

IS VIRTUAL EDUCATION A SUSTAINABLE OPTION: INSIGHTS FROM ONLINE COMMUNICATION CLASSES

Alina-Andreea URLICA¹, Laura COROAMA DORNEANU¹, Iasmina IOSIM¹,
Iasmina SAVESCU¹, M. R. LUNGU¹, R. PASCALAU¹
¹Banat's USAMVBT "King Michael I of Romania"
Corresponding author: iasminaiosim@yahoo.com

Abstract. *The study explores the current digitalization of learning / teaching processes and the learners' perspectives on this new educational experience as regards communication, as well as benefits and limitations of this emerging trend. The latest developments have transferred education onto electronic devices, leaving many students without voices and / or "faces", as they remain hidden or self-erased in the new virtual environments. Questionnaires have been applied to students from Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "King Michael I of Romania" from Timisoara, Romania during the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021. The students who sent in feedback were from various specializations at the faculties of Food Processing, Tourism Management, Biology, Horticulture, and Landscaping. Based on a qualitative analysis from the perspective of ecosemiotics and ecological communication approaches, the paper discusses opportunities for multimodal communicative learning. For this purpose, it proposes to develop multimodal and collaborative competences in language learners inspired by evidence-based insights into the principles provided by ecolinguistics. As a result, we explore the possibility of preserving the ecology of the learning environment in an active, enabling, and participatory manner. We also emphasize some relevant aspects that ought to be considered when implementing distance education, in the light of fostering a sense of a community of practice in a sustainable transformative learning process.*

Keywords: *communication, language learning / teaching, ecolinguistics, ecology of virtual learning environments, sustainability.*

INTRODUCTION

The latest developments in e-learning and the emerging digitalisation are profoundly affecting communication patterns, especially the learners' interactive modalities (DEDE & BARAB, 2009: 301). One aspect of virtual learning which remains problematic refers to the socio-affective learning strategies which were long upheld as ideal tools for language learning and communication based on emotional intelligence and other "soft skills". Despite the ease of getting connected, challenges are posed as to developing real interpersonal relationships to support learners and peer feedback, as well as overall group cohesion (DRAGOESCU URLICA, 2019: 53). For the same socio-affective reasons, the problem of agency is also a critical issue for the online pedagogical environment, as there is a risk for self-erasure and remaining hidden/non-vocal and/or non-visible, especially in introvert participants. Social and context-related aspects are also essential for building communities of learners who engage actively in relation to one another as they learn and coevolve.

In situated learning theory, there is enhanced emphasis on participating into the actual personalized context. (LAVE & WENGER, 1991) define "Communities of Practice" as groups of people who share a concern which they advance on collaboratively by interacting with one another (WENGER, 2006: 1). Not only is interaction and joint participation essential to establish a Community of Practice, but it is also exclusive modality for members to actually engage in situated learning (LAVE AND WENGER, 1991). By the same token, BROUWER AND WAGNER (2007) corroborate that learning is a social, as much as a situated phenomenon. Therefore, Communities of Practice is the appropriate locus for the acquisition of knowledge, as "learning not only takes place in the social world, but also constitutes that world" (BROUWER AND

WAGNER, 2007: 33). LAVE & WENGER (1991: 30-40) argue that comprehensive learning involves engaging “the whole person rather than ‘receiving’ a body of factual knowledge about the world” and therefore, “learning is necessarily situated” as a process which occurs by immersion within the learning community, while members absorb meaning and become part of the community member at the same time. Furthermore, learning is configured as a situated activity which requires immersion in a particular sociocultural context, for instance engaging in co-constructing the meaning of learning and thereby becoming a full participant in sociocultural practices (LAVE & WENGER, 1991: 33).

On the other hand, the European Commission’s Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) has placed strong emphasis on enhancing digital competences and digital literacy fit for the transformation imposed by the digital age (EC, 2020). The EC and Council recommendations on developing a comprehensive approach to language learning, as well as digital skills are in line with the new variants of community of practice that have been proposed under the blended denomination “online community of inquiry”, according to the model introduced by GARRISON & AL. (2000) regarding collaborative online learning. Thus, learning development within a Community of Practice, depends on socially constructed participation, which requires establishing mutuality of relationships, engaging in joint activities, as well sharing resources, whether language or other tools.

Moreover, GARRISON, ANDERSON, & ARCHER (2001: 11) have proposed the “online community of inquiry” framework in blended or distance education, which presents several advantages to classical styles of learning. Online education sustainably maintains some ecological aspects from the face-to-face modality which are even more readily available online, as communications technology provide the ideal opportunity to create instant collaborative communities of learners. Therefore, the “community of inquiry” framework supports a more balanced modality of collaborative learning, which transitions from the conventional teacher-centered classrooms (“the sage on the stage”) or even traditional distance education (“the guide on the side”), to the more complex facilitation of learning where instructors are collaborators and mediators of online direct learning (GARRISON, ANDERSON, & ARCHER, 2001: 11). It is thus easier to reach the desired outcome of encouraging active and direct participation as opposed to the formal face-to-face presence typical of lectures in front of the whole class.

In addition, from an ecosemiotical perspective, we have to rethink the sociocultural sphere that has been transferred to virtual environments as an entirely new type of extended semiosphere, *i.e.* the “digital semiosphere” (BANKOV, 2020: 246). This new phenomenon we are encountering has come to replicate socio-cultural activities, including learning and teaching (KRECH, 2020: 194). Within the extended digital semiosphere, “the socio-cultural sphere is conceptualized as communication that [...] is an emergent reality (LUHMANN IN KRECH, 2020: 194). Based on this larger perspective, the research we conducted proposes to develop multimodal approaches inspired by evidence-based practical insights into collaborative learning and ecolinguistics. As educators, we need to enable students to participate in networks of communication which are structured as semiotic micro-contexts building into an organic learning environment based on inclusive cooperation. While educators are developing new skills to help connect individual learners and system change in the digitalisation process, we need more guidance on communicating effectively. Connectivism theory (SIEMENS 2004, 2009) may also provide effective tools for “networked learning”, as the world has evolved into an evermore networked space, integrating principles developed by complexity and self-organization theories. This approach may have implications beyond technology in terms of establishing communicative networks of connections which enable the evolving flow of information (DARROW, 2009: 17). This approach will hopefully drive meaningful engagement

with the learning community in a more ecological manner and with more emphasis on personal encounters within collaborative education.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The material consists of questionnaires applied to learners of English as a Foreign Language and English for Specific Purposes from Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "King Michael I of Romania" from Timisoara, Romania during the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021. The students who sent in feedback were from various specializations at the faculties within the USAMVBT: Food Processing, Tourism Management, Biology, Horticulture, and Landscaping, year 1, 2, and 4. The poll results were anonymous, respected the protocols for collecting the students' personal opinions, and provided evidence for a qualitative analysis, along with experimental-based analysis during online classes. The discussion explores the challenges, limitations, as well as the potential provided by online education in the field of languages, communication and pedagogy, based on a multidisciplinary approach provided by ecolinguistics, ecosemiotics, and the ecology of communication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The feedback was collected from undergraduate students (N = 36) using an online questionnaire, which focused on the students' preference for online/face-to-face learning in English and communication courses. The evidence-based analysis reported in this study explores the communicative challenges that students faced in an online medium of instruction, where they are expected to contribute feedback. The challenges that students face during online classes were particularly connected to socio-affective personality factors, one the problems mentioned in the feedback being shyness and the difficulty of speaking in front of others. The same problem was also recurrent in face-to-face education, which is why educators need to focus more on developing communicative skills, EQ and other "soft skills" more generally (Littlewood, 1981; Dragoescu & Stefanovic, 2018; Bogusławska-Tafelska, 2013). One of the arguments cited in 90% of responses which favoured online learning revolved around or include the fact that learners find this modality "more comfortable". Attitudes vary according to individual traits and personality characteristics, which informs our choice of not validating this response as an instrument in designing future contexts for teaching/learning communication-related subjects. The analysis revealed that 50 % of students found it difficult to focus on listening and a majority (90 %) also found speaking to be the most challenging area during communication or language classes – which remains the core of these subjects.

Answers were correlated to the students' arguments in favor of one type of education over the other, as well as to their personalities and to the scores in the final examinations. Thus, 10 students answered in favor of online education and the main argument to support their choice was the comfort of being in one's home, having more time for other activities, multitasking during classes, and also being able to work without travelling long distances between the job-home-university. In reference to the personalities of students who preferred online schooling, based on observations throughout the semester, the most typical tendencies were to hide behind the camera and be less responsive and participative than expected. One of the most difficult aspects for educators whose subjects require feedback and constant communication with the learners, such as English teaching, was undoubtedly the fact students required ceaseless insistence to be active and responsive. Last but not least, with only two exceptions, the scores achieved by all students who preferred online education were medium-low, ranging between 50%-80%.

On the other hand, students who preferred face-to-face education are generally the responsive ones who participated effectively in online classes, the ones who are highly conscious of the importance of education, the ones who do not work, but focus on studying as much as possible, and also the ones who do not have proper conditions at home for attending as many as 8 classes a day in front of the computer undisturbed in a room of their own. Educators often happened to have extra guests in their classes, such as siblings, smaller curious children, and sometimes even parents who would tag along.

However, these highly conscientious students raised serious arguments as to their preference for getting back to actual classes at the university. Some of the arguments have been recorded in the present research and many others were variations on the same topic, *i.e.* the only form of real learning implies personal and embodied presence in the class environment, working together with a community of learners to achieve a valuable learning experience. In support of this standpoint, students responded: “I prefer face-to-face learning, because I am a traditional person and also it is very unhealthy that we need to stay in front of the laptop and our phones this much time”; 2. “I prefer to go to university face to face because one of the main reasons is the fact that I believe than the physical part of learning couldn't be done online. I'll be able to focus better on learning this way because there'll be fewer distraction than at home.”; 3. “The only form of real learning is at school being completely present, not doing some other activities at the same time”; 4. “I prefer to go to university face to face because this is the real and the only way to learn”, etc.

Based on the respondents' feedback, it appears that the comfortable home environment may present various distractions; students admit they are not always attentive, they often cannot follow, etc. On the other hand, the teacher fails to notice signs of incomprehension that would otherwise be quite obvious in the actual class environment and easily “readable”. It is interesting to note that all of the students who responded in favor of face-to-face education are high achievers, their scores in the final examinations at the end of the semester ranging between 80%-100% points. These figures also support the correlation made above with the type of personality we noticed during seminars, these being the highly conscientious and participative students who are actually the ones most interested in learning. Their arguments need to be taken into consideration to a higher extent to support meritocracy and high achievement in education, perhaps more so than arguments pertaining to comfort, the ability of multitasking, or the lack of distance.

CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusion of this study was that the only form of genuine, immersive learning is by being present personally and physically, while focusing one's full attention in the class environment in a group of peers forming a learning community. It is important to work together with peers, to give and receive feedback, and to have access to all aspects of communication, including facial expression or other personal or emotional aspects. This results in transforming education from a formal, impersonal, or disembodied educational setting into a fully human, embodied, and genuine experience. We need to pass on age-old human values and “soft” skills which can be developed only in contact with others in ecological settings rather than formalizing education and reducing it to the bare transfer of knowledge and diplomas. This basic educational appanage also implies supporting achievement for students who are ready to make active efforts in their learning experience and also to make real encounters with others belonging to the community of learners. Further analysis has to inquire whether online pedagogical strategies may also deploy personalized contexts for students, so that learning

would not become decontextualized, despite the emerging trends as regards the organization of schooling.

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