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THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ONLINE TRAINING

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Abstract: The paper examines the increasing role of digital communication skills in successful virtual training. We examine the trends in digital communication since Covid-19 lockdowns and how they influence teachers and trainers in their work. The paper includes an overview of the most popular trends in digital communication tools, their advantages and disadvantages and proposes possible changes to improve these tools. We focus on functionality of platforms and whether they help teachers, trainers and students.

Keywords: digital communication, online training, virtual training, communication skills, digital tools

JEL Codes: I20, I21

INTRODUCTION

Following COVID-19, educational processes began to employ new approaches to teaching and learning. Because of the pandemic's urgent need to work and study at home, educators began to incorporate digital tools into their teaching routine. This rapid digitalisation has become a pillar for professionals in education and training. Both schools and universities had to adjust to the new reality. Some experts believe that we may never return to the old reality – a solely analogue education process[2]. The goal of this paper is to present and discuss the most popular trends in educational digital communication tools.

We also examine the advantages and disadvantages of the most popular online platforms, as well as whether they benefit teachers, trainers, and students. The final section of this paper presents a proposal for the future of online training.

EXPOSITION

Defining digital communication skills

The increasing role of the virtual and digital environment in our lives inevitably shapes our perceptions of teaching and learning. As educators, we are confronted with a new system of teaching and learning. Even if we are uncomfortable with the new reality, our need for adaptation will drive the process of education renewal. Before we begin our investigation, we'd like to clarify how we intend to define digital communication skills in 2021. The ***ability to communicate in a digitally based environment, i.e. digital literacy,*** represents a set of ***oral, written*** and ***online training management skills,*** necessary for successful online education. We would also like to clarify that we choose to use *online* and *virtual* training interchangeably because they represent the same education environment.

Oral digital communication skills in education include preparation and delivery of virtual presentations (introducing new didactical material), quiz and game conducting (testing newly acquired knowledge), discussion facilitation (important for receiving feedback and building a spirit of pluralism in class), active listening (important for empathy and understanding) and mentoring project-based tasks (building team work and collaboration mentality in class).

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[2] Discussion session: A Knowledge Café – sharing online teaching experiences during COVID-19, Presented at ICERI2021 International Conference, Nov 8th 2021, https://iated.org/concrete3/session_detail.php?session_id=4663

Written digital communication skills include preparation and delivery of visual aids for virtual presentations (introducing new didactical material), preparation of methodical materials and tasks for online platforms (introducing new didactical material and testing newly acquired knowledge), assessing individual and group tasks in a digital environment (using platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Neo LMS, Big Blue Button, Google Forms, Google Classroom, etc.), real-time communication, e.g. live chat, and e-mail correspondence.

The final important category of digital skills is ***online (virtual) training management skills***, which include how educators manage their teaching process. Working with online training platforms (Zoom, Google Meets, BigBlueButton, Microsoft Teams, etc.), creating online webinars and lectures, time-management skills, discussion moderation with virtual tools (muting microphones or cameras, using breakout rooms, giving presenter rights, etc.), distributing e-learning materials via links in live chat and e-mail, encouraging the use of web-based self-preparation tools, e.g. Anki (https://apps.ankiweb.net/) or Studystream (https://www.studystream.live/home).

Strengths and weaknesses of digital communication skills in education

The following table presents a summary of the pros and cons of digital communication skills in education. It is up to the educator to assess which is an actual strength/weakness to their own work.

Table 1. Strengths and weaknesses of digital communication skills in education.

Digital communication skills	Strengths	Weaknesses
Oral	Real-time feedback. Improves empathy and understanding. Brings a human element to classes.	Depends on internet connection. Depends on educator's digital literacy.
Written	Best to introduce new material. Best for visualisations and demonstrations.	Depends on teacher's creativity and digital skills. Insufficient for real-time feedback.
Training management	Gives a solid structure to the classes. Improves learning pace. Good for building study habits.	Depends on computer/laptop/tablet availability and software features. Unsuccessful if teacher is not a good time-manager.

In our observation of the last 20 months virtual education processes we managed to outline a ***Six Pillar Model of Digital Literacy*** in virtual training and education. The model represents the main components of digital literacy: creativity and innovation in producing didactical materials, building team work mentality, improving social and cultural literacy, developing critical thinking, being able to manage information and online safety, and communicating effectively with students. Digital literacy has become a requirement for educators, but it also raises many questions for them. How can they improve their students' communication skills? When and how should classes be properly paced in order to maintain attention and interaction? The adaptability of teachers to the

new learning environment poses significant challenges. Differences in communication culture between generations also impede the success of online training. Visualisations on a surface (a white board) in front of the class, a commonly underestimated technique in face-to-face classes, have become critical in successful online training via the use of presentation tools like PowerPoint or Google Slides.
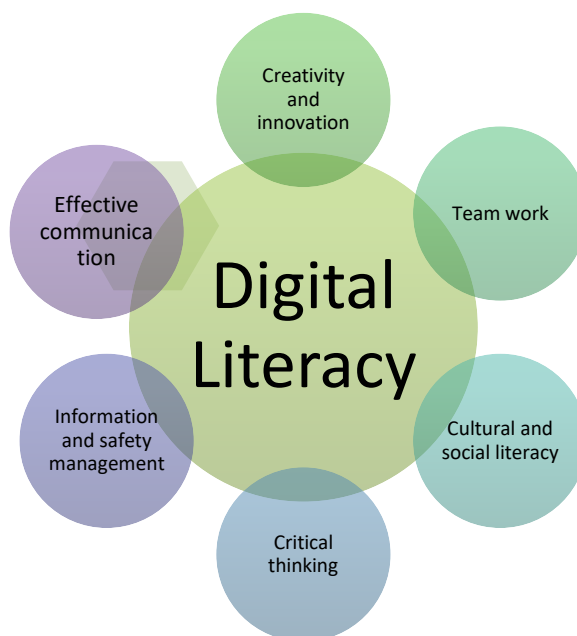

Fig. 1. The six pillar model of digital literacy in education.

All elements of the **Six Pillar Model of Digital Literacy** take up equally important roles in educators' work routine. We would like to emphasise that, due to the dynamic nature of the digital education environment, these are skills that must be constantly improved. Today's educators must adapt to their students' needs, such as the need for *improved critical thinking in an information society*, a *safer digital experience*, and *effective collaboration in virtual classrooms*. Practicing creativity and design thinking also helps students have a better virtual education experience.

Digital communication tools in virtual training

New challenges arose after the global education world went digital in March 2020. First, regardless of their actual digital literacy, educators needed to begin using digital platforms on a regular basis. Second, teachers needed to learn how to engage their students in online classes. A successful feedback and interaction between teachers and students was a third challenge. More challenges included keeping students' attention in class, completing tasks similar to face-to-face instruction, a lack of dialogue, lower academic success, and more forgiving grading regardless of actual results. The following table presents the key features of digital communication tools used by educators.

Table 2. Necessary digital communication tools in virtual training.

Communication tool	Key features
Online presentations	Engagement, interaction, feedback.
Infographics	Visual design, summary of information
Live chat in social networks	Interaction, feedback
Live chat in online training platforms	Interaction, feedback
Films and video clips	Engagement, summary of information,

	feedback
e-Learning platforms (e-Learning Shell, Google Classroom)	Engagement, summary of information, interaction, feedback
Online training platforms (Zoom, Google Meets, Big Blue Button, Neo LMS)	Engagement, interaction, feedback.

As we can see the key features of virtual training tools include engagement, feedback, interaction, information summary and visual design. These features are focused on student experience in both self-paced and teacher-led learning.
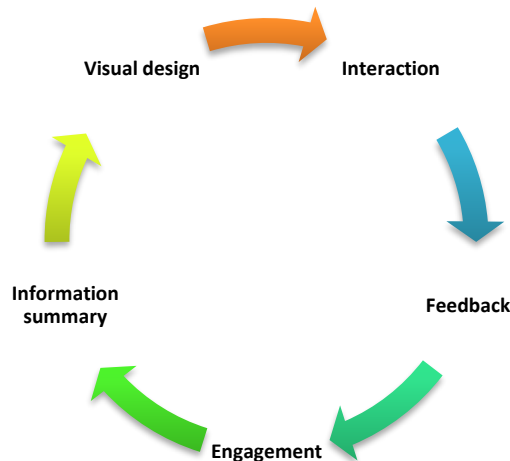
Fig. 2. Key features in online training.

The following section of the paper presents a small study of Chinese language teachers' teaching experiences in the University of Ruse's Confucius Classroom. We provide a brief systematisation of results, including a summary of teachers' responses to a short survey.

Virtual Chinese language teaching at the Confucius Classroom

Chinese language teachers used a number of approaches and methods based on students' language proficiency. The typical virtual language teaching method included using PowerPoint presentations as the primary visual focal point and sharing a screen with students who had to follow the teacher's instructions. Students' faces were rarely visible on the screen. Teachers were adamant about turning on their cameras, but students were uneasy because of their casual attire at home. Learners expressed some reluctance to use their cameras in class. Some language tasks could not be completed properly due to a lack of face-to-face contact. Furthermore, when instructed by the teacher, course participants preferred to interact. Learners avoided eye contact and felt more at ease listening to the teacher's instructions. We came to the following conclusions about online teaching based on the impressions of Chinese teachers from their virtual teaching experiences:

- A. More online teaching resources and various learning software were necessary.
- B. Teachers focused on reasonable balance between homework and classwork.
- C. Lessons included a number of stages.
- D. Teaching required designing a large number of classroom activities.
- E. Each student had to participate.
- F. A summary of the lesson at the end of the class was presented.
- G. The virtual training course in Chinese culture was successful in increasing cultural sensitivity and language competence among students.

Chinese teachers shared that they wanted to achieve inclusivity and greater cultural sensitivity among students. They also wanted to improve feedback and interaction with the students, as well as language proficiency. Thus, based on teachers' feedback, we outlined ***the most important goals of successful online training***.

1. ***Equal inclusion*** *of all students/learners;*
2. ***Equal distribution*** *of oral and written virtual tasks;*
3. ***Good balance*** *between homework and classwork;*
4. ***High digital literacy of teachers****/trainers in all 3 groups of skills.*

Therefore, we can derive the following takeaways from our research on virtual Chinese language teaching experiences. First, teachers used a variety of software tools and demonstrated well-developed digital communication skills. Second, they demonstrated good balance between oral, written and online training management skills. Third, teaching included a variety of virtual activities and equal student participation. Fourth, pacing of lessons was properly managed and, most importantly, the *major goals of successful online training were achieved*.

CONCLUSION

Experiences with online teaching in schools and universities continue to vary, but we must conclude that the new now of being present both in person and virtually is here to stay. Virtual/online teaching and training experiences will become more common for educators of all ages and abilities. We believe that studying synchronously (both virtually and in person) will improve educational quality. A variety of learning experiences is beneficial to students because it allows them to practise a wide range of skills. Keeping students' attention and increasing engagement in online classes will be a task for teachers. The primary goals of successful online training must stimulate education experts to work on supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom, balanced task and homework distribution, and improved digital literacy among educators.

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