



# The Methodological Sudden Shift Brought about By COVID-19 In The Teaching & Learning Of Italian LS In Malta: Perceptions, Reactions & Way Forward

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## Abstract

*Online Teaching has been a topic of major interest widely spoken, written and discussed about in the past couple of years, especially recently when the world was hit by the Coronavirus pandemic. In an era focused primarily on technology as made clear also by Selwyn, multimodality & multimedia: synchronous, asynchronous, blended, the Maltese education system had no other choice than to swiftly adapt, distancing itself from the traditional classroom with face-to-face instruction in favour of distance online learning, leaving educators on their own to experiment, practise and evaluate various teaching techniques and online platforms available for their perusal on the Web. This paper looks at the perceptions and reactions of Italian LS teachers in secondary schools in Malta as they swiftly shifted their practice to online modes of teaching and learning during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic. My study focused mainly on data collected through an online questionnaire which captured the views of almost 30% of Italian LS educators in Malta and Gozo, working with learners aged ten to sixteen years. Using a series of open and closed-ended questions, compelling data was yielded on the techniques language teachers were adopting to deliver learning. Findings indicate teachers used a multimodal approach in most cases. Advantages and limitations of both systems emerged from their feedback. Moreover, the study also sets light on the inadequate preparation in distance learning as perceived by educators while observing what activities, techniques and methodologies were put into practice. The results show how much language teachers still feel unskilled technologically speaking yet how much aware and conscious they are about the benefits of a blended approach to language teaching and learning.*

**Keywords:** *Education Technology (Edtech), blended learning, integrated digital learning, distance learning, professional development*

## 1. Introduction

The worldwide health emergency brought about by Covid-19 in early 2020 lead educational institutions to act swiftly and as efficiently as possible to meet the needs of the learners in what can be described as an unprecedented moment in human history. Notwithstanding the sudden shift, teachers, from the early years up to tertiary education, reacted swiftly keeping at heart the tremendous impact that such a pandemic would impinge on the learner's educational progression. In most cases only a couple of days were required to shift to online and distance learning, adopting educational software and digital platforms already available thanks to e-learning. Nevertheless, this transition wasn't all smooth and perfect and with time problems started to increase, especially due to the physical and mental side effects caused by the everyday and lengthy use of these devices. Moreover, in the Maltese context, the educational system was even adapting and implementing a new learning methodology called the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF). This, added to the inevitable health emergency created anxiety and added stress in most teaching staff and education stakeholders. It was imperative and indispensable for teachers to meet the needs of the reality surrounding them to self-teach how to use adequately and competently the various digital platforms chosen by schools and institutions to reduce as much as possible the negative effect of the "wasted transition time" from an on-site traditional setting to the online and distant one.

The research carried out zooms in and analyses the effects of distance and online learning of such context in Malta and how these affected on one side students but also teachers and educators. The research had the intention of highlighting the advantages as well as the disadvantages of synchronous



and asynchronous modes of online/distance learning and come up with a possible integration of digital methodology to the already known traditional methods of face-to-face education after providing the necessary adaptations and professional development to all stakeholders.

### **1.1 The Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was divulged to all teachers teaching Italian as a foreign language in all education sectors in Malta: private, church, and public. The questionnaire was primarily divided into two sections: the first part that had to do with the type of lessons that were conducted during the pandemic and their modality (synchronous & asynchronous). The professionals gave insight on what kind of modality did they prefer to use during such an emergency and what supplementary platforms were used to meet the needs of the learner in such circumstances. In the second part of the study the questions centred around the concept of potential and limits of distance and online learning also shifting the observation on the concept, validity and way forward as regards to evaluation, self-evaluation and testing in online and distance learning. Educators expressed their opinion on which skills were the easiest to evaluate and reliable against the ones who were deemed difficult to evaluate based on their own practice during Covid-19. Towards the end of the questionnaire, the idea and concept of blended learning was discussed offering another option to the already existing idea of online learning, e-learning and distance learning.

### **1.2 Results**

From the results collected by the educators it was observed that 98% of all respondents never had any prior experience with online nor distance learning, suggesting the inadequacy of the educators in adapting to this methodological shift without the specific and requested training done. As Kearsley and Blomeyer (2004:49) discussed a teacher or an educator needs to meet a list of prerequisites before he or she even decides to opt for an online learning setting: optimal & stable Internet connection as well as excellent competence and skill in the various e-learning platforms needed and used.

#### **1.2.1 Synchronous vs. Asynchronous**

It was observed that when asked about the type of modality used during COVID-19, most teachers opted for a blended type. Nevertheless, another point that emerged from the study was the increased amount of time needed by educators to prepare for the desired materials and resources and to think about ways and measures where each skill will be assessed and evaluated. It was interesting to note that around 20% of participants opted for an asynchronous mode because of various reasons but mainly because they were feeling unprepared, unskilled to conduct lessons in real time, they didn't have the required devices or the required Internet network connection for real-time videoconferencing. Most Italian teachers (82%) made use of Microsoft Teams for synchronous online and distance learning while those who opted for asynchronous modality still preferred to make use of Microsoft Powerpoint (65.4%) and digital handouts (57.7%). One can notice that these teachers continued to make use of the resources that they were accustomed to use in class in a traditional setting despite the class being transferred from a physical environment to a virtual one.

Those, however, who preferred an asynchronous approach to learning have resorted to an innovative way to teaching by introducing the flipped learning: sending video-presentations, slides, links to various resources and digital notes before sending the actual recorded lesson. Without doubt the flipped approach to learning made the students more responsible and autonomous in their learning progression as previously discussed also by Novello in Caon, Serraggiotto(2012:90).

#### **1.2.2 Engagement, Feedback and Assessment**

Feedback and assessment can also have different effects on the learner, depending on the modality and the skill being assessed. For speaking skills, sending oral feedback can be seen as being more coherent to the skill assessed however, it is also timely as it would be immediate and in real time but on the other hand there is the uncertainty that the message could be misunderstood or not clear enough for the learner. Besides that, learners may not feel at ease having their feedback exposed to other learners of the class. On the contrary, if the feedback is given in an asynchronous modality, there is the certainty that the message conveyed would be clear and personal, it can be read and reread by the learner and it wouldn't put the learner in an uncomfortable situation of showcasing one's



areas for improvement in front of the other learners however, there is no guarantee that the feedback would be read by the learner once it is sent.

30% of the educators noticed that the majority of students were not particularly engaged during an asynchronous approach because of the lack of immediate feedback usually given in class by teachers (58.8%), technological frustration due to lack of connectivity or sometimes the absence of it(73.5%) and due to a significant decrease of intrinsic motivation to learn(50%). As discussed by Nuzzo(2013L25) in an asynchronous distance learning environment feedback is not timely, hindering as such the correct educational development and progression for the student.

From the teacher's perspective, online learning seems to somewhat create feelings of anxiety due to an increase in preparation time when compared to in-person learning, it increases fatigue after a day's work, and it requires the acquisition of specific ICT skills of various online platforms and applications fundamental for the smooth progression of distance learning.

In fact when asked about the awareness, knowledge and implementation of specific education platforms created for educators and to enhance and increase engagement with students, only a relatively small percentage of the respondents made use (sporadically or regularly) of them during COVID-19 lockdown: Kahoot(25%), Quizlet(13.8), Edpuzzle(10.8%).

Finally, towards the end of the study, questions were asked to teachers regarding the validity and difficulty in conducting assessments based on the various skills. It is clear from the replies that as regards the Maltese context, there seems to be a common consensus among teachers that the speaking skill was the most complex to tackle and evaluate during lockdown mainly due to time constraints and validity reasons.

## **2. Way forward: Proposals**

After observing the above mentioned results and attitudes gathered by teachers and educators of Italian as a foreign language in Malta together with insights on what is considered nowadays as good quality education, some proposals were drawn up to give more insight, suggestions and ideas to educators as to how to better tackle distance learning even when the health emergency of COVID-19 would be far behind us. The approaches were drawn up based on a blended model of learning and could be adopted in synchronous or asynchronous modes rendering the learning progression more flexible, inclusive, innovative yet effective, engaging and personalised to the learner's needs.

In fact it was observed that through Mentimeter teachers could create presentations that are highly more engaging and inclusive than Slides or Powerpoint, it is highly engaging and keeps the learner on his/her toes throughout the presentation thanks to moments of interaction that the teacher would insert throughout his/her lesson or presentation (Mayhew et al,2020:8). It has various advantages like the integration of other multimedia, importing from Google slides or Powerpoint, creating quizzes and polls and making participation anonymous, reducing that fear of failure and fear of being judged in front of peers. It doesn't require any download, making it quick at accessing the software as well as making it the ideal application to use when opting for a blended approach to learning as it also shifts away from a traditional approach to learning centred around the teacher to a more modern and open one centred around the learner.

Apart from Mentimeter, Padlet can also be an innovative way of tackling production tasks and giving formative, effective feedback as well as being an outstanding tool to develop peer-assessment and shifting the focus from product-based tasks to process-based tasks. As previously discussed by Beck, Tsaryk & Rybina (2020:10) Padlet is a better reflection of the learner's reality as it mirrors the use of posts, multimedia and content creation that is what the learners are more accustomed to in their regular use of social media.

## **3. Conclusions**

As we have seen, the issue with online learning and distance learning is more complex than it may seem. It always must keep in mind various factors such as the context in which it is being adopted, its sustainability and efficiency of the various activities proposed (Favaro 2012:82) in various modalities, the inclusion of all learners and the shift in learning from a dogmatic one (teacher based) to a student-centred learning. The pandemic emergency of COVID-19 should also shed light on the need to better



equip teachers and student teachers with skills, competencies and by providing professional development opportunities that are relevant to today's age and needs (Lawless & Pellegrino 2007:575-614). It's imperative, however, to understand that the efficiency of online and distance learning is not based on using a myriad of software applications and platforms available online in all of our lessons be it if done synchronously or asynchronously but rather on the professional skill that the educator would have acquired from his/her PD opportunities, various trial and errors and experimentation to understand what platform, software or other resources are needed to guide all learners irrespective of their learning or educational needs to achieve the desired objectives as outlined in the planning documentation.

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