Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, **13**, 2 (2021) 21–36

DOI: 10.2478/ausp-2021-0011

Pandemic-Triggered Online Teaching in Romania. A Language Teacher's Perspective

Enikő TANKÓ
Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (Cluj-Napoca, Romania)
Department of Human Sciences, Miercurea Ciuc
tankoeniko@uni.sapientia.ro

Abstract. With the restrictions caused by the pandemic, schools closed and classes went online in the spring of 2020. Suddenly, teachers found themselves in unexpected situations they had to deal with. With limited IT skills and no training courses offered by the Ministry of Education guiding them into the world of Google Classroom, Meet, or Zoom, teachers all over Romania had to cope with e-learning somehow.
In the present study, I propose to investigate some of the positive and negative aspects of going online, to compare digital language classes involving different age groups (pupils of elementary schools or middle schools vs university students), as well as the diverse social background which influenced online learning to a large extent. I also intend to look at teaching different language skills: is there any relevant change in this respect as opposed to teaching face-to-face?

Keywords: e-learning, language learning, digital skills, social background

An unprecedented situation

At the beginning of 2020, teachers and students all over the world suddenly found themselves in an unprecedented situation: from one week to another, they had to switch to online learning. In May 2020, a UNESCO report showed that worldwide there were around 1.21 billion students who could not return to schools and universities, which made up 69.3% of the student population around the world (Ionescu et al. 2020).

In some countries, computer-supported learning was something that both teachers and students were familiar with, whereas in other parts of the world e-learning came out of the blue, without any special preparation for those involved in it. A UNICEF report from June 2020 pointed out that "only a minority of countries have the basic infrastructure to focus on the pedagogical challenges of online approaches to teaching and learning" (Hosszu–Rughiniş

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2020). The sudden shift to online education meant a struggle to participate in digital learning, both for students and teachers in Romania, as many of them had poor user experiences and there was no such training for teachers in this respect. On the other hand, not everybody had access to proper devices, or perhaps the Internet connection was rather poor (Sălceanu 2020). What is more, it turned out we had to face difficulties in the process of learning to use different platforms or various applications, too. Consequently, all teachers needed a longer time to prepare for their classes and correct assignments, while all students spent more time writing their homework or completing their assignments.

Theoretical background

In general terms, online learning is "education that takes place over the Internet synchronously and/or asynchronously and does not take place in a traditional classroom. It can be in the form of online videos, online learning materials, face-to-face meeting sessions, interactive online questions, quizzes and practices" (Wong 2020: 2). A great number of previous studies have dealt with some of the positive effects of online learning, such as the availability of authentic learning materials (Blake 2013), self-paced and self-directed learning mode (Fotiadou et al. 2017), or the flexibility of time and location for learning (Zhang–Cheng 2012). Others have researched some of the downsides of online learning: lack of immediate feedback (Aguerrebere et al. 2018), supervision from teachers (Farley 2010), learners' feeling of isolation and the lack of solidarity with peers (Koutsoupidou 2014), or "fears with respect to surveillance and control, privacy issues, power relations, and (new) inequalities" (Jarke–Breiter 2019: 1).

However, the above mentioned studies are mostly based on research involving blended learning, which combines face-to-face learning and individual online study of electronically available material. For example, Moorhouse (2020) describes his experience with combining synchronous and asynchronous online learning and teaching. While the first synchronous online sessions were optional, less than 1/3 of the students joined in, and many of them preferred writing in the chat box to actually talking to each other. These online face-to-face meetings were rather teacher-centred presentations of the previously provided online material that students should have read and discussed. Later, when synchronous online sessions became compulsory, and breakout rooms were created for discussions in small groups, students prepared more thoroughly and took responsibility for participating at the discussions (Moorhouse 2020: 2).

As compared to blended learning, exclusively online learning is quite different. What is more, there is a huge difference between choosing online learning of free will and having it imposed on one, as it was the case of students who could not

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attend the school because of the pandemic. As Wong explains: "Both teachers and students were ill-prepared to face this unprecedented learning and teaching condition with unpredictable challenges – teachers did not have sufficient training to cope with students' and the teachers' own problems and stresses when teaching and learning could only be facilitated online" (Wong 2020: 14).

Luckily, teachers and students have been provided, mostly free of charge, with many educational platforms and a wide range of sources to meet the requirements of the unexpectedly generalized online education (Williamson et al. 2020: 108). On the other side, there were also companies who benefited a lot from selling different education-related software or other electronically available products or services to teachers or students who desperately needed them in order to be able to carry out their activities on a daily basis. Providing access to the Internet to families with financial difficulties was another type of help education received in a number of countries. Beyond its benefits, this has also been a way for gambling or loan companies to get in touch with these families and market their products (Williamson et al. 2020: 111).

Changing to online mode has not been easy for anyone. It needs us to adapt in many perspectives, as other researchers also point it out:

> Transitioning from offline to online teaching and learning has long been found by its earliest researchers and exponents to be complex, problematic and evolutionary, though it can be done by managing the unrealistic expectations that you will be doing substantially the same thing with time, space and material artefacts as you did in face-to-face teaching. (Williamson et al. 2020: 112)

A quick look at the situation in Romania

According to data provided by the Romanian Ministry of Education, there were a total of 2,824,594 students enrolled in the last school year (2019/2020) in Romania. An official survey run by the same ministry, which aimed at identifying students who had limited or absolutely no access to online learning, revealed that officially there were around 237,000 students with no Internet connection and further 287,000 students without IT devices.[1] These numbers indicate that around 18.55% of the questioned students had some kind of technical difficulty and could not attend online learning.

1 Information retrieved from: https://www.edupedu.ro/sunt-237-de-mii-de-elevi-care-nu-au-internet-si-287-de-mii-de-elevi-care-nu-au-echipamente-it-anunta-ministrul-educatiei-sunt-mai-multi-elevi-fara-acces-la-educatie-online-decat-arata-recensamantul/ [Last accessed: 1 May 2021].

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The data of the research are somewhat questionable, though, I would dare say, since the information collected through the county inspectorates was not accurate enough. Class teachers had only one question to answer: did the families of their students possess any IT device that made e-learning possible: D for desktop, L for laptop, S for smartphone, T for tablet, and N for no device? Thus, the survey did not take into account larger families where several children had access to only one phone in the family. They all appeared as individuals with some access to online education in statistics. A survey carried out by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES) in April 2020 estimated that 36% of the families had two or more children and not enough devices for them to attend online classes (IRES 2020).

On the other hand, the data collected through the inspectorates did not consider the age or performance of the smart gadgets either. Some of the students used desktops that were hardly working or their performance was so poor they could not sustain a platform such as Google Classroom. The survey conducted by IRES estimated that only around 68% of the students had proper equipment for online learning in Romania. The study claims that 76% of the students who were able to take part in online learning were from urban areas, while only 62% from rural areas (IRES 2020).

On top of all the difficulties mentioned so far, the changing rules during the school year did not help anybody in these difficult times. In the first few months of online learning, which covered about the second term of the school year 2019/2020, it turned out to be rather difficult to agree upon basic rules during online classes, as some of the official regulations were missing or appeared later on. Even the ones emerging in the process proved to be controversial decisions of the Ministry of Education. For example, handing in homework or fulfilling tasks was marked as optional, and, eventually, every student got some grade in every subject, even though they did not attend classes, based on their results in the previous semester.

At some point, giving marks or grades to pupils became also questionable, as parents had to agree on the grade their children received. Obviously, there have been misunderstandings between teachers and parents in this respect. Attendance of online activities and marking attendance or active participation turned out to be problematic, too, because of central decisions, while turning on cameras or not using them at all was another controversial issue, difficult to impose due to ministerial decisions. All these decisions hindered real educational development, in my view.

Since the beginning of the pandemic in the first part of 2020, online learning has developed a lot, even in contexts where originally it was considered to work with difficulties. As such, I would say there are at least two distinct stages we can distinguish between: in the first stage, everyone was doing things on the run

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and managed as they could. In this stage of e-learning, some of the problems were identified, and also the needs for a short-term development were assessed. The second stage probably started with the fall of 2020, when everyone started school with some previous online experience to build on. During their summer vacation, teachers attended training sessions and became acquainted with different platforms and various applications. Consequently, this second stage began slightly more differently than the previous one.

One of the most important needs identified in the very first stages of online education concerned access to smart devices. Although the Romanian Ministry of Education promised to help financially challenged families by offering them tablets starting from late spring 2020, this did not happen until late autumn. In the meantime, schools tried to ask for help from local authorities, different NGOs or foundations, and some of them managed to equip a number of students with electronic devices. Eventually, the much-talked-about tablets arrived little by little in every part of the country and further improved the situation in this respect.

Methodology and data collection

In comparing the two stages of e-learning I have identified so far, I wanted to find out pupils' and students' points of view as well. In order to do this, I have used a short questionnaire. I asked my students various questions related to how they had managed to deal with online learning, what difficulties they had encountered on the way, and what advantages, if any, they could name in all this unprecedented educational process. The respondents of this study were my own students at József Attila Primary School in Miercurea Ciuc, where I teach 98 pupils grouped into 5 classes (aged between 9 and 14), as well as my students at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania in Miercurea Ciuc (87 students learning in 7 groups). In both of the institutions, students are native speakers of Hungarian who speak Romanian to some extent and also speak English on different levels (obviously, lower levels at the primary school and higher levels at the university).

One of the most important differences between the two institutions is, obviously, students' age and the peculiarities of the different age groups. With younger pupils, I used easier and fewer questions, and, as expected, their answers were not always relevant since they were able to see only bits of the whole picture when it came to the educational process. As a result, I have built my research mainly on the answers provided by the pupils in middle school and, of course, by university students.

Taking into account the age differences between the various groups of learners involved in the present study (9- and 10-year-old pupils in the youngest group,

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11–14-year-old pupils in the middle school, and 19–42 in the university students' group), important differences emerged in organizing online learning as well. As expected, older learners turned out to be more independent, while many of the 9-10-year-old pupils needed help from their family members in order to attend classes or turn in assignments.

Data was collected in Hungarian in the case of both institutions. The translations of students' responses from Hungarian into English are my own throughout the article.

Describing the data

At the university, we have been learning online for more than a year now. When the first lockdown was announced in Romania (middle of March 2020), we went online and started using the Google suite: Google Classroom, Meet, and Jamboard. It was a very swift and difficult switch for everyone at that point. However, we all got used to e-learning in a few months, got acquainted with the platform we all had agreed to use, gained some experience using other applications as well, and things have been going more and more smoothly since then. The students' opinion is reflected in the excerpts reproduced below.

> I think we all adapted well to the emerging situation. We advanced with the seminar material at the regular speed, and classes were interactive.

> In my opinion, in English, materials and tools were easier to adapt to online learning than other subjects. In the online context, English classes continue to be centred around communication […] I think this is why everything went smoothly.

In primary and middle school, moving online did not go so well. First of all, pupils did not have email addresses, and creating them implied parental agreement and paperwork, which was not at all regulated by the Romanian Ministry of Education at that point. So, in the first period of the supposedly online learning, teachers were sending different materials and worksheets to parents via Messenger groups or emails and did not have contact with their students on a daily basis. In some cases, we had to prepare take-home packages for younger students, as we could not reach them online. As expected, it was really difficult to follow if they had fulfilled the tasks or not.

There was a major difference when it came to attendance, as well. Attendance noticeably improved at the university – even students who had a job went through the tasks, and some of them even attended the online classes while working.

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However, at the school, there were quite a lot of students who could not participate in online learning. I did not manage to keep in contact with about 40% of the pupils on primary level and 18% of the pupils in middle schools. These pupils would have come to school on a daily basis under normal conditions. But having no access to technology did not allow them to do the same from their homes. At the university, around 6% of the students could not attend courses and seminars.

Table 1. *Number of students actively/inactively attending classes*

Type of school	No. of students taught	Not attending (early stages)	Inactively attending (2020/2021)
Primary school	37	15	9
Middle school	61	11	9
University	87	5	3

If we look at the reasons why these students did not attend classes, one of the most frequent reasons was the lack of proper devices (phones, tablets, laptops, PCs) or of Internet connection in their homes. As already mentioned, schools asked for help in terms of equipping their students with proper devices, and, luckily, their requests were met in some of the cases. While waiting for tablets promised by the Romanian Ministry of Education in the spring of 2020, many students received smart devices from the start of the subsequent school year from other sources: some of them from local authorities,[2] others from different NGOs and foundations (as in the case of our school).

> I usually join online classes using my mother's phone because my brother uses the laptop.

> My brother got a tablet from the school, but he cannot use it all the time. It keeps freezing.

Even though students had different smart gadgets, certain devices turned out to be unfit for e-learning, as they did not allow students to access different platforms or various formats. One of my students reported the following:

> Sometimes during English classes, the audio recordings keep interrupting, and it is really difficult to understand what they are talking about. I can't even watch the videos because my device wouldn't play those files. The only solution is to watch them on my sister's laptop, but she rarely gives me access to it.

2 Data based on information published in the local press. See: https://sfantugheorgheinfo.ro/stiri/news-5458 [Last accessed: 1 May 2021].

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Some of the difficulties in using different platforms or apps had to be bridged during online classes – for example, sending back assignments through Google Classroom required some practice in every group or class. While it went more smoothly with university students, where a tutorial did the job, it was much more difficult in the primary grades, where the teacher had to demonstrate the various steps several times to their pupils, and still there were problems with attaching files or turning them in. Younger students necessitated parental supervision in order to work online, which, again, was difficult as the parents had jobs and were not able to stay at home all the time.

On the other hand, when everybody went online, the quality of the connection dropped, the Internet connection kept interrupting or was rather poor. In many cases, it was difficult to hear what somebody was saying because of background noises, while in other cases presentations froze and videos or audio material proved impossible to watch or listen to. These problems can be traced in students' testimonials as well, as illustrated below.

> The Internet connection also fluctuates quite often; sometimes I am thrown out of classes, and I have to rejoin them. In such cases, I tend to get left behind, and it is difficult to catch up with things again.

> Explanation is not that clear during online classes. Sometimes there are interruptions in the Internet connection, so I don't understand everything exactly, and I have to ask questions all the time.

Obviously, online learning implied much longer time spent in front of the screen, at least in the first stages of working online. Not only teachers but students as well complained about that.

> We sit 5-6 hours doing online classes, then in the afternoon another 3-4 hours doing homework. We spend quite a lot of time in front of our devices.

> When we actually go to school, we go out in the yard and play football in the breaks between classes. With online learning, we don't have that. We only get up for a short time from the computer; we spend the whole day sitting in front of our gadgets.

What is more, younger students were not really used to being online, so quite often they focused on issues which were not really part of online classes, such as showing their pets or favourite toys to each other or teasing each other about their looks or backgrounds.

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Another side of online learning to be addressed was concentrating on the task. Sometimes it was difficult to follow if students really focused on what was happening in the class or they were doing something else, such as playing online games while attending classes or chatting all the time, etc.

> Sometimes it is difficult to pay attention because my sister is in the other room, and I can hear what is happening in their classes.

> I cannot pay enough attention, sometimes my thoughts are elsewhere, and sometimes I do other things too during online classes. There are times when my classmates write messages and I pay attention to that rather than to the teacher. For me, it is more difficult to pay attention at home than at school.

> The teacher is always asking me something when I am not exactly paying attention to the explanation. Then I can't really follow what we are doing in class. Sometimes it is really embarrassing.

We, as teachers, had to keep ourselves off multitasking during classes, as we experienced that multitasking requires a lot more energy and leads to less effective activities. Simple checks of emails or social media accounts were actions that I sometimes performed while my students were reading the text or solving an exercise on their own. In the first stages of online learning, I thought it was important to keep an eye on official communications or messages from the school, as things were changing suddenly. However, I had to be extra careful so that I was not engrossed in reading them but focus on the activities going on during the online class. Obviously, I had to admit that it was not worth doing several things at the same time, as I was unable to fully concentrate on any of the activities I was trying to perform.

Enlisting further problems in online learning, I have to say that, surprisingly, attendance in online activities and marking attendance or active participation turned out to be problematic in primary and middle school because of central decisions. No such thing emerged at the university level, as all these things were regulated and applied right from the first few days of going online. Having clear rules helped teachers and students alike in organizing all learning activities. Of course, students' age represents an important factor as well, since older students are more independent, so they are more likely to take more responsibility for their own learning.

> I think it was great that the university decided on having online classes, especially in the case of learning English. The teacher had some simple,

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> practical rules for the online English seminars. So, it was easy to follow what her expectations were related to the online activity, homework, or the tests and exams. I had a nice time attending the interactive classes.

Turning towards the positive aspects of e-learning, the most prominent one is a kind of reform imposed on the public education system, whether we like it or not. Since last spring, teachers and students have been pushed to develop their digital skills, to discover free platforms and educational resources and a variety of learning styles available. What is more, online learning gives students the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning process and to learn at their own pace. In my opinion, these elements represent huge steps taken towards autonomous learning, and some of the positive aspects might be used in offline learning as well.

Another positive aspect, experienced both by teachers and students, was less time spent getting ready for school. Undoubtedly, there was some time saved in the morning or in the afternoon, as we did not have to actually walk or travel to school, only to turn on our devices and join the online class. This aspect was also mentioned in students' testimonials, as illustrated below.

> We don't waste time walking to school, especially since I commute from a village.

> I can sleep longer because I don't need to get up so early.

> You don't need to dress and you don't need extra time to get to school.

> I can attend classes in pyjamas; I can have breakfast during the first class.

Beyond their time-efficient aspect, getting up later in the morning than usual or having breakfast during the first online class had a negative impact, too. During the first class, students were a lot sleepier, some of them could not concentrate enough or simply had to swallow their food before answering the question, as they had got up just a few minutes before the classes started and had no time to perform their usual morning rituals.

Data on the online ELT classroom

If we compare some of the problems encountered during online language classes with those that occurred during other online activities, we can state that several of the problems are general, rather than specific for language classrooms, or for

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English classes in particular. In what follows, we will have a look at the advantages and disadvantages of language learning in the online context, focusing on the four different skills to develop during online classes: reading and writing, listening and speaking.

Unexpectedly, reading proved to be more difficult when not using paper-based books. Luckily, most elementary and middle school pupils took their school books home, so we used those in online classes as well. Interactive books could not be accessed by a number of pupils because of their format. Yet, university students did not have access to books, as these got stuck on the shelves of the library. Thus, we had to resort to other solutions. Getting access to electronic books was not an easy task either, as going online happened from one day to another; there was hardly any time to prepare the material for online classes. Eventually, we agreed on uploading screenshots of smaller units of texts onto the learning platform so that students could read them using smaller devices.

The greatest problem with writing tasks was that writing longer text on a smartphone is rather difficult. Consequently, this type of task implied a lot of typos and spelling mistakes. The majority of university students checked their spelling using their gadgets; however, younger students did not manage to do the same. Obviously, all students liked more the tasks that did not imply a lot of actual writing. Younger students received their tasks in several formats, so they could work more easily on smartphones, too. Usually, as homework, they would have to write on the picture with the task, which had been thoroughly discussed during the online class, then save it and turn it in. Yet, sometimes they forgot to save them and turned in the empty document, as illustrated by the student testimonials presented below.

> With online classes, English homework is easier because we always get some task that we have already solved orally during the online activity. If you pay attention, it is easy. You only have to write it down.

> The first time I wanted to hand in my homework online, I forgot to attach the document, so I actually turned in an empty assignment. The teacher wrote me a message and sent me a short video about how to turn in the assignment correctly. From then on, I had no problems.

When practising listening skills, other types of problems occurred. As already mentioned, video data was difficult to handle since not all formats were accessible to the students. Thus, resorting to pre-recorded classes was out of the question in elementary and middle school. On the other hand, in the case of university students, the listening material proved difficult to obtain, as there were only two sets of CDs available at the university and several teachers who would have to use

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them. Fortunately, some of the listening material was available online for a short while. In the meantime, we managed to get access to the electronic version of the audio material. Of course, sometimes interruptions of the Internet connection hindered comprehension, but we all learnt to live with that.

Speaking went smoother than expected. Most of the online activities were built on verbal communication, which students of all levels liked. However, working in pairs or small groups was a problem in the online classroom, especially with younger learners, as they got bored very easily while their peers were talking, and they also needed to be checked on more often. So, forming small groups (e.g. using breakout rooms) proved rather difficult with younger students.

Looking at the bright side of things in ELT, one of the advantages mentioned by several students was practising everyday conversations more often during online English classes. Asking each other questions, inquiring about each other's mood or the activities performed were not exactly realistic at school. Not sharing the same space and not being in connection all the time made them realistic. So, asking a simple question such as "How are you?" or "What did you do yesterday?" became important in the online context.

> In the online context, English classes continue to be centred around communication […] I think this is why everything went smoothly.
>
> I like that before every class the teacher asks all of us how we are.
>
> I like English classes because we speak a lot. Those who are interested pay attention, those who are not, don't.

The greatest advantage I experienced as a teacher is that in online classes there are a lot more possibilities for differentiating. Students might receive different tasks or different texts to read, they might be assessed using various ways, based on their level of English within the group. In a face-to-face classroom assigning, differentiated tasks might have taken up much more time. In an online context, preparation of differentiated tasks might take longer, yet students are not even aware of getting a different task or a different assignment for homework, as they only see their own tasks and assignments. What is more, in the online classroom, students can learn at their own pace, going back and re-reading, skipping certain bits, or accelerating when needed. This is especially true about assignments that are to be prepared for a later meeting.

Another thing I have noticed during online classes, especially in the first stages of online learning, was real collaboration between the learners. Students helped out each other by sharing their screen and showing each other where to look for messages or assignments, how to check the tasks and their deadlines or how to

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turn in assignments. Since we could not find any useful tutorial in Hungarian, suitable for younger learners (at least in the early stages of online learning), collaborative learning proved to be very useful in this respect. Furthermore, students learned faster from one another.

Self-assessment has become more important, it seems. Many students liked the idea of exercises solved through interactive worksheets. Thus, they could check themselves, look for mistakes, possibly correct them and prepare for upcoming tests very easily. On the other hand, with online assessment, tests proved less efficient, as students themselves admitted. Since supervision was not really possible in an online context, some of the students might have cheated on these tests.

> When we have tests, then I get to have the laptop so that I can see the tasks better and type in the answers more quickly.
>
> You really have to be careful about time because if you spend too much time looking for words in your book, you can't finish all the tasks.
>
> Tests are easier online because if you don't know something, you can check it in your notebook or in the book. Of course, this is cheating a bit, but everybody does that.

Online testing brought forth a series of further issues, such as getting acquainted with different platforms used for testing before actually applying the tests or the question related to making the test results available to parents, yet adhering to the rules imposed by the GDPR.[3] Moreover, English teachers had to pay special attention to choosing the proper way for testing their students. Although designed in English, these tests may be easily translated into other languages. Such a case is reported by one of the middle school students, who received the English test in Hungarian since his laptop was set to translate everything into Hungarian (the student's mother tongue): "At our first English test, I got really scared because everything appeared in Hungarian on my screen and I didn't know how to set it back to English. Then the teacher helped me fix it."

Obviously, there have been certain differences in developing the four different language skills during online classes, but having more than a year of experience behind all of us, many of the problems that occurred in the first phase of online learning were solved or could be handled by both teachers and students. Positive changes, on the other hand, might be here to stay if we are smart enough to use them in face-to-face learning as well.

3 For more information on the General Data Protection Regulation, see: https://gdpr-info.eu/ [Last accessed: 1 May 2021].

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Instead of conclusions

Summing up, on the negative side, I can affirm that teachers and students alike have spent too much time in front of their intelligent gadgets. Consequently, especially younger students might have had problems with organizing their daily schedule and clearly differentiating between learning time, play time, or meal time, as all these activities could have overlapped at home; moreover, they took place in about the same space. Due to the prolonged online learning process, other health issues might appear as well, for example, backaches, sore eyes, Internet addiction, or psychological problems due to lack of socializing. So, going back to school might be a little different than during the times before the pandemic.

Until physically going back to school becomes possible, we need to improve in many aspects regarding e-learning. First of all, students should be offered equal chances for learning, whether it is online or offline. Social differences, for example, should not hinder learners to such a great extent. Secondly, teachers should be offered special courses for improving their IT skills, but also updating their teaching styles and adapting them to online conditions.

On the positive side, we must acknowledge that our digital skills have developed considerably, and this is essential nowadays. It has not been an easy process, yet teachers and students have become acquainted with using different educational resources and free platforms for learning, also tutorials and free online courses to help them in their online endeavours. Whether it is inviting e-guests to language classes, differentiating by computer-assisted tasks, or accessing interactive worksheets for self-practice, many elements of e-learning could be used in face-to-face learning in the future. We should stick to our guns when it comes to maintaining some of the positive changes that occurred during the pandemic.

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