NEW CHALLENGES OF ADAPTING TO TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE ONLINE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

March 2019 will definitely be remembered as the trigger of a historic event worldwide. Needless to say that the Romanian society as well had to learn almost overnight how to adapt and face such a dramatic situation in an already weakened and unstable social and political context. The pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus brought along not only fear for individual health and social security, but also an urgent need to switch to an almost exclusively online environment. The main focus of this paper is to highlight the empirical observations connected to teaching foreign languages in the online Romanian academic environment. These observations are based on personal experience and informal interviews and discussions with students and other teachers, as well as conclusions drawn from listening, watching and attending other online events, webinars and conferences on this topic. The short period of time we have had since the beginning of this regrettable situation has forced teachers worldwide to learn how to adapt, how to face and how to find solutions to the challenges raised by this swift shift to digitalisation and online teaching and learning. The interest, the solutions and the adaptations found so far emphasise the desire to improve and to balance the many concerns and shortcomings connected to this type of teaching and learning process. This, in turn, will lead to new ones in the future and even if, sooner or later, people happily manage to return to the traditional teaching system, many of them will most likely be further considered and integrated in new teaching and learning methods and techniques, as part of a natural technological and scientific process.

Keywords: *Challenges, online teaching, academic environment, digitalization, adaptation.*

JEL Classification: *I21, I29.*

Nobody had foreseen such a dramatic change at such short notice. The news of the worldwide spread of the COVID-19 virus had not only taken everybody aback and frozen almost all activities, from the economic to the social ones, but had also greatly challenged the educational system. It was clear from the very beginning that the medical system would be shaken and tested to the extremes, although nobody had all the necessary resources, both human and material, to deal with such a terrifying situation. The educational system had to undergo the same situation, being forced to step into a very blurry scenario - never tried before - that of exclusive online teaching. And this was topped by the social lockdown, fear, insecurity and lack of clear guidelines, since everything had to be adapted and created to suit what was happening and changing every day.

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The first moment of switching to online teaching was during the lockdown started in March 2019 in Romania and it was a very difficult moment since little was known about where to start and how to handle this online teaching and learning. But due to extensive digitalization it was soon possible to create tutorials and virtual meetings with peer teachers, to prepare online platforms and to start learning, step by step, how to use them and the online resources at the fullest. Nevertheless, the biggest issue was to have access to a reliable

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Internet connection and at least "decent" devices or gadgets to allow this type of process. Thus, this would be one of the biggest issues related to online teaching: connectivity, access to gadgets and computer literacy. They are essential for being able to be part of a two-fold process: teaching and learning, but at the same time they can also be quite easily and effectively solved if a financial issue does not add up to the already started list of challenges and difficulties. Even though, solutions can include the use of more reliable gadgets either provided by an institution or borrowing some if available. The ideal situation would have the government deal with the problem by giving enough gadgets for both teachers and students who do not have the possibility to purchase any on their own, as is the case in most villages, remote or poor area in Romania. Unfortunately this is a very lengthy process with very slim chances of becoming reality in a span of time that would allow students and teachers in question to even start preparing for the process of virtual teaching.

Technical issues may occur anytime and they can increase both students' and teachers' frustration but that is why it is always a good idea to use simple platforms, with simple programmes that do not involve downloading or creating accounts that may render the whole learning process unnecessarily difficult. As teachers, we have to double check everything before the online class, starting from planning the lesson and the time available – online classes take longer in terms of what can be delivered to students in the teaching-learning process – to the sound, the materials, the appropriate games, trying to avoid materials that have to be downloaded or printed out too often since it can make the whole process more difficult and more frustrating for some of the students. The simpler things are the better for everybody.

Computer literacy or better said, illiteracy, can be a very frustrating issue for teachers, for students or for both. It is very unlikely to expect everybody to be able to use efficiently virtual teaching or learning without prior training. Needless to say that the degree of training greatly depends on the previous computer skills and experience, which, unfortunately, will never be the same for all the students, let's say, in a class or for all teachers in a school or other educational institution. Training sessions for the use of different platforms and other online resources have been very useful and the feedback after each session can be very valuable in improving computer literacy and the use of platform, especially Zoom since it was and still is one the most popular and widely used platforms for online connections. Tutorials for both teachers and students are also valuable since they can show how to use different tools so that everybody is accustomed with them and knows how to make use of them in real time. Moreover, a general and understandable characteristic is that the younger generation is more skilful at everything related to computer literacy and hence a continuous exchange of ideas and skills in the online classes between teachers and students and the other way around as well. In fact, this can be considered something that can bring students and teachers closer together and increase the interaction between them.

The connectivity issue is not something that can be easily dealt with since the national network has to provide support for a reliable connection. Most common troubles refer to the unstable Internet connection that in turn leads to temporary disconnections, poor quality of sound and video, delays in connecting and delivering content, overloaded platforms, loss of signal or power cuts. These are some of the most common digital issues that all teachers and students have come across, but another interesting concern regards the passive students who are not interested or captivated enough by the online classes and blame their lack of interest and participation on poor connections without the teachers' being able to prove whether it is true or not, just an excuse for not attending the class. The passive students are usually those who choose not to activate their video either by saying that they do not have a gadget with a camera or simply by saying that there is something wrong with it and they cannot fix it. There are, of course, real cases in point, but they are far less than what happens in real virtual classes. One solution for this problem is the necessity for the institution or person organizing

the online classes to stipulate the exclusion from class of the participant who refuse to activate their cameras and participate as equals to their colleagues.

But the issue of passive students does not confine only to the refusal to turn the video camera on; it goes much deeper, to the refusal to interact, to answer questions, to do home assignments, to learn at least as well as they did during the traditional classes. In online English-teaching classes, as in most online classes, the lack of physical, face-to-face interaction decreased significantly the bond between teachers and students and it was reflected in the teaching – learning process. And the rather slow adaptation to this system of virtual teaching made it all the more difficult as well. Students can be easily distracted by so many other more interesting and entertaining things than studying and the shift to virtual teaching did not make this challenge any easier, on the contrary, it became worse. Now teachers need to find all sorts of ways to engage students in virtual interactions. For English-teaching classes there are numerous online resources and tips, tutorials and webinars from experts and professionals who share their experience and strategies to help other peers deal more successfully with such inevitable challenges. Among the most engaging strategies we can mention PowerPoint presentations, videos, short films, quizzes, break-out rooms in Zoom, for example, for pair or group discussions, easier and clearer structure of the taught units, continuous feedback, games, contests and, why not, where possible and appropriate, especially with young students, physical movement since it can compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction and it can break the long hours spent in front of the computer.

The big number of hours spent in front of a gadget, both by students and teachers, is yet another important issue that has often been brought up in discussions and webinars by teachers. The long process of planning the lessons and finding suitable resources for the virtual classes takes a long time which adds to the countless hours of teaching online and this unfortunately represents another important disadvantage. In some cases it is possible for the teacher to go to school and deliver the class from there and this allows for some physical movement. There was also the alternative, for a brief period in Romania, to have mixed classes, meaning the teachers and half of the class were at school, while the other half of the students were at home, watching the teaching process online. This "hybrid" or "mixed" type of teaching had numerous challenges in itself, because of the difficulty of engaging the students who got access to the teaching process from home: difficulty to see what the teachers were writing on the board, difficulty with the sound, lack of interaction, lack of engagement in the lesson from teachers who mostly focused on the students attending the class physically, lack of assessment and feedback. One the other hand, one of the advantages for the students who went to school was also the physical movement, which is no longer possible when in front of the computer. It is thus easy to understand why so many teachers, students and parents complain about this huge challenge – sitting for hours on end in front of screens topped with the banning of going out during the three-month lockdown.

The lack of engagement and motivation leads to boring classes and this, in turn, makes students give up or become less and less interested. English online classes can make use of all kinds of humorous resources and find more dynamic and interactive ways of teaching, at least once in a while if not possible for each lesson because otherwise students will gradually lose interest and find ways to stop interacting. Fortunately, there are many links to online resources that can help teachers find solutions or inspire them to become more creative. Unfortunately, all the search and analyzing takes a lot of time that adds up to more hours spent online, in front of the computer, which in turn can prove a little de-motivating for teachers as well. Nevertheless, one solution is to be part of the numerous online webinars and online international or national conferences or training session where teachers have access to experts and professionals who provide links to such online resources, together with pieces of advice and personal experience which can be of great help.

Some students fear the lack of intimacy with online classes and this represents a delicate issue since it depends on the teacher to handle such matters. One of the reasons why students refuse to stay connected with a video camera is the fact that they may be afraid to show or to share with other people where they live. It would be very important to have access to a virtual meeting where we can see each other's faces since there is no other way to take notice of body language and to assess students' reactions based on that. Without such virtual face-to-face interaction, the only possibility to interact is the audio input and the written one, but it is by no means enough for teachers to have successful interaction and feedback. Thus, the issue of being able to see at least the students' faces and to hear them online becomes extremely important. Teachers have to work out some of the reasons why students refuse to open their cameras or find excuses not to do it and try to talk to them offline and individually to see the different solutions available. Here, a big role can be played by the whole group dynamic, how well they know and accept each other and how easily and openly students can interact among themselves and with their teacher. English classes allow for such interaction through games, pair work, quizzes, break-out rooms, as mentioned before, and so forth. Making sure, as teachers, that we have all students with video cameras on can facilitate the entire process of teaching and spare us the difficulty encountered when students log on just for the attendance, without being there physically – which teachers cannot always check, but they can easily realise their absence when they keep calling out names and most of times with no response.

One more delicate issue is when students have to share the room with some other members of the family, siblings, parents or grandparents, and there is not enough intimacy for a normal learning process. Teachers too have to learn to deal with this problem and there are cases when the members of the family can interfere with the teaching process online; such cases must be dealt with diplomacy by teachers. Another issue may be the constant presence or disturbance in the background of a family member, even a sibling having simultaneous classes, and this may interfere with the student's being able to pay attention or may even cause the turning off of the video camera. As teachers, it is important to understand every situation as it is and be able to find the best solution for each challenge in order to adapt to all situations and learn everyday new ways to adapt to and improve the online teaching classes.

In the hope that this is just a way to adapting to new teaching techniques and future learning possibilities opened by the constant development of technology and not the exclusively way of teaching in the future, I deeply believe that both students and teachers cannot wait to safely go back to classes and really interact, hear, feel, connect with each other, because the teaching process is much more than merely conveying information, it is about creating long-lasting relationships based on mutual trust.

Conclusions

The interest, the solutions and the adaptations found so far emphasise the desire to improve and to balance the many concerns and shortcomings connected to this type of teaching and learning process. This, in turn, will lead to new ones in the future and even if, sooner or later, people happily manage to return to the traditional teaching system, many of them will most likely be further considered and integrated in new teaching and learning methods and techniques, as part of a natural technological and scientific process. Thus, as teachers, it is important to understand every situation as it is and be able to find the best solution for each challenge in order to adapt to all situations and learn everyday new ways to adapt to and improve the online teaching classes.

This regrettable situation has taught people worldwide many things about life in general, about themselves, about reconsidering the real values of life and in terms of teaching it made it very clear that the lack of physical, face-to-face interaction decreased significantly the bond between teachers and students and it was reflected in the teaching – learning process.

That is why it is highly important to find ways to combine technology and integrate it into the class, but the interaction teacher-student has to be face-to-face to have a 100% successful teaching process.

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