

## Using Microsoft Teams for Teaching Romanian to Foreign Medical Students - A Comparative Skill-focused Analysis of Online vs. Onsite Progress in Learning

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### Abstract

*The foreign medical students from UMFST GE Palade of Târgu Mures study Romanian for the needs of communication and interaction, particularly during their clinical internships. They start from the basics this compulsory but non-core subject, whose allotted time of study is 2 years. Thus, the maximum efficiency of the teaching / learning process, through an impeccable organization of the methodology and course material, is essential in the traditional lecture room. This became even more important online, when the COVID-19 pandemic imposed an extremely fast translation of the real-life education into the virtual environment. During this accelerated transformation, I did not unnecessarily complicate the teaching and assessment methods, but I relied on continuity, in order to maintain this beginners course in a familiar area as much as possible. The E-Learning platform provided by the university was Microsoft Teams. As evaluation in each semester employed both formative and summative assessment, I performed a comparative analysis of the learning progress, distributed on receptive and productive language skills. The relatively small group of students (23) allowed an in-depth analysis which showed how online learning favored the strengthening of some language skills and disadvantaged others, even in conditions of limitations such as the shock generated by the fast transfer to virtual courses, the inherent technical problems or the questionable correctness of asynchronous assessment in an institutional framework.*

**Keywords:** Romanian course, Language skills, Learning progress, Online, Onsite

### 1. Introduction

Mass access to Web 2.0 tools has started a revolution in the field of teaching / learning foreign languages. The possibilities to offer to those interested self-paced methods and alternative programs for acquiring language skills are very intensely explored and exploited. Thus, there are a multitude of programs that offer English lessons, at any level, for any type of learner, with or without an instructor and countless courses and exercises for the development of productive and receptive language skills. Nowadays, mobile applications are also advancing more and more in this territory of language learning.

If English is already a must, for a language too little known, such as Romanian, online training programs, although they exist, require a well-justified learning motivation, being successful especially those that offer guided-instruction. The foreign medical students from UMFST GE Palade of Târgu Mures study Romanian for the needs of communication and interaction, particularly during their clinical internships. They start from the basics this mandatory but non-core subject, whose allotted time of study is 2 years. In this short interval of time they should acquire limited working proficiency. This means that, in only 120 course hours, they should reach the A2 language level (elementary level), for which at least 180-200 guided hours are actually needed.

The motivation to learn the Romanian language is not so strong for these students, especially for those who do not know a Latin language. Thus, the maximum efficiency of the teaching / learning process, through an impeccable organization of the methodology and course material, is essential in the traditional lecture room. This became even more important online, when the

COVID-19 pandemic imposed an extremely fast translation of real-life education into the virtual environment. From this point of view, the global pandemic has become an opportunity for those concerned to study online and blended learning and for those skeptical, to discover the benefits of web-enhanced education.

### **1.1 Related literature**

Most of the recent studies which compared virtual education with real-life education recommend combining them. Nicky Hockly referred to a meta-study published in 2010 by Means, Yoyama, Murphy, Bakia, and Jones who reviewed over 1,000 studies into online versus face-to-face learning conducted between 1996 and 2008, which found that "a blended approach was most effective in terms of improved learning outcomes" (Hockly 2015).

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for language learning are expanding all over the world via universities from the United States, Spain, the United Kingdom etc. In 2016, two researchers from University of Virginia and Peking University China conducted an extensive study in order to compare the achievements and learning experiences of onsite and online students participating in a Massively Open Online Course (MOOC) in China, within an annual summer school, "New Media and Learning," hosted by Peking University, one of the top universities in China. They found no statistically significant difference in the online and onsite students' ratings (Chen and Jia, 2016).

In the field of languages, many enthusiasts develop online teaching tools, so attractive for the young generation, trying to overcome the resistance of those who prefer the classical school, because, in general, in Romanian educational institutions, the classroom represents the only environment for learning and practice. They consider that asynchronous Web 2.0 tools offer such students a venue for additional interesting and challenging activities, ensuring student-centeredness and autonomy but also interaction with peers and instructors and provide opportunities to practice reading, writing, speaking and listening outside the classroom walls at their own pace, in the safety of the virtual environment (Pop, 2010). Other researchers who appreciate the advantages and the potential of web-based courses point out that certain student characteristics play an important role in their success online, such as self-regulation, discipline, and consistency (Montiel-Chamorro, 2018).

Presently, many schools and universities produce and offer online language courses. These programs usually focus on all four classical language skills (speaking, reading, listening and writing), as well as on grammar and vocabulary. In such coursebooks, usually there are units on different themes with an integrated skills approach, and the students practice online reading, listening and writing, most of the time in asynchronous mode. As many researchers have observed, speaking seems to be the most disadvantaged skill online, requiring onsite face-to-face interactions, or synchronous online activities, for example via a videoconferencing platform (Hockly, 2015) or regular, recorded speaking assignments (Isenberg, 2010). Other researchers consider that a hybrid approach would be the most effective for oral proficiency, including online text-based chats (Payne and Whitney, 2002). Web-based teaching can include a great variety of grammar and vocabulary tests, depending on the instructors' available time, creativity and patience, unless they possess a collection of exercises provided by a publisher. To this extent, learners can make significant progress in grammar and vocabulary (Isenberg, 2010).

It is impossible to equate the learning experience of different courses delivered by different teachers via different formats and tasks, but making sure that students can easily move back and forth between onsite and online learning experiences should be made possible and should constitute a fundamental responsibility for a well-articulated language curriculum with online options (Blake, 2015). This is clearer than ever now, in 2020, when teaching and research personnel all over the world are trying to create the most efficient context for distance education and multimodal learning environments.

### 1.2 Study goals

In order to design an efficient blended learning program for the Romanian language course included in the curriculum of the medical faculty, an in-depth study to analyze the student's response to the educational offer in the virtual and real environment can help in finding a combination as functional as possible for the acquisition of the basic language skills in the short time available.

In this paper, I will present an exploratory study regarding the learning progress of a group of students in the virtual and real-life environment. The answers I sought in this study focus on both the student and the subject taught, respectively on the components of the language studied (Romanian). I proposed here, in addition to the classical skills: speaking, writing, listening and writing, two more lines of development, grammar and vocabulary. The great majority of summative language tests in educational institutions focus on the last two, because they are essential for language reception and production, as pointed out by a famous British linguist, David Wilkins: "While without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed".

### 2. Methods

The E-Learning platform provided by the university, for the second semester online courses during the Covid-19 pandemic, was Microsoft Teams. In the accelerated transformation of the teaching/learning paradigm, I did not unnecessarily complicate the teaching and assessment methods, but I relied on continuity, in order to maintain this beginners course in a familiar area as much as possible.

The course material from both semesters had, basically, the same structure: thematic units built on a specific vocabulary and a new grammatical concept. The classroom activities focused on the balanced development of the linguistic skills and included lectures, explanations, exercises, individual and group activities, presentations, class discussions, role-play, in-class written tasks, and additionally, homework. At the end of the semester, the continuous assessment was completed by a summative evaluation of grammatical and lexical acquisitions.

In the second semester, the didactic activity being 100% online, I adapted the Romanian course to the virtual communication mode, and to the teaching and evaluation possibilities offered by the Microsoft Teams platform. The course material was uploaded in advance, so that the students knew, as in the first semester, which unit would follow. I also exposed, from the beginning, the pattern of the online courses and my expectations for a good final mark, posted on the platform and verbally.

The development of language skills in the web-based context proved to be a challenge from the beginning. Reading online requires the involvement of more students in order to make sure that everybody follows the text, or did the tasks based on a text. Listening exercises were sometimes impaired by technical issues, however, students' feedback showed, most of the time, that they reacted synchronously to what they heard/saw (teacher, recordings, videos), which does not happen so often in the classroom. Writing was assessed during the course in the form of exercises (rephrase, complete, correct the sentence, put the words in the correct order to make a sentence) or more complex asynchronous assignments (letters, stories, descriptions etc.), placed in the respective folder of the learning platform. Speaking, which occurs naturally in the physical environment, was always prefaced online by the question "Teacher, can I say...?". But this question almost disappeared later after Microsoft Teams introduced the raise hand feature. Anyway, students' demand for synchronous speaking activities, interactions with instructor and peers, could not be covered entirely due to the time limits. The most successful speaking activities were presentations, role-play, describing a picture, class discussions.

Subsequent to the teaching session, students' acquisition was tested and they were very pleased to be able to see their scores almost instantaneously. They were also assigned homework tasks, to be uploaded on the platform within a certain time limit.

The formative assessment, both onsite and online, was based in part on direct communication between student and teacher, i.e. the interaction between a native speaker and a beginner in the study of language, in different conversational scenarios. This type of communication is exactly the purpose of the Romanian language course. The qualitative evaluation resulting from this is influenced by the subjectivity of the teacher, but corrected as the teacher's experience is greater. I agree with the view that language proficiency is not just about "knowing words, phrases, and verb conjugations, but being able to put those together to form coherent meaning and to use that meaning appropriately to engage in real or realistic communication with other speakers of the language" (Lord, 2015).

The online summative assessment consisted of a quiz of 50 questions that covered all the chapters studied, divided into equal shares on grammar and vocabulary.

### **2.1 Participants**

The studied group consisted of 23 foreign students, in their first year at the Faculty of Medicine in English within GE Palade University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science, and Technology of Târgu Mureş, in the academic year 2019-2020. They come from different parts of the world, from Italy, Germany, Spain, UK, Israel, Canada, and so on.

In order to follow and present in more detail the students' learning progress, I differentiated 3 performance groups, depending on the grades obtained in the first semester, on a scale from 1 to 10: group A, consisting of 8 students with grades between 9-10, group B, consisting of 7 students with grades between 7-8.99, and group C - 8 students with grades between 4 and 6.99.

### **2.2 Procedure**

In the context of such a special object of study, I was interested in discovering which learning activities were more effective online and which were more successful in the classroom, in both contexts being closely monitored by the teacher. As evaluation in each semester employed both formative and summative assessment, I conducted a comparative analysis of the learning progress, distributed on receptive and productive language skills. If many times, speaking, reading, writing and listening are considered macro-skills, and grammar and vocabulary - micro-skills, in the approach herein the first four will be considered formative directions of linguistic acquisition and assessment, and grammar and vocabulary will be considered summative directions of linguistic development and assessment.

For a clearer picture of the contribution of the online course to the development of the Romanian language skills, I had to take into account the natural learning progress that occurs during an academic year. It was necessary to eliminate from the start the standard increase of the scores obtained by the students in the second semester due to the acceleration of linguistic progress, as the foundation on which skills are built becomes more and more solid. Thus, I established some approximate corrective values necessary to prevent erroneous interpretations. These values are: 0.3p (on average), for students who learn Romanian very quickly, especially due to the fact that their mother tongue is a Latin language and they get good results from the beginning, with a slight increase in the second semester (group A); 0.5p for students with average results in the first semester (between 7-8.99), who usually have a more significant evolution in the second (group B); 0.7p for group C, composed of students who have grades between 4-6.99 in the first semester, and later they correct their marks, on average, to the extent mentioned above. Adding these values to the grades obtained in the first semester by the groups A, B and C, I obtained what I called predictive values for the second semester onsite. Practically, I did not compare the grades from the two semesters, but the predictive values for the second semester onsite with the results obtained by the students in the second semester of online language learning.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Data

Table 1. Group A: Formative Assessment- onsite/online (max. score=10)

Group A	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Mean
Sem I onsite	9.53	9.26	9.42	9.21	9.35
<i>Sem II-onsite prediction</i>	9.83	9.56	9.72	9.51	Sem I +0.3p= 9.65
Sem II online	9.87	9.63	9.75	9.83	9.77

Table 2. Group A: Summative Assessment – onsite/online (max. score 50+50=100)

Group A	Grammar	Vocabulary	Total
Sem I onsite	41.45	46.10	87.55
<i>Sem II-onsite prediction</i>	42.95	47.95	Sem I+3p=90.55
Sem II online	45.50	47.20	92.7

Table 3. Group B: Formative Assessment- onsite/online (max. score=10)

Group B	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Mean
Sem I onsite	8.45	8.02	7.4	7.34	7.77
<i>Sem II-onsite prediction</i>	8.85	8.52	7.90	7.84	Sem I +0.5p=8.27
Sem II online	8.72	8.45	7.55	8.20	8.23

Table 4. Group B: Summative Assessment – onsite/online (max. score 50+50=100)

Group B	Grammar	Vocabulary	Total
Sem I onsite	32.50	41.50	74
<i>Sem II-onsite prediction</i>	35	44	Sem I +5p=79
Sem II online	37.45	43.75	82.20

Table 5. Group C: Formative Assessment- onsite/online (max. score=10)

Group C	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Mean
Sem I onsite	6.25	6.12	5.70	5.56	5.90
<i>Sem II-onsite prediction</i>	6.95	6.82	6.40	6.26	Sem I +0.7p=6.60

<i>prediction</i>					
Sem II online	7.15	6.75	6.25	6.50	6.77

Table 6. Group C: Summative Assessment – onsite/online (max. score 50+50=100)

Group C	Grammar	Vocabulary	Total
Sem I onsite	20,80	33.50	54.30
<i>Sem II onsite (prediction)</i>	23.80	37.50	Sem I+7p=61.30
Sem II online	26.15	36.73	62.88

### 3.2 Discussion and limitations

First of all, the evolution of the students from group A is remarkable, they were extremely cooperative during the synchronous sessions and preoccupied to perform well in the evaluations. Groups B and C had mixed results, which led to moderate increases compared to the predicted average scores. In several specific cases, students in these groups became more active online, especially the timid, who in the classroom were somewhat "covered" by more vocal colleagues. Of the students who did not have such a solid foundation, a few were not able to recover online, but most struggled and benefited greatly from the help of colleagues, overt and / or hidden.

The comparison between the formative and summative evaluations, onsite and online, shows a more marked difference, when the verifications are made in the stricter conditions of the real-life classroom. Overall, the scores for listening are close in the two teaching environments, reading is slightly advantaged online, with a significant increase for group C. For writing, the results in the second semester-online exceeded expectations. Somewhat naturally, the scores for grammar and vocabulary also rose, certainly due to the increase in the frequency of these tests, which was possible online. Speaking was slightly disadvantaged, being even more difficult to assess, in the short time allotted to a student.

With regard to limitations, the most important was time: an online session of 100 minutes for 23 learners means a great effort on the part of the teacher, who should monitor closely everyone's work, and a frustrating short speaking time for them. Another problem was the parallel communication between the students, that called into question even the tasks during the course, with a solving time of a few minutes. For the tasks that had a resolution time of a few days, it was impossible to determine to what extent they relied on the help of colleagues and friends (Romanian or not) or, for example, on Google-translate, obvious help in some cases.

### Conclusion

For a course that aims a lot in a very short time, a blended learning formula could provide an extra space for the development of the Romanian language skills. In the first stage, when learners are absolute beginners, interaction with an instructor and peers in a traditional classroom is essential. The cultural and linguistic communication between teacher and students is very intense in this period when they have one thousand questions about real-life situations they faced after arriving in Romania, about the usual addressing formulas and essential structures of the language. The fact that this knowledge base and mutual trust between the instructor and the students had already been created in the first semester of the 2019-2020 academic year, helped enormously in the stage in which the course was completely transferred online.

With few exceptions, the development of language skills has made significant progress, especially due to synchronous activities, where the appetite for participation was very high, but unfortunately limited in time. The introduction of more synchronous speaking activities would certainly lead to a higher learning efficiency. And the group work was much more difficult online. On the other hand, listening and reading activities with immediate feedback were very productive. Grammar and vocabulary quizzes have aroused a lot of interest, being a quick way of (self) evaluation and reinforcement of knowledge. Asynchronous tasks, such as more complex writing assignments, although better graded, raised some correctness issues because students tended to try to get good grades with minimal effort.

All in all, Web-based learning contexts can offer virtually unlimited opportunities for teachers and students in the field of language education, and can greatly contribute to the success of such an intensive course. And not only can, but they should, because today's students are part of the generation that loves to use the virtual tools in order to achieve their real life goals.

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