Slobodaniuc Alina  
lecturer, PhD candidate, Moldova State University,  
Republic of Moldova  

ONLINE FOREIGN LANGUAGES LEARNING  
AT THE UNIVERSITY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC  
IMPACT IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA  

Abstract. The main purpose of this article is to assess the phenomenon of online language learning during the pandemic and to analyze the survey on the opinion of foreign language students who have expressed their views about the difficulties encountered and the solutions they consider appropriate in order to improve this process in the Republic of Moldova.  

Keywords: online language teaching, multimedia learning, la continuité pédagogique, distance learning, COVID-19 pandemic, university, oral communication in foreign languages  

Introduction  
The COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on all levels of education and learning from around the world. At the beginning of April 2020, the closure of schools and universities in the 194 countries affected all students around the world. Distance learning through the internet, television, radio and other technologies it has only partially succeeded in replacing the learning that takes place in the school environment. Online learning has become a lifeline for education, as institutions tend to minimize the possibility of community transmission of the virus. Countries that have resorted to learning alternatives online have achieved successes of different levels, according to their capabilities. [1]  

UNESCO published a set of specific recommendations for these countries to plan and implement distance learning. But a real problem is the lack of access to technology or good internet connection, which is an obstacle to lifelong learning, especially for students from disadvantaged families.
It is very likely that the pandemic will exacerbate existing inequalities in accessibility and quality of education between countries and people. The gap between the rich and poor, for example, can become even older.

In OECD countries, the most advantaged 10% of students surpassed the most disadvantaged 10% of their colleagues by 141 points regarding the discipline of reading before the pandemic. In Moldova this gap was smaller (102 points), but still significant. Disparities between girls and boys, children with and without disabilities, children of other ethnicities and those of Roma ethnicity, in rural and urban areas, with and without an internet connection could increase considerably both within and between countries. [1]

It can reasonably assume that online education on such a large scale is an imperfect substitute for face-to-face education, with consequences for different groups of students. Online education particularly limits tools available for teaching staff, representing an additional burden for students and carers, especially in the case of young or disabled students. This is especially true for parents of children with disabilities special educational institutions (SEN). Students with disabilities, especially young people with sensory and intellectual disabilities or learning difficulties, have the least chance of benefit from the solutions offered by distance learning. Distance learning not only requires access to appropriate information technology (IT) equipment and internet connection, availability of books and other adapted learning materials, but also access to devices assistance or adapted curricula to enable the participation of students with disabilities and make to their learning needs. This may deviate subsequently their career prospects and delayed their entry into the labor market.

Going to school means more than going to a place where you learn new things. For many students, schools also offer access to food, a way to escape from dysfunctional families or the only opportunity to socialize and reduce the time spent in front of screens, to interact with others and build relationships. Schools are places where teachers can identify early family issues, including domestic violence, health and behavioral issues and others, thus providing the necessary support to children or students. [1] To the same extent, the pandemic and the introduction of quarantine have affected language learning. Students who were accustomed to the university
environment, to group work, to the real interaction suddenly collided with the need to sit in front of the computer all day, locked in the house.

La continuité pédagogique- is the formula chosen by the French Government's Ministry of Education to integrate in a conceptual form the teaching efforts involved in the school moved, exceptionally, in the homes of students and teachers due to the pandemic of coronavirus. Of course, the juxtaposition of the two concepts is not a surprising construction for the world of education; the formula expresses a principle with the role of backbone for all teaching processes, carried out anywhere, anytime, in isolation or between classroom walls. But, in this particular context, of the need to move learning out of schools, in conditions of crisis, the idea of continuity acquires a different resonance and a different weight. [2]

But, foreign language teachers who have taught for many years according to certain rules, who have already developed certain skills and competences, used certain methods, do they manage to ensure now the same quality of studies, that pedagogical continuity?

Methods of teaching a foreign language. We cannot deny that online learning has certain advantages, however, there are a number of methods of teaching-learning a foreign language that have proven effective over the years, and some of them can only be applied in the classroom.

Examples of efficient methods of teaching a foreign language that can occur in the situation of distance learning:

– Translation method. Its main objectives are the study of grammar, vocabulary and literature, the emphasis being on conscious and deductive learning.

– Audio-lingual method. The techniques used are dialogue, role play, repetition and exercise for the student to use the language in an automatic, communication-based way.

– The method of silence. Students are encouraged to self-correct and interact, the teacher is silent, suggesting mistakes.

– Language learning in the community. The teacher has the role of language advisor, focusing on communication. [4]
Multimedia learning - learning with the help of ICT (information and communication technologies). This is an interactive method. It is a combination of different types of media, such as text, audio and video materials to which the teacher presents the information to the students. Using new technologies as an interactive strategy in the process teaching-learning based on concrete tasks, the teacher tries to motivate students to actively learn the foreign language studied in the light of real life problems. [5]

Advantages of using multimedia learning:

1. Improves interest and motivation;
2. Various multimedia tools help the student to better understand the teaching material;
3. The teaching process is oriented towards concrete tasks in real life situations;
4. It positively influences the formation of speaking skills and abilities. [5]

Anyway, there are certain important and effective methods of teaching a foreign language that cannot be applied in online learning. Someone might think that they can be replaced with the others, however each technique has its own goal and develops certain important student skills. Methods that cannot be applied in the situation of distance learning:

– Total physical response method. In the initial stage the teacher speaks, and the students respond nonverbally, then the roles change.
– The direct method. The inventor of the method, Charles Berlitz, suggests the meaning of words through images, pantomime and conversation, the translation not being allowed. This method can be applied only partially – conversation, but there is no possibility to present a pantomime. [4]

How the state governments act to help students in studying foreign languages and not only?

Here are some of the ways in which education reacts to the unprecedented situation it faces (87% of the world's school population, i.e. over one billion pupils and students in 165 countries do not attend school, according to statistics recently
released by UNESCO. The various preferred initiatives by governments, schools, teachers to effectively reach students in the "educational islet" include:

- To elaborate at central level of some supporting documents for the organization of the home school (methodologies, guides, resource packages), especially for moving the teaching in the online environment;
- To support home schooling through specialized platforms for online learning and official websites that centralize initiatives in this field;
- To support students and parents through frequent messages, explanations, questions and answers; [6]

For instance, France, which concretely answers the various questions that may arise in practice (“what do I do if I don't have the Internet?”, “Our school doesn't have a website, how do I do it?” Etc.); The same attitude can be noticed in Saudi Arabia, which sends frequent messages on social networks with advice for all parties involved and calls for the use of technology;

- To establish clear measures to promote equitable approaches in education, given that, in crisis situations, the vulnerable become even more vulnerable.

According to data presented by UNESCO, China has bought a large number of computers and telecommunication packages financially supported by the authorities for families in difficulty. France printed on paper activities and tasks for 5% of students who do not have access to the Internet, while Portugal initiated a partnership with postal services to deliver worksheets to children at home. Poland has launched an auction of 180 million zlotys for computer equipment for students and teachers. [6]

- Reorganization of evaluation procedures (adjustment of exam schedules, cancellation or rescheduling of exams).

The Netherlands has firmly announced that it is a year without national examinations in pre-university education, while many other systems have explicitly opted for the transition to assessment exclusively online, especially in academia. China did the same, the Netherlands did too. Even doctoral theses lose the ceremonial ritual of face-to-face presentation and move into the electronic world (University of Amsterdam announced on March 26, 2020, the organization of the first online public doctoral ceremony).
To promote decentralized solutions, which leave room for different initiatives, many procedural decisions being placed in the care of local authorities and schools / universities;

At this point, many examples come from the Netherlands, where there is already this training to manage local decentralization in education, a measure with strong cultural support. As a result, many higher education institutions may remain open, although they do not work classes, but may provide access to libraries and other spaces that may continue to be attended. [6]

**Distance learning of foreign languages in Republic of Moldova**

Thousands of students of foreign languages in the Republic of Moldova had to adjust to online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was not an easy task for either the students or the teachers. However, it was even more difficult for students with special educational needs, as they need more attention and greater involvement of teachers through special methods. [3]

However, the education system in the Republic of Moldova, as well as other states, is constantly supported by certain international organizations that help it cope with this difficult transition situation. For instance, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) or World Health Organization.

"Inclusive education allows students from all backgrounds to study and grow together by developing the necessary skills and competencies. UNICEF supports the authorities in deinstitutionalizing children with disabilities and integrating them into their families, communities and schools,” said Liudmila Lefter, education specialist at UNICEF Moldova. [3]

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the Moldovan education system in general and on the promotion of inclusive education in particular. Students with special educational needs found it extremely difficult to adapt to distance learning.

In order to simplify the process of reopening schools, UNICEF supported the development of Guidelines for students and parents, which explained in a simple and clear way the process of reopening schools in the Republic of Moldova, as well as the development of rules and hygiene measures, as well as tips to support learning and mental health.
UNICEF, in partnership with national NGOs and in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, has developed training materials for teachers and managers in the context of the reopening of kindergartens, schools, universities. These materials are used to strengthen the large-scale capacity of administrators and teachers regarding hygiene practices, the application of COVID-19 protocols and the prevention and control of infectious diseases. [3]

**Studying foreign language during the pandemic in the University of Moldova** - Students across the country learning foreign languages have clashed with the transition from physical education at universities to online. It is obvious that the pandemic and the quarantine directly influenced their way of life until then, but also the methods of learning foreign languages. However, nothing can stop a student who wants to know a foreign language. Thus there are also students from the University of Moldova who adapt, make efforts, study and fight further for their aspirations.

In order to better present the general opinion of students studying foreign languages at the state university, we conducted a survey. It will serve as a basic support for the analysis of the difficulties encountered by students and the solutions they propose.

**Survey - students’ opinion on distance learning of foreign languages.** This questionnaire was completed by 100 students, most of them students at the Faculty of Letters, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, State University of Moldova, and few students of other institutions of the same faculty or students who took online language courses at certain educational centers.

The objectives of this special target survey were:

– to identify opinions about access to qualitative studies of foreign languages during the pandemic;

– to assess opinions on the quality and transparency of the higher education institutions in the situation of online teaching;

– to identify students’ difficulties in the process of distance learning of a foreign language;

– to discuss issues such as lack of the possibility to communicate with a native speaker as a part of the study program;
– to identify the web tools used by students in oral communication in a foreign language;
– to identify the solutions and the reforms students really need.
– The results of the survey are quite complex and convey some important meanings.

**Interesting and qualitative or not?**

First of all, 50 percent of the respondents rated the online language learning methods as "interesting, comfortable, average quality of studies". Another 21% said that online learning is "tiring, uninteresting and low quality." However, 26% of students categorized their studies as "useful, interesting and with a good quality of studies". So, we notice that the opinions on the aspect of quality and level of interest concerning the distance learning of a foreign language are very different. Also, to this question, some of the respondents stated that it quite depends on the teacher and not on the format of the studies.

**Lockdown – more time to learn!** Pandemic – a chance to learn a foreign language. Even 62% of students declared that during the lockdown they came to the idea that with quarantine they have more free time to learn a new foreign language. The same conclusion is noticed in the answers to the question „Does distance learning save your time?” – 71% of respondents said „Yes!”.

**Physical or online dictionaries?** Learning foreign languages involves the constant use of numerous dictionaries. However, before the pandemic, when students physically went to classes it was difficult to bring with them all the necessary dictionaries and even to search for a necessary word takes a long time. While studying in front of the computer the student always has access to the necessary sources, which are also constantly updated. Thus, here we notice a huge advantage of distance learning of a foreign language. It is also concluded by students (94%) who appreciated online dictionaries as "more useful and easier and faster to use".

**Consequences of distance learning.** On the other hand, online learning can also cause some discomfort or even health problems. This is the conclusion drawn from the answers of the students in this survey. Here we have amazing statistics: 1%
spend in front of the monitor in the learning process 1 hour a day, 4% - 2-3 hours a day, 25% - 4-6 hours every day, 37% study in front monitor 7-8 hours, and 33% of three respondents study in front of the computer more than 8 hours daily. Spending several hours in front of the monitor in a row and for a long period of time can have unpleasant consequences, so some students said that after the period of suspension of physical education, being forced to study a lot in a digital environment they had headaches, neck pain, back pain, also, some students collided with serious vision problems.

**Competences developed.** Each study process has as main objective the development of certain skills and competences. With the transition to the online format, both the methods used by teachers and the range of improved skills of students were different. According to the survey, the most improved their competences in such a way (decreasing order):

- Written communication;
- Written comprehension;
- Oral comprehension;
- Oral communication;
- Socio-linguistic component.

Thus, we understand that students in the online learning process tend more to communicate and do their homework in written form than to communicate orally.

Then, we found out which are the most used applications for online language learning activities within the university. So, most respondents opted for - Zoom, Moodle, GoogleClassroom, Messenger, Viber, Slack, Skype, Google Meet. Also, the most used web browsers only for oral communication in foreign languages are - Zoom, GoogleMeet, BigBlueButton, Microsoft Teams.

**Need of native speakers.** Communication with a native speaker is especially important in learning a foreign language. Many people who want to learn a foreign language even go to the country of origin of the foreign language to communicate with the natives and learn it more easily. Other young people register on certain online platforms and look for native speakers there. Unfortunately, this method cannot always be safe, because you cannot know which person is actually behind
the monitor. And with the switch to distance learning, the opportunity to communicate with native speakers in a safe way and with the help of university has become easier to achieve. However, an extremely small percentage of students (30%) had the opportunity to communicate with a native speaker as part of their curriculum or at least organized in the faculty.

**The main difficulties.** According to the respondents’ opinions, the most frequent difficulties were:

– Technical problems (poor internet connection, lack of electricity in countryside) – 79%

– Mental difficulties (anxiety, depression, mental disorders due to the need to spend more time indoors) – 30%

– Difficulties in interpersonal relationships (lack of effective communication with family members or teachers or colleagues) – 33%

– And only 4% did not have any difficulties in learning a foreign language online.

Unfortunately, 53% these students were not helped in order to solve these problems by any one, but the rest were helped by their parents, teachers, and colleagues.

Also, some students said that for them they represented difficulties: lack of face-to-face communication, weak university platform (Moodle) that does not stand when it is accessed by a large number of students, also in front of foreign language students are put short deadlines for some complex and important tasks, the incompetent teacher in using online teaching methods, fear of making mistakes, suspension of electricity in difficult weather conditions, cheating on tests, fatigue, even teacher indifference and others.

Also, few students were able to participate in extracurricular activities. For example, some participated in Acord and Travel online courses, and others participated in trainings offered by AUF Moldova or in the Veto Club activities.

**Solutions proposed by students.** The students of the faculty of foreign languages and literatures also came up with a list of solutions that would be useful
INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC DISCUSSION: PROBLEMS, TASKS AND PROSPECTS

for them and would ensure the improvement of the online teaching-learning methods of foreign languages:

– capturing attention by speaking as often as possible in the studied language;
– practicing activities that will interest students;
– watching videos, movies, schemes, presentations. The visual image is easier to memorize than the auditory one;
– improving the university platform (Moodle);
– less homework on other optional objects;
– organizing trainings for teachers in order to develop their knowledge in PC;
– setting deadlines more consciously;
– recording the hours and placing them on a platform where they will always be available;
– group games;
– use of interactive means;
– diversification of teaching methods;
– conferences with native speakers of other languages;
– etc.

Conclusion

Distance learning of foreign languages – YES or NOT? The online learning of foreign languages was something absolutely new for the students of this faculty, but also for the teachers, because at this faculty there are no part-time studies as a learning format, only the full-time education. So, being a new teaching method for teachers, especially the older ones, but also a new learning method for students, from the beginning everyone was confused.

Now, after a longer period of adaptation to the new methods, everyone has created an opinion and can decide what is right for each individual. Because it is scientifically proven that each person with an individual temperament also has specific styles of life. For example, an introvert prefers less oral communication and more written communication, and an extrovert likes oral communication and less written communication. Thus, students who study foreign languages and literatures
mostly opt for blended learning (51%), for online learning they prefer learning with physical presence in classes - 27%, and the percentage of students who opt only for online learning is 21%.

Finally, 83% of respondents said that online language learning would be useful to remain possible in some situations. Therefore, this could be a chance for young people to be admitted at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures with part-time studies.

The students of the Faculty of Letters, the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at MSU, but also ordinary students learning foreign languages encountered a series of difficulties in the distance learning process, but they never intended to give up. Conversely, they come up with remedial solutions, they try to express their opinions in order to improve the situation and they want to be heard in the name of quality education and, respectively, of a better future for the country. The difficulties that students encounter are of different types: technical, health, family, moral, etc., and are bigger than in more developed countries, and the solutions they propose are worthy of the attention of the state government.

References:
6. Metode interactive ca un element motivant în predarea-învățarea unei limbi străine.
   Disponibil:  https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/101-103.pdf?fbclid=IwAR08DiTT6ugrA4POkMv3tIG3duBFZF8A31XmJwPvABXxbtIQCNZSW5AEsZ8