

REMOTE TEACHING: USING VIDEO RESOURCES FOR CLASS INTERACTION

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Abstract: The pandemic-biased restrictions of 2020 imposed a new approach from teachers, in the context of online teaching. While a remote relationship with students has broken the communicative basis we were all taking for granted, the new need-based system required adaptation at both ends, as well as an increased level of creativity meant to maintain interaction and the students' interest alive.

Key words: Remote teaching; interaction; video support; adaptation; digitization.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, teaching specific skills for students of Translation and Interpreting used a mix of theoretical data and applied exercises, with video being used from time to time as a support for specific class purposes. Seminars were particularly useful since face-to-face interaction made it easier to check pre-learned items with the help of class-based or pair-work techniques. Repetitive, but easy for all involved.

Last year's pandemic promised to be short and with a minimal influence on teaching, but reality hit hard on all of us, with it still being a painful reality at present. While being proficient in the use of technology, the author of this study nevertheless found it hard, at first, to comply with Microsoft Teams requirements and – psychologically speaking – with the reality of being far from her students and devoid of any chance to check their knowledge in the traditional ways.

But emergency situations call for emergency decisions, and creativity is called upon to play a major role in re-structuring teaching habits, from the basics and up to more sophisticated ways. The “new-normal” requires teachers to raise their awareness regarding digitization and its critical importance in this new type of courses and seminars. At the same time, the importance of video inserts within theoretical courses increased, not only because of the real-life situations presented, but also due to their being a welcome break from students' focus on Power Point presentations which, at times, can prove tiresome and even boring.

Following a tentative, timid start in the first weeks of this academic year, video excerpts were then added to adapted teaching variants – interactive exercises, pair work in speech-and-interpreting, or speech-and-translation, Q&A sessions, among others – all meant to increase students' active participation in remote conditions.

2. Basic contribution of theory to remote classes

Remote teaching is not new; while being used in Europe as an exception, it was largely part of the teaching system in various areas of the world, such as the USA, Canada, in

China or Japan. But the special health situation which saw Europe plunge into chaos in 2020 determined authorities to search for appropriate ways of coping with teaching by using various digital platforms. What started as a presumed short-term experiment ended by being the norm for most universities around Europe and the world.

Remote teaching, especially in emergency situations, to be precise, is significantly different from online teaching (Means, Bakia & Murphy, 2014: 7). In emergency cases, both teachers and students must adapt quickly and efficiently to a flexible type of interaction, whereby the face-to-face alternative is completely excluded. The theoretical part of teaching must also be adapted, made more synthetic and case-focused, with less lengthy theoretical presentations and an emphasis on applications and practical structures.

There is a wide range of concepts which, in theoretical terms, define the process of teaching by excluding the face-to-face system. While the general term covering them all still remains “distance learning” (or teaching), we can also speak of *blended learning* (when online teaching is mixed with face-to-face teacher-student meetings) or *mobile learning*, with a focus on learning through the internet, using mobile phones for a series of activities, including quizzes, animations or various types of assessments. We can also speak of *distributed learning*, whereby web-based teaching/ learning is combined with video conferencing and other alternative means of sharing information (Greving & Richter, 2018; Bjork & Bjork, 2011; Madison & Kumaran, 2017). The general purpose of all these proposed versions of learning is to improve the level of students’ proficiency by enhancing variety in the virtual “team” or “classroom”.

One of the positive traits of remote (online) teaching is that, at least in theory, it enhances teachers’ creativity and everybody’s flexible approach. On the one hand, creativity – while still remaining an important all-time asset for a good teacher – is needed, in this case, in order to maintain students’ interest and awareness to information being taught. This is an important challenge, as it involves the choice of video materials in support of each topic being taught, and this takes time. Most teachers are accustomed to using a significant part of their spare time for the research of a wide range of texts / audio / video materials for their courses, but their importance, in the case of online teaching, is much higher, in absence of the direct interaction, which is often helpful for receiving an appropriate feedback from students.

On the other hand, being more flexible under online conditions is fundamental for any experienced teacher, although this may involve stepping “outside the box”, that is, giving up some of the conservative teaching methods and choosing a more proactive style of teaching. This often implies a deep change of mentality for which quite a few of us were not prepared. Most lessons are pre-planned, and sometimes used – with some minor changes – over several years, and this system is no longer valid in online contexts. The active presence of the teacher involves a great deal of improvisation, as well as an inspired manner of shifting from one type of materials to another.

A useful aid in better understanding the basic requirements, but also the challenges facing teachers in online “classrooms” is given by the nine dimensions related to the design of courses and decision making by teachers (Means, Bakia & Murphy, 2004). These dimensions (or “options” as defined by the authors) include, among other suggestions: (a) the chosen mode of teaching (online, blended, web based, etc.), (b) the chosen pacing (either following the teacher’s pace at all times, thus requiring the students’ adaptation to it, or adopting a flexible approach, with the pace being faster or slower, depending on each topic), (c) the student-instructor ratio (with an emphasis on

the number of students participating at each course, while the teacher remains alone at all times), (d) the *teacher's* role online (as mentioned above, with an increased level of creativity and flexibility), but also (e) the *students'* role online (which also depends on the teacher's choice of method).

In this final case, the main challenge is to maintain the students' active participation by different methods, both traditional and new. Quizzes, role play, simulations or peer-work in separate "rooms" do work to a certain extent, but they also depend on students' openness to constant requirements of this type.

There is also the question of how efficient assignments are, in theoretical terms, in this new type of teaching. As a rule, assignments are closely connected to individual grades and performance awareness on students' side. However, traditional assignments in written form seem to be the most often used, thus leaving video or audio variants for face-to-face instruction exclusively.

How important is *feedback* in the case of online courses, and how does it work? The existing literature is still limited, if any, but we can expect an increase in research interest on this topic. One thing is already sure, resulting from teacher-students individual or group talks: the *isolation factor* plays an important role in the validity of students' feedback and general response to online courses. Face-to-face courses bring more motivation for a positive response to teacher requirements, than an online context. On the teacher's side, an overall assessment of each student's abilities and acceptance of class challenges is easier to make, while in the online context this assessment is rather presumed, not an active result of direct observation.

To conclude this part of our study, it must be said that the teacher has the responsibility of setting reasonable goals for online activities – course teaching or seminar work – so as to meet students' expectations and comply with their abilities to respond to this new challenge. Teachers must have those goals clear in their minds and serve them constantly during teaching. The feedback largely depends on the dynamics of course teaching and the teacher's ability to avoid using time-consuming, extensive theoretical explanations. What's more, the teachers' prestige during online teaching – especially if the students had no previous face-to-face communication with them - largely depends on the way in which they find the right balance between theory, online written practice, and exposure to video / audio materials.

3. Pros and Cons for an efficient online teaching

While some Western countries had already implemented an online teaching system as far back as two decades ago, for Romania this teaching / learning system was prompted by the emergency health situation of 2020. This required fast adaptation and enhanced flexibility for all those involved (teachers and students alike). For teachers, a period of sustained self-learning resulted from the implementation of new technologies, never before used in the teacher-student interaction.

The urgency of all involved changes determined the emergence of *a new type of learning culture*, in which direct communication was replaced by a computer-mediated interaction, which required quick adaptation and new skills being learned.

As in any other intellectual enterprise, enthusiasm alone cannot ensure an equal level of professionalism as already acknowledged in the traditional teaching / learning system. Drawbacks were bound to appear and hinder the initial expectations.

One of the main drawbacks – or, at least, challenges – related to online teaching, from the teacher's standpoint, is the *limitative character of his/her interaction with students*, resulting in the impossibility to assess the effects of online teaching, in all its phases, on students, and especially on those who, even in the traditional teaching system, were slow in acquiring information, for different reasons (indifference, lack of previous background knowledge, interference of various stimuli at the individual learning place, etc.).

Also, talking in front of a screen – as against talking to actual human beings in a live environment – can be frustrating and disappointing at first, and, again, a quick adaptation is required in order to cope with the situation and extract the best one can from it.

When we talk of language teaching, difficulties also arise from an *incomplete (or even inexistent) familiarity* with the newest computer-aided technologies. This partially explains the hesitation, and even the steps back taken by some teachers, doubled by worries of not being able to level the performance of more technically trained colleagues. At the same time, online teaching involves a *new perspective over details* that were once taken for granted: the availability of written course materials; class practice in groups or pairs; the limited attention span of learners, especially when a great deal of details is included in the teacher's presentation.

The students' learning pace is also an important factor which may have negative effects on teaching / learning. While, in the face-to-face system, teachers can adapt the speed of a presentation to the perceived needs of the class, this decision is much harder to make in the online system. From the personal experience of the author of this study, in the case of a Power Point presentation, the number of slides covering the extent of a normal, face-to-face, two-hour course is significantly exceeded in online conditions, the main reasons being the more "feeble" response from students and, of course, the fact that the presentation pace cannot be controlled and adapted.

Finally, one last negative issue proposed in this study is the lack of actual socialization which comes from this new type of e-learning. Many of us only realized how important direct socialization is, only when it was forbidden due to health safety risks. Traditional class interaction includes a large amount of body language elements, along with implied cooperation, rewards and critiques (as in the "carrot and stick" theory). During the traditional learning system, both teachers and students are used to watch out for each other's reaction to different stimuli (good or bad responses to questions or test, for example), they have expectations and a long-term perspective of individual results. In the e-learning system, expectations are not always proved in real terms, while the body language effect is insignificant, because it comes from a distance and can be ignored by choice.

On the positive side, online teaching involves more *freedom of choice for the teacher*, even if accompanied by a higher responsibility of the same choice. At the same time, for both teachers and students, online teaching allows for *the use of multiple devices* for the same learning purpose: topics can be taught / learned on computers, laptops, notebooks or even smartphones – the only variable being the dimension of the screen and the ability to distinguish information in a satisfactory manner for the eye. The use of multiple devices is also known as *mobile learning (or mLearning)*, and its real value results from the fact that said devices can be used for learning at any time and, of course, from any place one may be at, whenever needed. At the same time, e-learning is more dynamic, especially if the teacher has the ability to combine theoretical

information with more practical exercises, video clips followed by a class debate or learning-focused peer competitions (e.g. for term mining purposes).

According to Singh (2020) mobile learning “provides support to download the content and learn without access to the internet” (2020: 1), while the teacher (or presenter) is able to track the students’ progress, while displaying learning materials in various forms (PowerPoint presentations; individual slides; video clips on major topics; diagrams and graphic displays; reports, photographs, animated images and so on) as selected in support of each course topic.

Online software developers were among the first to accept the challenge and several online meeting systems emerged, such as Google Classroom, Zoom or Microsoft Teams. They continued to provide new alternatives for creating a better learning environment, especially from the visual point of view.

4. Video materials in support of online teaching

The most obvious opportunity provided by online teaching software is video-conferencing. The number of supported participants varies between 50 and several hundreds, depending on various technical features, as well as on the purpose of this activity.

For the teacher, the chance of being seen by students and seeing them during course presentations has the effect of mending, at least partially, the wound of coping with the actual distance separating participants.

The validity and positive effects of using video in e-learning environments was already confirmed by several studies. According to data published on the site of *Faculty Focus* (a US higher education structure for strategies and innovative methodologies), 93% of the respondents from universities around the US stated that it “Increases student satisfaction”, while 88% confirmed that including video clips in teacher presentations resulted in an obvious boost of “student achievement levels.”

After a whole year of e-teaching and using video materials as alternative support for some of her courses, the author of this study can also add that it was indeed very useful, not only for avoiding a passive attitude from the students, but also for their role in improving students’ understanding of previously taught theoretical data.

Apart for acting as a multi-modal learning aid, the use of video in e-learning can also be the basis for further class debates that include a higher number of students than simple Power Point presentations. And let us not forget the possibility of recording teacher presentations, thus enabling the students’ easy access to review the taught information whenever they want, thus becoming more secure in acquiring knowledge and improving their standards.

A simple review of the means used by the author during her courses for second- and third-year students from the Specialty of Translation and Interpreting in UTCEB, shows the following (approximate) percentages:

- About 60% Power Point slides for each course,
- About 20% multimedia materials (video clips, including animated explanations of course topics, recordings of interviews with important personalities, etc.),
- About 15% video-conferencing for class debates or the practice related to previously taught theoretical topics,

- About 5% graphics, diagrams, animations.

Of course, these percentages can be improved with experience, in case we have to continue with online teaching, even if it only means blended teaching, whereby face-to-face and video conferencing are mixed in various stages of teaching / learning.

In any case, video materials are bound to be used more frequently for teaching / learning purposes in the next years. They help us reach a larger audience and keep learners' interest alive, if their choice is based on rigorous rules and serve a clear purpose.

5. Conclusions – or the basis for future explorations of online learning

The personal experience of the author of this study with online teaching was largely (but not completely) satisfactory. While I generally enjoy challenges, viewed as opportunities for learning beyond limits and enhancing motivation, the only thing which was difficult to cope with has been the absence of direct interaction with students.

As explained in the introduction, online teaching (or e-learning, or m-learning or any other name that it may receive in future years) had a limited development in our country before the 2020 pandemic. As it happens, the emergency situation resulted in a boost of technology, which helped teachers overcome the difficulties of convincingly reaching their students.

This development will surely continue, even if the conditions which prompted it will cease to exist. So, it is largely up to teachers to find the required motivation to add further technological and information mining skills to those that already exist so far. Certain parts of online learning (such as using video for learning purposes) can prove useful in providing more variety to traditional teaching and creating a proactive environment in the class.

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