The Phygitalization of Moderne Languages Teaching in the Aftermath of COVID-19

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Abstract

Against numerous, more or less favourable backgrounds, education is among the many fields of activity always changing for progress, as it is designed so as to meet the needs of society. For some decades now, and even more to come, the main trigger for change has been technology. Being acknowledged for its immediate benefits, such as effort and time saving or enjoying the convenience of accessing wide-open resources, digital technology has considerably influenced all interested stakeholders' perspective on education. This article aims to present the role that digital technology tools play, not only in addressing the teaching challenges inherent in the aftermath of the COVID-19, but also in engaging and empowering students attending the English for Economics and Business Communication seminar at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE Bucharest). Many of the approaches used in what was called hybrid, blended, asynchronous or semi-synchronous teaching and learning currently prove to be useful tools in bridging the digital world with the physical one, with the purpose of driving engagement, avoiding info dumping, diversifying assessment means, all in all providing interactive experiences for both teachers and learners.

Introduction

Scholars have recently identified a need for research in the fields of pedagogical methodology and language teaching, that integrates the use of digital materials within the teaching-learning process. Many teaching tasks that were previously done manually are now digitalized and this has revolutionized the teaching experience (Tiwari, Séraphin, & Chowdhary, 2021). However, technology advancements have modernized remote education, allowing courses to be virtually provided for the first

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time in the early 1990s and has now become essential in higher education (McKenna, Horton and Kopittke, 2022). The shift to remote teaching has remained despite the COVID-19 pandemic subsiding. As a result, teachers and university professors have incorporated new emerging technology as part of the education experience. In this view, the specific teaching and methodology literature has contributed important insights to our understanding of the pre- and post-COVID times, when there has been an evident need for distance learning opportunities and the ability to create a positive, supportive, and inclusive learning environment through the application of online platforms and digital support. Starting from the terminology definition, we can state that, due to the novelty of the critical situation when the pandemic struck, the creation of a new hybrid term was a must. Therefore, combining the physical and virtual worlds became crucial in the attempt to embrace technology to connect teachers and students, performers and audiences across the world, despite all physical boundaries. However, when all the participants were finally at ease with the virtual environment, there came a time when hybridisation replaced the all-digital teaching process. Initially coined in business, the term phygital was used to "express the integral wholeness of the digital and physical" (Yuce, 2021:1). Related to teaching experience, the concept of "phygitalization" is used to describe the process of embedding digital devices within physical spaces (in our case – classrooms) to make the students' journey of knowledge acquisition truly fluid. It is a fusion of the physical world with the digital environment, whose rampant need is evident in the teaching and planning domain. Phygitalization emphasises the class management which benefits from the physical presence of the teacher who makes use of digital applications, both for theoretical explanations, and for the actual practice, in order to render the seminar more enjoyable and satisfying for the students.

1. Education and Digital Technology in the Pre-COVID Era

When approaching different fields of research interest there is an ongoing trend of separating the activity carried out in that field into three distinct and still overlapping time periods: pre-COVID-19, COVID-19 and post-COVID-19.

Due to globalization, which in its turn, occasioned not only an increasing movement of goods but also of people, as well as to the notable

advances made in digital technologies, teaching, on the whole, and foreign languages teaching, in particular, has been differently approached since the last decades of the 20th century. Digital technology had already gained considerable attention and importance in the pre-COVID era, basically for at least two self-evident immediate benefits, that is effort and time saving on the one hand, and the extremely wide availability and accessibility of online resources, on the other hand.

Writing 11 years ago, Jesse Stommel, Executive Director of Hybrid Pedagogy and co-founder of Digital Pedagogy Lab, claimed that "all learning is necessarily hybrid", encouraging the engagement of students' digital selves in the classroom and the engagement of students' physical selves in online classes (Stommel, 2012). Before the pandemic, digital was something nice to have in the classroom, supplementary to the coursebook and teachers acknowledging digital tool usefulness used to exploit them here and there, now and then. A survey conducted by GBH Education and PBS Learning Media on 1.914 K-12 teachers from the USA, in February - March 2020, revealed that 13% of respondents had never used digital media in their classes before the pandemic prompted shift to online learning (Teacher K-12 Digital Media Use Before & After the COVID-19 Transition to Remote Learning, 2021: 3).

Besides the traditional, face-to-face education, as the main form of education, there had also been a certain trend of academic institutions providing distance learning opportunities or of international language schools and centres delivering online courses. Until 2020, this version of education was usually accounted for either by "the availability of flexible learning opportunities for non-traditional students from diverse backgrounds" (Kang 2020: 3) or by the desire "to bend the higher education cost curve" (Deming, 2015:496).

2. The Accelerated Digitalization of Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Upon the onset of the pandemic, there was a complete switch of the entire perspective when the worldwide education system, including the academia, had to adjust promptly and act even more promptly. Delivering effective online education was suddenly at the forefront among many other concerns and even the most experienced and trained online teaching experts faced a series of challenges, as proficient digital skills were a

requisite, but not the only one. It was then when teachers and learners alike realized that, besides the method and modality of teaching, the learning environment plays an equally important role. Using the online environment and mastering digital technologies were no longer a choice for the sake of making a difference, yet they became a necessity. At that point, technology was not used to revigorated traditional means or amplify the learning outcome, as it used to happen before, but to transform the whole education process. And whenever such changes occur, there are people likely to accept and willing to support and people stubbornly resisting the change. The outbreak of pandemic meant a disruption of the whole long-applied learning and teaching methods and there has been much research approaching this topic. Reports show that there was quite some variability in the learning opportunities with the technology offered to students at that time (Fütterer, Hoch, Lachner, Scheiter, Stürmer, 2023; Jaekel, Scheiter, & Göllner, 2021; Steinmayr, Lazarides, Weidinger, & Christiansen, 2021), ranging from students being completely left to their own devices or receiving lectures via videoconference tools as passive listeners to students whose teachers did their best to involve them actively into learning using diverse methods and tools. In a much-appreciated attempt to assist foreign language trainers, teachers and professors to adapt to the new teaching desiderata, ESL textbooks publishers, researchers, and professional development programmes providers shared useful information on learning management systems, virtual learning environment platforms (VLEs), online content tools and suggestions, for both teachers and learners, for alleviating the obstacles encountered.

In terms of digital technology advantages, the topics of interest were mainly covering two directions: using tools as platforms and VLEs and using tools for content. Teachers then had to engage their flexibility and adaptability in order to incorporate adequate online resources into learning platforms, to deliver personalized feedback and assessment, to facilitate online interactions with and between the students. In an effort to meet the students' needs and to comply with the academic curricula, some teaching approaches such as asynchronous, blended or hybrid, became quite popular with online learning.

The hybrid approach – aiming to replace face-to-face teaching – or the blended approach – aiming to supplement face-to-face teaching, two different terms still used interchangeably by many of us, were mainly preferred by those who wanted to address the achievement of more

practical skills. Some teachers would rather have found asynchronous learning more useful than the traditional synchronous method, preparing power-point presentations and voiceovers to be sent via email or uploaded on blended learning platforms, enabling students to study from home, at their own pace and convenience, the online classes being devoted to interactive problem solving based on students' individual study. All the endeavours pursued were mainly directed towards the same goal, that is, maintaining the appeal and effectiveness of in-person learning and helping education evolve rather than regress, as many would have expected on the outbreak of the pandemic.

3. Digital Challenges and Opportunities in the Aftermath of COVID-19

The mid 2021-2022 academic year in Romania brought about another challenge facing education, namely the transition back to fully in-person learning. Apart from the compliance with the newly imposed health and administration related regulations, there was also the concern about having students re-adjust to face-to-face courses, all of us acknowledging the inherent changes that online learning had produced since the onset of the pandemic. Back then, not few of us had to admit the role played by technology in modifying, if not redefining, the learning process.

Lack of students' engagement in the class is one of the main concerns of most teachers, therefore the studies related to arousing students' interest, motivating them, finding relevant means for having them participate actively, have been the focus of many research articles in the field of education. As defined in the Glossary of Education Reform, student engagement "refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught" (Concepts, S. 2015). Being driven by such non-cognitive factors as motivation and curiosity, engagement consequently impacts students' progress in their education.

Struggling to meet this institutional objective, that is, obtaining a stronger student engagement in class, all relevant departments and professors in charge thereof constantly adjust courses and seminars syllabi available at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies in order to meet the labour market requirements, always considering the latest developments in education. Despite its linearity in terms of curriculum
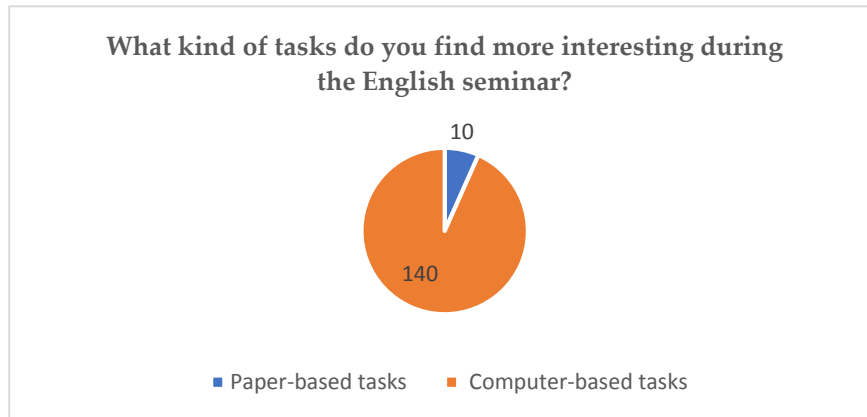
and syllabus, which have to be observed on a regular basis, language and communication teaching can allow some time for non-linear organization of the content and delivery strategies, designing the course workflow with the student in mind and sensibly responding to students' feedback. All the more, getting students' feedback and having them involve in the teaching-learning process is definitely a key strategy which helps enhance their engagement in task completion at the English seminar, especially during periods of transition.

With the obvious purposes of continuously improving the teaching-learning experience, of avoiding monotonous teaching and last but not least, of taking an interest in students' preferences, as well as in their needs and expectations, we dedicate some time at the end of each semester to ask students for their input related to their English learning experience during that semester, acknowledging the relevance of their feedback in organizing and prioritizing the educational strategies and teaching techniques for future seminars. Given the survey response fatigue the young generation tend to invoke, we decided to replace the thoroughly elaborated surveys with more informal means, more exactly a brief 7-question google form sent via email, with only 4 questions being relevant for the purpose of this article, preserving the complete anonymity of respondents, altogether considering that a stress-free environment makes students feel more confident and consequently speak their mind openly and honestly. The feedback form was sent to students covering four main fields of studies they are majoring in: International Business and Economics, Management, Finance and Banking, Agrifood and Environmental Economics, collecting a number of 150 responses.

3.1 Paper-based versus computer-based tasks

Respondents admitting their preference for computer-based tasks performed at the English seminar amounted to 93%. As we may have already known, some of the digital approaches used in online education proved to have certain constraints and imperfections, still many provided numerous opportunities which, taking all of the above into consideration, should be further exploited and integrated into our current teaching. On the whole, the computer proves to be a great resource, providing access to authentic English content, covering at least some of the main general and specific objectives provided in the curriculum, such as developing and

improving students' oral and written communication competences, in general, academic and professional contexts.

What kind of tasks do you find more interesting during the English seminar?

10

140

■ Paper-based tasks   ■ Computer-based tasks

3.2 Most preferred computer-based tasks at in-person seminars

One of the challenges difficult to overcome while preparing the materials is the constant struggle to avoid info dumping and its result, which is consequently a dull teaching. As long as students manageto find interest in the topic, there is great improvement in their attention and retention process. Language acquisition is generally ensured in the class by comprehensible input. Besides the common strategies, such as adjusting the complexity levels of lexical and grammar items, speed of delivery, or register, we consider that the diversity of materials provided and tasks assigned plays an important role in business English teaching, especially with undergraduates, the main purpose being to achieve a real interest in and a close engagement with what is being taught, practised or revised.

The answers provided by most students when asked to name at least one seminar activity they have found useful and efficient gravitated around two main directions: tasks performed during the input stage and tasks performed during the practice and assessment stages. Their preferences related to the input stage included the following, ordered gradually in descending trend: videos and TED talks (70 respondents), podcasts (67 respondents), business blogs (65 respondents), interactive platforms (46 respondents).

According to our respondents, the most relevant computer-based seminar activities performed during the practice and assessment stages include game-based learning platforms (KAHOOT in our case), claimed by

100 respondents as their main preference, and online crossword puzzles applications, preferred by 70 respondents.

Name at least two seminar activities you have found the most useful and efficient
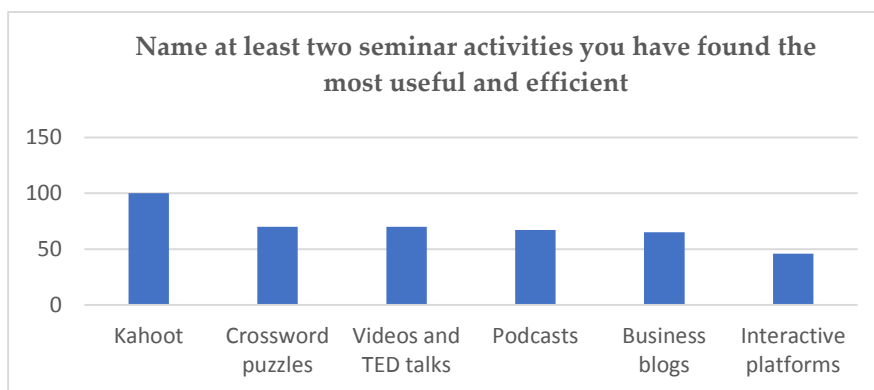

Due to their versatility in meeting different purposes, such as revising taught language, checking students' understanding of various concepts, encouraging critical thinking with shyer students who usually have difficulty expressing their viewpoint in front of others, game-based learning platforms represent a main takeaway from the COVID-19 era. Their large-scale usage in online learning was due to their unrivalled advantages, that is, featuring images and videos into multiple-choice tasks, a wide online library with already designed sets of tasks to choose from, adjusting the amount of time available for students to select the correct option according to various needs and/or skills, the displayed scoreboard useful for showing the scores obtained by each participant.

Having each and every student engaged in real time is still one of the unrivalled benefits of using game-based learning platforms at in-person seminars, most often reaching a 100% participation rate among students. Students sometimes become really competitive, far more competitive than they usually are. Still, if competitiveness can be a hindrance with some classes, students can join in using nicknames, so anybody can enjoy a safe and complete anonymous environment.

Some other responses relevant for understanding students' preferences for tasks performed during the input stage, though not in a large percentage, included: success stories posted on social media, professional websites, twitter feeds, documentaries, interviews and even irrelevant responses such as: anything from the internet, or any online activity with on-the-spot checking option.

### 3.3 Teacher-student digital communication in assessment tasks

As provided in the relevant seminar syllabi, students' assessment includes individual assessment tasks as well as team-based projects, the preparation and oral presentation thereof amounting to a certain percentage of the overall grade. The blended learning platform (BL@ASE) successfully designed and implemented by the Bucharest University of Economic Studies proves to have remained as efficient and as much accessed as it was during the COVID-19 period, when it used to be the main form of formal written communication between teachers and students. First and foremost, it helps students get the core of the issues to be approached or already approached at the seminar, as each and every material is weekly uploaded and consequently stored on the platform, the students being able to access it at their own convenience. According to 90% of our respondents, the blended learning platform is considered to be an efficient means of communication in the case of individual practice tasks assigned as homework.
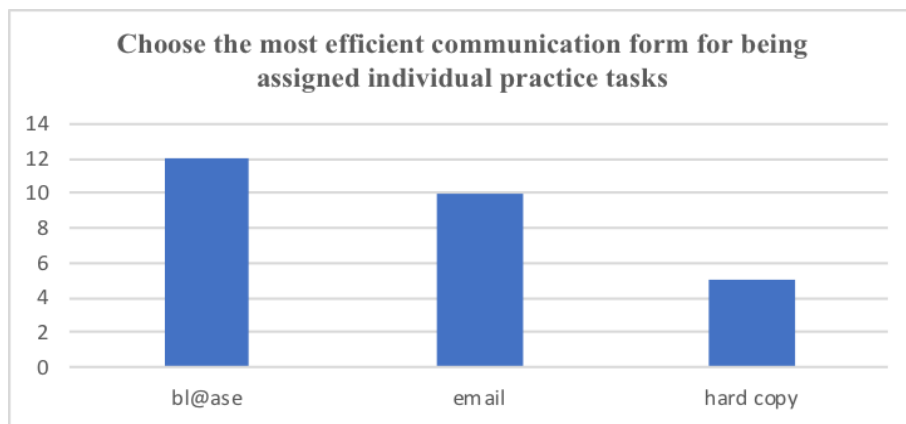
It is obvious that habitual practice has already integrated the use of the university platform as the main communication channel between students and teachers with respect to lectures and seminars information. The versatility of the blended learning platform which allows students to post their homework even if the deadline is due, makes it easier for the teacher to assess both the relevance of the posted information and the students' level of seriousness to meet the requirements on time. At the same time, it encourages students to keep doing their homework that was previously assigned, so as to accumulate at least one part of the percentage corresponding to the attendance grading scheme. Furthermore, the email

use comes second in rank, and it is followed by the hard copy version. For obvious reasons, the hard copy method of communication during the teaching-learning process is less preferred, as it is costly and difficult to provide, as compared to natural easiness of operating all the smart gadgets and devices that accompany us.

On the other hand, 123 respondents showed their preferences for google docs as being the most convenient form of teacher-student communication in the case of assigning team-based projects.
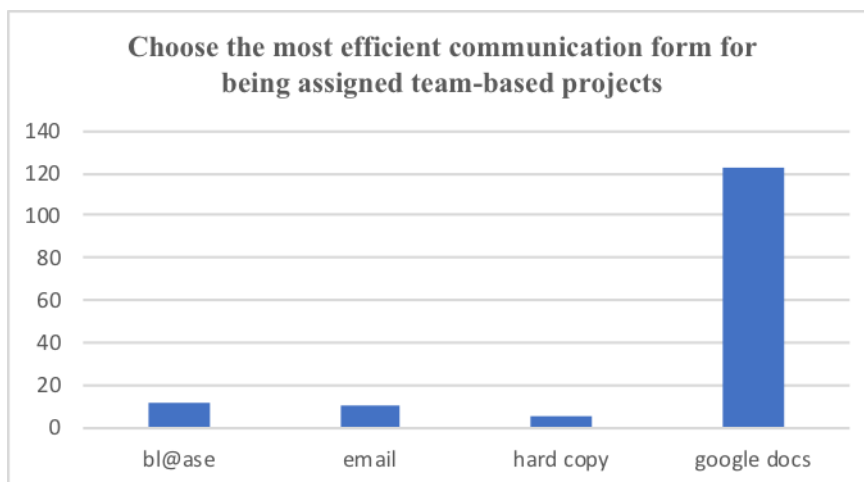
The instant availability and editing possibilities give google docs an outstanding advantage in the competition for the channel to be assigned team-based projects. A great advantage provided by these digital tools is the possibility to track students' participation and ensure in this way the equal share of burden among the team members and consequently, encouraging a truth-reflecting grade. After having been shared the presentation topics and some general bibliography, students can be encouraged to keep the whole conversation in the google doc so that the progress of each team can easily be monitored. One extra benefit is that students can get asynchronous feedback from their colleagues and from the teacher, enabling a continuous improvement of their work.

4. Conclusions

The perception of the value of digital learning technology has changed significantly over the three years, with many of us acknowledging that digital tools available now have really transformed the learning and

teaching experience, turning the classroom into a 21ˢᵗ century learning environment. In this study we have analysed the relevance of engaging in digital material use during the ESL seminars, as a result of the change in teaching modes during COVID-19, which provides insights for future research that could expand on this study, by exploring other online learning sources, platforms and applications. An obvious conclusion one can reach in line with the findings we have outlined in this article is that technology has become a sine qua non necessity in the pursuit of innovative and sustainable education. We can claim that in the field of academic subjects, modern languages included, the usage of digital technology has turned from a challenge into an opportunity benefiting teachers and students alike. Used adequately, with the main purpose of meeting learners' needs, digital technology proves to be an excellent opportunity to reduce the gap between traditional education, i.e. input-centered, and modern education, i.e. outcome-centered, as well as to promote involvement and learning autonomy in a comfortable and stress-free environment. As a result, the blended teaching mode, which combines the benefits of both face-to-face and online teaching, together with various language games and applications which develop students' vocabulary have proved to be the most preferred teaching approaches for higher education in foreign second language teaching at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies during the post-COVID-19 era.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of flexible and adaptable learning modes, and higher education institutions need to continue to support and develop a range of learning modes that meet the needs of all students. Technology integration and a greater focus on blended learning mode are expected to shape the future of teaching and learning in higher education.

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