TEACHING AND EVALUATION OF ONLINE GEOGRAPHY LESSONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT. *Teaching and Evaluation of Online Geography Lessons during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Romania.* Today, primary, middle and secondary schools in Romania access eLearning from different educational platforms, students manage connecting to virtual classes, sending/receiving emails, watch PowerPoint presentations, taking online tests. All these take place in the context of the pandemic determined by COVID-19. The authors tried to point out some observations to all the changes generated in the traditional Romanian schools, because of the generalized digitalization. Geography teachers try to make the necessary changes in their teaching and evaluation methods, to keep up with the digitalised demands of nowadays society.

Keywords: digitalisation, online classes, COVID-19, Google Classroom, SWOT analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The occurrence of the first COVID 19 cases in Romania started the forced digitalization process of the Romanian educational system. Teachers and students face a reality without precedent in the history of Romanian educational system: taking classes online.

On 11 March 2020, due to a national decision to stop or lower the expansion of COVID cases in Romania (Decision no. 6 of CNSSU), the schools were closed initially for 2 weeks, act followed by the implementation of online education.

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During the emergency state in Romania (16 March – 15 May 2020), teachers and students managed to stay connected with each other, accessing the WhatsApp application, forming groups for each class, in order to receive the lessons and homework. Then the reversed process started after learning the lessons and writing the homework: sending the homework back to the teachers. The difficulty of this process was on both sides, teachers and students depended on the phone's capacity to process all the sending and receiving data.

Later, by using the Zoom application, the online educational process developed differently. Thus, teachers and students were able to see and talk to each other, a most welcoming event during the lockdown. But the educational process was influenced by many problems: poor or no internet connection, the lack of modern gadgets, laptops, computers, etc.

There was an upgrade of the educational process, emphasised by the utilisation of Google Classroom, which assured a better connection between the two sides, and the improvement of the educational system.

In order to better organize the educational system during this pandemic situation, for the 2020-2021 academic year several scenarios were established in Romania by the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, together with the Minstry of Health, according to the COVID infection rate (Decree no. 5487/1494/2020):

- Green (face-to-face) scenario: all students and teachers go to school (under 1‰ COVID-19 positively-tested people)
- Yellow (mixed) scenario: half of the class is online and half at school (between 1 and 3‰ COVID-19 positively-tested people)
- Red (distance learning) scenario: classes are held online (over 3‰ COVID-19 positively-tested people).

In the autumn of 2020, the school started in Romania according to the mixed scenario, which lasted from September 2020 to November 2020, followed by the distance learning scenario. Some of the geography teachers considered the mixed scenario a real challenge, as they had to pay the same attention to all the students (in class / online), to check the connection to his/her online students, to assess the students present in class, while providing exercises to those online. Most of the times, the Geography lessons were disturbed by poor internet connexion, which led to the fragmentation of the lesson and loss of interest for the new lesson.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the authors analysed online education as a social phenomenon in the whole Romanian education system during the coronavirus pandemic period. The results were drawn from descriptive observations upon students in the middle school and secondary school and the effects upon the learning system, by the different teaching modalities: online, hybrid, onsite.

Differences may be easily noticed not only in changing tools applied for teaching, but also changing the methods of teaching, that must adjust to eLearning demands.

According to Edelhauser and Lupu-Dima (2020), the "2020 coronavirus crisis has shown an old weakness of the Romanian education system, the incomplete adaptation of the teaching process to the use of digital tools. In the Romanian education system, eLearning became a must on 16 March 2020, when the whole education system was reset for eLearning because of the state of emergency".

We agree with these authors that there is a growing impact of the internet in daily life as well as in education, because of the technological transformation to which humanity has been subjected and ignoring the digitalization is the equivalent of refusing to progress.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF eLEARNING IN ROMANIAN PRIMARY, MIDDLE AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Górska (2016) stated that eLearning would bring a new quality to academic education, as access to advanced technologies is very highly valued by young people accustomed to the daily use of electronic media. Many high school students approaching future studies at university are guided by the possibility of following courses offered not only with traditional methods.

According to Castle and McGuire (2010), one of the biggest assumptions commonly made in the development of eLearning programs is that the more visually appealing a program, the more the learning that will occur.

The vast internet network has provided access to multiple geographical data, most of it used for the first time by many geography teachers. Thus, geographical information could be easily linked to history facts (tutorials about the great geographical discoveries, the digital map of the European Union, etc.), biology (images about different biogeographical areas of the Earth, endangered animal species, etc.), maths (exercises of calculating the local hour, the scale of the map, different locations on Earth, using Google Maps, etc.), foreign languages

(different tutorials are presented in a foreign language, so it is important for the teacher to translate the new terms correctly, for a precise understanding of the new geographical notions).


Fig. 1. Use of a foreign language in a PowerPoint Presentation,
followed by accurate translation.
Source: the authors

Therefore, a successful lesson requires a consistent amount of work on behalf of the geography teacher, in order to reach the ideal education, established by precise objective activities (Maria Eliza Dulamă, 2000), and depends on the access and implementation of new and diverse information sources in the Geography lesson (Maria Eliza Dulamă, 2008). Before the online teaching, most geography teachers used for their Geography classes the Geography book, theme maps, scientific articles, different magazines, etc, while nowadays, the sources of information are mostly taken from the internet: YouTube tutorials, digital maps, spectacular geographical images, geographical articles, etc. The lessons themselves changed their presentation mode, so instead of just writing down the new lesson, students are presented PowerPoint lessons, are required to do different exercises in Excel, Paint, etc. The result is a better and faster way to understand new geographical terms, with the help of inserted images, maps, links, terms borrowed from other areas of study. The main goal at the end of the lesson is a better understanding of the geographical reality (Maria Eliza Dulamă 2008, O. Mândruţ and Steluţa Dan 2014, N. Ilinca 2015, Elena Matei 2020).

But the teacher's effort to make a great lesson may be in vain sometimes, because of the poor internet connection, caused by the massive number of internet users, lack of proper network structure, loss of the wireless internet signal, as a result of a bad weather, and so on, and the lessons are thus shortened

and inefficient. The positive aspect in online is that the teacher can upload the lesson on Google Classroom, to be accessed by those interested.
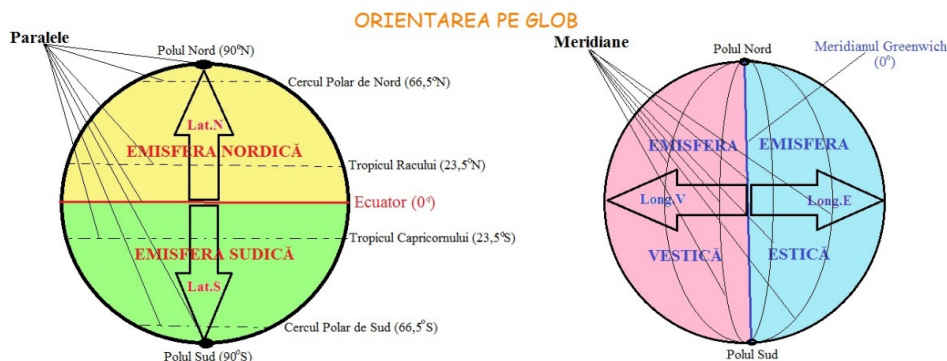
Fig. 2. The sketch of a Geography lesson made in Paint during a Geography class.
Source: the authors

Drawing a parallel between the classic Geography lesson in school versus the online Geography lesson, one can establish pros and cons for each system, with some differences in particular cases.

In the classroom, the teacher can use the Geography lab (unfortunately not all schools have it), the blackboard (the smart board is not present in all the classes or schools), the map, the Geography book, all these for the benefit of the students, who are more or less motivated to study Geography. Teaching Geography in school follows the steps already established by the methodology: after checking the homework, along with the geographical notions from the last lesson, the new lesson and its objectives are announced and written on the blackboard/smartboard/Geography notebooks, the new geographical terms are explained for a better understanding and finally the homework is set, in some cases (see also Maria Eliza Dulamă 2000, Maria Eliza Dulamă 2008, O. Mândruț and Steluța Dan 2014, N. Ilinca 2015, Elena Matei 2020).

Online, the teacher can create new, spectacular geographical lessons, by inserting lots of different pieces of materials during the Geography lesson, such as: images, short videos, YouTube tutorials, digital maps, PowerPoint slides loaded with interesting reality facts, etc.

For a successful result, according to Castle and McGuire (2010), the course content is the most important component in the teaching process, no matter how advanced the technology is and how competent is the teacher's ability to connect with students. "The positive impact of efforts to constantly

upgrade course content material, especially with respect to online instruction, is clearly seen in student assessments. Once course content has been addressed, then instructor teaching skills and the ability to connect with students and motivate them is likely an important component" (Castle & McGuire 2010, p. 38).

The most important disadvantages of online classes are that the field trips are not allowed, and the big group projects are replaced by individual projects. The time for presenting these projects is also limited or restricted because of the internet connection.

There are pros and cons for each educational system methods. In order to reduce the gap in the educational process of the students, a full-time commitment of both parties (parents and school) is necessary. So, in order to stay connected to the online educational system, students need internet access, computer/laptop/tablet, a desk and ideally their own study room. But these elementary conditions for accessing online education are not within reach to some poor and large families, who live in precarious conditions, with no money to invest in the education of their children. The consequences of these events will be seen in the years to come and will lead to a higher rate of unfinished studies for poor children or even abandoning school completely.

Other disadvantages of the online education are: the lack of legislation in force to establish the rules for what information is good or useful for the students in the educational process, how many digital competencies a teacher should possess in order to adapt himself/herself to the online reality, whether parents are capable to replace the teachers in order to fill in the gap in the educational knowledge where online education is not possible. But the process of online education continues and so, the necessary amendments will be established gradually, for a better online school environment.

4. SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE ONLINE GEOGRAPHY LESSONS

STRONG POINTS

- use of visual material resources (images, pictures, maps, diagrams, movies, geographical videos, video applications, online games, etc) in a higher percentage compared to the lessons in school;
- the use of motion pictures or films (films, geographical videos, geographical video applications) compared to those motionless leads to a higher rate of understanding of the geographical notions and the geographical reality;

- the possibility to assess the students' knowledge in far more diverse and attractive ways by means of Quiz tests, tests made on Google forms, Kahoot! tests;
- earned time resources (working online from home favours earning more time usually spent in going/coming to/from school) which can be used for other purposes.

WEAK POINTS

- time-consuming resources on selecting the right information for the Geography lesson (images, pictures, maps, diagrams, graphics, etc). All these must be sorted out, processed and adapted to the online lesson scenario (PowerPoint lessons, maps in Paint, etc);
- assessing the students' knowledge is not as accurate as in the classroom. Many students are overrated, because of the possibility that their answers are influenced/offered by someone else: parents, brothers, classmates, etc.
- for a proper evaluation of the students, the teacher should come up with more tests on a certain theme (more numbers), in order to limit the possible fraud;
- the large amount of time a teacher has to spend sitting, in front of the computer, as a teacher has to evaluate the students' tests and homework, which can lead to health issues for the teachers: poor sight and back bone pain. This occurs because the teacher has to establish a feed-back for each individual student, while in the classroom, the information is provided only once, for the entire class;
- children in primary school need adult supervision until they are capable of using the technology and can participate and interact during online lessons;
- online activities lead in time to a more sedentary life (teacher or student), and higher risks of childhood obesity.

OPPORTUNITIES

- the implementation of network infrastructure in school units, to access online education, with the help of the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research;
- the parents' support to provide high tech resources to their children and private spaces for learning;
- the large amount of geographical information on the internet (images, pictures, maps, diagrams, graphics, etc.);

- use of the digital school manual;
- use of various methods for students' assessment: Quiz tests, tests made on Google forms, Kahoot! tests.

THREATS

- power outage/no internet connection for periods of time and in different locations;
- the lack of high-quality technology: computers, laptops, smartphones, web cameras, high speed internet network;
- although the Geography lessons can provide quality information and offer spectacular visual effects, some of the students are not one hundred percent involved in the educational process because of the presence of other disturbing factors, such as: more family members in the same room, radio/TV on, temptation of computer games, written communication to classmates or friends, etc.;
- the teacher does not hold total and fair control in the assessment of his/her students, as many students close their web cameras, in order to easily communicate with their parents/brothers/classmates in order to get better grades;
- without parental support, some of the students cannot handle alone the technology, and have difficulties in sending the homework to the teacher, in due time.

5. SUGGESTIONS

These months of COVID-19 pandemic determined teachers and students to face and deal with outstanding situations for the Romanian educational system. The government, the local authorities, the schools' directors, the teachers and parents, have all tried to find and apply measures to support their children for accessing educational platforms. With tremendous efforts, they have succeeded to implement eLearning across most of the country and we all hope to make use of it in the future as well, when the pandemic ends. Below, some suggestions of using online education are presented, and maybe, if applied, will make the educational life for some students more fulfilling:

- Free access to online education, if there are health issues that do not allow students to be in school;

- Possibility for students to connect to online classes, if due to some impediments (bad weather, broken school bus) the student cannot be in the classroom;
- Possibility for smart children to access better education, provided by top schools, if the student is enlisted to that school, for online classes;
- Openness for school directors and teachers, to enlist at their school, for online classes, children who would/could not be there physically.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Despite all the challenges that brings along, eLearning opens the path to new ways to access primary education in Romania and follows the trend imposed by the more efficient use of technology, in Romania's 21st century society. Before the pandemic situation there was no possibility to access primary, middle and secondary school online, as often there was no internet in schools, no educational platform, no trained teachers able to handle hybrid lessons. In Romania, only some universities had distance learning platforms. Maybe in the future, eLearning will still be used for diverse situations, to allow students who cannot be at school physically, to access online education.

The positive impact on the Romanian educational system of this forced digitalization is that the traditional Romanian schools face a lift-up of their old, traditional teaching methods, and the result will be a skilled young generation, able to respond to the demands of a highly technologized society.

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