

## ONLINE TEACHING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC – CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS AROUND THE WORLD

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**Abstract:** When “school in the classroom” became “school at home”, both teachers and learners found themselves on an unexplored territory. We hypothesized that the change came along with a set of challenges that were partly similar, partly different around the world. Challenges were met with either timid or firm immediate efforts of applying approaches, strategies and techniques that could make teaching an effective process, even under the new circumstances.

The aims of the paper are to provide insights into the challenges online teaching faced during the Covid-19 pandemic in countries around the world, to identify the (applied or suggested) solutions for diverse challenges and similarities or differences between challenges/solutions. In our research, we used a qualitative method based on a purposeful sampling technique and collected data from the research work of scholars in countries from the six inhabited continents. Results confirmed our hypotheses. Although we had glimpses of the world online teaching process situation under unprecedented conditions, we could draw some general conclusions. The most important one was that countries tried their best to make teaching as effective as possible and offer students the opportunity to learn, although the approach was a difficult one, for both teachers and students, with repercussions (that were not necessarily positive) on the learning process. These repercussions could be noticed in each individual country, when returning to face-to-face teaching, and they now represent the hot topic of research all around the world.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 pandemic, online teaching, challenges, solutions.

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## Introduction

Online teaching and learning represent a challenging and interesting topic of research. Authors of books and scientific articles have debated for years on the offers, requirements, advantages and disadvantages of the two online versions of these interrelated processes.

The conclusions reached by these authors underline the ideas that online education offers accessibility (in terms of tools such as systems and programs), flexibility (with reference to time and use of materials), as well as opportunities for teachers' creativity, for a collaborative type of learning, for communication anywhere and with varied types of materials. These also may be regarded as advantages for both teachers and students. The process requires understanding of expectations from the part of the teacher and that of the students, teachers' mastery of new technologies, materials, strategies and techniques, as well as students' having devices for this particular type of activity and their handling the technology. Among the disadvantages that online education brings, research insisted on issues connected with the absence of face-to-face contact (triggering the possibility of less interaction with students); issues regarding knowledge, understanding and handling of technology (by both teachers and students); issues linked to various types of feelings, emotions and attitudes (often negative under emergency situations); issues related to adapted teaching methodology (which requires much more work from the part of the teacher), as well as increased responsibility for students (in terms of attendance and engagement in classroom activity).

## Online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic

The last two years have brought into focus a great preoccupation with online teaching and learning, as the education process had to be "moved" online during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Referring to teaching during the pandemic, Hodges et al. (2020) suggest that a difference should be made between *emergency remote teaching* (a temporary change of the mode in which classes are held under special conditions, such as crisis and disaster) and teaching online (the learning experience that is characterized by a very good planning and design). Hodges et al. (2020) also talk about the necessity of immediate adaptations to this type of teaching, in terms of:

- a) finding the most efficient application and tools to work with;
- b) identifying the most efficient strategies in order to make the transition to online teaching as smooth as possible.

On the one hand, this meant teachers' revising of concepts and conceptions and, on the other hand, of the characteristics and benefits of the two interrelated processes. These ideas are well summarized by Rapanta et al. (2020):

Online teaching and learning imply a certain pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), mainly related to designing and organising for better learning experiences and creating distinctive learning environments, with the help of digital technologies (Rapanta et al., 2020, p. 923).

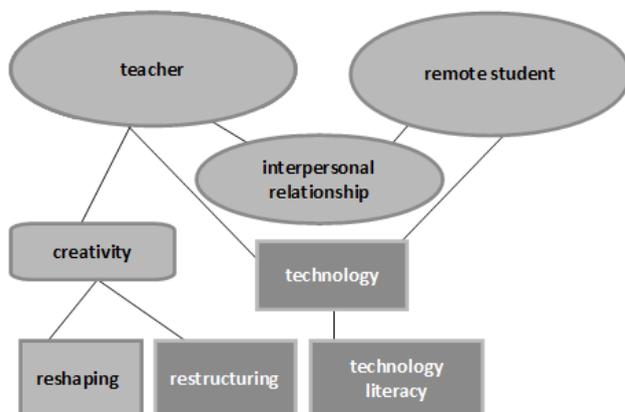
Online teaching under special circumstances also requires teachers' rethinking and reshaping their lesson planning and their strategies and class activities, as well as teachers' rethinking the relationship with remote students (trying to motivate and activate them) and make the transition to virtual classes a smooth process.

### **Online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. Literature review**

The literature on online teaching during Covid-19 pandemic already consists of a large display of bibliographic entries dealing with issues linked to the key words mentioned above. We shall offer a selection of these issues, having in mind two categories. The former is connected to teachers and their activity (but with direct influence on the process of learning). Studies were dedicated to types of challenges in the online teaching process (Recio & Colella, 2020); the importance of digital competencies, knowledge, and skills required to deal with emergency remote teaching (Tomczyk & Walker, 2021); teaching strategies during Covid-19 pandemic (Mahmood, 2021; Mankki, 2021; Teng & Wu, 2021; Lestiyawati & Widyantoro, 2020); creativity for online study success (Mahmood, 2021); pressure and disturbance to the teachers' professional roles and practices (Watermeyer et al., 2021) or psychological status of university teachers and their perceived motivation, the challenges and the technostress they faced (Akour et al., 2020).

The latter category has the student as its core. Thus, authors were preoccupied with issues such as students' level of satisfaction with online courses/ accomplishment of their needs (Lee et al., 2021); feelings associated with online courses (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021; Hidalgo-Andrade et al., 2021); the psychological behaviour of students (Ribeiro et al., 2021; Irawan et al., 2020); increased likelihood of cheating among students during online examinations and the efforts and time needed to prepare online examinations (Akour et al., 2020) as well as with the analysis of the impact of online learning and assessment on undergraduate student well-being (Slack & Priestley, 2022).

The literature review on the topic, corroborated with our own experience with online teaching, made us consider that the key words of the online teaching process during Covid-19 pandemic are those presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** *Key words of the online teaching process during Covid-19 pandemic*

## Methodology of research

During Covid-19 pandemic, when “school in the classroom” became “school at home”, both teachers and learners found themselves on an unexplored territory, or a (very) little explored one.

### a) Hypothesis and research questions

Teaching online came with a large display of challenges for both teachers and students. Challenges were met with either timid or firm immediate efforts – solutions – of applying approaches, strategies and techniques that could make teaching an effective process, even under the new circumstances. Both challenges and solutions were partly similar, partly different around the world. Thus, the research questions are:

1. What are the challenges that online teaching in different countries faced during the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What are the solutions that different countries identified for the challenges they encountered?
3. What is similar or different at the level of the challenges teachers and students faced and the solutions they resorted to?

### b) Mode of Inquiry<sup>1</sup>

1. “A mode of inquiry is a particular stance an analyst takes in order to accomplish an integral part of a research project”, Carbaugh mentions five distinctive modes: theoretical, descriptive, interpretive, comparative and critical (Carbaugh, 2007, p. 170).

The study uses a descriptive mode of inquiry. The meta-analysis of the data offered us insights into the different types of challenges and solutions that online teaching had to face during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### c) Data collection and processing

The paper is a collection of Internet data representing research work (articles) of scholars (professors in universities, researchers) in countries from the six inhabited continents. We selected data by using a sampling technique and we took a series of steps in data collection. First, we scrolled the internet (searching for <“Teaching online during the Covid-19 pandemic” + the name of the continent>. We identified 62 materials (country reports, articles and blogs) that met the requirements of the purposeful sampling. Then we applied two exclusion criteria, thus using an intensity sampling technique, that is, we chose

...excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not highly unusual cases...cases that manifests sufficient intensity to illuminate the nature of success or failure, but not at the extreme. (Patton, 2001, p. 234).

We first excluded the materials other than articles; we scanned them all (= 45) and then we excluded the articles that did not refer to universities and articles in which solutions were not mentioned (= 25). The analysis was then made on 20 articles whose authors conducted interviews or applied questionnaires in their universities/countries, in order to gather the necessary data. The following table includes data concerning the countries we had in view as our sources of information, through the “voice” of the researchers.

**Table 1.** *Data collection pool*

<b>Continent</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Researchers</b>
Asia	India, Indonesia, Korea, Pakistan, Taiwan	Darius et al., 2021; Bawawa et al., 2021; Iswati, 2021; Widarini et al., 2021; Haryana et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Bailey & Lee, 2020; Sahito et al., 2022; Sheng-Yi, 2021
Africa	Angola, Ghana, Nigeria	Mendonça da Costa & Gaspar, 2022; Agormedah et al., 2020; Ebohon et al., 2021
Australia	Australia	Mahmood, 2021

Europe	Poland, Romania, Italy, Bulgaria, Spain, Hungary , Serbia	Cicha et al., 2022; Barbu et al., 2022; Casacchia et al., 2021; Ivanova, 2021; Díez-Gutiérrez & Gajardo Espinoza, 2021; Molnár et al., 2020
North America	Canada, Mexico	Conrad et al., 2022; Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021
South America	Ecuador, Colombia	Estrella, 2022; Hidalgo-Andrade et al., 2021; Rizo & Pereira, 2022

## Findings<sup>2</sup> and discussion

The Covid-19 pandemic challenged both teachers and students alike, with direct repercussions on the whole context of online education. That is, in terms of Armengaud's (1993, pp. 60-62) conception

- a) the factual context – the interlocutors and their identity (teachers and students), the physical setting, the time and place of classroom interaction;
- b) the situational/ pragmatic context – with reference to the situation that is socially admitted by participants to interaction;
- c) interactional – having in view the chaining of speech acts in the discursive sequences;
- d) pre-suppositional – including the interlocutors' intentions and expectations.

A large display of challenges has been identified for all analysed situations; yet, not all our sources disclosed clear, detailed solutions for each challenge brought into focus.

Common challenges are related to the following issues:

- 1) *Readiness of teachers and students for quick transition from face-to-face classes to online classes*

Were teachers and students in universities prepared to work online? Literature shows that many universities around the world have implemented distance learning, offering online courses, supplementary learning material or educational videos, for example, for many years (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

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2. Names of countries occur anytime the researcher/author of the article mentioned things explicitly and the information was different from that offered by the other authors. At the same time, when names of countries are mentioned, the reader needs to take into consideration the authors and articles mentioned in the above table.

In this respect, our findings can start from mentioning the absence of clear institutional support as far as policies and technology are concerned.

Our findings also disclosed that there were universities in which working online was something usual (although not on a daily basis). It was the case of Hungary, for example, where education online was popular even before 2020; students were accustomed to receiving online courses and learning materials (Molnár et al., 2020). It was also the case of Australia, Serbia and Romania that offered, before the pandemic, alternative digital ways of teaching and learning, uploading materials on platforms and making them available to students, in the form of lecture recordings, pre- or post-reading activities, or various types of quizzes. Yet, there were countries such as Mexico, Bulgaria, Poland where both teachers and students were confronted with their little experience with online education and did not feel comfortable with the quick transition infrastructure (Cicha et al., 2022). In Nigeria, Pakistan, Ecuador, Ghana online teaching was something completely new and teachers and students were not prepared for the challenge of quickly coping with e-learning, as no training courses were ever offered to them. Korea also registered a large number of “novice” teachers with respect to technology use, a problem that caused intimidation. While in the first case teachers and students felt somehow confident in their abilities of handling technology, in the second case, feelings such as anxiety (Pakistan), discouragement, sadness (Italy) dominated the teachers’ online work, caused – first of all – by their lack of technology literacy (clearly stated by Indonesia), digital literacy and media literacy, doubled by the students’ ones.

Almost all countries signalled the necessity of (intense) training courses for both teachers and students as a solution for this challenge.

### *2) The issue of devices, software applications and platforms used for online classes*

In all countries, online teaching confronted with a series of challenges connected with technology.

Lack of state investment in technology was mentioned, for example, in countries such as Angola, Pakistan and Ecuador. Lack of access to digital devices (Italy, Ghana) or outdated ones (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020) was another problem, together with problems linked with the services provided by online platforms (Nigeria), lack of internet, especially in rural areas (Angola, but not only) or problems with connectivity (all countries), even electricity (Angola) or the cost of the internet usage and lack of constant access (Ghana). Lack of availability of facilities and infrastructure was also reported in Indonesia. Although somehow prepared for working online, Australia also encountered problems with technology especially for students belonging to ethnic minorities, students from rural areas or coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Teachers and students found similar solutions to create the link between them. Out of the

examples in which they were explicitly mentioned, we noticed that the similar types of applications (in the order of their use frequency in the analysed contexts) were used: Moodle, Zoom, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Edmodo, Whatsapp, e-mail, Facebook and even Twitter and Instagram (Indonesia). Students worked on desktops, laptops, tablets and smartphones.

The main solutions that all analysed countries found in order to solve the problem of bad connectivity are, by far, the following:

- a) pre-recorded lessons that allow students to access them when connectivity to internet is better/established. They are also a flexible learning tool for students, as they can pause whenever they want to, they can replay lectures and even adapt the speed to the individual learning style and preferences (Australia) (Mahmood, 2021);
- b) uploading the material on the website in advance (allowing students to read and understand the material, work on it, question it, expand information included in it, before being in the virtual class).

Yet, teachers and students often felt intimidated by the platforms they had to work with, especially because platforms did not allow them to see all students on the screen. This triggered challenges linked to students' motivation, their engagement in class activities, disruption of attention, or even to the teacher's control over the students' presence in the virtual space (Indonesia). The solutions the analysed sources mentioned were quite similar and they insisted on the teacher's need of changing their teaching methodology (to be developed in 4).

### *3) The teachers' need of adapting to online activity*

Under the new circumstances, teachers were confronted with the requirement of handling the same content in virtual classes, with virtual students. This proved to be a challenge, as they lacked face-to-face interaction with their students. Researchers mentioned the fact it was quite difficult for teachers to apply new strategies, as they were still learning about e-learning, in general, and they needed some extra-time to think about new strategies and implement them in the virtual class.

We drew a unanimous conclusion from the experiences presented by researchers, namely the fact that it was vital that teachers understood they had to produce changes:

- 1) at the level of their understanding of online teaching requirements, (understanding the necessity of such requirements and how to adapt to them);
- 2) at the level of their daily activity of planning the lessons (structuring, reshaping course material and seminar activities, thinking, rethinking appropriate approaches, strategies, methods and techniques). This meant finding flexible approaches to acquaint students with technology and flexible

approaches to teaching (Ghana). It also meant adapting planning to the new teaching and learning conditions (Ivanova, 2021). This presupposed rethinking the time allotted for different activities, finding substitutive activities for those which required practice that could not be done during the lockdown, applying transposition of material when possible (from long boring lectures into attractive charts, diagrams, tables), in order to avoid boredom for students. In other words, they had to put their creativity at work. Thus, similar types of strategies and techniques were mentioned by all countries, starting from the necessity of preserving activity within the framework of a student-centred approach. The list includes the following techniques: collaborative learning, online discussions, online quizzes, debates, brainstorming, small group work and project-based learning. Individual assignment and animations were used in India and animations and virtual simulations or projects in teams were preferred in Romania. Blended techniques, such as videos + applications were suggested by Pakistan and Indonesia, while blended technique of the type online + offline or student-centred + teacher-centred activities were solutions found by Indonesia. Online learning portfolio, self-directed learning, knowledge background check were also used in Indonesia.

#### *4) Coping strategies to solve diverse issues while working online*

Among the challenges in this area of teaching, we identified the following similar ones:

##### ► *Students' understanding and interpretation of taught material*

Researchers considered that it was difficult for students to gain full understanding of the material and to absorb all the knowledge that they were taught, or to concentrate during the courses (Korea, Nigeria). The cause was found in information overload (Canada) or the little opportunity for students to ask questions and clear doubts (Mexico) and this, in turn, caused – somehow – lack of students' enthusiasm for classes (Indonesia, Korea). The similar solutions for such challenges included the use of clear instructions, insistence on detailed explanations, asking questions to check understanding and the use of charts or tables – meant to reduce quantity and difficulty of the material. At the same time, asking the professor, asking peers, discussion forums (India), going through online material providing additional information proved to be efficient and solve the problem of clearing doubts. Other explicitly mentioned solutions for the same issue were the use of graphic diagrams (Romania) and flipped classroom technique (Pakistan), along with the use of chat box for elucidating queries in discussion forum (India) and providing more practical examples (Romania).

##### ► *Motivating students and developing their engagement in the class*

Researchers mentioned the fact that, on the one hand, online teaching faced the teacher with reduced possibility of controlling students' focus on the materials

(Indonesia) and, on the other hand, it came with a decrease in students' motivation (observable at the level of – sometimes – reduced attendance of classes and at the level of their motivation for study).

For drawing students' attention from the very beginning of the lesson, the solution was to open the lecture with a “smart” question meant to draw the framework of discussion (Australia), stir the interest/ develop critical thinking and allow for teacher's receiving an answer from each student, while being with their camera on. Another solution was that of using frequent/ periodic questions during the lecture (Australia). Sahito et al. (2022) (Pakistan) also relied on questioning students as a technique of keeping attention alive. In order to keep them focused on the activity, small group discussions, the use of the Chat tools, of the verbal and nonverbal buttons, the use of task-based approach were preferred (Indonesia, Australia).

In order to develop motivation and, respectively, engagement during the class, countries opted for quite similar solutions: use of PPTs, videos, project work, media, which are meant to motivate and make lessons more interactive through discussions as follow-up activities. Other countries suggested the use of reflective blogs and online learning portfolios (Indonesia), the use of short, explicit, exciting material, the use of debates or brainstorming (Romania). Other identified solutions brought into focus were the use of collaborative learning, offering students encouragement and appreciation or making lessons more interactive (Indonesia); online discussion forums; the use of verbal/ nonverbal button or chat rooms (Australia); free synchronous and asynchronous discussion based on text, audio or audio-visual materials (Taiwan); working in groups and working at one's own pace (India) or engaging students in various platforms of social media or in virtual learning communities (Korea).

► *Arranging and facilitating group work*

Working with large classes and not seeing all the students on the platform became a challenge, too. Arranging and facilitating group work was considered a complicated issue (Korea). Yet, the platforms frequently used by teachers (Zoom, Microsoft teams and Google Meet, for example) offered teachers the possibility to resort to breakout rooms in order to work with small groups in turns, whenever they had brainstorming sessions or lively conversations (techniques used in many analysed situations). In order to make the process an effective one, two solutions stood out: giving students clear instructions about how to “enter” breakout rooms and how to carry on the activity, along with that of establishing rules from the first meeting.

► *Assessment and evaluation in online classes*

One of the most important challenges of the online teaching activity was that of conducting assessment and evaluation. It was signalled by all researchers. The

challenge brought into focus two aspects: that of the techniques used in order to ensure an effective assessment (based on reliability, validity, lack of ambiguity and objectivity), along with that of making students' grades reflect reality. In other words, teachers had to answer the questions: how could they adapt to the new way of assessing their students (in both formative and summative assessment) and how could their evaluation be a fair one, offering marks that reflect reality and avoiding students' misconduct (cheating) during examination sessions.

The solutions identified in the research articles indicated preference towards promotion of discussion forums, mini-research reports (Pakistan), or online quizzes with multiple-choice solutions (India) or self-assessment questionnaires and peers' comments and evaluation (Ecuador). Insistence was also made on the necessity of a timely feedback on the part of the teacher, as students need to gain a sense of accomplishment of their work (Canada, Taiwan). At the same time, learning effectiveness was assessed through in-class study experience, in-class task-assignments and in-class peer-evaluation (Taiwan).

In the case of oral/ written evaluation, where summative evaluation seemed to have created problems in terms of form and content, the solutions found by teachers included alternative ways to traditional ones, such as portfolios or co-evaluation that could give accounts of students' reflective and critical thinking (Spain). An aspect signalled by researchers was that students seemed to have received better grades in their exams – not reflecting their true knowledge. One solution for that was teachers' resorting to more problem-based learning, able to encourage critical thinking and make it less easy to find answers online (Nigeria).

► *Teachers' and students' emotional and psychological issues linked to online activity*

Both teachers and students had to fight moments of sadness, depression, and lack of accomplishment or stress brought by the many hours in front of the computers, laptops or tablets. Teachers were also confronted with tiredness and concentration difficulty in front of the computer (Italy) or the feeling of discouragement and dissatisfaction in their work because of the loss of face-to-face interaction with their students (Korea). They also felt that lack of face-to-face interaction affected class dynamics very much. The solutions offered included humanizing courses and strengthening the interpersonal relationship, so that the atmosphere could be less tense, less tiresome or boring.

► *Much more time spent to prepare courses and seminars*

Many researchers mentioned the challenge caused by extra-workload for teachers (Ecuador, Italy, Romania). In Romania, for example, a study in which interviews on this issue were conducted with teachers (Barbu et al., 2022)

disclosed the fact that many of them declared they had to work more than 4 hours preparing teaching materials and correcting assignments (as compared to the 4 hours before the pandemic).

Although no clear solutions were mentioned in the analyzed articles, researchers mentioned some other challenges in their own country:

- ▶ *A great number of assignments students received and the decrease of practical skills (Nigeria)*
- ▶ *Lack of emotional psychological support (Canada, Angola)*
- ▶ *Discomfort of speaking in the void; intrusion in the teacher's domestic privacy; fear of being recorded during the teaching process (Italy).*

## Conclusions

This study aimed at identifying the challenges that teachers teaching online had to face during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the solutions that teachers from universities in different countries had to find in order to meet the challenges and to offer students the opportunity to continue their study in the most efficient possible way.

Findings proved that challenges (no matter whether the countries had or had not previous experiences with online work) were almost the same for all countries analysed, with slight differences (connected to investment in technology and problems with technology) that were linked, especially, to the degree of the countries' social and economic development. The solutions were also similar in most countries with emphasis on the issues of efforts of transforming teacher-centred classes into student-centred ones and of finding the quickest and handiest solutions of adaptations under the unprecedented circumstances.

Researchers highlighted important requirements for online teaching – that can become, any time, an emergency remote teaching or a constant in the near future. Among them, a greater state involvement in establishing policies and providing online technology for universities (suggested by all countries, but especially the underdeveloped ones); the necessity for training courses for teachers as far as the use of technology is concerned (suggested by almost all countries, especially the underdeveloped and the developing ones); the necessity of choosing the platforms or tools that are able to monitor students' progress or activity in real time and more practical work examples and summaries of taught material so that processes of understanding and interpretation of information could be helped (suggested by Romania); being considerate to the feelings that students experience under stressful conditions that may have an important impact on participation to classes, timeless attendance, or timeless assignment transmission to the teachers (Australia).

## Limitations and strengths of research

The study was based on a meta-analysis of data collected from research of scholars (articles exclusively) from various countries on the six inhabited continents.

Some limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the method of data collection we have chosen did not allow inclusion for analysis of a larger number of examples from various other countries. Second, the perspective we have taken is that of the teachers, as most articles responding to the data collection requirements did not take the students' perspectives. Our future work could have in view this aspect, too.

The strength of the study lies in the possibility of offering further extensive research on the topic, even by insisting on only one type of challenge with different solutions offered in the various contexts of different countries.

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