CHALLENGES OF ONLINE TEACHING IN THE BUSINESS LANGUAGE CLASS

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Abstract: *With escalating SARS-CoV-2 outbreaks, the fight against the disease has become an absolute priority and social distancing measures have been adopted both at the level of the community and at the level of higher education in Romania. The present article emphasizes the advantages and disadvantages of online language teaching for economics students while taking into consideration various aspects such as the flexibility of the program, saving information on the platform for the benefit of the teacher's focus on teaching materials, planning courses and communicating with students, adopting a new assessment system, improving time management, use of internet resources but also drawing attention to the fluctuating internet connection, the crash of the devices or of the platform, potential disturbing factors, students' passivity, the lack of motivation and real connection, the lack of a sense of belonging to a group or an institution, etc. The present paper brings forth several solutions while advocating the integration of the online experience within the traditional teaching system.*

Key words: *pandemic, online, challenges, constraints, strategies, disruptive factors, compensating elements, interactivity.*

1. Introduction

With escalating SARS-CoV-2 outbreaks, the world's governments, at the urging of the World Health Organization (WHO), consider fighting against this disease an absolute priority and are taking all the necessary measures, while also taking into account certain social particularities of the states concerned. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) has issued a guide for EU Member States and the United Kingdom that discusses various aspects regarding the implementation of social distancing measures, including decision-making processes, and also regarding the potential socio-economic effects that may arise in the current context[1].

As a member of the European Union, Romania is closely following these directives and guidelines in an effort to reduce or discontinue the transmission of Covid-19 among its population. Each progressive level of measures includes all the measures provided for in the previous levels. Thus, measures of social distancing were needed at the community

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level, in addition to the isolation method, which did not prove sufficient to delay the peak of the epidemic or to protect the capacity of health facilities as well as vulnerable groups at risk of severe effects. "Social distancing", i.e. the reduction of physical contact as a method of interrupting a chain of transmission, may feature the consequence of reducing social contact. That is why the success of such an operation depends on ensuring the maintenance of social contact between people at a distance (family, friends, colleagues, neighbours). Therefore, remote communication through any current technological means (telephone, internet, Zoom, social networks, WhatsApp, etc.) guarantees the success of the social distancing strategy.

In this plan of measures taken gradually, following the decisions of the senates of the universities, the universities of Romania have entered the red scenario of online teaching / learning.

2. Advantages of Online Language Teaching in Higher Education

Like any other topic, online teaching has its advantages and disadvantages. Strictly referring to the field of language teaching in higher education, although many fields of study have undergone a dramatic change with the transition to the online environment, we might conjecture that there are several issues prone to debate, but the central element is undoubtedly the teacher, who remains the main tool in this process, with his/her role and obligation to readjust his/her methods and materials and to include technology in his/her teaching strategy. Technology cannot replace the teacher's job, but it is a very useful tool for improving both the teacher's experience and the student's.

It is widely acknowledged that human contact within the teacher-student relationship is built in the lecture room and nothing can replace it. The emotional nature of the relationship between the two agents of the teaching / learning process, the essential exchange that creates empathy and generates the energy flow stems from reading all these messages on the faces of the interlocutors and from observing their body language. The emotional safety that is created through physical contact in class is therefore favourable to the teaching / learning processes. Through technology, the only thing remaining is the face, taken out of context, the additional information coming from the movements of the head in expressing agreement or disagreement, from facial expressions and the tone of the voice. Strictly linguistic elements such as pursing or rounding the lips, jaw spacing (which would be invisible from under a mask!) are useful and relevant for perceiving any type of verbal message, but especially to strengthen the teacher-student relationship in the processes of language understanding and language learning. From this point of view, the major challenge for the teacher comes from succeeding in rendering the emotions attached to the messages transparent, from transmitting informational elements beyond words for the global perception of the message, for stimulating learning, for creating social bridges based on trust, respect, interest and even affection. The solution to the problem can turn into added value if this kind of new interactivity refines the students' senses and leads to a more subtle understanding of the signs while decrypting messages beyond orality.

An advantage of online teaching is the opportunity to work remotely. In this case, the necessary and sufficient condition is a good internet connection.

A real benefit of digital platforms is the ability to save data. From this point of view, the automatic organization enables the teacher to take the necessary time to concentrate on aspects related to the selection of course materials, to the lecture planning processes and communication methods. Even the assessment system shifts its weight, as the final assessment becomes a summative one, adapted to the new conditions due to the possibility of pre-testing knowledge in a partially covered subject. This is an obvious benefit for foreign language teachers who teach economics students as they are able to adapt their teaching methods to students' needs and to be more focused on developing discussion topics to streamline the course. Spending long periods of time correcting students' work or projects made the partial assessment a difficult task for the foreign language teacher, especially as far as the field of economics is concerned, as it is very rich in subjects and resources, thus requiring special attention and good knowledge of the specialized language. Therefore, the new technological methods that the online platforms make available decrease general fatigue and the load of the daily work schedule of the teacher after any evaluative action. In addition, the use of the Internet in particular leads to developing skills in addressing the technological applications suitable for enriching the CVs of teachers and students alike.

Another challenge of teaching a foreign language for economics students online is time management. Traditional courses involved the idea of adapting to a work rhythm given by the level of language skills of the students, by the atmosphere created within the work group, the interest shown by students in their homogeneity or inhomogeneity, their team spirit in carrying out language-related tasks. The online teaching activity involves a different kind of adaptation, especially regarding first year students who unfortunately lack group cohesion, and where the fear of accidentally providing a wrong answer in front of their peers is quite obvious. Thus, the attempt to remain only a spectator during lectures is an option chosen by many students who, by lack of experience, do not feel the essential changes triggered by their status shift from pupils to students. This awareness in point of educational status was more visible and easier to achieve through traditional education even for the teacher, who would far more easily record the evolution of each student, correlating the name with the physical body. Generally, first-year students seldom use the video opportunity of the platforms to reveal their faces and that is the reason why a name attached to a voice is all that remains in the teacher's memory. Compared to second year students, who managed to avoid anonymity before the pandemic due to their prior physical presence during traditional courses, first year students lack the emotional connection created with the teacher – only the interest and pleasure of learning the language eventually being able to compensate for this shortcoming. However, there is also a gain in this loss, namely the attempt of some of the students to stand out through active participation, to bring about better manners of approach to different topics by openly expressing their views. In these conditions, the attempt of the foreign language teacher to gain the sympathy and interest of his/her students focuses more on the cognitive elements to be transmitted than on those of physical presence, with all that it entails.

An obvious advantage of online academic language teaching for students of economics is that the vast resources of the Internet are suddenly more affordable and always available to both teachers and students. In other words, everything is allowed, open and useful: from the use of online dictionaries to argumentative videos on a given topic. The multiplication of discussion topics, the emergence of various possibilities to approach the same topic, the selection of materials by the teacher and the possibility to improve it with the active contribution of the students – all these and many more are available to everyone more than ever.

3. Disadvantages of Online Language Teaching in Higher Education

A disadvantage of using technology in online courses is the surprise element, as the devices can crash at any time without any warning, the internet connection can be fluctuating or inexistent, the online platforms can freeze in moments of great interest for the course. All this can happen to the student or the teacher, on both sides the effect being disastrous. These inconveniences can be dealt with, however, by constantly checking the internet connection, by restarting the router or the computer, by browsing the user guide of the online platform, by using the mobile phone for hotspot. Full use of the mobile phone may not be a viable option, given the need for microphone intervention in class activities and the need for silence for a better understanding of the explanations, which may not be possible in cafes, malls or other public places where the phone is the main option for online connection to courses.

One particular challenge of online teaching is that the teacher has no control over external conditions– the conditions related to the environment in which each student works, especially if they choose to attend the course without any visual aid, but solely through the use of the microphone. The fact that the teacher has a list of names with the participants enrolled in the course – some visible with headphones, others with a closed microphone, others simply displaying the emoticon equivalent to their condition – requires effort, strategy, concentration, energy, methods to achieve the transition from passivity to activity. Compared to the lecture room where the work atmosphere was easier to assess and where the involvement of the participants was visible and easier to handle for the experienced teacher in pedagogical teaching, the online videoconference meeting truncates the group cohesion and interrupts what would traditionally be a continuous flow of information. In foreign language courses, it is difficult to encourage students to work if they either feel that they have lost track of the activities, do not have the necessary listening conditions, or are disturbed by external factors and cannot focus on the tasks they have received. The elements that distract students from the language-learning process can be more annoying than in other disciplines as they act upon several levels of understanding that the acquisition of language skills entails. Once again, the participation of students in their profile courses is necessary to strengthen the knowledge of specialized language, otherwise it will be very difficult for the foreign language teacher to convey information related to the field of economics.

In addition, the context in which the foreign language course is located in the students' timetable and even the time of day when it is scheduled are also very

important aspects to consider. An hour too early in the morning can make students stay in their pyjamas in bed and just listen to the lecture, while an hour too late in the evening would find them in the comfort of their home, already exhausted and deprived of the necessary energy to attend a foreign language course.

A possible solution to minimize disruptive elements is to use group documents, the virtual whiteboard with the annotation function on to allow all participants to write answers that are visible to everyone, to use the public chat section of the platform to facilitate interaction with other students. However, here too the need to use customised language programs arises because, for example, if the student writes a sentence in French using past simple without any French accent marks, the written phrase can trigger confusion.

Through online teaching it is more difficult to assess the feedback of the working group, as the teacher is able to analyse the effect of his/her contribution only through the reactions of those with whom he/she managed to interact, the rest of the participants remaining an impalpable mass.

Furthermore, the teacher himself/herself may be disturbed by the contextual elements of his/her online activity, from household issues, to attention-seeking children. In this situation, it is the responsibility of each teacher to create and organize the framework for the development of his/her teaching activity in good conditions.

The major problem faced by teachers, but also by students, in the processes of teaching and learning a foreign language during a pandemic is the radical and uncomfortable distance. The interaction, the general atmosphere, the face-to-face activities support intellectual development much more than the online environment can contribute.

One relevant shortcoming of online teaching for which no solutions have been found is the lack of real connectivity among course participants. The feeling of belonging to a group and the attachment to the institution are poorly represented by online courses, for students and their teachers alike. No matter how much technology is used, it does not replace the interpersonal relationships established by the physical presence in the organized framework of the educational institution.

4. Potential Solutions

As online lecturing is different from traditional teaching, the foreign language teacher must have additional activities prepared in case the course runs faster than planned, or on the contrary, be ready to give up certain phases in the structure, if the time allotted to all lesson plan items could not be kept.

Another proposal for improving the teacher's performance in online teaching is to plan short breaks organized within the course to restore students' attention and concentration. In addition to tea, coffee and sandwiches that can successfully assist any of the participants, the language course can be used with an element that will enrich the general culture of students and relax the atmosphere: a proverb to comment, a song to listen to, a video or advertising material to watch, some images with cultural objectives representative of the country whose language is taught, culinary traditions, sports

information or various up-to-date facts, etc. Also, as an intermezzo in the courses there may be individual activities that involve time for a particular practice, for example reading a text to summarize its content, while the microphones are off. As with traditional foreign language courses, it is important that the teacher sets the goals and rules of conducting online courses from the very beginning, repeating them along the way while building new routines[2]. As far as disturbing elements are concerned, it would be advisable for each participating student to have his/her phone on silent mode, any other means of noise to be interrupted, the work room to be ventilated.

Similar to the traditional setting, online teaching features students who dominate the lecture and stand out for their qualities and on whom the teacher is tempted to focus more, especially when it comes to instant feedback while actively participating in interaction as a result of their advanced level. Those who do not master the foreign language at the level approached by the teacher or find it easier to rely on others in carrying out work tasks, will be further guided to concrete activities in which they know explicitly what to do with the help of the chat section or of the smart board by nominal designation. The use of voice with modulations, intonations and exaggerations in some cases to emphasize pronunciation, as well as choosing the right words to stimulate active participation are the tools employed by the foreign language teacher in his/her struggle to convey the message in these conditions of constraint. The tone and intensity may compensate for physical presence, but they destabilize the work atmosphere while also affecting the vocal cords[3].

According to my aforementioned statements, the time of day when the language course is planned is important and it depends very much on the interactivity created within the working group. It would be desirable for the student schedule to have fewer lectures every day, for the curricula to undergo changes so that individual study and project preparation also be included within the day.

The experience of this period of claustrophobia, doubled by online learning activities, must be further used once the world returns to a teaching situation close to what everyone was used to. The advantages of online education should be taken into account, and it would be optimal if both the number of hours and the number of disciplines were adjusted in order to emphasize the practical side of things to a larger extent.

The new routine that has been created during this period is filled with unexpected disturbing factors, so it is advisable, especially in the case of language teaching, that one's teaching experience be shared among colleagues or with fellow economists, to find the best solutions to common challenges.

5. Conclusions

Since progress also implies a reassessment of what is already known, but also a change as a consequence of conjunctural impositions, online teaching of foreign languages for economics students features advantages and disadvantages. Recent changes have shifted the approach of the teaching process from face-to-face interactions in meetings to the virtual environment.

The transition from the instructive-educational process carried out in educational groups and based on direct psychological relationships to the exclusive use of modern means of communication lead to a change in the perception of the educational paradigm.

The constricting conditions caused by the pandemic have led to the disruption of an entire system of rules, principles, methods and strategies.

The effect occurred throughout the education system at each level, implicitly in all areas of university specializations, but in language teaching there was an imbalance concerning the interpersonal relationship built on the necessary teacher-student interaction that the online teaching system fails to replace.

The time gained by the teacher for organizing the materials by saving them on the online platform, the time recovered by easily evaluating students whenever necessary with the help of technology, the commuting time to the educational institution – all these are not equivalent to the normality of a life in which rhythm is given by paradoxical repetitiveness, but also by everyday unknown situations, or by the satisfaction to be in the middle of things, to contextualize an intellectual activity, to communicate physically with colleagues and students.

Education is also done through role models, and the current conditions of social distancing make the transmission of non-verbal messages impossible. It is a disadvantage for the harmonious development of some young people on the verge of their maturity not to have the opportunity to make true friends, to share common interests, hobbies, curiosities and passions with their peers, as they cannot realize the differences between a traditional university teaching system and a new one, adopted out of necessity and with too little training and enthusiasm.

Regarding the shortcomings felt by teachers, they see themselves in the situation of lifelong learning and self-education in the spirit of individual preparation for the technological challenges that surprised many unprepared. It is up to everyone to exchange views and opinions with other teachers, to invent methods and strategies with colleagues involved in the online teaching process, to analyse and adopt the comments and suggestions. Moreover, conducting questionnaires for students participating in language courses on their feedback could help lay more effective work bases and free the teacher-student relationship from the constraints of social distancing while constantly ensuring mutual respect and good cooperation.

Maintaining interest when disruptive factors can nullify students' motivation for active participation and individual study, creating learning incentives for the competitive spirit to lead to success, are additional challenges to online education.

When the educational process returns to normal, with the decrease or interruption of Covid-19 in Romania, the effects of online teaching will be easy to assess and most probably some shortcomings will prove to be difficult to recover. However, in light of the strengths listed above, if teachers who prefer to work in the traditional classroom and for whom adapting to a new education system has been difficult and detrimental, consider implementing more of the benefits of the technology they have had the opportunity to get acquainted with during the pandemic, they will certainly improve their overall performance.

In order to successfully fructify this experience, both advantages and disadvantages of online teaching should be highlighted and properly assessed.

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