

ISSUES

MIGRATING ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION FROM FACE to FACE to ONLINE LEARNING

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This paper describes a qualitative study that examined the lived experience of 50 English language instructors who transitioned from in-person teaching to online instruction during the COVID pandemic of 2020. The purpose of this study focused on the contrast between systematic online English language teacher preparation and rapid migration to identify strategies that can facilitate sudden shifts in instructional contexts. The data that was collected through snowball sampling with an anonymous Qualtrics survey revealed that during this rapid transition, instructors struggled with learning the technological pedagogy skills, establishing connections with their students, implementing assessment practices, and organizing student interactions. After a description of the findings, the article concludes with implications for teacher education for online English language instruction.

1. Introduction

Professional development for instructors of English learners has included online pedagogy given that many English learners are receiving their instruction via distance learning. While the pedagogy for computer-aided language learning has been widely studied (Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2018; Hubbard, 2013; Pawan et al., 2016), a planned transition to online language instruction could take six to nine months to develop (Hodges et al., 2020). In contrast, Adnan (2018) noted that rushing to produce online English teaching usually results in projecting in-person strategies, which do not meet the needs of online language learners. Accordingly, studying the lessons learned from a sudden migration experience can provide insight into how better to prepare teachers to acclimate English language instruction for various contexts.

This article seeks to explore the contrast between systematic online English language teacher preparation and rapid migration to online platforms to ascertain strategies that can facilitate sudden shifts in instructional contexts. This article will begin by exploring the types of knowledge that are needed to teach English online in planned professional development (Pawan et al., 2016) before describing a qualitative study of teachers' experiences as they rapidly learned how to teach English learners online in response to the COVID pandemic, which began in 2020.

2. Literature review

Teaching online is not a universal approach that applies to all situations because the technological demands of online teaching depend on the varieties of technology that are employed (Codreanu, 2020; Gillett-Swan, 2017), the

content of the course that is being conveyed (Orlando & Attard, 2016), and the mode of synchronous or asynchronous delivery (Folse, 2020; Hancock & Rowland, 2017). While each of these approaches delivers content to the students, the instructional skills needed across all the models focus on course design (Warren, 2016), student interaction (Baralt & Morcillo Gomez, 2017; Kebritchi et al., 2017), and content assessment (F. Martin, Budhrani, Kumar, et al., 2019).

Although individuals may be technologically savvy, harnessing these skills for a pedagogical context is essential to be a competent online instructor (Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2018; Kebritchi et al., 2017). Many teachers do not fully realize the extent to which technology can be used in online instruction and miss many of the functions that can enhance online instruction (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Steadman & Kraut, 2018). Likewise, Codreanu (2020) advocates that being aware of the diverse functions that technology affords to online instruction is more helpful than creating pedagogical innovations. Technology can be used to deliver content, promote student interaction, assess student learning, and provide student feedback (F. Martin, Budhrani, & Wang, 2019).

Effective course design skills have been promoted in traditional online teacher education (Pawan et al., 2016). Fayer's (2014) study revealed that students identified course design as a determining factor of their success in an online course. F. Martin et al. (2019) found that effective course design begins well before the start of the semester. A backward design approach enables instructors to consider the student results as they design the online course (F. Martin, Budhrani, Kumar, et al., 2019). Codreanu (2020) recommended beginning with a needs analysis to determine the skills and knowledge level of the students to plan the level of instruction. Such awareness influences the course organization and the student input. Martin et al. (2019) suggested that online instructors plan the course design around the various assessments of the course. Since in-person class tasks do not directly translate to online instruction (Bernardo & Duarte, 2020), providing novel activities can keep students engaged (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). Additionally, determining the language objective before the lesson is created keeps the instructional purpose at the forefront of online classes (Kolaitis et al., 2006). Each of these course design strategies improves the educational experience for online students.

Creating opportunities for meaningful online student interaction facilitates student learning (Baralt & Morcillo Gomez, 2017; Hodges et al., 2020). This deliberate focus on communication situates the student learning experience as both an interpersonal and cognitive process, instead of merely an infusion of knowledge through technology (Hodges et al., 2020). Constructing tasks for online instruction should focus on fostering interaction and promoting real-world problem solving (Koohang, 2009). After finding that students who posted using the discussion roles were more able to concentrate on experimenting with the concepts, Hancock and Rowland (2017)

recommended designating prescribed discussion roles to scaffold the students' responses. Although the discussion roles have the potential to guide the students towards a deeper level of analysis, Pawan (2016) reported that students were more often asking rudimentary questions to clarify instruction.

Designing and managing online language assessments requires the instructor to master several different skills and practices. Specifically, language assessment is defined as the process of gathering information and evaluating learners' understanding of the language and their mastery of its usage (Chapelle & Brindley, 2013). Martin et al. (2019) found that online assessment practices are pivotal in keeping the student motivated and engaged with the content. Using many different types of assessment for online language learning provides a fuller picture of the student mastery of language and content by incorporating both traditional and task-based real-world problem assessments (F. Martin, Budhrani, Kumar, et al., 2019). The assessment process can incorporate instructor feedback, peer feedback, and self-assessment tasks so that the student can receive a variety of responses that contribute to the student's language development (S. Martin & Alvarez Valdivia, 2017). Popular assessment tasks have been asynchronous discussion boards (Warren, 2016), online oral interviews (Codreanu, 2020), or online assessment applications such as Kahoot or other tools (Cheung, 2021). While online courses often use group assessments, Gillett-Swan (2017) found that students tended to view online group projects as being inequitable as far as the individual roles in the project. To promote egalitarian grading practices, rubrics can promote standardization across students' assignments (F. Martin, Budhrani, Kumar, et al., 2019). Despite the benefits of assessment in real time, Pawan (2016) argued that asynchronous writing assessment enabled English learner students to engage in better metacognitive processing since they wrote without an audience. With the diverse options for assessment, online English language instructors can create an assessment model that best serves the objectives of the course and the needs of their students.

As part of the assessment process, providing feedback online to English learners is often a significant challenge for their instructors for several different reasons. Feedback is defined as the procedure in which the instructor communicates with the student through a feedback loop in which they guide the students through starting discussions, answering inquiries, and promoting learning extensions (Pawan, 2016). First, students should receive feedback within 24 to 48 hours of posting which can be difficult to achieve (F. Martin, Budhrani, Kumar, et al., 2019). Secondly, online instructors must determine their methods of communicating the feedback. Kozar's (2016) study found that students in an online setting were more likely to incorporate feedback if they received the information through multiple channels rather than just receiving written commentary. Instructors can provide feedback to their students through chat functions or color cards so that the students are more able to fully identify the types of feedback being given (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020).

Regardless of the type of feedback given, Hubbard (2013) stated that teachers need to train their students on how to interpret the feedback to improve their performance.

Additionally, peer response, which is a dialogical exchange where learners discuss achievement in terms of specified criteria (Liu & Carless, 2006), can help the learners push beyond their current level of comprehension (Pawan, 2016). The process enables students to improve their work with a heightened sense of the expectations for assignments (Liu & Carless, 2006). Online learning enables students to give and receive feedback electronically using chat, discussion boards, or email (Guardado & Shi, 2007). Computer-mediated peer response transcends location and time specifications (Ho, 2015) while enabling students to access online internet resources to supplement and support their online peer feedback (Hsieh, 2020). Electronic peer feedback can provide English learners with opportunities for interaction, spaces for sharpening their critical analysis skills, and clarifications of assignment requirements.

3. Methods

This exploratory study examined the challenges, processes, and successes that English language teachers encountered when they migrated from in-person to online instruction during the COVID pandemic of 2020. The objective was to provide insight into online teacher training so that better learning experiences could be provided as teachers learn to teach online. Questions focused on the teachers' lived experiences of migrating to online instruction.

3.1. The aims of the study

This study aims at answering these research questions:

1. Which skills from the face-to-face instructional environment do you think transferred directly to teaching effectively in the online instructional environment?
2. Which strategies did you use to facilitate student practice of the various language skills?
3. Which specific professional development training activities would help you become a more effective online English instructor?

To achieve the goal, the current study elicited qualitative descriptions of the teacher's experiences through a survey of open-ended questions. A Qualtrics questionnaire was used to protect the anonymity of the participants and encourage more authentic responses.

3.2. Participants and the context

Fifty participants chose to respond to the questions asked. The demographics of this group were predominantly female, with only eight males in the study. The teachers in this study were very experienced educators with a range of 3

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

Demographic	Category	F	(M)	(SD)
Gender	Female	24	48%	
	Male	8		
	Choose not to answer	1		
	No response	17		
Teaching Area	Listening	19		
	Speaking	21		
	Reading	21		
	Writing	24		
	Other	15		
Type of Program	University-affiliated	28		
	Independent	4		
	Other	18		
Teaching Experience			(18.84)	(10.35)

to 40 years of teaching experience, with an average of 20 years of experience. Most of the teachers taught in university-affiliated English language programs, with only four teaching in independent English institutions. The participants were almost equally divided as to the number of participants teaching listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

3.3. Design and procedure

After receiving human subjects' approval, the responses were collected through a Qualtrics survey, which was posted on multiple listservs, as well as from a random sampling of instructors who taught English learners at higher education institutions in the United States. The questionnaire sought to focus on the depth of the stories that the participants shared rather than focusing on a large sample size. The questions focused on the lived experiences of the participants as they migrated from in-person to online instruction to gain insight into their successes and struggles to provide more beneficial guidance to educators learning to teach online.

3.4. Data analysis procedures

The data was analyzed through thematic analysis, which followed the steps of data analysis provided by Nowell et al. (2017). First, the researchers read the data to get an overall understanding of the scope and content of the data. After identifying the overall marking scheme for the dataset, the investigators searched for themes in the dataset and reached a consensus on the pervasiveness of the themes across the data set (Pigden & Jegede, 2020). Researchers named and defined the themes before producing the report and described the data analysis process in enough detail so that the study could be replicated in future research efforts. The investigators consulted with each other frequently to identify common themes. This approach to data analysis was chosen since they were unable to collect a triangulated data sample that compared the data from before and after the migration occurred. The researchers identified the

common themes of planning course design (F. Martin, Budhrani, Kumar, et al., 2019), facilitating student interaction (Baralt & Morcillo Gomez, 2017), and managing student assessment and feedback (Codreanu, 2020).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Findings

COURSE DESIGN

The instructors reported various experiences with the process of course design to get the course established for their students. Given the rapid pace at which the teachers had to transition to an online format (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020), there was an urgency to get the course set up and operational. For instance, one of the participants stated that they selected textbooks that came with course shells which facilitated the course construction. The importance of design and planning was noted by the participants in this study. One such instructor remarked, “Practice, planning, and organizing were key to my success.” However, the planning preparation required for online instruction was noticeably different from the traditional in-person class preparation as explained by the following quote: “Greater advanced planning needed. My syllabus had to become much more detailed for the length of the entire semester, whereas in face-to-face teaching I felt I had more flexibility in planning classes day to day and week to week.” Such precision required more advanced planning and long-range perspectives, which corroborates earlier findings of the value of prescriptive planning in course design (Hodges et al., 2020). Other instructors attested to the importance of details as seen in the following quote: “I have to break down tasks into minute activities that can be active. I have to craft breakout rooms that can progress more independently.” Participants also noted that planning for online instruction required more time and different structuring than preparing for their in-person classes. Such sentiments support findings by Kebritchi et al. (2017) who found that planning online instruction took twice as long as planning in-person teaching.

STUDENT INTERACTION

Participants discussed the technological skills needed to establish personal connections for their students. This interpersonal role of the instructor was elusive for some of the instructors because they could not find the connection that they wanted online. One teacher noted, “Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other formats don’t offer the same kind of contact as face-to-face instruction, and office hours via email does not work well for me. I have not solved this challenge yet.” Various tech applications offered different ways of establishing the teacher presence as has been documented in previous research (Pawan, 2016), but this approach did not work for all instructors. Using technology to facilitate student engagement remained a challenge for some teachers because multiple participants voiced sentiments like “I had students who logged on and tuned out, which was initially harder to address because I couldn’t distinguish them from those having legitimate tech problems.” Teachers freely

acknowledged that the rapport that had been previously established in their in-person classes served them well in maintaining connections with their students as the instruction shifted online. One participant remarked: “The fact that I already had established rapport with the students in real-time (physical classroom) helped facilitate the transition greatly.” This finding underscored the importance of relationships transcending the ease of technological connections (Pawan, 2016). Student rapport was critical because the students tended to be distracted by elements in their immediate environment. One teacher remarked: “While many students are more relaxed in oral communication class, many are unengaged and distracted by whatever is going on in their homes (including toddlers climbing on the student during class).” Other instructors echoed this sentiment that maintaining online student involvement was more challenging than sustaining in-person interaction.

ASSESSMENT

Instructors reported differing levels of success in documenting student mastery of course objectives. One participant stated: “Another challenge was figuring out how well students were or were not mastering the material and skills for my course. I overcame that through gradual revision of my assignments and assessments.” Accordingly, the process of tweaking assessment instruments enabled the instructors to gain more usable data to document the learning that was occurring within the online class. Participants who already had an online component in their in-person courses were able to use the existing assessments in their learning management systems. One instructor explained: “The main way I changed my lessons for a listening practice was to preview it more deeply, add in PollEverywhere questions before and after the first listening, and offer Canvas quizzes to guide them through the key concepts.” Therefore, some instructors reported that they were able to utilize external applications to implement assessment into their teaching.

On the other hand, participants that were new to online instruction found it challenging to manage their assessment in the online system. One of the comments was “Too much time spent grading tests in Google docs – learned how to transfer tests from Exam View to Canvas.” This time factor led instructors to utilize technology to expedite assessment. Other participants reported streamlining the assessments, as shown in the following quote: “We did cut out some of the tests/quizzes and tried to simplify things as much as possible.” Teachers adopted a practical outlook towards assessment to make the process more manageable for instructors and students alike. Some chose to use individualized assignments where students submitted their work via email and did not rely on real-time assessment of group work. The variety of options used for evaluating student performance reflects the instructors’ choices given the individual constraints of a given teaching context.

Although providing feedback was a familiar part of in-person teaching, some of the instructors struggled in this area. One such quote was: “Feedback is still a problem. Meeting more and more students in a private zoom call to discuss problems and errors.” In addition to the individualized feedback, other educators noted that they used quizzes that were outside of the learning management system. Other participants opted to provide feedback on lower technology options to expedite the process. While some instructors stated that the process of giving feedback remained the same as they had done in in-person writing classes, teachers in other skill areas noted that the process of providing feedback had to be adapted to the changed format.

In addition, the participants reported that the process of facilitating peer feedback as a form of assessment in an online classroom differed from the in-person procedures. The instructors struggled with implementing it in their online environment. One of the teachers commented: “I did, however, start using the ‘Assign Peer Review’ feature in Canvas (for first drafts of essays) since I couldn’t just collect papers and redistribute them.” Therefore, this teacher used online tools to facilitate the practices that were part of the students’ in-person repertoire. Some instructors abandoned the peer feedback component as evidenced in the following quote: “No more pair work or peer editing among students.” While the opportunity for peer reviews was not pursued by many participants, several incorporated them into online instruction.

4.2. Discussion

This study offers some insights into the importance of preparing English language teachers for online instruction. First, given the unpredictable changes in the delivery model of English language instruction, teacher preparation coursework should include pedagogical practices, skills, and knowledge needed to teach online. This knowledge can be incorporated into in-person instruction to facilitate a blended student learning experience that maximizes class time to promote student engagement with the content and their peers. Such preparation not only makes them more versatile instructors but also responds to a global marketplace that is increasingly seeing online opportunities for English language instruction and pedagogical applications for technology.

This research also revealed the need for online teacher training for English language administrators. Participants indicated that their administrators tried to be supportive of the process of learning to teach online but often did not have the technological expertise of online course design and management to provide direct knowledge to support the instructors. Therefore, professional development often had to be outsourced to technical professionals who were outside of the organization, delaying the technical support needed due to scheduling issues. If the administrators had more knowledge of online pedagogy, perhaps the technical assistance could have been more immediately provided.

This study also demonstrated that instructors who were able to find ways in which to transfer their in-person skills to an online format were much more comfortable with the transition to online instruction. Repurposing familiar skills, such as small group tasks or leading discussions for the online format, allowed instructors to maintain their sense of equilibrium as they shepherded their students through the transition online. Additionally, the rapport that was established prior to the migration helped the students to work with their instructors to make the move online. Participants who did not find transferrable skills often felt that they had to reinvent their teaching repertoire with limited time to do so. Such an outlook required large investments of time for the instructors to achieve their intended results.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this study found that the process of learning how to teach with little previous warning was a challenging endeavor for many of the participants. However, the instructors found that the experience enabled them to hone their craft and provide meaningful instruction through an online format. The expediency of the process required the educators to seek out specific solutions to instructional challenges they encountered online, thereby focused on targeted areas rather than a comprehensive approach to online teaching.

While participants in this study demonstrated resilience in their quest to learn instructional skills and strategies to deliver online English instruction, they noted that their experience could have been facilitated by language program administrators with more knowledge of online instructional pedagogy. Although some instructors were able to access online help through institutions, other participants did not have direct connections to technological support since many language programs are only affiliated with an institution. If the program director had more technological expertise, the instructional support could be more immediately available.

Results from this study indicated that instructors who knew components of instructional technology were able to build on their previous knowledge to expand their repertoire of strategies to facilitate online instruction. Such approaches included repurposing previously used instructional technology that was part of in-person teaching for online instruction. Additionally, other findings showed that non-instructional technological expertise could be applied to pedagogical practices. Beyond the technological mastery, this research found that the interpersonal skills that the instructor had built prior to the migration to online instruction helped the instructors to navigate the uncertainty of new technological approaches to classroom instruction.

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