

ESP Teachers' Perspectives on the Online Teaching Environment Imposed in the Covid-19 Era – A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper reports on the results of interviews conducted with ESP teachers examining their attitudes towards different aspects of online language teaching. The aim of this case study is to investigate how confident the teachers feel while teaching online in synchronous mode and to examine whether this emotive attitude is in correlation with their prior experience in both formal and informal online environments. It also aims to establish correlations between the respondents' attitudes towards the degree of difficulties and challenges pertaining to teaching all language skills in an online education context. The findings derived from the analysis of the respondents' answers point out to the need to investigate the possibilities offered by digital technologies in order to help learners enhance their language skills and competencies.

Key words: *online language teaching at tertiary level, ESP teachers' perspectives, COVID-19*

Introduction

Coronavirus disease outbreak has brought about abrupt and significant changes in everyday life, and education has experienced them so intensively that old habits, approaches, and teaching methods have to be adapted to a newly-designed online setting – or, in some instances, have to be completely altered (UN, 2020). Educational institutions across the world responded to these new demands with different models and policies, but, due to the demand for physical distancing, they

all contained the same denominator – an online context. In April 2020, the UNESCO estimated that over a billion and a half students across the world experienced changes in their educational habits (Huang et al., 2020, p. 97).

Foreign language teaching, already burdened by complexities of the 21st-century context demands, and learners whose needs have become subtler and specific, have faced various challenges enhanced by the use of ICT and various educational platforms. What characterises language is communication among people, which implies that language is realised in social interaction (Bugarski, 1996, p. 12) – and, consequently, teaching language presupposes a social context wherein this communication can be developed.

This paper reports on the results obtained from the interviews with 16 ESP teachers working at a private university in Serbia, located in 4 centres, who teach language for specific and academic purposes to over 10 000 students in economics, sports management, IT, tourism, and environmental science. The interview comprises questions examining teachers' affective attitudes towards online teaching experience. The variables are intersected and compared by a two-tailed Pearson correlation coefficient with the purpose to investigate whether there is a correlation between the teachers' attitudes towards the degree of difficulty in teaching skills paired together – and, if there is, what the value of the correlation is. The aim of this case study is to explore ESP teachers' perspectives on the newly created online teaching environment at the tertiary level and to investigate how demanding the respondents find teaching all language skills exclusively in the online context.

At the Crossroads of VLE and ESP

According to the official surveys, as much as 89% of the global student population has been severely affected by the scars the COVID-19 pandemic has left on the area of education, primarily embodied via massive classroom closure. The unexpected interruption of traditional activities has faced educators, students, as well as decision- and policy-makers from the field with a number of both possibilities and challenges of online teaching-learning.

The imposed virtual learning environment (VLE) has appeared in a number of different forms – some DLS platforms have reached their full potential, while some new have been discovered and introduced to teaching-learning practices. What all of them have in common is adequate maintenance, skilful management, i.e. proper training of all the participants, and technical equipment provided (Altbach & De

Wit, 2020). Education institutions at the tertiary level are considered to be less prone to the use of online teaching mode, and the most common reason stated refers to not only a lack of interaction and proper training for teachers (Allen et al., 2016), but also many other obstacles, which, according to Pu (2020), include issues related to a proper adaptation of curricula, uncertainties for how to carry out the evaluation, and, inevitably, technical issues related to the Internet connection.

We can undoubtedly claim that the phenomenon of digitalisation has led to countless changes and improvements in many spheres of human endeavours, including education. Though it is believed that digitally-oriented practices could immensely improve teaching-learning outcomes, given their transparency, flexibility, mobility, efficiency, etc., the questions regarding their limitations (as well as drawbacks) still remain open.

Educating qualified specialists nowadays envisions their fluency in at least one foreign language, which meets the needs of very competitive labour markets (Shcherbakova & Ilina, 2019). Teaching language for specific purposes has always asked for a specific skill, *dual* knowledge – adding online teaching requirements to the abovementioned makes a present-day ESP teacher a true wizard. The statement by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), “Tell me what you need English for, and I will tell you the English that you need” (as cited in Belcher, 2006, p. 8), vividly illustrates the notion of ESP, and speaks in support of its multiple and complex layers. We have witnessed the introduction of numerous MOOC (massive open online courses) platforms, as well as OER (open education resources) databases, aimed at encouraging contemporary trends in education. Even so, prior to the pandemic outbreak, it could be said that the abovementioned sources had not been fully exploited and that various forms of e-learning were visible almost solely at universities or senior years of high school (Juszczuk & Kim, 2020, p. 118). Namely, back in 2015, it was reported that 58.7 % of higher education institutions in the USA did not consider introducing any MOOCs, as part of their common practices (Allen et al., 2016, p. 6), despite the fact that the open-access resources had been recognised as a means by which institutions around the globe could ‘contribute worldwide’, as a form of the ‘New Learning’ approach (García-Sánchez, 2016, p. 491).

Irrespective of the abovementioned open-access spaces, it has also been noted that higher education institutions are less prone to the utilisation of online teaching modality when – compared with institutions focused on other levels of education, with teachers still regarding interaction and the lack of professional training as their primary obstacles (Allen et al., 2016). On a similar note, Pu (2020), addressing the potential of online teaching from a language teaching perspective, reported

that obstacles such as programmes (syllabi and course curricula), fair assessment in VLE, Internet support, etc. which – when put together - could trigger “insecurity on the instructor’s part as to whether the online communication is effective” (Pu, 2020, p. 347).

Technology has been a part of ESP classrooms around the world for decades – since the very introduction of the first PCs and websites, in the form of digital software, tools, or digital (-ised) learning sources, frequently as a means complementing traditional face-to-face instruction (Suhonen, 2005; Bloch, 2013). The present moment leaves language educators and learners with little choice; moreover, „the most evident impact on teachers is the expectation, if not the demand, of the continuity of teaching activity using a virtual modality” („COVID-19 and higher education”, 2020). Even though we cannot predict whether and what form of teaching will take place in the upcoming period, the recommendations speak in favour of a variety of modes characterising online delivery, such as (but not limited to) webcasts, MOOCs, flipped classroom, grouped, joint online activities, etc. (Huand et al., 2020).

Adding the abovementioned to the existing and undebatable complexity of ESP, which integrates „combined needs assessor, specialized syllabus designer, authentic materials developer, and content-knowledgeable instructor, capable of coping with a revolving door of content areas relevant to learners’ communities” (Balcher, 2006, p. 139), it appears that ESP teachers have never before been exposed to such tall orders and have been experiencing a gruelling test.

Research Context and Methodology

This research represents a case study investigating ESP teachers’ perspectives on the online teaching environment imposed by the COVID-19 outbreak. It also aims at getting a better insight into the possibilities and challenges the teachers faced while teaching productive and receptive language skills to university students. The study relies on the results obtained from the interviews conducted with 16 ESP teachers teaching students of specific professional areas – business, IT, tourism, sports management, and environmental science. The researchers conducted the interviews either in-person on the university premises or via the Google Meet platform, relying on the naturalist paradigm, which presupposes an individual as a pillar of society (Kvale, 1996). The researchers aimed at a unified set of questions presented to all the respondents, which, according to Firmin (2008), provides a high degree of reliability.

The interview comprises fourteen questions measuring teachers' attitudes towards online English language teaching. The answers provided for each question include a five-point Likert scale of agreeing. The results are shown in tables that illustrate the frequency of the respondents' answers and statistical data relying on a two-tailed Pearson correlation coefficient. With the aim to provide a better insight into the teachers' perspectives on the possibilities and obstacles of online teaching, the researchers noted down teachers' additional comments, and subsequently analysed and interpreted the data.

Research Results: Analysis and Discussion

The questions the interviewees gave the answers to are listed in Table 1, and the numbers in the columns indicate the number of teachers who opted for a given category, which are marked from 1 to 5, whereby 5 denotes „strongly agree”, 4 is the value for „agree”, 3 for „neither agree nor disagree”, 2 for „disagree”, and 1 for „strongly disagree”. The final column represents the mean value calculated for each statement.

Table 1. Questions from the Interview and the Number of Answers

| Question | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Mean |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|------|
| Q1: I feel confident when teaching online. | 9 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4.56 |
| Q2: I am skilful enough to overcome the obstacles which might occur during online classes. | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 4.25 |
| Q3: I am an active user of social networks. | 1 | 1 | 8 | 6 | 0 | 2.81 |
| Q4: I have already had significant experience in using ICT in language teaching | 0 | 3 | 8 | 4 | 1 | 2.81 |
| Q5: I find teaching vocabulary to be very demanding in an online environment. | 1 | 1 | 5 | 8 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Q6: I find teaching grammar to be very demanding in an online environment. | 1 | 2 | 6 | 7 | 0 | 2.81 |
| Q7: I find teaching speaking skills to be very demanding in an online environment. | 3 | 6 | 2 | 5 | 9 | 3.44 |
| Q8: I find teaching writing skills to be very demanding in an online environment. | 4 | 6 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 3.81 |
| Q9: I find teaching listening skills to be very demanding in an online environment. | 3 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 3.25 |
| Q10: I find teaching reading skills to be very demanding in an online environment. | 0 | 2 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 2.69 |

| Question | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Mean |
|---|----|----|---|---|---|------|
| Q11: I feel that I have full control over the teaching-learning process in an online environment. | 3 | 7 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 3.56 |
| Q12: What I miss in an online instruction is peer and teacher-student traditional interaction. | 10 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4.56 |
| Q13: Online teaching mode takes more time for class preparation. | 10 | 1 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 4.31 |
| Q14: Online instruction allows me to achieve the course (target) outcome | 2 | 12 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 3.63 |

The answers to the first question show a high level of self-confidence present among the teachers, with a mean value of 4.56 and a standard deviation of .512. The descriptive statistics for the second question, which examines the interviewees' habit of maintaining informal online communication, as provided by the social media use, shows a mean value of 2.81 and a standard deviation of .834.

Questions related to teaching primary (both receptive and productive) and secondary (grammar and vocabulary) skills (Q5-10) are grouped, and the correlation between them is represented in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation between Language Skills

| | | Q5 | Q6 | Q7 | Q8 | Q9 | Q10 |
|-----|---------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Q5 | Pearson Correlation | 1.000 | .736 | .360 | .660 | .476 | .767 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .001 | .166 | .005 | .062 | .001 |
| Q6 | Pearson Correlation | .736 | 1.000 | .655 | .598 | .634 | .526 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .001 | | .006 | .014 | .008 | .360 |
| Q7 | Pearson Correlation | .364 | .655 | 1.000 | .401 | .372 | .344 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .166 | .060 | | .124 | .115 | .192 |
| Q8 | Pearson Correlation | .660 | .598 | .401 | 1.000 | .504 | .630 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .005 | .014 | .124 | | .046 | .009 |
| Q9 | Pearson Correlation | .476 | .634 | .372 | .504 | 1.000 | .610 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .062 | .008 | .155 | .046 | | .012 |
| Q10 | Pearson Correlation | .767 | .526 | .344 | .630 | .610 | 1.000 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .010 | .036 | .192 | .009 | .012 | |

The respondents' answers reveal a high level of self-confidence present among language teachers relating to teaching in an online environment, and in their ability to cope with the potential obstacles occurring during online classes. The high-

est mean values stem from the answers to the questions reflecting respondents' attitudes towards their own abilities to organise and conduct online classes. On the other hand, the results show a considerably smaller number of positive answers to the questions relating to the respondents' active involvement in the use of social media and previous experience in teaching exclusively in an online environment using ICTs. Additionally, the mean value of the answers to the question related to teachers having full control over the teaching-learning process in an online environment is lower and amounts to 3.56. Although still high, this value indicates a more self-critical attitude compared to the previous answers, illustrating a rather high percentage of teachers who feel self-confident in an online teaching context.

The majority of the respondents believe that online instruction allows for the course outcomes to be achieved to a high degree – with a mean value of 3.63 – which represents one of the main aims of any teaching endeavour in both traditional in-person and online teaching and learning environments. In order to achieve these outcomes, proper preparations are needed, and the statistical data of the analysis of the answers to the question pertaining to the time needed for class preparation in online teaching mode show a very high level, with a mean value of 4.31. Regardless of the high mean values obtained for all the above questions which show language teachers' positive attitudes towards various aspects of the online teaching environment and its potentials, the respondents still prioritised a traditional in-person setting, as nearly all respondents strongly agreed or agreed to the statement that what they miss in online instruction is the peer and teacher-student traditional interaction, with a mean value of 4.56.

The analysis of the answers to the questions examining teachers' attitudes towards the degree of complexities involved in developing all language skills in an online environment shows that the respondents believe that the least demanding task for teachers was teaching vocabulary, and the mean value for this question is 2.56. Other questions that resulted in lower mean values relate to teaching reading skills and grammar, and they amount to 2.69 and 2.81, respectively. A higher percentage of the respondents find teaching speaking, writing, and listening skills more demanding, and the mean values for these are as follows: 3.25 for listening skills, 3.44 for speaking skills, with the most demanding aspect of teaching, according to the respondents, relates to teaching writing skills, with a mean value of 3.81. Table 2 illustrates the correlation coefficients between language skills, and the analysis of the results shows the high level of correlation. The only exception refers to teaching speaking skills – the findings show that there is no statistically significant correlation between difficulties in teaching speaking skills on the one hand, and vocabulary, writing, listening, and reading skills on the other. Interestingly, there is

a positive correlation between teachers' attitudes towards teaching speaking skills and grammar, and its value is .655. Another example of statistically insignificant correlation arises from the comparison of teaching listening skills and grammar, and the correlation coefficient is .476. The result which stands out refers to the positive correlation of teaching grammar and all other skills, which emphasises the permeating character of grammatical importance in language teaching on the part of the teachers. The highest correlation coefficient is observed in the variables of teaching reading skills on the one hand, and vocabulary on the other, and the values of the coefficients for these variables are .767 and .736, respectively.

The analysis of the interviewees' additional comments shows that these can be categorised into three groups. The first includes adjectives describing respondents' online teaching experience (challenging, demanding, time-consuming, practical, comfortable, useful, innovative, multi-tasking, boring, astonishing, amazing, tech-savvy, different, intense, emotionally distant, time-saving, safe). The second group encompasses comments related to the possibilities created in the online environment (more students attending classes; more relaxing atmosphere for some students; more efficient and immediate teacher-student feedback; time-saving on commuting; absence of discipline issues). The last group comprises comments referring to the obstacles and challenges encountered during the online teaching (student motivation; some students do not have proper equipment; some students feel uncomfortable turning on their microphones and cameras; difficulty to know the number of students involved in tasks; lack of body language). The comments provided by the teachers to a high degree correspond to the comments given by students in a study examining students' satisfaction with online teaching organised in a similar context (Prodanović, Gavranović, 2021).

Conclusion

This study focused on ESP teachers' perspectives on online language teaching and their experiences in teaching language skills gained in a synchronous teaching environment. The obtained results showed that the respondents, all of them "digital immigrants", consider that they can manage to conduct classes in an online environment in a satisfying manner, but with different levels of difficulty while teaching receptive and productive language skills. In their opinion, the most challenging skills to teach in an online education context were speaking, writing, and listening. On the other hand, other skills – reading, grammar, and vocabulary were easier to teach. The implications of these results point to the need for redefining teaching

language skills and investigating the digital environment characterised by specific features and potentials which are different from a traditional face-to-face teaching context. The use of ICT, governed by planned and carefully defined teaching goals, can cast new light on teaching receptive and productive skills. The additional comments provided by the interviewees draw attention to the important aspect of foreign language teaching, as emphasised in modern applied linguistics – that teaching should be subordinated to learning (Mishra, 2000). Teachers felt very confident when assessing the teaching process in the online learning environment, but the additional comments showed a more reserved and careful attitude towards the learning process. These comments, and the high value obtained for the question related to the respondents' attitude towards communication in the formal online environment, show that it is necessary to accord teaching techniques and methods in an online environment with a high level of self-confidence present among the respondents. This can be achieved relying not only on the traditional theories of the twentieth century – behaviourist, cognitive and constructivist – but also on the knowledge obtained from the theory of collaborative online learning in the twenty-first century (Li, 2017, p. 8).

While the results of the study can point to some prominent issues ESP teachers come across in online teaching environment, encompassing both characteristics they see as beneficial and those they regard as distracting or even interfering – the presented study has to be tempered by its limitations. Foremost, the study addresses a limited number of respondents working under the same working conditions (learning platform, equipment, IT support, etc.); an enlargement of the sample, along with its diversity, could be beneficial and uncover more useful data. This case study responded to only one aspect of the complex nature of online language teaching, which needs to be approached from other aspects as well, including students' perspectives and measurable learning outcomes. The pandemic opened a vast area yet to be investigated, and the potential research and findings which could greatly contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex nature of foreign language teaching.

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