

DIGITAL TOOLS AND ONLINE LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASS

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic has forced all of us to rethink and restructure our professional lives in order to cope with the challenges dictated by the social distancing measures implemented by most European governments. In 2020 numerous higher education institutions shifted to exclusive online classes in an attempt to curb the spread of coronavirus infections. In this paper I try to present the digital tools and strategies that English language teachers can use when teaching online. I also focus on the difficulties that they may face when making this sudden shift and I end with some recommendations to those undertaking this task of teaching online. The conclusion is that, with all its pros and cons, online education is an expression of progress and of the inevitable changes that characterize our contemporary era. I believe that only with the return to in-person classes will teachers be able to assess accurately the benefits and drawbacks of online education. Consequently, they will be able to either retain or eliminate features of this novel process.

Keywords: education, online, teaching, digital, TEFL.

1. Introduction

The past year brought about new realities and changes that many of us would have never imagined a while back. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced all of us to rethink and restructure our professional lives in order to cope with the challenges dictated by the social distancing measures implemented by most European governments. Thus, the year 2020 saw more and more higher education institutions shift to exclusive online classes in an attempt to curb the spread of coronavirus infections. Educational practitioners were instructed to move their entire activity online. For many, this change has been very sudden and therefore difficult to put into practice.

However, online education is not a new concept. In fact, it has been with us for many years before and there have been voices advocating a shift to online teaching for a number of reasons, chief among which easier access and flexibility. It is the speed with which educators have been forced by external circumstances to make this move that has created difficulties.

My main concern is teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and these will be the focus of the current study. In this paper I present the tools that educators can use in the process of teaching online, the difficulties that they may encounter when implementing these novel practices and some recommendations that I consider useful for both professionals in the field of TEFL and educators in general.

2. Digital Tools

The online environment has always been linked to learning and the need to know more. Nowadays it is definitely the fastest way to access new information. However, language learning is a long time process with specific skills and knowledge, building up gradually over a period of time. That is why, teachers of English need to think about planning, organizing and properly structuring their online classes.

Educators who have shifted to teaching online have multiple options in terms of digital tools available and a plethora of ways in which they can use these tools. There is not just one way of teaching online and each one must adapt to the resources available to students and teachers alike. Teachers are not new to teaching, they are just new to teaching online and well-trained teachers should have the ability to use the already acquired skills in the online environment just as in the in-person classes. Language teachers have already developed strategies for encouraging, motivating students and making them exercise their language skills in the learning process and they should find the ability to transfer everything they know to the online environment.

In order to be successful in their enterprise, teachers should make sure that they have chosen the right technology. This has been a difficult task for many, given the fact that the decision to move online was made very quickly by governments everywhere leaving no or little time for proper preparation. It is always recommendable to talk to a professional regarding what technology would be suitable for delivering classes.

In the following lines I will be listing and describing the most important digital tools available on the market nowadays.

Video-conferencing systems

These include *Skype*, *Zoom*, *WebRoom.net*, *BigBlueButton* and *Adobe Connect*. The above mentioned platforms are in fact virtual classrooms and they have been specifically designed for teaching and learning. Teachers and students can hear and see each other when using these platforms. The direct interaction enables teachers and students to get as real a class as possible. There are many facilities that these platforms offer such as: whiteboard, shared screen/ presentation space, shared note, etc. They all allow the teacher to upload materials that the students can see in real time during the lesson.

Personally, I would say that the tool that I have found most useful was the text chat. Students feel more confident to ask questions and provide answers by writing on the text chat than by using their microphones. At certain times, the text chat proved to be the most reliable tool because there have been a number of occasions when sound and audio failed to work properly. I have used the text chat in order to elicit various answers from students (translations, examples, paraphrasing, rephrasing, etc), to provide short examples and explanations and to pass links to online resources that I recommended to them.

Live streaming can also be an alternative which enables educators to teach live via video and interaction can take place in the comments section. *Facebook*, *You Tube* and *WhatsApp* offer live streaming options.

Messaging Apps

Since I have just mentioned *WhatsApp*, I should say that this is one of the most frequently used messaging apps. Almost everyone who owns a smart phone has installed *WhatsApp* on it. Communication between students and teachers is very important and *WhatsApp* delivers what it promises to – reliability, speed and numerous features to suit the needs of a variety of users. In addition to one-to-one communication, groups can be created for different classes where text messages, multimedia, links and tasks can be shared.

Viber, Line, Facebook Messenger, Skype, GroupMe, Telegram Messenger (especially for Android and iPhone), *ChatOn* (in-built in many Samsung devices) and *Kik Messenger* constitute viable, though less popular alternatives to *WhatsApp*.

Learning platforms

Undoubtedly the most popular learning platform is *Google Classroom* though *Edmodo* is also gaining worldwide recognition and many teachers have come to use and appreciate it.

Among the many advantages that *Google Classroom* offers I believe the following are worth mentioning:

- easy access (it is delivered through the Chrome browser which makes it accessible from all computers, mobile phones and tablets);
- teachers can create assignments and share them with the whole class;
- learners can submit assignments easily while teachers can check them with similar ease;
- teachers can give feedback to their students and, in turn, students can provide feedback to teachers.

One of the downsides of *Google Classroom*, and perhaps one of the most important reasons that prevent it from replacing a *Learning Management System (LMS)*, is that it does not offer the possibility of creating quizzes and tests for learners.

Courses can also be created by using a *Facebook Group*, especially for teenagers and adult learners.

For creating quizzes and games *Kahoot* and *Quizlet* are good options, too.

Digital planners

These virtual organizers are great because they can help students and teachers structure their work, manage their time and become more productive and effective. *Google Calendar* is one of the most popular and it can be used to set assignments, deadlines, to send alerts when live classes are due to start or when assignments are supposed to be submitted. These tools can bring organization and structure into the lives of both teachers and students.

Amethyst & Garnet Ultimate Student Planner includes daily, weekly, monthly and even yearly pages for planning and goal setting. It also boasts grade and homework trackers, essay planners and class lists.

Milanote can also be taken into consideration as it provides to-do lists, digital sticky notes and note-taking - all organized into visual boards.

Digital Portfolios

A digital portfolio is a computer-based collection of student performance over a period of time. One can track and assess student progress over time. When used as a student assessment tool, digital portfolios should demonstrate that

“the student is involved in meaningful performance tasks; there are clear standards and criteria for excellence; there is an emphasis on meta-cognition and self-evaluation; the student produces quality products and performances; there is a positive interaction between assessor and assessee.” (Burke, 41)

Portfolios should include the very best of students' achievements in terms of reaching goals and meeting academic standards. Personal reflections on each item are recommended in order to explain why those particular pieces have been included in the portfolio. Portfolios help teachers assess students more accurately, they provide valuable feedback, they enhance communication between students and teachers and help educators identify problematic areas. Not all of them are very easy to use and some require considerable time and effort but they do improve overall assessment. If a free version of these is not to be found, then a *DropBox* folder or a *GoogleDrive* folder might be excellent alternatives where work can be stored and shared.

3. Potential difficulties encountered by educators

Moving to teaching online is not an easy task especially when the change is supposed to take place over a short period of time.

a) Choosing the right digital tools

As I have previously mentioned, there is a wide range of digital tools available from which educators can choose. This can prove quite a challenge. That is why it is advisable that teachers decide very clearly what their expectations are and what they want to achieve. Then, they can set about analyzing the rich offer of digital tools and select the ones that they consider most appropriate.

Student accessibility should be taken into account too, when making this choice. Educators should always think carefully about issues such as Internet access, devices owned and used by students, etc. Some students may need to share the computer with other members of the family or they may only have access to a mobile phone, which makes things more complicated.

b) Unprepared students

One common mistake that teachers make nowadays is to assume that their students are digitally literate just because they were born into the world in this time and age and because they have been surrounded by technology since they were born. But this is not always true. They may be good at using video games and social media but

they may lack the basics in formatting documents or designing *PowerPoint* presentations.

c) Security challenges

When going online both students and teachers may fall prey to hacking, data theft or cyber-bullying. Special attention should be paid so that students should not be exposed to potential threats to their security and safety. An institutional *Learning Management System (LMS)* can provide a safer environment where all interaction is recorded. The above mentioned external applications are useful and enriching but one must make sure that they are safe.

It is a good idea for educators to set out what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the online environment in order to avoid potential uncomfortable situations.

d) Time management

The movement to teaching online challenges education professionals because it makes it more difficult to keep their life in compartments and efficiently separate between work life and domestic life. I have discovered that it takes more self-discipline and organizing than in-person classes. With online teaching, work time and personal time become one not just because of the common space in which both work and private life take place but also because students, and sometimes even institutions, expect educators to be available at all times.

e) English language use

Last but not least, for the EFL teachers there is an additional challenge in teaching online and that is the permanent use of the foreign language, which may create difficulties especially for students with a lower level of English. Visuals, support materials and setting out tasks clearly are always helpful in such circumstances.

4. Recommendations to ELT practitioners teaching online

a) Provide student training

Many teachers have the tendency to assume that their students, as "*Digital Natives*", are able to use easily whatever digital tools they encounter. This is far from being accurate and many a time it has been students not teachers who have been insufficiently prepared for the online environment. Students are conversant with the apps and platforms that they use on a daily basis but when it comes to online education they need training, too.

Therefore, it would be really useful to prepare students for learning online and provide them with a range of learner training materials. These could be either videos or written guidelines and sets of instructions. Everything should be kept to a minimum because a long set of instructions would deter students from reading them carefully.

b) Find a suitable space

When teaching online many educators work from home so it becomes very important that they manage to separate between the private and the professional space. A suitable isolated, quiet and well lit space is very important. Lighting is essential when you teach with a camera on. The light source is best placed behind the computer screen and natural light is always better than light coming from other sources.

c) Learn how to use the camera

With the camera on, facial expressions and hand gestures become an essential part of the communication process. Teachers should be aware of how much space is covered by the camera and make sure that students can see their every move if they plan to use make gestures relevant to the teaching process. Also, for a better image the camera should be positioned slightly above the eye level. Eye contact with students is improved in this way. There are online learning platforms that make the image of the person speaking bigger. It is up to the teacher to judge these things and make the right decision.

d) Manage sound

However, due to technical problems and the risk of overcrowding servers, many online classes have taken place without the camera on. At least this is what has happened so far in my experience. In this latter case, sound is vital and it becomes even more important than when the camera is on since now it is the only means of relating to your students. Teacher should try to find a very quiet space, free from background noise that might make it hard for students to understand. Headphones or earphones are recommended as they eliminate the possibility of causing echo and make the quality of sound better. With many classes a day, though, this may turn out to be problematic due to radiations. The microphone is also very important. Students and teachers should make sure that it does not pick up background noise. It is a good idea for teachers to record themselves first so that they check out the range and pitch of their voice. Also, especially in a foreign language class where the quality of sound is vital, it is worth spending a few moments at the beginning of each class to try and get the right sound quality and levels. Pronunciation is of vital importance in a foreign language class. Consequently, low-quality sound would make foreign language classes ineffective and unprofessional and it would make students consider them a total waste of time.

For me personally, working mostly with the camera off, I found myself matching voices to names and instantly recognizing every voice tone of students who actively participated in my classes. There has been. I must admit a huge discrepancy in this respect between students who frequently responded to my requests solving tasks orally so that they could be heard by everyone and students who only participated in the class as names on a list of users. I am aware of the fact that this difference exists in face-to-face classes too but at least there you can make sure as a teacher that students pay attention to class discussions whereas here the teacher has very little or no control whatsoever over that. A solution would be for the teacher to engage students in the online lesson by calling their names and requesting them to solve various tasks despite their unwillingness to do so. Even so, sometimes students may refuse to speak under the pretence that technical problems such as sound and connectivity have occurred.

e) Cooperate with the IT department

This brings us to getting the right technological support. Teachers need to communicate efficiently with the IT specialists in their organisation and make sure that both they and their students have got the proper training in terms of using technological resources. Inevitably, there will be situations when problems occur but it is important to

maintain your calm and ensure that everyone knows what steps to take in such circumstances.

f) Get feedback and teach interactively

Educators have less control over students in an online environment while the students' attention span is reduced under these circumstances. As a result, in foreign language classes it is good to promote interaction and ask for feedback from students at all times. Immediately after presenting a new theoretical issue, ask students to exemplify their proper understanding of it by requiring them to solve tasks focusing on those particular aspects. It would also be good to teach shorter classes, especially lectures, because students and teachers alike find it more difficult to concentrate in an online environment. Breaks are also a must since they have the potential to restore students' attention.

5. Conclusions

The Codiv-19 pandemic has forced many of us to re-think and reorganize our existence. Our whole lives have been disrupted by new rules and regulations imposed very suddenly upon us. The education system has been greatly affected by all of these new measures in place while educators and students alike have had to face the transition from in-person to online classes.

Generally speaking, online education is an expression of progress and of the inevitable changes that characterize our contemporary era. It has, of course its upsides and downsides but overall it should be regarded as a career development opportunity. Online teaching is still very new and no clear cut rules have been established yet with respect to it. However, there are a lot of materials, guidelines and support available online. It is best for teachers to do their research, set up practice sessions and get to know the resources they have before starting the teaching process proper. As it is the case with all new things, educators might feel apprehensive and hesitant at first but in time and with practice they will become more comfortable and more confident about this process.

We can all hope that in the not too distant future there will be a return to some kind of normalcy. Only then will teachers be able to assess accurately the benefits and drawbacks of online education. It may very well be that, some teachers will discover that they can use technology in more ways than before and they may wish to continue the implementation of certain digital tools in order to improve the education process.

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