

## **TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH IN A PANDEMIC-RIDDEN WORLD: A LOOK AT THE ACADEMIA**

**Oana Alexandra ALEXA**

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Faculty of Economics and Business  
Administration  
Iași, Romania  
*oana.alex@uaic.ro*

**Abstract:** *E-learning has been around for quite some time, but it has never been as important or as wide-spread as it is these days. After the initial switch to online education in March 2020, the changes to both teaching and learning are about to become more permanent than expected. This paper aims to discuss the implications for the academic world of the new online reality in light of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, focusing on how it affects communication in general and the teaching of Business English in particular. It is based on my personal experience at the oldest university in Romania and will highlight my thoughts on what the near future might look like in terms of the online education process.*

**Keywords:** *Online teaching, Business English, COVID crisis, academia.*

***This article was presented at 12th edition of the Annual International Conference Globalization and Higher Education in Economics and Business Administration (GEBA 2020), held at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Iasi, Romania from the 22nd to 23rd of October 2020***

### **INTRODUCTION**

Teaching ESP (English for Special Purposes) has always been more focused on learner needs. Up until very recently, for our Business English students those needs were centred around face-to-face business communication. But the year 2020 will probably be remembered as a somewhat online revolution. Now that the initial shock of the global pandemic has subsided, people have started to realise that most of the changes that we were forced to adopt in record time may actually become permanent and our new reality. In the academia, the switch to online teaching, learning and assessment had been a long time coming, but it was marked, nevertheless, by a steep learning curve. The hope had always been for things to return to normal come fall, but it is now obvious that the new academic year will start somewhat differently than in the past. So, where does that leave professors and students and what is the future of Business English teaching?

Unsurprisingly, the challenges following the switch to emergency online teaching are being shared by university professors all over the world. As part of their #StayHome programme, the British Council has organised a series of Higher Education dialogues which enables education specialists and academia from around the world to connect and share their own experience with the new teaching during a pandemic reality. The results of a three-question poll they devised for the *How can universities support their academic staff?* webinar, which took place on June 24th, accurately reflect the situation at our university as well. For the first question in the poll, about the biggest challenge faced since

the start of the pandemic, the results were, in the order of importance: having to work longer hours, utilising technology effectively, not feeling so connected to students, dealing with the challenges of working from home, insufficient support from my institution and feeling isolated from my colleagues. However, the results for the second question, about whether people wanted to go back to how things were a year ago, seem to contradict the first. The results were, in order of importance: 'I want to use some of the ways we are working now combined with how we worked in the past,' 'Yes, it was a much better way' and 'No, I like how things are now.' To this end, the third question was about the area in which staff would like more support from their institution. The results were the following (in order of importance): much clearer policy and expectation regarding student engagement, more structured interaction with colleagues to be able to share best practice and insure knowledge transfer, better technology, better equipment and more accessible counselling (Etherton, 2020)

Clearly, both distance learning and e-learning are not new concepts, but the key part is that they have never been used on such a large scale before. Even distance learning students at our Faculty would attend a set of face-to-face classes a couple of times per semester, followed by an in-person exam. So, while both teachers and students are familiar enough with using the Internet for communicating, teaching and learning, a full online experience has never been attempted. Clearly, the main advantage of distance learning is flexibility, since it does not require teachers and students to be at the same place at the same time and it allows the latter more freedom on what and how to learn. This flexibility leads, in turn, to lower costs, since online courses are typically less expensive and there are also significant savings with accommodation and travel. But the main question remains: is distance learning as effective as its face-to-face counterpart?

Taking all this into account, and since going back to normal for the fall 2020 semester is probably unrealistic at this point, some sort of blended learning situation is likely to be implemented. The Romanian Ministry of Education (in line with what is happening in other countries) is currently considering three scenarios: the first one would be reverting back to pre-pandemic, face-to-face courses, the second is the complete opposite and involves a full online experience, while the third is a mixed approach, which would be the most difficult to implement, but it would address the issue of complete lack of social interaction that has been proved difficult to cope with among students (and teachers). The third scenario would mean that students take turns in attending offline and online classes, so that the number of people in the classroom is reduced. Out of the three, this solution might be more feasible long term, but both the curriculum and lesson plans would have to be adapted. The class activities involving direct physical interaction would be reserved for the offline slot, while those requiring students to work independently can be done online, with appropriate supervision and feedback. In terms of summative and formative assessment, both can be done online with good results as we have seen recently, so a combination of the two should be accurate enough.

The 2020 spring semester seems to have ended partially due to inertia, since university teachers had at least a full month of direct interaction with their students before lockdown. It was enough for them to establish rapport and set the scene for the activities to follow. The first one to two weeks after March 13<sup>th</sup> (when our university suspended face-to-face teaching) were somewhat confusing, as everyone was trying to find the best way to handle the abrupt severance of educational activities, while also maintaining a sense of

normalcy and adapting the teaching process to the new reality. After the basics were settled and it became clear that the initial lockdown period would be extended, plans were made to ensure that summative evaluation and assessment (which takes place at the beginning of June) would be satisfactorily fulfilled under the circumstances.

Starting with October 1st, however, there would have to be clearer guidelines on how courses will take place, what platforms for videoconferencing and assessment should be used at the institutional level, the records that need keeping etc. My expectations for the (near) future are as follows:

- a) Both students and teachers will want to continue to implement part of what has been experimented with during lockdown in terms of online communication, activities, teaching and assessment methods. This will lead to more online interaction – possibly outside common working hours – even after things go back to normal and it will require more support for teachers on an institutional level and constant feedback from everyone involved in the educational process.
- b) Online admissions will probably replace the offline process entirely. The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, where I teach Business English, has already been implementing an online pre-admission process for a few years, so the transition should be relatively straightforward.
- c) Distance learning will be performed exclusively online. Given the relatively small number of distance learning students, this is realistic as well.
- d) Part of formative and summative assessment will be done exclusively online. As long as the platforms used are reliable and given the success of our spring experiment, I think there is no reason why part of the assessment process shouldn't be moved online.
- e) The number of students will probably increase rather than decrease, as remote learning will start to be accessible to more people all over the world.

Regarding the teaching of Business English, some changes are to be expected, too:

- a) More online-based communication, content and class-materials.
- b) A lot more focus on the topic of virtual business communication.
- c) More foreign students will bring more diversity to the classroom but also some challenges in term of mixed-level and mixed-ability groups.
- d) There will be an immediate need for teacher training regarding online course delivery and assessment.

One of the issues that was raised time and time again both during the British Council webinar series and the staff meetings at our university was quality assurance. So much so that the British Council dedicated an entire webinar to this issue titled *How can universities ensure quality teaching online?* The registered participants were asked to take a poll before the event and the top five elements that the audience considered should be addressed from a quality assurance perspective were the following (in order of importance): the teaching and learning environment, curriculum and teaching materials, assessment, delivery of online lessons and access to resources (IT related) (Güven, 2020). These apply in the case of our university as well and below is a short account of how we handled each one so far:

a) *The teaching and learning environment*

Given the nature of the pandemic, we did not get much say in terms of the teaching and learning environment. We have tried to keep the delivery of online lessons as similar as possible to our previous face-to-face interactions and assessment was adapted as well.

Keeping in contact with students was traditionally done via email, but we have since tried to expand our communication channels to Facebook™ and WhatsApp™ groups, Moodle™, Zoom™ and Skype™ chats so that all students would be kept informed, no matter where they were quarantining.

*b) Curriculum and teaching materials*

Fortunately, we provide students with the material for our Business English seminar and course at the beginning of each semester, so when lockdown started, most of them already had access to it. For those who didn't for various reasons, we posted it on Moodle™ so that it could be referenced when accessing their seminar assignments or course-based assessment.

*c) Assessment*

Online assessment was a major concern from the beginning, since it had never been attempted. Formative assessment was transferred online with some modifications, in keeping with the rules established by each teacher and agreed on with the students at the beginning of the semester. Personally, I was to grade each first- and second-year undergraduate at the end of each seminar, based on their contribution. In addition to that, second year students would have had to be graded on a group presentation, which would represent fifty percent of their seminar grade. Under the circumstances, I decided to keep the grade per seminar system, but adapt it as following: after a short online session in which we discussed the new topic and the students were offered the opportunity to ask questions, they would have limited timed access to an assignment on Moodle™ based on what had been discussed. It was usually a short quiz with some multiple choice and true/false items, an essay-type task (with a maximum of 250 words) on the lesson topic or a combination of the two. Each student would be then graded based on their individual answers to the assignment. In addition, second-year students delivered their presentations via Zoom™ videoconferences, using the Share Screen option and were graded accordingly.

In terms of summative assessment, Business English students would traditionally sit for a one-hour pen and paper quiz based on their course material. This year, the quiz was administered online, using Moodle™. A second session was held for those who were unable, due to technical issues, to take the quiz.

For those students who were approaching graduation, the decision was made to use the Microsoft Teams™ videoconference system for the bachelor's and master's theses defense, which provided a stable environment and the opportunity to record the session for future safekeeping. After running a few tests with the students and with the constant supervision and support from our IT department, this crucial activity for final year students ran smoothly.

*d) Delivery of online lessons*

When the decision was made to officially transfer all teaching activities online at our university, teachers were given the freedom to use whatever method and platform they, and their students, had access to and were comfortable with for their online classes. But after a while it became clear that a unified system needed to be adopted for the sake of coherence. Most professors started by using Zoom™ and Skype™ as their preferred videoconferencing platform, while some experimented with Microsoft Teams™. In the end, Zoom™ remained the most popular platform because it seemed to work better for everyone in terms of accessibility, video quality and ease of use. Nevertheless, it did not provide the opportunity to share documents, create assignments or evaluate students. For

this, we needed another platform. Moodle™ had already been used for providing long-distance students with the necessary education materials, so it was decided that it could be extended for everyone. This ensured that students could find the necessary materials for all their courses in one place, could complete assignments and be assessed in an organised way using their secure institutional accounts.

*f) Access to resources (IT related)*

Fortunately, all of my students were able to access, at least in part, the assignments on Moodle™ and most of them attended the online seminars, which meant that they could all be graded accordingly. The fact that both Moodle™ and Zoom™ could be accessed via mobile phone as well was a big plus, so besides the occasional technical difficulties, everything ran smoothly.

Moving forward, there are five fundamental elements which need to be considered by both education institutions and individual teachers so that a reliable system can be established. Based on the experience at our university and the thoughts shared by the professors from very diverse backgrounds who attended the British Council webinar on quality assurance, these principles are applicable to educational institutions worldwide:

*1) Setting clear guidelines for a digital future*

Learning from our past mistakes is crucial, so that when the new academic year starts, we are ready to further implement online teaching and learning with as few mishaps as possible. A set of clear rules is necessary so that everyone knows exactly what they have to do, what methods and platforms need to be used so that quality assurance is guaranteed.

*2) Providing functional, secure technology access and constant technical support*

It is clear that the education process will rely more and more on technology from now on, so it is crucial that everyone involved has access to both the infrastructure and the technical support needed in order to carry out their work.

*3) Implementing blended learning*

If, come fall, the situation does not allow for the mixed approach of both online and face-to-face courses, some form of synchronous and (active) asynchronous learning should be implemented. Teachers would have to spend much more time designing the lessons and activities, but this will result in more efficient independent work for students. Keeping video lectures short and allowing students more time to interact with each other (be it virtually) will set the tone for a new approach to teaching which will hopefully become, in time, as efficient as the traditional one.

*4) Investing in staff development*

In order to implement the above-mentioned methods, countries and institutions need to invest massively in staff training, so that the transition to online education is as seamless as possible. If and when the situation reverts back to normal, the investment in staff development will not be lost, given the digitalised future we are all heading towards. The switch might have been abrupt, but big changes usually occur this way, so we must learn to adapt rather than reject them.

*5) Being proactive and improving on constant feedback*

The global pandemic has presented us with huge challenges but also with some opportunities for improvement. The process of transitioning to a new reality will take some time and effort, so it is essential for institutions to anticipate problems and rely heavily on feedback from all parties involved.

As a later edit to what has been discussed in this article regarding the new 2020-2021 academic year, the decision was made at the University level to continue with full online activities, as opposed to the hybrid system that was adopted in schools starting with September 14<sup>th</sup>. However, due to a dramatic increase in COVID-19 cases, they too will switch to online learning starting from Monday, November 9<sup>th</sup>. At our Faculty, Microsoft Teams<sup>TM</sup> is the official platform for course and seminar activity, while Moodle<sup>TM</sup> is to be used for assessment purposes. Consequently, since the future of face-to-face interaction is uncertain and absolutely no one can predict at this point when normal activities will be resumed on a regular basis, the issues presented throughout this paper remain valid and require further consideration.

To conclude, educational institutions need to act swiftly and decisively in order to be prepared in time for the new academic year and also make long-term plans regarding the fundamental transition to virtual education. The year 2020 may not have started on the right foot, but education professionals worldwide recognise the pandemic as both a challenge and an opportunity to implement what has been discussed for a while in terms of e-learning possibilities. It is now time to set the foundation and establish the ground rules for the future of education, which will model the generations to come.

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