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IMPLEMENTATION OF ONLINE TEACHING IN UNIVERSITIES OF UZBEKISTAN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Abstract

This review, conducted in 2020, examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education in Uzbekistan, with a particular focus on universities and educators in the fields of medicine, economics, and technology. The pandemic has caused significant disruptions to the education sector worldwide, leading to the implementation of online learning as an alternative. This article analyzes the response of universities in Uzbekistan, specifically in the English language online courses offered to undergraduate students. The review provides insights into the strategies and perspectives adopted by educators in navigating this unprecedented situation.

Uzbekistan’s higher education response to Covid 19

The government of Uzbekistan announced closure of all educational institutions from March 16, 2020 for three weeks initially and then extended it to May 10, 2020. The nation-wide lockdown has resulted in more than 13,800 preschools, 9700 general secondary schools, 1500 secondary specialised and professional institutions and 92 local and international higher educational institutions closing down for the time period, and pushing close to 1.4 million preschool children, 5.85 million students in general secondary schools, 728,000 students in secondary specialised and

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professional institutions and more than 400,000 students in higher education institutions.

The Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education (MHSSE) promptly responded by announcing the reopening of all 85 state universities, accounting for 83% of all higher education institutions (HEIs) in the country, from April 1, 2020. However, classes were conducted online through a newly implemented distance learning platform integrated with the universities' Moodle system. The purpose of these platforms was to provide students with an innovative learning experience by creating virtual environments where teachers and students could engage (MHSSE news, April 2020). This transition affected a total of 417,816 students and 29,030 professors during the second semester of the 2019-2020 academic year in the higher education system.

This transition necessitated the recruitment of qualified specialists in information and communication technology (ICT) and learning management systems (LMS). The MHSSE also implemented an information system for administrative, academic, research, and financial management purposes. Universities diligently created educational resources and video lectures aligned with curricula, resulting in the integration of over 6,100 subjects into the distance learning platforms. The MHSSE centralised the learning platforms through a single portal for better quality monitoring and resource utilization. Two teaching options were provided: a mobile app using Telegram and the Moodle platform. Universities continued preparations for online education during the vacation period to address technical and administrative challenges. Eventually, the new academic year commenced in September, conducted entirely online.

Problems faced

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The big initiative faced big problems, the key ones of which were infrastructure, access, digital literacy, and lack of teachers' relevant skills. The survey conducted by the Westminster International University in Tashkent (WIUT) in October 2020 showed that because of the problem with infrastructure, which included electricity and internet, 70% of students and 60% of teachers had Internet connection problems. In addition, 25% of the students surveyed and 7% of the teachers had power outages. Another issue on the way of introducing online education is equal access to online resources - about 12-15% of the population in Uzbekistan live in poverty (Ahmedjanova, 2020). As a result, this segment of the population does not have the resources to buy a computer and the necessary accessories to attend online classes or to afford internet access.

However, the most acute and criticised problems still remained to be teachers' knowledge and skills. Teachers who did not have sufficient knowledge, skills and competencies had to prepare and post their lessons on the platform and start teaching virtually. The same thing befell teachers of English. Lack of knowledge and skills, such as communicative language teaching, lesson planning, development of materials, provision of instructions which were necessary in a traditional classroom, also shifted to online teaching. Teachers who developed and taught virtual classes have also struggled with these skills. However, the most relevant skills that most foreign language teachers were unable to demonstrate during online teaching were expressed through the materials they uploaded into the platform. It became clear that teachers lacked the skills to develop teaching materials, including writing instructions, interactive lesson planning and integrating ICT. Unfortunately, the current INSETT programmes have never focused on training these skills at all, or taught these professional skills theoretically with no practical bias. As for the development of skill of online assignments, it has never even been considered.

Analysis of English course online materials

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All non-language programmes in Uzbekistan have one common language course, “A Foreign Language” and follow one common national curriculum for all institutions with common learning outcomes. Therefore, we can find similar topics and hours in English course across institutions. The course is taught from the first to the third year (six semesters) of a four-year bachelor's programme, two academic hours per week. The Decree of Cabinet Ministers of Uzbekistan about ‘The requirements of knowing languages for all stages of education’ states that all students of non-linguistic faculties in Uzbekistan’s higher education institutions should be able to attain CEFR level B2 by the end of study, but “this has to be recognised as a long-term goal which cannot be attained by the majority of students in the current language teaching/learning context of Uzbekistan” (West & Stanford, 2020). As majority of students come to non-language universities with A1-A2 level of English, general English is taught minimum during three semesters. Some key universities which aimed to implement EMI and enter the international rankings of the best universities by 2030, offer an additional elective English course or teach ESP from Year 2.

For the first time, a national English curriculum, which was the same for many technical universities, proved to be useful to the language departments’ academic staff. The teachers of the same university but different directions/programmes divided the curriculum topics among themselves, and this gave them an opportunity to prepare and upload one or two lessons instead of, for example, 10-15. However, teachers' lack of the knowledge and skills described above influenced the design of the course(s), which can be analyzed in terms of content, structure, choice of teaching methods, materials and tasks.

a) Choice of topics, structure and learning outcomes in online English courses

The online English lessons in undergraduate programs primarily focus on General English and grammar topics. While some universities prioritise English

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for specific purposes, the course content often revolves around topic-driven approaches, such as those observed in the country's key medical university where the course is centered on medical, economic, or tax-related subjects with grammar components that may not always be directly relevant.

Upon analysing the structure of most courses, it becomes evident that the weekly or thematic structure at different universities typically consists of three to five sections. These sections usually include an introductory text or explanation of the grammatical structure, exercises, additional materials and/or homework, and, in some cases, a separate PowerPoint presentation and post-lesson test. Furthermore, instead of providing direct links to video or audio materials within the task descriptions, some universities present them as separate items.

The formulation of objectives poses a challenge not only for online English courses but for the entire English language curriculum in non-linguistic universities. One issue with the curriculum is the lack of transparent definitions for language levels and the absence of connections between learning outcomes, topics, and assessments (New ESP for HE curriculum, October 2020). Most universities do not provide clear lesson objectives or learning outcomes for students to achieve. In cases where objectives are provided, they are often expressed in a general manner, focusing on the content or topics that students should know rather than emphasising the skills they need to develop or the actions they should be able to perform, thus disregarding the behavioural approach.

b) Choice of materials

The selection of materials and resources emerged as a crucial factor influencing the communication and interactivity of the courses. Given that many teachers lacked materials development skills and often relied on textbooks, they resorted to simply

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uploading resources from open internet sources with similar topics and language points. However, this approach presented several drawbacks.

Firstly, the resources uploaded to the platform were in PDF format and lacked reliable sources of origin, limiting students' ability to fully utilize the potential of the Moodle system. Secondly, the texts and presentations primarily served an informative purpose, lacking elements that promote critical thinking and information sharing among students. Thirdly, although this process provided an opportunity for teachers to move away from monotonous textbooks and incorporate fresh and authentic information in various forms (such as text, graphics, audio, video, or combinations), the course creators failed to capitalize on this opportunity. The internet offers access to a vast amount and diverse range of information, including dynamic data and visualizations of complex phenomena, which instructors can utilize to provide students with research results, practical simulations, and real-world or simulated data (Herrington & Oliver, 2000).

Furthermore, since the course was developed by multiple English teachers within the same faculty, each teacher uploaded materials they deemed suitable. However, due to isolation and time constraints, there was limited agreement or discussion on common criteria. Only a few teachers took a different approach, collaborating more effectively with one another or involving students in the process of developing teaching materials. Involving students in contributing useful resources can enhance their motivation and the authenticity of the tasks (Woo et al., 2007).

c) Choice of teaching strategies and tasks

The undergraduate English courses primarily rely on teacher-directed strategies such as lectures, readings, and mastery learning. Unfortunately, student-centered models of learning, such as independent study, inquiry learning, and cooperative learning, are disregarded. The course developers did not fully utilize the interactive options available in Moodle, resulting in materials that were based on the grammar-

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translation method and deviated from the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. Students mainly engage in translation exercises, reading texts and answering questions, watching videos to identify language points, and learning new vocabulary and grammar structures.

The success of online learning heavily depends on the level of interaction within the learning environment. Interaction is particularly crucial for language courses, as it allows for meaningful communication in the target language. Incorporating technology into our practice was driven by the need to overcome the challenges of a large class size, which made interaction in English difficult, if not impossible. Online learning provides students with the opportunity to compose their thoughts in advance and express themselves in English more comfortably.

Authentic tasks play a vital role in facilitating meaningful interaction. When tasks are directly related to students' real-life experiences, they promote intellectual accomplishment and learning. However, the lack of meaningful purpose in some tasks hinders the realization of intended learning objectives. Authentic tasks allow students to make connections between new material and their prior experiences, apply their learning to real-world contexts, and engage in collaborative activities. Moodle offers various features like forums, wikis, conferencing, and group seminars that can enhance interactions during the course.

One advantage of learning a language online is that it provides students with ample time and resources. Therefore, tasks such as project work, e-portfolios, and creating texts or videos can be implemented at any language level. Unfortunately, these opportunities were neglected in the offered courses due to a lack of necessary skills among teachers.

Further steps

Despite the quality of the courses, which was also a problem in traditional education, the pandemic made it possible to overcome many of the difficulties that prevented

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the introduction of distance learning in the country. The online education is stated as one of the core development strategies in Uzbekistan, which is reflected in the Country development strategy until 2030. The last seven months have opened up many opportunities. It gives hope that one of the most ambitious problems that higher education in Uzbekistan is facing today will be solved. First, it can give many young people in the country access to higher education. When only 20% of all applicants can go to universities due to the lack of higher education institutions, this causes many problems, including corruption. Secondly, it is inclusiveness and the opportunity to empower young people from distant regions and villages, given the fact that 41 out of 85 state universities are located in Tashkent, and the remaining 44 are in the capitals of each region. Other opportunities can be following:

- Finally, universities begin to pay more serious attention to distance learning. It stimulated educational institutions to launch actively learning platforms and start developing courses that would be up to date;
- Teachers had to learn to use computers, the Internet, MOODLE platform as one of LMS;
- Teachers begin to use materials/resources beyond their textbooks;
- Distance learning platform in the system has been improved. “Higher education institutions have been provided with 85 modern server devices, and additional activities are being carried out to increase the speed of the Internet.” (MHSSE news, 2020);
- Technically capable and aspiring students are given distance learning opportunities.
- The directions and courses that require mostly a practical approach but have been purely lecture-based, now can integrate more interactive and practical Internet resources;
- Before the pandemic situation, universities never planned to offer their academic staff with sufficient training in delivering virtual/online teaching,

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including in cyber security, network administration, online assessment, and now it become an important priority.

Much remains to be done, but the most important is to reform the CPD system in the country and begin to provide sufficient training that will meet the needs of teachers. Training and practice of online or blended teaching should be essential for teachers. The INSETT courses themselves should introduce high-quality, interactive distance learning so that teachers, based on the experience gained during the courses, can effectively implement online teaching. PD courses should focus on training such teaching skills as planning teaching and learning, materials development, online task design, communicative task design, selection and adaptation of materials, writing language instructions and lesson objectives and others. Training programmes need a specific focus on the adaptation and use of ICT in the classroom as well. Along with general technical skills, teachers need to be comfortable working within a university's online learning management system in order to be confident and proficient in a virtual learning environment as in a traditional classroom.

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Samples of course materials are available at <https://dist.edu.uz/>