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TEACHING IN THE DIGITAL AGE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract. The present paper evaluates the way the digital age has changed how we teach at higher educational institutions and how that has helped us to adapt quickly to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus is on the way digital literacy has been re-defined in the last few years deeply marked by the pandemic and the way on-line resources and digital environment have been used at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" to ensure the continuation of the educational process in the conditions of a complete lock-down and pandemic restrictions. On the basis of the feedback by both students and university teaching staff, the paper analyzes the creation of new digital skills necessary for teaching the "digital natives" of today. The theoretical framework within which this analysis is carried out is closely connected to the study of the cognitive processes responsible for learning a foreign language and acquiring skills that are part of the new digital literacy of the twenty-first century. The conclusions can serve as a basis for suggested changes in the curriculum of teaching at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology at Sofia University.

Keywords: digital literacy; digital skills of the twenty-first century; online teaching; foreign language teaching; COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

There is no way to exhaust the definitions that have been given to the unprecedented development within what has become known as the digital media today. One of the latest terms to be used is digital technology, which has substituted the term 'information and communication technology'. What is more, we have experienced a very rapid development within the field of media or digital literacy. Media literacy is most often associated with the development of competencies associated with the new technologies but it is also closely related to the ability of understanding how these technologies function in the new digital environment (Danov 2019). Especially important is to see how fostering digital literacy can

become the right way of developing the skills and competences that are seen as essential for everyone's functioning in the twenty-first century.

Media Literacy Today

In the last two years we have learned the hard way how vital digital literacy can be, both in fighting “infodemics” (the term has been used by WHO: “infodemics are an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. They can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency. Infodemics can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people” as the recent *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation – Getting the Facts Right* issued by Brussels on 10.6.2020 JOIN(2020) 8 has pointed out and in re-structuring higher education along the lines of online education entirely¹⁾. The *Communication* does acknowledge the great role of media literacy but as EAVI points out, “it does not go far enough, prioritising mainly defensive and reactive measures instead”. They state that it diminishes “the primary importance of each citizen’s responsibility and media literacy’s capacity to foster a resilient info-ecosystem”. In this sense it has become very important to educate students as “digital natives” and as responsible citizens that can be “both respectful of freedom of expression and capable of decreasing the impact and spread of disinformation”²⁾.

Having the necessary skills and competences to function in a world that has overnight turned into a “onlife” world, to use Paolo Celot’s term coined in the recent months (2021), has become one of the priorities of university education today. This emphasis on the importance of media literacy and the resulting competences and skills goes hand in hand with the ever-increasing number of political documents – international and national – requiring its inclusion not only at all levels of education, but also as a substantial part of the job descriptions, characterizing a huge number of professions. Despite all that, in Bulgaria, digital literacy was not at a level that could satisfy the needs of the educational sector especially in the face of the pandemic that engulfed the country in mid-March 2020.

Although the country has been a full member of the European Union since 01.01.2007, Bulgaria was still far from the average standards for media literacy development in the Union, ranking 26th (or 27th) among all 27 EU member-state countries. It was as late as 2018/2019 school year, that the Bulgarian Ministry of Education provided media literacy classes at certain schools in the country for the first time, without being able to cover the whole country. What is more, no comprehensive Strategy for the development of media literacy has been published yet, although some specific directions in this area can be found in the Strategy for the effective implementation of information and communication technologies in education and science of the Republic of Bulgaria (2014 – 2020), adopted in 2014.

In other words, any analysis of the Bulgarian media environment shows a growing need for increasing the level of media literacy in Bulgarian society. Statistics data show that more than 51% of the children in Bulgaria get access to the Internet, i.e. to media tools and content prior to the age of 7, i.e. before they start going to school, before they learn to read and write. A research conducted by the Bulgarian branch of Safe Internet shows a significant increase over the six-year period in the use of digital media by children – smartphones, tablets, etc. According to another research, jointly conducted in 2016 by UNICEF – Bulgaria and the State Agency for the Protection of the Child, 93% of Bulgarian children use the internet daily, 20% of children contact people known to them only through the Internet. The data provided, however, illustrating the widespread adoption of digital technologies and tools in Bulgarian society, especially among children and teenagers, do not indicate a tendency to develop critical thinking skills, to understand, analyze and evaluate media content, what in fact constitutes the essence of media literacy.

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Online Education at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology

Against such a background and on the basis of a long development of what has become known as computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and the subsequent questions raised at the beginning of the millennium whether network-based learning is CALL (Chapelle 2000), and the introduction of the idea of a “computer-enhanced language learning” (Chapelle 2001, 1 – 26), the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology has been trying to develop online education for quite some time. The first attempts started in the late 1990s to continue much vigorously in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, at the beginning of 2020 we were using the official online platform of the University, MOODLE, only as an auxiliary educational resource. Just a few members of the academic staff were fully aware of the effective ways in which new technologies can help language teaching, and of the fact that “Many pedagogies exist as a result of technology and many technologies exist as a result of pedagogies” (Stockwell 2007, 118).

What is more, there were almost no attempts to introduce widely the so-called “flipped classroom” whose basic idea is to make use of technology so that less ‘teaching’ is done in the classroom and there is more focus on group work and task-based learning. Although, it has been seen from the very beginning as very relevant to higher education where the ‘teaching stuff’ can be moved out of the lesson, with mini lectures or screen casts being recorded with concepts explained and then put online for students to watch at home and then critically discuss in class, we lacked the expertise to use this model of blended learning as a way of organizing learning and the learning content based on two different approaches to learning, namely, the transmission (behaviorist) approach to learning and the social constructivist/task-based approach and on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning. Thus, the students are asked to do alone the work which is based on the

lower order of thinking when, in general, they need less support from teachers, while in class, the students are applying their knowledge, analyzing, evaluating, etc. with a focus on the higher order of thinking (Keengwe 2015).

In view of all these deficiencies, education as a whole had to be transferred online overnight, and both the university and the faculty had to do a lot to ensure that all courses could be delivered online. There was not enough technical back-up, not enough staff competent to work within a new digitalized working environment, not enough support for the unforeseen consequences from the pandemic. However, due to the very adequate and quick reaction of all concerned the educational process continued without major interruptions right after the first lockdown was declared. Now, two years later, we can say that the MOODLE platform has become much more user-friendly incorporating the option for conducting virtual seminars using the Big Blue Button option which did not exist before the pandemic, and being fully integrated with the other electronic systems of the University such as the Students' Information System and introducing inclusive e-administrative services, which has made it possible for the University administration to continue functioning at full speed during the pandemic.

Students' and Staff's Attitudes Towards Online Education

However, even after two years of working entirely online, the attitudes of both students and academic staff remain quite divided. At the beginning of the new academic year in October, 2021, the survey that was done among 670 students at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology by the Students' Council showed that 55% of the students who answered preferred to return to the face-to-face mode of education, only 30% were in favor of online education and 15% preferred the hybrid form that combines face-to face with online education.

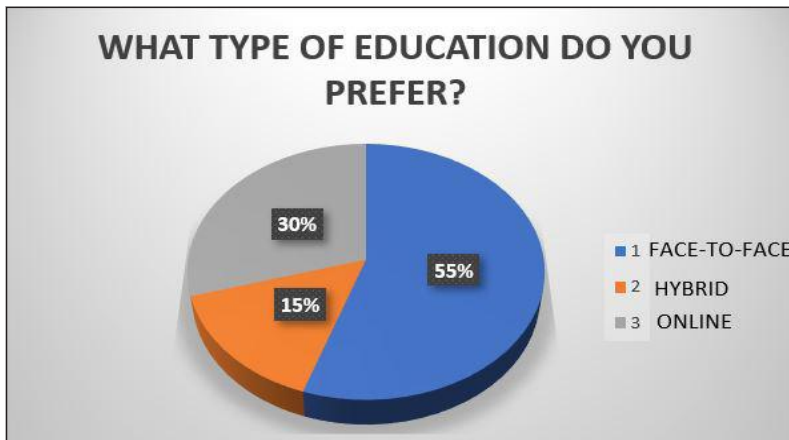


Figure 1. Type of preferred education

To the question “What do you think of introducing the “green certificate” in order to go back to face-to-face education?” 68% of the students have expressed disagreement, only 10% expressed their support and 22% said that they are not against it.

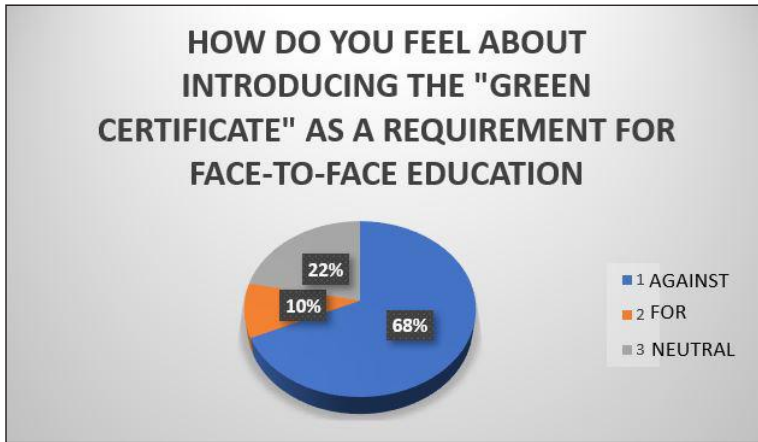


Figure 2. Attitudes towards the introduction of the “green certificate”

To the question “Are you vaccinated and, if not, do you intend to do it?” only 29% answered positively, while 47% answered negatively stating that they do not intend to do it, and 19% say that they are not vaccinated but they intend to do it and a very low percentage, 5%, answered that they are in the process of vaccination.

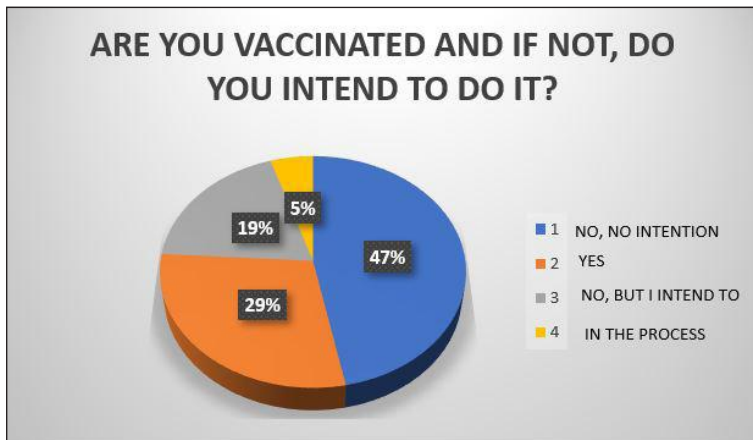


Figure 3. Vaccinated students and their attitudes to vaccination

Having in mind these results, it is possible to say that the online education that we have carried out quite successfully during the lockdown and the pandemic restrictions, has not turned the “digital natives” into ardent disciples of this form of education. In other words, it is possible to suggest that the unlimited use of new technologies that suddenly became possible, even mandatory, started exercising certain strain on both students and academic staff. The surveys carried out among academic staff also show that more than half of the people questioned have said that they prefer face-to-face education to online education. In the last months we have also faced a new challenge that has to be addressed, connected to the fact that more and more students and staff have asked for psychological support in the long months of staying home and not being able to lead a normal social life. That has made it necessary to set up a special Center for Psychological Consulting and Research at the Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia University giving an opportunity to everyone who feels in need of psychological support to receive such for free.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, we can say that despite the quick transition to an entirely online-based education at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology at Sofia University in the last two years, which was well backed-up by previous experience, we have faced some unexpected challenges such as the psychological consequences of the long stay of both students and academic staff isolated at their homes, consequences that we are still to deal with in the years to come.

NOTES

1. WHO, https://www.who.int/docs/defaultsource/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200305-sitrep-45-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=ed2ba78b_4, accessed on 24th Jan. 2022; Joint WHO Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on COVID-19.
2. EAVI Newsletter, <https://eavi.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/EAVI-Press-Release-23-June-2020-Media-Literacy-against-Covid-19-Disinformation.pdf>, accessed on 24th Jan. 2022.

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