

# LANGUAGE TEACHING THROUGH THE 'BLACK SCREEN': IMPLICATIONS OF AN EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING CONTEXT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the experience of language teaching and learning in a radical way. Instructors are faced with the challenge of carrying out online lessons exclusively, re-designing teaching materials and making urgent use of new technological tools in order to establish a flow transition. However, the current conditions of the pandemic have officially "legitimised" a new type of teaching in a mandatory and imperative way, that of emergency distance teaching in an online environment. This pilot study explores the views of five language teachers in Higher Education (HE) on how their teaching practices changed in the context of remote learning in the fall semester of 2020. The study aims to explore the following two research questions: 1. which student language skill has been most affected in distance emergency teaching in an online environment, according to the teachers and 2. to what extent language learning is pedagogically achieved in distance emergency teaching in an online environment. For data collection, semi-structured interviews are conducted individually, from which issues related to the shifting of language learning pedagogy in an emergency remote teaching in an online environment are elicited. Analysis brings to light the "black screen" phenomenon, which refers to the black screen of the videoconferencing software tool through which lessons take place, and the students' tendency to "hide" behind the screen during the online lessons. Moreover, data analysis showed that writing is the most-affected skill under the new circumstances, as teachers are no longer able to detect their students' weaknesses. One of the issues brought to light by this study is that further empirical research, based on the views of students and more teachers, is needed to evaluate more fully the conditions of emergency remote language teaching in an online environment.

Keywords: Emergency remote language teaching, HE, pandemic, multimodality, e-learning.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 The Corona virus pandemic (COVID-19) and the new reality in education**

The year 2020 was irreparably affected by the outbreak of the Corona virus (COVID-19), which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in March 2020. The outbreak of the pandemic in December 2019 brought significant changes which affected all areas of life, creating conditions of unprecedented state. A profound effort of social distancing was maintained, and a complete travel ban, and traffic prohibition were issued nationally and globally. As a result, people were confronted with a new socio-cultural reality through which human contact was reduced to a minimum, the teleworking sector was strongly reborn, and the supremacy of technology prevailed all areas of life.

Inevitably, the changes could not leave the education sector intact, from pre-primary to tertiary, with the urgent closure of universities and schools and, at the same time, the introduction of a plethora of technological tools and resources over the coming months. According to UNESCO statistics [1], the number of students affected by the new educational reality amounts to 990,324,537. Moreover, the learning gap that exists between western countries and vulnerable and disadvantaged communities and countries in terms of internet provision, lack of technological infrastructure, knowledge and familiarity with technological tools has been accentuated. In the context of secondary and higher education, the aim was to maintain and enhance the process of distance learning in an online environment. Online distance education has always provided a flexible and alternative way of learning through which the learner could adapt to their learning needs [2]. On the contrary, the current conditions of the pandemic have officially "legitimised" in a mandatory and imperative way a new type of teaching, that of emergency distance teaching in an online environment.

## 1.2 Higher Education: some pre-pandemic online examples

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the inevitable shift to online teaching have placed teachers in HE institutions (colleges and universities) in a context of profound diversity of technology tools and resources. Like modern MacGyvers, teachers have been forced to improvise, prepare in unrealistic timeframes, and find solutions under non-ideal conditions [3]. It is also worth noting that some HE learners already had uninterrupted access to open online spaces, such as MOOCs "Mass Free Online Courses", which provide free university-wide digital resources on a variety of subjects (including a wide range of languages), becoming a pioneering way of learning around the world. The specific courses are offered by over 500 universities worldwide [4]. However, MOOCs have stirred scepticism that led to the need for more consistent research concerning aspects such as the absence of pedagogical goals, the physical exhaustion of teachers in terms of preparation and lack of resources, as well as learner demotivation [5].

Another pre-pandemic online environment was through Virtual Worlds with various definitions such as three-dimensional / (3-D), computer-mediated communication (CMC), and Virtual Reality (VR). A well-known example of Virtual Worlds is Second Life (SL). Learners in SL do not participate with their physical characteristics using their camera or photo (profile), but acquire another identity, having their own image (avatar). This world represents a simulation of a sociocultural environment that enables participants to use speech for communication, written speech through commands and messages, and provides collaborative opportunities between participants through social events such as travel, music [6]. The rapid evolution of technology, and of virtual reality, has brought about a new form of multimodal resources which provide various semiotic ways, necessitating the development of knowledge of the ways in which meaning is reproduced linguistically, visually, and digitally [7]. An additional advantage of this example is that it increases the chances of collaborative learning among the learners [8] and allows for contextualised learning in authentic conditions [9]. Many universities around the world have also implemented a virtual or blended learning environment through their virtual campus such as Middle East Medical University (METU) and the University of Illinois Chicago campus [10].

A final example of online learning environments are the PLEs (Personal Learning Environments) which promote the pedagogical use of social media and electronic platforms. There is a focus on collaborative learning, on the creative expression of students and on the continued use of language and communication with the teacher after the end of the lesson [11]. Pedagogically, PLEs are considered a way of promoting formal and informal learning. The first model follows the traditional structure of a university course with credits and teaching objectives while the second model is more flexible since the objectives are more student-centered and are often set by the student himself [12]. Some already popular PLEs are YouTube for personal collection of course content, LinkedIn for social networking and community building with people of common interest and of, sometimes, educational background [13] and, finally, Deviant Art, a social networking platform for painters and Fine Arts students through which the possibility of collaborative learning arises [14]. The learning environments mentioned above combine a variety of semiotic resources such as graphics, audio, video, texts, etc, that could have a supplementary role in the lesson. In fact, PLEs do not completely replace learning with a physical presence but act as an additional method for learning. In the case of MOOCs, the earned certificate or degree cannot replace a university degree since most courses are not credited, therefore, the qualification given cannot lead to further university studies.

What is different in the pandemic era is the state of online emergency which revealed issues associated with limited technological knowledge, inexperience with some online, educational tools, reliance on peers for support [15] as well as lack of design for pedagogical application of tools. The present preliminary study aims to evaluate the feasibility of a proposed, larger-scale study in the future. Like all teachers worldwide, the language teachers who participated in the study were forced to adapt to new learning and teaching conditions. The study investigates the views of five foreign language teachers (English, Italian and Greek) working at the Language Center (LC) of the Cyprus University of Technology (CUT) and their experiences with the language course as formed during the COVID-19 pandemic in the fall semester 2020. The research questions addressed in the study are:

- 1 Which student language skills have been most affected in the distance teaching of emergency in an online environment according to the teachers?
- 2 To what extent is language learning pedagogically achieved in distance emergency teaching in an online environment?

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Traditionally, studies on new literacies revolve around first language practices and not so much on the practices of second or foreign language. Nevertheless, the pioneering model of multiliteracies, proposed by a team of prominent literacy educators known as the New London Group [17], constitutes an essential theoretical framework with a strong influence on language education, either as first, second or foreign [16]. This model laid the groundwork for the development of multiliteracies, responding to the emergence and evolution of multiple media and the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the world. Moreover, the multiliteracies model calls for technology integration in schools. It emphasises the need for technological support and infrastructure to enable students to meet future society demands stemming from the rapidly changing conditions of global capitalism in the workforce [18]. This relates to the present study since the emergency online context in which teachers were forced to teach requires having a large technological background in terms of knowledge and availability of tools. The latter is a factor that has reshaped the pedagogical dimension of language teaching. First, it requires a meta-language, that is, the way students can understand the various meaning systems and information they receive through the tools. Second, students need to place them in a sociocultural context [19], something which is likely to set unrealistic goals for teachers and students [20], even in remote environments in terms of time, familiarity, etc.

When it comes to language stimuli in an online environment, multiliteracies are associated with more multimodal literacy practices, a factor that applies faithfully to the present day. The representation of the world and the environment around us is changing radically, and this is also projected through the technological changes that are evolving rapidly and are becoming more imperative. Reading practices have acquired a multimodal character, since texts have become Hypertexts, which “unfold” on the screen with images, sound, and other semiotic ways [21]. At the same time, classroom discourse has shifted from “turn the page” to “click”, from book to platform, and from “copy” to “upload”. In terms of oral and written practices, an “emergency lesson plan” with many technology tools and platforms is not enough to practice a second / foreign language. Teachers need to apply a theoretical framework while designing technology-mediated collaborative tasks not only for pedagogical purposes but also for encouraging understanding, strengthening relationships between students online and reducing stress [22]. Finally, writing practices have been mapped within a global technological-cultural context that is multimodally and socially consistent with the use of technological tools for writing, either personally or professionally [23]. For example, blogs are a form of written text that is typed and used individually. There are also texts on the WordPress platform that come with static or animated images, audio and even 3D objects. Establishing coherence in these texts causes some skepticism since fundamental principles of writing are missing [23] such as writing sentences and paragraphs in a linear way, etc. Therefore, further research should be conducted on the principles of the current writing practices.

As already noted, the context of the pandemic has created great challenges for language teachers in an emergency remote teaching online environment. The global and multidimensional social crisis has caused unprecedented ‘disruption’ [24]. The field of education should respond to social needs and give meaning through research because it is affected by great variability in various social and professional contexts as well as by new communication technologies [25]. Variability is also apparent in how meaning can change among different genres and cultural contexts [19]. As for technology, it does not only demand multiple literacy skills from students, but it also raises issues as to how teachers are going to deliver pedagogical learning content through multimodal resources to create meaning for students [27].

## 3 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Context and participants

Language courses at CUT are offered by the CUT LC. The LC provides linguistic support to the 15 departments of the university through English (compulsory) and Greek courses (compulsory only if required by departments). The LC offers English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It also offers elective courses such as Greek as an academic language, Greek for the public (especially for immigrants), French, Spanish, Russian and Italian. Some of the goals of the LC is to teach languages that are tailored to the students’ linguistic needs related to their field of study and in their participation in international exchange programmes [27].

Two of the participants in the present study teach English for Academic Purposes (ESAP), one participant teaches ESAP and English for learning disabilities, while the other two participants teach Greek for Academic Purposes and Italian (levels 1 and 2) respectively.

### 3.2 Data analysis

Consent forms were sent to the five participants prior to the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection through the Zoom platform due to the distance measures for COVID-19. Semi-structured interviews are considered more appropriate for pre-existing theory that requires further investigation in new conditions [28]. The interviews took place after the end of the fall semester 2020 and then, the analysis and the coding of data followed.

The questions used in the semi-structured interviews are:

- What differences have you noted in your students' skills regarding the language you teach under the new circumstances?
- How do you ensure rich stimuli for your students in the lesson?
- To what extent do you believe emergency distance learning in an online environment is pedagogically achieved?

## 4 RESULTS / DISCUSSION

The choice of questions focused on the students' language skills within the context of pluralised technological tools, multimodal resources, and language learning pedagogy in emergency distance learning in an online environment.

Table 1. Thematic coding

Codes	Categories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The "black screen" phenomenon and the security it gives to students in the language course</li><li>• Undetectable student weaknesses</li><li>• The writing skill as the most negatively affected skill of all</li></ul>	Student language skills before and after
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Metalanguage elements are lost</li></ul>	Language learning pedagogy shift

### 4.1 The "black screen" phenomenon

The most prominent thematic codes for students' language skills are the phenomenon of the "black screen" and the skill of writing as the skill that has been most negatively affected due to the total reliance on the AutoCorrect feature in Word. The "black screen" phenomenon refers to the black screen of the Zoom videoconferencing tool that teachers face when students do not turn on their cameras.

#### ✦ Excerpt 1

"The main difference I have encountered in the specific courses I teach, ESP for Mechanical Engineers, and for Management, is that the participation of freshmen has dropped a lot. It is the first thing I have pointed out with **the black screen**, for example, and participation has dropped to a large extent, and I have not yet discovered how I can increase their participation through the new tools we have at our disposal right now. They are sporadic participations". (Participant 1)

#### ✦ Excerpt 2

"First of all, it is, generally, very difficult because you cannot see the students. Most do not turn on their cameras so while trying to teach, **I face a black screen**, so I have no response. If I ask a question, students ask me to repeat it almost every time which means they are not there; I mean, to be active and listen to me. They might be doing something else at the same time and not be focused". (Participant 5)

The "black screen" phenomenon is an inhibiting factor for oral participation in the language lesson by the students. Compared to face-to-face lessons, Participant 1 (Excerpt 1) admits that "participation has dropped" while Participant 5 (Excerpt 2) faces a black screen instead of responding students.

✦ Excerpt 3

"Generally, I have noticed that they do not participate. It is very difficult to assess their abilities, whether they have improved or deteriorated. In other words, it is very difficult to judge this thing because in a group of 17 to 20 people there are two, three who will answer, so there is an interactive discussion regarding the issues we cover but only with those three people. I have the feeling that the rest of them **are hiding behind the camera**" (Participant 2).

Participant 2 (Excerpt 3) gives a specific number of students who participate, "within a group of 17 to 20 people there are two, three who will answer" while the rest "are hiding behind the camera". This intensifies the reference to the screen and the reduction of student interactivity and participation.

Apart from "hiding" and feeling "safe" behind the computer screen, students also feel free to navigate on social media during their lesson which could, also, affect their level of interest and participation. As a result, according to Participant 3, the teacher is forced to inspect the students (Excerpt 4).

✦ Excerpt 4

"Some of them may have the camera on, but they, still, feel protected, let's say, to do other things. For example, they may be on surfing on Facebook during the lesson, and yes, I'm forced to act like a policeman".

However, data analysis also revealed an example of a negative case [29] which deviates from the above-mentioned statements:

✦ Excerpt 5

"There's this student of mine, I found that she writes her opinion on the chat. I don't know, I mean, I feel that this online learning took us back. However, this thing of responding via chat shows that the student feels more comfortable because her voice is not heard. When we were physically present in class, she never participated in class discussions. Now I can say that she is more active. But it's only this student, not the others". (Participant 2)

## 4.2 Writing as the most negatively affected skill / undetectable weaknesses

Thematic analysis allowed for the identification of writing as the most negatively affected language skill of all in the learning environment caused by the pandemic conditions.

✦ Excerpt 6

"Compared to, for example, their midterm examination with some diagnostic tests that I had given them on site, I've reached two or three conclusions. The first is that many of their spelling weaknesses are no longer detectable because they use the Word AutoCorrect which automatically corrects the errors. AutoCorrect is a machine, not a person. I've noticed that many times they choose the first suggested word because it appeared first in AutoCorrect, so this results in syntactic errors and expressive errors. They don't bother to check which word is correct, for example, "advertisement", "advertiser", "advertising"; this is an issue that we face. I've drawn their attention to this and I'm waiting to see what will happen". (Participant 3)

✦ Excerpt 7

"Everything is typed now; the students do not hand in anything handwritten so let's start with the fact that the computer does not have the Italian alphabet, so I would need to show them how to type the grave accent, for example... . As for listening, we are on the same level as before. I believe that speaking has not improved as a skill. I'd say that more work is needed". (Participant 4)

✦ Excerpt 8

"There is no control in the use of Google Translator, so it is easier to copy-paste from Google Translator now, much easier than it was before. This is an additional reason why they do not improve in writing". (Participant 4).

Based on the above excerpts, writing, as a language skill, has been affected the most in a negative way. The implementation of AutoCorrect, sometimes used incorrectly, results in the autocorrection of some significant spelling, syntax, and expressive errors. This results in the inability to understand some linguistic problems that may arise from the transition from handwritten to typed forms of language.

Finally, Google Translator is an additional feature that hinders the development of written practice according to Participant 4. Students resort to the easy alternative of submitting copy-pasted solutions instead of producing their own written work.

Teachers place their practices within a multimodal mediascape to provide richer stimuli for their students. Two participants shifted to a more explanatory pedagogical approach with more specific guidelines (Excerpts 9 and 10).

★ Excerpt 9

"We have always worked with multimodal texts and tools. What has changed is that I now try to use more resources of a social character from a socio-cultural context. We can't always see it, but students are upset; they are anxious. I explain things more now. I may need to explain something to them twice, three, or four times if it takes; we may need to analyse things because of the reasons I gave before; students feel lost". (Participant 3)

★ Excerpt 10

"Apart from the resources I use, I try to explain things more. I try to write down everything I say so that they can read it afterwards, I don't just say it. The material I give is more explanatory and I combine it with audiovisual resources". (Participant 5)

### 4.3 Metalanguage elements are lost

The second research question asked to what extent language learning is pedagogically achieved in distance emergency teaching in an online environment. Analysis showed that teachers believe that the pedagogy of language teaching is not achieved to a great extent in the current circumstances.

★ Excerpt 11

"I feel that the personal contact we can have with the students face-to-face is ruined. It's difficult to tailor the lesson to their needs. The things you can achieve with a glance, a nod ... to move and go next to the student who is distracted... to encourage him when a mistake is made... these things are lost. Because we all sit behind our screens. The contribution of body language, facial expressions no longer exist which is an important part of the lesson. My students are not native speakers of Greek, they learn Greek as a second language, which means they need to learn about the Cypriot culture, learn which language choices are acceptable and which are no, and practise the norms of behaviour. The eye contact, the distance between teacher and student, the tone of our voice, all these are elements that should be clear in a language lesson, either in Greek or in any other language. I always move in the classroom, I always pay attention to the weaker students, the ones who are more reserved, those with less confidence. I approach them, I might deliberately stumble on their chair". (Participant 3)

★ Excerpt 12

"In Italian we use our hands a lot ... that is lost. If I must share my screen, my students do not see me, they see my screen, so they do not see me". (Participant 4)

★ Excerpt 13

"In class, I can see in their eyes and in their reaction whether they understood something or not". (Participant 2)

Excerpts 11, 12 and 13 address the necessary metalanguage elements which are lost in the current teaching context as well as the social dimension of the language that is neglected. Participants refer to the verbal and non-verbal cues, body language, facial expressions, etc. [30] as missing elements from the emergency distance teaching in an online environment. These elements are an integral part of learning a foreign language that are, unfortunately, lost behind the "black screen".

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

This study explores the views of five language teachers in HE in the context of emergency distance teaching in an online environment, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Data analysis shows that writing is the skill, which is more negatively affected, as teachers are no longer able to detect their students' weaknesses. In addition, there is a significant reference to the "black screen" phenomenon that further intensifies the distance between teachers and students. Also, although teachers continue to embed

multimodal practices in their lessons, they are often forced to become more explanatory since, as they explained, they "lose" students in the process along with many other significant linguistic elements.

One of the issues brought to light by the present study is that further empirical research is needed concerning the teaching practices of teachers in the pandemic era. A larger number of participants will provide greater sufficiency and it will help explore further the issue with a more representative sample size. More interviews with language teachers should be conducted for a wider range of perspectives that can enrich the topic of foreign language teaching in an online distance learning environment. Moreover, it would be useful to examine whether students' views reinforce or contradict those of teachers. A more anthropological and psychological approach will help us to understand some of the students' behaviors, for example, what pushes them to "hide" behind the screen and the security it gives them.

Finally, empirical research on technological requirements and infrastructure is needed for educational institutions to meet the demands of the new form of teaching as well as to provide better crisis management [31].

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