

TEACHING ROMANIAN FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES ONLINE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ABSTRACT: Teaching Romanian for specific purposes is difficult in general and it often involves grouping students in teams according to their area of interest. Having a homogenous group of students with similar options for their future university studies is a rare occurrence in our university, thus teaching Romanian for specific purposes is seldom carried out with the whole class, and most likely involves “team work” activities. Starting with a questionnaire given to the preparatory year students in Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești, the present paper analyzes the difficulties encountered while teaching Romanian for specific purposes online, first in an asynchronous manner, and then in real-time by means of videoconferencing. The last part of the paper discusses further how the experience of asynchronous teaching was used during the following semesters to improve synchronous and mixed teaching for the same discipline and with similar groups of students.

Key words: Romanian for specific purposes, online teaching, asynchronous teaching, synchronous teaching, team work, individual learning, organizing contents, questionnaire.

ОНЛАЈН НАСТАВА РУМУНСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА ЗА ПОСЕБНЕ НАМЕНЕ ТОКОМ ПАНДЕМИЈЕ КОВИД-19

АПСТРАКТ: Процес подучавања румунског језика за посебне намене је тежак и често укључује груписање ученика у тимове према области њиховог интересовања. Постојање хомогене групе студената са сличним интересовањима и могућностима за будуће универзитетске студије ретка је појава на нашем универзитету, тако да се настава румунског језика ретко изводи са целом групом, и често укључује активности назване „рад у тиму”. На основу резултата истраживања и упитника, који је дат студентима припремне године на Универзитету за нафту и гас у Плоештију, овај рад анализира потешкоће са којима се студенти сусрећу током наставе румунског језика за посебне намене (најпре асинхроне наставе, а затим и наставе у реалном времену путем видео-конференције). У последњем делу рада говори се о употреби искуства асинхроне наставе током наредних семестара за унапређење синхроне и мешовите наставе за исту дисциплину и са сличним групама студената.

Кључне речи: румунски за посебне намене, онлајн настава, асинхрона настава, синхрона настава, тимски рад, индивидуално учење, организовање садржаја, упитник.

1. INTRODUCTION

The outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 affected modern society in general generating implications in all sectors of human activity. The measures taken by the governments of the world, generally referred to by the term of “lockdowns”, reached an unprecedented scale, with about half of the world’s population being placed under a form of restriction (Standford 2020). One of the most common restrictions around the globe, which applied to Romania as well, was seen by some as a “closing of schools” – face-to-face instruction was suspended and alternative methods of continuing education without physical interaction were used as emergency solutions. The methods and resources which were actually implemented to achieve the goal of continuing education were relatively diverse depending on the experience of each institution, or even of each teacher, with remote learning.

As the pandemic became even more severe and the lockdown was maintained for more than the two weeks planned initially, it became clear that face-to-face classes would not be considered “postponed” anymore and they needed to be replaced by some other form of education. The online environment appeared as a solution to the problem because it allowed communication to take place without physical contact, however, the exact manner in which classes would continue online was not clear from the beginning and this situation left room for experimentation. Many variants were used in the following months of remote learning: online platforms with learning resources, social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Discord), phones and emails – all of which allowed education to continue in an asynchronous manner – and, eventually, the use of videoconferencing tools (Google Meet, Zoom) became widespread, which ensured real-time interaction between participants and allowed teachers to organize synchronous online classes.

The transition to online teaching was unprecedented and mostly experimental. Confusing as it may have been for the people directly involved, the process of implementing online teaching and learning was very interesting for researchers, thus a large number of academic papers on the topic of online teaching and its effects started to appear as early as the spring of 2020 (Erarslan 2021: 353). If we narrow down our focus to the teaching of languages online, we can still state that the literature related to this topic is very rich. Most articles about the online teaching of foreign languages focus on the impact of the new context on teaching and learning, while a lower, but significant, number of articles focus on the

perceptions of the participants and on the psychological effects of this sudden change (Erarslan 2021: 354).

Referring to the technical aspects of the transition from face-to-face education to remote education via the Internet, studies have shown that not all participants had equal opportunities of adapting to the new situation due to lack of appropriate technology, such as computers or smartphones, and due to an unreliable internet connection. Some researchers noticed a difference between high-tech and low-tech countries (Hazaeta et al. 2021: 223), while others analysed the difference at the local and personal level, reporting inefficient or even absent internet connection or lack of devices within some communities and social categories (Almekhlafy 2020: 29; Atmojo & Nugroho 2020: 66; Novikov 2020: 294). Lack of computing skills and experience with online teaching was another problem emphasized by the studies (Bailey, Lee 2020: 187; Huang et al. 2021: 413; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison 2020) although the same studies which mentioned this problem admit that both teachers and students improved their abilities of working online over time if they had appropriate technology at their disposal (Erarslan 2021: 355; Yi & Jang 2020: 4).

Regarding the results of teaching foreign languages online as compared to the previous year (i.e. 2019), studies show that listening and speaking skills were less developed than writing and reading skills because the students had to do more homework received via written platforms or forum-type media such as Facebook or WhatsApp (Hartshorn & Mcmurry 2020; Karataş 2020) and real-time interaction was insufficient in many cases. The attempts to develop students' listening skill caused the most frequent problems (Rifiyanti 2020: 34).

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on the author's experience as a teacher of Romanian for specific purposes at the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești during the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020 and 2021. The subjects of the study were students from the preparatory year, which means they were students who come to Romania one year before starting their university studies and attend classes of Romanian language and Romanian culture and civilisation in order to obtain a certificate for the B1 level in Romanian language, the minimum language requirement for admission in the Romanian universities.

During the 2019–2020 academic year, 14 students attended the preparatory year coming from countries such as Cuba, Gabon, Guinea, Iraq and North Korea. For these students, the first semester was a regular one, with face-to-face classes,

while the second semester was almost completely online (except for the first two weeks).

The next year, 2020–2021, our university implemented a system of mixed teaching, both online and face-to-face, according to the dynamics of the pandemic and to the needs of the students. During this second year of online teaching, the group of students was smaller due to the international situation. Although 10 students were initially enrolled in the preparatory year, two students from North Korea were not allowed to leave their country or to connect to the Internet for synchronous teaching sessions, thus, eventually, only 8 students were able to attend the classes. All classes during the 2020–2021 academic year were held with this group in a mixed manner: the students who had managed to come to Romania attended classes face-to-face with the observance of the regulations for the prevention and control of Covid-19, however two students from Turkmenistan could not leave their country due to the pandemic and were allowed to attend the classes online in the form of video sessions. The students who attended the classes during the 2020–2021 academic year were from the following countries: Angola, Jordan, Syria and Turkmenistan.

Most of the teaching during the 2020 March-May lockdown was carried out in an asynchronous manner by means of the e-learning platform already in use for the distance learning programmes of the university, while the online classes taking place in the autumn of 2020 and in 2021 were synchronous, via online platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom.

The present paper will analyse the way in which asynchronous teaching and learning was used as an emergency method for continuing the educational process during the 2020 lockdown. Asynchronous teaching will be compared afterwards with synchronous and mixed online and face-to-face teaching, which was implemented during the following two semesters, in the 2020–2021 academic year. It is important to mention that, at the end of the first semester of online teaching, we carried out a survey by means of a questionnaire in order to identify the students' difficulties with asynchronous teaching. The results of the questionnaire will be presented and interpreted in this study as well. The survey was instrumental in organizing the educational process during the second year of online teaching, when our goal was to avoid, as much as possible, the shortcomings of the asynchronous learning and to provide a more communicative environment for our students by means of video sessions and screen-sharing.

3. CASE STUDY

Teaching Romanian for specific purposes in our university is a difficult task in general for the teachers because more often than not our groups of students from the preparatory year are very heterogeneous in terms of academic trajectory and interests. Our university can prepare foreign students for three curriculum areas: Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences and Engineering.

3.1. Description of the context

Due to the small number of students and to the fact that the students arrive to Romania after the beginning of the academic year (in October), the groups are formed without taking into consideration the students' projected academic path, thus it is very possible discover that, in one group there are students interested in each of the curriculum areas. As a result, Romanian for specific purposes classes are seldom organised as frontal teaching activities and more often they involve "team work" or even individual work. The teacher needs to organize the learning contents, the methods used and the time of the seminar to facilitate team work as much as possible.

During the 2020 Covid 19 lockdown in Romania, although the contents of the seminar were still adapted according to the learning plan of the students, what used to be team work during the seminars turned into working with each student individually by means of mediated communication (the Internet and mobile phones). This unprecedented situation brought forth new challenges, difficult situations, but also new opportunities both for the teacher and for the students. In our university the decision to stop face-to-face classes was taken literally in the middle of the week, on Wednesday, 11 March 2020, and it was an emergency decision arriving one day after the Minister of Education at that time, Monica Anisie, had decided to suspend all classes in the general and high schools.

At the beginning of the lockdown the term of "online classes" was not even used in our university. In an interview given on 12 March 2020 to the online newspaper *Prahova online*, the Rector of Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești actually stated that the classes in our university would be "suspended" and that the teachers would be encouraged to pursue research activities and to prepare lectures which were meant to be sent as written materials to the students by electronic means ("Cursurile de la UPG" 2020).

The emergency measure that the leadership of our university decided to implement at the beginning was to give everyone (teachers and students) access to an e-learning platform already in use for the distance learning programs in our university. This platform allowed teachers to post learning materials and

assignments and to check the papers submitted by the students in response to the assignments. This system of communication was more familiar to the teachers and more convenient for the management of the university who could check the activity on this platform with greater ease than on social media, on Google Meet and Zoom or on the WhatsApp groups. As a consequence, the main requirement for the teachers was to provide learning materials which would be posted on the platform each week and there was no mention about any form of synchronous teaching. The teachers were never instructed in the use of video conferencing tools such as Google Meet and Zoom and they were not even directed officially towards exploring these options of connecting online in real time with the students.

As the semester progressed, the teachers started finding out by word-of-mouth about the benefits of video conferencing and some even tried to figure it out by themselves or with the guidance of more savvy colleagues. Some teachers were relatively familiar with Zoom because it had been used during international conferences as a means to communicate with peers who could not be physically present to make their interventions.

However, many teachers were still reluctant to use these tools for various reasons. One reason was that they did not know these programs very well and could easily risk being caught off-guard in front of the students (thus losing authority). Another reason was that some teachers, especially the older generations, did not have the computer skills necessary for using such tools and last, but not least, there were some teachers who found videoconferencing from their own homes uncomfortable and even an intrusion to their privacy. The last reason, although might seem superfluous, is actually very common and it explains why the students themselves prefer to turn off their cameras during online video classes and why Google Meet and Zoom hurried to improve their digital background technology over the course of several months. Indeed, few people are happy to transmit live from their private homes several hours a day to a rather judgmental audience.

3.2. *Organizing the content*

When required to provide written material for the classes of Romanian for specific purposes, I found myself in the situation of actually creating content not for one class, but for three at the same time because there were three subgroups of students with divergent interests in the preparatory year of 2019–2020. The two students from North Korea wanted to study architecture, a group of four Cuban students and the student from Iraq wanted to study petroleum engineering and the students from Gabon and Guinea wanted to study economy after graduating the preparatory year. The only element of similarity that I could find between the three teams was that they were relatively homogenous ethnically and this was actually an important piece of information that I kept in mind while actually writing the content for their asynchronous online classes.

The premises that I started from were that these students had access to the e-learning platform of the university, although, as I could learn later, two of them did not own a working computer at that moment and were struggling to write their assignments on smartphones or on borrowed computers.

I also knew from the experience of the previous years that the students from North Korea had restricted access to the Internet on their otherwise functional laptops and that I could not send them links to content situated outside the e-learning platform because it was very likely that they could not access that content. This meant that the papers related to architecture needed to be self-sufficient, they needed to contain all the necessary photos and all the explanations of specific terms. These materials also needed to provide historical context for the styles of architecture presented in the texts because, as I had discovered in the previous years of teaching preparatory year classes, students coming from this country do not study in school about other nations in the same manner as the Western students do and may not recognize pieces of information which are considered common knowledge in the Western culture like the names of major cities, such as Paris or Vienna and historical landmarks, such as the Roman Empire or the Middle Ages. What I could not provide for these students were audio materials because they were all on platforms such as YouTube and I had no guarantee they could access them.

The strong points of working with the students from North Korea are that they prove to be very attentive and willing to assimilate information, so giving them longer texts and extra explanations was rather beneficial and did not lead to information overload. They were also more likely to remember details from previous lessons, so asking them to write comparisons of buildings from different

ages based on suggestive pictures proved to be a good writing and vocabulary exercise.

The students coming from Cuba, Gabon, Guinea and Iraq had no restrictions regarding internet access, so I could send them links to videos and documentaries available online. They were also students with previous knowledge about their subject matter which meant that the teaching of the new specific terms in Romanian could be done by means of analogy with their own language or with English, a language they knew at least at an intermediate level.

One strategy which I repeated with these students was to find a suggestive video on the internet and use the transcription of the explanations given in the video as a basis for listening exercises. I usually searched for suggestive videos on websites or YouTube channels belonging to the government or to well-known companies to make sure that the materials used were authentic and correct. As other authors have stated before, the authenticity of the material is important for teaching language for specific purposes for at least two reasons: one reason is that the teacher, who is not a specialist in the subject matter, can be sure that the information transmitted is scientifically correct and another reason is the psychological one regarding the students – the students become more confident because they know they can use the language in the real professional environment (Adam et al 2009: 782).

If I could only find videos in English on topics related to the subject matter in focus that week, I still used them in the following way: I translated the explanations of the video into Romanian and I used the translation as a support text to introduce new vocabulary. The students were sent both the text of the translation and the link of the original video in English and thus they had two variants of the same message, one in a language they knew and the other one in the target language. I found this strategy to be an effective way to introduce new vocabulary or to replace the physical presence of the teacher with a source of information holding enough authority to be credible for the students.

The use of this multimodal approach (text with exercises and videos) was very soon appreciated by the students who sent messages on WhatsApp with positive feedback. The downside of this approach was that not all students could benefit from the implementation of this method because, as I have explained before, not all of them had unrestricted access to the Internet.

As it can be easily deduced from the explanations above, in order to select or even to create the appropriate content for the teaching of Romanian for specific purposes online, it is very important to know very well both how accessible online

resources are for the students and to know the students themselves as well as possible. The information about the students which is vital to organizing any class, be it physical or online, has been identified before the outburst of the pandemic: teachers need to know the students' level of language learning and their knowledge about the subject matter of the targeted scientific area (Ciornei 2019: 14) Moreover, I would add, it is very important to know the cultural background of the students as well as any other conditionings of a political, cultural or religious nature which can influence in a positive or negative way the learning process. Having previous experience with groups of students coming from similar backgrounds, I found it very important in deciding what strategies to employ and what to avoid.

As stated before, one downside of continuing education online in an asynchronous manner was that the volume of work for the teacher increased significantly because what was team work in the face-to-face learning context had become individual teaching in the context of online education via the e-learning platform. Each student sent their own assignments to be checked by the teacher and any further explanations had to be given individually and sometimes even repeated with small changes for other students in the group who had encountered similar difficulties. The advantage was that, in this case, the teacher could really adapt materials and explanations to the needs and academic interests of each student without interfering with the interests of other students in the group as it sometimes happened during the face-to-face seminars where, for example, students who were not interested in engineering would unavoidably hear explanations about that subject matter being given to their colleagues. Audio and video recordings as well as other sources of information on the subject matter could be sent to the students individually and could be studied by them in the privacy of their own rooms and for as long as it was necessary.

In spite of the unusual conditions of work, at the end of the semester all students managed to receive a passing grade and eight of them even graduated with the maximum grade possible in our country, which is 10. As some of the students in this group continued their education in our university after completing their preparatory year, I could trace their academic trajectory over a period of two years after the end of the lockdown and there were no significant differences between these students and their peers who had graduated before the outburst of the pandemic. As a conclusion, in spite of the obvious disadvantages of using asynchronous teaching for a semester, with careful organization of the learning materials, after investing more effort than usually to maintain communication with

the students and to provide useful feedback to individual tasks and with a lot of effort from the students themselves, we can state that the educational process was not compromised and that it has reached its objectives.

3.3. Analysis of the survey

At the end of the first semester of online learning, which was carried out in the form of asynchronous education, the students were asked to complete the questionnaire reproduced below with the mention that the questionnaire given to the students was in Romanian. All students attending the preparatory year in our university during the 2020 March-May lockdown answered the questionnaire. The answers to the questionnaire will be represented further by means of diagrams and analysed as follows:

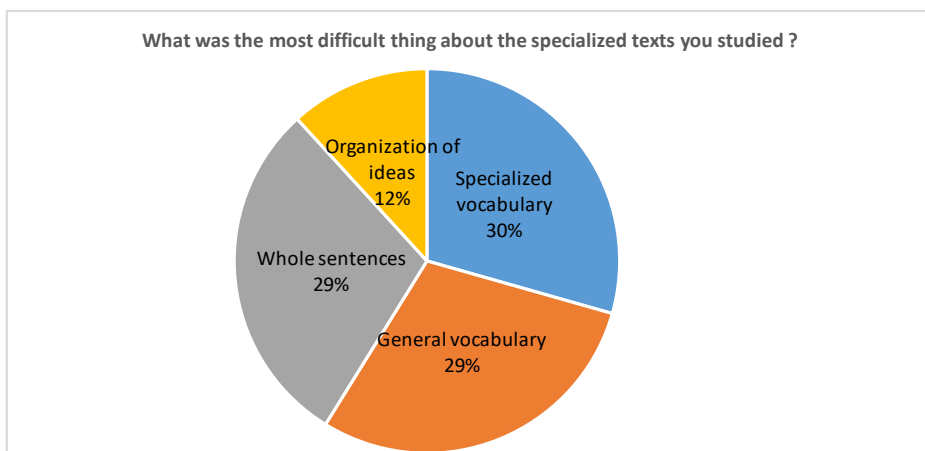


Diagram 1. What was the most difficult thing about the specialized texts you studied?

For the first question, “What was the most difficult thing about the specialized texts you studied?”, one can notice that the students considered that the specialized vocabulary was the most difficult aspect of specialized texts, but this category was followed closely by the general vocabulary and the way whole sentences were formed, while the way in which the specialized texts were organized was considered less difficult.

The fact that the general vocabulary of the text still represented a problem can be due to the low level of communication skills in the Romanian language at the beginning of online teaching (the students had acquired an A2 level after having face-to-face classes for one semester). Sometimes, the meaning of the

whole sentence was challenging for the students even though they understood each individual word. One of the most common requests from the students received via messages during the asynchronous online teaching was to translate whole sentences from texts into English. Just providing the translation of the new specialized terms was not satisfactory and they insisted in receiving an actual translation, which could be explained by the insufficient acquisition of grammatical forms and of idiomatic expressions. However, in spite of the difficulties with understanding words and even some sentences, the students managed to grasp the overall meaning of the texts and to fulfill their tasks in a satisfactory manner. Their occasional panic over unknown parts of the text was also influenced by the absence of immediate communication with the teacher and the impression that they were all of a sudden alone in their effort to improve their language skills. This particular problem will be emphasized further by the answers given to the next questions.

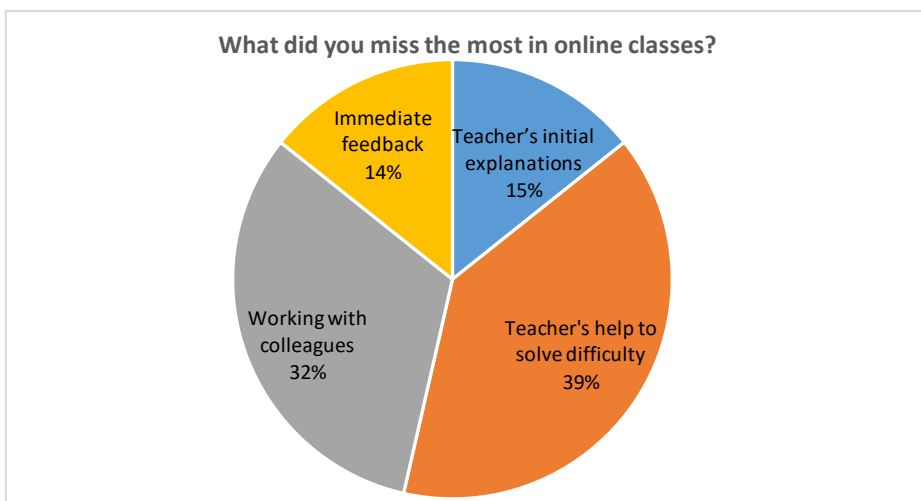


Diagram 2. What did you miss the most in online classes?

For the second question, “What did you miss the most in online classes?” the answer with the highest percentage was “teacher’s help to solve difficulty”, which supports the theory that finding themselves alone with the tasks during the period of asynchronous online learning represented a source of concern for the students.

As one can notice, the answers related to the role of the teacher, “teacher’s initial explanations” and “immediate feedback” were not considered as important by the students who considered the way in which the tasks were formulated and the

initial background information to have been satisfactory. It was the encounter with the unexpected difficulty that triggered most of the responses.

A strong second place belongs to the answer “working with colleagues”. As the seminar of Romanian for specific purposes was mostly organised in the form of team work, the students missed the opportunity to consult their colleagues and to share task solving with them. The lack of interaction was ranked higher by the students coming from homogenous ethnic groups: the Cuban students and the North Korean students who had the tendency to rely on each other for solving their tasks and ask for the teacher’s help only when no one in the group was able to solve the difficulty. The lack of interaction was also accentuated by the regulations for the prevention of Covid-19 in power over the two months of lockdown. The students who were not roommates could not visit each other (at least not legally and not without risks of being fined by the authorities), they could not interact face-to-face with older students from the same countries or with their Romanian friends. The situation led to occasional outbursts of frustration from some of the more out-going students who complained that they felt “imprisoned” in their own rooms.

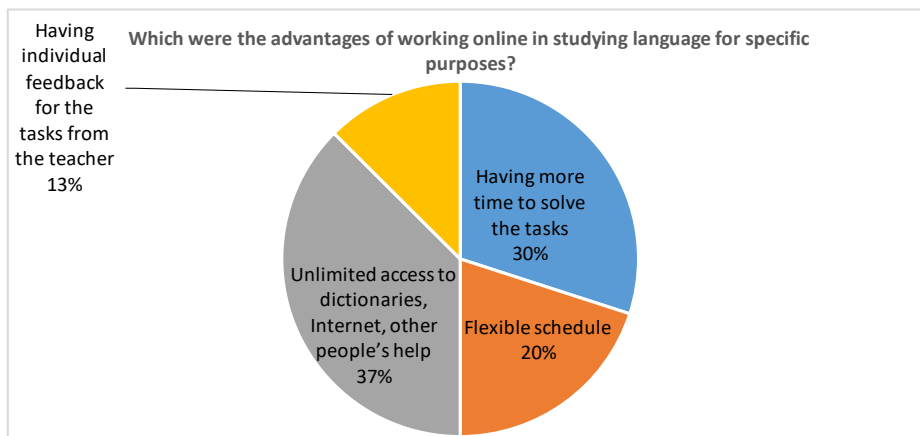


Diagram 3. Which were the advantages of working online in studying language for specific purposes?

The question “Which were the advantages of working online in studying language for specific purposes?” triggered negative reactions from some of the students, especially from the ones complaining about isolation during the lockdown. One student gave 0 points to all variants and explained that he did not find any advantages in studying online. However, from the answers of the students

who ranked possible advantages, we can conclude that the highest score was given to the “unlimited access to dictionaries, Internet, other people’s help”. Being no longer conditioned to solve tasks during the time of the class, the students considered that they had better access to other sources of information than during the face-to-face classes. It is worth mentioning that, given the nature of the texts and of the tasks, one challenge for the students, besides the linguistic difficulties was the knowledge about the subject matter itself. Preparatory year students are not specialists and may have limited knowledge about their future field of study. In their case, it is important to have access to background information about the subject matter. While organizing the content of the materials given to the students I anticipated this potential problem and I tried to avoid it by providing background information under the form of “trivia boxes” and links to suggestive videos (for the students with unlimited access to the Internet).

“Having more time to solve the tasks” was also considered an advantage by many of the students as well as the next variant, “flexible schedule”. The individual feedback of the teacher was not seen as an important advantage, probably because such feedback was not limited to online learning, but was present as well during the previous face-to-face meetings when teachers used to check students’ notes and give explanations when they noticed various problems.

I consider it important to mention, nevertheless that, after our university returned to the face-to-face classes with the observance of the social distancing, individual feedback with checking the students’ notes was no longer possible, as physical interaction needed to be avoided. Teachers tried to minimize this shortcoming by asking students to read their answers aloud and by writing the correct variants on the board or on the electronic documents themselves and projecting them on the board in front of the classroom. Students needed to correct their own mistakes in this situation and it was more difficult for teachers to notice if individual students made recurrent mistakes or had problems with the spelling or with grammar. Only after the social distancing norms were dropped, in the spring of 2022, teachers started to come again to the students’ desks and check their papers individually during the classes.

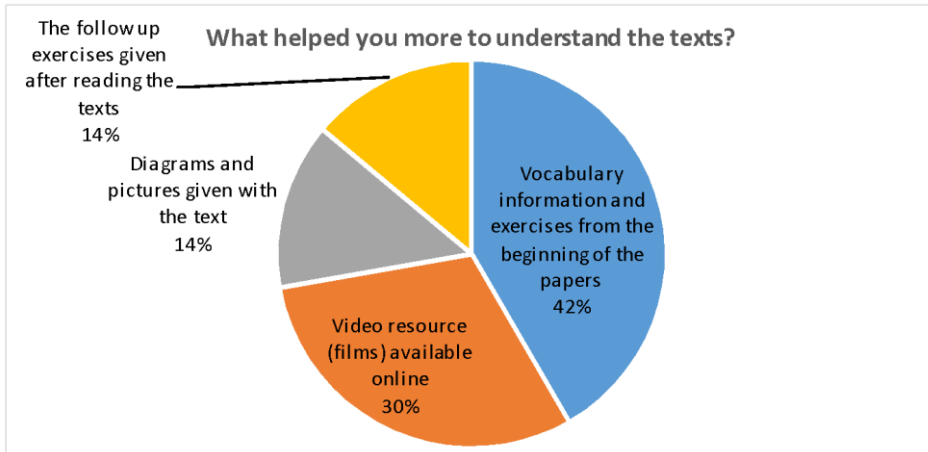


Diagram 4. What helped you more to understand the texts?

For the question “What helped you more to understand the texts?” the answer with the highest rank was “Vocabulary information and exercises from the beginning of the papers”. The section dedicated to vocabulary given at the beginning of the written learning materials was conceived exactly with this purpose in mind – to ease the understanding of the texts themselves. We can conclude that the result of the survey testifies that this goal was reached and the value of this section of the learning materials was recognized by the students. A solid second place was given to the video resources available online even if not all the students in the group had access to these videos, as I have stated before. The pictures and diagrams as well as the follow-up exercises were not considered as important in understanding the texts and the tasks themselves.

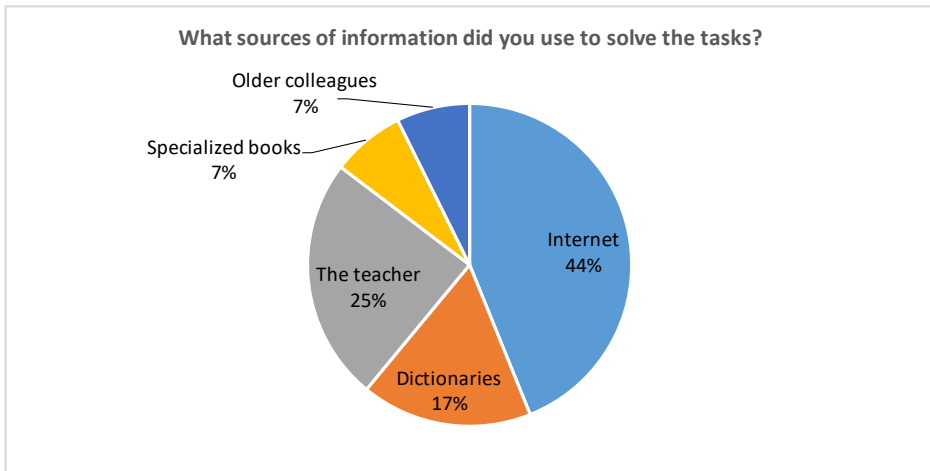


Diagram 5. What sources of information did you use to solve the tasks?

The last closed question of the survey “What sources of information did you use to solve the tasks?” identified the Internet as a main source of information followed by the teacher and then by dictionaries. Specialized books and older colleagues were the least important sources of information for our students. Ranking the teacher as the second important source of information came as a surprise, considering that most of the learning during the lockdown in the spring of 2020 took place in an asynchronous manner. However, my colleagues and I as teachers did our best to be available for questions and consultations online and by phone whenever the students needed them. Our continuous guidance was noted by the students as demonstrated by the results of the survey.

The last item of the questionnaire was an open question: “What suggestions do you have for improving the seminars of Romanian for specific purposes if the online learning experience will be repeated next year?” Only three students answered this question, some explaining orally that they hoped the experience would not repeat again the following year. Of the three students who answered, one wanted to study more texts related to the disciplines they would study in the first year of university studies, which in his case were mathematics, physics and chemistry, another student wanted more speaking and synchronous interaction with the teachers and a student from North Korea had personal goals such as to study more, to make friends among the Romanian students and to read and, surprisingly, to memorize many books.

3.4. Follow-up of the results in the form of synchronous online teaching

In the autumn of 2020, after less than a month of face-to-face seminars and online lectures, the Senate of Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești voted for online classes and examinations for the rest of the semester. This time synchronous teaching was encouraged with Google Meet as the preferred tool for videoconferencing. The teachers received some written lectures with instructions about the use of Google Calendars and Google Meet and they were subsequently requested to post the links to the videoconferences on the e-learning platform and to also send the same links to the heads of departments via email. The teachers were encouraged to use their institutional e-mails to create Google accounts and to log in to Google Calendars and to Google Meet. Google Classroom was not used for posting written materials. The e-learning platform of the university was used instead and the teachers had the obligation to update the content posted there the previous semester.

As Romanian for specific purposes is not studied during the first semester of the academic year, we did not have an exclusively synchronous online teaching experience with this particular discipline. In the second semester of the academic year 2020–2021, classes started in a mixed format, with lectures still being held online (on Google Meet) and seminars being held in a physical format, in the university, with surgical masks and social distancing. However, some students and some teachers who submitted medical documentation were allowed to continue their classes only in the online format.

Romanian for specific purposes was taught in the spring of 2021 in a mixed manner, with most of the students and the teacher present in the classroom and two students from Turkmenistan and any other student who happened to have flu-like symptoms logging in on Google Meet. Fortunately, the classrooms designated to the preparatory year were equipped with laptops, a Wi-Fi router and video projectors. Thus, the teacher would start a Google Meet videoconference at the beginning of each class, would share the screen with the students online and would project all activities on the board at the same time. The students in the classroom could see the exercises and hear their colleagues who were online. The online students however could only see the screen of the teacher's computer and the teacher, but they could not see their colleagues present in the classrooms and many times they could not hear them either, as the microphone of the laptop was not strong enough to pick up sounds from the entire classroom.

The advantage of this mixed format was that it permitted teaching in real time for all the students regardless of their ability to attend the class in person. Oral

communication with the teacher was possible and speaking exercises could be done with all students. However, the process did not always take place without difficulties, usually of a technological nature. The internet connection was not always stable for both the teacher and the students attending online, and listening activities were the most difficult ones with the online students complaining almost constantly about the quality of the sound when an audio file was played. Sometimes a compromise solution was used with the teacher sending the audio files to the students online and setting a time limit for them to submit their answers to the listening exercises. Although online students could communicate with the teacher, they could not communicate with their colleagues in the classroom and they could not take part in group or pair work activities. All they could do was to attend frontal activities and to work individually when required and send their answers to the teacher to be checked.

In spite of the imperfect solution of the mixed online and face-to-face teaching, the students attending classes online had a good progress in their language acquisition and were able to reach the B1 minimum level of linguistic competence required for entry in the Romanian universities. One of the students attending classes exclusively online, a student from Turkmenistan, for example, obtained a maximum average grade during the academic year 2020–2021 and took part with success in an online conference reuniting students of Romanian as a foreign language coming from a dozen universities from our country and from abroad. Although her success is undoubtedly due to her personal merit and effort, we can however conclude that the way in which synchronous online classes were organized and carried out by the teaching staff in our university over the academic year 2020-2021 was effective and it created a favourable environment for the students to develop their language skills.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic disrupted in a significant manner the learning process in the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti as well as in other teaching institutions of the country. As we have explained in detail in the present paper, the leadership of the university as well as the teachers and the students were caught off-guard by the decision to suspend face-to-face classes, which caused delay of action and a hesitant start in organizing online lessons, especially in the synchronous manner. The learning process did not stop in spite of all these shortcomings and students were still able to develop their language skills and to obtain their certificates. Speaking and listening skills were the ones that lacked

sufficient practice and the situation is not specific only to our university, as it has been documented by other studies as well (Erarslan 2021: 356; Hartshorn & Mcmurry 2020: 152; Karataş 2020: 26)

Teaching Romanian for specific purposes online in both an asynchronous and a synchronous manner was a challenging task and it required more time and effort from the teacher and more intense individual work from the students. The use of written materials adapted to the particularities of the students, the selection of the contents with the anticipation of possible difficulties and the use of multimedia (video recordings, images and diagrams) helped the students understand the tasks at hand and deduce meaning even if the teacher was not physically present to guide them through their learning process. The experience of these two years of pandemic, 2020–2022, is a lesson learned and would be useful in the future if similar emergencies were to happen again.

REFERENCES

- Adam, S. L., Stan, R. S., Monaga, A. S., Oroian, E., Rusu, M. (2009). Using the Communicative Method in the Process of Teaching/Learning Specialized Vocabulary. *Bulletin UASVM Horticulture* 66(2): 781–785.
- Almekhlafy, S. S. A. (2020). Online learning of English language courses via Blackboard at Saudi universities in the era of COVID-19: perception and use. *PSU Research Review* 5 (1): 16–32.
- Atmojo, A. E. P., Nugroho, A. (2020). EFL classes must go online! Teaching activities and challenges during COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. *Register Journal* 13(1): 49–76.
- Bailey, D. R., Lee, A. R. (2020). Learning from experience in the midst of Covid-19: Benefits, challenges, and strategies in online teaching. *Computer Assisted Language Learning Electronic Journal (CALL-EJ)* 21(2): 176–196.
- Ciornei, I. S. (2019). Predarea limbajelor de specialitate la anul pregătitor de limba română, in *Predarea, receptarea și evaluarea limbii române ca limbă străină. Dimensiune a interculturalității*, ed. L. Netedu (Ploiești: Editura Universității Petrol-Gaze din Ploiești): 11–17.
- Cursurile de la UPG Ploiești, sistate până la data de 29 martie (2020). ph-online.ro. Accesat 13. 7. 2022. URL: <<https://ph-online.ro/eveniment/item/110935-cursurile-de-la-upg-ploiesti-sistate-pana-pe-data-de-29-martie>>.

- Erarslan, A. (2021). English language teaching and learning during Covid-19: A global perspective on the first year. *Journal of Educational Technology & Online Learning* 4 (2): 349–367.
- Hartshorn, K. J., McMurry, B. L. (2020). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on ESL learners and TESOL practitioners in the United States. *International Journal of TESOL Studies* 2: 140–156.
- Hazaea, A. N., Bin-Hady, W. R. A., Toujan, M. M. (2021). Emergency remote English language teaching in the Arab league countries: Challenges and remedies. *Computer-Assisted Language Learning Electronic Journal (CALL-EJ)* 22 (1): 207–229.
- Huang, M., Shi, Y., Yang, X. (2021). Emergency remote teaching of English as a foreign language during COVID-19: Perspectives from a university in China. *International Journal of Educational Research and Innovation (Ijeri)* 15: 400–418.
- Novikov, P. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 emergency transition to on-line learning on international students' perceptions of educational process at Russian University. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 11(3): 270–302.
- Rifiyanti, H. (2020). Learners' perceptions of online English learning during Covid-19 pandemic. *Scope: Journal of English Language Teaching* 5 (1): 31–35.
- Sepulveda-Escobar, P., Morrison, A. (2020). Online teaching placement during the COVID-19 pandemic in Chile: Challenges and opportunities. *European Journal of Teacher Education* 43 (4): 587–607.
- Standford, A. (2020). Coronavirus: Half of humanity on lockdown in 90 countries. Euronews. Accesat 13. 7. 2022. URL: <<https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/02/coronavirus-in-europe-spain-s-death-toll-hits-10-000-after-record-950-new-deaths-in-24-hou>>.
- Yi, Y., Jang, J. (2020). Envisioning possibilities amid the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications from English language teaching in South Korea. *TESOL Journal* 11 (3): 1–5.

Михаела Трифан
Универзитет за нафту и гас у Плоештију
Филолошки и природно-математички факултет, Катедра за филологију

ОНЛАЈН НАСТАВА РУМУНСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА ЗА ПОСЕБНЕ НАМЕНЕ
ТОКОМ ПАНДЕМИЈЕ КОВИД-19

Резиме

Процес подучавања румунског језика за посебне намене је тежак и често укључује груписање ученика у тимове према области њиховог интересовања. Постојање хомогене групе студената са сличним интересовањима и могућностима за будуће универзитетске студије је ретка појава на нашем универзитету, тако да се настава румунског језика ретко изводи са целом групом, и често укључује активности назване „рад у тиму”. Наставник има задатак да организује часове, садржаје, начине учења, да размишља о коришћеним методама и о времену одржавања наставе како би што више олакшао тимски рад. Иако је садржај семинара и даље био прилагођен будућим студијама студената, у Румунији се током пандемије (2020–2021. године), тимски рад претворио у рад са сваким студентом понаособ путем посредоване комуникације. Ова нова и непредвидива ситуација донела је нове изазове, тешке ситуације, али и нове могућности како за професоре тако и за студенте. На основу резултата истраживања и упитника, који је дат студентима припремне године на Универзитету за нафту и гас у Плоештију, овај рад анализира потешкоће са којима се студенти сусрећу током наставе румунског језика за посебне намене (најпре асинхроне наставе, а затим и наставе у реалном времену путем видео-конференције). У последњем делу рада се говори о употреби искуства асинхроне наставе током наредних семестара за унапређење синхроне и мешовите наставе за исту дисциплину и са сличним групама студената.

Кључне речи: румунски за посебне намене, онлајн настава, асинхрона настава, синхрона настава, тимски рад, индивидуално учење, организовање садржаја, упитник.

Questionnaire

About teaching language for specific purposes online during the lockdown

Please rank the following variants with numbers from 0 to 5, where 0 means “I completely disagree” and 5 means “I completely agree”.

1. What was the most difficult thing about the specialized texts you studied?
 - a) Specialized vocabulary
 - b) The general vocabulary of the text
 - c) Understanding whole sentences even when you knew the words.
 - d) The way texts were organized
 - e) Other (write what):

2. What did you miss the most in online classes as compared to face-to-face classes:
 - a) Teacher’s explanations about how to solve the tasks
 - b) Asking the teacher to help immediately when you encountered a difficulty.
 - c) Receiving feedback from the teacher immediately after finishing a task
 - d) Working with your colleagues
 - e) Other (write what):

3. Which were the advantages of working online in studying specific languages?
 - a) Having more time to solve the tasks
 - b) Flexible schedule
 - c) Unlimited access to dictionaries, Internet, other people’s help
 - d) Having individual feedback for the tasks from the teacher
 - e) Other (write what):

4. What helped you the most in understanding the texts?
 - a) Vocabulary information and exercises from the beginning of the papers
 - b) Diagrams and pictures given with the text
 - c) Video resource (films) available online
 - d) The follow up exercises given after reading the texts
 - e) Other (write what):

5. What sources of information did you use to solve the tasks?
 - a) Internet
 - b) Dictionaries

- c) Specialized books
 - d) The teacher (via WhatsApp messages, Facebook groups, phone calls)
 - e) Older colleagues from your country
6. What suggestions do you have for improving the seminars of Romanian for specific purposes if the online learning experience will be repeated next year?

Received: 13. 7. 2022.
Accepted: 28. 12. 2022.