Supporting Cadets to Develop Their English Reading Skills during the Covid-19 Pandemic at the “Nicolae Balcescu” Land Forces Academy of Sibiu

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Abstract. The paper analyses the manner in which the developing of reading skills of the second year military students of the “Nicolae Balcescu” Land Forces Academy was done during the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, when the COVID-19 Pandemic was declared and the cadets had to leave the Academy. We consider that English Language course taught during the second semester, a course meant to help students hone their reading skills and to acquire basic military vocabulary was a success. The Academy provided the laptops, the high quality platform and online support necessary for the online courses. There were also certain qualities of the cadets that played an important role in the very good results they obtained at the end of the online English Language course: their age, their discipline, the good command of technical skills and particularly their motivation; all of them being aware that “since the end of the Cold War, foreign language training—especially the learning of English, the de facto operational language—has become increasingly important within armed forces. This is especially the case at NATO due to an ever-increasing number of peace-support operations, on the one hand, and the Alliance's enlargement and partnership activities, on the other. Language skills—in both Allied and Partner countries—are primarily a national responsibility. However, language training must be of concern to NATO as a whole since linguistic interoperability is as important to ensuring that countries are able to participate effectively in both NATO missions and wider Alliance activities as any other form of interoperability”.[1]

1. Introduction

Starting with the second semester of the 2019-2020 academic year, most teachers in Romania had to deliver online lessons, the classes taking place in a virtual learning environment. The professors of the “Nicolae Balcescu” Academy of Sibiu were no exception. We started from the premise that “the online lessons can present the same content and can be taught, with few exceptions, using many of the means and methods employed during the “conventional” lessons.

The start was not an easy one. The first big difficulty that had to be overcome was the familiarization with the Moodle Platform where the online lessons were to be held: Both the teaching staff and the cadets were promptly instructed on how to use the platform and they were also constantly offered quality equipment and technical support throughout the whole period of the second semester.

The Military English Course that we taught focused not only on improving the cadets’ military vocabulary, but also on developing all the four language skills, especially their reading. Of the online activities that we mostly used, we would like to mention the following:

- reading games (word finders; sentence scrambles, crossword puzzles based on the information taught during the lectures and the seminars; decoding “secret” messages, etc.);
- answering questions based on the information in the reading tests;
- identifying the structure of a text;
- summarizing;
- sequencing events;
- expressing opinions about the information in the reading texts;
- matching exercises (matching the vocabulary item with its definition or with the picture that illustrated it or with its synonym/antonym);
- multiple choice reading comprehension tests which helped the cadets to get familiar with the format of the exam.

It was during this second semester that we particularly focused on exercises intended to enable the cadets to make logical inferences, to draw conclusions, to understand the sequences of events presented in a reading text, to analyze the intentions of the authors of the texts, etc. All the readings selected to be used in the online classes had a military flavor as the cadets of the “Nicolae Balcescu” Land Forces Academy will have to take, sooner or later in their military career, a STANAG English exam and the language professors at the Academy take this into consideration when they choose the topics in the syllabi and when they design their lessons.

“A STANAG, or STANdardisation AGreement, is an international military standard created by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) for regulating equipment, procedures, tactics, training and just about everything that affects how armed forces from different countries work together on operations and exercises.

STANAG 6001 is a language proficiency scale designed to allow comparisons of language ability in different countries. The scale consists of a set of descriptors with proficiency skills broken down into six levels, coded 1 through 6.” [2]

The objective of the cadets at the Academy, as far as their English proficiency is concerned, is to have a STANAG level 2 or higher.

During the online classes we focused on the same objectives that we would have focused on during a regular class, aspects like the drawing of a conclusion from a given text; developing the students’ understanding of the logical sequencing of texts; of their purpose and even of their tone, making the difference between explicit and implicit meanings of words, etc. Special attention was given to the improvement of the military vocabulary on topics such as weapons, uniforms, modern warfare, military career, etc.

Even though the main focus of the course was the developing of the reading skill, we also worked on the other three language skills (speaking, listening, writing) during all the classes.

2. SWOT Analysis

We have considered that in order to better understand the factors that could influence the success of an online English course with the objective of developing reading skills, it would be helpful to make a SWOT analysis with the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities that such a course offered during the second university semester of the academic year 2019-2020.

2.1. Strong Points

The greatest advantage of online classes is that they can be accessed anytime, anywhere. In the conditions of sufficient motivation, any student who has access to a computer can obtain an education at least equal to one that benefits from a traditional program.” [3].

- the online classes helped all of us prevent the disease caused by the new Coronavirus by reducing the interactions with the others;
- both students and teachers felt safe having the opportunity to stay with their families;
- the interest of the students for a subject that will help them in their future careers; as future NATO officers they will have to be able to communicate both orally and in writing at an advanced level and in order to achieve this desideratum, they also need to improve their receptive language skills. “The need for effective communication is particularly acute in peace-support operations where linguistic misunderstandings risk leading to mistakes, which might, in a worst-case scenario, result in casualties.” [4];
- permanent technical support provided by the IT colleagues from the Academy. They helped us
whenever we did not know how to access a certain feature of the platform or when we had other technical problems;
- access to a quality learning platform, “The world’s most popular learning platform. With hundreds of millions of users worldwide, more organisations choose us to support their education and training needs than any other platform around the world.” [5];
- the teachers had the possibility to closely supervise the students' work even while they were working on the given exercises;
- the students managed to develop a lot the reading skill on which the course of the second semester was focused;
- many introverted students expressed themselves a lot more easily online than during the face-to-face meetings;
- the program was more flexible; the students were able to set a certain pace of work;
- the correction of the assignments and of the tests proved to be a lot simpler, the students receiving the results on the spot. In the case of the tests and exercises that were not taken into account for the evaluation, the students were also shown the correct variant and they could do the test or the exercise as many times as they wanted.

2.2. Weaknesses
- the effort to accumulate a lot of technical information in a short time as the teachers and the students had not been very familiar with the Moodle platform;
- sharing the workspace with other family members. The teachers and the cadets reported interruptions from other members of the family during the online classes;
- insufficient pieces of equipment needed for members of the same family who all had to work simultaneously on various tasks;
- problems with the internet connection in some cases, especially for those that live in remote rural areas and during the hours when a lot of people entered simultaneously online;
- the effort for preparing classes was a lot bigger as for all the items that were introduced online more operations were required than the simple typing of the text;
- the professors who had minor children at home also had to deal with the simultaneous homeschooling of children of different ages.

2.3. Opportunities
- the Moodle Platform used at present at the Land Forces Academy offers many more possibilities and it is in continuous development and thus, the teaching staff and the cadets can get familiarized with these and improve the teaching-learning process;
- the online classes could be used even when the pandemic is over, as part of blended learning, in order to diversify the teaching methods;
- we noticed during this course that many students felt at home with the online teaching and we will take advantage of this aspect and try to integrate online classes in the future courses.

2.4. Threats
Prolonged and permanent use of online teaching could lead to, both in the case of students as well as in the case of teachers, to:
- lack of socialization and contact with others;
- the tendency to isolation;
- the tendency of live a more sedentary lifestyle, which could determine numerous health problems;
- fatigue accumulated following the concentration required by the more difficult processing of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, etc. A lot of those involved in the online teaching-learning process affirmed that participating in an online class felt, especially in the beginning, exhausting;
- the aspects of life that used to be separate (work, family, friends) merged in the same confined space, increasing the degree of stress affecting the individual;
- the risk of an inability to fully empathize with other people. We noticed that some of the students who had used to patiently wait for their colleagues to formulate answers displayed a higher degree of impatience and sometimes even interrupted the speaker. This again was something that had not been common in face-to-face classes.

3. Conclusion

Despite the work done to learn how to use the Moodle learning platform, we believe that online teaching in the case of the English Language, year II, second semester, had certain advantages and was the best solution for both the students who succeeded not only to cover the subject matter provided in the curricula, but also to make certain progress—this being demonstrated by the good results the students obtained at the end of the semester—as well as for the teachers who were able to carry out their duties and to take care of those who depend on them. We are also aware that the students we worked with are more mature, more disciplined, probably more technology savvy than the great majority of students and that they all have laptops and technical assistance provided by the Academy.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed vulnerabilities; it has also surfaced extraordinary human resourcefulness and potential. Decisions made today will have long-term consequences for the futures of education. Choices must be based on a humanistic vision of education and development, and human rights.” [6]

Nevertheless, in the long run, the online classes should be alternated with face-to-face classes or longer breaks should be allowed for users. The online teaching should by no means replace the face-to-face one, but for emergency situations it proves to be the best solution if it is done properly.

References


