STUDENTS' DISINHIBITION IN ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

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Abstract. Research in computer-mediated communication has pointed to online disinhibition effect, i.e., a tendency to interact with less restraint when online than in face-to-face contacts. The current study explores the presence and level of disinhibition in online communication among university students and sets it in the context of synchronous online foreign language learning. To this end, 284 university students who took a course in English as part of their study programs participated in the research. A quantitative approach employing a survey design was adopted and the results were analyzed by means of descriptive and inferential statistical tests in SPSS 25. The findings show that the overall level of online disinhibition is rather low among the participants—the students self-report they feel inhibited when using the internet and communicating online. It also shows that male students tend to be more disinhibited in online communication than females. Two factors, the ability to immerse themselves in online learning surroundings and the use of headphones while attending lessons online are found to produce higher disinhibition levels. The findings imply that the affective domain deserves special attention in creating and conducting online language courses and that the digital environment requires a specific student-centered approach that is yet to be explored and defined.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the way in which we teach and learn, mostly by replacing common classrooms with virtual educational environments. Both teachers and students were expected to react quickly in early 2020 and adapt to these new conditions. The new circumstances have brought about substantial changes in class communication, as most of the teacher-student and student-student interaction has remained without direct eye-contact. However, can we expect communication in an online environment to be the same as in the case of physical presence? Given that classroom interaction is perceived as an important characteristic of successful teaching and learning, this question seems rather important and deserves to be given special attention by educators and researchers.

So far, research in computer-mediated communication has shown that people tend to interact with less restraint when online than in face-to-face contacts (Joinson, 2007 in Rose, 2014, p. 255). In other words, people may think, act, and feel differently online in comparison with similar situations when they meet face-to-face. Suler (2004) referred to this phenomenon as 'online disinhibition effect'. The effect can be positive when, for example, people who have difficulties in face-to-face communication due to their shyness overcome this problem and open up online as they feel less exposed and thus more comfortable in this environment. On the other hand, the effect can also be negative, as individuals in these conditions may be tempted to break social rules and norms and interact in an inappropriate way. Considering the current prevalence of online learning and teaching, particularly in the area of higher education, the presence and role of disinhibition in online class interactions is certainly worth exploring. This view is additionally supported by the lack of research illuminating the role of disinhibition in online education (Rose, 2014). The current study therefore explores the presence and level of disinhibition in online communication among our university students and sets it in the context of foreign language (L2) learning, as communication and interaction, although important for all areas of study, are of the highest priority for L2 education since it aims at the development

of students' communicative competence. The pedagogical implications of the study are discussed in light of the obtained results.

Theoretical Framework

Disinhibition is defined as "any behavior that is characterized by an apparent reduction in concerns for self-presentation and judgement of others" (Joinson, 1998, p. 44). The concept implies that behavior on the internet may differ from similar behavior in face-to-face situations in real life, since the digital environment creates distinct interpersonal contexts in which concerns for self-presentation and judgement of others can be reduced. Namely, certain features of the digital environment, such as anonymity and invisibility, create contexts where personal identity can be concealed and the social rules, responsibilities, and hierarchies of offline contexts are often absent (Radić-Bojanić, 2007; Stuart & Scott, 2021). Suler (2004) recognizes six factors that cause online disinhibition: (dissociative) anonymity; invisibility; asynchronicity; solipsistic introjection (the sense that online interactions are internal and not with others and this option is safer); dissociative imagination (due to which the perception of ourselves and others is different from the one in face-to-face interactions); and the minimization of status and authority (the sense that all individuals are presented equally in an online setting). According to this author (2004), online disinhibition operates in two different ways and these are referred to as 'benign' and 'toxic' disinhibition. Benign disinhibition relates to the positive effects of disinhibition, for example, expressing generosity, kindness, and support. Toxic disinhibition, on the contrary, produces socially unacceptable reactions and behaviours, such as rude language, anger, or threat. In some cases, these negative, undesirable effects can take the form of harmful, aggressive reactions causing what today is known as cyber-hate (Wachs & Wright, 2019). One of the main reasons for this expression of aggression is seen in the visual, emotional, and physical distance of aggressors from their victims, which in turn limits their ability to empathize with others (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). Positive online disinhibition effects have been associated with anonymity that positively correlates with online self-disclosure, resulting in higher levels of social well-being (Ko & Kuo, 2009). The positive effects of greater self-disclosure have been observed both in shy individuals (Saunders & Chester, 2008), as well as in those who are socially stigmatized (McKenna, 2008). However, as Suler (2004) concludes, the distinction between toxic and benign disinhibition can be ambiguous in some cases. If self-disclosure, for example, becomes too intense or is expressed in an inappropriate way so that others feel embarrassed, then originally benign disinhibition may turn into a toxic one.

As for the educational context, empirical evidence so far has pointed to both toxic and benign effects of online disinhibition. Thus, Shepherd and

Edelmann (2005) report that the online environment is a useful channel for social engagement for students who experience social anxiety. On the other hand, Prata et al. (2009 in Rose, 2014, p. 255) have found that interpersonal conflicts play a prominent role in collaborative learning environments. Based on their research with college students, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) conclude that the lack of eye-contact plays a much greater role than anonymity in creating toxic online disinhibition. In her study with college students, Rose (2014) found that both students and their instructors reported on instances of benign and toxic disinhibition, the former manifested in shy students participating more freely in online lessons, and the latter recognized mostly in angry and abusive emails and posts. Technology itself, as Cunningham (2011) observes, can be stressful, thus producing toxic disinhibition effects. However, as the author concludes, this seems to become less of a problem as the number of students unfamiliar with the use of modern technology is decreasing. Finally, focusing on the context of L2 learning and teaching, Cunningham (2011) concludes that the lack of excessive inhibition has been shown to have positive effects on L2 production. Indeed, inhibition has been recognized as a psychological barrier between language learners and others, which seriously affects learners' communication and becomes a stumbling block in the process of L2 acquisition (Wang & Wu, 2020). Along with other individual variables of affective nature, such as motivation, anxiety, etc., inhibition is important for successful L2 learning. When this learning occurs in an online environment, however, the feeling of reduced responsibility (i.e., lower inhibition levels) may lead to increased willingness to take risks and risk-taking is considered an important prerequisite for successful language learning. Good language learners, as documented in L2 literature (Brown, 2001; Skehan, 1989) are those who are ready to take risks, i.e., ready to experiment with language and to make mistakes in order to learn and communicate. This therefore implies that disinhibition may be seen as an advantageous factor to L2 learning. However, to the best of our knowledge, this conclusion lacks empirical evidence as the literature on the role of online disinhibition in L2 teaching and learning is scarce.

Taking into account everything said above, the current paper focuses on the presence of online disinhibition in university students, as mature and responsible learners, and the implications this may have on L2 teaching and learning, particularly in synchronous modes. It is our intention to attract the attention of teachers and educators to this rather important and seemingly neglected factor in digital educational practices. The research questions we address in the study are the following:

RQ1: What is the level of online disinhibition among university students?

RQ2: Which contextual factors (being alone in the room during classes, audio equipment used, use of camera, field of study) and individual factors

(gender, ability to tune out surroundings, English language proficiency) are related to higher disinhibition levels?

RQ3: Is there an interaction effect of the investigated contextual and individual factors on the level of the students' online disinhibition?

Method

Since this study is exploratory in nature, attempting to identify situational and factors of individual differences related to the students' level of online disinhibition, a quantitative approach employing a survey design was adopted. The major advantage of this approach is that, in a cross-sectional survey, we are able to investigate a higher number of potential predictors and describe the attitudes of a large sample of respondents in order to generalize our findings to the entire population of students who are taking a course in English as a foreign language as part of their study programs.

Participants. A random sample of 284 students from the University of Novi Sad took part in this research, all of them taking a course in English as part of their respective programs. Of the initial cohort, 116 (40.8%) were male and 168 (59.2%) were female. The students' mean age was 20.37 (SD = 2.08), ranging from 19 to 29. Table 1 shows the cross tabulation of the number of students from each faculty and gender distribution.

Table 1. Participants

	Gender		Total
	M	F	
Faculty of Philosophy	19	78	97
Faculty of Sciences	27	28	55
Faculty of Education	7	8	15
Faculty of Technical Sciences	23	14	37
Faculty of Economics	40	40	80
Total	116	168	284

Instrument. The instrument used in this research was the Serbian translation of the Measure of Online Disinhibition – MOD (Stuart & Scott, 2021). The questionnaire was selected as it assesses "self-perceptions of psychological and behavioral change in the online as compared to the offline environment" (Stuart & Scott, 2021, p. 9). In its English form, the questionnaire consists of a single factor solution across twelve items (e.g., "I am more assertive online than I am offline" and "I find communicating with others easier on the internet than in person") which ask the participants to rate on a 5-point Likert scale to what extent each item is representative of them. Lower scores (1-2) indicate

inhibited online behavior, whereas higher scores (3-5) indicate disinhibited behavior. The Serbian translation of the items by the authors of this paper was checked for validity and reliability. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis with a satisfactory KMO = .929, whereas Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p < .0001$), indicating that the correlation structure is adequate for factor analysis. The results of a confirmatory factor analysis revealed that three items did not have an acceptable factor loading (< .04) and were therefore excluded from further analysis. The model with nine items proved a good fit for the data ($\chi^2 (36) = 17333.728$, $p < .0001$), accounting for 74.48% of the variance. A test of scale reliability returned a highly satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of .931.

In addition to gauging the respondents' level of disinhibition, the questionnaire also collected data on seven predictor variables, including contextual factors (being alone in the room during classes, audio equipment used, use of camera, field of study) and individual factors (gender, ability to tune out one's surroundings, English Language proficiency).

Procedure. We first approached English teachers working at the faculties of the University of Novi Sad who, during the school year 2020/2021, taught English online in a synchronous mode. We then asked the teachers to share the link to the Google Forms questionnaire with the students, either by sending it through mailing lists or by posting it on their courses' online bulletin boards. The data collection lasted for two weeks, during which students volunteered to fill out the questionnaire. An initial inspection revealed that a total of three respondents did not complete the entire questionnaire and their responses were removed from the data pool. Complete questionnaires were analyzed by means of descriptive and inferential statistical tests in SPSS 25.

Results

The focus of the first research question was to determine the level of online disinhibition among university L2 learners. Overall, the results reveal that the participants report a tendency towards more inhibited online behavior (mean = 2.18, SD = 1.01), with the lowest mean recorded with the item "I am more competitive online than I am offline" (mean = 1.62, SD = 0.98) indicating a highly inhibited behavior and the highest mean with the item "I am more confident online than I am offline" (mean = 2.72, SD = 1.28) indicating a slightly inhibited behavior (Table 2).

Table 2. The level of online disinhibition among participants

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Skewness Error	Kurtosis	Kurtosis Error
Disinhibition Total	2.18	1.01	.896	.145	.176	.289
I am more confident online than I am offline.	2.72	1.28	.255	.145	-.891	.289
I am more able to discuss controversial issues online than I am in person.	2.34	1.30	.668	.145	-.613	.289
I am more expressive online than I am offline.	2.37	1.33	.614	.145	-.801	.289
My behaviours online are less restricted than in person.	2.44	1.34	.572	.145	-.874	.290
I am more outgoing online than I am offline.	2.12	1.33	.969	.145	-.314	.289
I am more assertive online than I am offline.	2.25	1.24	.721	.146	-.387	.290
I say things on the internet that I would not say in person.	1.90	1.22	1.216	.145	.387	.290
I make friends more easily online than I do offline.	1.81	1.20	1.398	.145	.847	.290
I am more competitive online than I am offline.	1.62	0.98	1.614	.145	1.955	.289

In order to answer the second research question, we conducted a series of separate tests checking the relationship between each of the seven independent variables and the students' reported level of online disinhibition. Of the total number of independent variables tested the following four were not found to be statistically significantly related to online disinhibition: the contextual factors of being alone in the room during online classes (t = .734, p = .463); using the camera during online classes (t = 1.470, p = .143); the students' field of study (F = 1.620, p = .169); and the individual factor of EL proficiency (r = -.010, p = .868).

Statistically significant results were found for a total of three independent variables. Namely, the results of an independent samples t-test indicate that gender is significantly tied to reported online disinhibition (t = 2.197, p = .029), with male students reporting higher levels of disinhibition compared to female students (mean difference = .267). The second factor that yielded statistically significant results is the contextual factor of the audio equipment students use to take part in online classes. The results of a one-way ANOVA indicate that there is a difference in the level of online disinhibition between the students who use headphones, the students who use speakers, and the students who use both in

order to participate in online classes (F = 5.292, p = .006). The third factor that returned statistically significant results concerns the students' ability to easily tune out their physical surroundings and immerse themselves in the online experience. Namely, the results of an independent samples t-test showed that the students who find it difficult to tune out their surroundings during online classes are statistically more inhibited than those who can easily tune out their surroundings (t = 2.101, t = .036, mean difference = .251).

The third research question probed into the issue of interaction effects between the investigated independent variables on the students' reported level of online disinhibition. In order to answer the question, we conducted a univariate, factorial ANOVA, including in the analysis those independent variables that in previous analyses proved to be significantly tied to online disinhibition. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Main and interaction effects on disinhibition

Source	df	F	p	η_p^2
Corrected Model	11	1.915	.038	.073
Intercept	1	1206.822	.000	.819
Audio Equipment	2	4.472	.012	.032
Tune Out Surroundings	1	4.300	.020	.012
Gender	1	4.064	.045	.015
Audio Equipment * Tune Out Surroundings	2	4.904	.016	.017
Audio Equipment * Gender	2	.435	.648	.003
Tune Out Surroundings * Gender	1	.009	.925	.000
Audio Equipment * Tune Out Surroundings * Gender	2	.192	.826	.001
Error	267			
Total	281			
Corrected Total	280			
R^2 = .073 (Adjusted R^2 = .035)				

Significant main effects were discovered for gender (F = 4.064, p = .045, η_p^2 = .015, with female students being more inhibited than male students), for audio equipment students use in order to take part in online classes (F = 4.472, p = .012, η_p^2 = .032, with the students who use both headphones and speakers being more inhibited) and for the difficulty of achieving immersion in online classes (F = 4.300, p = .020, η_p^2 = .012, with those who find it easy to tune out their surroundings being less inhibited). The effect sizes, indicated above as partial eta squared, are medium for the variable of audio equipment, and large for the variables of gender and the ability to tune out one's surroundings. Additionally, the only interaction effect that was found to be statistically significant was between the audio equipment and the ability to tune out one's surroundings (F = 4.904, p = .016, η_p^2 = .017), as shown in Graph 1.

Graph 1. Interaction between audio equipment and immersion
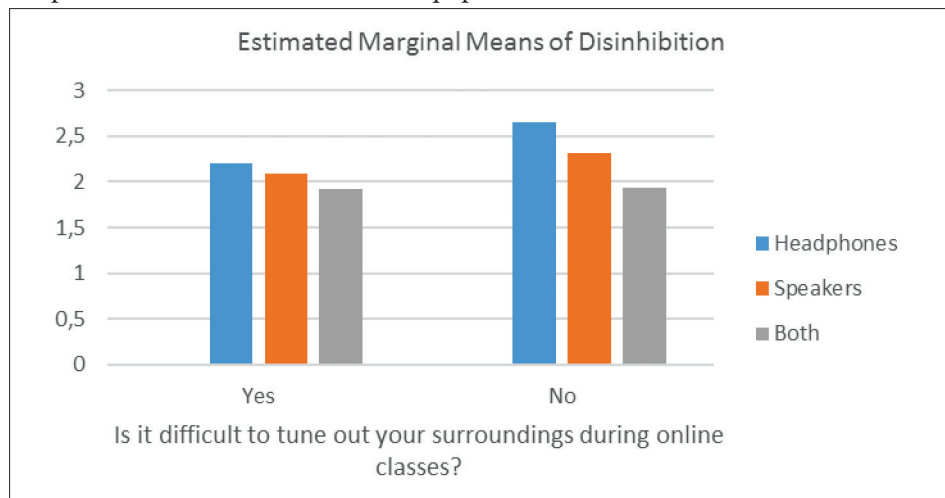
Among those who reported they did not find it difficult to tune out their surroundings the highest level of disinhibited behaviour was found with headphone users, while the highest inhibited behaviour was found with students who use both headphones and speakers. There is no difference in disinhibition among the students who reported they found it overall difficult to tune out their surroundings during online classes. The effect size of the interaction reported above as partial eta squared is considered large.

Discussion

The aim of the research reported in this paper was threefold. Our first goal was to determine the level of online disinhibition among students who took part in synchronous, online EFL classes as part of the requirements of their study program. Following this, we aimed to identify the contextual and individual factors which could be connected with the reported levels of disinhibition, and to determine if there is an interaction effect of the factors on the students' level of disinhibition. The overall level of online disinhibition is rather low among the participants—the students self-report they feel inhibited when using the internet and communicating online. In examining the responses to individual statements in the questionnaire higher levels of inhibited behavior are particularly evident in the students' ratings of lower competitiveness felt online compared to offline, of their lower ability to make friends online compared to offline, and in their overall unwillingness to say things online they normally would not say in person. On the other hand, there is a medium tendency for

students to report feeling more confident in online environments compared to real-world environments. All these results, particularly the low levels of competitiveness and confidence while being online point to the effect of affective factors on disinhibited online communication.

Gender is found to be a significant factor in the level of online disinhibition. Similar results have already been reported in the literature, particularly when it comes to various risky online activities where differences were found between male and female learners. For instance, the results reveal that male internet users are more likely to take part in risky online behavior (Mesch, 2009; Notten & Nikken, 2014), more often disclosing personal information online, thus exhibiting lower levels of inhibition (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009; Sasson & Mesch, 2014). Girls, on the other hand, are more likely to report that their online behavior resulted in unwanted situations (Baumgartner, 2013 in Notten & Nikken, 2014, p. 971) and that they were bullied online in various ways (Lenhart et al., 2011), which may raise their level of inhibition. However, the factor of gender does not interact with other factors—a student is not more or less likely to be disinhibited depending on whether they use headphones or are alone in the room during online classes depending on whether they are male or female.

Furthermore, "[s]tudents who are not obliged to use a webcam will generally prefer not to" (Cunningham, 2011, p. 31). This is in line with the results of our research, which found that of the entire sample of respondents only 23 participants (8.09%) turn on their camera during online classes. This situation is directly related to the notions of invisibility and anonymity, some of the factors that Suler (2004) identifies as crucial for feeling disinhibited online. In our study, however, this is not the case. Online students are usually required to register as users of educational platforms and thus their attendance, i.e., presence in class cannot be taken as invisible or anonymous, as their names or initials are displayed, making it less likely for students to feel disinhibited. This is a possible interpretation of the results. However, given the significantly low number of the students who use a camera, it is also possible that the results are influenced by this disbalance between the subsamples and that a more proportionate distribution would yield different results.

The ability to immerse oneself in the online environment with ease is also connected with higher levels of disinhibition. The factor of immersion was also found to significantly interact with the type of audio equipment the students use, with the highest disinhibited immersive experience achieved with the use of headphones only. In other words, the students who are disinhibited achieve best immersion by using headphones. This finding, however, is not to imply that exclusive use of headphones should be encouraged in online learning as a factor that would contribute to less inhibited class participation, since this variable had no impact on students who are already inhibited. We believe that the factor of immersion is directly related to the concept of dissociative imagination introduced

by Suler (2004), according to which disinhibited internet users feel that online interactions take place in an unreal online world. The sense of immersing oneself fully into the online environment implies a greater level of detachment from external reality (Aardema et al., 2010) and greater willingness to take active participation in virtual events (Bowman, 2010; 2015). While detachment from reality is treated as a pathological condition if it reaches its extreme form, minor dissociative experiences are considered normal (Bowman, 2018) and may even facilitate online interactions. On the other hand, the results of this research also point to a high number of participants who have difficulty achieving immersion and who are highly inhibited in online communication. Considering the factor of dissociative imagination, for these students the online world never becomes a new reality in itself as they remain firmly grounded in their physical reality and to the rules of behavior, norms, and expectations established there. For more inhibited internet users, attachment to the real world may even provide them with a way of coping with the potential anxiety that participation in online communication may induce, or as Cunningham (2011, p. 35) claims, "they have the security of being in familiar surroundings and can maintain a measure of protection from the total self-revelation required by physical presence, especially if they restrict the modes of their participation to exclude video."

What pedagogical implications can be drawn from the findings of this research? The prevalence of inhibited behavior of the participants in online communication should be interpreted as a signal for language instructors and educators that students need to be given additional support and encouragement if they are to speak up in their online lessons. The affective domain is certainly an area that deserves special attention in online language pedagogy. This further implies that digital educational environments require additional caution and even more attention to individual learner differences than traditional, face-to-face classrooms. This being the case, it may prove useful to conduct a needs analysis survey into students' attitudes and preferences regarding online communication prior to their language course for the purpose of creating a more stimulating environment for class participation. It would indicate what kind of activities and which modes of communication would prompt students to express their thoughts and ideas without restraints, especially at the beginning of their online course, when they are facing a new environment. Dosing the amount of input they are expected to produce also seems a good strategy for overcoming inhibited behavior. Using of a variety of interesting and fun activities as ice breakers might also prove effective and help students immerse more easily into the environment. Finally, as research into affective strategy development has given positive results regarding communication in a traditional, face-to-face classroom (Radić-Bojanić, 2014; Radić-Bojanić & Topalov, 2021; Topalov & Radić-Bojanić, 2014), this kind of an approach could also be beneficial for the digital environment. The development and regular application

of various affective strategies may prove useful in helping students deal with increased concern for self-presentation in an online classroom, as they have been reported to be useful in face-to-face classrooms. For instance, focusing on speaking anxiety in traditional classrooms, Woodrow (2006) offers a number of coping methods including perseverance (not giving up when speaking), improving language (planning and preparing ahead), positive thinking (positive self-talk), compensation strategies (smiling and volunteering comments) and relaxation techniques.

A systematic way of addressing students' emotional and personal attributes while functioning in an online learning environment could help them open up more easily and thus communicate more effectively. This, however, needs to be supported empirically in future research. Finally, regarding the situational context, advising students to use headphones in their online language lessons may prove efficient in helping them immerse more in the learning environment and thus overcome inhibition and preferably, feel more comfortable and ready to communicate.

The results and their interpretations are, ultimately, also subject to the main limitation of this study, which lies in the fact that this was a cross-sectional study relying on participants' ability to self-reflect. The relationship between the levels of online disinhibition and the individual and contextual factors that were considered in this exploratory study cannot, therefore, indicate the sequence of relationships, regardless of the nature of the statistical tests used to analyze the data.

Conclusion

The findings of the current research suggest that at this moment university lecturers and language instructors at the University of Novi Sad cannot count very much on any disinhibition effect in their students' interaction in online courses as the research participants have massively expressed inhibited behavior even in informal communication which is part of their regular daily activities on the internet. This could be perceived as a signal that their inhibition may be even higher in a formal digital environment, i.e., when they attend lectures online. The assumption definitely deserves further empirical testing as there are studies claiming that disinhibition may go hand-in-hand with inhibition (Rose, 2014) so further research in this area is needed. For the time being, the current study reveals that male students tend to be more disinhibited communicators in online setting than girls. It also stresses the role of two factors that affect how (dis)inhibited students are: the use of headphones while attending lessons online; and the other one, of a more personal nature, the ability to immerse themselves in online learning surroundings. All this implies that the

digital environment requires a specific student-centered approach that is yet to be fully explored and defined. Although the results presented appear somewhat inconclusive, the purpose of this contribution is to shed light and attract the attention of researchers to this under-researched phenomenon in digital language learning and its effect on students' communication. Its role is also perceived in pointing to the complexity of teacher-student and student-student interaction in digital environment, which definitely has its regularities and specificities. If these are not understood and handled properly, interaction with students may not be achieved and our online lessons are likely to transform into old, outdated frontal instruction classes.

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Дезинхибиција у онлајн комуникацији студената и импликације у настави страног језика

Р е з и м е

Истраживања у вези са комуникацијом путем рачунара указала су на ефекат дезинхибиције, тј. на тенденцију ка интеракцији са мање уздржаности у онлајн окружењу него у контактима лицем у лице. Овај рад испитује присуство и ниво дезинхибиције у онлајн комуникацији студената и то поставља у контекст синхроне онлајн наставе страних језика. С тим циљем, путем анкете испитано је 284 студента који су похађали курс енглеског језика у оквиру својих студијских програма. Резултати анкете анализирани су помоћу дескриптивних и инференцијалних статистичких тестова у СПСС 25. Добијени резултати показују да је укупан ниво онлајн дезинхибиције прилично низак међу учесницима – студенти наводе да се осећају инхибирано при коришћењу интернета и онлајн комуникације. Резултати, такође, показују да су студенти мање инхибирани у онлајн комуникацији него студенткиње. Два фактора – способност да се уживе у окружење током онлајн наставе и коришћење слушалица током тих часова – доводе до већих нивоа дезинхибиције. Са аспекта педагошких импликација, истраживање показује да афективни домен заслужује посебну пажњу у креирању и извођењу онлајн курсева језика и да дигитално окружење као такво захтева један посебан наставни приступ усмерен ка индивидуалним потребама студената који тек треба да се детаљније истражи и дефинише.

Кључне речи: дезинхибиција; онлајн комуникација; онлајн учење страног језика.