

TEACHING DURING THE PANDEMIC IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ONLINE DRAMA COURSE FOR TEACHER TRAINEES OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the components of successful online learning and teaching environments. By following a socio-cultural perspective on learning, the author underlines the importance of teacher-student and student-student interaction and the role of small groups in efficient online learning. The paper presents the findings of a case study investigating how a previously offline university bachelor course, Drama Techniques in Teaching English as a Foreign Language I, was transformed to virtual space during the lockdown period in Slovakia in the winter term of the 2020/2021 academic year, at the J. Selye University, Faculty of Education, Komárno.

Keywords: online teaching, online environment, interaction, drama techniques, higher education, non-native EFL teacher trainees.

1 Introduction

2020 was the year when the virtual and the real world in education intertwined in the phenomenon known as teaching online. Even in 2000, not many teachers knew what teaching online meant and only a few educators were familiar with the basic techniques of online teaching or knew much about video conferencing platforms. While many teachers have taken the plunge since then (Hašková-Šafranko-Pavlíková-Petrikovičová 2020), many of them still have some basic questions about online teaching and still find themselves challenged by the special demands of online teaching. The year 2020 forced educators to implement online teaching and left them no other choice. Educators, instructors, primary, secondary school teachers as well as lecturers, instructors and tutors in higher education started to explore the world of online teaching for the first time and the measures taken and decisions made were based more on improvisation and hasty choices, rather than on experience and deliberate planning.

When discussing teaching and learning during the pandemic and lockdown, more emphasis was given to learning, since it was not only students but also teachers and educators who had to overcome their anxieties about the use of ICT and learn about ways of teaching online. They had to gain new skills – many educators lacked previously – and design learning materials and come up with ways of learning and teaching that fit the demands of an online learning and teaching environment.

The aim of the present paper is to investigate the key features of successful online courses in higher education with special attention to the concepts, approaches and tools of online learning environments. The paper presents the findings of a case study investigating a university bachelor course Drama Techniques in Teaching English as a Foreign Language I, in the winter term of the 2020/2021 academic year at J. Selye University, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language and Literature. The major aim when transforming the course to online space was to maintain student engagement, foster interaction and keep down drop-out rates in order to make online learning effective.

2 Online courses in higher education

Universities rarely offered online courses before the COVID-19 pandemic in Central Europe. Of course, there were several attempts to implement new technologies in training programmes and to redefine traditional education (Bernátová-Bernát-Poráčková-Nagy 2020) and attempts to make teaching and learning more updated to live up to the technological expectations of the twenty-first century. Already during the

decade before the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 in Central Europe, there were serious shifts in the priorities and principles higher education courses followed. Abandoning the mere transmission of knowledge, more and more instructors designed courses that aimed at improving creativity and critical thinking (Zahatňanská-Nagy 2020) and developing competences such as the understanding of causality and logical argumentation (Bernátová-Bernát-Poráčková-Nagy-Sedlák-Sepešiová-Vadašová 2019) and built on the interaction of members of smaller learning communities or units. However, there are not many concrete examples of higher education courses in Slovakia which were offered merely online.

Correspondence learning or distance learning were quite common in higher education, however they always included face-to-face sessions, traditional teaching, learners had to attend classes during weekends or at set times. It is true that more and more faculties tried to adjust the traditional term to individual needs, for example by offering learners flexible study plans, where attendance of courses in the traditional classroom environment is not required on a regular bases and communication with the instructor can take place via online tools.

During the pandemic, all universities in Slovakia were forced to shift courses in all disciplines to online space, for the first time in March 2020, until the very end of the spring term. Though universities were allowed to open and start traditional teaching and learning, they were closed again due to the general lockdown in October 2020. Although much has been learnt from the practices and solutions of the first lockdown period in spring, even after the experiences of the second term in the lockdown period many aspects of online teaching are currently under study and are examined from various aspects with issues that still need to be tackled by academics and educators. Instructors have been experimenting with online solutions and practices and many times it is the mistakes they make that become their major teachers. Consultations with other instructors, sharing experience, finding online trainings and resources while teaching online can be beneficial, however, there is no manual for online teaching in higher education which would work with all courses and audiences, each situation is different, the goals and nature of courses, learners' needs, access to online tools, personalities as well as the teacher's skills and competences all contribute to the success of online courses.

The transition to online teaching during the first and the second major lockdown in higher education in Slovakia in 2020 has had an increasing influence on the understanding of the forms and the tools of higher education. In addition to the pandemic, of course, there had been several other drivers to online teaching and learning in higher education, not only technological changes and improvement, but also the need for establishing cooperation with other institutions on a global scale, the wish for easily accessible and available information and resources or the changing lifestyles and needs of students. University education has always requested independence, self-regulated learning and the maximum of freedom from the side of students, and materials and resources available online can help students in achieving success.

Online teaching and learning needs to follow many of the principles of course design applied in face-to-face teaching and learning, for example keeping in mind the major goals of the course, the analysis of detailed components and stages, design needs to consider how to achieve good learning interaction, selecting materials and making decisions about content (Bach-Haynes-Smith 2007). On the other hand, online learning is definitely changing policies and practices in higher education, since some of the major forms and methods of teaching in higher education have been challenged. Lectures are supposed to be the typical feature of higher education across the world. A good

lecturer inspires learners, promotes self-directed learning, has sophisticated social and presentation skills (Bach-Haynes-Smith 2007), however, during a traditional lecture there is no or little opportunity for engagement and interaction between the lecturer and the students. During online teaching, the role of the instructor to involve students and engage them in order not to lose them during the course and to find ways of connecting to the students became one of the most important priorities. With the involvement of technology and online tools, both students and instructors found out that lectures can be delivered in either a synchronous (online discussion that happens at the same point of time) or an asynchronous way (online discussion that does not all happen at the same point in time, but learners can visit the text-based discussion at different times within a defined period) (Bach-Haynes-Smith 2007: 131-132). It is not only this time shift that influences the judgement or the relevance of lecturing in higher education, but also the fact that during online teaching instructors have identified the benefits of small groups even to a larger extent than before and have taken a sociocultural perspective on learning by finding out how dialogue, interaction and high learner engagement play an important role in the process of learning. Certain scholars even emphasize the influence of sociocultural approaches to learning on learner identity and the interplay between language, culture and identity (Marosi 2019).

3 Designing an online learning environment

Boettcher and Conrad (2010) list four types of courses: (1) traditional face-to-face, (2) Web facilitated, (3) blended/hybrid and (4) online courses. Traditional courses are the ones where no online technology is used, the content is delivered in a written or oral form. Web facilitated courses use Web-based technology to post the syllabus, assignments and other types of course content. Blended or hybrid courses blend online and face-to-face teaching. A certain proportion of the content is delivered online, but it also uses face-to-face meetings as well as online discussions. Online courses, however, deliver course content exclusively in an online environment, there are no face-to-face meetings. (Boettcher – Conrad 2010: 9).

Transforming a course which has been taught face-to-face for years into an online course is great challenge even for more experienced educators. One of the biggest mistakes that can be made is putting all lecture material online, making it available in an online space without involving learners in online interactive activities.

If the course is designed for the first time and the instructor intends to start an online course because of own initiative, major decisions can be made voluntarily and freely. However, when courses need to be moved online because of external circumstances – for example due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is more difficult to disregard previous practices and solutions that were successful in the classroom. It is more effective to approach the course as if it was taught for the first time in order to find the best online tools and solutions in the online environment, of course rather than trying to push the same approaches and tasks in online space and stick to solutions which worked in traditional teaching.

3.1 Pedagogical approaches to teaching online

In order to deliver an online course successfully, the right pedagogical approach and strategies must be selected. When a course is shifted to virtual space, the methods and approaches previously applied by the instructor must be reconsidered, since the methods which worked well in a traditional course, do not necessarily match with the requirements and circumstances of online courses.

Effective online courses involve interaction, interpersonal connections, the sense of 'connectedness', promote learner autonomy and are the engines of further, self-regulated learning. Regular interaction is also necessary to avoid high drop-out rates and learner isolation. Interaction can occur in several ways.

Thereby this specific process "enter the cultural and literary context of intellectual spaces and apertures for written patterns of the past, creative activities of the present, and plans for the future. This view is extremely important and useful in the educational process itself" (Senkar 2019: 98).

Sociocultural theories of learning and teaching emphasize that learning is a social event and requires the interaction of several individuals, teachers, students, classmates, group-members (see e.g. Dawley 2007, Meskill 2013). The social experience is essential for learning. It is the connection between learners, the driving force that can even have an influence on motivation (Abrami et al. 1995, von de Water et al 2015). Katherine McWhaw et al. (2003) underline the importance of 'positive interdependence' and the effects of belonging to a group. They even link the social aspects of learning with learners' autonomy or independent learning. They claim that the sense of trustworthiness promote learning, develop social skills and support self-regulated learning. They argue: "(...) successful learners are motivationally, cognitively and behaviourally active participants in their own learning" (McWham et al. 2003: 81-82). They also add that it even works the other way round, which means that successful learners should take responsibility for their learning "such as those encountered in collaborative learning environments" (McWham et al. 2003: 83).

Martin Weller explains that one of the most dominant approaches in online courses is constructivism, which is heavily influenced by the work of psychologist Jerome Bruner. Weller claims that the philosophy behind constructivism is that learners construct their knowledge, solutions, interpretations to problems and ideas, based on their experience and relationship with concepts, through dialogue with other learners and the teacher (Weller 2005). This means that an online course based on a constructivist approach involves structured discussion, group work, collaboration, problem-solving and the role of the teacher is changed from a controller, leader to the role of a facilitator encouraging, helping, and assisting the learning process. Weller describes the following approaches to online learning: (1) resource-based learning, (2) collaborative learning, (3) problem-based learning, (4) narrative-based teaching, (5) situated learning.

Out of the above list, resource-based learning, collaborative learning and problem-based learning should be paid special attention when designing online courses, since they have a great potential in maintaining student-student and student-teacher interaction and open up more space for learner involvement. In fact, the three approaches to online teaching and learning can be used in combination, they share several similarities and all of them can be viewed as examples of the constructivist approach to online teaching. In a resource-based approach, learners must solve a problem or produce an output with the help of several resources, for example access to a database of articles, or a collection of resources on CD (Weller 2005: 67-68). This approach also involves making learners not only involved in but also responsible for their own learning process. They have to look for new resources and judge whether what they have found is relevant to the task they have been given. Learners are also provided with resources and guidance from the teacher, however, they have to complete the task on their own or by collaborating with another learner.

Collaborative learning is very much involved in almost all approaches to online teaching and learning emphasising the importance of interaction and the idea of the social learner. It involves giving tasks to learners that need to be completed in a group or in a team. Learners learn to communicate with each other and get feedback on their ideas or work from other group members, which may help them reflect on their own work. Working in a group or team face-to-face in traditional teaching and working in a group in online courses definitely have similarities, however, the latter raises some additional issues or principles that need to be kept in mind. Group members need to have the same access both to video-conferencing platforms (if the group decides to have regular meetings online) and to online

materials necessary for completing the task. Learners should also be given guidance on how to carry out tasks online with their group members (which online tools are appropriate) and what the particular individual contribution of each group member should be.

Similarly to resource-based and collaborative learning, problem-based learning is centred on increased learner responsibility and involvement in the learning process. Learners are expected to solve a given problem by collecting information, gaining knowledge and investigating several practices and ideas. Learners need to focus on the context in which the problem occurs and they need to find relevant solutions. Based on this approach, learners participate in meaningful tasks. In an online environment, problem-solving learning must go hand-in-hand with careful teacher guidance and constant support.

Selecting an appropriate pedagogical approach to online teaching is also determined by the availability of technological tools, since the latter determines the former to a great extent.

Moving to online space can also be understood as getting rid of the borderlines and limitations of physical space. It is very similar to the way Senkar describes the disappearance of borderlines between cultures and nations in literature: “also those elements of the exosphere had been incorporated into the literary devices (e.g. poems), which appeared in communication practice of the homeland after disappearance of physical borders of the countries. Because of this aspect, the current borders (external, internal) of the language have a heterogeneous character” (Senkar 2019: 259).

3.2 Choosing technological tools

Selecting technological tools for the online course is one of the greatest challenges for the instructor. There is no technology that would replace face-to-face contact or which would satisfy all learner needs, learning styles or all course objectives. However, the right choice of the online learning environment and online tools has a significant impact on learning efficiency, which can be further improved by using a variety of online tools.

Don Olcott (1999) lists what he calls the five “I’s” of effective distance teaching:

- Interaction – it refers not only to the communication between the student and the teacher and between a student with other students but also means the interaction between the student and the content of the course. (Olcott 1999, cited in: Palloff – Pratt 2001: 52)
- Introspection – students need practical examples where they can apply their understanding of the content. This can be encouraged by discussion boards, graphics, audio and video technologies (Olcott 1999, cited in: Palloff – Pratt 2001: 52)
- Innovation – experimenting with new technologies to satisfy the needs of various learning styles (Olcott 1999, cited in: Palloff – Pratt 2001: 52)
- Integration – refers to the integration of facts, concepts, theories, and practical application of knowledge. This can be carried out for example by case studies, print exercises or role-play (Olcott 1999, cited in: Palloff – Pratt 2001: 52-53)
- Information – refers to the knowledge and understanding that students need to acquire in order to move to the next level of learning (Olcott 1999, cited in: Palloff – Pratt 2001: 53).

Lisa Dawley (2007) underlines that effective online courses involve feedback, interaction and content, promote self-learning and pay attention to learning styles (Dawley 2007: 5). The most important components of any online course are student-student interaction, teacher-student interaction, learners’ independent work and available online materials.

Practical tips for instructors when designing an online course:

- Set clear course objectives, formulate what a successful learner will be able to do and which skills and knowledge will be improved by the end of the course.
- Decide on how much time students should be working on the course each week.
- Ask for feedback from learners continuously throughout the course – already early at the beginning of the course.
- Prepare course content and resources that are available in a digital form.
- Use a learner-centred approach and customise and personalise learning.
- Make sure that all participants are given enough opportunities for interaction during each online session.
- If possible, divide the class into smaller groups when teaching in a video-conferencing platform.
- Decide on how you are going to communicate with learners during the course.

4 A case study

The aim of the case study was to observe the characteristics of an individual unit – a group of teacher trainees during a bachelor’s level methodology course Drama Techniques in Teaching English as a Foreign Language I. (DRA1) in the winter term of the 2020/2021 academic year at the J. Selye University, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language and Literature, in Komárno, Slovakia.

The general method applied was unstructured participant observation to yield profiles of individual behaviour as well as group interaction. Correlation between course attendance (attendance of weekly course sessions) and the final results of students (successful course completion) was examined. The setting, at the beginning of the study, was in the natural environment of the university premises – classroom setting for three weeks. During the following ten weeks the course was shifted to an online environment due to the Covid-19 pandemic and general lockdown in Slovakia. 17 teacher trainees of English as a foreign language participated in the research. They were students in the third year of their studies at bachelor’s level, teacher training.

The case study presents the principles and goals of shifting DRA1 course to online space. The main aim when putting the previously exclusively offline DRA1 course online was to increase student-student and teacher-student interaction and student engagement in order to increase successful course completion and avoid student drop-out. Students’ involvement is checked not only by their active participation in online sessions on a video-conferencing platform, but also by their regular contributions (both oral and written) as well as their success in passing the course (pass the final test and hand in the final project).

4.1 Putting drama online

Traditional, classroom-based drama activities are hard to imagine in an online environment, since the essential parts of drama courses include plenty of movement, physical activities and tasks, non-verbal communication, using props, group work and intensive learner cooperation. The main objectives of the DRA1 course offered for EFL teacher trainees include the presentation and demonstration of the most frequently used drama techniques in teaching foreign languages. In the offline version of the course, the instructor presents concrete drama-based activities and lesson plans, the trainees participate actively so that they experience how drama is used in education through direct involvement, emotional engagement and active cooperation with other course participants. The most significant drama techniques presented during the course are the following: hot seating, mirroring, miming, teacher narrative, role-play, mingling, sculpting and improvisation.

The shift to online space was based on the constructivist approach to online teaching and focused on resource-based

learning, collaborative learning and problem-based learning. Tools and applications used during the online DRA1 course: e-mail, Zoom video-conferencing platform (interactive online lessons; one session every week), YouTube (for watching short videos), Moodle, online journals, blogs and the department website for publishing the syllabus.

E-mail

The online course was set off with an introductory e-mail sharing basic information about the course, time schedule and instructions regarding attendance of online lessons. E-mail is the most commonly used tool between an online teacher and the learners, it is the tool of one-to-one communication as well, since it offers the feeling of privacy and also immediate response, since e-mails are usually checked on a daily basis. In addition, e-mails offer a means of preserving written information, if the learners forget about something, they can search for it in previous e-mails. The learners need to feel that they can turn to the course instructor or teacher any time without agreeing on a consultation date or online meeting in advance. Being able to contact the instructor can improve the learner's sense of connectedness, and feeling of support from the side of the teacher, who is more accessible in this way.

Disadvantages of e-mails include the absence of non-verbal communication, lack of visual contact and the fact that it can be really time-consuming for the teacher if there is a high number of students or more online courses simultaneously. This requires high-level organization skills from the teacher and establishing boundaries at the beginning of the course, e.g. about how often and when, in which cases the teacher will respond to e-mails, could help avoid this problem. DRA1 students used e-mails for asking for clarifications regarding course requirements and asking for help from the teacher to clarify terminology.

Audio-video conferencing

Video conferencing platforms have gained wide popularity during the last few years and have received special and intensive attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. Audio-video conferencing is an interactive form of communication involving a camera, microphone, document sharing opportunities and chat. It provides space for more people taking part in verbal and visual communication simultaneously.

Video conferencing can be carried out with the help of various software and Internet-based tools, based on the type of the concrete tool, video conferencing can integrate other features such as a whiteboard area, application sharing, sharing the computer screen to another user, text messaging, polling, file sharing (Dawley 2007: 145). By using a video conferencing platform, both the teacher and the learners become more real, by seeing facial expressions, eye contact, and non-verbal communication. Interaction between both the teacher and the learner as well as interaction between learners becomes more intensive.

During the DRA1 course, the Zoom video conferencing platform was used. It is a platform for video, voice, content sharing, and chat runs across mobile devices, desktops, telephones, and room systems (www.zoom.us). The application allows whiteboard usage, both private and group text messaging, screen share and video communication with cameras and microphones. Power Point slide shows, videos were shared through this application during the DRA1 online sessions. The Zoom application provides opportunities for recording conversation and sessions, however, this function was never used during DRA1 lessons.

All participants of the course owned and were able to use a webcam and had a microphone and all course participants had previous experience with Zoom (during the spring term of the year 2020).

Online YouTube videos, websites and blogs

Students watched YouTube videos about recorded drama sessions, which helped to demonstrate drama techniques that could not be presented in front of the screen by the instructor and

could not be tried and tested by the students themselves. In addition, students received links to drama websites and articles on educational drama, which they had to use as the basis for completing three different tasks which they had to send back to the instructor. The three tasks, all of them based on a problem to solve, could be completed in pairs or groups.

Working in small groups

The 17 students were divided into two groups, group A consisted of 7 students, group B of 10 students (based on students' timetable preferences). Unlike during previous academic years, this term students worked in smaller size groups in order to increase opportunities for oral interaction during online sessions.

Moodle

Course assessment requirements included handing in a final project, a lesson plan based on drama techniques designed for EFL learners together with a self-reflective feedback on the lesson plan (reasoning the choice of drama techniques and feedback on the compilation of the lesson plan). For this task, students could collect 50 points. In addition, students had to take an online test in Moodle, the university learning management system, for further 50 points. The final test consisted of open ended test items.

5 Findings

Drama techniques based on physical movement such as mingling (moving around aimlessly in the room to fill in space) or sculpting (making a sculpture of a person, idea, notion or scene, trying to express it through the posture and the face of the sculpture) were impossible to present through the physical engagement of the students in online space, since there were no opportunities for physical interaction between group members. These techniques were presented to students via online videos showing learners using or trying these techniques. However, mirroring, miming, teacher narrative, role-play, hot-seating and improvisation worked well and could be presented, though instructions and task completion had to be adjusted to the online environment. For example, when doing a role-play, each student was given a role-card through private chat, in a text message on Zoom. After having read their role, they could start the activity and communicate with others.

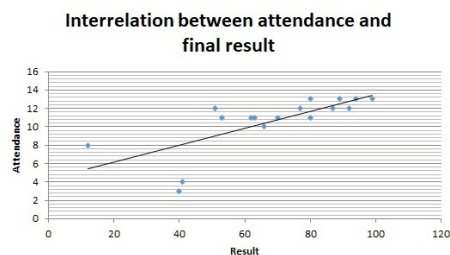
Attendance did not drop significantly after shifting the course online. During online sessions on Zoom (one session each week), student engagement could be observed based on the completion of tasks and participation in discussion. Each student completed at least one task connected to drama during the session and each student was involved in oral discussion, none of the students were silent or passive, though there were students who had to be encouraged to speak or challenged with a question.

When compared with the results of previous years, course drop-out rates, there is no significant change in the 2020/2021 online semester (see Table 1).

Year	Number of students enrolled in DRA1	Drop-out rate
2020/2021	17	17.65%
2019/2020	33	13%
2018/2019	16	18.18%

Table1: DRA1 course drop-out rates in three consequent academic years.

When examining the interrelation between attendance and final results (scores), strong correlation can be observed (see Graph 1).



Graph 1: Interrelation between students' class attendance and their final result

Students could attend the maximum of 13 sessions (3 face-to-face sessions and 10 online sessions). Arithmetic mean is 11.00, standard deviation is 2.87. The maximum of attended classes: 13, minimum: 3, sample range: 10, modus: 11, median: 11.

Students could collect the maximum of 100 points. Arithmetic mean is 69.69, standard deviation is 22.51. The maximum of obtained points: 99, minimum: 12, sample range: 87, modus: 80, median: 70.

There is directly proportional, linear, strong correlation between attendance and result (COR: 0.73), the more classes students participated in, the more likely they were to collect more points to pass the DRA1 course.

6 Discussion

Our findings support the research findings of Sedef Uzuner Smith and Ruchi Mehta, who examined a fully online course, master's level in the United States (Uzuner-Mehta 2013). The course being observed consisted of seven modules, each module lasted two weeks. The study of Smith and Mehta examined the role of dialogue, discussions and forms of interaction in the learning process and is a great example of investigating the social nature of learning. Though the course was not centred on drama techniques (it was about issues related to language, literacy and technology), the impact of interaction being examined the number of students (19 students in the US course) as well as course length (14 weeks) are very similar to our data. Contrary to Smith and Mehta, who examined students' attitudes on the quality of discussion and their perception of their learning, instead of learners' attitude, our study examined their learning outcomes in relation to their active participation, attendance and engagement in the course and their success in passing the course and fulfilling assessment requirements.

More and more research findings support the fact that the key to successful online learning is the formation of an effective learning community as the vehicle through which learning occurs online (Palloff-Pratt 2007). Although our findings are limited to one single case study and need to be repeated with different types of online courses, they underline the importance of interaction and student engagement in online courses in avoiding student drop-out and maintaining course attendance and draw a link between student engagement and interaction and successful course completion.

7 Conclusion

The transition to online teaching should go along with the development of teachers' skills and training. The transformation of existing practice, which was actually forced by external (pandemic) factors will definitely influence future approaches to the forms and platforms of teaching and learning. Sociocultural theories on learning and constructivist approaches to online learning will continue to be more and more dominant, since learner involvement and interaction are the key elements of effective learning.

Though the transformation of methodological drama courses in higher education into online space seem to be one of the greatest challenges an instructor can face, in the case of the DRA1 course

at J. Selye University in Komárno, a learner-centred approach, focusing on learner involvement, problem-based learning and the selection of the right online tools managed to keep students involved, could support successful learning and helped avoid an increase in student drop-out.

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Primary Paper Section: A

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