
Jarosław Krajka

Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie

**CLT IN PANDEMIC REMOTE TEACHING
– HOW COMMUNICATIVE ARE GROUP TASKS
IN SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS?**

CLT W NAUCZANIU ZDALNYM W CZASIE PANDEMII
– KOMUNIKATYWNOŚĆ ZADAŃ GRUPOWYCH
W SYNCHRONIZOWANYCH ŚRODOWISKACH ONLINE

Once COVID-19 pandemic struck the world in spring 2020 and continued for two more years, it exerted an enormous (negative and tragic, unfortunately) impact on the way people lived, worked and studied. New ways of coping with apparently well-established and familiar tasks had to be invented, often at quite a cost of time, money and effort. One could even say that in many domains the pandemic moved back the development of humankind a number of years backward. The purpose of the paper will be to highlight the way Communicative Language Teaching was implemented in the reality of online teaching in the first (March-June 2020) and second wave (November 2020-June 2021) the pandemic in Poland. The paper reports upon a study in which primary and secondary school teachers' perceptions towards teaching communication in the online medium, lesson models used as well as opportunities and limitations of different online platforms in terms of their suitability for organising communicative tasks were gained insight into through observation, lesson plan analysis and interview.

Keywords: pandemic teaching, Communicative Language Teaching, Computer-Mediated Communication, online learning platforms

1. Introduction

The effect of COVID-19 pandemic on education all over the world cannot be underestimated. The two-year period of lockdowns resulted in student isolation, social and psychological problems on the negative side, but new methodologies, tasks and techniques on the positive one. Deeper reflection on the educational landscape of pandemic-era teaching is useful to gain insight into how educators managed to adapt to the sudden shift of fully face-to-face to fully online instruction.

Foreign language education was no different – with school and university lockdowns, permanent or temporary, with uncertainty of what kind of school arrangement next week or day will bring, with equipment shortages and technical failures, pandemic-era language teaching was a hard battle fought by teachers to achieve expected results and provide learners with opportunities for developing language proficiency in its diverse receptive and productive skills.

As might have been predicted, abrupt change of the teaching medium did not result in an equally sudden shift of the instructional approach. Being accustomed to teaching communicatively for decades, foreign language teachers tried to continue following the assumptions of the Communicative Approach, especially that the coursebooks inclined them to do so. However, the limitations of computer-based teaching did not allow smooth transition from face-to-face to online communicative teaching.

The purpose of the current paper will be to report upon a study investigating the reality of communicative teaching in the first (March-June 2020) and second wave (November 2020-June 2021) pandemic teaching in Poland. It is particularly interesting to analyse the perceptions of teachers towards teaching communication in the online medium, to observe the lesson models as well as to find out the opportunities and limitations of different online platforms in terms of their suitability for organising communicative tasks.

2. Literature review

2.1. Major assumptions of Communicative Language Teaching

Since the beginnings of the 1980s and the Communicative Revolution, the main assumptions of Communicative Language Teaching have become firmly established as the predominant methodology in most Western contexts. Communicative competence as the goal of language teaching and procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that are needed to acknowledge interdependence of language and communication lie at the basis of the approach (Canale, Swain, 1980; Bachman,

1990). Since communication is a process, students need not only to have the knowledge of L2 forms, meanings and functions, but more importantly, be able to apply this knowledge while negotiating meaning, thus, it is through interaction between speaker and listener that meaning becomes clear. For Larsen-Freeman (2000), negotiation of meaning, where the speaker revises what he/she has said or tries to communicate his/her intended meaning again, is the essential step leading to interaction.

The major principles of CLT can be summarised as follows (Richards, Rodgers, 2001; Wesche, Skehan, 2002):

- Learners learn a language through using it to communicate, in a process of creative construction, trial and error.
- Meaningful communication is the goal of classroom activities, with fluency being the most crucial dimension of communication.
- Communication involves the integration of different language skills and communicative task is a basic organizing lesson unit.
- Message focus is ensured through information sharing and transfer, with use of substantive content ensuring greater motivation and noticing the connection with the real world.
- Cooperative and social learning, such as group and pair work, enable free language practice with low risk taking.
- Learners' backgrounds, language needs and goals are taken into account, with students allowed some creativity and role in instructional decisions.

As Larsen-Freeman (2000) notes, the range of exercises in CLT is unlimited, provided that they enable learners to attain the communicative objectives of the curriculum, engage them in communication, and require use of information sharing, negotiation of meaning and interaction. Littlewood (1981) draws attention to double nature of communicative tasks, functional communicative activities (creating a need for communication due to task design, e.g., by distributing slightly different pictures) and social interaction activities, with clear social roles creating a need for communication and the social context of the communicative event giving meaning to the utterances. Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning, whenever possible, authentic language (language as it is used in a real context) should be introduced, properly contextualized in authentic language exchanges, in activities that involve real communication (Guariento, Morley, 2001) and are characterized by information gap, choice and feedback (Richards, Rodgers, 2001).

2.2. Developing communicative competence in computer-mediated teaching

Most probably, one of the greatest breakthroughs in the ‘Information Revolution’ of today, as opened by the widespread access to the Internet, has been the communication opportunities opened to individuals, in personal, educational and professional settings. The availability of free and versatile Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) tools have opened up the language classrooms to the world, adding a truly authentic dimension to the target language interaction taking place in them.

Over the years, together with the development of new technological solutions, increased bandwidth and CPU power, there has been a notable progress in the types of conferencing tools offered, proceeding from simple text-based chat, through audio- and videoconferencing to the combination of text, graphics and sound in sophisticated whiteboard-enhanced solutions. Computer conferencing is the umbrella term used to encompass all kinds of information exchanges mediated by a computer, which, according to Berge and Collins (1993) and Lee (2002), are domains of information exchange via the computer, including all electronic messaging tools and systems subdivided into asynchronous (delay) communication tools (electronic mail systems, bulletin board system, newsgroups and mailing lists) and synchronous (real-time) CMC (instant messaging systems, chatrooms, audioconferences, videoconferences). Lee (2002) also introduces the division of CMC systems according to the structure of interaction, whether it is one-to-one interaction, one-to-many interaction or many-to-many (group) interaction.

A number of early Computer-Mediated Communication studies have proved the importance of CMC tools in enhancing the development of different learner competencies and areas, most notably learning skills and learner autonomy (Warschauer *et al.*, 1996; Gonzalez, 2003); learners’ intrinsic motivation (Kern, 1995; Skinner, Austin, 1999); encouraging the collaborative spirit (Kern, 1995); interactive competence through increased practice of productive skills (Chun, 1994, 1996); increased amount of target language production (Smyrniou, 2003); multi-channel communication simulating real-time exchanges (Goodfellow *et al.*, 1996); increased opportunities for noticing language use by native speakers (Mynard, 2002). Despite great technological progress since early CMC, much greater bandwidth and enhanced communication opportunities, computer-mediated speaking practice still struggles with such obstacles as how big groups should be, how members should be effectively assigned to groups, whether to teach collaborative skills, what should be the difficulty level of the tasks undertaken in groups, how often group activities are to be done as opposed to individual activities and teacher input, how to encourage everyone in the group to contribute their fair share to the learning of all group members, how to assess students when they learn in groups, whether to include

thinking skills when students do cooperative learning via distance as well as how to convince students of the benefits of learning together in the online medium (Jacobs, Ivone, 2020). Even though studies into social media use (e.g., Bozanta, Mardikyan, 2017) report upon social media usage improving peer interaction and course engagement of students, which have positive significant effect on collaborative learning, the question remains open whether the same CMC environments that are used for personal purposes (e.g., social media) are to be accepted for systematic educational usage (not just for occasional interventions by few most enthusiastic supporters).

3. Online solutions for organising communicative tasks

Pandemic remote language teaching, operating since spring 2020 with different intensity and degree in various contexts around the world, needed computer environments to make classroom interaction, materials presentation, language assessment and content delivery feasible. As the pandemic struck suddenly, educators needed to work their way through a gamut of Computer-Mediated Communication tools present at that time and work out possible solutions, hence the often-used term ‘emergency remote teaching’.

Especially the first wave of pandemic remote teaching (in Poland, between March 2020 and the start of summer holiday at the end of June) was fraught with attempts to find appropriate solutions to mediate teaching. Those environments which had been well-established before were either not comprehensive enough (e.g., Skype, which had been popular for videoconferencing, but did not possess course management capacities) or financially inaccessible (Blackboard). Even the most widespread open-source solution, Moodle, in wide use at universities since 2007, had not reached schools to such an extent to be readily applied when the pandemic struck suddenly.

The new situation necessitated verification of course management systems, conferencing solutions and online learning platforms. In time, the four main competitors remained in game: Office 365 with its Teams, Moodle’s Big Blue Button, Zoom! and Google Classroom. This part of the present paper will consider each of these four learning environments in terms of provisions for communicative tasks, facility of organising pair/group work tasks and options for management of closed group work.

3.1. Moodle's Big Blue Button

Long in operation before any other learning platform mentioned below, Moodle had been well established as a Course/Learning Management System mainly due to its open, collaborative and expandable nature. From Moodle version 4.0 on, it was equipped with Big Blue Button conferencing system, which proved highly useful in emergency teaching in those institutions which had Moodle installed and running when the pandemic forced lockdowns.

Big Blue Button is well integrated with Moodle as one of its activities. It allows easy setup of breakout rooms for the maximum time of 15 minutes. The instructor can establish up to 16 groups at the same time, with students allocated either randomly, with manual allocation by the teacher or student own allocation to groups. The instructor can switch between groups relatively easily for monitoring group work, however, students cannot do the same, and it is difficult to join the groups once somebody does not get placed during the lesson. During group work each group is provided with its separate room with voice, video, text and screensharing connection, is reminded about the running time and is automatically moved back to the main room once the time is up.

Apart from group work facilities as outlined above, BBB features audio connection, webcam connection, slide and screen sharing between participants. The platform allows the instructor to use multi-user whiteboard, breakout rooms, chat (public and private), polling, shared notes, random user selector and emojis. The latest version (2.4) also ensures student engagement through in-built polls and attendance.

Compared with its competitors, Big Blue Button group tasks prove very quick and easy to set up, especially grouping students purposefully and into uneven groups can be done seamlessly. However, the practice of online teaching in the system showed quite a few compatibility issues, with students complaining about problems with accessing the module or being suddenly disconnected from the session.

3.2. Google Classroom

Similarly to Moodle, Google Classroom proved to be the obvious choice for pandemic remote teaching due to its integration with Google services and free availability. The platform itself had operated alongside Moodle well before the pandemic, however, it was used more for materials storage and sharing rather than for self-study and collaborative learning. This was because GC was not equipped with advanced features for collaboration and assessment (as well as collaborative assessment and assessed collaboration). When the pandemic struck, numerous

educational institutions, also those using Moodle previously, switched to Google Classroom even despite its limited nature.

In terms of facilities for communicative tasks organised in smaller groupings, Google Classroom features free set up of breakout rooms in the educational license, while the free and standard version might demand setting up numerous alternative classrooms and sending groups to those “temporarily empty” rooms for separate collaborative work. In both of these designs there is no maximum time for group work and the number of groups is unlimited. Grouping can be done either by teacher allocation or student own joining, but not auto-assignment. Each group gets its own voice, video, text and screensharing capacities. However, switching between groups for teacher monitoring is more difficult, group work cannot be automatically terminated after assigned time with students moved back to the main room (which is very convenient in Big Blue Button). Finally, if separate classrooms are used as breakout rooms, all students need to remember to mute themselves off in the main classroom (or disconnect from it temporarily), otherwise all the other groups will hear group work. Newer versions of Google Classroom got equipped with corresponding student engagement functionalities (real-time quizzes and polls).

While Google Classroom proved to be quick to learn by instructors, its applicability for communicative remote teaching was not devoid of problems. Many concerns were raised about privacy issues and Google’s use of student data. The switch from Moodle (a Learning Management System with robust features for online self-study) to GC meant a loss of a number of learning procedures due to the latter’s simplistic nature. Complaints were also raised about the spartan interface and unappealing layout and difficulties in finding one’s way through chronologically ordered announcements/changes.

3.3. Zoom

Originally founded in 2011, Zoom experienced its huge outburst of popularity during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, making it the 5th most downloaded application in 2020. It was particularly well received for its powerful functionalities in free-of-charge version, with the 40-minute limit for more than two participants.

Communicative tasks within Zoom can be organised in up to 50 separate rooms, where the teacher can choose to split the participants of the meeting into these separate sessions automatically or manually, or they can allow participants to select and enter breakout sessions as they please. Breakout rooms can auto-close after designated time. Quite interestingly, Zoom not only allows the teacher to switch between sessions at any time (which is common to BBB), but also share

the screen of one room to all or broadcast a message to all breakout rooms at the same time. Moreover, Zoom enables participants from breakout rooms to ask the teacher to join their room, which is another highly interesting functionality.

However, despite robust functionalities, especially for group work, Zoom experienced its significant problems in educational settings during the pandemic remote teaching. Problems with security lapses and inadequate privacy of student data resulted in quite a number of institutions banning the use of Zoom. Easiness of access that Zoom became widely acclaimed for led, unfortunately, to the phenomenon of ‘Zoombombing’, which is unwanted, disruptive intrusion into a Zoom videoconference with insertion of racist, obscene or homophobic material into the session. Numerous incidents of that kind prompted software developers to introduce stricter security measures, including obligatory waiting room.

3.4. Office 365 Teams

Initially underrated, Microsoft’s Office 365 with its key component, Teams, slowly gained ground, competing with Zoom. In many contexts institutional agreements (e.g., between Microsoft and Ministries of Education or Ministries of Higher Education and Science) made it the only educational solution, with the exclusive right to conduct all online teaching via Teams. While the first wave of pandemic teaching relied largely on a browser-based version, which did not allow breakout rooms, from the second wave on (since summer 2020) the desktop version made communicative tasks in smaller groupings easier to organise.

In terms of functionalities of breakout rooms, Teams offers teacher allocation, student own allocation or automatic allocation. Time limit can be set for rooms and participants can be moved back to main room automatically once time is up. Students can call the teacher from breakout rooms while the teacher can send an announcement to all the rooms at once. The teacher can switch between separate rooms easily, monitoring students work there. Similarly to GC or BBB, breakout rooms in Teams have video, audio and text channel available, together with screensharing and session recording capacities.

While all the other platforms have very similar functionalities for real-time meetings, Teams is much ahead due to groups setup (called Teams), channels, group and individual conversations (on a telephone replacement basis), collaborative work on documents and calendar holding. Teams has proved to be especially useful for organisations (including universities and schools) by enabling administrators to insert the whole database of users (employees/students) for their quick retrieval for invitation to conversations or collaborative work.

4. The study

4.1. The aim of the study

Pandemic remote teaching was an interesting period to study a plethora of issues, on the part of teachers, learners, the learning process as well as the learning environments. Since different waves of pandemic teaching looked differently in Poland, it was also interesting to make a comparison across different COVID-19 pandemic periods, which gave way to distinct educational approaches in the online medium.

Taking the communicative nature of emergency remote teaching into account, it was interesting to find out what the nature of online teaching in the first and second wave of pandemic teaching was, how communicative the online instruction was as well as what obstacles and problems might have obstructed pair/group work in the online medium. Given the predominance of the Communicative Approach and its representation in coursebooks, it was also interesting to see the degree to which emergency remote teaching conformed to the principles of Communicative Language Teaching and what obstacles pair/group communicative tasks encountered in the online medium.

4.2. Participants and materials

The data for the study were collected indirectly, through second-hand observation, interview and lesson plan analysis. The participants of the study were primary and secondary school teachers, who were observed as well as interviewed and whose lesson plans were analysed by student teachers serving their online practicum as a part of the TEFL module at the applied linguistics department of a medium-sized state university in the east of Poland.

Such an indirect form of data collection was the only possible way of entering numerous classroom contexts by the researcher in a relatively natural setting, with primary/secondary teachers in question interacting in a predictable way with student teachers. If those were contacted directly by the university mentor/researcher, the response rate might have been very low and the teacher opinions might not have been fully honest. Obviously, great care was taken to ensure the current research conformed to research ethics, with assurances of full anonymity, non-traceability and non-maleficence.

All in all, the research data were collected from experienced teachers and novice (student teachers) as displayed in Table 1 below as a part of a larger study (Krajka, 2021). For the purposes of the present analysis, only the data pertaining to the communicative nature of pandemic online teaching were drawn from the research corpus.

Table 1. Composition of the research corpus

Kinds of resources	Number of cases
Observations of online lessons	35
Online lesson plans produced by student teachers (STs)	80
Interviews with school mentors (SMs)	80
Digital materials produced by STs	200

4.3. Results and findings

4.3.1. Teachers' perspectives on problems encountered during pandemic teaching

The starting point for the investigation of the communicative nature of pandemic online language teaching was the elicitation of problems and obstacles influencing the success of communicative teaching in the online medium. Experienced teachers were interviewed by student teachers in the safe environment of the classroom, which led to honest answers, probed deeper if necessary. The major obstacles to communicative teaching online were reported as follows:

- **motivation issues** – Ss' lack of concentration and demotivation, especially during tasks in smaller groupings with less strict teacher control;
- **misbehaviour issues** – Ss turning cameras off, muting microphones, saying unwanted/insultive comments unasked, interrupting teacher talk, eating, using mobile phones;
- **technical issues** – weak connection, unavailable computers, too old operating systems, problems with software versions (outdated word processors preventing opening documents), sound quality problems, synchronous class breakdowns, problems with launching/playing audio/video by Ss, server overload, lack of opportunities for pair/group work due to less robust learning platforms;
- **assessment issues** – problems with delivering feedback, administering assessment, monitoring Ss' individual work with the class spread into smaller groupings;
- **organisational issues** – problems with organising pair and group work in breakout rooms, monitoring Ss' work in smaller rooms, moving between them;
- **content delivery issues** – difficulties with activating lazier/more withdrawn/less able students, checking whether slower students are following the lesson or got lost on the way, ensuring Ss' independent work;
- **time management** during speaking lessons – too much class time spent on organizing, explaining and dealing with technicalities, too little on practice.

Other reported problems preventing effectiveness of pandemic online teaching, such as insufficient Ss' self-management skills (manifested, among others, in difficulties with managing online learning duties from different school subjects or failing to meet deadlines) as well as home and family problems (for instance, difficulties with computer access in multi-child families, inappropriate behaviour of other family members, parents not allowing online learning but engaging children in household duties during lesson time) were less frequently reported and were of more general nature, influencing the nature of language teaching as a whole, not only communicative tasks.

4.3.2. Typical models of online lessons

The second focus of the current study was examination of models of online lessons in those contexts in which they were run during both first and second wave teaching. Since lower-primary teachers (grades 1-3) were free to use asynchronous materials delivery in the first (emergency) wave teaching, there was no direct comparison between the first and the second wave teaching, hence, primary teachers' data were excluded from this part of the study. Lower primary level in the first wave followed the asynchronous mode of learning vocabulary and grammar by getting instructions, assignments, links to Padlet/Wordwall/islcollective.com/Quizziz authoring materials, Quizlet vocabulary sets, YouTube videos in the first wave, while switching to synchronous teaching via Teams or Zoom replicating regular coursebook teaching in the second wave.

As the interview and observation data from secondary contexts show, whenever synchronous teaching was allowed and Teams or Zoom were approved for classroom use, teachers mainly employed the whole-class, presentation-based mode of teaching in the first wave of pandemic teaching. This emergency approach showed a typical lesson structure oriented at whole-class presentation, individual coursebook text reading and whole-class summarising, as indicated in the most frequent lesson below:

- whole-class warm-up discussions;
- Ss reading text from CBs;
- T asking if they understand;
- if necessary, T using chat to give additional explanation;
- T showing the book's page on the shared screen;
- T playing YouTube video clips to the whole class;
- T giving students interactive quizzes, games, tests to complete (either individually during class time or as homework).

First-wave pandemic teaching was clearly dominated by teachers' need to harness the new learning environments, hence few attempts to organise pair/group work tasks and predominance of whole-class presentation and lock-step individual reading or viewing comprehension. At the same time, digital materials used to supplement lessons were mainly of behaviourist nature, filled with close-ended directed-response tasks. On the other hand, the second wave of pandemic teaching, especially in secondary settings, showed much greater use of communicative tasks in pairs/groups in breakout rooms. This shift clearly indicated greater independence of teachers in the online environments and greater level of their control over the medium. Thus, while first-wave teaching mainly conformed to Behaviourist CALL (Warschauer, Healey, 1998; Bax, 2004), Communicative and Integrated CALL activities started to be more prominent during the second wave language instruction in secondary contexts. Still, however, teachers did not go into connectivist learning, which would be most expected given the nature of online learning and students' familiarity with social media.

4.3.3. Teachers' skills buildup from first to second wave of pandemic teaching

The final aspect worth investigating for a fuller picture of communicative tasks in pandemic remote teaching was teachers' confidence in organisation of pair/group work in breakout rooms. When comparing the first and the second round of pandemic teaching, it seems the emergency teaching experience has resulted in making many language teachers either partially or fully skilled, or at least aware of, the following competences:

- managing students in a selected online learning environment,
- setting up classes,
- arranging breakout rooms,
- managing video, voice and chat channels,
- using screensharing for presentation and feedback-giving,
- setting up events and organising delivery of student assignments.

Towards the end of the first stage of the pandemic teaching (March-June 2020) most teachers got to level 3 of Hampel and Stickler's 2004 Skills pyramid, "Awareness of constraints and possibilities", which was visible in how they knew what teaching devices are missing or how to make the best use of the multimodality of the medium by combining text chat with audio. Few instructors investigated in the study moved to the higher levels – "Online socialisation", "Facilitating communicative competence", "Creativity, choice/selection".

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic teaching, even though dramatic in its effect, proved to be a highly interesting area for observation and analysis of language instruction. Due to the changing nature of the pandemic and the varying nature of teaching in its particular waves, language teachers proved to employ different instructional strategies when coping with online teaching.

As evidenced by the findings of the current study, the COVID-19 era showed effectiveness of the blend of behaviourist and integrated approaches to technology use in the classroom. Discrete-item quizzes and routines, dressed up in appealing multimedia graphics, were useful when providing computer-based practice while maintaining teacher control over the online classroom. Hence great popularity of Kahoot!, Wordwall, Quizziz, LearningApps and other online tools for quiz generation.

On the other hand, few examples out of the plethora of analysed lessons (and especially those proposed by student teachers) exhibited some traces of Communicative CALL, especially by providing online materials as stimulus for listening, reading and speaking. Especially the first wave teaching (so-called emergency remote teaching) showed little use of communicative tasks, due to teachers' lack of familiarity with organizing and managing group/pair tasks in breakout rooms. When comparing first- and second-wave lessons, though, one could notice growing confidence in the use of online learning platforms, resulting in more frequent and more effective application of online communicative tasks.

Not surprisingly, there were virtually no activities that could be attributed to the connectivist approach, even though both students and teachers were very familiar with using various social media for connecting with their peers for personal reasons. It was quite clear that the online environments for teaching and learning were kept clearly apart from those for personal interaction. Even though social media with their instant messaging systems offer enhanced capacities for communicative tasks, their application would not be perceived as educational and "serious" enough. It seems a long way for Communicative Language Teaching to find its full way to the online classroom.

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