



Reflection of Distance Language Teaching Experience During the Quarantine

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Abstract

Online, Distance, Remote, Virtual or Blended Learning (with their similarities and differences, as these terms are by no means interchangeable) have been fixtures in scholarly and pedagogical discourses in recent years. However, in the spring of 2020, in the advent of the pandemic, most European teachers and students faced the necessity of using new technologies for learning, as well as for language learning. They had to shift to the online and distance methods almost overnight. Abrupt and rapid changes in the teaching-learning procedures, coupled with everyday routines, did not leave much time to process the needs of both students and faculty. Nevertheless, they revealed existing inconsistencies, problems and hinted at further necessary transformations – at times opposite to what was discussed and believed before the pandemic. This paper is a practice-based self-study aimed at outlining contentious issues in the implementation of online learning. While we focus on the Russian Language classes, we contextualize our own teaching experience during the COVID-19 quarantine with the already emerging broader scholarly discussion on the learning-teaching experiences during the pandemic in forms of testimonies, webinars, online discussions and social media support, resource groups and institutional recommendations.

Keywords: *Teacher's Self-Reflection, Distance Learning, Blended Learning, Russian Language Learning and Teaching, ICT in Language Learning, COVID-19.*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a long list of changes at all levels of modern society, including education ([1], [2], [3], [4] and others). A big number of European schools and teachers have to shift the education process into the virtual space rapidly. As far as language learning is concerned, discussions about online, distance, remote, virtual or blended learning, including their definitions was extensively discussed, analyzed and used by language teachers for quite a long time. The researches and concepts introduced at different publications and thematic academic meetings, including the Innovation in Language Learning (former ICT in Language Learning) Conferences (www.conference.pixel-online.net), show different resolutions for the distance language learning and teaching. Nevertheless, in spring 2020, teachers and students faced the new reality of emergency compulsory teaching and learning at a distance. In this paper, we present our reflection of experience of teaching Russian Language courses for adult students during spring and autumn 2020 in a Czech public university.

General reflection on the experience

The following circumstances summarize our reflection of teaching and learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic based on our experience of teaching, emerging publications and debates [4]:

- The move to the distance teaching and learning was rapid and sudden and therefore unprepared: most often than not, the in situ teaching process was with minor adaptations reproduced online. Even though it has been over eight months now since the confinement was proclaimed globally, a profound revision of the experience is still ahead of us to make a prognosis for the future of education. What is certain is that it has to be reconsidered.
- The situation was changing everyday creating additional anxieties and uncertainties to both students and teachers;
- Not only teachers were unready for the new technological challenges, many students also had to learn almost overnight to use online resources. Not everybody had the appropriate equipment and internet connection. Not every household had a sufficient amount of the pieces of equipment. Abrupt transition online nearly simultaneously of the schools of different levels all over the world, often on the same platforms created significant pressure on the platforms;



- The universities and schools increased pressure on the teachers: teaching routine was complimented with rewriting lesson plans, additional meetings to control the process, in some cases with obligation or need to take the courses on online, with extra-hours to adapt the needs of students. In sum, universities and schools in many cases put extra duties on teachers, rather quantitative than qualitative [5];
- Borders between private and public space have been blurred [6], so were the borders between the intellectual property of teachers ;
- The confinement concerned not only schools but at different moments the entire population, personal (e.g. family relations, parenting, care for family members) became a more obvious factor of work-related efficiency ([5], p.13).

Now to a more case specific circumstances:

- The Russian courses at the university in question have never been taught online before;
- Most students of the courses in question had no or a basic level in Russian and required teacher's support;
- The teacher and some students had experience with technologies that can be applied for distance learning [7], [8];
- A technical support was provided for both students and department members, as well methodological help;
- The students' contact with the Russian language is usually limited by the classroom and learning tasks.

The list is not exhaustive but demonstrates the challenges the education faces with the pandemic: it requires different tactics, new skills beyond mere knowledge of the computer programs. It challenged the linearity of the teaching-learning process.

Findings

According to the survey made by Kalibro Project in April 2020, 86,7% of the participating Czech school teachers continued using printed textbooks and workbooks or their scanned copies (66%) in their distance classes. 90,5% of the respondents preferred emails and phone calls (49,5%) for communication with their students [9]. That reveals the teachers continued to employ the tools that they used before the lockdown. Some surveys [5, 9] confirm that teachers combined different tools and sources.

Similar strategies were chosen for the Russian Language courses discussed in this paper. Printed materials or their digitized forms were used as basic teaching materials, they were complemented with online teaching materials, mobile and web applications; face-to-face classes were replaced with regular video calls using different platforms and an online digital learning management system. This model was chosen as an urgent substitute of the common to the students face-to-face education, while the adaptation of the courses, tasks, instructions to new online reality was time consuming. Some researchers mentioned, "In contrast to experiences that are planned from the beginning and designed to be online, emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances" [2].

The offer and quality of the free online materials and sources that can be applied for distance Russian Language learning can be qualified as good, but the offer of such sources designed for Czech audience has to be expanded. The lockdown stimulated Czech publishers to work in this direction.

The new form of learning demanded from the students self-learning, and as consequence discipline, time-management and responsibility. The possibility to organize their personal learning process according to their needs was estimated positively by some students who participated in the survey conducted for this study. However, some students mentioned the lack of conversation and instant feedback provided by face-to-face learning. From the teacher's point of view, the distance did not let us monitor and support the education process, give opportune feedback, efficiently discover and correct mistakes and assess the students.

Moreover, students with the appropriate for the course language level had less learning problems, and did the course well. On the other hand, they might have better results at face-to-face learning or with a well-designed distance course. Students with lower language level had more learning difficulties.

While ICT facilitates teaching in the new conditions, it requires learning new skills and therefore time. Connection and technical problems, inability to use the technologies properly impeded comprehension of the material, demotivated students, reduced their attention. Colleagues noticed a lack of feedback from students and that they often had to speak to a black screen. Several students had to cancel the



Russian language course or needed more time to complete it. In addition, both students and teachers reported about the fatigue of the continuous online presence.

The urgency of the situation possibly made the decisions-making process less collaborative and more top-down. The enhanced use of technologies was favored over the improvement of learning methods and finding more efficient ways of teaching and learning. "For higher education institutions around the world to be competitive (again), evidence of faculty preparedness in terms of professionalism is necessary. <...> Universities, now more than ever, should invest in teacher professional development of their faculty, for them to be updated on effective pedagogical methods with or without the use of online technologies" [3].

Conclusions

While the chosen education strategies were most likely emergency driven and temporary, reproduction of the face-to-face teaching does not seem to be efficient. Administrators, teachers and students were not prepared for the different educational conditions. The lockdown caused by the pandemic challenges the entire educational system. Methodologies, assessment, decision-making and responsibility require complex reorganization based on collaborative, participatory and dialogical rather than top-down approach to teaching-learning: "alternative solutions to providing learning programmes remotely should be planned and delivered with the support of teachers, the education community and in collaboration with students and their families" [1].

Some online Russian language courses as well as other student- and needs centered education projects could be a good starting point (for example, webquests [10]). Exploration and use of flipped classroom [11], [12], studies on multimodality [13], [14] and "literacy practices across multiple spaces and contexts" [15] in language education is seen as another possible solution.

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