

Learning language online – interaction without interaction

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We live in a time where an (unknown) disease has spread across the globe and is making changes that affect every aspect of life, with that the educational system. Here are known facts: Language – shifting, something that is alive, used by the whole world, a thing that connects us; COVID-19 – shifting, something that destroys lives, spread all around the world, a thing that divides us. Meeting with people became a taboo topic. So, is studying, especially languages, lacking or is change imperceptible? Is a person capable of acquiring the same amount of knowledge when in solitude or a crowd?

It is said that genius is 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration but neither is possible if a person sits “locked” in a room. Inspiration can come when a person is alone, but it mostly comes from observing other people, people that surround us. Without an idea or even an outline of it, no work can be done, so that 99% are, in a way, useless. Online classes did just that. All students, and teachers, are doing is sitting behind a screen. Motivate yourself! Easier said than done – it is hard to accomplish something if you do not have someone telling you “You have got this” or even “You will never be able to do this”. Those words, positive or negative, push us forward. Your room and you – only silence. With mathematics, one can put on some background music and spend hours alone solving a task, but with language, one needs to be surrounded by people; one needs to use it in real life to be able to reach the full potential. To return to music – yes, it can be used to acquire a foreign language, but it cannot be the primary or the only way of understanding the complexity behind it.

Studying a language should be fun, and, sadly, COVID-19 made it a nightmare. Imagine sitting in a classroom with your peers, absorbing new words said by the teacher. You are there, present, somewhat compelled to listen – Why? Because you are there, you are limited with actions. Whereas home, online, you can either mute the professor, read a book, or be on your phone messaging your friends how boring the lecture is. There is no one to see you, no one to warn you to listen. You are alone. English, German, Croatian and every other language is best learned when listened to and spoken. Who am I supposed to talk to at home? The best solution – stand in front of a mirror and make conversation. That is just silly, nothing can be learned. You can make one mistake after the other without even knowing it – language learned is broken, hours wasted. There is no doubt that the learners should make a lot of effort and not rely only on the teachers; both are equal. But if the lecture is monotonous and exhausting – which most online lectures are – then the will to learn dies. A lot has fallen on the lecturers’ shoulders, it is not an easy task to transfer something that should be an interactive discussion to an online chat room where using a microphone makes chaos. Because of COVID-19, public education feels like self-education. Something is not clear, you do not understand something? Consult the internet! There is an option of asking your professor, but they are buried in e-mails, and it is easier to google what you need. With that, online teaching can be extremely inefficient and unreliable.

The main difference between online and live lectures? Written and spoken language. It is possible to study a language by looking at it, by writing research papers, by observing phrases, clauses, and sentences. It is not, however, possible to learn a language that way. Leading discussions, hearing others talk and make mistakes, and then being able to correct those mistakes, that is what means to truly study and to learn the language properly. COVID-19 has taken that away. People learn a language by listening to it. Doing it online can be tricky. Why? Not everyone, and not always, has the best internet connection which leads to a lot of words, even sentences, being misheard and thus

learn incorrectly. Looking from the student's perspective there are two types – students who find it easier to talk to their computers/laptops and not seeing their teachers' reactions and students who get anxious by not seeing it. There is a way to incorporate spoken language more easily into the lectures; it too has a downside. Recorded speaking does not come from the heart, it can be learned and perfected, and re-recorded until it is without a mistake. All of it leads to more broad usage of written language. It is said, if you want it hard enough, you will do it no matter the circumstances. It is the truth. Where there is a will, there is a way – but how should a student find that will when even the teachers are unmotivated and burdened by the new situation?

As aforementioned, language is something that has the power to connect us, but COVID-19 is destroying its foundations. Live classes are more active, more people talk, more questions are asked, and more knowledge is shared. This ailment shattered it. People will always communicate, but is the written word of the same value as the spoken? No! Some people use grammar-correct language in messaging but, the newer the generation, the more illiterate it is. Online classes are a solution for the situation we are in but let us hope it is temporary. Online classes should never replace live classes and all they provide. Thus, COVID-19 has taken the interaction from the one thing that needs it to survive. Things are slowly getting back to as they were, but as much as the teachers try to convey the knowledge, part of it is lost in our generation – make up the lost knowledge yourself!