TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ICT IN POST-PANDEMIC FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN SERBIA

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Abstract:

Having reshaped the landscape of (foreign language) education, it is argued that the COVID-19 pandemic did introduce certain modifications that were seen as potentially positive in the long run. Therefore, acquired knowledge about ICT and its application in teaching as well as learning, can be considered a meaningful asset for the present and future of education. On this occasion, the focus of the paper is set on foreign language teachers working at the tertiary level and their perceptions of ICT as a beneficial instrument in the post-pandemic context in Serbia. To be more precise, the opinions of 83 teachers have been collected through an anonymous questionnaire, containing twelve multiple questions considering their experience with ICT before, during, and after the pandemic. Based on the quantitative data gathered through the responses, a significant number of them have used and thus still frequently use digital tools in their classes, whilst believing that digital skills and the awareness of its usage during the pandemic are of great importance. The qualitative method component has been introduced by leaving the opportunity for the respondents to add their own answers to every posed question. It was noted that some of the examinees emphasized that their choice to make ICT an integral part of their classes (online or in person) is not related to the period of the pandemic, but a conscious decision to learn and develop themselves independently of the external factors, that is, the pandemic, the institution where they work or any others.

Keywords:

Foreign Language Teaching, ICT, Teacher's role, Tertiary Level.

INTRODUCTION

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic did reshape the (formal) educational system worldwide [1] [2] [3] [4], new perspectives on teaching in general, and foreign language teaching in particular that were acquired accordingly, cannot be disregarded. For that reason, in light of the post-pandemic period, it is only natural to wonder If and how the education landscape will be altered [1]. Therefore, teaching foreign languages at the university level in Serbia was also expected to inevitably go through the same adjustments which meant that, consequently, traditional teaching methods needed to be put aside for the epidemiological situation dictated so.

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Although nowadays it seems that ICT (Information and Communication Technology[1]) is almost a necessary asset in (foreign language) teaching [4], it is argued whether it has the supposed role and impacts on learning due to the lack of strong empirical evidence [1] [5]. On the other hand, it is not the same to have a choice to use digital tools to enhance performance in the classroom and to be forced to (learn how to) use them [3] [6]. Moreover, it is necessary to use them purposely and intentionally, as an integral part of the teaching method applied [5] [7].

2. THE ICT IN (FOREIGN LANGUAGE) TEACHING IN THE PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC ERA

According to [8], "the digital revolution that is sweeping the world has begun to infiltrate the realm of education", whilst [7] claims that ICT has great potential and thus will continue to transform the world in ways that were not thought possible. However, [3] reminds us that, even though ICT in foreign language teaching is a concept that has been present and updated over the years, it has never happened before that the whole educational system must switch to an online environment at once, which led to its increased presence and pointed out crucial importance [2]. With that in mind, it must also be said that the migration from in-person classes to a fully online environment at the time wasn't an easy transition for the teachers or the students.

The possible issues for both (online) classroom participants, meaning teachers and students, was the lack of pre-preparation [1] [2] [6] and, on some occasions, not sufficient level of digital literacy [9] and with it, less motivation and, thus, willingness to motivate students, considering, of course, the (lack of) technical equipment available to them [1] [2]. These shortcomings can reflect in the moment of the necessary change, considering the rather specific circumstances, and because of it, the teachers didn't receive any previous training [8] [10]. But it is also important to take into account the absence of awareness about digital tools that can have an instructional role in the classroom, both online and in-person [11]. That itself implies, on one hand, the necessity of proper teacher training, not only in the means of how to use certain tools, but also to encourage the teachers to focus on how ICT can influence teaching and, thus, learning [7]. Likewise, it should be clear whether these tools are considered a means of necessity or assistance in teaching, and it shouldn't confuse one with the other [10].

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1   https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/glossary/information-and-communication-technologies-ict

In general terms, but especially during the pandemic, the teachers' role in the application of ICT, therefore, is of great importance, having in mind that, based on [12], it is the university who should motivate and engage the students to learn, and one of the ways to do it is exactly by using ICT. Thus, the overall doubt is not whether to use, but why and how to use it, as [7] specifies. Furthermore, in order to improve the quality of teaching, digital skills are an important prerequisite [13], primarily referring to the possibilities that using a certain digital tool has and the objective that it brings along [2] [5], even the possibility to combine the aspects from traditional and modern teaching approach, i.e., the "synchronous and asynchronous" [9]. Therefore, teachers' own attitudes, perceptions, and opinions are correlated with the degree to which the digital tools will be applied in the classroom [14].

In the digital era, the idea of a teacher as a leader and a central figure in the (online) classroom has shifted its direction to the student, while the teacher becomes the moderator, facilitator, and instructor [13]. As a result, the teacher assumes the responsibility of meeting the students' requirements [6] so as to favor language learning. Based on quite the amount of conducted empirical research so far in Serbia, [2] [3] [4] [6] [9] [11] [13] [14], students do mostly welcome the usage of ICT before and during the pandemic at different university contexts, confirming the previous idea of teachers having the different role than before, i.e. to recognize the students' needs. The question left to answer is whether the teachers still continuously use ICT and what are their perceptions accordingly.

3. RESEARCH

Since the pandemic's inception, as aforementioned, the focus of academic research in the area of (foreign language) education was mainly on correctly incorporating ICT into teaching and making it comprehensible and viable for all learners. With the pandemic coming to an end in Serbia[2], and the academic year 2022-2023 being the first organized without the legitimate need to use digital tools in the face-to-face classroom context, this paper aims to draw attention to the post-pandemic context.

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2   The COVID-19 outbreak is still ongoing in Serbia on May 13, 2023., but the situation is stable and thus there is no need for online teaching at universities. The expressions "post-pandemic context" or "after the pandemic" are used in the sense that teaching is primarily done in person. https://covid19.rs/homepage-english/

With that in mind, the objective of presenting the findings based on the teachers' answers relies on the assumption that university foreign language teachers still do use digital tools in their classes in Serbia, whilst understanding that there is still no concrete (published) research done to confirm so.

The investigation was, thus, thought with the intention to investigate teachers' choices regarding the programs they used and still use to communicate with their students and to give lessons with or without additional digital tools after the pandemic. Though ICT is, for some foreign language teachers, as previously mentioned, a well-known and useful instrument that they employ according to their (and students') needs, it is not always the case, as the investigation will show. Having in mind that, during the pandemic, however, using ICTs wasn't optional, and, therefore, all teaching practices had to migrate online. The result was an increased resort to ICT while the initial pandemic period lasted, with not that much data on how the teachers would address its importance afterward. With that in mind, the inquiry contained short and concise questions that can offer an insight into the current situation.

3.1. METHODOLOGY

The research itself has been conducted through an anonymous questionnaire distributed online. Pre-pandemic and post-pandemic foreign language teachers' routines for giving (online) lessons, that is, on ICT they were and still are using, were investigated through twelve multiple questions. The results were gathered based on the quantitative analysis performed on their answers to twelve multiple-choice questions. In addition, the qualitative component of the research was carried out through the interpretation of the responses added by the respondents on occasions when they wanted to emphasize a certain answer or include an option or an idea that wasn't foreseen by the questionnaire.

3.2. RESPONDENTS

University foreign language teachers were chosen to contribute to this investigation, having in mind that they are the ones who promote the usage of ICT and, accordingly, decide whether certain tools will be used and how. The hypothesis, as aforementioned, revolves around the supposition that most respondents employ the same tools as they did before the pandemic, i.e., the ones that were already considered familiar and demonstrated good results, with the additional theory that some may have incorporated the tools they learned how to do use during the pandemic.

Between them, three groups were identified: teachers who teach at a faculty of philological orientation (main foreign language course) that present more than half of the examinees (50. 8% = 43), teachers who teach at a faculty of philological orientation (elective foreign language course) with as many as 6% (N=5) and the ones who teach a foreign language at faculties of non-philological orientation (39.7% = 31).

When it comes to foreign languages that the respondents teach, English teachers hold the majority with 41%, whilst the Spanish language is taught by 19% of the teachers. German and French teachers follow, with 12% and 10%, and then there are Italian (4.8%=4) and Russian (2.4=2) teachers. Those being the six foreign languages most taught in Serbian formal education, it seemed appropriate to emphasize the fact that those teachers were the pre-thought examinees. The results can also be seen in Table 1.

Naturally, not all the respondents possess the same professional teaching experience. Whilst the highest percentage (40.1%=34) states to have worked between 10 and 20 years in the field of education, almost one quarter (24.1%=20) has more than 20 years of experience. A little over one-fifth of them (21.7%=18) has five to ten years of experience. The lowest number (13.3%=11) presented between one and five years of experience.

Table 1 - Overview of the Foreign language taught.

Foreign language	Number	Percentage
English	34	41%
Spanish	19	22.9%
German	12	14.5%
French	10	12%
Italian	4	4.8%
Russian	2	2.4%

3.3. FINDINGS

When it comes to teachers' perceptions of ICT usage, the initial interest revolves around the means of communication between the students and the teachers. Moodle platform and email were the primary two listed out of the five offered. Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams were the next two to follow, whilst Viber groups were the least used. The respondents added other programs that they used, mostly Zoom (13 of them), but also Google Meet (2), Webex platform (2), or Skype. It is presumed those were used to give lectures, not just for communication. Moreover, the examinees also introduced Facebook itself and Facebook groups or WhatsApp groups, Telegram, and Trello, but those are all named one time. The following question tries to analyze how communication is handled in the present. Table 2 is showing the comparison of platforms/programs used before and after the pandemic, and it is noticeable that every other means of communication was used less in the post-pandemic period except for the email correspondence, which indicates to be around 5% more used. Besides that, 15 examinees have added the option in person, that is, in class. Other channels were pointed out as well, Zoom platform (3), Facebook groups (3), WhatsApp (2), and social media, Google Classroom, and Telegram were mentioned one time.

Exclusively for the purpose of giving online classes, the Zoom platform was the respondents' primary choice with 43 of them (51.8%) confirming so. Two of them noted that they used Zoom with Google Meet or Microsoft Teams, that were also two other most-voted platforms: Google Classroom with 21.7% (18) and Microsoft Teams with 14.5% (12). Big Blue Button (3) and Webex platform (2) were also pointed out in the additional answers, as well as Moodle (2) and Skype (1).

When asked to affirm whether they work online, it turns out that 63.9%, i.e., 53 out of 83 teachers nowadays give lessons in the classroom, 22.9% (19) give online lessons but not at the university, and 6% (5) emphasize to have done it before the pandemic also. What remains are 9.6% (8) that confirm the university allows online lessons or some number of classes online, and the 6% (5) who teach fully online. Teachers also remark to giving online lessons only in case of need, an illness, or to organize tutoring hours for Master and Ph.D. students, whilst one teacher pointed out that the classes are online, but the materials are uploaded to Moodle and the other mentioned that the classes too are online, with the emphasis that material and tests are online so that students spend more time working online than in person.

Table 2 - The comparison of the platforms/programs used before and after the pandemic.

Platform / Program	Before	After
Moodle platform	61.4%	54.2%
Google Classroom	28.9%	18.1%
Microsoft Teams	19.3%	13.3%
Email	67.5%	72.3%
Viber group	4.8%	3.6%

Table 3 - TThe digital tools used in online classes.

Digital tool	Number	Percentage
PowerPoint	73	88%
Google Docs	49	59%
Quizlet	28	33.7%
Kahoot	22	26.5%
Mentimeter	19	22.9%
WordWall.net	15	18.1%
Quizziz	11	13.3%
LearningApps.org	11	13.3%
JamBoard	2	2.4%

Concerning the other digital tools used for educational purposes, the respondents have shown great awareness of the websites and programs offered, as well as added quite more themselves. The results of an open multiple-choice question can be seen in Table 3. Most of the teachers do use PowerPoint and Google Docs, but JamBoard not as much, which is a board tool in Google Meet they did mention using. When it comes to gamification tools, one-third use Quizlet and Kahoot, while Quizziz is slightly less used. WordWall.net and LearingApps.org, the two websites where it is possible to create personalized exercises were marked as used respectively by 15 and 11 teachers. Mentimeter, a tool mostly used to give anonymous opinions or to make a word cloud to brainstorm an idea, was remarked by 19 teachers. Besides the programs and websites listed in the Table below, the respondents also added Miro (3), YouTube (2), Genial.ly (2), Padlet, Typeform, Zumpad, all options that Moodle has, Brainscape, Map.kits.blog, Pocker wheel, Wortwolken, Puzzlemaker, Stadtlandfluss, Story dice (story cubes digital), Bitpaper, Chat GPT, Flinga, Conceptboard[3]. Three teachers state to not have used any of the listed, nor have they added some that they do use. After verifying, it is found very peculiar that the three teachers have 5-10, 10-20, and over 20 years of experience and they teach different foreign languages at different types of institutions.

When asked whether they employed the aforementioned websites and programs before the pandemic, the majority state to have done it, but not as much (57.8=48), whilst the third (28.9%=24) claim to have used them frequently. The last option given was chosen by 5% (6) of teachers, noting that digital tools were not used at all, as though they are traditionalists. One teacher highlighted that during the pandemic, after attending a couple of seminars and receiving the right training, it was easier to start using more innovative tools, not just PowerPoint and some interactive websites. The other admitted to having started working at the university only during the pandemic, while another claimed to have used short films mostly. There are a couple of other additional answers, where one remarked on the traditional way of teaching, but the other two draw attention to the high frequency of implementing digital tools in their classes regularly, or in the same manner as before the pandemic, i.e., before 2020.

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3   All the names of the programs/websites used were listed in the order received because they were all mentioned one time.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, 61.4% (51) of foreign language teachers were familiar with some of the digital tools, whilst 25.3% (21) were familiar with them and have used them before, leaving 8.4% (7) who were also familiar with the tools but haven't used them and only 2.4% (2) who just started using them during the pandemic. One additional answer placed an emphasis on the individual pursuit to discover and employ digital tools in one's classroom.

Post-pandemic period poses an important question: whether the knowledge acquired through learning and adjusting to online classes was found useful and employable for the period after the teachers went back to the classrooms. On this occasion, 66.3% (55) of teachers state that it was very useful, even though 25.3% (21) claim to be relieved by not having to use them all the time. Moreover, 3.6% (3) believe that their way of teaching was better, and 2.4% (2) are not convinced that the acquired knowledge was useful for them. One of the additional responses points out again that the decision and willingness to use digital tools are not related to the pandemic, whilst the other one is, after confirming that every type of newly attained knowledge can have an impact on a person, but still wondering will it be used and how.

The final question remains to show if the teachers still do use digital tools in their classes, no matter if online or in person. The same number of teachers (31.3%=26) stated that they can't imagine their classes without them, but also that they use only the ones they have already used before the pandemic, whilst 20.5% (17) use them only if necessary. Between the additional answers mostly one main idea is shown: teachers do use digital tools, the ones they are familiar with, but also include, based on the type of class or unit that they teach, newly discovered ones.

3.4. DISCUSSION

Having presented the findings of the online questionnaire, it is shown that, as the hypothesis suggested, foreign language university teachers do still, in fact, use the digital tools they had employed before the pandemic, with a smaller number of those who have started using them more during and afterward. The traditional way of teaching is still present among the respondents, with some realizing that the fact they don't have to use ICT in their classroom is a relief. On the other hand, some stated to have been single-handedly introducing digital tools into their teaching, independently of their modality of teaching, and institutions' requirements.

Nevertheless, the sample acquired was found heterogeneous in terms of years of experience and also in languages taught. English teachers do present the majority, but it is believed that they are the most numerous in general, and at the tertiary level in particular. On the contrary, Russian and Italian teachers were, on this occasion, truly seen as a minority. Considering teaching experience, the lowest number presented the teachers with 5 to 10 years, while most teachers possess between 10 and 20 years.

When it comes to means of communication with students, the teachers have presented unanimity in decreasing the usage of channels other than email correspondence after the pandemic, even though all are still actively used. It was also shown that they possess diverse experiences in employing ICT in their classes, as a wide variety of different websites and tools was presented.

To narrow down, the number of teachers who presented only traditionalist views on foreign language teaching is less or equal to 5%.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper aims to present the university foreign language teachers' perceptions whilst using ICT in the post-pandemic period. It is thought that the COVID-19 pandemic could have left certain habits relating to the usage of digital tools that were merely mandatory while it lasted. The objective is to ensure how and do the teachers include them in their curriculums when there is no obligation to do so.

Even though for some of the enquired teachers pandemic ending was a relief, not only regarding the health issues but also the possibility of choosing whether or not they will use ICT in their classes, for one-third of them is almost impossible to imagine their lectures without it. Furthermore, it is encouraging that teachers themselves felt the need to add their perspectives and point out that they use the digital tools the same as before the pandemic, or irrelevantly to the pandemic itself, wanting to learn and develop their skills and classes. Showing awareness of digital tools that were presented in the questions, but also from their own experience is of great importance for the future of (foreign language) teaching, meaning that it could be said and concluded that the pandemic partially brought something positive to the Serbian high education landscape.

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