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The Rapid Shift from Onsite to Online Teaching – Students’ Perceptions

Lulzime KAMBERI¹, Alina-Andreea DRAGOESCU URLICA²

Abstract

Recent developments in response to the Covid-19 pandemic have had a substantial impact on students, teachers and content delivery modes around the globe. This paper reports the efforts of the University of Tetovo (UT) in North Macedonia (NM) and Banat’s USAMVB University “King Michael I of Romania” to find rapid and efficient means of switching from direct to remote course delivery while maintaining effective communication. Acknowledging that little space was available for training teachers and learners to prepare for such rapid changes, this study examines how students responded. Applying exploratory research methods, the paper offers a preliminary analysis of the difficulties that learners faced in shifting to online presentation. Qualitative data was collected using student interviews and content analysis (Silverman, 2005) was applied to identify themes, biases and meaning. Convenience sampling among enrolled students in the academic year 2020/2021 at both universities identified a non-random sample of 16 students. The findings of the study revealed that participants faced many difficulties in their venture; however, using various strategies, effective planning and organization, they managed to a certain extent to overcome this situation.

Keywords: *English language teaching; exploratory research; online learning; Students’ perceptions.*

1. Introduction

The rapid shift from onsite to online teaching, in response to the pandemic at the beginning of 2020, triggered a substantial challenge to educational institutions, teachers and learners around the world (Carrillo & Flores 2020). Apart from pedagogical constraints such as differences in teaching approaches, social interaction, and assessment processes, universities also had to deal with student psycho-social factors evidenced in lack of attendance and not turning cameras on when attending, which led to assumptions that students’ economic situations, financial issues and even lack of devices for attending classes were some reasons for their behavior.

Among the first scholars to respond to the situation, Jandrić (2020) argues

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that “... academics have a unique opportunity, and a moral duty, to immediately start conducting in-depth studies of current events” which will serve later social science researchers [and educators] (Jandrić, 2020). In response, scholars around the globe have started to put on paper what was happening to them and to their academic world. Neuwirth et al. (2020) have addressed various psychosocial factors manifesting at the University of New York, by urging for student online attendance etiquette during the pandemic. Kerres (2020) and Zawacki-Richter (2020) analyzed the situation in Germany to reveal that universities were not adequately prepared for online course delivery and received insufficient support from their institutions. Likewise, universities in China (Davies et al., 2020; Gao & Zhang, 2020) reported a lack of technological skills and institutional support.

The University of Tetovo in North Macedonia and Banat’s USAMVB University “King Michael I of Romania”, which have conducted joint project previously and found many similarities between our students, currently find themselves in analogous situations facing the new digital landscape of online language classes during the pandemic. As a consequence, this study identifies challenges faced by students in adapting to the online delivery of curriculum, while also addressing the similarities and differences between the two study contexts: the University of Tetovo (UT) in North Macedonia (NM) and the Banat’s USAMVB “King Michael I of Romania” University from Timisoara, Romania.

2. Material and method

We applied convenience sampling with a target group of students enrolled in the academic year 2020/2021 at each university (Tetovo University in North Macedonia and Banat’s USAMVB from Timisoara, Romania) and thereby identified a non-random sample of 16 students, eight from each context. Interviews and questionnaires were employed in order to collect sufficient qualitative data and we applied content analysis (Silverman, 2005) in order to identify the students’ perceived experience of their online language classes. The study identifies difficulties faced by inexperienced online learners by applying exploratory research (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

3. Results and Discussion

Seeking to explore student experiences during the pandemic while identifying similarities and differences between students from both institutions, semi-structured interviews, were developed. On each question, students were invited to express their responses to teaching and learning online, during the rapid forced shift, and the perceived difficulties. Initial results from the study suggest that both study groups faced psycho-social difficulties in their venture.

Financial concerns formed the basis for the first three questions and revealed that the great majority of respondents attended classes from their personal phones because of lack of personal computers for individual family members - parents and siblings. Space and access to facilities was especially felt among North

Macedonian participants. While only one student from Romania stressed “lack of space” as an issue, the majority of NM students attended classes from the living room because of heating issues in the winter semester. Although this finding suggests that, being members of the EU, Romanian students may have better living conditions, both groups reported ‘issues with the internet’ at one point or another during the study period.

One of the most relevant issues was to identify whether, from the students’ point of view, teachers should have their cameras on during classes. While the majority of Romanian students supported this idea, their counterparts from NM allowed for the ‘teacher’s personal choice’, with only two indicating that teachers’ cameras on makes them feel like being in the classroom or understanding the lesson better. This is probably a statement of concern for teachers from North Macedonia, urging them to opt for cameras on during their teaching, to better support student comprehension. Even though there is no real body language, it seems, there is eye contact - what White and Gardner (2012) call X-Factors of communication.

Interestingly, with the exception of one student in each institution, both groups agreed that students opening their cameras was a personal choice. The reasons for their choices were justified with concerns for privacy by both respondent groups.

Generally, the majority had no difficulties with Google Meet/ZOOM Platform, though two asserted that they “had to figure out myself how things worked on the online classroom”. Further, a quarter claimed to have experienced anxiety, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. Others had faced financial difficulties which limited access and involvement at some point due to the crisis. The last question requesting students to add anything they perceived as important led many to identify increased appreciation of life, health and family.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

One hindrance to the correct interpretation of data collected for analysis is considered to be the limited sample size. While analysis suggests that there may be some significant differences in student perceptions between the two study groups, it appears likely that all students have had a difficult time during this pandemic period. Financial issues, lack of space and psychological concerns appear to be major concerns to be addressed in further studies.

The main difference among the two groups, cameras for students and teachers, is a real concern that needs to be addressed by both institutions, more specifically teachers from North Macedonia. As stated by Neuwirth et al. (2020), in calling for an urgent ‘online etiquette’, several interpersonal or other ecological aspects of communication are lacking, for instance gestures, posture, emphasis, emotional tone, etc. Thus, not turning cameras on would make learning and teaching even more difficult. For these reasons, Ellis and Barkhuisen (2005) have proposed that it would be useful for teachers to conduct a process of needs analysis with students for the purpose of targeting the main issues they have so as to be able

to respond to their needs appropriately.

In conclusion, future research in this area needs to address the potential for quasi-experimental and mixed methodological research designs conducted over an extended period with a larger sample, including teachers, to confirm factors potentially affecting the outcome of online teaching. The aspects identified in this paper seem likely to shed light on future pedagogical approaches.

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