

## **EMPIRICAL ASPECTS IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ONLINE TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

*Alexandra MĂRGINEAN<sup>1</sup>*

**Abstract:** *This paper starts by describing the wider context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the effects that it creates on the psyche – the paradox of combined passivity and a new type of dynamism and agency, the one reuniting a break in the pace of living mixed with a superior, extreme speed experienced in people’s lives, and, thirdly, that of creating presence in absence. We then link them with the narrower context of academia, online teaching and psychology of the new context, which we analyze from the double perspective of the teacher and the student. The method is to start empirically from some observations based on real time and real life contexts in the above-mentioned activity, to then work towards potential solutions for the encountered difficulties or problems. It is then a deductive approach, and we explain the rationale for it as matching the way things have occurred naturally in reality, given the anachronistic manner in which know-how had to suddenly have been a given, and was taken for granted, since there was no time (or next to no time) to follow the logical chronology of training and preparation before launching ourselves in the online activity. We call what we are looking at the psychology of the situation, in the wider acceptance of the term, as we deal with feelings, reactions and behavior. We point out the particularities of both the technical support of the online teaching (i.e. the Microsoft Teams platform and the specific way in which we used it) and the teaching of foreign languages. A great part of the study is dedicated to the matter of creating presence online, followed by a minimal query proving some related points, then an enumeration of other elements noticed throughout the online teaching activity. The conclusions sum up the observations made in the paper and draw again towards an interpretation of online teaching in the wider context of life in a time of general and marked crisis, converging back to the starting points of the discussion to come full circle.*

**Keywords:** *pandemic, paradoxes, online teaching, foreign language teaching, psychology, empirical data*

### **1. Introduction – The wider context**

When we were abruptly faced, because of the Covid-19 virus pandemic, during the difficult times that we are living now, with leading our lives, all of a sudden, from inside our homes, and only from there, but full throttle, as paradoxical as this may

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<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Ph.D., Romanian-American University, [marginean.alexandra.roxana@profesor.rau.ro](mailto:marginean.alexandra.roxana@profesor.rau.ro)

seem, a paralyzing sense of ambivalence overarched our lives. Let us explain why we live at full throttle, and why ambivalently.

We suddenly needed to be both contained, within very small boundaries, restricted, bound to our households, i.e. *here*, as well as *there*, able to perform the activities that earned our living as normally as possible (if possible), and the concept of one's *presence there*, in the action, has acquired new dimensions.

It is true that the measures of self-isolation, social distancing and absence from the public sphere were taken progressively, leaving some time for adaptation, but it is debatable how much time is enough (which depends as well on the historical, political and social context of each nation), and they still represent a trauma for people, especially a people that has stepped into democracy after a long period of communism which still sees some of its effects and mentality nowadays.

Spatial anchoring and concrete immovability came with a sense of rapid change created with the bombarding news (some of which fake news) on the developments of each day: presidential discourses, military ordinances, the sensation that a lot of changes occur in a short time span – such as the fluctuating numbers depicting new cases of infected people, deaths, successfully cured patients, and figures referring to other counts – pieces of equipment acquired or needed, amounts of money planned for various acquisitions, numbers related to what happens in various cities of the country (arrests and fines for breaking the law, interviewed people), not to mention all these statistics for other countries as well etc. These generate a dynamism which comes with a sense of imposition and urgency that creates stress rather than empowerment, because it describes something that occurs *to us* rather than something that we *cause* or *produce*. The impression these days has been that the world revolves somehow faster, and it does so without our input, as the way it spins and the outcome of things is no longer in our control, or a result of how far humanity has come because of the progress and breakthroughs that it has made. Speedy eventfulness no longer comes accompanied by a sense of accomplishment or fulfillment. Nor is it the consequence of intentionality. It is something experienced and not something imprinted by people's will and skill. Humanity has been forced to merely witness (to some extent), losing the agency that it has been used to hold, and learning to gain other types of agency as well.

What we may derive from the introduction above is a *contrast* that people feel, between being both more passive and somehow more active at the same time. The new type of agency required, in one of its aspects, stasis, which was a paradox we all have had to quickly understand. Passivity came with being still, restricted, limiting one's area of activity spatially, concretely, and dynamism came with learning to function, while in this situation, as close to normal as possible – continuing one's working activity in a way that adapted to the new context. In some aspects of life this is possible, and in others it is not. This dynamism is imprinted by both the speed with which events occur, and the fact that in order to

cope people need to make extra efforts, be better than they used to, do something more than they did, while at the same time paradoxically doing less. This kind of contrast creates psychological strain, disorientation and even confusion.

*Technology* has become a pillar in managing one's work activity and survival. We have become dependent on it in a way that is new. We are no longer referring, at any time, to the negative addiction which has been often discussed and highlighted, countless, as a cause for worry in various discourses, when paramount were its harmful effects when used in excess. All of that *criticism is forgotten*, as in these times technology is, uncontested, absolutely necessary for survival. Those previous worries have subsided, been backgrounded and made irrelevant by the immediate context.

For teachers, the *e-learning* that has made the topic of various conferences, workshops, preoccupations of academia has a new dimension. It is not only debated on and inquired about theoretically, and used every now and then, by choice; it has gained exclusivity and has become a condition for the unfolding of regular activities. It is no longer a preference or an option, it has become a must and a prerequisite, a *sine qua non* element. Academia have been dived, head-on, full speed, immersively and forcedly, inescapably even, as well, in online teaching as the sole type made (or, should we say, left) available by the times. And one of the potential problems raised by the situation is the need for a special skillset pertaining exclusively to online teaching, which we have needed to self-teach in our turn on the way, no questions asked, a skillset taken for granted as both an absolute, indisputable necessity, and one which we can and should gain more or less in the blink of an eye, and unquestionably.

Even though employers have tried, generally speaking, to provide for this want through *training*, *there has been anachronism in the endeavor*, as the need for the know-how to be taken in, already in place and operative was long due, before the initiative was in place, and this was a characteristic of the context, with no one to blame for the situation. The online teaching activity had to have happened before the know-how could be acquired. And the theoretical background that any teacher should and may have had, especially in the higher education environment, is definitely not the same as practice. Using technological tools was a component of regular face-to-face classes on a daily basis. But this is not the same as online teaching at all. Blended and flipped classes, as well as gamification may have resorted to technology as an element, but it did not amount to such a change as the one entailed by online teaching.

## **2. Defining the immediate context, method and objectives**

If we think about the students' motivations to get involved in the online academic activities, we have to take into account the context of crisis created by the pandemic, which has caused a lot of activities to halt and a lot of businesses to

collapse, which triggered a fear that this may happen in the case of workplaces and learning institutions where students unfold their activities as well, impacting their lives negatively, both professionally and educationally. This fear correlated with the obvious and natural desire of a student to graduate and fulfill the requirements of the ongoing academic year so as to pass into the next, for financial, developmental, time-investment or other considerations. In other words, both the academia and the students have had in common the desire to make things work, to ensure the continuation of the activity as normally and smoothly as possible and to finish the year in good conditions while also minding health, security and legislative issues. What we have just said helps us make the point of a sense of communion and community when it came to switching to the performance of the activity online, and a commonality of purpose which created a favorable collaborative environment. This helped a lot in what concerns the willingness and availability of doing things in this manner, from both sides. The concept of partnership, present among the key aspects of the Romanian-American University's mission, acquired a new dimension.

In this paper, I shall start from simple facts observed by experiment as delicate issues that needed to be handled in the context of online teaching, and use theory in the area to support the solutions that I have come up with empirically, *ad hoc*. The main object of the paper is mainly to document some aspects concerning behavior online in class, aspects that have more to do with psychology (given that we look at behavior, impressions, emotional responses etc.), in comparison with the one in face-to-face interactions.

The advantage is that I could compare patterns and reactions of the same people in the two situations mentioned, I have had the chance to notice how the same individuals conducted themselves in these contexts. The fact that I not only knew the students, but also had been working with them for at least a semester and a half (with some even more than a year and a half) at the time when the online teaching started, gave me the opportunity to actually bear witness to the fact that there indeed are changes that young adults – the learners – as well as myself, the teacher undergo in such circumstances.

It is a double perspective that we mean to consider here. It is not only students' reactions that we are looking at, but also the teacher's feelings and thoughts when faced with this context. Some of these appeared before the actual event of online teaching occurred, some others in the middle of the activity, while it was unfolding.

### **3. Empirical data – aspects involved in the online teaching of foreign languages**

The online classes were organized on Microsoft Teams. To the purpose of smoothing out the application to work better, students were instructed to keep the video off throughout the whole time of the interaction, and even their microphones

shut as well to avoid microphony and in order to increase overall sound quality. However, given the nature of the seminars – foreign language teaching and learning – the communicative method used, and the category and level of the students (higher education, intermediate-advanced), the students’ active participation and input was particularly important. In other words, more than in the case of the other subjects that they study, most of the times they had to speak more than the teacher, whose main role was to guide and foster the activity from the background, to be a facilitator rather than the main actor [1]. With the exception of moments in which some theoretical problems are reminded to the students or revised, practice rather than theory is paramount, and a deductive method, rather than an inductive one, is more often used, starting from examples in the language to rather help the learner remember or derive the rules or theory, and this only inasmuch as it helps performance in the target language, as fluency rather than accuracy is the main goal.

### **3.1. Creating presence**

Given what we have just said, that the teacher is rather a prop and does not take the center position (with the exception of certain moments), there is one problem or worry which may appear, particularly in the context mentioned above, and that is “*creating presence*” [2], i.e. “*telepresence*” or “being there” plus “*social presence*” or “being together with others” [3], while at the same time preserving a type of effacement, the kind of presence that is merely supportive and leaves the floor to, and the focus on the student. Also, it is important to understand that presence, which is the “dynamic interplay of thought, emotion, and behavior in the online environment” is different from “engagement” which is merely the formal participation in the online event [4]. We notice from these definitions of presence online that a great component of it, if we consider the notions that make up the definition of the concept, are part of or related with psychology – once we discuss ingredients such as emotion, thought, behavior, i.e. perception, the significant role of which has been discussed in literature dedicated to online teaching [5].

One of the main transformations taking place in the switch to online classes is that the *visual and the auditory reversed roles*, in terms of their relevance in the online classes. Generally speaking, most of the information that someone takes from the environment is through sight. In our case, this was no longer possible. What we had available included, in theory, the visual element through video, but practically we heavily relied on the audio, for the reasons mentioned above. Hence, a serious reversal in the means available for information intake occurred, one that we had to cope with, accommodate and adapt to instantly. Practically speaking, the foreign language seminar took place, for the most part, with the video off, and communication had to be done through the audio. The teacher needed to *sense if the students became at some point reluctant to intervene and participate – willingness* to do so being a component of the creation of social presence [6] – and

to distinguish between when such moments meant merely an inconsequential change of pace or a break caused by a need for clarifications. The teacher *could not rely on the non-verbal visual feedback* from students, which helped contrast which of these two cases (s)he was dealing with easily and instantaneously. Hence, what was needed was an ability to “Be aware of feelings and attitudes expressed” [7] and to both show and decode feelings based on words [8]. Another aspect is that all the teacher’s *explanations had to be worded more thoroughly and fully* than when the visual element was present. During an explanation that the teacher provides in face-to-face interactions, the visual feedback from the students helps the facilitator know and actually see from the others’ reactions if and how the message that (s)he delivers needs to be adapted: if the teacher needs to go slower or, on the contrary faster, if (s)he needs to make breaks and explain certain elements some more or get into details here and there, when the point is made and understood and the teacher can move forward, who has not understood from the students and, using previous knowledge of that/those students resort to some ways and manners of explaining that are more individual-oriented etc. The possibility to notice all these aspects disappears in online teaching and, when elucidations are due, the teacher needs to find some middle way in the manner of delivering them, taking into account an average of the group performance and personalities (if this is even possible), and hope for the best.

The perspective of the student in what regards the above-mentioned aspect was the same. In face-to-face interactions, the physical co-presence of the teacher favors her/his quality of fosterer for and guide of the activity, because the non-verbal components of discourse can be heavily resorted to and function as immediate feedback for the student. The teacher’s glances, eye contact, frown, smile, mimicry in general may give indications as to the correctness of the student’s input without actually interrupting it, and simultaneously with the communication occurrence, i.e. in real time, not after it. Online, this is difficult to do even if the teacher leaves the camera on, because there are or may be some technical issues that make this approach less relevant or successful: minor delays in image rendering, image quality etc., which postpone or even eliminate the intake by the student/interlocutor. Hence, if this exchange still works, it works in a modified, improper or maimed manner. This is even more of a problem if the teacher does not leave the camera on throughout the whole class, which, theoretically, was what we were advised to do ourselves. This non-verbal feedback was crucial for the type of interaction specific for foreign language learning and it was suddenly absent or problematic in the context of online teaching. Non-verbal feedback negatively impacted what has been called “immediacy” and theorized as a key component of creating (social) presence online [9]. Non-verbal feedback had to be supplanted by strictly auditory signaling and cues, if the teacher is unwilling to merely say “yes” or “no” (meaning “correct” or “incorrect”) and would like to suggest the answer leaving it to the student to find it on his/her own rather than point it to him/her directly. This has meant an increased emphasis on and deployment of *paralanguage cues*. Paralanguage includes grunts, voice volume and pitch, and

these are all things that I have used [10]. The teacher had to signal through sound everything that (s)he did visually. This presupposed increased attention to sound stimuli for the students. Since the human beings are used to receive seventy percent of the information they take from the environment via sight, it meant a switch in capabilities which we all had to do naturally, and, for most, unawares. Sorin Walter Gudea notices, relying on testimony from online teachers, that the richness of the non-verbal and feedback in general is affected negatively in this type of classes [11].

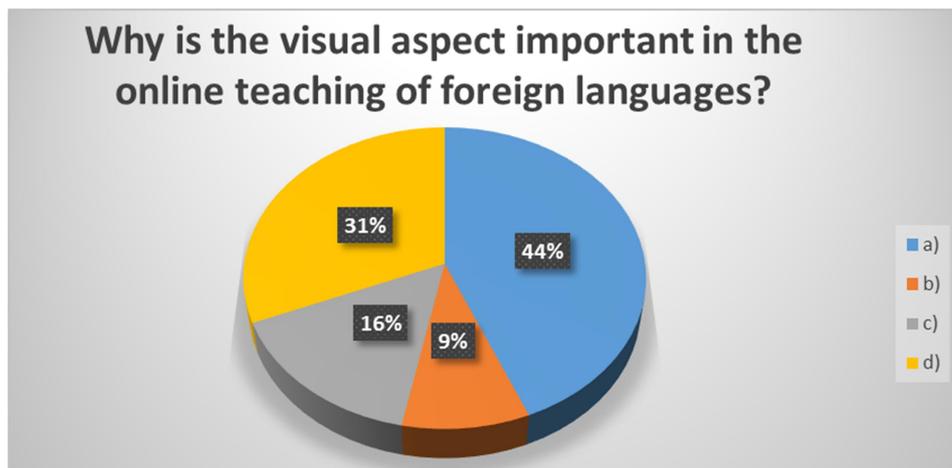
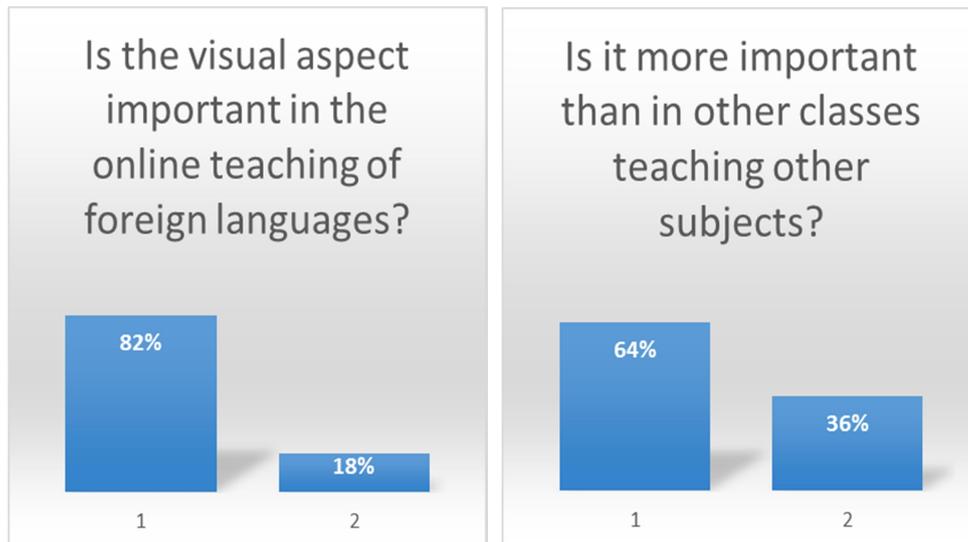
I checked the observations above by asking the students what seemed to them the most difficult aspect in this type of online interaction, under the conditions which we were advised to apply. I asked a number of 50 students to answer a query – in the form of a word document – two Yes/No questions at the end of the seminars that I held online, and one multiple choice question:

1. Is the visual aspect important in the online teaching of foreign languages? (Yes/No)
2. Is it more important than in other classes teaching other subjects? (Yes/No)
3. If you chose to answer Yes to the question above, why? Pick only one answer:
  - a) you see feedback from the teacher in real time while you give your input, and thus know if your discourse is alright as you deliver it
  - b) for the fun of the interaction
  - c) because not seeing the teacher makes you anxious and introvert
  - d) because you get non-verbal feedback from all your interlocutors/colleagues, i.e. you see their reactions

Out of the 50 students, 41 answered Yes to the first question and, out of these 41, 32 answered Yes to the second. Then, for the third question, 14 chose the first option, 3 the second, 5 the third and 10 the fourth. The results are summed up in the table and charts below:

Table 1. Students’ answers to the questions related to the presence of the visual aspect in the online teaching of foreign languages

	Numbers of students saying Yes	Percentages of students saying Yes
Question 1	41	82%
Question 2	32	64%
Question 3		
a)	14	28%
b)	3	6%
c)	5	10%
d)	10	20%



The visual aspect is what created presence in face-to-face interactions, and when this is missing – something revealed by the query above – other means of creating presence have to be developed. The ones that I have come up with are using paralinguistics – in the context in which I still wanted to preserve a deductive approach – and more carefully worded explanations so as to create a sense of security and implicitly presence. This wording was designed so as not to be too developed or convoluted, in order to avoid obtaining the opposite effect, in which students lose focus because they already know what is being said, or because, on the contrary, they feel that it is too difficult to grasp. Gudea has referred to this as “clarity”, based on teachers’ testimonials, and it was defined as a must [12]. I need to confess that the fact that I knew the students from before helped calibrate these

explanations in the case of each group. Also, when I joined the class, so whenever I began, I did it with a video on, so as to announce my presence, to signal officially that the class has begun and be noticed, but also, very importantly, for the sake of creating reassurance, comfortableness through familiarity, continuity and grounding. Seeing their teacher, the one they have had in face-to-face classes and interacted with, provided all these things for the students. Also, I turned the video on at the end of the seminar, as I thanked them for participation and bid them farewell. I noticed better response and quicker mobilization at the beginning of the class with the groups with which I used the video, as, for the sake of having a term of comparison, I did not use it with all groups. With those where I did, the passage from the face-to-face to the online felt much smoother, the unfolding of the seminar much more alike to the one having happened under the conditions of physically shared presence.

### **3.2. Other aspects**

One of my first thoughts and worries (having never worked on an online platform, like Microsoft Teams, Zoom etc.) was whether I would have the ability to grant students turns to speak, which is advisable for the type of online class I was teaching [13] – foreign languages, a highly active and participatory one, one that could be hence classified as “synchronous” (as opposed to “asynchronous”) [14]. Also, the need to be able to do that was specific and extremely high, as I give grades to my students taking into account both the quantitative and qualitative assessment criteria for each seminar. Consequently, it was absolutely necessary to be able to know who spoke and how much, and more than in broad lines. Also, although I know the students, especially those who used to attend regularly the face-to-face classes, I worried, for instance, whether I would recognize their voices online, if the sound quality would allow it and in the case in which they sounded very differently from real life – which some of them actually did, but to a small proportion.

Microsoft Teams provides the possibility to show the list of participants and I could check and monitor who was available and wanted to answer, as the respective student’s name became highlighted and bolded once (s)he turned on the microphone, and I had established for them to use it on only at a time when they wanted to say something. In my class, I actually kept the list open on the right of my screen at all times.

One of the things that I have noticed happening in general between people is the way in which the impact of what someone says through messages in the virtual environment that we resort to is more powerful in these days than it used to be before the confinement started. The effect of what someone transmits to you through virtual means is stronger. A (sometimes simple) message has greater impact, meanings and reactions get amplified, everything is put under a magnifying glass, the importance of posts and information is exaggerated or given a heightened

dimension. The reduction of communication to one that is not face-to-face has inflated perception to what one has to make do, and has increased acuity and sensitivity. This may work in either a positive or negative way. Negatively, it triggers more radical attitudes towards, sometimes, relatively minor stimuli. Positively, and in the context of our discussion, it helps people involved in online communication to naturally adapt to the means of communication at hand and, to a certain extent, naturally develop some skills needed in this type of interaction.

To be concrete, during an online seminar, a student was very active and ready to give his input countless times throughout the class, monopolizing the conversation. Initially, I told him to give his colleagues the chance to engage too, promising him I would listen to what he has to say as well afterwards. He did not heed me and intervened again. To give him a hint that it was perhaps a good idea to retreat a bit, and in order to avoid nominating him directly again so as not to hurt his feelings, I reminded all of them to keep their mics switched off, for better sound quality, unless they want to intervene – something that I had already mentioned at the beginning – and as he was the only one keeping it on at all times. I repeated my request, saying that there is someone who does not comply. He did not take the hint and continued to try to dominate the discussion. Ultimately, I switched off his microphone myself, without pronouncing his name or mentioning anything else to the group. The result was that he immediately retreated, and, as I sensed, feeling offended, as he refused to share any ideas even when I said that anybody could answer, even though I had given him the opportunity to take in the idea and I had avoided putting him on the spot or in a face-losing situation. The simple act of switching off his microphone acquired bigger dimensions than what it should have, in the context in which he had had more occasions to comply without losing face before his colleagues. I knew the student's behavior in face-to-face classes and he usually listened to reason and did not become upset when I asked him to be balanced in the amount of input that he gave. Hence, *some reactions are disproportionate to the stimuli in the online environment.*

Another case of too much boldness in online interaction came from a student who deliberately kept his camera on after the group having been specifically instructed not to do so. It was one of my first online classes, when I kept my camera on longer, perhaps two thirds of the time allocated for the seminar. In order to determine him to switch it off, I did that with my own camera – at a time when I was actually explaining something and it made sense to keep it on – as a hint to him. The desired effect took place, and he closed his own, taking the allusion.

The cases illustrated above could not exactly be categorized as bullying or bad manners, or, perhaps, a mild form of the latter, although the intention to bother was not there from the students' part, and we should, instead, speak of a little too much enthusiasm and eagerness to stand out. Nevertheless, literature advises teachers to give feedback privately, such as in a mail [15], which sometimes does not work for

the situation if feedback is needed right then and there, so indirectly letting the student know that he needs to change something in his behavior was a strategy that I consider to reflect the advice given by specialists well enough, as, what is important in classroom management amounts to indirect mentions and saving the student's "face" while still getting the message across [16].

Another effect that I managed to observe in online class interactions was that, generally speaking, *shy students gained more boldness*. This phenomenon has been noticed by specialized literature as "Less anxiety thanks to anonymity" [17]. I assign the same explanation in the cases that I have noticed, based on my knowledge of the students in previous interactions. They were reluctant to speak in front of the others mainly because they felt that they were being watched and afraid of disapproval or mockery. Their poorer level of English had put them in the situation in which they had perceived the colleagues' feedback as critical and unkind, even when this feedback was indirect or even inexistent. In other words, knowing that their foreign language was worse, they implicitly felt judged and uncomfortable, either objectively or subjectively. For them, it was helpful to no longer feel scrutinized, and it imprinted them the courage to manifest more freely.

Conversely, I would have expected highly participative students to behave in the same way online, as they did not have any such problems, so what they did face-to-face should have stayed the same. To my surprise, not all of them behaved similarly. Although literature on this subject seems to agree that in the case of active students in face-to-face context the same input from them or even more may be expected online [18], an idea supported by the example of the student discussed above, what I have noticed first-hand is that for some of them the willingness to participate diminished. I naturally looked for an explanation for this discrepancy, and I found it in the students' differences in personalities. In the clear cases of bright and talkative students who were paradoxically silenced and taken aback by the online environment, the problem resided in the fact that they were highly empathetic and perceptive individuals, relying on non-verbal elements more than the others and in a natural, intuitive way. To them, who liked face-to-face communication for the richness of details that it brings on the interlocutor, the online functioned as an unpleasant filter. It was not that they could not compensate for, or overcome this filter, precisely due to their emotional intelligence and perceptiveness, it was merely that it provided for them a less authentic and rich experience, and that they were aware of it. Also, they responded better to improvisations, pace changes and unexpected turns (questions, for instance) being more creative and responsive in such cases because of their empathy, and the online classes provide less possibility and room for such approaches.

#### **4. Conclusions**

We have started in this paper from some general aspects characterizing the critical context of the virus pandemic of the times we are living, pinpointing it as a

particularly stressful period. Out of this, we have extracted the notion of paradox, and revealed some contrasting and poignant elements that came in contradiction and which overrode our lives. Then, we have connected these with others pertaining to the particular situation of teaching staff, such as the specifics of foreign language teaching which does not really go well with blind online one, the need to adopt a know-how that was missing in the real sense, the manifestation of a set of skills without theorizing about it, merely having theoretical knowledge and/or having used it sporadically not exclusively. We have analyzed the notion of creating presence by correlating it with concrete examples from the situations encountered in the online teaching, as well as other aspects that I have come across on the way. The novelty of this paper is perhaps not so much the empirical approach, but the interpretation of the foreign language online teaching activity in the context of an extremely critical situation worldwide and the correspondences made between the psychology of online teaching and that of the wider context overall.

Most specialized literature describes the online teaching situation as an exclusively online one throughout a whole module. In our case, the fact that we have had previous knowledge of the students and face-to-face classes with them would probably qualify the activity sum total as a hybrid teaching. Also, this previous experience added advantages to the online interaction and eased it. In this sense, some of the difficulty and weight of the switch to online mode has been lifted. This is something that we need to mention in order to be fair and give due justice to the context.

We have seen that, among the elements that are lost in online classes, the most striking is the richness of the non-verbal cues. This attracts losses in improvisation and human touch. For those of us who are more empathetic, it can represent both a hindrance and a helpful element, because the fact that it is missing creates, on the negative side, a significantly less rewarding and satisfying experience (which, in the context in which the psychology of the encounter is the focus, is regrettable and significant), but, on the positive side, it helps adaptation to the conditions of online teaching, i.e. empathetic people will be both more affected by the change and deal with it better. Empathy as an innate feature functions as a paradoxical plus and minus in online teaching.

Overall, the switch to online teaching has an important positive effect. It contributes to the feeling that, despite the passivity and static mode of behavior involved in the context of the pandemic scourge, it renders the teacher a feeling of fulfilment and progress. One feels that one has accomplished something, that one has developed professionally from inside one's home. To this, we may add social benefit for all participants, as this activity creates and amplifies a sense of belonging to the academic community, as well as one of collaboration, partnership and satisfies the natural tendency of the human being as a social animal. It also

counters the disempowerment imprinted by the times. Referring to what we have begun with in this paper, it helps us exercise the new type of agency, bringing us in synchronicity with being active and in control while passive and deprived of agency, being present while absent, and being together despite isolation.

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