Building a literature review on Emergency Remote Learning during COVID-19 through the lens of European regulations

Simona Scanni

University of Birmingham, UK

Abstract

The present paper is extracted from in-progress research entitled "Effectiveness of Online Language Learning: a case study of Italian as a foreign language" which aims at investigating the effectiveness of learning Italian online. In recent years, the use of technology and the Internet have spread rapidly and have made it possible for people to learn foreign languages online. More recently, the unexpected shift from proximate learning to emergency remote learning during COVID-19, has raised attention on online and distance learning. The aim of this paper is to explore and discuss current theoretical approaches on the impact of COVID-19 on education, as well as delineate the differences between online learning and emergency remote learning, with the intention of building a literature review on COVID-19 and emergency remote learning. This can serve as a contribution in the research field and allows a critical evaluation and analysis of the last two years of pandemic and the near future. The study also represents one of the first contributions to the discussion about COVID-19 and emergency remote learning. The collection and presentation of sources from existing literature and articles, evidence from recent international documents (recommendations, regulations, guidelines), technical reports and opinions on the topic will provide a better understanding on how the pandemic has affected education and training.

Keywords: *Emergency Remote Learning, COVID-19, Literature Review, Online Learning, European Union.*

1. Introduction

The unexpected shift from proximate to distance learning after the COVID-19 outbreak and the temporary closures of schools and institutions, which according to UNESCO affected more than 1.5 billion students in about 188 countries, has raised attention on online learning. While before the pandemic remote learning was mainly embraced by students who freely and independently chose to learn online, the pandemic has generated a new category of online students, namely those who had to make a transition to distance education during the COVID-19 emergency, which were estimated to represent 94 per cent of students worldwide[1]. The aim of this paper is to explore and discuss theoretical approaches on the impact of COVID-19 on education, with the intention of building a literature review on COVID-19 and emergency remote learning in 2020. This can serve as a contribution in the research field and allows a critical evaluation and analysis of the last two years of pandemic and the near future. The study also represents one of the first contributions to the discussion about COVID-19 and emergency remote learning through the lens of European regulations. The collection and presentation of sources from existing literature and articles, evidence from recent international documents (recommendations, regulations, guidelines), technical reports and opinions on the topic will provide a better understanding on how the pandemic has affected education and training.

2. European actions and regulations: a literature review

The European Union has promptly contributed to the discussion on COVID-19 and education through many reports and documents delivered by agencies and centres which collaborate with the EU policies through providing data, reports and evidence. The COVID-19 crisis and the consequential temporary physical closures of schools and institutions have posed new challenges (continuity of education, students' wellbeing, accessibility to technology, ensuring inclusion and equality, redefining new learning skills) for the European Union, and all stakeholders involved.

In 2006 the European Union already recognised the importance of developing digital competences in learning among 8 key competences in education and training systems which students should acquire

by the end of compulsory education "to a level that equips them for adult life, and which forms a basis for further learning and working life" (Recommendation 2006/962/EC, paragraph 13)[2]. However, learners cannot acquire digital skills if not supported by well-digitalised environments and competent educators. The picture was then upgraded in 2013, when the Joint Research Centre (JRC), a service which supports the European Commission, first published the European Digital Competence Framework (DigComp)[3], a tool to improve citizens' digital competence, then updated in 2016, along with the publication of the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu)[4], which reflected the European States' awareness about the need for educators to improve their digital competences in order to enhance and innovate their teaching practices. The COVID-19 emergency has brought new issues to light, which have been addressed in the second Digital Education Action Plan (the first was adopted in 2018) which covers the years 2021-2027[5]. The action plan contains measures and policies which aim at making digital education and training more inclusive and effective through two priorities: "fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem" and "enhancing digital skills and competences of teachers and learners". It sets out to support Member States in adapting and transforming their education and training systems to the digital age. It is obvious that such transformation will not happen right away, but the awareness at European level shows how educational challenges and opportunities of the pandemic are acknowledged by international, supranational, and national institutions and set to be tackled.

Despite the measures and efforts of the European institutions in taking action against the COVID-19 crisis in order to avoid or limit the disruption to education, the published reports and studies have generically shown pessimistic outcome concerning the future of education and the impact of the pandemic on students' learning, although distance learning offers advantages in terms of time and space flexibility, innovation in teaching practices and source accessibility. Such a rush to switch education from in-person to online mode surely had a psychological repercussion on the perception of distance learning and its benefits. According to a survey conducted by the School Education Gateway [6] between 9 April and 10 May 2020 on 4,859 respondents (mostly of whom were teachers) from more than 40 countries, 66.9% of participants were experiencing online teaching for the first time and faced problems in accessing technology (by pupils according to 49% of respondents, and by teachers for 34% of answers). In addition to these inconveniences, such a lack of preparation in delivering online classes led to increased workload and stress working from home (43%).

There is agreement on the opinion that practical disadvantages were mainly caused by the unexpected and confused change in the educational delivery mode, labelled as emergency remote schooling by scholars and experts in the education arena. Nonetheless, subsequent reports and studies have been relevant to define problems and risks related to COVID-19 and distance learning, in order to better understand the circumstances and delineate strategies and policies to tackle the rapid digital transformation during, and due to, the pandemic. In a technical report published by JRC Research, Di Pietro et al. (2020)[7] focus on the impact that COVID-19 may have on students' learning and performance. According to the report, some factors resulting from the physical school closure and the consequential switch to online learning, which are less amount of time spent in learning remotely, the reduction of physical interaction among students, and the lack of extrinsic motivation in learning will cause a learning loss, especially among younger students and students with special needs and disabilities who need the support and supervision of educators. Moreover, the socio-economic status will play a role in students' achievement, as "students from less advantaged backgrounds are likely to experience a larger decline in learning compared to their more advantaged counterparts" (p.28), and this will lead to socio-economic inequalities in the future. The authors conclude the reports with some practical suggestions, from the need to detect students who have experienced learning loss during the lockdown (disables, students with special needs or loss of motivation) in order to adopt remedial measures accordingly, to the set-up of small group tuition as an approach to support students. Among future recommendations such as implementing technology as well as its accessibility and inclusivity and supporting teachers, parents finally emerge as "an essential element of the picture" (p.35) and therefore should be more involved as active interlocutors in their children' learning process and be emotionally supportive. This is an interesting turning point in the educational arena if we consider that until the school closure and the move to remote learning, the implementation of students' learning strategies was only delegated to teachers and schools, whereas the report recognises that a "constant and detailed communication between parents, teachers, and the school is a fundamental element of a successful online learning strategy" (p.35). Consistently with Di Pietro et al.'s findings, in a publication by the same JRC Research, Vuorikari et al. (2020)[8] questioned on how families of 10 to 18-year-old children from 11 EU countries handled remote schooling during the time of Covid-19 lockdown. The overall findings show that children involved in the report were able to study from home using

technology and through learning platforms provided by their schools, even if they perceived an increased workload than before the pandemic. The challenges faced were related to the accessibility of devices and the availability of parental support at home, as well as teacher competences in using technology. During the school closure, parents supported their children with free-of-charge additional learning materials to complement their online learning. On the perception of online schooling, families felt worried about the negative impact that this emergency situation might have on education, and they asked for better guidelines on how to support their children during emergency remote learning both educationally and psychologically, together with a personal need for more psychological support. The authors claim that these "early results" (p.4) can help and guide schools in their transition to distance education, and they conclude with the promise of conducting more in-depth surveys in the next year, for example about equitable access to education, a right that should be guaranteed by the school systems and society. The results of the survey show that online learning is an opportunity for children to improve their digital skills. However, the family socio-economic context and background can influence children' learning.

Another useful analytical report on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education in Europe has been conducted by Farnell, Skledar Matijević and Šćukanec Schmidt (2021)[9] for NESET, an advisory network of experts established by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture. The report consisted of rapid-response surveys administered in 2020 by university networks, student organisations and researchers on three areas, which are teaching and learning, the social dimension of higher education and student mobility. Again, accessibility, support from families and suitable home learning environment are recognised as factors which, if insufficient or missing, can cause learning losses and disengagement from education. Besides the negative impacts of moving to distance education emerged from the analytical report, namely the impact of learning losses and disengagement of students, the financial impact and the impact on educational inequalities, the authors recognise the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to rethink and renew higher education by adopting creative and innovative approaches to online learning and virtual mobility such as "internationalisation at home". Finally, the authors bring to light new questions about how to ensure the quality of online learning, how to support teachers struggling with online teaching and help students who experience difficulties in learning online and might disengage or dropout.

Teachers and students' digital competence and skills, technological implementation, learning loss, socio-economic inequalities, accessibility and inclusivity, families' support, are the aspects which emerged as educational challenges during the pandemic to be monitored and tackle.

3. Conclusions

The purpose of the presented chapter was that to gain an understanding of the existing research by building a systematic literature review on online education during the pandemic, provided that the migration to online mode in time of crisis is considered as emergency remote teaching/learning (Hodges et al., 2020)[10], a branch of distance learning (Bozkurt et al., 2020)[11] separated from online learning in many issues and challenges. The here-conducted literature review also represented one of the first contributions to the debates relevant to the topic. The listing of European documents (recommendations, regulations, guidelines), the presentation of sources and opinions from existing literature have been presented as well as analysed and discussed.

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