

EDUCATION IN THE CONDITIONS OF THE NEW CORONAVIRUS, TRAINING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE DAYS OF PANDEMIC

GOHAR GRIGORYAN

Head of the Chair of Foreign Languages at the International Scientific-Educational
Center of the National Academy of Sciences
PhD in Linguistics, Associate Professor
gohar.grigoryan@isec.am

LUSINE MOVSISYAN

Applicant at the Institute of Oriental Studies
lusmovsisyan95@mail.ru

They cannot stop me. I will get my education, if it is in the home, school, or anyplace. –

Malala Yousafzai

Abstract

In 2019 the spread of the new coronavirus in the world affected all spheres of life. The education sector suffered greatly as the shift to distance learning caused great psychological difficulties. Besides, the problem of technological equipment and access to the Internet arose. Many people around the world couldn't afford to use their computers or smartphones for distance education. The pandemic, however, was an opportunity to acquire new knowledge. In global lockdowns, people started to look for alternative methods for the teaching and learning process to continue. Thus, online learning became not an option but a necessity; people could acquire new knowledge without leaving home and spending resources.

In the course of our work, we conducted surveys among students, and with the help of research, discovered the effectiveness of teaching foreign languages in the context of a pandemic; we highlighted the role of foreign language knowledge in the modern era and studied the model of distance learning in the Republic of Armenia.

Keywords and phrases

COVID-19 pandemic, online learning, distance learning, foreign language teaching, distance education in Armenia.

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ԳՈՀԱՐ ԳՐԻԳՈՐԱՆ

ՀՀ ԳԱԱ ԳԿՄԿ օտար լեզուների ամբիոնի վարիչ
բանախիրական գիտությունների թեկնածու, դոցենտ
gohar.grigoryan@isec.am

ԼՈՒՍԻՆԵ ՄՈՎՍԻՍՅԱՆ

ՀՀ ԳԱԱ արևելագիտության ինտտիտուտի հայցորդ
lusmovsisyan95@mail.ru

Համառոտագիր

2019 թվականին աշխարհում տարածված նոր կորոնավիրուսային համավարակն իր ազդեցությունն ունեցավ կյանքի բոլոր ոլորտների վրա, մեծապես տուժեց կրթական համակարգը, քանի որ անցումը հեռավար կրթության նախ մեծ դժվարություններ առաջ բերեց հոգեբանական առումով: Բացի այդ առաջ եկավ նաև տեխնոլոգիական սարքավորումների ու համացանցի հասանելիության խնդիրը: Ամբողջ աշխարհում քիչ չէր այն մարդկանց թվաքանակը, ովքեր ի վիճակի չէին ունենալու սեփական համակարգիչը կամ սմարթֆոնը՝ կրթությունը հեռավար եղանակով շարունակելու համար: Համավարակը, սակայն, նաև հնարավորություն էր նոր գիտելիքների ձեռքբերման համար: Համաշխարհային “lockdown”-ի պայմաններում մարդիկ առանց տնից դուրս գալու և ռեսուրսներ ծախսելու կարող էին նոր գիտելիքներ ձեռք բերել: Աշխատանքը կատարելիս ուսանողների շրջանում կատարել ենք հարցումներ և հետազոտությունների միջոցով պարզել ենք համավարակի պայմաններում օտար լեզուների ուսուցման արդյունավետությունը, կարևորել ենք օտար լեզվի իմացության դերը արդի ժամանակաշրջանում, ուսումնասիրել ենք հեռավար կրթության մոդելը ՀՀ-ում:

Բանալի բառեր և բառակապակցություններ

COVID-19 համավարակ, առցանց ուսուցում, հեռավար ուսուցում, օտար լեզուների դասավանդում, հեռավար կրթություն Հայաստանում:

ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ В УСЛОВИЯХ НОВОГО КОРОНАВИРУСА, ОБУЧЕНИЕ ИНОСТРАННЫМ ЯЗЫКАМ В ПЕРИОД ПАНДЕМИ

ГОАР ГРИГОРЯН

заведующая кафедрой иностранных языков
Международный научно-образовательный центр НАН РА
кандидат филологических наук, доцент
gohar.grigoryan@isec.am

ЛУСИНЕ МОВСИСЯН

Институт востоковедения НАН РА
соискатель
lusmovsisyan95@mail.ru

Аннотация

Распространившаяся во всем мире с 2019 года эпидемия коронавируса оказала влияние на все сферы жизни, в частности, весьма пострадала образовательная система, поскольку переход на дистанционное образование вызвал большие затруднения в психологическом смысле. Кроме того встали проблемы технического оснащения и доступности интернета. Во всем мире немало людей, которые не в состоянии иметь собственный компьютер или смартфон для продолжения образования в дистанционной форме. Эпидемия, однако, стала также возможностью получения новых знаний. В условиях мирового локдауна, не выходя из дома и без затраты ресурсов, люди могли получать новые знания. При выполнении работы были проведены опросы среди студентов и путем исследований была выявлена эффективность обучения иностранным языкам в условиях эпидемии с учетом важности знания иностранных языков на современном этапе, исследована модель дистанционного образования в РА.

Ключевые слова и фразы

Эпидемия COVID 19, онлайн-обучение, дистанционное обучение, преподавание иностранных языков, дистанционное образование в Армении.

Introduction

On 31 December, 2019, a new type of coronavirus infection was registered in Wuhan, China, which in a short period began to spread around the world and affect everyone's life. The rapid spread of the infection, not yet known to humanity, led to

various forms of information dissemination. Coronavirus belongs to viruses that cause different respiratory diseases; from asymptomatic or mild to severe illnesses and death.

As early as 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization described the new coronavirus as a global pandemic and called on the world to participate in the process of overcoming it [1].

Studies have shown that new coronavirus infection is transmitted in different ways, and measures have been taken worldwide to prevent the spread of the virus. The outbreak in China began to spread throughout the world. To prevent the spread of infection, borders were closed, flights were suspended, public gatherings, public transportation, educational institutions were banned, and the use of medical masks became mandatory for everyone. Thus, the new COVID-19 restricted the activities of all sectors, forcing the world to seek new ways to continue a normal life.

Taking into account the urgency of the topic, we have set the following objectives .

- To Explore alternative ways of organizing education throughout the new Coronavirus pandemic;
- To Consider the strengths and weaknesses of distance learning;
- To Discover the new opportunities offered to humanity by the pandemic;
- To Study the model of distance education in the Republic of Armenia.

Education and COVID-19

This public health crisis has had a dramatic impact on the education system. One of the first steps to prevent the spread of the epidemic was the closure of educational institutions. According to UNESCO, 1.5 billion children and youth have been affected by school closures in 195 countries, ranging from pre-school to higher education [2]. The world began to switch to distance learning, and webinars were organized to train teachers and lecturers to enable them to develop and successfully implement distance-learning programs. States faced the challenge of ensuring the sustainability of education in the face of an epidemic threat to national security, so the priority was given to the online platforms. Online learning has thus challenged alternatives to traditional classroom learning. Along with the organization of distance education, several difficulties were more psychological for both students and professors. Problems arose with the interpersonal contacts of students, the perception of the students' material, the individual characteristics of students, and the correct organization of the distance learning process. However, some studies have shown that distance education is a new form of education that provides a wide range of educational services to the general public through educational media.

One of the most commonly used terms throughout the epidemic is the concept of a «new norm». In order to meet the new standards of education, it was necessary to provide education through online learning tools. COVID-19 brought new ways of teaching. Educational institutions around the world moved to online learning platforms to further the learning process of students. Digital education became an indispensable resource for students and schools around the world. For many educational institutions, this was an entirely new form of education that they had to adopt. Like any other type of learning, distance learning has its pros and cons. Research and analysis of these advantages and disadvantages will enable educational institutions to develop new strategies for more effective education delivery.

The advantages of distance education

- Distance education is much more accessible and flexible. Online learning for working students can be available in 24/7 format at the time, place, and reasonable price. Organizations save about 50% to 70% on training when they introduce online learning over instructor-led training due to reduced travel costs and non-requirement of logistics [3]. Online classes do not require physical presence, which helps reduce costs.
- Online education knows no geographic boundaries. Students from all over the world can assemble in an online classroom without crossing borders.
- Distance learning has no age limit. People of different age groups interested in any field of science can participate in online courses and register success.
- Distance learning provides a wide range of opportunities for people with disabilities, women raising children, those who do not have the chance to interrupt their primary work, and those living in remote areas.
- Online learning can be a source of motivation. Feedback from faculty students leads to increased self-confidence, encouraging students to participate more actively in the learning process. It can increase the effectiveness of learning.
- Distance learning is individual. That is, the learner decides the learning process. The distance learning student acquires skills and becomes more independent and self-responsible. Distance learning makes the learning process more creative and individual, thus facilitating the student's self-expression.
- In online learning, various video/audio materials, such as multimedia, can be combined with the materials provided, facilitating the understanding of the training materials. It is impossible only by the use of textbooks.

Disadvantages of distance education

- The first disadvantage of distance education is the availability of technological equipment for everyone. It is difficult for vulnerable segments of society to obtain a computer or smartphone for online courses. For example, In Denmark, Slovenia, Norway, Poland, Lithuania, Iceland, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands, over 95% of students report that they have a computer to use for working at home, but in Indonesia, it is only 34% [4]

- In addition to technological equipment, Internet connectivity and stability is a significant problem. Failures in the Internet connection cause a learning process to fail, resulting in inefficient lesson time.

- Online education has reduced collaboration between students and teachers, leading to isolation as dependence on technological equipment increases.

- The remote system gradually leads to a lack of communication skills, resulting in students being unable to communicate and share knowledge.

- In online education, the emphasis is mainly on theoretical knowledge; practical skills are relegated to the background, as academic lectures are easier to implement in distance learning. In the case of language instruction, the teaching of spelling suffers greatly.

- In the case of online learning, there are several fields of education that are left out of competition, as this form is more suitable for social and humanitarian areas. For example, for medicine, mathematics, all branches of art, it is entirely ineffective.

- Due to the rapid spread of the virus, it was almost impossible to train all the teachers to organize distance learning courses properly.

- In online education, the objectivity of the assessment is also a big problem, as control is incomparably more complex, fraud detection is more complicated than in the case of traditional procedures.

- One of the main tasks of online learning is to find out the learner's identity during the knowledge test, as it is difficult to say who is on the other side of the connection. The use of cameras is recommended to address this problem but is not a complete solution.

COVID 19 and Armenia

Along with the transition to distance education, dissatisfaction among the population due to being isolated increased. At the same time, however, we must be acknowledged that the distance learning model is a promising avenue for the

development and accessibility of education. Distance learning can be considered a self-learning tool of the 21st century. However, learning a foreign language during an epidemic can be very effective in preventing isolation, as mentioned above. Learning a new language during COVID-19 was an opportunity to continue everyday life and gain new skills.

On 1 March 2020, the first case of coronavirus infection was officially confirmed in the Republic of Armenia by a citizen from Iran. All those who had had contact with the latter were isolated, educational institutions were suspended until 9 March. On 16 March, a state of emergency was declared in Armenia, imposing several restrictions in all spheres of life [5]. Freedom of movement was restricted, rallies, vehicles, events and educational institutions were prohibited.

The declaration of an emergency state was, first of all, an excellent trial for the educational system of the Republic of Armenia. On 13 March 2020, the Minister of ESCS Arayik Harutyunyan, taking into account the need for measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus and instructions from the Ministry of Health, spoke about the suspension of classes on his Facebook live stream.

The Minister of ESCS called on all educational, cultural and sports organizations to organize themselves, to develop the most effective mechanisms not only to prevent the spread of the coronavirus but also to organize the educational process remotely on those days [6]. Along with online education, a crisis started in the RA education system, as not everyone was ready to switch to distance education. One of the first Armenian universities, where online education had already long been present via the Moodle learning platform, was the International Scientific-Educational Center of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia (ISEC NAS RA). After the educational institutions' suspension, ISEC NAS RA immediately switched to distance learning and resumed the online lessons.

The platforms mentioned above offer a number of services to their audience, aiming to modernize online education further.

Let's try to identify the advantages and disadvantages of the above-mentioned online platforms through research, compare the more widely used ZOOM and Google Meet remote platforms.

Following the introduction of online education under the emergency, ZOOM offered its free services. Various educational institutions in many countries began to use the Zoom Meetings Remote Management Platform to provide distance learning.

Concerning videoconferencing, ZOOM has a slight advantage over Google Meet. The most expensive paid version of ZOOM allows collecting the largest number of participants.

The most basic version of ZOOM is free, but in some cases, there are some limitations. It is noteworthy that we can organize videoconferences of up to 100 participants, which can last only 40 minutes.

Outside of the work program, ZOOM has unique solutions for education. Zoom Education licenses are intended for student, faculty, staff and alumni for pedagogical interaction within a classroom environment or the administration thereof and may not be used for any commercial purpose [7]. The educational program is available to a maximum of 149 hosts; each host has the possibility to organize an unlimited number of meetings, which can be accessed by more than 300 students. Google Meet is another online platform for remote meetings, video calls, and communication. Here, we have several options from which we can choose the one that best suits us. Although the free version of Meet is not very available, Google now allows you to use this version with some limitations. To unlock more features, you'll need to pay for Google Meet as part of a subscription to [Google Workspace](#) (formerly G Suite). Like Zoom, Google also offers education-specific Google Meet solutions [8].

Similarities and differences

- Both ZOOM and Google Meet have a screen sharing option that allows viewers to see what the presenter sees on the screen.
- Both platforms have the ability to record the lesson.
- Participants in Meet and Zoom can also raise their hands if they have to say something in a class or company meeting.
- In ZOOM, even with the free plan, you can [record a call](#), [mute participants](#), chat, share documents or your screen, make HD video calls, use a whiteboard or virtual backgrounds, send emojis, and a lot more: In case of Google Meet, G Suite subscribers can record meetings.
- From blurred to still photos and video backgrounds, Zoom has them all. Google Meet has none.
- One of the advantages of the ZOOM is the breakout rooms feature. If you're teaching groups, this is a must. This feature allows you to open multiple "rooms" and assign students to them for a set amount of time. You could use this to get students speaking in role-play tasks. Ensuring students are in smaller groups means that everyone is more likely to talk for longer than, say, a big group of 10, meaning students only get a few minutes speaking each lesson.
- The next advantage is the sound share. This enables students to hear the sounds that your computer is playing, whether they are music, or recorded dialogue, or the sounds from a video, or any other sound file you wish to have students hear during the class.

- When teaching/learning languages, professionals also use video-sharing. It's important not to over-use videos in the Zoom language classroom. Short, strategic use of videos is essential — not only to benefit language-learning but also to not overload the bandwidth requirements of your Zoom session.

- ZOOM is more suitable for remote oral examinations. You can organize your oral exams in the same manner you would organize them in the face-to-face classroom environment. Here ZOOM has another advantage; you can record the examination process if you wish to review it later for a more careful assessment of language produced by students.

It can be concluded from the above studies that it is more appropriate to use ZOOM to learn a foreign language, as the latter has many possibilities that can effectively contribute to language learning. The correct use of a remote platform can encourage students to learn new languages. However, we must note that the pandemic and many obstacles have also created opportunities for many people to improve and acquire new knowledge. In global isolation, people had the chance to use their free time at home to acquire new knowledge. Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication Club of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia has not ceased its activities even during the days of the pandemic. Foreign languages such as English, Turkish, French and Azerbaijani continued to be taught online. During this period, there has been an increase in the number of applicants. New groups were formed, which quickly began to adapt to the learning process. Students were very enthusiastic about learning foreign languages online, as this allowed them to learn languages more interactively through alternative means. The online meetings were full of exciting video and audio courses, multimedia, various schemes and schedules. Students had the opportunity to strengthen their knowledge of the language more effectively through different methods.

Later, an alternative course was created to teach a foreign language, in particular, Azerbaijani. An attempt was made to allow students to learn a new foreign language in an alternative way. A channel was created on Telegram that allowed those interested in the language to unite to learn the language for free, at preferred hours on preferred terms [9]. It enabled people to learn any foreign language at home, without any age restrictions, without spending any resources. A survey of students following the channel showed that the language training was practical enough and attracted a lot of interest. The training is conducted in many interactive ways; video clips are posted, which help learn the correct pronunciation of foreign words, inquiries are made through quizzes, which further strengthens the taught material, and quizzes are performed to test the acquired knowledge. The only drawback of such education is that it suffers from the teaching of spelling.

Research has shown that efforts to learn languages were practical during the pandemic. A large number of students interested in foreign languages was an explicit confirmation of this. Many young people have started to participate actively in distance education, taking advantage of opportunities to acquire new knowledge.

Conclusion

The new coronavirus has had an irreversible impact on people's lives. Especially the ideas about the traditional model of education changed. Nevertheless, learning effectively in various conditions remains a common goal for academics and university students. The traditional classrooms gave way to online platforms, and physical contact to gain new knowledge was no longer lost. Distance learning had both positive and negative effects. It can be said to allow students to receive an education that meets their needs. It is, therefore, necessary to build an open learning system based on distance learning technologies, the more advanced it is, the more effective it will be.

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