language in an online setting rather than in-person setting (Figure 2). There was an open-ended question in the research and it is whether the students would recommend online language learning to a colleague. There was a pattern where a lot of students would recommend online learning to avoid social anxiety and public speaking. This is interesting because as mentioned before according to Chen et al. (2007) students' awareness of camera exposure makes them feel uncomfortable and act unnatural yet this research shows otherwise.

One student said "classes are recorded so it is easier to practice". This connects to the behavioristic phase of CALL where students learn by being repeatedly exposed to the same material and use the system "drill and kill". Another student said that the cameras should be on

and this could be one of the first steps in closing the gap mentioned before. When cameras are off every student is doing their own thing and there is no possibility to develop a strong interaction and atmosphere. Overall, for the question would you recommend online language learning to a colleague, 18 students said yes, 13 students said no and the rest gave their opinion but they didn't state yes or no.

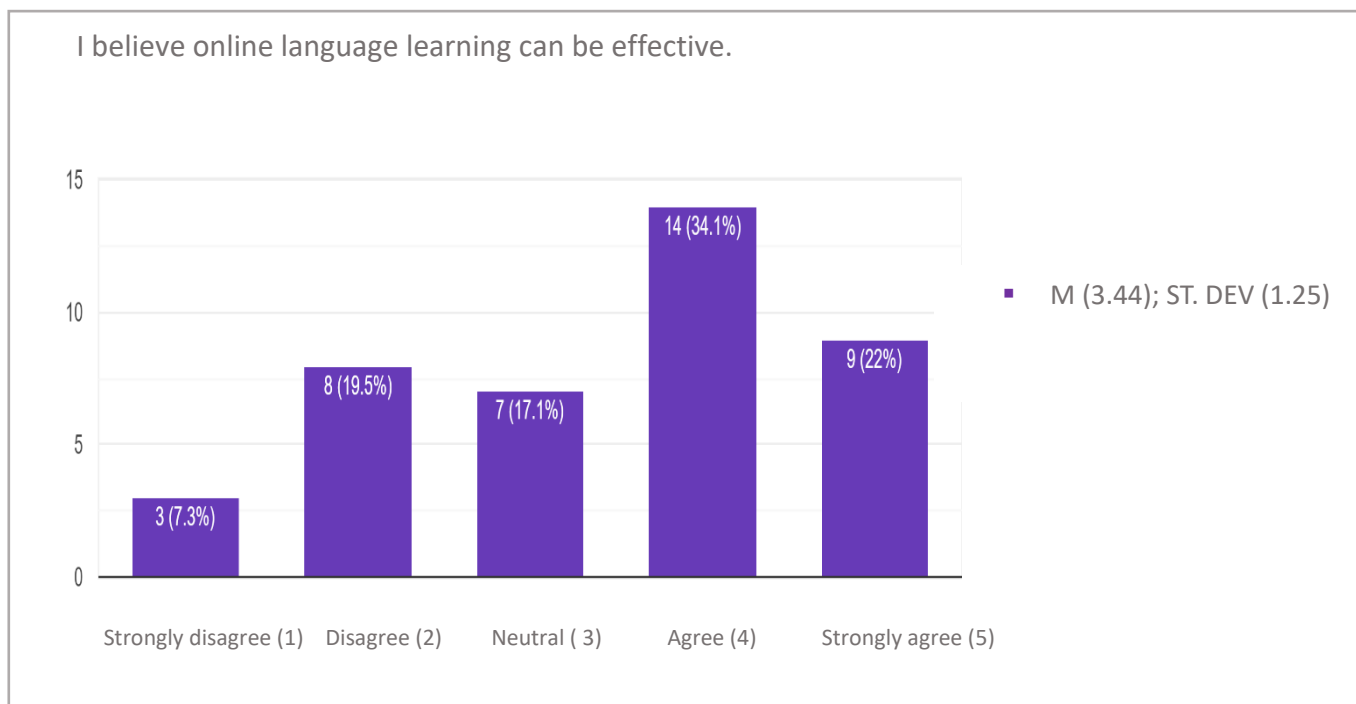
### **Limitations and Suggestions**

One of the limitations of this study is that there was a smaller pool of participants. There were only 41 students that answered the survey. Another limitation is the sample size, only RIT students were surveyed. In future research, it would be interesting to compare more different educational institutions in order to get a full insight into this issue. Another suggestion would be to do an experiment or an observation that goes more in depth than a survey. For example, comparing two different group of students where one group learns online and another in person and then compare their results.

To conclude there is definitely room for improvement and there are still many gaps that need to be closed. This paper focused on students' perception of online learning, but education institutions and instructors also need to find a way to adapt to this new method of learning. As mentioned, we need to turn to learner-centered approach and find the best way to adapt technology to support human learning.

## Appendix

**Figure 1.**



**Figure 2.**

I feel **less** comfortable speaking a foreign language during an online class than during an in-person class.

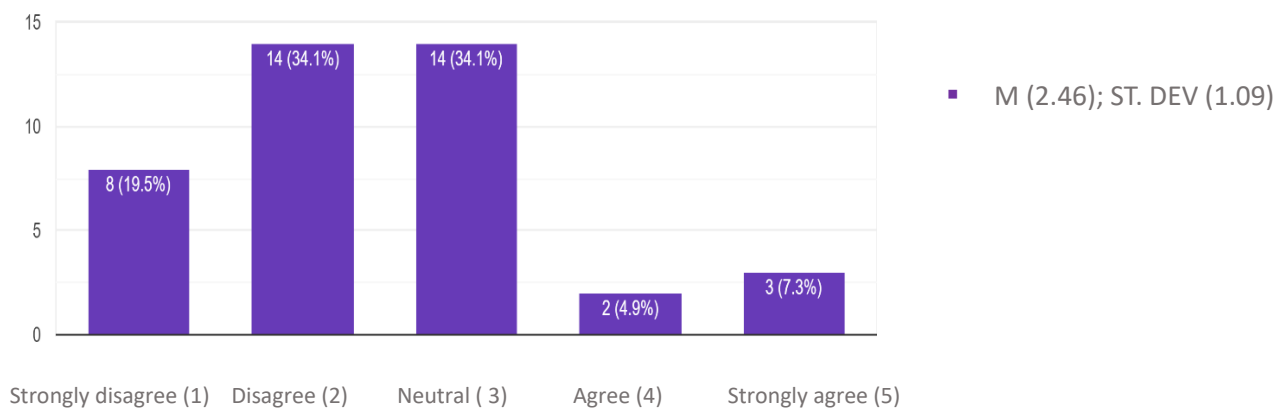
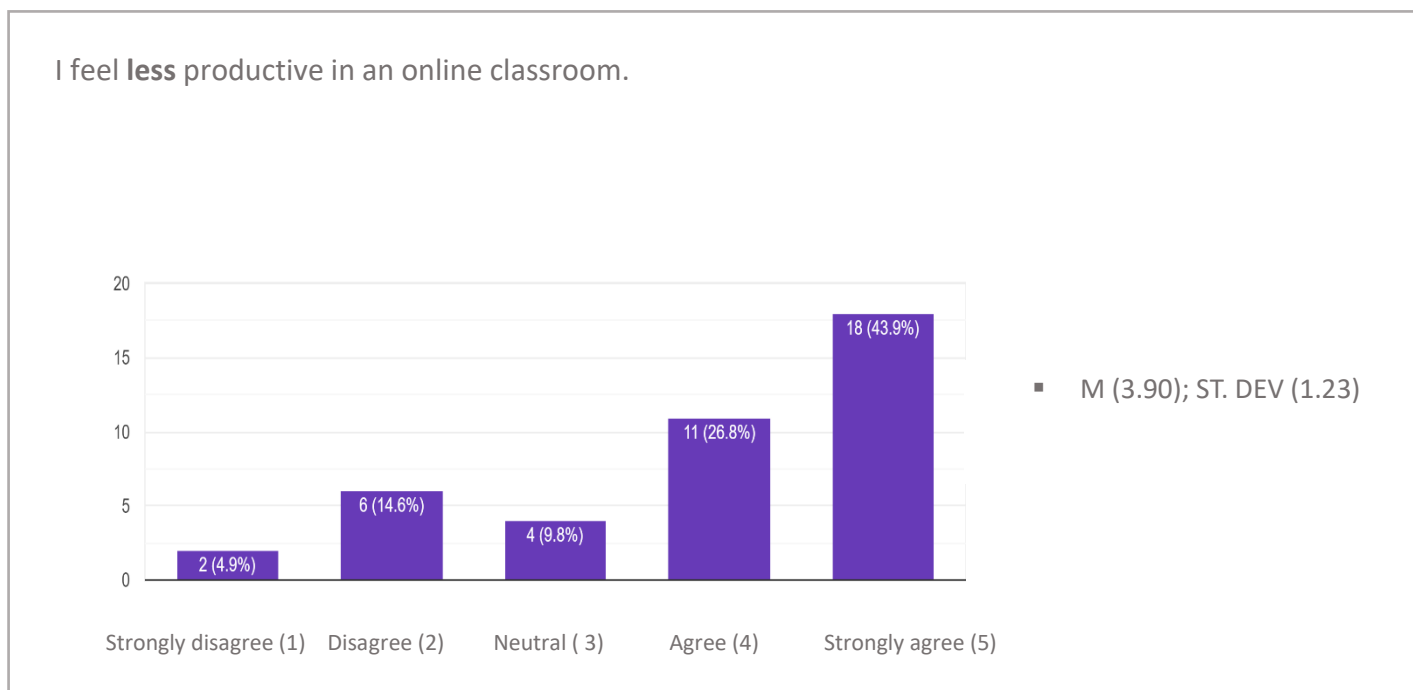
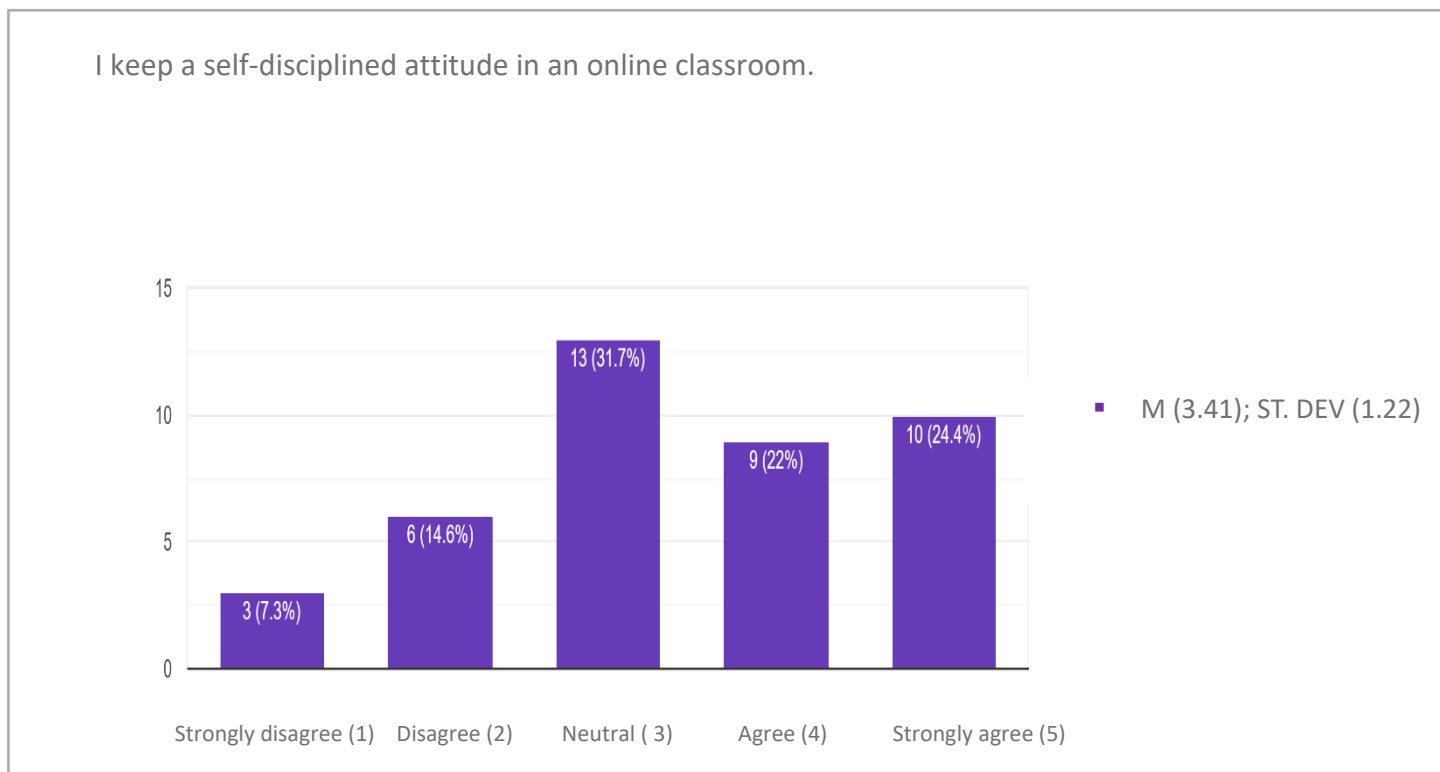
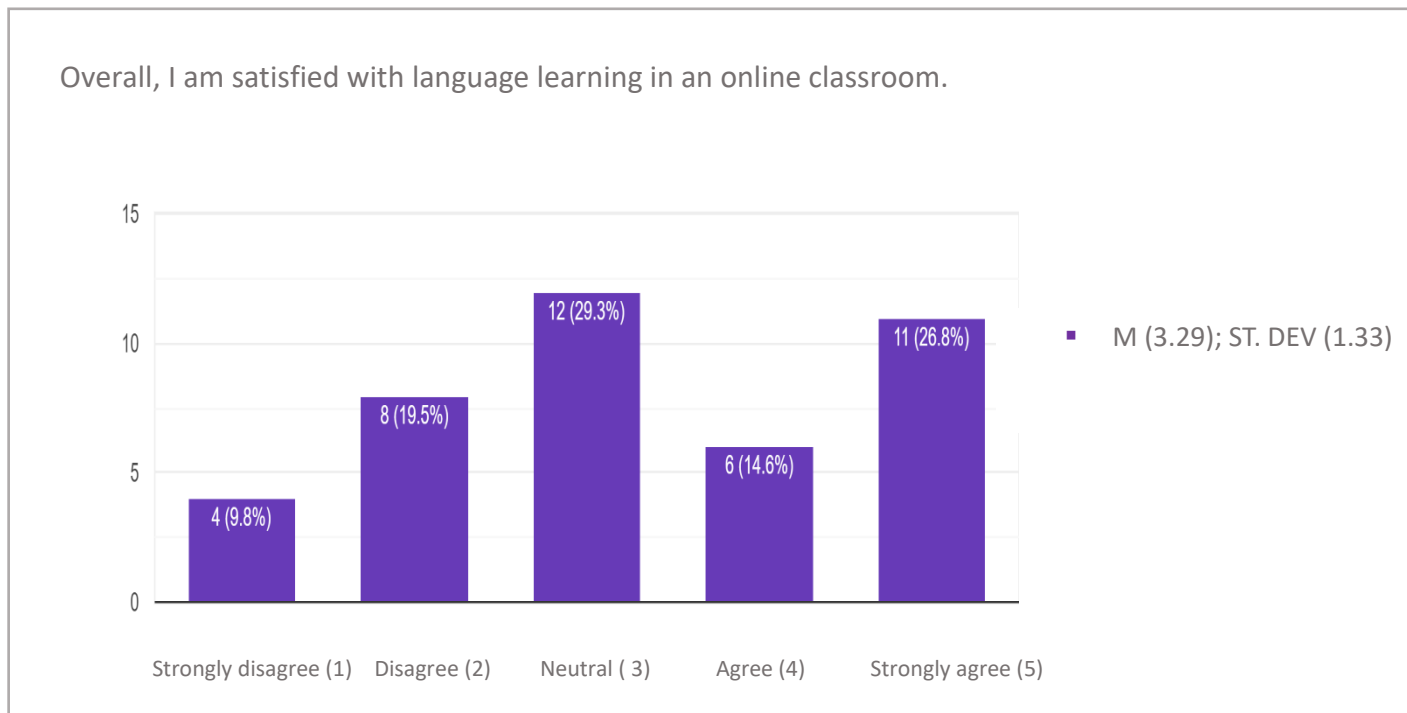


Figure 3.



**Figure 4.**

**Figure 5.**



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