

CHARACTERISTICS AND PRINCIPLES OF ONLINE TEACHING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract: Due to the circumstances caused by coronavirus, many teachers and students from over the world switched from blended courses that combine online and face-to-face teaching to courses which are entirely conducted online. Teaching online refers to »conducting a course partially or entirely through the internet – either on the Web or by way of mobile apps that allow one to manipulate the online course elements« (Ko & Rossen, 2017: 28). Teaching online is a type of distance education, that is, teaching which is not conducted in a traditional classroom. It can be conducted asynchronously, meaning that students can access and post content at time convenient for them or synchronously, referring to sessions that take place at the same time for all participants, but remotely (Ko & Rossen, 2017). Previous research study findings suggest that university students expect lecturers to adjust to their needs, to give useful examples, strengthen students' motivation, exhibit facilitation skills, conduct a good course, communicate clearly and express interest in student learning so as to deliver effective online teaching (Young, 2006: 65). In online teaching, students emphasise the importance of lecturers' involvement in the learning process, activities undertaken to form interpersonal relationships and classroom environment conducive to learning (Young, 2006).

There are many differences between online and face-to-face courses that instructors need to be aware of. First, the role of a teacher is enriched by requiring more guiding and mentoring, while students need to be more active and to deal with managing their own learning (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 8). This can pose a challenge, especially when teaching freshmen. Secondly, learning resources are more flexible – students can access them from various devices and research other content sources to use (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 9). Next, learning environments are predominantly asynchronous, while synchronous meetings are used for less reflective work, such as presentations, questions and answers, discussions and projects (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 10). Finally, assessment is continuous, which is in line with the Bologna Process in higher education. Assessment consists of evaluating quizzes, discussion forum postings, case studies and projects (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 10).

Online teaching can be made easier by focusing on ten key pedagogical principles. According to the first principle, learning should have four elements (the learner, the faculty mentor, the learning content, the environment), while the learner needs to be at the centre (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 26). This principle is particularly vital for English language teaching, since students need to have a chance to develop productive language skills as well and it is also advisable to include pair work to enable students to practice spoken interaction with their peers. The second principle refers to taking into consideration students' differing personalized previous knowledge and attitudes. (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 26). One of the ways of doing this is by assessing students' previous knowledge and then adjusting the learning content to it. The third principle states that teachers direct and manage learning, while the fourth principle suggests that all learners need to learn the core concepts, but not all concepts (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 26). The next principle focuses on the students' context and describes it as a part of learning experience (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 26). The teacher needs to become aware of resources and devices available to students and to make best use of them. According to the sixth principle, every learner has a separate zone of proximal development (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 36). This refers to a learner's openness to learning and the distance they need to cover to acquire knowledge (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 36). Students that are disengaged during a lecture are out of their zone of proximal development and need support to catch up with the group (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 37). The seventh principle points out that concepts are more than words and the eighth principle advises that different learning outcomes require different instructions. The ninth principle focuses on value of time – spending more time on a task means more learning (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 26). Finally, the last principle states that teachers choose teaching tools but that they shape the way people engage with the learning content (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 40).

Finally, online teaching also entails numerous challenges. The first one refers to timely availability of information, so teachers need to set up an announcement area where students can receive up-to-date information and inform students to regularly check notices (Ko & Rossen, 2017). The next one is concerned with encouraging student participation and making lectures interesting even to less engaged students (Ko & Rossen, 2017). Next, the detrimental effect of a large class size on class engagement can be mitigated by using built-in interactive content and group strategies, such as forming discussion forums for groups of up to 15 students (Ko & Rossen, 2017). In addition, teachers can also face a challenge of identity issues or suspicion that someone else is completing the assignments or giving presentations on behalf of the enrolled student (Ko & Rossen, 2017: 371). Apart from it, classroom management issues can also refer to dealing with noisy, quiet and disruptive students.

To summarize, online teaching of a foreign language is a highly complex process that entails many challenges related to course design and execution, technological savviness, online classroom management and the ability to form effective interpersonal student-teacher relationships online. The context of emergency and a health crisis further complicates these tasks, making teachers' flexibility, adaptability and willingness to learn of utmost importance for the effectiveness of teaching.

Key Words: *Online teaching, teaching principles, teaching challenges, English language for specific purposes, college students*

1. INTRODUCTION: DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ONLINE TEACHING

Due to the circumstances caused by coronavirus, many teachers and students from over the world switched from blended courses that combine online and face-to-face teaching to courses which are entirely conducted online. Teaching online refers to »conducting a course partially or entirely through the internet – either on the Web or by way of mobile apps that allow one to manipulate the online course elements« (Ko & Rossen, 2017: 28). Teaching online is a type of distance education, that is, teaching which is not conducted in a traditional classroom. It can be conducted asynchronously, meaning that students can access and post content at time convenient for them or synchronously, referring to sessions that take place at the same time for all participants, but remotely (Ko & Rossen, 2017). Previous research study findings suggest that university students expect lecturers to adjust to their needs, to give useful examples, strengthen students' motivation, exhibit facilitation skills, conduct a good course, communicate clearly and express interest in student learning so as to deliver effective online teaching (Young, 2006: 65). In online teaching, students emphasize the importance of lecturers' involvement in the learning process, activities undertaken to form interpersonal relationships and classroom environment conducive to learning (Young, 2006).

There are many differences between online and face-to-face courses that instructors need to be aware of. First, the role of a teacher is enriched by requiring more guiding and mentoring, while students need to be more active and to deal with managing their own learning (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 8). This can pose a challenge, especially when teaching first year students. Secondly, learning resources are more flexible – students can access them from various devices and research other sources to use (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 9). Next, learning environments are predominantly asynchronous, while synchronous meetings are used for less reflective work, such as presentations, questions and answers, discussions and projects (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 10). Finally, assessment is continuous, which is in line with the Bologna Process in higher education. Assessment consists of evaluating quizzes, discussion forum postings, case studies and projects (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 10).

2. PRINCIPLES OF ONLINE TEACHING

Online teaching can be made easier by focusing on ten key pedagogical principles. According to the first principle, learning should have four elements (the learner, the faculty mentor, the learning content, the environment), while the learner needs to be at the centre (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 26). This principle is particularly vital for English language teaching, since students need to have a chance to develop productive language skills as well and it is also advisable to include pair work to enable students to practice spoken interaction with their peers. The second principle refers to taking into consideration students' differing personalized previous knowledge and attitudes (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 26). One of the ways of doing this is by assessing students' previous knowledge and then adjusting the learning content to it. The third principle states that teachers direct and manage learning, while the fourth principle suggests that all learners need to learn the core concepts, but not all concepts (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 26). The next principle focuses on the students' context and describes it as a part of learning experience (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 26). The teacher needs to become aware of resources and devices available to students and to make best use of them. According to the sixth principle, every learner has a separate zone of proximal development (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 36). This refers to a learner's openness to learning and the distance they need to cover to acquire knowledge (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 36). Students that are disengaged during a lecture are out of their zone of proximal development and need support to catch up with the group (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 37). The seventh principle points out that concepts are more than words and the eighth principle advises that different learning outcomes require different instructions. The ninth principle focuses on value of time – spending more time on a task means more learning (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 26). Finally, the last principle states that teachers choose teaching tools but that they shape the way people engage with the learning content (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016: 40).

3. ONLINE TEACHING – AN ENGLISH TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

Online teaching also entails numerous challenges. The first one refers to timely availability of information, so teachers need to set up an announcement area where students can receive up-to-date information and inform students to regularly check notices (Ko & Rossen, 2017). A good solution for this problem is to use the option *Announcements* on Canvas or send a message to a channel on Microsoft Teams, as it is done at the Faculty of Technical Sciences. Students need to be made aware that it is their responsibility to regularly check announcements during the course. The next difficulty is concerned with encouraging student participation and making lectures interesting even to less engaged students (Ko & Rossen, 2017). One of the ways for tackling this problem in teaching English as a foreign language could be by using a lot of video clips that students find genuinely interesting and would enjoy watching even in their free time, such as TedTalks or YouTube clips on various topics about current affairs and cutting-edge technologies. Next, the detrimental effect of a large class size on class engagement can be mitigated by using built-in interactive content and group strategies, such as forming discussion forums for groups of up to 15 students (Ko & Rossen, 2017). However, group activities are more difficult to organize even in smaller courses. According to the experience of the author of this paper, giving presentation in pairs can be a beneficial way of organizing pair work in synchronous online teaching. If students are given the opportunity to choose their partner and a presentation topic in the field of technology, they get a chance to collaborate on a common task outside of class and to experience peer review as well, while talking about an area of engineering they find interesting in English. Many students perceive it as a great learning experience that is both fun and challenging, since it requires a variety of skills, including negotiating and agreeing on a topic, finding and reading technical content in English, choosing the most important information and making a presentation and then presenting it to the whole class and the lecturer. Although the task can be quite demanding for students who are on the intermediate language level, many students of the author of this paper reported that they enjoyed the activity, in spite of it being somewhat stressful. The groups of students that prepared presentations in pairs on specific topics did not perceive that there was an insufficient number of group activities during the semester, which was something that students in other courses did, in spite of having done a doing smaller in-class assignments together with other students during the semester that was conducted entirely online.

In addition, online teaching also raises issues regarding cheating in traditional and modern ways. The prevalence of plagiarism may increase due to students' ignorance or a belief that different, more lenient rules apply to online courses. The author of this article became aware of this problem when she received several plagiarized homework assignments in a single course during a single week. Since it was a first year course called English language – elementary, the lecturer assumed that the students were not familiar with the term »plagiarism« and took time to discourage them from future plagiarism by explaining to them what it is, what kinds exist and how to check whether the assignment they have turned in contains plagiarism or not. After this intervention the students did not turn in plagiarized assignments any more. Apart from plagiarism, teachers may also face a challenge of dealing with identity issues or a suspicion that someone else is completing the assignments or giving presentations on behalf of the enrolled student (Ko & Rossen, 2017: 371). It seems that students rarely ask peers or friends for help when it comes to completing short essays, so the author of this article purposely gave students more shorter homework assignments instead of one lengthy seminar paper and the students' level of knowledge in homework assignments was generally in line with the knowledge they exhibited during the lectures.

Some forms of classroom management issues were easier to deal with, such as noisy, quiet and disruptive students, even though a number of students participated in lectures with noisy environments in the background. The author of this paper introduced rules for behavior in online synchronous lectures, but not everyone took them seriously, so several students complained that they did not hear a part of the lecture or a certain question. Such occurrences are connected with one of the difficulties of online teaching that arise from the fact that it becomes a student's responsibility to organize an appropriate place for learning in a quiet environment. While it is quite possible that some students do not have their separate personal space, most of them can negotiate quiet time that is necessary for participating in lectures with their roommates or family if they are made aware of its importance. Hence, it is the teachers' responsibility to explain that students are now in charge of securing an appropriate learning environment and that online learning at university is merely another form of course participation that entails clear rules. This is yet related to another issue that students face in the beginning of the semester and that is not being aware of rules of conduct on online platforms. Most students associate video calls and chatting with playing computer games online or communicating with their friends, which is why their attention needs to be directed to appropriate ways of communicating in the classroom context. Students which are unaware of contextual and register differences often use informal abbreviations and slang, for instance *imo* (in my opinion) or *LOL* (laughing out loud), they leave out vowels, for example by typing *wknd* instead of *weekend* or *prblm* instead of *problem*. The lecturer can use this as an opportunity to lecture students on contrasts between written and spoken language and register differences. Even though noisy students can be muted and disruptive ones can be removed from class by using the option *remove the participant* in Microsoft Teams, according to the experience of the author of this paper, students rarely engage in such behaviors, expect in cases in which they activate the unmute option by accident. More creative

ways of disrupting a class include trying to play students' favorite music to the whole class during a break, in which case the lecturer should react to this but can also use it as a cue that students would like to engage more with their classmates. A good way of enabling more communication is to assign students to mini groups consisting of several other students and then to have them exchange ideas, write comments or answer questions on the lesson covered in class by next week. In order to make it more interactive, students should also be required to thoughtfully respond to their peers comments.

Many writing tasks can be performed in the online setting but the majority of students in English classes do not have a habit of taking notes, which is why availability of electronic teaching materials and presentations is of utmost importance. Writing words down is a useful way of practicing spelling that has almost been obliterated by using spelling checkers or relying on visual memory as the only way of memorizing how a word is spelled. In case of learning a language that does not have clear spelling rules such as English, students should be encouraged to note new words down or at least to type them several times.

Most university students who study technical sciences are quite adept at using different platforms for participation in online courses and enjoy helping their peers who are not familiar with using a certain option. Since technology and relating to people online has been a natural part of young people's lives for a long time, it seems to be easier for them than for teachers to adapt to online courses. As the majority of them have both a computer and a smartphone, the teacher can suggest to them to use a computer. Using a computer as opposed to a phone has the following useful implications: the student is in a sitting position and can focus on the lesson instead of exchanging calls and messages with friends. Most students keep their computer on their work desk, which is why it is easier for them to access additional learning materials, such as books, workbooks, dictionaries or notebooks.

Finally, when advised to attend the lectures regularly and in their entirety, some of the students complained about fatigue caused by looking at the computer screen for several hours or problems with focus. Apart from using teaching methods that accommodate different learning styles, it is also useful to make more shorter breaks and to vary one's tone of voice, but also to practice recognizing interest and boredom by focusing on students' voices. Synchronous online teaching becomes a much better experience if everyone in a course has a camera and uses it, since teachers can evaluate students' understanding of new concepts by looking at their faces and they can also give them better tips on improving pronunciation by explaining the shape and positions of lips necessary for forming certain sounds.

4. CONCLUSION

Online teaching of any course requires much preparation and flexibility and both students and teachers face challenges they have not dealt with in traditional teaching. Students who are capable of autonomous learning and understand that they are in charge of arranging their own learning environment, managing time and keeping their focus generally enjoy online courses. However, they can be more challenging for less experienced learners who need to be reminded to do their tasks and who also need to become acquainted with studying at university and are used to the high school context. Teachers can improve their performance by implementing ten described principles and expanding their role to include more guiding and mentoring, while keeping the learner at the center.

Based on the results of a self-assessment questionnaire that the author of this paper used to assess her courses at the end of the winter semester of the academic year 2020/2021, the students generally appreciate availability of online materials, use of video clips, learning games and chances to share their opinions with the class. Even though some students do not enjoy not being able to evade questions when the teacher calls on them, being removed from a meeting when they are non-responsive or doing homework assignments, such practices are conducive to their learning. However, even though the students generally enjoy online courses, they mentioned talking to their classmates and not enough group work as deficiencies of online courses they participated in. In spite of limitations of such a small survey of students' experiences conducted for personal development reasons, its results can be a starting point for planning future research directions.

To summarize, online teaching of a foreign language is a highly complex process that entails many challenges related to course design and execution, technological savviness, online classroom management and the ability to form effective interpersonal student-teacher relationships online. The context of emergency and a health crisis further complicates these tasks, making teachers' and learners' flexibility, adaptability and willingness to learn of utmost importance for the effectiveness of the whole process.

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