18 University of Cambridge Asian, Middle Eastern and Persian studies during the pandemic

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Abstract

This case study will focus on the COVID-19 lecturers' experience in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (FAMES)[2] at the University of Cambridge. After a brief background about how the academic year works in the University of Cambridge and an introduction about the situation after the outbreak of COVID-19 in the UK, the author will discuss about the measures taken by the faculty and the way the teaching was conducted in the FAMES in general and Persian language courses in particular. Then, the challenges and problems regarding online teaching in Department of Middle Eastern Studies (DMES) will be highlighted. Finally, a short explanation about the way the examination and assessment were handled in the faculty will be provided. The findings show excellent management and steady leadership turned the classic classroom-based teaching to remote and online teaching. Also, professional collaboration and performance of lecturers along with the ongoing technical and training support were the main factors to go through the critical phase of the pandemic's impact successfully. It seems that the language teachers have gained valuable experience and skills in teaching languages differently, which can be deployed in future post pandemic situations.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, Persian language, UK.

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2. https://www.ames.cam.ac.uk/

1.   Introduction

In this section, a brief introduction of the academic year in the University of Cambridge, the institutional context, and the outbreak of the COVID-19 in the UK will be provided.

Usually, each academic year in the University of Cambridge consists of three terms named Michaelmas, Lent, and Easter term[3] respectively, of which Easter term includes the assessment and examination period. Therefore, usually, examination is conducted only once in an academic year.

> "All Cambridge undergraduate courses are assessed through examinations in broad subject areas called Triposes. Each Tripos is divided into one or more Parts and you need to complete a number of Parts in one or more Triposes to qualify for the B.A. degree"[4].

In the FAMES, there are two separate departments and hence two different triposes: Department of Middle Eastern Studies, where the students study Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, and/or Hindi languages, and Department of Asian studies, where the students study Chinese, Japanese, or Korean languages. Either of these Triposes will last four years before the students graduate and are awarded a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree.

Year three of their study is called the Year Abroad[5] and the students need to spend this third year of their four-year course in a country or countries relevant to their course. This is an excellent opportunity to increase their fluency and understanding of the language. It also provides the opportunity to start work on their dissertation, which must show evidence of a substantial use of the sources, whether oral or textual, in their language of study.

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3. https://www.cam.ac.uk/about-the-university/term-dates-and-calendars

4. https://www.camdata.admin.cam.ac.uk/structure-undergraduate-courses-cambridge?

5. https://www.ames.cam.ac.uk/undergraduates/what-can-you-study/year-abroad

The first cases of COVID-19 were reported in the UK on 15 Feb 2020[6], which was in the middle of the university's Lent term, which was planned to end on 13 March 2020. So, in the last couple of weeks of that term, the anxiety and stress amongst students and staff could be seen as the news was indicating that the number of daily cases was increasing, particularly in other countries. Very soon, more precisely, 10 days after the end of the Lent term, the national lockdown was announced in the UK[7].

The university's vice chancellor published messages[8] accordingly, and different working groups were set up. The Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning[9] gave some guidelines and consulted staff to help them with practical advice. That was the starting time, when departments, faculties, and the university started to think about the possible ways to address the issue and the brainstorming of how the teaching could be conducted after Easter.

It was early April that the university decided to have the lessons online, and for that reason, a lot of meetings were started for the best way of delivery. Although I am a member of the FAMES, I am working at Cambridge University Language Centre too. They were pioneers in deciding to use the Zoom platform for online delivery of their lessons. So, the meetings, training sessions, and practice sessions on how to use Zoom were really helpful. That made me prepared in advance for what I would plan to do when teaching would start in the FAMES.

In our DMES virtual meetings, I shared my findings and learnings with my colleagues and also delivered a couple of training sessions for the academic staff (particularly lecturers of different languages) on how to use Zoom in the classroom. I should emphasise that teaching online and using such platforms were not easy for many lecturers. However, my previous experience in designing remote online and offline language resources as well as my experience

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6.   https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2020/feb/15/coronavirus-first-fatality-in-europe-confirmed-wuhan-COVID-19-death-toll-symptoms-cruise-ship-liner-quarantine-live-updates

7. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-on-coronavirus-23-march-2020

8. www.cam.ac.uk/notices/news/an-update-from-the-vice-chancellor-on-the-coronavirus-outbreak

9. www.cctl.cam.ac.uk

in online language teaching gave me confidence that I could easily continue my teachings online. Actually, I had been involved in developing content and the preferred way those contents could be designed, adapted, and delivered digitally when I was dealing with a Multimedia software for teaching Persian language and introductions to Iranian culture, which was named 'Alefba-ye Iran' and designed and produced by 'RayMehr Company' in 2007. I also had been in charge of content and design of the first interactive online Persian language teaching website named "www.PersianLanguageOnline.com", created by the Persian Language Foundation in 2014, which was acquired by the Iran Heritage Foundation in 2018. On the other hand, I have been teaching online, particularly using Skype since 2009 and also using other websites which were helpful for language teaching, such as Oovoo.

Hence, when I was introduced to Zoom by Cambridge University Language Centre in April 2020, I found that the platform had many features and advantages which could be helpful for online delivery of the lessons. It was very user friendly: you could have 100 students logged in to your class and you could see them on your screen; the breakout rooms provided the opportunity to divide students into pairs and groups in order to practise speaking skills and conversation; recording the session was straightforward and reasonably easy to be shared with those unable to attend so they could make use of it; the chat box was available to communicate with the student and write words and phrases for them; the whiteboard was helpful to write in Persian script, so the students could see the cursive handwritten form they would experience in normal in-person classes; and above all, you could share your screen with the students to work on particular text, watch a particular clip, etc. Finally, as we are using Moodle in the University of Cambridge and we have already lots of e-content over there, Zoom was easily compatible with Moodle. So, I decided to use Zoom over other platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Google Meet and suggested it highly to all other colleagues in the faculty.

Therefore, considering all my experience and knowledge of offline, digital, and interactive or online live remote teaching, I put myself forward to help other members of the faculty in using online technology and representing them in the

School of Humanities Online Learning, Teaching, and Assessment Group of the University of Cambridge.

2.   Objective

The objective of this chapter is to highlight the actions which were taken in the FAMES after the lockdown during the Easter term, and this section particularly focuses on Persian case study.

As it was mentioned earlier, the faculty offers different Asian and Middle Eastern languages at the undergraduate level for four years. The number of students accepted and admitted for the undergraduate programme is about 40 students (20 students in the department of Middle Eastern studies and 20 students in the department of Asian studies) per year, and hence the classes are not exceeding 12 students and accordingly much smaller in size in comparison with other courses and other universities. In the department of Middle Eastern studies, usually 90% of students have a combination of two languages of the Middle East or one language from the Middle East and another language from the Department of Modern Medieval Languages and Linguistics. Therefore, they may have up to ten contact hours of language classes per week and these would form about 50 to 60% of their degree.

Apart from language classes, all students will have some other classes on history, literature, anthropology, cinema, etc. of the regions. These are called content papers, which are more like lectures with discussions. Also, students will have dedicated supervision sessions every week for the language or non-language subjects they take. These are usually in groups of one to four students.

It should be noted that the advantages of having language classes of small size made the online teaching of languages perfectly feasible. This is also applicable to very small supervision sessions as well as lecture type classes of bigger size which do not need the active engagement of students for language learning. Hence, it was fairly manageable to conduct online language classes in the faculty.

In the case of Persian studies, there were 12 students in total, of which 5 were doing Persian Elementary, 2 were doing Persian Intermediate, and 5 were doing Persian Advanced with the same lecturer. Each group had at least 4-5 sessions per week. Each session of language class was 50-60 minutes, and the students were connecting through the provided Zoom link. The teaching task was straightforward and done as usual. It should be acknowledged that the teaching time in online mode was the least difficult part of the whole process. Students were engaged and involved actively in the learning process, the breakout rooms were used properly for pair work and group work activities, and the reading texts and listening materials were accessible via Moodle and also were screen shared with or played for the students respectively. In addition, the videos and online interactive Persian teaching websites were of great help during the Easter term.

3.   Support

The University of Cambridge reacted promptly to the advent of COVID-19 in order to support students, lecturers, and staff to make them prepared and equipped for online remote teaching. At the faculty and department level, a considerable amount of meeting and consultation sessions were held in order to find the needs and requirements as well as best possible solutions towards the critical situation. Despite the guidelines and advice the university and the faculty provided, the lecturers were given freedom in deciding the best practices for the classes that they were teaching.

Regarding technical and technology support, the faculty provided all teaching staff with Zoom premium accounts to address the shortcomings of basic accounts. The devices needed for marking the students' assignments were requested by some language teachers and were purchased quickly. The university acquired Panopto as a recording platform for the academic staff to create and share the videos of their lectures. Different training sessions on using technologies such as Zoom, Panopto, and other platforms as well as online and remote teaching principles, techniques, and strategies were provided by different parts of the

university. Ongoing support and training were in the core of the plan in a way that it was really impossible to attend all, and the teaching staff had to choose only the ones they found most beneficial from the many webinars and the training sessions provided.

4.   Challenges

There were also some challenges, some of which needed more time than in normal classes. Among which, I can refer to preparing the materials for online classes, including scanning the texts which were not available in digital format and uploading the written and oral materials in the Moodle. Also spending a huge amount of time on the computer for lesson preparation as well as having the classes online for a few hours in row were tiring, and problems such as eye fatigue, back pain, and other physical health problems were unavoidable. What should be added to this is the after class workload, which was doubled. The students were submitting their homework and assignment online in different formats, and marking them digitally was time consuming, tiring, and problematic. Unavailability of printers and learning how to mark the digital language homework were big issues. However, the devices such as Penpads (which have been provided by the faculty if asked) were helpful to some extent to do the marking on the computer without the need of using a mouse or printing much homework (which is, on the other hand, not environmentally friendly). The colleagues who were in possession of tablets or iPads had fewer issues of such kind.

The other challenge was to find the perfect time where all students of a particular class could log in and attend the class, as some of them had returned to their home countries, which were in different time zones. We had students who were in Canada, Egypt, France, the UK, and the USA. Moreover, it was needed that all participants, including the teacher, be in an appropriate place with the proper desk, chair, and light and without any disturbing noise as well as having reliable internet connection. There were a couple of instances when somebody entered a student's room and distracted not only that particular student but also all other

participants. Moreover, there were times when one student lost connection and could not connect any more to one particular session. Despite all these downsides and challenges, the Easter term went well, with above 95% attendance and covering all the required topics and materials and preparing the students for the examination and attendance.

Regarding Arabic and Hebrew language classes, the experience of the lecturers were to some extent similar to the Persian ones. All language classes and supervision sessions were conducted online through Zoom. For other content papers (lecture type classes) and their supervision, the lecturers were using a mix of platforms including Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, and Skype.

5.   Assessment

For the assessment and examinations, after several meetings and consultations with all teaching staff, the university decided to have formal examinations for final year students and summative assessment for other year group students. In the case of Persian studies language papers, all oral exams (including listening and speaking skills) were conducted online where each individual student was attending exam sessions separately in their dedicated time. For written exams (including reading and writing exams), the same examinations which were provided for normal situations were made available on the specific date for the students to access them. They needed to complete the assessment in the normal exam duration and finally scan and upload their work into the system to be marked by the examiners. The exam results were in line with the lecturer's expectations based on the students' one year performance, and also there was no meaningful difference in comparison to the results in the previous years.

6.   Discussion

For getting the feedback from the students and teachers, a couple of questionnaires with open questions were sent to the lecturers. The questions were mainly

asking about the problems, opinion, experience, best practice, requirements, and support. The students' feedback was gathered in online sessions and through the emails received. Also, another survey was conducted by School of Humanities Online Learning Teaching Group, in which many language teachers and students participated. Some feedback was gathered from this survey.

Based on the feedback received, the online teaching was welcomed warmly by the students because not only they have been more familiar with modern technology as well as different features and advantages of social media and virtual world but they were also less worried and stressed about the pandemic. However, different feedback was received regarding the productivity of teaching language remotely. Some believed that body language was missing, which has a great role in understanding spoken language, and there had been less opportunity to focus on speaking skills in comparison to classroom-based teaching. However, they found that online learning is as good for reading skills, enhancing vocabulary, and understanding grammar.

In the same way, the language teachers had mixed experience about online teaching. Some were really struggling and had negative feedback, and some were supporting it and wanted to use their materials and experience even post COVID-19. Some language teachers believe that face to face language teaching is irreplaceable and remote teaching doesn't allow for a sense of real contact with and among the students. There are associated costs with remote teaching: teachers might have home responsibilities with family around or have a partner as a key worker, some of them are single parents and hence school/childcare setting closure should be accounted, and finally, their working environment has been less than ideal and they would prefer uninterrupted access to their offices at the faculty. These groups of lecturers found that they didn't have sufficient time to seek training in remote teaching. They found their students were less active with inadequate concentration. Also, they found online teaching exhausting, tiring on eyes, and very demanding with a lot of strain on them physically and mentally. On the other hand, some lecturers find remote language teaching and particularly the Zoom platform interestingly useful and surprisingly easy. They believe it works really well and is quite intense.

What has been learnt and can be considered as the findings of this case study of online language teaching in the FAMES can be summarised in a few points.

Apart from all the shortcomings and problems with online remote teaching, the higher the familiarity of the teachers with technology, the easier and less stressful the online teaching experience. It may start with a steep learning curve, but it would get easier with familiarity and through time. This has been true and visible in the first term of the new academic year 2020-2021. Although the interaction with the students via online platforms is tricky, it can be carefully and professionally managed after gaining more training and experience. Teaching online can be highly effective with no major pedagogical hurdle particularly for small group teaching and supervisions. However, the pace in online teaching would be slower than in-person teaching. In general, it needs a great amount of adaptability. Mastering how to use one particular platform is much better than not having enough deep knowledge of many platforms at the same time, and, among those, the Zoom platform is one of the most appropriate for online language classes. More tailored training courses would be much more beneficial for supporting the lecturers and addressing their needs and solving their problems. Availability of digital or online content will help the lecturers in saving time and energy spent for digitalising the hard copies of their teaching materials. Access to offices and an adequate working atmosphere with all the needed materials, technology, and devices around will make online teaching more straightforward and pleasant both for lecturers and students. Online teaching can be a way forward, but if it is blended with in-person teaching, it will solve many problems and overcome the downsides and disadvantages.

7.   Conclusion

The FAMES took action immediately concerning the outbreak of COVID-19 and the sudden changes of the educational requirements. Due to different teaching staff expertise, beliefs, and approaches in the faculty, with limited technologies in place, excellent management and steady leadership were absolutely essential for turning the classic classroom-based teaching to remote and online teaching.

The exceptionally professional and quick collaboration and performance of colleagues to adapt to this sudden change, along with the ongoing technical and training support were the main factors to make the lecturers and students able to go through the critical phase of the pandemic's impact successfully. The language teachers of the faculty gained valuable experience and skills in teaching languages differently. They are now more comfortable in using technology inside and outside classrooms, developing their materials appropriate for remote and online teaching, and addressing their new pedagogical needs. Not only are they better prepared to continue their teaching whilst there is the COVID-19 pandemic condition but also to deploy these skills and advantages in future post pandemic situations.

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