



*Tools and models for distance teaching  
in an English Language and Culture  
university course: the flipped classroom and  
cooperative learning in a digital environment*

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**ABSTRACT:** The Covid-19 pandemic emergency has contributed to shift towards a more learner-centred teaching approach accelerating an ongoing trend in the university system. Re-arranging teaching materials and devices in different forms using digital tools and delivering online lessons, has been a complex challenge for academics. This necessity to re-adapt and possibly implement and re-shape traditional contents has contributed to consolidate teaching strategies as the flipped classroom (integration of pre-recorded lectures with online synchronous lessons) cooperative learning among peers (both in class and on online platforms with discussion groups), and small group teaching. These teaching strategies have also brought about a general re-thinking of learning strategies on the students' part. To meet students' needs in this emergency situation, materials have also been frequently developed by teachers themselves. Given such premises, this paper reports on the challenging attempt to adopt the aforementioned teaching strategies in an online course (English Language and Culture) held in 2020/21 at the Department of Education Science (Roma Tre University), also providing the students' response to a questionnaire submitted after the completion of the course.



KEY WORDS: flipped classroom; distance teaching; COVID-19; task-based activities; teaching strategies

## INTRODUCTION: E-LEARNING AND THE PANDEMIC EMERGENCY

In recent decades “technology has added multifaceted new dimensions to [both] teaching and learning, which include new ways of teaching every aspect of language, new pedagogical and assessment approaches, as well as new ways of conceiving and conducting research development” (Chapelle and Sauro 1). This has been even more the case during the current Covid-19 pandemic emergency, which has contributed to a shift towards different teaching approaches, accelerating an ongoing—and inevitable<sup>1</sup>—shift in the university system from traditional face-to-face classes to fully online, blended or web-facilitated courses. University teachers have been forced to re-think materials using digital tools in various ways, providing online courses, but trying to “educate technology rather than digitalizing the classroom” (Prensky).

Although “the real revolution of e-learning is a revolution in terms of communication, widespread use, and accessibility to learning processes” (Biasi *et al.* 213),<sup>2</sup> it is also clear that there are obstacles and difficulties which must be overcome. The difficulties that have arisen are mainly due to deficiencies in our (Italian) technological infrastructure and the lack of widespread computer literacy. Many related problems cannot be solved without the prompt action of governments and institutions. As such structural problems are beyond the remit of individual professors and educators, a specifically targeted plan for digitalization and for training in e-learning literacy is necessary. As early as 2001, the *E-learning Action Plan* produced by the European Commission stated that e-learning is “the use of new multimedia technologies and the internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration” (European Commission, 2001). Since the recent COVID 19 emergency, the *Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)* of the European Commission (European Commission, 2020) has become an even more compelling priority; this plan is meant “to support the

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the word “inevitable” is perhaps naive and does not imply any exclusive recourse to online learning: as stated, it refers to three distinct options (i.e., fully online, blended or web-facilitated courses). Nevertheless, the term “inevitable” is a bold statement on my part: it also conveys a more personal wish to see an end to any reluctance towards new technologies (it is disconcerting to see that some university teachers still avoid using microphones at conferences and/or lessons even when classroom size makes such use necessary).

<sup>2</sup> “Ma la rivoluzione vera e propria dell’e-learning è una rivoluzione in termini di comunicazione, diffusione e accessibilità ai processi formativi.”



sustainable and effective adaptation of the education and training systems of EU Member States to the digital age.” Though this plan was launched in a moment of emergency, it should not be seen solely as a consequence of the pandemic, but as a general goal in a technological era.

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that in response to the recent urgency to switch to online learning, several national and international institutions and organizations have provided help and support with online resources or created documents listing useful teaching/learning websites. UNESCO, for instance, has created a webpage with a list of online resources to help face the challenges that derive from distance learning and education. The UNESCO website page reads:

The list of educational applications, platforms and resources [...] aims to help parents, teachers, schools and school administrators facilitate student learning and provide social care and interaction during periods of school closure.<sup>3</sup>

In response to the emergency, also the Italian Ministry of Education and the Italian Ministry of Technology, Innovation and Digitalisation signed agreements with the state television service (RAI) and several firms and associations to provide an adequate substitute for the lack of in-presence learning. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education provided schools with financial resources for the allocation of tablets and laptops on free loan to facilitate this shift. Nevertheless, a recent study (Mascheroni at al.) produced by the UNICEF Office of Research—Innocenti and Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore—on children’s and parents’ experiences of remote learning during the COVID-19 crisis in Italy reported that approximately 27% of families did not have suitable technology during the lockdown as several areas of the country still have poor or unreliable internet connections.

In addition, it must also be acknowledged that, as Hodge at al. (2020) have recently warned after conducting research into the university courses on offer during this recent academic year, “well-planned online learning experiences are meaningfully different from courses offered online in response to a crisis or disaster”: hence the necessary distinction between an “emergency remote teaching” and “high-quality online education” (Hodge at al.). Thus, the present paper does not conflate policies that are clearly meant to tackle emergencies (i.e., the UNESCO guidelines) with a more general move towards distance learning as the consequence of the availability of new technologies. Rather, it illustrates how experiences that have derived from these obligatory re-adjustments to university teaching have also given rise to a timely re-thinking of teaching and learning practices by using, adapting and implementing strategies for a new situation.

The Italian Minister of University and Research, Gaetano Manfredi, recently (10<sup>th</sup> November 2020) stated:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/solutions>.



The pandemic has returned teaching to the centre of the academic debate: we must not miss the chance for there to be a structural transformation, considering that we now have many students who are digitally aware. The classic face-to-face lesson, which is not very interactive and makes little use of technology, is now an antiquated method.<sup>4</sup>

This view is somewhat partial as it suggests that there is a dichotomy between innovative teaching activities (or at least teaching activities other than frontal lessons) and online learning (which may actually also involve teaching frontally). In addition, even if it might be true that most university professors do not use technological devices in their classes, this does not mean that their teaching strategies are obsolete. Nevertheless, a problem of our universities, as confirmed by recent research (Ramella and Rostan), is the lack of attention given to online strategies. The study included a survey of 3,398 university professors and researchers at Italian public universities. Only 9% of respondents said that they had previously had practical experience of distant teaching, and just 17% had some experience of e-learning, mostly involving sharing teaching materials with students (Ramella and Rostan).

On the other hand, the so-called frontal, lecture-like lesson, which traditionally relegates students to being mere listeners, is not as common as we might expect. The aforementioned research (Ramella and Rostan) found there were three didactic strategies prevalent in the period preceding the emergency. A “transmissive-dialogic” strategy, which is close to the traditional stereotype, but with a significant variation: although based on frontal lessons, the class is enlivened by teacher-learner discussion. This strategy accounted for 23% of teacher experiences. A second strategy was defined as “transmissive-interactive”: here the previous dialogic model is further enhanced by the active involvement of students through exercises, workshops, group work, etc. This strategy was used by 33% of teachers. Finally, there is a “collaborative-innovative” strategy in which the transmission of knowledge is accompanied by the contribution provided by students not only in the interpretation and processing of the information received, but also in its transformation into personal skills. In addition to group work, this strategy often also includes peer-to-peer discussion and evaluation methods, activities aimed at enhancing soft skills, and work intended to stimulate creativity and problem-solving abilities. This strategy was used by 45% of teachers.

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<sup>4</sup> “La pandemia ha riportato la didattica al centro del dibattito accademico: non dobbiamo perdere l'occasione di una sua trasformazione strutturale, considerando che ormai abbiamo tanti studenti nativi digitali. La classica lezione frontale, poco interattiva, che utilizza scarsamente le tecnologie rappresenta una modalità non più attuale.” This speech was given on the presentation of a study entitled “La didattica a distanza durante l'emergenza Covid-19. Torino e le Università italiane a confronto”, a national survey carried out by the Centro “Luigi Bobbio” (Università di Torino) in collaboration with UNIRES (Centro interuniversitario di ricerca sui sistemi di istruzione superiore). See [https://www.unitonews.it/index.php/it/news\\_detail/la-didattica-distanza-durante-lemergenza-covid-19-torino-e-le-universita-italiane-confronto](https://www.unitonews.it/index.php/it/news_detail/la-didattica-distanza-durante-lemergenza-covid-19-torino-e-le-universita-italiane-confronto) (last accessed February 8th 2022).



This interesting overview shows that as far as teaching strategies are concerned, Italian universities are much less static and more innovative than is usually believed (and as expressed in the above-mentioned quotation from the Minister). Nevertheless, teaching strategies and the use of technology do not necessarily go hand in hand and the correspondence between the two elements does not necessarily signify a single trend—that is to say, adopting an innovative strategy does not always imply the use of technical devices. This is demonstrated once again by Ramella and Rostan, who show that the need to switch to online modalities in 2020 also caused a drastic reduction in the more innovative teaching practices. While the “transmissive-dialogic” strategy doubled in the lockdown (47% of teachers) and the “transmissive-interactive” strategy remained almost constant (31% of teachers), the “collaborative-innovative” strategy was more than halved (just 22% of teachers).

The risk posed in this switch to online classes is that students interact with teachers and colleagues passively (as if listening to the radio or television); correspondingly, teachers might find themselves talking to a blank screen, without seeing how students are reacting (Siciliano and Ramírez Ganfornina). The results of the study conducted by Siciliano and Ramírez Ganfornina in several universities in Puglia reveal that “according to the perceptions of the students involved, online emergency teaching works when the teacher manages to build a good educational relationship with students through the design of teaching, dialogue, and a stimulating and constructive atmosphere” (Siciliano Ramírez Ganfornina, 434). This final remark should be taken as a crucial warning for online effective learning/teaching experiences.

## TEACHING STRATEGIES AND METHODS: A COURSE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AT ROMA TRE

Given such premises, the present paper reports on different teaching strategies adopted in a distant learning course of English Language and Culture held in the academic year 2020/21 at the Department of Education Science (University of Roma Tre). This is a 6-credit one-semester course (with four hours of classes per week) that is open to second year students (MA) who are expected to have a B1 entrance level. The final assessment is based on an exam for non-attenders and a combination of course work activities and presentations for attenders. In this case, several adjustments to the traditional classes were implemented to provide students with suitable lessons and materials notwithstanding the restrictions imposed by the pandemic emergency. Some of these changes and adjustments will undoubtedly be implemented in the future, as they are not necessarily limited to the requirements of distance learning.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Some preliminary observations are in order before discussing a specific case of emergency teaching and its consequences on didactic practices and strategies. The data presented in the two aforementioned surveys (Ramella and Rostan, and Siciliano and Ramírez Ganfornina) are not specific to language classes but to university teaching in general. While it would be interesting to have specific research conducted involving university teachers and language students, the circumstances are much



In order to prepare students for a shift in perspective as regards learning, it was necessary to state explicitly that online lessons would move away from the traditional mode of frontal instruction. Students would be required to participate actively and study materials closely, adopting a proactive attitude to creating, evaluating and sharing knowledge in a synchronic learning experience.

Indeed, the first teaching<sup>6</sup> strategy adopted in the course was that of the *flipped classroom*<sup>7</sup>. Before attending the weekly online classes on Microsoft Teams, students were advised to work autonomously, watching pre-recorded traditional lessons—posted in advance and available on *formonline* (Moodle) and YouTube—as well as study a selection of materials (on *formonline*) or complete specific tasks.<sup>8</sup> This preparatory study drew on only some of the course materials available, as one week (or less) would not have been sufficient for students to read everything. The subsequent synchronous classes thus allowed for discussion of the concepts raised in the pre-recorded lectures and materials, which were already familiar to the students. However, the lessons were not only open debates, but included semi-structured conversations and discussions of materials produced by the students themselves.

The sudden need to adapt to the flipped classroom as a remote learning experience thus created a new paradigm for those students who previously based their learning strategies on traditional modes of frontal teaching intended for a silent audience or at least for an audience that could not yet access the course materials. Although many Italian university students attend lessons, study the subject throughout the course and carry out weekly assignments, it is also true that the Italian system often only requires students to pass an exam (through formal testing) after the course is over rather than be evaluated with ongoing tests or continual assessment. Furthermore, students might not be encouraged to speak during class or participation might be

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more complex than a simple distinction between language learning practices and other learning experiences. Moreover, such a distinction would imply further sub-distinctions (a theoretical approach to language as linguistics and translation studies vs. practical language courses; courses intended for language majors vs. those for students from other departments, and so on).

<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that in-presence classes would have been 'traditional' frontal lessons. Indeed, it was important to inform students that active participation was needed and that an online lesson is different from a TV show!

<sup>7</sup> This approach, which preceded the pandemic, has received growing interest over the past decade: "In Italy [...] experiences of flipped classroom and flipped learning are quite widespread in K-12 courses (<https://flipnet.it/nuova-mappa/>), as well as being disseminated through manuals (Cecchinato and Papa, Longo, Maglioni). Flipped experiences carried out in the university context are instead more sporadic, as explained by Bevilacqua (2018). Overall, many researchers—Hamdan *et al.*, Yarbrow *et al.*, and more recently Raffaghelli—point out that rigorous quantitative and qualitative research on FL is limited and mainly refers to higher education" (Bevilacqua *et al.*, 406). Though this quotation reads that FL is less frequent in the university context, it later adds that research mainly concerns higher education. Apparently, FL is becoming more and more studied in different contexts. As for the flipped classroom and its theoretical rationale, see, among others, Talbert, Mori, O'Flaherty and Phillips, Flores *et al.*

<sup>8</sup> On the introduction and implementation of this strategy, eventually defined as the *flipped classroom*, see Innocenti and Mazur.



limited to the occasional question or providing a short answer. There is often no shared learning experience that includes giving personal opinion or debating the issue from shared/different perspectives.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the fact that “technology has become an integral part to the ways that most language learners in the world today access materials in their second and foreign language, interact with others, learn in and out the classroom, and take many language tests” (Chapelle and Sauro 1), several students seemed to be resistant to change and preferred more traditional tools and strategies. Consequently, this course also signified a general re-thinking of learning strategies on the part of the students (specifically for those students who intended to attend classes), encouraging them to feel involved and sometimes change their perspectives regarding direct participation and working consistently and constantly on the texts provided. Classes were interactive learning experiences, as students in the synchronous lessons were asked to work and report back on the main issues discussed in the pre-recorded lectures—either by completing specific tasks or simply expressing their own ideas—rather than sitting passively and listening to a traditional lecture. This strategy allowed students to prepare more thoughtful and relevant questions and provide immediate feedback. The time spent in class was devoted to discussion and teamwork activities that led to a deeper understanding of what had been explained and discussed in the pre-recorded lessons.

Such methods have proved particularly useful in this period of social distancing, since it fulfilled the secondary, yet crucial, function of traditional universities, that of nurturing social (academic) communities, sharing knowledge and enhancing social interaction—especially at a moment when the latter has been considerably limited. This new arrangement fostered better relationships between peers, as well as greater engagement, once students were motivated to carry out the tasks consistently and progressively. Several scholars have observed that students who attend flipped classrooms are happy with this methodology (see Roach, Jacot *et al.*). This was apparently also true for the specific course considered here: encouraging feedback was given by several students, who explicitly stated that they would miss the weekly classes as lessons had become regular moments of social interaction which filled a void in their everyday lives during lockdown.

As mentioned above, each lesson would start with a discussion of a specific topic. There were generally *task-based activities* based on the two main exercises that were part of the weekly homework:<sup>10</sup> an online discussion forum and one or more structured

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<sup>9</sup> Some clarification may be needed here: giving students the chance to ask questions in class (whether at the end of and/or during the lesson) is not an innovative teaching strategy and is not very different from the traditional frontal lesson. Despite students not being just passive listeners in such a learning situation, they are not really encouraged to start a discussion or embark on any real dialogue. On the other hand, professors who intend to conduct a real interactive lesson should start simply asking leading questions or echo students’ replies but should eventually leave the possibility to have an open debate and work on specific tasks as student centred activities.

<sup>10</sup> The course was not entirely structured as task-based language teaching. Here it is useful to refer to the distinction between *task-based language teaching* and *task-supported language teaching* (see Cortés Velásquez and Nuzzo 29).



gap filling activities. Accordingly, discussions were gap activities consisting of sharing personal opinions about the social /cultural / linguistic issue in question. Other activities were more structured, and covered issues requiring research on authors and specific references. Always, “the whole-class activity consisted of a pedagogic dialogue in which the teacher’s questions were [...] invitations to learners to demonstrate their ability, not pretended requests for enlightenment” (Cook 259). Each task did not have a primarily linguistic goal, but a communicative one (Cortés Velásquez and Nuzzo 20). Indeed, as the course was not only about English language, the point of each task was not to master a specific language point, but to achieve a particular non-linguistic goal. The tasks provoked discussion in the L2 on topics of interest connected to the student’s degree course. Therefore, unlike Cook (262) who states that task-based learning is concerned only with “short-term fluency gains”, I would say that in a context of *integrated content and language learning*, task-based learning simultaneously fulfills various linguistic and non-linguistic needs. Most of the assigned tasks in our course dealt with expressing meanings rather than manipulating linguistic forms: the main objective was extra-linguistic (apprehending content) as students were meant to exploit their own linguistic resources to convey meanings and show not only their communicative skills, but also their ability to express their own views on the issues raised in class. The intention was to respond to a real communicative need (see Rizzardi and Barsi 459): that of being able to discuss complex topics in English that related to their specific fields of interest.<sup>11</sup> Students were encouraged to study and eventually discuss how languages shape cultural identity both within and across political borders, and to consider the ways in which language can shape and control the way we think.

Such differences in class organization also led to adopting a *cooperative learning among peers* approach both in class and with discussion groups on online platforms. These activities included short (pre-prepared) presentations, debates (based on what others had said) and even brainstorming or idea storming (thus exercising the students’ abilities to discuss topics in English when speaking off the cuff). Students were encouraged to reply to what their colleagues said during our classes (either agreeing or disagreeing) and to create conversation threads on the different forums. They were thus working together, sharing their opinions, and comparing their experiences with those reported by other students. This encouraged them to feel part of a community (*our class*), to help each other formulate concepts in English (thus developing communicative skills), and to learn from each other. This approach partly replaced more competitive and individualistic traditional learning, though it did not ignore the students’ own individual responses or disregard personal skills and abilities.

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<sup>11</sup> Content dealt with issues such as gender equality and discrimination, social integration and immigration policy, cultural differences, the use of language for political purposes and how ideas of culture are interpreted.



## COURSE MATERIALS

To meet students' needs in this complex situation, "materials [were also] frequently developed by teachers themselves, who add[ed] their personal response to their teaching needs as well as their own perspective in the teaching-learning process" (Lopriore 183). There was thus a switch from course books to self-produced materials based on the integration of various resources. These materials—available on the course web page (Moodle) provided by the academic institution—included extracts from books and online articles as well as multimedia resources (videos and audio materials) and pre-recorded lessons and tests. The course web page was divided into different sections (centering on different issues) with a forum for discussion. The use of self-produced materials was considered crucial as it gave students everything they needed without them having to buy books (thus avoiding the potential difficulty of searching out second-hand or cheaper editions) or needing to access the library (which was closed for several months of the emergency). In this respect, it must be remembered that "lectures are [just] one instructional aspect of an overall ecosystem specifically designed to support learners with formal, informal, and social resources" (Hodges *et al.*): libraries and other infrastructures are a crucial part of the learning environment and online emergency courses have to supply students with commodities that can no longer be provided by the institution.

Part of the available material, which centred on issues relating to the topic discussed in the specific unit, consisted of different tasks and exercises developed using procedures of task-based training and assessments. While the discussion forum, which presented specific controversial issues to be discussed (first in written form, and then to be reported orally in the subsequent lesson), assignments might consist of research on authors that students were not familiar with. For example, in the section devoted to gender studies and women's emancipation, a Word document listed well-known quotations from women who had over time contributed to the debate, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Emily Davis, bell hooks, and Ursula Le Guin. Students were asked to identify the author who had written / spoken the words reported in the document and investigate their importance, while also considering the relevance of the quotation to the argument.

## DIFFICULTIES AND LIMITATIONS

The main drawback of this approach—based on flipped classrooms, task-based activities and cooperative learning—was the Department's non-compulsory attendance policy. Adopting this learning experience was only possible for those students who intended to attend regularly and not for 'non-attenders' or for those who only made "cameo appearances" (Grove). Active participation also meant that attenders always had to be prepared in advance and respond to various requests. Being silent was not an option as it meant being excluded from the whole purpose of the learning



experience. Consequently, the fact that various Italian universities offer students the chance not to attend classes at all (especially in the Humanities), or to attend silently, and consequently read and study the materials at the end of the whole course, becomes an obstacle when trying to implement new strategies that imply a rethinking of old habits and learning procedures.

Unfortunately, it must also be acknowledged that such strategies can be applied fruitfully only in certain contexts, such as in *small group teaching* (see Mills and Alexander), preferably with students of a similar language level. The latter highlights a twofold problem: firstly, flipped classrooms are possible when the average number of students attending each lesson is not much higher than twenty as this gives the majority of attenders the chance to talk and interact. The number of potential students on the course in question was far higher, and if other students had decided to attend the class, it would have been difficult to apply the same method as successfully. Secondly, the average linguistic level of students must be taken into account. In the Department of Education Science the level is not homogeneous since students have attended different high schools (with very different input as regards English), and are generally not required to have a specific L2 level to access any of their courses. Consequently, while some students have a solid linguistic background, others have a poor (and in some cases extremely poor) grasp of English.

Finally, it is clear that in an emergency situation, where there has been an abrupt transition to distance learning with new strategies, modalities and, for example, new deadlines for course assignments (and a new course policy in general), the key word is flexibility. For this reason, asynchronous activities might be more reasonable on some occasions than synchronous ones (see Hodges at al.). Furthermore, students need time to get used to re-orienting their approach to new learning experiences.

## STUDENT FEEDBACK

Given this situation, two distinct reactions on the part of the students involved might be expected: on the one hand, those with very poor English might not attend lessons, feeling a sense of inadequacy and being embarrassed and discouraged when requested to participate actively; on the other hand, those with a solid grasp of English might consider the lessons low-priority and not attend. Nevertheless, data collected from a short survey with thirty-five respondents showed that half of them attended over 50% of the lessons. Furthermore, their level of English (whether attenders and non-attenders) was not homogenous, thus contradicting any expectations that attendance was directly linked to language level.

The main challenge in such a context was to involve all the students and create an atmosphere that was interesting and stimulating for those who already had a good level of English, while still being comprehensible and useful (and not stigmatizing mistakes) for those with poor English. Lessons would then be rewarding for both categories.



Data regarding the students' satisfaction, and their perception of the different elements of the course as well as their perceptions of personal learning outcomes and learning experiences were collected using a mixed method approach. This was done via a questionnaire consisting of both open- and close-ended questions, i.e., both qualitative and quantitative types. However, due to the limited number of students attending lessons and completing the questionnaire, it is advisable to rely here on just the open questions, which measured the students' perceptions of the main learning goals of the course. In the future, when more data is hopefully available, it will also be possible to consider a statistical survey.

The results of the questionnaire showed that students who did not attend the actual lessons particularly appreciated the pre-learning materials (pre-recorded lectures and handouts) as these gave them the opportunity to listen to more traditional lessons and better understand the issues raised. Many also listened to the synchronous lessons that were recorded and made available. In contrast, attenders particularly valued interactive in-class meetings and the teacher's supportive intervention. Both attenders and non-attenders, however, claimed that the main goal of both interactive and pre-recorded lessons was to enhance self-confidence in speaking activities. Attenders also appreciated the chance to study materials before class in order to have a clear idea of the topic under discussion; this also helped them manage any feelings of anxiety, a common problem relating to speaking in public. Similarly, task-based activities were appreciated. In particular, semi-structured questions were seen as helpful for students in order to break the ice within the peer group. Finally, one further advantage of synchronous lessons was the chance to make the acquaintance of other students and create workgroups: students reported that in a difficult time like the pandemic emergency and consequent lockdown, our classes fulfilled a valuable social function.

A downside of this teaching/learning experience was the tendency for some participants to indulge in monologues. To this effect, some students suggested setting a specific time limit for each intervention in class, thus allowing all attenders to take the floor. While a good idea, this did not always prove possible, and time management in online classes remains a challenge. A further potential problem, as mentioned above, is crowded classes, which again would have made it difficult for all participants to have the chance to speak (a factor which is also true for in-presence courses).<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes of the questionnaire and of the final exam have proved both the limits and the efficacy of remote teaching in the present emergency. Although the online

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<sup>12</sup>I do not consider a group activity, where there is a spokesperson for each team, is a valid solution for two reasons: firstly, it might mean that not everyone in the group has effectively taken part in the discussion and practiced their English (meaning that the teacher has no feedback on some students). Secondly, if an important purpose of an active participation is to practice the language, delegating the job to a representative might undermine the whole activity.



adopted strategies have been particularly valued by students, the evidence shows that some “non-attenders” still rely on more traditional teaching. Yet, the good news is that many students who did not attend also started to partly reshape their approach to the course including recorded synchronous lessons (even if seen as asynchronous) as a crucial part of their learning experience. As for attenders, even though they initially resisted the move to active learning, they gradually felt more at ease in moving out of their comfort zone. They took the risk of sharing their thoughts in English, thus gaining confidence and self-possession. Furthermore, some said that they were reassured by their peers when expressing any doubts and uncertainties as they realized that no individual has all the answers and that they could figure out problems together.

The structure of the course also proved effective for the final oral exam. Students recognized the benefit of practicing the language constantly and of starting early with their exam preparation. The possibility to talk in public during the lessons also helped them feel less anxious and stressed up at the final exam. Furthermore, they appreciated the fact that they did not have to study too much material in the last few days, that were mainly devoted to revising what have been done during the semester.

To conclude, teaching in emergency conditions is clearly not the same as teaching well-structured courses designed regardless of such specific urgent needs. Likewise, structured online teaching implies building a real set of tools and practices for remote lessons that cannot be adequately prepared in a very short time in an emergency situation. However, it must be acknowledged that our response to the pandemic has contributed to the current debate on education in two different ways. On the one hand, it is now clear that bridging the digital divide and the digital inequality must be a priority at a governmental level: these are institutional responsibilities in terms of access to education.

On the other, it should also be clear that not only professors but also students need to reconsider their traditional teaching and learning practices in order to adapt to and exploit new technologies and alternative methodologies. These do not necessarily replace old strategies and courses but enhance them. Finally, it must be stressed that online teaching does not necessarily imply innovative teaching strategies *per se*, although the latter should be implemented in online teaching if we want to reach students and involve them actively in their learning processes. More specifically, a positive aspect of this move to online teaching, which will also be useful in blended teaching environments in a non-pandemic (or ‘semi-pandemic’) situation, is the accessibility of the pre-recorded lessons and extra-materials that were needed in the very first weeks of lockdown. The production of material to be assigned for asynchronous lessons undoubtedly increased professors’ workload initially. However, such lessons can profitably be used for future courses, either as introductions to the course, as asynchronous lessons, as summaries, or even as supplementary materials on online platforms.



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