

15 Braving remote instruction at Vilnius University: response to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This chapter examines the experience of teaching English-related courses at Vilnius University (VU), 'the oldest and largest Lithuanian institution of higher education, in the spring 2020. We discuss arrangements made in the organizational process and implementation of the subjects within the areas taught in English by the staff members of the Institute of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Philology, VU. Limiting our account to the period when the instruction was changed abruptly from face-to-face to remote, we focus on three areas of instruction: the intra-course logistics of transferring students to the remote synchronous method of instruction, the delivery of a course syllabus in the lockdown conditions, and student reflections on the experience.

Keywords: COVID-19, remote, online, language teaching, language learning, leadership programme, qualitative data analysis, LSP, Lithuania.

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1. Introduction

The first case of coronavirus infection was identified in Lithuania on February 28th 2020⁴. After putting all efforts toward preventative measures⁵ long before COVID-19 received pandemic status, the Government of the Republic of Lithuania made the difficult decision to introduce the national quarantine on Monday, March 16th 2020⁶. The week running 9-13 March celebrated Lithuania's Independence Day on Wednesday, March 11th 2020 and was the official state holiday. On March 12th at 12:25 pm, VU officially announced the impending quarantine regime through a pan-university email released in Lithuanian and English and addressed to both the staff and the students. The staff were advised to cancel face-to-face classes and switch to a remote mode of instruction starting Friday, March 13th. The initial quarantine period was to extend until March 27th, with the possibility of further extension.

It is natural that, even in challenging times, the academic school seeks both to ensure maximum possible safety to its members on the one hand, and on the other, to provide for an interrupted study process. Below, we share the experience of tackling the organizational issues and delivering courses within the three distinct areas taught in English by the Institute of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Philology, VU: the elective course on 'Language and Leadership'; the compulsory course English for Law Students; and the study program 'English and Another Foreign Language (Spanish, French, Norwegian and Russian)' run by the Faculty of Philology. In particular, we focus on three different aspects of the lockdown: (1) the logistics of the shift to the remote synchronous mode of instruction of the course Language in Leadership (LL), (2) the good practice of delivering the course English for Law Students, and (3) the analysis of the language students' attitudes toward the pros and cons of the remote teaching following the spring quarantine. Methodologically, our study relies on the aspects of qualitative content analysis and case study.

4. <https://lrv.lt/en/news/first-coronavirus-case-confirmed-in-lithuania>

5. <https://koronastop.lrv.lt/en/news/lithuanias-efforts-to-combat-covid-19-come-into-worlds-spotlight>

6. <https://lrv.lt/en/news/quarantine-announced-throughout-the-territory-of-the-republic-of-lithuania-attached-resolution>

2. Institutional context

Established in 1579, the VU is the oldest and largest Lithuanian higher education institution. The 12 faculties, seven institutes, and four study and research centers of the university offer the widest range of study programs in the country. Besides study programs, VU offers a rich variety of elective courses, coming under the umbrella notion of General University Education (GUE). The mission of GUE courses is to “go beyond the boundaries of fields of study and study programs”, promoting “interdisciplinarity, dialogue, and sociality typical for university studies and science”⁷. LL is one of these pan-university GUE courses, first launched in 2019. It is an innovative interactive interdisciplinary course delivered in English, and, at the time of writing this article, the only English-language GUE course offered by the Faculty of Philology. LL, conceived and developed primarily for international students at VU, is also open for local students. The course comprises 16 lecture hours and 32 seminar hours. When COVID-19 hit in the spring semester of 2020, LL was running for only the second time.

Interdisciplinarity and availability to all VU students are two reasons why all GUE courses are scheduled for Thursdays and Fridays, at 15:00 and 17:00, seeking to minimize schedule clashes across the various specialties.

3. LL – braving the turn to the remote synchronous instruction

Unsurprisingly, when the pan-university email was released on March 12th at 12:25 pm announcing the switch of instruction to the remote mode starting on March 13th, to be enhanced by the national lockdown starting on 16 March, this came just two and a half hours before the LL seminar classes and put LL participants into a logistical predicament. Many international students, especially those living in geographical proximity, hastened to book tickets and return home to avoid being locked down in a foreign country with no clear plans

7. <https://www.vu.lt/en/studies/academic-info-for-students/regulations>

for reopening. Others chose to stay in Lithuania, viewing the situation from a more long-term perspective and considerations of safety, subsequent return to resume face-to-face studies (hoping the quarantine period would be brief), and mandatory self-isolation following the quarantine. As a result, only three students turned up for the seminar at 15:00 on March 12th (and none at 17:00). The class time was thoroughly emotionally charged, imbued both with the academic dedication and solidarity on the one hand, and with the understanding of the looming unknown and, most likely, the abrupt last occasion to meet on the other. Amidst this uncertainty, however, there was a clear understanding and determination to develop the logistics for an uninterrupted synchronous mode of instruction. To that point, LL employed Moodle for storing course materials, collecting home assignments, as well as providing all information announcements. Another option already available to VU staff yet regarded with little interest at the time – which is the exact opposite of its present-day use – was Microsoft Teams (MS Teams), part of the Microsoft 365 package. Whatever the initial lecturer’s exposure to the technology, availability of MS Teams offered the valuable opportunity to run the LL sessions on March 19th in the remote synchronous mode, sustaining both the continuity of academic instruction as well as the leadership vision of the course as of fundamental value, as advocated in the course title and manifested, in particular, through perseverance and ability to withstand difficulties. Therefore, careful planning was needed.

Two potential problems were identified. Firstly, despite the students’ almost guaranteed presence on social networks, the likelihood of their previous exposure to MS Teams was rather weak. The second problem was of technical nature: availability of a reliable connection in the face of the sharply increased load on university servers, quality of participants’ internet connections, the equipment available to them, and so on. In the absence of previous exposure to consistent remote teaching, and as a reserve plan alongside the LL course page on MS Teams, an LL course page was created on Facebook, the former intended as the main platform, and the latter as a back-up resource. A general announcement was sent through Virtual Language Environment (VLE) with wishes of well-being and successful resolution of travel arrangements (since a number of students were in the process of moving to their homes), as well as the

request and instructions: (1) to befriend the LL course page on Facebook and (2) to join the course on MS Teams using the code provided.

At the time, MS Teams had already been available through the university system, and introductory seminars on MS Teams were delivered by Dr Saulius Preidys, Head of the university Information Technology Service Center (ITSC). During the first quarantine week, Dr Preidys relentlessly ran multiple sessions per day so as to facilitate the transition to remote teaching. One just cannot underestimate the most dedicated contribution of Dr Preidys and the three members of his team.

On the first days of the lockdown, MS Teams had not yet been widely used. With basic skills in their operations, step-by-step guidelines on setting up MS Teams were developed specifically for the LL participants by the course teacher. Consequently, while the staff were allowed to deliver classes asynchronously during the first weeks of the quarantine, LL switched to remote synchronous teaching within the regular interval between two successive seminars.

The day before the first meeting on MS Teams, the students were contacted again through Moodle (alongside communication via Facebook and university email, responding to individual students' queries) with the guidelines on connecting for the first remote meeting, considering the likelihood of lack of previous exposure to MS Teams among the students. On the day of the seminar, a welcome message was posted on MS Teams 30 minutes before the seminar, greeting the students and informing them that the seminar would begin shortly. This early greeting, conceived to reflect the 30-minute break between lectures at VU, has become a tradition and has been employed since then in all lectures and seminars conducted on MS Teams.

At the beginning of the first remote seminar, it did take some time for students to join the meeting. There were to begin with minor technical issues, such as noise, unstable network, opening multiple meeting sessions, but with the combined efforts of all course participants, these were soon resolved. Overcoming the state of being a novice user of MS Teams herself, the teacher introduced the students

to the basic functions of the platform, such as starting and ending a meeting, screen sharing, downloading a document, etc. Overall, making the students feel comfortable during class time was perceived as an important objective for the seminar setting.

Facts that soon became common caveat areas, at this initial time were new. Besides technical issues of internet connection and server overload, these included ensuring students' involvement in classwork while their cameras were off, and upholding and fostering the leadership idea, one manifestation of which was efficient use of class time. The teacher was the only uninterrupted connection point during class sessions, and solutions for empowering students in the face of occasionally imperfect technical resources available were to be developed. One of them was the creation of a number of channels, or *Discussion lounges*, within the LL team, the name of the channels carefully designed to create an atmosphere of a large international forum. The physical on-camera presence of the teacher throughout the class, somewhat surprisingly, provided a certain stability benchmark and was perceived enthusiastically by the students. On one occasion, when the teacher's camera went off, a few students immediately expressed their concern: "We don't see you anymore!". The students' involvement and lively reaction were also suggestive of the successful construction and implementation of the, albeit simulated, face-to-face communication even though the students readily put up with the less than regular opportunity to see each other while team-working synchronously in breakout rooms referred to, within the context of the course, as the Discussion Lounges.

Despite its challenges, the quarantine period provided an invaluable experience in technological immersion, the use of MS Teams for classwork ultimately to become a criterion of the efficiency of the course itself.

4. Legal English studies in a remote mode

The legal English course offered to the second year law students comprises 270 hours; the content of the course is agreed with the law faculty administration;

it complies with the major subjects, taught in the respective terms (third and fourth terms): civil law, criminal law, EU law, international law.

As in most language for specific purposes studies, students aim at acquiring language skills needed for professional communication, which for law students includes reading and interpreting professional texts, and exchange of opinions in writing and orally; besides, about one quarter of the workload is dedicated to academic skills, namely reading and summarizing academic articles, and giving presentations. With the ratio between face-to-face sessions and independent work being 1:2 (96 hours of class work and 174 hours of self-study), the transition to distance learning was quite smooth and painless. The university VLE, even before the lockdown, was used as a tool for communicating weekly tasks, for sharing and storing learning resources and authentic materials, and for time management and control.

Although the switch to distance learning was quite sudden, it did not cause any serious disruption or inconvenience. Within about two weeks, the studies were fully transferred to MS Teams as that platform proved to be very well adjusted to teachers' and students' needs: calendar and message facilities, storing and sharing the learning materials, quizzes and other testing possibilities, collaborating in mini groups (channeling) either with or without teacher's interference.

All the reporting on students' individual tasks (submission of summaries of academic articles, course paper presentations, and mock professional correspondence) was done in MS Teams, without any difficulties or failures. During the course, the students had several opportunities to 'try out' the tasks that not only provided practice in certain language skills (debates, presentations, etc.), but also to get used to being 'restricted' in human interaction and to making the most of the existing tools and ways.

The biggest challenge for teachers was to carry out the course exam under the new conditions. The exam traditionally consists of two parts, the assessment of writing and of speaking skills.

There were two main points to consider: (1) how to exclude or, at least minimize cheating in writing; and (2) how to organize the oral exam, so that students could demonstrate not only the prepared speaking, but also their skills in a spontaneous exchange of opinions or ideas.

To prevent cheating, the following measures were taken:

- students had to base their written responses on the specially selected authentic materials/documents. There was very little chance of finding something similar on the net; the tasks (opinion essay, professional advice on a legal issue) required one's independent reaction to the prompt;
- students had to observe the time limit; the exam started and was to be submitted at the same time for all the second year students; and
- students had to have their cameras in the 'on' mode throughout the whole exam (50 minutes).

The oral part of the exam included two stages: (1) individual preparation for discussion (with the relevant authentic materials at hand), and (2) participation in a mini-group discussion to complete the task.

During the term sessions, students had sufficient practice in group discussions. They had mastered the relevant functional language and other language requirements ('turn taking' conventions, interaction, discussion dynamics, etc.). The discussions were carried out simultaneously in several groups (four students per group), so that all the students had equal time for preparing and presenting their opinions. The group discussions were recorded and the recordings were submitted at the end of the exam. These recordings were viewed by one or two teachers and assessed according to the agreed assessment criteria.

Overall, the transition to the remote mode of teaching the legal English course was void of serious problems or setback, most probably due to the nature of

the target skills and the initial ratio between face-to-face and self-studies. The IT facilities and services offered by VU were sufficient. Nevertheless, the quarantine period showed that the adequate use of MS Teams and other communication platforms requires additional technical skills, teachers' confidence, and openness to new/alternative ways of teaching.

5. Student feedback

This part explores the 63 third-year students' feedback on the organization and implementation of the study program 'English and Another Foreign Language (French, Spanish, Norwegian, and Russian)' during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey is based on the evidence provided by 63 respondents who either participated in two focus groups (24 students in total) to discuss the issues of the study process in the spring 2020 or completed an online questionnaire which targeted at discovering:

- the overall dynamics of the students' attitudes toward remote teaching-learning during the spring 2020 semester;
- the advantages and disadvantages of the remote teaching-learning mode; and
- the students' attitudinal tendencies toward remote teaching in general.

Both forms of data collection allowed us to obtain an abundance of emotionally vivid reflections on the target mode implemented in the spring 2020. The analysis of the recorded texts was based on qualitative content analysis (Bitinas, Rupšienė, & Žydžiūnaitė, 2008); analytical and descriptive approaches were applied.

From the respondents' point of view, the spring 2020 lockdown brought much uncertainty to all the citizens across the country. The atmosphere in the academic environment reflected people's general mood which, consequently,

led students to focus more on their existential issues rather than concentrate on education. The respondents elaborately report on their time spent following every piece of news either in the media or on social networks “with a hope that this will end soon, and they will be at their university again” (S1). Both members of the academic staff as well as students regarded the pandemic upheaval temporary, which would take just a number of weeks, and then bring all of them back to the university premises. To manage the teaching-learning process to continue, the MS Teams and VLE platforms were recommended for use by the university ITSC. VMA⁸ was not a novelty for the teachers since they have been employing it for several years. The instructions of the application of the MS Teams platform were shared online⁹. The students were extremely eager “to feel the taste of online teaching” (S27) since they had been told about it so many times, though almost never had an opportunity to experience it in practice.

“Thanks to global digitalization, Linguistics is on the list of subjects which can successfully survive being taught only online with absolutely no damage to our knowledge and skills!” (S38).

Their excitement grew due to the fact that non-residents of Vilnius could return home and spend time together with their family members. Enjoyment of parental care without ‘worries about food’ or ‘constant rental issues’ added some extra appeal to the novelty of the whole study process. The initial stage of the remote teaching-learning mode listed a number of advantages that were ranked in the following way (Table 1).

Table 1. Advantages of the remote mode

1.	Longer sleeping hours
2.	No morning worries about make-up, what to wear, and what to eat
3.	No need to waste time on commuting or sitting in the traffic jams
4.	Common monthly budget saved

8. The functions of VMA (Vilnius University’s virtual learning environment) are equivalent to the ones of Moodle: <https://www.vu.lt/en/covid-19/teaching-online/tools-for-online-teaching#virtual-learning-environment-vma>

9. <https://www.vu.lt/covid-19>

5.	Much freedom when your camera is turned off
6.	Less stress than in contact classes
7.	Access available from everywhere
8.	It is easy to combine part-time job and study activities at a time
9.	The use of technology makes classes more appealing

However, the elation stage, listing the benefits of flexibility of the remote teaching did not last long. The shift to remote teaching clashed with the respondents' expectations in a way, and that is why it could not escape some criticism.

“At the beginning of remote teaching, there was a bit of confusion from both sides, professors and students” (S20).

“Some lecturers were quite quick, others took a bit more time to get adapted to the online system” (S5).

“It was easy for the students because we are more tech-savvy and it took us just a few days to get used to it” (S5).

“Not all the lectures were held on time, changes in the timetable occurred every week, professors were using different platforms for communication” (S20), thus, “working online became a bit chaotic” (S12), leading to misunderstanding, such as where to look for homework and information.

“Some lecturers were exceedingly kind, understanding, and flexible, and everybody could feel their support” (S48), however, not all of them “were able to distribute workload” (S52), which led students to sleepless nights and too much time spent at the computer. Since the majority of the students did not use their webcams “there was a lack of real communication” (S22) “leaving professors talking to themselves” (S19), “preventing students from asking questions” (S3) and putting them into difficulties to concentrate on the theme.

As soon as the initial technical issues were tackled, the period of confusion transformed itself into a routine. Very soon, the majority of the respondents

admitted that they “could easily dedicate themselves to such a type of their studies” (S3). They started learning on their own, found that “writing tests or presenting projects was not as stressful as in the class environment” (S26). In occasional cases, some teachers were thought of as being pretty harsh by setting ridiculously short time slots for tests “trying to prevent students from cheating” (S20). Doubts about the quality of studies disappeared.

“At first, I thought that the quality of the studies would decrease sharply, that we would not be able to learn something, that we would not be able to communicate properly as we did in contact classes. But after some time, [...] all the teachers¹⁰ taught in alternative ways and made that period even more interesting than it would have been in classes” (S19).

Many respondents became aware of their own responsibilities.

“Over time, I started to overcome my time-management problem and learned to use that extra time that I had properly. In the end, I managed to devote more time to studies than usual and learn more than in the previous semesters” (S20).

“I had to become amazingly fast at using IT because there was an opportunity to gain information from sources. It became a key to my success” (S8).

Apparently, the pandemic changed students’ personalities, their worldviews: the first stage of stress was over and they got used to the routine “a kind of a comfortable one” (S52). However, this wasn’t the case for all of them. Yet, there appeared different types of distractors, or disadvantages, preventing them from full engagement in the study process (Table 2).

10. In the Lithuanian context, university teachers (assistants, associate professors, and professors) are called teachers in general. The same term of a ‘teacher’ is used in secondary and tertiary levels. However, when foreign teachers start working at the university, they usually teach students to call them professors.

Table 2. Disadvantages of the remote mode

1.	Inability to separate home environment from study environment
2.	Difficult/tiresome to sit in front of the computer all day long
3.	Unstable internet connection/improperly functioning devices
4.	Shortage of living space/devices (among family members)
5.	Social interactions disrupted ('stuck at home')
6.	A plethora of distractors: telephone calls, constant constructions outside, family members' interruptions
7.	Motivational downturn
8.	Lack of coping mechanisms: concentration, self-discipline, and time management
9.	Depressive mood swings
10.	Worsening eyesight
11.	Debatable efficiency
12.	Some teachers' poor proficiency in IT application

It can be added that students' personality types have possibly contributed much to the level of their ability to adapt to the new mode. The shy or reserved ones did not feel comfortable and blamed IT for damaging their self-esteem:

"I was afraid of speaking, expressing my opinion, showing my face though the camera; the lectures were so unreal all the time! I started avoiding them, and that led to a large number of missing lectures. I have always been afraid of technologies; they do not cooperate with me. I found myself judging this whole situation as it took away the joy of sitting in the classroom and being able to communicate in a normal way as humans do!" (S41).

The more outgoing ones suffered from "missing social contacts" and a "limited environment". The events happening outside, including the media reports on the soaring number of COVID-19 cases, made the young people feel desperate:

"the question whether I should be engaged in endless homework until nightfall or whether I should perform my civic duty? Volunteering had always been on my mind [...] and I was about to help my society" (S8).

According to Pacansky-Brock (2017, p. 53), in order to achieve specified learning results, a diverse student group requires engagement, an understanding who they are and what the level of their willingness to adapt is. However, the reflections quoted above reveal the students' greater concern about surviving the unusual circumstances of the spring 2020 semester as much as possible rather than searching for the ways of adaptation to satisfy their own needs.

Having considered all the positives and negatives of the remote teaching mode presented by the language students, there might be a question raised on how many supporters of this mode were left? Actually, just two of them, stating the fact that "online learning is not a bad thing at all!" (S11). All the rest found teacher-student live interaction crucial for their advance toward foreign language proficiency with "a few online theoretical lectures" (S35).

6. Conclusions

In this article we sought to provide an account for the arrangements and study process through the prism of several courses delivered in English at the Faculty of Philology, VU. In particular, we presented an overview of setting the organizational logistics for the elective course LL on the threshold of moving from face-to-face to remote synchronous mode of instruction. We then discussed the delivery of the course English for Law students in light of the adjustment of the curriculum and examination tasks to the remote instruction mode. Finally, we referred to the study program 'English and Another Foreign Language' and examined its students' perceptions of the study process during the quarantine. The selected approach has revealed two perspectives. In our discussion, we hoped to portray the work conducted by the teachers during the pandemic, in which accompanying factors, such as reconsidering and remodeling both the environment of the classroom and the assignments, especially for seminar settings, ultimately leading to extra work time during remote instruction, were essentially taken for granted. The feedback solicited from the students and presented in the final section of our study reveals the true size of the iceberg of COVID-time teaching: it is feeling at a loss, overcoming fear, learning time

management, mastering the new technologies as well as the communication skills of the new reality, and – at all times – persevering in the face of the unknown, striving for quality performance, and sustainable professional approach.

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