

EMPATHY AND SYMPATHY IN SYNC WITH TECHNOLOGY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC – FACILITATING THE LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract: *In times of crisis, it is paramount that higher education institutions build a community of shared values to keep the leverage in their hands. Ever since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the rapid adoption of the proper technologies worldwide has become a sine qua non for online education. Professors (the organizers of classes and meetings) and their students (the guests) have embraced connectedness and change in a sustainable manner. The paper highlights the benefits of using innovative ubiquitous tools for online learning, discusses the challenges faced by language professors during the pandemic and evaluates roughly, how close or how far we are from implementing a unitary and effective system of online language education in Romania. In addition, it places empathy & sympathy at the core of online teaching and presents strategies that hone professors' virtual teaching skills to facilitate the linguistic development in undergraduate students.*

Keywords: *pandemic, empathy, sympathy, technology, connectedness, linguistic development*

1. Introduction

In today's times of crisis, ICT is used in education and training globally and has become a facilitator of connectedness between language educators and students. However, there are gaps in digital skills and learning resources across Europe as shown by the public consultation launched by the European Commission. More than half of the interviewees had not used distance and online learning before the pandemic while half of them want to achieve more through relevant and user-friendly online learning resources.

Language teachers need to have digital skills to meet the challenges of the information age. At present, at the end of initial training, teachers have a certain level of digital skills linked to their curricula and their informal and non-formal education. On the other hand, many language educators completed their initial

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education long ago, when many tools and information technologies were not available. At the same time, the field of ICT is very dynamic, the rate of development of new tools and opportunities is growing exponentially, and the range and complexity of skills needed to be a language teacher in the 21st century is so great that it is unlikely a teacher will possess them fully.

It is imperative that teachers grab professional development opportunities to become familiar with the new trends in the 21st-century educational technology and to acquire a new set of skills. Moreover, educational transformation should focus “on nine dimensions of practice: roles, relationships, curriculum, discipline, theoretical stance, motivation, focus, perspective and stance” (Twining, 2010). Modern teachers need to be flexible and able to adapt to new critical contexts. The models of professional development (see Figure 1) have been tailored to support the integration of ICT technologies in the teaching practice. Professional development sessions for digital education aim to make language teachers apply their knowledge of the subject matter in a synchronous or asynchronous approach. Furthermore, language teachers need to test whether a synchronous event is essential in their work, how to plan for active learning and participation and how to overcome the barriers caused by this approach.



Figure 1. Key models of Professional Development in the Digital Age (Adapted from teachhub.com)

2. Using the proper video conferencing software solution to benefit various learning styles

Throughout this year, Romania ranked between third and fifth place in the top of Internet speed globally. The pandemic has not affected the speed of the Internet in our country too much, according to Speedtest data. More precisely, in January 2020, Romania ranked in the 4th place, with 148.98 Mbps, in February 2020, it ranked in the 3rd place, with 155.78 Mbps, in March 2020, it ranked in the 3rd place, with 151.55 Mbps and in April 2020, it ranked in the 5th place, with 151.87 Mbps. However, in March, the month in which quarantine began and people worked harder from home and children went to online school, there was an increase in latency and interference compared to the previous month (Speedtest data, 2020). Despite this great advantage for digital education, many public schools in rural areas could not provide the proper devices to students to be able to attend online classes and they could not catch up with colleagues who study in urban areas.

In this extraordinary period, for other academics, teaching online has been a partnership between them and their students and a driver of research outputs concerning the benefits and drawbacks of digital education in a global pandemic. It is widely acknowledged that interactive teaching and learning of a foreign language is “based on the adoption of technologies such as mobile devices, augmented reality, Web 2.0, and so on.” (Twining et alii., 2013). The application of ICT in language learning has become a norm around the world. Motivated students who attend online classes will adapt more easily to unforeseen situations. However, a recent study found that “among the elements that are lost in online classes, the most striking is the richness of the non-verbal cues.” (Mărginean, 2020:118). Our institution was prepared to make ICT integral to the work of teachers and learners due to the outbreak of the pandemic therefore it moved its classes and lectures on Microsoft Teams. At the pandemic outbreak, young teachers were apprehensive and did their best to revamp how they deliver curriculum while older teachers had to overcome the fear to embrace technology to teach remotely. Luckily, the institutional support played an important role in this regard by offering training sessions and guides for online teaching and online examination.

Even if we were connected – language teachers and students – we had to learn to adapt and adjust. We thought it would be easier because we use the proper tools and our students are digital natives (Prensky, 2001). These youngsters have spent their entire lives surrounded by computers, video games, digital music, video cameras, mobile phones and any other tools from the digital age. So digital natives see the Internet as interaction and participation and not as a passive or one-way form of communication and meet frequently and constantly, getting to know each other and developing relationships, even if they have never met face-to-face. They prefer to connect with others through text, chat, Facebook, online games, etc. Most importantly, they solve problems intuitively, engaging in quick trial-error actions, to discover things through action, experiments and interaction, rather than through

reflection, to receive information quickly and simultaneously through different multimedia sources, parallel information processing, multiple tasks and continuous task change, and to interact with pictures, graphics, sounds and videos before writing texts (Prensky, 2001).

Surprisingly, while collaborating with digital natives, we learned that it is more challenging to teach 1st year undergraduates than 2nd or 3rd year undergraduates. The main reasons for 1st year students derive from the fact they have been part of a mandatory system focused on face-to-face education. In addition, their impossibility, due to pandemic restrictions, to connect with their teacher and colleagues in face-to-face classes to reach a certain level of comfort, shyness, fear to turn on the camera during presentations, online misbehavior and poor Internet connection have hindered their adaptation to online learning. Other colleagues had to adjust to students enrolled in distant programs, who have a digital immigrant behavior. Digital immigrants think of the Internet in passive terms as a virtual world that is not part of real life, as an environment that helps them identify what to read, review, or learn. They like written instructions, with clear steps to follow and a logical and linear model of discovery. Furthermore, they prefer to read texts instead of browsing material in audio or video format. Thus learning online is a necessity and often an inevitable chore for them (Prensky, 2001).

In the table below we present the components and benefits of the English Class organized on Microsoft Teams.

Table 1. Components and benefits of the English class on Microsoft Teams

Video – students can see the teacher and teachers can see each participant in the meeting
Audio – teachers can hear each participant and vice versa, the teacher can assign students to groups, different groups can meet and collaborate simultaneously and the teacher can move from group to group, join their discussion and monitor their progress
Text chat – students can ask and answer questions, do translations, teachers reply to their questions, check the translations (see Figure 2), correct students' mistakes, explain to them the new vocabulary or grammar rules and share links with multiple choice questions for vocabulary and grammar practice
Posts – students can post their queries and questions because they might need further clarification of the topic debated in class, the examination procedure, the elaboration of projects, deadlines for project submission, etc.
Screen sharing – it is very useful for lecture delivery with slides, students' project presentation, the use of visuals and educational videos to ensure the understanding of grammar and English terminology for a specific technological process, product descriptions, business scenarios, etc.
Sharing and uploading files – teachers can upload files for class activities: reading texts and reading comprehension exercises, mistake finding exercises, etc. and students can upload their projects, homework, for or against essays and case-study written analysis.
Class Materials – students can review all the materials used in class and the students who could not attend the meetings can study the materials to catch up with their colleagues
Recording – the teacher is permitted to record the class but always by asking for consent to record a conversation: notifying the students of the intent to record, getting the consent off-the-record, starting the recording and ultimately asking the students to confirm on the record that they consent to the recording.

Whiteboard – it is catchy because it allows participants to write together the missing letters in business words and words belonging to the same family on a shared digital canvas
Class Notebook – OneNote Class Notebook was integrated into Teams to provide a workspace for every student, a content library for handouts and collaboration space for classes and other creative activities for language learning and to assist teachers to quickly review student work and be more efficient with their class notebooks.
Assignments – language teachers can create assignments within the Teams class
Grades – language teachers can view assignments at a glance as well as track student progress in the Grades tab.

It is increasingly clear that our mental health is linked to social connectedness. In an online language class both teacher and students can foster social connectedness in several ways. For example, an open and a positive teacher confers social connection among students based on intensive communication and collaboration. Even in this period of social and economic instability, there are teachers who encourage students to stay safe and see the move into digital education as an opportunity for sharing and collaboration. Through seemingly minor but very significant actions to create a close relationship based on trust, openness and honest communication, caring teachers see and are aware of students' needs and the technological world in which they live as adults, can increase openness, creativity and harmony within the team.

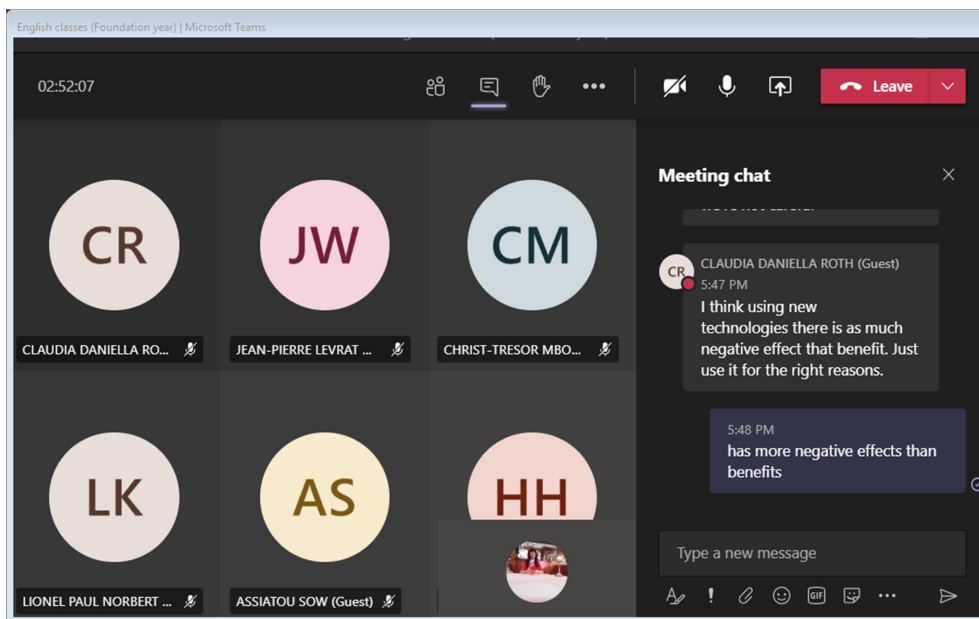


Figure 2. Translation activity in the Meeting chat

The major attribute of the language teacher is to be well organized. Organizational skills are at the core of digital education since they encompass a set of abilities that

help a language teacher adopt the proper technology, plan and prioritize. This process ensures a smooth teaching and an enjoyable experience for the members of a virtual team who are encouraged by the organizer (the language teacher) to participate actively in decision-making and send their feedback instantly. Even when problems arise, the organizer and his/her team will do their best to overcome barriers together and achieve teaching and learning results consistently. An organized teacher designs a well-structured lesson plan reducing the chance of developing poor learning habits such as miscommunication, inefficiency and procrastination.

Synchronous language teaching contributes to the improvement of students' language skills because conversation takes place in real time, students are encouraged to ask questions and teachers can gauge students' understanding straight away. When outlining the online class objectives, any language teacher should consider that second language learners have each of these learning styles as preferential (Reid, 1995: 205-207):

- *The visual style*: students can learn well by reading either in books or on the blackboard. They remember and understand better the information and instructions if you read them. They do not need as much oral explanation as an auditory student, and they can often learn only with a book. They need to take notes of the oral explanations to remember the information.
- *The auditory style*: students learn better through oral explanations. They can remember the information by reading aloud. It benefits them to listen to audios, debates and conversations with the teacher and the classmates.
- *The kinesthetic style*: students learn better if they are physically involved in classroom experiences. They remember the information well when they participate actively in activities and roleplaying games. It benefits them to have different types of stimuli: audio combined with an activity.
- *The tactile style*: students learn better, when they have the opportunity to do practical activities (experiments in a laboratory, build models, etc.). Participating in activities and taking notes can be beneficial to understand the new information and remember it.
- *The group style*: students learn more easily when working with other classmates. They like group interaction and remember information better when working with two or three colleagues. The stimulation they get from group work helps them learn and understand new information.
- *The individual style*: students understand the new material, remember it and progress better when working alone.

Given the pandemic context and the focus on digital education, we can add another relevant style to the list – *the accommodation style* when students accept and understand the transition from face to face education to digital education. They feel investment and ownership and become more engaged in this transition (through connectedness) with the organizing teacher.

We should note that language teachers' andragogy in tandem with digital skills lead to effective organization of the class and proper accommodation of guests (learners) to the digital learning environment through constant dialogue, sympathy and empathy, mainly targeted at 1st year students. For example, by asking them about how they are feeling, what good online learning experiences they have had and if they want to collaborate with us (the teachers) during the transition, we can work together fruitfully.

Using an institution-supported video-conferencing system such as Microsoft Teams from the desktop made the transition from face to face to online easier as we had a certain level of direct interaction with the students and direct audio and video communication due to a small number of students in a meeting (below 30).

Many factors influence the success of online language learning such as language skills, motivation, personality, age, learning styles and learning strategies. Regardless of the way of learning, in the classroom, "face to face" or on Microsoft Teams, in virtual classes, these factors are paramount as they help learners broaden their knowledge. Teaching experience and especially teaching online in a pandemic have shown us that each student has a preferred way of presenting, processing and acquiring information. Based on the preferences and the learning style, students implement various learning strategies with a hands-on technology approach. From our standpoint, online language classes reinforce teachers' digital competences and students' ability to reshape their learning style, be it auditory, visual or practical. Microsoft Teams includes multiple options and achieves a balanced mix between visual learning (video, virtual background, multimedia, nonverbal feedback - all posted by the teacher in real time), auditory learning (videos, audio) and kinesthetic learning (practical activities can be done and shared directly and the whiteboard can be used simultaneously with the teacher and the other colleagues in the group).

This period has triggered new feelings which sometimes made teachers and students vulnerable alike. However, we managed to find solutions, to reinvent ourselves and to adapt to an online collaborative environment. Even if the continuation of online teaching is viewed with fear and skepticism regarding the impact of online teaching over a long period, we could say that we have to accept we are all part of the new normal when we look at the context through global lens. These days, patience, empathy and sympathy should be the prevalent traits of human behavior.

Therefore, learner support should focus on forms of assistance to learners beyond the delivery of content, skills development, or formal assessment (Bates, 2019). I would like to pinpoint why empathy and sympathy are essential elements of an effective online learning environment in this pandemic, and how they can be integrated in the main sub-components of learner support. I use the term

pedagogical empathy & sympathy to cover the situations when language teachers respond to learners' difficulties, including:

- helping students to interact in an expanded warming-up;
- helping shy students to get involved in class activities;
- dedicating time to praise their contribution with laudatory remarks;
- helping students to integrate first in a small group and later on in a large group;

Not long ago I received this email from a 1st year student:

“Good evening! Sorry for bothering you, I was informed that the activity in class is also scored. I am a very nervous person and I tremble and get lost when I have to speak in front of many people. I wanted to get involved in the seminar many times, only I was too ashamed and afraid to do it. I just want to let you know because when you invite us to express our opinions, I will be too scared to interfere, but when I am required to answer, I will answer. Thank you for your understanding!”

After analyzing this particular case and after learning that my student lives in an orphanage, I considered it was appropriate for me to adjust to her needs based on her confession in the email. I did my best to provide her the necessary support to be active during the class through constant encouragement to read text, to pronounce unknown words, to ask her colleagues questions related to the topic and to reply to her colleagues' questions.

All students are unique. Getting to know students whom I have never met face-to-face requires an expanded warming-up as it is a very useful starting point for building strong relationships. It is ideal to identify their concerns then settle together an adjustment plan to ensure an effective learning environment for their needs. By following the principles of effective communication, responsiveness, active listening and ethics, we could empathize and sympathize with the students' condition and managed to build trust and rapport. In an online class, it is difficult to understand how students feel but it is highly recommended by experts to ask them open-ended questions. Vulnerable learners reacted differently than confident learners. They expressed their worries and needs in rambling sentences while confident learners provided accurate and insightful answers. For example, I could elicit information about their emotional state, by simply asking, “Is there something that's been troubling you?” and by listening carefully to students' words and pitch. It has been equally important for me to respect their feelings and point of view by confirming what they have told me and validating their feelings.

3. Online pedagogical empathy & sympathy through Microsoft Teams

In this section, I analyze how students perceive remote learner support and online pedagogical empathy & sympathy. I checked this by composing questions related to the observations above and by asking 50 undergraduate learners to complete a short questionnaire with only a Yes or No to each question. The questionnaire was sent by email to 1st year undergraduate students from the School of Computer science for Business Management. We see this questionnaire as a surface exploration, more precisely as a starting point for an in depth analysis, which will be included in a project proposal.

- a. Has the language teacher provided good learner support remotely? (Yes/No)
- b. Do you feel like you are part of an empathetic & sympathetic online learning environment? (Yes/No)
- c. Has student or teacher ethical misbehavior occurred in the online English class? (Yes/No)
- d. Would you attend a face-to-face class knowing the risks of contracting Covid-19? (Yes/No)

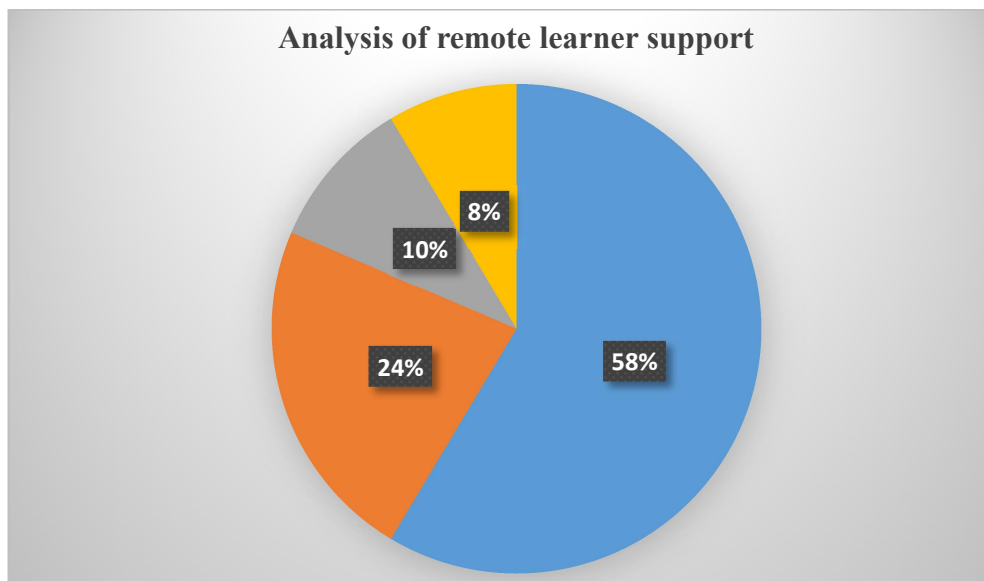
Out of the 50 students, 1 student didn't complete the questionnaire, 24 students answered Yes to the first question, 12 students answered Yes to the second question, 5 students answered Yes to the third question and 4 students answered Yes to the fourth question. The results are shown by the table and chart below:

Table 2. Students' answers for the analysis of remote learner support

	Number of students saying Yes	Percentages of students saying Yes
Question a	24	58%
Question b	12	24%
Question c	5	10%
Question d	4	8%

The current learning environment respects the state regulations enforced to diminish the spread of the Covid-19. Students must continue to learn and it is up to us to create conditions for practice within an environment that favors second language acquisition. Moreover, even if each class is conducted with empathy and sympathy for students' various conditions (e.g. poor internet connection, nervousness, delays in joining the team, health problems, lack of academic skill, etc.), emotional, technical and institutional barriers to online teaching and learning exist. For example, a barrier that causes lamentation on students' side is the preservation of the traditional teaching slot. Measures to diminish the teaching slot and increase the teach-load for online education have not been discussed although researchers argue that the proper teaching slot for online education is less than one hour to keep the students focused on tasks.

Microsoft teams is my favorite tool for my entire remote teaching. Its collaboration communication and translation tools are easily accessible for a collaborative learning environment, which fits into this pandemic context. However, even if education in Romania is based mainly on face-to-face education, language teachers should take advantage of this online experience and should focus more on adopting cutting-edge and user-friendly tools to ensure an effective learner support for developing soft skills that meet the actual requirements of employers.



4. Conclusions

The experience of organizing meetings on Microsoft Teams has made us realize that behind the social behavior associated with the use of technology, in fact, there are also factors, which help learners to adapt online such as their relationship with family, teachers, colleagues, and with their digital selves in this moment of global uncertainty.

The need for a curriculum based on state-of-the-art technologies, such as interactive whiteboards, 3D / VR glasses and multiple online resources, in order to create lessons that are as engaging and interactive as possible, is imperative. This covers all learning styles and uses various teaching and learning strategies, precisely to meet the needs of all students, regardless of their prevalent learning style. Not many language teachers apply a multi-sensory approach because it involves a sustained effort to collect resources and educational materials appropriate to each learning style.

Finally yet importantly, each foreign language department within universities must dedicate time to identify the learning styles specific to each student to place them in a compatible group in terms of age, level of English and learning style. In this way, teachers will apply a multi-modal approach to expose their students to English in a way that is best suited to their future job role; thus, second language acquisition will unfold naturally and effectively.

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