



## **Remote teaching in the Covid-19 era: adjusting to new tools and technology.**

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The challenges COVID-19 has put the Universities face to face have been sudden and unexpected. Many Universities were caught unprepared or half-prepared for the changes they had to implement amidst the pandemic turmoil when it was realized that the online mode of delivery would be the only way to achieve the intended program outcomes.

For Azerbaijan University of Languages (AUL) there were certain specific features that have possibly made the transition, in some sense, easier than for other institutions. This is, first of all, connected with the class size parameter that AUL has to observe. As the main institution where foreign language teachers, translators and interpreters, as well as other language specialists are trained, AUL has to maintain class sizes to the minimum: the largest amount of classes are practical language classes where no more than 15 seats are permitted. Therefore, mobilizing the groups for the continuation of classes through available (and accessible for everyone) technological means was not too difficult for the majority of the teaching staff. Secondly, as an institution where a great number of teachers and administrative staff have a solid command of foreign languages, in particular of English, AUL has long been practicing joint teaching in cooperation with partners from many parts of the world. This has gained the teaching staff advanced skills in using technologies in distance modes of delivery.

In consideration of possible difficulties with groups of a bigger size, AUL mobilized the teaching, administrative and IT staff to immediately transfer the deliveries to an online regime, using various channels and platforms. Zoom and Skype were among the first implemented with Microsoft Teams following. In a short period of time, AUL organized several online training sessions for the staff to promote the diversified use of IT technologies in teaching. The training sessions were organized in cooperation with local and international experts.

Several serious steps were taken to also diversify the methodological basis of deliveries. The volume of written tasks and project-based assignments were increased to replace the oral participation and face-to-face discussions. Certainly, this has contributed to the increased quality of written assignments and to the heavier weight of tasks requiring critical thinking. This is due to the obvious fact in still reforming education systems where critical thinking is considered to be easier to evaluate in the process of oral speech through Q&A. It is also known that in education systems undergoing reforms, in particular in those which are struggling to dismiss the Soviet approach of considering writing just a means to achieve proficiency in other skills, creative writing is still a capacity to enhance. This aspect was immediately focused on in several training sessions that AUL held for the teaching staff as well as for the students where possible. A considerable part of the student delivery was transferred to project-based

assignments such as paper analysis or writing a critical review on a scholarly position and sharing it with the rest of the group. There are certain elements in these tasks which encourage students to partially replace the role of the teacher. In the face of possible risks of the decrease in student motivation (due to the lack of group discussions and active participation among other factors), we have been trying to keep the students engaged in roles that may increase expectations in normal circumstances. For example, some students are given assignments to complete the analysis of a paper (following the analysis commenced by the teacher) and share the critics with the entire group. This is where the student is seen assisting the teacher in conducting the class.

Among other changes, certain alterations are considered also in terms of assessment and grading. As many traditional modes of assessment will be difficult or impossible to administer, various other modes of knowledge assessment are being discussed among the teaching staff (and with the participation of the Ministry). Project-based group work for other than practical language classes are being considered as an option for final assessment. For the practical language classes, the University is planning to transfer a considerable portion of final assessment to oral formats including student presentations, interviews and debates.

In the light of the closure of libraries and resources centers at the University, in terms of facilitating student access to resources, there is an intensive focus on creating materials and placing them through sharing platforms such as Google Docs, Dropbox etc. Students are also advised to use online book and journal resources as well as online data bases such as JStor, EPDF etc.