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Review paper

## ORGANIZATION OF ONLINE LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION TEACHING AND EXAMINATION IN TIMES OF COVID-19

#### Milena Sazdovska-Pigulovska

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**Abstract:** The global Covid-19 pandemic marked the beginning of a new era in the field of education. On the one hand, it shed light on the flaws of the existing educational systems in many countries across the world. On the other hand, the new reality created space for educational improvements, which resulted in tremendous methodological and organizational changes and novelties. Furthermore, technological advancement contributed to the advent of technology in education, hence technology is nowadays a constituent part of both teaching and learning. The shift from traditional to online education opened the doors for use of e-learning platforms in the academic environment, for creation of virtual classrooms as well as for digital collaboration, whereas the latter is particularly important in language and translation teaching. This paper deals with different aspects related to the organization of online teaching and examination after the start of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The author provides an overview of the most commonly used platforms for educational and assessment purposes, which are particularly applicable in language and translation teaching and examination as well as crucial for future organization of education in the digital era. The main goal of this paper is to define and discuss the concept of language management systems (LMS), to emphasize the advantages and drawbacks of currently applied practices and to suggest ways to improve future online teaching and examination in the field of language and translation at all philological faculties in North Macedonia.

**Keywords:** distance learning, online exams, language and translation, educational ecosystem, learning management system.

#### 1. Introduction

The global Covid-19 pandemic, which started in early 2020, marked the beginning of a new era in the field of education. On the one hand, it shed light on the flaws of the existing educational systems in many countries across the world. On the other hand, the new reality created space for educational improvements, which resulted in significant methodological and organizational changes and novelties. Furthermore, technological advancement contributed to the advent of technology in all spheres of education. Hence, technology has become an inevitable part of teaching and learning nowadays.

In particular, the shift from traditional to online education opened the doors for use of e-learning platforms in the academic environment and for creation of virtual classrooms and digital collaboration between teacher and learners. The use of technology requires digital skills, which are defined as a range of abilities to use digital devices, communication applications, networks to access and manage information, to create and share digital content as well as to collaborate digitally.<sup>1</sup>

In North Macedonia, many faculties had been facing a strong need for introducing changes and novelties in terms of teaching and conducting exams before turning to full online education. Hence, some of the changes that were forced upon educational institutions when the global Covid-19 pandemic started in 2020 were quite welcome and anticipated. For instance, they were enthusiastically accepted by many members of the academic staff at the author's institution, which is the Faculty of Philology in Skopje. This is owed to two main reasons, firstly, the desire to modernize and to improve the quality of teaching and, secondly, the necessity to keep up with more advanced European universities offering similar studies in foreign languages and translation.

#### 2. Subject of Research and Purpose of the Paper

This paper discusses different aspects of the organization of online teaching and examination after the start of the global Covid-19 pandemic, with special focus on applied practices and challenges in the field of language and translation teaching. The author provides an overview of the most commonly used platforms for educational and assessment purposes, which are particularly applicable in language and translation teaching and examination.

The main goal of this paper is to define and discuss the concept of language management systems, to emphasize the advantages and drawbacks of currently applied practices and to suggest ways to improve future online teaching and examination in the field of language and translation at philological faculties in North Macedonia. Namely, e-learning platforms and other communication platforms have been widely used at many universities across the world even before the Covid-19 pandemic and play a crucial role in organizing education in the digital era. Platforms enable the creation of hybrid learning environments where face-to-face interaction and classroom-based teaching methods are complemented with online interaction and digital exchange of information and knowledge.

One of the main conclusions presented by the author is that many of the introduced changes and novelties were more than needed and long anticipated by academic staff and that education is constantly evolving and transforming, whereas educational institutions must keep pace with the digital age and use technology to enhance the quality of both teaching and learning.

#### 3. Organization of Online Language and Translation Teaching

Many European universities offering studies in foreign languages and

<sup>1</sup> https://en.unesco.org/news/digital-skills-critical-jobs-and-social-inclusion.

translation have been using e-learning platforms to complement face-to-face teaching and to facilitate content sharing and learning for more than ten or twenty years now. The rest of the European universities followed this trend when Covid-19 started and education transitioned online. E-learning platforms are used to create hybrid or online learning environments and they are suitable for online courses in different fields ranging from mathematics to foreign languages. In this way, educational ecosystems are created with their own unique plethora of features relevant for a particular academic field.

Online language and translation teaching at the author's institution is organized through use of different e-learning platforms, video and other communication platforms and online examination platforms. They offer various features and have different advantages and disadvantages. Namely, e-learning platforms enable overall online teaching management, such as teaching online courses through audio-video communication, digital content creation and course publishing as well as digital collaboration between teacher and students. They also support text and video content creation and digital exchange of information and materials between teacher-students, teacher-teacher as well as between students themselves. In this way, digital ecosystems are created, whereas basic knowledge of technology is required as many platforms are fairly intuitive.

The author provides an overview of different platforms and their advantages and disadvantages for online language and translation teaching.

#### 3.1. E-Learning Platforms

According to Alvite and Barrionuevo (2010), e-learning platforms are dynamic learning environments aimed at facilitating both the teaching and the learning process. Different e-learning platforms are used by universities worldwide, whereas noticeable examples include Microsoft Teams, Moodle (Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment), Udemy, Sakai, etc. They have similar or differing features, and each platform has its advantages and disadvantages compared to other platforms. For example, Moodle<sup>2</sup> is a popular learning management software, which is widely used for language and translation education across universities in Europe. In North Macedonia, Moodle is used by different faculties, for example it has only recently been used at the Faculty of Philology for teaching foreign languages and translation, but enjoys longer use at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Information Technology.

E-learning is also closely related to learning management systems (LMS). The most widely quoted definition of LMS is the definition provided by Ellis (2009): "A learning management system is a software application for the administration, documentation, tracking, reporting and delivery of education courses, training programs or learning and development programs". There are two types of LMS: cloud-based and those that require an open source license. Learning management systems were first introduced in the late 1990s in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> https://moodle.org/.

higher education sector, however today many of them are widely used in the corporate sector as well (Davis et al., 2009). A typical example of this dual use is the Microsoft Teams platform which enjoys extensive use in both academic and corporate environments. However, a defining feature of LMS, which differentiates it from e-learning platforms is the ability to track learner progress, which is crucial in order to create an educational ecosystem.

The national e-learning platform in North Macedonia is Microsoft Teams, which is used in all levels of education, from elementary, to secondary and higher education. At the Faculty of Philology, the most widely used learning management system is Microsoft Teams.<sup>3</sup> It enables the creation of a virtual environment through creating personal and shared workspaces, sharing learning content and creating digital libraries, organization of virtual classes and collaborative work during online classes, use of breakout rooms for small group discussions, afterclass discussion forums, recording of online lectures, video creation, student progress tracking through insight on student participation and assignment credits as well as final grades, sharing homework and assignments, providing teacher feedback on assignments, creation of classroom notes, organization of online quizzes or exams, etc. It is applicable for all types of academic courses, including online language and translation education.

Some of the advantages of Microsoft Teams compared to other platforms include digital collaboration of students working on the same grammar assignment or on the same text translation during online class, which is especially important for language and translation education since this feature results in abandoning the old-fashioned lecture-and-note approach in language teaching as well as the outdated read-and-translate approach in translation teaching. The breakout rooms feature is of key importance for online small group discussions of language students who are involved in speaking exercises, especially for students working on translation projects and related research. Language and translation students are particularly impressed with digital libraries which systematically organize and archive course content, quizzes and assignment exchange, whereas this feature is also convenient when preparing for exams.

#### 3.2. Digital Communication Platforms

Digital communication platforms are of two types and are either used for audio-video conferencing, especially in case of geographic barriers and social distance, or for document sharing and archiving. The key aspect of digital communication platforms is that they are not the same as e-learning platforms since document sharing and video conferencing features are already integrated in e-learning platforms and language management systems. Hence, digital communication platforms are typically used for professional purposes and real-time conferencing, thus enjoying wide use for organization of webinars, online conferences, panel discussions, project management, etc. Although they cannot

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> https://www.microsoft.com/en-ww/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software.

be used to create educational ecosystems, digital communication platforms are mainly used by educational institutions for organization of online conferences, meetings and webinars as well as panel discussions during the Covid-19 pandemic, but they are also often combined with other platforms in order to conduct online examination.

Video conferencing software enables online communication for audio and video meetings and seminars with built-in features, such as screen sharing, recording and chat. 4 The most widely used video conferencing software nowadays includes Zoom, Skype, Cisco Webex, Google Hangouts Meet, Team Viewer, Adobe Connect, etc. On the other hand, typical content and document sharing and archiving platforms include Slack (document sharing and archiving platform with real-time messaging), Edmodo (platform combining LMS, collaboration and Zoom video conferencing tools), Asana (project management platform), Skype for business (video communication and messaging platform), Dropbox (cloud sharing application), Google Drive (web-based sharing platform), etc. Although digital communication platforms are not typically used for educational purposes, before the advent of learning management systems at educational institutions in North Macedonia, many faculties integrated different types of digital communication platforms for some aspect of the teaching or learning process. For example, even during traditional education with physical presence at lectures, archiving and exchange of assignments and real-time messaging between teachers and students often took place via Slack and Asana, whereas the exchange of course materials usually took place via content communication platforms, such as Google Drive and Dropbox. With the introduction of blended learning many teachers were prompted to use video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom for various types of assignments and webinars, Skype for online interpreting, Google Hangouts Meet for online teacher meetings, as well as Cisco Webex and Adobe Connect for international webinars.

Today, with the advent of learning management systems in educational institutions, the use of such digital communication platforms for educational purposes is limited to webinars, online conferences, panel discussions, online examination, etc. Namely, the main disadvantage of using video conferencing tools for online language and translation teaching is the inability to archive course materials and assignments and the inability to work collaboratively during online class. They also do not enable creation of classroom notes that students can learn from after class, but only enable a chat box for exchanging short information during online class. The advantage of content communication platforms is that users can personally create some of the features by creating channels and workspaces for a particular course, whereas teachers can archive course materials and assignments. However, the main drawback of content management platforms is that they do not enable collaboration during online class and do not offer audiovisual communication and need to be used in combination with the above video

<sup>4</sup> https://www.g2.com/categories/video-conferencing.

conferencing tools. Hence, when used independently, communication platforms do not enable creation of educational ecosystems, but the combined use of audio-video communication tools and content communication platforms are an alternative to faculties where learning management systems are not available.

#### 3.3. Content Management Platforms

LMS are different from Content Management Systems (CMS) as the latter are a type of software that enables creating a website and managing content. According to Alvite and Barrionuevo (2010), CMS are applications that help users edit and manage information through a web browser and offer an administrative system through which web content is provided and managed by a group. Typical examples of CMC include Joomla, Drupal, Word Press, etc., however they are not primarily used for educational purposes, but mainly for organizational purposes that facilitate some aspects of the education process, such as online library creation, etc.

#### 4. Organization of Online Language and Translation Examination

With the start of the global Covid-19 pandemic many educational institutions were suddenly faced with the inability to conduct exams with physical presence of students and were therefore forced to conduct online exams. This entailed extensive teacher research on available online solutions which are both reliable and affordable. In the new reality, language and translation teachers are given the choice between use of digital exam platforms or combination of alternative platforms. The author provides an overview of both options with their advantages and disadvantages for online language and translation exams.

#### 4.1. Digital Exam Platforms

Different types of exam platforms are available online, which are suitable for creating, automating, monitoring and grading online examinations at educational institutions. Typical examples include Exam.net (for secure digital exams creation and surveillance), Synap (for question-based learning and assessment), Test Invite (for self-made and ready-to-use professional assessment), Flexi Quiz (web-based exam, quiz and test software), Class in Pocket (online examination system with analytics for student performance), etc.

Exam.net is a widely used platform for remote examinations and it is frequently used at the author's institution as well. This exam platform supports the creation of online exams by uploading files, by exporting students' essays and answers to Google Drive, One Drive or directly to the computer in order to share grading and feedback with students, by supporting auto-marking of exams, use of audio files, speech synthesis, spell check, programming, formula sheets, etc.<sup>5</sup> It offers high reliability of the overall online examination process, which is especially suitable for a large number of students taking the same exam instantaneously.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> https://exam.net/.

One of the main advantages of Exam.net is the option to create different types of exam questions from multiple-choice to open-ended questions, etc. Hence, it is suitable for conducting online language exams, such as EFL exams where students either provide descriptive answers to theoretical exam questions, complete grammar exercises or writing assignments or fill out multiple-choice questions on listening and reading exercises. The use of this platform for online translation exams is also possible in such a way that the teacher uploads a text in pdf format, students use the writing area in the Student Workspace where certain options are disabled, such as translation help, spell check for different languages, synonyms and speech synthesis. Despite of the cheat protection mode at this remote exam platform, teachers should allow student access to external resources during online translation exams, however a problem arises when students leave the exam area, which requires them to provide an explanation and usually takes a long time to write.

Exam.net offers abundant features that indicate whether a student is attempting to manipulate during an online exam, such as switching between exam area and browsers, taking longer pauses, etc., so it is particularly suitable for online language exams where students are not expected to consult online resources but only to complete essay questions, give short answers or multiple-choice questions. Although it offers numerous advantages, especially for language exams, one of the main disadvantages of this remote exam platform is the inability for video surveillance of the students taking an online exam. Furthermore, another disadvantage is the pricing policy which depends on the number of students per individual exam. Bearing this mind, other alternatives are also available for online exams, whereas the author of this paper provides examples of several alternatives suitable for online language and translation exams.

#### 4.2. Alternative Platforms for Online Exams

After transitioning online, one of the main issues for teachers is conducting online exams. When deciding between remote exam platforms and learning management systems for online examination, a teacher must choose an option that provides full insight into the screens of all students taking the online exam and that ensures limited possibility for student manipulation. An alternative option for organizing online language and translation exams are language management systems, whereas teachers often make a decision between Moodle or Microsoft Teams.

Namely, Moodle exams offer quiz functionality, survey tools, etc. and integrate options such as timing (with time limit, due date and submission grace period), grade category, layout of questions, different question types (multiple-choice, essay answers, random short answers) and marks, changing order of questions for second attempts, review options and teacher feedback on each exam question, extra restrictions, etc. For comparison, Microsoft Teams offers a key

feature for speaking exercises that are a constituent part of language exams, such as EFL, etc. In particular, the "breakout rooms" feature allows the teacher to make small independent groups of several students who engage together in a private speaking activity which is supervised by the teacher. Zoom is mainly used for conducting listening activities within an online EFL exam, however one of its main disadvantages remains the inability for the teacher to simultaneously share his/her computer sound and monitor shared students' screens.

However, for conducting online exams in the field of translation, learning managements systems, such as Microsoft Teams, are often combined with audio-video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom. For example, Zoom allows both switching between screens and browsers as well as pauses, but one of its advantages is that it enables synchronous surveillance, high quality video and sound as well as recording of the online exam. In particular, Zoom offers multiple screen sharing of all students taking the online exam, whereas this feature is not supported by Microsoft Teams as only one student can share his/her screen at a time. By combining LMS with audio-video conferencing platforms, the teacher closely monitors how all students complete assignments during the online exam, or how they translate a text and search for terminology online. In that way, the teacher has fast and real-time insight into every word typed and every website opened by students, which is especially important for translation exams where students engage in information mining and consult various online resources. All students leave their cameras and microphones on during online exams and cannot see each other's screens. The main disadvantage of Zoom is that students who join the exam later could have insight into somebody else's screen, but by choosing the host and member option the teacher can prevent students from joining later. Furthermore, if not using a paid version, Zoom only allows limited 45-minute online sessions or shorter, which usually complicates online exam taking.

One of the key issues with online examination is how to make sure students are not cheating or sharing the exam questions with somebody else during and after the online exam. On the one hand, this problem is usually solved by providing limited time for students to complete given assignments or translations and by not accepting students who join the exam later than the rest of the group. On the other hand, each student translates a text sent via the One Note or Class Notebook option in Microsoft Teams, where the translated text is archived and reviewed by the teacher, but not shared with other students. Furthermore, the author makes a comparison of different features of relevance for online language and translation exams in Table 1 below, thereby highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of audio-video conferencing platforms and learning management systems.

Table 1

	Audio-video communication platforms	Learning management systems	
Number of participants supported	High	High	
Time sessions	Limited if not paid	Unlimited	
High-quality and real-time audio-video communication	Yes	Yes	
Multiple screen sharing of all participants	Yes	No	
Full display of shared screens	Yes, what the student sees is what the teacher gets	No, participant chooses which browser/document to share on their screen	
Collaboration on joint assignments	No	Yes, via class notebooks, notes and forms	
Student portfolio and document archiving	No	Yes	
Grading	No	Yes	

#### 5. Conclusion

The subject of research in this paper is the organization and planning of education in the digital era, with special focus on language and translation studies. The purpose of this paper is to discuss organizational and methodological aspects of online education, with special focus on the mostly used platforms applied in the virtual language and translation classroom, which are the main subject of research and discussion in this paper. With the shift from traditional to online education and the advent of e-learning platforms in the academic environment, the digital changes that were implemented in educational institutions when the global Covid-19 pandemic started were quite enthusiastically accepted by many members of the academic staff who were willing to modernize and to improve the quality of teaching as well as to keep up with other European universities offering similar studies in foreign languages and translation.

In addition to changes, possibilities for using technology to enhance education have been the topic of discussion and research of many scholars (Ramaiah 2020; Hillier et al., 2018). Thus far, numerous national discussions on improving future online language and translation teaching and examination have been held at educational institutions. For example, the Faculty of Philology has organized a series of online panel discussions on best practices for conducting various online language exams, including online translation exams, which have resulted in specific recommendations for improving applied practices in the future.<sup>6</sup>

Based on the author's overview of different platforms used since transitioning to online education, it can be initially concluded that learning management systems

<sup>6</sup> https://coda.io/d/ d\_E7zCctFNy/\_suzcx#\_luVxs.

play a key role in organizing future language and translation teaching and exams in the digital era that we live in. In particular, the comparison provided in Table 1 demonstrates that LMS are suitable for all types of academic courses, whereas Microsoft Teams enjoys very frequent use for online language and translation education. Some the advantages of Microsoft Teams compared to other platforms include digital collaboration of students working on the same assignment or translation during online class, which is especially important for language and translation education since this feature results in abandoning the old-fashioned lecture-and-note approach in language teaching as well as the outdated read-and-translate approach in translation teaching. The breakout rooms feature is of key importance for online small group discussions of language students who are involved in speaking and listening exercises, whereas students are also provided with digital libraries which systematically organize and archive course content.

The key aspect of digital communication platforms is that they are not the same as e-learning platforms since document sharing and video conferencing features are already integrated in e-learning platforms and language management systems. Although they cannot be used to create educational ecosystems, digital communication platforms are mainly used by educational institutions for organization of online conferences, meetings and webinars as well as panel discussions during the Covid-19 pandemic, but they are also often combined with other platforms in order to conduct online examination. The main disadvantage of using video conferencing tools for online language and translation teaching is the inability to archive course materials and assignments and the inability to work collaboratively during online class. Hence, when used independently, communication platforms do not enable creation of educational ecosystems, but the combined use of audio-video communication tools and content communication platforms are an alternative when learning management systems are not available and they are a good solution for online exams.

With the start of the global Covid-19 pandemic and transitioning online, one of the main issues for teachers is conducting online exams. In the new reality, language and translation teachers are given the choice between use of digital exam platforms or combination of alternative platforms. Based on the author's overview of their advantages and disadvantages for online language and translation exams it can be concluded that one of the main advantages of the most widely used remote exam platform Exam.net is the option to create different types of exam questions from multiple-choice to open-ended questions, so it is thus suitable for conducting online language exams, such as EFL exams where students either provide descriptive answers to theoretical exam questions, complete grammar exercises or writing assignments or fill out multiple-choice questions on listening and reading exercises. The use of this platform for online translation exams is also possible, however despite of the cheat protection mode, teachers should allow student access to external resources during online translation exams when students

leave the exam area they are required to provide an explanation which usually takes a long time to write. Although it offers numerous advantages, especially for language exams, one of the main disadvantages of this remote exam platform is the inability for video surveillance of the students taking an online exam as well as the pricing policy.

It can be concluded that for conducting online language and translation exams, the best solution is to combine learning managements systems with audio-video conferencing platforms. For example, Zoom allows synchronous surveillance by switching between screens and browsers as well as pauses, high quality video and sound as well as recording of the online exam. Multiple screen sharing of students taking the online exam is not supported by Microsoft Teams where only one student can share his/her screen at a time. Hence, by combining LMS with audio-video conferencing platforms, the teacher closely monitors how students complete their assignments during online exams or how they translate a text and search for terminology online. In that way, the teacher has fast and realtime insight into every word typed and every website opened by students, which is especially important for translation exams where students engage in information mining and consult various online resources. All students leave their cameras and microphones on during online exams and cannot see each other's screens. The main disadvantage of Zoom is that students who join the exam later could have insight into somebody else's screen, but by choosing the host and member option the teacher can prevent students from joining later.

One of the key issues with online examination is how to make sure students are not cheating or sharing the exam questions with somebody else during and after the online exam, which is usually solved by providing limited time for students to complete given assignments or translations, by not accepting students who join the exam later than the rest of the group and by using collaborative features of LMS, such as sending texts for translation to students via the One Note or Class Notebook option in Microsoft Teams, where the translated text is archived and reviewed by the teacher, but not shared with other students.

The main conclusion of this paper is that the above-described platforms for both teaching and exams are marking a digital revolution in the field of education. This means that technology can be used to enhance education by empowering teachers and students with the proper tools and skills in order to teach and learn more effectively in the digital age. Recommendations for future activities include organizing practical workshop on how to organize online teaching and examination, providing more opportunities for professional development of teachers, finding solutions for technical issues concerning the use of LMS as well as engaging in a constant search for knowledge by exploring micro learning via other platforms offering improved and diverse features.

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