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## 'It's the Best Way to Learn': Face-to-Face Attendance in University Language Courses

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### Abstract

The arrival of COVID-19 in 2020 marked a radical change to the university learning environment. With lockdowns and restrictions of various kinds, teaching and learning within the university had to shift to online and alternative modes of delivery within a short space of time. While life has gradually returned to "normal" and students are increasingly physically present on campus, patterns of attendance and engagement seem to have altered. Although, anecdotally, many students have reported a renewed appreciation for face-to-face teaching – particularly in relation to learning a foreign language – there appears to be an overall drop in on-campus attendance since COVID-19. This study investigated students' reasons for attending or not attending face-to-face language classes. The aim was to inform changes to the teaching and delivery of our courses that could increase student attendance, engagement and overall retention. Through an online survey focusing on different factors that influence student attendance – using a combination of multiple choice, ranking, and open-ended questions – the study identified key reasons for students' decisions around class attendance.

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# Introduction

## ***Background and context***

This paper explores the question of student attendance in face-to-face language classes through a case study conducted at an Australian university. Student attendance and its implications for engagement in university courses is an ongoing concern in many parts of the world, and one that has been exacerbated by the widespread pivot to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the wake of the COVID-19 years and the predominantly online learning environment that resulted, educators are reflecting on how best to motivate students to return to the classroom and remain actively engaged (Kaushik et al., 2023; Kurt et al., 2022; Pickett et al., 2023). Issues such as lecture recording, mandatory attendance, and motivation have garnered attention in various countries, as well as across disciplines and in different institutional settings. Researchers are approaching afresh the question of how to increase and maintain student engagement and connectedness in the face-to-face classroom (Tarc, 2020), and many institutions are consequently rethinking their teaching methodologies, evaluating how teaching (whether online or face-to-face) might be reimaged for more effective learning (Li et al., 2021; Vlachopoulos & Jan, 2020). These are “big questions” that are often outside the control of individuals, and demand further reflection (Moore et al., 2019).

Numerous studies reveal that there is an overall positive correlation between attendance and academic performance (Bevitt et al., 2010; Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Pinter et al., 2020; Sloan et al., 2019; Woodfield et al., 2006), although there is some divergence of opinion on this topic (Eisen et al., 2015; St Clair, 1999). Researchers have investigated several variables that might influence attendance, such as work commitments, timetabling, the availability of technological alternatives, and whether attendance is assessed. In an early paper on attendance in economics, Marburger (2006) found that an enforced mandatory attendance policy significantly reduces absenteeism. A large-scale study found that a compulsory attendance policy’s effect on performance “depended on the student’s level of prior academic achievement” with a greater impact being observed in those with a lower achievement level (Snyder et al., 2014, p. 433). A recurring theme in previous studies is the question of precisely *who* goes to classes, and whether it matters in the first place (Fay et al., 2013; Marburger, 2001; Massingham & Harrington, 2006; Romer, 1993; Triado-Ivern et al., 2018). Other research has endeavoured to define further issues relating to attendance and student engagement in an effort to re-evaluate the determinants of both. Attendance can be facilitated through different modes of delivery – online, face-to-face, or blended (Li et al., 2021; Mehta et al., 2024) – but it is also influenced by timetabling and the style of teaching (Skead et al., 2020).

A major factor that has impacted student attendance, especially in relation to lectures, is the advent of recording technologies. Although our study focuses on face-to-face language classes, it is relevant to observe these trends, particularly as many language courses take a blended approach to content delivery and are complemented by high quality online resources (Brown et al., 2024; Caruso & Verdina, 2024; Tonkin et al., 2019). At least in some institutions and particularly in Australia, “lecture recording is mandated as the default position” (Skead et al., 2020, p. 367). This interest in lecture recording has led to the investigation of more specific variables and the “multitude of influences” that drive student attendance and engagement. The overall result

is a “complex picture” when it comes to lecture recording and attendance (Moores et al., 2019, p. 381). Generally speaking, the “availability of lecture recordings does seem to decrease attendance overall” and “withholding of recordings seems likely to disadvantage the highest users of them” (Moores et al., 2019, p. 381; see also Edwards & Clinton, 2018). Similar findings are reported by Skead et al. who found that “lecture recording is strongly associated with decreased attendance at face-to-face classes” (2020, p. 367; see also Wongtrakul & Dangprapai, 2020). Büchele’s paper, based on studies from areas outside the humanities such as economics, engineering and science, also evaluated the link between attendance and performance in higher education and found that “it does not matter if but rather how students attend class” (2021, p. 132). In other words, the most important factor is not attendance itself, but the degree of in-class engagement (2021, p. 145). Similarly, Vlachopoulos and Jan (2020) show that attendance at lectures correlates positively with overall motivation, and that “for students to attend on-campus lectures, the lectures need to involve and engage students actively and effectively for them to realize the value the lecture adds to their knowledge” (p. 14).

Recently, researchers have investigated the effect of commuting on the academic performance of students, including the effect on their physical and emotional state (Geeta et al., 2023; Kaushik et al., 2023; Vlachopoulos & Jan, 2020). There is also stronger recognition among educators that certain factors influencing student attendance are largely outside the control of higher education providers. These include finance, student employment, student demographics, and psychological factors (Moores et al., 2019). In particular, Moores et al. (2019) call for a broader study of socio-demographic influences on attendance in future research and for it to be larger in scale, including longitudinal studies. These issues are likely to vary according to institutional and local environments.

### ***Problems of attendance in language courses***

Our paper addresses the same question of factors impacting student attendance, but with a specific focus on face-to-face language classes. The articles cited above indicate that much of the literature to date has focused on lecture attendance; far fewer studies have investigated the issue in relation to language classes. In contrast to lectures, language classes are generally not recorded and devote less class time to content delivery and far more to active learning (see Malpartida, 2023; Sulis, 2023; Tonkin et al., 2019). As a result, low attendance at language classes may impact negatively on language acquisition and skills development (Bruen et al., 2020; see also Bruen & Erdocia, 2024; Winch, 2023). Previous research addressing the question of attendance at university language courses has tended to do so in relation to associated issues in language learning pedagogy, including motivation, the availability of language courses in study programs, or performance and progression. In this context, questions related to engagement – such as motivation, demotivation, “enjoyment”, confidence, vision, and the psychology of the language learner – have seen renewed interest in recent years, including much work in the Australian context (for example, Amorati & Hajek, 2021; Brown & Caruso, 2016; Caruso & Fraschini, 2021; de Burgh-Hirabe, 2019; D’Orazzi & Hajek, 2021, 2022; D’Orazzi, 2023; Fraschini & Caruso, 2019; Lambert et al., 2017; Tonkin et al., 2019; Vlachopoulos & Jan, 2020). In relation to attendance, a study by Bruen et al. (2020) specifically considers the introduction of a compulsory attendance policy in first-year language courses in Irish higher education. Consistent

with the findings on mandatory attendance discussed above (for example, Marburger, 2006), the authors concluded that “an argument can be made in favour of attendance policies for first year language modules” (p. 994). The introduction of a mandated policy of attendance at their institution “raises expectations” regarding attendance in language classes, with the authors reporting that students are more likely to attend classes and educators are more confident in identifying students at risk of failing. Nevertheless, the authors also advise “light-touch sanctions in the form of follow-up meetings with first-year students to explore the reasons for their non-attendance” (p. 995).

### ***Research objectives***

The principal aim of this study was to explore levels and patterns of student attendance in university language courses and to understand which factors were driving this behaviour from the students’ point of view. A second impetus was to provide a complementary perspective to research that examines language learning motivation and engagement – understood as “the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education” (Glossary of Education Reform, 2016, para. 1) – but which does not give attendance patterns due consideration. This paper presents findings from a large-scale survey and a focus-group discussion on student attendance at face-to-face university language courses at an Australian university. While the evidence gathered for this project took place in an Australian setting, the results can equally be applied to non-recorded language classes in other tertiary institutions nationally and internationally. Furthermore, although the focus is on attendance in language courses, the results offer strategies for improving attendance rates at face-to-face classes that are not recorded in other disciplines.

## **Methods**

### ***Study setting***

This study was conducted at The University of Western Australia (UWA), a research-intensive university located in urban Perth. Academic programmes taught at UWA cover a broad range of liberal arts subjects, as well as a wide offering of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects and professional degrees at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Domestic students come mainly from Perth metropolitan areas, with a smaller proportion from rural Western Australia. Approximately one third (28%) are international students, mainly from south-east Asia (China, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia) but also from Europe (Norway, Sweden) and increasingly from Brazil and Argentina. Student exchange programmes have been established with many universities around the world, and some overseas study is strongly encouraged to form part of all degree programmes.

Eight languages are taught at the institution: four modern European languages (French, German, Italian and Spanish) and four Asian languages (Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean). Languages can be studied as a major (first or second), as a minor, or as electives in any degree. A specialised Bachelor of Modern Languages is available and may be combined with a range of other Bachelor degrees. Students can start at beginner, intermediate or near-native level and can enrol in a language course in their first, second or third year of university study. Beginner courses

consist of three hours of face-to-face language classes (not recorded) per week (25-40 students per class) with accompanying online content. Higher-level courses comprise a combination of lecture, seminar, workshop and/or language classes (face-to-face/online, recorded/not recorded) that vary according to the course, for a total of three hours per week. Language classes at all levels have a high emphasis on active learning and peer interaction.

### ***Data collection***

Following a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach, we designed and administered an online anonymous survey (Appendix A), complemented with data elicited through a focus group discussion. The study received ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Office at UWA (ref. number 2023/ET000110). The survey was designed based on existing recent literature, specifically the study by Skead et al. (2020), whose recommendations for future implementation of their survey were considered carefully. The survey comprised 34 questions covering, in the first part, the students' demographics and study details, and in the second part, their perceptions of what impacts their attendance at face-to-face classes. While ensuring that the survey suited the characteristics of the sample we were measuring, we considered a wide range of possible factors that might influence attendance, including the time of day, having other classes on the same day, personal commitments, paid work, whether participation was assessed, the availability and quality of online resources, whether the classes were predominantly interactive or information-giving, parking availability, and the length of commute to university.

Nineteen questions were designed using a five-point Likert scale, from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1), and one question asked students to rank the five most important factors that might cause them not to attend face-to-face classes. The survey also included two open-ended questions: 'What influences your decision most when considering whether to attend face-to-face classes?' and 'What would encourage you to come to face-to-face classes?' The responses to the open-ended questions contributed particularly valuable qualitative data. The survey was administered via Qualtrics at the end of the semester, with the link to the survey made available via the course learning management system (LMS) page.

To gain further in-depth qualitative insights that the survey may not have captured, a focus group session was run (Liamputtong, 2020) with a small number of students who had previously submitted the survey. We ensured that the facilitator of the focus group was not involved in teaching any of the participants. The focus group allowed for more nuanced discussions, where participants could elaborate on their thoughts and provide concrete examples. It was run online via Microsoft Teams for one hour and consisted of a semi-structured discussion guided by the facilitator. Open questions such as "What difference does attending language classes in person make to your language learning?" were asked to facilitate general discussion. Some questions were asked to better understand the "why" behind some frequent responses in the survey. For example, many survey respondents had agreed that an engaging teacher motivated them to attend, so focus group participants were asked to clarify "what represents to you an engaging teacher?" Other topics included factors that may decrease students' motivation to attend classes such as their experience of campus life, their views on mark allocation for attendance, and logistical issues. To ensure that all voices were equally valued and to prevent any single participant from dominating, the facilitator encouraged quieter participants to share their thoughts

and maintained a balance in the conversation flow. The focus group session was recorded, automatically transcribed by the recording software, Microsoft Teams, and the transcriptions were thoroughly checked. All responses were anonymised during the final transcription and any identifying information was removed by the facilitator before making the data available to the other authors.

### ***Participants***

Participation in this study was voluntary. Participants for the anonymous online survey were selected using purposive sampling (Liamputtong, 2020) and were students enrolled in (at least) one of the European language courses. Recruitment took place via in-class and LMS announcements. While it was not possible to reach all language students (some coordinators declined to advertise the study to their students), 188 students out of 769 invited to participate completed the anonymous survey (24%) (Table 1). Emails were sent by course coordinators to students identified as non-regular attendees to encourage them to complete the anonymous survey and provide their perspective.

To recruit participants for the focus group, emails were sent to all students who took part in the survey, inviting them to voluntarily participate. Following purposive sampling, we selected students from various ages, levels and attendance habits, ensuring that we included students who did not attend regularly. Purposive sampling was deemed the best sampling technique for the focus group as it allowed the researchers to seek out the specific information needed for the study. Ten students were recruited and signed a consent form agreeing to audio-recording of the discussion. The 10 students were studying French (4), Italian (3) and German (3). Two students were from the beginner level, 4 from the intermediate level and 4 from the advanced level. Half of the participants were aged under 30 and the other half over 40. There were 4 male and 6 female students.

### ***Data analysis***

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted on the quantitative data from the surveys to determine which factors impact students' attendance the most. The answers to the open-ended questions were analysed following the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) using NVivo. A preliminary scrutiny of the data via a word frequency analysis was followed by a systematic coding process, which identified all recurrent ideas of interest and organised them into codes. The codes were then categorised into broader themes, and after a rigorous peer cross-checking of the data, key themes were finalised and interpreted. The transcripts of the focus group session also underwent qualitative analysis to gain a deeper understanding of students' motivations for attending classes. The automatic transcription was meticulously checked and clarified. It was then analysed and categorised into main themes to triangulate the overall data (Liamputtong, 2020).

To ensure credibility of the results, the qualitative data from the survey was triangulated with the focus group data. During data analysis, peer scrutiny was ensured through continuous cross-checking between two of the authors to determine a coding consensus (Guba, 1981; Liamputtong, 2020). Purposive sampling employed to recruit participants to the focus group also aided in the transferability and credibility of the findings, as the power of this technique lies precisely in the

opportunity “to maximise the range of information uncovered” (Guba, 1981, p. 86), allowing the authors to seek out the specific information needed for the study.

**Table 1**

*Profile of Survey Participants (Summary)*

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Number	188 (24% of invited participants)
Gender	68% F, 29% M, 3% other
Degree of enrolment	40% Bachelor of Arts 16% Bachelor of Science 13% Bachelor of Biomedical Science 21% other
Enrolled in the language Major	42%
Enrolled in the language Minor	23%
Year of study at university	40% first year 33% second year 20% third year 7% other
Stream of enrolment	67% beginners 19% post intermediate 8% native or near-native 5% other
Declared attendance in F2F classes	63% I have attended all classes 20% I have attended most classes 9% I have attended 2-3 hours per week 6% I have attended 0-1 hours per week 1% I haven't attended any classes

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Finally, the reflexivity and positionality of the research team itself should be borne in mind when considering the results reported below. We acknowledge that, as university language teachers

who were the instructors of the students investigated here, our own perspectives and positions may have influenced the data analysis processes. One potential area of bias lies in the fact that recruitment was conducted via announcements in class and on LMS, therefore possibly skewing respondents towards those who were regular attendees and sufficiently engaged to read LMS announcements. In order to mitigate this influence, unit coordinators identified regular non-attendees in their classes and emailed them individually, inviting them to participate in the survey and focus group. The emails included written assurance that the researchers simply wanted to understand students' reasons for not attending classes and that students' participation or non-participation in the research would have no impact on their grades.

The power differential between the researchers and responding students was also a potential source of bias. For this reason, the survey was conducted anonymously and students contributing to the focus group were advised they could leave the discussion at any time without repercussions as set out in the participant information form and participant consent form in the ethics application. Furthermore, the focus group was led by a researcher who did not teach any of the students and it took place after the release of the semester's results. Participants were also assured any statements cited in publications would be de-identified.

On the other hand, we believe that our expertise as language teachers, and as applied linguists, has contributed positively to our project design and research. It has allowed for an interpretation of the data that we would not be able to offer without an understanding of the nature of language learning and of our students and their needs. More generally, while we have attempted to keep an open mind throughout the research, similar comments made by Yip (2024) regarding positionality and reflections on (1) gaining access to participants; (2) understanding participants' contexts, and; (3) the nature of the researcher-researched relationship, are important to bear in mind during the intricate and nuanced process of all stages of the research.

## **Results**

This study investigated students' self-reported reasons for attending or not attending language classes. The qualitative analysis of students' responses to the open-ended survey questions "What influences your decision most when considering whether to attend face-to-face classes?" and: "What would encourage you to come to face-to-face classes?" revealed ten themes, with a number of sub-themes, as outlined in Table 2. The relative importance of these themes was supported by the quantitative data.

The relative popularity of the themes is captured in a visual format in Figure 1, a word cloud generated from the coding terms using the website wordclouds.com. The word cloud reflects the prevalence of each item by enlarging those most frequently referenced in the students' responses.



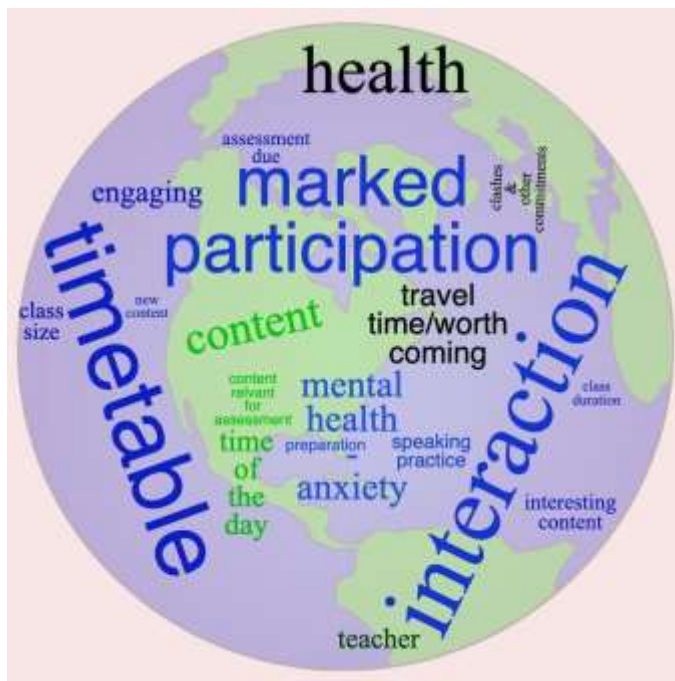
**Table 2***Themes Identified in the Students' Responses to the Open Questions*

Themes	References
1. Interaction	55
Speaking practice	
2. Timetable	51
Time of day	
Travel time and/or worth coming	
Clashes and other commitments	
Class duration	
3. Health	38
Mental health – anxiety	
4. Marked participation	29
5. Content	26
Interesting	
Content relevant for assessment	
New content	
6. Engaging	17
7. Teacher	16
8. Class size	13
9. Assessments due	11
10. Preparation	9

The top four themes that emerged were that students' decisions to attend or not attend language classes were influenced by: (1) the level of peer-to-peer and peer-to-teacher interaction in the classes; (2) a variety of issues around the timetabling of classes; (3) physical and mental health concerns; and (4) whether participation in the classes attracted a mark. For a more focused and synthetic discussion, we have concentrated on these four key themes, although there is some overlap with some of the other themes identified. The findings are reported for each of the four key themes below, with reference to both qualitative and quantitative data and their integration. Tables presenting the relevant quantitative results are provided in Appendix B. Additionally, some statistics are incorporated as tables in the results section for ease of interpretation.

**Figure 1**

*Visual Representation of Thematic Analysis*



**Theme 1: Interaction**

“Interaction” is the theme with the largest number of references (55 in total) made by the students in their responses to the two open-ended questions. The representative comments below exemplify the relevance of the level of interaction for students’ decision to attend classes. They reveal that students value classes in which the emphasis is on interaction rather than the one-way delivery of content by the teacher, and that they see a connection between interaction and their learning:

I am influenced by how engaging the tutor is and how interesting the topic or subject matter are presented during the class. Classes that encourage interaction between student and

teacher, and between student and student ensure that the language learning process is stimulating and engaging.

I also prefer interactive lessons as it is the best way to learn, however sometimes this can be stressful.

I can meet and interact with other people, practice listening and speaking and ask questions.

You basically must attend the face-to-face class if you want to learn how to speak and interact.

Two comments in the focus group discussion indicated that students understood the relationship between their interaction with other students and their progress in speaking and listening in the target language, which implies they saw value in attending interactive classes:

I think with language learning a big part of it is obviously listening and speaking. And if you are not attending a class, then it's very hard to do that and certainly you're not.

Being able to put into effect what you've learned like when you're speaking. Definitely you could see the difference between people who did attend and participate in people who didn't attend /didn't participate.

The quantitative data supports the relevance of interaction for students' decisions to attend or not attend, with the majority of the students (67%) agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement "I am more likely to attend interactive classes than information delivery classes (i.e. lectures)" (Appendix B).

For the survey question which asked students to rank the most important reasons that might cause them *not* to attend face-to-face classes (Appendix B), the statement "There are not enough opportunities to engage with my peers and teacher in class" was one of the lowest ranked (mean: 3.50, rank: 14/17), suggesting that students are satisfied with the amount of interaction provided in their classes.

### ***Theme 2: Timetable***

"Timetable" is the second most-referenced theme in the qualitative analysis of the two open-ended questions (51 references, cf. Table 1 above), with several sub-themes identified in the analysis: (a) the time at which a class is scheduled; (b) the length of the student's commute and whether they have other classes scheduled on the same day (i.e. whether it is worth making the commute); (c) whether the student has a clash with another class or another commitment (work or personal); and (d) the duration of the class – whether one or two hours. The following comments span the range of sub-themes:

The time of day and whether I have other classes that day due to the time it takes to get to uni.

I am more inclined to attend an in-person class if I have other university classes also scheduled on the same day as otherwise it can feel a bit pointless to spend the time travelling to and from university for a single class.

My decision to attend face-to-face classes is mostly influenced by timetable restraints (sic!) and/or clashes with unavoidable commitments.

I would prefer a longer class just once a week.

The impact of timetabling issues on attending classes is confirmed by comments from the focus group:

Actually it depends on how long the tutorial is [...] I think it was too many [classes] and all of them last one hour. Maybe we can put them together like 2 hours each and we have only 2 classes because if I need to go to uni everyday it's hard for me.

... some of them [other students] have to travel an hour to come in for 45 minutes.

The descriptive statistics of the quantitative data supports the view that having other classes on the same day favours attendance. In fact, 71% of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I am more likely to attend a class if I have another class on the same day". However, only 46% of the respondents indicated they were influenced by the timing of a class (e.g. morning vs. afternoon), and a small minority (26%) agreed or strongly agreed they were more likely to attend a longer class. These results are recorded in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Timetabling Issues*

Statements	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	M
I am more likely to attend a class if I have another class on the same day.	71%	3.94
The time of a class (i.e. morning, afternoon, or evening) influences my decision to attend it.	46%	3.24
I am more likely to attend a class if it is a two-hour class, compared to a one-hour class.	26%	2.90

These findings on the impact of timetabling are reinforced by the results of the ranking question discussed above, where "I have timetable conflicts" is ranked as the fourth most important reason for not attending classes (M 2.77, SD 1.41), after "illness/disability", "family/personal commitments", and "work commitments" (Appendix B). While the time of class is sometimes mentioned in the comments, it tends to appear in the context of other influencing factors, such

as the commute length or other commitments (as in the fourth comment above). In interpreting these results, we must consider that the various elements of the timetable, whether the day, time, duration of a class, clashes, travelling time or other, are interconnected with the students' many "unavoidable commitments" (see the second comment above).

### ***Theme 3: Health***

Our results reveal that health is a central factor influencing our students' attendance in language classes. This emerges both in the qualitative data, where the theme is referenced 38 times, and in the quantitative data, where it is ranked as the top reason for not attending class. ("Illness/Disability", Mean 1.63; cf. Appendix B). This is not a surprising finding: particularly in the wake of the pandemic, we expect students to stay away from face-to-face classes if they are unwell. Examining the qualitative data more closely, however, we found that in response to the survey's open-ended questions, a larger number of comments refer to mental health (21) than to physical health/illness (17). Some examples include:

If there is pressure of being put on the spot in class [I won't attend]. I usually feel anxious when called on to answer questions. It usually disrupts my routine and impacts my stress levels.

Anxiety, especially around the time of assessments for other classes [stops me attending], and the fact that I am poor at interacting with people, so I sit alone.

Having a smaller class size gives me less anxiety and enables me to make friends and want to continue to turn up to class.

An environment in which it is less stressful to make mistakes.

Mental health was not an explicit point of discussion in the focus group, but this does not diminish its relevance (in fact it could signal the continuing stigma attached to mental illness), nor the need to further investigate how anxiety relates to interaction, class size and belonging, for example.

In the survey, students were also asked to what extent they agreed with the statement "Anxiety influences my decision to attend" and 21% agreed or strongly agreed (Appendix B). Considering that the survey response rate was 24% and that the majority of the survey respondents (63%) declared they had attended all classes (cf. Table 1), it is possible that the extent to which anxiety affects class attendance in language classes has not been fully captured in the data.

### ***Theme 4: Marked participation***

Another clear result that emerged from the analysis is that students are more likely to attend classes if participation is assessed. The comments in response to the open-ended questions suggest not only that the expectation to participate in class activities can encourage attendance, but also that at least some students would favour mandatory attendance:

Knowing that participation is marked encourages me to attend the class.

I need high attendance for my VISA requirements and participation marks. However, I have really enjoyed attending this class.

I always go but I guess having mandatory attendance would encourage people [to attend].

When first starting the unit I was mostly influenced by the in class participation mark however during the course of the semester I attend face to face class to ask questions, learn parts of the culture and practise with people who can give me valuable feedback.

Some of the responses to the open-ended questions suggest that while a participation mark is sometimes needed to 'get students in', once they have started attending they are motivated to continue by other reasons – for example, they find the experience enjoyable and beneficial in a way that is only possible through personal interaction. The last comment above is indicative of this. Also supporting the idea that grades can be a strong motivator for students to attend classes, 78% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the survey statement “I am more likely to attend classes if there is a participation/attendance mark” (Appendix B).

Finally, it is important to note two further results that emerged from the statistical analysis (cf. Appendix B) that were not strongly reflected in the qualitative data: 85% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that an engaging teacher motivated them to attend, while 79% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they are “more likely to attend classes when guidance/revision for assessments is provided during the classes” (corresponding to Theme 7: “Teacher,” and Theme 5: “Content relevant for assessment”, in Table 2).

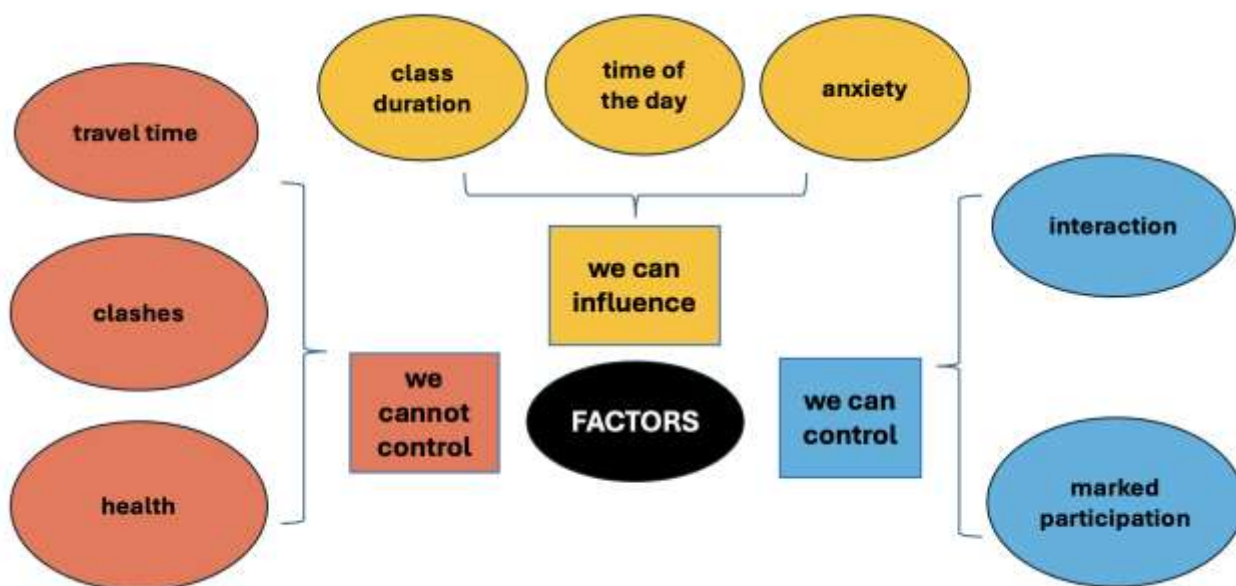
## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to understand students' reasons for attending or not attending face-to-face language classes. The authors hoped that this would assist language educators both in Australia and in countries where approaches to language teaching are similar, such as the US and UK, to make informed changes to the teaching and delivery of courses that might increase student attendance, engagement, and retention. Analysis of the four themes that emerged most strongly from the data suggests that while some of the numerous factors influencing attendance are outside of teachers' control, in other areas, teachers may be able to effect changes that could have a positive impact on attendance (see Figure 2).

Factors outside of the control of teachers include several concerns that were grouped under the theme 'timetable', such as the length of the student's commute, the availability of parking or public transport options, whether they have other classes scheduled on the same day, and clashes with personal or work commitments (see also Skead et al, 2020; Lewohl, 2023). However, given many students indicated they were less likely to attend if they only had one class on a given day and more likely to attend a two-hour than a one-hour class, teachers could consider whether requiring students to attend class several times per week might act as a disincentive to regular attendance. Scheduling a two-hour class on one day rather than two one-hour classes on different days might be part of the solution to the question of how to increase levels of attendance. The need to facilitate a more functional timetable is particularly urgent in the current climate when almost 90% of Australian university students are reported to have paid work commitments (Hartge-Hazelman, 2023), and a large number are mature-age students who require high levels of flexibility to fit their study into their busy lives (Massingham & Herrington, 2006). Similarly, a recent large-scale UK study found that students in languages and some other disciplines favour blended learning approaches as they combine face-to-face classes with the flexibility of some online content, allowing them to accommodate work and other commitments (Mehta et al., 2024).

**Figure 2**

*Factors Impacting Attendance: Beyond our Control, Within our Influence, Within our Control*



The level of in-class interaction and whether participation is assigned marks point to the significance of course design for encouraging student attendance. Our finding that assessing participation motivates students to attend class is consistent with research indicating mandatory attendance policies significantly reduce absenteeism (Brien et al., 2020; Fay et al., 2013; Marburger, 2006; Triado-Ivern et al., 2018) and that assessed participation in non-lecture classes motivates students to attend (Skead et al., 2020). This may be particularly important in the context of a higher education environment in which the availability of lecture recordings has led to a widespread sense among students that attendance is not a prerequisite for university success (Skead et al., 2020).

Of all the factors identified by participants in this study as having an impact on their decision to attend or not attend language classes, the area most open to teacher control is the amount of time devoted to peer-to-peer interaction and speaking activities. In line with previous research (Kemp, 2020; Tonkin et al., 2019), students in this study indicated that they see more value in attending interactive classes than content-delivery classes such as lectures because "it is the best way to learn." Our results align, therefore, with Vlachopoulos & Jan's (2020) findings relating to the link between attendance, motivation and interaction. The majority of students at our institution and participating in this study belong to Generation Z, so-called 'digital natives' who have grown up with technology and prefer practical learning approaches with an emphasis on interaction to

traditional lectures (Mokhtari et al., 2021). In the context of language learning in particular, interactive activities have been shown to be important for facilitating L2 development (Moranski & Henery, 2017).

Alongside physical illness, anxiety and mental health concerns emerged as a major factor in students' decisions around attendance. There is a wealth of literature examining mental health in university students, particularly in relation to the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 periods (for example, Liyanage et al., 2021; Basheti et al., 2023). Some of the comments made by students in our study illuminate ways in which their anxiety might be impacted by class size and point to the important role of the teacher in creating a friendly, safe and supportive environment where students feel a sense of belonging and where they are known and treated as individuals. Larger classes can increase students' sense of isolation and make it more difficult for teachers to learn their students' names, while smaller class sizes enable connections between teachers and students, creating an atmosphere conducive to interactive learning. Conversely, smaller class sizes increase the need for students to engage with others, which might lead some students to feel more anxious and decide not to attend. The crucial role of the language teacher in managing students' negative emotions is emphasised by Frascini (2023), who found that anxiety is not triggered to the same degree in all students, and that for some it may be associated with positive feelings, like curiosity. Therefore, "it is the role of the teacher to understand, between deciding whether to call upon students to answer or leaving them free to contribute, what strategy works better in their classroom" (p. 234). Here, further research is needed to understand exactly how anxiety interacts with the emphasis on interactive learning activities in language classes.

## Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate students' attendance patterns at face-to-face language classes at an Australian university, and the reasons driving them. Through a large-scale survey and a small focus group discussion ten themes emerged, with the top four – interaction, timetable, health and marked participation – examined in this article. As our discussion indicates, some of these factors are within teachers' control while others are not. Those that we cannot control, other than health, include factors that interact with the timetable such as the commute time, parking situation and personal commitments; those we can control include the length of the class, the amount of time spent on interaction and speaking, and whether there is a participation mark attached to the course. Others still include factors that we think we cannot control, but which we may be able to influence, such as some timetable considerations and mitigating student anxiety.

There are some limitations to our study, such as the 24% response rate for the survey, which implies our sample is not representative of the language student population investigated and therefore the findings of the quantitative component cannot be generalised to all university language students. In addition, our sample is possibly skewed towards those who attended regularly (i.e. the more motivated students; see Vlachopoulos & Jan, 2020), providing more insights into what makes students come to class rather than what makes them *not come*. On the other hand, the rigour of the qualitative data analysis supports the credibility and transferability of the findings to language courses both in Australia and internationally, and more generally to face-to-face classes that are not recorded. The results uncovered valuable areas for consideration, which have implications for improving students' attendance rates and engagement. The findings



also pointed to the benefits of continuing research on this topic, particularly in relation to anxiety and mental health issues for students and the teacher's role in promoting an inclusive, supportive and welcoming learning environment.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

### Survey

**Project title: Student engagement and attendance at face-to-face classes in European languages.**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. The survey is completely anonymous and will take less than 10 minutes to complete. Completing the survey implies your consent to participate in this study (Ethics approval reference: 2023/ET000110)

**PART ONE In the following section, you will find questions and statements relating to your studies at The University of Western Australia. Please tell us about yourself.**

Q1 Which language(s) are you studying at [Institution]?

- Ancient Greek
- Chinese (Mandarin)
- French
- Indonesian
- Italian
- Japanese
- German
- Korean
- Latin
- Spanish

Q2 What Bachelor are you enrolled in?

- Arts
- Biomedical Science
- Commerce
- Economics
- Engineering
- Modern Languages
- Philosophy (Bachelor of)
- Philosophy, Politics, Economics
- Science
- Other - Please explain

Q3 Which is your current year of study?

- First
- Second
- Third
- Other - Please explain

Q4 What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say

Q5 Which stream of language study best describes you?

- Beginners stream
- Post-high school
- Native or Near-native stream
- Other (please specify)

Q6 Are you taking French/Italian/German/Spanish as a major?

- Yes, French
- Yes, Italian
- Yes, German
- Yes, Spanish
- Maybe, please specify which language(s)
- No

Q7 If so, is it a first (degree-specific) major?

- Yes (please indicate what language)
- No

Q8 Are you taking French/German/Italian/Spanish as a minor?

- Yes, French
- Yes, German
- Yes, Italian
- Yes, Spanish
- Maybe - please specify what languages
- No

Q9 Please tick the box for the language unit(s) you are currently enrolled in.

[Options removed for legibility purposes]

**PART TWO** In the following section, there are two questions that ask about your attendance in language units. Please read each question and set of responses carefully and answer honestly. If you are unsure, please try to estimate as close as possible.

Q10 How often have you attended face-to-face classes this semester, whether on campus or via Zoom?

- I haven't attended any face-to-face classes this semester
- I have attended 0-1 hours per week per language studied
- I have attended 2-3 hours per week per language studied
- I have attended most face-to-face classes this semester
- I have attended all face-to-face classes this semester (except if absence was unavoidable – e.g. due to illness)

Q11 I am more likely to attend a face-to-face class if it is in the (you may tick more than one box):

- early morning (9am-11am)
- middle of the day (11am-1pm)
- early afternoon (1pm-3pm)
- late afternoon (4pm-6pm)

**PART THREE** In the following section, there are statements about different factors that can influence attendance at face-to-face language classes at university. Please read each statement and consider honestly how much you agree or disagree with the statement.

(choice of SD, D, N, A, SA and/or Not applicable)

Q12 The time of a class (i.e., morning, afternoon, or evening) influences my decision to attend it.

Q13 I am more likely to attend a class if it is not recorded.

Q14 I am more likely to attend classes when guidance / revision for assessments is provided during the classes.

Q15 My personal commitments (e.g. sport, childcare) influence my decision to attend classes.

Q16 I am more likely to attend a class if it is a two-hour class, compared to a one-hour class.

Q17 I am more likely to attend classes taught in groups of 30 or fewer students.

Q18 I am more likely to attend classes if I find the content of academic value.

Q19 My decision to attend classes is influenced by whether I have assessments for other units due.

Q20 I am more likely to attend classes if I find the teacher engaging.



Q21 My paid work commitments influence my decision to attend classes.

Q22 I am more likely to attend interactive classes than information delivery classes (i.e. lectures).

Q23 I am more likely to attend classes if there is a participation/attendance mark.

Q24 I am more likely to attend a class if I have another class on the same day.

Q25 I'm more likely to attend a class if little preparation is required.

Q26 The cost and difficulty of getting to and/or of parking at university influences my decision to attend classes.

Q27 The quality of online resources is such that I don't need to attend face-to-face.

Q28 Anxiety influences my decision to attend.

Q29 I am more likely to attend when I think that speaking activities are a focus of the class.

Q30 I am more likely to attend when I think grammar explanations and/or language practice are a focus of the class.

Q31 I am more likely to attend when I think there is an emphasis on cultural aspects.

**PART FOUR In the following section, there is a list of factors that might affect your attendance at different kinds of classes. Please read each statement carefully and rank from 1 to 5 the most important reasons that might cause you NOT to attend face-to-face classes (with 1 being the most important).**

Q32 What do you identify as the FIVE most important reasons that might cause you NOT to attend face-to-face classes? (Rank by typing the numbers 1 to 5 in the boxes, with 1 being the most important reason).

\_\_\_\_\_ Family / Personal commitments

\_\_\_\_\_ Illness / Disability

\_\_\_\_\_ Work commitments

\_\_\_\_\_ I can access the recordings online

\_\_\_\_\_ I have timetable conflicts

\_\_\_\_\_ The time and day of the class

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not enjoy how the material is taught

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not like the teacher

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not find the content interesting

\_\_\_\_\_ There are not enough opportunities to engage with my peers and the teacher in class

\_\_\_\_\_ I find attending classes too stressful

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not want to participate in class activities

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I don't belong

\_\_\_\_\_ I am taking the unit as elective/broadening and I don't think it's important for my future

\_\_\_\_\_ I have assessments due

\_\_\_\_\_ I am not prepared for class

\_\_\_\_\_ The content of the class is not relevant for the assessments

**PART FIVE** In the following section, there are two open-ended questions about your attendance at classes. Please read each question carefully and answer honestly, remembering that your responses are anonymous. We would really appreciate your written feedback, so that we can improve our classes. This is the final part of the survey!

Q33 What influences your decision most when considering whether to attend face-to-face classes?

Q34 What would encourage you to come to face-to-face classes?

**THANK YOU FOR SUBMITTING THIS SURVEY!**

**Your response has been recorded.**

**We would greatly appreciate your participation in a focus group. If you are interested in joining the discussion, please contact the chief investigator [name and email address].**

## Appendix B

### Survey results

Questions 12-31 (Likert scale questions)

Statements	Agree/strongly agree%	Agree/strongly agree (N)	M	SD
The time of a class (ie. morning, afternoon, or evening) influences my decision to attend it.	45.6%	68	3.24	1.25
I am more likely to attend a class if it is not recorded.	56.4%	84	3.70	1.29
I am more likely to attend classes when guidance/revision for assessments is provided during the classes.	79.2%	118	4.03	0.89
My personal commitments (eg. sport, childcare) influence my decision to attend classes.	56.7%	83	3.48	1.10
I am more likely to attend a class if it is a two-hour class, compared to a one-hour class.	26.2%	39	2.90	1.26
I am more likely to attend classes taught in groups of 30 or fewer students.	61.1%	91	3.73	1.03
I am more likely to attend classes if I find the content of academic value.	79.2%	118	4.10	0.90
My decision to attend classes is influenced by whether I have assessments for other units due.	44.3%	66	3.26	1.27
I am more likely to attend classes if I find the teacher engaging.	85.2%	127	4.25	0.85
My paid work commitments influence my decision to attend classes.	43.6%	65	3.56	1.42
I am more likely to attend interactive classes than information delivery classes (ie. lectures).	66.5%	99	3.88	1.02
I am more likely to attend classes if there is a participation/attendance mark.	77.7%	115	4.01	1.01
I am more likely to attend a class if I have another class on the same day.	70.9%	105	3.94	0.97
I'm more likely to attend class if little preparation is required.	43.9%	65	3.17	1.12
The cost and difficulty of getting to and/or parking at university influences my decision to attend classes.	43.2%	64	3.15	1.26

The quality of online resources is such that I don't need to attend face-to-face.	16.2%	24	2.39	1.05
Anxiety influences my decision to attend.	20.9%	31	3.03	1.41
I am more likely to attend when I think that speaking activities are a focus of the	41.2%	61	3.31	0.99
I am more likely to attend when I think grammar explanations and/or language practice are a focus of the class.	64.2%	95	3.75	0.85
I am more likely to attend when I think there is an emphasis on cultural aspects.	40.5%	60	3.43	1.00

**Question 31. Ranking.** (Instructions: What do you identify as the FIVE most important reasons that might cause you NOT to attend face-to-face classes? Rank by typing the numbers 1 to 5 in the boxes, with 1 being the most important reason).

Statements	M	SD	No.
Illness/Disability	1.63	0.99	100
Family/Personal commitments	2.69	1.27	95
Work commitments	2.73	1.28	74
I have timetable conflicts	2.77	1.41	88
I do not want to participate in class activities	3.15	1.41	13
I can access the recordings online	3.16	1.35	37
I find attending classes too stressful	3.17	1.48	40
I do not enjoy how the material is taught	3.23	1.31	30
I have assessments due	3.27	1.13	71
I do not like the teacher	3.37	1.25	27
The time and day of the class	3.38	1.35	53
I am not prepared for class	3.48	1.30	40

I do not find the content interesting	3.48	1.20	25
There are not enough opportunities to engage with my peers and the teacher in class	3.50	1.26	18
I am taking the unit as elective/broadening and I don't think it's important for my future	3.50	1.55	12
I feel like I don't belong	3.58	1.55	26
The content of the class is not relevant for the assessments	3.77	1.17	30