EXPLORING CHALLENGES IN EFL CLASSES IN THE NEW DIGITAL LANDSCAPES

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Abstract. Academic research on the effect of technology and digital support in education, language learning and teaching has greatly increased in recent years. This issue has come into focus with recent global developments, which have led to research directions taking a radical shift towards digitalized training. Institutions all over the world, including academic establishments, were forced to find strategies to adapt to the pervasive introduction of distance education. As a result of the shift from onsite to online education, academic institutions in North Macedonia and Romania also resorted to digital learning strategies. The transfer from direct to remote learning occurred rapidly, which gave institutions and teachers little time to prepare. Various educational needs called for urgent solutions at all levels. The way teachers handled the situation largely depended on their own creativity and became their responsibility. This exploratory study examines student experiences and perceptions on the new digital environments established through remote education. Acknowledging convenience sampling, the subjects who participated in this study were students at the English Language and Literature Department of the University of Tetovo (UT) in North Macedonia and University 'King Mihai I' from Timisoara, Romania. Data were collected using questionnaires, via Google Docs, in which participants were asked to reflect on their experience. Responses were subjected to a modified content analysis to identify the main themes and topics. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken via Google Classroom to substantiate the essential findings of the subsequent content analysis. The results of the study have shown that safety, security, time and cost effectiveness were perceived among the advantages of online learning. However, peer collaboration and learning were felt as ineffective during online language classes. The study identifies the need for urgent staff and student training in line with recent global developments. This suggestion is not limited to building digital skills from a technological point of view, but also highlights the need to enhance situational and communicative settings in digital environments.

Keywords: EFL (English as a Foreign Language), students' perceptions, digital education, qualitative analysis, tertiary education

INTRODUCTION

While Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) was launched as far back as the early 60s and 70s in the western world, it is still considered highly relevant, especially in the Balkan area. The use of technology in language classes in this part of the world has developed more slowly and such issues have been researched for about a decade only. Consequently, teachers have been struggling to incorporate some aspects of technology (especially audio) in their teaching rather late, while still debating its effect on learning outcomes.

In relation to second language acquisition (SLA), CALL researchers have explored these issues from a wide array of theoretical approaches, including cognitive and conceptual, interactionist theory, and various other sociocultural, or systemic–functional approaches, as well as connectivism theory (CHAPELLE, 2009; SIEMENS, 2005, 2006, 2007; KOPP & HILL, 2008).

As a result of this shift, a growing need was felt for Open Educational Resources (OER), such as free instructional materials, tools, technologies, as well as applications with applicability to education (DAVIS, 1989; LEARNING, 2011; DE HART et al., 2015; MENZLI, SMIRANI, BOULAHIA, HADJOUNI, 2022).

Based on Rogers's Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) Theory (2003), this side of the world would fall under the last of his five adopters – *Late Majority*. However, one cannot blame individuals alone, but rather system evolution. It can be inferred that the diffusion of innovation or the lack thereof is caused by a variety of factors including "the larger social and political context […] and the timing of its introduction" (DEARING & COX, 2018). Upon the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the whole world was taken by surprise, as institutions and individuals struggled to identify ways of facing the new challenges. The need to overcome the situation in higher educational contexts called for urgent remote strategies to continue teaching and to provide students with adequate opportunities for development (ALI, 2020).

Accordingly, the universities introduced Google Classroom / Zoom platform along with Google meet, appeared to be a reliable tool supporting teachers and learners during the remote learning experience, as well as to share documents. Previous research conducted by Okmawati (2020) and others confirms that using this platform is highly effective, as it offers students attractive e-learning opportunities, which have the potential to completely transform English language classes but with some preparation.

Nevertheless, the new situation required an immediate shift to the new form of virtual education, as classes were cancelled without any notice or warning. Accordingly, learners were left to find their own way of using the platform, teachers had to adapt to virtual teaching, and struggled with the difficulties of assessing learners fully remotely. Thus, Google Classroom / Zoom officially replaced the classrooms and lecture halls. Based on data reported by UNESCO, at the beginning of April 2020, a tremendous number of institution closures were registered, with around 1.6 billion learners in 194 countries, which accounts for around 90% of the total number of enrolled learners around the globe (UNESCO, 2020).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Aiming to explore student perceptions and experience of language learning during virtual classes, participants were invited to complete an online questionnaire sent to subjects via Google Docs. The questionnaire, consisting of 8 questions of multiple choice and open-ended types, required respondents to reflect on their experiences during the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken via Google Classroom to substantiate the essential findings of the subsequent content analysis, by focusing on the most critical responses of the online questionnaire (YIN, 2011).

Acknowledging convenience sampling, the subjects who participated in this study were students from the UT at the English Language and Literature Department and University 'King Mihai I' from Timisoara. The questionnaire was sent to 70 students, out of which 64 (n=64) responded, representing 96% of the possible cohort. Moreover, 7 of the 64 students agreed to take part in stage 2 of the study (semi-structured interviews).

Quantitative data consisting of questionnaire responses were analyzed using content analytical procedures which were applied to the student responses based on the frequencies of the responses (see table 1). Semi-structured interviews with student volunteers have been used to triangulate the questionnaire responses (FRAENKEL & WALLEN, 2000). Finally, results have been described using descriptive analyses applied to both study instruments which are reported in detail in the following section.

Besides quantitative methodology, the study also makes use of qualitative and comparative analysis (DRAGOESCU URLICA & STEFANOVIĆ, 2018; KAMBERI, DRAGOESCU URLICA, & AMETI, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Initial results from the quantitative section of this study suggest that respondents had mixed experiences and perceptions regarding the usage of instruments and the effectiveness of studying foreign languages remotely. These results have been backed-up by semi-structured interviews with volunteers. The first two questions focused on the device used for attending classes and issues related to attendance. Thus, around 50 % (48.9) reported having attended classes from the mobile phone; while 38% from a computer; with the remaining combining both depending on the situation. Whatever device they have used, respondents reported having had various issues with the internet connection and power shortages during remote studies.

Nevertheless, most students had a positive attitude towards the platforms. For example, some learners confessed feeling less anxious expressing themselves in the digital context. It can be inferred that the new environment offered a safe place for more introverted learners which was also confirmed in the semi-structured interviews. Further, many students felt that there was more interaction in the virtual environment. As one respondent alleged, an advantage was the time spent by not having to travel. As students revealed in the interviews, not having to travel saved time and money. Nevertheless, among the perceived disadvantages of the GC / Zoom platforms was missing the campus experience like meeting peers, as well as the different methodological approaches implemented in the real classroom, such as peer and group work and genuine interaction with colleagues. This is generally considered as the main drawback of digital education.

The next questions focused on motivation and cognition/comprehension. Over 49 % of the respondents listed lack of motivation as a reason for their dissatisfaction. As one participant asserted in the interviews, "There is a big/ huge difference, I want just to be honest, nobody is learning in this way." Also, most of the students had difficulties understanding and remembering lessons. Responses like, "When we used to go to university, we really did get tired, but we were responsible to work on our assignments, to study and prepare for the upcoming classes. Now, […], there were times when I didn't take the studying part seriously" confirmed their stance.

Table 1.

Advantages and disadvantages of remote learning-student responses

Advantages	Disadvantages
Safe at home (16)	Missing campus life (33)
Wake up later (6)	Internet connection (19)
No rush (2)	Missing interactive games (6)
Warm at home (5)	Group and pair work (15)
Save money (4)	Never meeting colleagues, feelings of isolation, anxiety (4)
Save time (9)	
Speaking free/safely (12)	Many people talking (3)
Access to documents (3)	Microphones all on (2)
Reminders for assignments (3)	Sharing with peers (17)
Fast access to everything (2)	Didn't study a lot (28)
No classroom noise (3)	Too long lectures (1)
Control who talks / raises hands (1)	Unfair grading (1)
Saving trees (1)	Lack of motivation (20)
	Noise in the room (11)

Question six required students to express their feelings about their relationship with their peers and they were divided with respect to this matter. Even though some believed it was the same, others disagreed and stated it was emotionless. As one student confessed, during the interviews "I'm very sociable and I think it would be wonderful getting in touch with other students, here in distance our relationship was distant, we did not talk to each other we just listened to lectures and signed out." Another respondent approved that, "Compared to the classroom, I didn't have any relationship with my colleagues, and I really missed that." This was felt differently by more introverted learners which asserted being more interactive in the online setting.

Question seven required students to express their opinions about the perceived relationship with their teachers, and their mixed responses indicate the very diverse range of perception one may have on the same experience. Some respondents even claimed the relationship in the remote classroom was better, warmer, and they got closer to the teachers. This was confirmed in the interviews, "We had a good relationship and I feel happy that they have managed to teach us despite the difficulties we have had". However, there were a few students who could not make a distinction and believed peer relations were the same in remote and face-to-face classrooms. The last question required participants to give suggestions for future improvement and the most frequent response was to overcome the pandemic. This was addressed in the interviews and a suggestion was to work more on online teaching activities and make them more interactive, as well as to keep cameras on during the meetings.

The results of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews presented and discussed above suggest that learners had mixed experiences and a range of different perceptions regarding the new digital environment of their language lessons. Among the cited benefits were ecological advantages ("saving trees"), control by instructors over noise levels, who may speak / who raises hands, and saving time on commuting. However, the perceived disadvantages are seriously worth taking into consideration, among the most important ones being feelings of isolation, anxiety, and not learning as much as in class due to lack of motivation and group stimulation / emulation. In sum, as reported in previous research we conducted to compare our respective situations with online learning (DRAGOESCU URLICA, KAMBERI, BOGUSLAWSKA-TAFELSKA, 2022, our universities did not have sufficient experience with blended or virtual environments.

The study set out to investigate other factors that might have affected participants' online experiences such as restrictions created by social and economic factors. It is therefore possible that all these factors have impacted student perceptions on online delivery, therefore it is suggested our findings should be interpreted in terms of all these factors, such as teachers' course delivery mode, social factors like sharing one living room with the extended family, as well as economic factors such as lack of devices, internet and electrical power, indicators that might have biased the results. It can be inferred that this is what Bengtsson & Van Poeck (2021) call the *precariousness* of the new, unknown environment as a *milieu of study* (p. 292).

CONCLUSIONS

The limitations of this study include the small sample size, which does not enable the authors to generalize results. Had we researched the students' perceptions on a larger sample of

participants, the proportion of results would probably be altered. Secondly, the survey was carried by two teachers only during their English language classes, which may have achieved very different conditions than other remote classes. Having said that, involving more colleagues from a wider range of departments would result in a variety of expectations and anticipations, thus more reliable results.

Finally, despite these limitations, the study identifies the need for urgent staff and student training in line with recent global developments. This suggestion is not limited to building digital skills from a technological point of view, but also highlights the need to enhance situational and communicative settings in digital environments.

Based on the findings of the study, among the recommendations that may be suggested is that decision and stake holders in higher institutions overcome traditional learning tools and adopt instead and share open education resources (OER) to encourage more accessible education.

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