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WHAT IT TAKES TO COMMUNICATE: COMPARING EFL STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN TRADITIONAL AND ONLINE CLASSROOM

The multimodality of the online learning environment allows students' participation in different modes, relying either on video, audio or text-based communication. The current study explores the level of students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in the three modes of interaction in synchronous online English language lessons and compares it with their willingness to communicate in a conventional face-to-face language classroom. To this end, we recruited for this research 281 university students who took a course in English as part of their study programs. Relying on a cross-sectional survey design, we analyzed the data on the response variables by means of descriptive statistical tests and factorial ANOVAs. The results reveal that the students' willingness to communicate in synchronous online classes decreases whenever they are required to activate more modes of communication. They also show that the highest willingness to communicate is found in conventional, face-to-face classrooms. An implication of the research is that the mode of communication has the potential to encourage or discourage WTC in EFL among students. It is proposed that the factors of responsibility and face-saving affect the students' participation in online classes, aligning with the idea that WTC is a dynamic, fluid variable which changes depending on the situational context.

Key words: willingness to communicate, English as a foreign language, traditional learning, remote learning, modes of communication.

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INTRODUCTION

The communicative approach to foreign language (L2) teaching has dominated modern L2 pedagogy for decades. The central place in the approach belongs to meaningful and purposeful interactions that occur in real-life tasks and situations. In applying this concept in the L2 classroom, it is a common situation that some students seem eager to take almost every opportunity to communicate, while others rather remain silent, in spite of having a high target language proficiency. One reason for this situation certainly lies in the students' personality, i.e. their extroversion or introversion, self-esteem etc. Alongside these factors (and cognitive factors important for any kind of learning), there are other factors of social and situational nature that affect the learner's readiness to interact in L2, such as the relationship with the interlocutor, the topic of conversation, the classroom climate, cultural issues etc. In the theory of L2 acquisition, the mutual effect of all these factors contributing to the L2 learner's decision to communicate is comprised in a construct known as "willingness to communicate" (WTC). A significant body of research has focused on the extent to which these variables may influence learners' WTC in L2 (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Burroughs, Marie & McCroskey, 2003; Halupka-Rešetar, Knežević & Topalov, 2018; Hashimoto, 2002; McCroskey & McCroskey, 2002; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément & Donovan, 2002; Öz, Demirezen & Pourfeiz, 2015; Peng, 2007; Yashima, 2009). All of these studies investigate learners' WTC in the conventional, face-to-face classroom, while the context of online learning environment remains under-researched. Considering the recent rise in online teaching and learning practices, the current study tries to fill this research gap by exploring WTC in English as a foreign language online classroom among university students and compares it with their WTC in a traditional, face-to-face setting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most widely used definitions of L2 WTC is the one offered by MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément and Noels (1998), who describe this construct as "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using a second language" (MacIntyre et al., 1998: 547). As already stated, the construct is perceived as a complex interplay of a number of individual, social and situational variables that all affect the students' decision to engage in L2 communication. To better explain this interplay, the authors created a six-layer pyramid model that encompasses a range of linguistic, psychological, affective and

social factors. Some of the layers, i.e. the variables that constitute them are stable and unchangeable, such as intergroup climate and personality, while others represent more dynamic and changeable factors referring to situational and specific circumstances that all affect the individual's communication behaviour, i.e. the actual use of L2. In that respect, WTC in L2 is also perceived as a dynamic system in which a complex interconnectedness between social, linguistic, cognitive, emotional and situational factors results in dynamic changes in the learner's WTC (MacIntyre & Legato, 2011). Since this model was proposed, numerous studies have been conducted with the aim of examining either the influence of individual factors or the interrelationship among several of these on the learner's L2 WTC. Thus, Baker and MacIntyre (2000) claim that the learners' perception of their L2 competence, which very often does not represent their actual L2 competence, significantly affects their L2 WTC. The effect of self-perceived language competence on WTC has also been documented in research conducted by Burroughs, Marie and McCroskey (2003), Knell and Chi (2012), Knežević and Halupka-Rešetar (2015), Halupka-Rešetar et al. (2018). Anxiety has also been identified as one of the strongest predictors of WTC in L2 (Kissau, McCullough & Pyke, 2010; McCroskey & McCroskey, 2002; MacIntyre, et al, 2002; Öz et al, 2015). More recently, factors such as interpersonal posture and the ideal L2-self have also been identified as highly influential predictors of L2 WTC (Yashima 2009). All of these studies focused on examining students' WTC in the context of the traditional, face-to-face L2 classroom. In contrast to this, research in L2 WTC in a digital learning environment has been scarce. Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006) found that students preferred online chat to face-to-face discussions as they perceived online environment as more comfortable and that enhanced their WTC. Alwi (2015) found that engineering students produced more L2 in text chat than face-to-face communication. These studies, however, fail to differentiate between synchronous and asynchronous online communication, and also between the three modes of communication that the synchronous environment allows, that is (a) video communication in which students participate with their cameras on, (b) voice communication when students use their microphones only, and (c) text-based communication, when students interact in real time classes writing in the text-chat section. With this in mind, the present study aims to examine how the situational variables of different communication modes in synchronous online EFL learning (video, voice and text-based communication) affect the students' WTC and how this compares to their WTC in the traditional classroom. Accordingly, the following research questions are set:

1. What is the level of students' WTC in the three modes of interaction in synchronous online EFL lessons?
2. How does this compare to their WTC in a conventional face-to-face language classroom?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample consisted of 281 students from the University of Novi Sad who, during the school year 2020/2021, took an online synchronous course in English as a program requirement. Of the total number of participants 113 (40.21%) were male and 168 (59.78%) were female (see Table 1).

	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Faculty of Philosophy	19	78	97
Faculty of Sciences	27	28	55
Faculty of Education	4	8	12
Faculty of Technical Sciences	23	14	37
Faculty of Economics	40	40	80
Total	113	168	281

Table 1: The structure of the sample

The average age of the participants was 20.37 (SD=2.08), ranging from 19 to 29.

Instrument

In order to measure the participants' WTC in traditional, face-to-face classrooms and in the three modes of interaction in synchronous online EFL lessons, this study relied on a questionnaire which was constructed based on a number of instruments previously published (MacIntyre et al., 2001; Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2016). It was necessary to construct a new research instrument since, to the best of our knowledge, there were no readily available instruments that measured WTC in online classrooms at the moment this research was conducted.

Based on existing literature, we assembled 10 items which the participants rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – ‘I am never willing to do this’, 5 – ‘I am always willing to do this’). To explore the factor structure of the questionnaire constructed, all 10 items were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis. The Keyser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, $KMO=.930$. Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(45)=8868.437$, $p=.000$), indicating that correlation structure was adequate for analysis. The maximum likelihood factor analysis with the Kaiser’s criterion of eigenvalues greater than 1 (see Field, 2009) yielded a single factor solution as the best fit for the data, accounting for 64.53% of the variance (see Table 2 for the English translation of the original Serbian items).

How willing are you to...	Component ^a
	1
1. answer the instructor's question when you know the answer	.819
2. interrupt the instructor to ask a question when something is not clear	.811
3. ask a question at the end of the lesson when instructor asks 'Are there any questions?'	.829
4. answer the instructor's question when you're not sure you know the answer	.744
5. answer another student's question	.792
6. paraphrase what the instructor said to make sure you understand it	.808
7. ask the instructor to further clarify the instructions when you didn't understand how to do the task	.815
8. give your opinions/arguments related to the topic of the lesson	.844
9. participate in a debate the topic of which is familiar to you	.825
10. participate in a debate the topic of which is not familiar to you	.739

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis
^a. 1 component extracted.

Table 2: Exploratory factor analysis of the questionnaire items

In order to test the reliability of the instrument, we calculated Cronbach’s alphas for each of the four classroom contexts relative to which the participants rated their WTC:

- Conventional, face-to-face classroom – $\alpha=.913$,
- Online classroom with video-based communication – $\alpha=.954$,
- Online classroom with audio-based communication – $\alpha=.937$,
- Online classroom with text-based communication – $\alpha=.921$.

The overall reliability of the questionnaire in all four classroom situations, as indicated by Cronbach’s alpha, was $\alpha=.964$, which is considered an excellent indicator of reliability.

Procedure

The participants were recruited by their English instructors through mailing lists and online classroom bulletin boards. The questionnaire was posted online via Google Forms (<https://forms.gle/qgdRB6FcjiceSQTm8>) and was made available to participants from March to May 2021. The participants took roughly 10 minutes to fill out the questionnaire. Following an initial inspection of the data, of the 300 forms that were returned, a total of 19 were excluded because they were incomplete.

The data were first analyzed by means of descriptive statistics, after which a series of factorial ANOVAs were conducted in order to answer the research questions. The analyses were conducted using SPSS 25.

RESULTS

The results of the descriptive statistics of students’ WTC in EFL in four different classroom contexts (face-to-face classroom, online classroom with video communication, online classroom with audio communication and online classroom with text-based communication) are displayed in Table 3.

	WTC in face-to-face classroom	WTC using video communication	WTC using audio communication	WTC using text-based communication
Mean	3.40	2.45	3.04	3.18
SD	0.93	1.13	1.05	1.03
Skewness	-.570	.286	-.203	-.356
Error	.141	.141	.141	.141
Kurtosis	-.212	-.974	-.975	-.846
Error	.282	.282	.281	.282

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for WTC across four classroom contexts

The students reported highest WTC in face-to-face classroom contexts (mean=3.40, SD=0.93) and the lowest in online classrooms which used video communication among participants (mean=2.45, SD=1.13). The indicators of skewness and kurtosis reveal that the data for all four dependent variables are normally distributed (Hair et al., 2022).

In order to determine if the factor of the mode of communication (face-to-face, video, audio and text-based communication) significantly influenced the students' reported WTC, we conducted a factorial ANOVA. The results reveal that there is a significant impact of the factor ($F=45.397$, $p=.000$, $\eta_p^2=.103$), with a medium strength of the effect, as indicated by partial eta squared. Further testing of simple effects reveals that the majority of pairwise comparisons are statistically significant (see Table 4).

Mode of Communication		Mean Difference	Std. Error	p^b	95% CI ^b	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
WTC face-to-face	WTC using video communication	.950*	.085	.000	.783	1.118
	WTC using audio communication	.361*	.085	.000	.193	.528
	WTC using text-based communication	.219*	.085	.011	.051	.386
WTC using video communication	WTC face-to-face	-.950*	.085	.000	-1.118	-.783
	WTC using audio communication	-.590*	.085	.000	-.757	-.423
	WTC using text-based communication	-.732*	.085	.000	-.899	-.564
WTC using audio communication	WTC face-to-face	-.361*	.085	.000	-.528	-.193
	WTC using video communication	.590*	.085	.000	.423	.757
	WTC using text-based communication	-.142	.085	.096	-.309	.025
WTC using text-based communication	WTC face-to-face	-.219*	.085	.011	-.386	-.051
	WTC using video communication	.732*	.085	.000	.564	.899
	WTC using audio communication	.142	.085	.096	-.025	.309

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

Table 4: Pairwise comparisons of marginal mean differences in WTC

As shown in the table, there is no significant difference between WTC in online settings using the microphone and using the chat option.

In a similar vein, we conducted a series of factorial ANOVAs on the individual items of the questionnaire in order to better understand the students' WTC in EFL with respect to specific communicative situations that normally take place in foreign language classrooms. The results are shown in Table 5.

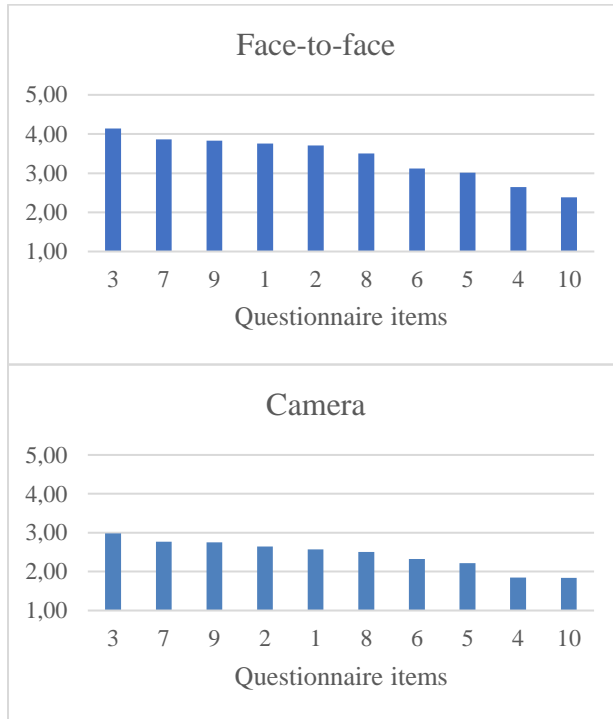
How willing are you to...	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
1. answer the teacher's question when you know the answer	67.360	.000	.146
2. interrupt the teacher to ask a question when something is not clear	41.918	.000	.096
3. ask a question at the end of the lesson when teacher asks 'Are there any questions?'	51.303	.000	.115
4. volunteer to answer the teacher's question when you're not sure you know the answer	25.604	.000	.061
5. volunteer to answer another student's question	17.337	.000	.042
6. paraphrase what the teacher said to make sure you understand it	16.381	.000	.040
7. ask the teacher to further clarify the instructions when you didn't understand how to do the task	32.617	.000	.076
8. give your opinions/arguments related to the topic of the lesson	27.197	.000	.064
9. participate in a debate the topic of which is familiar to you	29.602	.000	.070
10. participate in a debate the topic of which is not familiar to you	11.505	.000	.028

Table 5: Factorial ANOVAs for WTC across classroom interactions

The results reveal that the factor of the mode of communication influences every communicative classroom situation investigated by means of individual questionnaire items. Effect sizes range from small (WTC when answering another student's question, when paraphrasing what the teacher said to make sure they

understood it and when participating in a debate the topic of which is not familiar to them) to large (WTC when answering the teacher's question when they know the answer). In all of the above situations, the students were most willing to communicate in face-to-face classrooms and least willing to communicate using camera during online lessons.

Finally, we investigated the distribution of mean scores for individual items across four different modes of classroom communication (see Chart 1).



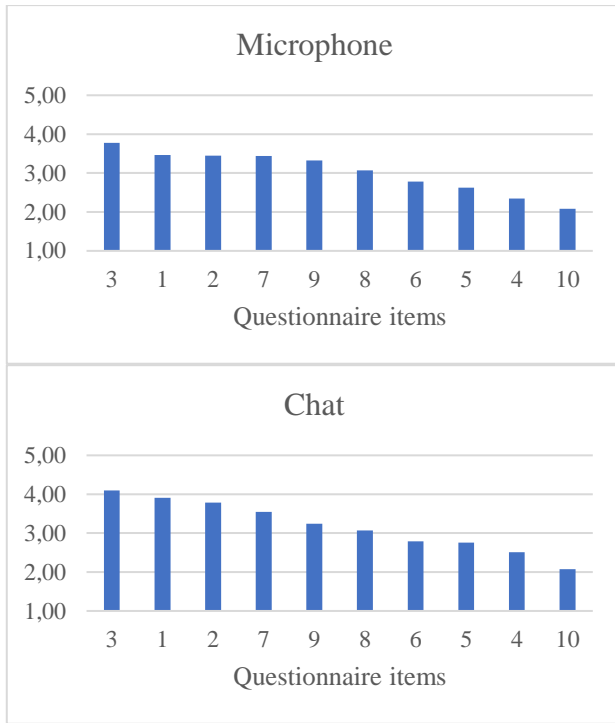


Chart 1: Mean scores of items across modes of communication

The analysis reveals that in all four classroom settings students report the highest WTC for the same type of classroom interaction (item 3), whereas they report the lowest WTC for the same five types of classroom interactions (items 8, 6, 5, 4 and 10). Variation across different modes of communication was found for the remaining questionnaire items.

DISCUSSION

The main aim of this study was to determine the effect of the mode of interaction (video, audio and text-based) on the students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in online, synchronous EFL lessons. Even though WTC in a traditional classroom has received considerable scholarly attention, few studies thus far, as explained in the literature review, have tackled the issue of the mode of online communication and how it affects the learner's readiness to enter into interaction with other classroom participants. Any insights into this issue are particularly important in view of the shift to remote learning, as a direct

consequence of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, which, according to the latest report from the World Bank, disrupted education in over 150 countries and affected 1.6 billion students (Muñoz-Najar et al., 2021). For an EFL remote learning lesson to be successful, WTC is certainly positioned among the factors the importance of which cannot be overstated.

The most immediate conclusion that is supported by the results of this study is that the online learning environment represents a context in which students show low levels of willingness to take part in classroom interactions, be it with the teacher or other students. WTC in all three investigated online modes of communication (video, audio and text-based) is statistically significantly lower than WTC in a traditional, face-to-face classroom. This is further evidenced by the statistically significant results in investigating the individual questionnaire items, all of which suggest that the online synchronous context brings with it a set of challenges for engaging students in meaningful interaction that are particular to the online mode of communication, which certainly warrants further comprehensive inspection. Although more in-depth reports on the effects of remote learning on learners' WTC are yet to be published, the students' overall reluctance to take part in online lessons found in this study accords with the findings of Lyytikäinen (2022) and Yarwood and Bennett (2022), who also found that WTC in online settings was considerably lower compared to traditional classroom lessons. The results also point to differences in the reported WTC among the three online modes of interaction, with WTC being lowest during lessons where students are required to participate in the lesson online via video (by turning on their camera) and highest when students do not have to turn on either the camera, or the microphone, and can interact with the teacher and other students in real time using the chat option.

A closer look at the distribution of mean scores of individual questionnaire items across the four investigated modes of classroom communication reveals a number of interesting findings. First, it is possible to identify similar patterns in participants' ratings across all four classroom contexts with respect to the highest and the lowest rated items. Namely, students report that the classroom interaction they are most willing to take part in is asking for clarification at the end of the lesson, regardless of the classroom context. It is, perhaps, not surprising that this mode of classroom interaction is rated the highest if we consider what it means to be a university student. In relation to situational WTC, Kang (2005) refers to this as 'responsibility', i.e. "a feeling of obligation or duty to deliver and understand a message, or to make it clear" (p. 285). In a university setting, the most important task a student has is to understand the lesson. Failure to do so "may result in a loss

of personal benefit and intergroup respect, or ruin an interpersonal relationship” (Kang, 2005: 285). It would seem that the uncompromising importance of this task universally raises a student’s readiness to engage in this type of classroom interaction.

Another similarity between all four classroom contexts can be found among the lowest rated classroom interactions. Namely, regardless of the mode of communication (face-to-face, and online via video, audio or text) the students are least willing to volunteer to answer another student’s question (item 5), volunteer to answer the teacher’s question when they are not sure they know the answer (item 4) and participate in a debate the topic of which is not familiar to them (item 10). With respect to the former two classroom exchanges, students’ unwillingness to communicate in, what is essentially, whole-class interaction is consistent with the literature (e.g. Cao, 2011; Cao & Philp, 2006; de Saint Léger & Storch, 2009; MacIntyre et al., 1998; McCroskey, 1992; Zhang, Beckmann & Beckmann, 2018), which reports that this interaction setup can be seen as anxiety-inducing due to public appraisal and peer pressure. This is further aggravated by the possibility of giving the wrong answer, which poses a high risk of threat to one’s face, the logical consequence of which is lowered level of willingness to participate. Cao (2011) further proposes that unwillingness to take part in whole-class activities is also related to the perceived difficulty of the questions posed by the teacher to the whole class – students may be less willing to answer a question if they feel other students might give a better answer, making their own participation redundant. Turning to the classroom interaction which was universally rated the lowest across all four classroom contexts (participating in a debate the topic of which is not familiar to the student), these results not only reflect the conclusions of previous studies in this area (e.g. Cao, 2011; Lee, 2018; Peng, 2012; 2020; Zhang, Beckmann & Beckmann, 2018), but also reaffirm the importance of background knowledge and topic familiarity in (dis)inhibited classroom communication.

A closer inspection of the differences in the distribution of ratings across the four classroom contexts also reveals an interesting pattern of findings. Namely, the results show that students are more willing to answer the instructor’s question when they know the answer and interrupt the teacher to ask a question when something is not clear in audio and text-based communication compared to video communication and face-to-face communication. At the same time, they are less willing to ask the instructor to further clarify the instructions when they do not understand how to do the task and to participate in a debate the topic of which is familiar to them when classroom communication takes place via microphone and

via chat. We believe that an explanation for this may be found in the most important factor that sets apart face-to-face and video communication from audio and text-based communication – the presence or absence of visual cues. In classrooms where teachers can see their students, non-verbal messages add an important element to communication as students can signal their WTC through eye contact, exaggerated facial expressions, by raising their hand, etc. Peng (2020) indicates that this is particularly true for students who would not normally speak up, but are prepared to do so when nominated. In non-visual classroom communication, students are denied the opportunity of not speaking up and instead waiting to be called upon because they used nonverbal signals of willingness, whether this refers to situations of self-promotion (answering a question when they know the answer), or to face-threatening situations (interrupting the teacher when something is not clear). Their increased WTC is particularly important in the latter situation, since, touching upon the concept of responsibility introduced by Kang (2005), they risk missing the opportunity to understand what they need to learn.

CONCLUSION

This study examined WTC in remote learning contexts by comparing different online modes of interaction (video, audio and text-based communication) during synchronous online EFL classes and contrasting it with the traditional classroom. While previous research has examined a myriad of factors affecting learners' readiness to enter into communication with other participants in face-to-face classroom exchanges, this study set out to examine how WTC in different types of regular classroom interactions might change depending on the type of cues students are exposed to in remote learning contexts. The findings indicate that students are overall unwilling to participate in online classes and that this unwillingness is most extreme in cases when they are asked to take part in classes by turning on their camera. Importantly, the type of classroom interaction may increase or decrease the students' WTC depending on the presence or absence of visual cues.

An implication of the results is that the mode of communication has the potential to increase or diminish WTC in EFL/L2 among students. It has been proposed that the factors of responsibility and face-saving affect the students' participation in online classes, aligning with the idea that WTC is a dynamic, fluid variable which changes depending on the situational context (Cao, 2011; Kang, 2005; Lee, 2018; Peng, 2020). This further means that if remote learning is to be successful "it needs to allow for meaningful two-way interaction between students

and their teachers” (Barron et al., 2021: 51). This is only possible if the most appropriate mode of communication is used for the most appropriate learning situation.

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ŠTA JE POTREBNO ZA KOMUNIKACIJU? POREĐENJE SPREMNOSTI UČENIKA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA KAO STRANOG ZA KOMUNIKACIJU U TRADICIONALNOJ I U ONLAJN UČIONICI

Rezime

U savremenoj metodici nastave engleskog kao stranog jezika u kojoj dominira komunikativni pristup učenju, kao jedan od ključnih pojmova javlja se termin „spremnost za komunikaciju“. Ovaj termin podrazumeva istovremeni uticaj niza ličnih, društvenih i situacionih faktora koji zajedničkim delovanjem utiču na odluku učenika da se upusti u komunikaciju na stranom jeziku u datom trenutku. Rad se bavi ispitivanjem nivoa spremnosti za komunikaciju na engleskom jeziku u univezitetskoj nastavi koja se realizuje u dva konteksta: u tradicionalnoj učionici i u onlajn okruženju, tj. u vidu nastave na daljinu. Nastava na daljinu koja se odvija u realnom vremenu pruža tri načina za komunikaciju na času: putem direktnog video uključanja, putem zvučnog uključanja samo, i putem pisanja poruka. Ova tri oblika komunikacije uzeta su u obzir prilikom ispitivanja spremnosti studenata za komunikaciju na engleskom jeziku i upoređena su sa nivoom spremnosti za komunikaciju u tradicionalnoj nastavi. Odgovori su prikupljeni pomoću onlajn upitnika koji je popunio 281 student novosadskog univerziteta tokom akademske 2020-2021. godine. Statističkom obradom podataka došlo se do opšteg zaključka da studenti pokazuju veću spremnost za komunikaciju u tradicionalnoj učionici nego u onlajn okruženju. Što se tiče tri načina komuniciranja u onlajn okruženju, podaci govore da je spremnost za komunikaciju najveća ukoliko se ona odvija putem ispisivanja poruka, a da je najmanja kada student treba da uključi i kameru i mikrofonski uređaj. Dobijeni rezultati ukazuju na kompleksnost izvođenja nastave jezika na daljinu u kojoj komunikativne aktivnosti moraju biti zastupljene u sva tri vida interakcije, uz pažljivo planiranje redosleda aktivnosti koje će najpre podrazumevati pisanu komunikaciju u vidu poruka, zatim audio uključivanje studenata, i konačno, učešće studenata i putem video slike.

Ključne reči: spremnost za komunikaciju, nastava engleskog jezika, tradicionalna nastava, nastava na daljinu, vid komunikacije

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