

Reviewing consequences of emergency transition to distance learning in efl classroom (ase Study of Foreign Languages Department of Batumi State Maritime Academy)

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Abstract. We are all aware that COVID19 has drastically altered our lives and lifestyles, which caused an emergency transition in all the fields including Higher Education worldwide. The learning process has been swiftly shifted into distance learning mode without any prior preparation and expectation of the educational staff (teaching and administrative) of the institutions as well as the students. This unprecedented transition necessitated incorporating soft skills and diverse e-platforms in the learning process, selecting between the most effective form among online (synchronous) and hybrid modes of distance learning in the EFL classroom. Moreover, HEIs were forced to encourage and mobilize educational staff without direct practical experience in order to ensure on-click transition to ‘New Normal’, prioritizing students’ safety, resilience and mental health.

Therefore, the presented paper aims at highlighting the outcomes of emergency transition to remote learning in EFL Classroom on the basis of a case study conducted by Foreign Languages Department of BSMA. With this purpose a quantitative survey was carried out through questioning the opinions of EFL students (both Bachelor and Master level) from the faculties of Navigation, Engineering and Business and Management of BSMA. The results of the case study were analyzed, processed and summarized in the form of generalized conclusion, on the basis of which practical recommendations were drawn for more effective planning and implementation of the EFL learning process during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key words: EFL; effectiveness; F2F learning, hybrid / blended learning; online learning; e-platforms.

1. Introduction

It is obvious that Covid-19 indeed turned our lives upside-down, radically changing all areas of areas of lives, including our lifestyle. Educational sector other with Healthcare has undergone most dramatic changed, being forced to move to distance education in an emergency manner.

According to United Nations Policy Brief [1]: Education During Covid-19 And Beyond in the field of education, this emergency has led to the massive closure of face-to-face activities of educational institutions in more than 190 countries (UN Sustainable Development Group August 2020) to prevent the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact, which more than ever required

taking reasonable and effective measures and urgent steps at the management level at all levels of educational institutions, in particular higher education institutions (HEIs).

It is noteworthy that Georgia managed to respond to the crisis in an urgent and effective manner and mobilize and support academic personnel and community with recent distance learning modalities and formats in tandem with caring for the students' mental and physical health and wellbeing through taking efficient steps, i.e. 1. Continuing education in Face-to-Face, Blended and Online format; 2. Country's readiness towards blended or online education; 3. Adopting new assessment methods; 4. Ensuring professional retraining of the teachers and students to fill the gaps in response to the digital divide and digitalization. 5. Providing technical support to HEIs in Georgia.

Before Covid-19 Pandemic, officially announced on March 20, 2020 English as a Foreign Language conventionally has been taught in traditional, i.e. Face-to-Face format. Therefore, after mandatory transition to distance education at all levels and academic programs in tertiary education in Georgia, educational authorities had to initially tackle the issue of continuing Spring Term 2020 in a new format and manner. Naturally, emergency transition period raised a cascade of questions among educational decision-makers and stake-holders, i.e. which format? Which academic disciplines and programs to be moved to online modality? Online or Hybrid Modality? Therefore, as the result of joining hands local and internationally, taking urgent measures and actions in order to ensure continuous academic process primarily by Educational Authorities, EFL Community also acted efficiently and effectively to respond to the crisis; Hence, EFL Educators together with Administrative staff took an active and effective steps in emergency transition to distance education via revisiting and adaptation academic courses in response to new needs and reality, being forced to fully switch to fully ICT-based learning environment. In, Georgia EFL instructors started to share and exchange their approaches to most effective online teaching platforms, programs (zoom, cisco webex, social media platforms, etc.) and did their best in order to timely respond to the crisis and succeed in mandatory integration of technology in EFL Classroom within shortest terms.

It is noteworthy that Technology integration in English as Foreign Language Education can be traced back to 60 of XX Century [2]. Demonstration of authentic materials (both written and oral) and teaching foreign language with communicative approach with maximal exposure to authenticity is achieved via effective integration of ICT in EFL Classroom. From this viewpoint,

EFL Community of Georgia has always kept pace with recent demands and trends via continuous professional development and put into practice the digitally assisted learning process. To our luck, a series of professional development courses, webinars and online courses (MOOCS, Canvas) were organized by highly-reputable international organizations, i.e. IATEFL, MACMILLAN and others in synchronous and asynchronous format, as well as professional courses, seminar and conferences held in hybrid format, which indeed played a crucial role in putting the internationally recognized standards in EFL education into practice and ensuring comparatively less painful transition to distance learning as the result of already existing experience.

As shown with recent experience before the beginning of the first wave of the pandemic majority of EFL teachers (those not having access to the courses offered with MOOCS) were devoid of hand-on-experience to delivering a fully digitally-assisted academic process, without prior preparation and training. Though, as the result of unpresented support, unification of sources and mobilizing material/technical/intellectual resources, after selecting an officially licensed platform – zoom by Batumi State Maritime Academy, digitally-assisted academic process was successfully continued, ensuring an effective foreign language learning process maximally approximated with traditional setting via using multimedia functions, i.e. whiteboards, breakout rooms, chats, etc.

In addition to the abovementioned we should not forget that emergency transition to distance modality was related to unforeseen costs and expenses for the Higher Educational Institutions as well as for the academic staff and students. Though, this problem was immediately resolved via purchasing a licensed online platform – zoon to ensure continuous academic process, besides this necessary technical equipment were provided to the students and teaching staff in need of the latter. Despite of taken steps, other side problems, i.e. continuous and high-speed internet, inappropriate technical facilities still created problems and barriers for effective delivery of the academic process. In tandem with the above-mentioned technical character problems, other challenges were identified, which was basically related to extremely high workload for the academic as well as administrative staff (24/4). As teaching English as a Foreign languages requires integration and practicing of all four language skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) during one class therefore it naturally requires proper planning and organization, though this was still achieved during distance modality and within shortest term and with existing resources it became possible to receive maximal results and feedback via practical activities during

synchronous regime (i.e. via zoom platform) and as well responding to the uploaded assignments in an asynchronous manner.

To sum up, from today's perspectives mandatory integration of technologies in the process of teaching English as a Foreign Language under force majeure circumstances has led to its own positive outcomes despite of faced problems and challenges, which first of all is the result of non-stop and continuous work of all the involved stakeholders. Therefore, our paper highlights all three – traditional - F2F, distance and hybrid forms of distance education and describes their positive and negative sides. Furthermore, the aim of presented work is to review the outcomes of emergency transition to remote learning in EFL Classroom on the basis of a case study conducted by Foreign Languages Department of BSMA. With this purpose a quantitative survey was carried out through questioning the opinions of EFL students (both Bachelor and Master level) from the faculties of Navigation, Engineering and Business and Management of BSMA. On the basis of the survey results general conclusions were made.

Literature Review

There are following types of distance learning: Face-to-face, hybrid and distance (synchronous/asynchronous).

2. Face-to-Face Learning

Face-to-face learning is a traditional method of learning English as a second language, which requires mutual contact of lecturers and students in classrooms with the help of the resources, as: books, projectors, white boards, markers and so on. Moreover, it requires direct interaction among communicants. Besides, students pass their homework, exams and complete their task based learning in the live process form and other.

One of the main functions of teacher and lecturers are to rise motivation in students and enroll them in learning process to the full. The mentioned approach could be assumed as a teacher based process, as the function of teacher-lecturers are to supervise and monitor the learning process and at the same time to manage it effectively. According to UNESCO (2020) “face-to-face teaching offers opportunities for student-teacher interaction that are difficult to replicate at a distance, particularly where there is inadequate training for distance education” [9].

Accordingly, face-to face learning is characterized as follows:

1. The dialogue among students and teacher/lecturers;
2. Sharing knowledge among students, which provokes their enrollment;

3. Eye-contact, which encourages interaction.

The above characteristics are important mediator in learning English as a foreign language.

As the observation of language learners has shown, the face-to-face learning is characterized by such features as the social aspect, as it includes face-to-face meetings with students for the purpose of teaching, which facilitates socialization and networking.

In addition, the traditional audience is completely based on the use of printed material, such as textbooks, printed learning resources, handouts. Also, printed out authentic materials (newspapers, magazines), learning realia facilitating the study of English as a foreign language in an environment as close as possible to its native language. When teaching English as a foreign language in a traditional format, teacher and lecturers have a chance to use variety of activities on a target language, which is tailored to all types of teaching styles, especially, kinesthetic and tactile methods that are very difficult or almost impossible to integrate in distance learning.

As for the teacher's creativity aspect, the latter can be realized during the "live (teaching) process". Of course, the teacher may use his / her own creative skills during distance learning to make the meetings more active and less stressful but, this undoubtedly requires more planning and preparation and is therefore more time consuming. As for the accessibility factor, we cannot deny that in face-to-face teaching, lecturers in classrooms are constantly available to students willing to help. While in distance learning, some students may be reluctant and do not ask to delve into a specific issue, ask questions, and so on. Thus, traditional classes offer more opportunities for both lecturers and students to learn English as a foreign language in a more effective and interactive way, as it is characterized by direct interaction after the end of the classroom session, even during breaks, and these relationships are related to human emotions [3].

The next noticeable advantage of traditional teaching is that it allows us to effectively manage distractions such as cell phones, noise, talking, copying, and so on. However, in distance learning, the greatest effort is required to manage student engagement (turn on cameras, sound), this is more easily achieved through eye contact.

During distance learning we cannot avoid cheating by students as if they are attending a meeting. Or, have fake eye contact, in front of the turned on cameras. The eye contact plays a favorable role in communication and feedback. Accordingly, "eyes are the window of the soul [4], it can only be fully achieved through face-to-face interaction. It is also noteworthy that during face-to-face meetings, students are positively motivated by role model students for them, which is

the biggest incentive for a relatively "weak" student, aiming to compete and excel while learning English as a foreign language like a successful group mate. This factor is more obvious during face-to-face learning.

According to Arias, Swinton, Anderson [5] “students in the face-to-face section have statistically significantly higher exam scores and statistically significantly greater improvement on the post-test instructor questions. There is no statistical difference in the improvement on the post-test overall nor in the improvement in the post-test standardized questions. These mixed results suggest that both course objectives and the mechanism used to assess the relative effectiveness of the two modes of education may play an important part in determining the relative effectiveness of alternative delivery methods”.

The next factor that characterizes traditional real classroom meetings are linked to the role of teachers and lecturers, who can understand students' problems, jointly seek ways of their common solution. Also, students can easily get support from a classmate when working in groups and in pairs, and finally, dialogue between teacher and student is more effective during face-to-face teaching between students and students.

3. Distance Learning

As a result of the pandemic, the learning process has changed radically and face-to-face learning has been replaced by distance learning. Distance learning integrates the use of digital materials and Internet resources in an educational environment. Distance learning has a fairly wide range of benefits, e.g., it is flexible in time and space, depending on the student's individual learning rhythm, and so on.

There are currently two types of distance learning methods: synchronous and asynchronous. According to Oxford Learner's Dictionaries the term “synchronous” is defined as "what happens or exists at the same time" [10].

Accordingly, the synchronous learning type belongs to a learning process that takes place remotely in real time. In distance learning, lecturers and students meet at a pre-scheduled time and their communication is direct using the technology platform of their choice. As Hyder and his colleagues define [6] “the roots of synchronous e-learning derive from three main influences: the classroom, the media, and the conference”(p.6). Besides, synchronous learning is defined “interaction of participants with an instructor via the Web in real time” [7].

As mentioned above, as a result of the pandemic, most of the higher education institutions in Georgia and in the world switched to the format of distance learning spontaneously and instantly. Therefore, the academic staff needed to master Internet platforms unknown to them in the shortest possible time, such as: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Jist meeting and other. Different universities used different platforms, but in our case, Batumi State Maritime Academy used the licensed Zoom platform, which encouraged lecturers to conduct lectures on a continuous basis, to use 'breakout rooms' for group and pair works, also, different emotions for feedback, such as: praise, surprise, mutual understanding, celebration, etc.)

In addition, Zoom, like other platforms, has a screen sharing feature that is effective for learning materials, e.g. For sharing books as well as videos, audio, and chat interactions (e.g., assigning assignments, asking questions, etc.). To summarize the above, the synchronous method of distance learning has enabled English as a foreign language student to be actively and effectively involved in the academic process, learning from home and safely with maximum effort during the "New Reality" of academic semester.

The synchronous form of distance learning is similar to face-to-face learning. This method is teacher-centered as well, however, with all the learning stages are fulfilled remotely, using technology. Accordingly:

- Time is planned in advance;
- is interactive;
- Includes group and pair work;
- It is possible to implement projects;
- It is possible to evaluate;
- Internet resources are shared via link, e-mail or so-called "chats" and others;
- Students are involved in the learning process.

As for the asynchronous method of distance learning, it is defined as "two or more objects or events" that do not occur at the same time (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries [10]). Therefore, the form of asynchronous learning is related to the rhythm of the student's individual and independent work, although the deadlines for task completions are defined. This means that students are provided with study materials and assignments for a set period of weeks, months. Asynchronous learning is "an interactive learning community that is not limited by time, place or the constraints of a classroom" [8] this method is student oriented implying self-teaching and self-instruction

which was used before the pandemic in the form of mass open online courses (MOOCS) (short courses and vocational training). In addition, higher education institutions offer distance education at all three levels (undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral).

Students receive the relevant qualifications without visiting the university, only communicate with representatives and administrative staff via email, remotely register for subjects, watch course videos uploaded by the subject teacher, read officially uploaded study materials. For instance, Pegaso International University in Malta (www.pegaso-international.eu).

Asynchronous distance learning is similar to synchronous, conducted remotely but is a student-centered approach that does not require immediate and face-to-face interaction between students and lecturers. This method requires:

- Self-discipline;
- Rhythm of individual work;
- Flexibility.

4. Research Method

A quantitative survey (Likert scale) was chosen as the research method. The study: *"Assessment of English Language Distance Learning at Batumi State Maritime Academy"* (see Annex 1) was conducted in asynchronous mode, which was uploaded through Batumi State Maritime Academy's electronic services platform in the student journal. The questionnaire consisted of 20 open-ended questions (please find the link below: https://docs.google.com/forms/u/0/d/1EDg1TL4tt_w8EAdGeCnoJQMjAWg5PN35kZWQ5PXQJno/viewform?fbclid=IwAR1e67VS2SZwhmUNi1Yw40PRP16lPOpIfKbA1eF1jaLjMs6GsaMQQNHxnsU&edit_requested=true). Participants had to choose answers based on the principle of multiple choice (1. Strongly disagree; 2. Disagree; 3. Neither agree nor disagree; 4. Agree; 5. Strongly agree). The total number of students (respondents) was: 300.

5. Analysis of Results

Table1. Results of the Survey

#	Questions	1	2	3	4	5
1	I had online learning experience before the pandemic	41.6%	17.4%	-	15.5%	20.5%
2	The format of online learning was acceptable to me	8.7%	9.1%	25.5%	20.5%	36.2%
3	I felt comfortable at English lectures (general / specialized English)	-	-	-	26.8%	54.4%

4	Teaching English language was as interactive as before the pandemic	7.5%	10.9%	19.7%	21.1%	40.8%
5	I had the opportunity to engage in various activities (in pairs, teamwork using the so-called 'breakout' rooms on the Zoom platform)	7.1%	-	15.8%	26.3%	45.8%
6	I received timely and effective feedback from the lecturer	-	-	-	25.9%	60.8%
7	The lecturer gave explanations on and beyond uncertain issues / topics	-	-	-	22%	66.1%
8	I was actively involved in discussions / debates	-	-	17.4%	34.1%	40.3%
9	The proposed grading system was acceptable	-	-	16.6%	30.7%	40.5%
10	The offered learning material was diverse and relevant to the course	-	-	11.3%	35.5%	41.1%
11	The learning goals and objectives set by the lecturer were achievable	-	-	9.9%	32%	53.7%
12	English language teaching was effectively planned and organized	-	-	14.3%	29.4%	49.5%
13	I felt alone during distance learning	37.1%	20.7%	15.6%	8.2%	18.4%
14	Distance learning for me was stressful and depressing	40.5%	15.3%	16.3%	10.2%	17.7%
15	I did not have relevant technical skills during distance learning	39.7%	19.7%	19%	-	15.2%
16	The distance learning process was hindered by various technical issues (unstable internet connection; faulty equipment; lack of appropriate equipment; electricity)	21.8%	16%	22.9%	14.7%	24.6%
17	The process of distance learning was hindered by the lack of appropriate learning environment (isolated learning space, noise, etc.)	34.7%	18.4%	17.3%	12.6%	17%
18	I found it difficult to maintain self-discipline and stay focused during online learning	31.7%	20.1%	18.1%	10.2%	19.8%
19	Distance English learning equipped me with new and practical experiences	-	-	22.7%	27.1%	37.6%
20	During distance learning my ability to communicate in English in a virtual environment improved	7.5%	-	17%	27.2%	43.2%

6. Conclusion

The survey shows that the majority of students (60%) did not have experience of online learning before the pandemic, which is natural and understandable due to the fact that the format of distance learning was not used in Georgia before the pandemic. It should be noted that for most of the respondents (60%) the format of online learning was acceptable. It is noteworthy that the vast majority of the students surveyed felt comfortable at English language lectures (general / specialized English), which is a very positive fact for both, Foreign Languages Department as well as the whole Batumi State Maritime Academy. For most of the respondents teaching English was as interactive as it was before the Pandemic. As mentioned above, qualification upgrade webinars, trainings and online courses in methodology have contributed greatly to it. In 2020-2021 an unprecedented number of professional development courses were conducted in this area by international organizations (Macmillan Educational, National Geographic, British Council, IATEFL) as well as our partner organization (SR Teaching and Learning) and the English

Teachers' Association (ETAG), which produced relevant results. Student satisfaction is a priority during pandemic, which is extremely stressful and tense. Majority of the students surveyed also mentioned that they had the opportunity to engage in various activities (in pairs, teamwork using the so-called 'breakout' rooms on the Zoom platform), which suggests teaching English as a foreign language based on the communicative method. It is a pleasant fact that the vast majority of respondents received timely and effective feedback from the lecturer and the lecturer provided explanations on and beyond uncertain issues / topics, which was extremely important because without the latter it is impossible to conduct an effective and results-oriented distance learning process. Lecturers' great efforts and their readiness to work 24/7 for students are appreciated.

74% of the students also mentioned that they were actively involved in discussions / debates, although this may still be biased assessment, although their high-level activity is worth mentioning, which is a prerequisite for mastering English as a foreign language in the right communicative context. The proposed grading system was not very acceptable for only 16.6% of the students and highly acceptable for the rest of them. The Quality Assurance Service of the faculty undoubtedly played a big part in it due to the fact that during the 2020-2021 academic semester the grading system for distance learning changed dramatically and became very flexible and efficient compared to the first wave of the pandemic.

The offered learning materials were diverse and relevant to the course to the for majority of respondents, which is really welcoming due to the fact that the lecturers tried their best to integrate diverse and stimulating additional authentic materials into the lecture process and it is gratifying that it was seen by the students understood it.

It should be noted that the vast majority of respondents (85%) believe that the learning goals and objectives set by the lecturer were achievable, which is transparent due to the fact that the electronic learning process management system clearly reflects goals and objectives of the course, which was not unnoticed. It is gratifying to learn that English language learning was effectively planned and organized for the vast majority of students.

As for the question: "I felt alone during distance learning", students univocally gave positive responses, which was expected due to the fact that socialization and empathy is achieved better during face-to-face meetings needs no proof and so it is not surprising that for most students the current learning format was stressful and depressing.

Only a small proportion (15%) of the students surveyed did not have relevant technical skills during distance learning; 24% noted that various technical issues (unstable internet connection; faulty equipment; lack of appropriate equipment; electricity) hindered the distance learning process, while 17% stated that the distance learning process was hindered by the lack of appropriate learning environment (isolated learning space, noise, etc.), which is an external cause independent of them and it cannot be solved by external intervention.

About 20% of students surveyed admit that it was difficult to maintain self-discipline and stay focused during online learning, which can be explained by many reasons, including the fact that the format of distance learning was not taken seriously at first by a number of students and they still feel the same.

Finally, distance English learning equipped the vast majority of students (99%) surveyed with new and practical experiences, which in our view was not only new but also necessary and very important experience tailored to the 21st century global skills and the pandemic accelerated its implementation. It is noteworthy to mention that the majority of the students surveyed, with the exception of only 7.5%, mentioned that the ability to communicate in English in a virtual environment during distance learning improved, which is a really positive sign and an indication that despite a “virtual wall” between students and lecturers, effective communication took. Despite the small expected and unavoidable difficulties, challenges and shortcomings, teaching English as a foreign language on the example of the Batumi State Maritime Academy (the number of the students surveyed was 300) was successful and fruitful.

We hope that the theoretical knowledge, practical skills and undoubtedly valuable experience gained during the pandemic will contribute to the further development and application of English as a foreign language teaching methodology, the results – both, positive and negative - will be analyzed and evaluated in more depth by specialists and experts and, ways and means of partial and alternative implementation in practice will be developed in the future.

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