Business English Learners' Perceptions of Synchronous Online Tuition as a Substitute for Face-to-Face Tuition in a French-Speaking Context

Daniel Costa[1,*]

[1]English Language Teaching, Woospeak Learning Center, Online, France

*Correspondence: English Language Teaching, Woospeak Learning Center, Online, France. E-mail: d-costa@woospeak.com

Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to delve into Business English learners' perceptions of synchronous online tuition and its potential as a substitute for face-to-face tuition in a one-to-one educational context. It involved nine French-speaking students spanning different proficiency levels and who completed at least a course consisting of twenty lessons which involved voice and text-based communication using Cisco Webex Meeting Center. They were asked to complete questionnaires and to attend semi-structured interviews in French, which were recorded and transcribed.

The results show that the learners were generally pleased with the course and its medium. They commented on its flexibility both in terms of space and time, the former enabling them to have lessons from their office or home and the latter allowing them to schedule lessons according to their schedules. The respondents believed that the voice-based nature of the medium was effective in enhancing their listening and speaking skills, but not all acknowledged the benefits of text-based communication. Technical issues were considered a hindrance by several participants, while digital literacy, learning disabilities and learning styles were alluded to as factors which could affect the learning process. Blended learning was suggested to include further practice with colleagues or face-to-face tuition.

Keywords: Business English, synchronous online tuition, learner perceptions, Cisco Webex

1. Introduction

According to Harasim (2000), educators were pioneers in embracing the computer communications revolution in the mid-20th century. Synchronous online education is nowadays increasingly available rather than additional or peripheral as in former times, markedly in the fields of Business English, 1-2-1 and adult education. Understanding the manner in which learners perceive the adequacy of the current medium in the light of their professional needs plays a major role in determining its strengths and weaknesses. Despite not necessarily providing evidence with regard to the actual benefits it yields in the field of language education, delving into learners' perceptions is likely to allow language educators to gain some clearer insight into what prompts their satisfaction and motivation, which are ultimately important aspects of learning. This appears to be especially true for contexts where courses are based primarily on learners' needs and expectations, as is often the case with online education (Bailie, 2014) and Business English learners (Oishi, 2015).

This research study intends to explore the perceptions of nine Business English 1-2-1 adult learners at an international online school based in the north of France, shedding light on how the recipients of voice and text-based synchronous online learning view this medium in the 21st century. Ultimately, it seeks to understand whether, in their view, this type of tuition is able to replace face-to-face learning in a context such as this one, by taking into account its affordances and limitations. The adequacy of Cisco Webex Meeting Center, the tool used for class delivery, shall also be considered, as well as the extent to which the lessons taken have contributed to the enhancement of the respondents' language skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Emergence of Online Tuition

Online teaching was initially primarily asynchronous (Peachey, 2017) and occurred via formal online courses, as well as mobile apps, virtual worlds, MOOCs[1] and online language learning communities (Hockly & Clandfield, 2010). Despite being characterised by convenience and equal opportunities (McBrien, Cheng, & Jones, 2009), it was at first frowned upon due to high student attrition rates. Peachey (2017) discusses the challenges faced by online educators, such as the need to transfer classroom skills to the online medium, to build rapport with students, to develop paralinguistic communication, to adapt to the tools available and to provide technical support to learners when necessary in order to avoid affecting their approach to learning. He also contends that this type of learning requires self-discipline on behalf of the learner, echoing Mcdonald and Shirley (2002), and entails isolation, which is challenging for many (Peachey; 2017), mirroring Woods (2002), Vonderwell (2003) and Hurd (2006).

Moore, however, introduces the 'transactional distance theory' to support his contention that distance is essentially seen as a pedagogical rather than physical aspect of learning and is thus shaped by dialogue, structure and learner autonomy (Moore in McBrien et al, 2009). Ng (2007) goes further by suggesting that classes devoid of the physical presence of a teacher can, on the contrary, be advantageous for certain students. This could be particularly true for business learners, who are notoriously constrained by limited availability due to their tight schedules (Oishi, 2015). Clark and Quinn, in fact, believe that online learning would entail "less time away from the job" (2007: 4), and a decrease in travelling time (Salmon, 2000). Meskil and Anthony conclude that online learning allows information to be "accessed and engaged at any time from any location" (2010: 8). Flexibility in terms of space appears to be also advantageous for students or teachers facing serious illnesses, as exemplified by Pearse (2011), or natural disasters, such as the flood crisis in Thailand (Srichanyachon, 2013). The practicality inherent in the current medium is underlined by Schroeder (2008), who contends one needs no more than a personal computer, an internet connection, an optimal microphone and webcam for teaching or learning.

Flexibility in terms of time, however, prompts delayed feedback, which has been considered a major limitation of asynchronous online teaching, leading to the relative absence of opportunities for social interaction (Branon & Essex, 2001) This appears to have played a major role in research conducted by Tratnik, Urh & Jere (2019), leading them to conclude that asynchronous online learning cannot replace face-to-face teaching, on the grounds that the latter ultimately "offers a real-life learning experience, human interaction, and personal contacts with both tutor and fellow students" (2019: 43).

2.2 Synchronous Online Tuition

While some research points to the scarcity of differences between synchronous and asynchronous online tuition (Abrams, 2003; Johnson, 2008), the ability of the former to mirror face-to-face interaction both in terms of time and in its psychological dimension "endows it with many benefits that asynchronous learning would have difficulty in achieving" (Chen, Ko, Kinshuk and Lin, 2005: 182), such as immediate feedback and increased motivation, stemming from the need to be present and to participate (Salmon, 2000; Chen et al, 2005). This occurs in a context where the supply of verbal elements and the strengthening of social presence occur (Park & Bonk: 2007), prompting an increased feeling of connection between learners and educators (Watts, 2016). This is echoed by Salmon (2000), who contends that synchronous online teaching is able to provide learners with some fun coupled with a feeling of immediate contact, thereby simulating a face-to-face environment. Recent research by Francescucci and Rohani (2019), in fact, suggests that the level of learner performance outcomes is the same in both environments, despite higher student engagement in the latter.

In this context, Peachey has asserted that "online teaching can now offer a more realistic and competitive alternative to the face-to-face classroom by using synchronous communication in real-time, live lessons" (2017: 143), thereby echoing the contention made previously by Meskil and Anthony (2010), according to which synchronous environments are stronger and closer to face-to-face interaction, especially as they foster communication strategies and discourse patterns absent from its asynchronous counterpart (Hirotani, 2009). Stephenson (2001) emphasises the importance of drawing inspiration from face-to-face learning and taking it to new dimensions, in the form, for instance, of simulations and role-plays.

Hannum (2001) distinguishes between logistical, instructional and economic affordances. He posits that synchronous online learning entails greater flexibility, a wider variety of resources and lower costs for both teachers and learners, while allowing them to interact accordingly. Strongly related to cheaper broadband connectivity (Ng, 2007), lower financial costs have also been underlined by Ventura and Jang (2010) in the field of synchronous online private tutoring,

as well as increased safety and comfort for students, prompting them to suggest that it is particularly appropriate for those with learning difficulties. It has been claimed that synchronous online tuition is particularly customizable (Croxton, 2014) This plays a significant role in the Business English context, as shall be discussed in the relevant section.

Synchronous oral interaction has been said to further the negotiation of meaning via an increase in repair moves, especially to enhance pronunciation (Jepson, 2005; Bueno, 2010). The use of paralinguistic compensation strategies leads to greater linguistic experimentation, entailing the application of new syntactical patterns as well as the testing of hypotheses to delve into the meaning of lexical items (Payne and Whitney, 2002). Lower anxiety in this context has in fact led to gains in oral proficiency (Satar & Özdener, 2018) confirming claims made by Beauvois (1994), according to whom learners trained using this medium performed better in oral tests than those exposed to face-to-face instruction because it was a low-stress environment that preserved anonymity.

Research by Lamy & Hampel (2007) has suggested that voice-based communication can be inadequate in communicative language teaching, especially for lower-level learners, since students are under pressure to answer quickly owing to the absence of visual cues. Similarly, Aaltonen, Takatalo, Hakkinen, Lehtonen, Nyman and Schrade (2009) found that gestures and facial expressions made visible via the use of a webcam enhanced turn-taking and conversation management while O'Dowd (2006) posited they made interactions more relevant.

Research suggests that synchronous online learning is able to outperform both face-to-face and asynchronous online instruction due to its ability to provide the educator with a greater variety of teaching modes (Meskil & Anthony, 2010; Chen & Chen, 2006). One of these additional modes is in fact written computer-mediated communication, which Michel considers a "pervasive means of human interaction in modern society" (2018: 164). Able to bridge the gap between oral communication and written language (Michel, 2018; Zheng & Warschauer, 2018), their ability to provide learners with the opportunity to interact by writing simultaneously leads to the production of more complex language than face-to-face communication (Payne & Whitney, 2002), particularly since it enhances learners' grammar (Hampel & Stickler, 2012) as it allows for the bridging of theory to practice (Heafner & Plaisance, 2014).

A study conducted by Hamano-Bunce (2011) in a face-to-face classroom showed how synchronous online interaction enhanced learners' reading and writing skills while preparing them for real-world use. He believes it encourages "comprehensible input through interactional modification, corrective feedback, pushed output, and collaborative dialogue" (2011: 4) yet acknowledges the fact that lags in transmission may hinder the pace of communication, echoing Chun et al (2016). Payne and Whitney, however, claim that the decreased speed is likely to reduce the memory load associated with face-to-face interaction, as interlocutors can "re-read comments to refresh their memory" (2002: 25). It would be more beneficial to lower level or even anxious learners, as it is characterized by 'slow motion' interaction (Beauvois, 1992). A study conducted by Satar and Özdener (2008) in a secondary school context, in fact, lends support to the assumption that text-based communication triggers lower anxiety levels than the voice chat. Adams et al (2015) also claimed that text-based communication was more beneficial to shy learners, echoing Kern (1995), who underlined the freedom of self-expression it fosters. Chun and Yong (2006) show how a lack of paralinguistic clues made intermediate-level students sense less time pressure, challenging Muniandy (2002), who contends that time constraints trigger a sense of urgency, while also asserting that the medium prompts an increased use of contractions and short forms. The uniqueness of the skill inherent in this kind of interaction was mentioned by Sotillo (2000), who concluded that it was more interactive and personal than asynchronous written communication and is thus more similar to face-to-face or voice-based synchronous interaction, while Herring (2011) later underlined the conversation-like nature of the medium.

Alluding to Schmidt (1990), noticing also plays a significant role after the chat takes place, as learners can access transcripts and pinpoint errors made during interaction (Chun & Yong, 2006). This is later echoed by Haythornthwaite and Andrews (2011), who claim that online teaching provides a "ready-made transcript of communications that can be reviewed and reused" (2011: 22), allowing learners to "'rewind' spontaneous interactive discourse" (Chun et al, 2016: 67). Users not only communicate simultaneously but can also interpret and reflect on their own contributions later (Ko, 2012), allowing them to focus on both form and meaning (Salaberry, 2000). The transcript thus acts as a "cognitive amplifier" (Warschauer, 1997: 472), as text form is likely to enhance users' memory as they visualise the spelling of words (Warschauer: 1991).

It has also been claimed, however, that teachers are unable to immediately monitor students' attention states as they would in face-to-face interaction, which affects performance (Chen et al, 2017), particularly in voice and text-based tuition, as they are devoid of meta-linguistic factors such as facial expressions and gestures (Lee, 1999). Kötter (2003) suggested that the synchronous medium is more appropriate for higher-level language learners, thereby mirroring

contributions by Wang (2004) and Stockwell (2004), who contended that voice-based synchronous online learning is likely to pose a challenge for lower-proficiency learners, as the negotiation of meaning during interaction can take longer. Furthermore, Hampel and Barber (2003) asserted that the lack of body language triggered awkward silences and reduced spontaneity.

Synchronous online teaching may also be hindered by technological issues such as lags in transmission and the need to adapt to sound quality during interaction (Chun et al: 2016). As regards Business English, "corporate firewalls are a hurdle that don't exist in general ELT contexts" (Hogan, 2015: 33), preventing learners from accessing certain websites. Moreover, time must be spent setting up the tool used for class delivery and learners' familiarity with it plays a major role, advocating the need for preparation (Reushle & Loch, 2008; Rehm, 2012; Kuo et al, 2014), particularly for users who are 'digital visitors' (White & Le Cornu, 2011).

Finally, the nature of the medium imposes restrictions in terms of time, which Perveen (2016) considers a major weakness, especially when the interlocutors are located in different time zones (Chun et al, 2016), which may entail the need for special organizational arrangements, as mentioned by Moore and Kearsley (2006).

Rutter (2016) believes that the majority of research has so far focused on its asynchronous counterpart, thereby echoing an earlier contention made by Chen (2006).

2.3 Learner Perceptions of Synchronous Online Learning

Timmis (2002) underlines the importance of listening to students' voices, echoed by Ferreira and Santoso (2008) who assert that learners' perceptions ultimately influence their performance. In a study conducted by Ward, Peters & Shelley (2010), synchronous and face-to-face learning were regarded as equally favourable, with mean ratings being higher than their asynchronous online counterpart. Face-to-face learning was still deemed superior, however, in terms of the 'dimensions' of instructional quality (Ward et al, 2010). Research conducted by Altıner (2015) reported students' satisfaction with regard to the relaxed nature of the medium as well as to the ability to review course material after the lessons, echoing Pearse (2011), whose respondents commented on the ability to listen to recordings of the sessions.

In both contexts, however, students admitted that they would still opt for face-to-face rather than synchronous online learning. Altıner (2015) mentions respondents' comments on the relative lack of motivation and connection to the educator, which led respondents to conclude that the acquisition of the different language skills would not benefit from the medium. Worthy of mention is the fact that lessons in this context consisted primarily of lectures rather than 1-2-1 communicative teaching. Similarly, owing to the amount of social interaction, students using Adobe ConnectPro and Webex in a research study undertaken by Pearse (2011) preferred the face-to-face environment.

Park and Bonk reported students' satisfaction with regard to the synchronous medium's ability to provide them with verbal clues, as well as for the provision of feedback and "suggestions without delay" (2007: 259). Research conducted by McBrien et al (2009) suggested that the tool used increased the amount of interaction, enhancing learners' confidence and their ability to share their opinions as they feel more comfortable and less inhibited than in a face-to-face context.

The use of the webcam during classes was questioned by a study conducted by Bailie (2014) as well as by Karal, Cebi and Turgut (2011), where it was a distraction and triggered boredom due to the limited number of angles provided. Brunet and Schmidt (2007) and Telles (2010) reported learners' discomfort with the tool, arguing that it hindered their approach to communicating with their interlocutors. On the other hand, research undertaken by McIntosh and Hanlis (2002) lent support to its use, as respondents felt that their progress was hindered by the lack of visual cues. Similarly, a study at a Malaysian university reported that students' increased boredom stemmed from their inability to see each other (Ghazal, Samsudin, & Aldowah, 2015) while Kozar (2016) showed that the webcam was only used during the first few lessons for socio-affective reasons, due to the fact that it was considered more tiring, that it encroached on learners' privacy and that it enhanced self-consciousness. Research by Salbego and Tumolo (2015) regarding the use of Skype also substantiates the value of voice-based learning, claiming that learners felt they benefited from an enhancement of their listening and speaking skills owing to a lower affective filter and the need to listen more carefully.

Hamano-Bunce (2011) concluded that written interaction using the chatroom is less effective than its oral counterpart because it increased the amount of learners' spelling errors. Interaction, however, occurred primarily between learners rather than with the educator. In a similar context, however, Michel (2018) found that the new mode was considered exciting and refreshing, and thus enhanced motivation among participants, while Wang and Chen (2007) reported students' satisfaction with new mode.

Technical issues also came into play in different contexts, such as inconsistent volume levels (McIntosh & Hanlis, 2002), reduced speed triggered by inadequate connectivity (Park & Bong, 2007; Karal et al, 2011), lags in transmission

(Salbego & Tumolo, 2015) and other issues related to the tool used for voice-based communication (Park & Bong, 2007). McBrien et al (2009) also mentioned technical glitches coupled with the 'over-stimulation' triggered by the simultaneous presence of multiple modes of communication.

3. Contextual Background

3.1 The Educational Context

This study was undertaken at an online learning centre headquartered in northern France, which provides business and general language training in English, Spanish, Japanese, German, Portuguese, Italian and other languages, as well as information technology. The school works closely with a number of international organizations, meaning that the vast majority of students are employees whose professional fields of expertise include finance, IT, aeronautics, human resources, logistics, management and cosmetics. Language learning is thus seen by the vast majority of learners as a means to enhance their professional skills due to their current or future use of the language, with employers and recruiters measuring employees' current level by means of a placement test such as the TOEIC, BULATS or BRIGHT. While these are often taken at the end of each course for the aforementioned reason, courses do not focus on exam preparation or on a pre-determined syllabus and are primarily based on learners' educational and professional needs, which are probed during the initial assessment or during the course itself. Needless to say, learners are given ample opportunities and resources to practice exam-style tasks throughout the course and the final lesson is entirely devoted to the nature of the exam in question. Business English skills such as socialising/ networking, attending and chairing meetings, telephoning and negotiating are thus at the heart of many courses, although some students are more inclined to focus exclusively on General English.

While face-to-face teaching also occurs in the educational context in question, synchronous online teaching plays an important role in the school's current success as well as in the quest for new learners. Both educators and learners reflect diverse cultural backgrounds and are located in a number of different countries worldwide, which contributes both to intercultural communication and to an attempt to fulfil learners' educational needs. The majority of students, however, are located in 'expanding circle' countries such as France and other French-speaking areas such as Monaco, New Caledonia and Luxembourg, due to the learning centre's location and sphere of influence. While the educator conducting this study teaches several languages and students from different countries, the present study aims to focus on English language teaching to learners whose first language is French, as these constitute the largest cohort.

Synchronous online language lessons are 1-2-1 and typically occur on a weekly basis using Cisco Webex Meeting Center, with the school's online platform sending automatic emails to learners when the training is not as regular as recommended. Nonetheless, flexibility plays a significant role in the institutional context in question, with courses tailored to students' needs and availability. Certain learners choose to have two or more lessons a week while some others opt for one every two weeks or less, owing to tight schedules and unavoidable professional commitments. Similarly, while most lessons last an hour, some students prefer them to last 30 minutes and others 2 hours. Learners' tight schedules can also challenge punctuality, and late cancellations due to impromptu meetings or other professional and personal commitments sometimes occur. This appears to challenge the school's policy which requires cancellations to occur with a 24-hour notice, causing lessons to be lost.

On the quest for quality, the school regularly sends questionnaires to learners to explore their views about their personal evolution, the school's organisation, the method used to teach, the teacher in question and the sound quality. While the answers provided by such questionnaires provide an indication of learners' overall satisfaction about the course, a more focused approach is likely to provide an understanding of the potential of synchronous online teaching and the extent to which it can replace face-to-face teaching in a Business English educational context. It would thus entail a comparison with previous educational environments and class delivery in a face-to-face context.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Questions

The aim of this investigation was to find out the extent to which Business English adult learners in a one-to-one educational context believe that face-to-face learning can effectively be replaced by synchronous online learning. Taking into account the tool used for class delivery, Cisco Webex, it sought to explore the learners' reasons for choosing this medium, the extent to which it has helped them meet their linguistic needs and their underlying concerns, which are likely to provide useful insight in regard to strategies for improvement and an incentive for future research.

In the light of the above, the current study has considered the following research question:

How do 1-2-1 Business English learners perceive text and voice-based synchronous online tuition as a substitute for face-to-face tuition?

The following sub-questions have also been considered:

What are the affordances and limitations of this medium?

To what extent is Cisco Webex an adequate tool for class delivery? In what ways can the course enhance learners' skills?

4.2 Data Collection

This enquiry is fundamentally a case study, reflecting the author's willingness to "explore in depth a programme, an institution, an organization, or a community" (Dörnyei, 2007: 151). It entailed the use of two research tools, namely questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to explore in depth the different claims by the participants. Nine French-speaking adult learners spanning different language levels and who have completed at least one Business English course consisting of twenty lessons were first sent an e-mail in English with a brief introduction to the study and an invitation to participate.

The majority replied promptly confirming their willingness to take part and were thereupon sent a questionnaire in their first language, as well as a consent form to be signed and a sheet containing comprehensive information about the study. The nine participants were then contacted by e-mail anew in order to enquire about their availability for the subsequent interviews, which took place within the following two weeks. Participants' ages ranged from 30 to 60 and differed both in terms of their professional background and experience with regard to English language learning, which was probed during the semi-structured interviews.

The choice of students was primarily based on their different levels, substantiated by test results and the contents of the course. Purposive sampling, and more specifically criterion sampling (Dörnyei, 2007), allowed the researcher to consider three groups: the first one consisted of students whose level was A1 or A2 according to the European Common Framework of Reference (MA, NB and HW), the second one had learners whose level was B1 or B2 (OS, YC and HR) and the third one had students whose level was C1 or C2 (MG, BG and SA).

4.3 Limitations of the Study

Certain limitations with regard to this study must be acknowledged. Firstly, while a small sample such as this one may allow for a more exploratory stance, it may be restricted to this specific cultural and educational setting, thereby restricting the generalizability of the investigation. Students from other settings could thus report different issues, although the answers provided to the interviews were quite diverse in nature, as shall be explored henceforth. While their interventions were generally comprehensive, participants' tight schedules may have had an impact on the length of the answers and, as a result, of the interviews.

It may have been more reliable to choose students who have had the same number of lessons, or which started and ended the course at the same time, yet this was not possible, as each learner has a different course and educational path. As a result, some learners had lessons at the school for longer than others, which may have affected their answers to both the questionnaire or interview. Furthermore, since the questionnaires were sent by e-mail and interviews were conducted and recorded with students' consent as is often the case with qualitative research, inhibition may have played a role (Bell & Waters, 2014), while the Hawthorne effect may have entailed a different performance altogether (Dörnyei and Taguchi, 2007).

5. Analysis of Findings

5.1 Questionnaires

Upon receiving the results of the questionnaires, they were inserted in a Microsoft Excel document. Learners were then arranged according to their language levels. As regards the rating scales included throughout, these consisted of several dashes which the students selected according to the answer they wished to provide. Respondents' answers were interpreted by dividing the point on the scale by the total number of dashes in order to achieve accurate results. The decimals were then converted into percentages. The scores were then added and divided by the number of respondents to calculate the different means, which shall be explored henceforth.

5.1.1 Prior Experience

When enquired about their experience learning English prior to the course in question, the vast majority of students, namely seven, had studied English during five to ten years before starting the course. Only one student, MA, had studied from ten to fifteen years, while only one, HW, had studied for less than five. As far as the time when the previous course took place, results varied amongst the cohort. Four learners, namely NB, YC, LS and MG, had studied English more than fifteen years before joining the school at the heart of this study, while two students had taken a course between 10 and 15 years before. Three students, namely BG, HR and SA, had studied the language less than 5 years before taking lessons in the current context.

In regard to online learning, most learners had no prior experience and only three, BG, HR and SA, had taken an English language course, coincidentally the same students that had studied English less than 5 years prior to joining the school.

5.1.2 Needs and Expectations

The respondents were asked to reflect on the extent to which the course met their needs and expectations by means of a rating scale, which generated results later expressed in percentage. As shown in the chart below, which was organized according to language proficiency levels, students were generally satisfied with the course, regardless of their level. There was some variety within the cohort, as each of the three most pleased learners was from a different group. The least pleased learner, YC, was from the second group, which comprised medium-proficiency learners. The results generated a mean of 81.1%.
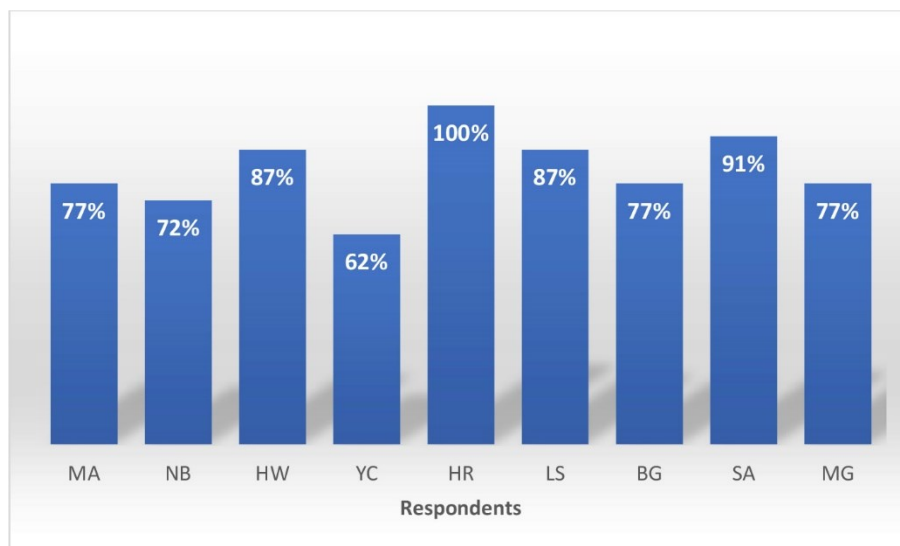

Figure 1. Learner Satisfaction with the Course

5.1.3 The Enhancement of General English Skills

When asked which General English skills they felt improved the most during the course, most respondents – YC, HR, LS and SA - opted for listening. Two – BG and MG – asserted that their speaking skills improved the most, while one – MA – thought the course chiefly enhanced his reading skills. NB and HW thought the lessons contributed to the enhancement of two skills in equal measure, and opted for speaking and listening, and reading and speaking, respectively.

5.1.4 Distance between Mediums

The learners were then questioned on the extent to which they believed face-to-face teaching and synchronous online teaching differed. Their answers displayed some variety and were expressed in percentage, achieving a mean of 55.2%. As shown in the bar chart below, one of the lower level students, MA, thought there was a 95% difference between face-to-face and synchronous online tuition. The closest was a student belonging to the second group, LS, who thought there was a 79% difference. The three students who thought there was less difference between the two mediums, BG, SA and MG, were from the third group and therefore higher-proficiency learners.
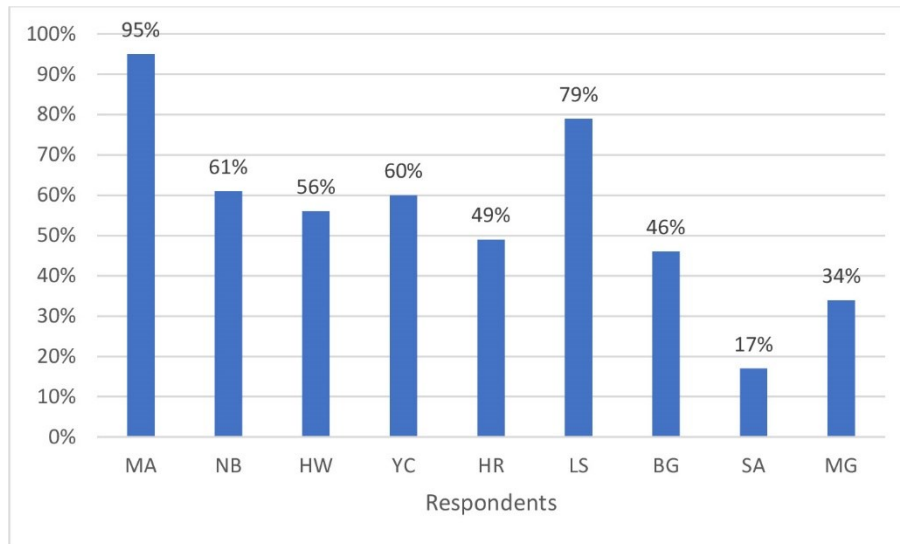
Figure 2. Difference between Face-To-Face and Synchronous Online Learning

Bearing in mind the difference between the two mediums, the nine respondents were also asked whether, based on their own experience, synchronous online learning is able to replace face-to-face tuition in their context. The results generated a mean of 65.4% and were rather varied, as shown in the bar chart below.
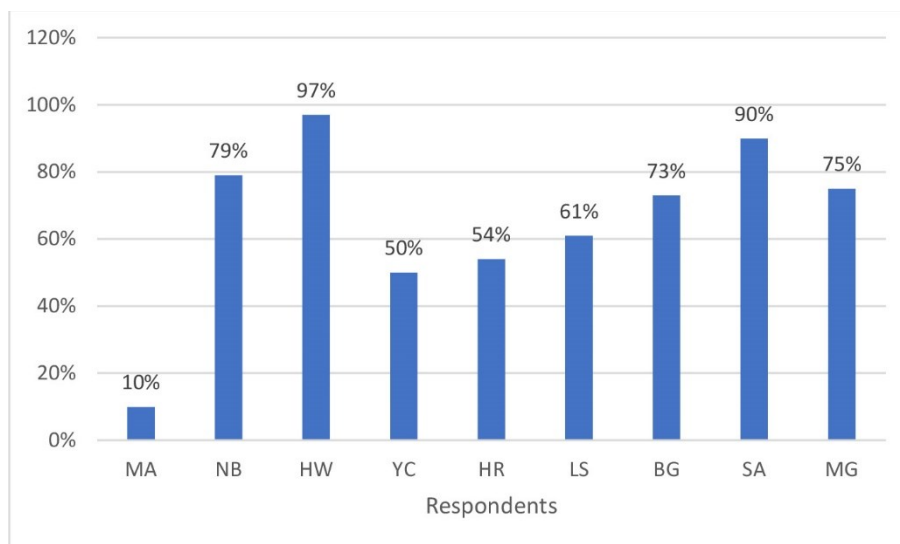

Figure 3. Ability to Substitute Face-To-Face for Synchronous Online Tuition

In line with the answer to the previous question, lower-proficiency learner MA believed there would be a 10% chance and was therefore barely able to do so due to their differences. The other two lower-proficiency learners, on the other hand, thought differently. Despite believing that there was a 56% difference between the two mediums, HW thought that synchronous online learning had a 97% chance of being able to replace its face-to-face counterpart. The answers provided by the second group displayed relative uncertainty while those given by the third group showed more confidence in this respect.

5.1.5 The Adequacy of Cisco Webex Meeting Center

Finally, respondents were asked to express their opinions on the extent to which Cisco Webex Meeting Center is an adequate tool for synchronous online class delivery. The results were once more varied, regardless of language proficiency levels, generating a mean of 71.7%. A higher-proficiency learner and one from the second group thought that Cisco Webex Meeting Center was 100% adequate for effective class delivery. Another learner from the second group, LS, believed that Cisco Webex was only 33% adequate, however, followed by YC, a peer, whose opinion was balanced, substantiating the variety that pervaded the second group. Two learners, a lower-level and a higher-level one, both thought that it was 58% adequate for effective class delivery.
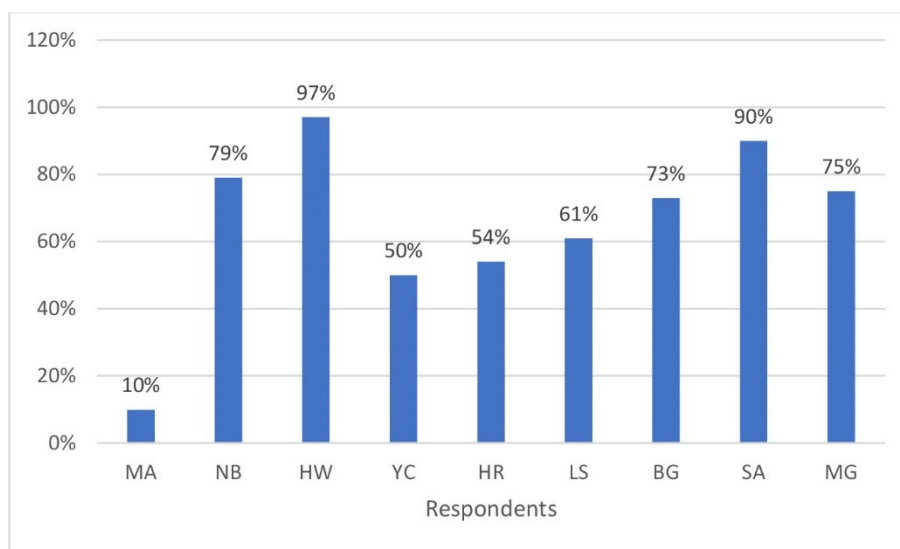

Figure 4. Adequacy of Cisco Webex Meeting Center

6. Interviews

The semi-structured interviews held enabled the researcher to gain insight into respondents' thoughts as well as a deeper understanding of the answers to the questionnaires.

In line with the answers to the questionnaire, only BG, HR and SA had embarked on online language learning courses before joining the school at the heart of this research study.

6.1 Prior Online Learning Experience

According to the answers to the questionnaires, three students had taken online lessons before joining the current school. The interviews, however, revealed there was a fourth respondent in the same situation. Three of these four were higher-proficiency learners.

Higher-proficiency learner SA had already had some experience with synchronous online learning and mentioned the need to connect to her former online school's platform earlier in order to prepare the lesson during an hour or an hour and a half. The lessons themselves, she says, took place by phone, lasted an hour and exclusively involved oral interaction. She compares the two courses by highlighting the greater ability of the current one to foster the enhancement of more language skills:

> It's really a complete online course which can be used to work on oral skills, writing, listening, speaking, etc. with a platform system and an online teacher

BG also discoursed on his experience at his former online language school, where he studied four to five years prior to this interview, taking voice and text-based synchronous online lessons. He states that "it wasn't a very positive experience", owing to his former teacher's strong accent, which made listening and interaction extremely challenging, especially as classes lacked visual cues. On the other hand, however, extensive written chat exchanges, as well as related tasks, helped him to improve his ability to write at the time. On the whole, as opposed to what occurred with

SA, he feels that the course prioritised the enhancement of his reading and writing skills, while speaking and listening lagged far behind.

HR's experience with synchronous online learning was also shaped by a focus on writing and reading skills. In her context, however, lessons were devoid of oral interaction altogether and took place exclusively by chat, with written texts and occasional listening exercises. She explained that these lessons were "not at all satisfactory" and that she didn't manage to adapt to the medium or to improve her skills due to the absence of a "direct contact", which she deems essential. This experience mirrors MG's, which consisted solely of "presentation, clarification, videos, quizzes but no interaction", which may suggest why she said she had never taken online classes in the questionnaire.

Regarding affordances of the medium, the learners concluded that flexibility is a major advantage of synchronous online learning. Flexibility in terms of time and location appear to be interrelated, as suggested by the opinions shared by the interviewees. HR claims that one can connect from "the other side of the world" to have language lessons. Based on her experience, she states that she can thus take her time to get ready before the lesson, whereas with face-to-face learning she would often start lessons unprepared. When comparing with a colleague who has face-to-face in-company classes twice a week, MG concludes that it is easier to book or postpone classes with an online teacher due to the greater flexibility inherent in the current medium, a claim echoed by NB in her interview. For SA, learning Business English in her office allows her to save time and to have "an efficient hour". Similarly, LS asserts that his initial reluctance to take online lessons was soon overcome by the fact that they didn't encroach on his professional schedule, seeing as they allowed him to improve his language skills without forcing him to leave his workplace. BG also contends that synchronous online learning enables him to work around his tight schedule and echoes MG by claiming that it is easier to book classes in a synchronous online learning context. HW admits:

> For me it was easier to access the online course because it allowed me to be on the spot, at my office, to be able to work more easily. Sometimes it's difficult to travel

Similarly, MA asserts that there are often traffic jams in his region, which would have a significant impact on the learning process if he had to travel in order to have face-to-face classes. This leads him to conclude that connecting to a platform is more convenient. Considering the fact that he works exclusively online, as does YC, the current medium appears to be all the more coherent to his professional context. Flexibility in terms of space also allowed HW to work with a native teacher, an aspect which he values.

Several learners mentioned the pedagogical advantages inherent in the current medium. Based on his experience, BG believes that lessons were more comprehensive than in a face-to-face context and fostered the enhancement of all language skills, such as writing in the case of synchronous written chats, reading in the case of online texts or listening by directly accessing certain links. Lessons were therefore particularly relevant to his professional endeavours owing to the topics explored. HR and NB also acknowledge the comprehensiveness of the current medium, with the former stating that it is "the best way to learn a language", and claims that the course has introduced her to several videos which she still watched to enhance her listening skills. HW showed a particular fondness for the structure of lessons, which allowed him to develop all language skills.

I believe that the lesson half-written half-oral is great for me, at least. It has allowed me to develop my writing skills while being able to listen, according to the lesson's documents SA contends that the lessons were especially effective in enhancing her speaking and listening skills, and used the right combination of image, sound and learning tasks, while underlining the fact that the right pedagogy is not necessarily related to the medium used for teaching. LS shares his fondness for the ability to access the material used during the lesson right after it has ended and comments on how effortless it was to access words written on the screen as well as videos during class. This was echoed by BG, who mentions a folder where he keeps all the documents with the tasks undertaken during the lessons, including transcripts of written chats, for later use.

MG asserts that the course has motivated her to read more and watch more videos, while mentioning the difference in terms of tasks undertaken in comparison with face-to-face learning. She then alludes to the written chats, asserting that in face-to-face contexts students are less likely to write than in the current medium, and it usually takes the form of essays or emails. Written chats have helped her to make less spelling errors, especially owing to corrective feedback on behalf of the teacher, which she values. In fact, MG also states that written chats allow one to practice "in real time", as opposed to essay writing which prompts one to think carefully. This leads her to conclude that she doesn't see any pedagogical advantages in having face-to-face lessons. HR goes further by contending that the written chats have enabled her to explore different aspects of grammar while widening her lexical range and MA highlights the uniqueness of this feature, absent from face-to-face learning. HW commented on the fact that the online medium has given him the unique opportunity to work with a native teacher, which he believes has an impact on the course's pedagogy.

The lack of visual cues, a key aspect of voice-based synchronous online interaction, was in reality perceived as a benefit by several learners, who believed that it made lessons more challenging. Learners, however, asserted that it enhanced primarily their receptive skills, exemplified by BG, who states that he had to pay more attention to what was being said, as well as by both YC and OS, who posit that this triggered an enhancement of their listening skills. This allowed HR to address her professional needs, as she admits that, in a face-to-face context, the voice gets lost more easily. Similarly, MG sees the greater need to focus on her interlocutor's oral utterances as a significant advantage because it mirrors the nature of her professional context, where business calls in English play a major role.

A number of comparisons were also made between 1-2-1 online learning and group classes, owing to the fact that both of these are common options in learners' contexts. SA enjoys being physically isolated when learning and claims that she wasn't particularly inclined to have group lessons as she sought a context where the educator would know her well and would be able to identify her mistakes. NB contends that she was more reactive as she felt at ease with her educator since the start. She claims that she felt more relaxed online and lacked confidence in a face-to-face context, where the presence of other learners intimidated her and prevented her from spending more time interacting with her teacher. Similarly, MG believes that the transition from lessons where she shared the class with 25 to 30 people at school to the current 1-2-1 educational medium was beneficial for her as far as the enhancement of oral skills are concerned, since the teacher is more available and therefore makes more corrections, which leads HR to conclude that 1-2-1 face-to-face classes are very similar to 1-2-1 online classes. She goes further by suggesting:

> So, the online medium provides us with all the advantages of the face-to-face one without having its disadvantages

Such a claim lends support to its ability to outperform both face-to-face and asynchronous online instruction. MA says he had had group classes at school and the transition to 1-2-1 online classes was primarily marked by his noticing of his own difficulties because no classmates were there to help him, so it was a rather challenging endeavour. Most learners conclude that the course could be appropriate for anyone, particularly for children, owing to the shortcomings of the local educational context (YC) and for learners who have already studied English in the past (MG, LS).

When questioned about the limitations of the medium, greater flexibility can, on occasions, be seen as a disadvantage. MG believes that the ability to postpone lessons is not "necessarily good for learning". She mentions a colleague who had to give up his lessons due to excessive workload and suggests that the physical presence of a teacher would have made him more reluctant to do so. In terms of logistics, MG mentioned difficulties she had when trying to book a specific room for her synchronous online learning lessons. She admits having to postpone classes as the room wasn't available when needed, particularly because in an open space context, "you wouldn't want to have English training surrounded by your colleagues, especially if you have many". She adds, however, that this depends on the company, as she didn't struggle with such issues with the one she had worked for previously. Such issues lead SA to conclude that this kind of training would only be appropriate for professionals who have their own office, rather than those working in an open space environment.

Technical issues were mentioned by several learners. MG, LS, NB and BG reported difficulties connecting, as well as issues with Webex Audio or the telephone, both used to communicate orally. More specifically, both MG and NB discoursed on difficulties accessing the website or even videos during lessons due to firewalls put in place by their respective companies as well as on the need to launch temporary applications in an attempt to solve the issue, which hindered punctuality. Similarly, MG commented on the struggle inherent in making her headphones work, which sometimes made her arrive "fifteen minutes late to class".

Based on her context, SA questions the perceived benefits of text-based synchronous online interaction, as she believes that developing writing skills is not as important as enhancing speaking and listening due to translation websites she uses. This claim is echoed by LS who, despite acknowledging the positive impact it had on his writing skills, believes it is "slightly too long" and should therefore be used as a warm-up.

The perceived benefits of voice-based interaction have also been questioned by learners such as MA, who believes it can mask the real difficulties of the student, and compares it with being in a class with other students. He believes that the use of Google Translate can thus become frequent and may hinder interaction with the teacher. He also admits that not hearing certain words well impacts on his ability to learn, so he believes that a face-to-face context might be better to improve his pronunciation.

SA believes that the medium does not reflect her frame of mind, as she contends that life is not "being in front of a machine". This leads her to conclude that it lacks variety, prompting her to compare it with blended courses she had taken previously, which included both synchronous online and face-to-face lessons, and thus allowed the learner to

experience different situations. She advocates the inclusion of workshops to allow several learners to participate in role-plays in order to enhance their Business English skills when, for instance, attending meetings. This is echoed by YC, who also advocates a blended approach to learning as he longs for a greater human touch to the learning process in order to increase motivation. YC also feels that his approach to learning was hindered by the fact that he never met the teacher in person as well as the limited number of lessons and his fear with regard to the medium itself. LS concludes that more than an hour can be more tiring and demanding in this context than in a face-to-face one.

The level of learners was also mentioned by interviewees, such as BG who believes that an online learner would find it more challenging to adapt to the current medium:

> You need to get used to the tool as well as to have good listening skills in order to understand your teacher and interact accordingly

He admits, though, that there might be tools to help users grow accustomed with the medium, alluding to the need for additional preparation. MA mentions the fact that when he was younger he struggled with dyslexia and asserts that this still has a significant impact on his relationship with both the English language and the current online medium. Although he believes that the educator plays a major role and is pleased with his current one, his experience learning online leads him to suggest that synchronous online learning may not be the best option for learners with learning difficulties.

Finally, it has been suggested that with this medium, more work may be needed between lessons to consolidate input. SA gives the example of having to take the TOEIC exam at the end of the course and felt that she improved dramatically in that period, as she even studied at the weekend, or in the car. She thus advocates the inclusion of additional online tasks to be completed on the platform between lessons, in addition to the usual homework tasks which were given throughout the course. Similarly, YC mentions the fact that, due to his cultural context, he has to work significantly between lessons to overcome the fact that he does lacks the incentive to practice more.

As regards the adequacy of Cisco Webex Meeting Center, LS comments on the high quality of Webex Audio and on the ability to use the whiteboard in order to share tasks and highlight key words, as well as the previously mentioned ability to access all documents in Pdf format after the lesson. Having already made use of the tool in question, BG points out that it is constantly being updated for better performance and is thus generally pleased with its features, mirroring contentions made by both HR and HW, who believe that the whiteboard is "very good". SA claims that she is generally pleased with the tool as it did not have an excessive number of features. Moreover, she believes these were easy to use and visible.

On the contrary, LS questions the tool's user-friendliness and suggests improving its ergonomics. He believes it is "not very intuitive", on the grounds that it is not always immediate to understand where exactly he has to click in order to perform a specific function such as turning pages. In a similar fashion, NB believes that due to the tool's comprehensiveness she sometimes felt puzzled. YC says he finds it difficult to make good use of the chat transcripts after the lessons on the grounds that they automatically include irrelevant information, namely the time and date each message was sent coupled with its sender. He claims that this is an impractical aspect of Cisco Webex Meeting Center, since deleting all this additional information in order to focus on the actual messages where he can pinpoint elements such as common mistakes can be time-consuming. He also believes the format that the exchange is automatically converted to, notepad, is less adequate than, for instance, Microsoft Word, and contends that the impact is even worse when he tries to access such documents on an iPhone. MG mentions the fact that the tool didn't always work due to the firewall imposed by her company. Chat exchanges were not always as swift as she would have liked them to be, thereby echoing SA's contention that there were often lags in transmission during the written chats but also when communicating orally. It is still unclear, however, whether such issues are related to the interlocutors' connection or whether they stem from Cisco Webex Meeting Center itself.

When asked for suggestions for improvement, BG advocates the presence of specific warnings on the whiteboard when students make mistakes to complement the usual corrections made by the educator during the written chats. HW mentions the fact that he has difficulties finding the sessions on the website so would like to receive an alert allowing him to connect directly to the session at the start of every lesson.

Despite their initial reluctance to make use of the webcam, several students, namely HW, HR, LS, MG and MA showed interest in its inclusion on future occasions, as they believe it may mirror the face-to-face context more intently owing to the presence of visual cues which would ultimately enhance interaction, echoing findings. YC goes further by stating that he is a visual learner and that this feature may enhance his approach to learning. LS, however, still believes that lags in transmission and lack of confidence could hinder its effective use, thereby mirroring MG's contention that

interaction may be affected by her "funny faces". In a similar fashion, MA believes that it is likely to encroach on the learner's private sphere and YC concludes that he wouldn't feel comfortable.

As related to the enhancement of Business English skills, lower-proficiency learner HW contends that he is now better able to structure his emails, especially when responding to different requests in his professional context, and admits that he no longer feels the need to "cheat" as much as he used to by using online translators. NB asserts that she is better able to introduce herself, "especially in a face-to-face context", and recalls having delved into skills such as attending meetings and telephoning, which she has not yet had the chance to use due to the French-speaking nature of her professional environment. MA also comments on his ability to introduce himself, particularly when attending business meetings, yet acknowledges that he still finds it challenging to understand his interlocutors in such contexts, claiming that he is currently unable to pick up more than "a word per sentence".

As regards to the second group of learners, HR claims that the course has greatly enhanced her ability to understand her interlocutors during teleconferences. YC believes that he is now better able to understand his interlocutors during meetings but admits that he still struggles to overcome his self-consciousness when he is a chairman. OS recalls those that took place during the course, where he was given the opportunity to put into practice an array of useful phrases commonly used during meetings and business calls as well as to understand their different functions.

As far as higher-proficiency learners are concerned, BG claims that the course was very focused on his professional needs and asserts that he is now better able to participate in business meetings, both with foreign colleagues and clients, especially due to the tasks undertaken during the synchronous online lessons, which he reviews upon receiving the so-called End-of-Lesson mails. In a similar fashion, SA believes she is much more confident in her professional context but feels she lacks opportunities to put into practice what she has learnt throughout the course. MG asserts that the voice-based nature of the course has enhanced her ability to understand her interlocutors during business calls or teleconferences.

7. Discussion

7.1 Flexibility and Distance

The importance given to flexibility both in terms of space and time echoes contributions by Hannum (2001) and by Meskil and Anthony (2010), as well as by Clark and Quinn (2007) and by Salmon (2000) who underlined the time-saving aspect of the medium, an important feature in a Business English context (Oishi, 2015), especially on occasions where learners have to commute long distances in metropolitan areas. Needless to say, such issues also affect teachers who have to commute when giving in-company classes.

In some cases, however, excessive flexibility in terms of time was seen as a hindrance even in a synchronous context, as the rescheduling of classes is purportedly easier than in a 1-2-1 face-to-face one, and therefore requires greater self-discipline, mirroring previous research in the field (Mcdonald et al, 2002; Peachey, 2017). The physical isolation inherent in synchronous online learning stemming from the presence of a computer rather than a teacher was mentioned by a few learners, mirroring contentions made by Woods (2002), Vonderwell (2003), Hurd (2006) and Peachey (2017), while challenging Ng (2007). Such a claim leads one to question whether this feeling of distance is merely psychological or even pedagogical, as Moore would say (1993, in McBrien et al, 2009). That said, learning styles do play a significant role here, as recently noted by Tratnik et al (2019), whose respondents preferred the face-to-face course on the grounds that it provided more "suitable conditions for the teaching of communicative, social, interpersonal and affective aspects of language learning" (Tratnik et al, 2019: 42) because the subject matter is felt and seen, alluding to the kinaesthetic and visual aspects of language teaching.

Blended learning or elements thereof thus appear as a potential solution to this issue, echoing Francescucci and Foster (2013), Oishi (2015) and Tratnik et al (2019), who believed that the medium would enhance learners' skills further. In fact, Johnson et al (2000) and Wilson (2002) believed that it is the best medium of instruction owing to its increased flexibility and decreased demands in terms of place and time. This seems to play a major role in the business context, often characterised by face-to-face communication, and is particularly relevant to situations where learners are endowed with limited opportunities to practice between lessons, prompting the need for additional study practices (Mcdonald et al., 2002; Tratnik et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, this appears to be influenced by prior experience, as exemplified by MA, who thought there was a mere 10% chance in that respect. This learner had studied English for a greater amount of time than the rest of the cohort in other contexts and was still a lower-level student, which may be explained by the learning difficulties mentioned in the interview. This lends support to his preference for face-to-face teaching not only due to the physical presence of

the teacher but also owing to the support of his peers, thereby challenging Ventura and Jang (2010) who suggested that synchronous 1-2-1 online tuition would be more appropriate for learners with educational needs, on the grounds that they wouldn't face discrimination. His difficulties also appear to be linked to the relative lack of monitoring mentioned by Chen et al (2017), particularly due to the lack of visual cues (Lee, 1999). Ultimately, as alluded to in the interview, his experience in his local educational context made him grow accustomed to a teacher-centred grammar-based style of teaching where communication played a minor role. This may explain why he feels that the communicative nature of the current medium exposes his difficulties further, as he is more distant physically from his tutor yet less educationally, as the focus is on one learner. At the same time, however, the different style of teaching may at the same time entail greater educational distance, which may affect his approach to learning. Worthy of mention is the fact that digital literacy does not play a role here, as the learner is one of the youngest in the cohort and works primarily from home.

This alludes to a more general distinction between 1-2-1 teaching and group teaching which shows, on the other hand, why learners like lower-proficiency learner NB would rather embrace this medium. Her fear of being judged or discriminated due to past experiences echoes claims made by McBrien et al (2009) as well as by Ventura and Jang, who state that in group situations students often "fear being victims of embarrassment by their colleagues" (2010: 65), and may thus grow more distant from both their peers and tutors. In fact, none of the learners interviewed appear to have missed the perceived constructivist benefits of group teaching that prompted the conclusion that "Business English as an online course cannot fully replace face-to-face learning" (Tratnik et al, 2019: 43). This is likely to have stemmed primarily from the current context's synchronous 1-2-1 nature.

7.2 Skill Enhancement and Technical Issues

Learners generally believed that the course was comprehensive, tailored to their needs and expectations, echoing Croxton (2014), and capable of fostering the enhancement of different language skills, in line with the ability of the medium to replace its face-to-face counterpart. The vast majority of learners, in reality, thought there was a chance it could, echoing findings by Ward, Peters & Shelley (2010), where the two mediums were considered equally favourable in terms of the "amount and quality of content learned" (Ward et al, 2010: 73), echoing Meskill & Anthony (2010) and Chen & Chen (2006).   This appears to be linked to the needs analysis which occurs at the beginning of every course and plays a primary role in course success, particularly in ESP, as mentioned by Robinson (1991).

Murphy (1991) once claimed that listening is considered the primary channel for learning within most classroom settings, alluding to the importance of input, as advocated by Krashen (1985). Learners' general belief that the course was especially effective at enhancing their listening skills and, to a lesser extent, speaking, echoes research by Salbego and Tumolo (2015). This appears to be closely linked to the voice-based nature of the medium, devoid of webcam. Certain learners do indeed feel uncomfortable and frown upon its use, mirroring findings by Brunet and Schmidt (2007), Telles (2010) and Bailie (2014). On the other hand, several respondents' willingness to make use of the webcam on future occasions owing to the provision of visual cues echoes findings by McIntosh & Hanlis (2002), O'Dowd (2006) and Aaltonen et al (2009), particularly in the case of visual learners, based on the contention that "approaches to learning should be taken into account while delivering course content synchronously" (Kuo et al, 2014: 176). This may also decrease the sense of anxiety and urgency mentioned by Lamy & Hampel (2007). The use of the webcam is ultimately influenced by both parties' connection, however, as it occupies a significant portion of bandwidth.

The interference of technical issues, mentioned by several learners, echoes research undertaken by Park and Bong (2007), Karal et al (2011) and Ghazal et al (2015). Issues related to corporate firewalls echo claims made by Hogan (2015), according to whom these pervade the Business English context. At the current learning centre, when issues occur on the teacher's side, the lesson is rescheduled, yet when they do on the learners' side, the lesson is lost, which prompts the need for the companies in question to address such issues when possible in order to avoid encroaching on learners' progress.

In this context, a valuable point that emerged regards the need for learners to be given the means to enhance their approach to dealing with Cisco Webex Meeting Center. BG's positing that additional preparation should be considered in order to assist learners on their educational– and digital – journey echoes previous research in the field (Reushle and Loch, 2008; Rehm, 2012; Kuo et al, 2014). This is particularly true for the so-called 'digital residents', as coined by Prensky (2001), substantiated by research that suggests that more experienced online learners are more likely to appreciate the medium (Arbaugh & Duray, 2002; Tratnik et al, 2019). The over-stimulation prompted by multiple modes of communication underlined by McBrien et al (2009) was also mentioned during the interviews and suggests the need for additional training to support learners.

Learners' satisfaction with the tool, however, appears to be generally related to its user-friendliness, coupled with its ability to provide documents related to the exchange after the lesson, enabling one to review, notice and reflect on course content, echoing previous research in the field (Salaberry, 2000; Chun and Young, 2006; Ko, 2012; Martin & Parker, 2014; Altıner, 2015). This may prompt one to go further and consider recording lessons on future occasions, which research by Pearse (2011) has lent support to.

Respondents mentioned the benefits inherent in the written chats, such as the ability to enhance spelling, pinpointed by Warschauer (1991) and Hamano-Bunce (2011), and language systems such as grammar (Hampel and Stickler, 2012; Zheng and Warschauer, 2018) and lexis (Beauvois, 1997), as well as their general contribution to the enhancement of emailing. MG underlined its value during the interview, particularly as she could access corrections made during interaction, thereby noticing her shortcomings, as made clear by Schmidt (1980), Chun & Yong (2006) and Haythornthwaite and Andrews (2011). On the whole, however, its contribution to the development of their skills appears to have been overlooked by many, which may stem from the fact that its value hasn't been fully acknowledged yet owing to its absence from traditional classroom-based education. It may also suggest that it simply isn't one of their primary needs, mirroring Trinder and Herles, who quotes one of his respondents as follows:

> "I am convinced that speaking would be much more helpful than simply writing emails or communicating via a chatroom" (2013: 223)

That said, the idea put forward that one can easily cheat when writing by resorting to translation websites leads one to assume that it is a skill that needs little work due to Business English learners' underlying belief that the focus should be on oral interaction, as mentioned by Trinder & Herles (2013). This appears to be in stark contrast with previous research which suggests the very opposite, claiming that text-based synchronous communication also enhances learners' speaking skills (Payne & Whitney, 2002; Healy-Beauvois, 1992; Kern, 1995). As alluded to by Sotillo (2000) and Hamano-Bunce (2011), writing asynchronously is quite different from its synchronous counterpart and should thus be considered a different skill altogether. Looking for a word in an online dictionary when in doubt plays an important role in language learning, as posited by the comprehensible output hypothesis, introduced by Swain (1985), as production allows learners to deliver their message appropriately by noticing gaps in their knowledge. Besides, one must take into account that online translators may provide inadequate translations and corrections by the educator are therefore invaluable.

Lags in transmission echo Hamano-Bunce (2011) and Chun et al (2016) but the idea that decreased speed during written interaction hinders learning contrasts with the previously mentioned claims made by Beauvois (1992), Payne and Whitney (2002) and Satar & Özdener (2008), who posited that an enhancement of learners' language skills are likely to emerge. Further research may shed light on the role played by the nature of the synchronous written exchange itself when considering its value as a means to contribute to learners' progress.

Finally, worthy of mention is also the fact that learners' comments on the nature of the content of the course itself were relatively limited. This appears to stem from the fact that learners concentrated primarily on the format of the course rather than on its content. This could be related to their underlying belief that changes in format do not necessarily entail changes in pedagogy, mirroring Blake (2005) who believes that the content of the lesson plan supersedes the means of communication. As SA asserts:

> "It's all about the pedagogy, regardless of the form. When the method is good, related to objectives that were well pinpointed since the start, and that then we have training based on learner's expectations and their needs, either personal or professional, and that this platform has sound, image, tasks, well, globally, it's an all-round training"

As Wright (2008) notes, technology involves more than the medium itself, as it entails the pedagogical aspects of teaching, such as tasks and strategies to enhance learners' skills, as well as collaboration and reflection. Since the questions provided in both the questionnaire and interview aimed at understanding students' views on the ability to replace face-to-face teaching with synchronous online tuition in this context, some were related to the enhancement of their language skills and their needs and expectations. In order to delve further into their opinions on the tasks undertaken as well as on the topics covered throughout, the questions could have been more specific to allow them to discourse more intently on, for instance, the resources used and the different tasks created specifically by the educator in question to meet learners' specific needs and related to their current fields of expertise, as mentioned by Hogan (2015) and Oishi (2015). After all, as Hogan asserts (2013), one cannot teach tomorrow's leaders today using yesterday's methods.

8. Conclusion

Linda Harasim (2000) contends that online learning is not peripheral or supplementary as it once was and has thus become a mainstay of contemporary society. In this context, as stated by Allen et al (2002), the replacement of face-to-face education with its online counterpart should not trigger student dissatisfaction with the learning process. The learners at the heart of the current study generally believed that there is a good chance face-to-face teaching could be replaced by its synchronous online counterpart in their 1-2-1 Business English context. This appears to be due primarily to its increased flexibility in terms of space and time as well as its ability to improve learners' language skills, in a context where Cisco Webex Meeting Center was generally considered an adequate tool for class delivery.

As shown, however, certain factors have impacted on certain learners' perceptions and they need to be taken into account. These include the interference of technical glitches, students' different learning styles and potential difficulties, and learners' digital literacies which may entail the need for additional training. Blended learning, comprising both face-to-face and synchronous online learning, has been advocated by learners longing for the physical presence of peers or of the educator in question, which they believe would prompt additional practice and support. Further research is needed to delve into the aforementioned aspects more intently, as well as to understand the extent to which the inclusion of the webcam and written chats affect learners' skills and approach to learning. Finally, it is hoped that this study will contribute to the burgeoning literature in the field as well as to the credibility and development of synchronous online education.

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Note

Note 1. Massive Open Online Course

Appendix A

Questionnaire (Français)

1) Pendant combien d'années avez-vous étudié l'anglais?

     a. Moins de 5

     b. 5à10

     c. De 10 à 15

     d. Plus de 15

2) Quand est-ce que votre parcours d'anglais précédent avait-il eu lieu?

     a. Il y a moins de 5 ans

     b. Il y a 5-10 ans

     c. Il y a 10-15 ans

     d. Il y a plus de 15 ans

3) Avant de rejoindre notre école, aviez-vous déjà pris des cours en ligne ?

     a. Oui, d'anglais

     b. Oui, dans un autre domaine

     c. Non, pas du tout

4) Sur l'échelle ci-dessous, indiquez jusqu'à quel point ce parcours a atteint vos attentes par rapport à l'apprentissage de l'anglais professionnel en ligne

     Très satisfait -- Très insatisfait

5) Dans lesquelles de ces compétences croyez-vous que ce parcours vous a donné plus de confiance?

     a. Lecture

     b. Écoute

     c. Expression orale

     d. Expression écrite

6) Sur l'échelle ci-dessous, indiquez dans quelle mesure l'apprentissage en ligne diffère par rapport à l'apprentissage en présentiel

Identique --- Très différent

7) Sur l'échelle ci-dessous, indiquez dans quelle mesure l'apprentissage en ligne peut remplacer l'apprentissage en présentiel

Peut remplacer -- Ne peut pas remplacer

8) Sur l'échelle ci-dessous, indiquez dans quelle mesure Cisco Webex Meeting Center est un outil efficace pour l'enseignement de l'anglais professionnel.

Très approprié -- Pas approprié

Questionnaire (English)

1) How many years have you studied English for?

    a. Less than 5

    b. 5-10

    c. 10–15

    d. More than 15

2) When was the last English course you took?

    a. Less than 5 years ago

    b. 5-10 years ago

    c. 10-15 years ago

    d. More than 15 years ago

3) Before joining our school, had you ever taken a synchronous online course?

    a. Yes, in English

    b. Yes, in another topic

    c. Not at all

4) On the scale below, rate the extent to which this course has met your expectations with regard to Business English synchronous online learning.

Very satisfied ---Very dissatisfied

5) In which of the following skills do you feel this course has made you more confident?

    a. Reading

    b. Listening

    c. Speaking

    d. Writing

6) On the scale below, rate the extent to which you believe synchronous online learning differs from face-to-face learning.

Very similar --Very different

7) On the scale below, rate the extent to which you believe synchronous online learning can effectively replace face-to-face learning.

Can replace -- Cannot replace

8) On the scale below, rate the extent to which Cisco Webex is an effective tool for Business English class delivery.

Very effective ---Very ineffective

Appendix B

Entrevue en Français

Bonjour ___, merci beaucoup d'avoir accepté de participer à cette enquête. Soyez bienvenu(e) à cette entrevue. Je vous poserai quelques questions. Si vous avez des doutes n'hésitez pas à m'interrompre.

1) Si vous aviez déjà pris des cours en ligne, comment a été votre expérience ?

2) Comment ce parcours en apprentissage de la langue anglaise diffère-t-il par rapport à vos parcours précédents ?

3) Pourquoi avez-vous choisi de prendre des cours en ligne plutôt qu'en présentiel ?

4) À votre avis, quels sont les avantages d'apprendre l'anglais professionnel en ligne ?

5) À votre avis, quels sont les inconvénients d'apprendre l'anglais professionnel en ligne?

6) De quelle façon pourrait Cisco Webex Meeting Center être amélioré pour l'apprentissage en ligne ?

7) Dans quelle mesure ce parcours a-t-il atteint vos attentes et pourquoi ?

8) Comment l'apprentissage en ligne vous a-t-il aidé à progresser ?

9) À qui recommanderiez-vous l'apprentissage en ligne et pourquoi ?

Merci beaucoup et bonne continuation.

(Interview in English version)

1) If you had previously taken synchronous online courses, what was your experience like?

2) How does this course compare with your previous face-to-face English language course(s)?

3) Why did you opt for online rather than face-to-face lessons?

4) In your opinion, what are the advantages of studying Business English synchronously online?

5) In your opinion, what are the disadvantages of studying Business English synchronously online?

6) In what ways can Cisco Webex Meeting Center be improved for effective class delivery?

7) In what ways did the course meet or did not meet your expectations?

8) How did the synchronous online medium help you to improve your skills?

9) Who would you recommend synchronous online learning to and why?

Thank you and all the best.

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