

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered the landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT), challenging educators, students, and institutions worldwide. The sudden shift to online learning, driven by the necessity to maintain educational continuity during lockdowns and social distancing measures, has highlighted both the resilience and vulnerabilities of educational systems. This essay explores the multifaceted impact of COVID-19 on ELT, covering the transition to online learning, the challenges encountered, the innovations and strategies adopted, pedagogical changes, psychological and emotional impacts, and the long-term implications for the future of education.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, ELT, e-Learning, Pedagogy, Technological Tools

INTRODUCTION

On March 12, 2020, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, DirectorGeneral of the World Health Organization (WHO), officially announced through the WHO's official Twitter account that the world has entered a world of global emergency and COVID 19 has become a pandemic. Since then, 2020 has seen a real shift the way we work and study, almost overnight. Education has been affected by the pandemic. In order to break the chain of COVID19 and stop the spread, schools, colleges, universities and institutions were closed. There is no clear indication of when this nasty disease will be eradicated. Later, as students were forced to switch to online learning, English teachers were forced to use various online platforms like Microsoft Teams, Zooms, Google Meet, etc. to interact with students and complete assignments. Despite the difficult situation on both sides and the pandemic showing no end in sight, it has become important for teachers to use these online platforms to support students' learning. Online platforms or elearning play an important role because it not only helps in learning across the curriculum but also enables teachers to grow and become more skilled when they take advantage of the opportunities presented online.

TRANSITION TO ONLINE LEARNING

Teaching English is not an easy task. What makes teaching English increasingly difficult is the fact that schools have not closed. English teachers have to shift their English teaching from the workplace to online. As English teachers run online courses, more and more challenges are emerging. At the same time, as the number of COVID-19 cases increases, policy changes have made the job of some teachers more difficult and their responsibilities even more difficult. Lack of experience in using elearning will place a heavy burden on English teachers or tutors. The outbreak of COVID-19 necessitated an immediate shift from traditional in-person classes to online learning environments. This transition, while crucial for continuing education during the pandemic, presented significant challenges for educators and students alike.

COVID-19 has tested education in a whole new way. Research shows that there are six lessons from this dark and creative period that can help people decide the future direction of education: innovation, poor planning and ongoing support, student engagement, assessment, student language skills, and conflict.

RAPID SHIFT TO DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Institutions worldwide were compelled to adopt digital platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Classroom to facilitate online learning. This abrupt transition required educators to quickly familiarize themselves with these technologies, often with minimal training. Teachers had to learn to create and deliver engaging content in a virtual format, while students had to adapt to learning in a home environment that might not have been conducive to study.

It has provided change and opportunity for language teachers to step out of their comfort zones and improve their skills. Teachers stated that they believed that adapting to the new curriculum through trial and error improved their digital knowledge and personal and professional expectations. They stated that thanks to this experience, they are now more open to the use of technology in language lessons and have a different perspective on the potential of technology. Finally, the pandemic also played a role in professional development, helping even those who resist change want to become 21st century teachers and spur growth.

The rapid shift to online learning exposed gaps in digital literacy among both teachers and students. Many educators, particularly those with limited experience with technology, found themselves struggling to navigate digital platforms and utilize various online tools effectively. Simultaneously, students had to become proficient in using these platforms for learning, submitting assignments, and participating in virtual discussions. The lack of adequate digital infrastructure in many regions further highlighted the digital divide. Students without reliable internet access or appropriate devices were at a significant disadvantage, exacerbating existing educational inequalities. Schools and governments had to find ways to provide devices and internet access to those in need, but the gap remained a persistent issue.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

The transition to online learning was not without significant challenges. These challenges affected the efficacy of ELT during the pandemic and necessitated the development of innovative solutions.

Access and Equity

One of the primary issues was access and equity. Not all students had the necessary technology or a stable internet connection to participate in online classes. This digital divide exacerbated existing educational inequalities, leaving some students at a considerable disadvantage. Schools and governments took steps to address these issues, such as providing devices and internet access, but these measures were often insufficient to bridge the gap entirely.

Student Engagement

Maintaining student engagement in a virtual classroom posed a significant challenge. The lack of physical presence and direct interaction made it difficult for teachers to gauge student participation and understanding. Furthermore, students faced distractions at home that could detract from their focus on learning. Teachers had to employ creative strategies to keep students engaged, such as using interactive tools, gamification, and frequent check-ins.

Many teachers have said that lack of physical closeness and closeness can have a negative impact on language teaching because it affects authenticity, communication and connection between students. These teachers stated that the paralinguistic and kinesthetic activities available in face-to-face in online environments do not have opportunities that could hinder communication and interaction between people using the online language.

Assessment and Evaluation

Traditional assessment methods were disrupted by the shift to online learning. Conducting exams and quizzes in a virtual environment raised concerns about academic integrity and the reliability of assessments. Educators had to explore alternative assessment methods, such as project-based evaluations, open-book exams, and formative assessments, to accurately measure student learning. The rapid transition to online teaching required educators to adapt quickly to new tools and methods, often without sufficient training or support. Many teachers felt unprepared and overwhelmed by the demands of online instruction, which required not only technical skills but also new pedagogical approaches. Professional development became essential, with institutions offering training programs to help teachers navigate the challenges of virtual teaching.

INNOVATIONS AND STRATEGIES

In response to the challenges posed by the pandemic, the field of ELT witnessed a surge in innovations and the adoption of new strategies aimed at enhancing the online learning experience.

Blended Learning

Blended learning, which combines online and face-to-face instruction, emerged as a valuable approach. This model allows for flexibility in learning, catering to students' diverse needs and preferences. Blended learning can provide the best of both worlds: the convenience and accessibility of online learning, coupled with the engagement and interaction of in-person classes.

Interactive Tools and Resources

The use of interactive tools and digital resources became integral to online teaching. Platforms like Kahoot!, Quizlet, and Padlet were used to create engaging activities and quizzes. These tools helped in maintaining student interest and providing immediate feedback, which is crucial for language learning.

Professional Development

To equip teachers with the necessary skills for online teaching, many institutions offered professional development programs. These programs covered a range of topics, from technical skills related to using online platforms to pedagogical strategies for effective virtual instruction. Continuous professional development helped educators adapt to the changing landscape and improve their online teaching practices.

Collaborative Learning

Online platforms facilitated collaborative learning, allowing students to work together on projects and assignments despite physical separation. Tools such as Google Docs, shared online whiteboards, and discussion forums enabled real-time collaboration and peer interaction, fostering a sense of community and teamwork.

PEDAGOGICAL ADAPTATIONS

The shift to online learning necessitated significant changes in pedagogical approaches to ensure effective language instruction.

Student Autonomy

Online learning often requires students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Teachers provided guidelines and resources, but students had to manage their time and efforts independently. This shift encouraged the development of self-regulation and time-management skills among students, which are valuable for lifelong learning.

Personalized Learning

Technology facilitated personalized learning experiences, allowing educators to tailor instruction to individual student needs. Adaptive learning platforms and data analytics enabled teachers to track student progress and provide customized feedback and support. This personalized approach helped address different learning styles and paces, making education more inclusive and effective.

Flexible Learning

The flexibility of online learning allowed for asynchronous instruction, where students could access materials and complete assignments at their own pace. This flexibility was particularly beneficial for adult learners and those with other commitments, providing opportunities for continuous learning despite external constraints.

Enhanced Engagement Techniques

To counteract the challenges of maintaining student engagement in a virtual environment, educators adopted various techniques to make online lessons more interactive and stimulating. These included using multimedia resources, interactive polls, breakout rooms for small group discussions, and virtual simulations. Such techniques not only helped keep students interested but also facilitated deeper learning through active participation.

The long-term implications of the pandemic on ELT are still unfolding, but some trends and potential changes are becoming evident.

Hybrid Learning Models

Hybrid learning models, which combine online and in-person instruction, are likely to become more prevalent. The flexibility of these models can cater to diverse student needs and preferences, offering a more personalized learning experience. Hybrid models allow institutions to leverage the benefits of both formats, providing a balance between convenience and interaction.

Preparedness for Future Disruptions

The pandemic underscored the need for educational institutions to be better prepared for future disruptions. This preparedness will involve not only technology but also robust online teaching plans and resources. Institutions are likely to invest more in digital infrastructure, ensuring that they can pivot to online learning quickly if needed. Additionally, policies and protocols will be developed to ensure continuity of learning in case of emergencies.

Policy Changes

Governments and educational authorities are expected to implement new policies to support digital learning infrastructure and training for educators. These policies may include funding for technology and internet access, professional development programs for teachers, and guidelines for online and hybrid learning models. The aim will be to ensure that all students have equitable access to quality education, regardless of their circumstances.

Evolving Pedagogical Practices

The innovations and adaptations made during the pandemic are likely to have lasting effects on pedagogical practices. Educators have gained valuable experience in online teaching and have developed new strategies that can be integrated into traditional classrooms. The focus on student autonomy, personalized learning, and flexible instruction will continue to shape the future of education.

Global Collaboration and Sharing

The pandemic fostered a sense of global collaboration and sharing among educators. Online forums, webinars, and professional networks provided opportunities for teachers to share best practices, resources, and experiences. This collaborative spirit is expected to continue, promoting a more connected and supportive global community of educators.

Enhanced Digital Resources

The surge in the use of digital resources and educational technologies during the pandemic is likely to persist. Educational publishers and tech companies have developed a wealth of online materials, platforms, and tools that can support both online and in-person learning. These resources will continue to play a significant role in ELT, providing teachers with a broader array of options for instruction and assessment.

It may be concluded from the above discussion that although e-learning had gained considerable popularity over the past few decades, its widespread adoption and growing reliance became particularly evident from early 2020, owing to the global crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Previously regarded as a supplementary tool, used selectively based on specific learning outcomes, e-learning suddenly transformed into a fundamental component of language education. This shift not only highlighted its numerous advantages but also brought to light several challenges faced by both educators and learners. The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted English Language Teaching, bringing both challenges and opportunities for innovation. The rapid shift to online learning highlighted issues of access and equity, but it also spurred the adoption of new technologies and pedagogical approaches. Teachers and students demonstrated resilience and adaptability, finding ways to maintain engagement and continue learning in a virtual environment. The psychological and emotional impacts of the pandemic were significant, but the lessons learned have paved the way for more flexible and inclusive educational models. As the world emerges from the pandemic, the changes in ELT are likely to have lasting effects, shaping the future of education in ways that are more prepared, resilient, and adaptable. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of flexibility, innovation, and preparedness in education. By embracing these principles, the field of English Language Teaching can continue to evolve, providing high-quality education that meets the needs of all learners, regardless of the challenges they may face. The integration of technology, the focus on personalized and flexible learning, and the emphasis on mental health and well-being will be crucial in shaping a more resilient and inclusive educational future.

While e-learning has become an integral aspect of 21st-century education, offering numerous advantages for teachers and learners, language departments must still devise practical strategies to address the challenges it presents. For e-learning to be truly effective, fostering a positive attitude and promoting technological literacy among students is essential. Such efforts will help learners transition more confidently and smoothly from traditional face-to-face instruction to digital platforms. One helpful measure could be the allocation of an additional hour or half-hour each week as open office hours, dedicated solely to addressing students' doubts and queries. These sessions should maintain an informal tone to encourage open communication. In addition, teachers can provide supplementary learning materials and activities to clarify the week's expectations and reinforce key concepts. Lecture slides accompanied by audio recordings can be made available for asynchronous access, allowing students to engage with the content at their own pace and convenience. But when incorporating online resources, it is important to ensure that all materials align with the intended learning outcomes and correspond to students' proficiency levels. Moreover, students should feel a sense of belonging and community, even in a virtual environment. Assigning collaborative tasks such as group or pair activities can promote interaction and ease feelings of isolation. Research consistently shows that students learn more effectively when they engage with peers. In this context, peer tutoring can also serve as a valuable support mechanism, especially for learners who require additional assistance. While these supplementary tools and activities enhance the overall learning experience, the core focus of online instruction should remain on the development of essential language skills and the strategic processes involved in acquiring them. In doing so, virtual language education can become both meaningful and transformative for all learners.

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