

CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING COVID -19: THE EXAMPLE OF ARABIC CHAIR AT YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Keywords: *online learning, distance learning, Arabic Studies Department, COVID-19, higher education*

Abstract: As a result of the spread of COVID-19, during the months of February and March of 2019, the educational system in most countries around the world, along with other systems, faced a number of new challenges. In an effort to curb the spread of the epidemic, educational institutions in many countries, including schools and universities, were temporarily shut down shortly thereafter. Yerevan State University was not an exception. Starting from the second half of March until the end of the second semester, classes were held online. Facing the fact that stakeholders participating in the educational process had to adapt to the new conditions and solve the existing problems. At the end of the semester, a survey was conducted among the lecturers and learners of the department of Arabic Studies to identify these problems, to understand to what extent they managed to solve them, and what kind of teaching the survey takers consider to be the most effective. This article presents the results of a survey conducted among 78 learners and 12 lecturers of Arabic Studies Chair at YSU.

Background of the Study

Teaching During the COVID 19 Pandemic:

As a consequence of COVID 19, most countries around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the pandemic³. Yerevan State University was not an exception. In one day, the whole system was changed, and stakeholders had to adapt to a whole new way of teaching - online or distance teaching. Being forced to adapt regardless of being prepared for it, the whole second semester was held online.

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³ UNESCO. (2020, Match 13). *COVID-19 educational disruption and response*. Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures>

Off-Site Education

Distance education, also known as distance learning, e-learning, or online learning, it is form of education which does not require the physical presence of teachers and students in the same area during the learning process and is instead accomplished through the usage of different technological gadgets and platforms that to facilitate the student-teacher and student-student communication.

Boston Gazette is known to be the first to attempt Distance Learning in 1728⁴. This was before the invention of technological facilities. The process was accomplished through weekly mailed lessons.

The first ever distance course was created and conducted in mid-19th century England by Sir Isaac Pitman⁵, who used transcribed texts and postcards to teach and receive-assignments from the students⁶. Due to positive feedback throughout England, the courses were established on a more formal basis three years later. Afterwards, in the late 1800s, this model was adopted in the United States of America at the Society to Encourage Studies at Home and it eventually spread all over the world.

Types of Distance Learning via Internet

There are many different types of distance learning:

Distance Learning through Video Conferencing, which is considered the most common type nowadays. This type of learning can be done one-to-one or in groups, and it requires a gadget connected to the internet.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Distance Learning: Synchronous means at the same time while asynchronous means not at the same time. From here comes the second type of distance education which demands the learners to be in the same room or place. This type of learning it is usually less flexible. It also facilitates large group interactions between professors and students. Asynchronous distance education is based on assignments, and it provides students with the freedom to work as per their own will but with deadlines. In synchronous learning, students can have more interaction with each other, while, in asynchronous distance learning, the focus is on the assignments.

Open-schedule online courses add yet another layer of flexibility. These courses are a type of asynchronous course setup, except there aren't any

⁴ *"Boston Gazette April 10, 1775". Walking Tours of Historic Boston. 2004–2006. Archived from the original on 5 April 2006. Retrieved 16 July 2019.*

⁵ *"Pitman, Sir Isaac (1813–1897)" by Tony D. Triggs in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, online edition. Retrieved 12 January 2014.*

⁶ Talitha Hudgins, Janet L. Holland, Digital Badges, Wearable Technologies, (2018).

deadlines either. This is ideal for learners with other demands on their time, such as professionals or stay-at-home parents.

Fixed-time online courses are a type of synchronous course that requires online users to all visit a specific virtual location at a set time and place (e.g. a webinar). Unlike more rigid synchronous lessons, this does allow students from anywhere in the world to connect and interact online⁷.

Computer-based distance education involves fixed-time, synchronous lessons on computers, usually in a computer lab. This is most common in existing institutions that already have access to the necessary devices.

Hybrid learning combines elements of synchronous and asynchronous styles. It may require some rigidity in scheduling for subjects in which students need direct access to the instructor, however, other lessons can be self-directed. It is a system that adapts to the needs of the curriculum⁸.

The Difference between Distance and Online Learning

Location, interaction, and intention are the biggest differences among distance and online learning. While in online learning, students may meet with the instructor and get the assignments and content online, distance learning is applied from home.

Moreover, distance learning includes no interaction, while on the other hand; online learners meet on a regular basis.

Finally, the difference in intention among online and distance learning is that online teaching includes a variety of in-person teaching methods and mixes up various teaching techniques, while distance learning only applies an online method for delivering instruction⁹.

The Example of Arabic Studies Department

Starting from the second half of March 2020, a lockdown was applied in the Republic of Armenia and the field of Education was put in a rather stressful situation on all stakeholders, students, educators and administration.

In one day, the lesson delivery system had to be shifted from the regular face-to-face classroom into online platforms.

⁷ *"Anniversaries of 2013". The Daily Telegraph. 28 December 2012.*

⁸ Kaplan, Andreas M.; Haenlein, Michael (2016). "Higher education and the digital revolution: About MOOCs, SPOCs, social media, and the Cookie Monster". *Business Horizons*. **59** (4): 441-50. doi:[10.1016/j.bushor.2016.03.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2016.03.008).

⁹ Jump up to: ^a ^b Owen Ward. *Isaac Pitman and the Fourth Phonetic Institute* (PDF) (Report). Archived from [the original](#)(PDF) on 4 October 2015. Retrieved 2 October 2015.

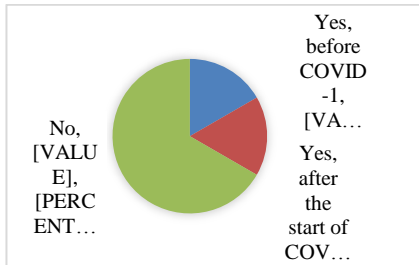
Educators had to self-educate themselves and start using different online platforms like Big Blue Button, Facebook messenger, ZOOM, however; most of them later shifted to ZOOM.

Findings

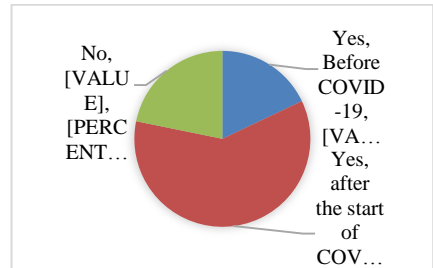
12 lecturers and 78 students in the Chair of Arabic Studies took part in the survey, the results of which are presented below.

1. Have you ever taken an online teaching / learning course?

Lecturers



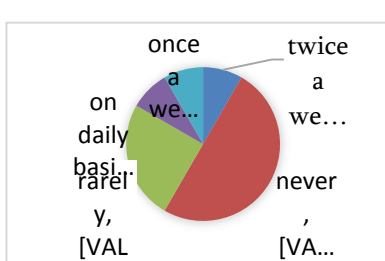
Learners



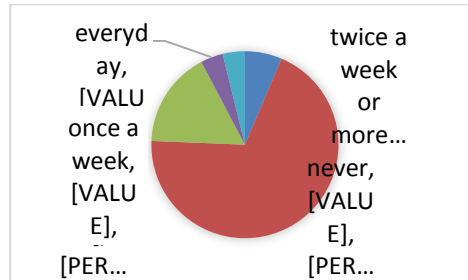
Prior to COVID-19, 69% of the learners and 50% of the lecturers had no online teaching / learning experience. About 14% of the learners, 25% of the lecturers had an experience on a systematic basis; however, it was basically private online lessons. Most of the lecturers did not take such a course even after being forced to teach online. On the other hand, almost half of the students took a similar course.

2. How often did you teach / study online before COVID-19?

Lecturer



Learners



It was not difficult for both the lecturers and the students of the chair of Arabic Studies to use the necessary tools for online teaching / learning. Moreover, 83% of the lecturers considered the use of such tools easy or very easy, and the percentage among the students was 56%. At the same time, 76% of the lecturers and 75% of the learners claimed they had relevant computer

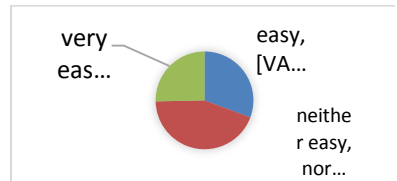
skills, which indicates that special attention should be paid to online learning tools as a compulsory course.

3. How easy is it for you to use online teaching tools?

Lecturers

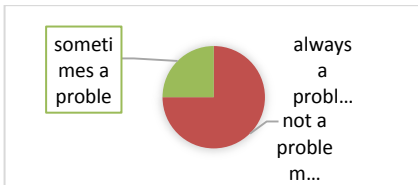


Learners

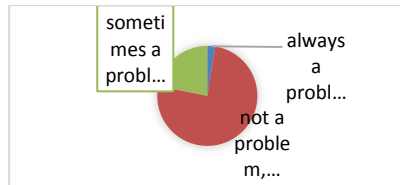


4. How problematic it is for you to have the required computer skills for online lessons?

Lecturers



Learners

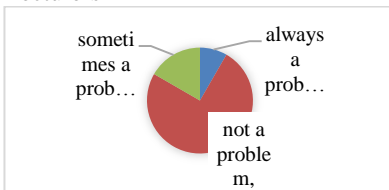


While 75% of the lecturers said that the necessary internet connection for online lessons is not a problem at all, only 31% the learners said the same.

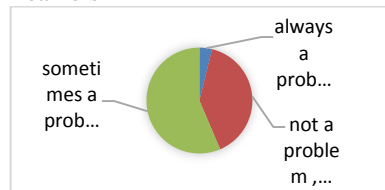
Also, 60% of the learners said that they sometimes have trouble connecting to online classes if not always, which is explained by the fact that, unlike lecturers, the vast majority of the learners live outside Yerevan, in different regions of Armenia, where the internet connection is not always stable.

5. How problematic is the availability of internet for online lessons?

Lecturers



Learners



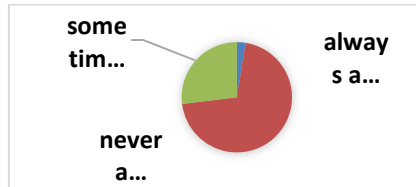
Having a computer for the online lessons is not a problem for 100% for of the lecturers and learners who participated in the surveyed. Some of the learners joined the online classes through mobile phones, which, of course, caused some difficulties during in the performance of specific tasks.

6. How problematic is having a computer for online lessons?

Lecturers



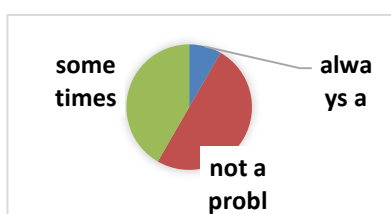
Learners



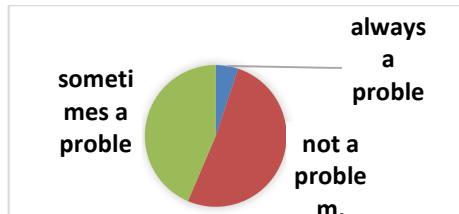
It is sometimes a problem for both lecturers and learners to provide good conditions or atmosphere for online classes taking into consideration the conditions at home, which sometimes interfere with the quiet atmosphere, especially when than more one household member is taking an online class at the same time.

7. How problematic is it for you to have the right environment for online lessons?

Lecturers



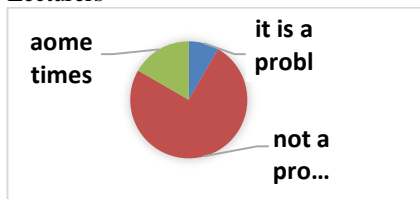
Learners



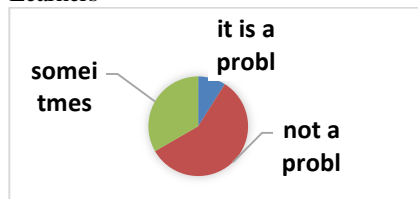
The number of both lecturers and students who constantly have problems using the virtual whiteboard does not reach 10%.

8. How problematic is using a virtual whiteboard?

Lecturers



Learners

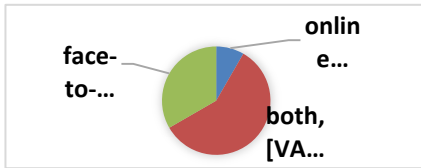


Regarding communication, 59% of the lecturers considered both online and face-to-face teaching equally effective. On the other hand, only 28% of the learners agree and 64% of the learners prefer face-to-face teaching. Moreover, only 8% of both lecturers and learners see advantages of online teaching.

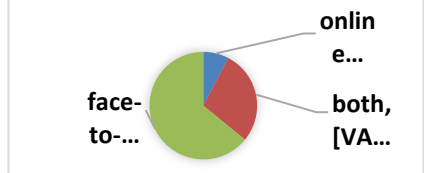
However, those learners and the lecturers were able to compare face-to-face lessons they had experienced before shifting into online learning/teaching.

9. In your opinion, which type of teaching is more effective regarding personal communication?

Lecturers



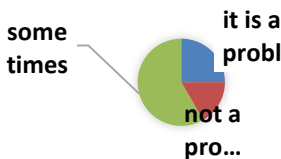
Learners



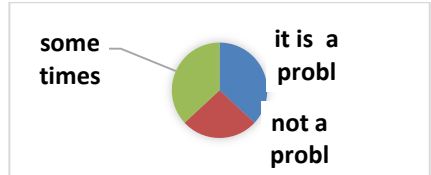
Lack of physical contact was always a problem for 25% of lecturers and for 37% of the learners and not a problem at all for 17% of the lecturers and for 26% of the students. These figures show that both lecturers and learners strive to communicate face-to-face with one another, at least occasionally.

10. How problematic is the lack of face-to-face classes with you?

Lecturers



Learners



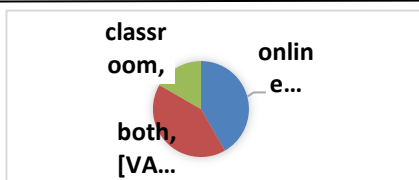
Only 6% of learners think that online teaching has made the lecturers more conscientious, while 46% state that the lecturers have had the same conscientiousness under both teaching methods. At the same time, 56% of learners prefer classroom teaching in terms of their own preparation, and only 13% prefer online teaching.

Regarding students' responsibility, 41% of lecturers think that online teaching has an advantage, and 42% do not see a difference between these two forms of teaching. As for the students' readiness for lessons, 50% of the teachers do not see a difference between the two teaching methods, 25% prefer the classroom, and 25% prefer online teaching.

11. Which option do you consider most effective for teaching?

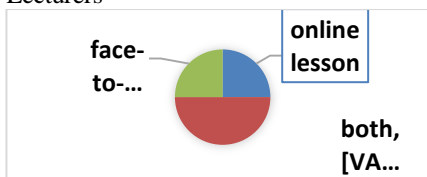
Lecturers

Learners

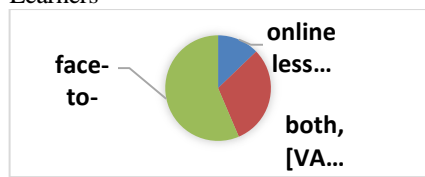


12. To learners, which type of class do you consider more effective regarding preparation for lessons?

Lecturers



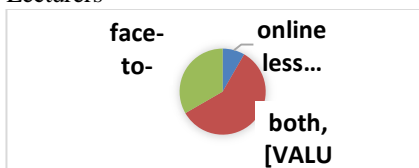
Learners



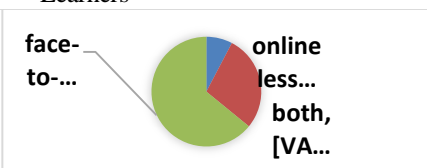
The majority of lecturers, 58%, do not see a difference between the two forms of teaching. Only 8% prefer online teaching. While the majority of learners by the above criteria give an advantage to classroom teaching, respectively 64.58 and 64%. It should be noted that in terms of their involvement in the lessons, 12% of the learners prefer online lessons.

13.Regarding student-centered teaching, which option do you consider more effective?

Lecturers

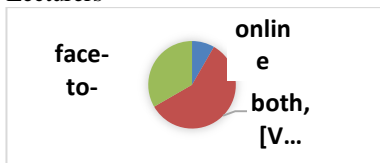


Learners

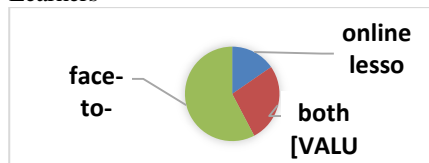


14.Regarding learners' involvement, which type of teaching do you consider more effective?

Lecturers



Learners



15.Which option do you think is more effective regarding having a personal approach of learners towards learning?

Lecturers

Learners

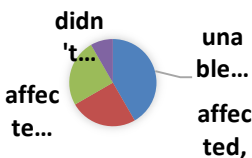


49% of the learners think that the techniques used in online teaching did not affect the teaching method, while only 8% of the lecturers think so. 14% the learners and 25% of the lecturers think that the being online has had a positive impact on the teaching method is positive.

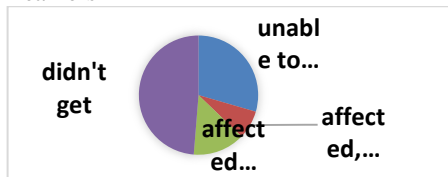
It should be noted that 29% of the learners found it difficult to answer this question, which means that they did not see a clear difference after switching to online learning. Therefore, we can conclude that 78% of students do not see a significant difference in terms of method among the type of teaching.

16.Has online teaching affected the teaching method?

Lecturers



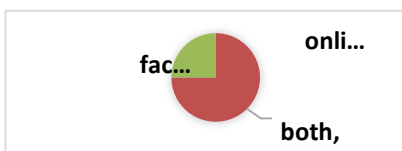
Learners



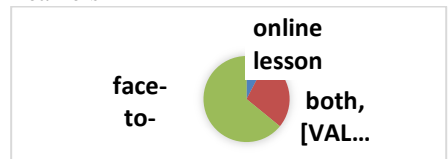
According to the content of the course program, the majority of learners prefer the strictness of the course in classroom teaching, respectively – 64: 51 and 61%, while the majority of lecturers do not see a difference in the above-mentioned, respectively - 75. 58 and 67%. Also, none of the lecturers by the above criteria distinguishes between online and classroom teaching.

17.Which option of teaching do you consider more effective regarding the heavy workload of the program in specific courses?

Lecturers



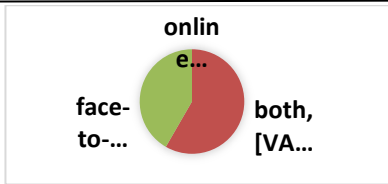
Learners



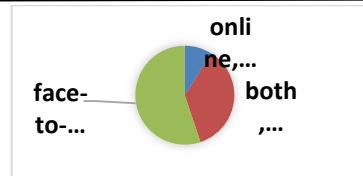
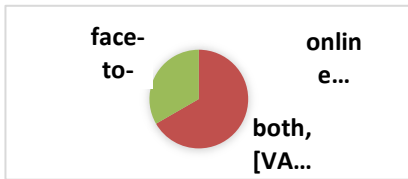
18. Which option of teaching do you consider more effective regarding the content of the lesson?

Lecturers

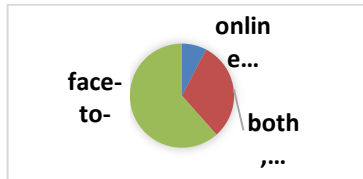
Learners



Lecturers



Learners



In terms of providing the technical part of the lesson, online teaching has an advantage in the opinion of the 50% of the lecturers, and only 18% of the learners. Meanwhile, 46% of the learners and 325% of the lecturers see the face-face lessons more effective.

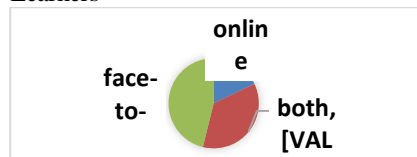
As we can see, the opinions of the learners and lecturers on this issue are inversely proportional, which can be explained by the fact that the learners who took part in the online classes through mobile phones and not computers had difficulties in using online equivalents of different technical means.

19. Which type of teaching do you consider more effective regarding the technical part of the lesson (use of video, audio and other materials)?

Lecturers



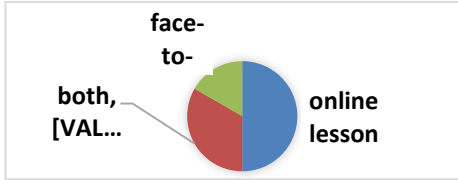
Learners



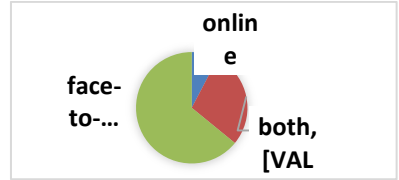
We see opposite opinion among teachers and students regarding the effectiveness of the board. From this point of view, online education has an advantage in the opinion of only 8% of the learners and 50% of the lecturers, and the face-to-face lessons have an advantage only in the opinion of the 17% of the lecturers and 64% of the learners. The reason for this is that online education allows teachers to choose the most convenient hours of the day for them, which is not always possible during classroom teaching. However, this fact may actually prolong the learning process throughout the day, almost depriving students of free time.

20.Regarding the construction of more effective schedules, which option do you consider more effective

Lecturers



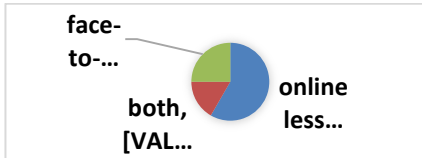
Learners



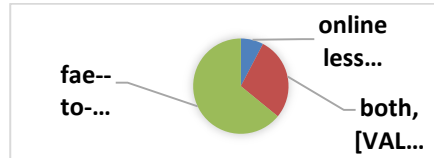
In terms of more effective use of class time, lecturers and learners also have opposite opinions. Online teaching is preferred by only 8% of lecturers and 58% of the learners, and classroom teaching is preferred by 25% of the learners and 64% of learners. This is a worrying indicator, as it shows that lecturers and students have different ideas about the effectiveness of the class.

21.Regarding using the class time in the most effective way, which type of classes do you consider to be more effective?

Lecturers



Learners



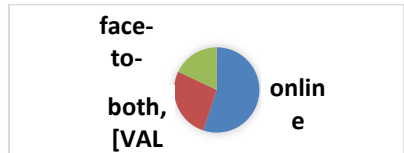
Opinions are also ambiguous in terms of workload and stress. If the majority of both learners and faculty (60% and 55%, respectively) say that online teaching is more burdensome, then we see the opposite picture in terms of stress: while online education is always stressful for only 25% of lecturers, it is for 65% of the learners.

22.Which type of lesson burdens you the most?

Lecturers



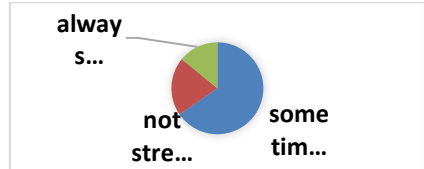
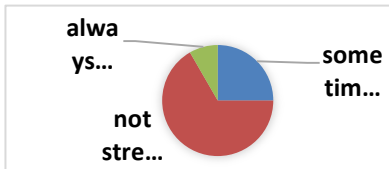
Learners



23.How stressful is online teaching/learning?

Lecturers

Learners



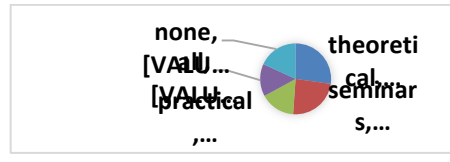
Online teaching of theoretical courses is more effective for 27% of learners, while 34% of lecturers prefer online teaching of practical lessons. This can be explained by the fact that 8 out of 12 lecturers who participated in the survey (67%) teach only practical subjects. Moreover, 18% of the learners and 34% of the lecturers do not consider the implementation of any type of class ineffective when online.

24. Which types of online classes do you find most effective?

Lecturers



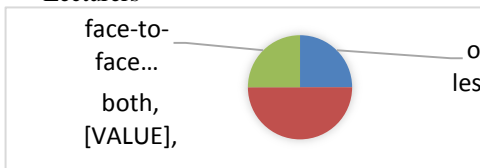
Learners



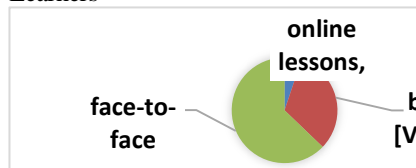
63% of the learners would prefer to study in a classroom if they had the opportunity, and 32% would combine classroom teaching with online teaching. Only 5% would prefer online teaching. Regarding lecturers, 50% prefer the combination of classroom and online lessons, and 25% would prefer only one type of lessons.

25. If you have the opportunity, which type of lessons would you prefer?

Lecturers



Learners



50% of lecturers and only 32% of learners preferred combining of both types of teaching while 63% of learners preferred face-to-face teaching.

Conclusion

Based on the survey, most of the lecturers do not see a significant difference between classroom and online teaching, a combination of the two

forms of teaching is preferable if possible, then most learners prefer classroom teaching, which, among other benefits, plays a significant social role in direct communication as learners say.

Learners should be given the opportunity to pay special attention to online learning tools as part of the "Fundamentals of Information Technology" compulsory course, which is included in the curriculum. Also, it is necessary to organize special courses on online teaching skills for lecturers.

Online lessons should not exceed one hour not to be too stressful for both students and teachers.

Moreover, it is preferable if YSU has its own platform to deliver the lessons online as the currently uses ones are free of charge but have many limitations.

**ԲԱՐՁՐԱԳՈՒՅՆ ԿՐԹՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՄԱՐՏԱՀՐԱՎԵՐՆԵՐԸ
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*Սոնա Տոնիկյան
Սեդրակ Յովսեփյան
(Ամփոփում)*

ԿՈՎԻԴ-19-ի տարածման արդյունքում 2019 թվականի փետրվար-մարտ ամիսներից սկսած աշխարհի երկրների մեծ մասի կրթական համակարգերը՝ ի թիվս բազմաթիվ այլ համակարգերի, կանգնեցին նոր մարտահրավերների առջև: Փորձելով զսպել համաճարակի արագ տարածումը, բազմաթիվ երկրների նաև ուսումնական հաստատություններ ժամանակավորապես փակվեցին՝ կարճ ժամանակ հետո առկա դասավանդումից առցանցի անցնելով: Երևանի պետական համալսարանը բացառություն չէր: Մարտի երկրորդ կեսից մինչև ուսումնական երկրորդ կիսամյակի ավարտ դասապրոցները կազմակերպվեց առցանց եղանակով: Փաստի առաջ կանգնելով, ուսումնական գործընթացին մասնակցող կողմերը ստիպված էին հարմարվել ստեղծված նոր պայմաններին և հրնթացս լուծում տալ ծառացած խնդիրներին: Կիսամյակի վերջում ամբիոնի դասախոսների և ուսանողների շրջանում հարցում անցկացվեց՝ վեր հանելու համար այդ խնդիրները, և հասկանալու համար, թե որքանով է հաջողվել դրանց լուծում տալ, ուսուցման որ տեսակն են հարցվողներն առավել արդյունավետ համարում և այն: Սույն հոդվածում ներկայացվում են ԵՊՀ արաբագիտության ամբիոնի 12 դասախոսների և 78 ուսանողների շրջանում անցկացված այդ հարցման արդյունքները: