Online language teacher training – Challenges and new perspectives

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Abstract

As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, the education sector faced a major challenge, struggling to provide continuity by shifting to online teaching and learning. This study presents the process of the shift to online teaching and practice in language teacher training, working with a group of translation and interpretation students enrolled in a teacher training programme as well. With the help of an interview, we asked our students to reflect on their personal experience related to the following issues: advantages and disadvantages of online and offline language teaching; eventual changes in student autonomy; changes in the role of the teacher; future perspectives of language teaching following the shift to online education; and the difficulties they encountered in this period. We intend to use the results in designing an up-to-date curriculum for language teacher training, considering possible paradigm shifts in language teaching in the near future.

Keywords: Online, language teaching; blended learning; adaptive learning; teacher training.

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1. Introduction

What happens to education when opportunities for physical, 'personal' meetings are eliminated, teachers and students are not allowed to go to school and everybody has to teach or learn from home? This scenario was created by the COVID-19 epidemic and put the whole world in an unexpected and critically difficult situation, both economically and in terms of health and education. These new restrictions proved to test the flexibility and adaptability of the whole education system. However, it is known that in new and challenging situations more creative and innovative ideas and solutions emerge.

During the quarantine, teachers and students who had little or no experience in digital education have been forced to switch to online teaching / learning, meaning that they had to step out of their comfort zone and make considerable efforts in adapting to the new circumstances. It seems that this challenge will undoubtedly help the education system prepare for a new phase based on a more up-to-date, decentralised exchange of knowledge. There are some areas where the online systems had already been used efficiently before the pandemics, and there are teachers and students who had already been utilising the means, tools and sources offered by the digital environment, but in some areas and for many educators and learners this period meant a change of perspective, exploring the various possibilities in search for solutions.

The effects and changes that are already emerging could be analysed from several viewpoints related to the teaching and learning of any subject, but in this study, we are focusing on language teaching and learning, and within that domain language teacher training.

Public education in Romania implies compulsory physical presence in schools; therefore, teacher training has been focusing mainly on face-to-face teaching, complemented eventually with materials and tools offered by information and communications technology (ICT), but teachers and teacher trainees have not been prepared for switching from this traditional teaching scenario to fully online work. When schools had to be closed because of the COVID-9 pandemic, the need for a change in paradigm became obvious.

2. Concepts of online, blended and adaptive language teaching and learning

Concepts and practices such as online, blended and adaptive language teaching and learning are not new; they emerged, evolved and spread in parallel with the development of ICT, and their various forms have been widely used all over the world. In Romania, however, fully online teaching has never been encouraged in public education; it has only been used by some private language schools or universities offering online courses.

There is a considerable amount of literature and research focusing on the principles, issues and good practices related to these domains, and the recent situation caused by the pandemic confirmed that the already existing experience and knowledge related to adaptive, online and blended teaching and learning must be given more importance in language teacher training. Language pedagogy has always been open to changes, and nowadays, in the age of coexisting methods of post-communicative language teaching, we can say that any tool can be used and applied to promote language learning, increase motivation, interest, expand vocabulary, improve reading comprehension, listening comprehension, speaking and writing skills and mediation skills (translation and interpretation). Language teachers can apply an eclectic approach and rely on the opportunities offered by communication and information technology. Quick access to information and various possibilities for

communication provided by the Internet can be of great help in both individual, personalised learning and project-oriented group activities.

Adaptive learning can mean different things to different people; however, a broad definition of the term is offered by the Macmillan Dictionary, according to which it is 'a method of education that uses computers and data to adjust the learning experience to the individual student'[a]. In *A Short Guide to Adaptive Learning in English Language Teaching*, Kerr (2014) examines the world of language teaching through the lens of adaptive learning, approaching the topic critically. Some ELT publishers have started to invest heavily in digital courses containing adaptive learning elements, moving away slowly from the world of traditional printed textbooks. More and more online teach yourself language learning programmes and apps are being developed, which can also complement institutional language learning, such as Babbel, Duolingo and Rosetta Stone, which use adaptive learning software. But, as Kerr (2014, p. 8) points out, 'for anyone with a background in communicative language teaching, the experience with many of these programmes can be slightly surreal', and he mentions two weaknesses as explanations: 'little thought appears to have been given to the selection of items in the vocabulary syllabus' and 'the use of strange decontextualised sentences to illustrate the meaning of vocabulary items' (ibid.). In spite of such features, these programmes are extremely popular. *Gamification* may be one of the reasons of their popularity, meaning that users are awarded points, badges and can reach different levels just like in computer games. This makes learners feel more motivated, because the work seems to be more fun. However, the generated motivation is extrinsic, and it fades away as soon as the users figure out how to receive extra points and get bored.

Kerr (2014, p.13) also describes the growing popularity of online learning platforms, also known as virtual learning environments or learning management systems (LMSs), such as Moodle. 'These platforms allow course content – lectures, videos, activities etc. – to be stored and delivered, and they allow institution to modify courses to fit their needs. In addition, they usually have inbuilt mechanisms for assessment, tracking of learners, course administration, social networking and other communication (email, chat, blogs etc.). While these platforms can be used for courses that are delivered exclusively online, more commonly they are used to manage blended-learning courses'.

Language teachers have to be aware of the fact that technology is radically transforming education, and they have to be familiar and up to date with the changes, otherwise one day they may find themselves 'out of work, or in a very different kind of job. The claims for adaptive language learning need to be considered in the bright light of particular, local context' (Kerr 2014, p. 26)

Hockly (2015) reviews and explores the main issues, trends and research related to *online learning*, and lists the variety of terms referring to the phenomenon, often used interchangeably, such as 'distance learning', 'E-learning', 'hybrid' or 'mixed' learning', 'blended learning' and 'web-enhanced learning', and notes that this abundance of terminology may cause some overlap and confusion in their use. In her view, it is important to distinguish two main categories: blended teaching and learning, which is a combination of face-to-face and online learning, and fully online teaching and learning through the Internet, which includes no face-to face interactions.

Regarding *fully online, distant learning*, White (2006, p. 258) identified some important pedagogical research areas, such as course development, course evaluation, teaching roles, learner support, choices and challenges in technology use, learner contribution 'exploring what learners bring to the process and how those changes as their experience develops within the new learning environment', and perspectives for future research. Her article was published 14 years ago, but the discussed issues are still relevant today. Based on White's research, Lamy (2014) identified other research areas related

to online learning, such as the effect of multimodality (various meaning-making modes involving visual, audio, textual or linguistic means in digital communication), knowing more about learners (considering their heterogeneity, diversity, various needs and preferences) and online teacher training. Further developing her research agenda related to distance learning of foreign languages, White (2014, p. 538) proposed that more focus should be placed on 'on theory, pedagogy, technology use, learner contributions, innovation and less commonly taught languages. Within those broad areas, the scope of proposed research tasks includes the distinctive features and practices of distance language teaching, task design for synchronous settings, mentoring, multimodal learning environments, the transfer of speaking skills, and learners' affective experiences'.

According to Whittaker (2013), *blended learning* originated in the domain of corporate training, then it was implemented in higher education, and finally it was employed in language teaching as well. Whittaker (p. 11) believes that 'the adoption of the term symbolises a change in what is being blended nowadays, as it signifies the inclusion of computer technology providing online or offline activities and materials in the mix, rather than implying this is a wholly new approach to teaching and learning', and according to her definition 'in ELT "blended learning" is the term most commonly used to refer to any combination of face-to-face teaching with computer technology (online and offline activities/materials)' (p. 12). To this Hockly (2018, p. 97) adds that, 'the use of 'computer technology' as part of blended learning is usually understood to take place in another location to the face-to-face (f2f) teaching, and most likely in the learners' own time'. She also points out that in North America, in primary and secondary schools blended learning can refer to 'learners working individually with educational software on computers in the school building, either in the classroom itself, or in a separate computer lab' (ibid.). Hockly (2018, p. 98) also summarises the main drivers of the growing popularity of blended learning in language teaching, which are the following: financial considerations (low costs); affordable and easily accessible digital tools; limited space and large number of learners in the face-to face classrooms; limited exposure to the target language in timetabled classes; political instability in certain countries impeding learners from physically attending classes; and a pedagogical 'best of both worlds' view implying a balanced use of face-to-face and online teaching and learning, based on the fact that both approaches can offer some undeniable benefits and advantages.

Course design for effective blended learning and finding the optimal balance between face-to-face and computer-based work may depend on various factors, such as the context in which the course will take place, the available technology and the needs of the learners. In an online language learning research network webinar, Thornbury (2016) presented 12 main criteria based on his reading of SLA literature (also described in his article 'Educational Technology: Assessing Its Fitness For Purpose' published in 2016), which he felt should be taken into account in terms of assessing the fitness for purpose of any means or tools of educational technology: *adaptivity, complexity, input, output, noticing, scaffolding, feedback, interaction, automaticity, the use of chunks and formulaic language, personalisation* and *flow*. Hockly (2018, p. 100) proposes the following list of areas that should be taken into consideration when designing blended learning courses:

- '*Interaction*: include provision for online interaction with other learners, the teacher, and possibly with individuals in the wider world.

- *SLA research*: the blend should reflect the 12 SLA principles described by Thornbury (…).

- *Task design and tools*: task design and the choice of technology tool(s) need to match.

- *Materials*: rather than only providing content/input, technology-based tasks and materials can also facilitate process (...).

- *Integration*: there needs to be a clear link and integration between f2f and technology-driven components of the course, with each complementing, supporting and developing the other.

- *Evaluation*: technology-based work (including speaking and/or written work) needs to be integrated into overall learner evaluation.

- *Context*: the blended learning design must take into account the local context, including the needs, skills, expectations, and beliefs of learners and teachers.

- *Teacher training*: training is key for the successful implementation of a blended approach, to ensure that teachers understand the underlying principles, and are able to implement the blend effectively.

- *Learner training*: if learners find working autonomously a challenge, the blend may require some initial learner training'.

Research related to the use of *artificial intelligence* (AI) in language teaching is also expanding (Gawate, 2019; Longwell, 2018; Wang 2019). AI is based on collecting and using data, and it is considered 'a booming technological domain capable of altering every aspect of our social interactions. In education, AI has begun producing new teaching and learning solutions that are now undergoing testing in different contexts' (UNESCO, 2019). It can also be used in language teaching in order to enhance students' learning experience. Language learning platforms powered by AI allow learners to work at their individual speed, focusing on issues they have more difficulties with, offering them topics they are interested in, engaging them with tasks they are good at and also taking into account their cultural background. The collected data allow teachers to understand their students better and foresee their future performance.

Future language teachers will have to be aware not only of the possibilities, advantages and benefits, but also disadvantages and limitations of the above-mentioned tools, concepts and practices, and they will need to be up to date with new forms of teaching and learning. It can also be useful for them to know how to utilise, implement and eventually design and develop online or blended courses if or when it is necessary.

3. Results and discussion of the interview with teacher trainees related to their experience in online teaching practice

Our target group consists of 20 translation and interpretation students, who are also enrolled in language teacher training. The Teacher Training Institute of Sapientia University undertakes psychopedagogical training for students who, in addition to obtaining a qualification appropriate to their university degree, also want to acquire the skills and didactic competences necessary to practice teaching. The certificate entitling students to work as teachers can be obtained in parallel with their BA degree, by completing the level 1 psychopedagogical module. During their 3-year training, language teacher trainees study the following subjects: Basics of pedagogy; Curriculum theory and methodology; Theory and methodology of training; Theory and methodology of evaluation; Class management; Language teaching methodology; Computer-aided education; and Teaching practice in compulsory public education.

In the theoretical part of their Language Teaching Methodology course, they study the various approaches, methods and techniques developed and used along the history of language teaching, such as the grammar translation method; direct method; reading approach; audiolingual and audio-visual methods; community language learning; suggestopedia; the natural approach; total physical response; presentation, practice and production; and communicative and post-communicative language teaching. They also learn about the principles and techniques related to teaching pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and developing the four basic skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. The importance and role of culture in language teaching, evaluation, materials development and computer-assisted language learning are also part of the curriculum. In the seminars – the practical part – of the Language Teaching Methodology course, they have the possibility to practice face-to-face teaching with their colleagues as role-play activities. Each of them has to prepare a lesson plan and teach a class based on it to the group, and group members are asked to behave as children of the age and grade for whom the lesson was designed. This course is followed by the teaching practice which takes place in their final year of studies. In the first term, they visit and observe the classes of experienced teachers in schools, and in the second term, they practice teaching under the guidance and mentoring of their teacher trainer and the school teacher whose classes they have to teach.

However, in the spring of 2020, they did not have the possibility to practice teaching face to face, because the schools were closed as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, and a shift to online teaching took place. Therefore, they had to perform their practice online, which was a considerable challenge, given the fact that they had not been prepared for this scenario. They proved to be very flexible and open to this change, managed to prepare appropriately for their classes and taught online successfully.

Our goal has been to examine how online education affected language teacher training, using our focus group and interview-based qualitative research method for data collection. We asked our students to reflect on their personal experience related to language teaching and learning, considering the following issues: advantages and disadvantages of online and offline language teaching; changes in student autonomy; eventual changes in the role of the teacher; language teaching following the shift to online education; difficulties they encountered in this period; new things they learned in the process; their previous experience in using digital communication tools, such as e-learning platforms and digital LMSs in language learning; new tools and possibilities they discovered during their online teaching practice and would use as language teachers in the future.

The first question referred to the advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face versus online language teaching within a comparative perspective. Based on the answers, face-to-face teaching compared to online teaching has the following advantages: stronger, direct personal and interpersonal connections; the teacher sees better the students and realises if they do not follow the explanation or do not understand something; both the students and the teacher can move around in the classroom if necessary, and therefore explanation, evaluation and practice are easier; there is more interactivity, teamwork, directness and spontaneity; togetherness, gestures, physical movement and action make learning and memorisation easier and more fun; students can be more relaxed and more 'themselves' than in front of a computer. Students also mentioned some disadvantages of face-to-face teaching compared to online work, such as it is more difficult to play videos, sound files, start online games in class because in some schools there is no Internet, or the computers are old and useless, or the speakers are broken; students are often late for class, they have to get up earlier, travel long distances in rush hours when the traffic is slow and, therefore, they are more tired; if students are together in

the classroom they tend to pay less attention to the teacher and more attention to each other, they chat, play and disturb their colleagues, thus forcing the teacher to interrupt the ongoing explanations and activities and deal with conflicts instead or maintain discipline in the class.

According to our students, the advantages of online teaching and learning compared to face-to-face work may be the following: student can log in conveniently, anytime, from anywhere; they do not depend on unreliable means of public transport; however, the respondents also specify that online education is more acceptable in higher education, universities, especially for theoretical subjects which require less practice or practice is done on computers; from a teacher's perspective, it might be an advantage to be able to switch topics with one click, to make the lesson more colourful; students may feel safer, more relaxed and comfortable at home than at school; it is easier to access necessary materials and various online sources. One of the respondents pointed out that as a result of the shift to online teaching 'as future teachers, we could see how to deal with unexpected situations like teaching during pandemics. We already have some experience in learning and teaching, and if we build on that, one day we can be good teachers. There were some teachers who had not used online interfaces before at all and now they were forced to use them. Lifelong learning and the ability to adapt to new situations is essential for a teacher. I think it is important that there should be no big difference between the teacher and the student in the sense that the teacher should also be familiar with the interfaces that students like to use, and use them for educational purposes as well'.

The respondents described the following disadvantages of online teaching and learning compared to face-to-face work: some learners or even the teacher may encounter technical difficulties: weak on no internet connection, lack of up-to-date, appropriate devices – computers or tablets – for online communication or the lack of knowledge and experience regarding their utilisation; it is unpleasant to sit in front of a computer, laptop or tablet for hours; difficulties in communication due to the lack of physical and social interaction; invisible gestures, facial expressions and movements; breaks cannot be spent together, playing, running around or simply chatting and moving outside; there are less possibilities for learners to help each other, discussing, explaining what some of them do not understand; less occasions for teamwork, learners may feel lonely and isolated; certain things are better understood, language is more easily memorised if students can touch, hold, move certain objects or role-play various scenarios, such as shopping, going on trips, cooking, cleaning and rearranging objects in a room; learning by doing and learning by playing are more restricted in the online space; it is more difficult for the teacher to supervise the class and make sure that everybody is paying attention to the lesson and not doing something completely different.

Eventual changes in student autonomy resulting from the shift to online teaching and learning are the topic of the next question. Most respondents claimed that students became more self-sufficient in the period of online education. They learned to solve more problems on their own and they were able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Internet. Language learning requires a considerable amount of self-study, as it is not possible to learn a language only during school hours. Autonomy also resulted from the fact that learners could not interact as spontaneously and frequently as they would have in face-to-face classes, and because of this they turned instead to online sources, or tried to figure out certain problems on their own. However, other respondents claim that learners who used to focus and solve the tasks in the face-to-face classroom, solved them online as well, and the others, who had not taken learning seriously in the classroom and had neglected their tasks, have not changed their attitude in the online period either.

Respondents observed both positive and negative changes in the role of the teacher in online teaching. Some of the students highlighted that the teacher works more like a source of information, a coordinator, 'delivering' the new material to the learners, but his or her role as an educator and group facilitator is diminished. As one of the respondents described it, the teacher's hands are tied; he or she cannot pay so much attention to the students individually, simply explains the material of the lesson and then gives instructions to solve the tasks, but is unable to follow the progress of the task's solution as he or she could in face-to-face teaching. A few respondents drew attention to the technical difficulties faced by teachers and students alike. Solving technical problems demands and consumes significant amounts of time and energy, often forcing the teachers to give IT support instead of teaching their subjects. Other respondents observed more positive changes, in some cases the opposite of the previously mentioned ones, such as teachers becoming more efficient in using online interfaces and resources; the relationship between teachers and students became more relaxed and informal, teachers mentoring and guiding students depending on their individual problems and needs; less time is consumed by maintaining discipline and through the online meetings teachers hold the class together, reminding them that in spite of the physical distance they are still the members of the same community. Also, teachers developed a stronger trust in their students, relying on their conscience and sense of responsibility to follow the explanations and instructions. This was essential in the circumstances when capturing students' attention and maintaining their concentration proved to be more difficult sitting in front of a computer.

The next question focuses on teacher trainees' views on eventual changes in future language teaching as a result of the online teaching experience (such as the use of more ICT). Most of them believe that digital devices will be playing an increasingly important role in language teaching and they will also influence the change of teaching techniques and methods. Teachers will also strive to create an offline classroom environment online: it will move in the direction of how to recreate the face-to-face classroom environment as much as possible online and how to adapt good practices of the face-to-face teaching methods. Digital tools are useful and they are becoming increasingly popular, but they cannot replace the teacher. Various electronic gadgets can help with language learning because the learners like to use them, and there are a growing number of applications and programmes developed for language learning purposes, but teacher guidance and mentoring are not replaceable. ICT has to be accepted and used as an efficient additional tool in the teaching–learning process.

Teacher trainees were also asked to reflect on what would be preserved of the traditional language teaching techniques and procedures in the future. They mentioned the following: live, face-to-face communication, teamwork, pair work, role-plays, simulations, physical activity, 'learning by doing', workshops and classwork based on interactivity. Most of the respondents agreed that teachers may have learned a lot about ITC tools in this period, but online work can be no match for personal presence in the classroom. Some respondents believe that after the pandemics teachers will return to the traditional routine and soon forget all the new things they have learned in this period.

Another question referred to the eventual difficulties they encountered during their online teaching practice. They described the following issues: they did not know the children and they could not see them if they did not have a camera, and in the Zoom programme used by the school where they practiced names were not always visible on the screen, which made communication very difficult. This could have been solved very easily in face-to-face teaching with the help of name cards. Teacher trainees could not see the facial expression of the children, so they had no immediate feedback or reaction and they did not know whether the task was interesting, boring, easy or difficult. Because of these circumstances, there were moments when they felt insecure or frustrated. However, some of

the students felt comfortable with the new situation and claimed that they had no difficulties resulting from online work.

We also asked if they learned anything new as a result of the online practice that they would like to use in their future (online or face to face) teaching career. Three respondents answered that they did not learn anything new, but all the others agreed that they had the possibility to discover and learn to use new resources and tools, which they also intend to use as teachers (such as online books, digital versions of textbooks, online dictionaries, interactive language learning sites, Google Classroom, YouTube and TED or TED-Ed videos). They had learned about the possibilities of using audiovisual aids and ICT tools in language teaching, and as students they had been using LMSs, (e.g., Moodle), but interfaces such as Google Classroom and Zoom were new for them.

For planning their online classes, they used mainly online sources, such as the digital, interactive versions of the textbooks (e.g., https://manualedigitaleart.ro/biblioteca/art5-en-intensiv), YouTube, TED or TED-Ed videos, sites for creating quizzes, crosswords, word plays and other tasks (they mentioned websites such as https://wordwall.net/hu, http://www.eslgamesworld.com/members/games/, https://worksheets.theteacherscorner.net/make-your-own/crossword/).

Another question referred to their experience related to adaptive language learning platforms (e.g., Duolingo and Rosetta Stone). The respondents were asked to express their opinions whether these platforms may replace or complement language learning with the help and guidance of a teacher. All of them have used such platforms for second or foreign language acquisition, and they agree that these can be very useful. However, based on their personal experience they believe that explanations and practice under the guidance of a teacher, group activities and interaction with other learners make the language learning process more efficient and more fun than learning alone in front of a computer. But they would definitely recommend for their students to complement their schoolwork with individual learning using such platforms.

Finally, we asked them what knowledge, information or skills development would have been useful for them in their online teaching practice that they were not able to acquire along their studies. According to the answers, the following should be included in the material of the Methodology course: managing interfaces that can be used to hold online classes (such as Google Classroom); how to organise group or pair work in these online classrooms; and how to reorganise and adapt some tasks for online class work. Students had less difficulties with reading and listening comprehension tasks, even conversations worked well if students were interested in the topic and motivated to talk, but in case of tasks that would develop writing skills (compositions or essays), it was more difficult to follow and check what the children were doing, and it often happened that instead of independent, creative writing they handed in texts copied from the internet. Problem-solving in online classrooms also proved to be quite challenging, and teacher trainees were not prepared to deal with certain situations, such as maintaining discipline and attention, solving technical problems or explaining certain issues without being physically present.

4. Conclusion

In this study, we proposed to present the effects of the process of a sudden shift to online teaching and practice in language teacher training as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. The unexpected and sudden shift to online teaching and our students' feedback related to their teaching practice in this period shed light on several new needs and aspects that have to be addressed in the training process

of future language teachers. Their reflections showed that they discovered some advantages and disadvantages of both online and offline language teaching; they observed changes in student autonomy and certain changes in the role of the teacher; most of them believe that language teaching following the shift to online education will utilise more tools and means offered by digital technology; they encountered several difficulties in this period, but they learned new things in the process of solving these problems which they would continue using as language teachers in the future; their previous experience in using digital communication tools, e-learning platforms and digital LMSs did not prove adequate in the new circumstances.

This study proved that the concept of training teachers only for face-to-face teaching (eventually complemented by the use of some ICT tools) has to be abandoned, and a more flexible approach is needed, with a stronger emphasis on the seemingly endless and continuously developing possibilities offered by familiarity with the experience and good practices accumulated in the domains of online, blended and adaptive learning and teaching, and the utilisation of AI in language learning. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for teachers who are proficient in digital technologies and use them confidently in order to continue effective educational activities and maintain student activity and motivation. The new type of learning environment and the new technology require new methods and approaches from teachers, and teacher training institutes have to prepare them for these new challenges.

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