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“A Terrible Beauty Is Born”: Opportunities
and New Perspectives for Online Teaching and Assessment

“Nasce una terribile bellezza”: opportunità
e nuove prospettive per la didattica e la valutazione online

Edited by

Franca Poppi and Josef Schmied

EDITORIAL

“A Terrible Beauty Is Born”: Opportunities and New Perspectives 5
for Online Teaching and Assessment
Franca Poppi and Josef Schmied

A Comparison between EFL Writing Errors in Computer-Based 17
and Paper-Based Assignments
Paola-Maria Caleffi

Students’ Voices from the Pandemic: The Use of Modal 45
and Semi-Modal Verbs for Expressing Subjectivity in a Local
Academic Learner Corpus
Emanuela Tenca

Il ruolo della funzione ‘Feedback’ nelle attività di Moodle 69
Alessandra Pettinelli e Dalila Rauch

Apprendimento digitale dell’italiano L2. Un approccio ludico 99
Silvia Gilardoni e Alessandra Cerizza

Buone pratiche per la didattica digitale dell’italiano L2 121
Marialuisa Sepe

Valutazione e nuove tecnologie nell'ambito del Progetto Marco Polo - Turandot <i>Dimo Dimov e Mara Mutti</i>	139
Spazi di apprendimento virtuali per la didattica della lingua tedesca <i>Antonella Catone</i>	161
Un salto nel mondo digitale. Un progetto condiviso e multimediale per l'apprendimento della lingua tedesca <i>Carla Christiany e Julia Heumann</i>	185
Emergency Remote Teaching: Student Responses to Intensive versus Extensive Course Modalities during the Pandemic <i>Michael Joseph Ennis, Dietmar Unterkofler, and Elena Bonetto</i>	203
Online ELT during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study on Students' Perspectives <i>Ilaria Iori</i>	231
Authors	257

Emergency Remote Teaching

Student Responses to Intensive versus Extensive Course Modalities during the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 forced university language programs to reevaluate and revolutionize their teaching practices. While in the years preceding the pandemic, many administrators and practitioners were reluctant to embrace blended or fully online language courses, these teaching/learning modalities quickly became the “new normal”. To monitor the efficacy of the courses offered remotely during the 2020/21 academic year, the Language Center of Libera Università di Bolzano administered a series of surveys to students – in addition to the data we routinely collect by way of our “big data” approach to language curriculum monitoring. These courses were offered both in an “extensive” and an “intensive” format. The responses to the surveys – in combination with course enrollment, participation, and completion data – offer an opportunity to investigate students’ attitudes and behavior toward remote teaching and learning, but also to compare intensive language teaching and learning with extensive language teaching and learning, a topic which has not received sufficient attention in the literature to-date. Notwithstanding the well-documented challenges associated with “emergency remote teaching”, we observed many positive experiences and outcomes. Our data is being used to inform decisions regarding which courses will continue to be taught fully or partially online in the years to come.

Keywords: curriculum monitoring; distance learning; emergency remote teaching; English; German; intensive language programs; Italian; language teaching; mixed-methods research; online learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Language Centre at Libera Università di Bolzano (UNIBZ) had been exploring the development of self-paced, distance-learning, and blended-learning courses for many years prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. Our interest in these modalities of teaching and learning were in part due to their well-established pedagogical benefits (e.g., Marsh 2012; Tomlinson and Whittaker 2013; Coskun and Arslan 2014), but also for various practical reasons, such as their increased accessibility in comparison to face-to-face (f2f) courses. But we encountered many administrative barriers (e.g., the lack of an institutional pay scale for online teaching hours), and many of our more experienced teachers, who are highly trained and experienced in traditional f2f pedagogies, had often expressed skepticism and resistance. As a result, the implementation of various forms of e-learning had never been attempted on a wide scale in our context, though they had occasionally been employed on the initiative of individuals or teams of instructors (e.g., Ennis 2020; Ennis *et al.* 2022).

The switch to “emergency remote teaching and learning” (e.g., Fragai *et al.* 2020; Gacs, Goertler, and Spasova 2020; Murphy 2020; Celentin *et al.* 2021; Palumbo and Duin 2022) effective from 15 March 2020 at UNIBZ therefore provided an opportunity to experiment with new methodologies and technologies and to explore students’ and teachers’ attitudes and behaviors toward fully online courses. Our context also provided a unique opportunity to compare online teaching in “intensive” versus “extensive” modalities, which is of particular importance due to the known gap in research on their comparative efficacies for language learning (Gass 2019).

Given this opportunity, we conducted a mixed-method exploratory study based on convenience sampling to monitor the effects of emergency remote teaching during the 2020/21 academic year. Specifically, we analyzed trends in language course enrollments and course results and compared these to student responses to a survey. For colleagues working in other contexts, our results should be read as a case study on changes in learner behavior and attitudes as a result of emergency remote language teaching and learning during the pandemic. In addition to our findings, also our “big data” approach¹ to curriculum monitoring

¹ Within data science, the term “big data” refers to the use of very large data sets which have typically not been collected specifically for research purposes and are

may be of particular interest to higher education institutions with official language policies.

2. THE LEARNING CONTEXT

UNIBZ is a trilingual university with three official mediums of instruction: English, German, and Italian. Most undergraduate degree programs offer tuition in all three languages, while some graduate programs are “monolingual” in that they are taught entirely or predominantly in English. Since the 2012/13 academic year, the university has maintained strict entry language requirements for all “trilingual” degree programs to ensure that prospective students can succeed at multilingual study. Even stricter exit requirements endow graduates with a competitive advantage in local and international job markets. More specifically, undergraduate students must certify B2 proficiency – according to the *Common European Framework of References* (CEFR) – in two of three languages to matriculate and they must certify C1 proficiency in two and B2 proficiency in the third language to graduate. Which language is their “first” language, which is their “second”, and which is their “third” is simply a matter of the highest level certified for each medium of instruction in chronological order – which, presumably, but not necessarily, correlates to a development in the ability to communicate in each

therefore often unstructured. Examples include data stored in institutional repositories for administrative purposes or data accessible via the internet. This data must often be *queried* or *mined* (that is, extracted) and then *cleaned* and *wrapped* (that is, restructured and prepared) before it can be analysed with appropriate computational or statistical methods. For example, most corpora which are used to train machine learning algorithms in computer science and computational linguistics can be considered “big data”. “Big data” is also frequently exploited in the context of biostatistics and medical research, including in the study of Covid-19, and in business analytics, including for the mining of sentiments and opinions from social media posts. “Big” data sets, which often contain thousands or even millions of observations, provide researchers with an opportunity to work with very large samples or even entire populations, which produces more robust results and profound insights about human behavior, reactions, attitudes, opinions, sentiments, etc. The main limitations are that traditional experimental procedures cannot be applied to “big data” and “big data” is not always as reliable as experimental data (for reviews of current applications and limitations of “big data” and data science in education, see Baig *et al.* 2020; Aljawarneh and Lara 2021). To the best of our knowledge, we are the only university in Italy applying data science to language curriculum monitoring.

language over time. It should be noted that most students are “mother tongue” German and/or Italian speakers. The language requirements in force at the time of writing are summarized in *Table 1*.

Table 1. – Language requirements for undergraduate students at UNIBZ.

LANGUAGE	ENTRY REQUIREMENT	AFTER ONE YEAR	EXIT REQUIREMENT
<i>First Language</i>	B2	–	C1
<i>Second Language</i>	B2	–	C1
<i>Third Language</i>	–	B1	B2

The primary role of the Language Centre within this context is to assist students in satisfying their exit requirements by offering language courses, language proficiency exams, and other services to support language learning among the University community – such as tandem partners and language advising (see Ennis 2020 and Bonetto *et al.* in press, for a more detailed description). Both the courses and the exams are aligned to CEFR.

The courses are typically organized into modules of 30 or 40 hours and are offered in “intensive” and “extensive” modalities according to fixed “learning paths” that are based on a student’s entry level in their third language: A0, A1, A2, B1, or \geq B2. Extensive courses are offered during the two semesters and consist of one 40-hour module that meets for 4 hours per week across ten weeks. Intensive courses are offered during study breaks before, between, and after the two semesters and consist of one, two, or three modules of 30 or 40 hours that meet for four to six hours per day for one to three weeks. Students are encouraged to follow their learning paths from the very start of their academic careers, so that they can achieve B1 and then B2 certification in their “third” language, before working toward C1 certification in their second language (and, in the case of international students whose mother tongue is neither German, nor Italian, nor English, toward C1 in whichever is their de facto first language). *Figure 1* depicts the Modular Course System and *Table 2* details the learning paths (which correspond to course offerings throughout the academic year) depending on a student’s entry level in their third language. Not pictured in *Table 2* are the C1 courses, which are offered during all five course sessions, so students can start working toward C1 in their second language as soon as they meet their exit requirement for their third language.

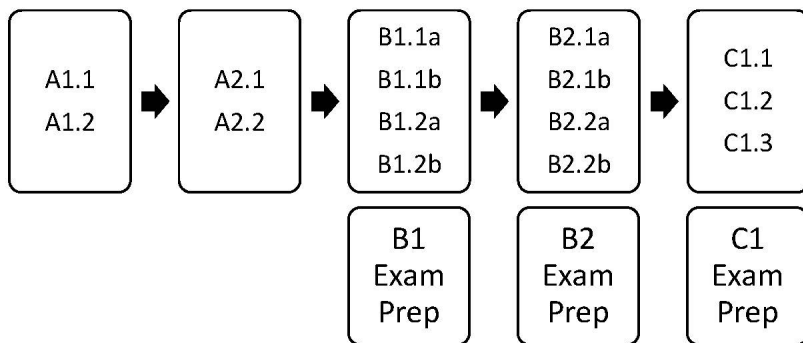


Figure 1. – The Modular Course System.

Table 2. – Learning paths for “third” language.

COURSE SESSION	LEARNING PATHS			
	Starting level A0	Starting level A1	Starting level A2	Starting level B1
FIRST YEAR OF STUDY				
September intensives for new students (three weeks)	A1.1* A1.2*	A2.1 A2.2	B1.1a B1.1b B1.2a	B2.1a B2.1b B2.2a
First semester extensives (ten weeks)	A2.1	B1.1a	B1.2b	B2.2b
February intensives (two weeks)	A.2.2 B1.1a	B1.1b B1.2a	B2.1a B2.1b	
Second semester extensives (ten weeks)	B1.1b	B1.2b	B2.2a	
July intensives (one or two weeks)	B1.2a B1.2b	B2.1a B2.1b	B2.2b	
SECOND YEAR OF STUDY				
September intensives For returning students (two weeks)	B2.1a B2.1b	B2.2a B2.2b		
First semester extensives (ten weeks)	B2.2a			
February intensives (one week)	B2.2b			

3. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The UNIBZ Language Centre embraces concepts such as reflective practice (e.g., Farrell 2019; Mann and Walsh 2013; Walsh and Mann 2015) and language teachers as researchers (Hutchinson and Waters 1987; Dudley-Evans and St John 1998; Freeman 1998; Basturkmen 2010). As such, we support the position that all university language centers should engage in applied research to evaluate the effectiveness of the services they provide, but also to contribute to academic and professional discourses on language education (e.g., Rontu and Tuomi, 2014, 2015; Unger-Ullmann 2018; Gass *et al.* 2019). Language centers are in a unique position to collect and analyze data regarding language education at the tertiary level, and our trilingual language model is a ripe field for such research. To this end, we adopt a “big data” approach to language curriculum monitoring and regularly engage in action research and classroom interventions to find solutions to the practical challenges we face (for examples, see Ennis 2020; Ennis *et al.* 2022; Bonetto *et al.* in press). As a result, we were already collecting large sets of quantitative and qualitative data before covid restrictions and public health measures imposed remote teaching and learning upon all Italian universities. But for the present study, we relied upon two smaller data sets: (1) a subset of our data model² that we maintain to monitor language course enrollments, participation, and completion, and (2) responses to a specially designed survey about remote learning administered to students during the 2020/21 academic year.

3.1. *Why do curriculum monitoring?*

At UNIBZ, all students must meet their language requirements by passing an in-house language exam or submitting a recognized language certificate (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL, PLIDA, TestDaf), otherwise they will not graduate. But the language courses which are intended to help them acquire the skills needed to pass such exams are “extracurricular”, that is, optional and without academic credit. Considering that students are

² The full data model integrates all institutional data at our disposal from various institutional information systems. The data includes demographic data, academic data, language course enrolment data, data entered into teaching registers, language exam results, and course evaluations.

free to choose if and when they attend courses, we have a plethora of real-world data to support the “process” theory of motivation (Dörnyei 2000; 2005), in that students often exhibit *preactional* or *choice motivation* to learn, whereas a multitude of intrinsic and extrinsic forces influence their actual engagement over time.

For instance, some of our students enroll for courses but then never attend (i.e., “no shows”) or request to withdraw before or during the course (i.e., “dropouts”). Then some students will start the course but not finish it (i.e., “incompletes”). Others will complete their course but fail to complete enough of the course work or do not perform well enough to pass (i.e., “fails”). Therefore, only a portion of all enrolled students successfully complete a course and gain access to the next module (i.e., “passes”). Furthermore, we tend to see a decrease in course participation across the learning paths and course sessions, as students satisfy intermediate language requirements and/or prioritize other academic and personal pursuits at different stages in their studies.

In a complex context such as ours, monitoring course enrollment and completion data and determining the various factors which impact students’ motivation to complete language courses is paramount to the success of our trilingual model. Observing recent trends in this data can also help us understand how the pandemic and remote teaching impacted students’ motivation to engage in formal language learning.

3.2. Course enrollment and completion data

The UNIBZ Language Centre requires all language instructors to maintain digital teaching registers for every course that they teach. The platform was developed by the Language Centre and has since been upgraded and integrated into institutional information systems by our ICT department. After each lesson, the instructor inserts the day of the lesson, the total hours taught, a summary of the teaching content, and the total hours – in half-hour intervals – attended by each enrolled student. At the conclusion of the course, the instructor also enters a final mark – based on both continuous and summative assessment – for each student before finalizing and submitting the register. All data collected from teaching registers is accessible through our Language Centre Information System (LCIS), an application which has been custom designed to our specifications by our ICT department. In LCIS, we can view course enrollments, course attendance, and course results

for any current or past course. We can filter the courses by academic year, by instructor, by language, by campus (including online), by CEFR level, and by type (e.g., intensive versus extensive). The application serves many didactic and administrative purposes. More relevant to the present study, the historical data for any course offered since 2014 can be extracted to perform analyses. For monitoring purposes, we query the raw data into Microsoft Power BI³ so that we can clean and wrangle it and connect it to all other institutional data at our disposal, including language exam results, data compiled by degree programs, and demographic information submitted at matriculation. With Power BI, we can build data models and generate visualizations and reports which enable us to monitor historical trends, make predictions about future needs, and inform upper management in policy decisions.

The data used for the present study was but a tiny subset of our data model. It comprised anonymized data regarding course enrollments and basic course results. This data – downloadable as a supplementary file from the website of this journal – had already been cleaned, wrangled, and aggregated in Power BI. It includes basic counts of course results segmented by three academic years (2018/19, 2019/20, and 2020/21), by the five course sessions, by target language, and by the five aforementioned course result categories: “no show”, “drop out”, “incomplete”, “fail”, and “pass”. Microsoft Excel was used to create pivot charts to visualize trends in enrollments and course results before, during, and in some cases after the period of emergency remote teaching at UNIBZ. Due to our exploratory goals⁴, and as the data represented the entire

³ Power BI is a data analytics software which enables users to work with very large data sets to create visualizations and reports which can be shared within institutions. Simple reports, called “dashboards” can also be shared publicly online. The reports allow stakeholders to monitor key trends and metrics. The ICT department at UNIBZ has designated Power BI as the preferred software for institutional data analytics. At the Language Centre, we currently use it for internal monitoring but also aim to use it for institutional reporting purposes. For example, our course evaluation results are now shared with language coordinators and teachers via interactive Power BI reports. The only disadvantage of Power BI is that it has limited built-in statistical functions, as it is primarily used for data visualization. However, users with at least intermediate understanding of statistics can write their own codes in DAX, R, or Python to add most test statistics and coefficients to any report.

⁴ In the post-positivist tradition, qualitative research methods aim to achieve *verstehen*, that is, an “interpretative understanding” of social phenomena (see Schütz 1971; Glaser and Strauss 1999). Whereas quantitative methods can be utilized to test hypotheses and formulate theories to “explain” (*erklären*) observable phenomena by

population of course participants, no statistical inference tests (e.g., chi square) were run on this data and we only report counts and proportions in the form of stacked bar graphs.

3.3. *Survey data*

Given our longstanding interest in online teaching and learning and our commitment to monitoring the efficacies of our services, it only seemed natural that we would administer a survey to students who enrolled in language courses during this period to explore their attitudes toward a novel form of teaching and learning and compare their expressed attitudes with some of the quantitative data we regularly collect via our course enrollment platform and digital registers. We piloted the survey during the second semester of 2019/20, during the initial phase of remote teaching, and then administered two versions of the survey across four of five course sessions during 2020/21. Our aim was to elicit students' perceptions of remote teaching and learning over time and compare their behavior and attitudes in intensive versus extensive courses.

The survey – described in more detail below – consisted of a series of multiple choice, Likert-like, and open response items. The survey was created using Google Forms and students were invited to participate via an email which informed them of the purpose of the survey and informed them that all responses would remain anonymous. Instructions were provided in English, German, and Italian, although questions were presented only in English, which is our institutional lingua franca. Students were invited to submit textual responses in any of the three languages, which is common practice in our context. All responses were exported to Microsoft Excel for data analysis.

As not all course participants responded to the survey although we needed to generalize responses to our context as a whole, we did apply the standard statistical procedures employed for such surveys (e.g.,

means of experiments, qualitative methods are useful for the exploration of phenomena which are novel or unknown to the investigators. The ideal outcome is the formulation of new and testable hypotheses about those phenomena. Mixed-method research, in our view, seeks to bridge the gap between these paradigms through the triangulation of data (see Mackey and Bryfonski 2018). The data at our disposal lent itself to the exploration of emergency remote teaching in our context by means of mixed methods.

Warmbrod 2014; Harpe 2015; Derrick and White 2017). To test for the internal consistency (i.e., reliability) of the survey, we calculated Cronbach's alpha for each administration. To determine if attitudes shifted over time, we calculated the summated mean scores for the Likert-like items and performed one-way ANOVA using the Real Statistics⁵ add on for Microsoft Excel. Student comments were analyzed by means of thematic analysis (Charmaz 2006), conducted manually, also with the aid of Microsoft Excel. The comments were read, interpreted, and coded in accordance with grounded theory (*ibid.*). During the coding process a dual focus of interpretation emerged: whether the comment expressed positive or negative attitudes and what aspect of the learning experience the comment was about. According to our mixed-method approach (Mackey and Bryfonski 2018), survey data was interpreted in relation to course completion data and vice versa.

4. EFFECTS OF REMOTE LEARNING ON COURSE ENROLLMENT AND COMPLETION

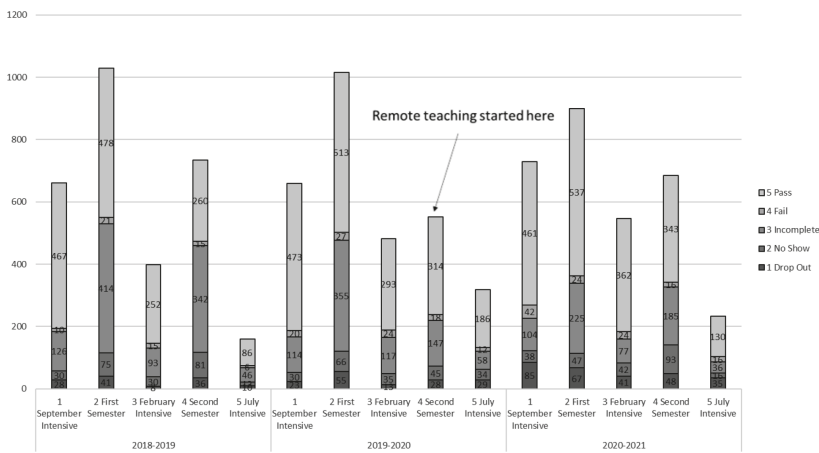


Figure 2. – Course enrollment and completion during the pandemic.

⁵ See <https://real-statistics.com/one-way-analysis-of-variance-anova/> [23/03/2023].

Figure 2 presents trends in the course enrollment data for all English, German, and Italian language courses organized by the Language Centre during the academic years 2018/19, 2019/20, and 2020/21. This visualization reveals a clear and predictable cyclical, downward trend in course participation across course sessions. The pattern in this snapshot is representative of all academic years in our data model since the implementation of our current language policy. The graph also shows that extensive courses tend to receive more enrollments, while intensive courses tend to have higher pass rates. At first glance, it may seem that there is a downward trend in total enrollments, but this is in fact an optical illusion created by the trends in first-semester enrollments. For this reason, it is fruitful to compare like with like and focus our attention on what happened during the pandemic.

4.1. September intensive courses

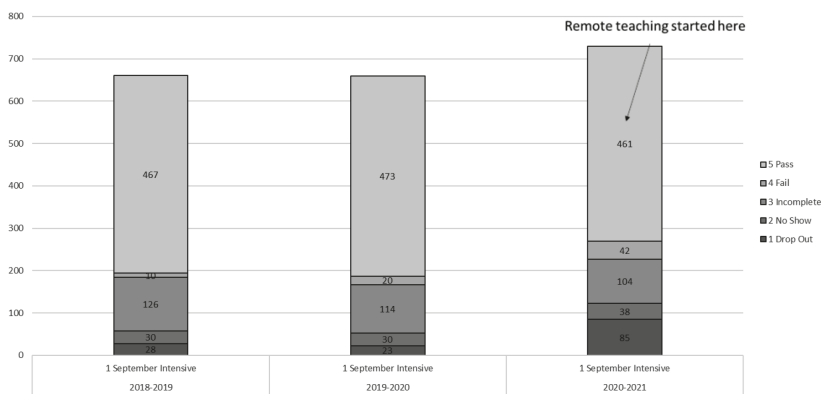


Figure 3. – Course enrollment and completion during september intensive courses.

Figure 3 filters the same data to display only our September intensive courses. It should be stated that the September courses were affected by covid restrictions (i.e., social distancing, mask requirements, and contract tracing), but most of these courses were conducted f2f, so they were not affected by a shift in modality. In September 2020, the only course session in this graph which occurred during the pandemic, we saw an increase in course enrollments (661, 660, 730) – despite a decrease in newly matriculated students – but a decrease in pass rates

(70.1%, 71.7%, 63.2%), as well as a slight decrease in the total number of students who passed (467, 473, 461). The decrease in the number of students who passed appears to have been due to an increase in fails and dropouts during the pandemic.

4.2. Semester extensive courses

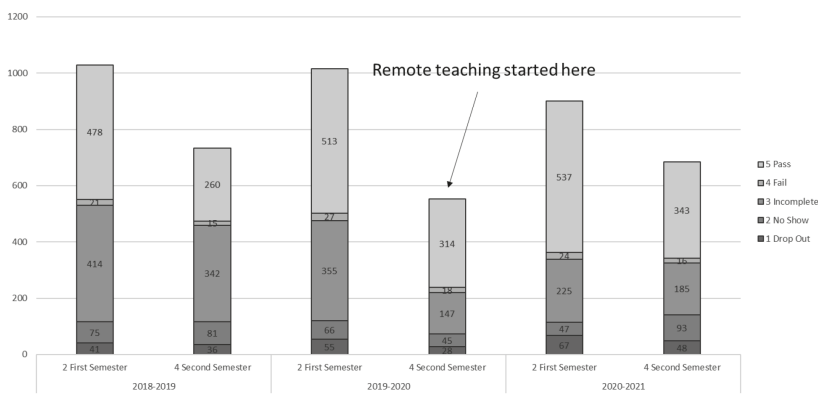


Figure 4. – Course enrollment and completion during semester extensive courses.

Figure 4 plots the data for the extensive courses held during the first and second semesters of the respective academic years. We switched to remote teaching at the Language Centre just before the start of the second semester in 2019/20, which was, of course, logistically challenging. In fact, we delayed the start of that course session by two weeks so that we could prepare for remote delivery. Perhaps due to these challenges in combination with the challenges students were facing, we experienced a decrease in the number of enrollments for extensive courses during the pandemic. The first semester courses had over 1000 enrollments in 2018/19 and 2019/20, but only 900 in 2020/21. The second semester courses declined from 734 in 2018/19 to 552 in 2019/20 but did rise again to 685 in 2020/21. However, we observed a significant increase in pass rates: from 46.5% to 50.5% to 59.7% in the first semesters and 35.4% to 56.9% to 50.1% in the second semesters. The increase in the pass rates were so large, that more students were completing courses despite the decline in enrollments. This trend was largely due to a smaller proportion of “incompletes”.

4.3. February and July intensive courses

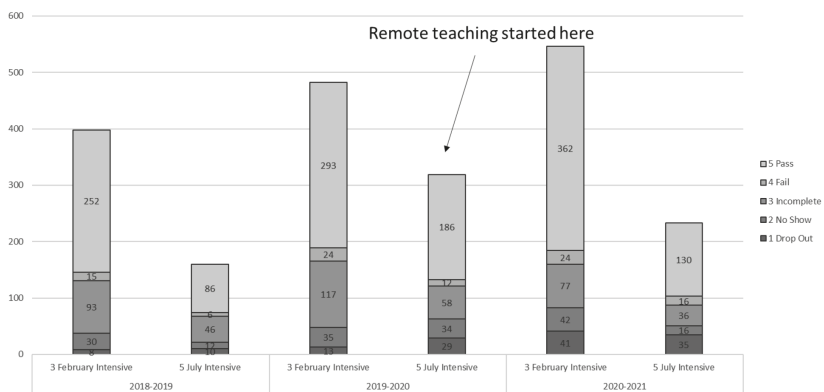


Figure 5. – Course enrollment and completion during February and July intensives.

Finally, *Figure 5* graphs the data for our February and July intensive courses. With the switch to remote teaching occurring in March 2020, the July 2020 intensive session was the first affected by the pandemic in this case. Looking at the intensive courses, we can see that the increases in the pass rates are not as large as they were for extensive courses: the overall pass rate increased from 60.1% in 2020 to 66.3% in 2021 for February courses, and from 53.8% in 2019 to 58.3% in 2020 and 55.8% in 2021 for July courses. On the other hand, we saw significantly more course enrollments, peaking at almost double the number of enrollments, so that we still had many more passes in intensive courses offered remotely. So, again, the net effect of the remote modality was more students engaging in language learning.

5. STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING

The surveys conducted during the 2020/21 academic year may help explain some of the trends observed above. Surveys were sent at the end of each course session, excluding our pre-session courses in September, to all enrolled students who did not officially drop out of our courses. These surveys were in addition to our standard course evaluation surveys and specifically aimed to elicit students' attitudes toward their experi-

ences learning remotely during the pandemic. The number of responses received per course session can be seen in *Figure 6*. The response rates, dividing total responses by all students who did not drop out, were as follows: 32.9% during first semester, 49.9% in February, 15.0% during the second semester, and 42.5% in July. These response rates align with both the decline in engagement we typically see during any academic year (see above) and the response rates on our standard course evaluations.

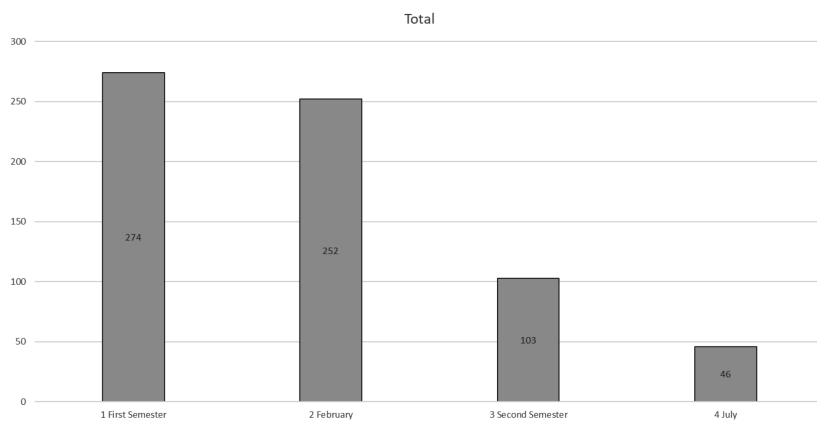


Figure 6. – Number of survey respondents by course session.

5.1. *Learning platforms and virtual interaction*

The first question on the survey was a multiple-choice item about the platforms used during courses. UNIBZ has been using Moodle as an online learning environment for many years. As has been observed in numerous other contexts (e.g., Coskun and Arslan 2014), Moodle has proven to be an effective platform for online language learning. However, remote teaching necessitated the adoption of new technologies, in particular the need for a video conferencing platform for synchronous lessons. In response, our ICT department purchased a limited number of professional licenses for Zoom as well as an institutional license for Microsoft Teams. Administrative and academic staff were urged to use Teams for both work and teaching purposes. In response to the first question, the students consistently reported that most instructors were

in fact using Teams or Teams with Moodle, although some were using just Zoom or Zoom with Moodle (*Fig. 7*). Only one student responded that some “other” platform was used, during the first semester, but this outlier is likely a result of some misunderstanding.

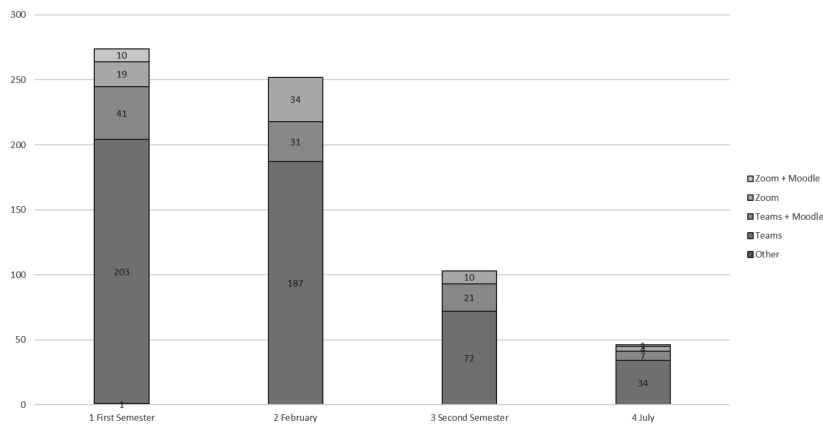


Figure 7. – Platforms used by instructors.

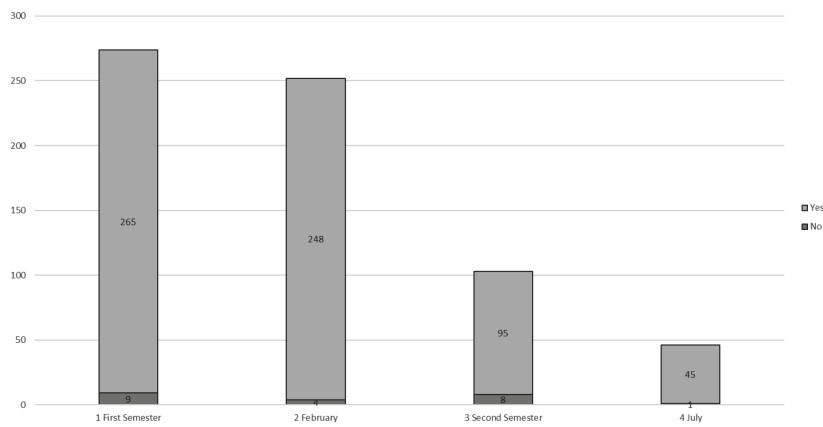


Figure 8. – Did you have sufficient opportunities to interact?

The second item on the survey was a yes or no question to determine whether students felt they had sufficient opportunity to interact with their instructors and peers via the platforms used. In March 2020, we

were concerned that some instructors might revert to frontal teaching when asked to hold their lessons on a video conferencing platform. We offered guidance and training on basic practices such as screen sharing and groupwork via *breakout rooms* in Zoom and *channels* in Teams – as Teams had not yet added breakout rooms at that point. In response to the yes or no question, the vast majority of students reported that they had indeed engaged in sufficient interaction, with little variation across course sessions and intensive versus extensive modalities (Fig. 8).

5.2. Likert-like items regarding remote teaching and learning

The largest section of the survey consisted of a series of Likert-like items that sought to elicit students' attitudes toward key aspects of language learning in a remote format, including their experience with the platforms used, their perceptions of their instructors' use of the platforms, the suitability of remote teaching/learning for practicing and developing the four skills and learning grammar and vocabulary, and their openness to learning in this fashion in the future. Table 3 reports the number of responses received, the response rate, Cronbach's alpha (a standard measure of internal consistency), the mean summated scores across course sessions, and the mean scores for each item.

Table 3. – Student attitudes toward remote teaching/learning.

VALUES	1 ST SEMESTER	FEBRUARY	2 ND SEMESTER	JULY
Number of responses (rate)	274 (32.9%)	252 (42.9%)	103 (16.2%)	46 (42.5%)
Cronbach's alpha	0.88	0.88	0.84	0.90
Average of summated scores	31.41	36.38	36.85	39.41
Average of experience using platform	3.96	4.23	4.32	4.43
Average of teachers use of platform	4.14	4.56	4.50*	4.76
Average of suitability for writing	3.39	4.09	3.93*	4.39
Average of suitability for speaking	2.94	3.62	3.73	4.13
Average of suitability for reading	3.42	4.00	3.97*	4.37

Average of suitability for listening	3.31	3.88	4.05	4.33
Average of suitability for grammar	3.37	4.02	4.05	4.41
Average of suitability for vocabulary	3.41	3.94	4.02	4.28
Average of online courses in future?	3.47	4.03	4.28	4.30

* Decrease from previous course session.

Table 3 clearly shows a trend toward more positive attitudes across course sessions. Scores in boldface font were higher than the scores from the previous course session (i.e., previous administration of the survey), while values in italics and marked by an asterisk represent a decrease in a mean score in comparison to the previous session. Only three negative shifts occurred at the item level, between February intensive courses and second semester extensive courses, and all but one of these were small, statistically insignificant changes. All scores peaked in July in the “very positive” (i.e., ≥ 4.0) range, and summated scores consistently increased across all course sessions. Moreover, comparing like to like – that is extensive to extensive and intensive to intensive – the second semester scores were higher than the first semester scores, and the July scores were higher than the February scores. A visualization of these upward trends is perhaps more discernable from the box and whisker plot shown in Figure 9⁶. The results of the one-way ANOVA of mean summated scores are reported in the Appendix.

⁶ For the qualitatively minded readers of this journal, a box plot (or boxplot) visualizes the distribution of a sample and often complements ANOVA. A summated score is calculated by assigning a ranked point value to each Likert response (e.g., 1 for least positive to 5 for most positive) and then summing the total points across all items (i.e., questions). The “whiskers” (or lines) of this box plot thus represent the range (the minimum value versus the maximum value) of summated scores for each respondent for each course session. Any points outside the indicated ranges have been deemed to be outliers by the software, where outliers are extreme responses that do not fit with the rest of the data. The box represents the inner two quartiles of data, that is, where the middle 50% of all summated scores reside. The line in the middle is the median value, or the middle value in the sample of summated scores. The X shows the mean (or average) of the summated scores, the same value reported in Table 3. As can clearly be seen in this box plot, all elements except for the maximum shift upward across the sessions. This provides evidence that attitudes measured by the Likert-like items became more positive over time. However, any Likert scale has a maximum possible summated

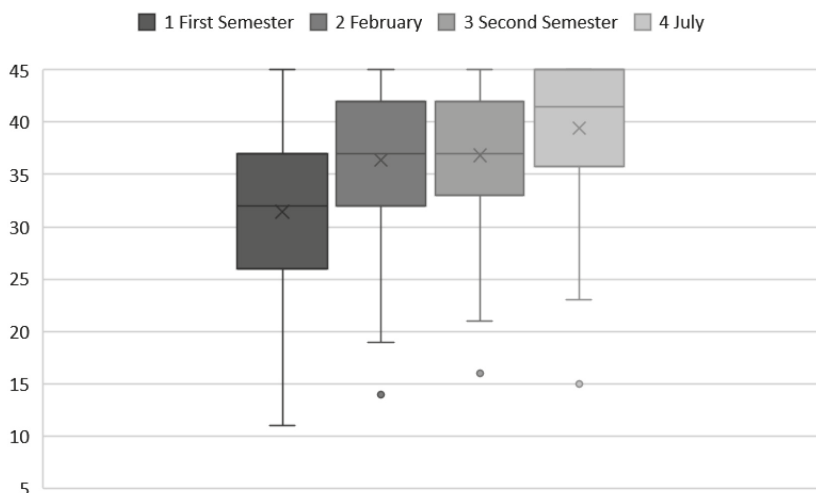


Figure 9. – Box plot of summated scores of likert items by course session (9 = minimum possible score, 45 = maximum possible score).

5.3. Open response questions regarding remote teaching and learning

Table 4. – Open-response questions.

	<i>Do you have any additional comments regarding your positive and negative experiences with your online language courses?</i>	<i>In your opinion, how does the effectiveness of online learning compare to your previous experiences with face-to-face learning?</i>
First semester	<i>n</i> = 99	–
February intensives	<i>n</i> = 114	–
Second semester	<i>n</i> = 29	<i>n</i> = 99
July intensives	<i>n</i> = 16	<i>n</i> = 43

The survey sent to students at the end of the first semester and the February intensives concluded with one open-response question soliciting any additional comments about positive and negative experiences. In response, many students explicitly compared their experiences

score, and the distribution of the summated scores has a “ceiling”. By July 2021, the median, mean, and inner quartiles were all approaching this maximum.

during emergency remote learning with their f2f experiences before the pandemic. For this reason, we decided to insert a specific question about the comparative effectiveness of remote and f2f modalities. This was the only change we made to the survey during the entire academic year. The open-response question(s) posed at the conclusion of each course session, as well as the number of responses received, are reported in *Table 4*.

The thematic analysis, conducted manually by one of the co-authors, revealed four central themes in student responses. Regarding the organization of courses, students left many positive comments about course structure, the organization of course materials, and the abilities of their teachers. Regarding classroom interaction, students were also very satisfied with their teachers' abilities to motivate them to participate in discussions and collaborative tasks. However, when speaking of teaching methodology, some students gave negative comments about teachers attempting to apply traditional f2f methodologies to the virtual classroom, which may reflect a lack of prior training and/or inexperience on the part of some teachers.

When comparing online versus f2f teaching and learning, students' comments were mixed, and these responses therefore warrant a deeper analysis. Students generally had positive things to say about the flexibility afforded by online courses (especially for academic staff and PhD students) and the ease of interaction and speaking practice with breakout rooms and channels. But they lamented the lack of f2f interpersonal interaction with their instructors and classmates and often alluded to technology fatigue and digital overwhelm, which has been reported elsewhere (e.g., Fragai *et al.*, 2020; Gacs, Goertler, and Spasova 2020; Murphy 2020; Celentin *et al.*, 2021), as exemplified by these two comments submitted in English:

It is different approach in general, but due to long period of online courses, I almost forgot what is the feeling to have the face-to-face course.

Honestly I feel a bit tired of being always in front of a Computer, and that had a bad influence on my learning, considering that we are using a lot more electronic devices currently.

Some students felt that the challenges of remote learning were accentuated in intensive courses and proposed restricting online distance learning to extensive courses in the future, as demonstrated by this comment in English:

I think that the best way would be to have the intensive course in presence and the extensive course online. Online course allows students to do not waste time in coming to the university, since it is just needed to switch on the computer, this could be very useful during the extensive course because it would allow to have a lighter monday⁷. For the extensive (means intensive?) course I think it is better to come in presence, because talking with friends or having the lunch break with someone else would make the course not to heavy as it could be online, also because students would not be on the computer for 6 hours per day.

For the extensive course the online learning is very effective while for intensive courses it is not effective as in presence.

Such comments stand in stark contrast to students' Likert item responses, whereby mean scores were consistently higher for intensive courses than they were for extensive courses. Yet, these attitudes might also offer an explanation as to why the increase in pass rates was not as large for intensive courses as it was for extensive courses.

As the surveys were intentionally anonymous, it is not possible to trace shifts in perceptions over time which might correlate with the Likert scores – nor is it possible to segment the scores by course result. However, a few students did leave relevant comments on their own, such as the following, also left in English:

The first online language courses were hard to follow. Over time, it seemed to me that both teachers and students (us) became a bit more confident with the tool and learned how to teach/follow the courses proficiently. Face to face learning allows for no distraction and writing skills are tested in a more realistic manner. Nevertheless, online learning has several positive points. First, flexibility: courses are usually held late in the evening, and following the courses from home is a great advantage. Also, people can follow the courses while in business travels or if sick. Listening, speaking and other skills are not affected by online learning in my opinion, as long as the group of participants is close-knit.

6. DISCUSSION

The course completion rates and the survey responses must be interpreted as complementary data. In other words, quantifiable learner behavior during the pandemic is best interpreted by considering the attitudes that learners expressed toward their learning experiences, while

⁷ Most language courses for students take place on Monday mornings.

the quantitative analysis aids in understanding students' comments. Such is the nature of mixed-method research (Mackey and Bryfonski 2018).

Considering all the data at our disposal, a key finding is that our students (and our teachers) gradually adapted to remote teaching and learning and came to accept its pedagogical value as an effective alternative and/or complement to f2f teaching and learning, at least in certain situations. This is evidenced by the increase in pass rates, the increase in the total number of students engaged in learning, the increasingly positive mean Likert scores, and specific comments left by students. These results may suggest that students and teachers simply grew more accustomed to their learning platforms and remote higher education over time. A more optimistic proposition, worthy of further study, is that our teachers and students improved their abilities to teach and learn remotely upon gaining some practical experience. Either way, both teachers and students are now more open to online courses at our institution than they were before the pandemic.

The discrepancies in responses to extensive versus intensive modalities require a more nuanced interpretation. On one hand, intensive courses attracted an increase in enrollments in comparison to prior academic years, while extensive courses saw a decrease in enrollments. On the other hand, the increase in pass rates was much higher in the extensive courses, and almost caught up to the pass rates seen in intensives. The survey data also seems somewhat paradoxical: Mean Likert scores and summated means were higher for intensive courses, but several students expressed that remote learning was more challenging in the context of an intensive course, with some explicitly suggesting that this form of learning is better fit for extensive courses.

The process theory of motivation (Dörnyei 2000; 2005) may be able to reconcile these apparent contradictions. During the *preactional* stage of learning – that is, before a learning activity starts – our students make a choice to engage in the activity based on their goals as learners, the perceived value of formal learning, and their attitudes toward the services of the Language Centre. The decision to enroll in a language course is therefore often in reaction to abstract concepts and desires or distant needs. Yet motivation during the *actional stage* – that is once a language course has actually started – can be more susceptible to powerful intrinsic and extrinsic phenomena.

For example, students who enrolled for language courses during the pandemic may have been more likely to complete those courses in

comparison to prior years in part due to the ways in which the pandemic forced them to prioritize all their choices as learners, and in part because of the increased ease at which they could participate in lessons. Enrolled students may have had higher levels of motivation during the preactional stage because they believed they “really needed” to complete a course and thought it might be opportune to do so during a nation-wide lockdown. In addition, remote lessons seem to have made it easier for them to maintain motivation during the actional stage since they could participate in lessons from the comfort of their bedrooms and living rooms.

The reason that the intensive courses saw a greater increase in enrollments is likely due to the combination of the accessibility of remote learning and the compact schedule of intensive courses. The idea that an entire course module could be completed in one week from home – especially during a period when they were already stuck at home – must have been an attractive proposition for many students⁸. But the added fatigue and overwhelm of learning remotely for six hours per day obviously proved to be too “intense” for many to handle, despite their preactional motivation and despite the fact that teachers were instructed to conduct no more than two-thirds of the daily learning hours synchronously.

To be sure, the modalities of courses – online versus f2f and intensive versus extensive – were clearly not the only factors influencing students’ motivation to complete language courses during the pandemic. For instance, a larger number of students enrolled for a language course in September 2020 than in the previous two years, but fewer of them successfully completed the courses, resulting in a lower pass rate. All September 2020 courses organized for first-year students were conducted f2f. In fact, the September intensive language courses in 2020 constituted the first f2f activity at UNIBZ since February of the same year, and many students were enthusiastic about a “return to normal”. So, other intrinsic and extrinsic factors must have reduced students’ actional motivation. In personal correspondence with the Language Centre, some students expressed concerns about contracting coronavirus, while others expressed disappointment with health and safety measures (e.g., mask mandates, social distancing, and contact tracing protocols). We also had students miss lessons or drop out of courses due to infection or illness. Surely, there were many other factors which were never communicated to us, such as the tragic passing of loved ones. In other words, the impact of the pandemic on language teaching and learning was multi-

⁸ Although this suspicion cannot be corroborated with the data at hand.

faceted, and we must consider that students faced many new obstacles which were beyond our control.

On the other hand, students also found new reasons to learn a language during the pandemic. Another intrinsic factor that may explain the success of remote teaching and learning in our context could be the social-psychological need for human contact. In the context of another study involving telecollaboration conducted at our institution during the initial lockdown, we found that online collaboration supplied students (and teachers) with much needed social interaction during a time in which many of us were physically isolated from peers, friends, and family (see Ennis *et al.* 2021). Since contemporary language courses involve frequent pair- and groupwork, our courses provided students an opportunity to meet new people, exchange experiences, and even vent a bit. And they were not necessarily receiving these experiences from other subjects whose professors tend to adhere to lecture formats even when teaching online. Hopefully, this therapeutic function of language courses during the pandemic will translate into the realization that language learning is about communicating in new ways with new people, and the experience can be both enjoyable and rewarding.

7. CONCLUSION

As stated at the beginning of this article, our study was conducted to explore responses to emergency remote teaching within our unique context. As an exploratory study, any generalizations to other contexts should be done cautiously. Yet the strength of our mixed methods and large samples is that our data is representative of our context and is therefore informative for decision making. Our study might also serve to encourage similar explorations in other contexts and will hopefully also inspire further research at other language centers, especially on the efficacies of intensive language programs.

For our part, we have decided that we will be offering more online learning options in the future, but we need to reflect further on when this modality is most appropriate. For instance, since the return to f2f teaching, we have continued offering courses for academic staff and PhD students remotely, even during intensive course sessions. This decision has been very well-received given the busy schedules of academics and the fact that staff are dispersed across three campuses. We are also

now offering exam preparation modules in blended modalities, simply because we often only have one or two weeks between the conclusion of language courses and the start of language exam sessions.

Offering remote courses for students during semester extensive courses is something that deserves due consideration whenever practicalities dictate – such as when we have too few students to activate a course on a single campus but sufficient enrollments to activate a course online. A more viable solution for intensive courses, however, may be blended modalities with distance learning options, which could make the courses seem less “intense” without overburdening students with platforms and technologies. But before instituting such policies, we need to collect and analyze more data.

For one, we need to compare results on internal language exams during the pandemic to have a more objective measure of comparative efficacies. If remote learners performed at least as well as f2f learners on standardized exams, then there can be little argument against online teaching. But we may also find some nuance in efficacies. For example, success in online learning may depend on the level of proficiency. A so called “proficient user” may gain more from remote teaching than an “independent user”, and an “independent user” may gain more than a “basic user”, who needs more structure and support from a teacher. We may find that courses for beginners are best taught f2f, while courses for intermediate or advance learners are even more effective when taught partially or entirely online. But we will not know for sure until we look at the data.

Regardless of the choices we make in the coming months and years, we must continue to monitor and reflect. New challenges will surely emerge, and we will find new problems to solve. Most importantly, as our students have implicitly informed us, there will always be a need for continuous professional development so that we can adapt to new realities.

APPENDIX

DESCRIPTION					Alpha	0.05		
Group	Count	Sum	Mean	Variance	SS	Std Err	Lower	Upper
1 First Semester	274	8607	31.41	58.09	15858.40	0.41	30.60	32.22
2 February	252	9167	36.38	40.91	10269.19	0.43	35.53	37.22
3 Second Semester	103	3796	36.85	32.44	3308.82	0.67	35.53	38.18
4 July	46	1813	39.41	44.11	1985.15	1.01	37.43	41.39
ANOVA								
Sources	SS	df	MS	F	P value	Eta-sq	RMSSE	Omega Sq
Between Groups	5167.686492	3	1722.56	36.78	0.00	0.14	0.49	0.14
Within Groups	31421.55203	671	46.83					
Total	36589.23852	674	54.29					

TUKEY HSD/KRAMER		alpha		0.05					
group	mean	n	ss	df	q-crit				
1 First Semester	31.41	274	15858.40						
2 February	36.38	252	10269.19						
3 Second Semester	36.85	103	3308.82						
4 July	39.41	46	1985.15						
Q TEST		675	31421.55	671	3.633				
group 1	group 2	mean	std err	q-stat	lower	upper	p-value	mean-crit	Cohen d
1 First Semester	2 February	4.965	0.422	11.755	3.430	6.499	0.000	1.534	0.725
1 First Semester	3 Second Semester	5.442	0.559	9.731	3.410	7.474	0.000	2.032	0.795
1 First Semester	4 July	8.001	0.771	10.377	5.200	10.802	0.000	2.801	1.169
2 February	3 Second Semester	0.477	0.566	0.844	-1.578	2.533	0.933	2.056	0.070
2 February	4 July	3.036	0.776	3.913	0.217	5.855	0.030	2.819	0.444
3 Second Semester	4 July	2.559	0.858	2.982	-0.559	5.676	0.151	3.117	0.374

* Note that the maximum summated score of 45 is the reason why the difference in means between July and the second semester are not significant at alpha = 0.05. *Figure 10* clearly depicts a shift in the distribution of scores and the effect of a ceiling.

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