Students´ attitude to improving language competence in online teaching/learning environment

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Abstract

Education experts have been discussing the importance of online education environment in the 21st century for many years. Plenty of projects have focused on e-learning, online tools, information and education technology. However, the current situation regarding COVID 19 pandemic surprised us or even shocked us. Some teachers, school managements and even students themselves are feeling uncomfortable in an online environment. The contribution describes the situation at MTF STU and maps students' attitude to online education, particularly improving language competence in the online environment. ESP teachers have made the questionnaire and distributed it to their second-year bachelor students aiming at finding their attitude to improving language competence via online education.

1   Introduction

The implementation of information and communication technologies into education have been discussed for several decades in all stages of educational environment. Multiple projects have been investigated, hundreds of conference papers have been contributed, yet, the current situation concerning the COVID 19 pandemic has shown the preparedness (or unpreparedness?) of teachers and students or pupils and even the management as well.

Regarding the graduates of the Slovak University of Technology (STU), and this relates to all its faculties, not only those ones from the Faculty of Materials Science and Technology (MTF), which is dealt with in the contribution, do not have generally difficulties with finding a good job. On the contrary, in terms of STU MTF students´ expertise in technology or ICT, some of them are even headhunted. In addition, if their expertise is complemented by an appropriate language competence, then the students´ marketability is increased. Nevertheless, as the recent weeks have proved, some teachers, school managements and also students are feeling not convenient with their own skills in an online environment that is so essential now.

The language competence undoubtedly enhances the employability of the graduates since English has become the *lingua franca* of the international scientific communication, making thus this competence a prerequisite to be successful in the field of science and technology. Therefore, the authors have been interested in the students´ attitudes to an online teaching/learning environment, particularly in the field of language.
The English practitioners have prepared a questionnaire to map the situation and have distributed it to the second-year bachelor students. The courses of English (English for Science and Technology) at STU MTF are being carried out according to the syllabus based on a thorough analysis of the Faculty's students and graduates' needs on one hand, and the demands of market on the other hand. It has been continuously innovated and upgraded in accordance with growing demands of industrial practice to improve the graduates' skills and their marketability.

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Some of the secondary school students enter the Faculty of Materials Science and Technology study with low e-learning experience, and that is why they have to get familiar with an e-learning environment and e-learning techniques, as the major part of study materials for the STU MTF students is currently being published in an electronic way, frequently as interactive materials. As abovementioned, the current situation has shown the gaps the teachers and students still have in this online environment.

The contribution aims at showing the attitudes of students, mapping the situation and proposing possible solutions to overcome the feelings of being uncomfortable in the online environment.

2   ICT in education at STU MTF

ICT are a useful tool to generate, distribute and evaluate various methodology ideas as well as to administer necessary information and the knowledge gained. Thanks to these technologies both teachers and students can communicate with each other easily, while making an effective use of presentations, animations, videos, pictures, scans, notes, or commentaries. Furthermore, e-education possibilities can save time, are designed to be user-friendly and what is more, they are costs-effective. In addition to this, the trainings can be tailored to the specific needs of a group and the approach can be customised, i.e. more personalised and flexible.

It is needless to add that good e-learning materials support recent educational trends, which highlight learner autonomy, learner-centeredness, pro-activity, creativity, assertiveness, reasonable time-management and self-motivation. Regarding the STU MTF students and teachers, the most frequent way of utilising ICT before the pandemic was the Academic Information System, which is not meant to record only the study achievements but also offers electronic study materials, tests in order to provide the students with the advantage of an effective channel for communication and interaction.

STU MTF teachers realize that producing an e-learning material and uploading it in the Faculty information system is only half the job. The verification of material quality, the level of understanding and the extent of acquired knowledge is the next step. Therefore, examining via tests is an essential part the Faculty e-learning. Via the tests administered in the AIS, the students can check their self-access to verify their knowledge and skills acquired in the subject matter in question. Few years ago, when it was necessary to divide the students into homogenous groups according to their language competence, the English practitioners used to execute also online placement testing. Now, since the language competence of secondary students has improved significantly, and the students are organised into study groups according to their study programmes, this type of testing is not used any more.

Project work has proved to be the most reliable and effective tool for transforming the above mentioned concept into teaching and learning process. It has been successfully integrated into EST classroom for its effectiveness, authenticity, learner-centeredness, professional knowledge involvement, focus on language discourse level, employment of integrated language skills, and obviously the use of ICT, as the final product – output is delivered in the form of presentations, either using PowerPoint, prezi, or pdf.

All of this has currently been forced to move into the online teaching/learning environment. Therefore, the authors have become interested, how the situation has influenced or changed the students´ attitudes to learning the language online.

3   Current situation at STU MTF

3.1   The shift of teaching into online environment

As mentioned in the introduction, the current situation has shown the preparedness of teachers, students and the management, since the shift into the online teaching/learning environment was not smooth, on the contrary it was slow, inconvenient for many involved and encountered several difficulties. It is necessary also to mention that an appropriate legislation related to such a situation is missing, too. One of the reasons that the shift was that slow could be represented by the fact that many teachers and students have not considered the situation to be as serious as it was. The quarantine and the switch to the online teaching/learning environment started on 9 March 2020 and it took two or three weeks until some of the teachers and students realised that the shift into the online environment is inevitable. There was no unified system how to start the online teaching, though there

are many e-materials ready in the Academic Information System. In addition, some of the teachers as well as students did not have a suitable equipment for online teaching or good Internet connection.

Yet, there were some teachers, though a few, who immediately accommodated the change and started teaching online, particularly thanks to their previous experience with Google Drive, Google Classroom or other applications. Finally, the situation has made the teachers and students, however, deploy their skills and replace the face-to-face teaching by an online one. The teachers used mainly the study materials uploaded in the AIS, the e-mail communication for setting the assignments and providing feedback.

It is interesting also to mention that it was in the beginning of 2020, when Google and Microsoft Companies offered applications for online teaching (Google – GSuite Meet, Microsoft – Office 365), although in the current situation some teachers preferred ZOOM or Webex applications.

Regarding this new situation, the authors decided to provide the students a questionnaire to map their attitudes toward the shift from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. As for the Language department of professional communication, which consists of four English practitioners, the use of tools varied: from AIS, e-mail communication to active use of Google classroom and ZOOM application for online meetings.

3.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire comprised six items: one limited question, one scale question, one multiple choice question and three open questions. It was sent via AIS to all 264 STU MTF students in the second year of bachelor study, both full-time and part-time, for whom the English language course II was mandatory. Until the deadline 78 respondents sent their replies. Although the sample of returned replies was not big, the authors consider it as a representative enough. The first item of the questionnaire asked whether the students study full-time or part-time.
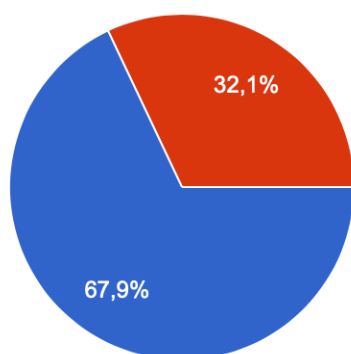

**Fig.1:** Illustration of questionnaire sample.

As seen from the graph, 53 respondents study full-time (67.9%) and 25 part-time (32.1%). In the second question the authors asked the respondents about the forms used by their English teacher for online teaching. The second question elicited what tools the STU MTF English teachers used for communicating, organising and delivering the English II course. The respondents could choose more than one options as the teachers are using several tools to educate and communicate with students during the quarantine time. The table below shows the options.

Tool	%
e-mail communication	60,3%
study materials uploaded in AIS (Academic Information System)	51,3%
google classroom (G-SUITE)	70,5%

google drive (G-SUITE)	32,1%
online meeting (G-SUITE Meet, Teams, ZOOM, other application)	19,2%
no contact and assignment yet	0,0%

Table 1. Illustration of teachers´ used tools for English II course.

The table shows that the mostly used tools for communicating, organising and delivering the course content was Google classroom (70,5%), email communication (60,3%) and AIS (51,3%), online meeting were used just by 19,2%. There were no responses saying that the teachers did not communicate at all. The reason why the teachers did not utilise the online meetings was probably by their low online teaching experience via above mentioned applications. The following question was a scaled one and asked about how the students found the English II course educated online. Scale 1 represented the most positive attitude and scale 5 represented the opinion that the online education of the English language is absolutely unsuitable.
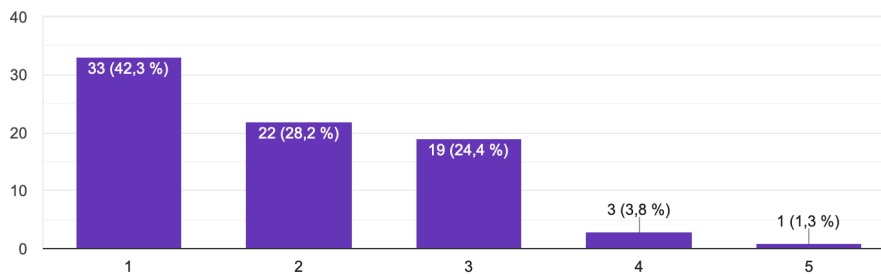
Fig. 2: Graph illustrating the students´ attitude to the English II course educated online.

From the graph it is seen that 33 students (42.3%) considered the online course in English positively, 22 students (28.2%) less positively but still suitable form of learning foreign language, and there was also one student (1.3%), who found this online teaching of the language absolutely unsuitable. The findings showed that it seems the students do not feel that uncomfortable with this method of teaching.

The next question of the questionnaire was open, and here the authors asked the respondents to suggest the tools, methods to be used in case of online teaching for a longer time period. The replies introduced articles, videos uploaded in Google Drive, division of the academic year into more terms (possibly trimesters), have more online meetings via various applications (MC Teams, Discord, Webex, Skype, ZOOM, GSuite - however, more students would appreciate if the online environment is unified and not so different for each subject), have more tests and exercises at their disposal to train the skills, have the possibility for online consultations with their teacher. There was also mentioned that some students cannot imagine online education of the English language for a longer time period.

By the item 5 of the questionnaire the authors wanted to learn what – according to the students´ opinion – are the biggest disadvantages of teaching/learning English in an online environment. The students stated it was the lack of communication and personal contact, or lack of explanation. Then they mentioned also insufficient access to the Internet and poor PC equipment (missing web camera or poor microphones). There were also some students who were satisfied and did not find any disadvantages of online teaching/learning.

By the last question we asked how the students should be evaluated if being taught online and the students replied that they would prefer term assignments and online tests.

4   For the future online teaching/learning environment

The questionnaire as well as our own experience showed that if in the future we have to face the situation requiring the shift to online educational environment, the following should be done:
- unifying online educational environment,
- setting requirements for the new educational context also in terms of legislation,
- setting criteria for teaching online,
- setting criteria for assessment,
- developing new digital skills both for teachers and students,
- designing new curriculum,
- fostering e-learning for teachers´ development,
- being able to shift into the online educational environment more flexibly,
- applying more AI (artificial intelligence) powered tools into education.

Conclusion

The current situation related with COVID 19 pandemic and the subsequent quarantine was a challenge for all educational environment, starting from the primary schools to universities. It checked the preparedness of all stakeholders involved and showed we need a lot of trainings in the field.

On the other hand, as our short questionnaire mapping the students´ attitude to improving the language skills via online teaching/learning environment showed, that more than 70% of respondents considered this online educational environment as a positive change, nevertheless, they lacked more communication with their teacher. Both groups, teachers as well as the students are aware that this new educational environment calls for setting new criteria and new requirements. To conclude, this new context requires also new educational environment.

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