THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY OF EMERGENCY ONLINE LANGUAGE TEACHING AT UNIVERSITY

Sonia Carmen MUNTEANU

Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Although technology had pervaded language teaching and learning long ago (the recorded tapes of the Audio-lingual method spring to mind here as a relevant example), the heavy dependence on communication tools, learning management systems, interactive applications and alike that occurred with the recent, pandemic-driven upset of social and educational life is unprecedented. Just as any other aspect of our lives in 2020, teaching and learning of languages at university in the traditional face-to-face mode were suspended and moved to an online environment, which, for better or worse, replaced well established methodological practices with, at times, experimental pedagogies, in an attempt to better adapt the process to the new online context, mode and consequent expectations of stakeholders – learners, teachers and educational management. The present paper investigates the process of transferring language classes at tertiary level to the online environment, as a consequence of the recent Covid19 pandemic. The approach is analytical, with emphasis on recording and highlighting main milestones, such as the jump from emergency education to a quasi-permanent state of affairs in 2021, when, at least to this moment, there is little hope language education at university will resume its place in the physical classroom any time soon. The purpose is to review particular aspects of language education in this transitional process, such as the need for curricular overhaul and its impact in the long run over how languages will be taught to students during lockdown periods or face-to-face interaction periods.

Keywords: *language teaching, online teaching, emergency remote teaching, curriculum development, higher education, educational technologies.*

Introduction

A year before the outbreak of the Covid19 pandemic, Louise Drumm (2019) wrote that “‘pedagogy before technology’ is something of a mantra in the support and development of teaching with digital technologies”, highlighting a fundamental principle in using educational technologies: that technology for teaching must be pedagogy-driven and not used just because it is there, available and trendy. However, when the world stopped in 2020 and went in lockdown, education was faced with a very pressing dilemma – should it stop too, or find a way to continue, paying the costs? As weeks and months went by, the health and social situation did not improve and predictions about the fate of education globally and locally seemed to depend on the ability of all stakeholders to choose to pay the cost of continuing to function in a totally technology-dependent medium – the online. Many educational contexts had not been fully accustomed to an online component of the teaching and learning process and to relying heavily on technology before laying out the pedagogy, to paraphrase Drumm’s observation.

In higher education, just as everywhere else, the sudden, forced switch to the online medium for teaching and learning happened without the necessary time to revise and adapt curricula and syllabi to the specific pedagogy for computer-

mediated teaching and learning, without the time to tailor content to fit the delivery mode, and without the time to reconsider learning outcomes for a more realistic scenario of learning. The phenomenon grew globally, with ever growing numbers of universities and colleges closing for traditional face-to-face education (Alexander, 2020). This led to necessary problematisation of the phenomenon in relation to what had been known as online education/remote education. Conceptual and practical consideration rendered the name *emergency remote teaching (and learning)*, an approach that has little in common with established online learning and was also referred to as the ‘great online-learning experiment’ (Zimmerman, 2020).

Emergency remote teaching vs online learning

The move of instruction to the online mode in higher education can give an added impetus to the move towards including more and more technology into pedagogy. With this, several other benefits can be recognized: flexibility of teaching and learning processes, increased ability to tailor content and modes of delivery to accommodate a wider range of students’ needs and preferences in learning, increased access to activities irrespective of location and distance and many others. However, the speed with which this move happened was unprecedented and allowed almost no time to consider the costs to benefits ratio. Therefore, the term used for the type of instruction caused by the pressing circumstances of the Covid19 pandemic is *emergency remote teaching (and learning)* and not online teaching (and learning).

In a comprehensive and insightful review of research into online instruction, Means, Bakia & Murphy (2014) identified nine dimensions, each with several options, which define online instruction. The nine design options and their variations can be summarized as follows:

Modality	Student role online
- Fully online	- Listen or read
- Blended (between 25% and 50% and over 50% online)	- Complete problems or answer questions
- Web-enabled face-to-face	- Explore simulation and resources
Pacing	- Collaborate with peers
- Self-paced (open entry, open exit)	Online communication
- Class-paced	synchrony
- Class-paced with some self-paced mix	- Asynchronous only
Student-instructor ratio	- Synchronous only
- Under 35 students to 1 instructor	- Some blend of both
- Between 36 and 999 to 1 instructor (with several options in this range)	Source of feedback
- Over 1,000 students to 1 instructor	- Automated
Pedagogy	- Teacher driven
- Expository	- Peers driven
	Role of online assessment
	- Determine if the student is ready for new content
	- Adaptive instruction (the system supports the student based on responses)

- Practice	- Provide student or teacher
- Exploratory	with information about
- Collaborative	learning state
Instructor role online	- Input grade
- Active instruction online	- Identify students at risk of
- Small presence online	failure
- None	

Online instruction described by Means, Bakia and Murphy and implemented widely at various cycles of educational systems, higher education included here, displays grain-level planning for optimum implementation results. Moreover, the nine dimensions are supported by a carefully chosen, tested, and constantly updated infrastructure that brings resources to the teacher and students in the most timely and accessible way.

In contrast, the kind of teaching higher education was forced to adopt recently due to the pandemic crisis had none of the planned, designed, time-proven, or option-laden dimensions of online teaching. It was a sudden halt of face-to-face, or in certain cases, blended instruction, and a jump into a remote scenario without any predictable time-frame. This is the scenario deemed *emergency remote teaching* and, in the given circumstances, its objective was not necessarily to re-create the established educational eco-system as articulated in the curricula and syllabi of different programmes, but rather to provide temporary access to instruction. Decisions to do this were swift, so that a large gap in teaching and learning could be avoided, paying the cost of having little choice of delivery infrastructure, with accessibility as key consideration in making that choice. For most higher education institutions, the underlying hope was that the crisis would be short and whatever loss could be compensated when all returned to the established education design, face-to-face or blended. I will illustrate some of these aspects of emergency remote teaching in contrast to the planned online teaching on a case of language instruction in a Romanian higher education institution. The aim is to show both the disruptive effects of emergency remote teaching and the positive lessons that can be learnt for a better integration of online technology and applications into the future syllabus.

A case of remote emergency teaching of languages in higher education

The higher education institution which constitutes the provider of the focus language courses for the present case study is a top education and research university in Romania with programmes offered in twelve schools ranging from engineering and sciences to arts and humanities specializations. The language courses under discussion here are part of the mainstream mandatory curriculum of engineering students for four semesters, as general and specific-purposes language courses. Instruction is organized both as lectures and seminars. These terms refer not to the mode of delivery but rather to the ration of students to instruction; in lectures there are several administrative groups participating to an instructional session given by one professor, hence a ratio that can range between 50 to over 150 students to one professor; in seminars the ratio is one group (up to 30-32 students) to a professor.

Before the pandemic, language courses in this university were organized exclusively in a face-to-face (F2F) setup. The syllabi provided for teaching and

learning activities and tasks based on F2F interaction, student to teacher and peer to peer. The approach to language learning is a communicative one, task based and aiming to fully integrate all macro-skills in the process, at every stage of the learning. In practice, it means that tasks were so designed and sequenced that a learning activity could include, for instance, reading and then discussing the content, speaking and then taking notes based on the discussion, listening and writing down notes, etc. The vast majority of the materials used (textbooks and worksheets) were print materials, with some audio and video and a few online resources mostly for homework or short in-class activities. Officially, there was no blending in the design of the courses, although some flipped learning was provided by the syllabi, as pre-course preparations, especially in the stages delivered as lectures (large classes to on teacher), to save on class time and focus more on practice and discussion of content. In the case of the courses taken as a case-study here, the flipped part was meant to take place on the learning platform EDMODO. A class for each course was opened and much of the support materials were uploaded there for accessibility and for saving time. Students who missed some of the F2F classes could find a summary of the week-to-week content in the form of PowerPoint presentations. In addition, some quizzes were administered via EDMODO in an asynchronous manner, for formative, rather than summative purposes.

When the pandemic situation became critical, all F2F instruction stopped in the university we focus on here. Soon, due to uncertainty and seriousness of the health threat, the management decided that staff and students should engage into online teaching and learning until further notice. There was freedom of choice to which platform, technical solution or technology would best suit each course or subject. The language courses discussed here first switched entirely on the EDMODO platform, as the most convenient solution; students were used to it, had their own accounts, classes were configured and needed only further development as the courses progressed. However, the ‘ugly’ side of this move was soon apparent. Teachers became providers of content, mostly asynchronous, as EDMODO does not have a conferencing/meeting application inbuilt in its learning management system. For a while learning was mostly asynchronous, with the teacher providing content and practice for students to handle at their own pace and time. What the emergency remote teaching lost in its first stage of implementation was the very soul of university education: the learning community. Separated by space and divided by technology shortcomings, students and teachers were limited in how and how often they communicated and could not share promptly each other’s input and feedback to the learning process. At the same time they started realizing the negative effects of social deprivation and the fact that social contact is even more important when it comes to training independent language speakers, as scientific studies show: „...Învățarea, facilitată de contactul social, dezvoltă independența, cel care învață determinându-și singur strategia și tactica vorbirii în baza materialului asimilat” (Braniște, 2016: 25).

From the point of view of education management, the fact that some courses, the language courses discussed here included, in the university were struggling in the asynchronous mode pushed towards a critical technology-related decision, that of adopting and implementing Microsoft Teams as a learning platform across the university. Zooming in to the language courses in focus, the

most important benefit was that MSTeams offers a class-space (the learning environment) as well as a meeting feature for synchronous sessions. The negative side to that was mostly the increased workload of teachers who had to do a complete overhaul of the course. With months of (mostly 'ugly') online experience at that moment, the switch to MSTeams was not just one of location, but a more profound one, affecting the content and the design of the classes. The awkwardness of using print materials with online interaction was eliminated by either replacing those materials which did not have an electronic version (unfortunately most available textbooks for specific-purposes language learning do not) with online resources or e-textbooks or electronic worksheets, in-house designed. A lot of practice was re-design with the help of available educational technologies such as apps and features of online platforms (MS Forms, Google Forms, etc.). Shortly, the benefits became apparent. By using available apps and software to make students engage with content and practice individually, while still being in the community synchronously, the language class started to have more of the features of online learning than those of emergency remote teaching. With the benefit of (albeit short) previous experience with online tools for teaching, some planned design features could be included in the syllabus, so that online sessions were not a mere transfer of what used to happen in class to an online virtual medium but a more effective form of remote, technology-mediated teaching and learning. Some of the most challenging aspects were:

- trying to avoid a teacher-centred learning environment by replacing as much as possible the expository pedagogy with collaborative practice (discussion and task-solving in breakout rooms, for instance) and individual, technology mediated practice (teacher created activities with Worwall, Edpuzzle, etc.);
- foregrounding the students' role as drivers of own learning and fostering autonomy (e.g. by designing assignments where students have to find online resources, evaluate and use them);
- valuing timely individual input and feedback and thus re-creating the learning community of a traditional class (e.g. by making students' work available to the class for ideas sharing, improvement suggestions, peer-to-peer learning with, for example, Padlet).

Conclusion

More than a year into 'forced' emergency remote teaching, the good, the bad and the ugly lessons need to be learnt. Perhaps Drumm's (op.cit) mantra of 'pedagogy before technology' raised the necessary awareness to allow teachers to rethink their practice and keep the 'emergency' shortcuts of remote teaching as short as possible. In the case study presented here, this happened with the second stage into the lockdown when a university management decision brought MSTeams as the readily available platform for organizing online teaching, synchronously and asynchronously. Albeit far from established online teaching with its planning and design principles underlying all instructional processes and outcomes from the start, the language teachers' practice began to incorporate educational technologies where and when pedagogical considerations showed their effectiveness and not just for the sake of using apps and e-tools or because F2F interaction was not possible. The good of it was apparent for all stakeholders – teachers returned to syllabus overhaul as critical starting point of all relevant

instruction, while students regained the control of their learning within the community of learning, guided by teachers and peers and engaging with each other and with a variety of technology-mediated resources for learning.

Although beyond the scope of the present discussion, the fact that transition from emergency remote teaching to more principled online learning meant an immense added workload for teachers and students is worth mentioning. Both categories were forced to engage in crash courses on educational technologies and digital solutions for learning, in using and understanding CALL pedagogy and outcomes and many other alike. Whether this is a negative or a positive consequence of the process remains to be decided when the educational sector will be able to return to (perhaps, the new) normal.

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