Under the Wind of Change: Fly on the Wings of Digitalisation

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Abstract:
The situation which has recently turned the world upside down (that of the coronavirus disease which has rapidly spread among the people from all over the world, taking its tribute and being merciless from all points of view: social and economic), has forced education to adjust in a matter of seconds and discover ways of transferring knowledge virtually to learners. The connection of the teacher to digital resources is not new, on the contrary, it has passed quite a while since electronic gadgets and materials have slowly but constantly "invaded" the teaching act. The novelty lies in the total movement of the teaching process in the digital world. A numberless range of issues stirred each educator's mind regarding the platform that should be used, the difficulty to cope with a large number of students, possible technical problems that may appear, etc. The current paper is meant to focus on all the constraints, fears, problems but also on the positive aspects of digital teaching under the current changes generated by the appearance of a highly contagious disease such as COVID-19.

Keywords: *digital teaching, effectiveness, fears, issues.*

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Introduction

The ending of the winter holidays brought students of all ages back to school for the second semester. Lessons, homework, projects, studying for tests and all kinds of competitions made everyone complain about being stressed and anxious. Rumors about a deadly disease in distant China appeared and, in time, they turned into a horrific piece of news which started to affect more and more countries until it finally reached Romania. Everything suddenly stopped. The emergency procedure that applied, just as everywhere else in the world where the virus had appeared, reduced all to silence. Adults were sent at home from work, children as well.

Mixed start up reactions

The sudden breakup of the schools in the middle of the week, in March 2020, in Romania (because of the fears generated by the new virus), "threw" educators and students into a period of puzzlement, panic and silence. The beginning of the shutdown period brought together blended reactions of relaxation (everyone feeling comfortable in his/her home, late mornings in bed and comfortable outfits), worry related to the lack of lessons and anxiety induced by the possibility of getting infected and not knowing which would be the end of this scenario. For teachers, the issue of how to continue the schoolwork increased the amount of concern and accentuated the search of adequate online applications to support the teaching act. Technology had already been integrated in the lessons but a total "transfer" of the teacher in the virtual world was something new, especially in the case of classes with a large number of students. The huge variety of programs that could be used for performing the teaching act only increased the level of uncertainty and placed the teachers in an attitude of puzzlement. In fact, it was a matter of generalization. People who worked in offices made no exception. Everyone had to find a way to adapt. The positive side of this unlucky situation was that, unlike other jobs which couldn't be done in the virtual world, teachers had a choice, a solution to keep in touch with the students. On https://bridge.edu/tefl/blog, it is specified that:

This has affected people across industries, and classroom based English teachers (…) are no exception. Luckily we have the option to transition to teaching English online, which provides a financial safety net, a chance to learn new skills and a way to support and stay connected with our students .

Digital tools for teaching

Virtual teaching is not something to be scared of. There is of course, at least at the beginning, a sort of fear which is natural when confronted with something new. It also has to do with the lack of technical knowledge that some teachers have and /or, the lack of proper instruction. Schools began to invest in training courses only during the summer holiday after a whole semester had already been completed in various ways chosen individually by each teacher. Monitoring students and teachers was impossible; it seemed to be more than clear that nobody was ready for the situation. However, digital sites appeared one by one, getting to an impressive number and providing all kinds of tools designed to facilitate the educational act. On www.graphicmoama.com there are mentioned 20 digital tools for preparing highly attractive educational lectures which may captivate the students and engage them actively in the class. They allow teachers to free their imagination and to be flexible when making presentations, playing videos, drawing quizzes or assessments or simply checking the homework. They stimulate the teachers'

professional practice and for students, they represent something new, a modern approach which increases their interest in the subject.

From the point of view of the digital tools, the most innovative are considered to be: Prezi, Haiku Deck, Scratch, Animoto, Pixton, BoomWriter, Explain Everything, Educreations, Glogster, Flipsnack, Padlet, VoiceThread, StoryJumper, Storybird, Quizlet, Socrative, Edmodo, Schoology, Piktochart and Visme. All of them are suitable for students, parents and educators as well and have guiding instructions which are sketched in all sorts of video demonstrations, meant to provide support even for the least experienced technology user. Age is not a major factor to be taken into consideration when it comes to deal with these types of software because tutorials are meant to explain all the procedures in detail, offering accurate demonstrations in a concise and interesting way. There are numerous sites which characterize all these tools and it's up to each person to choose the one that suits his/her objectives the most.

Digital platforms

Educational software platforms allow students to learn from home in an engaging way by connecting them to all sorts of multimedia forms. Lessons are delivered in an interactive and interesting way which enhances deliberate practice and accelerate growth learning. They keep students motivated and hold their attention for an extended period of time.

On www.graphicmama.com there is a classification of them and of the advantages and disadvantages they have. Wiziq, Echo360, Google Classroom, Zoom, LearnCube, Vedamo, Microsoft Teams, ezTalks, LearnWorlds, TutorRoom, BrainCert, e-Lecta, Adobe Connect, etc. There are plenty of sites and solutions which enable instructors either to create their own lessons or to upload files from their personal computer.

Pros of the Digital Learning Process

The birth of technology has brought a lot of positive changes to the world we live in. It has become extremely used in all fields of work and the educational area makes no exception. There are countless arguments in favor of using it. Below there are some of them.

*one of the major benefits of online instruction is that both the educator and the students can sit comfortably in their homes and participate at the learning process without feeling the stress of being in front of the audience.

*lessons are generally interactive and fun; students love to discover new things related to technology, especially when it comes to the new generations

*virtual attendance is higher than the physical one because students can connect not only on their personal computers or laptops, but also on their mobile phones

*lessons may be recorded so that students can replay them until they understand or master certain structures which they may find difficult

* technology encourages teachers to design personalized lessons with materials that are adapted to the needs and expectations of each individual in the classification

* homework or any other tasks required by the teacher can be checked at all times as a result of date reminders

*some students may gain more courage and self-confidence because they don't feel the pressure of their classmates around them anymore.

*digital learning can be of great support for those who travel long distances to get to school/university or for those who spend a lot of time in the means of transport; it is also a good way of saving money; bad weather can also become a factor for skipping classes but it doesn't happen in the case of online classes

*live correction may also be used for making sure, the teaching process, especially when in comes to a foreign language unfolds without any errors.

*screen share is brilliantly replacing the traditional whiteboard

The site www.webanywhere.co.uk provides a list of six benefits of using technology in the classroom. The first one mentioned is that it improves engagement (by "taking students on virtual field trips" and "delivering teaching through gamification"; it also enhances knowledge retention, encourages individual learning and collaboration. There is also mentioned that students get used to seeing live presentations and may develop practical skills which may have a positive impact on their future careers .

Cons of the Digital Learning Process

The number of cons is not to be neglected either. The ones mentioned below represent only a small part of the disadvantages of teaching online.

*computers are just like any other machine, so, if they get broken then there are no chances of teaching the lesson anymore.

*sometimes updates to the software of the computer or poor WiFi connection may affect the quality of the sound or the video.

* children may use, as an excuse, the different technological problems that may appear, not to pay attention to the explanations of the teacher and to lose their interest to games on mobile phones or other activities that they may find interesting.

* screen fatigue may appear to teachers as well as to students

*lack of socialization is not a matter to be neglected either; students do no longer meet and talk during the breaks, therefore their communication is limited to their participation during classes

*when there is a large number of students online, all kind of difficulties may appear: some of them may join a zoom session, for example, without writing their names or simply using nicknames; in such cases, it is extremely hard to monitor all of them; it is impossible to see everybody on the front page and communication may be hindered by various sounds, if they forget to turn off their microphones or by their willingness to participate in the class; of course, they may be guided to use the virtual hands if they want to provide an answer but it takes a lot of time to coordinate them. There are some platforms which don't allow to have more than 25 participants and the teacher should analyze in advance before choosing the right one.

*some platforms impose a time limit and the lesson may be interrupted exactly in the middle of an important explanation; there is a fee that may be paid to benefit of limitless time but schools or universities are not always willing to accept this.

There are for sure numberless advantages and disadvantages for teaching online but I guess the main issue is whether the teacher is ready to embrace this challenge. It's not easy and there is a constant fear that something may go wrong because electronic devices or equipment don't always function the way they are supposed to; you may never know what to expect so there is a certain level of uncertainty that adds a note of stress to the online lesson.

As Major C. H. said, "I was nervous and unsure of the challenge. While comfortable with technology, I had my fair share of PowerPoint presentations not

working or dodgy wireless in the lecture hall to know that a course constructed and delivered online would present a challenge to anyone. What if I can' manage the technology? What if the students can navigate the space better than I can? Or what if they can't figure out how to log in? The 'what ifs' are endless when you embark on designing and teaching online. (Major, 2015: 8).

Teachers should embrace this challenge with great patience; there should always be a backup plan in case something goes wrong; moreover, they should devote quite a long period of time for designing lessons; it's not easy to get accustomed to all the virtual tools and platforms; it is advisable to search for tutorials and to ask for the help of IT specialists or work colleagues in case there are situations that they cannot handle. Students may come up with solutions while attending the class. Teachers shouldn't feel ashamed for requiring a piece of advice. The current tech generation has answers to many technological problems; teachers should perceive students as collaborators who can add a positive feature to the drawing up of a virtual lesson. Being involved in this process, students feel important for bringing their contribution and may develop a higher interest for engaging in class. The barrier between teacher and students may disappear because they may sense they have a common ground, technology bringing them closer to the learning tasks. Even the most reluctant ones will react positively if asked for an opinion related to a technological issue or when posted an attractive virtual lesson.

Utilizing technology in the classroom not only captures the students' interest but also gains their respect; you as a teacher, are acknowledging their virtual world and thus validating them as independent thinkers. Students' preconceived mindset of "I can't learn a foreign language. I don't want to learn a foreign language. Who needs to learn a foreign language?' is quickly replaced with "This video is cool!", (…). Even the most reluctant student, the computer techie (…) comes around -a moment of triumph! The barrier is successfully torn down, the mindset open to learn, the path to embrace foreign language acquisition set in course." (Ameri, 2014: 205).

It is important for teachers to overcome the fear of working with technology, of being open-minded - in the sense of having the desire to evolve and accept the new technological advances – be ready to work hard and invest time and patience for creating stimulating lessons. Help may come from various sources: IT specialists, parents, students, work colleagues, other online users and the teacher should not be afraid or feel embarrassed to accept it. On the contrary, the more you look for other opinions and solutions, the better it will be. In virtual classes, the teacher will no longer be the main focus but the materials and the way he/she coordinated them to be in a logical order, to provide useful information but, at the same time, to be visually attractive and audio stimulating; the use of the computer needs to be perceived as as an extra bonus from which everybody will benefit.

In fact, digital media supports the learning process in many ways. The use of digital media can affect the quality of teaching in a positive way, as it fosters self-directed and cooperative learning and supports the development of more open forms of teaching. Consequently, lessons are less teacher-centered and involve higher levels of student activity. Learning processes can be better individualised and differentiated through digital media, not only of the various ways of working alone, but also because of adaptable and adaptive software and Internet, through self-selected materials and students choosing their own learning approaches.(…) Internet based teaching and learning can be used e.g. for documentation, presentation, practice and repetition,

finding, viewing, selecting and structuring, communication and cooperation, experimentation and simulation " (Eisenmann, 2019: 114).

Nobody denies the huge amount of possibilities that Internet access provides for educators and students, only that, the passage from classroom to online teaching has been done in just a few weeks which put the teachers in the stressful situation of having to cope with something they have rarely experimented, that of switching completely to the virtual space with no clear instructions and little IT knowledge. It is not a complete new notion to use online materials during teaching. This has been done for a long period of time; the novelty lies in transmitting knowledge in totally different ways, by using a screen, text messages, chat boxes, etc. Pedagogy is still the key factor, despite being virtually present. With some practice and dedication, the teacher can become an expert in the use of technological devices and be able to transfer knowledge in a concise and wonderful way.

Facilitation is as much art as it is science, just like classroom teaching. In fact, many good classroom teachers will quickly develop into fine online instructors. Helping students understand the course materials, drawing out their thinking with carefully constructed questions, and providing support when needed as students work to show competency with the material are all a part of the face-to-face and virtual classroom environments. The major differences between teaching in the face-to-face classroom and the virtual classroom are how messages are communicated and the need to troubleshoot technical problems ". (Lehmann, 2004: 18).

In other words, the teacher is still the most important pillar of the teaching act. It is the method of communication which changes.

Conclusions

In conclusion I don't think that teaching a foreign language should be done completely online. Classroom teaching still remains the most efficient type of learning. There is a totally different type of interaction that is created when physically attending classes. The teacher can perceive better students who cannot cope with the tasks they are supposed to do and encourage them to complete them.

Not all students want to participate in the use of online tools. There could be several reasons for this. Some (…) learners equate the use of social media and blogging with friend chat (…). On the other hand, there are some learners who simply do not have time to participate outside the classroom. This is especially true for students in Business English class (…). These clients have a busy working schedule (…). Class participation is extremely hard to maintain under such circumstances ." (Arora, Sanjay, 2016:113)

These are just a few of the impediments of virtual classes. There are also groups of students who, although don't have a job or other responsibilities, will look for excuses in order to skip classes. The classroom environment is the one which enhances face-to-face interaction, supporting the students with poor language skills to progress and overcome their fears. Debates, games and other communication tasks are easier to achieve when being in class. Students may be divided into pairs or groups and may collaborate to complete the task. It is difficult or almost impossible to use group work or pair work online. The only possibility would be to try this through the chat box but it's neither efficient nor constructive.

In the back of the screen, shy students or those with poor language skills may hide, turning off their video in order to avoid participation. In class, a teacher can deduce

from the student's body language or from the tone of the voice if he/she struggles to perform and can provide the necessary help.

Lack of the daily routine of going physically to classes may affect in time the students' weight; sitting on a chair for a long period of time as well as in front of the screen, may lead to serious health problems.

Online assessments are another issue of great importance. Unlike the traditional ones where the teacher supervises the students, in the case of online tests there is no way the teacher can control the fairness of students. There is a large amount of information on Internet that students can easily make use of to provide accurate answers and they may also appeal to the help of parents, friends, etc. Discovering whether they cheated or not during exams is not possible to happen.

Moreover, one of the biggest problems of all is the fact that not all students have the possibility to acquire a computer, laptop, tablet or modern mobile phone and benefit of Internet facilities. In such cases, a huge discrepancy appears between students with financial possibilities and those who cannot afford such devices. The teaching act becomes somehow accessible mainly for the middle or upper class people. In this case, education will no longer be available for everybody but will be restricted to a limited group of students. The basic idea is that there are positive and negative aspects of both online and classroom education and there is no precise research that one form functions better than the other. In my opinion the blended type of teaching is the most successful one. Being in class and having the possibility to use technology in order to create vivid lessons is the best solution. Students and teachers can connect to each other, socialize and enjoy a wonderful experience of learning a foreign language in a constructive and lovely way.

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