

As the quarantine nears its end, English teachers from Lithuania and foreign countries conclude: students must learn not to copy other people's thoughts and works

The global pandemic - and the strict quarantine restrictions imposed as a result of it - have become a precondition for the biggest experiment carried out by the education system both in Lithuania and in other countries - a massive reorientation towards distance learning has been implemented. At the end of such an extraordinary school year, English teachers from two different countries who teach according to the same curriculum and materials, talk about what this change has taught them, what disadvantages and advantages it has revealed. One interviewee is from Lithuania, the other from Slovakia.

The challenge and patience of academic integrity

According to Alla Chvostova - a methodologist English teacher at the Šiauliai Didždvaris Gymnasium and the International Baccalaureate – a lot of confusion was brought to the teaching process by the quarantine implemented in Lithuania. School administrations and teachers had to quickly change the course of the teaching process and prepare for distance learning. According to the teacher, the first lessons required understanding from both teachers and students, who needed to adapt to new realities, requirements and technical possibilities. “All lessons were conducted remotely using a variety of platforms. The experience gained during the quarantine is tremendous. This extreme situation has once again shown how quickly people can mobilize and change their working methods, scope, time and place, trying to achieve the best results possible.”

Lýdia Kotuličová, an English teacher at one of Bratislava's gymnasiums, also admitted that the transition to distance learning was not very easy. According to her, she herself had to learn to how teach students online. “It was very new and unusual for me at first. I didn't even know how to create a test on the platform our school was using. However, I had to quickly understand everything and ensure the continuation of the education process,” explained L. Kotuličová. According to her, working during the quarantine made her realize that everyone must have patience and constantly remind themselves of the extraordinary circumstances of life.

Teachers were aided by the variety of teaching materials

According to A. Chvostova, in any system, including education, a lot depends on one's personality - its creativity, flexibility and honesty. “Teaching methods have not changed significantly, but they have taken on new forms - students were given many creative tasks: they prepared short videos, presentations and dialogues. At the beginning of the quarantine, Gateway textbooks were a great help. They have a full package of electronic tools: exercises, test kits and a bank for additional tasks. In distance and blended learning, it really helps when the textbook is designed to focus not only on improving language skills (reading, writing, listening) but also on developing general competences. Materials like this provide excellent opportunities for the teacher to improve, as well as encourage students to learn in a different, unusual way.” - said the English language teacher from Šiauliai Didždvaris gymnasium.

Her Slovak colleague, who works with the same educational tools, says that during the quarantine, she tried not to change the teaching process as much as possible and do everything that would be done normally, but online.

“Much of the teaching and learning took place orally, while textbooks– the structure of which I relied on the most - helped to maintain the usual line of teaching. The preferred form of learning among the students was discussion. They also enjoyed describing pictures and creating stories based on them,”- said L. Kotuličova.

What we didn't know about education

When asked about the insights, observations and lessons learned while working as a teacher during the pandemic, A. Chvostova insisted that all parties of the education process – administrative staff, teachers and students alike – gained new understanding about the possibilities of the teaching/learning process. "We all saw that with clear requirements, instructions and evaluation criteria, the process can go smoothly even without 'live' supervision. The work of teachers during the pandemic required a lot of time to prepare and evaluate tasks, and the students had to learn to plan their time and perform tasks accurately and / or creatively," said the teacher. According to her, the biggest issue faced by many in the newly-created education process is academic integrity. "The ability to use the Internet honestly, without copying other people's thoughts and works, is a challenge for our society. We must make an effort so that both students and their parents understand how the theft of an intellectual work differs from quoting," stressed the English teacher at Šiauliai Didždvaris Gymnasium.

How to maintain the high quality of education?

A. Chvostova, who works in Lithuania, assures that teaching English is very closely related to communication. According to her, English is everywhere these days, and in the lives of young people it is even more prominent than that of their teachers. She regards this as the reason why the methods of communication and collaboration worked best with her students during the quarantine. "The English vocabulary of contemporary youth is very extensive, most of them have excellent speaking skills. It is our duty to show students the variety of language styles and the ways to apply them. I believe that children's ability to use mobile phones and computers needs to be explored. Because my students feel their best when they are allowed to apply their IT skills, I focused on communication-type group assignments. I believe that a creative approach to learning and teaching helps to maintain the high quality of teaching. I always emphasize that the language tools we use reflect our personalities," explained the Didždvaris Gymnasium teacher.

Students' reactions were different

While the teachers were sweating and trying to master the intricacies of distance learning as much as possible, the students, according to the teacher from Didždvaris Gymnasium, reacted with enthusiasm.

“Learning in front of a computer is not an unusual way for them. They felt right at home in these circumstances. During the lessons dedicated to reflecting on the school year, many students mentioned that they enjoyed such a learning process, they felt safe. However, many of them mentioned that they missed the "live" contact with friends and teachers, "A. Chvostova revealed.

In her opinion, graduates, who were hampered by the stress of the final exams, were particularly disadvantaged. In addition, many mentioned that learning at school and lessons with teachers would help them feel safer and respond to their personal needs.

According to the teacher from Bratislava, her students initially seemed unsettled and somewhat confused. However, after a while, they got used to the new conditions. "I can say that most of my students are diligent, organized and hardworking young people. They didn't skip almost any lessons, completed their tests and did their homework," said L. Kotuličova, adding that even those who missed lessons later still did their homework.

The teacher claims that her students' particular attention to English is common, as young people in Slovakia are required to take their final exam in a foreign language, and most of them choose English.

The teachers advise to make use of resources and have patience

Observing the work of her colleagues, teacher A. Chvostova believes that English teachers are privileged. According to her, the whole English-speaking virtual world is at their service, with such tools as the YouTube platform, TEDTalks, news portals, movies, interviews and many more that can easily be used for English lessons. Moreover, English teachers have access to high quality digital textbooks like Gateway. Unfortunately, teachers of other subjects do not have such a wide selection of resources available to them.

"I urge my colleagues not to be afraid to use existing resources, to adapt them to their own and to their students' needs to make their lessons interesting and creative," said A. Chvostova.

For her part, L. Kotuličova wants all teachers to keep in mind that we all live in unusual times, in unprecedented circumstances. "Let's hope that we won't experience anything like this ever again, and, for the time being, I wish for all of us to be patient and focused," said the English teacher from Slovakia.

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Alla Chvostova (LT) and Lýdia Kotuličová (SR)