

The future of language education in the light of Covid - Lessons learned and ways forward

Case Study by Alina Pisica (Romania)

- A. *Please write briefly about a memorable language teaching experience, either particularly challenging or especially successful, as an example of your practice during the pandemic:*

Who were the learners?

The learners were high school students, preparing for CAE Cambridge exam, C1 level (CEFR), scheduled to take place in July 2020.

What were the aims of the session/lesson?

The aims of the session were to brainstorm useful ideas for writing a review and produce a very good piece of writing. The review the students had to write was of an application that they used, and the additional objective was to suggest improvements. Taking into account that a writing task might be quite difficult in a real learning environment, the perspective of doing it online seemed quite daunting.

Please write a brief description – the ‘story’ - of what you did/what happened that made this an especially memorable experience:

It was April, just a few weeks after the pandemic had started, and nobody had any idea what would happen in the following months. My students were quite stressed, because they wanted to take the exam in July and they knew that they would have to continue their learning process in order to pass it, but they felt completely overwhelmed.

When we attempted to work on their writing skills, it seemed impossible, at first. However, I started a Power Point presentation and I asked them to come up with ideas, photos, details and, together, we built the support for the Writing task, sharing ideas, adding information to the presentation, improving viewpoints or finding new perspectives.

I would like to underline the fact that Writing became interactive, with students engaging in this activity, which was finally shaped into a project, and what looked like a Writing task eventually turned into an extraordinary activity, which built my students' confidence and courage to overcome the existing situation.

Tailoring the requirements of the task in order to boost my students' motivation and keeping them engaged all the time was key to the success of the activity.

What lessons might there be in your experience for language teaching in general beyond the pandemic?

Firstly, I believe that the main lesson that I have learned is the fact that a teacher and their students will always adapt to any new situations, as long as there is determination and motivation, since the educational process requires hard work and focus. Furthermore, I think that students should be involved more in the process of learning, because they can produce invaluable ideas and their perspective is completely different from ours.

I have tried to establish a good mindset for me, because I have realised how important it is for students to have someone to rely on, someone who could help them, even under those difficult circumstances. I consider that being able to provide a continuous flow of information and a positive attitude towards learning, being there for my students, trying to preserve a “normal” learning environment, even if it was a virtual one, has enabled me and my students to adapt and overcome, and, finally be successful, as all my students who enrolled for the course in September 2019, before the pandemic started, passed the exam with flying colours.

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I have also come to the conclusion that online learning (synchronous, asynchronous, remote, hybrid, etc.) requires flexibility and versatility, otherwise students will not be motivated to take part in the learning process (phubbing is the most common phenomenon that we might experience unless lessons explore our students' potential).

- B. *In your context, how have teachers and other colleagues supported each other's professional practice during the pandemic?*

After succeeding in building my self-confidence, based on the newly - attained approach to teaching, I have tried to help my fellow colleagues, teachers of different subjects, to improve their techniques, too.

What is more, as an English teacher, I could say that I have benefitted from various courses delivered online, this leading to a better network of professionals, all determined to find a solution to the new situation. I have attended a lot of international events, presentations, workshops, which have enlarged my mental scope. Sharing all the information I have been able to access with my colleagues has proved to be more than helpful, because, this way, everybody could access new resources and we all felt empowered, and this added a boost to our confidence.

- C. *It is now several months since you responded to the survey. What additional thoughts, experiences or insights have you had about language education during the Covid pandemic?*

I believe that, in this age of technology, we can incorporate different software so that learning can become more interactive. Students love sharing their ideas and being involved in projects, activities which could be developed at an international level. Making use of student-generated content and applying it in your lessons might be more useful to students, than just drilling grammar or vocabulary. Additionally, building action-oriented tasks might engage the students more, shaping the path to mastering all the necessary skills for the 21st century. In terms of teaching methods and materials, the fact that students are natives in the land of technology, while teachers are only tourists, should be taken into consideration and the development of new tasks should involve students more, providing them with resources which can help them improve their newly acquired skills

However, I believe that, while Artificial Intelligence can teach sets of rules, drilling grammar and vocabulary, it can never teach values, therefore it can never replace teachers, the greatest asset of the educational system, since we might just end up having a generation of empty "vessels", instead of complex beings endowed with reasoning and feelings.

I consider that most teachers were not prepared when the pandemic struck, thus the transition to virtual lessons has been hindered, not to mention the shortage of digital technology and devices, which added to the problem. I think that teachers should be trained in the future so that they can cope with the challenges they might face and be able to assist the students in order to achieve their potential. Nonetheless, as educators, we should take into account the students' age, since this can be an obstacle, as the situation has revealed that young learners have struggled in this period the most. I believe that a new survey should focus on the parents' and students' opinions, because, to my mind, they are the sector that has been highly affected. Their responses might give us another perspective and we might design better solutions to the problems that have arisen.