ENSLT Report

Impacts on Sign Language Teaching and Learning in Europe during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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1 – Introduction

This report highlights the state of sign language teaching in Europe during the crisis caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease or illness caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2); the pandemic has had a worldwide impact on the population, creating consequences such as the closure of schools and universities. This has in turn encouraged innovative methods of delivering sign language education to ensure that students continue to receive teaching, but with different teaching methods and through a different modality from how they previously learnt, i.e., the movement from face-to-face learning to online. This also required the learning of new and varied software among teachers, changing the teaching methodology (Ferdig et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2020; Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020). In recent years the European Network of Sign Language Teachers (ENSLT)[1] has often organised various meetings such as symposiums, LESICO

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[1] ENSLT is a European non-governmental organisation, created during the LESICO conference in Prague in 2013 in response to the needs expressed by sign language teachers from different countries. ENSLT was legally established in 2018 in Belgium. Any sign language teacher from any of the European countries in the Council of Europe can become an ENSLT member. For more information see www.enslt.eu

conferences are also organised with the aim of disseminating and sharing information among sign language teachers in Europe, and they do raise the level of competence in teaching, learning and in the evaluation of sign language. During the pandemic, ENSLT was not able to organise any face-to-face conferences due to various national laws that required everyone to stay at home and also to work at home.

The idea for this report came about as the result of an informal discussion and short survey by ENSLT, which aimed to share information among its membership about the online teaching and learning modes and tools adopted during the pandemic. The report focuses on the problems that sign language teachers have faced in Europe and the coping mechanisms that they had been using throughout 2020.

2- Situation review

Prior to the pandemic, most sign language students received their education through face-to-face learning and the delivery of teaching activities occurred primarily within a classroom setting. Many sign language teachers have learnt how to design and deliver programmes or curricula, or training courses based on face-to-face teaching. During the coronavirus pandemic many teachers switched their delivery from face-to-face in the classroom to remote teaching using different online platforms offered to them from their respective institutions. There are several websites, prior to the impact of the pandemic that offered sign language courses online in various countries, but these followed an asynchronous mode (Hrastinski, 2008; Offir et al., 2008; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014), where students can learn in their own time with fixed learning plans and without the presence of teachers. With the impact of the change of teaching modality from face to face in the classroom towards virtual remote learning, many teachers are turning to online teaching as a synchronous mode, and this involves a new teaching approach, which many have not tried before. So, in this digital environment, the teacher takes care not only of teaching but also of classroom management in a completely new environment, never learned or tried before (Lathifah et al., 2020; Mahmood, 2020). Whilst there has already been a considerable amount of research published on the teaching and learning of spoken languages during the pandemic, there is a dearth of such studies on sign language teaching. This lack of understanding and identification of the current situation for sign language teaching is resulting in a lack of ability to share knowledge and ideas among sign language teachers.

3 – Method

Data Collection Survey

In order to collect data, ENSLT released an online invitation to take part in a survey that contained seven questions (see Section 4). The questions were created by ENSLT board members following discussions regarding observations of the teaching situation created by COVID-19. The first two questions are based on the employment status of teachers during the current pandemic situation, specifically the current workplace from which teaching is taking place, and the type of employment contract. The following two questions then focused on the impacts that the pandemic situation is having on the working patterns and health situation of sign language teachers. The remainder of the questions, other than the last, centred on the use of online resources as a strategy for dealing with the lockdown situation, and help from the institutions they work within. The last question enquired as to their views on future teaching methodologies. This open invitation was launched 20 days before an online event was held by ENSLT, during which the participants were able to complete the survey.

Procedure of data collection

The survey was distributed via a one-hour video call on Zoom[2] using International Sign[3] (IS) and written English via a PowerPoint presentation, on 29th January 2021. Participants comprised of 57 sign language teachers from 21 different countries, including Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, United Kingdom, Ireland, Iceland, Poland, Greece, Malta, Norway, Sweden, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia Republic, and Israel, although not part of the Council of Europe[4].

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[2] Zoom is a videotelephony software program developed by Zoom Video Communications, created in 2012. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a major increase in the use of Zoom for remote work, distance education, and online social relations.

[3] International Sign is a lingua franca that is employed by deaf people to communicate with other deaf people who do not share the same conventionalized local sign language (Whynot, 2016).

[4] See https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/47-members-states

Figure 1 - Highlighted European countries involved in the survey

Participants were free to participate and there were no minimum requirements. Whilst all 57 participants joined the meeting, it was anticipated that some would refrain from taking part in the online survey and the number of actual respondents would not be known until the completion of all of the questions. When the survey began participants were informed that the video call would be recorded. It was then stated that this would be kept in an ENSLT archive to use only as an internal resource to create the ENSLT report on Sign Language Teachers in Europe, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were told that should they have any concerns they could contact ENSLT board-members. All participants clearly agreed to proceed with the survey by typing YES in the chat function of the online meeting, indicating that consent was being given.

Answers were based on a multiple-choice basis, picking from answers A - B – C; in some questions it was also possible to select more than one answer, which was clearly indicated. There was also an option to add comments to the answers given, using the chat facility. Included within the results are the questions that some participants chose not to answer. The survey questions appeared one at a time on PowerPoint slides, which were simultaneously translated into IS by an ENSLT board-member. Each question with multiple choice answers had an independent slide, and once all answers were received for each question, the PowerPoint then moved to the next slide. Thus, the participants, after having understood the question in English or in IS, responded in the chat space giving a letter based on the question posed and the answer choices present. Occasionally, participants requested some clarifications with regards to the questions in order to avoid misunderstandings. Clarifications were made in IS.

All questions were carried out using the above method, and after the survey two board-members collected the answers from the chat space, disregarding anything that was not an answer. The two ENSLT board members then cross referenced the results they had recorded to ensure no mistakes had been made in collecting the data.

4 – Results

Following from the description of the survey as a method of collecting data in the previous section, each question and correlated results are detailed below.

Do you work within an institution setting or a private organisation?

The first question of the survey focuses on the participant's workplace. A total of 57 replied; the majority of the participants (38) work in public institutions, 25 of which are Universities and 13 are schools. The remainder (19) work in private organisations such as businesses or associations.
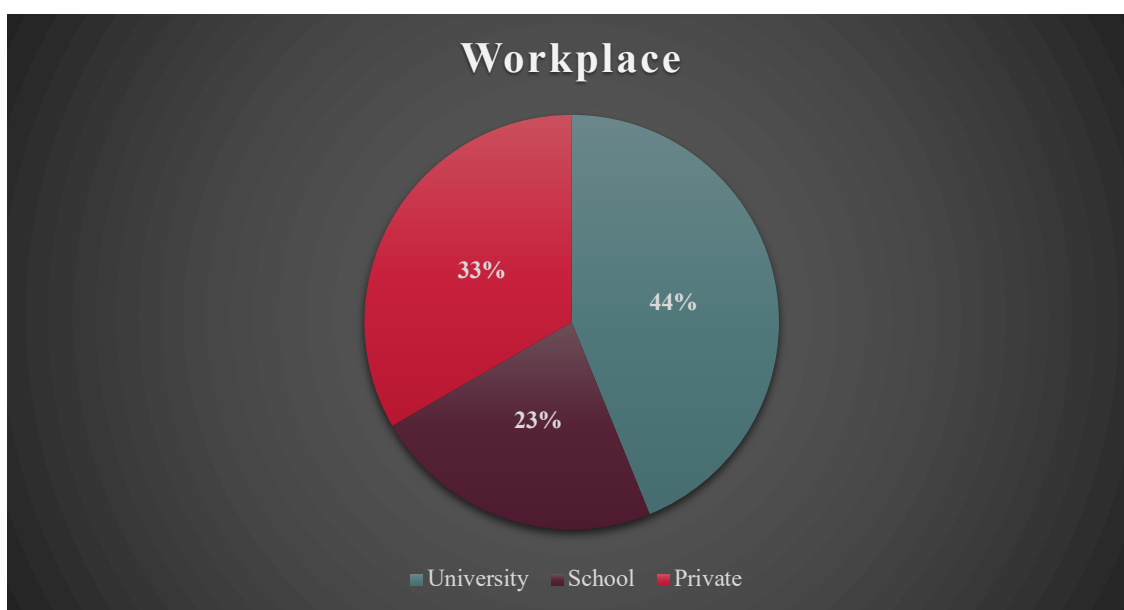

Figure 2 - Workplace results

What is your contract of employment: Full-time, part-time or ad-hoc?

The second question regarding employment contracts was answered by 46 participants: 19 work full time, 15 work part-time, and the remaining 12 work on a fixed-term basis (ad-hoc).
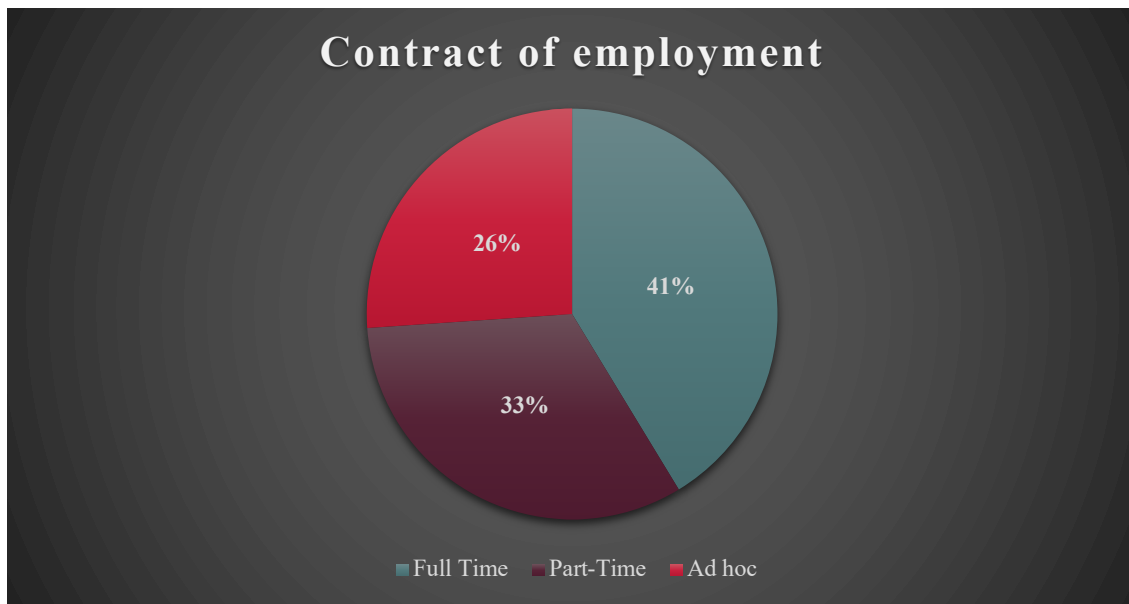
Figure 3 - Contract of employment results

Since the Coronavirus pandemic started has your work been adversely affected either by a lack of work or reduction in hours?

The third question was answered by 41 participants. More than half (33) replied stating that they had not undergone any change, continuing as indicated previously. Six of them saw a reduction in teaching hours. Finally, 2 reported the loss of their jobs.
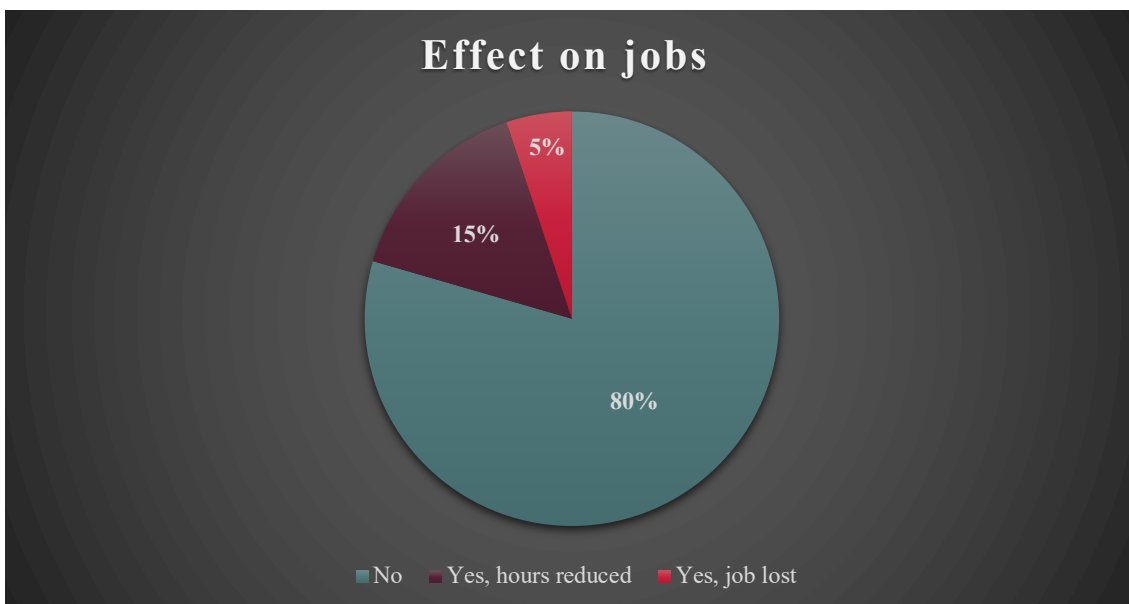

Figure 4 - Effect on jobs results

Lerose, L. (2021). *ENSLT Report – Impacts on Sign Language Teaching and Learning in Europe during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, ENSLT, https://www.enslt.eu , published on 20th July 2021.

Do you feel that since the pandemic your work has become harder and/or more stressful and your health has suffered?

ENSLT had also received a lot of enquiries about how teaching during the pandemic is affecting the health of sign language teachers, hence the following question was added to the survey.

In the fourth question participants were able to give more than one answer. In total there are 74 answers. Half of the sample (31) said their job was harder now than pre pandemic and 27 felt they had more stress; 16 stated that they had more health problems due to work.
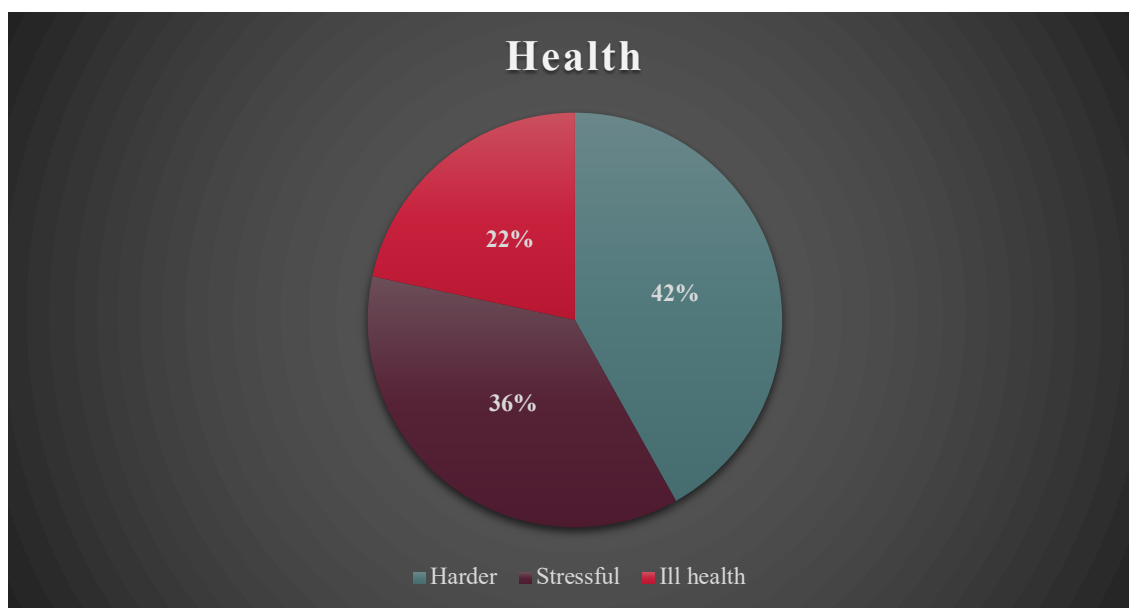

Figure 5 - Health results

Have you been utilising new resources since the pandemic started?

In relation to the fifth question, which comprises of two sub questions, 44 participants answered in total. The first sub question asks if new resources had been used by participants, enabling them to continue to work, 43 said yes. Only 1 participant stated they had received none. It is important to note that with this question almost all teachers (98%) were prepared with the idea of having to change their teaching method with very short notice using a variety of resources to enable them to continue their teaching activities.
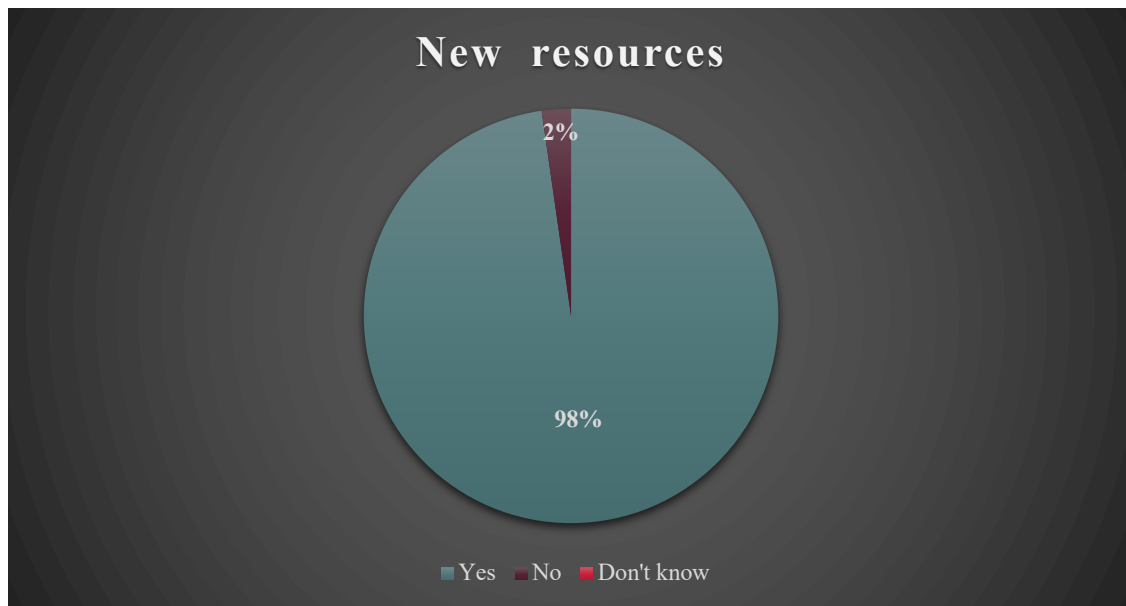
Figure 6 - New resources results

The second sub question (multiple questions with 60 answers) enquired as to what software participants had received from their institutions or organisations: 34 highlighted that they had used the platform Zoom, 11 used Microsoft Teams, 7 used Google Meet, and 8 used other software, such as BigBlueButton, Skype and Cisco.
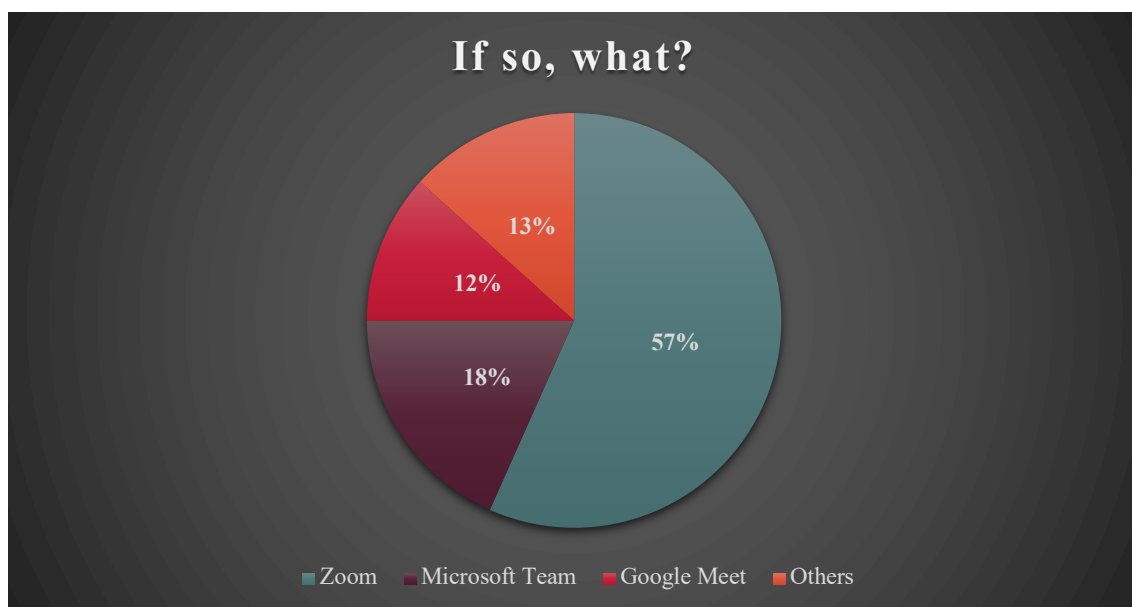

Figure 7 - Software results

Has your institution or workplace offered you sufficient support to manage your work?

The sixth question asked participants about the support received by their institutions, 36 participants answered. Few (14) received support from their institutions; many (21) selected 'no' they did not receive sufficient support.
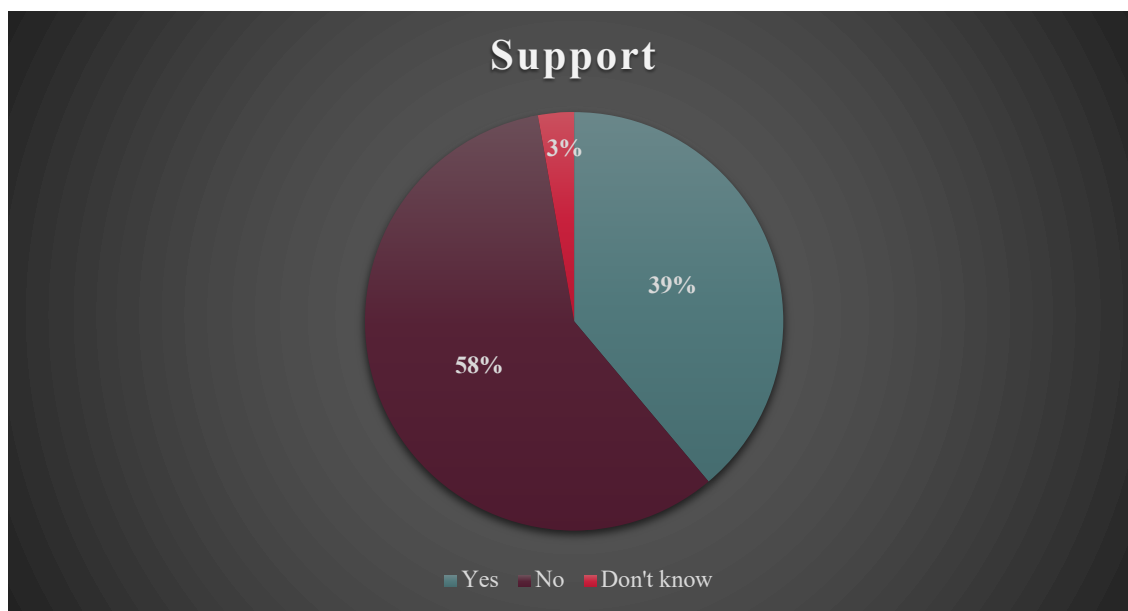

Figure 8 - Support results

Those who received support specified that they had received Zoom licenses, technical support, new PCs, new webcams, new colleagues and have more meetings between staff.

Do you feel that in the future you will change your working patterns to being back to previous face-to-face teaching, stay online teaching or a blended mix of the two?

The last question discusses the participant's future, post-pandemic, and if they think they will continue to use the methods adopted during the pandemic. In all, 45 replied: 35 participants stated that following the pandemic they would prefer to work using blended teaching; only 8 highlighted that they would like a full return to their previous work patterns and 2 stated they will continue teaching remotely only.
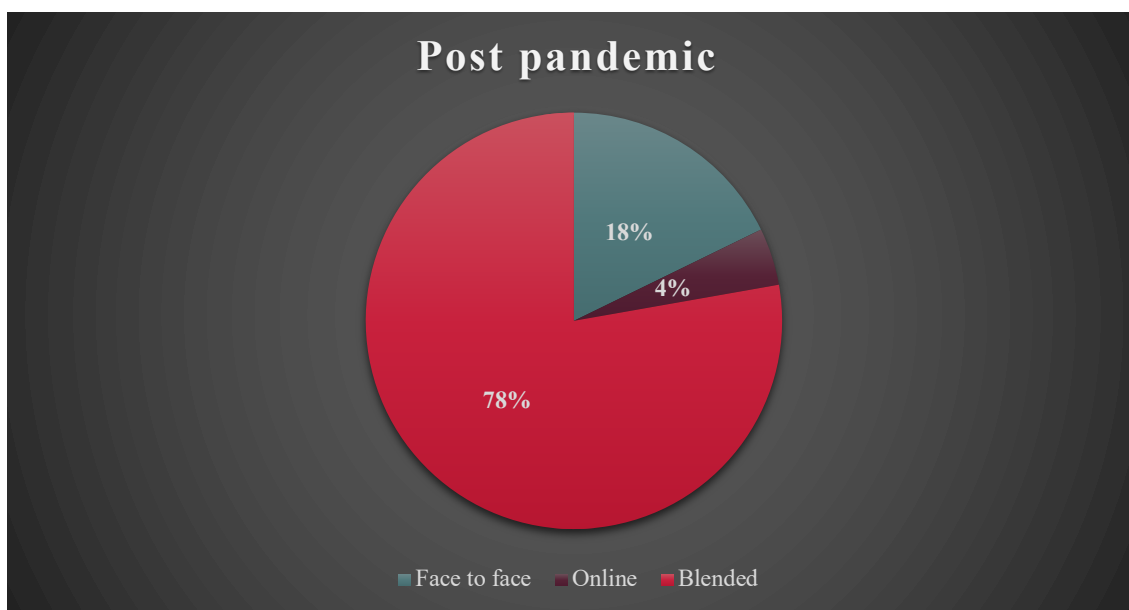
Figure 9 - Post pandemic results

5 - Discussion

The results of this survey on how sign language teachers were impacted during the pandemic suggest that a large majority of the respondents already had a good level of digital competence, as they were quickly able to use the software and technology necessary for remote learning. It is clear that Zoom was the platform that sign language teachers in Europe were most likely to use during the pandemic. Interestingly, many participants highlighted their desire to continue teaching online in some capacity. Before the pandemic, many teachers had accumulated many years of experience with the use of cameras in their teaching activities due to the visual-gestural nature of sign languages. It is possible that this became an advantage for them in the change to online teaching, since they had already had this type of experience (Bauman & Murray, 2014). This is one of the recommended topics for sign language teachers, published on the SignTeach website in section 'Teacher skills': https://signteach.eu/index.php/teacherskills-video. These solutions that have been previously mentioned have helped sign language teachers positively during the pandemic and will do in the future too, supporting them to perform more efficiently under the ever-growing demands of the institutions.

A point of interest is that many participants declared that they would want to continue working remotely in some capacity, such as through blended teaching. This may cause professionals to reflect on their practices, and to become aware of improvements they could make in their roles as teachers. Throughout the pandemic, students have been learning in ways that transcend traditional methods; while clearly there is a place for face-to-face teaching, remote modalities have brought about benefits that may have not been previously recognised. Blended learning may

feel futuristic. However, the digital transformation is not a new concept (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020), and it has been in higher education institutions for some time (Kopp et al., 2019; Leszczyński et al., 2018).

6 – Conclusion

In this report, the difficulties that sign language teachers face while practising during the COVID-19 pandemic have been highlighted. Various solutions have been found to remedy these issues, and these include software, materials and additional staff. This report not only encourages professionals and institutions to plan for emergency remote teaching, but to also continue with the evolution that this pandemic has caused. Remote teaching appeared as a short-term solution to the coronavirus pandemic but could now be considered an opportunity to revise and create new teaching strategies and methods of delivery. It could well be that some remote activities are more satisfactory and efficacious than when using more traditional face-to-face modalities, which could see the rise of blended teaching.

It is imperative, therefore, that institutions are aware of how to deal with the pandemic in the best possible way and with as little negative impact as possible for the entire learning community, meaning provision of support is ensured for teachers, to enable them to attain the highest levels possible when teaching. Finally, this report demonstrates the importance of the notion that help needs to be given to teachers, following their health trends and requests made by professional bodies, so that teaching can reach the most optimal levels. Obviously, this case is of interest to all fields of teaching, not only among sign language teachers. Further investigation and analysis of these teaching modalities needs to be done to ensure the development of these new tools occurs in the most beneficial way to the teaching profession and the community.

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Gratitude

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About the Author

Luigi Lerose is a Senior Lecturer in British Sign Language & Deaf Studies at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan). His research focuses on teachers' work, with particular attention to the training and education dimensions of professional teacher knowledge; and on applied concepts of sign language linguistics within teaching to build students' knowledge and competence. Currently Luigi is also the President of the European Network of Sign Language Teachers (ENSLT).