



## **Facing the Challenges of Language Teaching and Learning in the New Normal.**

**Prof. Mario Pace**  
University of Malta  
Malta

### **ABSTRACT**

*One of the most worrying effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is the amount of challenges and uncertainties that have marked the lives of adolescents. These include, amongst others, disruptions to social connections, health concerns (both mental and physical), socio-economic worries, qualms about catching COVID-19 or with infringing restrictions, uncertainties about the future, and motivation challenges. To further compound matters, during the 2 years of the pandemic, when all teaching and learning was transferred online, students were deprived of personal interaction with teachers and peers, considered as one of the most fundamental aspects in language learning, with the result that they became far less likely to be motivated to learn. In fact, languages are considered, by many students, as not being practical in nature and relevant to their lives. Students are often reluctant to study languages as they do not find them appealing to their interests, they do not consider them as being relevant to their future careers, and they often find it difficult to transfer the language skills they have acquired from the classroom to their everyday life. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges faced by language teachers is finding ways to motivate their students to complete language courses. Very often the root of the problem is that the existing language courses offered in schools focus too narrowly on the most urgent need of meeting language requirements and give little importance, if any, to the students' needs. Today, more than ever before, to make language learning effective in this post-pandemic era is for teachers to focus on 3 key aspects of motivation, namely autonomy, competence and social relatedness.*

**Keywords:** *New normal; motivation; language learning; challenges; relevance.*

### **1. Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic will be remembered for the way it has suddenly altered our ways of living and how, in a matter of days, has significantly disrupted our lives in various ways. The pandemic has had huge disruptive effects on normal life, difficult as it already was in many countries. For schools, students and parents, the impact of closed schools and children stuck at home with little or no access to learning, the effect has been devastating. As far as adolescents are concerned, social distancing and the interruption of typical school routines have been extremely challenging and have left a whole trail of repercussions. The sudden ban on social connections and social distancing requirements have not only left a huge emotional and developmental impact, but they have also presented a number of unprecedented challenges, namely health concerns (both mental and physical), socio-economic worries, qualms about catching COVID-19 or with infringing restrictions, uncertainties about the future, and motivation challenges.



The pandemic has also changed the whole dynamics of education. From the conventional classroom model of learning, we shifted to modern technological means with practically all educational institutions in the world having completely transferred their teaching and learning process to online mode. As Comer and deBenedette (2021: 305) [1] point out, such a situation, which was imposed by institutions rather than chosen by instructors or learners, “brought into the world of remote teaching and learning practitioners and students who otherwise might never have considered delivering or receiving language instruction online” and practically covered all areas and academic subjects. On the other hand however, for those thousands of students with little or no access to remote learning, the impact of closed schools has had huge disruptive effects, with experts estimating that a whole cohort of students could be permanently lagging behind in their learning given that in many countries teaching-learning programs and examinations of primary, secondary, and tertiary levels have been postponed. And language teaching and learning was no exception. As a matter of fact, we have moved from a situation wherein formal language lessons took place in a classroom and online lessons were the exception and regarded as too risky and complicated to organise to a reality where almost all schools embraced the virtual classroom and many have taken their language teaching online. Distance learning solutions were developed and a wide range of Distance Learning Tools were created with the result that the essential role of teachers has been put into question. All this has highlighted the need for better training in new methods of language education delivery, as well as support for the teaching profession.

## **2. Challenges of Language Teaching and Learning during the pandemic.**

Without doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed the lives and professional practice of language teachers and the learning strategies of the students. In a matter of days, most language teachers and students were compelled to shift their teaching and learning from face to face to online mode, having to face all the resulting challenges and difficulties without the required professional preparation and the necessary shift in mentality. In fact, whereas prior to the pandemic face to face activities were the order of the day in most language classes, in a matter of days these had to be replaced by distance learning modalities through a variety of formats and platforms. As stated by Gacs, Goertler, and Spasova (2020) [2] the relative speed with which crisis-prompted remote teaching was adopted in 2020 meant that there was little time for most teachers used to face-to-face instruction to think about how to implement these online practices in an intentional way following best practices in instructional design. Most teachers in fact, who were previously used to textbook teaching, were obliged to learn further more than their students to make their online classes seamless and engaging, given the immense technological evolution in the educational industry with the creation of a very broad range of distance learning solutions and distance learning tools. Many educators found themselves having to re-evaluate not simply their roles as language teachers but also their teaching skills and expertise in a bid to find new ways to motivate their students, highlighting the need for better training in new methods of language education. The students’ first reaction, on the other hand, was quite positive, believing and arguing that they could learn everything and access all study material from the comfort of their homes. As the days ticked by however, teachers and students alike soon realised that although no one can ignore or underestimate the benefits of online remote teaching and learning, technology is not all that matters after all and that notwithstanding the creation of a multitude of platforms intended to facilitate language learning, many of the existent problems were not solved while new ones were created. One of the most pressing of these new problems is that suddenly teachers realised they “... must be proficient in a variety of information processing activities, as well as have the know-how to effectively teach the type of 21st-century global communication required of an international language. These new technologies challenge not only pedagogical certainties but also professional identities as teachers become discouraged and frustrated if the software or skill required has a high degree of complexity”. Lorimer (2020) [3].

## **3. Direct Implications on the Language Classroom.**



All this has direct implications on the language classroom and a number of considerations have to be highlighted. First of all, it must be ascertained that the educators know how to make the best use of the technological resources available in class in the best interest of their students. Given that the most important change-agents in class are the teachers themselves, "... the process of effective technology-based education without teachers' adequate skill and dedication will not be successful even if schools are sufficiently equipped with sophisticated technology". Bećirović, Brdarević-Čeljo, Delić, (2021). [4]. In fact, the teacher's attitude is a major enabling factor in students' adoption of technology, which should never be regarded as the solution to the learning crises, but rather as a tool to help teachers to be as effective as possible. The role of technology in language teaching is to equip educators with various tools, apart from resources like textbooks and worksheets, to help students develop a better understanding of the target language. But the question is whether adequate technical support in schools/classrooms is being offered and whether language classrooms are adequately equipped. Apart from the fact that training is often not prioritised as it can be expensive for schools to undertake and it takes up precious limited time, not all schools and governments can afford to invest in the latest high-tech equipment and adequate infrastructures such as computer labs, protected software and high-speed internet. This may often lead to interruptions to the service and disconnections which can be extremely frustrating both for the teachers as well as for the students. Furthermore, purchasing and investing in the right hardware is only the beginning of such an investment as curriculum, assessment, and instruction must all work together with the hardware to leverage its potential, requiring considerable costs for planning, design thinking and ongoing training. This calls for appropriate access to technical support, both within and outside of classrooms, to address possible technical faults in time so as not to hinder the smooth flow of classes, availability of an adequate infrastructure, clear policies and time allocated to incorporate such new technologies as well as technology-oriented policies in order to avoid any possible administrative barriers in the execution of digital programs on time.

#### **4. Language Teaching and Learning in the New Normal.**

In view of the above, the way languages are taught and learned in the new normal is different to what it used to be before the pandemic, with most countries having to adopt and adapt new approaches to overcome the difficulties and face the challenges encountered in class. To further compound matters, during the 2 years of the pandemic, when all teaching and learning was transferred online, students were deprived of personal interaction with teachers and peers, considered as one of the most fundamental aspects in language learning, with the result that they became far less likely to be motivated to learn. In fact, languages are considered by many students as not being practical in nature and relevant to their lives. Students are often reluctant to study languages as they do not find them appealing to their interests, they do not consider them as being relevant to their future careers, and they often find it difficult to transfer the language skills they have acquired from the classroom to their everyday life. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges faced by language teachers is finding ways to motivate their students to complete language courses. Very often the root of the problem is that the existing language courses offered in schools focus too narrowly on the most urgent need of meeting language requirements and give little importance, if any, to the students' needs. Today, more than ever before, I strongly believe that to make language learning effective in this post-pandemic era is for teachers to focus on 3 key aspects of motivation, namely autonomy, competence and social relatedness.

The so called 'New Normal' is a time characterised by uncertainties, even where language teaching and learning is concerned. A lot of what we took for granted about language, culture, intercultural communication, communication in itself, is not what it was prior to the pandemic. Teaching methods have changed; our modes of communicating have changed; the way people speak and interact with each other has changed; the scope/s of learning a language have changed. To be able to respond to these evolving needs and to be able to remodel and create new programmes of study, it is pertinent to ask ourselves three vital questions, namely: Who are our students? What are the main challenges



and difficulties that need to be faced and overcome in order to successfully motivate our students? Where do we want to arrive?

The social changes that have occurred in these last couple of years compel us to adapt to new social, cultural and linguistic realities: young people's language use, their way of doing things, their way of studying today is very different to what it was prior to the pandemic. If we, as language teachers, do not keep in mind who our students are, their characteristics, their way of doing things, their study habits, we risk running a situation where we honestly believe that our message is getting through, we are convinced that our teaching is effective when in fact learning is not taking place, or rather only a fraction of what we are trying to teach is being learnt. I will only mention (due to word limit constraints) one such characteristic which is of fundamental importance in language teaching and learning. I am referring here to the main mode of communication of adolescents, which is digital. And we all know that the language used when we communicate on the social media (the way we write, etc) is at times totally different from the language we find and teach in class, in textbooks, at University, etc. This, very often, not only results in students feeling frustrated at the fact that they have studied the language for a number of years and know it is not the language they use in everyday life, but they also consider it as being irrelevant to their needs and not practical for their everyday communication needs, especially now that learning is not solely confined to the classroom during the prescribed hours of lessons, but students have countless options outside the "classroom hours" to further their learning by means of an infinite choice of technological tools.

## 5. Conclusion

To make language teaching and learning pertinent to the students' needs, language teachers have to keep abreast with all these developments and changes taking place both within and outside the classroom. Keeping the pace with language change has always been a difficulty, but with social media and the NET, this has become a much bigger challenge given that the pace with which language is changing has lately become much faster. One of the reasons for this is the Internet, which is fostering new experiences faster than ever before and whereas up to some decades ago, it used to take a generation to accept or introduce a new word, today all you need to do is put a new word/phrase on the social media and everyone starts using it immediately, very often creating new varieties of the same language in the process. The challenge is that while it is important to retain the respect of the "traditional accent or language", it is equally important to make students aware of other varieties given that one of the main taxing aspects of communication is being able to interact fluently with people of different backgrounds, cultures and interests. Not understanding what someone else is saying due to language varieties often leads to embarrassment, rejection, or misunderstandings and this gives rise in students to frustration and lack of self-confidence. The philosophy of the classroom should therefore be to expose students to as many different varieties of the language as possible, using different means and channels with the ultimate aim of helping them become autonomous learners.

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