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ORIGINAL PAPER

Creating Online/Offline Spaces for Knowledge Transfer and Competitiveness in Teaching English to University Students in Romania

Alina-Roxana Popa[1)]

Abstract:
The global pandemic, together with the ever-rapidly growing pace of Internet technologies, prompted a paradigm shift in university education, along with changes on various societal levels. Online spaces replace offline knowledge delivery, but will they supersede the offline experience and effectiveness? In the case of English language teaching, the multitude of electronic materials, the often enhanced circumstances for exploiting such resources via the available online platforms, joined with the convenience and cost-effectiveness of online courses, might determine many learners' preference for this form of interaction, or at least a mixture between the traditional and the newer means. The role of academics is examined not only as repositories of knowledge, but also as facilitators among the myriad of possibilities, and as forecasters of needs and realities, which will require new spaces and places for development or adaptation. With universities revisiting their educational offers both according to economic realities, and to the students' "likes", educators have the responsibility of keeping structure to the educational process; moreover, they are the human "interface" that mediates what is lost and what is gained in the space in front of the screen.

Keywords: *online teaching, university students, EFL, MOOCs, mediators.*

[1)] Senior Lecturer, PhD, University of Craiova, Faculty of Letters, Department of Applied Modern Languages, Romania, Phone: 0040 251414468, Email: roxana.popa@edu.ucv.ro, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-9409-4789.

1. Introduction

The paper starts from the premise that the role of universities is not limited to knowledge delivery; they have always been spaces which have formed individuals on several levels: professional, cultural, behavioral, ethical, economic, etc. Being part of an academic community shapes one's character in certain parameters which further determine the way in which that individual will perform as an active member of the society in a broader sense. The university as a physical place, the knowledge that it can access and impart, together with the academics, staff and students, they all interconnect and interact, resulting in a space that propagates a number of results that is in direct proportion to the ever growing number of university graduates and the fields of activity to which it relates.

Before the global pandemic, when the university physical campus was totally replaced by online spaces for some time, gradual steps towards the digitalization of the academic experience had already been taken on various levels in the previous years: digital libraries and resources; simulation programmes; the university web page as a first interface with the general public; training programmes encouraging all actors in the academic sphere to use computers and the internet; the development of digital platforms allowing synchronous and asynchronous interaction by crossing space and time limits (e.g. Zoom, Meet, Moodle etc.); the emergence of MOOCs (massive open online courses), which allow an unlimited number of participants and open access through the Internet (e.g. Coursera, edX, LinkedIn etc.; the appearance of social digital networks and apps facilitating interaction and the formation of groups belonging to any imaginable social sphere (e.g. Facebook, Tweeter, WhatsApp etc.); widening the coverage area of mobile and Internet networks, as "95% of the world population now has access to a mobile broadband network" (ITU, 2022); following the large-scale production and diversification of ICT devices and software programmes, their improved accessibility by the general public from the price point of view; the increasing preference for digital transactions, digital information exchange, or digital authentication in all fields of activity. Thus, the period of global online education that we underwent during the pandemic emerged against a complex background of factors: the digital era was able to reach an extreme expression of its inexorability.

The global pandemic period might be regarded as an experiment which has proved that totally and indefinitely transferring the whole academic experience to an online space is not desirable, as students worldwide cheerfully welcomed universities reopening their gates after restrictions were lifted; conversely, ignoring the advantages that can be brought by the relocation of certain academic activities towards the online area is counterproductive. As always, a middle-ground solution should be sought.

The article wishes to stress how strong points of both online and face-to-face approaches could be integrated in a hybrid space that can be functional in the long run. Practical observations in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) at the University of Craiova, Romania, will be included. Being based on EFL, and more specifically ESP (English for specific purposes), which is the author's field of activity, a disclaimer should be noted: the observations are not supported by quantitative research, but remain at an anecdotal level, backed by general observations, intuitions and informal discussions among the author and other members of the academia.

The main aspects through which the university space (and more specifically, for the teaching of EFL at the University of Craiova) could be enriched are identified two-

dimensionally: the social space, with its human factor; and the knowledge space, marked by the information component. In broad lines, the main directions of improvement converge as follows: providing more opportunities for interaction and constructing a more profound feeling of belonging to an academic community both online and offline; earmarking activities that can migrate from one space to another by (re)assessing and redefining their scope; constantly getting feedback from academia members regarding the appropriateness of the status quo, in a continuous effort to streamline the educational experience in a flexible manner.

2. The social space: the academic community

Probably the most significant element that contributes to the formation of an individual is the community to which that person is affiliated. While the accumulation of information can be gained individually, the way that information is put into practice depends on the practices, habits and openness towards innovative development which are cultivated within the individual's environment. Starting with family education during early years, which neuroscience deems to be the most momentous, continuing with peer influence, the wider social sphere and formal education, the role of the academic community at a higher level of professional development cannot be underestimated. The academic community has traditionally been identified by the sharing of a physical space, which is the university campus. But along with the transfer of educational activities online, that space needed to be redefined: the space and (in the case of asynchronous activities) even time limits were transcended.

It has been rightfully argued that, since the advent of mass online education, university administrators may be tempted to abandon physical spaces just for the sake of economizing on resources, without taking into account the loss of effectiveness in the educational act. As Pursell and Iiyoshi note, "from a senior administrator's perspective, maybe the convenience, efficiency, cost-effectiveness – and, in this case during COVID-19, safety – dominate policy decisions. Too often, we are not really talking about effectiveness or the meaningfulness of a student's experience in the classroom, and on campus, too. It's kind of dangerous to believe everything can be replicated or recreated using technology." (Pursell&Iiyoshi, 2021: 536-537)

Indeed, this is true to the extent that we are trying to replicate the same classical model of interaction which presupposes the permanent sharing of the same physical space during educational delivery. Since the students' experience and teaching effectiveness are directly linked to the possibility of creating direct human contact by sharing a physical place, for the sake of conserving resources, maybe we should consider introducing the practice of regular face-to-face meetings between students and professors in order to calibrate the human factor, while keeping the delivery of theoretical knowledge online. Physical meetings should also be organized for practical subjects when simulation software does not cover that subject's needs.

The key to triggering the formation of a feeling of belonging to the academic community lies in the opportunity among its members for interacting and getting to know one another. At a formal first level, a university's website should provide enough details about the possibilities of interaction with both the teaching and administrative staff, and with student leaders and organizations. Additionally, students could be guided how to set up clubs and societies according to their own interests, and here the online tools are able to reach wide audiences. Such interest groups may meet online or offline, leaving it to their respective members to decide upon the appropriateness of the location.

Regular meetings should also be set up for the teaching staff, not only to fulfil contractual duties, but also in order to maintain a supportive environment, in which to address various issues and exchange ideas. Again, it is for them to decide upon whether the meeting place should be virtual or physical, depending upon their availability at different times.

Regarding the nature of relations in the workplace, here Hofstede's "power distance" cultural dimension should be mentioned, with Romania being a country with a large power distance index: "In the large-power-distance situation, superiors and subordinates consider each other as existentially unequal; the hierarchical system is based on this existential inequality. Organizations centralize power as much as possible in a few hands. Subordinates expect to be told what to do. […] In the small-power-distance situation […] subordinates expect to be consulted before a decision is made that affects their work, but they accept that the boss is the one who finally decides." (Hofstede, Hofstede&Minkov, 2010: 73-74)

Thus, in a culture whose members are reluctant to cooperate in order to solve problems that may arise, the initiation of a meeting itself for such a purpose is often a problem in itself. Generally, in the Romanian culture, meetings are called by the boss and the boss is expected to provide the solutions and to set the general trend for the discussions; as the status quo is not easily challenged, formal meetings will perpetuate these traditional parameters, which are also reinforced by a traditional physical space with a formal setup. A physical space is a significant resource, as well as other assets (e.g. the participants' time or money for transport to get to the location etc.), which not anyone may feel entitled to access. Consequently, the ready availability of online meetings may encourage academic staff at all hierarchical levels to establish and engage in constructive dialogue.

Similarly, students may find it easier to start online dialogue among their peers or upwards in the academic hierarchy. Furthermore, they may be guided to interact by providing contact details with different actors and events on the academic ground all along their university itinerary. And even more significantly, it is for the teaching staff, as mentors, models and authority figures, to instil the drive towards and practice of dialogue into their students.

For students and even the teaching staff to get to interact outside the set limits of courses and formally organized meetings, it is important to know about one another. Hence, we always welcome a TV show such as "Personalities: Portrait Gallery" ("Galeria Personalităților") hosted by the University of Craiova TV station, "Tele U Craiova", which presents leading figures among the University of Craiova academics. Moreover, more numerous video presentations of other actors in the academic community could be made available on each faculty and department's webpage. Also, a good idea would be to increase the number of video recordings on the website of that department / faculty with instances of their different activities, this also being a marketing strategy meant to attract students.

A special note should be made about older students, for whom peer interaction is essential. As one author stresses when analyzing mobile-assisted language learning in older adults, "Older learners value peer teaching and collaborative learning, and appear to perform best when encouraged to plan, self-regulate, and control their learning process." (Puebla, Fievet, Tsopanidi & Clahsen, 2021: 170)

Another element of the online space is social media. Even if not directly linked to a university's space, it can be used as a connecting element among its members and

beyond. While we might be tempted to ignore it and purport that the thin air around the academic ivory tower should not be tainted by the brutality of a minimally controlled environment, this is an impractical stance. Social media constitutes a significant part of a student's experience and instead of trying to discount it, we could try to embrace it and beat the devil at its own game. Thus, irrespective of the students' chosen specialization, faculties may provide courses in order to raise their awareness about the nature of the content present on social media networks, and also to teach them how to turn their personal social media profiles to their advantage, in view of their future professional lives. Considering that the employment process involves personnel managers inspecting candidates' profiles on social networks, there is much at stake when it comes to what is and what is not to a person's advantage to be disclosed publically. An idea would be to invite human resources managers from various domains and companies to student meetings and discuss what they look for when they select their employees. For this purpose, seeing that those people have very busy schedules, or live in remote areas in relation to that university, online sessions will provide unique opportunities for such encounters.

Inviting guests for discussions via online platforms is a way of making the lecture room global and also of opening new pathways for future development. Discussing the role of virtual exchange in language teaching and learning, authors note that "Much research into VE [virtual exchange] language teaching practices tout positive gains in language learning by foregrounding functional, sociolinguistic, grammatical, discourse, strategic communicative competences and intercultural competences. […] VE has been found to be particularly useful for drawing learners' attention to formulaic sequences, communication strategies such as fillers and sociopragmatic features that are common to 'everyday' talk without resorting to contrived role plays or repetitive drills." (Dooly &Vinagre, 2021: 397-398)

The quality of the social space during a lecture course or seminar also varies according to the number of students who attend it, whether physically or online. In the case of foreign language teaching and learning, the effective acquisition of communication skills is achieved through interaction, which a teacher can manage more easily when the class size is smaller. The careful planning of interaction, promoting a relaxed atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, making an effort to find out about the students' particularities, preferences and styles of learning, about their experiences and opinions, making them feel that they are seen and appreciated, these will all contribute to strengthening the sense of belonging to a safe space, which nurtures growth and learning.

Regarding which space is more appropriate for interaction, online or offline, again, the main question is whether we use the advantages of each in a proper manner. There have been complaints from the part of students that they find it harder to concentrate during online lessons, as they get distracted more easily. But distractions do occur in the physical lecture room, too, as students are often tempted to check their smartphones, chat to their deskmates and consequently disturbing those who are trying to focus, or simply switch off because of tiredness or boredom. Personally, I have heard colleagues say that they cannot realize whether they are successful in their approach when they teach online, as they "cannot read the reaction in the student's eyes". While acknowledging the tremendous importance of body language in communication, I also believe it is a little self-delusional to persist in the idea that we can or should exert absolute control over our students, or underestimate their dissimulation talents. As

someone who was a quite successful student during my school and university years, even the teacher's pet in some cases, I confess I often managed to look deferentially into my teachers' eyes pretending to be interested while my mind was light years away. And my suspicion is I was far from being the only one resorting to such means in order to avoid sanctions or get some form of reward. The "sticks and carrots" method Daniel Pink (2009) discusses will only be efficient on a lower level: while generating immediate and external results, it will block creative processes in the long run.

Maybe we, as instructors, should start to renounce our deep-seated beliefs that control gives the measure of effective learning, and seize the opportunity created by the online space as a challenge to succeed in motivating our students without being able to control them as much as in a physical space: setting meaningful tasks or giving students the power of choosing between these, making connections between subjects, stimulating critical thinking, giving students entrepreneurial hints or about how to use the acquired knowledge in their future professional lives, encouraging them to express themselves in a persuasive manner, these are but a few ideas.

Sam Baddeley (2021) also gives some suggestions about how to boost student concentration online:

"•Greeting students by name at the start of the lesson, using student names throughout, and asking students to repeat instructions back to me.

•Laying out expectations at the start of the lesson with respect to switching off mobile phones and closing redundant browser windows to minimise distractions […].

•Monitoring student activity during the lesson via live marking of work completed […], and engaging with students who do not seem to be completing tasks (e.g. by sending them a direct message in the chat) […].

•Monitoring the work completed by students during asynchronous periods […].

•Cold-calling and in general having high expectations of students in terms of the level of contribution expected. Short quizzes (five questions maximum) and opportunities for contribution at regular intervals […]." (Baddeley, 2021: 113)

Among the Ofsted (2021) findings in relation to "What's working well in remote education", we note that "Feedback, retrieval practice and assessment are more important than ever." (Ofsted, 2021)

There has been a lot of emphasis in Romania on the idea of keeping webcams open all the time during online sessions, in an attempt to get feedback from students at a visual level, but also as a manner of checking that students do not leave the front of the screen in order to engage in activities unrelated to the lessons. I have also received feedback from some of my students that they find it easier to concentrate when they communicate if their webcams are turned on. On the other hand, most students prefer to keep their webcams turned off, even when they actively engage in current activities, either by pleading technical issues, or by openly arguing that they feel more comfortable this way. And indeed, it is stressful to constantly look at yourself in a mirror and knowing that anyone of those present can check for flaws in the way you or your private space looks (often applying visual effects makes the Internet connection weaker), with the camera presenting details on your face that interlocutors would not normally perceive when sharing the same physical space.Ramachandran (2021) also discusses the work of Stanford researchers who signal the phenomenon of "Zoom fatigue", and among other solutions, urges us to turn off webcams regularly in order to have some "audio only" rest, or to use mobile keyboards to take distance from the screen. In my view, when students are not engaged in active interaction, they should be allowed to turn off

their webcams, instead of forcing them to rigidly sit in front of the monitor. In this case as well, when instructors feel that using the webcam adds value to the interaction, it is for them to help their students overcome their anxiety of public exposure, but by convincing them with logical arguments, not by threatening, blaming or shaming them into compliance. Given that during their working lives, people in an ever increasing number of professions will probably carry out some if not all of their activities online, and online synchronous sessions can represent a significant part of those activities, university professors should be able to train students to perform successfully in those roles. As Mediafax.ro (2022), one leading news company in Romania announces, "Romanians prefer working from a distance: this month there have been 130,000 [representing 15% of the total number] applications for remote jobs […] Companies started to transform into benefits for their employees the opportunity to work from home permanently or a certain number of days per week." (my translation) (Cornea, 2022)

3. The knowledge space

The knowledge space is informed by three factors: information per se; the professor's or lecturer's role, as information expert; and the role of technology, as navigational, exploitation and liaising tool.

Regarding the professor / lecturer's role in the academic sphere, it is becoming a more and more complex one. Pursell and Iiyoshi (2021) wonder how professors will manage to keep their intellectual property rights for recorded lectures once they have become public. In the Internet era, students can access information from the most prestigious universities without even being enrolled at those universities. From repositories of knowledge, professors will need to increasingly act as curators of information, having in view the students' need to gain structured knowledge: "Part of our responsibility as faculty is not just to know "facts," but to have an understanding of what students need to know. I think we can assume that they don't know what they *need* to know. They know what they *like*. They know what they're interested in, but highly educated grown-ups have a sense of, "Well, that's fine. Indulge in that. But you really ought to know this topic."" (Pursell&Iiyoshi, 2021: 539) The authors also consider the need for professors to anticipate future trends and developments, as these should determine the choice of information to be delivered to students.

Besides creating conditions for interaction between the students themselves and between students and other actors in the academic community, professors also need to mediate between students and the myriad of existing information channels. On the other hand, the complexity of information and technologies might become so extreme that we might need other technologies to navigate the existing ones: "With sixteen thousand MOOCs and zillions of open learning materials, everyone can be a teacher of something. That can be a wonderful thing, but it's also very chaotic, and I think, as you said, people just don't know where to go. In the future, I think we might need that kind of a smart technology for all learners and people to navigate through, and then enable them to learn whatever they want to learn. Increasing complexity requires increasingly complicated technologies." (Pursell&Iiyoshi, 2021: 540)

But will this mean that professors will be replaced in this role by machines or smart search software? To a certain extent, they already have been, and Google is an example. Their mission then will be to do things that computers cannot do: being creative, showing students how to make use of information, how to make connections in

order to get to innovative results, how to discern between valid and misleading data, how to promote critical thinking in a specific field.

Among the online resources that are available to study in any domain, a more and more prominent place is occupied by MOOCs (massive open online courses), offered by leading universities and organizations, and where an unlimited number of students can enrol. Regarding language MOOCs (LMOOCs), authors note that "studies of LMOOCs have reported low engagement and completion rates (as with other MOOC subjects)." (Chong, Khan &Reinders, 2022: 2) Among the reasons why LMOOCs are not totally successful, the same authors note that most learners on those platforms are mainly "viewers", who lack the self-discipline and motivation to complete the courses. More specifically, LMOOCs are more appropriate for receptive (reading and listening) than productive (speaking and writing) skills, as they do not have strong interactivity features. (Chong et al., 2022)

In Romania, universities could consider LMOOC platforms both in order to include them as references for their students, so as to enrich bibliographical data, and to develop such platforms that would be informed by local features in the study of foreign languages (e.g. difficulties encountered by native Romanian speakers). Furthermore, in order to cater for the needs of local industries, ESP teachers could develop LMOOCs with a stress on interactive features. As a general approach, this would mean involving a large number of ESP teachers to be made available for interaction, and to identify the particular needs of their students, so as to cater for these successfully by offering diverging paths of study in the structure of the platforms.

With reference to how university distance learning could be improved in Romania through technological means, a lot more emphasis should be laid on the purchasing of simulation software for practical courses, along with enriching digital libraries. Maybe contracts could be negotiated with companies such as Amazon to offer subscriptions for digital resources, which can be accessed through their products, e.g. Amazon Kindle, which is an e-reader application that can be promoted and used by both teachers and students.

An important aspect in relation to the use of technology is represented by the training of the teaching staff, which can be formally imposed at a certain level, but most importantly, Romanian universities should start mutual support groups, which would offer collaboration, confidence, feedback and practical help to its members, as training in this field is a dynamic and continuous process.

In the same line of thought, Elliot (2021) reflects upon the complexity of this mechanism: "After introducing a new technology, take some time to stop and reflect. Jot down a few notes about what worked, what didn't work, and how it might work better in the future. The next time you use the technology, make any necessary adjustments and afterward reflect again. Don't be afraid to keep an eye out for new technology that might do the job better. Finding the right tool for the right job, and knowing the right way to use it, takes time." (Elliot, 2021: 304)

The teaching of ESL can be hugely boosted by the use of technology in universities, by following the trend towards "adaptive learning" (Ofsted, 2021), "personalized learning", or "precision education".

In language learning, technology has evolved so much as to allow full-body movement in virtual reality interactive video games developed to that purpose, which triggers processes in both brain hemispheres, thus facilitating language acquisition. Moreover, as Li & Lan (2021) explain, "ITS [intelligent tutoring systems] can give

feedback containing detailed, content based corrections, comments, and suggestions, in response to and tailor-made to the individual's learning behavior and outcome." (Li &Lan, 2021: 13)

As someone who teaches ESP to IT students, I have always observed how easily fluency in English is acquired by learners who are generally passionate about computers, watching films and engaging in multiplayer video games. Even if their grammar accuracy or level of formality is not always perfect, their starting point does not bear comparison with ordinary students. If we accessed technology that can address the specific needs of every learner, combined with the teachers' expertise, who can calibrate tools and provide the linking factor with all the other processes and spaces, the results would probably be even more spectacular.

4. Conclusion

A considerable number of academics in Romanian universities are still reluctant to access the online space to its full potential. Among the members of a society with a large power distance index (in Hofstede's terms), change will occur later if it is to be initiated only by the higher authority figures. Whether for that cultural reason or also because of a more widespread global phenomenon, online higher education is still being considered sceptically, and often rightly so, since it is not without its faults. Finding the middle ground, getting the best out of the two worlds (the physical and the online space) will bring us closer to people's real needs against a background permeated by technological tumult. And irrespective of some people's preferences, the trend of education will naturally follow developments in society at large, in its attempt to prepare learners for what lies ahead.

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