PARADIGM SHIFT: SOME CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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Abstract: The current pandemic brought about unprecedented change in the way we envision education, which was forced to move online overnight, in the felicitous cases where the infrastructure was available. At least in the more theoretical field of foreign language instruction, the digital education era, whether imposed by lockdown periods or not, is here to stay. Despite its disadvantages, the affordances of online language learning cannot be discounted, nor can the prospect of significantly more people opting for online language instruction in the years to come. Hence adapting pedagogies for the virtual learning environment should be high on the universities' agendas.

Keywords: Online language learning; online education advantages; synchronous lessons; social presence; academic community; interaction.

1. Introduction

The article presents a survey of some of the literature connected to online university language learning and teaching in the context of the present pandemic, with stress on practical steps, both from the literature and from the author's personal teaching experience, towards an improvement of the process. The paper dwells on the need to adapt policies for online components, in the context of an explosion of online programmes in universities around the world, in conjunction with an ever-increasing number of the students enrolled, following the ongoing process of higher education massification.

Balancing the disadvantages against the advantages of online education in language instruction, universities cannot afford to dismiss some obvious benefits brought by the online component, especially for certain categories of students, who lack the resources for accessing traditional, face-to-face programmes. In broad lines, provided the availability of the technical infrastructure is not an issue, if all the stakeholders can be determined to collaborate in order to overcome the main drawbacks of online education, those connected to the human factor, and succeed in providing a more satisfactory online *college experience*, it is likely that such programmes will thrive even in the post-pandemic era.

2. Analysing the current situation and solutions

2.1. The massification of higher education in the online era

Romania, along with other European Union countries, is still following the *Europe 2020 Strategy*, the European agenda for growth and jobs for the past decade. One of the

objectives formulated in this document was "increasing the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education from 31% to at least 40% in 2020" (*Europe 2020*: 13). Whether that objective is realistic or not, desirable or not, when we think of people's cognitive capacities and specific talents, that is a discussion that does not make the object of this paper. But what is obvious is that the present circumstances favour tremendous competition among higher education institutions around the world to attract enormous numbers of students and keep them interested and motivated enough so as not to drop out. Therefore, in order to survive, universities need to adapt practices of teaching and relating to students by acknowledging the new realities of the digital educational era.

2.2. Disadvantages of online education

The first concern when it comes to online learning is the availability of the technical infrastructure. In a situation such as the one created by the current pandemic, where online higher education is most often the only option, social inequalities are widened. Thus, government programmes meant to overcome these difficulties should be developed urgently. Moreover, even when the devices and the Internet are available, the quality of the Internet connection is not always very good, which will interrupt the instruction process. In order to counteract such occurrences, where possible, users must be ready and learn how to switch between devices and Internet providers.

Regarding the physical engagement in online lessons, which involve long hours in front of a computer, participants in synchronous online lessons experience *Zoom fatigue* (Ramachandran, 2021); also, asynchronous online experiences lead to exhaustion caused by sitting in front of a screen for prolonged sessions. In order to improve the situation, Ramachandran recommends solutions such as: increasing the distance between the screen and the personal space, using the hide self-view option, using an external keyboard to create flexibility, turning your video off periodically, etc. From a psychological point of view, students may not feel as relaxed online as they do in traditional classes, even though authors signal that "online learning can be friendlier and more accommodating to specific groups of students. For example, introverted students feel more comfortable contributing to an online discussion than speaking up in a face-to-face course" (Muljana and Luo, 2019: 21).

Another drawback refers to body language and the connection between participants. In online lessons, interaction happens unnaturally and is defined by the limits of technical attributes. Deriving from this, students lack the "college experience", feel isolated and run the risk of abandoning their studies. Before the pandemic, universities around the world advertised their campuses with wide green spaces crossed by lazy streams of water under the shadow of willows, with nightclubs and all types of attractions in the area to attract students. Conversely, the age of online education will need to offer remedies that will supplement the human and social components as closely as possible. In addition, instructors and students alike lack spontaneous interaction with their peers, they too feel isolated and maybe not getting enough support from their organizations.

Another aspect relates to the constant advancement of technologies and the need to integrate these. Instructors need to adapt their courses to a different mode of communication and delivery; students and instructors were forced to hone their technical skills and perform with unfamiliar instruments overnight; these technical tools will also continue to develop, which involves an effort from their users to remain up-to-date.

A major difficulty concerns the effectiveness of online studies, as determined by assessment and exams in the case of fully online programmes. Thus, even by administering open-book tests, or individual oral examinations in front of the webcam, cheating is very difficult to control, which questions the validity of the awarded diplomas. Consequently, exam sessions should be organised face-to-face when possible, while online examinations should be mostly oral, with a video component; in the case of online written exams, a creative component should be included, which is supposed to limit the scope for cheating. Undoubtedly, since many instances of cheating happen through online collaboration or via mobile telephony, students should be made aware that the traces of their activities can always be retrieved under certain circumstances, thus discouraging such unethical and illegal behaviour.

Lastly, there is the risk run by smaller universities of losing the categories of students that they normally attract, especially those from their neighbouring areas. Higher education institutions see themselves forced to provide online experience along with competitors who

> "have been doing it longer, have better infrastructure, and may do it better. For example, partnerships between elite universities and technology companies may have an advantage over colleges that are scrambling to transition online (e.g., a projected iStanford and HarvardxFacebook)" (Daigle and Stuvland, 2021: 182).

Therefore, if universities fail to adapt and provide competitive online programmes, they will lose substantial numbers of students, who will find themselves tempted to migrate to providers from anywhere in the world, due to the ease of accessibility that online courses entail.

2.3. Advantages of online language learning

Firstly, online learning offers flexibility: it transgresses space limits and participants save time and resources related to transportation or accommodation. Not only does this feature make online learning a viable solution in times of crisis (what has been called "emergency e-learning" (Martel *et al,* 2021: 173)); but it also accounts for its popularity among students who are employed, a parent, married, do military service, who cannot afford to relocate on a student campus or who, for various reasons, have limited time resources and cannot access traditional forms of education. Online learning is also a convenient solution for those who seek lifelong learning and are interested in improving their performance or credentials. Moreover, it is an advantageous solution for employers, who save resources that would normally be spent for employee training programmes, and who transfer this responsibility to the employees themselves. The flexibility of the system also allows for participants from all over the world to be brought together very easily, not only for the process of delivering and receiving instructional units, but also in order to cooperate and initiate projects in the educational field.

From the point of view of language learning and teaching, this subject makes use of materials (written, audio, video, multimedia) which are readily transferable in an electronic format, and which can now be used even more effectively than in a traditional scenario, with students having just pen and paper at hand. The materials used in online lessons can be kept available for students on platforms (e.g. Google Classroom), deadlines and assignments can be found all in one place, something that students appreciate as leading to a better organization and accessibility of resources.

One main advantage of online synchronous lessons is screen sharing, a technical feature of platforms such as Zoom, Meet etc. This allows participants in language classes to work on the same assignment simultaneously, to learn together or from each other's mistakes, to follow explanations more easily etc., processes which used to take much more time and energy when such tools were not available.

The technology of online learning and teaching will continuously develop and if we look on the bright side of things, if we use these advancements and affordances creatively, if we embrace change instead of resisting it, we may gain advantages and reach potentialities that now we cannot even envision.

2.4. Practical steps

In what follows, some steps will be enumerated, which can be taken in order to increase the quality of online language (and not only language) learning and teaching, to foster student retention and also to improve the experience of all the actors in the academic community. These observations are offered after surveying some of the literature on the subject of online education and consolidated with examples of practices in the study of EFL, with stress on what happens in synchronous sessions.

The first aspect pertains to the size of online classes. "The urgent need at present seems to be a radical shift of pedagogy towards an individualised, small group oriented, multi-dimensional model of teaching" (Sun, 2011: 444). The same author notes that, in language classes, when it comes to getting students to interact and work together in the breakout rooms, "A group with two to four people seems to be the most comfortable size for student interaction in the virtual classroom" (Sun, 2011: 437). In order for the teacher to be able to properly supervise such small groups, it would help if, in future, universities considered reducing the size of student groups that a teacher needs to manage at one time.

With respect to student interaction in the case of larger groups, it is clear that extroverted students tend to engage naturally in dialogues. In my experience, if the purpose is to make them express opinions in *spoken* interaction, they react best when being exposed to authentic materials dwelling upon a theme of current interest. Thus, selecting a short video from sites such as *BBC News*, or an article from the students' field of studies, is a practical option. As regards large heterogeneous groups of students, if the topic of discussion is interesting enough, even those with a lower level of language proficiency will overcome their anxiety of speaking up in front of others. In order to engage reluctant students, the teacher should follow the discussion closely and intervene with follow-up questions addressed to those individuals. In general, they respond well if they do not feel patronized and the created atmosphere is relaxed, friendly, respectful and permeated with a general feeling of collaboration and concern for their needs.

In the case of *writing* assignments, I find the share screen option a very effective tool for the students' mutual improvement. With their permission, or by presenting one anonymous piece of work, corrections and comments can be made to a document, with everyone learning from those mistakes, or having the possibility to step in for further comments. Also via the share screen option, the teacher can demonstrate the use of various tools in electronic format such as dictionaries, where to revisit grammar rules, theory or previous assignments.

A distinct advantage of online lessons with respect to improving the *reading* skill has been brought, in my experience with students, by introducing them to online tools such as the *Amazon Kindle* e-reader application. I suggested a short list of titles on topics of interest to their age, which I presented shortly in successive sessions, also providing reading excerpts to sample them. For those willing to invest in the purchasing of a book, besides the benefit of reading the book itself, it was highly rewarding to see them acknowledge the advantages of e-reading in English and getting familiar with it. This provides a series of tools that facilitate comprehension, assimilation, or accessibility: e-dictionaries; note-taking; the selection of paragraphs and archiving them in a database; organizing new vocabulary in lists that are available for reviews; ease of purchase or storage, etc.

As to the *listening* skill, compared to the traditional scenario, the online medium provides far more opportunities for accessing, storing or recording audio materials, which students can be provided with, or which they can create themselves. Thus, online tools such as Flipgrid, English Central, ELLLO, Padlet, Kahoot, etc. allow students and teachers alike to play and interact in new ways.

More importantly, students need to have the feeling at all times that they can choose, that they have a certain degree of control over the activities that they perform towards the achievement of a grade, in order to have their motivation and involvement stimulated. For that purpose, online platforms offer the advantage of efficient storage and organization of resources, along with a clear presentation of individual or group assignments and deadlines.

But besides the technicalities of a specific subject teaching, the greatest challenge that the online education environment faces is the human factor, the feeling of isolation, of no genuine interaction taking place at a personal level, of no academic community being created. As authors note, "learning is social in nature" (Muljana and Luo, 2019: 37). Thus, all the participants in the educational act (the faculty, students, administrators, personnel) need to interact in a manner that promotes empathy, collaboration, support, inclusion, care, along with acknowledging one another's needs, expectations and limitations.

Firstly, as Glazier explains, "the burden is on the faculty to create opportunities for connection with students in our online classes. Research shows that the instructor is more important than any other aspect of an online course" (Glazier, 2021: 175) The same author offers some recommendations in order to build rapport: start early; humanize yourself; get personal; provide opportunities for interaction; be compassionate (*Idem*: 175-176). Moreover, as Roberts (2021: 184) underlines, "Rapport is about creating an environment in which students and faculty interact to achieve common goals. [...] Rapport is built on engagement and communication, not simply by 'being nice'".

Student retention and degree of involvement are connected with social presence. More specifically, a "low degree of student engagement was found to be associated with the uncomfortable social presence that could yield a poor sense of community" (Muljana and Luo, 2019: 27).

In what follows, other recommendations are enumerated from the literature, in order to build a successful online experience. Muljana and Luo (2019) stress the importance of efficient planning, early interventions, collaboration among and support for all the participants in the educational act:

> "Early interventions targeting students (Early assessment of students' prior knowledge and behavioral characteristics to inform decision making in deploying interventions and ongoing

progress monitoring.) […] At-all times support for students. […] Support for faculty. […] Active interaction between instructor and students. […] Sound pedagogy course design and delivery. […] Fostering synergy among stakeholders" (Muljana and Luo, 2019: 31-33).

A noteworthy aspect concerns the balancing of the amount and difficulty degree of the academic load. As authors argue, "students are inclined to leave the online program if there are many low-level, easy assignments, or if the program curriculum is too difficult." (Muljana and Luo, 2019: 36). It should be added that instructors should avoid the temptation to give massive amounts of assignments to their students, holding the false belief that while not spending time for physically travelling to courses, students should take advantage of those moments, thus their performance being improved. In reality, they will only get tired, discouraged, will neglect other aspects of their daily existence, physical and psychological issues will be triggered, developing a feeling of rejection towards the online experience altogether. In the same line of thought, another author warns that a minimalist approach should be employed: there is a "need to declutter online courses, extend the period between deadlines, and focus scarce student attention on a limited quantity of materials and assignments" (Phillips, 2021: 178)

Communication (both between instructors and students and among the students themselves) is another element requiring furtherance. As Hutchinson argues, between faculty and students, there is a "need for a clear and constant line of communication, particularly in written form" (Hutchinson, 2021: 186). Other authors stress the importance of the *perceptual social presence*, which will strengthen the feeling of belonging to an academic community, which, in turn, will encourage student retention and satisfaction:

> "perceptual social presence can be enhanced even in a fully asynchronous scenario […] (e.g., incorporating interactive discussion boards and asynchronous lecture content) that allow learners to post questions or comments viewable by the instructor and other students." (Daigle and Stuvland, 2021: 183)

Also considering the communication and feedback aspect, authors urge instructors to rely on anonymous student feedback, by using polling software. (Hernández 2021: 216) Esty suggests asking questions such as: "'Do you have regular access to high-speed Internet?' 'Do you have any concerns about different modes of learning (i.e. synchronous / asynchronous)?'" (Esty, 2021: 223).

It is also crucial to calibrate expectations, setting a positive and optimistic mood, based on trust and collaboration. Hernández (2021) discusses the priority of a *social contract* between instructor and students:

> "make a very clear statement of the social contract between [instructor and] students regarding […] new duties and responsibilities, all while reinforcing this agreement with a degree of flexibility. Students need to know that the highly experimental nature of the digital project means that not everything will go as planned, but at the same time that [instructors] will also be more responsive to their requests and accommodating of their needs, considering the context of the pandemic" (Hernández 2021: 216).

All things considered, it seems that didactic strategies being employed effectively are more important than the learning mode (online, blended or traditional) when it comes to learning success (Muljana and Luo, 2019: 36).

Regarding what struck me most in my personal experience with online teaching, I believe the most relevant aspect can be illustrated by an episode when I had my first-year students engage in a speaking exercise. I presented a short three-minute video to

them from the *BBC Learning English* site, where some presenters had a set of questions that they asked one another in turns:

"Who do you love most in the world?
What makes you scream?
How do you take your coffee?
When did you last cry?
Are you feeling excited?
Do you speak another language?" (*BBC Learning English* 2021)

I then picked a student, asked him the same questions and afterwards, it was his turn to pick a colleague and ask the questions, who in her turn would pick another one and so on. Besides the fact that they were really eager to engage in that game, I was amazed to witness the intensity of the feelings that they were experiencing. Although I had been aware that they needed to connect and express themselves, I did not know about the degree to which they craved seeing each other at a personal level. After asking the question "What makes you cry?", one young woman literally had tears in her eyes when the answer she got was "Quarrelling with my boyfriend.", to which she replied, "I know what you mean!". Other students were breathlessly telling each other how excited they were about the progress they were making in a network game they were playing at the time. And most importantly, it was clear to me they were not trying to buy time in order to avoid maybe doing some difficult grammar exercise, but what they were doing was gasping for air. They thanked me for giving them that opportunity and commented how happy they were to answer questions that were different from the eternal "How are you today?", "Have you done your assignment? "Do you have any questions?", "Do you need clarification?", the polite and impersonal type that they generally get from instructors.

3. Conclusion

With or without a pandemic, if we are to successfully implement programmes with an online component, whether fully online or blended, synchronous or asynchronous, we need to become aware of our shifting roles in this process. Surely, we should adapt strategies that are subject related, but we are no longer just deliverers and assessors of academic content, but facilitators of interaction, coaches, mentors, mediators. We need a large degree of empathy and manifest care towards a generation who had already been struggling, due to the gradual loss of meaningful interpersonal interaction of the technological era. We need to carefully integrate the personal factor in the planning of our performance, and our policies should be formulated in a concerted effort, from the part of all the stakeholders in the higher education schemes.

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