

Education 2020 The emergency transition¹

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Abstract: There are certain issues to be considered prior to evaluating the feasibility of remote learning implementation. The present paper reviews just three of them – lasting anxiety and pressure, drop down of motivation, inability to follow through with the intended learning outcomes which, based on personal experience, are believed to be of importance to the overall learning process. The aim of the review is twofold. Firstly, to point out these issues and raise the awareness of ESP instructors on the probable setbacks. Secondly, to contribute to ongoing discussions of the most effective approach towards ensuring the safety and quality of learning regardless of the delivery mode.

Key words: remote learning, ESP, motivation, learning outcomes, anxiety, productive education

Резюме: Глобалната криза, предизвикана от бързото разпространение на Ковид-19 наложи радикални промени във всички социални сфери, включително тази на образованието. Въпреки успешното прилагане на смесеното учене (blended learning) като метод в чуждоезиковото обучение в ТУ-София, преминаването към изцяло онлайн обучение в края на февруари 2020 година се оценява като стресиращо преживяване както за преподавателите, така и за студентите. Предвид невъзможността за ограничаване на разпространението на вируса в близките месеци е необходимо да се анализира проведеното до момента онлайн обучение като на първо място се очертаят силните и слабите страни на процеса, след което да се направи преценка на евентуалните „заплахи“ и начините за елиминирането им, и не на последно място, да се прогнозира допълнителните възможности за повишаване на ефективността на онлайн обучението по чужд език.

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Introduction

The only thing constant in life is change. Hence, whenever disruptive events affect the social environment people must no longer rely on or expect the same results in taking certain actions. Change, especially drastic and sudden, brings uncertainty, unpredictability, instability and challenge. It commands people to be on the qui vive as it creates new environments with new living and working conditions. Change demands resilience, agility and innovation in all aspects of life.

Change and education

The incorporation of technology in ESP in a meaningful way should ensure the quality and sustainability of the process of education in any given learning environment. However, not only theoretically is the use of technology in education a hard-to-define concept.

Personal experience during the better half of the spring semester of 2020 determined three major issues to come to terms with prior to implementing remote learning per se:

- escalation of stress and anxiety,
- drop down of motivation,
- inability to meet/achieve the intended learning outcomes at satisfactory level.

Before all else, the ad-hoc manner of adoption of remote learning at universities nationwide should be discarded as it was reported by students and instructors alike to have aggravated the already dire situation.

Although the majority of students are used to the synergy of traditional face-to-face learning environment and online resources and activities achieved through the application of blended learning, the reason why and the speed with which educational content was moved online created lasting anxiety and pressure.

Besides the “expected/awaited” hiccups brought about by hardware and software issues, coverage, price and quality of the mobile internet, as well as the lack of privacy, there were a few more hitches to overcome once in the virtual learning classroom.

First, online teaching and learning require a lot more focus to process non-verbal cues like settings, background noises, facial expressions, tone and pitch of voice, body language.

Second, more often than not periods of prolonged silence and the lack of eye contact (camera off) feel unnatural because whenever one is online they think there might be some problem with technology or some miscommunication/misunderstanding issue which hinders the flow of information, or prevents the exchange of data.

Third, the camera and the awareness of being on stage that comes with it magnify the stressful and nerve-wrecking experience of the virtual learning classroom. Asked to evaluate how they felt in the virtual learning environment 83% of students reported considerable increase of stress levels as opposed to the 10% of those among them who didn't feel any difference whatsoever (see Fig.1).

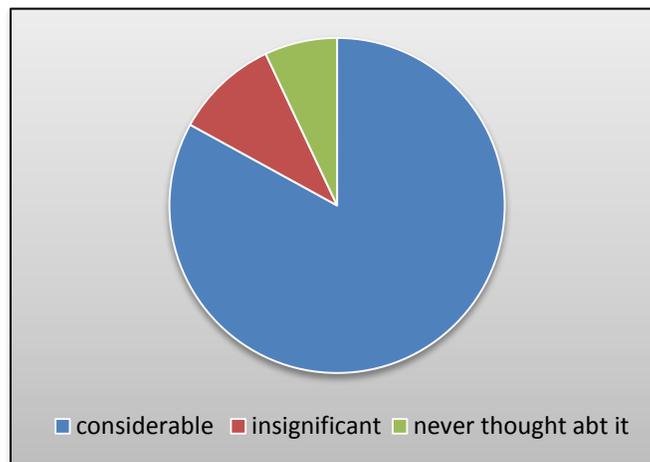


Fig.1 Reported stress levels

The lack of rapport and the mix-up of context-dependent social roles and activities on account of their computer-screen substitution brought about certain sulking on part of

the students. Being out of sorts held sway on active participation in live sessions (Zoom in our particular case).

What is more, there was unwillingness to do critical analysis and summary of texts as compared to certain enthusiasm to analyze visuals or do some problem-solving activities, which rarely happened in a real classroom environment.

Evidently, being in a virtual learning environment (VLE) all the time was the reason why otherwise industrious students felt dissuaded from devoting enough effort to enhancing their FL skills. A considerable number of students (11%) experienced depersonalization, while another 19% frankly admitted they were not the self-driven type and couldn't be bothered to do much outside a real classroom (see Fig.2).

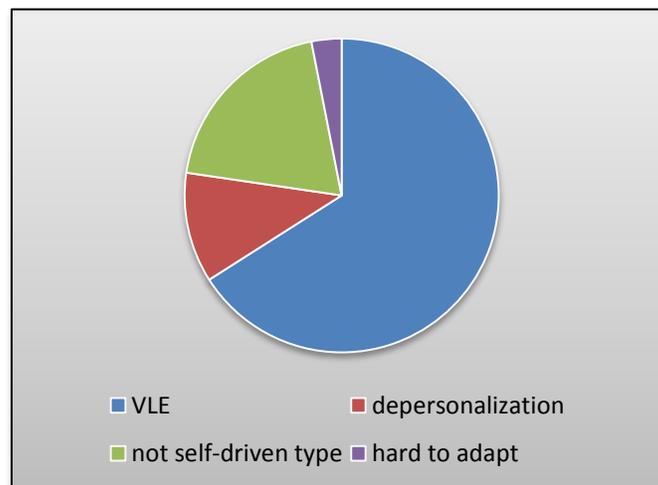


Fig.2 Demotivating factors

The final issue, which in the long run is expected to have the most serious repercussions, is the inability to meet/achieve the intended learning outcomes at satisfactory level while modifying syllabi on the run.

It should be clear by now that an instructor can't go far if they try to recreate the traditional classroom situation online and that the ability to achieve learning outcomes

has to override perfection. Therefore, an ESP instructor at tertiary level is expected to specially tailor the educational process so as to maximize the experience in VLE and provide quality interaction and value for their students.

Being proactive guarantees that instructors are able to maintain high standards as well as act in advance to resolve expected difficulties, and most importantly eliminate any skepticism towards self-study by creating a learning environment that is purposeful and encouraging.

Adopting proactive teaching strategies requires on the one hand tremendous preparation and vigilance to head problems off before they escalate into full-blown meltdowns, confrontations, or withdrawals, and on the other well-developed soft-skills to integrate all students despite their strengths, weaknesses, and individual differences, and form a productive VL community.

Personal experience proves that good instruction, timely encouragement, keeping track of progress, providing prompt feedback, and most of all maintaining a positive attitude keep students engaged in their training for most of the time.

Yet, the mere fact that everything happened in a VLE was self-reported by the students as the one and only reason why a certain number of them (8%) failed to achieve the intended learning outcomes (see Fig.3). In contrast, the number of students who failed to achieve the intended learning outcomes during the winter semester was below 2%.

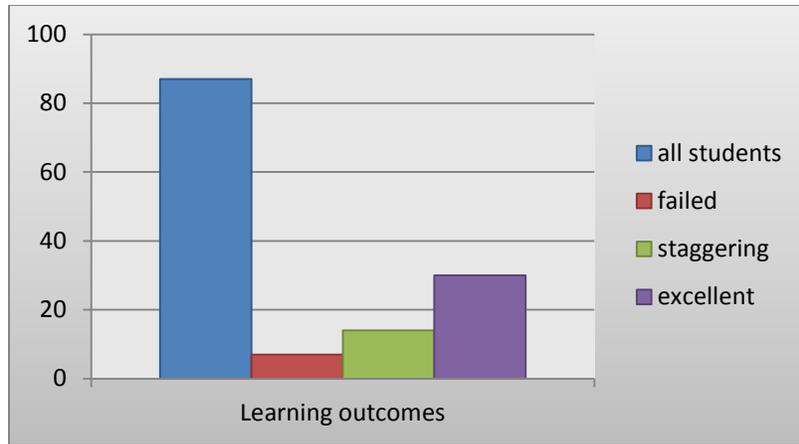


Fig.3 Achievement of learning outcomes

On the upgrade

As the new academic year (2020-2021) is about to start the safety of the students and instructors is of utmost importance. The debates around access to and quality of remote learning along with risk management will continue as the coronavirus spreads.

Experience has already proven that the implementation of remote learning poses many challenges, among which how to measure the effectiveness of learning and how to grant access to VLE for all students. At present it is clear that in an education system which is rather rigid finding the balance between learning and safety is quite challenging. Therefore, sharing a few “lessons learned” might provide some of the solutions.

First, adapt the curriculum so that the focus is on essential skills and resilience rather than perfection. Thus one is able to resolve two problems, on the one hand the learning gap between disadvantaged and better off students won't become “a learning gulf” during expected lockdowns, and on the other the quality of learning will be ensured no matter the mode of delivery.

Second, be flexible. The COVID-19 pandemic has already changed the way students learn and the place where they learn. Blend the physical and remote learning

experiences and make sure the switch between the two will be with the least disruptions.

Third, remember that teaching online integrates virtual learning classroom (live sessions, e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams Room, Discord) and virtual learning environment provided by the learning management system (e.g. Moodle, Blackboard), the latter being more important as up to 70% of learning takes place there or outside the live sessions.

Forth, strive to create inclusive and equitable supportive educational environment which fosters communication and collaboration between students with different learning abilities and needs.

Last but not least (couldn't resist the temptation of the cliché), remember that your students are inexperienced and vulnerable. Be generous and supportive, give them every chance to prove how well they can manage in unsettling times, praise and encourage them in their efforts to make a difference.

Finally, as health and safety are paramount, I include an infographic [1] created by the World Bank (see Fig. 4; typo on left of column three should be disregarded) in an effort to help schools.

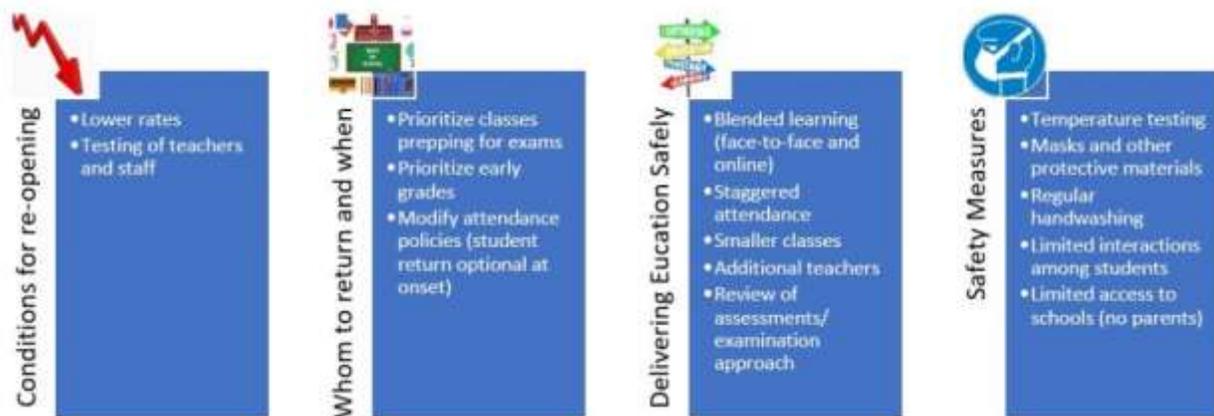


Fig. 4

Launching the new academic year

I strongly believe that these additional guidelines will also help decision makers in universities ensure that academic standards are maintained and all stakeholders (students, staff, administration, etc.) are protected.

Bibliography

1. Shimis, T., Barron, M., Azzi-Huck, K. (2020). Launching a new academic year under the cloud of Covid-19. Available from: <<https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/launching-new-academic-year-under-cloud-covid-19>>.