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Anna Daszewska

University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn

ORCID 0000-0002-3338-8190

Teaching English online based on the experience of the “AZS” Language School in Szczytno

Introduction

On 11th March, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a COVID-19 pandemic caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (PARP, 2020). In Poland, the first case of the virus was reported on 4th March, 2020. On 8th March a special act came into force called “The Act of 2nd March, 2020 on Special Solutions Related to Preventing, Counteracting and Combating COVID-19, Other Infectious Diseases and Emergencies Caused by Them” (Journal of Laws 2020: item 374). Under “The Regulation of the Minister of Education of 11th March, 2020 on Temporary Restriction of the Operation of Units of the Educational System in Connection with the Prevention, Counteraction and Eradication of COVID-19”, the operation of units of the educational system was temporarily restricted (Journal of Laws 2020: item 410). Under “The Regulation of the Minister of Health of 13th March, 2020 on the Declaration of an Epidemic Emergency on the Territory of the Republic of Poland”, restrictions were introduced to citizens, companies and institutions, effective from 14th March until further notice (Journal of Laws 2020: item 433).

According to the researchers of diagnosis and treatment, COVID-19 has proved itself to be a tricky illness which can emerge in different forms and levels of severity, from mild to critical, with the possibility of organ failure and death. With the progress of the pandemic and the rising number of the confirmed COVID-19 cases, there have been solid reasons to be really concerned about the consequences of this viral infection (Jamshid, Labakhsh, Tall et al. 2020: 1–2).

The new restrictions meant that in an instant, without any preparation, institutional and corporate managers, employees and their families in Poland were faced with a great risk of losing their jobs and social stability. Initially, without any assistance, facility managers had to make new, spontaneous decisions related to the immediate need to change the stationary to remote way of working. This was the only solution to maintain communication with employees and customers. Some companies had been unable to take on the new challenge and were forced to close down. Others, being flexible enough, quickly implemented new solutions to stay in business. One of these Polish working places was the “AZS” Language School in Szczytno, a training institution established in 2005. This local company has been providing

language teaching and translation services to companies, institutions and individuals in the Warmia and Mazury region for 16 years. Before the pandemic period, classes had been held at the school’s premises or at the workplaces of the employing institutions. The situation had changed completely since March 2020 and had been a great challenge for the company, teachers, students and their parents until the lockdown was cancelled on 30th May, 2020.

This article examines four major research problems related to the activities of the “AZS” Language School during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and attempts to answer four research questions. The first question is: What impact did the pandemic have on the functioning of the “AZS” Language School? The second question is: How did “AZS” teachers assess the online work during the pandemic period? The third question is: How did English language learners evaluate e-learning at the “AZS”? The fourth question is: How did the parents of the English language students perceive the online work at the “AZS” Language School? Altogether, 73 people (36 students, 34 parents, and 3 teachers) participated in the survey conducted in February 2021. The tools for the study were: analysis of company documents (coded lists of participants, a revenue and expense ledger), survey questionnaire and in-depth questions obtained during the free interviews. The analysis of the above research questions is preceded in this article by a section on the theoretical foundations of e-learning, the origins of e-learning in Poland and teaching English online, and followed by the conclusion, bibliography, netography, and appendices.

Theoretical background of e-learning

Distance learning – a way of teaching in a setting where a teacher and students are not in the same place – has been known for more than a century. Some sources even indicate that it was 300 years ago that the American press printed the first advertisement for distance courses. As early as 1883, the Correspondence Learning University was established in New York City, and in 1890 the International Correspondence School was founded. e-Learning, or learning conducted with the use of electronic media, is one form of online education (Bambrowicz 2013: 342). It covers content and instructional methods delivered via CD-ROM, the Internet and includes audio, video materials, satellite broadcast and interactive TV (Moore, Dickson-Deane, Galyen 2010: 2; Dudeney, Hockly 2007: 136–137).

e-Learning is a response to the demands of a mass society. The first need is connected with the willingness to gain knowledge throughout life (long life learning). Secondly, people expect easy and quick access to specialized knowledge. The third need concerns the reduction of learning costs. The emergence of educational platforms was another stage in the development of e-learning. They are specific learning environments available on the Internet that are compared to classrooms. In these “virtual classrooms” remote learning can be planned, implemented and evaluated at will (Bambrowicz 2013: 342–343). It may also be adjusted to the needs of a specific group (Erben, Cruz, Thornton 2009: 118) and create educational opportunities for individuals (Moore, Dickson-Deane, Galyen 2010: 2).

The origins of e-learning in Poland

In Poland distance learning has had a tradition of over 200 years and was initiated by the University of Krakow, which in 1776 made the first attempts at distance teaching. These were lectures using the correspondence method, mainly for craftsmen from outside the university. e-Learning appeared in Polish higher education in 2005. The Act of 27th July, 2005 – Higher Education Law (Article 164, paragraph 3) – enabled the conduct of remote academic classes. The rules for distant learning at universities were subsequently regulated by “The Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education” of 27th September, 2018. Universities must provide academic staff prepared to conduct remote classes, offer access to infrastructure and software that allows synchronous and asynchronous interaction between students and academics, provide electronic learning materials, offer students the opportunity to consult individually with a teacher at the university, as well as continuously monitor the progress of their studies, conduct exams at the premises of the university or its subsidiaries. In Poland e-learning mostly takes place with the use of educational platforms. It is both a database of teaching materials, as well as a common communication space for all participants of the teaching process (Hałas 2020: 261–264).

Faced with COVID-19 in March 2020, higher education in Poland had to make a decision on how to continue teaching and ensure the safety of staff and students. Many institutions made the immediate decision to cancel all stationary classes and move lessons to a virtual space, which is now known as “crisis remote teaching”. This refers to the use of completely distant delivery of instructional content that would normally be taught at location, and returning to its original form when the crisis subsides or is resolved. The primary goal of this situation is to provide temporary access to learning and quick and reliable support during a crisis or emergency (Gulati 2020: 68–169; Noise 2020: 261–264).

Teaching English online

Information technology plays an important role in language teaching. Computers were used for language research as early as the 1960s, and the spread of personal computers in the 1970s contributed to their implementation in language teaching. Nowadays, the development of computers makes it possible to use interactive multimedia packages, rich Internet resources and technological applications offering teachers ways of creating communicative spaces in language teaching (Lesiak-Bielawska 2015: 4).

In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the speed of implementation of remote education and all the restrictions, teachers have been trying their best to fulfil the educational mission. The educational effects of e-learning can be discovered once the implemented restrictions are no longer in force. The scale of problems related to mandatory remote teaching has been enormous and concerned all of the teaching areas, not only language education. The hardware, technological, location and family difficulties have affected many participants of e-learning. Teachers had to acquire knowledge about remote learning independently (Karolczuk 2020: 38–49) and with colleagues’ assistance (Murdaya et al. 2008: 134).

Parents, especially of younger school-age children, felt that they had been falling behind in many dimensions, and for students, e-learning had become a source of frustration at times. Some of the Polish children had even been excluded from e-learning because of the lack of adequate equipment and access to the Internet or an online connection with unlimited bandwidth. Therefore, the previously expressed admiration for e-learning, often poorly supported by practice, in the era of its widespread use, no longer evokes such enthusiasm as before (Karolczuk 2020: 42).

The impact of the pandemic on the “AZS” Language School

The analysis of the documents of the “AZS” Language School (the coded lists of participants and the revenue and expense ledger) revealed that during the first year of the pandemic the school had lost 30% of its students, and consequently, the company’s income also had decreased by 30%. The school was forced to purchase additional computer equipment for teachers to conduct online lessons, with further costs. The first challenge in March 2020 was to find an immediate way to change the way of working. Initially, the school offered students the use of links to the teachers’ recorded lessons posted on YouTube. This solution worked temporarily and gave the company precious time to train itself, create the new e-learning platform for the school, prepare logins and passwords for all the students and train parents by phone, especially of grades 1–3, how to use the platform. The company also struggled with how to quickly train the teachers and implement the new online working system due to the lecturers’ fear of a face-to-face contact concerning the pandemic. In addition, during the lockdown, the school stopped receiving orders to conduct language trainings in companies and institutions, where international projects and business trips abroad had been limited. As a result, the demand for language courses at these institutions decreased. For the language school, this meant not being able to hire additional teachers to run courses externally. In previous years, the company had conducted an average of two courses for companies per year and a translation business, which had given it additional income. The situation became difficult and required new actions. Then again, the company’s expenses related to electricity consumption, additional educational materials and cleaning supplies had decreased.

Online work at the “AZS” Language School from the teachers’ point of view

The school needed only three teachers during the first hit of the pandemic. Of those interviewed, 100% preferred to work on-site. The biggest problem for all the teachers had been the inability to have direct contact with the students, to monitor the ongoing work of individuals in the group, to approach students, point out material, and explain it on the spot. All the teachers also expressed the fear of changing the current way of working, from the stationary to remote one. The teachers had initially been afraid of using the e-learning platform and working in front of the camera. Another problem for all the lecturers was the inability to help the students during their technical difficulties. For example, the pupils had experienced problems with the connection, speakers, headphones, interruption, ejection from the programme, and many others. In addition, a novelty in grades 1–3 had turned

out to be the children working over the Internet assisted by their parents. These pupils needed constant help with the computer during lessons, which also caused the teachers' anxiety about the new way of working with the students and their parents at the same time. e-Learning had also made it necessary to modify the way of teaching and checking the students' progress. Therefore, vocabulary quizzes in older classes were replaced with oral answers, tests started to be filled in online.

There had also been advantages of e-learning. The first mentioned had been the ability to post videos and links that students could open immediately. Another positive aspect was no need to silence the students and less health problems due to the lack of contact with them. Additionally, the teachers had saved time due to not having to photocopy supplemental materials. The greatest satisfaction for the teachers turned out to be the awareness of achieving success in the new way of teaching, breaking their own barriers and going beyond the old patterns of working. Educational platforms, initially so intimidating, turned out to be easy to use. Satisfaction from the ability to flexibly adapt to the new circumstances was the greatest gratification for the teachers (Appendix 1: The questionnaire for teachers of the "AZS" Language School in Szczytno).

e-Learning at the "AZS" Language School from the students' point of view

The survey of the English language learners revealed both the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning. Among the questioned, 94% strongly preferred stationary learning over remote work. The biggest problem reported by 89% of the surveyed students of all age groups was the lack of real contact with the peers and the teacher. Additionally, the lack of opportunity to leave home for extra-curricular activities proved to be a problem for 69% of the students. Among 61% of the respondents, the problem had been the fear of working remotely, using the e-learning platform, and the fear of performing in front of the camera. Additionally, 75% of those surveyed had had technical problems related to computer use. However, 69% of the students evaluated the e-learning at the "AZS" Language School as strongly positive, 22% as positive, and 9% as negative. Moreover, 75% of the surveyed said that thanks to online classes they had quicker access to video materials, and 31% considered the lack of necessity to come to the school as a positive side of working remotely. Of the questioned students, 42% claimed that working online allowed them for more opportunities to cheat on tests and earn better grades. Additionally, 80% of the students identified learning to use the e-learning platform as a positive aspect of working online (Appendix 2: The questionnaire for students of the "AZS" Language School in Szczytno).

e-Learning at the "AZS" Language School from the parents' point of view

The survey of parents of the "AZS" Language School's students has also revealed the positive and negative sides of e-learning. Among the respondents, 50% of the parents rated online work as strongly positive, 20% as positive, and 30% as negative. In addition, 100% of the respondents claimed that they preferred stationary

work for their children. According to 70% of the parents, the biggest problem with e-learning had been the need to purchase equipment for remote work and technical problems they had struggled with. Furthermore, 62% of the surveyed said that the lack of familiarity with the e-learning programme had been problematic. Additionally, 30% of the questioned identified the need to help their child with the computer as a problem. Furthermore, 85% of the parents stated that the biggest benefit of working remotely at the “AZS” Language School was the possibility for their child to learn the way a computer and the e-learning platform work. Among the adult respondents, 30% considered as a positive aspect no need to bring their children to school (Appendix 3: The questionnaire for the parents of students of the “AZS” Language School in Szczytno).

Conclusion

This article has discussed teaching English online based on the experience of the “AZS” Language School in Szczytno. The sociological research conducted at this training institution revealed that due to the introduction of restrictions related to the presence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Poland, the school had lost 30% of its income, but managed to survive in business. The teachers, English language learners, and their parents overwhelmingly preferred face-to-face work to e-learning. Most of the respondents claimed to be satisfied with the remote studying at the “AZS”, but it had also caused many educational, technical, financial and emotional problems for all the parties. The biggest challenge in working remotely turned out to be the fear of a complete change in the way of working and troubles related to the computer equipment. However, the greatest satisfaction for the company, teachers, students, and most of the parents was the feeling of educational and technical success, continuation of work, adjusting to the circumstances, learning new skills, and functioning efficiently in the new world.

In general, the worldwide creation of the language online courses has both positive and negative sides in terms of overall satisfaction. Students frequently report the need for additional motivation to maintain their focus so as not to fall behind in their work. The learners whose expectations are not met, are frustrated with their experience. The importance of setting realistic student expectations has become obvious through the course of the teaching process. e-Learning can only be successful with the proper training and guidance for both students and teachers (Murdaya et al. 2008: 134–137). Working online is not for every teacher, and the e-classroom is not appropriate for every student. Many lecturers agree that the current technology they have access to is, in many aspects, too basic. Teachers continue to make choices based on their experiences and exposure to the online environment and with the use of technology in the teaching process. Today teachers working online may feel that they have been socially isolated from their colleagues. Nevertheless, e-learning continues to develop and teachers will have to revise their positions in online education (Gudea 2008: 110–111). e-Learning is important, but it cannot fully replace face-to-face education based on collaboration (Merryfield 2003: 161; Lier 2001: 90–93).

The experience of the “AZS” Language School during the first year of the pandemic period has shown the problems and challenges faced by many companies and institutions in Poland and worldwide. Sociologists of education should re-initiate the debate over technology and education, with the focus on technological relations. Important debates concerning various changes need to take place, asking who benefits, in what ways, from the connectivity supported by the Internet and other digital technologies. For example, does the Internet strengthen or disrupt existing social patterns and relations? Is the Internet acting only as an instrument of empowerment for the already empowered relationship between online and offline? Also, what are the differences between an individual having connectivity “done to them”, as opposed to being able to “do” connectivity by themselves? What advantages (if any) are to be by being disconnected rather than connected? (Selwyn 2010: 96).

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Appendices

Appendix 1

The “AZS” Language School, ul. Leyka 23/24, 12-100 Szczytno,
e-mail: azs_school@wp.pl

The questionnaire for teachers of the “AZS” Language School in Szczytno

Dear teachers! We would like to ask you to fill in this questionnaire about online language teaching at the “AZS” Language School. Your answers will help us learn more about your work and the problems you have currently been facing. The replies will help us improve the way the “AZS” Language School works. You may send the survey back via e-mail or bring it to the “AZS” office. Thank you!

1. Which way of working at “AZS” do you prefer? (Please circle only one answer.)

a) I prefer stationary work

b) I prefer remote work

2. What problems have you encountered while working remotely at the “AZS” Language School? (Please circle all answers which you agree with and/or write your own answer.)

| | |
|--|--|
| a) lack of real contact with learners | f) lack of possibility to approach a student |
| b) fear of using the e-learning platform | g) lack of possibility to indicate the material to a student |
| c) fear of working in front of the camera | h) lack of possibility to explain the material to a student on the spot |
| d) fear of working online with grades 1–3 | i) lack of possibility to help students with technical problems that occurred on their side while working online |
| e) lack of possibility to monitor current work of students | j) others (which) |

3. What problems have you encountered while studying remotely at the “AZS” Language School? (Please circle all the answers which you agree with and/or write your own answer.)

| | |
|---|--|
| a) lack of real contact with the group | e) fear of using the e-learning platform |
| b) lack of real contact with the teacher | f) fear of appearing in front of the camera |
| c) technical problems with using the computer | g) lack of the possibility to leave home for classes |
| d) fear of working via the Internet | h) others (which?) |

4. What have you gained from working online at the “AZS” Language School? (Circle all the answers you agree with and/or write your own answer.)

| | |
|--|---|
| a) I have learned how to use the e-learning platform | d) I have been able to get better grades |
| b) I have gained faster access to video materials | e) I have not had to come to school for classes |
| c) I have been able to cheat more during the tests | f) others (which?)..... |

Thank you for completing the survey :-)!

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Appendix 3

The “AZS” Language School, ul. Leyka 23/24, 12-100 Szczytno,
e-mail: azs_school@wp.pl

The questionnaire for the parents of students of the “AZS” Language School in Szczytno

Dear parents! We would like to ask you to fill in the survey about online English language teaching at the “AZS” Language School. Your answers will help us learn more about your children’s learning and the problems they have currently been facing. The replies we receive will allow us to improve the way the “AZS” Language School works. You can send the questionnaire by e-mail or bring it to the “AZS” office. Thank you!

1. Which is the preferred way of studying at “AZS” for your child? (Please circle only one answer.)

- a) I prefer stationary work b) I prefer remote work

2. How would you assess online working at the “AZS” Language School? (Please circle only one answer.)

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| a) definitely positively | d) definitely negatively |
| b) positively | e) difficult to say |
| c) negatively | ----- |

3. What problems have you encountered when working with your child online at the “AZS” Language School? (Please circle all the answers which you agree with and/or write your own answer.)

| | |
|--|---|
| a) lack of knowledge of the computer programme for remote work | d) technical problems with the computer |
| b) the need to purchase computer equipment | e) others (which?)..... |
| c) the need to help the child with the computer | ----- |

4. What benefits have you gained from your child’s online learning at the “AZS” Language School? (Please circle all the answers which you agree with and/or write your own answer.)

| | |
|--|--|
| a) not having to bring the child to classes | d) learning to use the programme for remote learning |
| b) spending more time with the child at home | e) others (which?)..... |
| c) learning computer skills by the child | ----- |

Thank you for completing the survey :-)!

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Abstract

The article examines four major research problems related to the activities of the “AZS” Language School during the COVID-19 pandemic and attempts to answer four research questions. Altogether, 73 people participated in the survey conducted in February 2021. The tools for the study were: the analysis of company documents, survey questionnaires and in-depth questions. The study of the research questions is provided with the theoretical foundations of e-learning, the origins of e-learning in Poland, teaching English online, as well as the conclusion, bibliography, appendices, and summary.

Nauczanie języka angielskiego online na podstawie doświadczeń Szkoły Językowej „AZS” w Szczytnie

Streszczenie

W artykule przeanalizowano cztery problemy badawcze związane z działalnością Szkoły Językowej „AZS” w czasie pandemii COVID-19 oraz podjęto próbę odpowiedzi na cztery pytania badawcze. Łącznie w badaniu zrealizowanym w lutym 2021 roku wzięły udział 73 osoby. Narzędziami do przeprowadzenia badania były: analiza dokumentów firmy, kwestionariusz ankiety oraz pytania pogłębione. Analiza pytań badawczych została opatrzona podstawami teoretycznymi e-learningu, genezą e-learningu w Polsce, nauczaniem języka angielskiego online, a także konkluzją, bibliografią, załącznikami i streszczeniem.

Key words: e-learning, online teaching, teaching English online, pandemic, COVID-19

Słowa kluczowe: e-learning, nauczanie online, nauczanie języka angielskiego online, pandemia, COVID-19

Anna Daszewska – dr nauk społecznych w dziedzinie socjologii, mgr filologii angielskiej, pracownik naukowo-dydaktyczny na Wydziale Nauk Społecznych Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego w Olsztynie. Opublikowane prace: *Agresja i jej związek z niedojrzałością dziecka jako przejaw uczestnictwa społecznego* (Kolno 2009); *Janusz Mariański, Religia w społeczeństwie ponowoczesnym* („Ateneum Kapłańskie” [Włocławek] 2012), *Globalizacja, tożsamość, wartości w ujęciu Roberta Wuthnowa* (Lublin 2021); *Zjawisko demagogii na przykładzie polityki Donalda Trumpa* (w: *Od słów do czynów. Rzecz o demagogii*, red. Marek Sokołowski, Toruń 2022, s. 205–218). Zainteresowania badawcze: socjologia edukacji, socjologia nowych mediów, socjologia religii.