

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LANGUAGE TEACHING - USEFUL APPLICATIONS AND PLATFORMS

Silvia Laura MADINCEA PASCU

Tibiscus University of Timișoara, Romania

Abstract: Even though online teaching is not a novelty, the year of 2020 with the Covid-19 pandemic has brought numerous challenges to the educational system of many countries. Online teaching has turned from a variant into the main way of teaching. Every teacher had to face different changes in the educational process, methods, techniques, and tools. The paper discusses the main challenges of teachers, especially of language teachers, such as the switch from face-to-face classes to online classes with different ways of keeping the attention of students and turning the cameras on, computer literacy, knowledge and access to different platforms and applications, as well as lack of proper equipment. All these aspects as well as others were taken into consideration through a questionnaire consisting of nine questions administered to 62 teachers of various subject matters, 40 of them being language teachers. The questionnaire resulted into various useful suggestions for online classes and revealed numerous effective platforms and applications, with a brief description of their main features.

Keywords: Online teaching; applications; platform.

1. Introduction

The term MOOC referring to Massive Open Online Courses, designed for a large number of learners in a common online environment, was first introduced in 2008 by Dave Cormier from Prince Edward Island University. Other universities such as Stanford in 2011, and Harvard in 2012 started providing open online classes. Due to the fact that in the last years online courses have played an increasing role in teaching, it turned out that educators had to redefine their role, placing the student in the center of the educational process. If traditional face-to-face classes were more teacher-centered, online courses were more student-centered. (Evrin, Correia, Thompson, 2011: 421) Therefore, even though online teaching is not a novelty, the Covid-19 pandemic started in 2020 and the subsequent lockdown has brought numerous challenges to the educational system of many countries. (Huang, Liu, Tili, Knyazeva, Chang, Zhang, Burgos, Jemni, Zhang, Zhuang, Holotescu, 2020: 4-25) Online teaching has turned from a variant into the main way of teaching. All teachers had to overcome different changes in their educational process, methods, techniques, and tools. They had to face new challenges such as keeping students focused in front of the screen during the class, turning and keeping the cameras on, computer literacy, knowledge and access to different platforms and applications, lack of proper equipment and numerous others (cf. Iepure, Curcubătă, Vaida, 2020: 27-44).

2. Purpose, methods and respondents

The main purpose of the present paper was to identify and find suggestions for the various challenges of online teaching, especially of online language teaching. Moreover,

there was also special interest in the identification and brief description of some useful platforms and applications.

A questionnaire consisting of nine questions was administered to 62 teachers of various subject matters, among them 40 were language teachers. The questionnaire can be seen in Tables 1 and 2.

1. Indicate the age group you belong to:	
a.	18-22
b.	22-30
c.	30-40
d.	40-50
e.	over 50
2. Indicate the environment in which you teach:	
a.	university
b.	high school
c.	secondary school
d.	primary school
e.	companies (trainings for employees)
3. Indicate the level of your computer skills:	
a.	proficient
b.	excellent
c.	good
d.	basic
4. If you could choose, regardless of the current pandemic situation, which type of course would you prefer?	
a.	Face to face (in the classroom)
b.	Online
5. What are the disadvantages you can identify with the online courses held so far? (check all the options you consider)	
a.	Lack of adequate technology (computer, laptop, tablet, phone)
b.	Technical problems (internet, electricity)
c.	External temptations (phone, TV, emails, people in the house)
d.	Lack of direct contact with colleagues and the teacher
e.	Inadequacy of the course for online teaching
f.	Teacher's low computer skills
g.	Student's low computer skills
h.	Inability of the teacher to control / guide the class
i.	Other: (specify)

Table 1. Online teaching questionnaire

6. What should teachers do to overcome the disadvantages of online classes?	
a. To improve their computer skills / knowledge	
b. Establish clear rules from the beginning (webcam turned on, the order of speaking, etc.)	
c. To give up traditional teaching	
d. Use attractive applications and platforms	
e. To involve students more in the teaching activity	
f. Other: (specify)	
7. What could students do to overcome the disadvantages of online classes?	
a. To improve their computer skills / knowledge	
b. To follow the rules established by the teachers (webcam started, speaking in turns, etc.)	
c. To show up in an appropriate outfit and posture for an educational environment	
d. To take part in the course without other interferences (chat discussions, job-related activities, games, TV, etc.)	
e. Other: (specify)	
8. Indicate the platforms and applications you have heard about:	
a. Google Classroom	
b. Google Meet	
c. Zoom.us	
d. Moodle.org	
e. Edmodo	
f. Mentimeter	
g. Kahoot	
h. Wordwall	
i. Socrative	
j. ISLCollective	
k. Liveworksheets	
l. Other: (specify)	
9. Indicate the platforms and applications you have used at least once during the courses:	
a. Google Classroom	
b. Google Meet	
c. Zoom.us	
d. Moodle.org	
e. Edmodo	
f. Mentimeter	
g. Kahoot	
h. Wordwall	
i. Socrative	
j. ISLCollective	
k. Liveworksheets	
l. Other: (specify)	

Table 2. Online teaching questionnaire

3. Results

As far as the age of the respondent teachers was concerned, the questionnaire covered different age groups, from the young teachers between 22-30 years old (20%), to those

between 30-40 years old (17,5%), to the more experienced teachers between 40-50 years old (45%) and to the most experienced ones over 50 years old (17,5%).

The participants in the survey belong to different education levels from Romania, they teach in different environments: university (28%), high school (19%), secondary school (19%), primary school (15%) and training programmes for adults (company trainings – 19%). It is important to mention that some teach in only one education level (at university mostly), and others teach in two (at university and in a company), three even four education levels (at university and in different private schools providing courses for companies as well as high school and secondary school students).

As far as the computer literacy of the teachers is concerned, the majority of 63% stated having a good level, 16% mentioned an excellent level, 11% pretended being proficient and only 10% admitted having a basic level of computer skills.

Regardless of the age and the education level they work in, the majority (82.5%) would rather choose face-to-face teaching than online teaching (17,5%).

The survey disclosed eight important disadvantages of online teaching, as well as a few other drawbacks indicated by the respondents.

The first disadvantage, selected by 27% of the respondents, was the lack of direct contact with students in the virtual class (direct contact among students, and between teachers on the one hand and students on the other, body language, as well as direct facial expressions). A second place was taken with 22% by technical problems such as low internet connections or lack of electricity; followed by external temptations as distractions caused by phone calls or messages, TV, emails, other people or pets in the house, with 16%. The following two drawbacks selected by 9% were the inability of teachers to control and guide the class (more students mean less control) and the inadequacy of courses for online teaching (too many courses based on traditional methods). 7% of the teachers chose lack of adequate technology or inappropriate equipment (an old computer, laptop, tablet, phone, headset). Low computer literacy of students and the fact that many times teachers turn into IT specialists was mentioned by 5% of the respondents. On the other hand, sometimes students are more skilful than teachers and therefore 3% of the respondents selected low computer skills of teachers. Apart from the disadvantages provided in the questionnaire, there were also many others mentioned by 1% of the respondents such as lack of long-term focus (staying in front of a screen for 2 hours may result difficult), lack of immediate feedback from students, lack of control over the answers and exams of the students, and lack of motivation and rewards for an active presence of the students in the virtual class. It is still worth mentioning that surprisingly enough, adults have a positive reaction to online rewards as emoji provided by zoom for example.

In order to overcome these disadvantages, teachers have different alternatives. 26% of the respondents thought of using attractive applications and platforms as there are numerous apps they can choose from and use for different parts of the course. With 23%, closely followed another alternative i.e., improving computer skills and knowledge of teachers as there are numerous courses, webinars, tutorials for the use of different platforms and apps. Another solution, selected by 22%, was to establish clear rules from the beginning, rules regarding a continuously active webcam, the order of speaking, the use of microphone and so on. Turning classes more interactive through a major involvement of students in the teaching activity was considered by 20% of the respondent teachers. 7% marked the necessity of giving up traditional teaching and

monologues. Other 2% suggested different solutions for the online classes, such as keeping students focused by naming them randomly and adapting the course to the available online resources.

On the other hand, the respondent teachers could identify a number of activities that students could do in order to overcome the disadvantages of online teaching. 33% of them chose the suggestion for students to take part in the course without other interferences (chats, job-related activities, games, TV, or pets). Another solution, selected by 32% was to follow the rules established by the teachers (webcam started, speaking in turns, etc.). 21% of the respondents considered students should improve their computer skills and knowledge and 13% mentioned that they should show up in an appropriate outfit and posture for an educational environment. Only 1% of teachers stated that students should be actively present in the course, not just turning on the microphone and doing their own business.

The following question of the questionnaire was aimed at a number of platforms and apps teachers have heard about. A randomly chosen number of platforms and applications was listed, allowing also the respondents to mention other platforms.

The most commonly known platform was *Zoom.us*, selected by 23% of the teachers. It is a free and handy video conference tool, provided with useful features such as *schedule meetings* (with name, short description, date, period of time and password), *waiting rooms*, *breakout rooms* (for small groups or pair activities), *share screen* (for the host but also for the participants), *reactions* (with a few emoji), *record*, *whiteboard*, as well as the possibility to share documents and to chat. There are also other features available on paid license, such as social media streaming, recording transcripts, cloud recording, and so on.

The above-mentioned platform was very closely followed by *Google meet* with 21% of the respondents. It is another highly used video-communication platform which can be freely used for meeting with up to 100 participants for an hour. Features as *schedule meetings*, *share screen*, *record*, *chat*, and *whiteboard* are also provided, along with *English subtitles*. There are also paid versions which increase the number of participants to 250 and the duration of meetings to 300 hours.

Google Classroom is another platform known by 19% of the respondents. It keeps an accurate evidence of assignments, projects, homework, tests, or documents, all through the create function. Teachers can establish also deadlines, make suggestions, announcements, requests, ask questions, evaluate and grade students. Collaborative teaching is also available on the platform.

Only 6% of the respondents mentioned *Moodle.org*, an open-source learning platform used by more than 60% of all higher education in the world. It is generally purchased and installed on institutional servers by administrators and it consists of various drag-and-drop tools, with features as forum, content sections with resources (documents, directories, links) and activities (tests, questionnaires), news, events, course administration, etc. The platform was translated into more than 95 languages.

Still with 6%, *Mentimeter* was mentioned by the teacher respondents. It is a useful platform used during interactive presentations for real time questions, questionnaires, polls, quizzes, slides, and images. It seems to be successful in turning boring one-sided presentations into interactive and appealing ones.

Three other platforms, *Kahoot*, *Wordwall* and *ISLCollective*, were recognized by 5% of the respondents.

Kahoot, an attractive platform for children, but also for adult learners, is generally used for collaboration, formative assessment and feedback. Tests with images, animated GIF-s and pictures replace traditional paper-based tests and increase the competitiveness of learners. Studying seems easier as the teaching process turns into a game.

Wordwall is another application providing different quizzes, match ups, word games, supporting thus the learning process.

ISLCollective, as suggested in its name, is a platform which gathers an international community of more than a million language teachers who share their self-made language teaching materials for English, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian. Among the features provided by the platform, there are *worksheets*, *PowerPoint* and *video lessons*. They are all organized on different topics of grammar and vocabulary, according to students' level, age and needs (General or Specific Purpose language). There are also other filters such as skills (reading, listening, speaking, spelling, writing), language exam (Cambridge, IELTS, TOEFL, PTE, etc.), dialect (American, British, Canadian, Irish, etc.), and communicative functions. Apart from the shared materials, teacher can create their own with genuine materials picked from YouTube videos.

Liveworksheets, an interactive worksheets maker, closely follows the previous platforms, with 4% of the respondents having heard of it. The platform results effective especially in evaluations.

Only 1% of the respondents of the questionnaire heard about *Edmondo*, a worldwide educational social network, which allows teachers, students and parents to collaborate. It is mainly used in teaching children and it consists of numerous features such as *library* (with different teaching materials), *assignments*, *quizzes* for evaluations, *grades* (listing the activity, homework and result of each student), *polls* (with quick voting possibilities), and *badges* (as rewards or showing the level reached by students).

Unfortunately, none of the respondents has mentioned *Socrative*, an effective application which can be used to build up attractive quizzes and polls or tests for children from kindergarten to high school, as well as for language trainings dedicated to corporations.

On the other hand, 5% of the respondents, mentioned other platforms and applications which were not provided in the questionnaire, such as *Microsoft Teams*, *Quizziz*, *Webex*, *Testmoz*, *Exam.net*, but also *Skype* and *Whatsapp*.

The last point of the questionnaire refers to the platforms and applications which are literally used by teachers during the educational process, in different parts of a course. As shown in Figure 1., the first three places are taken by *Zooms.us* used by 23% of the teachers, *Google Meet* by 21% and *Google Classroom* by 19%. At distance, there are two other platforms, *Moodle* and *Mentimeter* used by 6% of the teachers. They are closely followed by *Kahoot*, *Worldwall* and *ISLCollective* with 5%. Only 1% of the teachers use *Liveworksheet*, while *Edmondo* is not used by any of the respondents. Last but not least, the questionnaire revealed other platforms used by 5% of the participant teachers such as *Microsoft Teams*, *Quizziz*, *Webex*, *Testmoz*, *Exam.net*, but also *Skype* and *Whatsapp*.

There are also other platforms and applications which have not been included in the questionnaire or mentioned by the respondents, such as Hot Patatoes, Livresq, LearninApps.org, Liveworksheets, Poll Everywhere, which definitely may result useful. Each platform serves specific necessities and is useful for specific subject matters, teachers, teaching methods, students, ages, levels, specializations, etc.

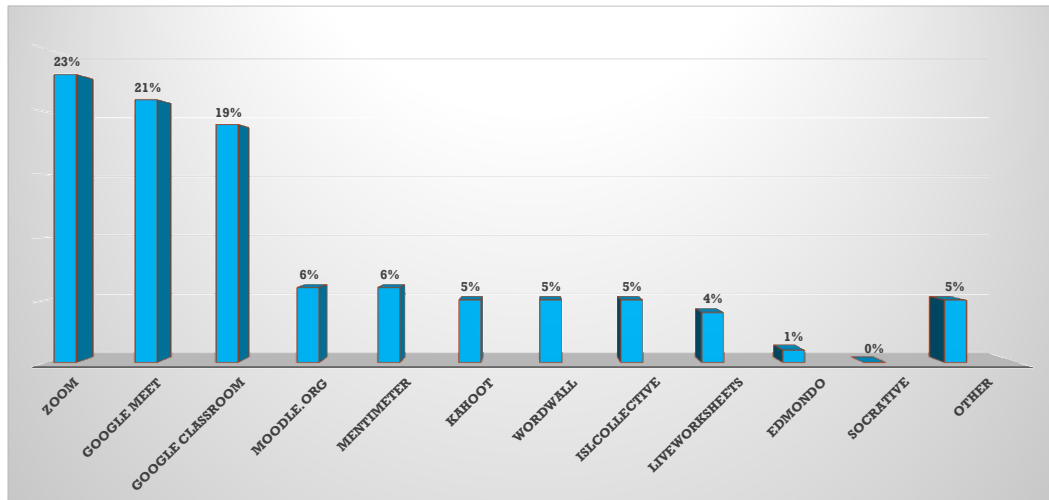


Figure 1. Platforms and applications used by respondent teachers

4. Conclusions

The present paper, through the questionnaire applied to 62 teachers, 40 language teachers, revealed a few aspects.

First of all, regardless of their age, their teaching environment or level they work with (university, high school, secondary school, primary school, or companies), the majority of the respondents prefers face to face teaching. Online classes have been a real solution for the Covid-19 situation, but once everyday life returns to normality, online teaching will probably be a second option for the face-to-face teaching.

Secondly, the main drawback of online teaching is the lack of direct interactions and feedback while the main solution is the use of attractive platforms and applications. It is worth mentioning that the previous suggestion for successful online classes does not imply the use of limitless applications and platforms. Two or three applications may result attractive during a course, as their overuse may have an opposite effect on students who might be confused by so many new technical tools and reject them. Moreover, the paper did not intend to evaluate the discussed platforms and applications, as there are definitely many other valuable ones which were not taken into consideration either by the questionnaire or by the respondents.

Last but not least, the main platforms used by the respondents of the questionnaire are *Zoom.us*, *Google Meet*, and *Google Classroom*.

To sum up, teachers should be aware of the great variety of platforms and applications and choose those that better suit their personality, purposes, style of teaching, students, and subject matter.

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