

Challenges for Teaching Online in Higher Education

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The aim of this paper is to assess the adoption rate of online classes and to highlight the required changes of existing resources of higher education adopted by Akaki Tsereteli State University (ATSU) in Kutaisi, Georgia amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The conducted research manifests the insights and perceptions of teachers and students on online modes of teaching and learning. The paper explores and examines the challenges and drawbacks of online courses at the university based on the analysis of the questionnaire handed to students and it also discusses the needs to completely implement digital learning/teaching process with its new sources and assessment strategies, thus indicating the way forward in the years to come.

Key words: COVID-19 pandemic, online education, challenges, obstacles, technology

Introduction

Fast-paced pressurized modern life has undoubtedly brought new approaches to working practices, but in times of significant disruption, in the midst of corona virus pandemic new challenges have been brought in various fields, including higher education. Rapid advances in modern technology together with the pandemic situation have spread the necessity of transforming education from the classroom and books to the electronic world. Many institutions of higher education have faced problems of designing online courses to be a complete solution for anywhere/anytime learning.

During the Corona virus pandemic universities in Georgia including Akaki Tsereteli State University in Kutaisi, Western Georgia were closed in March 2020, so educators' main concern was to adapt the educational process for exclusively online teaching in a very short time and to impart online education during these difficult times. Undergoing psychological and emotional stress educators realized that a lot depended on the expertise of staff and student readiness to be involved in this process. Initially some collaborative efforts were made by the university authorities along with IT system administrators, head of the department and teachers. Certain technical skills and capacities were shared and the action plan for implementation of online teaching mode included some incentives and resources as well. Smooth use of online educational Platforms such as Microsoft Teams was a first sign of positive transfer of traditional learning to online education. Obviously, there was no reason to get into panic about becoming technically literate. It should be noted that teachers prepared themselves on their own having the mix of

opinions about inevitable changes related to the new mode of teaching/learning process, but they did their best to be cooperative.

To achieve the purpose of the study literature review was conducted to formulate and analyze the problem. The focus of the study is on online courses offered by Akaki Tsereteli State University (ATSU), Georgia

Literature Review

Experts provide many empirical studies, useful insights on challenges that online instructors/teachers and learners may face. Lots of opportunities have been offered to promote online learning with considerable impact on the distribution of content, learning tasks, assignments, motivation, interaction, assessment system, etc. An emergency remote teaching situation caused by the Covid-19 virus takes into account the time and effort both learners and instructors need to regulate themselves to adapt to the new learning situation (Hodges, 2020). Diverse features of online learning/teaching process caused a controversy about benefits and downsides of this mode in education. Majority of findings regarding online education focus on its flexibility in delivering education and accessing content and resources that leads to elimination of barriers in space and time, allowing students to learn in their own pace (Bakia, Shear, 2012). Online learning is based more on materials integrating media, mediated communications, either synchronous or asynchronous and indications from instructors should be given clearly and carefully (Rapanta, 2020). Thus, online teaching requires more careful student-oriented design based on authentic learning.

It should be noted that self-regulation and motivation have been identified as two main factors for determining success in online courses (Matuga, 2009). Some studies point out the significance of such key factors like interaction between the learner and the instructor, the learner and the learners, and the learner and the content leading to enhanced student satisfaction (Savenye, 2005). According to Sadeghi (2019) with no peers or instructors around for face-to-face interaction, the chances of getting distracted and losing track are high. Working alone might cause many complexities and depressing experiences. Thus, lack of social and physical interaction in the education process may lead to a great degree of isolation. Once being completely engaged in traditional classroom settings learners are likely to transform from active participants to passive ones. They might go through various learning activities and even pass assessments, but they might tend to lose depth of their learning. Learners with a lack of self-regulation, motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, are likely to lose their original goal and become lost within the course (Chaney, 2001). According to Darby (2019), instructors should be engaged with learners by posting weekly announcements, explain expectations, and make the online class an exciting place to be. Cornish, Jameson, and Records (2020) indicate that instructors should communicate early and often, share an introductory video message from the instructor, require student introductions, consider an icebreaker, establish discussion boards every other week, rotate team members in small group activities, and reach out to students individually during online instruction to engage learners.

There is relatively little empirical research concerning assessment issues. An absence of an accurate assessment plan for online learning or the case of an assessment plan not being synchronized with an institution's overall assessment program tend to cause failure in measuring success of online student outcomes. (Miliam, 2004). Moving courses from traditional classes to online settings fundamentally shifts assessment techniques that in most cases are not thoroughly modified to reflect the nature of online courses. Continuous assessment model must be adopted

to manage learning process systematically oriented to achieve goals. According to Chrysi Rapanta (2020) one way to control students' activities is so-called learning analytics, this means identifying key indicators and setting up a way to control them. Key indicators can be downloading a text, posting to a forum, accessing the course at least once a week, etc. If these indicators are properly defined and communicated to students, they can be part of the evaluation, though these analytics do not provide complete and accurate insights. Learners can be asked to comment on course and task design that helps the instructor to adjust precisely so as to bring to the highest level of performance or effectiveness. It also heightens the relationship between the instructor and learners.

Analysis

The study adopted descriptive research method for the analysis of the obtained data and its focus is to elicit the challenges and obstacles during online English learning classes. Fifteen teachers of English Philology Department including both language and literature teachers at the undergraduate level answered 14-item questionnaire (Likert Scale questions ranging from "Agree" to "Strongly disagree") that basically focused on advantages and disadvantages of online education to reflect current practice in online courses and to reveal valuable feedback and suggestions.

The content analysis made it vivid that most of the educators encountered similar kinds of obstacles and issues. Some teachers express their grave concern about the needs of more preparedness in the terms of online educational resources as well as training programmes. The quality of the educational process in the online environment is completely based on factors like the level of training teachers have about the use of technology and certain teaching strategies via the technological tools. Confusion is greatly felt when student assessments are carried out online. Teachers had to work a lot on reconstruction of progress check tests, mid-term and final examination papers. Approaches used to online examinations generally vary in accordance with the aims and outcomes of the academic subjects as well as the compatibility of the learners. The first and major obstacle teachers came across was plagiarism, thus special measures had to be taken to overcome this problem. Authenticity of assignments and examinations is difficult for teachers to control as all the tasks are done from home so that educators have to invest more time and resources to explore the alternatives for actual meaning. Some options are available in Microsoft Teams quiz format, for instance, randomization of isomorphic questions, so this method can reduce the probability that students will work together. ATSU also tried to install a special exam program enabling teachers to monitor examinees as there was the issue of exam candidates cheating by communicating with other students or by browsing the Internet.

Thus, the common problems related to online teaching at ATSU (see table 1) incorporates the factors as follows:

1. Lack of digital education
2. Less motivation and engagement
3. Lack of interpersonal aspects of communication
4. Non-visual classes
5. Unstable internet connection

Therefore, taking into consideration challenges ATSU teachers encountered it is vivid that the most appropriate way to carry out the teaching process is the conventional, face to face mode of teaching stating that electronic platforms should be used as a complimentary instrument to facilitate educational process.

Today's net generation is exposed to various technological gadgets such as mobile phones, tablets and, undoubtedly IT literacy has become a major requirement for nearly all qualifications. Surprisingly, but in this digital era some of our students do not have stable access to the Internet or computers, thus being technologically insecure they are not able to constantly participate in ongoing academic work. What is more, there are numerous psychological as well as financial problems our students face that have direct influence on their academic performance.

Table 1

Questions	Agree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Strongly agree n (%)	Strongly disagree n (%)
1. The sudden change to full online teaching was smooth	0(0%)	10(67%)	2(13%)	0(0%)	3(20%)
2. I received enough training and IT support about the electronic platforms	4(26%)	7(47%)	1(7%)	1(7%)	2(13%)
3. I feel qualified to use digital gadgets	6(40%)	0(0%)	6(40%)	3(20%)	0(0%)
4. Online learning is more motivating for students than conventional learning	1(7%)	4(26%)	3(20%)	0(0%)	7(47%)
5. I find online classes to be as effective as conventional learning	1(7%)	4(26%)	3(20%)	0(0%)	7(47%)
6. Online exams are appropriate for any subject area	0(0%)	6(40%)	5(33%)	0(0%)	4(26%)
7. Online exams are fairer and more objective than paper-based exams	0(0%)	11(73%)	1(7%)	0(0%)	3(20%)
8. Online exams are more efficient in terms of time and effort spent	2(13%)	3(20%)	8(53%)	1(7%)	1(7%)
9. Exam materials are more secure than traditional methods	1(7%)	7(47%)	4(26%)	2(13%)	1(7%)
10. Using randomized questions means that cheating is less likely during online exams	10(66%)	0(0%)	2(13%)	3(20%)	0(0%)
11. I do not have to be more creative in online classes	2(13%)	6(40%)	3(20%)	0(0%)	4(26%)
12. I am able to provide better assessment and feedback to my online students	2(13%)	4(26%)	5(33%)	0(0%)	4(26%)
13. I do not have any problems controlling my students on the online environment	0(0%)	5(33%)	7(47%)	0(0%)	3(20%)
14. My students are actively involved in online classes	0(0%)	9(60%)	4(27%)	0(0%)	2(13%)

Discussion

Unquestionably, online education courses are here to stay and will be in great demand in future, so some uncertain issues need to be worked on and clarified. Communication with

students in online courses, firstly, requires special approaches. Choosing a suitable platform can offer a wide variety of content, applications and different forms of communication and interaction available in an online setting. Traditional pedagogy used for face to face classrooms is no more feasible for online courses, so instructors/teachers need more professional development and training. Online classroom experience that is far different from that of traditional classes requires clear explanatory skills and presentation along with certain online teaching techniques. To increase students' engagement and participation in online educational process teachers should be open and available for students' needs. Solutions can be found by teachers giving access to the information provided during online courses. In most cases teachers at ATSU had to individually work on some basic teaching strategies for their academic subjects familiarizing with online tools and looking up e-textbooks and other additional materials. Consequently, the syllabi had to be redesigned in order to be adapted to the needs of online teaching.

Notably, if online courses should have a student-centered design, authentic online assessment tend to be more student-centered allowing students to demonstrate their learning through hands-on activities. It goes without saying that online assessment should begin with measurable learning objectives. Defining relevant tasks – what students will actually do to engage them in a relevant and new situation – is the next step that follows by identifying essential performance criteria. For a fair and consistent assessment rubrics are a useful tool for online assessment as well as traditional one. There should be clear methods for evaluating students' performance and class participation should be undoubtedly reflected in their grading. The use of e-Portfolios, for example, is one of the strategies that is highly recommended for online education. It allows the students as well as the instructors to collect evidence of their learning/teaching and reflect about them and the teacher to facilitate the monitoring of the process. A clearly written syllabus and course calendar will help avoid misunderstandings and unclear directives. Thus, courses should be well-organized from the very beginning providing learners with detailed explanations, instructions and clear expectations. Successful implementation of online exams can be achieved by designing them to be reliable, valid and flexible and by the institutional support providing the necessary guiding and technical help. Challenges concerning online exams show the need for management commitment to provide guidance for educators not only in the terms of technical support but also pedagogically. The whole process requires careful planning including pedagogical principles.

Like other countries, Georgia faced significant challenges while transferring in-person educational process to virtual one. After considering the issues concerning online higher education there will be solutions developed to answer the challenges. The complexity of implementations and generally novelty of online learning demands additional research to identify practices with advantages and pitfalls that may outline guidelines for practitioners concerning under what circumstances online courses can be more effective. There are lots of questions to be answered for improved productivity and better learning/teaching opportunities. Experience with online learning will increase the readiness of both instructors and learners for the post pandemic time.

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ეკატერინე ქურდაძე

აკაკი წერეთლის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი

ონლაინ სწავლების გამოწვევები უმაღლეს სასწავლო დაწესებულებაში

რეზიუმე

სტატია მიზნად ისახავს COVID-19-ის პანდემიის დროს აკაკი წერეთლის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტში დისტანციურ რეჟიმში ჩატარებული ლექციების შედეგად გარკვეული ტიპის დაბრკოლებების გადალახვის მცდელობის აღწერას. ჩატარებული კვლევა ეფუძნება იმ ახალ გამოწვევებს, რომელთა წინაშეც აღმოჩნდნენ აღნიშნული უმაღლესი სასწავლებლის როგორც ლექტორ-მასწავლებლები, ისე სტუდენტებიც. ონლაინ ლექციების ინტენსიურმა გამოყენებამ ახალი საგანმანათლებლო რეალობა შექმნა. წინამდებარე სტატია განიხილავს დისტანციური სწავლების ზოგიერთ გამოწვევას, მათი გადაჭრის სავარაუდო გეგმებს და არსებული რესურსების მობილიზებას.

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