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The New Virtual Reality – Teachers’ and Students’ Perceptions and Experience in English Language Learning and Teaching Online

Extended summary

The new reality of teaching and learning foreign languages presents numerous challenges for all the stakeholders in the educational process – management, lecturers, students and parents. The change which was abrupt due to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic led to feelings of anxiety and stress. This paper describes the process of migration of English language courses to emergency remote language teaching and learning at two university institutions in Serbia – The Teacher Education Faculty, University of Belgrade (TEF) and Belgrade Metropolitan University (BMU). Although online language teaching and learning has been present in the field of higher education for decades, the emergency of the transition from traditional to online settings was in many aspects different. The preparatory stage is crucial for developing successful online language courses. In the circumstances when this stage was entirely skipped due to the emergency of the situation, it led to feelings of stress and anxiety.

The aim of this qualitative research was to investigate the experience of teaching and learning English online. Relying on the descriptive and reflective methods and focus group interviews, the paper presents the students’ and teachers’ experience of using digital tools and platforms for remote collaborative learning and teaching, such as ZOOM, Microsoft Teams, Jitsi Meet, and online learning management systems, applied at the two academic institutions in Belgrade.

The e-learning platform (LAMS) used by BMU is a project developed by IT experts working at the University. It allows content to be uploaded to it, lessons to be structured the way they are to be conducted in the traditional classroom. The software for preparation of les-

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sons has additional tools allowing for Q & A sessions, quick assessments, forum discussions, upload of video and audio content, as well as images, graphs, charts and tables. The platform caters for many pedagogical needs of language learners – they can find the most suitable time and pace for learning, they can use other digital tools for scaffolding, they do not feel intimidated when working on tasks and they can modify and fine-tune their responses. However, there are no options for preparing gap-fill or matching types of activities.

BMU opted for Zoom for conducting live lessons. With lack of time for proper research and practice, lecturers and students were learning how it works by doing. The experience of using Zoom for live lessons was positive. Lecturers gradually became self-confident; students participated in lessons by using chat or speaking. There were problems with slow or no internet connection and less use of camera. However, with time, the level of enthusiasm and motivation of students was dropping.

The platform officially used for online teaching at TEF is Microsoft Teams. It is convenient for large groups of participants, whether for teaching or conferencing purposes. Its advantages are the options for sharing materials, their upload, download and editing in either synchronous or asynchronous manner, the Class Notebook for students' notes with a canvas for collaboration, and specially designated space for assignments, grades and reflective insights. Lessons can be recorded and saved in shared Team folders for subsequent viewing. What makes this collaboration platform rather complex for use is its reliance on the Microsoft 365 family of products, which requires opening accounts for institutional use and some time and training to grasp its full potential.

Jitsi Meet is an open source video conferencing solution that does not require an account. Due to its very simple lesson scheduling and log-in procedures and similarities with other computer software programmes like Skype, Jitsi Meet was a temporary solution for some of the TEF's elective courses. What it does not offer is the possibility to download presence lists or upload any class materials, except for sharing textual, audio and video contents during the lesson.

Among the students included in the GE, ESP and EMI-based courses, ten first-year students were randomly chosen for the focus group interviews at BMU and seven students of TEF volunteered for collaborative tasks monitored through unstructured interview sessions. As shown in the results of the conducted interviews, despite certain motivational obstacles, students' perceptions and reflections on their learning experience within the courses under the new circumstances were positive, and even resulted in presentations that they created through collaborative work and delivered at an international LSP conference.

Such findings can be a stimulus to those who feel less motivated to use new digital tools, applications or platforms and rather rely on a restricted choice of synchronous and asynchronous forms of working online. Also, it would be useful to conduct similar research among larger groups of university students, as well as high school students and teachers in order to compare their reflections on online learning, teaching and assessment with those of university students and lecturers.

We surely miss our classrooms. But this is the time of change. And however unfortunate our new virtual reality may be, the life "in the cloud" has obviously had its share in our students'

linguistic, cultural and professional development. As for the teachers, they too have undergone a form of digital acculturation.

Keywords: teaching English, collaborative learning, online teaching and learning, EMI, educational technology

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