

Thematic Article

Assessing Language Learners' Knowledge and Performance during Covid-19

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Abstract

The new reality created by the COVID-19 caused a lot of changes in the educational sphere. The transition from face-to-face to distance learning was not smooth in Ukraine because distance learning was not a common practice in the country before and teachers were unprepared for teaching online. This unusual situation prompted us to start our qualitative research primarily to get insights into the altered daily routines of teachers and educators. In particular, we were interested in how they assessed their students' performance online. This article focuses on secondary school language teachers (n=65) and language tutors at the tertiary level (n=18). The research findings have revealed that teachers gave feedback through different digital applications like Google Classroom. Oral performance was evaluated either synchronously or asynchronously. The most crucial implication is that teachers should improve and further develop their digital skills and distance teaching and assessing skills in order to provide quality education in the modern form.

Keywords: distance learning, assessment, Transcarpathian Hungarian schools, secondary and tertiary education, language teachers and educators

Introduction

The year 2020 is crucial for humanity and will be memorable for a long time, as the rapid spread of COVID-19 has fundamentally changed life across the globe. While we were still optimistic about the epidemic in January and hardly believed it would reach us from the quite distant China, a national quarantine was announced in Ukraine on 12 March 2020 to prevent the spread of the epidemic, or to at least slow it down. The full closure of the country was initially only for one month and then extended weekly until June 2020, depending on the current situation.

However, during this time, education did not stop, it was just transformed. Although educational institutions were closed, the educational process itself continued in cyberspace. This was the case at the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education. The college is located in Transcarpathia, a western county in Ukraine, in a small town called Berehove, with a population of about 23,000 (Number, 2020; Tátrai *et al.*, 2018). The region of Transcarpathia is multi-ethnic, with national minorities like Hungarians living here. The college is a relatively new higher educational establishment, only 24 years old. The Transcarpathian Hungarian Cultural Association and the Transcarpathian Hungarian Pedagogical Association founded it in 1996 on behalf of the local Hungarian minority with the aim of supporting and maintaining Hungarian higher education in Transcarpathia, and providing well-trained, competent teachers for the 100

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Hungarian primary and secondary schools in Transcarpathia. Besides other majors, we train language teachers (English, Hungarian, and Ukrainian) at the bachelor's and master's levels at the college.

The educational process also continued for the 100 Transcarpathian schools with Hungarian language of instruction. In the spring of 2020, we had to move from face-to-face learning to distance learning (Bender, Wood, & Vredevoogd, 2004; Kovács, 1996; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2000) in Ukraine at record speed. As distance learning was not widespread in the country before, many educators, teachers, students and pupils were only able to catch up and keep up with the educational process with difficulty. It was this situation that prompted our research team to conduct a survey among the four target groups on how they could cope with the challenges of distance learning. We wanted to gain insight into their changed daily routines due to online education and get answers to urgent questions such as how to motivate pupils or students to learn a language through distance learning and how to most effectively assess and evaluate their knowledge or performance.

Theoretical background to the research

The current situation has brought significant change: the transition from face-to-face education to distance learning has taken place through online platforms. Teachers did everything possible (and impossible) to keep students learning. Educators have done a tremendous job around the world in transitioning to distance learning and are still working diligently today to meet the needs of their students (Herrmann, 2020). Also, a huge amount of research has been carried out throughout the world on the impact of the pandemic on the educational process (*cf.* Day *et al.*, 2021; Flores & Gago, 2020; Purushotham & Swathi, 2020; Said Pace, 2020; Toquero, 2020).

Szűcs and Zarka in 2006 declared that “distance learning in today’s world is an essential component of education” (Szűcs & Zarka, 2006, p. 15), but they could not even imagine how true this statement would prove in 2020. Distance learning is a form of education in which the teacher and the student are not physically located in the same space (Kovács, 1996). For most of the training time, students study independently, autonomously; for a smaller part they consult their teachers in person.

Bereczki *et al.* (2020) provide useful advice for educators working in higher education:

- Focus on learning goals, outcomes and link selected interfaces and solutions.
- Define the priorities both in the content of the course and in connection with the technical background / framework.
- Be flexible and open, try to take into account the needs and possibilities of students as much as possible.

The authors hope that solutions will be introduced in higher education “that will serve quality higher education well in the long run, even after the situation due to the epidemic threat has passed” (p. 3).

The role of assessment is central in both the traditional and non-traditional modes of teaching (Ogange *et al.*, 2018; Said Pace, 2020). Due to the limited physical connection between the teacher and the student, assessment and feedback are particularly important factors in distance learning.

In distance learning, the significance of the practice Davidson (2013) called “assessment for learning” (AfL) can be appreciated, distinguishing it from “assessment of learning”. Assessment of learning is done for the purpose of grading, evaluating student outcomes, using existing well-established procedures and methods, while assessment for learning requires different priorities, new procedures and new commitment to learning.

The main features of “assessment” in AfL are: 1. assessment is embedded in teaching and learning; 2. learning objectives are shared with students and students are taught how to recognize desired norms; 3. students engage in continuous peer and self-assessment; 4. constructive qualitative feedback helps students identify the next steps needed for learning; 5. assessment data is regularly reviewed and considered by teachers, parents and students; 6. it is assumed that all students are able to improve (Davidson, 2013, p. 264).

In AfL, assessment has two key roles: to inform and shape decisions about what to do next, helping teachers decide what to teach further, and more importantly to help students understand what they have learned and what more they need to learn in the future (Black, 2001; Black *et al.*, 2003). The emphasis is on why students do not learn well and how they can be helped to improve, and not just focus on teachers using assessment to determine what knowledge students have acquired (Davidson, 2013, p. 267).

A key concept for evaluation is exactly what we measure. Do we assess students’ knowledge? Or, perhaps the use of taught vocabulary and language structures? Or both at the same time? In traditional face-to-face teaching, of course, this was also measured by language teachers using paper-based module tests. However,

during online education, the method of measurement has changed, although its purpose has remained the same. The measurement methods also had to adapt to the new reality, so e.g. paper-based tests have been replaced by online ones.

Jaczkovits (2020, p. 2) emphasizes that one form of assessing students' knowledge "... is live, real-time reporting, which can be accomplished using video conferencing, telephone applications (taking into account students' equipment). Another form is time-delayed, remote reporting (worksheets, tests, questionnaires, homework, presentation, mind maps, etc.)". The author believes that in digital education, formative (developing, shaping, supporting) evaluation plays a role rather than summative evaluation, which may be based on the electronic portfolio collected online in the digital agenda (Cambridge, 2010). It can collect student work, notes, online consultations, instructor feedback, etc. However, it is advisable to use formative assessment in distance education.

Research Design and Methods

In this paper, we will focus on the results of our research that we have obtained from questionnaires from two target populations, secondary school English, German, Hungarian and Ukrainian teachers and college tutors teaching all four of these languages.

Participants

Our research participants belonged to two target groups: secondary school teachers (n=65, Group 1) and college tutors (n=18, Group 2, making up 50% of the total of full-time language instructors). All of them taught languages (English and German as foreign languages, Ukrainian as a second language, and Hungarian as the mother tongue of school children and college students). (See Table 1)

Table 1. Teacher and tutor participants' personal data (age and gender, F=female, M=male)

Age	English		German		Ukrainian		Hungarian		Number of Ts
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	
20-25	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>					<i>1</i>		<i>5</i>
26-30	<i>2</i>				<i>1</i>				<i>3</i>
		<u>1</u>							<u>1</u>
31-35	<i>10</i>		<i>1</i>		<i>3</i>		<i>8</i>		<i>22</i>
	<u>1</u>		<u>1</u>		<u>1</u>		<u>1</u>		<u>4</u>
36-40	<i>7</i>	<i>1</i>					<i>4</i>		<i>12</i>
	<u>1</u>		<u>1</u>				<u>1</u>		<u>3</u>
41-45	<i>6</i>						<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>8</i>
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>			<u>2</u>		<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>7</u>
46-50	<i>1</i>				<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>		<i>6</i>
	<u>1</u>						<u>1</u>		<u>2</u>
50+	<i>1</i>		<i>2</i>				<i>6</i>		<i>9</i>
	<u>1</u>								<u>1</u>
TOTAL	<i>29</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>3</i>		<i>6</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>65</i>
	<u>5</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>		<u>3</u>		<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>18</u>

Note: teacher data are presented in italics, while tutor data are underlined.

The teaching experience of teachers ranged between one year and more than 30 years. Table 2 presents the data on the participants' years spent in the sphere of education as teachers. Out of the eighteen college tutors seven had been working in higher education 1-5 years. One teacher had been a college instructor 6-10 years and another one 11-15 years. Five had been working in teacher education 16-20 years and four 21-25 years (see Table 2 for summary of teaching experience of the research participants).

Table 2. Teaching experience of participants (Group 1 – data in italics, Group 2 – data underlined) in years

Years	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	30+	TOTAL
Number of teachers /	<i>10</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>65</i>
tutors	<u>7</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>4</u>			<u>18</u>

The teachers who participated in our research taught secondary school children aged 15-17. Only five teachers have tried teaching online before the 2020 spring quarantine, while sixty teachers have not. Out of the 65 teachers 62 have never been trained how to teach online. Only three teachers mentioned they had done some training course on distance learning. Most of them (59) used some kind of online applications or platforms (see Table 3). However, fourteen teachers did not apply any of these.

Before the spring of 2020, only two teachers had tried teaching distantly earlier, sixteen had not. Also, only three had participated in training courses on distance learning in the past and fifteen had not. Similarly to the case of secondary school teachers, this also proves the novelty of the situation, to which we had to adapt in a very short time (about two weeks) because in Ukraine, on 12 March 2020, the quarantine was officially introduced for one month, and the educational institutions had to close. Table 3 presents the data on which online applications the teachers and the tutors applied during their teaching.

Table 3. Online programs most commonly used by teachers (data in italics) and college tutors (data underlined)

Applications / programs	Number of teachers / tutors who used it
Google Classroom	<i>30</i>
	<u>18</u>
ZOOM	<i>13</i>
	<u>17</u>
Messenger	<i>59</i>
	<u>17</u>
E-mail	<i>39</i>
	<u>17</u>
Google Drive	<i>18</i>
	<u>9</u>
Skype	<i>7</i>
	<u>8</u>
Google Meet	<i>2</i>
	<u>3</u>
Viber	<i>6</i>
	<u>5</u>
Redmenta	<i>1</i>
	<u>1</u>
Facebook Live	<i>8</i>
	<u>1</u>
Liveworksheets	<i>1</i>
Wordwall	<i>1</i>
Edubase	<i>1</i>
Screencapture	<i>1</i>
Classmarker	<i>1</i>
Quizizz	<i>1</i>
Edmodo	<i>1</i>
Ha ypok [Na urok = For the lesson]	<i>1</i>

Table 3 shows that all college tutors used the Google Classroom program, as five teachers responded that the educational institution required it to be used, while 13 teachers stated that the educational institution suggested which program to use, but the teacher was given a free hand, in solving the issue. This was also true for the use of ZOOM, which was used by almost everyone, and the use of Messenger and email, which were applied by at least seventeen people. Less preferred were Google Drive (nine teachers), Skype (eight teachers),

or Google Meet (three teachers). One instructor even used Redmenta and Facebook Live. However, MS Teams and Chromebooks were not used by any instructors.

The school teachers decided to use these applications for various reasons, as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4. Reasons why teachers used different digital applications

Reason	Number of teachers
The school made a suggestion about which application to use but the teacher could decide individually	42
The school staff made a common decision	13
The school insisted on using the given platform	4
My own experience	1
I knew these programs	1
I worked with what I had done before	1
My own decision	1
I tested them all	1
On what interface the student was available	1

Instruments

Both groups of participants were asked to fill in questionnaires online. There were two different instruments developed for the two groups. Their structure was similar; however, their content was slightly different taking into account the peculiarities of the teaching context.

The first part in both questionnaires enquired about the teachers' and tutors' personal data, like age, gender, what language they taught, number of years of teaching experience, experiences with distance learning, and the reasons why they decided on using this or that digital platform during online teaching.

In the second part of the questionnaires, we asked teachers to express their views with us concerning the daily routine of online teaching, the difficulties of motivating children and students when teaching remotely, as well as issues related to effective assessment of their knowledge and performance during distance learning. Teachers and tutors were expected to indicate to what extent they agreed with statements on online teaching on a five-point Likert-scale.

In Part 3 of the questionnaires, our respondents had the possibility to share their experiences with motivating students and assessing their knowledge and performance freely answering open-ended questions. All the questionnaires were filled online in June, 2020.

Results and Discussion

Assessment in the secondary school and at college

Twenty secondary school teachers (31%) claimed they only held synchronous lessons with differing frequency ranging from every day to once a week. Twenty-nine teachers (45%) instead of online lessons posted the learning material and tasks to learners on various platforms weekly. Eleven teachers (17%) applied a hybrid form of teaching: they had synchronous lessons as well as posted tasks for the learners to solve. The type of teaching depended on the character of the topic. For example, School Teacher 37 said: "Depending on the type of topic, I either held an online lesson or uploaded the teaching material. In each case, I used practice tasks." Five teachers (7%) prepared asynchronous video lessons for their learners on a weekly basis.

On the initiative of their institution, all the college tutors applied Google Classroom as the basic platform for their distance teaching where they posted the learning material and tasks and exercises to solve for the students.

In the following, we are going to analyse the data obtained about the focus of our paper, assessment of students' and learners' knowledge and performance.

A majority of teachers (54 – 83%) applied various programs to assess and evaluate student performance online. Four teachers (4 – 6%) did not do it at all, they made use of the mobile form to inform students about their evaluation, while seven teachers (7 – 11%) could not decide how to answer this question.

There were more teachers admitting that they were not able to assess the children's knowledge online (29 – 45%) than those who were satisfied with their ability to evaluate children's performance online (22 – 34%). A rather high ratio of teachers was hesitant to decide about this question. In many cases, teachers explained that they did not trust that the student worked alone, so their assessment may not be realistic.

We obtained 55 replies from our teacher respondents concerning the ways they performed the assessment in their classes. These explanations are included in Table 5.

Table 5. Ways of effective online assessment of learners' knowledge and performance

Assessment	Number of teachers
In writing (tests, homework, essays, submitted assignments)	23
Tasks and projects requiring creativity	5
Orally	5
Orally and in a written form	9
With the help of an online program	7
Cannot evaluate realistically / effectively online	6

Examples:

It depends on the situation. If a poem was submitted, live-online, with the eyes closed, I could actually give a realistic grade right away, and it worked pretty well. But if the student submitted a well-prepared worksheet in which I recognized someone else's style, I could evaluate it effectively, but not realistically - so I still can't evaluate the student's knowledge effectively. (School teacher 7)

Google Classroom offers many opportunities for this. Another question is whether the child's real knowledge is really reflected back in solving the tasks, or perhaps the parent's. (School teacher 23)

I don't think online education has been able to assess students' knowledge effectively and objectively enough. For younger students, the tasks simply asked for return also adequately reflected how well the student managed to master the curriculum. In the older age group, this method did not work, they are already able to trick the various testing platforms quite skilfully and they can talk about the answers. I tried to send out tests with them in as many versions as possible so that I could minimize this to some extent. (School teacher 44)

With the help of a program I used, I also had the evaluation. Google Classroom offers many opportunities for this. (School teacher 61)

Some college tutors explained how they assessed their students during distance learning. We have summarized the answers in Table 6.

Table 6. Ways of assessing students' performance as given by college tutors

Methods of assessment	Number of tutors
Based on the returned tasks in writing	18
Setting a deadline and scheduling the assignment in Google Classroom	15
Based on the evaluation of each task separately, quick average calculations can be performed with the help of Google Classroom.	11
With tasks that encourage self-employment	10
By written assignments	9

If one looks at Table 6, one can see that all the tutors assessed their students mainly assigning them written tasks, most frequently via Google Classroom as this was the directive of the management of their workplace. However, some tutors were not satisfied with the way of assessment:

I cannot effectively evaluate students' knowledge because in several cases I have found that they have not completed the tasks alone, used some outside help, or handed over the completed tasks to each other. (Tutor 5)

I can't be sure that online evaluation is really effective, or reliable. I just assume knowing students from an older age. (Tutor 17)

All these findings are in line with what Flores and Gago (2020) found in Portugal, in that the transition from face-to-face to online teaching meant real pedagogical challenges for teachers and educators concerning the use of assessment strategies and tools.

Giving feedback in secondary school and at college

First, we asked teachers about how many hours a day they spent marking the tasks returned to the teachers online. Ten teachers (15%) spent one or two hours daily on this duty, ten teachers (15%) spent two or three hours, and another ten teachers (15%) spent three or four hours on doing this. Thirteen teachers (20%) claimed they spent more than four hours marking the learners' submitted works, while six teachers (9%) admitted this amount of time was changeable for them. However, sixteen teachers (26%) gave no exact answers using phrases like “many hours”, “a few hours”, etc.

The majority of schoolteachers gave feedback to learners in a written form (either in emails, or text messages, or messages via Messenger, or private comments in Google Classroom – 33 / 51%). Twelve teachers (18%) preferred to give feedback to learners on their performance in the form of a mark accompanied by a comment, while nine teachers (14%) preferred to give only a mark. There were four teachers (6%) who practised giving feedback both orally and in written form, whereas two teachers (3%) gave feedback only orally. The replies of five teachers (8%) were vague in this respect, e.g. “online” (Schoolteacher 52).

Table 7 summarises the length of time that college tutors spent daily marking their students' written assignments during distance learning. Tutors who spent three or more times on marking the students' tasks claimed they needed that much time because there were more than 15 students in their groups, so they needed more time to assess students.

Table 7. Time tutors spent daily marking students' written assignments

Hours	Number of tutors
1 or 2	7
3	6
4	4
5	1

College tutors made use of various forms of giving feedback to students. All of them (18 – 100%) provided written feedback to their students. Most of them sent private messages to students in Google Classroom. There were two tutors who sent emails with personalized feedback to students. Another educator explained that “I indicated the correction on the submitted works, evaluated it with a score, and also described my personal comments in messages. And when we held a class with the help of Messenger or Meet, I also told the students my remarks and suggestions orally” (Tutor 7). There was a tutor who mentioned that “When I felt it important, I phoned the student and gave feedback over the mobile phone” (Tutor 2).

The biggest challenge for language teachers in distance learning assessment

Our participants indicated certain difficulties that they found really challenging when assessing their learners' performance and knowledge during distance learning. The most serious difficulty was caused by the fact that about a third of the teachers did not trust their learners concerning who was the homework done by (23 – 35%). Twenty teachers (20 – 31%) doubted whether their assessment was real and objective. Related to this was the main concern of five teachers (5 – 8%) who considered it problematic that weak learners achieved better results and got better marks than they did during face-to-face education. The lack of real contact between the teachers and the learners meant difficulties for ten teachers (10 – 15%). For ten teachers (10 – 15%) assessing the learners' language skills caused some inconveniences, especially testing speaking skills and listening comprehension of children. Two teachers (2 – 3%) referred to some technical problems (e.g., the photos or video material returned to the teachers by the learners were of poor quality). One teacher (1 – 2%) emphasized that they felt bad because they had to evaluate disadvantaged students in the same way (e.g. there was no smartphone in the family, the child did not participate in the educational process through no fault of their own, etc.). One teacher (1 – 2%) mentioned that they could hardly find an appropriate platform for learners' assessment. Another teacher (1 – 2%) admitted they had to reconceptualise their own evaluation system, and introduce new categories into it. However, we found fifteen respondents (15 – 23%) who did not indicate problems concerning assessing learners' knowledge and performance, but rather general problems of teaching online:

Learners were not motivated enough to learn the language distantly. (School teacher 11)

I had to spend too much time in front of my computer screen. (School teacher 47)

It was extremely time-consuming to prepare the tasks for my learners. (Schoolteacher 49)

College tutors indicated that assessing student performance in general was the biggest challenge for them in online teaching, as they could not be sure whose performance was being assessed for a particular task: whether that student's or someone else's (e.g., a classmate's or friend's if they had just helped with solution of the task). It was also a problem for several instructors that marking and evaluating module papers written online was extremely time consuming. For some tutors the lack of personal contact caused inconveniences; for example, Tutor 8 complained that "I did not see the students' reaction during the assessment". Another educator spoke pessimistically, saying that "Many times I felt cheated, unable to decide if the student had done the tasks based on their own knowledge or with the help of others. I couldn't trust them" (Tutor 13). Only a few respondents self-declared that they were able to effectively evaluate their students' performance in distance learning. This fact points to a serious shortcoming that needs to be addressed urgently (e.g. by improving the knowledge of college teachers in this area).

Conclusions

The results suggest that the biggest and most common problem in both secondary and higher education was assessment and evaluation. Similarities were found in the responses of both target groups, as both school teachers and college teachers complained that it was difficult to decide from time to time whether students solved a task on their own or whether they made use of external help (in the case of schoolchildren, parents or private teachers, in the case of college students, friends, groupmates, or the Internet). From this result the pedagogical implication can be deduced that teachers should strive to build relationships based on trust with their students. This, of course, is much easier to accomplish in face-to-face education, where teacher and student meet in person daily, with physical presence and real-time conversations. Building trust in distance learning is a bigger challenge for teachers because it is not easy to converse with students in person, it is definitely necessary to use some kind of intermediate tool, e.g. telephone, or the internet. In any case, building mutual trust between teachers and their students is paramount in order to end the mistrust that a teacher and student often experience, as teachers themselves admit. If the student trusts his / her teacher, they will not feel the need to "cheat" him / her during testing, and if the teacher also trusts his / her student, he / she will not doubt his / her honesty.

Members of both target groups of our research mentioned that it was time-consuming to prepare teaching materials for online learning and then mark the students' or learners' written assignments and give feedback on them. In addition, a great majority of school teachers and college tutors complained about the difficulties in assessing speaking and listening skills in distance learning. There can be one possible solution to this urgent problem: teachers and tutors must acquire the skills of effective online assessment that in our new COVID reality can also be done online by participating in special MOOCs that focus on the issues in question.

In the next phase of our research, we want to compare and contrast the opinions of secondary school and college students with the views of their teachers to get more objective images of our central issue, distance learning, from four different perspectives.

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