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New Challenges, New Strategies, and New Prospects in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Foreword

This special edition themed as, *New Challenges, New Strategies, and New Prospects in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, is a timely response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the approaches to EFL and/or ESL teaching and learning across the globe. The outbreak of this globally unprecedented coronavirus pandemic has led to an all-encompassing disruption of education systems and has raised significant challenges for teachers and learners worldwide. A particular challenge has been the change of modes in teaching and learning which has resulted in the need for teachers to learn quickly to adapt, teach online and support learners in new ways, in terms of a ‘new normal’. While COVID-19 has created unprecedented challenges, it has also offered an opportunity for teachers, educators, and learners to develop their creativity, innovation, and productivity in terms of upskilling the profession and online pedagogy. This special edition provides a platform for EFL/ESL teachers, learners, researchers, and educators to share their original research and latest developments of their effective practices to engage with and overcome the challenges presented by COVID-19. The fundamental feature of this edition is its universal scope and usability. The research studies published in this edition are undertaken locally in different parts of the world, but the knowledge and skills presented in the papers can be applied globally in EFL/ESL field during the current crisis and in the future.

All ten selected research papers are focused on the theme as presented at the beginning of this foreword, in response to the impact of COVID-19 on EFL/ESL teaching and learning across the globe. The authors have provided evidence-based, new insights into understanding the lived experiences of EFL/ESL teachers and learners with respect to different topics, the challenges they faced, the strategies they employed, the benefits they enjoyed, the recommendations, and pedagogical implications for future research. In the first paper, *Supporting EFL Writing during the Pandemic: The Effectiveness of Data-Driven Learning in Error Correction*, Fangzhou Zhu reported on the effectiveness of DDL-mediated error correction in online EFL writing practice during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. This study highlighted the positive effects of DDL mediation during the pandemic to promote self-learning, which not only helped students achieve better error correction, but also encouraged students to employ a series of cognitive strategies for inductively discovering or recalling the appropriate language use. In the second paper, *The Effectiveness of Online EFL Instruction amid COVID-19: An Attitude-and-Need-Based Study of EFL Learners at Changzhou University, China*, Yan Han and Yong Yi reported that online instruction as an emergent teaching alternative proved to be effective and welcomed by both learners and teachers. The findings also indicated that learners had strong needs in learning engagement and classroom management to achieve the learning objectives in online EFL instruction. In the third paper, *The Role of Technology during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of EFL Online Teaching Placements*, Astrid Morrison and Paulina Sepulveda-Escobar examined the use of technology as the pivotal tool that allowed Chilean EFL student teachers to continue learning to teach during the COVID-19 pandemic in a university in Chile. The results showed that this online placement prompted the interest and motivation to search and discover new technological tools to enhance the learning process of school learners, especially in a context where access to technology cannot be afforded by everyone. This study also indicated that this health emergency contributed to raise awareness of student teachers’ ‘The Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge framework’ (TPACK) and the integration of ICT as a key aspect for their future teaching careers. In the fourth paper, *Online Project-based Language Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: University EFL Students’ Perceptions of Content, Process and Development of Competences*, Evelina Jaleniauskiene and Donata Lisaite reported that they applied the method of project-based language learning (PBL) and devised two collaborative language learning projects for a group of second-year students enrolled in the EFL course (C1

language proficiency) at a technical university in the Baltic region. The inductive thematic analysis of their content revealed that the projects were perceived to be instrumental in gaining additional major-related knowledge in a meaningful way. In the fifth paper, *EFL Teaching and Learning via Zoom during COVID-19: Impacts of Students' Engagement on Vocabulary Range and Reading Comprehension Skills*, Tien Thinh Vu and Diem Bich Huyen Bui investigated the impacts of EFL students' engagement when studying reading online through Zoom on the performance of vocabulary and reading comprehension at a public university in Vietnam. Findings from the questionnaire revealed overall satisfaction towards this learning style, and more interestingly, a correlation appeared between students' attitudes and the post-test scores. In the sixth paper, *Student Engagement in an EFL/SFL Speaking LMOOC during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Influence of Learners' Social, Affective and Cognitive Dimensions*, Blanca Cristòfol Garcia and Christine Appel presented their study conducted at a university in Spain which contributed to the understanding of learner engagement in an English as a FL (EFL) and Spanish as a FL (SFL) speaking Language Massive Open Online Course (LMOOC) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequent integration of findings showed that learner engagement in TandemMOOC increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and revealed that aspects of the course linked to learners' social dimension were the most engaging ones, followed by the aspects related to the affective and, finally, the cognitive dimension. In the seventh paper, *Emergency Remote Teaching in Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak: Pedagogical Adjustments of Community College ESL Lecturers in Hong Kong*, Wenli Wu and Huiwen Shi reported a study of emergency remote teaching (ERT) in a community college in Hong Kong. The study indicated that language educators need to develop technological and online interactional competencies so that new pedagogical activities can be developed to enhance students' learning. In the eighth paper, *COVID-19: Challenges of Online Teaching among ESL Educators of Private Higher Learning Institutions in Malaysia*, Nalini Arumugam, Geraldine De Mello, Selvajothi Ramalingam, Mohammad Nor Afandi bin Ibrahim, Puspallata C Suppiah, Isai Amutan Krishnan investigated the challenges faced by ESL educators of private higher learning institutions in online teaching and proposed practical strategies for overcoming those problems. In the ninth paper, *COVID-19 Changes Teaching Practices: An Autoethnographic Account of a Japanese EFL Teacher*, Tomoko Hashimoto described autoethnographically how the researcher initially changed her teaching practices to cope with the difficult situation but ended the semester with an increased feeling of competence as an educator. In the tenth paper, *An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Japanese EFL Learners' Motivation during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Stephanie Keith Lim employed the IPA approach to analyze the data and provided insights into how EFL learners' motivation has been affected by the pandemic, and they serve as an important reference for students and educators in the EFL field.

This special edition would not have been possible without the support of a number of key individuals. Firstly, I must voice my appreciation to Paul Robertson's endorsement of the theme for the special edition, and John Adamson's patience in answering questions and guiding me along the way. I wish to extend my special thanks to Sviatlana Karpava for her proofreading, formatting and all the production matters. I would also like to thank the co-guest editor I-Chin Nonie Chiang who has helped me out with the special edition work throughout the time, and the assistance provided by Joseph P. Vitta concerning statistical issues was greatly appreciated. My heartfelt thanks are to all my wonderful review team members for their continued support, hard work and rigorousness in review, ensuring quality work for this edition. The reviewers are Md Al Amin, Barli Bram, Daniela Cifone, Ayse Ciftci, Liaquat A. Channa, Patrisius Istiarto Djiwandono, Sima Khezrlou, Elham Naji Meidani, Malihe Mousavi, Aysegül Nergis, Ratna Rintaningrum, Irish Chan Sioson, Marga Stander, Toshiyuki Takagaki, Phan Thi Thanh Thao, Joseph P. Vitta, Huili Wang, Robert Weekly, George Whitehead, Xiaodong Zhang. To the authors, I am sincerely appreciative and thankful for all the time and efforts they have dedicated

to this special edition. Additionally, I would like to express my thanks to Fiona Bell and Joseph Scanlon from Ulster University, UK for their sustainable interest in this special edition and offer of assistance. Overall, I admiringly appreciate each participant for their invaluable contributions during the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the successful completion of this special edition. In closing, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered new ways of teaching and learning, which engenders a new era, from the “new normal” to a “new future”. With the world still in the grip of COVID-19, it is hoped that the present edition will be of interest and inspiration to EFL/ESL teachers, learners, educators, researchers and all the readers in their creative work, striving for a better academic future, as the theme indicates *New Challenges, New Strategies, and New Prospects*.

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Supporting EFL Writing during the Pandemic: The Effectiveness of Data-Driven Learning in Error Correction

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose challenges to the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) around the globe, including China. Through online instruction, data-driven learning (DDL), a pedagogical tool that extracts concordances of authentic language examples from specific corpora, can be seen as a powerful resource for helping learners deal with their EFL writing errors during the lockdown. This paper examines the effects of DDL on students' EFL writing accuracy considering four specific error types and shows how students, as well as teachers, perceive this learning method. Four students and their English teacher in a Chinese university participated in this study. Students were required to complete six writing tasks electronically, which were later revised for four most frequent lexico-grammatical errors under the conditions of using (a) typical referencing resources, (b) DDL material only and (c) the combination of two. Online error correction spreadsheets and stimulated recall were used to investigate students' error correction preferences and processes, while the online questionnaire and interview were used to retrieve students' and their teacher's perceptions of DDL-mediated error correction. The qualitative data analysis revealed that DDL material supported activation of students' prior knowledge and helped them learn appropriate language use by utilising a series of cognitive strategies. Participants highly appreciated the advantages of DDL-mediated writing activities, although some reservations were made about their practices which warrant further investigation.

Keywords: DDL, EFL writing, error correction.

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1. Introduction

To help schools and universities to meet the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, China's Ministry of Education has published a guidance on online learning which outlines a blended approach combining online teaching with students' self-study, and which emphasises supporting students to develop into autonomous learners (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

This guidance posed challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in China, who have few resources to refer to when adapting their existing teaching practices to meet the new requirements for online learning.

Data-driven learning (DDL) was first introduced by Johns (1990), referring to language acquisition via searching corpora. The latest review of DDL literature revealed that DDL-mediated error correction in second language writing is one of its most frequent application (Chen & Flowerdew, 2018). The literature also indicates that DDL helps learners achieve the inductive language learning by comparing between learner outputs and target linguistic knowledge inputs (Boulton, 2009; Chambers, 2010; Schmidt, 1990). However, recent classroom-based research reported that specific learning environments with prescribed syllabus may limit the DDL application (Bridle, 2019).

The new teaching and learning context occasioned by the pandemic offers an opportunity to retest the effectiveness of DDL and evaluate its potential contribution to second language writing instruction in China. This paper reports upon a small-scale study which applied DDL to support Chinese students' EFL writing error correction as part of their online EFL classes. The study investigated the process of DDL-mediated error correction activities as well as users' perceptions of using DDL-mediated error correction in an online teaching and learning environment. The author argues that making a precedent in and after the pandemic, DDL may inspire the EFL teaching for the purpose of enhancing online instruction and promoting personalised learning that go beyond the traditional EFL classroom.

2. Literature Review

EFL online teaching in China during pandemic

To date, only a limited number of papers have described and reviewed the practice of EFL teaching in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Zhang and Wang (2020) undertook a reflective study of college English online teaching practice in their institute. They found that most students were satisfied with online EFL teaching and responded positively to live teaching resources, in-class communication, and after-class learning tasks. Teachers involved in the study emphasised the importance of carefully designing online activities, information and communication technology (ICT) training, and prompt feedback to high quality online learning. Gao and Zhang (2020) interviewed three Chinese EFL teachers about their experiences of online teaching. The participants noted the need to learn how to use new technologies and to integrate them with traditional teaching methods.

In summary, little research reported how Chinese EFL teaching was, or is, being conducted and adapted to fulfil the requirement of high-quality online instruction during this pandemic, which calls for more studies investigating the details of practice under such circumstances.

DDL-mediated error correction in EFL writing

DDL refers to a series of exploratory learning activities via searching corpora (Johns, 1990). It is believed that "a corpus that contains thousands of authentic text samples can greatly enhance a learner's

exposure to naturally occurring language and offer a vast linguistic resource” (Quinn, 2015, p.165). The outcome of corpus search, the concordance lines, is an index of the words or phrases in a corpus searched by syntax queries, whose most common format is the KWIC concordance - Key Word in Context (O’Keeffe et al., 2007). In a KWIC concordance, the node word/phrase is in a central position with all lines vertically aligned around it (see Figure 1). A learner is then able to compare their own language output and the concordance lines, meaning the learner can generalise the information from the concordances to arrive at a solution to a language problem (Quinn, 2015).

13	ABK 242	a bill not contained in the Queen’s Speech . It will	prevent brewers from	evicting publicans in tied houses if they sell one ‘ guest beer
14	A95 363	the foresight to crack down on its democracy movement in June ,	preventing China from	being thrown into the ‘ turmoil and confusion ‘ now prevailing in
15	A9D 117	to prevent an unwanted takeover , introduced a new rule which would	prevent Pennzoil from	calling a shareholders ‘ meeting and asked the courts to approve its
16	A9E 613	the foresight to crack down on its democracy movement in June ,	preventing China from	being thrown into the ‘ turmoil and confusion ‘ now prevailing in
17	A9M 92	new US initiative towards Beijing , arguing that the priorities were to	prevent China from	retreating further into isolation , and to show support for moderates in
18	A9N 6	GDR . ‘ The Soviet Union was doing everything possible to ‘	prevent interference from	outside and to neutralise attempts at such interference ‘ in socialist countries
19	AAK 437	would be prize freezes , limits on co-operatives , and controls to	prevent producers from	cutting back on low-priced goods in favour of more profitable lines to
20	AAI 450	‘ even-handed approach ‘ to industrial relations . For instance , it	prevented people from	being excluded from trade union membership and be denied that this clause
21	ABB 1864	salted water . * Adding a little oil to the water	prevents pasta from	sticking together during cooking . (Using enough water is also important
22	ABE 1218	seems to fear so ; at least , he has produced legislation	preventing judges from	granting interim injunctions to allow depositors access to their money . This
23	ABP 1152	Acts (1878 and 1882) , which have been passed to	prevent persons from	obtaining credit by continuing to remain in possession of goods when they
24	ABP 1251	‘ receiving order ‘ , which protects the debtor ‘s property and	prevents creditors from	suing him without the leave of the court . The debtor may
25	ACL 181	Lev . 15. 1-18) . But these laws are intended to	prevent men from	such ‘ wastage ‘ of seed , and thus define men much
26	ACS 459	more public and less private investment . Perhaps the book helped to	prevent things from	getting even worse . But when I wrote it , nobody had
27	ACS 1574	thermonuclear superiority or , if you looked at it another way	prevented America from	attaining such superiority . His name was Klaus Fuchs and the penalty

Figure 1. Concordance lines for the phrase “prevent ... from ...”

DDL-mediated error correction means using DDL for correcting written errors. On a theoretical level, DDL-mediated error correction, in the context of “scaffolding”, is a Social-cultural Theory term to describe supportive mediation in the learning process (e.g., Flowerdew, 2015; O’Keeffe, 2020). Learners have shaped their own level of language knowledge, then through the mediation of feedback and concordance lines provided by experienced teachers, their knowledge can be progressively reshaped for reaching a higher level. This means DDL emphasises the significance of interaction between teachers, DDL material, and learners for the engagement of knowledge co-construction. There are two DDL approaches to error correction exist in the literature: indirect DDL and direct DDL. Indirect DDL involves the consultation of corpus-informed material through teacher’s mediation, while direct DDL involves students exploring the corpus data themselves and performing follow-up analyses (Leńko-Szymańska & Boulton, 2015). Yoon and Jo (2014) conducted a study investigating the effectiveness of these two DDL approaches on learners’ error correction in an English writing class. The study revealed that the error-correction rate was higher with indirect DDL than direct DDL.

Research also reported that DDL is suitable for correcting lexico-grammatical errors (e.g., Bridle, 2015; Crosthwaite, 2017; Gaskell & Cobb, 2004; Tung et al., 2015). Crosthwaite (2017) found that students used corpora to correct errors of word choice, word form, collocations, and phrasing, but were less likely to use corpora to correct errors of deletion or morphosyntax. Furthermore, students were likely to successfully correct errors of collocation but were less successful in correcting errors of morphosyntax via DDL. Bridle (2015) found that incorrect words and informal words were more likely to be treated by concordances, compared to other errors, and these two types of errors were also more

successfully corrected through DDL than through other methods.

However, few studies explored the process of DDL-mediated error correction and its relationship with other typical referencing resources. Liou (2019) conducted a study blending DDL with other available tools (e.g., prior knowledge, online bilingual dictionaries, Google) in EFL writing class. The result shows that most of the students could learn how to use concordances to correct errors and they realised the advantages of DDL. But due to the research design and the focus, it is difficult to know whether DDL played a decisive role in error correction when multiple resources were used, and whether the process of DDL-mediated error correction was different from that with other tools.

The research findings on how students perceive DDL in writing error correction share many similarities. Students believe DDL is helpful for improving their writing accuracy, and learning appropriate vocabulary and grammar usage (e.g., Crosthwaite, 2017; Yoon & Hirvela, 2004). However, students complain about the time-consuming process of reading concordances (Tung et al., 2016) and potential confusion when linking the teacher feedback with the concordances to correct errors (Crosthwaite, 2017).

Rationale of this study

It is well documented that Chinese EFL learners in higher education make numerous lexico-grammatical errors in English writing, especially errors of preposition, article, verb, and word choice (Jichun, 2015; Zhan, 2015). In China, where most EFL teachers' instruction is didactic (Kılıçkaya, 2015; Lin & Lee, 2017), inductive learning is not emphasised, and so students often find it difficult to address their specific writing problems. Meanwhile, DDL has not been adopted by EFL teachers in mainstream education due to relatively limited local research with few theoretical supports (Yoon, 2011).

However, the situation has been changing during the COVID-19 pandemic, as both teachers and students have been required to adopt more flexible strategies for online instruction (Fu & Zhou, 2020). Individual learning outside the classroom plays a more important role than before. The pandemic therefore represents an opportunity to re-explore implementing DDL in Chinese EFL classrooms, where students should be guided to recognise their problems first and then find the solutions independently.

This study aims to evaluate the DDL-mediated error correction applied in the context of EFL instruction during the COVID-19 in China, by answering the following questions:

RQ1: To what extent did students correct the errors of articles, prepositions, verbs, and word choice under the condition of using typical referencing resources (such as prior knowledge, online dictionaries, grammar books, textbooks and peer support), DDL material, and the combination of two, in their online English writing?

RQ2: What is the interaction between referencing resources and student error correction behaviour across these three conditions?

RQ3: What are the teacher and students' perceptions about the usefulness of DDL-mediated error correction on EFL writing during the pandemic?

3. Methods

Participants

Participants in the study were chosen through convenience sampling, based on the researcher's connections with their university. Convenience sampling was the most appropriate sampling method because campuses were closed during the early stages of the pandemic in China and the researcher had no alternative method of contacting potential participants. Four second-year English major students with intermediate English language proficiency participated in the study, as did their English module teacher with 12 years of teaching experience. The students were preparing for Test for English Major: Band 4 (TEM-4) examinations. The teacher and the researcher invited these students to participate in a series of short-term online writing sessions focussing on TEM-4 writing. Before commencing, the author confirmed that these students and their teacher had limited knowledge of language corpora or DDL.

Instruments

Error correction spreadsheet

The error correction spreadsheet aims to assist the researcher in investigating students' error correction process with/without DDL. Students used the empty error correction spreadsheet to record errors, their attempts to identify the types of errors they had made, the sequence in which they used referencing resources, and the resource they found most useful when making corrections. The spreadsheet provides the real-world data about to what extent students consult different reference resources and whether there is a pattern in error correction behaviour.

Online Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to collect data about students' perceptions of DDL-mediated error correction. It is a modified version of Yoon and Hirvela's (2004) questionnaire measuring students' experience of using DDL for error correction. A Likert scale is used for all questionnaire items, containing five response options, from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Stimulated recall and semi-structured interview

Each student engaged in stimulated recall to verbalise their processes of error correction and provide details to support their questionnaire answers. Mackey and Gass (2015) assert that stimulated recall is some tangible reminder of an event which can stimulate recall to the extent that respondents can retrieve and then verbalise what was going on in their minds during that specific event. In this study, the error correction spreadsheet and questionnaire answers facilitated the stimulated recall. The focus of this recall is to find out whether there is a similar pattern among students' error correction behaviour, and whether they experienced difficulties in using DDL/non-DDL referencing materials during error

correction.

Additionally, the researcher conducted a semi-structured interview with the class teacher. Questions focussed on the teacher's familiarity with language corpora, their reflections on the advantages and disadvantages of DDL as applied during the online sessions, and their opinions on the future application of DDL in her classes.

Procedures

Students engaged in a total of six writing tasks across three separate writing sessions (two tasks per session). Each session was assigned to one of the following research conditions: (a) using typical referencing resources only, (b) using DDL material only and (c) using typical referencing resources and DDL. Students received a writing task during the weekday and were required to submit by the weekend. In the following week, students received the feedback and revised their writing for re-submission, while a new writing task was also assigned requiring students to submit it by the weekend, again. After completing all of the assignments and the revised versions, students were asked to undertake an online questionnaire and to join a stimulated recall session, while their English teacher was invited to participate in a semi-structured interview.

The written assignment topics were selected from the TEM-4 mock test bank maintained by the exam organiser, and participants were asked to complete their writing within 30-40 minutes for no less than 350 words without the support of any external references. Due to remote teaching, all assignments were submitted electronically. The teacher and the researcher monitored the status of the submission and used the automatic marking system iWrite (developed by Beijing Foreign Studies University) to help provide feedback. The teacher and author then took 2-3 days to review and modify the feedback produced by the system, focussing on encouraging inductive learning. The feedback form provided to the students highlighted problem areas and also included a summary comment summarising the strengths and weaknesses of the writing. Students read the feedback and corrected errors by using the referencing resources under the research conditions. They were also required to complete the error correction spreadsheet and submit it with their revised writing.

Additionally, for the second and third round of writing, the author reviewed the target errors, then attached relevant DDL material before returning the writings. The DDL material comprised concordance lines selected by the author and the teacher which helped indicate the appropriate correction for each highlighted error. Figure 2 illustrates an example of how students' target errors were marked in the feedback and how concordances were attached.

For instance, we are not necessary to carry too much cash, especially when we go out or travel with our family and friends, and cashless payment embodies an enormous advantage that is conducive to our pleasant purchase or travelling **without much burden**. More importantly, **carrying considerable amount of cash** may increase the risk of loss.

de us in all of our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual preparation. that we can leave home **without any burdens** tying us down and holding us back from the journey set before us. that we can grow to be one, i pathways of industrial development, they still hanker for a global agreement that will leave them **without any burdens** at all. </s><s> This is especially reflected in the attitude of the Indian state in the climate negotie ble of suffering I want it to give Jesus everything [15] possible. </s><s> Here, dear Mother, I live **without any burdens** from the cares of this miserable earth, and have only to accomplish the sweet and easy mission en stopped seeing her altogether when he married Nancy who wanted him to make a fresh start **without any burdens** from his first marriage. </s><s> Maureen remained locked out. </s><s> Speaking of her father a uilding a crypto-valley that will make it possible for crypto-currency related companies to operate **without any burdens** or difficulties and most importantly – they will be able to operate legally. </s><s> The goal is it to

deficiencies'. Chatterton told the conference: 'regretfully there is	a considerable amount of	material which is unrecorded and unavailable to the researcher locked away in
though Chatterton in his notes to my thesis argued there has been	a considerable amount of	'participant police research', I would question whether many of
presentation of information necessary for an ethnography could be actionable. For	a considerable amount of	inconsequential information owned by the institution is classed as confidential, eve
ideal should be a circular seat but I felt it would take	a considerable amount of	timber with a lot of waster so I opted for an hexagonal
Cabinet discussion. But I start that by saying there was already	a considerable amount of	Cabinet discussion. Nevertheless, he appeared to suggest Mrs Thatcher

Figure 2. Feedback and DDL material in a student's sample assignment

Data analysis

In this study, quantitative and qualitative methods were employed for answering the proposed research questions. To answer the first research question, the frequencies of four targeted errors were recorded, and the percentages of their appropriate corrections were calculated in Microsoft Excel. To answer the second research question, the student participants' spreadsheets were collected and the stimulated recall about their error correction was audio-recorded. These data were analysed with the grounded theory (Mackey & Gass, 2015), which examines the error correction behaviour from multiple points, to help arrive at a complete picture of the interaction between error correction behaviour and referencing resources, without predetermined coding or analysis schemes.

For answering the third research question, the questionnaire answer scores were calculated and the common issues the student participants brought up during the stimulated recall were identified. The semi-structured interview was audio-recorded, transcribed and carefully studied to summarise teacher's viewpoints.

4. Findings and Discussion

The data reported in this paper has been derived from students' writing assignments (with revisions), error correction spreadsheets, questionnaires, stimulated recalls, and teacher's interview. The major research findings have been divided into three categories: 1) descriptive data on error correction of target error types, 2) DDL-mediated error correction process, and 3) users' perceptions of DDL-mediated error correction.

Descriptive error correction outcome on target error types

The frequencies with which the four targeted types of errors and their corrections occurred in participants' writings were counted, and the correction rates for these error types were calculated. In Table 1, across the three rounds of writing, students generated more errors related to articles and verbs than those to prepositions and word choices. Frequencies of errors for prepositions and word choice slightly declined after the introduction of DDL from Round 2. Figure 3 indicates that in Round 1,

without access to DDL, students corrected article errors less successfully than any other target types of errors (correction rate 0.54). However, an increase in the rate of successful correction of article errors was observed after introducing DDL (0.93 in Round 2 and 0.8 in Round 3).

Table 1

Frequencies of Target Errors before and after the Correction

	Round 1 (No DDL)		Round 2 (DDL Only)		Round 3 (Blend)	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
ART	11	5	15	1	19	3
PREP	6	1	4	2	1	0
V	10	4	10	2	9	4
WC	9	0	6	2	6	1
Total	35	10	35	7	35	8

Note. ART = article; PREP = preposition; V = verb; WC = word choice.

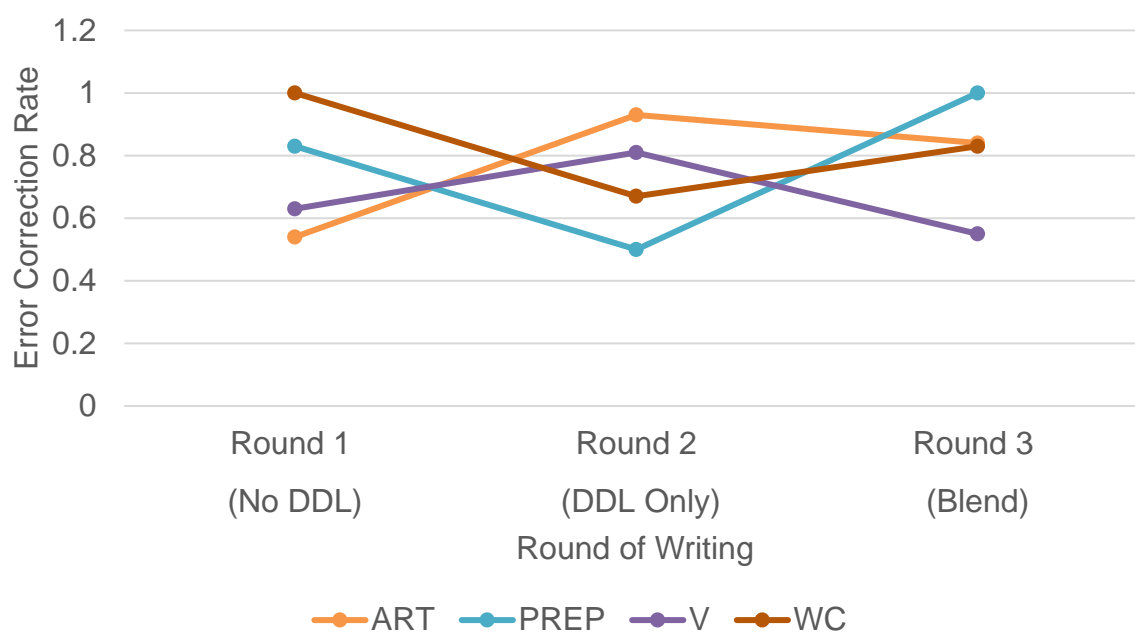


Figure 3. Correction rates of targeted error types among three rounds of writings

To investigate the relationship between the use of referencing resources and the error correction, a qualitative analysis of the error correction spreadsheet was conducted. In Round 1, the following major patterns of using referencing resources were identified as: prior knowledge only, online dictionary only, and online dictionary support for prior knowledge. Table 2 illustrates the most frequent referencing patterns by each target error type and the relationship between referencing patterns, the most useful referencing resource and the correction rates. For preposition errors, students tended to

consult their prior knowledge then an online dictionary. When following this pattern of referencing, students tended to rely most on online dictionaries when making final decisions (66% of usefulness). For verb errors and word choice errors, although students had high correction rates when consulting prior knowledge (100% in both cases), they did not often consider it as the most useful resource.

Table 2

Most Frequent Consultation Patterns, Usefulness and Correction Rates (Round 1)

	Most frequent pattern	Percentage of total attempt	Usefulness	Correction rate within pattern
ART	Online dictionary only	55%	50%	83%
PREP	Prior knowledge then online dictionary	50%	33% (For prior knowledge) 66% (For online dictionaries)	100%
V	Prior knowledge only	89%	37%	100%
WC	Prior knowledge only	56%	20%	100%

Table 3 shows that in Round 2, major patterns of using referencing resources were prior knowledge only, concordances only, and prior knowledge plus concordances. Use of concordances was common when students attempted to correct all target error types. Compared to the use of online dictionaries in Round 1, students displayed higher rate of choosing concordances as the most useful referencing material, and usually concordances resulted in more successful corrections. When combining prior knowledge and concordances in correcting verb errors, students considered concordances as the most useful resource for 75% of the corrections.

Table 3

Most Frequent Consultation Patterns, Usefulness and Correction Rates (Round 2)

	Most frequent pattern	Percentage of total attempt	Usefulness	Correction rate within pattern
ART	Concordances only	73%	100%	100%
PREP	Concordances only	100%	100%	100%
V	Prior knowledge then concordances	80%	25% (For prior knowledge) 75% (For concordances)	88%
WC	Concordances only	33%	100%	100%
	Prior knowledge only	33%	50%	50%

In Round 3, where students could use both concordances and other available resources, concordances and prior knowledge were frequently used for revising target error types. As described in Table 4, students expressed a similar level of confidence in consulting concordances for error correction, in comparison with Round 2, although this did not necessarily lead to the appropriate

correction. Students in Round 3 mainly used concordances without prior knowledge to review article and preposition errors, while students tended to apply prior knowledge to correct verb and word choice errors.

Table 4

Most Frequent Consultation Patterns, Usefulness and Correction Rates (Round 3)

	Most frequent pattern	Percentage of total attempt	Usefulness	Correction rates within pattern
ART	Concordances only	79%	100%	87%
PREP	Concordances only	100%	100%	100%
V	Prior knowledge only	40%	100%	100%
WC	Concordances only	50%	100%	66%
	Prior knowledge only	50%	100%	100%

These preliminary findings form an image consistent with former research (e.g., Crosthwaite, 2017; Gilmore, 2009) that students positively and actively apply DDL to the correction of the target error types. Similar to Yoon and Jo's study (2014) in an Asian EFL setting, students in this study had weak performances regarding uses of articles, however they demonstrated improvements after DDL. New findings from this study may suggest that DDL can potentially become a stable substitution for online dictionaries, even though students could freely select referencing resources. To a large extent, students used DDL material to address their issues relevant to articles and prepositions, while prior knowledge was combined with DDL material for treating verb and word choice errors.

DDL-mediated error correction process

DDL-mediated error correction was investigated via stimulated recall. The qualitative data provided useful information about how students processed error correction with/without DDL and whether DDL applied in this study reflects the existing second language acquisition (SLA) theories.

In Round 1, similar patterns of error correction process were identified from the stimulated recall. Students reported that the use of highlighting as feedback first drew their attention. Then, they read the context and referred to prior knowledge to interpret the feedback. If students were able to rely on their prior knowledge to address the particular issue, they would attempt to correct errors. In such cases, students might decide to double-check their intuitions with online dictionaries and attempt to find examples to support themselves. However, if they had not previously encountered the particular issue, students complained that few external referencing resources could help. One of the participants reported the following experience on correcting the highlighted errors in Round 1:

Sentence with errors: *On this way, people can embrace more convenient and efficient future.*

Student B: *I repeatedly read the sentence and I guess the first error is preposition error, but I*

don't know what's wrong with the second one. I think I used the wrong preposition but I'm not that sure. I typed "this way" in iciba.com then I found two sample sentences used "in this way", so I feel I had the right answer. I don't know how to correct the second error by dictionary. I tried to type some of the words in the search box, but I can only get meanings and a few sample sentences. They didn't help me figure it out.

In Round 2 and 3, students reported that concordance lines provided a clearer navigation for the error correction process. They paid attention to the feedback first, and then used lower-level cognitive skills, such as re-reading problematic areas and translating it into Chinese, to activate their prior knowledge (Yoon & Jo, 2014). They would form a hypothesis about how to correct the error. Depending on how confidently they relied on their prior knowledge, either they directly corrected the target error, or they read the concordance lines to seek supporting evidence. If students failed to gain useful information from their prior knowledge, they were still able to read concordance lines and used a series of cognitive skills to generalise new language knowledge or re-activate their prior knowledge for error correction (Sun, 2003). Specifically, students mentioned in their recall that because of their limited knowledge of article use in English, they relied heavily on the provided concordance lines to assist them in identifying the article error type. All the participants agreed that concordance lines were specific enough to indicate the error type and the number of concordance lines provided per error was sufficient in helping them reach to a solution.

Figure 4 illustrates a model of DDL-mediated error correction process, which was generalised from participants' recall data. These findings indicate that DDL-mediated error correction can be beneficial to improve EFL writing. As Flowerdew (2015) points out, DDL helps to promote SLA via conscious efforts on noticing the gaps in the linguistic knowledge a student might have in their L2 repertoire. Moreover, O'Keeffe (2020) believes that "if we can provide a more detailed articulation of the pedagogical underpinnings of DDL and the related teaching and learning processes, we will be able to align more with key areas of concern within instructed SLA" (p. 6). The involvement of students' attention and awareness of erroneous areas, their exposure to authentic language input, and their use of cognitive strategies when reading concordance lines, reflects well-known learning theories (e.g., Flowerdew, 2015) and SLA theories (e.g., Schmidt, 1990). Such a connection between practice and theory found in the current research suggests that students may benefit from the DDL-mediated error correction process and teachers may better understand DDL from a theoretical perspective.

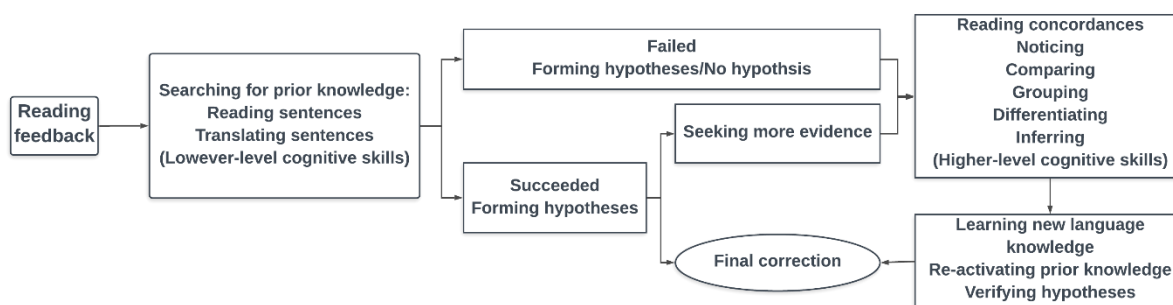


Figure 4. DDL-mediated error correction process

User's perception of DDL application in EFL writing

Users of DDL are not only students, but also their teachers. In the questionnaire, students not only displayed a positive attitude towards DDL-mediated error correction practice, but also expressed their willingness to apply it in their future studies (Figure 5). Some of the questionnaire items, such as the benefits and drawbacks of DDL-mediated error correction, were later expanded in the stimulated recall so that students could provide specific examples from their practice. They generally agreed that DDL mediation promoted active self-learning during the pandemic when it was difficult for them to seek help from classmates or teachers. Concordances were considered to be more useful than online dictionaries for learning grammar rules. Furthermore, students expressed a desire to learn more about DDL for future EFL learning purposes. However, segmented sentences, unfamiliar lexis, and limited numbers of concordances without enough context were reported as complaints which stopped students from gaining useful information for error correction. These findings are consistent with the literature about how students perceived DDL (e.g., Crosthwaite, 2017; Luo, 2016; Quinn, 2015). What is new to the DDL research field is that students in this research reported they were not only satisfied with the immediate correction facilitated by selected concordances, but they also expected further material explaining their errors and guiding them to conduct individual research in the corpus. Such a requirement seeking direct DDL is considered as a limitation of applying indirect DDL to more advanced learners.

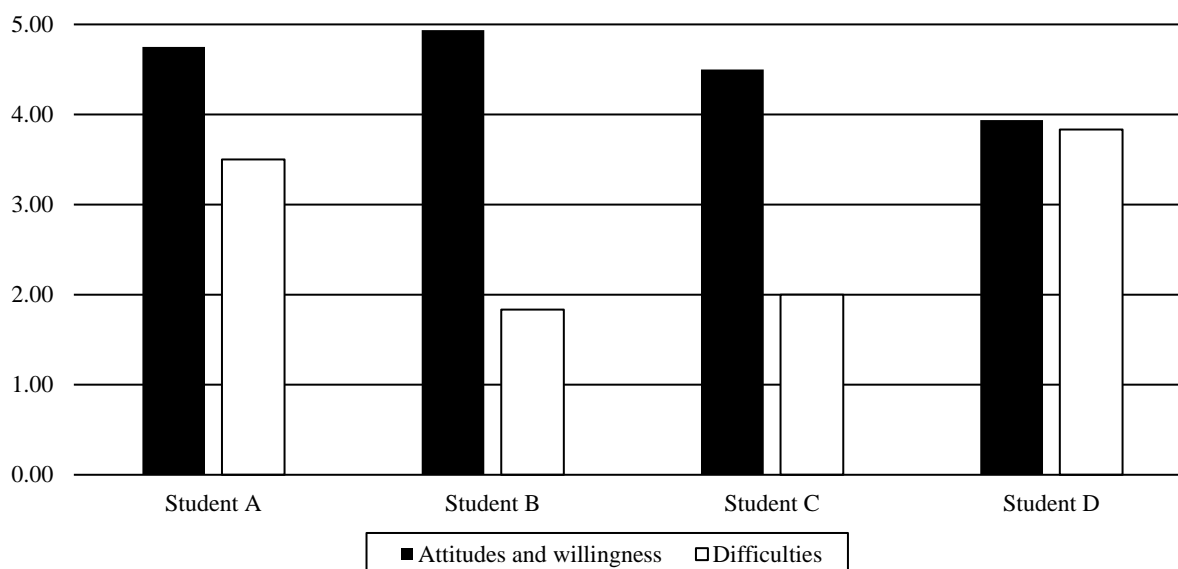


Figure 5. Students' perceptions on DDL-mediated error correction

Note. 1: negative attitude/fewer difficulties - 5: positive attitude/more difficulties.

The semi-structured interview with the teacher revealed that she perceived DDL-mediated error correction as a positive activity for promoting student-oriented learning and improving students' writing accuracy, especially when she could not deliver English writing classes as normal during the lockdown. She also affirmed she would continue learning and using DDL in her future teaching practices. However, she highlighted that the limited knowledge and practice of DDL, the time-consuming process of DDL material preparation, and the difficulties accessing online corpora in China were the major issues potentially limiting her from applying DDL. In the present study, the teacher only needed to prepare materials and provide feedback for four students, and she could use the author's account for searching corpora, which is not reflective of the real circumstances in her daily teaching.

These opinions are similar to what can be found in previous DDL research: teachers were positive about DDL for teaching because of its potential for inductive learning; on the other hand, they had concerns about additional knowledge and the workload required for developing the activities as well as about technical difficulties with materials design and classroom practice (Chen, Flowerdew & Anthony, 2019; Lin & Lee, 2015). However, both students and their teacher in this study believed that the pandemic offers an opportunity to learn and use DDL, because they were not able to teach and learn as usual and so were open to alternative modes of study, and had more flexibility in time and focussed more on online resources and learning. This research thus argues that the COVID-19 pandemic could potentially speed up implementing DDL alongside traditional EFL instruction and may encourage more students and teachers to take advantage of it, though it should be of course based on the systematic training.

The findings of this study imply that EFL teachers in the Chinese and other Asian higher education systems need to progressively erase "fears" relating to the application of DDL. Schaeffer-Lacroix (2019) categorised these fears as being at knowledge level or cultural level. Knowledge-level

fears, as the teacher interview in this study suggests, are due to a lack of knowledge about the corpus and data exploration skills. The teacher participant learnt about DDL from the author through the error correction activities, but she would still like to receive systematic training in DDL during her career. Crosthwaite, Luciana and Schweinberger (2021) implemented a training project in Indonesia for pre-service teachers. It included an online DDL course for academic writing, expert's comments on trainees' lesson plans and online workshops. This kind of training project can help teachers better understand and apply DDL in their daily practice. There are reasons to believe that after training, the issues reported in this study, such as increases in the teaching workload, can be addressed with more flexible solutions. However, cultural-level fears may be more difficult to resolve. These fears are often related to doubts about DDL as an approach rooted in the local EFL education system. Unlike Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) contexts, the DDL practice in Asian countries is more challenging as there is an insufficient literature base and fewer supporting policies. One example in this study is that the teacher did not have access to a wide range of corpora or hear about relevant DDL research or practice occurring in the national education system. On the one hand, this calls for more local research focusing on the connection between DDL and the mainstream SLA theories that most teachers are familiar with (O'Keeffe, 2020). On the other hand, policymakers should realise the importance of improving ICT services and then encourage teachers and researchers to implement more DDL-relevant curriculum designs, teaching methods and assessment practices.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the effectiveness of DDL-mediated error correction in online EFL writing practice during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. The DDL material played a significant role in helping students correct the four most frequent types of lexico-grammatical errors, especially for errors of articles, while typical referencing resources, such as online dictionaries, were considered to have limitations in error correction activities. This study used stimulated recall to generalise the process of DDL-mediated error correction, which indicates that the DDL mediation not only helped students achieve better error correction, but also encouraged students to utilise a series of cognitive strategies for inductively discovering or recalling the appropriate language use. More importantly, this study highlighted the positive function of DDL during the pandemic. DDL mediation was of great value in connecting students and teachers outside the class and promoting self-learning. Considering the success of applying DDL during the lockdown, both the students and their teacher in this study expressed the willingness to learn more about DDL in the future, although with some reservations. Overall, this study will hopefully encourage more local EFL teachers and researchers to embrace DDL and consider it as a powerful tool during and after the pandemic.

An obvious limitation of this study is that all the research data were collected online, raising potential issues such as participants not fully obeying the task instructions and not accurately self-reporting error correction processes. Another limitation of the present study is that due to the small

sample size, the DDL-mediated error correction outcomes may not be representative of the actual classroom settings. It is therefore reasonable to conduct a follow-up study based on a real-world EFL class with a larger sample for better testing the DDL-mediated error correction efficiency and user experiences.

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Appendix A

Error correction spreadsheet (3rd round of writing)

No.	Error Area	How do you know about your error (Error type)?	Which consulting resources do you use for error correction?					Which resource is most useful?
			Online Dictionaries	Paper-based Tools	My Own English Knowledge	Peer Support	Guessing	
1								
2								
3								
4								
5								
6								
7								
8								
9								
10								

Appendix B

Semi-structured interview guide (For teacher)

1. How much do you know about language corpora and their application in language teaching?
2. How do you like the experience of using DDL and/or traditional referencing resources in your English writing teaching?
3. How would you describe the differences, if any, between using DDL and/or traditional referencing resources to correct errors in English writing?
4. Could you tell any difficulties or challenges if you teach with DDL and/or traditional referencing resources? If so, what are they? And why?
5. How do you like the DDL treatments in this research?
6. How would you describe your students when they were asked to use different referencing resources to correct errors?
7. Would you like to share any other observations, thoughts, or perspectives relating to any of the treatments in the research?
8. Would you consider adopting DDL, traditional consulting resources, or any combination of the two to teach English teaching in future? Why or why not?

Appendix C

Online questionnaire (adapted from Yoon & Hirvela, 2004)

○strongly disagree ○disagree ○neutral ○agree ○strongly agree

1. I felt confident in understanding the written corrective feedback in my assignment about my writing errors when I used concordances.
2. I felt confident in generalising the appropriate language usage through concordances and then applied it to correct my writing errors in the future.
3. Concordances are more helpful than a dictionary or other available reference material for my English writing error correction.
4. Concordances are more helpful than a dictionary or other available reference material for my English writing error correction.
5. Using concordances is helpful for learning the meaning of vocabulary.
6. Using concordances is helpful for learning the appropriate choice of vocabulary.
7. Using concordances is helpful for the usage of collocation.
8. Using concordances is helpful for learning grammar knowledge.
9. Having online assignment, receiving written corrective feedback electronically and using concordances are practical for improving my writing accuracy, especially during the pandemic of COVID-19.
10. I want to use the concordances in English writing error correction if possible in the future.
11. Besides error correction, I want to learn to use concordances in English writing for other purposes in the future.
12. If I learn more about concordances, I wish to do my own search in a language corpus based on feedback.
13. Learning more about concordances will enhance my confidence in producing English writing with fewer errors.
14. If I had learned to use concordances earlier, I would have had a better performance of writing in English tests.
15. The application of DDL should be introduced to my English courses.
16. I will recommend students using the DDL material for English writing in the future.
17. I had some difficulties in understanding the feedback (I did not know what kind of error I had even I received feedback) to correct my errors when using concordances.
18. I had some difficulties in connecting the feedback to concordances (I did not know how concordances provided can help me correct errors indicated in the feedback).
19. I had some difficulties in using concordances for error correction due to a lot of time and efforts

spent reading the material.

20. I had some difficulties in understanding and using concordances due to unfamiliar vocabulary.

21. I had some difficulties in understanding and using concordances because the sentences were cut-off (not completed) without context.

22. I had some difficulties in understanding and using concordances because I did not get sufficient amount of lines to validate my hypothesis.

The Effectiveness of Online EFL Instruction amid COVID-19: An Attitude-and-Need-Based Study of EFL Learners at Changzhou University, China

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the world not only a health crisis but an instructional challenge about shifting teaching and learning from the classroom to online. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of online English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction during the coronavirus pandemic at Changzhou University in China (CCZU). A mixed-method design, including questionnaire surveys and interviews, was employed for the specific purposes of this study. A group of 90 Chinese EFL students from CCZU completed the surveys measuring learner attitude and needs in online EFL instruction amid the pandemic. 5 Chinese EFL university teachers from CCZU with rich experience in online instruction participated in the interviews. The findings displayed that Chinese EFL learners showed positive attitude toward online EFL instruction since it is proven that achieving learning objectives was also possible in emergency online classes which are considered as more convenient and effective amid the pandemics. The findings also indicated that learners had strong needs in learning engagement and classroom management to achieve the learning objectives in online EFL instruction. Strategies for effective online EFL instruction delivery were discussed and recommendations for future instruction were given.

Keywords: COVID-19, effectiveness, EFL learners, online instruction

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 disturbed the normal teaching of all schools in China and the whole world. In January of 2020, China issued a quarantine and isolation policy to reduce social approaches and curb the virus spread requiring people to avoid travelling and stay at home as much as possible. The Ministry of Education in China then issued guidelines for universities to reduce the spread of COVID-19, including delaying the start of on-campus classes and implementing fully online courses for the spring semester of the year. E-learning platforms including MOOC and Chaoxing are open to the public freely to facilitate the online instruction policy.

Online teaching used in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching originates from Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). The regularly used online teaching methods in the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) field include blended, flipped and fully online learning (Bailey & Lee, 2020). The blended learning is usually based on the combination of face-to-face classroom learning and web-based learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Hrastinski, 2019). Flipped learning involves online learning resources during the face-to-face classes. Fully online learning adopts online resources and learning management system for instruction without any face-to-face classes (Nakayama et al., 2014). These teaching methods have been implemented in many Asian countries including China and have been researched extensively (Bailey & Judd, 2017; Caldwell, 2018; Durriyah & Zuhdi, 2018; Tananuraksakul, 2016; Yang, Wei & Zhang, 2017). Being able to combine the advantages of both face-to-face classes and web-based resources, the blended and flipped learning are more popular and often adopted since they are possible to create a student-orientated learning environment and improve students' engagement in learning (Northey et al., 2015). Fully online learning, however, is not standard in the English language learning context in Asian countries (Bailey & Lee, 2020).

The sudden decision to implement fully online instruction at universities in China in light of COVID-19 provides educators, administrators and students an opportunity to experience fully online learning under a very special background where students and teachers are almost isolated at home. This is not just a simple decision moving offline EFL classes to a fully online environment, but also involves a complicated teaching management system about how to continue instruction and student support in the event of an extended disruption due to the pandemic. This study investigated learner attitudes and needs and discussed teaching strategies in the context of web-based language learning.

2. Literature Review

Effectiveness of online instruction

Researchers investigated the practicality of online classrooms and found learners' questioning

ability and engagement can be both improved (Heggart & Yoo, 2018). Additionally, learners were found behaving better in communication and self-confidence building (Halim & Hashim, 2019). Diversified ways are used in delivering effective online instruction. Some explored that implementing fun and engaging activities during online learning can help increase student motivation (Morat et al., 2016, as cited in Bailey & Lee, 2020). Others mentioned the use of information and communication technology for online instruction, including songs, videos, television clips, websites, e-books, text chatting, automatic writing evaluation software, voice messages, language learning apps, video chatting, social media (e.g., YouTube, Wikimedia, Wikipedia, and Spotify) and other sources of multimedia (Gavin, 2019; Pazilah et al., 2019).

Online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 spread posed challenges to the current teaching mode. Schools and educational institutions were compelled to shut down temporally and shift their teaching from the traditional classroom to online. Online instruction emerged as a safe and viable option for education continuity (Darkwa & Antwi, 2021). Meanwhile, concerns and arguments around online instruction are emerging.

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, it had been reported that certain challenges should be considered when implementing online classes or learning activities, including digital distraction (Melor et al., 2012), insufficient technical knowledge (Kessler & Plakans, 2008; Gillett-Swan, 2017), lack of authentic contact and interaction (Pazilah et al., 2019), and the conflicts between expectations from students, parents, and schools (Halverson et al., 2017; Manca & Ranieri, 2013).

Some of the challenges were further identified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Existing evidence on students' online learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic suggested attentions to several concerns, including problems with access to adequate digital devices and reliable internet (Agung et al., 2020; Fu & Zhou, 2020; Niemi & Kousa, 2020), limited interactive and collaborative experiences (Yates et al., 2020), reduced learning motivation (Yates et al., 2021), and increased learning burdens (Niemi & Kousa, 2020).

Online EFL instruction and learner attitude

The implementation of online EFL instruction has gained increased popularity in language-teaching and language-learning contexts (Wang & Vasquez, 2012; Zou & Li, 2015; Shin & Son, 2007). The benefits of being location independent and ease of use make it a popular alternative to traditional language classrooms. Besides being able to facilitate the process of

teaching in a paperless environment, online EFL instruction is also regarded as a wonderful tool that can save time, teach social skills, help self-learning and-discovery, improve higher order thinking and provide motivation.

A study conducted by Fageeh and Mekheimer (2013) revealed that English language learners responded actively to the asynchronous and synchronous online learning activities in improving their language proficiency. Again, studies found out that students had a positive attitude in using online platform, regarding it as a tool that can save time, teach social skills, help self-learning and-discovery, improve higher order thinking, and provide motivation (Albashtawi & Bataineh, 2020; Apriyanti et al., 2019; Xia et al., 2013).

Research Questions

The literature review shows many studies have been made on the effectiveness of online EFL instruction. But there are few limitation studies carried out in EFL online instruction under fully online conditions, especially in online EFL instruction amid COVID-19, in the context of China. It is important to know how far this longer-term digital switchover from the classroom to online could go and to what extent people could apply online technologies in EFL instruction. This study is in an attempt to investigate learner attitudes and needs among diploma students with EFL at Changzhou University in China to identify the effectiveness of fully online EFL instruction amid COVID-19. We also aimed to discuss strategies to deliver effective online EFL instructions amid COVID-19.

Based on the above review of literature, and in the context of seeking to achieve effective online EFL instruction, this study aims at answering the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of learners toward fully online EFL instruction amid COVID-19?
2. What are the learner needs for effective online EFL instruction amid COVID-19?
3. How is effective EFL instruction delivered via online technologies?

3. Methods

Design

This study examined the effectiveness online EFL instruction from the perspective of learners. Questionnaire surveys on learner attitudes and needs in online EFL instruction were adopted to identify the effectiveness of instruction. Interviews with teachers about their responses were designed as the supplementary investigation. Strategies or approaches available for the delivery of effective online EFL instruction were discussed based on both the survey and the interview findings. A mixed-method design was adopted for this study. Quantitative data were collected employing questionnaire surveys and qualitative data were collected using in-depth interviews.

Participants

The study was conducted at China Changzhou University (CCZU) in Changzhou, China, at the end of the spring 2020 semester. A total of 90 freshman students participated in the survey. All of the students were from the School of Art and Design and registered for the College English II course. They were taught from the prescribed books entitled *New College English 2: Integrated Course* and *New Horizon College English 2: Viewing, Listening and Speaking*. The student participants were native Chinese. Their mean age was 18 years, and the range was 17-19. They all had 6 years of EFL instruction in grades 7-12 prior to their admission to university. Their English was at the lower-intermediate level and preparing for National College English Test Band 4 (CET-4). All of the students were registered for the online course because of the lockdown amid COVID-19. The implementation of the online course was conducted through combined technologies including e-learning platform Chaoxing, social media Tencent QQ, and conferencing tool Ding talk.

Five teachers participated in the interview study. All teacher participants were from the English department of CCZU. They were native Chinese and taught the College English II course during the spring 2020 semester. They all had EFL teaching experience over 10 years and online instruction experience over 4 years. They were familiar with technologies related to online instruction. To keep the anonymity of the participants, they were referred to as teacher 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 in the present paper. Table 1 provides an overview of teachers' demographic information:

Table 1 *Overview of Participants' Demographics*

Name	Gender	Age	Educational Background	Years of EFL teaching	Years of online teaching	Online platforms
Teacher 1	Female	39	Master of Arts	14	5	Chaoxing, QQ
Teacher 2	Male	36	Master of Arts	11	5	Chaoxing, QQ
Teacher 3	Female	35	Master of Arts	11	5	Chaoxing, Ding talk
Teacher 4	Female	42	Master of Arts	15	5	Chaoxing, QQ
Teacher 5	Female	41	Master of Arts	16	5	Chaoxing

Ethical clearance was done before the experiment. All the participants were informed of the major activities they were to be involved in and all of them signed a consent form.

Sampling and Data Collection

The lockdown situation made it difficult for the researchers to collect data from all students registered for College English II. Therefore, a convenience sample was utilized for this study.

The survey was constructed and developed based on reviewing previous research on theories, practices, and findings related to online instruction in EFL and technology acceptance

context (Albashtawi & Bataineh, 2020). The questionnaire was designed to measure the learner attitude and needs in online EFL instruction among participants. The questionnaire was divided into 2 parts. The attitude part measured participants' evaluation of online EFL instruction in terms of usefulness, accessibility, and ease of use. A Likert scale questionnaire of 12 items was designed for this part. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were calculated and the results showed high reliability of the questionnaire ($\alpha=0.941$) according to Murphy and Davidshofer (2001). Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (0.863) and Bartlett's test of sphericity (0.00) were achieved and the results proved the construct validity of the questionnaire. The needs part investigated participants' demands in achieving effective online EFL instruction. The whole questionnaire was validated by two EFL teachers.

Purposeful sampling was used in the selection of the teachers from the English Department of CCZU. A total of five EFL teachers took part in the interviews. The interviews were via WeChat throughout five weeks and responses of the participants were recorded in written form during each interview session. The interview questions were constructed partially on the basis of the previous research on online instruction in the EFL context (Dashtestani, 2014). Questions were designed to serve for the third research question about effective learning delivery. The content of the interview questions was validated by two EFL professors. The interview questions were as follows:

- (1) What are the possible benefits and limitations of online EFL instruction compared to traditional offline classes?
- (2) What types of strategies could be adopted to facilitate classroom management in online EFL instruction?
- (3) What types of strategies could be adopted to facilitate learning engagement in online EFL instruction?

Data Analysis

The data of the questionnaire were analyzed through a descriptive analysis. Descriptive statistics about the Mean, Standard Deviation and Frequency were conducted for the data related to each item of the questionnaire. SPSS version 21.0 was used for the data analysis. To ensure the intercoder reliability of the data analysis, two different coders (including the author) read the data obtained by the interviews and then transcribed them. Excerpts from teachers' statements were included in the study.

4. Results

Research question 1: What are the attitudes of learners toward fully online EFL instruction amid COVID-19?

The attitudes of learners toward using fully online EFL instruction were examined quantitatively by analyzing learner responses to the 12 items in 3 domains (usefulness, ease of use, and accessibility) at the end of the semester. The learner responses in the survey were evaluated based on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree. Then, their scores were determined and the obtained quantitative data were put into statistical analysis. The descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) of the learners' responses were conducted.

Table 2 *Learner Attitudes towards Online EFL Instruction*

Number of participants=90	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ease of Use	4.03	1.05
Access	3.92	1.21
Usefulness	3.84	0.97
Total	3.92	1.07

Table 2 shows that the ease of use domain was ranked first based on the mean value (4.03 ± 1.05) and the accessibility domain (3.92 ± 1.21) was ranked as the second. The mean score of usefulness (3.84 ± 0.97) was ranked as the least. These results indicate that the EFL learners held fairly positive attitudes towards online EFL classes (3.92 ± 1.07).

Table 3 *Descriptive Statistics of Learner Attitudes towards Online EFL Instruction*

Number of participants=90	Mean	SD
Ease of Use Items		
I feel instructions of the activities are clear.	4.04	0.99
Using applications for online class is easy.	3.97	1.11
I feel positive for submitting assignments through online class platform	3.74	1.23
Access Items		
Online learning apps are available on my phone/pad/computer.	4.11	1.11
I can login into the apps for online instruction anytime anywhere.	4.03	1.14
Assignment through e-learning platforms is better than paper-based assignments.	3.77	1.28
Usefulness Items		
Online EFL class provides good interactions between teachers and students.	4.16	0.96
Online EFL class is time-efficient	4.09	0.93
I have strong motivation for study in online EFL class.	4.07	1

I can engage well through activities in online EFL class.	3.82	0.99
Online EFL class is as effective as traditional class.	3.6	0.9
I can respond quickly to questions and learning assignments in online EFL class.	3.28	0.76

As Table 3 depicts, good interactions, time-efficiency, and improvement in learning motivation and learning engagement were the perceived merits of online EFL instruction reflected in the responses of the participants. In addition, the easy use of and access to e-learning applications were highly accepted by participants.

Research question 2: What are the learner needs for effective online EFL instruction amid COVID-19?

The investigation on the learner needs took part in 2 stages. Firstly, suggestions on online EFL instruction were collected among student participants in the form of open-ended questions. Then the collected data were analyzed and classified into two survey questionnaires. One was about ways of effective learning engagement and another was about ways of effective classroom management.

Table 4 is the collected results of the open-ended question about possible suggestions on online EFL instruction. The results revealed an active attitude of participants toward online EFL instruction. The majority of the participants were willing to make reflections on the implementation of online EFL instruction and proposed suggestions focusing on learning engagement and classroom management.

Table 4 *Suggestions on Online EFL Instruction*

Number of participants=90	Frequency
I'm satisfied with the video/audio live lecture.	46/90
Questions and learning assignments should be easy to understand.	13/90
More group activities to attract students	10/90
Improvement of online platforms and net connection	9/90
Keep students' attention.	8/90
Clear rules and expectations for classroom management	8/90
Chinese subtitles/explanations on lecturing videos would be better.	5/90
More drills on CET-4 and listening	3/90
Paper books are necessary.	3/90
Prefer offline instruction to online instruction	2/90
More time for thinking and reflections in class	2/90
Introduction of cutting-edge knowledge that is not contained in textbooks	1/90
More scientific videos	1/90
Teachers can be kinder and more patient.	1/90

Table 5 and Table 6 present the participants' responses to different ways of effective learning regarding learning engagement and classroom management based on the findings illustrated in Table 3.

Table 5 *Ways of Effective Learning Engagement*

Number of participants=90	Frequency
Video/audio live communication	79/90
Bilingual teaching	51/90
Easy Q & A mode	41/90
Collaborative activities	37/90

Discussion board participation

5/90

As is shown in Table 5, the synchronous communication method is regarded as the most efficient for improving online learning engagement by participants. Bilingual teaching, easy-question mode, and collaborative activities are also viewed as essential to be adopted for the effective implementation of online EFL instruction.

Table 6 *Ways of Effective Classroom Management*

Number of participants=90	Frequency
Flexible attendance policy	69/90
Advance course information	63/90
Slow-down of teaching	59/90
Clear expectations on assignments	10/90
Frequently asked questions on e-learning platform	2/90

As is shown in Table 6, the top four ways preferred by participants for effective classroom management are flexible attendance policy, advanced course information, slow-down of teaching, and clear expectations on assignments.

Research question 3: How is effective instruction delivered via online technologies?

The supplementary investigation on the delivery of effective instruction was based on the interviews by teacher participants. Participants were required to answer the interview questions by focusing on the learning not the teaching aspect.

In the interview, when asked about the benefits and limitations of online EFL instruction compared to traditional classroom teaching, the participant teachers showed positive attitudes. Most of them regarded online instruction as an efficient teaching method by offering more effective, flexible, and personalized teaching for learners. They also noted that though being promising, the online class was not perfect. For example:

Chaoxing platform can record and grade the learning performance of each student synchronously so that students can clearly know how they behave in learning and then make adjustments. I think this is wonderful. Students can do self-learning more efficiently even without teachers around them. (Teacher 2)

My student told me that she was not accustomed to online instruction and wished to go back to the traditional teaching in a real classroom. The e-book is a big problem. (Teacher 4)

In response to the question regarding the strategies for learning engagement, teachers considered diversified activities would be popular among students. Other constructive ideas are related to the use of new technologies. For example:

Keep lecturing sessions short and save time for more activities. A 45-min lecture will

make them feel dull. They can learn more through activities than the long boring lectures. (Teacher 3)

The video lectures are helpful for learners to go over and over again after class until they feel they've got a clear understanding. The videos provide chances for slow learners to keep up with the teaching. (Teacher 5)

Chaoxing could show the progress of each assignment so I can make use of it to keep students engaged in learning. (Teacher 2)

QQ allows one to one conversation, which I think is quite helpful for those who are too shy to ask questions in front of others. (Teacher 1)

For the strategies employed to facilitate classroom management in online instruction, teachers reported that questions and quizzes would be efficient for keeping students concentrated. In addition, all five teachers considered implementing blended EFL teaching more beneficial than fully online EFL teaching:

Without face-to-face communication, the interaction may seem to be a little bit unreal. A quiz or test can bring students back to the reality. (Teacher 3)

More questions than explanations would be sufficient to draw students' attention back to the learning. (Teacher 1)

In a real classroom, with the studying atmosphere created by a group, students may become alert, competitive, and thus more concentrated. In an online class, students can have more accesses to diversified teaching materials. The combination of these two teachings together could fully develop students' learning potential. (Teacher 5)

5. Discussion

Findings from this research revealed the effectiveness of online EFL instruction amid COVID-19 pandemic. Learner attitudes and needs were identified. Strategies for the delivery of effective online EFL instruction were discussed.

Incommensurate with the previous studies on the effect of online EFL instruction (Albashtawi & Bataineh, 2020; Shin & Son, 2007), the findings of research question 1 affirmed the positivity of online EFL instruction even amid the emergent situation COVID-19 when schools were closed and traditional classroom teaching became unavailable. The majority of students participating in this study were showing an overall satisfactory attitude toward online EFL instruction. The learner attitudes were discussed in terms of ease of use, accessibility, and usefulness. The results were a bit different from what Albashtawi and Bataineh (2020) had found. In their study using the online instruction platform Google Classroom App as a

supplement for face-to-face instruction, Albashtawi and Bataineh adopted the same scale to examine the attitudes of EFL students toward Google Classroom and identified its effectiveness with the domain of usefulness ranking the first. But in the present study, the domain of usefulness was ranked after the ease of use and the accessibility, showing that learners' responses to the usefulness were not as positive as the other two domains. This indicated that compared with the positivity on the convenience and accessibility of e-learning classroom, learners were less satisfied with the effect of e-learning itself. Despite the success, there still exist in online instruction some issues that should be explored in future discussion. The findings also found out that learners related the effectiveness of online instruction with improved learning motivation and engagement. These results are consistent with the studies by Halim & Hashim (2019), Heggart & Yoo (2018), Morat et al. (2016, as cited in Bailey & Lee, 2020). While quarantined at home during the pandemic, realizing that virtual class was the only viable option to educational continuity, students were more motivated to cherish the chance and engross themselves than before. They would be more willing to participate in the online class, more voluntarily to answer questions, and accordingly more likely to study and practice even after class.

The findings for research question 2 pointed out the learner needs for effective online EFL instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online learning engagement and classroom management appeared to be the major concerns. Learning engagement is viewed as an indicator of effective classroom instruction and key to developing learning motivation and satisfaction (Yang et al., 2018; Gutierrez et al., 2010). Compared with traditional classroom learning, achieving learner engagement in online courses may be more important (Chametzck, 2014). The findings also disclosed top four learner needs in improving effective online EFL learning engagement and classroom engagement. The top four needs in learning engagement are live communication, bilingual teaching, easy-question mode, and collaborative activities. Live communication can provide the opportunity for learner-to-learner and learner-to-instructor interactions. The need to interact with other peers and instructors is significantly beneficial to one's online learning (Diep et al., 2019). Bilingual teaching, easy-question mode, and activities can help improve the relevance of the course materials and the peer collaborations which are crucial to the meaningfulness of course material (Chametzck, 2014). When the material is sufficiently meaningful to learners, they may be able to get positive involvement and strong interest (Starr-Glass, 2013). The top four learner needs in classroom management are flexible attendance policy, advanced course information, slow-down of teaching, and clear expectations on assignments. Effective classroom management is about creating a positive learning

environment that promotes high academic learning, experience, satisfaction (Sieberer-Nagler, 2016). Flexible classroom management approaches involving attendance, course information, teaching expectations, and teaching schedule could play a positive role in helping learners to adjust to the shifting from their familiar offline classroom to online and to improve their engagement in online learning.

The findings for research question 3 discussed approaches to the delivery of effective online EFL instruction. In the interviews, teachers suggested several strategies and approaches for improving learning engagement and classroom management. Their suggestions of short lecturing sessions, more activities, questions, and quiz were essentially in agreement with the findings of the learner needs. Teachers stated that using new online technologies in a well-designed way can help the effective instruction. This has been confirmed by recent findings that instructors' support in terms of role of technology is necessary in student learning experience (Asoodar et al., 2016; Diep et al., 2019). Worrying about the lack of real-world communication and the possible damage to the psychological health of both students and teachers, teachers suggested blended teaching combining classroom learning with web-based learning be adopted for EFL instruction in the future to improve the socially impoverished online situation that Pazilah et al have discussed in their studies (2019).

Unexpected problems caused by the lockdown crisis were also reported by teachers, referring to the insufficiency in learning resources and technical assistance. The use of E-books as a replacement are not convenient for note-taking in learning and paper books were left at schools and inaccessible to students at home. Even purchasing is also difficult because of shorting stock and stagnant production after the disease outbreak. What's more, when university courses were all switched to online platform, having so many students online at the same time had created chaos of network conditions. As the English class size in Chinese universities is usually more than 50 students, the situation became even more complicated. It was quite often that teaching was interrupted by technical problems or network delays. Therefore, educational authorities, providers, supervisors, and funders should implement measures to help alleviate the lagging resource and technical support.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of online instruction on EFL students in China in COVID-19 pandemics based on learner attitude and needs investigation. It also discussed strategies to the effective delivery of online EFL instruction over an educational crisis like lockdown in the pandemics.

The findings of the study showed, during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, online instruction as an emergent teaching alternative proved to be effective and welcomed by both learners and teachers. Compared to the traditional classroom environment, online learning is more convenient and efficient in achieving certain teaching objectives. Ways to keep students' attention and interest were suggested for achieving effective and efficient learning engagement and classroom management in online EFL instruction during the pandemic, including live communication, bilingual teaching, collective activities, flexible attendance and assignments, and explicit teaching instructions. For the long run, with concerns about the insufficient social and emotional development in online instruction, blended teaching was more preferred to fully online teaching after the pandemic.

The findings from the present study might also have pedagogical implications for EFL teachers to get ready to learn new digital skills and technologies and be prepared for other unexpected challenges. Hopefully, our findings can help Chinese EFL teachers or instructors in other parts of the world to understand that online teaching should not be about making students machine-like learners but about helping to provide a better teaching and learning environment so that learners could benefit more from education.

This study had some limitations. The number of the study was small, and data collection was restricted to part of the students and teachers of China Changzhou University. It would have been beneficial to obtain more survey responses. Future studies should be performed with a larger sample size in different contexts. Furthermore, future research should consider learners' performance throughout fully online EFL learning by assessing their learning outcomes with the adoption of different quantitative and qualitative methods.

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Appendix

Questionnaires for obtaining learner attitude and needs on online EFL instruction amid COVID-19

Part 1: Value the following statements about learner attitude on online EFL instruction amid COVID-19.

☐ strongly disagree ☐ disagree ☐ undecided ☐ agree ☐ strongly agree

- 1) Online EFL class is as effective as traditional class.
- 2) Online EFL class provides good interactions between teachers and students.
- 3) Online EFL class is time-efficient.
- 4) I have strong motivation for study in online EFL class.
- 5) I feel instructions of the activities are clear.
- 6) I can engage well through activities in online EFL class.
- 7) I can respond quickly to questions and learning assignments in online EFL class.
- 8) Assignment through e-learning platforms is better than paper-based assignments.
- 9) I feel positive for submitting assignments through online class platform
- 10) Online learning apps are available on my phone/pad/computer.
- 11) I can login into the apps for online instruction anytime anywhere.
- 12) Using applications for online class is easy.

Part 2: Learner needs of online EFL instruction amid COVID-19

1. Choose the ways that can be helpful for improving learning engagement in online English class amid COVID-19 (multiple choices).

- ☐ 1) Easy Question & Answer mode
- ☐ 2) Clear expectations on assignments
- ☐ 3) Discussion board participation
- ☐ 4) Bilingual teaching
- ☐ 5) Video/audio live communication

2. Choose the ways that can be helpful for improving classroom management in online English class amid COVID-19 (multiple choices).

- ☐ 1) Advance course information
- ☐ 2) Collaborative activities
- ☐ 3) Flexible attendance policy
- ☐ 4) Frequently asked questions on e-learning platform
- ☐ 5) Slow-down of teaching

The Role of Technology during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of EFL Online Teaching Placements

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Abstract

The Coronavirus 2019 pandemic has undeniably changed the educational scenario around the world. With schools and universities closing until further notice, initial teacher education had to be moved from a traditional setting to an entire online environment, making technology the fundamental support for its development. Considering that the current health emergency uncovered the scarcity of practice and empirical research about online teaching placement, this study aims to examine the use of technology as the pivotal tool that allowed EFL student teachers to continue learning to teach during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fourteen Chilean EFL student teachers undertaking their teaching experience remotely participated in this interpretative case-study. Data was collected through a semi-structured interview at two different points of their online teaching experience, and it was analysed using thematic analysis as a framework. The results show that adaptations to technological teaching strategies affected prospective teachers' development of teaching skills. Nevertheless, this online placement prompted the interest and motivation to search and discover new technological tools to enhance school learners' learning process, especially in a context where access to technology cannot be afforded by everyone. Student teachers also acknowledged that this once-in-a-lifetime experience would potentially contribute to their technology literacy and their future teacher development. As this health emergency has affected the education sector worldwide, implications for teacher education providers that have faced this transition in multiple contexts are discussed.

Keywords: EFL, teaching placement, technology

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly affected educational systems worldwide. Teacher education providers were forced to adapt not only their teaching-related activities, but also prospective teachers' field-experience due to schools' adjustments to remote teaching. This practical phase is an integral part (Anderson & Stillman, 2013) and key component of most teacher education programmes serving as a building block in the education of future teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2017). It is during this phase where student teachers exhibit and develop a personal teaching competence bridging the gap between theory and practice and improving aspects about teaching such as classroom management (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). Due to the unprecedented scenario presented by the current pandemic, student teachers had to display all these skills in an entirely virtual setting. Technology thus played a fundamental part in enabling them to continue learning to teach under these uncommon circumstances and offered them a basis to explore, discover and take part in the changes that education systems had to face.

Most of the adaptations to online teaching and learning have come from the experience of face-to-face education. However, this is challenging when it comes to the practical stage of teacher education programmes as there are only few face-to-face aspects that can serve as a basis for the development of an online practical experience. Here, the use of technology has become the means of instruction, development, teaching and learning. It is therefore crucial to research its uses and implications for teacher education, particularly if this scenario stays for longer. As the COVID-19 pandemic is nowhere near the end and the use of technology seemed to have come to stay, there is a current call for more research into the development of the final practical and fundamental phase in teacher education in online environments. Hence, this study seeks to shed light on the role that technology played during the development of online teaching placements, offering the possibility for EFL student teachers to continue their teacher preparation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Student teachers' placement

The curriculum underpinning Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes is generally structured around standards of skills, values and knowledge that future teachers are required to meet. During their training years, student teachers undergo a series of teaching experiences that built up towards their teaching skills and teacher identity. An important stage of this process is the practical experience student

teachers undertake at schools displaying all the dynamic nature of content and pedagogical content knowledge (Abel, 2008) acquired in university-based courses. Literature on teacher education has described this experience using different terms (e.g., teaching placement, teaching internship, practice, teaching practicum and field-experience) which all refer to the time teacher candidates spend at schools fulfilling the teacher's role. For this study, the concepts of teaching placement, internship and practicum will be used interchangeably.

Although teaching placements can vary in terms of length (e.g., around 18 weeks in Chile and 10 weeks in China) (Chunmei & Chuanjun, 2015), the objective of this practical experience is quite similar: giving prospective teachers a first-hand experience into the school context since the setting presented in higher education cannot equate with the school reality (Ulvik, Helleve & Smith, 2018). This in-the-field phase contributes to the development of university-based learnt aspects (Lawson, Çakmak, Gündüz & Busher, 2015) and the enactment of their pedagogic skills (Pedraja-Rejas, 2012). Hascher, Cocard and Moser (2004, p. 624) regard this teaching practice as a “protected field of experimentation” where student teachers are offered the opportunity to show their teaching competencies in a safe environment with the support and guidance of the cooperating teacher and university supervisor (Murray-Harvey et al., 2000).

Lofthouse, Greenway, Davies, Davies and Lundholm (2020) argue that this hands-on experience promotes the development of practices in the school and encourages student teachers to interact with other members of the community. Here, the teaching practice offers a site for questioning and collaboration where teachers-to-be question practices, reflect on them and prepare for the unknown (Ulvik et al., 2018). Not only pedagogical competencies are developed, but also emotional aspects such as self-esteem and well-being are enhanced during this practical activity (Hascher, et al., 2004). Considering that this crucial phase in teacher education had to be adapted to fit the rapid changes in education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of technology for learning to teach became an aspect of interest for teacher educators and researchers.

2.2. ICT for teaching and learning

Teachers' knowledge about technology and its adaptations to the teaching and learning process are key aspects when analysing technology integration in classrooms. The Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPCK or TPACK) framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) provides powerful insights into teachers' views of technology as a support for teaching rather than a simple instrument for content delivery. The TPACK framework comprises three main components: Content Knowledge, which relates to teachers' knowledge about the subject that is being taught (e.g., English as a foreign language); Pedagogical Knowledge, their knowledge of the methods of teaching and learning (e.g., lesson planning and assessment); and Technological Knowledge, which can be seen as a state of knowledge of technology broad enough to be able to constantly adapt to the changes in Information Communication Technology (ICT). All these different constructs interact with each other making up the TPACK, as

shown in Figure 1.

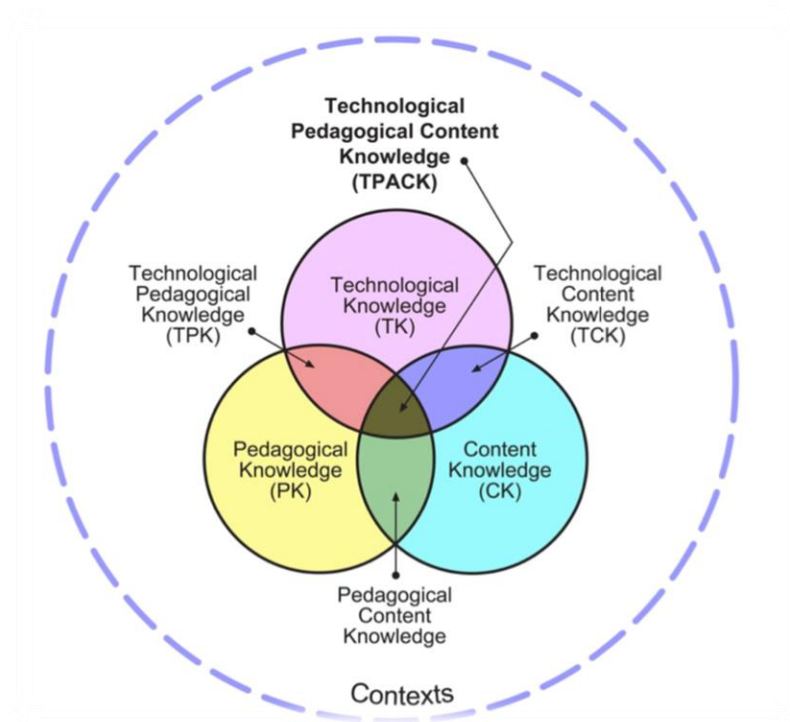


Figure 1. The TPACK framework and its knowledge components (Koehler & Mishra, 2009, p. 63)

The TPACK framework provides a new approach into teaching by combining knowledge of three different areas. However, it is important to be aware of the singularities each teaching situation has, and that technology use cannot be seen as a ‘one size fits all’ approach. Hence, it is not possible to provide a singular technological solution that can be used by all teachers, in all classes, and all contexts. There are other factors that can also affect technology adoption. Ertmer (1999) classified them into first-order and second-order, which are also known as external and internal barriers respectively. Following this classification, further studies emerged (e.g., Francom, 2020; Kopcha, 2012) which are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 *Barriers to Technology Integration*

Barrier	Brief description
Access	Access to technology: quantity and quality of technology resources (Hew & Brush, 2007)
Training	Training and support for teachers to use technology to education-related activities (Kopcha, 2012)

Administrative support	Besides technical training and support for teachers, schools need to provide support so teachers can work towards the proper integration of technology (e.g., the management and leadership of schools and regional administrative who promote technology in schools) (Francom, 2020).
Time	Time for teachers to plan classes where technology can be used. Because of the time limitations teachers tend to face, the use of technology can become teacher-centred, instead of student-centred (Tondeur, van Braak, Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2017).
Teachers' beliefs	Teachers' beliefs about technology integration. These beliefs can vary, from beliefs about their own capacity to the effectiveness technology has in education.

The plethora of technology-related research in language education in the past decades has shown the different benefits that integrating technology in the classroom has in terms of improving learners' responsibility (Drayton, Falk, Stroud & Hammerman, 2010) and their linguistic skills (Peregoy & Boyle, 2012). Language teachers should then be accordingly prepared during their training years to integrate ICTs into their curricula as "the groundwork must be laid at the trainee or pre-service teacher's level. To do otherwise is to produce future teachers with underdeveloped skills in the use of technology" (Teo, 2009, p. 2). Teachers' preparation to integrate technology does not only include the instruction for using it, but also the support they need to set it up and maintain it (Inan & Lowther, 2010). Deficient teacher training and lack of support from the teaching programmes might hinder the proper integration of ICT in student teachers' L2 classrooms (Kopcha, 2012).

2.3 Online teaching placement during the COVID-19 pandemic

Schools across the globe had to close its doors and some of them either moved their teaching to an online setting (using technology as an asset) or stopped working completely.

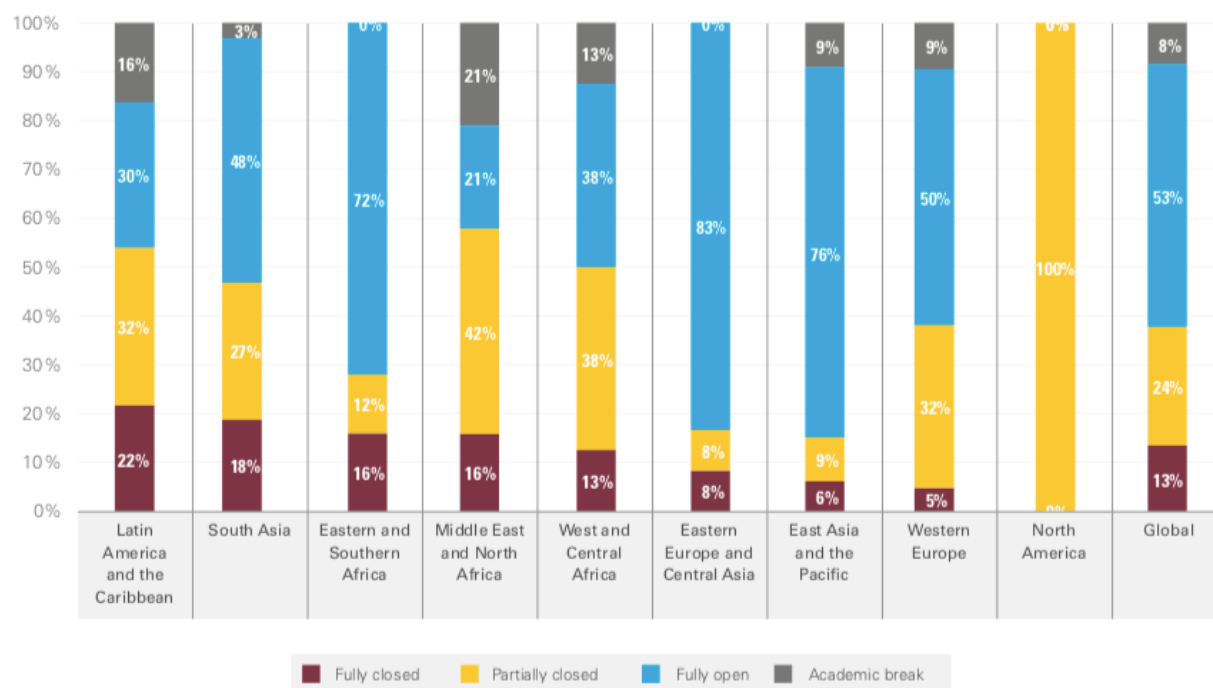


Figure 2. School closure status, by region as of February 2, 2021 (UNICEF, 2021, p. 11)

Source: UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2021).

Figure 2 shows that the regions of Latin American, the Caribbean and South Asia had more than 50% of their schools either fully or partially closed. UNESCO (2021) showed that a total of 173 countries faced school closures due to COVID-19. Countries like Chile, Indonesia and China closed their schools and universities in February-March 2020, moving all teaching to a virtual setting (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Chang, & Yano, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020). For future teachers, this faced an unimaginable challenge as teacher education programmes were forced to put technology platforms at the heart of student teachers' placement process. As teaching practices had to be enabled by technology, these telecommunications became a focus of practice, opportunity and innovation (Kidd & Murray, 2020). However, this 'virtualisation' has given rise to issues of equity particularly related to the loss of time student teachers spend on school placement affecting the opportunities to practice their teaching competence (la Velle, Newman, Montgomery & Hyatt, 2020).

Van Nuland, Mandzuk, Petrick & Cooper (2020) expect that all this challenging situation will make student teachers stronger and more capable of adapting to change. Indeed, Rosenberg, Mason-Williams, Kimmel & Sindelar, (2021, p. 88) suggest that teacher candidates can help alleviate teacher shortages in some content areas "augment[ing] veteran teachers' efforts while successfully honing their own professional practices". In this way, they would bring knowledge of technology to support virtual instruction and would receive support and guidance from more experienced in-service teachers. Eventually, this experience of online teaching and learning could be perceived as an opportunity to continue learning how to teach and as an addition to student teachers' education (Ellis, Steadman &

Mao, 2020; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). As there is a research gap in the examination of online teaching placements and the role of technology in the education of prospective teachers, the research question that guided this study is:

What role did technology play during Chilean EFL student teachers' online teaching placement caused by the COVID-19 outbreak?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

A group of Chilean EFL student teachers undertaking their teaching placement remotely participated in this case study. This type of methodology enables the analysis of specific situations in their natural context offering a detailed picture of the studied phenomena (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). The experiences of teacher candidates using technological devices and applications as supportive tools to continue learning to teach were explored and analysed.

3.2. Context and participants

A total of 14 undergraduate student teachers of an ELT programme in a university in Chile responded to our invitation to take part in a semi-structured interview. The ages of the eight female and seven male participants ranged from 23 to 32, and all studied in either state or semi-private schools. All of them had been placed in either a semi-private or state school before the pandemic started to undertake teaching placements. After the school closure, they continued collaborating with cooperating teachers and schools delivering online lessons and completing a total of 20 hours of weekly work during a semester (18 weeks), in addition to being a headteacher (i.e., Homeroom teacher). This experience was the last practical stage of the ELT programme, after having undertaken a progressing school placement journey since the first year of the undergraduate degree.

3.3. Data collection methods

Data was collected in two stages. Firstly, all the students from the cohort were invited to participate via email, but 14 responded and were interviewed at the beginning of their one-term online teaching placement. The interviews, which were conducted for approximately 40 minutes each via Microsoft Teams, focused on this new scenario (see Appendix 1) and their experience of teaching through technology. At the end of the semester, participants were contacted again to hold a follow-up interview. Eight out of 14 participants responded and took part in a second online semi-structured interview (see Appendix 2) with similar technical characteristics to the previous one. For both data collection points, a set of questions was created and piloted with student teachers from other cohorts. All data collection

was conducted in Spanish, the participants' mother tongue, to enable them to share their answers easily and to avoid possible misunderstandings. To ensure the validity of translation, interviews extracts were translated by two English language teachers besides the authors. Translations were then revised by all, and an agreement was made.

This research project followed established ethical research procedures to collect data. Consent from the participants was sought and they voluntarily responded to the invitation to take part in this study. The researchers explained the objective of the research and presented participants with relevant information for ethical procedures to seek their consent. All interviews were recorded, and the files saved on a password-protected online storage. Pseudonyms for EFL student teachers and third-party institutions were used throughout the analysis of the findings.

3.4 Data analysis

Qualitative data was analysed following the approach developed by Clarke, Braun, Gareth, & Nikki (2019) wherein themes were developed through the reading and examination of data. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and transferred to Nvivo12. This package provided assistance in the coding process where the authors, individually, read the interview transcripts imported into Nvivo12 several times, highlighting interview extracts and allocating them into nodes/codes. After having a list of codes, they were arranged into themes using the same package. Thus, Nvivo12 supported the tagging, retrieval and arrangement of the interview transcripts and the consequent data analysis. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa coefficient which reached 0.66, meaning a substantial agreement between the researchers.

4. Findings

The thematic analysis of the two-stage interviews derived into two main themes which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 *Main Themes Extracted from the Data*

Theme	Description	Example from data
An opportunity to learn about technology	Student teachers regarded this online teaching placement as a possibility to learn about technology and its use for EFL teaching.	"an opportunity to work in a different setting that has forced us to search for new online teaching strategies" (male, 22 years old)
Limited technology and internet access	The lack of internet and technology access influenced student teachers' learning and learning to teach processes.	"this situation discriminates [among students]. There are some who do not have this benefit [of a proper internet connection]" (Female, 27 years old)

4.1. An opportunity to learn about technology

In this uncommon scenario, participants acknowledged that lack of training to use technology to teach was one of the main barriers. During their teaching programme, they only developed basic computer skills, such as using Microsoft Office. Nevertheless, they agreed that this scenario has forced them to learn ‘on the go’, looking for tutorials online and exploring the new websites and platforms to improve their technological skills. Thus, they recognised the contribution to their professional learning and its impact on their future teaching careers. As participant 10 (male, 24 years old) put it “I did not know any of the tools I am using right now and if it was not because of this online teaching placement, I would have not learnt about them”. Indeed, participant 6 (male, 22 years old) sees this experience as “an opportunity to work in a different setting that has forced us to search for new online teaching strategies”. Similarly, participant 13 (male, 27 years old) recognized that “my technological skills have improved 100%. Though, I am not saying that I am a complete expert in technology, but I have discovered so many useful things I did not know before this online placement”.

Participants had to learn how to use platforms such as Kahoot®, Loom®, Zoom® and Google Classroom®, which triggered a significant improvement in their technological knowledge and technological pedagogical knowledge. Participant 13 stated that he “learnt a lot about teaching online and now I know I have the competence to continue teaching online and I feel confident about it”. Here, it is important to reveal student teachers’ attitude towards this remote teaching placement and how they regarded this experience as an opportunity to learn rather than as a detrimental stage in their professional learning. Participant 3 (male, 25 years old) declared that “as teachers, we need to be willing to learn and try new things, especially with technology. Our knowledge about it cannot stagnate”. It seems that student teachers not only learnt about new online teaching strategies, but also seemed to be willing to incorporate technology as part of their future careers.

4.2. Limited technology and internet access

Access to technology was an issue that hindered the smooth development of student teachers’ online teaching placement. Not only did participants have problems with their own internet connectivity, but also school learners had limited internet access, which restricted their online participation. In some cases, the challenge was related to the equipment student teachers needed to deliver an online lesson. Three of the participants shared that they had to purchase a new laptop, either because they did not own one before, or because the one they had was not enough for their daily work.

Because of the disparity in terms of technology access due to the socio-economic hurdles most public-school learners faced, the participants had to work asynchronously preparing worksheets and short video clips that could be shared through social media¹. Participant 10 (female, 26 years old) shared

¹ In Chile, people who own a smartphone, either using Pay As You Go or a monthly-paid plan, usually receive unlimited access to social media apps, but not platforms such as Zoom or Meet.

after finishing the teaching practice process that:

Unfortunately, in the school I worked, the teacher could not teach live classes, because most of the kids at school did not have access to a computer. There are lots of them who live in rural areas, therefore they don't have a reliable internet connection, so the school decided not to have online classes since most of the students were not going to be able to join. (Participant 10)

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the role of technology during online teaching placements. Based on the data collected, it can be argued that technology was seen both as a hurdle and as an opportunity to keep learning, as can be seen in Figure 3.

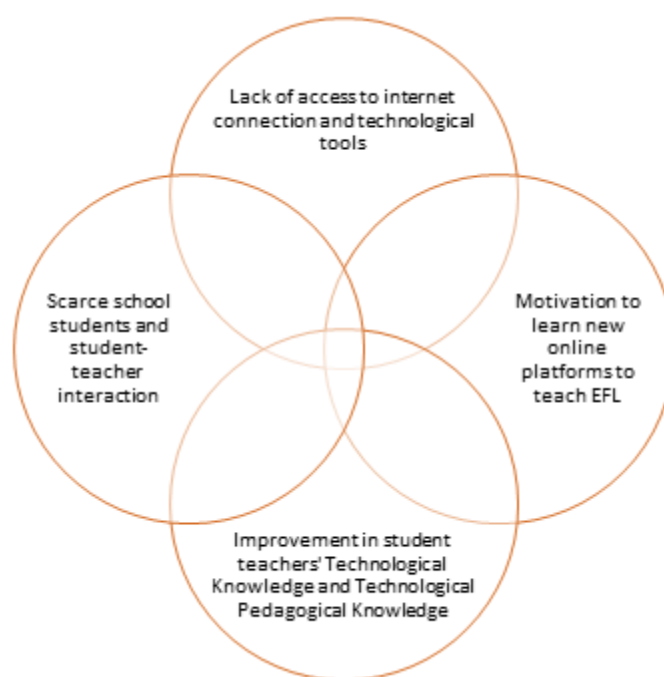


Figure 3. The online teaching placement in a nutshell

Based on the TPACK framework, participants expressed confidence in their pedagogical knowledge, though, they felt unsure about their technological competence to teach in a complete online setting. This scenario also uncovered student teachers' lack of technology knowledge and technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK), supporting previous research in the topic (e.g., Costley, 2014; Park & Son, 2020). The results of this study show that although student teachers were born in the digital era, this does not guarantee that they know how to use technology to teach. This new teaching context showed not only that they did not have proper access to technology, but also that they were not

taught how to use technology as a tool for teaching the subject matter (i.e., English as a foreign language). These issues suggest that student teachers need to be equipped with proper technological tools that support the teaching and learning process (Hew & Brush, 2007).

The call for more teacher preparation regarding technology adoption seems to be a relevant subject worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected the education in mainly under-developed and developing areas where access to ICT is scarce (e.g., rural areas, which are common places for students to undertake their teaching placements in some Latin American and Asian countries) (Lim, Tinio, Smith & Bhowmik, 2018). We even venture to say that this online environment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic increased these inequalities even further, calling for a restructuring of the educational system that places technology at the heart of the process. Equal technology access should not be taken for granted.

In terms of the role and use of technology, student teachers regarded the limited access to technology as one of the main barriers to continue learning. Second-order barriers, particularly the one related to training (i.e., using technology with an educational purpose) also prevailed. Saudi EFL teachers faced similar challenges with lack of access to modern equipment and weak internet connection (Hakim, 2020). Despite this challenge, both Chilean EFL student teachers and Saudi EFL teachers acknowledged how this context provided an opportunity to enhance their technology knowledge and usage, contributing to their education wherein the pedagogical possibilities of technology are considered (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). The fact that participants were able to integrate technology into their lessons and to learn how to use different platforms and websites might also indicate the high value they place to technology and education (Tondeur et al., 2017).

Alike the Omani experience, this scenario enabled teacher candidates to sharpen their technological and instructional skills, preparing them for both face-to-face and online teaching (Osman, 2020). In this way, technology played a fundamental role in enabling student teachers to continue with their practical experience which encouraged them to search and discover new possibilities to teach using the affordances of technology. In this matter, research from the Israeli context, which was one of the first educational settings to adapt to online teaching and learning, suggests that teacher education programmes should equip student teachers with knowledge and skills that would prepare them to face imminent challenges (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020).

Kidd and Murray (2020) acknowledged the fact that technology offered a space to practice and introduce changes and new ideas to teaching. Hence, this remote teaching practicum prompted the interest to learn about new technological tools to teach the foreign language despite the school learners' lack of accessibility to internet connection. Because the use of technology was not an option (i.e., it was *the* one mode of delivery), student teachers seemed to have gone above and beyond trying to find alternatives to engage with their students, showing high levels of motivation that enabled them to overcome any difficulty.

6. Conclusion

Education in the past year has seen technology with different eyes as it has become, in many cases worldwide, the only option for schools and students to continue teaching and learning. The results show that barriers to technology integration, such as access or lack of teacher training, and student teachers' deficient technological pedagogical knowledge, were predominant in this unforeseen scenario. This 'virtualisation' of teaching and learning restricted the spaces for prospective teachers to bridge theory and practice and develop teaching competences they learned in university-based courses.

This study has reinforced the prevailing role that technology plays in education, especially in the current global context. Despite the challenges student teachers faced, this new scenario served as an opportunity to search and discover new online teaching techniques that they would have not learnt otherwise. Surprisingly, this health emergency contributed to raise awareness of student teachers' TPACK and the integration of ICT as a key aspect for their future teaching careers.

The results of this study resonate with other contexts where technology has also been regarded as an asset and a hurdle (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020; Hakim, 2020; Osman, 2020). These studies could serve as valuable input to raise awareness about the changes in language teaching programmes' curricula, their views on online teaching practicums and how technology could support the learning process of teachers-to-be. We recommend teacher education courses to revise their curricula and to prepare future teachers to teach *through* technology.

Future studies could also gain insights from other actors from the educational arena, such as school learners, cooperating teachers and university supervisors. As the current pandemic will most likely last longer, the impact of technology on education will certainly rise. Therefore, it is recommended that ITE programmes work on how to put technology at the centre of their teaching methodology educating. As the effects that this global pandemic will have in the educational sector are still unknown, institutions should educate professionals for the unexpected.

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Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview protocol

I. Information about the allocated school (e.g., Type of school, agreed online work and allocated classes).

Please tell us about the school where you are currently doing your teaching placement. Where is it located? Which grades are you currently teaching? What's your role at the school?

II. Opportunities and challenges of online teaching placement

1. What are the learning aspects of this online placement?
2. What are the aspects that need to be enhanced during this process?
3. What are the benefits and drawbacks of undertaking this kind of experience?

III. Technology as a tool to teach

1. Do you think you have learned how to teach using technology? Why? Why not?
2. What are the challenges of teaching online using technology as a key tool?
3. Were you prepared to teach online? Do you feel comfortable with this kind of instruction?
4. How would you rate your technology literacy?
5. To what extent have you put into practice your technological knowledge and skills? Did you have to learn how to use technology for teaching?

IV. Supportive agents

1. Could you describe your work with the cooperating teacher in terms of communication, support, ways of working, feedback and material creation)
2. Could you describe your work with the university supervisor in terms of communication, support, ways of working and feedback)

V. Future implications

1. To what extent has this online teaching placement been considered as an opportunity to continue learning?
2. If you were given the opportunity to choose between undertaking an online or a traditional teaching placement, which one would you choose? Why?
3. Is there any other aspect you'd like to mention?

Appendix 2: Follow-up interview protocol

1. Could you briefly tell us which software/platforms you used the most last semester?
2. Which technology strategies were the ones you used the most in the online placement process?
3. To what extent did your technology skills improve during this virtual teaching placement?
4. Do you think this scenario motivated you to learn new technologies?
5. What were the biggest challenges you faced when working with technology last semester?
6. We would like to know about the experience of working 100% online in terms of the relationship with their students, who perhaps did not have access to a computer with stable connection. How was that 'engagement' process? How did you manage to establish a connection with them through the screen?
7. Generally speaking, what would you say was the greatest thing you learnt regarding the use of technology and virtual platforms?
8. If you have had previous experience with teaching or online studies before, do you think that the previous experience helped you for this online teaching placement?
9. Do you think that what you learnt last semester in terms of the use of technology and virtual platforms will be useful to you in your future teaching role?
10. Now that you have finished your online teaching placement, do you maintain your position regarding the preference of online vs the face-to-face teaching?

Online Project-based Language Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: University EFL Students' Perceptions of Content, Process and Development of Competences

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Abstract

In the updated version of *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment – Companion volume* (Council of Europe, 2020), the action-oriented approach is highlighted as the most viable approach for learning languages. To translate this approach into practice, we applied the method of project-based language learning (PBL) and devised two collaborative language learning projects for a group of second-year students enrolled in the EFL course (C1 language proficiency) at a technical university in the Baltic region. The projects were implemented online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure rigorous implementation of the method, we designed them on the basis of the research-informed Essential Project Design Elements for Gold Standard PBL (Boss & Larmer, 2018). Because PBL projects aim to go beyond mere linguistic development of learners, the present study explores the students' reflections in terms of three aspects: 1) acquisition of their major-related knowledge, 2) procedural aspects, and 3) development of general and communicative linguistic competences. Data was collected through the participants' individual reflective learning journals. The inductive thematic analysis of their content revealed that the projects were perceived to be instrumental in gaining additional major-related knowledge in a meaningful way. Although online collaboration was a new experience, the students experienced it as a beneficial hands-on introduction to this way of working. While the learners were poor judges of their communicative linguistic development in an online environment, they indicated a number of general competences that the projects helped to develop. Importantly, the study draws attention to the research-informed project-based language learning elements and other aspects that need to be considered when implementing this method online.

Keywords: EFL, higher education, online learning, project-based language learning (PBL)

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1. Introduction

Across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated the unprecedented speed of apparently irreversible changes in education, including foreign language education. First and foremost, having moved online, it has embraced a number of new technological solutions opening doors to online communication and online teaching, which have become the new norm of language classes. As most language educators were unprepared for it, this change must have caused them to feel like beginning teachers again. On the other hand, this situation has not only accelerated the use of new technology-based solutions, but also created a space for reconsidering long-standing language teaching and learning approaches and methods as well as the overall purpose and meaning of language teaching, learning and assessment.

Importantly, language educators have recently been criticized for teaching too much about language rather than ensuring learners' learning through language (Cammarata et al., 2016; Cox & Montgomery, 2019; Jordan & Gray, 2019; Piccardo & North, 2019). The teaching of language as the ultimate goal in itself is seen as inadequate and the need to integrate EFL and development of 21st century skills is emphasized. To achieve this integration, language educators need to search for new language learning approaches and methods that ensure a holistic development of learners and their better readiness for the job market.

The updated version of *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment – Companion volume* (Council of Europe, 2020; hereafter CEFR CV) is an important language policy document advising on teaching, learning and assessment of languages, especially in Europe. In comparison to its earlier version, the current one includes a number of significant changes, e.g., enriched 'can-do' descriptors, the introduction of online interaction, elaborate notions of mediation and plurilingualism. Notably, the updated CEFR CV marks a methodological paradigm shift to the action-oriented approach (hereafter AoA) and highlights it as the most viable approach for learning languages (Piccardo & North, 2019). In the AoA, language learning is seen as an activity of purposeful communication while performing open-ended and authentic action-oriented tasks (e.g., projects and scenarios) that require creation of concrete project outcomes via collaborative work (Piccardo & North, 2019).

According to Harmer's (2015) classification, the concept of approach in language education refers to theories related to the nature of language and its learning in general. Conversely, methods are practical realization of language learning and teaching achieved by applying specific techniques and procedures. Since projects are action-oriented tasks (Piccardo & North, 2019), we assume PBL to be

the most suitable method to implement the AoA. In language education, it is called either project-based learning (e.g., Dressler et al., 2020) or, more explicitly, project-based language learning (e.g., Cox & Montgomery, 2019; Thomas, 2017). In this study, we adopt the view that PBL is a method which represents the adoption of the AoA in language education and refer to it as project-based language learning (hereafter PBL).

While literature praises PBL as a suitable method in language education (Boss & Larmer, 2018; Cox & Montgomery, 2019; Montgomery, 2018; Stoller, 2006; Thomas, 2017), research into online PBL, including students' perceptions of it, is lacking. Therefore, the aim of the study is to investigate how university students perceive online PBL. More specifically, as PBL projects do not solely focus on linguistic outcomes, we collected students' perceptions of the following elements: 1) acquisition of their major-related knowledge, 2) procedural aspects, and 3) development of general and communicative linguistic competences.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Online Project-Based Language Learning Based on Research-Informed Elements

For many years, PBL has been used to organize learning in the context of projects in a variety of disciplines. A number of researchers and practitioners (e.g., Cox & Montgomery, 2019; Dressler et al., 2020; Montgomery, 2018; Thomas, 2017; Vaca Torres & Gómez Rodríguez, 2017) have indicated that PBL is also an efficient method to ensure both meaningful language learning and holistic development of learners. Currently, there is a renewed interest in this method because of its suitability to equip learners with deep content knowledge in a meaningful way and to open up possibilities for mastering various 21st century success skills, such as communication and collaboration with diverse people, critical thinking and problem solving, self-management and project management, creativity, readiness to tackle increasingly complex challenges of the world (Boss & Larmer, 2018; Buck Institute for Education, 2019; Cox & Montgomery, 2019).

In this study, to refer to the use of PBL in EFL, we adopt the term PBL, which, according to the National Foreign Language Resource Center (2014), can be defined as:

A transformative learning experience designed to engage language learners with real-world issues and meaningful target language use through the construction of products that have an authentic purpose and that are shared with an audience that extends beyond the instructional setting. PBL can be conceived as a series of language learning tasks that are articulated toward a common goal: the construction of a public product. (para. 1)

The use of PBL has already been translated into practice in various different forms (Montgomery, 2018; Stoller, 2006). Evidence also suggests that in some cases educators simply ask learners to do so-called projects by simply highlighting the creation of the final product and mere practicing of language in this process instead of following rigorous elements of the method, which prevents them from harnessing the full potential of the method (Buck Institute for Education, 2019;

Montgomery, 2018). To avoid this and ensure more successful application of the method, as suggested by Boss and Larmer (2018) and the Buck Institute for Education (2019), it is important that research-informed PBL models are utilized. To this end, we employed the model of Gold Standard PBL including seven Essential Project Design Elements: Challenging problem or question, Sustained inquiry, Authenticity, Student voice and choice, Reflection, Critique and revision, Public product (Boss & Larmer, 2018).

To ensure the implementation of the aforementioned elements in PBLL, language learners need to be engaged in a series of real-life tasks that immerse them in a sustained inquiry into a challenging problem or question, where they share ideas and co-construct new knowledge while working in small groups. In the university context, students should deal with challenging questions or problems that are related to their major and/or are personally relevant. Additionally, the inclusion of student voice and choice might be implemented by giving freedom to choose group members, topics and tasks for projects, information sources, tools and formats of their final products (Cox & Montgomery, 2019). Furthermore, students should be encouraged to reflect on their learning during entire projects and this could serve as a tool to boost their own personal agencies (Boss & Larmer, 2018). For critique and revision, it is vital that learners receive ongoing feedback and are given opportunities to refine their project outcomes based on either teacher or/and peer feedback (Montgomery, 2018). Crucially, language-learning projects should result in learning artefacts for which learners feel ownership and which can be shared with a real-life authentic audience and thus be driven by an authentic purpose (Cox & Montgomery, 2019; Piccardo & North, 2019). For example, if learners are asked to make a brochure or video without a clear understanding for whom they are creating it and for what purpose, it does not reflect the essence of high-quality PBLL. In addition, high-quality PBLL expects language learners to collaborate with some community partners in order to investigate real-life issues (Montgomery, 2018).

For the language part of PBLL, educators might benefit from the descriptions of communicative language activities and communicative competences (linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic as well as sociocultural) expressed through ‘can-do’ illustrative descriptors matching each language proficiency level in the CEFR CV (Council of Europe, 2020). The descriptors might be useful for planning more concrete language-learning tasks and material selection, assessment and result reporting. On the other hand, educators should search for more interesting, creative and authentic tasks; learners might experience such tasks as more engaging than traditional textbook-led tasks. For example, the meaningful language-learning context that PBLL creates might include tasks such as asking learners to find some language usage examples related to the theme of the project in trending song lyrics. Another type of task might be the creation of audiovisual texts as multimodal content with the mix of audio and visuals is much appreciated by learners nowadays. Importantly, when designing tasks, language educators should move away from the dominance of written material.

Moreover, it is crucial to consider aspects of online PBLL, especially the ones related to the

new mode of communication. With the aim to broaden the scope of language education and even without predicting the emergence of the pandemic, online communication (referred to as online interaction, i.e., co-construction of discourse among two or more parties through the use of technology) is also reflected in the CEFR CV (Council of Europe, 2020) as a core language learning activity. As it is not identical to oral interaction or written interaction, the CEFR CV (Council of Europe, 2020) adds the third type of language activity, i.e., online interaction, which is subdivided into two types: 1) online conversation and discussion, and 2) goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration. Both types of online interaction are illustrated with the descriptor scales matching each language proficiency level from pre-A1 to C2, which can be utilized for the planning, implementation and assessment of online PBL. While asynchronous interaction is relatively similar to what students typically do in written tasks (e.g., no time pressure, possibility to use a dictionary, etc.), synchronous (happening in real time) interaction might cause new challenges because technology transforms communication.

Since the introduction of PBL in the EFL classroom in the mid-1970s (Stoller, 2006), considerable research has been conducted into its use. However, as online communication only became frequent in mainstream language classes in March 2020, studies on the implementation of online PBL are still sparse. In addition, some projects described in the literature do not include all the core elements of the method, which differentiates them from research-informed PBL. Consequently, empirical research centering on high-quality language learning projects that would be of use to language educators worldwide remains limited. Importantly, there is also a lack of research conducted into EFL in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study aims to fill these research gaps by examining how university students perceive this type of learning and showcasing examples of projects that were designed using research-informed elements.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The study was conducted at a leading technical university in the Baltic region, i.e., Kaunas University of Technology in Lithuania. Its participants were 36 second-year Bachelor's students (14 males and 22 females) from the Faculty of Chemical Technology following the course of Academic and Professional Communication in English (Level C1). The groups consisted of Lithuanian (32 students) and foreign students (four students; one from India and three from France) and represented two academic groups: one majoring in Food Technology (21 students) and the other majoring in Biotechnology (15 students). Generally, students starting this course are required to have level B2 language proficiency. In order to test their level, all first-year students are obliged to take a language proficiency test.

3.2. Procedure

The first project was designed for the students with a major in Food Technology and the

second one for those with a major in Biotechnology. The projects lasted three weeks (i.e., eight online lectures of 90 minutes and 2-5 individual meetings). The table below summarizes both projects.

Table 1

Summary of the PBL projects

PBL elements based on the seven key elements of Gold Standard PBL (Boss & Larmer, 2018)	Our help for foreign students: Bon appétit in Kaunas!	Through the eyes of future biotechnologists: the COVID-19 pandemic
1) Challenging problem or question	How can students of Food Technology support international students in selecting local restaurants best suited for their needs?	How can students of Biotechnology assess various aspects of the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and inform society about it?
2) Sustained inquiry	Searching for information about local restaurants in Kaunas; conducting interviews with international students; selecting and applying data for making brochures.	Searching for information about the COVID-19 pandemic; selecting and applying data for the creation of videos.
3) Authenticity	Authentic audience: international students coming to study in Kaunas. Authentic purpose: to facilitate their search for restaurants in Kaunas.	Authentic audience: general audience. Authentic purpose: to inform society about the current situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
4) Student voice and choice	Self-assignment into groups; self-selection of collaborators (international students as interviewees), brochure formats and tools to create brochures.	Self-assignment into groups; self-selection of video formats, tools to create video content and criteria to evaluate videos.
5) Reflection	Reflections on learning in the learning journals during the entire project.	
6) Critique and revision	Revision of drafts after peer feedback based on a tuning protocol.	
7) Public product	A digital brochure or website with	Stories in the format of videos with

restaurant reviews and other
information.

still and/or moving images and
voice narrations.

As online classes were conducted via Zoom conferencing tool, the teacher assigned students into breakout rooms at the start of each lecture; she then visited each room to follow the groups' progress, encourage them to reflect on both the process and outcomes as well as to provide other scaffolding.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Since reflective learning journals are considered both as a way to promote active learning and generate valuable data about students' learning (Thorpe, 2004), we utilized this tool to collect students' individual perceptions of their learning during the project. At the beginning of the project, the participants were provided with a template of the journal including three groups of questions related to the aforementioned aspects of online PBL. The students were instructed to continuously reflect on the project, e.g., to consider aspects such as the benefits that collaboration has generated, difficulties related to collaboration, differences between online and face-to-face communication.

For the language-based qualitative data gathered, we applied one of the pattern-based methods, i.e., thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), in order to identify themes and subthemes reflecting how students perceive online PBL. Specifically, we did an inductive thematic analysis which "aims to generate analysis from the bottom (the data) up; analysis is not shaped by existing theory (but analysis is shaped to some extent by the researcher's standpoint, disciplinary knowledge and epistemology)" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 175).

The data analysis was done as follows: first, the entries from each individual journal were collated into one document. Following one of the principles of triangulation, we coded and did the initial analysis of the qualitative data separately and collated our findings afterwards. Thus, we did complete coding (Braun & Clarke, 2013) of the whole dataset individually. As a result, we had lists of both data-driven or semantic codes and researcher-driven or latent codes. After coding, we combined codes to look for larger patterns across the dataset, i.e., candidate themes or central organizing concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For the later revision and development of the analysis, we collated our candidate themes to agree on the ones that answer our research question: How do students perceive online PBL in terms of content-knowledge acquisition, procedural aspects and development of competences?

4. Results and Discussion

This section is divided into three parts and each presents the results and discussion related to students' perceptions of the three groups of aspects related to the implementation of PBL as reflected in their learning journals: 1) acquisition of major-related knowledge, 2) procedural aspects (related to project management and collaboration), and 3) development of general and communicative linguistic competences.

4.1. Acquisition of Major-Related Knowledge

In individual reflective learning journals, the students often referred to the projects as helping them to acquire additional major-related knowledge in a meaningful way. In addition, the students of Biotechnology that were researching various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted an increased perceived value of and satisfaction with their chosen major. Although the participants highlighted different aspects of major-related knowledge that the projects enabled them to acquire, the majority of them confirmed the usefulness of this task, as illustrated by the comments below:

The creation of videos was very useful as it allowed me to better understand what is behind this virus and what we can do to protect ourselves. (S4)

I have realized the importance of the information about your restaurant or café online; otherwise, you risk losing potential customers. I understand now what needs to be included to be successful. (S9)

As the reflections reveal, the sense of meaning lies in the fact that these projects allowed to understand various portions of major-related knowledge more thoroughly. These findings also suggest that language education that allows students to co-construct and apply new knowledge purposefully makes the process of learning more meaningful. As PBL is usually considered to be the method of deep content acquisition (Boss & Larmer, 2018; Buck Institute of Education, 2019; Cox & Montgomery, 2019), this finding shows that it can be achieved in online PBL, too.

A common reflection among those who were engaged in the biotechnology-related project was related to their altered attitude towards their major:

I realized the role of biotechnologists in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, such as finding a vaccine against the virus and developing disinfectants and reagents. (S17)

I have understood that I have chosen the right major. I feel proud of it, especially at this time. (S19)

These content-related reflections imply that if challenging questions are closely related to students' field of study, PBL contributes not only to the acquisition of major-related knowledge in more meaningful ways, but can also enhance overall student satisfaction.

4.2. Procedural Aspects

In terms of the reflections on the process of working on the project, the students were given more specific questions related to the experience of online project management and social or collaborative aspects of these tasks. The most pronounced theme concerning project management was that online PBL helps broaden the understanding necessary for online project management. The majority of the participants agreed that it was a new experience which will prove necessary in the future. Two students commented:

I gained very useful project management experience. It was also interesting. (S7)

It was a new kind of experience. I think it is a universal skill and we will definitely need it later. (S21)

In addition, the participants were able to spot a number of subskills necessary for successful project management, such as an enhanced capability to plan and implement steps of a project, better time management as well as increased self-discipline and responsibility, including shared responsibility:

I have learnt to divide tasks and plan as a group member. (S28)

I think we have become more responsible. We felt responsibility not just for the completion of the project, but also felt accountable to each other. (S1)

The majority of students (n=27) also complemented the new technological project management wall, i.e., the tool *Trello*, for helping them better focus on the projects.

The board we used was divided into three sections of 'to do', 'doing' and 'already done', which enabled us to track our group's progress. (S5)

We used it to save our material for the video. It is useful to have everything in one place. (S13)

I have understood the value of a visual scheme for planning both group and individual work; I downloaded a similar app on my phone and started to visualize my own plans. (S8)

Considering these reflections, students seem to appreciate the use of a visual organizer for project work online. Most importantly, the project wall facilitated the enhancement of metacognition or the processes of planning and monitoring the group's performance.

Social or collaborative aspects of the process included recurring themes of online PBL providing opportunities both to develop collaboration and to better grasp it.

As reflected in the quotes below, online collaboration contributed to becoming better at perspective taking or seeing the situation through the eyes of others as well as learning to share responsibility and achieve consensus.

I learnt to listen to my groupmates. (S2)

While collaborating, you can learn what needs to be done and what needs to be avoided in group work. Personally, I learnt that everyone needs to listen to each other's ideas. (S30)

Although it was complicated, in our group we learnt to reach consensus. (S32)

I think most importantly I have learned to share responsibility. I usually find that quite difficult, but this time I managed to rely on my team and trust their abilities. (S24)

From the first day onwards, we were forced to put our egos and differences aside so we could achieve a common goal. (S3)

The reflections below imply that this type of engagement contributed to students' understanding of the peculiarities of collaboration. They appreciated both its advantages and additional opportunities to self-assess their own ability to collaborate. Among the advantages, the participants listed their ability to achieve higher quality goals and work more efficiently. Ultimately, PBL leads to a higher satisfaction with this type of work:

The whole collaboration process allowed me to understand what I still lack and need to learn.

(S11)

This experience was useful as it allowed me to realize the advantages of teamwork. (S12)

Collaborative work has its benefits; [...] we were much quicker in achieving our goals; also, it was more interesting. (S5)

We were much more focused and achieved a better quality in comparison to what we could create separately. (S31)

I realized that the more people look at a given project from the beginning, the easier and faster the work can be done. I liked it. (S17)

Regarding the perceived difficulties of collaboration, the participants indicated both temporary and persistent difficulties throughout the entire process. In terms of temporary challenges, they listed the use of English for collaboration:

In the beginning, it was hard to understand each other. Later we got used to it and it was no longer difficult. (S15)

It was not easy to collaborate in English for so long and not to see each other in real life. I think we all got used to it. It helped to get this kind of experience. (S1)

In terms of persistent difficulties, the learners pointed out the process of reaching consensus because of the presence of various perspectives on diverse steps of the projects, e.g., tools for the creation of either videos or brochures, their format, final topics of the videos or lists of places to eat in brochures. However, this learning experience contributed to becoming better at consensus making and perspective taking:

Working together in a group, we learnt to find compromises. (S29)

We frequently faced different opinions; it was especially difficult to decide on the final list of the restaurants we should include in the brochure. In such situations, we learnt to listen to each other attentively and make the decision that could satisfy all of us. (S19)

When choosing the final formats and tools of our videos, there were a lot of disagreements, the same goes for the other things. It was not easy to find common opinions. (S22)

I learned to be more open-minded and take criticism from others more easily. (S6)

The quotes show that PBL helps enhance both project management and collaboration skills in an online environment.

4.3. Development of General and Communicative Linguistic Competences

In relation to the students' perceived growth through these projects, one main theme emerged, i.e., online PBL merges the development of general and communicative linguistic competences. First, while reflecting on communicative linguistic competences, the learners focused on two types of improvement most frequently, i.e., enhancement of speaking skills and an increased vocabulary range as well as its control:

Even though I became better at expressing myself, it was not easy at the beginning of the project.

I was afraid to speak and thought that they would not understand me, but later I realized that making mistakes does not matter. (S11)

This helped me express my thoughts in English without fear. I was able to use more vocabulary related to biotechnology and found myself using more words in general. (S20)

In comparison to our earlier classes, these series of tasks gave us many more real opportunities for speaking and vocabulary improvement. (S29)

As reflected by the two participants above, the projects helped some students to overcome communication anxiety in English. Moreover, as observed in one of the comments, this type of speaking practice was more natural and intense in comparison to traditional classes.

These findings point to at least two major aspects. First, students use very restricted language to describe their communicative linguistic development. Second, they still attach considerable importance to vocabulary enlargement and speaking skills. Some possible explanations for this might be that they lacked opportunities to reflect on their language learning earlier and their previous language experience was based on explicit vocabulary enlargement and division of learning merely into the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Moreover, it might be that learners equate their perceived improvement of language proficiency with vocabulary enhancement and ability to speak because of the fact that they can or are used to notice it best. These findings imply that if students want or are used to more explicit training of vocabulary, language educators might also consider highlighting these aspects in PBL.

When it comes to the students' reflections on the development of general competences, the comments differed. Apart from the development of skills and subskills related to collaboration and project management, the participants indicated a number of other general competences that the projects helped to develop, such as online communication, digital literacy, design thinking as well as creativity and divergent thinking.

Regarding online communication, the students' opinions diverged. Some of them complained that it was more difficult; the limited view of body language was the main obstacle. While one student defined online communication as lacking emotions, two others noticed cases of using additional verbal cues or tones of voice to compensate for the lack of body language:

Some of us turned cameras off from time to time; it is difficult when you cannot see body language; in real life nobody is able to 'turn' himself or herself 'off'. (S15)

Even though it was hard in the beginning, later we got used to it and became better at it. (S27)

No body language made online communication very complicated. Very cold, no feelings. (S13)

In my opinion, to better understand our messages, the lack of body language was substituted with relevant verbal cues and tones of voice. (S4)

Other students indicated that online communication posed no difficulties or they got used to it quickly. For them, the attractiveness of being online lied in having all information and tools at their fingertips:

I did not feel any real difference. I think we were more productive when we had our devices during every meeting. It was better than in real life. (S21)

For me, it was very good; no difficulties. (S23)

Maybe a bit of time was necessary to get used to it, but then it was OK. We could learn this type of communication. (S5)

These two distinct perceptions of online communication need further investigation. Possibly, some students have already had this experience or are simply quicker to adapt to a new environment. Importantly, as reflected in the statements, this task also helped to become better at communicating online.

Next to using *Trello* for project management, the students listed a number of newly mastered technical solutions, which proves the enhancement of their digital literacy. The solutions included tools for creating brochures and websites as well as tools for video content editing. Apart from technology, the enhancement of digital literacy was reflected in the answers about being able to navigate digital content more quickly as well as master new applications more efficiently in the presence of others:

The best thing about this project was finding information quickly, the same as finding out quickly how programs work. (S10)

Reflections on the enhancement of creativity and divergent thinking were also common among the participants. The following statements illustrate this gain:

I enjoyed this project and its tasks as we could choose everything and show our creativity as a group. (S1)

The task was interesting and I was able to rely on my originality without constraints. (S3)

I liked the idea of not being told exactly what format we should finish with. (S18)

The quotes suggest not only the enhancement of creativity but also point to the students' satisfaction with their projects and PBL as a method for EFL. We consider these findings to be the most valuable. The majority of our findings related to online PBL are corroborated by literature with the focus on this method in face-to-face language-learning environments (Cox & Montgomery, 2019; Dressler et al., 2020; Montgomery, 2018; Thomas, 2017; Vaca Torres & Gómez Rodríguez, 2017).

5. Conclusion

The study presents research on university students' perceptions of online PBL. Given its multifaceted findings, it is evident that online projects represent an enhanced vision of language education in higher education, which merges additional major-related knowledge acquisition with the development of a useful real-life readiness skillset. Such skills include project management, collaboration, online communication, digital literacy, creativity and divergent thinking, with the latter still being overshadowed by too frequent training of convergent thinking (i.e., learning the right procedures or being able to get the only right answer) in formal education. PBL prepares students for an increasingly common project-based reality and thus helps to bridge the gap between what they learn in formal

education (too much focus on content knowledge and solo working) and what they need in real life. Indubitably, when the pandemic is over, individuals will continue working online. Future working situations may also include international collaboration and communication in a foreign language, where a wider range of perspectives and collective knowledge may lead to better results and innovations.

Online PBL in the form of the projects described does not present any serious challenges to university students and allows moving away from common language-learning environments consisting of isolated tasks without an emphasis on collaboration with co-construction of knowledge and inclusion of real-life tasks. For language educators, all stages of the preparation, scaffolding and assessment of such socially and cognitively complex tasks might be challenging at first. However, practice makes perfect. Crucially, online PBL-based projects should be prepared in accordance with the research-based elements discussed.

6. Pedagogical Implications

This study represents our intention to make the EFL learning and teaching more authentic and engaging in higher education. We hope that the projects described and students' perceptions of them will contribute to increasing language educators' awareness of both how to implement rigorous online PBL and what results it may yield.

As the action-oriented approach represents the most promising language teaching approach (Council of Europe, 2020; Piccardo & North, 2019), we view PBL as a suitable method to put this approach into practice. It posits that language learning is driven by actions when learners are engaged in purposeful collaborative tasks, which result in the creation of some meaningful learning artefacts or products (Piccardo & North, 2019). PBL is also underpinned by the same foreign language learning principles. In addition, PBL follows two important trends in education in general, i.e., the move towards more active methods that ignite students to learn on the one hand and their encouragement to create more diverse learning artefacts on the other (Cope & Kalantzis, 2017).

We also consider PBL to be particularly suitable for the context of higher education as it merges language learning through learners' sustained purposeful communication, collaboration, co-construction and acquisition of new (major-related) knowledge with the development of a wide range of the 21st century skills. Furthermore, we see online PBL as a modern EFL learning method, which can sometimes be easier to implement than in the traditional classroom because groups of learners can communicate more efficiently without the restrictions of physical spaces and time. Considering the growing popularity of online communication, online PBL offers the perfect opportunity to hone skills and tools necessary for online communication.

Importantly, the implementation of online PBL projects can be applied at universities worldwide, including the Asian context. We believe that projects with real-life scenarios might exemplify an important non-cognitive aspect, i.e., increased motivation and engagement because of having an authentic and real-world purpose. Regardless of the geographical context, online projects

teach learners to be more successful while acting and collaborating online, which has already become the major form of communication and will remain relevant in a post-COVID world.

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EFL Teaching and Learning via Zoom during COVID-19: Impacts of Students' Engagement on Vocabulary Range and Reading Comprehension Skills

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Abstract

The social distancing policy by nearly 200 countries and territories (Le et al., 2020) due to the quick widespread of the COVID-19 Pandemic triggered the online learning mode via various platforms, including Zoom, MS Teams, Google Meets or Hangouts. This change left many teachers and stakeholders concerns about creating and maintaining a virtual but dynamic and engaging EFL learning environment. Since the size of vocabulary and reading comprehension play an important role in acquiring other skills in English learning (Amirzai, 2021; Hartshorn et al., 2017), this study aimed to investigate the impacts of EFL students' engagement when studying reading online through Zoom on the performance of vocabulary and reading comprehension. Forty-four intermediate-level students at a public university in Vietnam were placed into a control group and an experimental group based on the results of a pre-test. While students in the control group followed the traditional format with the teacher-centred mode, those in the experimental group experienced the student-centred mode with frequent use of breakout rooms for pair work, group work and screen sharing for giving answers, elaborating on explanations and hosting vocabulary activities. After ten weeks, all the participants were required to take the post-test and particularly those in the experimental group were asked to complete a questionnaire on their attitudes towards this new learning style. Descriptive statistics of the post-test scores indicated that the experimental students outperformed the control students in vocabulary and reading comprehension. Findings from the questionnaire

revealed overall satisfaction towards this learning style, and more interestingly, there appeared a correlation between students' attitudes and the post-test scores.

Keywords: reading comprehension, student's engagement, vocabulary, zoom platform

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1. Introduction

Effectiveness in teaching and learning has always been a major concern when considering online learning in the EFL context. In a developing country like Vietnam, where online learning still exists as a learning platform with numerous risks, distractions and little published academic certainty of its effectiveness, many teachers, especially the old generation, showed their hesitation or refusal to adopt this form of learning. Although the COVID-19 Pandemic forced many teachers to reluctantly change to online teaching, the change to online learning mode raised many issues relating to connection quality (Fresen, 2018), how to keep the class under control, how to keep the students connected and focused (Davis, Gough, & Taylor, 2019), how to motivate the students to speak, and which methods or techniques should be adopted.

To respond to the call from the government to switch to online learning, a quick decision was made by the university, requesting the teachers to start online sessions with the paid version of Zoom application to utilise all the functions provided by the application's developer. However, many lecturers, especially the old ones, were still taking the first steps in online teaching and decided to be "on the safe side". They chose to apply the traditional teacher-centered approach with more control of the class, hoping that the teaching session would proceed as planned, rather than taking risks using the learner-centered approach, attempting to use the Zoom meeting functions that would even confuse them and lead them to unexpected circumstances. In the meantime, students were required to pay tuition fee, with no difference to the normal face-to-face (F2F) learning. They then requested an online teaching quality similar to that offered by the traditional F2F learning. The situation was a reflection of what was happening at the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the field of education in Vietnam.

Until now, in Vietnam, almost no research findings, particularly teaching vocabulary and reading skills exploiting the benefits of using Zoom in teaching university students with the application of learner-centered approach and an emphasis on interaction have been

officially published. This research study was an attempt to find out whether the use of learner-centered approach with a strong emphasis on students' engagement and interaction in learning had an impact on the performance on the vocabulary and reading comprehension test.

2. Literature review

Throughout the history of teaching methodologies, two main approaches including teacher-centeredness and learner centeredness have been exploited. According to Lancaster (2017), traditional teacher-centered pedagogy is defined as the practice when the teacher takes the primary responsibility for the communication of knowledge to students. Learner-centered approach, on the contrary, treats learners as the center of the class and hands learners the opportunity to be actively involved in their learning process (Lynch, 2010).

Students' engagement and interaction play a key role in the success of online learning (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). In recent years, a variety of studies have been conducted to explore different aspects of engagement and interaction in online learning. A meta-analysis of the questionnaire with 799 university students examining three key types of interaction in online learning: student-content, student-teacher, and student-student revealed that these forms of interaction were "significantly related to students' self-efficacy for learning and course satisfaction" (Cho & Cho, 2017, p. 79). Newmann (1992, p. 12) defined student engagement as "the student's psychological investment in an effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote".

Lak, Soleimani, and Parvaneh (2017) conducted a study with 120 10-to-16-year-old EFL learners in an experimental model with teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches and reported that "learner-centered instruction was more effective than teacher-centered instruction in improving Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension performance" (p. 8). In 2018, Martin and Bolliger surveyed 155 online students at eight universities around the USA and found that working collaboratively with peers via online communication tools was selected as the most beneficial engagement strategy. In the same year, Tsai and Tsai (2018) conducted a meta-analysis on 26 empirical studies in L2 contexts and provided strong support for the use of digital games in vocabulary learning. Lai, Lin, Lin, and Tho (2019) investigated 62 university students in an 8-week pre-test post-test design. The experimental participants were engaged in an online learning community where they could interact with their peers. The finding showed that higher interaction learners from the online learning community revealed better performance in learning achievement and student engagement. A survey at a midwestern university in the USA aiming to evaluate the influence of presence and interaction on online

learning reported that teaching presence and learner-instructor interaction were the most influential factors to effectiveness in teaching and learning (Kyei-Blankson, Ntuli, & Donnelly, 2019). Obniala (2019) conducted a study to discover the impact of active learning on the capability of learning science vocabulary of Thai students. The pre-test post-test model revealed that the experimental participants outperformed those in the control group.

Research questions

This study aimed to investigate the impacts of EFL students' engagement when studying reading online through Zoom on the performance of vocabulary and reading comprehension based on the following questions:

1. Do the students in the Experimental group achieve higher scores in the post-test vocabulary section than those in the Control group?
2. Do the students in the Experimental group achieve higher scores in the post-test reading comprehension section than those in the Control group?
3. Is there a correlation between the students' post-test scores and their attitudes on the applied learning mode?

3. Methodology

Participants

Upon getting permission from the school, participants for the study were 44 intermediate-level students at a public university in Vietnam, aged 17 or 18. These students, training in the English linguistics program, were from two English reading classes with English proficiency equivalent to IELTS 6.0. The reading course was taken as the target for the research since this was an obligatory foundation course whose results might have an influence on other courses in the program. These students were asked to do a pre-test, lasting for 60 minutes, consisting of two sections: vocabulary (20 points) and reading comprehension (80 points).

Table 1 *Descriptive statistics of the pre-test*

Variable	N	Mean	StDev.	Min.	Max.	Range
Pre-C	22	63.64	11.32	42	78	36
Pre-E	22	62.18	12.15	35	79	44

Note. Pre-C stands for pre-test of the control group. Pre-E stands for pre-test of the experimental group.

Table 2 *Descriptive statistics of the pre-test vocabulary section*

Variable	N	Mean	StDev.
Pre-C.V	22	13.09	2.52
Pre-E.V	22	12.00	2.62

Note. Pre-C.V stands for pre-test of vocabulary section of the control group. Pre-E.V stands for pre-test of vocabulary section of the Experimental group.

Table 3 *Descriptive statistics of the pre-test reading comprehension section*

Variable	N	Mean	StDev.
Pre-C.R	22	50.55	9.26
Pre-E.R	22	49.9	10.9

Note. Pre-C.R stands for pre-test of reading comprehension section of the Control group. Pre-E.R stands for pre-test of reading comprehension section of the Experimental group.

The groups were then randomly named as the control group (N=22, M=63.64, SD=11.32), and the experimental group (N=22, M=62.18, SD=12.15). Judging on the two parts of the pre-test separately, the Control group showed the statistics for vocabulary (N=22, M=13.09, SD=2.52) and reading comprehension (N=22, M=50.55, SD=9.26). Similarly, the data for the Experimental group revealed vocabulary (N=22, M=12, SD=2.62) and reading comprehension (N=22, M=49.9, SD=10.9).

Procedures

The first class was reserved for asking for students' agreement to join the research. Following the course orientation, students were asked to do a 60-minute pre-test, which consists of 20 points on vocabulary and 80 points on reading comprehension.

During the entire process, students of the two groups were provided with similar input, including the lists of key vocabulary of each lesson and the learning materials (reading texts and questions). From the second-class meeting, the flow of the lessons ran quite as a routine for each group. The control group followed the teacher-centered approach with more teacher control of the classroom to assure that the class would not turn into chaos. The experimental group, on the contrary, employed the learner-centered approach with maximization of student engagement and cooperative learning. The overall framework and detailed descriptions of each group's procedure of a class are presented below.

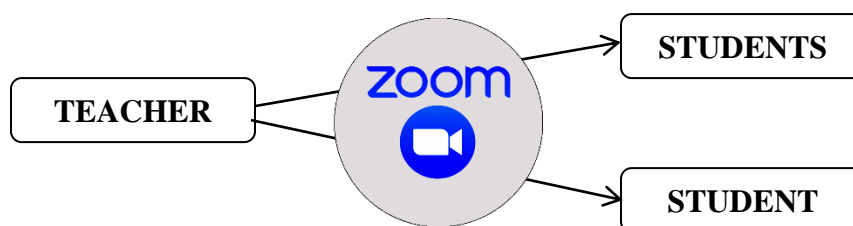


Figure 1. Interaction model of control group.

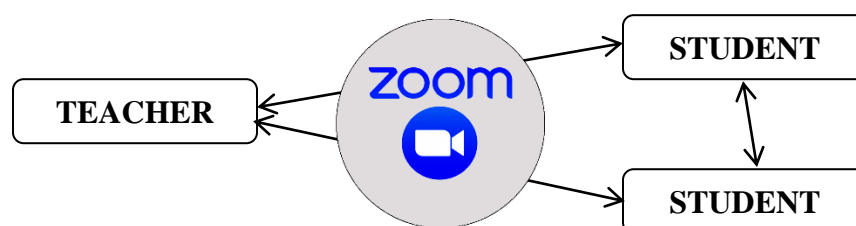


Figure 2. Interaction model of experimental group.

The Control group

Students were provided with a list of key vocabulary of the lesson one week before class time. They were required to check the meaning of the words and then write examples using the words. In class, students were guided to guess the meaning of the words through contexts or use the context to choose the right words. After listening to the teacher's instruction, students did the task individually. In the correction stage, teachers call students at random to give the correct answer.

The teacher led in the reading lesson by sharing the screen and asking some questions related to the topic. Some individuals were called to answer the questions. In the pre-reading stage, students went through the key vocabulary as described above. Then the teacher kept sharing the PowerPoint slides and taught the reading lesson. The teacher also took the primary role in giving reading skills of the lesson. During the while-reading phase, students mainly did the reading tasks individually in silence within a time limit. Then, the teacher gave correction by calling the name of some individuals to answer. Finally, students would read the passage again and try to summarize the passage individually, then present the summary to the whole class. During class time, it was the students' choice to have their camera on or off.

The Experimental group

In addition to the vocabulary tasks assigned at home similar to the control group, students working in groups were required to take turns to design vocabulary activities for classmates to play in class to learn and review the keywords before doing the vocabulary exercises.

“Educational gamification is an instructional method that makes learning into a game. Students work through or play activities to learn” (Kingsley & Grabner-Hagen, 2018, p. 545). Students could use online platforms like Kahoot, Wordwall or create PowerPoint slides to design games. Games needed to be sent to the teacher one day prior to class time. The teacher would help give some feedback on the content and interactive style, so the games would turn out to be more beneficial and professional during play. In class, the selected group led the games for the other groups to play, and the winning groups would receive two bonus points to the assignment scores. After the game session, the teacher gave instructions on the vocabulary task of the lesson. Students were then assigned into breakout rooms to do the task cooperatively. One member of the group should create a Google doc or Google slide so that every member of the group could contribute to add information to the online file. They had to take notes on the answer and discuss the reason why they chose that answer choice. When students got back from the breakout rooms, the teacher asked individuals at random to speak out the answer choice and give explanations for that choice.

The teacher started the reading lesson with a small sharing section or discussion related to the topic to arouse students’ interest. Instead of doing this task separately, students worked in breakout rooms to exchange ideas and opinions. In the breakout room, students shared screen and used Google doc or Google slide to note the group’s ideas. Following the discussion session, representatives of groups took turns to share screen to briefly present about what their group had discussed. Members of the class listened and asked questions after the presentation. The teacher then discussed with the students to work out the strategies or tips for the reading task. Sometimes, students were given a predicting task to develop critical/analytical thinking and higher order thinking skills (Balinon & Batang, 2020). The while-reading phase also maximized students’ engagement and interaction. After listening to the teachers’ instructions, students were placed into breakout rooms to do the reading tasks, look for keywords, discuss the answers and share screen to show their group’s answers to classmates and teacher. Regarding the post-reading activities, breakout rooms and online tools like Google doc and Google slides were again utilised for students to summarize the reading passages. They then presented their summary using the screen sharing function. The teacher gave some comments at the end of the session. Students were strongly encouraged to keep their camera on all the time.

In week 10, students of both groups did the post-test, and those in the Experimental group did the questionnaire (see Appendix) on the overall perception of the research study.

Research instruments

Based on the concept by Taherdoost (2016) of Validity and Reliability of the Research Instrument including Criterion validity, Face validity, Content validity, Construct validity, the research instruments in this study included:

- The pre-test and post-test: in the same format, with similar items for both groups (10 vocabulary questions in the gap-filling format, worth 20 points and 3 reading passages with 21 questions in various question types, worth 80 points).
- The questionnaire with 8 questions, including 4 questions on the Likert scale to get students' perceptions on the learning mode and 4 tick-the-box questions on personal opinions about the advantages and drawbacks of the learning mode.

The test format was developed based on two objectives of the reading course: (i) improve learners' English competence oriented towards the IELTS proficiency exam, (ii) provide learners with background knowledge and vocabulary for major courses in the English linguistics program. A test specification, which was a detailed summary of the test structure and scoring rubric, was informed to the students before they took the pre-test and the post-test. This test specification had been used three times in previous years. It was important to note that the vocabulary questions focused on the vocabulary items learnt during the experiment. Regarding the reading passages, selection of the passages was based on the themes or topics covered in the experiment and the students had to use all the reading skills learnt to answer the questions.

Data collection procedure and Data analysis

Collection of data on the pre-test was taken in the first-class meeting and data on the post-test and the questionnaire in Google form were collected in week 10. A shortened link was provided to give students quick access to the questionnaire, which could be completed on desktop, laptop, iPad or smartphones. To analyse descriptive statistics from the pre-test and post-test scores, Minitab19 was used as it is lighter, faster in installation and result processing than SPSS. To process data taken from the questionnaire, the criteria on the Likert scale were coded as 1-5 (negative to positive). Then, a spreadsheet was extracted from Google form to run necessary statistical formulae.

4. Findings

Post-test scores

Descriptive statistics of the post-test in Table 4 showed the mean score and standard deviation

of the Control group at 67.68 and 10.38 respectively while the figures for the Experimental group were 89.73 and 6.36. Tables 5 and 6 showed the post-test scores of the vocabulary and reading comprehension sections separately. The Control group reported the statistics for vocabulary (N=22, M=14.50, SD=3.85) and reading comprehension (N=22, M=53.18, SD=9.06). The statistics of the Experimental group found the vocabulary section (N=22, M=17.82, SD=2.24) and the reading comprehension section (N=22, M=71.91, SD=5.60).

Table 4 *Descriptive statistics of the post-test*

Variable	N	Mean	StDev.	Min.	Max.	Range
Post-C	22	67.68	10.38	48.00	87.00	39.00
Post-E	22	89.73	6.36	74.00	100.00	26.00

Note. Post-C stands for post-test of the control group. Post-E stands for post-test of the experimental group.

Table 5 *Descriptive statistics of the post-test vocabulary section*

Variable	N	Mean	StDev.
Post-C.V	22	14.50	3.85
Post-E.V	22	17.82	2.24

Note. Post-C.V stands for post-test of vocabulary section of the control group. Post-E.V stands for post-test of vocabulary section of the experimental group.

Table 6 *Descriptive statistics of the post-test reading comprehension section*

Variable	N	Mean	StDev.
Post-C.R	22	53.18	9.06
Post-E.R	22	71.91	5.60

Note. Post-C.R stands for post-test of reading comprehension section of the control group. Post-E.R stands for post-test of reading comprehension section of the experimental group.

Questionnaire responses

Due to the focus of this study, the outcomes of only four questions on the linear scale are presented.

Table 7 *General perception of the learning style from the experimental group*

Question 1	Very ineffective	Ineffective	Neutral	Effective	Very effective
	4.55%	31.81%	63.64%	0%	0%
Question 2	Very bored	Bored	Neutral	Interested	Very interested
	0%	0%	4.55%	27.27%	68.18%
Question 3	Absolutely No	No	Not sure	Yes	Absolutely Yes
	0%	0%	0%	31.82%	68.18%
Question 4	Absolutely No	No	Not sure	Yes	Absolutely Yes
	0%	0%	0%	27.27%	72.72%

Ratings in Table 7 showed that before joining the online reading course, no students regarded this learning mode as effective. After taking the course, up to 95% of the experimental students revealed “interested” and “very interested” in this learning model. 100% of the students ticked “Yes” and “Absolutely Yes” for the questions whether the online lessons meet the learning outcomes of the course.

5. Discussion

To answer research question 1: *Do the students in the Experimental group achieve higher scores in the post-test vocabulary section than those in the Control group?* Statistical results of a few tests were considered, including (a) independent Samples t-test of the pre-test vocabulary section scores of both groups, (b) independent Samples t-test of the post-test vocabulary section scores of both groups, (c) Paired t-test of the pre-test post-test vocabulary section scores of the control group, (d) Paired t-test of the pre-test post-test vocabulary section scores of the experimental group.

Looking solely at the vocabulary section, the result of test (a) [$M=1.09$; $p>0.05$] indicated that there was no significant difference in the pre-test of the two groups. This means students of the two groups had similar English competency at the beginning of the research, which is an important criterion for reliability. Test (b) [$M=3.32$; $p<0.05$] showed a significant difference in the post-test scores of the two groups. With the finding from test (c) [$M=1.41$; $p>0.05$], it is inferred that students of the control group performed better in the vocabulary section in the post-test, compared to the pre-test. It is logical to see that students were trained with appropriate method and they got improved. However, the p-value calculated at 0.15, greater than 0.05 indicated that the improvement was not statistically different. Test (d) [$M=5.82$; $p<0.05$] confirmed that the mean difference of the post-test pre-test scores of the

experimental group reached 5.82 out of 20 points of the vocabulary section. From the results of tests (a), (b), (c) and (d), it can be confirmed that the experimental students achieved higher scores in the post-test vocabulary section than those in the Control group.

Regarding the research question 2: *Do the students in the Experimental group achieve higher scores in the post-test reading comprehension section than those in the Control group?* Similar tests used in the research question 1 were carefully examined with the following results.

- Test (e): independent Samples t-test of the pre-test reading comprehension section scores of both groups [$M=0.64$; $p>0.05$]
- Test (f): independent Samples t-test of the post-test reading comprehension section scores of both groups [$M=18.73$; $p<0.05$]
- Test (g): Paired t-test of the pre-test post-test reading comprehension section scores of the Control group [$M=2.64$; $p>0.05$]
- Test (h): Paired t-test of the pre-test post-test reading comprehension section scores of the Experimental group [$M=22.01$; $p<0.05$]

The above statistical results showed that from similar English level at the start of the study with the mean score difference of just 0.64 (test e), both groups got improved after ten weeks of training. However, the improvement discrepancy between the two groups was a significant gap of 18.73 (test f). Students in the Control group got higher scores in the post-test although MiniTab19 reported that the improvement was not statistically significant (test g). Turning to the performance of those in the Experimental group, the gap between the pre-test and post-test was obvious with the score improvement average of 22.01. Minitab19 found this improvement statistically significant. Therefore, it could be claimed that the students in the Experimental group achieved higher scores in the post-test reading comprehension section than those in the Control group.

To deal with research question 3: *Is there a correlation between the students' post-test scores and their attitudes on the applied learning mode?* The relationship between student's level of satisfaction and the performance in the post-test was considered. Question 1 showed that all the students felt skeptical about the effectiveness of learning reading online at the beginning of the course. More specifically, more than a third of the students surveyed reported this type of learning as ineffective. However, responses to questionnaire question 2 played an important role as it reflected whether students felt satisfied with the learning model. MiniTab19 ran the correlation test between question 2 responses and students' scores in the post-test. The result showed $p<0.05$, which means that the relationship between the students' satisfaction with the course and the post-test scores was significant. A more thorough analysis

of the correlation ($r=0.835$; CI [0.637,0.929]) gave an R-sq of 69.68%. This explained that up to 70% of the experimental students were affected by this regression model. The positive correlation indicated that when student's level of satisfaction increased, their performance on the post-test would increase. This might not act as strong proof of positive correlation between students' satisfaction and performance, but it was in line with a few research studies stating that affective factors like intrinsic motivation or satisfaction could be used as an indication of learning outcomes (Cartwright et al., 2020; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Kuo, Walker, Belland, & Schroder, 2013).

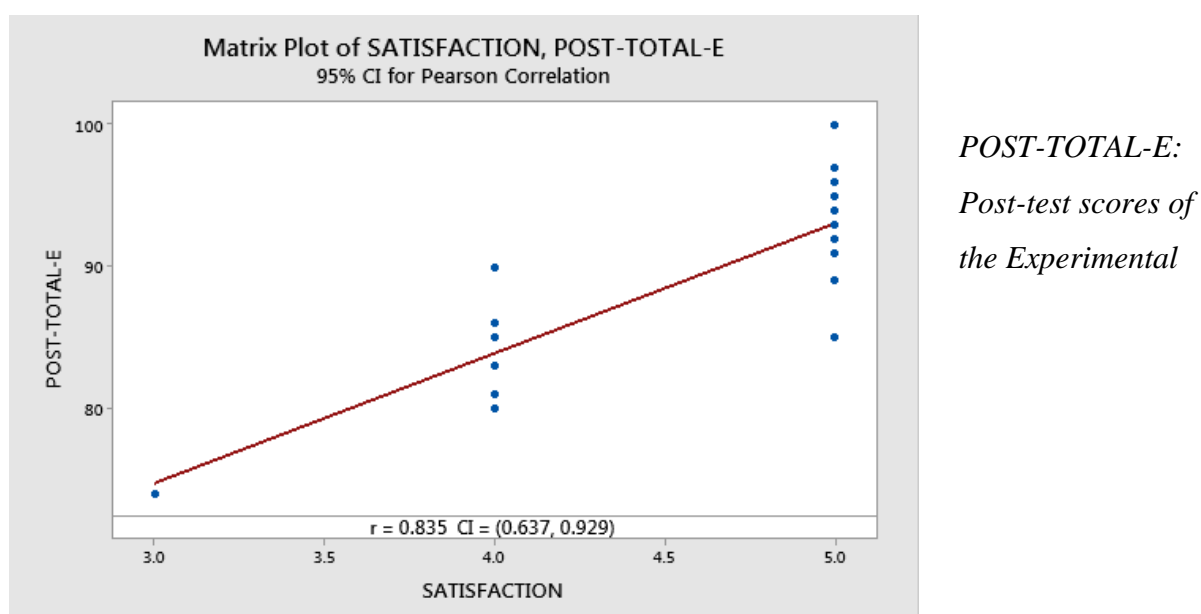


Figure 3. Correlation: Satisfaction and Post-test scores of the Experimental group

It is important to acknowledge limitations of the current research. Although the study received positive feedback and results, it was a small-scale study with only 44 students. The finding would reach higher scientific reliability with the results taken from a variety of groups of participants. Further research on a larger scale should be carried to confirm the effectiveness of the model.

6. Conclusion

The study investigated the impacts of EFL students' engagement when studying reading online through Zoom on the performance of vocabulary and reading comprehension. The descriptive statistics and correlation provided some evidence that the more satisfied students felt with the applied online learning style with various forms of interaction and engagement, the more

improvement they would achieve on the vocabulary and reading comprehension test (Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2016). The findings foster the theoretical and practical viewpoint that learner's satisfaction is one of the key factors for success in an educational environment. Also, engagement plays a crucial role in helping learners achieve educational aims. Then, whatever methods and techniques the teacher tends to use, focusing on the learners to help them explore their potentials seems to be the most effective method (Lak et al., 2017). Although the study possesses some limitations as acknowledged in the above section of Discussion which require further consideration and investigation, the positive findings shed light on the belief that keeping learners engaged during class time via the Zoom platform might be an appropriate choice for EFL teaching and learning during the time of COVID-19 Pandemic.

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Appendix

The Questionnaire

1. Before starting the online learning mode, what do you think about this type of learning?
☐ Very ineffective ☐ Ineffective ☐ Neutral ☐ Effective ☐ Very effective
2. How do you feel when you learn this skill online in this course?
☐ Very bored ☐ Bored ☐ Neutral ☐ Interested ☐ Very interested
3. Do the online lessons meet the course learning outcomes?
☐ Absolutely no ☐ No ☐ Not sure ☐ Yes ☐ Absolutely yes
4. Do you want to continue learning this skill online like this in the next 5 weeks?
☐ Absolutely no ☐ No ☐ Not sure ☐ Yes ☐ Absolutely yes
5. What do you like about the online learning mode? (Tick all that are applicable and/or type in "Other" for different ideas.)
☐ can stay at home comfortably
☐ can save 10% tuition
☐ can achieve the knowledge that meet the learning outcomes of the course
☐ can interact and discuss with friends
☐ can save time from traveling to school
☐ can turn off the camera so that nobody can see your face
☐ can have well-prepared lessons from teacher
☐ can join interactive activities
☐ can receive support from teacher
☐ it's eco-friendly (teacher don't have to print the materials for you)
☐ can review the lesson easily thanks to "lesson recording"

- ☐ can improve computer skills
 - ☐ can improve self-study skills
 - ☐ can improve cooperative skills
 - ☐ can improve academic vocabulary
 - ☐ Others: _____
6. What do you dislike about your online class? (Tick all that are applicable and/or type in "Other" for different ideas.)
- ☐ Teacher always starts the lesson on time
 - ☐ You cannot see your friends' faces because they all turn off the cameras
 - ☐ It's tiring sitting in front of the screen for 3 periods
 - ☐ Your internet connection is unstable.
 - ☐ Your teacher doesn't understand what you say.
 - ☐ It's difficult to understand the lesson because you don't receive enough explanation.
 - ☐ Your teacher doesn't prepare the slides well.
 - ☐ Your teacher doesn't prepare the lesson well.
 - ☐ There is little chance of improving communication skills.
 - ☐ There are not enough discussions and interactions.
 - ☐ There is no variation in class activities, just the repeated routine of tasks then keys provided.
 - ☐ You receive insufficient support from teacher.
 - ☐ The teaching is more theoretical, not focusing on the practical side.
 - ☐ It is hard to do reading tasks via smart phones or computers.
 - ☐ There is a lack of teacher's feedback.
 - ☐ Others: _____
7. What functions do you like when your teacher uses Zoom/ MS Teams to teach? (Tick all that are applicable and/or type in "Other" for different ideas.)
- ☐ Video conferencing to teach the lesson and communicate with students
 - ☐ Chat room to answer students' questions or figure out students' problems to help
 - ☐ Chat room to send materials to students
 - ☐ Share screen to show the slides, explain the lesson and correct the tasks
 - ☐ Share screen for making presentation
 - ☐ Share whiteboard to take notes
 - ☐ Share screen for checking attendance

- ☐ Share screen for doing tasks
 - ☐ Share screen for other interactive activities
 - ☐ Breakout room for group work and discussions
 - ☐ Others: _____
8. What functions do you dislike when your teacher uses Zoom/ MS Teams to teach?
(Tick all that are applicable and/or type in "Other" for different ideas.)
- ☐ Video conferencing to teach the lesson and communicate with students
 - ☐ Chat room to answer students' questions or figure out students' problems to help
 - ☐ Chat room to send materials to students
 - ☐ Share screen to show the slides, explain the lesson and correct the tasks
 - ☐ Share screen for making presentation
 - ☐ Share whiteboard to take notes
 - ☐ Share screen for checking attendance
 - ☐ Share screen for doing tasks
 - ☐ Share screen for other interactive activities
 - ☐ Others: _____

Student Engagement in an EFL/SFL Speaking LMOOC during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Influence of Learners' Social, Affective and Cognitive Dimensions

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Abstract

It is empirically demonstrated that Language Massive Open Online Courses (LMOOCs) contribute to the development of learners' foreign language (FL) competences. Thus, it is not surprising that these courses have experienced exponential growth over the last decade, being English as a foreign language (EFL) one of the most demanded subjects by LMOOC learners. However, LMOOCs face low learner engagement rates, which might be influenced by learners' proximal and distal variables. The present study contributes to the understanding of learner engagement in an English as a FL (EFL) and Spanish as a FL (SFL) speaking LMOOC during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, it aims to understand to what extent learner engagement in the course varied during the pandemic emergency period. Second, it aims to identify the aspects of the course that promoted learner engagement, related to learners' cognitive, affective and social

dimensions. The research context is *TandemMOOC*, an EFL/SFL speaking LMOOC offered annually by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spain). Participants of the study were 2,585 enrolled learners in the *TandemMOOC* edition of 2019 or 2020. The study followed a mixed-method approach. First, data on learner participation was retrieved from the course system. Second, a post-course questionnaire with closed and open-ended items was administered to learners of the latter edition. Descriptive statistics on quantitative data and content analysis on qualitative data were carried out. Subsequent integration of findings showed that learner engagement in *TandemMOOC* increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, and revealed that aspects of the course linked to learners' social dimension were the most engaging ones.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, engagement with the language (EWL), language massive open online course (LMOOC), online speaking interaction.

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1. Introduction

Language Massive Open Online Courses (LMOOCs) are defined as “dedicated Web-based online courses for second languages with unrestricted access and potentially unlimited participation” (Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2014, p. 1). It is empirically demonstrated that these courses contribute to the development of learners' foreign language (FL) competences (Martín-Monje & Bárcena, 2014), and thus, it is not surprising that they have expanded over the last decade (Beirne, Nic Giolla Mhichíl, & Ó Cleircín, 2017), in particular for the teaching of foreign languages such as English, Spanish or Chinese, which are in high demand. Moreover, due to the imminent shift from traditional to online learning as a result of the COVID-19 breakout, these courses have become more widespread (Alamri, Zhongtian, Cristea, Lei, & Craig, 2020) and have experienced exponential growth².

Due to their nature, LMOOCs fall under the umbrella term of non-formal education, as they take place outside the framework of formal learning, and are characterised by being structured, systematic, and sometimes guided by an instructor (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). Despite the fact that participation in MOOCs is beneficial for learners' education (Ferguson & Sharples, 2014),

² For more information, visit *The Conversation* online newspapers article ‘Massive open courses see exponential growth during the COVID-19 pandemic’. <https://theconversation.com/massive-online-open-courses-see-exponential-growth-during-covid-19-pandemic-141859>

the voluntary nature of these courses and the diversity of enrolled learners make, amongst others, learner engagement in this type of courses conspicuously challenging (Cook, Bingham, Reid, & Wang, 2015). Learner engagement occurs when learners are emotionally, behaviourally and cognitively connected to their study (Kahu, Stephens, Zepke, & Leach, 2014, p. 523), and it is linked, amongst others, to learners' satisfaction, self-development, and achievement (Kahu, 2013).

Recent research carried out on massive open online courses (MOOCs) released during the COVID-19 emergency period report improved learner engagement rates as a consequence of the global lockdown situation (Flores-Tena, 2021), a particular worldwide circumstance that caused, amongst others, individuals' sense of isolation (Schwartz, 2021). Nevertheless, concerning the specific area of FL education, the existing knowledge on learner engagement in LMOOCs during the COVID-19 pandemic is scarce, which makes it difficult to reach generalisable conclusions on this topic (Mahyoob, 2021). For this reason, the present study aims to gain new insights into learner engagement in LMOOCs during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency period, which today represents a gap in the literature of LMOOCs in FL education. More precisely, this research focuses on learner engagement in *TandemMOOC*, an EFL/SFL speaking LMOOC offered annually by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spain). First, it aims to analyse to what extent learner engagement in *TandemMOOC* varied during the global emergency period in comparison to the previous edition of the course. Second, it expects to identify the aspects of *TandemMOOC* that contributed to learner engagement in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic emergency period. Consequently, the research questions (RQs) of the study are formulated:

RQ1: To what extent did learner engagement in an EFL/SFL speaking LMOOC vary during the pandemic emergency period in comparison to the previous edition of the course?

RQ2: What aspects of an EFL/SFL speaking LMOOC contributed to learner engagement within the pandemic emergency period?

2. Literature review

The first successful MOOC was organised in 2008 by the University of Manitoba (Canada) with more than 2,000 international students (Pernías Peco & Luján-Mora, 2013). Today, MOOCs have proliferated, for which they offer a huge variety of subjects, have several sizes, and follow different pedagogical models. In any case, all types of MOOCs are seen, today, as

safe learning tools, able to promote education despite any worldwide emergency situation (Ricart Casadevall, Villar Navascués, & Hernández, 2020). However, literature shows that usually less than 10% of the enrolled learners in a MOOC complete the course successfully (Reich & Ruipérez-Valiente, 2019). In the case of FL learning, as generally occurs with MOOCs, LMOOCs are also highly valued courses (Bárcena, Read, & Sedano, 2020), although they face low learner engagement rates, too (Beaven, Codreanu, & Creuzé, 2014). Therefore, it is not surprising that scholars claim the need to conduct further research on LMOOCs in order to improve learners' experiences and retention rates within these courses (Kan & Bax, 2017).

In order to study FL learners' engagement, Svalberg (2009) establishes the Engagement with Language (EWL) model, which states that learner engagement is “a cognitive, affective and/or social process in which the learner is the agent and the language is the object” (p. 3). The dimensions of the EWL model are graphically represented in Figure 1 by three circles, as its distinction is necessary in order to have an in-depth understanding of the concept. However, the circles are surrounded by a dotted line, as the dimensions of EWL may overlap. Moreover, additional distal variables, such as learner structural factors (e.g., support within the course) and/or psychosocial factors (e.g., personality traits) may also interfere with EWL (Svalberg, 2012).

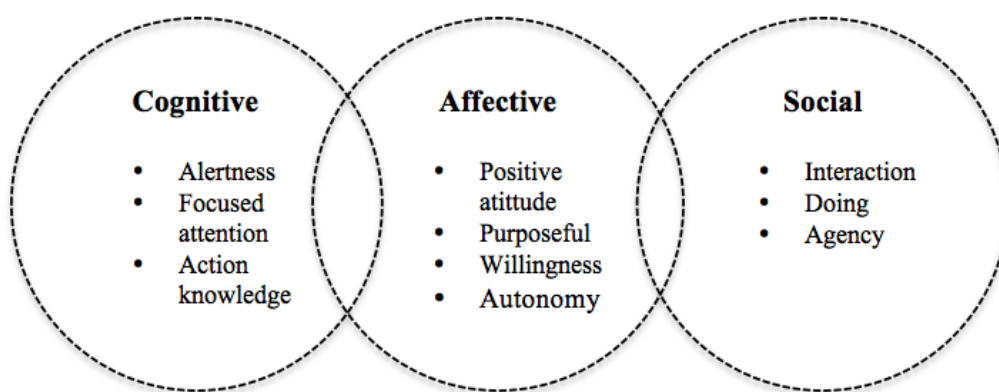


Figure 1.

Graphical representation of the EWL dimensions, adapted from Svalberg (2009, p. 4).

Concerning previous research on EWL in online learning contexts, a study carried out by Baralt, Gurzynski-Weiss, and Kim (2016) shows that learner engagement is lower in online contexts than in face-to-face contexts, although, according to the authors, several aspects of online language courses might be adapted in order to foster learner engagement. Regarding learners' cognitive dimension, Bárcena and Martín-Monje (2014) explain that LMOOCs should be designed under the premise that FL learning is mostly skill based. In this line, they

argue that LMOOCs should provide FL learners with opportunities for both individual and collective practice, in combination with theoretical explanations and examples displayed in a well-organised manner. Additionally, Sull (2012) points out the importance of providing learners with immediate feedback in this type of online FL learning contexts.

Moreover, in relation to learners' affective dimension, LMOOCs should be designed taking into account that, besides cognitive demand, language learning implies high emotional load (Dewaele, 2011), as FL learners' emotional experiences are significantly correlated to their motivation and learning outcomes (Dörnyei, 1994). Accordingly, Svalverg (2018) states that FL tasks should foster learners' positive, enthusiastic, and autonomous mindset towards the learning process, by offering meaningful activities based on topics related to learners' reality outside the course, which should be applied in the context of LMOOCs, too. Furthermore, concerning learners' social dimension, LMOOCs are required to guarantee peer-to-peer interaction (Sokolik, 2014), and to promote a sense of belonging to a community of learners (Moreira Teixeira & Mota, 2015) in order to be successful. In some cases, LMOOCs might also adopt an intercultural approach, which triggers learner engagement and positive attitudes towards the language learnt (O'Dowd, 2007). In addition, Bax (2017) explains that learners might have high expectations before starting an LMOOC, fed by the belief that they will become proficient in the target language (TL) solely by the fact of participating in an online course. Bax (2017) highlights that learners' unreal expectations can, indeed, lead to a drop in course engagement, and "*massive* might become *minuscule* as a consequence of this" (p. 15).

Finally, in order to improve learner engagement in LMOOCs, Fuchs (2019) suggests that a better use of these courses is achieved when they are considered as add-ons to learners' language classroom instruction. Today, after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, which affected more than 60 countries, Fuch's suggestion is becoming a reality in FL education. Indeed, Chen et al., (2020) explain that online education is evolving from being an auxiliary method to being a key one. Nevertheless, Chen et al., (2020) also warn that, despite the increasing presence of MOOCs, these courses are still in need of improvement. In line with this, the essence of the present research is to contribute to a better understanding and development of LMOOCs, as their role in FL education is unsurprisingly expanding.

3. Methodology

Research context

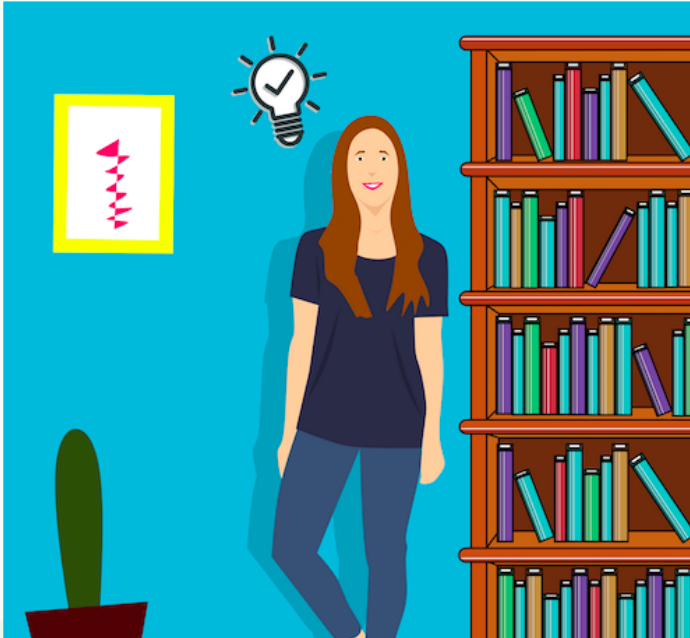
The research context of the study is *TandemMOOC*, a six-week EFL/SFL speaking LMOOC offered annually by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spain). The course is based on the e-

tandem language learning practice, through which two learners who have a different L1 interact in order to learn each other's language. For this reason, *TandemMOOC* is addressed to adult EFL and SFL learners who, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)³, have an intermediate or upper level of the FL and who are, at the same time, native or near native speakers of Spanish or English. Within the course, dyads are randomly formed by the course system and communicate via video conference in order to undertake a series of speaking activities, carried out 50% in English and 50% in Spanish. In addition, learners in *TandemMOOC* are guided by two language instructors who provide them with general feedback, while individual feedback is provided by the speaking partners, following the basis of tandem language learning.

The present study took into account two different editions of *TandemMOOC*, one released between October and November of 2019, and another one released between April and May of 2020, on the score of the global lockdown. Henceforth, these editions will be referred to as TM19 and TM20, respectively. In both editions, the course was displayed within the same platform, had the same structure and language instructors, and counted with almost identical activities and speaking topics. However, the TM20 edition also included a series of speaking activities and course materials related to the COVID-19 pandemic. An example of a speaking task in TM20 is shown in Figure 2.

In this task, you have to speak English.

- Make a list of **15 activities for wellbeing during confinement**. Take turns in adding an item to the list.
- Once the list is ready, evaluate the relevance of these activities, and make together a **ranking of the Top 10 activities**. In order to reach an agreement, don't forget to justify your opinion!



³ For more information about the levels of FL proficiency established by the CEFR, visit the Council of Europe website: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>

Figure 2. Example of a speaking task in TM20. Picture: Hassan, M. (2017). *Girl with ideas* [Image]. Retrieved from <https://pixabay.com>

Participants

Participants of the study were 2,585 EFL or SFL learners enrolled in *TandemMOOC*. At the moment of their enrolment, they completed a socio-demographic questionnaire and gave their consent to participate in this research. Of all participants, 1,098 were enrolled in TM19 (364 males; 734 females), and 1,487 were enrolled in TM20 (527 males; 960 females). All participants were over the age of 18 at the moment of their registration in the course. The mean age was 35.9 years ($SD = 12.3$) in the TM19 group, and 38.2 years ($SD = 12.8$) in the TM20 one. Additionally, there were more EFL learners than SFL learners in both editions of *TandemMOOC* (see Table 1) as EFL is, indeed, a highly demanded subject by LMOOC learners.

Table 1 *Information on Participants' Gender, Mean Age, and FL Learnt*

	Enrolled learners	Male	Female	Mean age	EFL learners	SFL learners
TM19	1,098	364	734	35.9	775	323
TM20	1,487	527	960	38.2	1,156	331

Regarding the level of the FL learnt, more than half of participants of the TM19 group reported to have an intermediate ($n = 537$) or upper intermediate ($n = 324$) level of the TL, as occurred in the TM20 group (intermediate, $n = 691$; upper intermediate = 519). On the contrary, participants who reported to have a proficient level of the FL represented a minority within the sample (see Table 2).

Table 2 *Information on Participants' Level of the FL Learnt*

	Intermediate	Upper intermediate	Advanced	Proficient
TM19	537	324	199	38
TM20	691	519	248	29

Furthermore, most of the learners enrolled in TM19 and TM20 were from European countries, although there were also learners from Asia, Oceania, America and Africa. In this line, participants of the study had different cultural backgrounds, as frequently occurs in MOOCs (García-Peñalvo, Fidalgo-Blanco, & Sein-Echaluce, 2018). Finally, concerning participants' native language (NL), the majority of enrolled learners in TM19 were native speakers (NSs) of Spanish ($n = 587$), followed by NSs of English ($n = 286$). Likewise, most of the learners who enrolled in TM20 were also NSs of Spanish ($n = 940$), followed by NSs of English ($n = 231$). In both TM19 and TM20 groups there were also bilingual NSs of Spanish or English and another language, and NSs of other languages, who represented less than a third of the participants of the two groups (see Table 3).

Table 3 *Information on Participants' Native Language(s) (L1)*

	Spanish	English	Bilingual Spanish and other	Bilingual English and other	Other(s)
TM19	587	286	82	17	117
TM20	940	231	125	23	168

Data collection and instruments

Two different research instruments were employed in the data collection process. These provided us with two different sets of data.

- *Learner engagement and participation data* was retrieved from the course system in TM19 and TM20, with a record of the total number of speaking activities completed per active learner, as well as the total time they spent fulfilling the speaking activities. By active learner we refer to a learner who completed, at least, one speaking activity in *TandemMOOC*.
- *A questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions* ($n = 98$) was sent via e-mail to the active learners of TM20 at the end of the course. The questionnaire included 2 items on learner engagement, and 5 items on self-reported emotions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and their experience talking about it within the course. Open-ended items,

such as *'If tandemMOOC has given you some support in getting through the pandemic situation, please briefly explain why'* and *'During the course, did you learn anything about the pandemic situation in other countries that you did not already know?'* allowed participants to express themselves openly, and to give certain information that the researcher may not have contemplated before (Campbell, McNamara, & Gilroy, 2004).

Analysis

In the first place, participants' data was anonymised. Afterwards, in order to answer RQ1, learner enrolment and participation data in TM19 and TM20 was analysed by carrying out univariate analysis. Descriptive statistics allowed us, indeed, to organise and to summarise data (Frey, 2018). Besides, in order to answer RQ2, a mixed-method research approach was carried out with the aim to analyse participants' responses to the closed and open-ended items of the questionnaire. Data from the closed-ended items was analysed by carrying out univariate analysis, and data from the open-ended items was analysed through qualitative content analysis (Berelson, 1952). In consequence, a coding scheme was designed following Boyatzis's (1998) hybrid approach, which blends inductive and deductive coding techniques. The resulting coding scheme counted with three main categories related to the dimensions of the EWL model: *cognitive*, *affective* and *social* (Svalverg, 2009), and it was subjected to a process of interrater reliability that involved two experienced researchers of the field. Following, systematic text analysis was conducted (with) for the purpose of developing a controlled qualitative procedure (Mayring, 2000). Finally, information from the different data sets was integrated.

4. Results

RQ1: To what extent did learner engagement in an EFL/SFL speaking LMOOC vary during the pandemic emergency period in comparison to the previous edition of the course?

In the first place, data retrieved from the course system showed that, concerning learner enrolment, there was a 35.4% increase in the number of enrolled learners in TM20 ($n = 1,487$) in comparison to TM19 ($n = 1,098$), as can be seen in Figure 3.

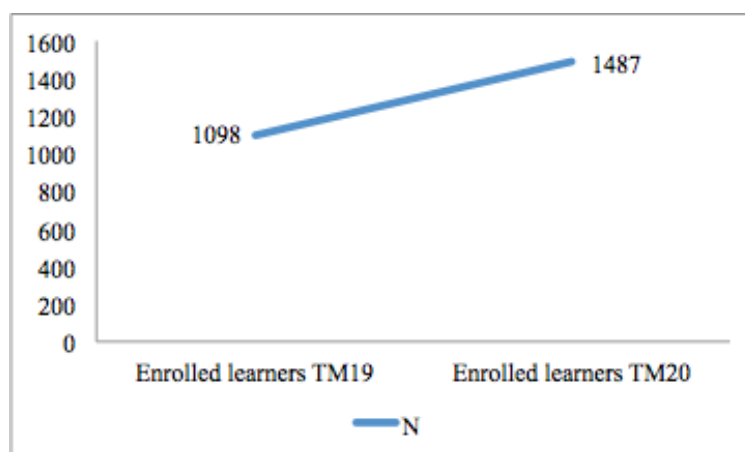


Figure 3. Increase in the number of enrolled learners from TM19 to TM20.

Moreover, in relation to active learners, there were 210 active learners in TM19, and 254 active learners in TM20. Therefore, active learners represented 19.12% of the total of enrolled learners in TM19, and 17.8% of the total of enrolled learners in TM20. Despite the slight decrease in the number of active learners in TM20 in comparison to TM19, the total amount of speaking activities completed by active learners in TM19 was 579, while in TM20 it was 910. There were, also, differences observed between the mean number of speaking activities completed per active learner, which increased from TM19 ($\bar{x} = 2.7$) to TM20 ($\bar{x} = 3.5$), as shown in Figure 4.

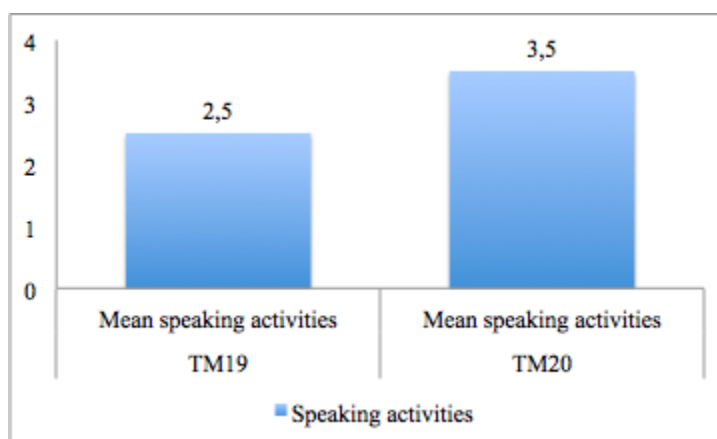


Figure 4. Mean speaking activities completed per active learner in TM19 and TM20.

Additionally, in reference to learner participation, the total amount of time active learners spent completing the speaking activities within the course was 572 hours in TM19, and 738 hours in TM20. Besides, there was also a slight increase concerning the total amount of time spent per active learner fulfilling the speaking activities from TM19 ($\bar{x} = 2.7$) to TM20 ($\bar{x} = 2.9$), as

performed in figure 5.

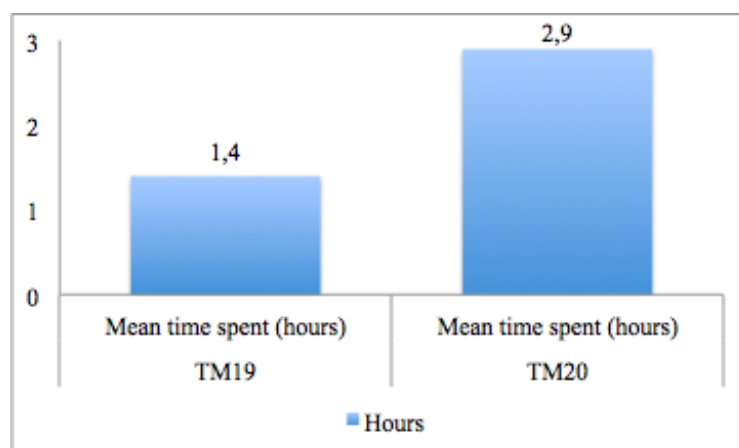


Figure 5. Mean time spent (hours) fulfilling speaking activities per active learner in TM19 and TM20.

RQ2: What aspects of an EFL/SFL speaking LMOOC contributed to learner engagement within the pandemic emergency period?

Participants' responses to a closed-ended question ($n = 98$) on the aspect(s) of TM20 that made learners feel more engaged revealed that speaking partners were the most valued aspect in this matter, followed by the speaking tasks and the portfolio, a tool where learners' activity was registered, including the recordings of their speaking activities and their partners' feedback. As illustrated in Figure 6, site content and teachers were the two least engaging aspects of the course.

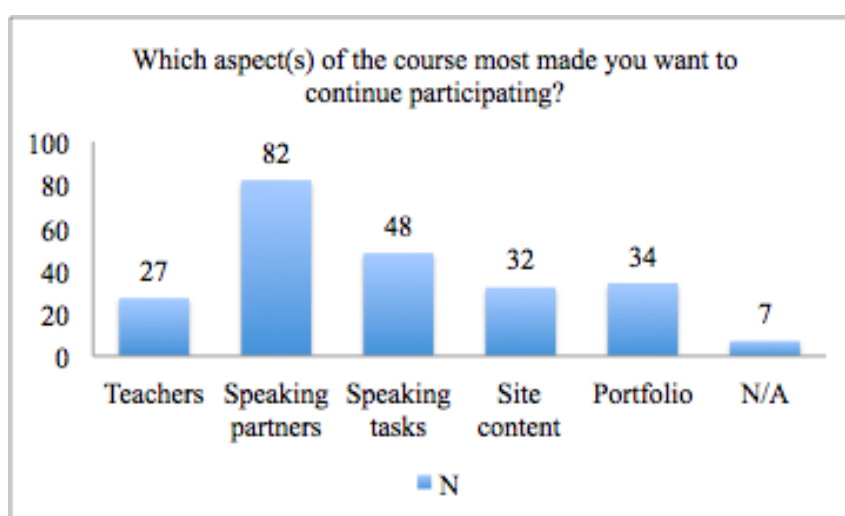


Figure 6. Aspects of TM20 that made participants engage with the course.

Accordingly, in a further closed-ended question, respondents ($n = 98$) indicated that the most valued type of feedback in TM20 was the individual and immediate feedback provided by their speaking partners, followed by their own self-reflection and teachers' feedback, as shown in Figure 7.

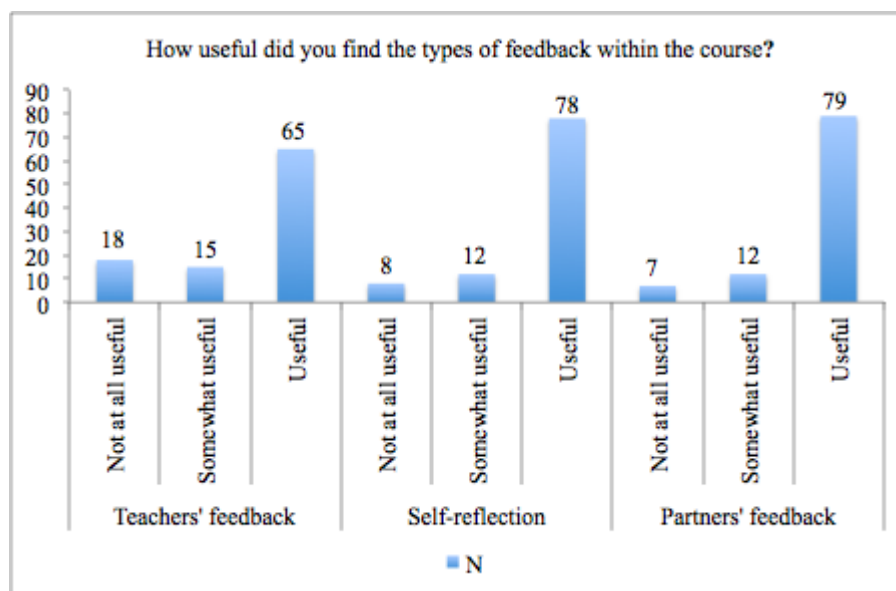


Figure 7. Participants' assessment of the types of feedback in TM20.

As regards learners' emotional state, participants' responses ($n = 98$) indicated that the majority of them had been, somehow, emotionally affected by the pandemic emergency situation before the start of TM20. Besides, a minority of participants indicated that their emotional state had been extremely affected by the pandemic, as shown in Figure 8.

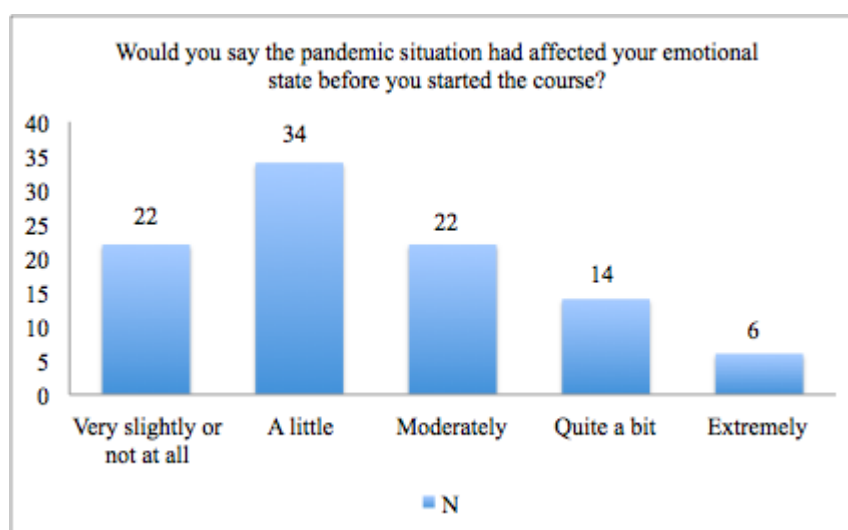


Figure 8. Participants' responses on their emotional state before starting TM20.

In line with this, the majority of the respondents indicated that their participation in TM20 had, to some extent, given them support to get through the global emergency period, while a third part of the respondents replied that the course had provided them with *very slightly or not at all* support within the emergency period. A detailed illustration of the responses to this item is represented in Figure 9.

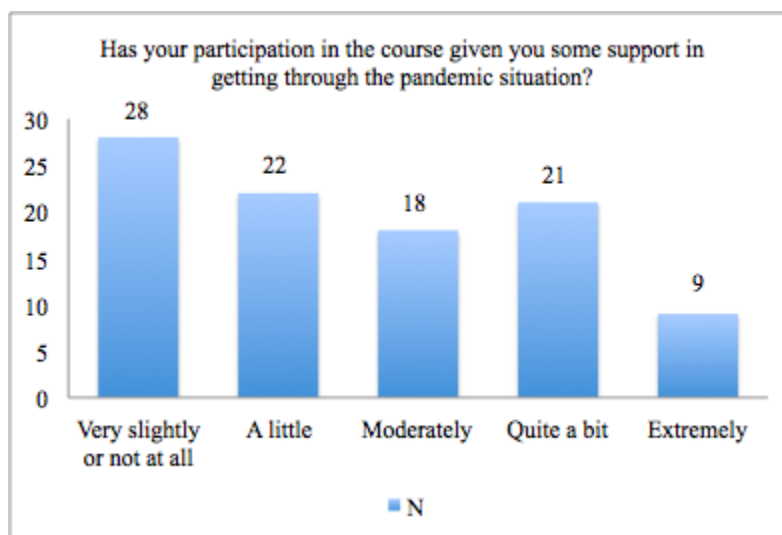


Figure 9. Participants' responses on the support that TM20 gave them in getting through the pandemic situation.

The question described in the paragraph above was followed by the open-ended question '*If TandemMOOC has given you some support in getting through the pandemic situation, please briefly explain why*'. Responses to the aforementioned question ($n = 57$) revealed that the *social* and the *affective* categories were, implicitly or explicitly, mentioned 29 times each by the respondents, while the *cognitive* category was mentioned 11 times. In this case, two codes of the social category emerged. One was 'social contact', which referred to the fact of being in contact with other learners, and of meeting new people. As participants reported, human interaction was considered as a valued support within the lockdown period:

"I loved having the possibility to meet people in order to avoid the feeling of isolation"
(Participant, TM20).

Moreover, the *social* category also encompassed the code 'gaining new perspectives', that referred to the possibility of knowing other people's experiences throughout the pandemic period. Indeed, several participants also referred to 'interculturality' within their responses:

“It has been nice to learn about how the pandemic is being dealt with in other countries”.
(Participant, TM20).

As concerns the *affective* category, it encompassed, in this matter, four different codes. One was related to ‘good time management’, as learners expressed the usefulness of taking part of the course within the lockdown period:

“It provided some structure to my days, which had become uncomfortably unstructured” (Participant, TM20).

Moreover, within this category, participants’ responses were also related to ‘positive feeling and emotions by talking about the COVID-19 pandemic’, ‘improvement of self-confidence when speaking in the FL’, and ‘positive feelings and emotions by being distracted from the COVID-19 pandemic’. Concerning the latter one, participants explained how the course had offered them an opportunity to be mentally detached from the pandemic:

“When I was connected, I forgot about the COVID-19 problem” (Participant, TM20).

Lastly, concerning the *cognitive* category, the fact of ‘learning’ and having a ‘focused attention’ was mentioned as a supportive element by some participants.

“I got focused on learning and that is a valuable experience in a situation like this. Having meetings every day helped me to move focus to things that are important for me, like language learning” (Participant, TM2).

Additionally, learners’ enjoyment while sharing their own experiences and discussing pandemic issues with their international peers was explored. First, a closed-ended question (n = 98) revealed that most participants enjoyed talking about it with their partners, and less than a third of the participants indicated that they enjoyed this experience sometimes. Finally, a minority of the participants reported that they did not find it enjoyable, as shown in Figure 10.

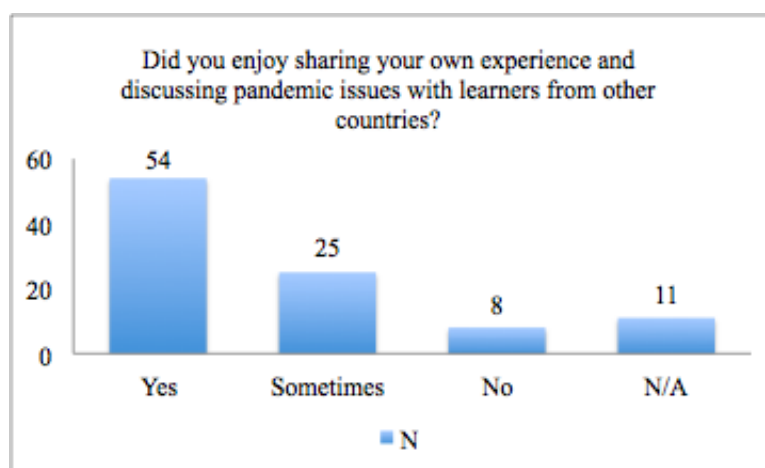


Figure 10. Participants' responses on their enjoyment talking about COVID-19 in TM20.

Along with the question described in the previous paragraph, the closed-ended question '*If you enjoyed sharing your own experience and discussing pandemic issues with learners from other countries, please briefly explain why*' was formulated. Data analysis of the responses ($n = 61$) showed that the *social* category was mentioned by participants, implicitly or explicitly, a total of 43 times, followed by the *cognitive* category, mentioned 15 times, and the *affective* one, mentioned 10 times. Within the *social* category, participants reported to have enjoyed 'social contact' and 'interculturality'. Moreover, they also enjoyed the fact of 'gaining new perspectives':

"It is nice to know what's happening in different countries other than what we are being told on the news. I liked finding out in a more personal way rather than based on statistics" (Participant, TM20).

As regards to the *cognitive* category, participants referred to 'learning' as an enjoyable part of sharing with their partners their experience and thoughts about the COVID-19 pandemic:

"I could learn and practice medical vocabulary that in normal conditions, I do not usually use (Participant, TM20).

Finally, concerning the *affective* category, participants in TM20 reported to have enjoyed the 'positive feelings and emotions experienced by talking with their peers' about the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, participants reported feelings of empathy or a sense of community, that made their experience within the course enjoyable:

"I enjoyed sharing experiences with other learners because it helps to feel empathy

between us and realize that, in essence, we are the same all over the world as human beings, despite the differences in language, race, countries” (Participant, TM20).

5. Discussion

Results of this study showed that there was an increase in the number of enrolled learners in TM20 with respect to TM19. In line with Alamri et al. (2020), the increase in the number of enrolled learners in TM20 reflects the spread that MOOCs experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency period. Besides, although the percentage of active learners remained similar in both editions of *TandemMOOC*, results revealed an increase in participation and engagement rates in TM20 with respect to TM19. More precisely, there was a rise in the mean number of speaking activities completed per active learner in TM20 in comparison to TM19, as well as in the mean amount of time active learners spent fulfilling them. These findings are consistent with Flores-Tena (2020), who also found improved learner engagement rates in MOOCs released during the COVID-19 lockdown. Moreover, according to participants’ responses in the questionnaire distributed in TM20, we acknowledged that most active learners in TM20 were not extremely affected by the COVID-19 crisis, which may have favoured their participation within the course.

Findings of the study also pointed to different aspects of *TandemMOOC* that contributed to learner engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency period. Regarding the *social* dimension of EWL, quantitative data indicated that speaking partners were the most valued aspect by learners, as well as the feedback they provided. Indeed, peer-interaction (Sokolik, 2014) and immediate feedback (Sull, 2012) have been previously reported to favour learner engagement in MOOCs. Moreover, concerning learners’ self-reported emotions, the *social* dimension was the most recurrent in participants’ responses. They referred to this dimension in terms of social contact, interculturality, and gain of new perspectives, which have been previously outlined in the literature as contributors to online learners’ engagement (O’Dowd, 2007). Besides, the social dimension helped, in some cases, to palliate learners’ feeling of isolation, generally caused by the global lockdown situation (Schwartz, 2021).

Moreover, the *affective* dimension of EWL was also relevant according to participants’ responses. In this matter, learners reported to have experienced positive feelings and emotions by talking about the COVID-19 pandemic and, at the same time, by forgetting about the pandemic problems while participating in the course, which might seem

controversial. Furthermore, in their responses they usually referred to their own feelings and emotions, but also to a sense of community, which has been previously found to foster learner engagement (Moreira Teixeira & Mota, 2015). This is tightly interrelated to the *social* dimension of EWL, as dimensions are not steady and they may overlap (Svalberg, 2009). Additionally, still concerning the *affective* dimension, learners also reported to have strengthened their self-confidence when speaking in the FL. Lastly, the less mentioned dimension of EWL in TM20 was the *cognitive* one. This dimension was linked to learners' possibility to practice their FL skills, earlier mentioned by Bárcena & Martín-Monje (2014) as a trigger for learner engagement. Moreover, participants also positively valued their capacity to focus on their FL learning despite the pandemic situation.

To conclude, it is to be noted that the aspects of *TandemMOOC* that most contributed to learner engagement within the pandemic emergency period are, also, those that constitute the basis of tandem language learning. Therefore, interaction with international peers, reciprocity, and learner autonomy were key to foster learner participation within the COVID-19 pandemic emergency period. On the one hand, learners had a general desire for socialisation, and the fact of giving them a space to talk about the pandemic with learners from all over the globe contributed positively to their emotional state. On the other hand, with the fast shift from traditional to online learning (Chen et al., 2020), there was an imminent need from learners to practice their FL speaking skills which, undoubtedly, motivated their participation within the course.

6. Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The present study provided us with deep understanding on learner engagement in an EFL/SFL speaking LMOOC released in 2020 during the COVID-19 emergency period. The course edition carried out in 2020 counted with improved learner enrolment and participation rates in comparison to the previous edition of the course, delivered in 2019, before the pandemic took place. Moreover, several aspects of the EFL/SFL speaking LMOOC that contributed to learner engagement were identified. In summary, the aspects related to learners' *social* dimension were the most significant ones, followed by the aspects related to the *affective* and, finally, the *cognitive* dimension.

As frequently occurs in research carried out on MOOCs, participants of the study were from a wide variety of countries, such as Spain, China, Turkey and India, for which its results

are not bound to a particular cultural context, but are transferable to further investigations on LMOOCs (García-Peñalvo et al., 2018). However, this study is not without its limitations. On the one hand, it took place during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency period, whose circumstances inevitably influenced participants' emotional state and behaviour. For this reason, further research carried out on learner engagement in an LMOOC during a post-pandemic period could lead to different results. On the other hand, this study did not take into account participants' individual differences, such as gender, age or FL level, in relation to their EWL. Concerning future research directions, we suggest that a focus on learner internal variables would provide the online EFL education community with additional and relevant information on learner engagement in LMOOCs released during the COVID-19 emergency period.

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Appendix

Post-course questionnaire (TM20)

Hello! This is a post-course questionnaire that will take you approximately 6 minutes to fill in. We would love to have your opinion on *TandemMOOC* in order to improve it in future editions. Thanks for your participation!

1. What is your gender?

- a) Female
- b) Male

2. What is your age group?

- a) 18 to 30 years old
- b) 31 to 40 years old
- c) 41 to 50 years old
- d) 51 to 60 years old
- e) 61 to 70 years old
- f) +71 years old

3. Have you previously enrolled in any other online course(s)?

- a) Yes
- b) No

4. How many speaking activities did you complete in this course?

- a) I did no speaking activities
- b) 1-3 speaking activities
- c) 4-7 speaking activities
- d) 8-12 speaking activities
- e) +12 speaking activities

5. Would you say the pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 had affected your emotional state before you started *TandemMOOC*?

- a) Extremely
- b) Quite a bit
- c) Moderately
- d) A little
- e) Very slightly or not at all

6. Has your participation in *TandemMOOC* given you some support in getting through the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?

- a) Extremely
- b) Quite a bit

- c) Moderately
- d) A little
- e) Very slightly or not at all

6.1. If *TandemMOOC* has given you some support in getting through the pandemic situation, please briefly explain why: _____

7. In *TandemMOOC*, there were some activities related to COVID-19. Did you enjoy sharing your own experience and discussing pandemic issues with learners from other countries?

- a) Yes
- b) No

7.1. Please, explain briefly why you enjoyed or did not enjoy sharing your own experience with other learners: _____

8. Which aspect or aspects of *TandemMOOC* most made you want to continue participating in the course? You can choose more than one answer.

- a) Teachers
- b) Speaking partners
- c) Speaking tasks
- d) Site content (videos, articles...)
- e) Portfolio

9. How useful did you find the following types of feedback on your speaking skills?

	Extremely useful	Very useful	Useful	Somewhat useful	Not at all useful
Teacher's feedback					
My self-reflection					
Partner's feedback					

10. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

Emergency Remote Teaching in Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak: Pedagogical Adjustments of Community College ESL Lecturers in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the education sector to explore dramatically different teaching modes. This article is a study of emergency remote teaching (ERT) in a community college in Hong Kong. It investigates the challenges that a cohort of 50 ESL lecturers encountered and the strategic responses they adopted in relation to ERT. Documents such as the college newsletter, post-teaching reports and meeting records were used to analyze the language teachers' context of adjustment, and one-on-one interviews were conducted with four participants from the cohort to explore their firsthand experiences. The analysis revealed the variety of challenges that the participants faced, including the development of technological skills, the preparation of online materials, the implementation of online assessment and marking, as well as interaction with students. In response to these challenges, the participants adopted diverse strategies to achieve pedagogical development in facilitating their teaching practices with students in synchronic online teaching. This article argues that language educators need to develop technological and online interactional competencies so that new pedagogical activities can be developed to enhance students' learning. In addition, training sessions should be provided to support their pedagogical adaptation and development of new

skills. Accordingly, it concludes that adjustment requires both individual and institutional investments.

Keywords: COVID-19, emergency remote teaching (ERT), ESL, pedagogical adjustment

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1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, for the first time in history emergency remote teaching (ERT) has been implemented globally (Bond, 2020). ERT can be viewed as a temporary educational measure during a time of crisis before a return to normal modes, such as face-to-face, blended or hybrid teaching (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Hazaea, Bin-Hady and Toujani (2021) emphasised the *emergency* and *remote* attributes of ERT. An ‘emergency’ refers to unusual situations, such as pandemics, wars or catastrophes, while ‘remote’ denotes a distance mode of teaching (Hazaea et al., 2021). The current implementation of ERT provides both asynchronous and synchronous learning modes (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). Because it had not been anticipated and due to the circumstances of the pandemic, it involved a sudden shift from an established teaching mode to a remote one (Affouneh, Salha, & Khlaif, 2020).

Approaches to the conduct of ERT vary in practice. Firstly, teachers adopting an ERT approach can convert traditional face-to-face lectures into annotated PowerPoint presentations with a tutor’s voice-over narration available through a learning management system (LMS; see Moorhouse, 2020), or as “a three-stage lesson including pre-live-lesson task (office), live lesson (through VCS [video conferencing software]), and post-live-lesson task (on a [sic] LMS)” (Moorhouse & Beaumont, 2020, p. 2). Simply put, ERT can be conducted either synchronously with video conferencing software (VCS) such as Zoom, asynchronously with an LMS such as Moodle, or as a combination, to help students continue their learning during an extended crisis such as a pandemic. Nevertheless, as ERT is a new and sudden adaptation of modern technology to a global problem, despite sporadic evidence reported by a few pioneering studies (e.g., Cheung, 2021; Moorhouse, 2020; Moorhouse & Beaumont, 2020), no conclusive or generalizable findings on ERT can be derived from the currently available literature.

Furthermore, although ERT can be implemented in almost any subject and at any level, teaching synchronously online can be especially challenging for English language teachers because language is both the subject matter and the medium of instruction, and multimodal actions such as facial expressions and gestures operate in a very different way in ERT (Moorhouse, Li, & Walsh, 2021). Coincidentally, in the field of English language education, little if any research to date has rigorously studied how tertiary English language teachers have reacted to ERT since the first half year of 2020, and what strategic responses they have adopted in response to the pedagogical challenges they have encountered.

Different instructors conducting ERT can have different outcomes even within the same socio-cultural environment. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced schools to provide ERT to continue teaching since February 2020 (Chan, 2020), teachers in Hong Kong also experienced a social movement that resulted in temporary school closures in the last two months of 2019 (Wong & Moorhouse, 2020). The unique experiences of the 2019–2020 school year may have harmed teachers' long-term commitment to their careers (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011) and it may have also led to negative effects on students' well-being (Han & Yin, 2016). According to Ma's (2017) application of Vygotsky's social cultural theory, language is one of the most important higher-level cultural tools, serving "as a buffer between the person and the environment and acting to 'mediate the relationship between the individual and the social-material world'" (p. 184).

Engstrom (1987) claims that the most important cognitive activity of human beings is developed through social and material development. Since English is the medium of instruction in all universities in Hong Kong, Hong Kong's English language lecturers are key to developing tertiary students' most fundamental medium of cognition—the English language—through interaction with students in instructional settings. The roles English teachers play during the pandemic are therefore central to students' well-being and the successful implementation of ERT and it is essential to explore the experiences of these teachers in emergency contexts (Wong & Moorhouse, 2020).

This research addresses these issues by looking at the responses to ERT of English language lecturers at a community college in Hong Kong. We also wish to consider the potential pedagogical significance of these responses for English language education in the broader Asian context. The study thus aims to contribute to the growing line of research on ERT and to offer adjustment recommendations to ESL teachers in terms of their technological

preparation and pedagogical adaptation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Adjustment

Many scholars have provided definitions of *adjustment*. For example, French, Rodgers and Cobb (1974) suggest that adjustment involves a working process between a person and an environment to achieve an acceptable fit. Another concept put forward by Searle and Ward (1990) is that there are two dimensions of adjustment. One is the psychological dimension, which refers to the psychological and emotional well-being of an individual (Ward & Kennedy, 1994); the other is the socio-cultural dimension, which describes how well an individual can “fit in” and negotiate the interactive aspects of a new culture, creating a feeling of comfort and being at ease. These two dimensions of adjustment have been widely accepted by researchers (e.g., Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006). Alongside these views, Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga and Szapocznik (2010) suggest that psychological adaptation could include various aspects, such as life satisfaction, reduced anxiety and depression, while sociocultural accommodation could include academic achievement, career success, social skills and so on. More recently, Schwartz et al. (2010) propose a third dimension in adjustment, which is health related. It includes not only low levels of somatic symptoms, such as headaches, but also high levels of physical activity and healthy eating. Given the current pandemic situation, this health dimension becomes even more important and relevant as a concern in ERT. The urgent adaptation to remote teaching is aimed at preventing a public health crisis, and rightly so. However, if such adaptation is not done properly, new health issues could arise because of ill-adjustment.

Adjustment involves several procedures. According to Britannica Academic (2020), there are four parts in the accommodating process: “a) a need or motive to change; b) the nonfulfillment of this need; c) activities or behaviours which are accompanied by problem solving; d) a response which removes or reduces the initial stimulus” (para. 2). This definition leads to a clear understanding of the evolution of each adjustment stage. Anderson (1994) echoes this in his view that modification is a process of overcoming and solving problems in a new situation. For people who want to shorten the time it takes to reach a final adaptation stage, Lynch (1992) suggests that risk-taking, a flexible mind, and a willingness to change oneself are essential psychological preparations or “adjustment engines”.

2.2. Pedagogical Adjustment

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed education, as most universities and schools around the world have had to urgently adapt to online teaching to prevent the further spread of the virus (Tam & El-Azar, 2020). Like colleagues in other disciplines, English language teachers also need to find appropriate modes of teaching and interacting with students (Moorhouse et al., 2021).

Pedagogical adjustment is beneficial for students in ensuring that individuals who go through schools can achieve their best efforts towards their goals (Cooper, 1958). It is suggested that a change of curriculum, instruction and environment are three dimensions of adjustment in teaching, learning and assessment (NSW Department of Education, 2021). Curriculum adjustment refers to changes in the amount of content in a lesson or time allowance that students are given to complete the tasks. Instructional adjustment includes altering the ways that lessons are delivered. To be specific, it comprises using alternative ways to deliver teaching and learning materials, with the aims of arousing students' motivation to engage with skills (such as guided practice), providing additional modelling and offering an increased level of prompting. The environment adjustment dimension includes peer assistance, physical access needs, and so on (NSW Department of Education, 2021).

In line with pedagogical adjustments, Moorhouse et al. (2021) identified classroom interactional competence (CIC) as important in both synchronous online lessons (SOLs) and face-to-face language classrooms. To interact with students effectively in SOLs, ESL teachers need three key competencies: technological, online management and online teacher interactional (Moorhouse et al., 2021). These three key competencies are summarized briefly below.

2.2.1. *Technological Competencies*

Technological competencies include the utilization of various VCSs to increase interaction opportunities in SOLs. Asynchronous platforms, such as WeChat and WhatsApp, can be employed in sequence or in parallel with a VCS to increase interaction. In addition, various features of VCS platforms, such as annotation, written chat and “breakout rooms”, provide different interaction modes for learners (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020), so teachers are expected to employ them in SOLs. Further, competent language teachers can also combine a VCS with other tools, such as game-based platforms (e.g., Kahoot!) and collaborative software (e.g.,

Google Docs), to ensure that learning is conducted in an appropriate and successful manner.

2.2.2. Online Management Competencies

According to Moorhouse et al. (2021), specific capabilities, such as designing language lessons and materials, can help educators tailor the context for “in-class” and “out-of-class” times, in order to build rapport with and between learners who are located in different physical locations. Important strategies include setting context-specific routines and expectations, as well as accepting the differences between online and physical classrooms.

2.2.3. Online Teacher Interactional Competencies

Online teacher interactional competencies involve using multiple modes of communication in a VCS and other platforms, developing specific questioning techniques and providing longer wait times when eliciting questions (Moorhouse et al., 2021). Another strategy for increasing online interaction is to provide students with time to prepare replies in small groups, so that they can then present their answers to the whole class.

2.3. Challenges for ESL Teachers in ERT

ERT offers unique challenges for teachers who need to adapt rapidly to a drastically different learning and teaching environment (Xie, Heddy, & Vongkulluksn, 2019). As such, there is an increasing need for research which focuses on the pedagogical challenges these teachers are experiencing, as well as how they cope with online teaching and management (Moorhouse, 2020).

Since the instructional support provided in ERT must be both reliable and easy to create during a crisis or emergency (Hodges et al., 2020), teaching synchronously online in ERT is particularly challenging to tertiary English language teachers, because interaction, which is of utmost importance in language acquisition, is not easy to facilitate in ERT (Huang, Shi, & Yang, 2020). Further, Moorhouse et al. (2021) point out that in ERT, teachers cannot “see” students because a VCS may limit the number of participants that can be viewed at one time and students may not want to turn on their cameras. As a result, interaction with students is less rich because paralinguistic features are lost (e.g., eye contact, facial expressions and hand gestures which signal turn-taking in class).

In addition to interaction, learner engagement is another challenge for language

teachers in ERT. In SOLs, teachers cannot monitor students directly; moreover, environmental distractions and technical issues make it harder for students to stay engaged (Peachey, 2017). In a survey of students' insights into online teaching in a university in China, Sun, Tang and Zuo (2020) found that students demonstrated low focus and restraint, which implied a need to improve the students' self-management skills and concentration levels. Moorhouse (2020) also showed that SOLs are more teacher-centred than F2F classes, and that shorter student responses and longer silences are common during group and whole-class discussions.

Taken together, the literature confirms that changes during the COVID-19 pandemic have created obstacles for English language teachers but also that adjustment is crucial to their survival and further development. So far, however, little research has investigated the emergency work adjustment triggered by the pandemic in the context of post-secondary institutions in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2021). Through studying how a group of English language lecturers adjusted their teaching successfully, we aim to deduce meaningful patterns and offer constructive advice to help the larger ESL teacher community adapt to crisis-prompted challenges smoothly in the future.

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

- RQ1.** What pedagogical challenges did ESL lecturers have to face from January to June 2020 in their ERT in Hong Kong?
- RQ2.** What strategic responses did ESL lecturers adopt in response to the pedagogical challenges they encountered?

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach to investigate the challenges and strategic reactions of a sample of lecturers who were teaching English as a second language in a community college in Hong Kong (HK) during the 2019–2020 academic year. A case study approach was adopted because we aimed to develop an in-depth description and analysis of one case, namely, teachers' adaptation experiences in the year 2020 (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

3.1. Research Context and Participants

The study took place in a community college in Hong Kong, a former British colony in which

English is learned as a second language⁴, because students have many communicative uses for the language outside the classroom (Wilkins, 1999). The college is a non-profit-making tertiary institution that offers sub-degrees to high school graduates. Most students in the college are secondary school leavers wishing to pursue bachelor's degree studies but who are not yet able to obtain a place due to unsatisfactory scores in the public university entrance examinations (Lo & Ip, 2021). Students at the college are academically-oriented because GPA is the most important criterion for their degree transferal (Lo & Ip, 2021). In the past three years, the matriculation rate of this college has been over 80%, a very high university admission rate compared to its local competitors. In 2020, the matriculation rate was 90.05%, which was the highest since the institution's establishment (Cheng, 2021. p. 1).

In 2020, there were 50 full-time English lecturers who taught mainly academic English to year-one sub-degree students (K. Chow, personal communication, September 7, 2020). All the lecturers were ethnic Chinese who had already received professional teacher training when they took up their teaching posts. All the academic English subject teams shared the same objective: to prepare students for successful academic studies in an English-medium post-secondary school learning environment (W. Tsang, personal communication, February 10, 2021). Due to the pandemic, an announcement of the suspension of face-to-face (F2F) teaching was made in mid-January 2020; two weeks later, the college enacted ERT to help prevent the spread of the virus while allowing students to continue their studies.

The criteria for recruiting participants for this study were that they were experienced frontline teachers who had at least 10 years of teaching experience and were popular among students. The term "popular" was operationally defined to mean the lecturer had secured an overall rating of four out of five or above consistently in the student feedback questionnaire (SFQ) administered by the college at the end of every semester. The participant selection criteria were set in this way because normally popular teachers have more willingness to make changes to cater to their students' needs, since better psychological preparation has been shown to have a positive association with behavioural adaptability (Yu, 2021). It was a homogeneous group because all our target participants were motivated to adjust. Invitations were sent to 10

⁴ English in Hong Kong is sometimes regarded as a 'foreign language' and sometimes as a 'second language' as speakers vary in their degree of usage and competence. This article uses "English as a second language" not only for consistency's sake but also because English is the second language for these lecturers we interviewed.

sought-after lecturers via email, and two male and two female teachers agreed to participate voluntarily in this research. Consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews were conducted.

3.2. Data Collection

We collected data² by accessing documents and conducting individual interviews, as described below.

Documents. We gathered seven emails from college senior management, 27 post-teaching reports from the academic English teams, six college newsletters, about ten college internal emails, two meeting memos and students' assessment results from the English teams. Three prompts were used to guide our document selection:

- (1) What reactions had the college and government shown towards ERT?
- (2) At the college, what were the English language lecturers' communication and learning experiences during the ERT?
- (3) What had the English lecturers done when facing difficulties during the ERT? These documents were valuable sources of information to enable the researchers to understand the core phenomenon in the qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2012). All the documents were identified by a unique code (e.g., "Email/C/020620" meant the item was an email from college senior management sent on 6 February 2020).

Interviews. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with the four participants as part of the investigation. As our participants were experienced English lecturers who were popular in the college, they were comfortable talking with us. The interviews allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of our participants' experiences and perceptions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). A semi-structured interview form was used to guide the interviews. It covered the following main themes: adjustment towards class suspension, perceptions of the pandemic, strategies adopted, difficulties, and successful examples. Interview questions were developed by the researchers based on the literature in the field (e.g., Cohen et al., 2011) and were reviewed by an expert who had rich experience in using technology in ESL. We then ran a pilot study with a colleague who had also experienced ERT in another college. Explanations for each item were checked, suggestions for wording were induced, and the interview questions were

revised accordingly.

Each interview lasted around 90 minutes and was conducted and recorded using Teams (VCS). The interviews were conducted mainly in Cantonese, with English as a supplementary language to make sure interviewees could express their truthful feelings in the language in which they felt most comfortable.

²The interview data is not published here due to the word limit. The authors are willing to share the English transcription privately upon request.

3.3. Data Analysis

All the interviews were transcribed into English by our research assistant, who holds a doctoral degree in English.

The study adopted a thematic analysis, as we were looking for themes in the data. Both the interview and document data were hand coded; the steps commonly used in analysing qualitative data were then applied (Creswell, 2012). We approached the data without prior codes but were guided by the interview questions. When we read the interview transcripts, we wrote notes in the margins. These notes recorded our first impressions, such as “lecturers were given three days to learn VCS”. Initially, we created 21 codes (which were individually numbered); after revisions, we reduced the number of codes to five. With the final list, we coded the interviews by assigning information using the respective codes. The coded information from each interview was organized into tables. We then looked for themes in the data.

To ensure the accuracy of the data analysis, as recommended by Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell and Walter (2016), all the interview transcripts were sent back to the participants to see whether they wanted to correct, add or delete any of the information; the participants were also able to examine the findings and suggest corrections. One participant requested omitting some personal information from the transcript and findings.

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the qualitative data revealed that Hong Kong ESL lecturers experienced various challenges during the ERT. The challenges not only involve a range of problems that occurred at the initial stage of the ERT but also relate to interaction with the students and online marking. The experiential accounts also demonstrated that all the participants adopted different strategic

responses to various challenges in order to help students achieve satisfactory learning outcomes. The results are presented in accordance with the research questions.

RQ1. What pedagogical challenges did ESL lecturers have to face from January to June 2020 in their ERT in HK?

Obstacles relating to the lecturer's technology competency and the re-design of teaching materials for online teaching were found at the preparation stage of the ERT. As time went by, the major challenges became interactions with students, setting assessments and online marking.

Technological Competency

Shortly after the institution announced the policy that all teaching was to be conducted online, all the lecturers actively attended training sessions for synchronous and asynchronous online teaching and started to prepare for their online teaching. As it was necessary to switch to synchronous online teaching within a few days, teachers spent a large amount of time learning how to use communication tools (e.g., Microsoft Teams and Zoom) and other available software to meet the new teaching demands. This was illustrated by the following comment:

I didn't know how to use Teams. In just a few days, we downloaded the stuff from the IT Unit website, and some colleagues tried the new tools. And then step by step with the instruction from the IT colleagues and instructors, I tried the online mode. I am not technologically savvy, and I was not very confident in controlling the new apps, the internet, the teaching rhythm, and even some emergent classroom incidents. (Sophia, pseudonym)

As indicated by Sophia's interview excerpt, the lecturers were pushed to learn different software in a short time because they had no other choice. Students were informed of the forthcoming synchronous online teaching, and it seemed that most of Sophia's colleagues were able to learn to use the software quickly, so she had to spend days and nights learning in order to keep up with the others. All four of the interviewees confirmed that having a supportive learning community was crucial for them in learning the new technologies in a short period of time. This was consistent with findings from Siripol and Wilang's (2021) research, indicating that teachers in Thailand had to deal with many difficulties in adapting to a new digital era, such as managing online platforms. In a similar way, Al-Khresheh (2021) identified that

teachers need special skills, such as becoming familiar with new technology, in order to conduct effective ELF teaching during the pandemic. With the help of other colleagues and IT trainers in the college, Sophia learned the necessary skills within days. The data from internal emails and post-teaching reports of this college showed that all the lecturers from the academic English teams were able to use synchronous online teaching in the first week of the new online teaching mode. In this case, the training provided by the college played a crucial role as lecturers had to master specific professional skills to implement the ERT (Amarullah & Imaniah, 2020; Moorhouse et al., 2021). A lack of training could demotivate educators, as Siripol and Wilang (2021) reported in their research.

Compared with most other tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, the community college that was the focus of our investigation reacted to the need for online learning during the pandemic in a very proactive way, which directly affected the teachers' levels of pedagogical adjustment. This college began delivering Teams software lessons in the middle of February 2020, which was much earlier than most schools and tertiary institutions in Hong Kong (see Moorhouse, 2020; Pao, 2020). In addition, the college provided IT training sessions and equipment loan schemes to teaching staff during the preparation week. As the teaching staff observed that the college's response to the crisis was swift and timely, they also felt a need to adjust accordingly. This was quite unlike a case reported by Cheung (2021) in which one school's lackadaisical approach to e-learning contributed to teachers' apathy.

Preparing Online Course Materials

At the preparation stage of ERT, adapting teaching materials specifically for an online mode was another challenge that the teachers had to face. Because it was ERT, the college had announced that all the course materials should remain the same, in the hope that the pandemic would end soon, and all the courses would be able to go back to normal. Nevertheless, as experienced frontline teachers, due to the drastic change all the interview participants felt a need to change the ways in which they delivered their teaching materials. This was illustrated by the following comment:

Teaching materials that I used for online teaching needed to be refined. For example, the PowerPoint presentations (PPTs) for students each week had to be complemented with some self-study elements, because some students might not be in HK and some were not fully online during lessons. Also, we had to provide PPTs with embedded voice-overs (Paul, pseudonym).

This interview excerpt illustrates that teacher (at least the popular ones) were willing to adopt course materials that were desirable for ERT, though Egbert (2020) has claimed that during ERT, it was understandable if language teachers, in the short term, do not worry about how well the content is designed but focus just on providing access to it.

If they cared for students' learning outcomes, however, the teachers put effort into changing the course materials and spent much time on the adaption of materials. Though Paul was highly motivated to make changes and did not use any negative words such as "difficult" or "challenge" in the interview, he also agreed that his eyesight was impaired due to the extended online activities. This was in line with Alolaywi's (2021) study that explored English as a lingua franca (ELF) learners' perception towards online learning during the crisis and in which it was reported that excessive screen time resulted in eyesight problems.

When preparing online course materials, the teachers' major concern was time because they were given only a few days to learn the VCS, as well as adapting the PPTs with embedded voice-overs. As Sophia said, "*During the initial few days, I tried and tried without sleep*". Other interview participants also indicated the same issue with dealing with time constraints.

Online Assessment and Online Marking

During the ERT, evaluating the students' performance fairly raised another issue, namely: designing online tests and marking scripts online. This was illustrated by the following comments:

Designing online tests, which had to be changed to open-ended questions, as those "all or none" questions are not appropriate when testing online (Paul).

When I set questions on my part, which was about grammar, I found it was hard to make them into open-ended questions (Sophia).

My teammates and I thought about how to do the online marking. "Using Apple pencil, printing for marking, or using the rubrics on Moodle?" I worked with IT staff, and my partner worked on the assignment. We didn't have enough sleep (Alice, pseudonym).

From these three excerpts, we can see that the lecturers found it challenging to design the test questions and to grade students' test scripts, due to the limitations of online assessment and

their lack of experience. Sophia, for instance, stressed the obstacles to assessing students' grammar competences in the design of open-ended questions, as she had never had this experience, and there were no references to consult. Similarly, Al-Khresheh (2021) also reported that due to students' unethical behaviour during assessments, teachers found it hard to evaluate students' learning fairly during the pandemic. At this stage, again, one of the issues that all the interviewees reported was not enough sleep.

Interaction with Students

Between March and April 2020, when the teachers had become familiar with the different functions of Teams, the coding of all the interviews showed that interaction with students was the biggest challenge. This challenge arose due to the students' unwillingness to switch on their webcams and microphones. This was illustrated by the following comment:

The classroom interaction, which I am used to, is hard to achieve in the online mode. I cannot see students' faces. Yet, switching on the camera all the time seems not possible for students. Also, in the F2F mode, I would walk around, but I can't do it while using Teams. (Terry, pseudonym)

This interview excerpt demonstrates that the teachers felt that when teaching online, they lost normal interaction with students. This finding was consistent with the results of Rehn, Maor and McConney (2018), who reported that in the absence of physical proximity, facilitating interactions with students through a screen can be demanding.

RQ2. What strategic responses did ESL lecturers adopt in response to the pedagogical challenges they encountered?

In this study, all the lecturers were able to make swift pedagogical adjustments because of their passion for good teaching, their commitment to self-learning and a very supportive learning environment. This was illustrated by the following comment:

I learned and explored via clips of YouTube, and I found a lot of relevant clips, which I needed, such as how to use Kahoot. What is more important is it is only an idea when you learn via YouTube clips—it is just the first step of basic learning, but you have to practice and exchange experiences with others. That's why peer support is essential. (Sophia)

Sophia's commentary shows a common strategy that all four lecturers employed: watching tutorials on YouTube to discover new teaching tools and to facilitate better online teaching. This puts the emphasis on personal dedication and commitment. It should be added that all the interviewees were full-time lecturers, so they also had pressure from the college management and their students. Although such pressure was not formally verbalized, the interviewees felt compelled to achieve excellence due to high expectations from different parties.

The interview excerpt from Sophia also stressed another strategy that was adopted by all interviewees: learning the norms of work adjustment and receiving emotional support by embracing a community. The department of all of these interviewees offered training sessions and sharing sessions; colleagues exchanged ideas and offered mutual support to those who worked on the same team. Such a supportive community contributes greatly to the interviewees' completion of their tasks. Therefore, we argue that actively joining a supportive community is an important strategy in the adjustment process, as it is vital to life satisfaction and psychological well-being. The supportive community that Sophia and her colleagues embraced can be seen as a type of *community of practice* because the members joined in common activities, and they learned through mutual engagement in the activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

5. Limitations and Recommendations

It must be said that this study was conducted only with four "popular" ESL lecturers in one college and that because of this limited sample, the findings cannot be over-generalized. Rather, the major strengths of this research are its scope and the findings on strategic responses in relation to ERT. With the virus still spreading globally at the time of writing, we hope that more training will be provided to frontline English lecturers, so that they can have better synchronous engagement with their students. In addition, a variety of teaching modes, such as adopting flipped learning plus online consultations, could be feasible in the event of crises or emergencies. Facilitating online assessment and online marking are other areas that need further investigation.

6. Conclusion

This study has investigated a sample of HK ESL lecturers' strategic responses to pedagogical challenges during the ERT from January to June 2020. The analysis of interview data and documents suggests that ESL teachers encountered diverse challenges and adopted different strategies to deal with these challenges in order to help their students to adapt and learn during the pandemic. Of paramount importance in this process of facilitating successful pedagogical

adjustment were willingness to change and a supportive working environment.

While this study provides merely a glimpse into ESL teachers' emergency adjustment experiences, further research could involve a longitudinal study to explore ESL lecturers' strategic responses over time, especially with regard to ways of enhancing students' online engagement. This would provide a fuller picture of the adaptation process of ESL lecturers and help future cohorts in adapting to synchronous online teaching in different educational environments.

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Appendix

Emergency remote teaching interview codes

	Sophia (pseudonym)	Paul (pseudonym)	Terry (pseudonym)	Alice (pseudonym)
1. first reaction				
2. feeling of class suspension				
3. adjustment				

toward class suspension				
4. motivation of adjustment				
5. personal development during pandemic				
6. perception of changing social context				
7. feeling toward ERT				
8. adjustment of teaching design				
9. technical preparation in ERT				
10. strategies adopted				
11. difficulties and success				
12. health concern				
13. communication with colleagues				
14. supportive community				
15. other comments				
16. creating a supportive community				
17. other information				
18. suggestion for institution				
19. advice for students				
20. suggestions for colleagues				
21. further adjustment				

COVID-19: Challenges of Online Teaching among ESL Educators of Private Higher Learning Institutions in Malaysia

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Abstract

The serious consequences of COVID-19 have resulted in a temporary slowdown in different sectors of daily activities including the education sector. In Malaysia, the impact of the pandemic has caused all the classes to be conducted online. The present study aims to investigate the challenges faced by English Second Language (ESL) educators in online teaching. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth phone interviews were conducted with 20 ESL educators of Private Higher Learning Institutions. The findings indicated that they encountered problems such as isolation, lack of motivation in online teaching, technical difficulties with online teaching tools, time-consuming resources and work-life imbalance. The findings further revealed that ESL educators' work-life imbalance had emotionally impacted their families and social relations, which in turn had affected their professional lives. Thus, by understanding the problems, educational institutions can come up with short and long-term strategies to ensure that ESL educators can be productive regardless of the mode of teaching activities. Among them would be introducing pertinent courses in online teaching, Internet training, and the integration of multimedia resources that could improve online teaching.

Keywords: COVID-19, ESL educators, online teaching

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1. Introduction

The sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused many problems in the education landscape whereby the English Second Language (ESL) educators have to adopt the new method of online teaching. Consequently, all educational activities have moved to online teaching in Private Higher Learning Institutions (PHLIs). Educators have struggled to switch to the new norm of online teaching within a short period of time especially in ESL.

A recent report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that in 150 countries globally including Malaysia, many educational institutions had closed since March 2020 (WHO, 2020). This sudden change in the education sector, has resulted in the implementation of alternative teaching methods (Oyedotun, 2020). This new teaching approach also known as online distance learning (ODL), offers the educators and students a new platform whereby they can interact for the purpose of teaching and learning (Khairuddin, Mohd Arif, Khairuddin, 2020).

ODL seems to empower students to learn individually from their homes or wherever they are by managing their own learning pace and time based on their needs and preferences (Amado-Salvatierra, Hilera, Tortosa, Rizzardini & Piedra, 2016; Wieland & Kollias, 2020). The educators have accepted this learning mode optimistically and they have made adjustments to progress steadily (Al-Rahmi, Alias, Othman, Alzahrani, Alfarraj, Saged & Abdul, 2018; Schwartzman, 2020).

Since the implementation of the Movement Controlled Order (MCO) in Malaysia, teaching and learning activities could not be conducted in the traditional way. Online teaching was introduced as an interim measure was expected to end in 2020 (Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2020). Thus, educators had to grasp this new method of teaching and apply it in their teaching (Mei & Ka, 2018; Wei & Chou, 2020). However, both students and educators had encountered problems in adapting from the traditional face-to-face teaching to online teaching and learning.

Although ESL online teaching and learning have been used in educational institutions worldwide in ESL classes, little has been done to study the efficacy of online teaching and

learning among the educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this paper focuses on the problems of educators and the methods to overcome these problems.

Based on the problems faced by the educators, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. What are the major problems among ESL educators of PHLIs in the implementation of online teaching?
2. To what extent can educators assist in addressing online problems?

The following research objectives have been developed in accordance with the research questions.

1. The major problems encountered by ESL educators of PHLIs when implementing online teaching.
2. The extent to which educators in PHLI can assist to solve online problems.

2. Literature Review

The new method of online teaching is viewed as a solution to overcome the current teaching crisis created by the pandemic. The Malaysian government closed all educational institutions like the rest of the world and switched to online classes. This change to online classes requires new teaching materials to be designed and developed based on technology and which are pedagogically appropriate (Schwartzman, 2020). The question is whether educators can accept the instructions from the management and introduce the transformation from face-to-face classes to online teaching within a short period of time. The impact of online teaching depends on the readiness of both educators and students to accept the new form of instructions that embraces technological knowledge (Jacqueline, 2020).

The impact and efficacy of online teaching depend on the technological competence of educators and their readiness to change quickly to this new method of teaching. Bender (2003) has advocated that to succeed in managing online teaching, instructors have to: (1) attain the needed skills to be an online teacher; (2) have prior experience in being an online student; and (3) assist students in gaining experience and use approaches to be excellent online learners. Bender's suggestion gives a strong hint that the knowledge of educators in technology plays a significant role in conducting successful online classes.

Carey (2020) argued that during the pandemic due to the quarantine the problem was not whether the online mode of teaching provided good quality of education, it was how academic institutions were able to adopt online teaching successfully. However, presently

educators are concerned with the objective of online teaching that is, whether students practise what they have been taught without the personal attention of educators (Dhawan, 2020). And also, the educators and students need to be sufficiently prepared to balance their work, families and social lives. Although there are numerous forms of technologies available for online instructions, they sometimes create difficulties which hamper learning and eventually lead to boredom during online classes (Favale, Soro, Trevisan, Drago & Mellia, 2020).

The online mode of teaching requires the knowledge, skills and confidence of teachers to achieve successful interaction with the learners that indicate the competence of the educators (Lauermann & König, 2016). Similarly, Aboderin (2015) too believed that educators, just like students, faced problems during online teaching due to lack of Internet access, inadequate technological devices and software. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, when educators worked from campus, they used the facilities provided by their faculties but now they had to rely on their own resources at home.

The success in overcoming the problems of ESL online teaching and learning, have been discussed by scholars. Researchers conducted online teaching have suggested different approaches, theories and assessment criteria that emphasise quality online teaching and learning (Tinungki, & Nurwahyu, 2020; Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020; Juhary, 2020; Vladova, Ullrich, Bender & Gronau, 2021; Budur, Demir, & Cura, 2021). Similar approaches and steps have also been adopted by the Malaysian Education Ministry with the assistance of higher learning institutions to achieve positive learning results. Regardless of the new procedures and guidelines introduced by the Education Ministry, there is still uncertainty whether educators in Malaysia are prepared for online teaching, especially in PHLIs. Therefore, the present study intends to investigate the problems faced by educators in ESL online teaching and learning during the pandemic.

3. Methodology

Setting

This study adopted a qualitative research approach as Creswell (2018) noted that spoken data can be analysed qualitatively. The data was collected with the consent of the educators and PHLIs. The selected respondents were from established PHLIs from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. All the PHLIs are approved by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) which offers courses to students from foundation to PhD levels. To add, there are also 15 public Government Higher Learning Institutions in the country monitored by MQA with their entry requirements being comparatively higher than PHLIs. As for the present study, the PHLIs offer more than

20 courses ranging from foundation, diploma, degree, masters to PhD levels. To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, the original messages and emails are not shared as appendices.

Sampling

There were 20 educators who participated in this study and they have more 10-12 years of teaching experience. Fifteen of them have obtained their masters while five have doctoral degrees. All of them are teaching the English language and linguistics. They have attended several professional development programmes offered by the university to enable them to conduct online teaching and learning classes.

Instrument

Due to the restricted movement control, primary data were collected through phone interviews from September 2020 to November 2020. ZOOM and Google were not used due to poor Internet connection. An online form was dispatched to obtain the consent of the respondents. The phone interviews were entirely conducted in English to accommodate the preference of respondents. The semi-structured interview with each respondent lasted between 30 and 45 minutes while the entire interview session with all the correspondents was between 10 and 12 hours. The questions were adapted and modified from the study conducted by Krishnan, Mello, Kok, Munian, Ching, Kandasamy, Ramalingam, Baskaran and Kanan (2020) (see Appendix A). All the interviews were initiated by introducing the purpose of the study, assuring the confidentiality of their responses, explaining how the information will be used in the study and finally asking questions in relation to the problems they encountered with online classes during COVID-19. All the interview sessions were conducted during weekends as the respondents were busy with online classes during weekdays. An 'E1' letter was used as an abbreviation in the analysis for each Educator. At the end of each interview, all the notes taken from the respondents were read back to them to ensure that all their responses were complete and exact.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The data were analysed qualitatively based on the themes. Only those responses that were relevant to the objectives of the study were chosen for analysis. In analysing of the data, Patton's (1990) thematic analysis was employed. This process is crucial considering the vast amounts of rich data gathered at the end of all the interview sessions. At the initial stage of data

analysis, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Then, all the interview responses were thoroughly skimmed and assigned codes using NVIVO. This software program was used for qualitative studies to analyse spoken texts, written texts, audio, video and images. The present data were collected from the spoken content, therefore NVIVO was used for the coding purpose. Once all the data were coded, the next step was to put together all the sections in an orderly manner based on the code. In the next stage, the collated codes were systematically organised into different themes. Lastly, each theme was reviewed and refined to see whether the data were clear, supported the theme and did not overlap with other themes. Two experts in transcription and coding were engaged to varify the transcriptions to determine the reliability and validity.

4. Findings

The responses of the educators were analysed to identify the problems they encountered on online teaching and learning. Through in-depth interviews, the following five problems emerged, namely, (1) isolation, (2) lack of motivation in online teaching, (3) technical difficulties with online teaching tools, (4) time-consuming resources, and (5) work-life balance. The responses from the educators were summarised as follows:

(1) Isolation

- E1 ...I am surrounded with lots of students but now I am feeling lonely...
- E3 ...I am feeling lonely when I have online classes...
- E5 ...I feel I talk alone and no mutual interactions...
- E11 ...feeling empty like talking to the walls...
- E12 ...no mutual conversations...
- E17 ...less interaction with students, students became passive and not responsive, worried and shy to talk in in live class...
- E18 ...not connected to people, only laptop or computer- Computer- Mediated Communication...

From the above utterances, it was evident that respondents E1, E3, E5, E11, E12, E17 and E18 felt isolated. These educators revealed the teaching environment had changed following the

transition from face- to-face to online teaching. Online teaching had caused them to feel lonely as there was hardly mutual interaction with students.

The Educators' expressions such as '*I am surrounded with lots of students but now I am feeling lonely*', '*I am feeling lonely when I have online classes*' and '*I feel I talk alone and no mutual interaction*' clearly reveal their isolation'. E11 felt "like talking to the walls" and E 17 agreed there was "less interaction with students" while conducting their teaching tasks. E18 pointed out "human connection" was lacking "via computer-mediated communication".

The educators expected their students to respond to their questions instead they were quiet and waited for their educators to provide the answers. Although the educators were teaching online classes, they felt isolated when students remained silent and "passive" without interacting with them.

(2) Lack of motivation in online teaching

- E1 ...not all lessons/subjects are effective when delivered online. I have to think about whether the lessons will help students connect with me, each other, and the subject matter...
- E2 ...unable to interact/ discussed with other educators or working colleagues regarding problems occurs while doing online teaching. All educators have different multiple problems with their online teaching...
- E7 ...feel that they should be equipped with several trainings to adopt the new transition in teaching and feel demotivated when lack of teaching skills via online...
- E9 ...self-solve problem. I have to solve problems by myself in terms of technical and students' issues...

There was a lack of motivation as expressed by E1, E2, E7 and E9 who revealed that their quality and way of teaching were affected while teaching online as they could not deliver effectively their lessons.

They were also demotivated as they could not discuss with their colleagues and solve their problems. This predicament of not being able "to interact/ discussed with other educators or working colleagues regarding problems" was expressed by E2. Similarly, E7 "felt demotivated with the "lack of teaching skills via online". Just like the other educators, E9 had

“to solve problems by myself in terms of technical and students’ issues”. From the problems expressed by the educators, it was evident they felt demotivated when teaching online.

(3) Technical difficulties with online teaching tools

- E1 ...poor strengths of internet connection...
- E2 ...have different teaching styles...
- E3 ...Not all students have reliable access to technology especially those who live in the rural areas. Moreover, not all students ‘digital natives’, as some of them not technological savvy when it comes to handling unacquainted software. Always need to check chat box if any issues faced by students which can alert the educator opt out for alternative arrangements. This consumes time. Educators are not IT support team and they can’t fix everything...
- E7 ...unable to do student centered learning, games, class discussion. Q & A doesn’t take place effectively...
- E17 ...takes time when uploading teaching materials in online platforms...
- E18 ...educators are not well off with all the online tools used or been told to use and lack of IT knowledge...
- E19 ...complaints from students lack IT knowledge that they can’t hear the educators due to instability of WIFI connection...
- E20 ...malfunctions of the platforms itself...

From the above excerpts of the educators, it was evident they faced multiple technical problems daily when conducting online classes. According to E1, a basic problem was “poor strengths of internet connection”. The Internet problem was also felt by the students as revealed by E3, E17 further added that it took “time when uploading teaching materials in online platforms”. Apart from that, E20 mentioned there were “malfunctions of the platforms itself”. E18 further added “educators are not well off with all the online tools used or been told to use and lack of IT knowledge”. The Internet problem was also felt by the students as revealed by E19 who said “complaints from students lack IT knowledge that they can’t hear the educators due to instability of WIFI connection”. As a result of the poor Internet service student-centered learning, games, class discussion, Q&A could not be conducted. The excerpts of the educators revealed they encountered numerous problems when they conducted online classes.

Research has revealed that sufficient training should be regularly provided to educators to help them prepare suitable materials for their online classes. This is supported by Sywelem, Al-Harbi, Fathema, and Witte (2012) who suggest that educators should have adequate training to make them successful and productive in online teaching. Similarly, Hardaker and Singh (2011) have reiterated that educators need to acquire technological skills to develop good resource materials for online classes.

(4) Time-consuming resources

- E8 ...educators need to understand each student's learning style...
- E10 ...always available to help students in the learning process via email or social media groups...
- E11 ...need to do more preparation, in terms of educator notes, assignments, test, project work, ppt video presentation...
- E14 ...takes a lot time when uploading the teaching material...
- E16 ...we have to keep track of students' attendance, final exam entries, scores, reminder letters via online is really tough...

The excerpts above provide a glimpse of the time-consuming resources of the educators. As revealed by E8 the introduction of the online classes consumed more time as there was a need to "understand each student's learning style". It was further elaborated by E10 who said that students needed more help "in the learning process via email or social media groups". E11 agreed that there was a "need to do more preparation, in terms of educator notes, assignments, test, project work, ppt video presentation". E14 also shared the views of E11 that it was time-consuming as it took "a lot time when uploading the teaching material". Besides the increase in the regular workload, E16 informed there were other time-consuming tasks like keeping "track of students' attendance, final exam entries, scores, reminder letters via online is really tough". From the opinions expressed by these educators, it was evident the online teaching method was time-consuming as it had imposed additional tasks that demand equal attention.

(5) Work-life balance

- E2 ... more stressful and emotionally affected...
- E9 ...parents' interference when their children can't cope with online learning and they complained to head of faculties. Most of the time blame the educators even when any technical problems arise at their student's laptop or computers...
- E12 ...anxiety whether lessons have taken successfully...

E14 ...extended working hours than usual in a day...

E19 ...no family time or personal lifestyle affected...

The above expressions clearly revealed that the new online teaching method had impacted the educators' lives. E2 stated that life had become "more stressful and emotionally affected". According to E19, there were more parental interference to settle the problems encountered by their children like technical issues related to online classes and if he did not comply, the parents sent their "complaints to head of faculties". There was "anxiety" in E12 whether the lessons were successful or not. In addition, E14 felt his duties had "extended working hours than usual in a day". Finally, E19 expressed there was "no family time" and "personal lifestyle" was also affected. Based on the interviews it was evident the normal lives of educators were disrupted after the introduction of the online classes. The educators' personal lives were affected badly with long working hours.

The need to shift from face-to face learning to an online format has already become an integral part of many educational institutions in different parts of the world. The different forms of changes ranging from isolation to work-life balance were contributing factors that affected the quality of online teaching.

5. Discussion

The results indicated there were five issues encountered by the educators namely isolation, lack of motivation in online teaching, technical difficulties with online teaching tools, time-consuming resources and work-life balance. Past studies had proven that online learning offers many benefits as it was more flexible and allowed learners to be actively engaged in learning (Dhawan, 2020). Students had the privilege of taking classes anytime and anywhere (Luaran, Samsuri, Nadzri & Rom, 2014; Chan, Ranjit, Jamiah Baba & Eliza Parman, 2007). Besides, through online activities, students' interaction improved via asynchronous and synchronous tools such as e-mail, forums, chats, and video conferences (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Despite the advantages the online learning platforms offered, challenges related to online teaching were evident among the educators at PHILs s particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the findings obtained from this research, it was firmly established by the educators in this investigation that they felt unenthusiastic about online teaching and learning and favoured face-to-face method. They encountered problems in preparing lessons and materials for online classes which were challenging (Li & Irby, 2008). In fact, it was not that convenient to transfer the content of face-to-face materials to suit the online medium. This is supported by Choi and Park (2006), who lament that instructors face pedagogical problems, like not being able to

transfer their face-to-face lesson materials to the online environment effortlessly. Koehler, Mishra, Hershey, and Peruski (2004) stated that instructors were encouraged to take content, pedagogy, and technology into consideration when creating online lessons. König, Bremerich, Buchholtz, Fladung, and Glutsch (2020) provided an opposing view stating that instructors felt reluctant to change their teaching strategies especially in an online classroom setting.

Many educators also stated that they were unprepared to conduct online learning during the pandemic because of issues related to online communication efficiency. In line with the purpose of this investigation, a few inferences (implications) can be drawn. To start with, it was established that there was a lack of effort by educators to equip themselves with the latest developments regarding online learning. Next, the educators were unhappy with online teaching and learning as they experienced many difficulties and problems in contrast to in-person teaching. There was a predominant view among them that they would like to discontinue online instruction if they had the option for the upcoming semesters.

Osika, Johnson, and Butea (2019) said that the proficiency level of educators using technology was an important factor that contributed to their readiness to teach online. Responses from the educators revealed that a few of them with good Internet connectivity and IT skills favoured the online teaching and learning system and used their readily pre-recorded lectures that were uploaded to Google Classroom and YouTube. They wanted to avoid frustration caused by poor Internet connection. However, those who faced Internet connectivity issues found it a big obstacle when it came to online teaching and learning. Dhawan (2020, p. 16) in her study on “Online Learning: A Panacea in the Time of COVID-19 Crisis” agrees to this finding saying that, the “unavailability of proper digital tools, no internet connections, or iffy Wi-Fi connections can cause a lot of trouble due to which many students might lose out on learning opportunities”. Additionally, comments from educators who did not have a home based WIFI facility, revealed that the free broadband data provided was insufficient for conducting online teaching. This issue became evident when lecturers live streamed by utilising applications such as Google Meet, Zoom or Webex. In response to this finding, Chung, Noor, and Mathew (2020) concurs that Malaysian university educators using online teaching and learning faced problems during online classes as a result of unreliable Internet connections and broadband data limitations.

Hence, there is an urgent need for the Government to invest in long term infrastructure plans to develop high speed Internet connectivity (Chung, Subramaniam, & Christ, 2020). Efforts should also be made by private institutions to ensure that their faculty teaching staff are provided with good access to the required resources. Many universities have permitted students and educators who encounter poor Internet connectivity, especially those from the rural areas to return to their respective universities as there is better Internet connectivity to enable more

effective learning. Even this effort has not been very helpful or effective as the Internet speed at many campuses is slow and in dire need of upgrading. While the pandemic brought about online teaching and learning to public universities immediately, private universities too acted promptly in implementing technological tools and systems to enable a smooth transition from face-to-face to online teaching and learning.

Based on the analysis, it is evident that there is a sense of urgency in implementing online teaching and learning that has resulted from the pandemic. It is important for private institutions to re-evaluate current managerial or staff resources to enable online teaching and learning, assets and funds for technological upgrading, and implement regulations to support the critical requirements for online-based teaching, particularly for instructors. The anxiety of educators should be resolved as soon as possible to prevent issues that could hinder online teaching and learning. This can possibly be done by providing proper guidelines to help both educators and students with ways to access and use the different e-learning tools in online teaching and learning. In addition, Dhawan (2020) also suggested that to reduce digital divide, institutions can take initiatives to ensure that all the educational apps function on mobile phones to help students who do not have laptops.

6. Implications

For decades, educators have been comfortable with the traditional ways of teaching or face-to-face approach, hence, the hesitation and apprehension in accepting any new change. Under the current pandemic state, educators are left with no other alternative than to accept and change to the online teaching mode that works best for them and their students. They are placed in a critical situation and need to make use of the Open Educational Resources (OERs) that are free to guide them in their programs and subjects that interest them. Other than the OERs, educators and students can use the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) which have been introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia.

Another issue of particular importance in relation to the adoption of online teaching and learning is related to online appraisals, tests and exams. This aspect of online learning requires close scrutiny and careful planning by the university's examination department which should take extra care to ensure that there is accountability regarding the exams. These should include conforming to existing rules, conditions and strict Quality Assurance, and making sure online examinations are easily assessable, and technical problems like Internet availability and other related issues are fixed immediately.

Some of the steps that can be taken include conducting interactive ESL e-classes and

inclusive e-exams using Microsoft Teams as well as setting up a wide-range of e-library materials and self-paced learning. While a number of Malaysian universities are undertaking similar steps, more needs to be done to enable excellence in the presentation of lectures and courses. It can safely be said that many Malaysian universities that have been successful in this transformation, have met the needs of their students and have improved their ranking. The significance of online learning as a study option can enable educational institutions to attract overseas students to study in Malaysian universities, either in person or online from their countries. University managements should make greater efforts to transform online education from being seen as ‘the need of the hour’ into an opportunity to offer new ways of education.

7. Conclusion

The current investigation was undertaken in order to understand the problems encountered by educators better and, there is an urgent requirement by the universities to arrange additional training courses to prepare them to be more effective in offering online teaching. Besides improving the devices and applications utilised for online teaching and learning by the university, it is also vital to prevent educators from issues like wasting time dealing with a host of different web applications. The assistance from the universities can greatly assist in alleviating the problems of educators in relation to online teaching.

There are a few limitations to this investigation. The numerous issues involved in introducing online teaching must be clearly understood by the institutions in order to achieve success. Educators must be familiar with Internet technology and have a positive mind with regards to ODL for successful learning outcomes. For this to materialise, the necessary training must be provided to all educators and others for a university to succeed in attaining greater academic excellence. Educators should not only provide technical assistance to students but have proper training to use the various Internet-based technologies so that well-edited videos and tutorials can be presented productively. The training should not be like a brief refresher course but a realistic, inclusive and hands-on training designed to inculcate self-assurance in educators to apply the systems confidently.

All these issues are apparently interlinked with each other; hence if a problem arises and is not adequately resolved in the early stages, then the whole online presentation and learning system will be affected. For instance, if educators are inadequately training, then they will be spending more time to overcome the difficulties encountered by students. An unstable, slow Internet system, vulnerable to downtime, virus attacks and technical difficulties can result in annoyance and exasperation among educators.

Future research should be conducted with a larger group of participants, which include students from various faculties and multiple geographical locations. Additionally, research should also be undertaken to evaluate the possibility of the existence of mitigating features between lectures and students and their online teaching and learning preparedness. There is also a need to investigate academic achievement as a consequence of online learning. The findings from these investigations can support universities in their efforts to advance online teaching and learning. The results might also be useful to all institutions of higher learning that intend to institutionalise online education.

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Appendix A-Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How did you react when you were asked to switch to online teaching mode?
2. Were you mentally prepared to conduct online classes?
3. Do you have proper facilities to conduct the online class?
4. Does the university monitor you?
5. Does the university provide any facilities to assist your online teaching?
6. How do you feel after several weeks of online classes?
7. What are some of the challenges you faced during the online classes?
8. Were you able to overcome those challenges? If yes how? If no, why?

COVID-19 Changes Teaching Practices: An Autoethnographic Account of a Japanese EFL Teacher

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Abstract

COVID-19 has affected university educators on a global scale, and Japan is not an exception. Many EFL educators, including myself, began the academic year with much uncertainty as to how things would unfold. And, like many other EFL teachers in Japan, my spring semester classes were taught fully online. This study intends to illustrate the experience of a Japanese EFL university teacher amid COVID-19. It portrays how I initially changed my teaching practices to cope with the difficult situation but ended the semester with an increased feeling of competence as an educator. This experience is described autoethnographically in a three-part journey: *Sho, chiku, bai*. As Chang (2008) points out, one danger in autoethnography is excessive focus on the self. In order to avoid this, artifacts and comments of the students whom I taught were used for analysis in addition to autoethnographic reflections. Results pointed to three obstacles that I faced. Rewriting the course syllabus, getting students accustomed to information technology and altering my teaching practices. However, by the end of the semester students appeared to have developed close interpersonal relationships amongst their peers, improved IT literacy, and increased their motivation to study English. These positive results boosted my feeling of efficacy as an educator. Findings imply that there may be ways to change this tough COVID-19 situation into an opportunity to grow as a teacher. The research may provide instructional ideas that could possibly be implemented into other Asian EFL educators' classrooms.

Key words: COVID-19, Japanese university EFL teacher, teaching practices

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1. Introduction

The spread of the pandemic has changed what was considered to be “normal” on a global scale in various industries including education. In Japan, a state of emergency was declared in some parts of the country as COVID-19 spread at alarming rates in urban areas. This measure was enacted until May in Tokyo making schools delay the start of their academic year which usually starts in April. A national survey of higher educational institutions conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) revealed that as of May 20, (MEXT, 2020b) 90% of universities and technical colleges were delivering online classes. With this change, lecturers were forced to alter their method of delivery, rewrite their syllabus, and learn new computer systems. This study aims to investigate the process in which, I, a Japanese university EFL teacher in Tokyo, navigated through this dark tunnel caused by the pandemic. Using an autoethnographic approach, this study illustrates how I initially started the academic year doubtful and uncertain. It also portrays how I maneuvered through the spring semester, ending it somewhat unexpectedly with a sense of accomplishment and competence as a teacher. The pronoun “I” will be used to refer to myself throughout the paper. To avoid excessive focus on the self (Chang, 2008), artifacts (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) and student comments were used to recall the emotional journey I went through. The study offers insights into possible EFL classroom practices to cope with the challenges introduced by COVID-19.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teaching and learning amid COVID-19 in Asia

Since the World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020), it appears much research has been conducted in this area (i.e. Alaghbari, 2021; Khan & Hameed, 2021). Roughly speaking, these studies may be categorized into three according to its area of focus: teachers’ experiences (i.e. Nugroho, Ilmiani, & Rekha, 2020; Yi & Jang, 2020), students’ experiences (i.e. John, 2021; Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020), and teachers’ and students’ experiences (i.e. Mishra, Gupta, & Shree, 2020).

Out of studies that focus on teachers’ experiences, I will introduce two which explore EFL teachers’ experiences in Asia. The first is a research conducted by Nugroho et al. (2020)

and the other is an investigation by Yi and Jang (2020). Nugroho et al. (2020) probed the difficulties and insights of teaching online during COVID-19. They researched 17 Indonesian EFL university teachers using semi-structured interviews and self-written reflections. Results showed that the challenges experienced were: (a) deprivation of an e-learning platform, (b) time required to create online learning materials, (c) internet connection problems and limited quota, (d) lack of motivation and engagement of the students, and (e) required knowledge of digital technology. Some insights were suggested as well. These concerned the need for (a) financial investment by universities to build an e-learning platform and improve information and communication technology (ICT), (b) teachers to design modules which can continue to be used after COVID-19, (c) teachers to improve their teaching methods by creating lessons focused on student-centered learning, and (d) universities to offer regular professional development courses.

The second study which was conducted on EFL teachers is by Yi and Jang (2020). They explored two elementary school teachers' experiences in South Korea. The two teachers cotaught and had conducted remote teaching amid the COVID-19 breakout. They provided one to two video clips per week for their Grade 3 to 4 students to watch. Yi and Jang (2020) describe the practice and pedagogy of the teachers and conclude that remote teaching seems to make teachers reconsider their former teaching practices. Findings recommended that remote teaching allows teachers to (a) consider deliberate and effective use of their second languages, (b) negotiate more in order to develop the lesson plans and (c) take on new responsibilities as a teacher (i.e. making videos).

Results from Nugroho et al. (2020) and Yi and Jang (2020)'s analysis of Asian EFL teachers' experiences during COVID-19 provide noteworthy suggestions to educators. However, they do not fully illustrate voices of the teacher as an insider. One way to express teachers' inner voices is by using autoethnography. Autoethnography is an approach to research that construes personal experiences and tries to understand this in relation to society and culture (Ellis et al., 2011). In autoethnography, the researcher is an insider who tries to analyze how his or her personal experience contributes to understanding an environment or a particular situation (Chang, 2008; Yazan, Canagarajah, & Jain, 2020). In the next section, I will introduce autoethnographic research which reports personal experiences during COVID-19.

2.2. COVID-19 research conducted using autoethnography

A quick search on Google scholar using the key words "autoethnography" and "COVID-19"

reveal more than 3600 entries (as of May 18, 2021). This shows how much attention autoethnography is receiving as a method to report individuals' experiences during the pandemic. Much of the research in autoethnography appears to use collaborative autoethnography. In collaborative autoethnography, data are gathered from multiple sources (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013). An example of a research conducted using collaborative autoethnography is one by Peters et al. (2020). They collected 15 autoethnographical texts of students at a university in Beijing and investigated how students who were connected virtually but apart from one another physically coped during the peak of the pandemic. The study provides accounts of the feelings and realities that students experienced and illustrates how they wrestled with the unexpected situation (Peters et al., 2020). Wilson et al. (2020) conducted another study which is smaller in scale. They studied four university students (from Australia and Singapore) individually and asked them to reflect on their experiences during COVID-19. Analysis of data suggested that the students appeared to find it difficult to build social connections and felt detached from their experiences.

Collaborative autoethnography is an effective method to provide multiple perspectives of a phenomena (Roy & Uekusa, 2020). However, autoethnography presented through the lens of a single individual may also be worthwhile as social context can be explored in more detail. An example of an autoethnography written by an Asian teacher on her account of teaching during the pandemic is one by Kim (2020). Kim (2020) does not explicitly state that she is conducting autoethnography. However, her account appears to be presented autoethnographically. In her study, she describes how she redesigned her preservice teacher education course in early childhood education, giving the students opportunities to teach children online in response to the pandemic. She describes her experience in three phases: planning, implementing, and reflecting. In addition to her autoethnography, she addresses preservice teachers' voices by including some of their written comments. Results suggested the importance of providing preservice teachers with the skills and opportunities to teach online.

Kim (2020)'s study contributes to a better understanding of an Asian university teacher's experience during COVID-19 and the process in which a teacher changed her teaching style under the unexpected circumstances. However, it is not in an EFL context nor is she situated in Asia. Furthermore, university policies during COVID-19 are not explicitly explained, making it somewhat difficult to understand the broader social context she was in. However, learners and contexts should not be treated as separate entities (Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015). Therefore, the current study aims to provide insight into these domains by using an autoethnographic approach to elucidate an EFL university teacher's experience in

Japan during COVID-19 while not losing sight of its relation to the wider social environment.

3. Methodology

As described before, the research design employed for this study is autoethnography. According to Poulos (2021), autoethnography concerns “an observational data-driven phenomenological method of narrative research and writing that aims to offer tales of human social and cultural life that are compelling, striking, and evocative (showing or bringing forth strong images, memories, or feelings)” (p. 5). The methodology taken for this study is explained in the sections below. First, information of participants, duration, and data collection are provided. Next, data analysis and data presentation are described.

3.1. Participants

The participant of this study was a part-time Japanese EFL university teacher who teaches first-year EFL university students who major in early childhood education.

3.2. Duration

The duration of the autoethnographic account was spring semester of 2020. Spring semester for universities in Japan is usually from April to July. However, because of the pandemic, this was from May to August at the university where I taught at for AY2020.

3.3. Data collection

This study collected three forms of data: a) autoethnographic reflections, b) artifacts (in the form of emails and reflective journal entries and c) student comments (through written student accounts at the end of the semester). The first form of data were autoethnographic reflections. They contain intuitive reflective responses, which are said to ultimately lead to self-investigation and self-awareness (Cunliffe, 2016). These were written after the end of the spring semester as accounts looking back on my experiences. The second form of data were artifacts. Because autoethnography sees the individual as situated within a society, I tried to include a thick description of culture (Geertz, 1973) to increase understanding of the social context. This, in part, was done by analyzing emails sent to and from university administrators where I worked at, and reflective journal entries which were kept during spring semester 2020. Reflective journal entries were referred to in order to accurately retrieve emotions I was having at the time. The third form of data were student comments. At the end of the spring semester, students were asked to write about the following: How was your EFL course this semester?

Students typed this on their electronic devices and submitted this online. To maintain authenticity, students were told they could write in a language of their choice. All comments were downloaded in an excel file and reorganized with the student comment written next to the corresponding student's number who had written the comment. As student comments were originally written in Japanese, I translated them into English, which was double checked by a Japanese-English bilingual. Data gathering of the autoethnographic reflections were assisted by artifacts and student comments.

3.4. Data analysis

Data were investigated analytically. Ellis et al. (2011) recommends that autoethnographers recognize and write in a way that personal experiences illuminate cultural experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). This mindset was taken heed of when analyzing data for the current study. Emails were read and reread in chronological order of events as it was important to link this to government announcements regarding COVID-19. This was examined alongside the journal entries and student comments to see what kind of correlation between data could be seen. For example, in analyzing an email from university administrators, the kind of announcement made by the government before the email was received was searched, and journal entries were investigated. The journal entries reflected my teaching practice, and responses to this could be examined in student comments. The autoethnographic reflections sought to collectively describe the phenomena by analyzing the elements mentioned above comprehensively.

3.5. Data presentation

Results of the study will be presented in three phases: *sho*, *chiku*, *bai*. This is similar to Kim's (2020) approach. In reading Kim's (2020) journey, the three-phase composition made it easy to relate to her experience. It was believed that incorporating a similar approach would organize accounts in a clear and concise way.

The origin of *sho*, *chiku*, *bai* is said to be the Chinese phrase *saikansanyu*, meaning the three friends of winter. The Japanese words mean pine (*sho*), bamboo (*chiku*), and plum (*bai*). These three plants are evergreen and sprout beautiful leaves and flowers even during the harsh winter. They are strong enough to withstand the cold, and for this reason, represent rich vitality (*Sho-chiku-bai*, n.d.). The plants became a symbol of perpetual youth and longevity (*furouchouju*), starting from the old to the new eras in Japan: *sho*, during the Heian Period, *chiku* in the Muromachi Period, and *bai* amid the Edo Period. Furthermore, in Japan, they are used to represent three tiers. *Sho* is the lowest tier, *chiku* is the middle tier, and *bai* is the highest

tier. It was believed that using these words would illustrate phases in my emotional journey of teaching during the pandemic. The situation brought on by COVID-19 had many challenges and obstacles, similar to a harsh winter. I started from a state of much fear and anxiety, which gradually started to ease as the academic year unfolded. A brief summary of the three phases is as follows. In the first phase, *sho*, it was announced that classes would be conducted fully online in the spring semester by university administrators. In this phase, I rewrote my syllabus to reflect the altered method of delivery. In the second phase, *chiku*, I started to teach students with uncertainty. In the third and final phase, *bai*, I began to feel more relaxed and in control of my new teaching practices. The next section provides a thicker description of each phase.

4. Results and Discussion

Sho

April in Japan is usually filled with joyful events: Entrance ceremony for schools and companies, and the cherry blossom season. Moreover, spring 2020 was supposed to be special. Tokyo was expected to be preparing for the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. However, following the spread of COVID-19 everything was halted unexpectedly. Former Prime Minister Abe announced a state of emergency and requested that commencement of schools in some areas of Japan be delayed. As a part-time Japanese teacher who teaches EFL to first-year university students, I had gotten an e-mail from my employer at the beginning of March. The e-mail was to inform me that classes would start after “Golden Week,” a period including four national holidays from April 29 to early May in Japan. Several days after receiving this e-mail, I attended an online meeting in which the Dean announced that all classes for the spring semester would be held online. It was explained that teachers should educate themselves regarding free web services. We were provided with a webpage link that explained how to use Google Classroom but without any further assistance. As many universities were taking similar measures I was not surprised. However, I was concerned. With this announcement, my chaotic semester began. It appeared that I had three main obstacles: (a) rewriting the course syllabus, (b) getting my students accustomed to internet technology (IT), and (c) changing my teaching practices.

Obstacle #1: rewriting the course syllabus

The first obstacle concerned the course syllabus. It was announced that all teachers were required to submit a new syllabus without changing the required textbooks indicated on the already submitted syllabus made before the pandemic. The rationale was that students had

already purchased textbooks prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. The timeframe given to teachers was 2 weeks. According to Murphy (2018), a syllabus can be a simple reminder of things to do. However, a well-written one “could provide a doorway into the pedagogical beliefs of the teacher” (Murphy, 2018, p. 1). The new syllabus had to be written for a real-time online class (real-time online class refers to online lessons conducted using a platform such as Zoom, where students and teachers attend at the same time). Moreover, continuous wireless connection for students was to be made as short as possible. Not the usual 90 minutes per lesson. This was because some of my Japanese students had wireless connection contracts which limited the amount of data transmission they could have. Although the mega telecommunications companies made 50 gigabytes in connection fees free for smart phone users up to 25 years of age (“Japanese telcos”, 2020), certain conditions applied making this system inapplicable to particular students. Hence, the university suggested connecting real-time the first and last 20 minutes of class. With a completely new method and style of delivery, 2 weeks seemed too short to create a well-thought-out syllabus. Moreover, according to Nakata (2006), “there is a general consensus that the educational system has resulted in Japanese learners with weak English communication ability and low motivation to learn the language” (p. 166). Thus, I needed to figure out how to provide an online environment where my students could improve their communication skills and become motivated to study English.

To solve these problems, the question I asked myself was: What are the necessary English skills for my EFL students? I thought of the four skills in English, reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Reading and writing skills are undoubtedly important. However, I concluded that for my students, strengthening their speaking and listening skills may be more useful to them as pre-service trainee early childhood educators. Therefore, I decided to focus on speaking and listening in my real-time lessons. If I had a time limit, it was inevitable that I be selective.

Obstacle #2: getting students accustomed to IT

Another challenge I faced with moving classes online involved IT issues. Many of my students had an iPhone or smartphone but did not have an accessible personal computer (A survey conducted on first-year students at the university in April 2020 revealed that 30% did not have such a device). In addition, students were not accustomed to using computers for their courses.

To tackle this obstacle, the question I considered was: What IT problems could I encounter in an online English class? One possibility was students having internet problems such as weak or sudden cut-off of wireless connection, but I had no idea as to what extent this

might occur. Another possibility concerned issues in students' typing skills. A survey conducted on the typing speed of second-year high school students in Japan revealed that students typed 24.7 words per minute on average (MEXT, 2017a). Nonetheless, it is said that one should be able to type 100 words per minute to create documents smoothly (Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) (JCCI, n.d.). Moreover, my students were not used to typing in English. (This last point may be a common issue among EFL learners.) For these reasons, I realized I would need to consider typing speed when calculating the number of hours it would take for students to complete their work, or if I asked them to write something in the chat message box during online lessons.

Obstacle #3: changing my teaching practices

Lastly, I felt I needed to change my way of teaching. In the previous year, I had incorporated many cooperative learning activities in the classroom. However, I had never conducted cooperative learning online. Working in groups is known to have many benefits in second language classrooms (Jacobs, McCafferty, & Iddings, 2006). However, I was unfamiliar with how I could do this over the internet. A new plan was required.

In an attempt to design teaching practices for online cooperative learning, the question I asked myself was: What kind of cooperative learning activities should be done in real-time online classes? The importance of authenticity in language learning has been stressed by previous studies (i.e. Ozverir, Osam, & Herrington, 2017). As it was likely that my students would be using English in real-time verbal communication after university as previously mentioned, I decided to consciously provide opportunities for them to talk with one another. After much consideration, I chose to focus on using think-pair-share, a cooperative learning strategy where participants are given a topic and are required to think individually before pairing up with a partner (Kaddoura, 2013). I gave them a question as homework which they were to work on alone and be prepared to discuss with a classmate in the next lesson. Individual thinking time seems to be especially important for Japanese EFL students as they develop foreign language anxiety in classroom situations (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2018). Thus, I wanted to ensure that students are well prepared before placing them in groups.

In the *sho* phase, I identified three obstacles and thought of possible ways to overcome these. Once the new syllabus was completed, it was time to apply it to my classroom. I decided to start with a clean slate and unlearn my previous ways. In my mind, I was once again a first-year teacher in a new era of the pandemic. Although I was worried how things would unfold without a trial run, I had no choice. Online classes begun and I entered *chiku*, the second phase

of my journey brought on by the pandemic.

Chiku

By the end of “Golden Week,” green leaves started to replace flowers on the cherry blossom trees. I was armed with a new course plan but was far from confident. I felt uncertain as I met students online for the first time. I had spent countless hours honing IT skills and preparing for my lessons up to and during “Golden Week,” but I was still concerned. This may have been because I felt, as teachers often do, that I needed to be an expert in my subject area (Horwitz, 1996). However, I was just as unfamiliar as my students were when it came to online English lessons.

The online lessons

The first few lessons were very chaotic. I encountered four major problems. First of all, I received close to 90 emails from panicked students who wanted immediate replies. Many were simple questions such as “when is the deadline for the homework that you assigned?” or “I got a stomachache during class and had to excuse myself for a second. Will I get points deducted for this?” Another question which may be specific to EFL/ESL learners was “I couldn’t understand what you said in English. Could you explain it again?” Although questions such as these would usually take a couple of seconds to answer in-person, each took several minutes to reply on a computer.

Secondly, I found myself having to multi-task, trying to teach while simultaneously replying to online chat messages sent from students during lessons. Sometimes their words were misspelled or I could not understand what the student meant. At these times, I had to stop my lecture and verbally ask what the student had intended to say.

Thirdly, I had not considered the housing situation in Japan. With Tokyo’s average total floor area per home at 65.18 square meters (Statistics Division, Bureau of General Affairs, 2020), some students were joining lessons from shared rooms with siblings or parents. On one occasion, I had a student log-in from an outside staircase of her apartment building on a cold and cloudy day. After this incident, I reminded students that they would not be penalized for turning off their cameras and to let me know if they had any difficulties attending lessons. However, possibly due to the *haji* (shame) culture in Japan where individuals do not want to stand out, none of my students came to me about such issues. I did have a student who wrote the following comment at the end of the semester. “I am sorry that I could not turn on my camera sometimes. My sister was sleeping behind me after working a night shift.” Another

wrote, “my wireless connection was very weak sometimes because my father and mother were also using Zoom while working at home. Thus, I could not turn on my camera.”

The final issue I had, involved breakout sessions where students appeared emotionally disengaged. To combat this situation, I decided to use knowledge from a previous study I had conducted in organizing breakout sessions: when conducting cooperative learning, doing short, easy tasks in groups first is best, as this appears to make students’ have positive perceptions about cooperation (Hashimoto, 2021). Combining this with think-pair-share, I had students prepare one-minute speeches ahead of time in English about themselves such as “how I spend my time inside the house.” I made sure topics were easy to talk about even for EFL students. Then, as the next step, students were paired up and worked cooperatively in groups for a short period of time according to cooperative learning propositions (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993). Previous studies show that while meeting the basic psychological need for relatedness in and of itself does not raise intrinsic motivation, it is an important element (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Realizing the importance of intrinsically motivating students especially in times when they are studying at home individually, I thought that this kind of activity was important to build students’ relationships. The one-minute speech activity appears to have built interpersonal connections as I had intended. One student wrote the following comment at the end of the semester.

Concerning the one-minute speech that we did almost every week, at first I had a simplistic idea that it would be easy since it was just one minute. But it was a lot longer than I had imagined and I realized that I needed to go into great detail in order to talk for one minute. It was pretty difficult at first. But I got used to this after working on this task a couple of times. Pretty soon I was able to come up with a lot of things that I wanted to talk about and also became better at presenting in front of my classmates. Also, the content of my friend's presentations were also very interesting. Everyone shared something different that they liked in their presentations. I was able to learn a lot about my classmates in place of a self-introduction so it was a lot of fun!

The new syllabus

As for my new syllabus, students seemed to enjoy and learn from working cooperatively as they worked together in breakout rooms. One student made the following comment about a reading activity I had conducted in the *chiku* phase. She had participated in an activity where she and her partner took turns reading a selected passage aloud to one another.

My partner was not good at English just like me but together we said, “what’s this pronunciation?” and helped each other out. This allowed us to enjoy practicing reading in English. I thought maybe the dislike for English can be erased by a feeling of enjoyment when working together. I got stuck in some places, so next time I want to be able to read aloud smoothly.

Although this student had never met her partner in person, she seems to have had a motivating experience online. This points to the possibility that students may be able to build positive relationships if teachers make a conscious effort to organize activities where students can get to know one another. As Stevick (1980) points out, whether or not one is successful in language learning depends more on what happens within an individual learner and between individuals in the classroom than on course content or method. Furthermore, Arnold and Brown (1999) indicate that what goes on between individuals and groups should be facilitated and cared for. These studies suggest that teacher's assistance is important for groups to work cooperatively. I realized that perhaps the fundamental principles of teaching are the same regardless of method of delivery, a finding which increased my confidence to teach online.

University administrators

During the *chiku* phase I continued to be reminded by university administrators to (a) persist in holding real-time online classes so students would feel connected to the university, and to (b) accommodate specific conditions such as bad internet connection and inability to purchase IT equipment. I was not guided on how and to what extent I should care for students, which made this somewhat challenging. This may be evidence on how university administration was also in chaos amid COVID-19 and unable to set down firm guidelines. Further examples of this can be seen in emails sent by university administrators to part-time teachers. On one occasion, I was notified that I should maintain the same grading system I had planned for and had written in my old syllabus. However, in an email sent out weeks later, I was asked to be flexible. With an increased sense of confidence, yet without a guiding light, I continued into the *bai* phase, which lasted from the middle to end of spring semester.

Bai

Bai started mid-June, when *tsuyu* (the rainy season), began in Japan. The rain usually dampens my spirit, but I was not as negatively affected this year. This may have been because I appeared to be seeing three positive results of my new teaching practices and syllabus. Firstly, students' IT skills seemed to have improved. At the start of the *bai* phase, students sometimes still had trouble logging into online lessons and had difficulty submitting their homework. However, by the end of this phase, it seemed that these issues rarely occurred. Secondly, more and more students appeared to willingly turn on their cameras during breakout sessions. Possibly in part, due to the lack of confidence that many Japanese EFL university students' have of their English skills (Yashima et al., 2009), my students did not turn on their cameras during lectures even in

the *bai* phase. However, a fair number of students began to voluntarily show their faces when placed in small groups with other students. Finally, I noticed that students seemed to have built stronger, more stable relationships. I became aware of this as I hopped in and out of breakout sessions. Laughter was often heard as I entered a breakout room and students would continue to talk even when I joined unexpectedly. In the previous phase, *chiku*, they would often stop when I entered.

In *bai*, I felt I was beginning to see positive signs of my new teaching practices. Some students even commented that online lessons were more beneficial than in-person classes. The following is an example of this.

I was able to talk to various students through online classes. I don't think this would have been the case if I were attending in-person classes. I probably would have talked to the same people and would not have become friends with so many students. In this respect, I think online classes are better.

This student appears to have made a wider scope of friends through online classes than in-person classes. A possible benefit of online classes is the secluded break out rooms. When students are placed in these rooms, they are forced to only engage with a few of their classmates, whereas in in-person classes, they are surrounded by other groups. The seclusion of online breakout groups may have allowed this student to focus on building relationships within the group allowing her to form close bonds with people she would not have befriended otherwise. This positive comment I received regarding online classes made me feel that the hard work of planning and running classes had paid off.

5. Conclusion

As I am writing this paper (December, 2020), Japan is being hit by a third wave of COVID-19 outbreaks. Many other countries around the world also continue to struggle with the pandemic. Although some have begun to circulate a newly developed vaccine and other countries are expected to follow suit soon, an end to COVID-19 is expected to take some time (Solomon, 2020). For Asian EFL teachers around the world, this means that online classes, hybrid classes (a combination of face-to-face and online classes) or an alternation of online and face-to-face classes (in reaction to COVID-19 cases rising and waning) may become the norm. In an unpredictable environment such as this, increasing one's knowledge of how other EFL teachers coped or are coping with the pandemic may be worthwhile. This study is meaningful in this respect. However, there are limitations. The research covers only one semester which may not have been long enough to capture all the effects brought on by the pandemic. Furthermore, it lacks a description of personal struggles. Needless to say, a teacher is not only a teacher and

has a life outside of being a teacher. Bringing this element into the study may have added to an even fuller analysis of the COVID-19 situations teachers are facing. In addition, it may also have been beneficial if I had included more detailed information on which practices, I abandoned due to the pandemic or which ones I could keep even after COVID-19 settles. Fulfilling these limitations could have perhaps made the study richer and more in-depth. These are possible areas which could be explored in future studies.

Just as a welcoming spring always comes after a harsh winter, I felt that the end of spring semester was a new beginning for me as an EFL teacher. Experiencing and getting through a whole pandemic-stricken semester allowed me to gain confidence as an educator. Accounts of the obstacles that I faced and how I overcame these may provide lived experiences regarding teaching practices to other Asian EFL university teachers.

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An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Japanese EFL Learners' Motivation during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Bioprofile

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Abstract

In the spring of 2020, many educational institutions around the world were thrust into novel and challenging situations due to the spread of COVID-19. These situations have been highly consequential for educators and students. The purpose of this study was to explore how the motivation of four Japanese, second-year university students to learn English as a foreign language (EFL) was affected by the sudden shift to virtual learning and scaling down of their study abroad program following international travel restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (referred to hereinafter as “the pandemic”). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted to analyze the data obtained from semi-structured interviews. The five themes that emerged from the interviews suggested that the students' motivation to learn English remained stable despite the shift to online learning and modification of the study abroad program. In this regard, the following was observed: (1) All participants expressed that they inherently enjoyed learning English; (2) They imagined themselves using English in their future work or travel; (3) They derived motivation from other EFL learners; (4) They realized the practical benefits of online learning; (5) They became proactive in seeking ways to supplement their EFL studies. Themes 1, 2, and 3 applied to the participants even before the pandemic. Themes 4 and 5 emerged as they had to adjust their studying practices in response to the pandemic-induced restrictions. The findings of this study provide insights into how EFL learners' motivation has been affected by the pandemic, and they serve as an important reference for students and educators in the EFL field.

Keywords: EFL learning, motivation, online learning, pandemic

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1. Introduction

The pandemic has had harsh and far-reaching ramifications across our lives. In particular, the field of education has been severely impacted. All over the world, schools of all levels have had to rethink and drastically modify schooling. For many, this meant that face-to-face classes had to be temporarily

replaced by online learning. Teachers were required to deliver classes through various online platforms despite inadequate training and/or preparation time, and students had to adjust to taking these online classes at home (Cowie, 2021; Efriana, 2021; Lee & Ogawa, 2021; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020; Rahim & Chandran, 2021).

In Japan, this shift to online learning has been challenging. The reason, as Cowie (2021) asserts, is that education in Japan has been “decidedly traditional” (p. 420). Even at the university level, the use of Learning Management Systems (LMSs) is not commonplace, Wi-Fi connections are not always reliable and widely available, and many students, though adept at using their smartphones, are unfamiliar with using such devices as laptop computers (Cowie, 2021).

These remote teaching-related challenges have all been true for the university whose students participated in this study. Moreover, as the pandemic also caused the imposition of strict travel restrictions on out-of-country travel, the university had to significantly alter its study abroad program. Instead of students spending a semester in a foreign country, they ended up experiencing study abroad online.

How these abrupt changes brought about by the pandemic affected students’ motivation to learn EFL is the focus of this research. Specifically, this study aimed to explore the experiences of four Japanese EFL learners, in their second year of university vis-a-vis their motivation to learn the English language during the pandemic. This study employed IPA to achieve its specific objective. To this end, the following two questions were addressed: (1) “How has the sudden shift to virtual learning affected students’ motivation to learn EFL?” and (2) “How has the change in the university’s study abroad program affected students’ motivation to learn EFL?”

While student motivation has been widely explored in the EFL context, there have hardly been any studies that examine how the motivation of EFL learners is impacted by particular challenges brought about by the pandemic. The results of this study can help in the following ways: (1) It can provide insights into how EFL learners’ motivation has been impacted by the pandemic; (2) It can be a useful reference for students, teachers, and schools concerning how they could maintain and/or increase the motivation of their students as alternative ways of schooling during the pandemic are being explored.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Motivation in the EFL Context

It is well established that motivation, defined by Gardner (1985, p. 50) as “language learners’ goals, their effortful behaviors, their desire to attain their goals, and their favorable attitudes toward the activity in question,” (Halvaei & Ansarin, 2018) and second language (L2) learning are inextricably linked (Cocca & Cocca, 2019; Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2017; Halvaei & Ansarin, 2018; Lai, 2013; Pawlak, 2012; Tsai, 2012). In other words, learners’ motivation and success in acquiring L2 are positively correlated (Cocca & Cocca, 2019), and it is indeed one of the most crucial elements in learning a language (Dincer

& Yesilyurt, 2017; Lai, 2013). Over the years, L2 learning-related motivation has been conceptualized in different ways. Among the most prominent conceptualizations are Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model, Dornyei and Ushioda's (2011) L2 motivational self-system, and Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory.

Given how essential motivation is in L2 learning, it has been extensively studied in relation to different aspects. For this study, how motivation relates to methods of delivery (i.e., online or face-to-face), usage of technology, and an opportunity to study abroad were found to be particularly relevant.

First, concerning the methods of delivery, Genc, Kulusakli, and Aydin (2016) conducted a study that looked at students' motivation and attitude in terms of online distance education versus traditional classes. They found no significant difference between the two; i.e., if they are motivated to study English in face-to-face classes, they are motivated to do so in online classes as well (Genc et al., 2016). This result is in line with what Dimitroff, Dimitroff, and Alhashimi (2018) found in their study in which they compared the motivation of English as a second language (ESL) and EFL students. They concluded that one's environment is not among the main factors that significantly affect students' motivation to study English. Instead, having a positive attitude toward their learning is more consequential.

Second, different studies have found that technology can increase motivation in learning as its use makes students curious (Egan & Gibb, 1997; Genc et al. 2016). This concurs with the finding of Ilter's (2009) study that using authentic films, videos, CDs, and e-learning, in general, has a positive effect on students' motivation, though there's a caveat that students find it boring if/when technology is always used. Liu and Lan (2016) also observed that collaborating on Google Docs increased students' motivation as they enjoyed the learning experience more. In a more recent study, Lamb and Arisandy (2020) noted that young students' Online Informal Learning of English (OILE), (such as watching YouTube videos or listening to music) is associated with a higher motivation to learn English.

Finally, the effect of the study abroad experience on the motivation of EFL learners has been beneficial. Tsai (2012) found that for EFL students who go to a different country to study, the experience of immersing themselves totally in a particular culture, along with its people and cultural products, facilitates intercultural learning. Intercultural learning can have a positive effect on their motivation to study English and their overall success in acquiring their target language.

Motivation in relation to EFL learning has been investigated comprehensively; however, studies that look into how motivation in EFL learning during the pandemic per se are still very limited. A study by Subakthiasih and Putri (2020) surveyed 90 university students in Bali, Indonesia to investigate their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to study EFL during the pandemic. The results of this study indicated that learners have higher intrinsic motivation (i.e., doing something because that activity itself is inherently enjoyable) than extrinsic motivation (i.e., doing something for external reasons, such as passing a test).

Many of the early pandemic-related studies on EFL seem to focus on identifying the barriers

to online learning that were experienced by teachers and students. For teachers, one of the challenges that has been identified in this regard is their lack of familiarity with e-learning. For instance, not all teachers are technologically savvy, so they may find using certain devices and online applications problematic (Efriana, 2021; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020). Another barrier was increased difficulties faced by teachers in explaining concepts and monitoring and controlling their students online as evidenced in the students contacting their teachers directly after class for further explanation (Efriana, 2021). For students, certain physiological repercussions, such as eye strain, arising out of online learning because of extended screen time has been identified as an impediment (Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020). The lack of Internet infrastructure and support in addition to the prohibitive costs related to its use have also been determined to be among the obstacles (Efriana, 2021; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020; Rahim & Chandran, 2021). With all these barriers brought about by the sudden shift to online learning, Mayhoob (2020) has found that many students were left unsatisfied with their language learning experience. However, how all these challenges directly affect EFL students' motivation remains unclear, thus requiring further investigation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

Derived from phenomenology and hermeneutics, IPA is an idiographic method that focuses on a small group of individuals, and it aims to offer a “close” description of participants' experiences of a particular phenomenon (Noon, 2018, p. 75). In IPA, it is the participants who are considered to be “experiential experts” (Noon, 2018, p. 75); therefore, researchers closely look at the narratives the participants share, then extract common/general as well as unique themes from them (Noon, 2018). This research method was chosen as the framework for this study given its effectiveness in capturing the richness and complexities of the participants' experiences.

3.2. Setting and Participants

Cresswell (2013) states that in IPA, the number of study participants may vary from three to fifteen, while Clarke (2010) recommends having four to ten participants so that rich data can be generated (Noon, 2018). Through purposive sampling, four Japanese, second-year university EFL students in their second semester (three female students and one male student) were chosen. All four were selected as they are the founding members (and at the time of the study were the only members) of an English-speaking club established during the pandemic with the primary objective of providing its members with additional English-speaking practice. The university that they are enrolled in is a private liberal arts institution in Kyushu, Japan, which has the English language as its primary medium of instruction. Additionally, the university has a study abroad program that allows students to spend the Fall semester during their second year in a partner institution in the US, UK, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand.

The participants were 19–20 years old, and their average Test of English for International

Communication (TOEIC) score was 700, meaning they belonged to the higher-level class in their cohort. Also, they belonged to the batch that was arguably the most affected by the abrupt changes brought about by the pandemic, for they had the experience of being in a live classroom in their first year and then had to transfer to virtual learning in their second year. Moreover, they were in the process of preparing for their semester abroad when local and international travel restrictions were imposed which prevented them from leaving the country. For these reasons, they made suitable subjects for the purposes of this study.

3.3. Data Collection

Data collection commenced after obtaining the necessary approval from the university's in-house ethics review board. Each of the participants was separately interviewed by the researcher for 20–30 minutes. The interview was carried out as per the interview question sheet that was prepared for this study. All the interviews were fully audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the participants were assigned code names to ensure anonymity.

3.4. Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, the IPA approach was employed to analyze the data through the following steps: (1) reading transcripts multiple times, (2) annotating and color-coding, and (3) looking for common themes. Arroll (2015) has recommended that if there are four to eight participants and at least three of them speak of a particular idea, that idea is to be classified as a main theme (Noon, 2018). This recommendation was followed for this study. Further, if at least two of the participants expressed a particular idea, it was determined as a sub-theme.

In IPA, it is assumed that the participants have been truthful about the narratives that they have provided. This is how validity is achieved (Noon, 2018). Moreover, in this study, to check the data for accuracy, the participants were asked to review their interview transcripts.

4. Results and Discussion

In all, five main themes and two sub-themes were drawn from the interviews, which can be categorized further into two-time frames. Themes 1, 2, 3 and sub-theme 3a pertain to the pre-pandemic time frame, while themes 4, 5 and sub-theme 5a relate to the pandemic's time frame. It must be noted that the results and discussion have been presented below in a combined manner to link this study's findings to those of already existing research.

Table 1 *Themes and sub-themes emerging from the study data*

Pre-pandemic
Theme 1: Positive feelings toward learning English
Theme 2: Imagined future L2 selves
Theme 3: Motivation from other EFL learners
Sub-theme 3a: Sense of competition with others
During the pandemic
Theme 4: Positive response to change
Theme 5: Being proactive in their studies
Sub-theme 5a: Proving one's self

Theme 1: Positive Feelings Toward Learning English

All four of the participants expressed positive feelings toward learning English. They used verbs such as “like,” “love,” “enjoy,” etc., and adjectives such as “interesting” and “fun” when asked about their English learning experience:

- *Since I was a junior high school student, English [has been my] most favorite subject. Also [in] high school, I loved English. (P1)*
- *I [am]lucky to have been able to find the field that I [am] interested in, so if I hadn't found English interesting, then I wouldn't [be] motivated like this. (P2)*
- *When I go out and meet a foreigner, I [always say] “hi”. I think I like to talk with foreigner[s] [in English]. (P3)*
- *Communicating with foreigners in English is really fun. (P4)*

These responses demonstrate that all of the participants intrinsically had the motivation, which Deci and Ryan (1985) defined as doing an activity because it is inherently enjoyable to the person. It has also been suggested that having a positive attitude toward learning English is linked to increased engagement in class (Dimitroff et al., 2018).

Theme 2: Imagined Future L2 Selves

All four of the participants reported that they imagined themselves using English in the future either for work or while they travel. Participants 2, 3, and 4 also imagined living abroad at some point and having to use English in their interactions there.

- *[The] biggest motivation for me, is [that] English is [an] advantage for [my] future job [as a flight attendant]. (P1)*
- *I'm motivated [because I have] always imagined myself in the future . . . talking to people in English fluently [and] giving lecture[s] in English in Japan or a foreign country. (P2)*

- *I imagine living in another country because I want to be [a] nail artist . . . I was looking at Instagram account[s] of nail artists abroad, like New York. It's cool . . . I will be like [a] superstar artist. (P3)*
- *[I imagine] living in another country for a short time [in the future], one year to three years . . . I just want to use English in other countries. (P4)*

Imagining their future selves using English for work or travel illustrates Dornyei and Ushioda's (2011) ideal L2 self, which is one of the components of their L2 motivational self-system. The ideal L2 self refers to the learner's future L2 speaking self. The image of the ideal L2 self motivates the learners to acquire L2 skills (Lai, 2013). This could also be related to Gardner's (1985) idea of instrumental orientation in that the participants are motivated to learn a language to improve their status economically, professionally, and/or socially (Cocca & Cocca, 2019; Halvaei & Ansarin, 2018; Lai, 2013).

Theme 3: Motivation from Other EFL Learners

Three of the participants expressed that they derive motivation from other EFL learners. When they see that their peers are working hard and pursuing their goals, they too are inspired and motivated to do the same.

- *The students [at the college] have some goals related to English. Some student[s] [are] very motivated . . . I['m] impressed with them. (P1)*
- *Especially when I talk [to my friends], I get motivation. When I [see] them studying . . . [I think] "Wow! I have to study. I want to study." (P3)*
- *When I see [my friends], I really get [the] motivation. (P4)*

Sub-theme 3a: Sense of Competition with Others

Two of the participants talked about getting motivation when they experienced competition with their peers.

- *[In junior high school, I was motivated to learn English because there was] one girl who did not always study hard, but in English class, she could perform well. (P1)*
- *At first, I just wanted to be higher than others because I failed [to get into my first] university choice. When I came here, I didn't want to get lower point[s] than others. (P4)*

Theme 3 and sub-theme 3a are related to another component of Dornyei and Ushioda's (2011) L2 motivational self-system, the L2 learning experience. In this case, the participants gained motivation from some of their peers because they found them inspiring and/or wanted to surpass what their peers could do (Lai, 2013).

Theme 4: Positive Response to Change

All four of the participants highlighted the fact that attending classes via Zoom saved them a lot of time and allowed them to do more self-study and/or rest before the classes started.

- *Because we don't need to [travel] to school, I [could] get more time to study. (P1)*
- *I didn't have to prepare for school. I had more time to study in the morning. After I woke up . . . I read some books, or I studied a little bit about vocabulary [before the first class] . . . [Also,] I didn't have to take a shower [and] dress up well . . . I was more relaxed [in] online classes. I was in pajamas, and I had a cup of coffee. (P2)*
- *I have more time to study other things like Chinese and Korean. (P3)*
- *I can sleep a lot . . . I don't need to use [my] time to choose clothes. It's kind of [a] hassle. (P4)*

Participants 1, 2, and 4 highlighted the new skills gained through this novel instruction format.

- *I was honestly kind of excited because it's completely different from [the] lecture[s] I was used to. (P2)*
- *Because I used [the] computer a lot, I [learned how to] use it fluently. (P1)*
- *After changing to online [classes], I ha[d] to check the deadline[s] myself because teachers didn't mention [them] so much. I checked the deadline every day. I took notes of [the deadlines]. [I had to organize]. It's a good point. (P4)*

Regarding the cancellation of their trips abroad, participants 1, 3, and 4 had some interesting things to share.

- *It [would have been] my first time to go abroad, so firstly, I was shocked, but I've heard it is safe[r] to stay [in] Japan. (P1)*
- *[It] is a blessing in disguise for me because I think [the] study abroad [program] is too expensive, and too short, just four months. (P3)*
- *[If I went abroad,] maybe, I would be lazy or just enjoy talking to foreigners and sightseeing. (P4)*

These observations of the participants are consistent with a finding of Falout's (2012) study in which he reported that learners who perceive themselves and their language learning positively are more likely to succeed in acquiring their target L2 as they are more likely to persist even when they experience barriers in their studies. In the case of the four participants of this study, they tended to view the changes that had to be implemented in a positive light, which must have helped them stay motivated.

Theme 5: Being Proactive about their Studies

Three of the participants actively looked for other ways to supplement their learning of EFL.

Participants 1 and 3 turned to online platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube to get extra practice, whereas participant 3 joined an informal online class organized by one of their teachers in partnership with another university. Students from both of these institutes met once a week via Zoom to practice conversing in English.

- *I found some English conversation [groups] on Instagram or Twitter. I often follow them. They provide [lots of] useful information. (P1)*
- *I watched YouTube a lot [maybe one hour per day] about how to pronounce and how to use idioms. (P4)*
- *We could get [an] opportunity to talk in English on Zoom [with students from the other university]. Having the opportunity to interact with other students is good for language learners. (P3)*

Sub-theme 5a: Proving One's Self

Two of the participants expressed their desire to show that they were different from the rest and that they could still learn English even though they were unable to go abroad:

- *I thought the more difficult situation I am in, the more I have to be enthusiastic to prove that I can do it. When I heard from the Dean that [the] study abroad program had been canceled, I was extremely motivated . . . I am so eager to show that I can study English in Japan. (P2)*
- *When I hear[d] the news, I [was] really sad because I really wanted to go to the UK to study English, but when I saw on Instagram, every student posted “Oh my gosh, I wanted to go abroad,” [I thought] I don’t want to be like them . . . I don’t want to be [the] same [as the other] students [who are] just sad and depressed. I thought, “Oh, I have to change myself. It’s not [a] sad time. It’s [a] chance to improve my English more. (P4)*

Theme 5 and sub-theme 5a, demonstrated yet again that the participants had intrinsic motivation in that they had an “inherent tendency to search for novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore and to learn” (Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2017, p. 5).

In summary, this study examined two questions: (1) “How has the sudden shift to virtual learning affected students’ motivation to learn EFL?” and (2) “How has the change in the university’s study abroad program affected students’ motivation to learn EFL?” The data showed that the motivation of all four participants to learn English remained stable despite the shift to online learning and modification of the study abroad program. The participants have intrinsic motivation, a clear vision of their ideal L2 self, an ability to derive motivation from their peers, and an ability to view and respond positively to the changes implemented to their studies. It can be argued that these are the qualities that enabled the participants to maintain their motivation to learn EFL during the pandemic.

These findings are consistent with the results of previous research conducted before the pandemic that examined the motivation of EFL learners. First, it was found that EFL students with

intrinsic motivation are more effective learners and have higher levels of engagement in class (Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2017; Halvaei & Ansarin, 2018). As well, one of the factors that was identified to facilitate successful distance language learning is having explicit reasons and goals for studying the target language (Xiao, 2012). This can be related to the concept of the ideal L2 self, which Lai (2013) pointed out to be strongly linked with intrinsic motivation. Moreover, it was demonstrated that peers can be influential to learners' motivation; Halvaei and Ansarin (2018), for example, noted that activities such as discussions could be enhanced if students are surrounded by fellow learners who are also eager to speak English. Finally, it was found that a positive attitude toward EFL learning is associated with increased engagement in class (Dimitroff et al., 2018) and success in acquiring English proficiency (Cocca & Cocca, 2019).

On the whole, these are encouraging insights into the motivation of EFL learners during the pandemic. The findings suggest that one's motivation is largely influenced by internal rather than external factors. Consequently, teachers and students could endeavour to cultivate the aforementioned qualities for students to maintain their motivation to learn EFL.

4.2. Limitations of this Study

This study has several limitations. First, only four students were interviewed, so the results are not generalizable, although in IPA, generalizability is not the main aim (Noon, 2018, p. 81). In the case of this study too, the goal was to shed light on the participants' learning experiences during the pandemic and how these impacted their motivation to learn EFL. Also, given that the number of participants is at the lower end of the recommended number by Clarke (2010) and Cresswell (2013) when conducting IPA studies, one could argue that this may be treated as a case study. Another limitation of this study was that all four of the participants were high-level language learners, and as per their characterization, they had medium to high levels of motivation in the first place. The results may, therefore, have been different with students with lower levels of motivation or those who were intrinsically less motivated. Finally, one may argue that the participants could not have known the benefits of going to a study abroad location without actually having had that experience. They were merely speculating about its merits and demerits because they had no choice. As mentioned previously, it has been found that study abroad experiences can have a positive effect on a student's motivation and overall success in language acquisition (Tsai, 2012).

4.3. Future Research

As we are all still in the early stages of this new global reality, the pandemic, there are still many unknowns. Consequently, there are numerous avenues to be explored in the EFL field. If further research is conducted involving students who may not have the same language level or motivation, it could yield results that are different from those of this study. Moreover, interviewing the previous cohorts of EFL students who were able to experience studying abroad for a semester could be useful in

finding out how their motivation may or may not have changed based on their experience. Conversely, studying the younger/older student cohorts who, unlike the participants of this study, began their college education itself in the online mode could yield interesting and useful insights.

4.4. Recommendations

The participants of this study reported that they maintained their medium to high levels of motivation in learning EFL throughout the changes they experienced in the wake of the pandemic. However, it is easy to imagine that many other students may not feel the same way. One way in which teachers can help protect, maintain, and/or increase students' motivation is by helping them to be more aware of their motivational orientations and strengthen their intrinsic motivation as recommended by Halvaei and Ansarin (2018). Moreover, Lai (2013) stated that especially for EFL learners, their imagined L2 self can be a "powerful light" (p. 98) that can help them navigate their language learning experience. Consequently, Lai (2013) proposed that teachers support students by helping them define their vision based on what they intend to achieve. Also, it would be greatly beneficial if teachers can help students foster a positive attitude toward themselves and their language learning experience as it was found that students who have a positive outlook have higher class engagement (Dimitroff et al., 2018) and better coping mechanisms when impediments arise. They are also more likely to be proactive in their studies (Falout, 2012). Finally, some of the early pandemic-related studies within the EFL context have indicated that students and teachers faced considerable barriers to studying during the pandemic (Efriana, 2021; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020; Rahim & Chandran, 2021). Therefore, it would be advantageous that these stakeholders are made cognizant of the various challenges that need to be dealt with in eventualities like the pandemic. A better understanding of the challenges and coping mechanisms can lead to greater cooperation and compassion while everyone strives to work as effectively as possible, individually and in cooperation with each other, in such challenging times.

5. Conclusion

Using IPA, this study examined how the motivation of four Japanese students in their second year at university to study EFL was affected by two significant changes implemented by the university as a result of the pandemic, i.e., the abrupt move from face-to-face classes to online learning and the modification of their study abroad program. In all, five themes were extracted from the interviews with these four students, which were further categorized into two time frames. The first category comprised themes that have been true for the participants even before the pandemic set in; these include the participants genuinely enjoying learning and using English, deriving motivation from the future images they have of themselves using the language for work or travel, and being motivated by other EFL learners who work hard. The second category included themes that emerged due to the students' learning experiences during the pandemic, whereby they recognized the practical benefits of online learning as opposed to face-to-face classes and became proactive themselves in searching for avenues

beyond their university classes to supplement their EFL learning.

As previously mentioned, IPA-based studies seek to shed light on the experiences of a particular group of people within a particular context who have gone through the same experience (Noon, 2018). For the four participants of this study, the emergent themes seem to indicate that their motivation to study English remained stable even in the face of considerable changes in their education consequent to the pandemic-induced restrictions. It is hoped that the results of this study will contribute to the growing pandemic-related literature on EFL, provide insights into how EFL learners' motivation has been affected by the pandemic, and serve as a useful reference for not only students but also educators in the field of EFL.

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Appendix A

Interview Question Sheet

How would you describe your experience while learning English as a foreign language?

How did you feel when you found out that the classes were moving online?

What do you think are the advantages of online classes?

What do you think are the disadvantages of online classes?

What do you think are the advantages of live classes?

What do you think are the disadvantages of live classes?

Do you prefer online classes or live classes?

What were the things you did differently last semester given our switch to online learning?

Did you find that your interest in studying English changed in the 2020 Spring semester compared to the semester prior?

How did you cope with the new challenges?

What strategies did you find helpful?

Did you find it easier or more difficult to complete the tasks assigned in your language classes?

How do you feel about the change in the study abroad program?

Do you think the possibility of spending a semester abroad made you want to study English more?