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ZOOM FATIGUE – IT'S REAL!

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As COVID-19 hit in March 2020, many workplaces and educational institutions had to start using various online tools to replace their daily conventions quite rapidly. One such tool, or rather a set of tools, were the online video conferencing tools: Zoom, Teams, GoogleMeet etc. While Zoom is certainly not the only tool available, its name has become almost synonymous with video conferencing, and has even lent its name to a new – or at least more widely acknowledged – phenomenon: Zoom fatigue. This has been the subject of many, many articles and studies in 2020 already. So, what is Zoom fatigue, how can it be prevented or at least lessened?

Video conferencing causes tiredness. This is not news in itself: the 2014 study "Why are you so slow? – Misattribution of transmission delay to attributes of the conversation partner at the far-end" (Schoenenberg, Raake, Koeppe 2014) discovered that even a short, more than a second, delay in the telephone conversation caused difficulties for the listener. This was further affected by the presence of an echo – a case in many video conferencing situations from the participants' homes, which are not ideally acoustic spaces. The participants take turns in speaking and listening, and the delay disrupts the natural flow of the discussion. As a result, unintended disruptions happen, as the person talking begins talking again because the respondent has not yet had time to respond. In the study, several groups of people took part in teleconferencing situations, with various delays in different situations.

In the study, the participants rated the quality of the connection, as well as the perceived attentiveness of the other person, ranging from "very attentive" to "very inattentive." While the results were inconclusive, the researchers discovered a trend, where the

longer the delay, the less attentive the listener was perceived. This was especially true with the first contact to the listener. Also: "If a participant perceived that their turns were being terminated more often with successful interruptions or if they needed to stay in double talk longer, and could not remain in own single talk as long as in non-delayed conditions, the participant gave lower ratings for the aforementioned personality scales." (Schoenenberg, Raake, Koeppe 2014.)

The new situation in 2020

Already on April 22nd, just a bit over a month after the COVID-19 lockdown hit most European countries, Finland included, BBC published an article "The reason Zoom drains your energy." In the article, Manyu Jiang (2020) interviewed Gianpiero Petriglieri, an associate professor at Insead who focuses on sustainable learning and development at the workplace, and Marissa Shuffler, an associate professor at Clemson University, whose area of expertise are workplace wellbeing and teamwork effectiveness. According to Petriglieri, we need to focus more during video meetings than face-to-face-meetings. There are several reasons for this: it is harder to process non-verbal cues through video, the body language is not there quite the same way as in a face-to-face situation, the tone of voice is affected by the connection. We cannot relax into the conversation naturally, says Petriglieri, and that is exhausting.

Schuffler also points out that when we are using video, we are very aware of being watched – it is like being on stage. For many teachers, this is a normal situation, we are used to being in front of the classroom after all. But in a video conference, we may feel like we are the only person in the room, especially if our own cameras are on, but nobody else's is. There is no feedback from the audience, or even a way of knowing if they are present at all. This too can lead to frustration and tiredness.

Another problem Petriglieri points out is the fact that the parts of our lives which are normally separate, such as work and home, became intertwined during the lockdown. We work from home, which should also be our place of relaxation. "We are confined in our own space, in the context of a very anxiety-provoking crisis, and our only space for interaction is a computer window." (Jiang 2020.) This is also the case when we are meeting our friends in Zoom, mentioned Shuffler. Again, we are using the same environment for work and leisure time, resulting them blending into each other – and of course our students are in the exact same situation.

These same kinds of articles kept popping up during spring and summer 2020. In addition to the lack of non-verbal cues, other factors also affect Zoom meetings. The lack of meetings rituals and the ability to gauge the other participants' attitudes and feelings and subtleties (Sander & Bauman 2020), looking approachable and professional all the time is draining (Callahan 2020) and so on. Many of the articles also pointed out that in our COVID-19 era of online working, many are not able to have any breaks at all, but instead have Zoom meetings scheduled back-to-back. While this same unfortunate phenomenon also happens during "normal" times with "regular" meetings – and it should not happen –, at least the participant has the time it takes to move between meeting rooms to stretch their legs and gather their thoughts. In Zoom-meetings, there is no such time.

What about education?

Many of these things resonate with teachers as well. When the lockdown happened, online education was the only option to continue teaching. For many, this meant transferring their lectures directly into Zoom, as there was very little to no time to plan. Zoom has many great features, and for language learning, being able to see and hear the students is important. Speaking and listening can

only be learnt by doing them, and interaction is – naturally – a key component in communication. But many of us quickly felt the impact of Zoom-fatigue – and it also hit our students, when all classes all of a sudden became Zoom-marathons. While all-Zoom-all-the-time was a good quick-fix at the time, more sustainable solutions will be needed for the future – 35h of Zoom classes each week will result in even more burned out teachers and students.

Zoom, somewhat paradoxically, also brings people sometimes closer together. Many people have their cameras very close to their face, which of course does enable better facial expressions and facial cues but can also feel like invading the viewer's personal space. For many people, being too close to each other physically is very draining, and the same, it seems, happens when using videos. In a short meeting, this is not necessarily a problem, but in a longer session with multiple participants all doing the same, the end result may tire the persons needing a larger personal space. In addition, many people are very aware of their own faces in Zoom. This “objective self-awareness” (Duval & Wicklund 1972) is very stressful, but luckily can be overcome by not displaying one's own video feed on one's own screen in Zoom. Of course, one must still be aware of the fact that the others in Zoom can see them!

Online learning has had a long history of both synchronous (live) and asynchronous (not live) tasks, but it seems that in the Zoom-frenzy of 2020 the asynchronous tasks were quickly abandoned. This should not be the case. While it is true that asynchronous tasks can be boring, repetitive tasks that the students do alone, this does not have to be true. It all comes down to how the course is planned and what kinds of tasks are implemented.

What can be done to reduce Zoom fatigue?

The first piece of advice most articles offer is: "Is this meeting really necessary, or could the task be done through e-mail or other method?" This is a valuable viewpoint which should be considered in education as well. There are situations when a Zoom-class offers definite value – for example, having students discuss topics in a foreign language together in a Zoom breakout room and then having a re-cap discussion with the teacher – but if the students are just listening to the teacher lecture, could that be done through a pre-recorded video which the students can watch on their own schedule and ask questions from the teacher later?

Obviously, when we are in Zoom, we should take advantage of its tools to encourage participation and to check attention: in addition to the afore-mentioned breakout rooms, Zoom also has nice gesture functions ("Wave everybody who's still awake") as well as polling options ("Small talk poll: Small talk is A) Fun! B) Horrible, I'd rather eat my own shoes C) OK, and I'd like to be better at it"). Even if the students are not very willing to turn on their cameras, they seem to be fine taking part in these more anonymous activities.

Another piece of advice has to do with scheduling. In Zoom, our attentiveness wears down much quicker than in a face-to-face situation. This is why Zoom meetings – whether classes or "work" meetings – should be kept short, preferably with breaks every 30 minutes (e.g., Fossilien & Duffy 2020). This very much goes against the grain of 90 min classes & 15 min break afterwards, but Zoom is just a different medium. How can we, as teachers, schedule our Zoom-classes in a way that retains the students' attention all the way through? Is a 90-minute class, where the students are zoned out for the last 60 minutes better than 30min+15min break+30 minutes, where the students are attentive for the full hour? They get "less" education, but might what they get be better?

Another “trick” that can be tried in order to reduce the teacher’s Zoom fatigue is bringing in another teacher in the same session and teaching in a tandem or tag-team manner. The teachers could divide the topics between themselves beforehand, but offer input and additions to the other person’s topic as well. This way the teacher who is presenting knows there is at least one person in the Zoom-room who is listening to them, interested in what they have to say and also willing to comment. This works especially well if both the teachers have their cameras on all the time, so the presenter can get at least some visual input of somebody listening to them. Somewhat surprisingly, this also resulted in the students commenting more and asking more questions, possibly because there was somebody to show an “example” on how it was acceptable to interrupt the presenter for questions and comments.

Let’s not forget asynchronous tasks!

We should also consider which of our tasks could be done asynchronously. Even in language learning, there are certain things that do not require face-to-face meetings, such as most writing tasks. This, of course, requires time to plan the course schedule beforehand, and as such, was not an option in spring 2020. But if there is time to plan and schedule, could – maybe, as a suggestion – there be Zoom classes every other week and students working independently the other weeks? A good option might be offering the students a virtual “office hour” on Zoom on the weeks when they do not have “classes” – the teacher will be in Zoom for, for example, 30 minutes during the “normal” classroom hours, in case anybody has questions. The teacher is present, the students can approach them, but the fatigue is lessened by not having “classes” every single week. This also gives the teacher more time to give feedback to the students on the tasks they complete during non-Zoom weeks – feedback from the students seems to value feedback from the teacher. The students need to be clearly aware of the schedule, of course, preferably right from the course start.

What kinds of tasks could then be done online, without being in Zoom? There are more options than the "classic" tasks where the students write something individually and the teacher then offers feedback, or automatically corrected tasks (H5P tasks in Moodle, for example). The students can work together on collaborative writing tasks, meeting online if they so wish. They can read an article together, write a summary, collect vocabulary, and post those to the learning management system used – and naturally these tasks can be as long and complex as the teacher wishes. Collaborative knowledge construction (e.g., Arvaja, Salovaara, Häkkinen & Järvelä 2007) can work very well in these types of cases, especially if the students have plenty of prior knowledge or expertise on the topic.

The students can create videos and link them to the learning management system – this does not necessarily have to happen synchronously. They can interview each other, or maybe even experts in their field if they have access to them. On some weeks, just reading longer texts or watching a longer video is worthwhile. The students can also give each other feedback on various tasks, on writing tasks or maybe about the videos they have created – asking questions, for example. All of this does require students to take more responsibility of their own learning, when there is no teacher in the "classroom" at the same time telling them to work on it, but on the other hand, giving the students more flexibility and responsibility teaches them valuable working life skills.

We need to take care of many things: our own well-being, the well-being of our students, and also ensure our students are offered the education they are entitled to. Sometimes that education may mean a Zoom meeting, but there are other alternatives, which may promote the over-all well-being of everybody better.

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