

ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING BETWEEN TEMPORARY SOLUTION AND FUTURE NECESSITY

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic pushed the limits and limitations of all educational systems, teachers and students around the world. The solution adopted – distance, online teaching, learning and assessment – has proven to be of a longer duration than initially anticipated, to the frustration of students, parents, and teachers alike. Nonetheless, following a careful analysis of these processes over the last (two) semesters, surprising findings point out to the fact that the digital experience has brought forth, at least at the higher-education level, substantial positive outcomes that cannot be neglected. It has strengthened the digital skills that both students and teachers will need in a technology dominated future and has made the actors of the educational process aware of the constant need for an innovative look and creative approach toward sharing and assimilating the impressive amount of knowledge existent nowadays. The present article aims at discovering both the strengths and the weaknesses, the motivational factors and the technical difficulties that have characterized the recent online educational process; it also inquires to what extent this type of learning will be an integral part of our daily lives in the academia, once the on-site courses will be resumed.

Keywords: *online teaching, online learning, digital skills, motivational factors, technical difficulties, blended learning*

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Following the strict lockdown measures imposed by authorities in March 2020, as a consequence of the flare-up of Covid-19 cases, the Romanian higher education teachers and students (along with the rest of the educational system actors), faced a new challenge many have never envisaged before: switching entirely to a distance learning mode with the use of web 2.0 connected devices. Prior to the current pandemic, the e-learning and e-teaching, even in their partially electronic, hybrid/ blended format was something few were familiar with, maybe with the exception of

those enrolled in the distance-learning courses and some intrepid, technology-curious teachers.

Obviously, switching overnight to using new devices, new apps, new methods of teaching, adapting oneself to finding new suitable learning styles given the new context was anything but easy. The Ministry of Education first emitted contradictory regulations, most institutions were caught completely off-guard lacking technical infrastructure, with inexistent prior training programs for the tutors on how to approach such an endeavor and missing tech support teams. In the ensuing chaos, what seemed to function though, according to the author's experience, was human solidarity, even at a distance. Departmental colleagues tried to come up with quick but efficient solutions as to which app, which particular course management system was the most suitable for our types of courses – specialized language ones (The university at the time gave several suggestions to the course tutors, yet allowed everyone to choose the best option for their type of science and for the most part left teachers to learn on their own how to actually operate them).

During the second semester of the 2019-2020 academic year, most teachers from the Department of Specialized Foreign Languages within Babeş-Bolyai University focused on using a combination of apps and platforms for delivering the seminar-style, practical courses of various languages. In order to cover all skills that students needed to practice, and to insist on the pragmatic, hands-on, student-focused type of activities we normally deal with, Edmodo, Google Drive and the email were used for keeping in touch, for posting the Word/PDF format of the courses or the other materials students needed (audio files, Internet sites' links, specialized glossary lists, dictionary and specialized English textbook extracts), as well as for providing students with asynchronous activities needed (most in the quiz-like format) to help them test their newly acquired vocabulary or listening/ reading skills. To enhance their speaking skills, synchronous discussions were regularly carried on Zoom, which allowed for conversation practice, course details discussion and clarification, exam preparation as well as more or less (in)direct communication and emotional support.

In the 2020-2021 academic year however, the online educational process became more organized and unified. Our university decided to ask all tutors and students to adhere to the MS Teams learning management system that contained a number of integrated instructional functions that could satisfy most requests. Coming to this conclusion was a logical one, considering how frustrating and difficult it was for students to manage things. They had to adapt to, learn and use all the different apps and platforms their tutors would recommend, irrespective of one another's overlapping demands and regardless of the impossibility to keep up with all of them. While some scholars (Vereş et al., 2020) noted the considerable effort of professors at Babeş-Bolyai University to acquire rapidly the necessary ICT skills and to adapt their instructional materials, their teaching methods to the myriad of new apps new and course management platforms (MOODLE, Microsoft Teams), some have noted the urgency for university

managemnt to offer an increased, more direct, hands-on support to both teachers and students, perhaps by creating a permanent educational technology team (Ilovan, 2020).

Of course, in the face of such dramatic, sudden changes, one must keep in mind that not only the teaching medium changes, but everything else as well – the way the course is structured, the methods of teaching employed, the type of activities that are carried out, the way one connects with the students and the faculty members, the way the assignment is done, the feedback regulation. What seems to change the most though, is the role of the teacher as indicated by Sorin Gudea in his book *Expectations and Demands in Online Teaching: Practical Experiences* (2008):

“Technology brings about a potential for enhancing the role of the teacher. Yet, it is not solely the technology, but rather the changes in teaching style that are important. Different environments will call for adjustments to the teaching styles. [...] In distance education, the role of the teacher evolves to a constructivist stance – one that requires the teacher to be a facilitator. As multimedia technologies become an integral part of traditional education, the teacher is no longer the knowledge source and instead becomes a knowledge facilitator. [...] Rather than filter the access to information, as is the case in the traditional classroom, teachers can recommend additional resources and guide students toward their own discovery. Conceptually, the teacher moves from being in the center of the physical classroom to the periphery of the online classroom. [...] The teacher is responsible for framing the course and providing resources and opportunities to supplement the students’ interactions. In their revised role, teachers facilitate interaction by engaging the students” (Gudea, 2008, pp. 6-7).

Several studies have inquired what kind of teacher personality will make the best one for the e-learning environment. Many scholars suspected that having a sound grasp of the tech world, having extraordinary ease in using all sorts of apps and platforms and being the students’ go-to technical backup specialist will surely indicate the right teacher for the online environment. This was one of the questions we were curious to find an answer to by asking for our tourism students’ feedback. Several of their answers (as discussed later on in the article) would confirm the hypothesis that a tech-savvy teacher is important to them, yet they also emphasized the human dimension of the problem. In a similar manner, Susan Ko and Steve Rossen’s *Teaching Online, A Practical Guide* (2010) mentions that a tutor for an online course should pay attention first and foremost to his/her students’ needs – technical, intellectual or emotional:

“What kind of people make the best online instructors? Surprisingly, it is ‘people-oriented’ people who make the best online instructors. Though these people-oriented people may initially feel the most anxiety about teaching online, their desire to reach out to their students, their empathy and interest in others, and their urge to bridge communication gaps mean that they have the aptitude and motivation to become the very best online teachers. [...] ‘Techies’ don’t necessarily make the best online instructors. An interest in teaching should come first, technology second” (Ko & Rossen, 2010, p. 18).

In their turn, students also find that their “workload”, the way in which they manage their time, the learning style they need to adopt for the e-learning have changed too. With the incredible flexibility given by the online framework (where geographical, physical, chronological and accessibility barriers have fallen), students are clearly at the center of the educational process. Everything is about facilitating learning for them and providing them with the best sources of knowledge (internet and teacher driven ones), with the best methods of enhancing the knowledge they need to acquire. They are also more responsible for their own learning than they were before. In the context in which the teacher’s direct supervision and guidance is missing, it is the duty of the student to organize himself/herself, to manage his/her time wisely, to study on his/her own without procrastinating. In this context, a crucial element for the teacher would be achieving the right degree of *engaged learning* on behalf of the students, as the concept is defined by Rita-Marie Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson in their book *Engaging the Online Learner; Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction* (2004).

“The involvement of the learner in the course, whether one calls it interaction, engagement, or building community, is critical if an online course is to be more than a lecture-oriented course in which interaction is primarily between the learner and the content or the learner and the instructor. [...] Engaged learning stimulates learners to actively participate in the learning situation, and thus gain the most knowledge from being a member of an online community. [...] Students cannot be passive knowledge-absorbers who rely on the instructor to feed information to them. In an online course, it is imperative that they be active knowledge-generators who assume responsibility for constructing and managing their own learning experience. In a learner-centered environment, the traditional responsibilities such as generating resources and leading discussions shifts to the learners. Success in an online learning environment depends on the use of instructional strategies that support the shift in roles and the development of self-direction. [...] The student’s role as an engaged learner develops over time. Interaction and collaboration is not intuitive to many adult learners who have been educated in a predominately lecture-based environment. Initially a learner may be more comfortable in a passive student role and will need guidance and the opportunity to become more involved in an online learning environment. An online learner must quickly establish comfort with the technology, comfort with predominantly text-based communication, and comfort with a higher level of self-direction than in a traditional classroom. If this comfort level is not reached, the learner will walk away from the course in frustration” (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004, pp. 6-7, pp. 9-10).

This last situation highlighted by Conrad and Donaldson is particularly illustrative of the Romanian university students, most of whom come from their lower education years with a traditional idea about what is their role in their own learning. Many professors in our country have repeatedly complained that their students only expect “to be taught” lecture-style, being only passive absorbers of knowledge because in the secondary school, in high-school, the students’ creativity was never emphasized, the students were not really accustomed to express their opinions about a subject,

especially if that meant coming into contradiction with colleagues or teachers. Since most students expect to simply receive knowledge, but not to actively search for it (even under the professor's guidance), since they are not used to do a selection process for finding the right source of information, the tutors in Romanian universities still have their work cut out for them in this respect.

It is at this point when using web 2.0 technologies proves to be useful in helping build student engagement and motivation. The fact that quite often teachers describe the current generation of young students as people who "were born with the mobile phone/ the computer in their hands" illustrates the belief that students nowadays may be (unintentionally) better trained and prepared for an online type of education (at least compared to previous generations). As further illustrated in this article, the students of the Faculty of Geography specializing in Tourism have indicated a good familiarity with the online teaching/ learning tools. The geographical students' good computer skills and propensity for using mobile, digital tools in their content learning and teaching skills' acquisition has also been noted by other specialists (Dulamă et al., 2019), indicating that the current student generation (generation Z) is the one to embrace with ease the e-learning facilities and materials. As Patrick Blessinger and Charles Wankel noted in their article "Novel Approaches in Higher Education: An Introduction to Web 2.0 and Blended Learning Technologies" (2013):

"Web 2.0 technologies are especially useful because they overlap and integrate with many other technologies such as mobile technologies to create a more seamless and transparent experience for instructors and students. These technologies are also supported by several learning theories because they support the building of human relationships and global communities, not just simple exchange of information. This implies that they are also aid in both affective and social learning, not just cognitive learning, thus addressing all learning domains of students. [...] Regardless of the setting, the idea is to create better learning by making it more meaningful, more purposeful, and more authentic. [...] Students today are often referred to as digital natives or the net generation and this matters to the extent that the technology they use is an unescapable and normal part of their lives" (Blessinger & Wankel, 2013, p. 4).

According to Jennifer Lock and Petrea Redmond in their article "Empowering Learners to Engage in Authentic Online Assessment" (2015), one way to motivate students to get engaged in their own learning is to focus on a special kind of evaluation. If students learn only because they know they have to pass an exam at the end of the semester, if that exam only checks a list of information students learnt by heart with details that have little relevance for them, then a lot can be lost in terms of students' motivation. What is necessary is *authentic assessment* that would connect to the learners' own reality and future professional interest: "If something in education is thought of as being authentic it is often thought of as being or mirroring 'real-world' activities and being useful or relevant beyond the classroom [...]" (Lock & Redmond, 2015, pp. 24-25). As such students need to control "the nature and the direction of the learning based on their

perceived gaps in knowledge" (Lock & Redmond, 2015, pp. 28-29). If they manage to "identify the relevance of the content to their professional lives" (Lock & Redmond, 2015, p. 28), students will surely be a lot more engaged in their learning and their assessment will not be a process devoid of relevant results and long-term achievements.

In practical terms, that means that the way teachers view assessment needs to change from the traditional, summative practices done at the end of the work/semester by means of a (written) exam or even quiz as it frequently happens online, to a new form that will stress the acquisition of skills students will need in real life, at their future jobs. Through authentic assessments students will also use materials and maybe even try to duplicate the conditions of a real-world environment like the one where they will practice their profession. If the *summative assessment* verifies the cumulative learning from the course, a better form – the *formative one* – occurs throughout the course and informs the way, the content and the pace of teaching, thus proving to be of more relevance for the students. Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt made a similar observation about the usefulness of authentic assessment in their book *Assessing the Online Learner: Resources and Strategies for Faculty* (2009):

"Many online instructors have noted the difficulty of using tests and quizzes as effective assessments of student learning. Many feel that more authentic assessments – such as projects, papers, and artifacts that integrate course concepts – are more effective means by which to assess student learning online. [...] Involving students in the development of assessments helps to move a learner from the role of student to that of reflective practitioner. Sparked by reflective questions, collaboration, feedback, and the linking of learning to experience, students begin to reflect on their learning process, thus transforming how they perceive themselves as learners. [...] Additionally, the use of performance-based or authentic assessments reduces the possibility of plagiarism; when writing assignments are related to real-life situations known only to the learner, it is difficult to plagiarize or purchase a paper from the paper mill" (Palloff & Pratt, 2009, p. 40, p. 42, p. 46).

The later aspect mentioned connects to many fears and susceptibilities teachers usually have regarding online assessment. Quite often tutors wonder how to ensure the fair, correct nature of the exam if they are not there to supervise students, how to make sure they do not plagiarize texts found on the internet or even more, how to make sure their students from the online courses are actually the ones who take the exams or solve at home the asynchronous assignments they are allotted. Shijuan Liu mentions in her article "Assessment Methods in Online Graduate Courses" (2015) both the advantages and disadvantages brought by this new medium of communication and teaching. The benefits include: "the ability to track, monitor, and document students' activities automatically; unlimited and self-paced access to course materials, and an increased emphasis on student thoughts and reflections" (Liu, 2015, p. 78). Needless to say, there is a downside to every new technological advancement and its usage – the listed disadvantages are: "students may need specific instruction in online assessment; and instructors may have limited ability to

control the time and have no control over the resources that students can access when they take online exams at a distance" (Liu, 2015, p. 78).

What comes forward as a key concept from several studies is the idea of "learner control" over the study environment, over the allotted time for accessing an online class or home assignment, over the assessment form indicated by the tutors. Michael N. Karim and Tara S. Behrend, in their article "Controlling Engagement: the Effects of Learner Control on Engagement and Satisfaction" (2013), identify two types of learner control that teachers should be aware of: instructional and scheduling. If instructional control is about controlling "the pace, content, sequence, guidance and design of training content [...], scheduling control [...] allows learners to control the time and location that they complete training [...]" (Karim & Behrend, 2013, p. 61). What they also noted is that the level of student engagement in an online course is regulated by the student's attitudinal approaches to the course and the way they use the controls mentioned above.

"Learners who dislike the training program may use learner control features to skip through the content and learners who enjoy the training may use these same features to further explore areas of interest. [...] Individuals enjoy feeling in control over their environment and their behaviors. [...] By providing learners with control, they may feel an increased sense of competence and ownership of their learning" (Karim & Behrend, 2013, p. 68).

Considering the relevance for students' future professional life of the student-centered, online instructional materials and assessment forms, as previously noted by several scholars (Dulamă & Ilovan, 2020; Dulamă et al., 2021), the use of multimedia materials – photos, videos, Power Point Presentations, animated films – should often encapsulate real-life content which students may experience firsthand and even create themselves. These instructional and assessment materials have proven to be essential in building participation and motivation in online classes, adding furthermore to the pleasant learning environment thus created. The centrality of authentic assessment to online teaching and learning is further emphasized in specialist literature (Tobin, Madernach & Taylor, 2015) also in the context of the institutional evaluation regarding the instructional process quality and teacher performance in the e-learning framework (a process still in its infancy in Romania, given the novelty of the mass online teaching done here).

What this brief analysis of a few of the traits of e-teaching and learning has shown us, coupled with the practical experience of online teaching during the last three semesters (two of which are presented in detail in the following study using students' feedback), is that online teaching will surely stay with us, even if courses are to be resumed in their regular onsite nature. The hybrid, blended format would be ideal in our vision. It couples the benefits of the much-needed human face-to-face interaction, with all the perks of the online facilities for keeping in touch asynchronously with students, keeping an e-archive of class materials, courses, extra practice activities, web links, individual or team projects,

assignments that can be consulted at any given moment and in any location by both teacher and students. Furthermore, the makeup of the world we live in makes it essential for future generations to have flawless digital skills, to be able to use selectively, in a critical fashion the flood of information the internet provides them with and to use all the advantages of the digital media and devices to enhance their job hunting prospects.

THE STUDY

The focus of this paper revolves around the answers to a questionnaire submitted by the 1st year Tourism students of the Faculty of Geography from Babeş-Bolyai University regarding the impact of the online teaching and assessment conducted in the 2020-2021 academic year. Given the remote distance teaching paradigm that was enforced upon us by the Covid-19 pandemic, a detailed feedback on the highs and lows of the virtual classroom interaction, choice of methods and materials, possible technical drawbacks and advantages seemed a necessary step to take by any responsible teacher.

Measuring students' perception on this whole process perceived as a challenging one, was done on three dimensions: 1) the students' previous easiness in using their digital skills and their familiarity with the online teaching from their last high-school semester; 2) the students' current satisfaction level with the way the English for Tourism course was conducted during their 1st year at university, the way they could find a motivation to study without the direct support of their tutor and peers, as well as finding out the drawbacks that prevented them from performing at an optimum level and 3) the students' opinion regarding the best version of the online assessment options.

The conclusions of this study will inform the way various elements of online education will be inserted in the next academic year's teaching, as it could be potentially done in the classic on site format next October. However, the benefits of the blended learning and the useful lessons learnt during this distance teaching timeframe should not be neglected, but incorporated in an improved version of what teaching English for specific purposes should be like in the 21st century.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In order to determine the students' point of view regarding the effectiveness and usefulness of the methods and means of teaching adopted, as well as the suitability of the assessment methods employed, the author of this article adopted a quantitative approach for this particular research. In this regard, a Microsoft Teams questionnaire was used, with a total of 25 multiple-choice questions and an open-ended one which was supposed to bring a further qualitative nuance.

The survey was administered online, using the MS Teams platform the students and their English tutor used during the academic year. The time frame allotted for the completion of the questionnaire was of three weeks (from April 19th to May 9th 2021) so as to give a chance to all students, even the ones who did not regularly attend the online courses, to respond to it. The students were informed of the anonymity of the data collecting process, a detail meant to ensure the transparency and the ethical nature of the inquiry, in addition to potentially attracting genuine answers. They were also told that the results of the questionnaire would be used in academic research studies. What is to be noted here is the fact that the survey was presented to the respondents in the second half of the second semester, thus allowing them to have an almost complete picture of the entire teaching-learning-assessment process for the 2020-2021 academic year.

SAMPLING

The data processed in this article come from a number of 90 respondents out of a total of one hundred and ten 1st year Tourism students enrolled in the *English for Tourism* specialized course (taught at the Faculty of Geography, Babeş-Bolyai University). The respondents belong to both the Romanian and Hungarian groups, which make their answers relevant for the majority of the tourism students from the Faculty of Geography. Considering the sociometric measurements, from the respondents profile we can notice that the vast majority (80%) are very young high-school graduates belonging to the 18-20 age group, which makes their answers particularly relevant when it comes to their familiarity in using online teaching platforms, since their last semester in the lower educational system was spent on the web due to the first wave of Covid-19 lockdown measures. The remainder of 20% of students that were aged 20+ (up to 25 yrs. old) were most probably the ones who later on indicated having no previous experience in using any web 2.0 means of education.

Another comfortable majority of the students inquired was represented by female students (62%), and by those who indicated that they were enrolled only in the Faculty of Geography (94%). Surprisingly, 5 out of 90 students indicated that they were enrolled in more than one faculty, probably enjoying the more facile opportunity to study in different domains offered by the online teaching paradigm.

In trying to build the profile of the student enrolled in the *English for Tourism* course, we have found out that the overwhelming majority are highly familiar with studying English – more than 73% have studied it for more than 10 years before enrolling at the university and most of them, 84 out of 90, reported having obtained at least the general level of B1 at the

Baccalaureate exam.¹ This would tell any English teacher that according to the requirements for enrollment at the course (the minimum level of proficiency of the students needs to be at least B1-B1+), their familiarity with the general English language and its study could not represent (one of) the cause(s) of their predominant lack of motivation throughout the academic year that they had reported in the survey. Approximately the same distribution was found at the *Placement Test* that all 1st year students need to take at the beginning of their specialized foreign language course since they are compelled to do so by the university's linguistic policy (65 students were at level B1 or above, while 20 did not take the test at all). Also 40% of them mentioned that they can understand as much as they can express in English, while 55% of them said they can understand more than they can express. This finding indicates that almost all students were in the situation in which they were receptive to what was being taught; however, less than half of them felt reassured enough to engage in an open dialogue with the course tutor and/or their colleagues because they felt they did not know how to express themselves well in English. The answers received to the survey's open-ended question, which are discussed in the next section of the article, would further illustrate this point.

We find these above-mentioned details particularly relevant because in the author's 18 years of teaching experience, the fact that students feel "comfortable" during the English course (due to their proficiency level and familiarity with the subject matter) has long-lasting implications when it comes to measuring their satisfaction level with the topics studied during the course and the manner in which the teacher approached them, as well as with establishing what factors might influence their motivation level.

Another aspect that would influence their degree of getting involved in the course and being motivated to study even in unusual circumstances (as was the distance, online teaching framework) is the degree to which the students considered that studying English would prove to be useful for their future career. This extrinsic factor could be for the students, if not the most important, then at least one of the top three motivators for putting in a tremendous effort to get engaged in a course where the human connections with the teacher and their peers, as well as the direct support factors were reduced to a minimum. Eighty-five out of ninety students mentioned that studying English at the university would be useful for their future career, although surprisingly, only 44 were certain that this career would be in tourism, their current specialization domain (41 students answered "maybe" at this last question and 5 students answered a definite "no"). Even so, supposing that they *would* have a career in tourism, a comfortable majority envisaged using English in their professional life either "frequently" – 64% or "all the time" – 6% of the students inquired.²

¹Their Baccalaureate results indicated that out of 90 respondents, 1 student obtained level A1, 5 students obtained level A2, 28 students obtained level B1, 49 students got level B2, 6 students got level C1 and only 1 student was at level C2.

² These findings can be positively correlated with the results of prior surveys taken by young people from previous generations of students of the Faculty of Geography. The similarity of

MAIN FINDINGS

The students' good familiarity with the online teaching process – an advantageous starting point for the 2020-2021 academic year

One of the first important findings of the survey regarded the level of familiarity with the web 2.0 teaching and examination means and methods that students had prior to their enrollment at the university. The fact that they were acquainted with at least one online platform and/or several other apps or social-media websites that allowed them to easily keep in touch with their teachers and peers and to attend online courses was of tremendous help in negotiating this academic year's teaching process. It also removed the considerable emotional burden that usually comes with getting in touch for the first time with such a novel way of long-distance interaction. This aspect is particularly important in Romania, where before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the online teaching was mostly unknown.

If one wants to determine the level of satisfaction with an online course, one needs to start at the very beginning, with the expectations that students had at the start of the academic year regarding the way those courses would be taught. Asked whether they expected to study online during the 2020-2021 academic year, most students revealed they were left in the dark in this respect. Indeed, the state's authorities (the Ministry of Education) and the university's senate announced at the very last moment that courses would be held online, long after students had already enrolled for the study programs, not knowing what would happen next. More than half of them thought they would meet with their colleagues and teachers at least from time to time: 27% expected to study in a regular, face-to-face format and 26% of them believed they would study in a hybrid format (some courses online, some course on site). Only 13 students out of 90 mentioned they suspected they would study online. Fifteen out of 90 mentioned that the safety factor during the pandemic came first for them, the nature of their educational process being only second to that (they were prepared for either format). Given these findings, one can suspect that many of them started with a slight misapprehension and mistrust feeling coming from the uncertainty of the whole educational process.

As it can be seen in Figure 1, when asked if at their enrollment at university they were familiar with the online teaching format from high-school, the majority of students reported having at least a medium-level expertise with the online teaching format that most of them (we suspect the 80% aged 18-20) had obtained in their last semester of high-school: 28% mentioned they were "very familiar", while 36% mentioned their had "medium level" expertise in using the web 2.0 for studying and learning. We

these findings denotes a trend both in the acute need of mastering English in view of the Romanian labor market requirements and the 1st year students' marked indecision regarding the professional path ahead of them. For further details see Mihele & Păcurar, 2019.

could assume that the 12 students out of 90 that said they had no experience whatsoever of online teaching would be among the 18 students that were aged 20+ at the beginning of the academic year (considering they graduated high school prior to the pandemic lockdown). These findings of “familiarity” with the online teaching/ learning points toward a possible lower anxiety factor for the way the students faced the fact they would continue to study at distance at university too, despite their initial expectation of meeting professors and peers face-to-face.

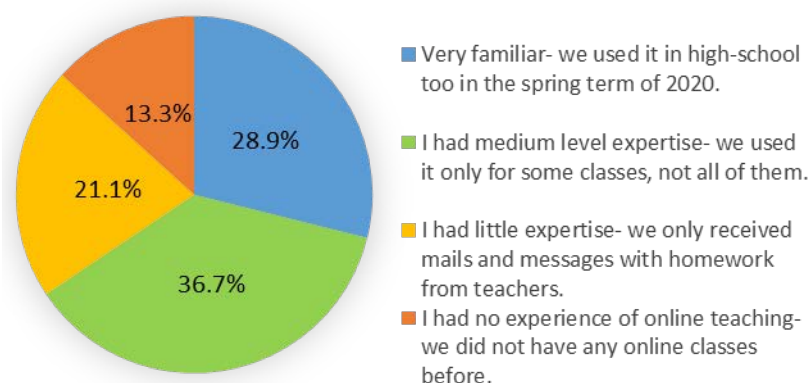


Fig. 1. Students’ previous familiarity with the online teaching format at the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic year

When it comes to the actual e-tools they knew how to use at the start of the academic year, 32% of the students reported having employed predominately Zoom, while 30% of the students mentioned having studied before using Google Classroom. Only 16% of them were familiar with the platform “Microsoft Teams” that Babeş-Bolyai University decided to officially acquire and recommend all its teachers and students, in an effort for uniformization.³ That decision probably came as an answer to the previous year (2019-2020) students’ complaints that in their first semester online, without an official guidance line from the Ministry of Education or the university, each course tutor decided upon his/her own app or platform to recommend/ demand for the teaching process. That ended in a plethora of apps and platforms that students had to learn to use and master in a very short period of time, a fact that increased the students’ confusion, anxiety and frustration. This points out to the fact that a well-thought and coherent plan of action offered by the regulators of the educational process is crucial in determining the efficiency of it and the satisfaction level students have with their academic experience. Teachers can only compensate so far for

³ The other tools the students were familiar with were Skype, WhatsApp, the email, Edmodo (in percentages between 3-1%) and 8% of the students reported that previously they had not used any online teaching tools and apps.

the potential decisional lacks and gaps; in such situations, the improvisational nature of the teaching and learning process risks leaving everyone disappointed and discouraged.

A further indicator pointing out why the motivation level of the students was low throughout the entire academic year (according to their own assessment) is represented by their complex, even contradictory emotional background at the start of the online courses. When asked how they felt at the start of the online courses at university, given 10 choices of various emotional nuances that could have illustrated their frame of mind, as we can notice in Figure 2, the tourism students alternated in almost equal percentages between being “concerned I would not keep up with the rhythm of teaching online” as confessed by 35% of them, to feeling “curious about the platform/ app the teacher would use” as mentioned by 27%. The same percentage of students (25%) were to be found at extreme positions: some were “anxious, even scared because I was not familiar with the online educational tools”, while on the contrary, some of their peers were “more curious about the content of the courses rather than the teaching tools used”.

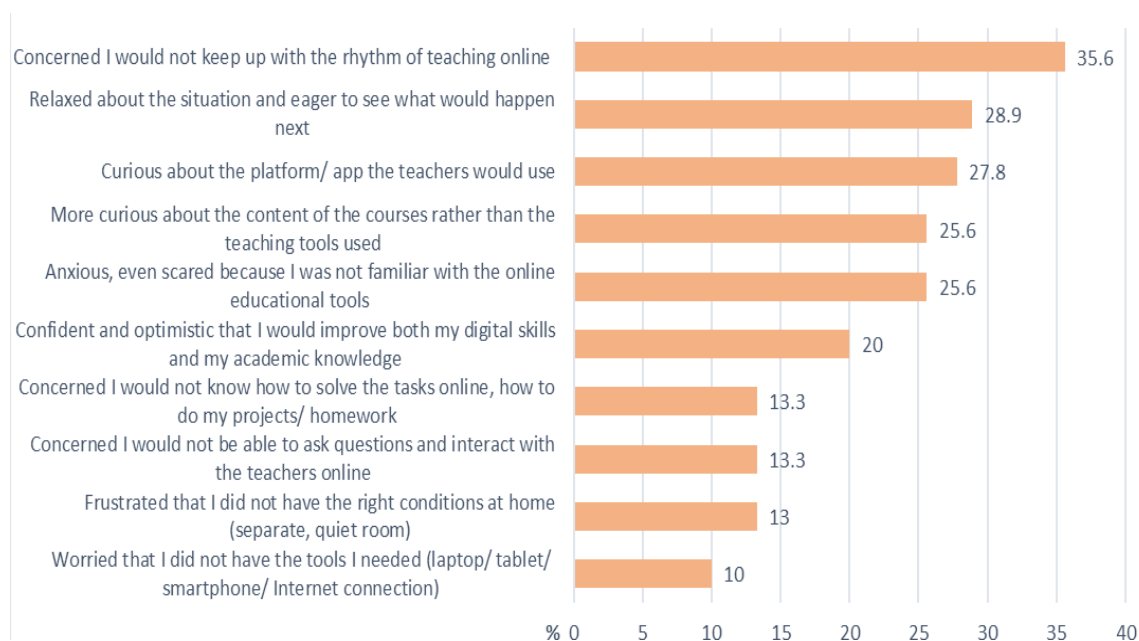


Fig. 2. Students’ emotional expectations regarding the new academic year on the background of the Covid-19 pandemic and distance learning format

This variously colored painting of the students’ emotional state nonetheless reveals more optimistic hues rather than bleak ones, since most students picked the options that included the words “confident and optimistic (that I would improve both my digital skills and my academic knowledge)” – 20% of the students, “relaxed about the situation and eager to see what would happen next” – 28% of the students, and the two “curious about...” answers mentioned above. It is at this point that the students’ individual personalities and coping strategies for new, unexpected and difficult situations are indirectly revealed.

Struggling to find a motivation – the core problem in the remote-distance educational setting

In our attempt to find out the highs and the lows of the online teaching conducted during this academic year, which could inform future (on site) practice as well, several survey questions revolved around the problems encountered by the students and their causes. Our suspicion was that the problems which were at the heart of what went less smoothly in the e-teaching/learning process would be found on a continuum of drawbacks, not just in a single cluster of issues. Therefore, to the question: "Throughout this academic year, which were your biggest problems regarding the online English course?", students had a range of 12 items to pick from – from technical problems connected with the lack of the right tools (laptops, tablets, computers), unstable internet connection, lack of suitable studying space; to digital competencies matters like not knowing how to use the online platform and apps; to time management matters and finding the suitable learning style for the online format; to emotional support issues like not receiving the help of the teacher or parents with the usage of digital tools or not finding a way to motivate themselves. Last but not least, students also had the possibility to indicate social problems regarding the inability to attend courses either because they already had a job, or they had to take care of somebody in their family considering they stayed at home.

Surprisingly, all these matters were picked/ identified by the students to a greater or lesser degree, which would indicate the complex factors young people nowadays had to face and deal with during the Covid-19 lockdown. What topped the list were "not being able to find a motivation to study", indicated by 43% of the students, and "not having a good, reliable internet connection" chosen by 30% of the students (many of them reported during (informal) class discussions that they were living in the countryside during the pandemic). A fifth of them (21%) mentioned that they were not able to attend courses online because they had to go to work, which is somewhat similar to the regular, on-site teaching situation; while 14% indicated as a problem "not having good studying conditions at home (separate/quiet room) with an identical percentage of their peers choosing "not having understood how to study for the exam".

Connected to the motivational factor, when specifically asked about their motivational level for studying English online, as shown in Figure 3, a third of students (38%) reported feeling "considerably motivated", while 26% indicated that they were "averagely motivated". Adding this mixed result to the above-mentioned problem of "not being able to find a motivation to study", it is clear that the online format makes it a lot more difficult for the young, 1st year students, not accustomed to the higher studies' particularities, to follow the courses delivered on the web. It is equally hard for them to focus on the tasks they receive as assignments and to find the suitable style of studying the immense load of information they receive without direct "human" mediation.

ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING ...

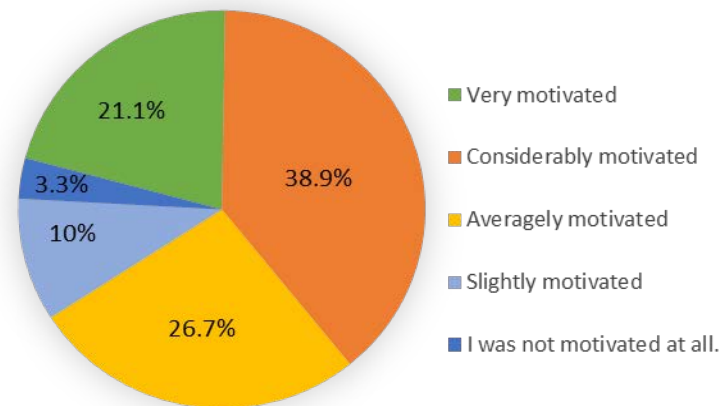


Fig. 3. The students' motivation level during the 2020-2021 academic year according to their own evaluation

Suspecting from the previous class discussions that finding a motivation was a thorny issue this academic year, the next survey questions strived to find out which factors helped positively with finding it (as illustrated in Figure 4) and which ones contributed negatively to this aspect. What definitely helped according to 61% of the students was their familiarity with studying English and their good proficiency in it ("the fact that I always liked English"), "the teacher's attitude and teaching methods" indicated by half of them (50%), and their curiosity about their new domain, tourism – "the new specialized topics and content which are centered around my specialization" – picked by more than a 1/3 of students. In other words, the familiar (matters), the emotionally close support and the professional interest driven curiosity helped them to overcome the blockage brought on by the novelty and the uncertainty of the online distance teaching.

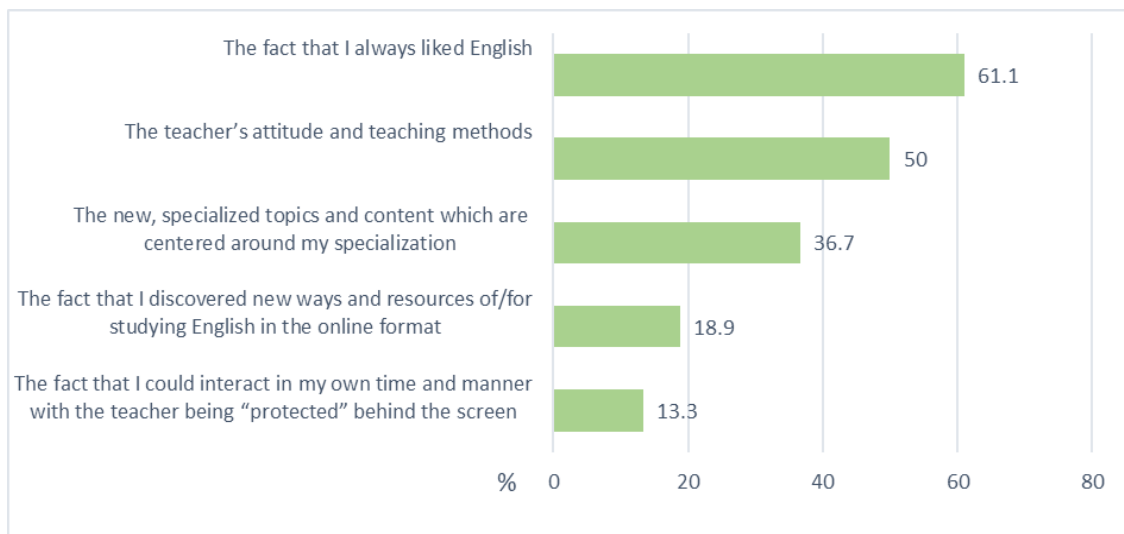


Fig. 4. Positive reinforcers for students' motivation to study

What hindered building a motivation was, according to a vast majority of the students (65%), "the online format which prevents real communication", their own lack of self-confidence ("the fact that I am really shy and do not find the courage to interact with people I have never seen") which was indicated by more than a third of respondents (36%). Only 11, respectively 10 students out of 90 mentioned that their "low level of English" or "the fact that I always found English difficult" was a cause for concern. These responses point out towards the inhibiting nature of the novelty of online interaction and teaching as being the main culprits when it came to finding enough intrinsic resources to perform well during the English course.

In such a delicate context, the role of the teacher somewhat shifted from that of instructor, provider of knowledge to that of technical support person, digital expert and counselor. Asked about what a teacher should be (like) in the online format, almost half of the students (46%) pointed out towards desiring "a guide who can help us with using the online tools properly, but placing the focus on his/her subject to teach", then 40% of them expected the teacher to be "a very good digital expert and use as many apps as possible for various course activities". Their third ranking option (with 34% of the choices) indicated that in the online format a teacher should be "more attentive to our feelings and motivation, in order to supplement the missing direct interaction", which again emphasizes the deep need for the "human touch" we all felt during this isolation period. A quarter of the students also desired more professional guidance from the course tutor who should also be "a counselor to give us advice about our academic development and future career from the perspective of his/her subject". This last finding would correlate positively with a previous survey result, the one previously mentioned as referring to the confusion students felt regarding the future career they would follow – many of them saying that they are not currently sure they would follow a career in tourism, their specialization domain. We can suppose that the serious setback the hospitality industry suffered during the Covid-19 pandemic has affected their perception of finding a stable, successful career in this domain, and thus their teachers' guidance was acutely needed.

The most serious drawback of online education that students reported can be easily guessed – it is the lack of direct human interaction. Once again, if we needed any more proof, we notice that the human element is at the basis of a successful educational exchange between teachers and students. To the question "what did you miss the most during this year's online education?", the option "not meeting my colleagues and teachers face-to face" was picked by an overwhelming majority of respondents (84%), then "not having experienced the new life of being a student in Cluj-Napoca" was chosen by 62% of the students and more than half of the respondents missed "being able to interact directly and communicate more easily with colleagues and teachers".

Considering that each cloud has a silver lining, students also pointed out what good has the pandemic distance learning format brought to them.

Safety and comfort were among their primary concerns so, more than half (53%) indicated that a positive outcome was the fact that they “could stay at home and study” in their “comfortable, familiar environment” and 38% appreciated being “protected from Covid-19 by staying and studying at home”. Half of them also paid attention to the financial aspect, enjoying “the fact that I saved a lot of money by not moving to Cluj-Napoca” and, close to the same percentage, (41%), appreciated the fact that they improved their digital skills considerably.

Besides the obvious and easily visible improvement in their digital skills, the students also assessed the skills and/or specific areas where they noticed having made progress as a follow-up of attending this year’s specialized English course. What improved the most was according to more than 55% of the students their general and specialized vocabulary, while more than a third of the students mentioned having better writing skills (especially writing emails, letters, messages – 37%), better listening skills (understanding the general idea from a recording – 33%) and better speaking skills (expressing their point of view on a subject – 32%). What most still need to practice on, according to their answers to the only open-ended survey question (about what they would have liked to work on more/ to practice more this year), are their speaking skills:

“I want to learn more about tourism in general and to speak more than I do now” [S1].⁴ “Honestly, I need a friend with whom I only speak English, after this I would enjoy the lessons better” [S2].⁵ “I would like to practice more on my confidence and at my speaking skills because I could be very shy ...😊” [S3].⁶

This expressed need to have more practice in speaking English in more or less formal settings is not characteristic to the pandemic isolation context. As noticed by the author along the years of teaching in the academia, this is a constant desire of the Romanian students. They probably feel that the large number of students in a group and the limited number of hours of studying a foreign language per week, is not enough to give them all the chance to practice the spoken language enough to gain fluency and confidence. At the same time, as previously shown in this study, they understand the need for good English skills in their future quest for a good job.

Finding the right balance between asynchronous and synchronous assessment – the key to a successful examination

As mentioned in the theoretical background to this study, one of the main components of a successful online teaching process is represented by the

⁴ [S1] = the first student quoted from the anonymous survey. We have decided to quote the students’ words accurately as they have been written, mistakes included, to illustrate their real usage of English.

⁵ [S2] = the second student quoted from the anonymous survey.

⁶ [S3] = the third student quoted from the anonymous survey.

controversial nature of the web 2.0 assessment. Confronted with the impossibility to supervise the students during the examinations, facing the radically different nature of the online assessment as compared to the on-site one, the author (and her colleagues from the Department of Specialized Foreign Languages of the Faculty of Letters) carefully measured the pros and cons of various solutions. These ranged from the more classical performative assessment to the more updated formative one, from the synchronous variants to asynchronous and hybrid ones. At the end of the first semester, our department's instructors were given the freedom to choose the type of examination that suited best the teaching style and methods that were employed during that semester, while considering first and foremost the specificity of the subject matter tackled by each specialized English course and the students' best learning style revealed during the class discussions that had taken place.

In the traditional on-site framework, the written examination was the preferred method for checking the students' progress and learning efficiency. However, the nature of the electronic, remote distance assessment pushed us toward choosing a more generous format, the hybrid one (two written home-based tasks were considered as being equally important as the results of an online quiz that checked the general and specific understanding of a specialized tourism text and the acquisition of the 1st semester specialized vocabulary). However, when considering their preferred assessment format, the students had the opportunity to consider all the "exams" they had taken at the end of the 1st semester, not only the English one, since their answers should be indicative also for the best assessment method to be used in the future when the educational process would resume its regular post-pandemic course.

The students' preferred examination options showed how diverse they are in their learning style as well as in the scenarios that best help them show how much they have progressed in acquiring knowledge and skills. As indicated in Figure 5, out of a total of 90 students, 33 mentioned they preferred the synchronous exams (like the quizzes or viva online exams), while 33 students picked the very opposite choice – asynchronous exams (like projects posted on the platform or semester-long continuous assessment homework tasks), and 24 of them indicated an inclination for hybrid exams. Given this almost equal distribution of preferences, it would logically follow that a hybrid type of examination would be indicated to be used in the future as well, since it gives the possibility to all the students to shine through the diverse tasks they will have to complete.

As mentioned before, teachers had carried on heated debates about the accuracy level of the marks obtained in an assessment process they could not supervise. The most feared situations were represented by the possibility that students would cheat at the exam by having someone else take the exam for them, by discussing together with their colleagues through other (hidden) media which were the correct answers to be given at an online quiz, or by plagiarizing (parts of) the home projects they received. Nonetheless, the students' opinions about these issues were a lot more candid, only 6% of them having considered the online (therefore

teacher non-supervised) examination as irrelevant due to the possibility that students could easily cheat on them.

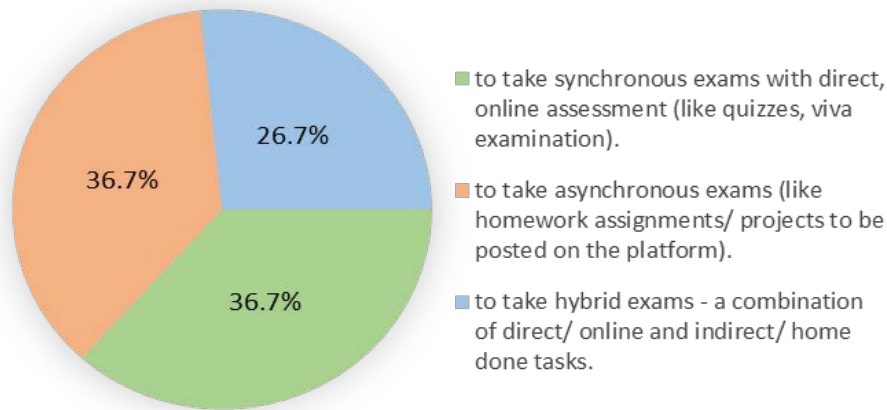


Fig. 5. The students' preferred exam types following their first semester experiences

Given the fact that they benefited from the anonymity of the survey, we see no reason for them to distort the reality at this point, so it results that the vast majority are honest students, who are eager to find out their real worth, who are not afraid to receive the correct mark for their acquired knowledge, skills and effort put in. Some of them, 27% to be more accurate, did mention however that the online exams are "less accurate and precise in their evaluation than face-to-face ones" and 12% of the students said the afore-mentioned examinations would be "ideal if combined with a face-to-face exam where teacher supervision is essential". Again, these options would point to the necessity of a future hybrid form of assessment where the rigor of a traditional, teacher supervised exam would be balanced by the less stifling and more creative nature of a formative, asynchronous verification task.

Of the options they were given, the biggest percentage of students (27%) mentioned that they viewed the online exams as easier to prepare for and take than the face-to-face ones. This finding is not surprising considering that they are 1st year students who at the time of the survey's completion had been only once through the "tough" university-level exams, so most probably they did not know what to expect from a face-to-face "confrontation" with the teacher in classroom exams either. This survey's findings already had informed the author's examination choice for the second semester where a hybrid exam format was again picked to evaluate the general proficiency level as revealed by the linguistic competence exam.

To conclude the questionnaire, students were required to assess their overall online educational experience during the 2020-2021 academic year,

and the findings are colorfully, but also realistically illustrated in Figure 6. More than half (51%) emphasized the duality of the experience, “both positive and negative”, a third considered it “mostly positive” and only 13 students out of 90 mentioned it was “mostly negative” or “something I would not like to repeat”.

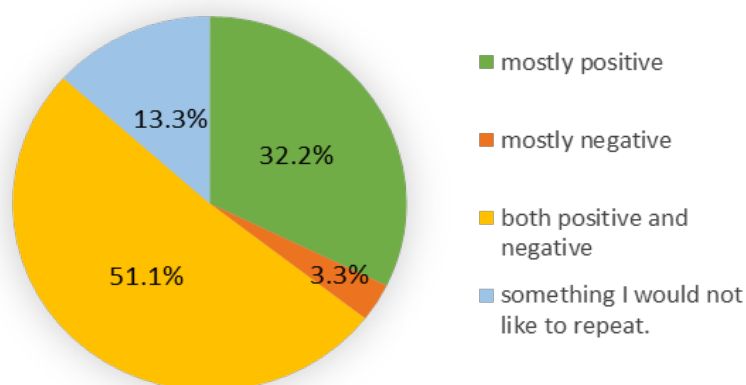


Fig. 6. Students' overall evaluation of the 2020-2021 online academic experience

If these results are indicative of a troubled time that students and teacher(s) have strived to make at least bearable, if not even to beneficial, then we can say that the overall impression is not disappointing. It is illustrative of the struggles we went through to adapt to new learning and teaching modes, apps, devices as well as our success at looking at the world with new eyes. If adaptation to change is essential for any human being, then we have done so with both a painful grin and a smile.

As previously mentioned in specialist literature (Bach, Haynes & Lewis Smith, 2007), although perceived by some teachers as an attack on traditional values, ways of working, communicating and imparting knowledge, the online teaching needs to focus more on how technology can be applied to learning, rather than the technology itself. With the overwhelming development during the last decade of new learning management systems and apps, both students and teachers may have the feeling that they “serve” technology, instead of technology being used to serve the educational process. What comes into question is also how we define and establish what knowledge is as opposed to simple information in the era of information technology. “Technology is not just about opportunities to learn at a distance, but also about opportunities to learn in a new way not available to previous generations” (Bach, Haynes & Lewis Smith 2007, p. 31).

CONCLUSION

All in all, this past two years' online experience could be considered as a very steep learning curve for both professors and students which we believe was decently navigated and honorably passed. We all realize now that the future may potentially place us again in other situations where online learning is a necessity; we are also aware that the digital environment is too much embedded in our lives to be ignored. Given these facts, we can consider that these two years' forced web 2.0 experience was a much-needed impulse for the Romanian educational system in general, and the author's teaching practice in particular, to become updated to the new electronic era in which students will surely live and conduct their professional lives. Probably the best benefit from this experience, for the author of the current article, is the chance to find new perspectives on teaching, to improve the way knowledge is disseminated, and the way students could be put at the core of the educational process. Taking everything into consideration, upon return to on-site courses, we believe that the hybrid teaching modality (with regular classroom courses improved with additional online activities, formative assessment and digital databank) will represent a framework that both tutor and students would benefit from.

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