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Author:	Elena BRAN

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CREATIVITY IN ONLINE TEACHING. MYTH OR REALITY?

Elena BRAN¹

ABSTRACT:

CREATIVITY IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES HAS ALWAYS BEEN A PREREQUISITE OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS. MOVING TO ONLINE TEACHING HAS BROUGHT CHALLENGES IN THE TRADITIONAL WAYS OF PRESENTING THE CURRICULUM, AS EDUCATORS NEEDED TO FOCUS NOT ONLY ON CONTENT, BUT ALSO ON THE MEDIUM OF DELIVERY AND ADAPTING THEIR MATERIALS TO A NEW REALITY. THERE WERE ALSO QUESTIONS ABOUT THE VALIDITY OF THIS TEACHING PROCESS, WHETHER THIS NEW WAY OF DELIVERY THE CONTENT COULD BE CALLED EFFICIENT OR NOT. THE ARTICLE DEALS WITH THE MAIN DIFFICULTIES EDUCATORS FACED IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT AND COMES WITH SOME PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES THAT WERE EXPERIENCED SUCCESSFULLY WITH LARGE GROUPS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS.

KEY WORDS: TBL, COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH, ONLINE TEACHING RESOURCES, STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT.

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic situation has been one of the main challenges for the educational system. In Romania, as in most countries of the world, universities and schools were closed for almost a year and a half. Some universities were open for seminars and laboratories and the exams were organized with the students' physical presence in the amphitheatres. Other universities had to find resources to evaluate the students through an online option. This paper's main goal is to present some practical ideas all educators can use when teaching large or smaller groups of online students, but not in the sense of bullet-pointed advice reeled out in imperative. I shall be exploring the underlying principles and factors which might make online lessons difficult, with the aim of widening educators' repertoires. This paper will go through the most common issues online classes might raise and some possible ideas to overcome them. As educators, we had to become inventive, computer-savvy overnight and to adapt all the content materials to another environment. Everything seemed to look like a perceived myriad of tasks to which no-one has ever prepared. Furthermore, there was no estimate to when the situation would end. Educators wished sooner, but the reality decided

¹ Lecturer Ph.D., at the University of Medicine and Pharmacy *Carol Davila*, Bucharest, Foreign Languages Department, elena.bran@umfcd.ro.

something different. On the other hand, we had more time to self-evaluate the situation in the physical classrooms and find ways of delivering and checking the same content, but in a new environment.

In terms of hybrid classes, where the case, the key word was *safety*. Unfortunately, with greater safer measures increased the reduced interaction possibilities, a reduced number of students in the classrooms and the impossibility of creating as many meaningful communicative situations as possible. Some of the measures taken in amphitheatres during the seminars or exams included keeping two meters between each student, the students remained in the assigned seats throughout the exam, there was a limited handing of papers, and the teacher could not move from the front positions. In case of any communicative language teaching input, the effects were visible. Some of them included no monitoring, no mingling activities, limited options for pair work or group work. The only option was to fall into a lecture trap, which is not a style we would strive for when teaching foreign languages. This is the point where we embrace technology and make it our little helper. Therefore, when universities and schools reopened, we needed to make sure technology would be part of our new teaching toolkit.

THE (IN)SUCCESS OF ONLINE ACTIVITIES

One of the ways of measuring the success on an activity, online or face-to-face, is the students' output. In other words, how much of what we have taught them can be understood and integrated naturally in a different language context. By activity we understand a cognitive approach to education, the underpinning learner-centred one, opposed to the traditional lecturing, teacher-led questioning or student presentation, where we lose the focus on individual learners and students are not given the opportunity to work individually or collaboratively. No matter the environment we are teaching in, I reckon the most common approaches are the task-based learning and the project-based and cooperative learning, which can be made possible only by the teacher's selection of tasks. In our daily teaching practice, we had the tendency of using the 'activity' and 'task' interchangeably. We call them seminar tasks, communicative activities, project tasks. But the writers in the field of education, mostly those who focus on task-based language teaching (TBLT), such as David Nunan, make a distinction between the two and use the term 'task' for occasions when the learners are using language to primarily express or understand meaning, and 'activity' for occasions when they are expected to practise a more specific range of language (e.g. an activity to practise the simple past tense)². Therefore, no matter the teaching environment (physical or online), the educators should always make sure they make a good choice of language tasks and activities.

Following a similar pattern of seeing the teaching process, Robin Alexander, in his book on the relation between *culture* and *pedagogy*, makes another distinction between 'task' and 'activity', considering 'task' as a description of the conceptual purpose or aim for which an 'activity' is used: "The learning task is its conceptual component; the learning activity is the task's practical counterpart, or the means through which the teacher intends the child to make the required conceptual advance from what was learned previously to what must be learned now"³. In the activity-based learning approach, the term 'activity' overlaps the one 'task' to refer to any kind of classroom/seminar practice in which there is a student's output. According to Marilyn Suydam and Jon Higgins, for example, during activities, the students

² David Nunan, *Task-based Language Teaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 224.

³ Robin Alexander, *Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001): 10.

may be ‘involved with such things as worksheets or workbooks, programmed instruction booklets, teaching machines or computer terminals, audio-visual materials or calculators’⁴.

In this article, my direction is to see the ‘activity’ as any type of interaction the student has with the language that he is provided an opportunity to work independently of his educator’s control, whether this is an individual occasion or a collaborative one. One might argue that the opposite of ‘activity’ is the whole-class teaching, approach familiar to most of us, when the teacher expects students to be listening, responding, or interacting only with him. The question I had in mind was whether the online platforms were an nuisance for most teachers because it became difficult to implement the whole class teaching in an environment they could partially control. In this case, the activity-based approach or the task-based ones became the real allies, as any online platform (Zoom, Google Meets or Microsoft Teams) offered educators the chance to keep students involved through the novelty they have brought.

The use of the new technology in the educational process has been seen as another impediment and an additional task teachers were forced to deal with by their main administrators (schools, universities, language centres or kindergartens). In the beginning, most educators opted for the asynchronous teaching, mostly through Google classroom, hoping the situation was not going to last for too long and they would have the chance to continue from where they left off in March 2020. The solution proved successful, but for a limited time. This type of teaching relies on the student-student interaction patterns and student-educator, but with a delay in feedback, depending on the type of technological source used. This type of learning has its advantages, and it is suited in the context where students are in different locations with different prior technological knowledge and resources or may not all be available at a specific date and time. There are of course limitations. My personal belief is that any sequence of synchronous online courses needs a routine break via an asynchronous course, thoroughly planned in advance and including a variety of tasks students can work in small groups. I shall be presenting such a planning strategy in this article.

WAYS OF SUCCESSFULLY EXPLORING THE ONLINE TEACHING STRATEGIES

The online teaching has never stopped challenging teachers to use the contemporary frameworks of lesson planning, such as the PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production) or TBLT (Task-based Language Teaching). Both frameworks had to be adapted for online teaching, as they have common stages such as a lead-in, a pre-teaching vocabulary, a task, a consolidation of vocabulary/grammar, a freer practice and if time allows it, a production phase. The online environment created a context for all of them, but not for the online platform offered the chance to be implemented as if they were physically in a classroom. For instance, Zoom offered the option of creating break-out rooms where students could interact, while MS Teams only allowed one screen sharing and no option to create groups or separate rooms. Zoom was definitely the winner of the online teaching, as the multitude of functions allowed teachers to replicate their face-to-face classes in an online environment. The challenge most teachers agreed on was the one of building the same rapport they used to have in the f2f classrooms in this newly created online environment. Because genuine reactions are essential

⁴ Marilyn N. Suydam and Jon L. Higgins, “Activity-Based Learning in Elementary School Mathematics: Recommendations from Research”. *ERIC Information Analysis Center for Science, Mathematics and Environmental Education* (1977): 24.

when learning any foreign language as they build learners' motivation and level of engagement⁵, online platforms became a micro form of socialization.

But teachers were not the only ones affected by the new technology. At the same time, students had to learn how to work with the technology, how to organize their time and try to find a balance between the hours spent in front of the screens and their quarantine or isolation periods. This new environment has taken a serious toll on the emotional well-being of both educators and learners. Shifts in everyone's lifestyle have led to loneliness and partial isolation. One thing the online teaching managed to do successfully was to keep people engaged and give them a reason for learning and interacting.

Some of the things which could have been attempted to avoid this, no matter the teaching platform used, included the attempts of dealing with emotional struggles students might have had (because of personal or other reasons, loneliness or being afraid of the new technology). Some possible ways of doing this included creating a virtual context for them to feel confident when using English. Most students tended to exploit to their own favour this lack of control the educator had over the environment by turning off their camera or/and microphone and becoming unwilling to participate in the activities. Some of the things that could have done included:

- a) Start the lesson with a positive quote. Each student had to think/research a positive quote to share in the chat in the beginning of the lesson. Students then voted for the best one and the teacher could pin this quote in his Zoom's name for the rest of the class.
- b) Encourage free talk. Providing learners with a relaxed learning environment will make them become more interested in the topic of the lesson. One thing teachers could do is to design a take-away task at the end of each lesson/lecture/seminar that students could do in pairs. An example might be to think of the most important three things you have learnt today and how you will explore them further.
- c) Build a world wall or world cloud. There are plenty of online platforms, except from WhatsApp groups or Google classrooms, that can be used to encourage students to become creative in their own way. Some examples include Padlet, Mentimeter or Lino, which can be used to allow students to share their writing or projects and get feedback from all participants. These platforms allow teachers to also create individual pages for groups, so that what they share does not become public information.
- d) Step away from the screen. Students need moments to reboot, and so do teachers. Therefore, teachers need to include tasks in their online lessons that require at least some minutes of standing-up and using some realia or even raising hands or swivelling the chairs might make them productive.
- e) Make use of educational technology as much and as varied as possible. There is a myriad of online resources and teachers might feel confused when choosing which ones are appropriate for each group. Therefore, one way might be to design activities in a lesson or seminar according to the aim of the activity. For example, if we are brainstorming ideas for an essay, a mind map app/online version might help learners as they can work together and all of them can keep a copy of the ideas produced. Another resource that can be used in everybody's interest is liveworksheets.com that

⁵ Răzvan Bran, "The Role of Active Listening in the Acquisition of Second Languages", *Research and Science Today* 1(15) (2018): 90.

allows teachers to design individual tests/evaluation forms including a variety of items, from multiple choice to matching or true or false or even sentence completion.

We embrace technology nowadays in our classes not because we got used to it, but because it has become our responsibility to provide learners with relevant and resourceful activities. And even after returning to face-to-face classes I strongly believe teachers need to continue the best practices of technology when designing materials and lessons.

DEALING WITH LARGE GROUPS IN ONLINE TEACHING

The logistics of managing large groups of students (over 100) has always been overwhelming, no matter the teaching environment (online or offline). When using the online one, things needed to be re-organized to make sure the level of students' engagement is similar to the one in the offline. Moreover, students' access to technology could not be well controlled and there are still plenty of cases when teachers find it difficult to deliver the content of their lectures or even their worksheets or other materials. There was also the students' tendency to relax more at home, when they were in control whether to turn on their cameras or microphones or not, or even to be at home when the English class took place. The mobility brought by the online teaching was not in the teachers' control.

Some aspects which were in the teachers' control were the quality of the content delivered and the type of deadlines established. In terms of content delivered one of the improvement the online teaching has brought was the replacement of too much text with pictures or even videos or recordings. The online teacher was now able to record himself and then send or post the recording and this facilitated a more effective access to information. Another advantage of online teaching of large groups was the asynchronous teaching. This meant using Google Classroom or Padlet to post tasks with deadlines for students and also allow them to become creative thorough projects or polls. An example of such an attempt took place with the students at the Faculty of Midwifery. Students were divided into 5 groups of 15 members. Each group received a different TED Talk of around 15 minutes to watch on medical topics. Then, they had to post on Google Forms their answers to a series of comprehension checking questions and while-watching tasks, to write a summary and to design a quiz with 15 questions for another group who was about to watch the same video as homework. They worked together in Zoom, in different break-out rooms, having the chance to ask the teacher any questions they might have had, as she was in the Main Session. The main aim of this course was to make students get involved more and collaborate rather than just watch the video and answer the questions. Other ways of working with large groups included creating a Padlet page for them to post writings and share personal experiences through pictures, giving them tasks to create mindmaps online of their domain and present them to other groups and identify the things in common, setting tasks to design quizzes for other groups, assessing one another's work using Zoom's whiteboard.

In order for these activities to be successful, educators need teach students first how to become successful online learners by taking full responsibility of the process. Students need to understand that a lesson or a course is not only about content, but it should also be a universal goal to be able to become flexible and adapt and respect the teaching environment.

CONCLUSION

Creativity in the online teaching is no longer a myth but a reality. Educators became creative and adapted their materials and teaching strategies as much as possible in the pandemic. Teaching English has had the advantage of having plenty of online resources available, from textbooks with software to exam preparation websites and even the possibility

of organizing online exams. Moreover, technology should be seen as an enabler (with its own challenges) and creativity in online teaching depends mostly on course organization and curriculum choices. On the other hand, students' needs are important and valuable when making course decisions or adapting materials. Technology also facilitated access to other forms of communicative language teaching, including not only reading and writing as in the traditional manners, but also listening and speaking. Most of the activities required feedback, both from students and also from the teacher which meant a better reflective attitude that led to a change in the teaching behaviour.

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