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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3984854>**DEVELOPING LEARNERS' SOFT SKILLS IN THE TIME OF A PANDEMIC****Viorica CONDRAT***Universitatea de Stat „Alec Russo” din Bălți*

Language educators' role is to facilitate the process of language learning. They should design their education process so that it responds primarily to the real needs of their learners. Special attention should be paid to the development of soft skills in learners, so that they are able to think critically, communicate, collaborate, and engage in problem solving. The article presents an overview of the challenges faced in developing soft skills in learners taking into account the present COVID-19 context. The results seem to indicate that the onlinization of the education process contributes little to the development of learners' soft-skills.

**Keywords:** *online education, socialization, soft skills, 21st century skills, communication, collaboration, onlinaziation, offline, HOTS.*

**DEZVOLTAREA ABILITĂȚILOR SOFT LA STUDENȚI ÎN TIMPUL PANDEMIEI**

Rolul profesorului de limbă străină este de a facilita procesul de învățare al elevilor. El trebuie să-și proiecteze activitatea de educație lingvistică în așa fel încât să răspundă la nevoile reale ale elevilor. O nevoie imperativă a societății moderne este de a educa o generație capabilă să gândească critic, creativ, care să poată colabora și comunica în rezolvarea anumitor probleme; adică, dezvoltarea abilităților soft trebuie să devină o prioritate. Studiul de față vine să prezinte problemele educației online în dezvoltarea abilităților secolului XXI la orele de limbă engleză, în contextul pandemiei COVID-19.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *educație online, socializare, abilități soft, abilitățile secolului XXI, comunicare, colaborare, onlinizare, offline, HOTS (abilități de gândire înaltă).*

**Introduction**

One of the prerogatives in nowadays education is to scaffold learners' development of skills that will prepare them for the challenges of the 21st century [1]. The endeavour itself is quite challenging, particularly when the system seems to be outdated and reluctant to change. Moldovan education system was not ready to face the challenges of distance learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemics.

The pandemic has caused quite a lot of turmoil in every walk of life. Things that have been taken for granted were taken away without any definite prospect of a soon comeback. It is up to each individual how they choose to respond to this anxiety-provoking time. Some have accepted the pillow challenge, others have started reconsidering their whole lives. And everyone has the right to (re)act the way they find most suitable for themselves.

In times like this, one understands the importance of education in a person's life. It is the education one gets, both formally and informally, that shapes one's personality and contributes to the development of critical thinking (HOTS). Yet, the (re)actions of both teachers and students now highlight the drawbacks of an outdated system which is still followed by the traditional way of teaching, the one used in the 20th century, or even in the 19th century.

Technology has become part of our daily life. There have been attempts at integrating technology into the process of education. However, I would argue that, in the majority of the cases, this integration is not well-planned and is little effective in developing the skills needed for the 21st century. Being interested in this topic for more than a decade, I have looked at ways of integrating technology into the education process [2-7]. The conclusions I arrived at are that learners still rely on the teacher's presence in their education process, whereas technology is not perceived as a tool actually contributing to their skills development, particularly to soft skills.

Methodologists have been quite hesitant in offering specific methodological suggestions of effective technology integration into the EFL classroom (8-15). It is true that they mention it, they are aware of the possible benefits it might offer, yet, their books still revolve around methodologies primarily applied to offline education. This is understandable and can be justified by the fact that education is above all socialization, which is rather impossible to be done online. So far, there has been no evidence that online education contributes to the creation of small communities where people really engaged in the process of collaboration and communication.

Pre-school starts the process of socialization, which must be developed in schools as well as colleges. Learners should be prepared to build complex relationships and work in teams to solve problems in life as well as their future work environments. Thus, teaching should cease to be viewed as the act of knowledge transmission (which can be very well achieved in online learning), where the learners are expected to learn something without necessarily making connections to real-life situations. It should become mindful and purposeful. Moreover, learners should be helped develop their emotional intelligence as this skill is the one defining humans, in general. I think once these become priorities in education, learners will find the education process motivating and purposeful.

### **Challenges of online learning**

So how is it possible to make the education process motivating and engaging in time of the Covid-19 pandemic? The traditional classroom vanished into thin air one day, leaving teachers and students alike in the dark. I will not speak about the lack of digital skills in both students and teachers. (The fact that almost all of them have Facebook or Instagram accounts does not make them digitally literate!) I will not mention the issues some might have related to the internet connection or the necessary equipment (Moldova is still the poorest country in Europe!).

What I would really like to focus on is whether or not offline education can be equalled to online education. I can say that it can never do it, as such a process can be called many names, yet I do not think one of them would actually be 'education'. To what degree does 'hiding' behind screens contribute to the development of soft skills as well as emotional intelligence?

It is true that nowadays educators look for engaging and motivating ways of bringing learning online. The principles of active learning applied in the online context seem to offer the optimal solution to the problem. Yet, there are still many challenges, particularly when it comes to communication and collaboration.

As known, communication is an extremely intricate process involving so many factors of various kinds, such as psychological, social, linguistic, and cultural. The onlinization does not seem to enact all of these factors. When entering the process of offline communication, people engage in negotiating their roles, in getting outside their comfort zones, in adapting to a new reality. Being behind a screen does not allow this; it actually oversimplifies the communication process, which would result eventually in communication failures in face-to-face contexts.

I am not against integrating technology into the process of education. The key word here is 'integrating'; it is not replacing. Technology cannot replace education. It can replace, for example, a knowledge transmission channel, but never the person.

Moreover, even this knowledge transmission channel might not result in positive effects for learners. Research shows that the moment people delegate the primary mental processes of their brain to the machines, such as memorizing, for example, they regress [16]. Thus, the development of hard skills might be in jeopardy as well. It appears to be quite obvious that the moment one finds a substitute to the brain work, the brain stops developing, it stops creating complex constructs needed for critical thinking.

### **Observations of online courses**

On the internet one can find quite a lot of useful information concerning how to make online teaching engaging and motivational. I can say it has always been there, actually. There have always been so many online tools one can use in the process of education. Yet, they were considered only when the teacher thought appropriate to integrate them in a lesson/course.

The current context is different. The teacher has no choice now. The teacher must rely exclusively on technology to do his/her job, and to make his/her learners feel like home nonetheless. There are useful tips shared online. These are good tips one should definitely consider while designing the online education process. Yet, one should similarly be prepared that they will not create the same results as offline education does.

My virtual classrooms usually look like this. I rely on videoconferencing as the substitute for synchronous learning, and on google classroom as the substitute for asynchronous learning. To my mind, this can be the optimal solution to the present situation. It helps create the illusion of (inter)contentedness. Yet, an illusion is just an illusion.

Alexandra Matrusova [17] debunked some of the myths related to online education, starting with the myth that it is extremely easy to change from offline to online learning, and ending up with the myth that teachers

are just reluctant to embrace the change. The passage I particularly liked in the article is that the human brain develops more actively when people are interacting/communicating face-to-face (i.e. socializing). Unfortunately, by simply sitting in front of the computer, one's brain cannot make neural connections necessary for the elaboration of complex constructs the way it does in face-to-face contexts. It does not mean that the brain does not develop at all. Yet, as our thinking is primarily social, it cannot be developed outside a social context. Virtual classrooms can create only the semblance of an educational context. Maybe this semblance contributes to what has been labelled as 'Zoom fatigue'[18].

The fatigue I particularly experienced was due to the fact that I did not get feedback. I could not see the learners' faces as they had their cameras turned off. They did not seem to want to have their cameras on, a wish that needed to be acknowledged and respected. There were delays when it came to answers they gave to questions (and the delays were more than 1.2 seconds). One more remark, there were cases when they would simply disconnect, claiming later that the connection was very poor just not to get involved in an activity. Another problem was the impossibility of making them work in pairs or groups.

The learners' reaction to the onlinization was rather negative. They admitted to feeling 'disconnected' and 'anxious'. They confessed that it was very difficult for them to concentrate and learn. Some of them would tell that they saw very little sense in learning. Out of 30 students asked to leave their impressions on one of my blog posts only one admitted that they liked the online education. All the others expressed their hope that this situation would soon end and they would come back to the 'normal' way of studying. It was also interesting to note that the part they were missing most was socialization. They confessed they had not been aware of its importance in their lives before the pandemic.

### Conclusions

The point is that distance learning cannot replace face-to-face education, and it definitely has little contribution in the development of learners' soft skills. How is it possible to develop one's social skills when the only place for interaction is the computer screen? Yet, I do realize that technology has become part of our lives, and it won't go anywhere. Hence, we have to look for viable solutions of integrating technology into the education process so that it helps develop our learners' 21st century skills. If, however, we choose to rely on technology exclusively, this is rather impossible to attain.

Things will get back to normal, a new normal, a different one, as every experience shapes our way of being, thinking, and (re)acting. I think we are changing. Change, no matter how painful it is initially, is something that contributes to our growth and development provided we embrace the change and think critically.

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