

10 The response of the University of Isfahan to COVID-19: remote online language teaching

Adel Rafiei¹ and Zahra Amirian²

Abstract

This study describes the changes in the instructional system experienced by the language departments in the University of Isfahan, Iran, during the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak and the consequent national lockdown. After providing a very brief scenario of a regular academic year in higher education in Iran, this chapter focuses on the changes made to the instructional system in response to this world-wide pandemic and the non-academic measures taken across the university in general and language departments in particular. After pointing to some challenges of online instruction, the advantages and disadvantages of remote instruction with regard to the four language skills from both teachers' and students' perspectives will be discussed. A review of the assessment procedures in the platform used by the University of Isfahan will then be provided. This case study will come to an end by providing some outlook for the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, teacher-feedback, student-feedback, Iran.

1. University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran; a.rafiee@fgn.ui.ac.ir

2. University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran; z.amirian@fgn.ui.ac.ir

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1. Introduction

The University of Isfahan was established in 1946. Over the last 70 years, it has evolved into one of the top academic institutions in Iran. The university has 14 faculties with over 15,000 students and 650 academic staff. The faculty of foreign languages has over 1,500 students (with around 1,000 undergraduate and 500 post-graduate students) and 54 teaching staff. The faculty has five departments, including the department of English language and literature, the department of German, Armenian, and Chinese language and literature, the department of Arabic language and literature, the department of French and Russian language and literature, and the department of linguistics.

Each academic year at the University of Isfahan, like at most universities in Iran, consists of two terms named Autumn and Spring semesters. The Autumn semester starts around mid-September and ends late January while the Spring semester begins early February and ends late June. Iranian New Year holidays are in the Spring semester. New Year holidays start from 20th March and last around 20 days.

The first cases of COVID-19 were reported in the third week of the Spring semester on 19th February 2020. In a few days, with an increasing number of daily cases, universities in Iran closed their campuses and opted for remote online instruction.

2. Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

- to describe the instructional measures taken by the University of Isfahan to tackle the problems raised by the pandemic; and
- to describe the non-instructional measures taken by the University of Isfahan to tackle the issues raised by the pandemic.

2.1. The instructional measures taken by the University of Isfahan during COVID-19

In line with other higher education institutions in Iran as well as the schools, the University of Isfahan had some emergency responses in order to effectively and urgently tackle the instructional and non-instructional problems raised by the national lockdown. Although the University of Isfahan was equipped with some previous virtual teaching experience, the immediate change of the whole educational system was a far-reaching task. The university had the following concerns.

- To what extent could the technical infrastructure of the university afford this volume of virtual classes?
- How could the infrastructure be improved and strengthened?
- To what extent could teachers, students, and staff adapt to the new educational system?
- Did all students have access to computers and high-speed Internet?

When the lockdown was nationally announced, there were three weeks to the beginning of the New Year holidays in Iran. Given this situation, the university took the following measures in response to the concerns mentioned above. First, it was announced that virtual classes are optional. Besides, teachers were free to use any platform they found appropriate, although they were encouraged to use BigBlueButton, the platform that has been used in the university in some virtual courses for years. With this decision, the initial shock largely subsided, and the university had time to strengthen its infrastructure and train the teachers, students, and staff by the end of the New Year holidays. To introduce the teachers and students to the platform used for teaching, the university designed and conducted various workshops and posted some instructional videos on the university website. The university also telephoned each student to ensure their access to computers and the Internet. In case a student did not have access to a

computer/smartphone, the university attempted to solve the problem through charities. If the issue remained unresolved, the student was recommended to cancel the semester.

Meanwhile, the administrative staff of the university had a lot of virtual meetings in order to find ways to go through the educational and technological challenges that occurred due to the sudden outbreak. After empowering the technological infrastructure of the university, the university offered online classes from the very first day after the New Year holidays. The classes were to be held on the university platform, and the catch-up classes, i.e. additional classes, were automatically scheduled by the system for each course.

Some training workshops were also arranged for both the teachers and the non-academic staff in order to make them familiar with the BigBlueButton, the platform of choice for the delivery of remote courses. These workshops also helped the academic staff learn how to handle usual technical problems. Some guidelines about the assessment of the students were also suggested.

2.2. The non-instructional measures

Some non-instructional measures were also taken by the university. First, all students were telephoned and consoled. They were asked about their own and their family members' infection or possible loss due to the COVID-19. Students were also asked whether their parents (or themselves) lost their jobs in this critical situation and if they were in financial trouble. Some food packs were donated to students in need in line with the National Donation Movement across the country. In addition, those who could not afford smartphones or the cost of the Internet connection were identified and helped through charities.

The second measure was that all non-academic staff who suffered from underlying conditions, including diabetes, heart disease, cancer, or kidney disease were allowed to stay home and do their job online. This attempt reduced the rate of infections and relieved the vulnerable staff. Moreover, in different points of time when the country suffered from a sudden increase in number of

infected people and consequently in the number of the dead, only a small number of non-academic staff (one third, half, or two-third, based on the severity of the conditions) were present at the university, and others did their jobs at home.

3. Teacher feedback

To get feedback from the teachers, an online questionnaire was developed to learn about their problems, opinions, experiences, best practices, and requirements of online language classes. In order to collect data, nine teachers were randomly selected from different departments: five from English, two from French, one from German, and one from the Chinese language department.

Based on the feedback received, the most significant challenges in teaching language skills in online classes are inadequate interaction (65%) and technical problems (35%). The most significant advantages are the availability of teaching resources and tools (50%), the ability to record the classes (25%), and low student stress (25%), respectively.

Most teachers believe that students participated less in online than in face-to-face classes. According to them, students sometimes avoid interaction on the pretext of technical problems and lack of access to high-speed Internet. However, they claim that the problem will be removed if the technical infrastructure is good enough and the instructors are proficient in working with the platform.

The next four questions looked at teaching language skills. Regarding reading and writing skills, most teachers prefer online classes to regular face-to-face classes. According to the teachers, in online reading and writing classes, providing feedback is more comfortable, students are more focused, and online text correction tools are available. Low intensity of students' interaction is considered as the only drawback of these classes.

Despite the positive opinion of teachers about online teaching of reading and writing skills, they have very different opinions about listening and – especially –

speaking skills. All respondents – except one – believed that teaching speaking skills is more effective in face-to-face classes. Regarding teaching the listening skill, the teachers' opinions were more moderate. Only two of nine teachers were in favor of online classes. According to the teachers, the most significant drawbacks of teaching speaking/listening online are low student participation and lack of face-to-face interaction. Easy recording of classes is the only advantage mentioned for these classes.

Regarding the most critical technical problems, the teachers mentioned the following: low Internet speed, the platform limitations, and insufficient mastery of the teachers and students of the platform. The most crucial non-technical challenge from the teachers' point of view is how to engage those students who refuse to participate in class activities under the pretext of technical problems, and more importantly, how to take a valid exam.

All participants in the study stated that in addition to the university-approved platform, they also use other messaging applications, especially WhatsApp, for further coordination and sending content, etc. All the participants have taken the final exam with the help of WhatsApp video calling.

For the post-corona period, one teacher wants to continue online classes, three want to go back to the face-to-face classes, and five teachers prefer a blended method provided that the technical infrastructure is strengthened.

4. Student feedback

The students' feedback was examined through an online questionnaire too. The link was sent through WhatsApp to student populations of different departments in the faculty of foreign languages including English, French, and Chinese. Around 128 students voluntarily filled in and submitted the questionnaire. However, since this study mostly focused on the quality of learning language skills, the target student populations were those who were passing language skills courses in their second to fifth semesters. Last year's students were,

therefore, excluded. First semester students were excluded as well because due to the pandemic their semester started later. The researchers supposed that since these students have not yet experienced usual face-to-face learning in the context of higher education, they may not be able to pinpoint the distinctive features of virtual learning or come up with a rational comparison between traditional and virtual learning contexts. As a result, the responses to 90 questionnaires were carefully examined.

The first item asked about the quality of virtual teaching in general at the University of Isfahan; 33.3% of the respondents rated it as good; 44.4% described it as having medium quality; 11.11% supposed it to be weak; and 11.11% rated it as very weak.

Concerning the efficacy of the number of teaching hours, that was 60 minutes a week for every two credit course, 44.4% believed it was good; 33.3% rated it as very good; 11.1% rated it as moderate; and 11.1% rated it as weak. Those who rated this item as moderate or weak believed that more time is needed for the students to participate in classroom activities or find the opportunity to talk or ask their questions. They thought this amount of time does not provide them with enough opportunity to speak or write and practice their communicative skills.

Four items of the questionnaire dealt with the quality of learning the four language skills in the online setting. Regarding reading skills, 33.3% of the respondents rated it as good; 33.3% rated it as moderate; 11.1% believed it is weak; and 22.2% believed it is very weak. The low possibility of focusing on the text was mentioned as their problem. They stated that they were unable to zoom the text because either the platform did not have such capability or they did not know how to zoom the text.

With regard to the writing skill, 44.4% rated it as good; 11.1% rated it as moderate; 33.3% of the respondents believed it is weak; and 11.1% rated it as very weak. The possibility of writing in the chat-box to answer the questions raised by the teacher was mentioned as a good opportunity for improving writing

skill. Moreover, since there was no traditional pen and paper final exam, the teachers assigned different tasks or essay-type quizzes for the students. This was considered as an opportunity by some of the students while others viewed it as a misfortune that takes a lot of their time.

Regarding listening, 33.3% of the respondents rated it as very good; 33.3% rated it good; 11.1% considered it moderate; 11.1% supposed it is weak; and the remaining 11.1% of the respondents ranked it as very weak. Generally speaking, the students were satisfied with online teaching because it provided them with the opportunity to practice their listening. As a matter of fact, listening was supposed to be the most privileged language skill in the online teaching environment because the teachers recorded their lectures, and it was possible for the students to listen to them as many times as was required. However, those who were dissatisfied and rated it as weak or even very weak were mostly from less privileged, rural areas of Iran who did not enjoy high-speed Internet, and therefore had problems with the quality of the voice and even got disconnected many times.

Finally, regarding the speaking skill, 33.3% of the participants rated it as good; 33.3% rated it as moderate; 11.1% considered it as weak; while 22.2% believed that it is very weak. Those who rated it as good and moderate stated that they have very low anxiety and stress in online environments, and they are not embarrassed of talking in front of their classmates. They said that some teachers assign them speaking tasks or require them to present lectures in the classroom. Such kinds of activities provide the best opportunity for the students to improve their speaking ability in a low-stress environment. On the other hand, other students blamed online teaching sessions as being short, depriving them of finding the chance to talk or participate in classroom discussions and activities.

Another item of the questionnaire investigated students' attitudes toward learning different language skills in the online setting on a five-item Likert scale of very positive to very negative. Statistically speaking, the attitude of students toward all four language skills was nearly the same: 14.3% of

the participants have a very positive attitude toward all four language skills; 42.9% had a positive attitude toward listening, while 14.3% had a positive attitude toward speaking; 28.6% of the respondents had no opinions with regard to reading, writing, and speaking skills. However, as mentioned above, the students believed that they could best improve their listening skills. Due to the speed of the Internet and in order to prevent the noise and even the probable disconnection, the teachers close their webcams; therefore, the students are only exposed to the teacher's voice without his/her picture. This makes the students more attentive to what they hear. Consequently, it would improve their listening abilities. In addition, the classroom sessions are recorded by the teachers so that the students, especially those who missed the class due to the infection with COVID-19 or various technical problems, could use the recorded file at their convenience as many times as required.

Speaking was the second skill favored by the student respondents. They believed those tasks and practices which require them to talk are highly effective especially because they enjoy a less embarrassing learning experience in the online setting. Writing ranked third. The respondents believed that since most of the time they write in response to the teacher's questions instead of talk, they have more opportunities to practice their writing skills. They also believed that they have more time to organize their writing or revise what they have written in the chat-box while listening to the teacher. However, reading was the least favored skill; the respondents believed that they do not have enough concentration on the passage especially because the font of the texts is very small on this platform, and they cannot (or do not know how to) zoom the text and make it more readable. To sum up, listening and speaking were the most challenging skills for the students, while the least challenging skills were reading and writing.

The final item of the questionnaire asked the respondents about their preference for the mode of instruction after the pandemic: 55.6% of the participants preferred a classical face-to-face classroom while 44.6% preferred a good blend of classical and online instruction. Interestingly, no one selected online instruction as his/her preference. This may be due to the fact that online

instruction is associated with the COVID-19 outbreak in the minds of students, and this may lead to a sense of disgust among them. The other reason may lie in the fact that some students come from less privileged families who cannot afford smartphones, laptops, and even the cost of the Internet connection, or they may come from rural areas and do not enjoy high-quality Internet.

5. Assessment

In the first Spring Semester that coincided with the outbreak of COVID-19, the university required teachers to have formative assessment through the term and report the results regularly to the head of departments. Accordingly, based on the nature of different courses, the teachers assigned various tasks and activities during the term to observe students' learning and development. Giving lectures, taking quizzes, taking open-ended exams, assigning short essays, or taking oral tests through BigBlueButton or other platforms were among the popular options. Most students were happy with this assessment procedure. They believed that the gradual nature of such an assessment decreased their test-related anxiety, specifically in this situation that they were worried about technical problems and the disconnection on the day of the final exam. Of course, some teachers took the final exam as well because they believed that the summative assessment would give integrity and formality to the course; however, it only formed a small part of the total score of the students.

However, for the next semester, the teachers were required to take the exams using the testing platform provided by the university. A detailed video clip made by one of the teachers designing his own test on this platform was provided for all the teachers in order to help them learn how to follow different steps in order to take their own online tests. Some workshops were also held in order to help the teachers design their tests on this platform. However, it was suggested to the teachers that if they are offering the courses to post-graduate students whose tests are essay-type and project-based by nature, or if they are teaching to international students who have problems working with this

testing platform, they can substitute any other convenient platform and report the results and share the documents with the heads of departments.

6. Conclusion

As a matter of fact, although not pleasant, the experience of COVID-19 was a giant leap for the online instruction in Iran in general and in the University of Isfahan, in particular. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, the University of Isfahan had the experience of holding online courses, workshops, and even the entire educational programs for some fields of study on a small scale. However, at that time, both the teachers and students hesitated to hold or attend online courses because they only thought about the drawbacks of online teaching. This seemingly unpleasant experience taught us that it *is* possible, and more importantly, it can be a good complement to our traditional classroom-based teaching. Future programs can be developed in a way that they blend both types of instruction in an appropriate way in order to reduce the efforts and costs for both the university and the students.

Moreover, based on this experience, it can be inferred that some workshops or different optional courses, especially those offered to post-graduate students or international candidates, can be more effective and more convenient if held online even after the pandemic. Online courses and workshops not only are more convenient for the participants, but also they are more cost-effective for the university because a greater number of students will participate without much cost for accommodation purposes. However, for achieving the best outcomes and the most satisfaction of both students and teachers, the university should enhance its infrastructure with regard to technological facilities. In addition, both teachers and students require more training in order to work more efficiently and more smoothly with the teaching and specifically the testing platform defined by the university. Therefore, planning ongoing, up-dated workshops, and providing instructional voice clips or video clips on how to work with the teaching or testing platforms are in urgent need, especially for first-year students.

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