ONLINE LEARNING: A VIABLE COMPLEMENT TO THE TRADITIONAL PARADIGM OF EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The context of the most recent Coronavirus pandemic has forced universities all over the world to cancel all in-person classes and shift to the online, a step that many of the academic institutions have been toying with, but never had the courage to totally put into practice.*

The present study discusses the specific case of language teaching in an online format, focusing on the communicative aspect of language teaching, and highlighting its difficulties and the subsequent disadvantages. If CMC was in the past just a theoretical approach to teaching, it now becomes the reality and adaptation is the key aspect that both students and teachers need to learn.

The study tries to answer a couple of thorny questions related to how prepared we are for the shift, to clarify the background for the change in the mentality of foreign language teachers, and last but not least, to offer solutions for the best approach a teacher should have towards the new trend of online education.

Keywords: *Computer Mediated Communication, FLT, online teaching, synchronous versus asynchronous e-learning, coronavirus, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Classroom.*

1. Introduction

After World Health Organization declared on March 11, 2020 that the outspread of the most recent Coronavirus turned into a pandemic, universities all over the world started shutting down, in the attempt to slow the spread. Mid-March found Romanian universities cancelling their in-person classes, in an effort to prevent COVID-19 from spreading to the academic population, and, thus, to local communities. All international conferences, exchange programs, Erasmus+ exchange programs were banned, students were sent back home, and it took a couple of weeks of uncertainty until specific online platforms were put into practice.

Among the most common communication platforms that are used in Romania during this period we can mention Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Classroom. Each of them has its advantages and disadvantages, particularly in the context of foreign language teaching, where interaction is the key element for improvement.

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Although the beginning was difficult both for the students and for the professors, who had to adjust their teaching methods, lectures and study materials, to attend webinars and ask for IT support in order to install and access the platforms, little by little things went to normal, and virtual classes completely replaced in-person ones.

The present study reviews literature with reference to synchronous and asynchronous e-learning, highlighting the importance of CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) and CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) as two important elements, which in a way help pave the path of the shift from in-person to online teaching of languages. Although online language teaching is not a new concept, and language schools all over the world have practiced it for many decades by now, some of them more successfully than others, professors have always been reluctant to acknowledging the efficiency and effectiveness of this type of teaching. And although online language examinations are not a new concept in the industry, we are still reluctant to using them, for fear they might affect our effectiveness as language teachers.

It is true that we, as teachers, are used to eye contact with the class, and there are situations when we develop a preference for one group or another, simply based on the empathy that we build with students at the beginning of the semester. But this whole concept of one-to-one interaction, face to face, involving stimulation from the teacher's part with the help of verbal or nonverbal communication will have to disappear, at least for a period. In this situation, we have to understand the background, rely on the present and innovate in the future, so that situations like the present one could become more bearable.

2. Social change – the trigger for online learning

The present disease outbreak was in fact the trigger for the new change in the old mentality regarding face to face classes, in real time, in a special environment, which is school. However, what we want to understand is how easy or how difficult it is to answer the following questions:

1. Are we, as language teachers, prepared for the online environment? Because generally speaking, online classes require special skills on virtual class conduct, information technology skills, sometimes special platforms, knowing how to use video conference platforms, share content, or respond to students' demands.
2. How should professors be prepared for such a life changing experience? Is an online webinar enough or should they be trained in one to one sessions?
3. Can we engage all students, or is it just a part of a class that will stay focused?
4. How easy or difficult is it for me, as a teacher, to keep focused in front of an empty screen?

All these questions stem from the need to become conscious of the challenges posed by online teaching/ learning and their proper answering will tell us how

prepared the community is for such an abrupt change. But when social distancing is called for as an immediate solution for the limitation of the disease spread, we need to merely take action and forget about the social or emotional feedback. Because school in general is a source of balance in learners' life, and the sense of engagement that the brainstorming sessions during the class, or the student-teacher, student-student dialog can produce, is extremely important for the overall development of individuals.

Higher education was prepared for this shift, even before we knew we were going to need it. Numerous conferences took place all over the world, piles of research books, articles, specialized journals have been published focusing on the importance, analyzing the theoretical backgrounds and the necessity of a change from face to face to virtual learning.

Due to technological developments, universities were able to invest in various technologies, increasing the amount of hardware and software that they made available to their staff and students, but the speed in technology was not able to keep the pace with the slow development of training programs in organizations, so teachers made the change at their own pace, with the amount of change they wanted or were able to digest, which was not enough.

According to specialists, there are a couple of factors that play an important role in the need for a shift towards online learning, as can be seen in the figure below. But unfortunately, none of them has ever thought that we will need the online as a unique solution for education during some tough medical times such as a pandemic.
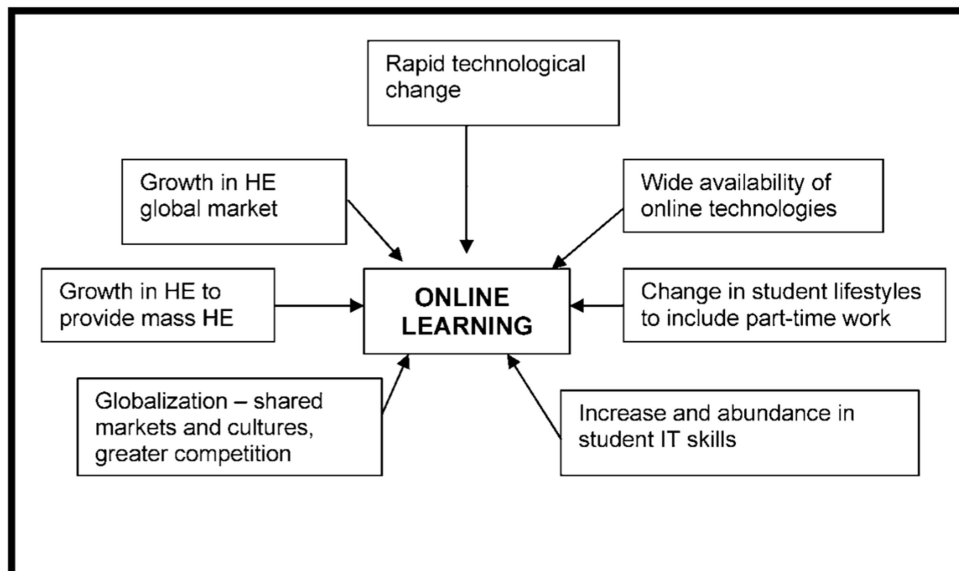

Figure 1. Determiners of online learning [1]

In the specific case of language learning, since the 1990s computer mediated language communication became more and more important, placing greater emphasis on conversation and discourse, learner involvement in online activities and collaboration, as Hampel and Lamy suggest in their study. As the researchers indicate and highlight with the figure below, in second language acquisition the direct interaction between the learner and the teacher, as well as between learners is of great importance, having a highly stimulating effect on the acquisition of the new language. If this element does not exist, stagnation in language acquisition may appear, hampering fluency and immediate reaction. [2]

The figure below highlights the importance and cohesion between three poles: learner – teacher – peer, or input – output as the specialists call this interaction.
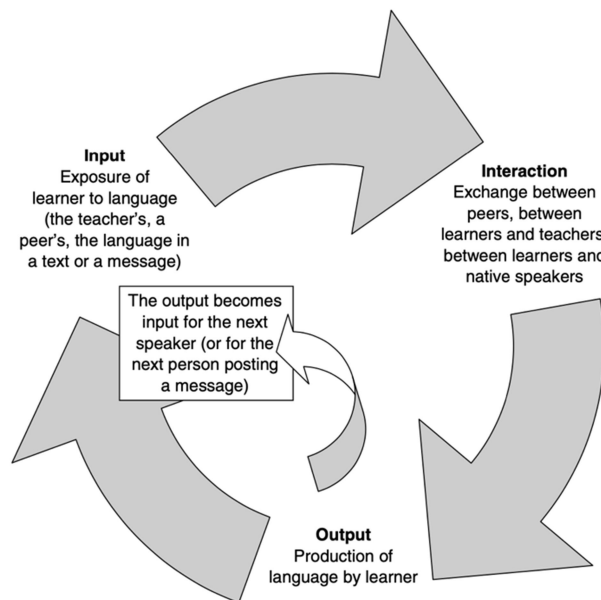
Figure 2. Model of language acquisition based on input-output

As Gass, Mackey and Pica suggest, input becomes an efficient tool for language learning only when this is done in an interactive way, allowing learners to discover meaning, in other words, focus being placed on attention to language acquisition. [3]

Later on, Swain developed a new SLA model, suggesting that the output should be also included as relevant for the learner, since it allows them to concentrate on syntactic processing, in other words, focusing on form. But the most important question is in what way can the computer improve the cognitive approach to language learning? In 2001, Chapelle suggested that CALL should be evaluated according to a set of criteria, which should include the following elements:

- Focus on form – taking into consideration learner characteristics we would be able to find engaging activities that should fit learners' profile.
- Focus on meaning – materials should be adapted to the real-world, so that they are as up to date as possible, and in tune with the students' interests.
- Positive impact – development of adequate strategies.
- Practicality – adequacy of materials to support the use of CALL activities. [4]

3. Online Teaching – challenges and achievements

Sociocultural theories consider that the teacher is more than a fountain of wisdom, s/he is a facilitator, able to move around the class, help students solve problems, answer questions and offer partial solutions, in order to fulfill the educational process. Thus the main focus is on the learner, and the question that the new modern methods of teaching pose is related to how well can the teacher maintain the level of motivation of the learner, if s/he is no longer present in the class, where competition between peers is the most relevant trigger.

As specialists suggest, we as language tutors, have to focus more on developing communication skills, apart from the technical skills required for the online interaction. Hampel and Stickler offered in 2005 a pyramid model, containing the seven mandatory skills that we need in order to perform efficiently during the language class.

Thus, at the bottom of the pyramid there are computer skills, or the technical knowledge that allows us to access online platforms, upload and download materials, connect on different communication platforms, use applications, use software technologies, adapt to the requirements or constraints of the respective applications, be able to socialize online, then be conscious of the impact of the communicative competences as a facilitator; among the most important elements are creativity and the ability to adjust your own style in the interest of the student. [5]
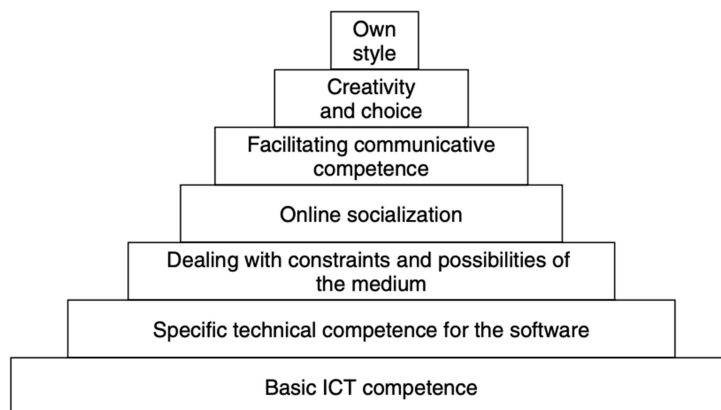

Figure 3. Hampel' and Stickler's *pyramid model* of skills

"Research shows that an important part of the facilitation of learning is the skill to encourage the bonding of the online group in order 'to ensure that learning is meaningful, socially based and supportive of cognitive outcomes' (McLoughlin and Oliver, 1999: 40). This is particularly important for language learning, with its focus on communication." [1]

Thus, language learning is linked with the cooperative and collaborative method, which in turn, is directly related to the concept of the teacher as a facilitator of information and an intermediary between the two poles: learners and technology. Cooperative activities imply that the tasks are given by the teacher, but responsibility is shared among the learners, while the collaborative method implies that students have immediate and direct control over the content and are encouraged to achieve goals individually or in teams, rather that ask for the teacher's help.

There are numerous benefits of collaborative learning, which include academic, social, as well as psychological benefits for the learners. Collaborative learning can help develop critical thinking, allowing students to get involved in activities and improve their overall results. Psychologically speaking, collaborative learning helps students develop self-esteem, reducing anxiety and developing a positive attitude towards learning. Last but not least, the social benefits include the ability to develop understanding, cooperation and a positive atmosphere, creating a so-called learning community.

A different perspective on language learning in the virtual environment. It is meant to create the most appropriate environment for the unfolding of a problem-based learning, which represents a constructivist frame, encouraging the development of a problem that the learner himself can solve by asking and answering himself the matters at stake. It is particularly effective when dealing with essay writing, where the learner is by himself, allowed to express his views and deal with the matters without a time constraint, compared to the face-to-face interaction where you are under pressure because of deadlines or immediateness of answers. However, it addresses a very mature group of learners, mainly adults, requiring involvement and extensive research on their part.

In their study, Hampel and Lamy came up with the most extensive list of pros and cons for online learning, but from the learner's perspective. Among the positive aspects we could mention the fact that learners have now the possibility to participate equally during online classes, have more autonomy, as well as time available for reflection. They are no longer under the eye of the teacher, who is waiting for an immediate response during the class; we can thus talk about a lower level of anxiety among language learners, which in turn offers the background for more creative achievements.

Among the negative aspects, the two specialists mention elements such as the length of the monologues uttered by the professor, who in many situations is alone

in the virtual class, particularly if the subject is not very interesting or interactive. This is not always the case with foreign language teaching, where the level of interaction is very high, but there may be situations where the topic is either very difficult, or too complicated for the language learners, and where learners' involvement is extremely low. Another negative aspect, as specialists consider, is the fact that learners are not totally autonomous, their autonomy being managed by the institution that provides the learning platform. There is also a level of anxiety when speaking in synchronous audio environment.

4. Online Learning – involvement and contributions of the language learner

Beginning with the year 1995 specialists used to consider that learners' involvement in online activities, be they synchronous or asynchronous, was comparable to the face-to-face one. However, recent research highlights the fact that the modern computer-assisted class discussion (CACD) has the ability to involve learners in different types of discourse, allowing learners to access a wide variety of discourses.

Unfortunately, there is a certain level of anxiety among language learners, particularly when we talk about speaking activities, where learners need to get involved in direct interaction, and their pronunciation skills will become visible, which automatically has a direct impact on listening comprehension.

According to Dörnyei, one way of overcoming language anxiety is to develop learners' confidence. Because language learning involves the use of nonverbal communication, the disappearance of these types of cues can increase the level of stress from the learners' part. Elements like kinesics, proxemics and paralanguage can help learners enhance meaning when they lack knowledge of a specific term, while they are online. At the same time, students usually wait for the nonverbal approval of their trainers/ teachers, who can suggest them visually. If all these aspects of face-to-face interaction are now missing, language learners' level of anxiety is at higher levels and this could be an explanation for their lack of involvement or decreased level of interest in online language classes. [6]

But as Pritchard himself suggests, the level of anxiety is equally visible both in the case of learners, and in that of teachers/ tutors, who were previously unfamiliar with information technologies. As can be noted from the picture below, there are a couple of factors which have the ability to level the ground between students and teachers, all the four poles being directed towards the essence of the process, that of developing a set of skills and understanding the importance of ICT in all our future endeavors. [7]
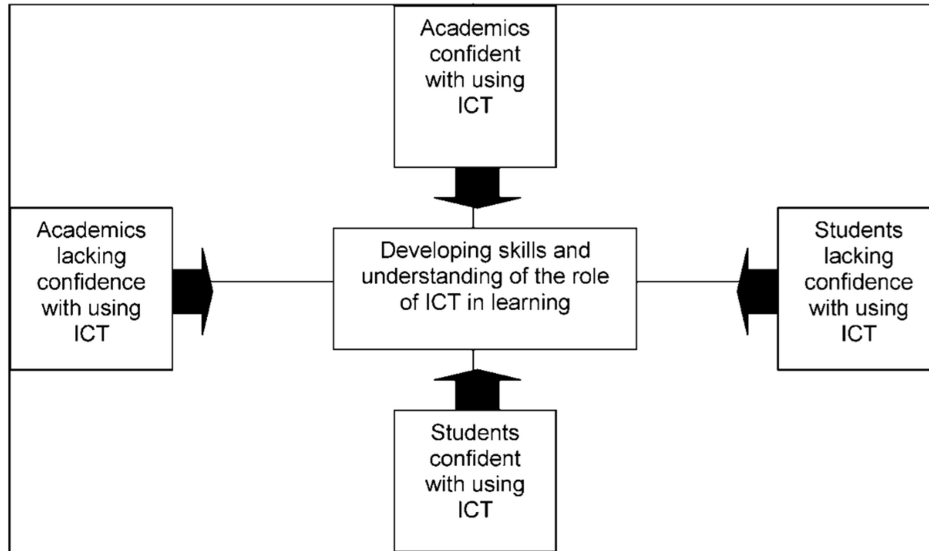
Figure 4. Pritchard's model for the leveling of ICT knowledge between learners and teachers

Another aspect that can cause anxiety among language learners is the evaluation, which is now in an online format. On the one hand learners can be less stressed, because they are in their own environment, at home, but on the other hand, it is the fear of the unknown, of the unexpected demand of information that they might not be in the possession of, which can increase the levels of anxiety among language learners. However, in language learning, which is a lifelong process, fear of unexpected is lower than in other subjects.

On the other hand, in the online environment, when we refer to the assessment methodology challenges appear not only for learners, but also for teachers. First of all, this is due to the fact that for many teachers, this year's challenges have been a novel approach to teaching in general. There are many language teachers who have never taught in the online, or had only little experience in the field, particularly with lectures, and not that much with interactive language seminars. After this challenge was overcome, a new aspect appeared related to the method of evaluation, the best approach that could be able to evaluate all linguistic aspects. Some of the language teachers decide to include all the linguistic skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), although it is harder and more solicitating for the assessed student. For the evaluator, this stage is very demanding, as the development of online test is not extremely easy, both from a technical perspective, but also content-wise. However, there are always positive aspects, such as the fact that the review and revision of tests is easier due to the automatic answer reply, particularly with grid tests, but it can be also easier to check, due to the fact that everything is in electronic format. So, aspects related to a student's handwriting are

overcome. On the other hand, we should not forget the administrative aspects related to the registration of results. Due to the fact that the system is automatic, results are imported into an xl. file, which in turn can be automatically connected to online grade registers.

Specialists still question the reliability of online testing, as plagiarism or substitution of identity are the two important negative aspects of the online evaluation system. However, they are optimistic the new technological developments as well as the creation of new and ingenious solutions, will overcome in the future the problems that we experience today. And hopefully, we will be able to return to the class, where we are all accustomed to interacting, teaching and assessing in a specific manner.

Also connected with the teachers is the issue of the design of materials to be used in the classroom. Especially for language training, it has always been emphasized that that the use of resources found online is of paramount importance, particularly since language teaching/learning has a very strong component of direct interaction, particularly for the listening and speaking skills. Teachers have long resorted to the what the internet has to offer that can be of use in the language class, but technological and/or financial constraints have not always made it possible for all students to access the resources simultaneously during a given class.

From among the resources that can prove valuable in a language class we should mention blogs, online bibliographies, online dictionaries and thesauri, online journals, information centers etc. Teachers can engage their students in a multitude of activities through the use of these resources, with a plethora of advantages. First, there is the topicality of information – students can comment, for instance, on very hot pieces of news which helps them train their language on topics which are both actual and in keeping with their own interests. Then, it is obviously easier for the trainer to refer the students directly to the sources when the purpose is, for instance, to compare different writing genres and styles: a letter to the editor, a dictionary entry, a brief article of popularized science, a piece of news, fragments from a blog etc.

Another huge advantage is tandem learning, which is particularly useful for language acquisition. While it can occur in person, its efficiency is the same in the case of online interactions via socializing media, email, phone etc. (the online medium can even be preferable if the partners are also interested in developing their writing skills). What is interesting is that it can be done both at the student's own initiative or under supervision and guidance of the language trainer. International students who interact in this form of learning can be from countries at different poles of the Earth. This means that, apart from the language interaction per se, they also exchange cultural information, which becomes thus an integral part of the language learning process. And it has become apparent by now that efficient language use is impossible in the absence of a broader context which encompasses the culture in which a particular language is embedded.

5. Conclusions

The very recent events that have affected our entire planet have definitely shown us that the paradigm of how education is perceived and put into practice needs to change in order to answer new and not always pleasant realities. In the process, all the agents involved have to be aware that flexibility and openness to the acquisition of new skills – whether they are technical or emotional, adaptive – are paramount for the success of this new approach to education. Fortunately, the fast pace of technological advancements has already prepared us for this stage to some extent, as students, trainers, institutions and organizations involved in providing education services have had to adjust quickly to the constantly shifting requirements of reality.

Language learning ranks very high among the types of content most preferred by people all over the world. This could probably account for the fact that for some good decades, this area of training has benefited numerous tools and strategies for the inclusion of the online in the practical activity of language acquisition. It is undeniable that the online teaching/learning environment has its challenges which are both technical (students' and teachers' need to familiarize with various platforms and tools, issues connected to assessment, from test design to the implementation of ethical practices, students' access to the necessary devices etc.) and emotional (adjustment to this form of mediated interaction, students' occasional lapses, participation motivation depending on the type of class – synchronous or asynchronous or lack of direct interaction with peers). However, the latest events have demonstrated that all the parties involved are willing to and capable of making efforts to adjust to this form of education. With constant betterment which derives from the awareness that online education is here to stay, it will eventually become a good complement to face to face learning.

In this, a key role will be played by the teaching staff, as they will be the ones guiding their students through this intricate process that relies on online resources completely (from identifying the adequate information to using it accurately and appropriately). They will have to support their students in "developing new skills to effectively search, critically evaluate and assimilate information and acquire knowledge for later application. They will help students to use analytical interpretative processes (…) and abstract the meaning and relevance of this knowledge for application to specific and differentiated contexts" [1]. It is, therefore, a huge responsibility that will fall on trainers' shoulders and they will have to, as they have always done, rise to the occasion, because they are among the key factors upon which the success of this enterprise will depend.

This new landscape of education that is in full process of reshaping and redefining its strategies and approaches is also an opportunity for increased collaboration. This will have to be visible among all the parties. The collaborative effort will

probably have to be greater than before to supplement for the much-needed face to face interaction. Because, despite the numerous advantages it has and which cannot be challenged, online education should not replace in-person training, as it is not suitable for all contexts, all student age groups, all types of content etc. But it will definitely be a significant part of the future of education, as its relevance will increase with every new generation that comes with heightened technological needs, expectations and ability to use technology to its advantage and, hopefully, for the best.

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