

## THE ONLINE TEACHING VIS-À-VIS THE CLASSROOM TEACHING (ON THE BACKGROUND OF COVID-19)

**Darejan Tvaltvdze**

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia

**Irina Gvelesiani**

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia

**Abstract.** *The history of mankind will depict 2020 as the beginning of the new era – the era of the pandemic, which has invaded the world countries. The life on the earth has changed drastically. A partial or complete lockdown, numerous infected citizens, an increasing economic crisis, devaluation of a national currency, paralyzed cultural and social lives – this is a partial list of the challenges faced by the majority of the world countries that have made efforts to survive. The paper depicts the challenges of Georgia’s educational space in the environment of the pandemic. The major emphasis is put on the transition from a classroom teaching to an online lecturing as well as on the (dis)advantages of a face-to-face interaction and a virtual communication. Moreover, the paper presents some strategies of the “peaceful” transition (creation of a student-oriented virtual-classroom atmosphere, timely informativeness, usage of appropriate technological means, replacement of written-type exams with hybrid-type examinations, flexible site-oriented means of an extracurricular communication, updated criteria of assessment, etc.) elaborated at the Faculty of Humanities of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. The methodology of research includes observation, analysis and evaluation of the recent processes.*

**Keywords:** *classroom, face-to-face interaction, online teaching, pandemic, virtual communication.*

### Introduction

The coronavirus named as COVID-19 has been gradually invading the world countries. The life has been changing drastically via shifting the population from socialization to desocialization, from activeness to passiveness and from a face-to-face interaction to an online communication. The latter has been treated as the safest way of the prevention of the spread of COVID-19 that has influenced and reconstructed our lives. The greatest challenges have been faced by the educational systems of the world. It has been estimated “that 107 countries implemented educational institutes’ closures. It is roughly said to be affecting 862

million people around the globe. This is approximately calculated as half of the world student population” (Mahmood, 2020, p. 1).

During the outbreak of the pandemic, when the earth faced numerous challenges, technology started playing a crucial role. Educators and students found themselves in the situation where they felt compelled to embrace the digital academic experience as the summum bonum of the online teaching-learning process (Mishra, Gupta, & Shree, 2020). „In the education system E-learning has been found to be a significant tool for effectively continuing the teaching-learning process during the lockdown” (Soni, 2020, p. 1).

Generally, the e-learning should be treated as the teaching conducted via the electronic media. „It was first used in 1999 at a CBT systems seminar... It offers a way to share reading materials using internet through emails, documents, presentations or webinars” (Soni, 2020, p. 2). Educators justly indicate that the e-learning is a recent variation of the distance education, which is a long-existing phenomenon. It graduated from the correspondence and the usage of the parcel post, to the radio, then to the television and finally, to the online education. The distance teaching can be traced back to as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It began in the late 1800s, but its rapid growth started in the late 1990s with the advance of the online technical revolution (Kentnor, 2015, p. 22). This revolution enabled some universities of the world to implement the online education as a tool for increasing the number of students via meeting requirements of learners’ diverse groups. The 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Sloan Survey on Online Learning indicated that 4.6 million college students were enrolled in one or more online courses in fall 2008 (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2013, p. 2). „By fall 2010, the number of higher education students had risen to 21 million, and 6.1 million of those (29.0%) were enrolled in an online course... Still, as of fall 2012, of 20.6 million higher education students, 6.7 million (32.5%) enrolled in online courses” (Kentnor, 2015, p. 22). Despite an increasing popularity of the e-learning, until 2020 a great number of the world universities adhered to the traditional face-to-face model of teaching. „In 2018, Times Higher Education conducted a comprehensive survey with 200 participants from 45 different countries. The study revealed that virtual higher education would never replace the real traditional F2F model” (Abdeldayem, Aldulaimi, Lateef, & Aldulaimi, 2020, p. 12635). However, during recent months the latter has been forcedly replaced under the influence of the pandemic.

The paper depicts the challenges of Georgia’s educational space in the environment of the coronavirus. The major emphasis is put on the transition from a classroom teaching to an online lecturing as well as on the (dis)advantages of a face-to-face interaction and a virtual communication. The paper presents some strategies of the “peaceful” transition elaborated at the Faculty of Humanities of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU).

## The Transition from the Classroom Teaching to the Online Teaching

The Georgians have always paid the greatest attention to the development of the educational space. It was assumed that education was a key factor of the nation-building. Accordingly, after the dissolution of the USSR, under the influence of the reformation plan, Georgia's universities transplanted the western model (the so-called Bologna model) and replaced the traditional *five-year teaching* with *4+2/BA+MA model*. Each teaching year comprised autumn and spring semesters. The latter started in the beginning of March. However, the spring semester of 2020 became exceptional. Due to the rapid spread of the pandemic, "the learning process was suspended from March 2 to March 16 under the recommendation of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia. On March 21 the country announced the state of emergency and one month' restrictions. Georgia became one of 188 countries of the world that closed all schools or localized them to avoid the spread of the virus affecting 1.576 million children and 91.3% of the world's student population" (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020, p. 2). A rapid transition from a classroom teaching to an online teaching was necessitated at schools and at higher educational institutions. This unexpected turnover caused confusion of teachers and professors. They had to follow all administrative and ministerial directives and simultaneously, ensure a successful lecturing as well as a peaceful completion of midterm exams, final exams, defenses of BA, MA or PhD theses, etc. The above-mentioned necessitated the modification of the already-existing teaching modes and techniques by:

- accommodating to the most appropriate online platforms (Zoom, Facebook, Skype, Moodle, etc.);
- providing the creative and skilful updating of syllabi and lecture plans;
- creating a friendly online atmosphere for the engagement of all students in classroom activities;
- providing students with teaching materials and informing them about schedules, assessment criteria, etc.;
- insurance of an appropriate arrangement of midterm and final exams, defenses of BA, MA or PhD theses, etc.

It was quite difficult to ensure an excellent modification, because there were some significant drawbacks:

- the lack of online teaching skills in educators;
- a time-consuming character of an online preparation (recording; distributing) of lectures;
- the lack of online skills in students;

- the overload of online platforms and the resulting seizures or frequent failures of communication;
- inadequate learning environments at some students' homes;
- the lack of access to internet in some regions of Georgia.

All the representatives of the educational space realized that 2019 was the starting point of the new digital era. “While the complete online and blended learning sounded like the “holy grail” in this new era in education, it required massive changes” (Cahapay, 2020, p. 3). TSU, as a driving force of Georgia’s educational space, made some crucial steps for meeting new challenges. All teachers/professors were invited to join the so-called *Learning Management System (LMS)*, which presented each educator’s timetable, students’ lists, all students’ contact information and digital registers for indicating scores and criteria of assessment. *LMS* enabled each teacher/professor to communicate with every student individually or via group letters. Moreover, all syllabi, textbooks, readers, supplementary books and other teaching materials could be uploaded. The only drawback of *Learning Management System* was the ability of sending a limited number of materials. The authorities of the Faculty of Humanities solved this problem quite easily. The educators were invited to use the *Moodle Platform/e-learning*, which had been elaborated at the faculty several years earlier. Initially, this platform served as a supplementary e-space assisting educators to distribute readers, presentations, extra materials, videos, extra exercises, etc. After the transition to the online learning, the Moodle became one of the compulsory components of teaching. Moreover, the educators were asked to use Zoom (a cloud-based, direct communication software platform created for teleconferencing, telecommuting, distance learning and social networking (Kristóf, 2020, p. 89)) for delivering online lectures/seminars. However, the usage of Skype or Facebook was also acceptable in cases of small groups. It is noteworthy that in certain cases, communication via two social networking services became compulsory, because the majority of students were scattered in different regions of Georgia. They could not enter Zoom, but could use Facebook or Skype. As a result, at the end of the semester the results of those groups of learners, which were communicated via two social networking services, were better than the results of other students.

It is noteworthy that on the initial stage of the transition to the online teaching, the authorities of the Faculty of Humanities realized that all teachers/professors did not have appropriate skills for using the above-mentioned e-systems. Accordingly, a duly technical support was necessitated. The authorities created and distributed the special guidelines for an effective downloading or usage of the *Learning Management System*, *Zoom* and *Moodle Platform*. Moreover, they formed the special support teams of the administrative staff that

assisted all lecturers in need. As a result, the technical problems were gradually solved.

Moreover, the authorities took the following significant measures for guaranteeing the continuous and effective student-oriented teaching process:

- the special monitoring team of the administrative staff was formed and was asked to enter Zoom for checking every lecture/seminar delivered by the professors as well as the invited lecturers of the Faculty of Humanities;
- the teaching process was carried out even during holidays;
- the assessment criteria were duly updated - the component “presence” was dropped out and the system of scores “60 (*pre-exam*) + 40 (*exam*)” was replaced by “40 (*pre-exam*) + 60 (*exam*)”;
- the teachers/professors were given an opportunity to carry out exams in the mode of their choice - oral or written. The hybrid mode was also acceptable;
- the teachers/professors were obligated to carry out main exams three times plus an additional exam per course;
- the students were duly informed about schedules of exams as well as changes made in the assessment criteria;
- the students were duly provided with e-materials (scanned or created in PDF format) necessary for their studies and preparation for exams;
- all teachers/professors and students were provided with an institutional gmail - a free web based e-mail service that provides users for storing messages and provides the ability to search for specific messages (Mahalakshmi & Radha, 2020, p. 2405).

### **The Experiment**

During the autumn semester of 2020-2021 we decided to make the experiment for finding out the usefulness of the online teaching. The target groups of the experiment were the students of the direction of English Philology (courses: “Theoretic Grammar” (2 groups), “Introduction to British Studies”, “Abstracting and Reviewing of the English Text”). In total, 65 students were interviewed. The experiment was conducted in two stages. At the initial stage, the students were asked to single out advantages and disadvantages of the online teaching. Their answers enabled us to create the following table:

**Table 1 The Advantages and Disadvantages of the Online Education**

<b>The advantages of the online teaching</b>	<b>The disadvantages of the online teaching</b>
An easy access to all resources and teaching materials	Lack of socialization
Saving time	Lack of an academic atmosphere
Saving money	A monotonous lifestyle
No traffic jams	Inactiveness
An easy access to lectures for those students, who work or have children	Psychological problems
An easy time management	A deteriorated eyesight
No sleepless students i.e. better concentration of minds	Lack of students' self-discipline
	An inadequate learning environment at students' homes
	Lack of the access to internet
	A constant fear of the appearance of technical problems

At the second stage, every statement of Table 1 was brought to a vote. The following tables depict the results of voting:

**Table 2 The Advantages of the Online Teaching - for and against**

<b>The advantages of the online teaching</b>	<b>The number of the supporters</b>	<b>The number of the opposing students</b>
An easy access to all resources and teaching materials	64	1
Saving time	65	0
Saving money	64	1
No traffic jams	65	0
An easy access to lectures for those students, who work or have children	62	3
An easy time management	62	3
No sleepless students i.e. better concentration of minds	48	17

**Table 3 The Disadvantages of the Online Teaching - for and against**

<b>The disadvantages of the online teaching</b>	<b>The number of the supporters</b>	<b>The number of the opposing students</b>
Lack of socialization	65	0
Lack of an academic atmosphere	65	0
A monotonous lifestyle	63	2
Inactiveness	65	0

Psychological problems	60	5
A deteriorated <b>eyesight</b>	65	0
Lack of students' self-discipline	57	8
An inadequate learning environment at students' homes	56	9
Lack of the access to internet	64	1
A constant fear of the appearance of technical problems	65	0

As the above tables reveal, the major disadvantages of the online teaching are related to health problems, technical issues, monotony, desocialization and less adequate learning environment at students' homes. Nothing indicates to the failure of the teaching process or problems associated with lecturing.

### **The Online Teaching vis-à-vis the Classroom Teaching**

We quite agree with the students' opinions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the online education. However, we should express our viewpoints about the traditional and virtual lecturing. In contrast to the classroom teaching, the online (synchronous) lecturing has the following disadvantages:

- it is impossible to promote a pair-work or a group-work;
- it is impossible to fully use VAK/VAKT (Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic & Tactile) learning styles for equally encouraging all types of learners, especially, kinesthetic ones, "who prefer to learn via experience – doing, touching, performing" (Gvelesiani & Tvaltvdze, 2011, p. 46);
- sometimes technical problems prevent from a continuous teaching process;
- many students live in towns or remote villages. Due to a poor internet connection their voices sound impurely and discontinuously;
- it is impossible to check that all students wrote their homework in exercise-books. Turned off videos prevent this process. Turning off is often necessitated due to an unstable connection;
- non-video participants may cheat a lecturer via reading instead of retelling;
- midterm and final exams are time-consuming due to downloading and checking of 300-400 tests/essays per semester;
- an extra-curriculum communication with students via different e-platforms is time-consuming due to answering many students' letters and messages.

The following table depicts the above discussion:

*Table 4 The Online Teaching vis-à-vis the Classroom Teaching*

<b>The online teaching</b>	<b>The classroom teaching</b>
An easy access to all resources and teaching materials, i.e. saving money	Paying money for teaching materials
No traffic jams	Constant traffic jams
An easy access to lectures for those students, who work or have children	Students, who work or have children, have problems with attendance
An easy time management	Some difficulties in time management
Less sleepless students, i.e. better concentration of minds	More sleepless students, i.e. less concentration of minds
Lack of socialization	A complete socialization
Lack of an academic atmosphere	A complete academic atmosphere
An inactive, monotonous lifestyle	An active lifestyle
Health problems	Less health problems
An inadequate learning environment at students' homes	An adequate learning environment at the university
Lack of the access to internet	A constant access to internet
A constant fear of the appearance of technical problems	No fear of the appearance of technical problems
No pair-works or group-works	Promotion of pair-works or group-works
No possibility of the usage of all learning styles	Usage of all learning styles
Possibility of cheating a lecturer	No possibility of cheating a lecturer
A time-consuming extra-curriculum communication with students	Less time-consuming extra-curriculum communication with students
Time-consuming midterm and final exams	Less time-consuming midterm and final exams

Despite the above-mentioned, the virtual teaching has some prominent advantages. It is convenient and affordable for everyone. Despite some time-consuming activities, lecturers have new opportunities brought by the coronavirus. They may attend free webinars as well as online conferences organized by various foreign centers/universities. As a result, educators save money, save time, acquire new skills and share experiences of the prominent world universities.

## **Conclusions**

Georgia's history comprises twelve years of the electronic teaching. The latter started in 2008, when Georgia was involved in the project "E-learning in the Caucasus". One of the first universities that used e-teaching method was TSU,

which created E-Learning and E-Courses.tsu.ge in 2009 (Kikoria et al, 2019, p. 212). However, these courses were only supplementary ones. In 2020 the e-teaching became the only method used by TSU. Initially, the process of transition from a traditional to a virtual mode of lecturing seemed sudden and complicated. However, all attempts made by the authorities of the Faculty of Humanities were rational and effective. This fact is clearly demonstrated in the above tables.

Accordingly, a peaceful transition should comprise the following components:

- creation of easily accessible e-platforms;
- lecturers support with appropriate guidelines;
- lecturers support with a technical assistance;
- creation of monitoring groups;
- duly informativeness i.e. a simultaneous communication with students via two or more e-platforms;
- creation of flexible criteria of assessment and examination, etc.

Although the method of e-teaching created at the Faculty of Humanities is quite effective, it cannot fully replace the classroom lecturing. An academic atmosphere, a personal interaction, an eye-contact, an honest retelling or checking exercises (i.e. no cheating), socialization, encouragement of shy learners, usage of various methods (a pair-work, a group-work, debating) or learning styles oriented to different learners are crucial components of the process of teaching. Our observation and experiment revealed that the online education lacks these components. Moreover, delivering lectures to small groups of students (10-14 learners) is more effective than to big groups (30-40 learners). Accordingly, we recommend to divide the latter into smaller ones during the pandemic.

### **Summary**

“Before the coronavirus pandemic, eLearning has been more or less an area of science, rather than a widespread practice” (Mladenova, Kalmukov, & Valova, 2020, p. 1163). However, nowadays it is a must-to-do activity.

The paper presents the major advantages and disadvantages of the online education, discusses the online teaching vis-à-vis the classroom teaching, describes the transition from the former to the latter and highlights the major strategies of an effective online lecturing that should be useful for different universities of the world.

Finally, it is noteworthy that despite the appearance of the greatest disaster called COVID-19, the educational institutions of the world carry out their usual activities almost uninterruptedly. This is the greatest achievement of our challenging epoch. Modern technologies, various electronic devices and e-platforms enable us to live, to work and to survive. All of us have gained new skills that will be useful in the post-pandemic period, for instance, in cases of missed lessons or emergency situations. Moreover, curricula will be updated, the created e-sources (teaching materials: e-books, videos, e-exercises, e-readers, etc.) will be available to students, many universities will implement the online learning and attract

foreign students for raising the popularity and merit. As a result, the post-pandemic period will deal with the traces of COVID-19 that will lead to more digitalization, virtual scientific cooperation and online lecturing.

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