Coping with COVID-19-related online English teaching challenges: teacher educators’ suggestions

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Although a number of studies have surveyed the challenges of remote English instruction imposed by COVID-19, a main research gap yet to be addressed is examining the relevant pedagogic experiences and suggestions given in language teacher educators’ blogs. Through analysing fifty-one blogs posted by teacher educators on four well-known language education websites, this study attempted to identify their perceived COVID-19-related online English language instruction challenges and suggested coping strategies. Analysing the blogs revealed nine main perceived online English teaching challenges associated with the teacher, learner, and online instruction implementation. To overcome these challenges, the teacher educators suggested seventeen main coping strategies pertinent to planning for online teaching, managing online classrooms, supporting students’ mental health, enhancing students’ ability to use/access technology, fostering active language learning engagement and motivation, and promoting teacher professional practices and wellbeing.

Key words: Online English teaching, COVID-19, teachers’ blogs

Introduction

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, schools and universities worldwide have witnessed major organizational changes as a result of the sudden closure and emergency transition to online teaching. Teachers, students, and families in most countries have been greatly affected by these organizational and instructional changes as they have had to cope with the newly imposed conditions of learning and teaching. The radical educational changes caused by the pandemic have been accompanied by a growing body of research addressing the pertinent challenges. Meanwhile, an increasing number of blogs discussing COVID-19-related English language teaching and learning practices have been posted on several websites.

A clear research gap yet to be addressed concerns the analysis of the COVID-19-related experiences and suggestions reported in teacher educators’ blogs. Such blogs normally include insightful reflections and suggestions. Therefore, the present study explored the COVID-19-related online teaching challenges reported in the blogs written by language teacher educators and their suggestions to overcome them.
Reacting to the pandemic crisis, researchers have explored the challenges of online teaching during the face-to-face schooling suspension period. Some studies have explored these challenges in specific international contexts. For example, Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison’s (2020) study showed that Chilean teacher candidates suffered from teacher–student online interactions, and from distractions and limitations caused by working from home. In Evans et al.’s (2020) study, the challenges reported by nine London-based English teachers in their narratives about online teaching in the lockdown conditions include: students’ unaffordability of required technological devices, limited online class interaction, mental and emotional pressures, and students’ performance assessment. Gao and Zhang (2020) also found that the sudden transition to online instruction in China caused university teachers some challenges, including confusion and anxiety, insufficient network conditions, and class management problems. Additionally, Pu (2020) referred to unfamiliarity with online teaching tools, course delivery adjustment, and ineffective online communication as the three main pedagogic challenges he experienced in the Chinese university context during the crisis.

Other studies have surveyed these challenges using a cross-cultural approach. For example, MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer (2020) examined the remote teaching challenges encountered by language teachers in Asia, Europe, North America, South America, and the Middle East during the COVID-19 crisis. The stressful experiences reported by the teachers in this study include: workload, loss of control over work and personal decisions, online teaching difficulties, and financial issues. In three large-scale cross-cultural reports published by the British Council (2020a,b,c), the respondents reported the following COVID-19-related online teaching challenges: performance assessment, technology access and device availability, learner demotivation, online learning content and delivery, teacher support, teacher technology illiteracy, and parental support and communication. Responses to the three surveys indicate that the teachers’ rating of some difficulties varied during the different stages of the crisis.

As noted, the above studies have mainly focused on language teachers’ perceived challenges of online English instruction during the pandemic crisis. Two questions yet to be answered relate to how these challenges may differ from those perceived by language teacher educators, and to whether or not using another data source may reveal a wider range of such challenges. In addition, it is worth noting that a few of the above research attempts have looked at online English teaching coping strategies. For example, the main coping strategies the teachers in MacIntyre et al.’s (2020) study reported were: accepting the realities of the crisis, advanced planning, refusing to accept what happened, positive reframing of emergent situations, and engaging actively in these situations. Overall, the coping strategies revealed by these studies are described briefly, and are limited in number. By researching COVID-19-related online English teaching challenges and coping strategies from a different angle, this study investigated how English language teacher educators have addressed them in their blogs.
Given the above, this study aimed at examining COVID-19-related online English teaching challenges and coping strategies in teacher educators’ blogs. Since teacher educators are seen as experts in their field, they are likely to provide more informative and insightful views on these issues. Experts are able to crystallize key practical issues and give insights on newly emerging topics such as remote teaching during the COVID-19 crisis (Rapanta et al. 2020).

The study focused on analysing fifty-one blogs posted on the following four websites: British Council [https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/] (n = 8 blogs), Cambridge Assessment [https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/] (n = 6 blogs), Cambridge University Press [https://www.cambridge.org/] (n = 25 blogs), and TESOL International Association [https://www.tesol.org/] (n = 12 blogs). These four websites were selected due to the assumed wider reach of the organizations running them. Although I recognize there may have been other valuable blogs published by teacher educators on their own websites, these were not included in this study. Forty-nine blogs were written by thirty-seven teacher educators, whereas two blogs were written by Cambridge English team members but no specific writer names were given.

According to the short bios given in the blogs and related websites, the thirty-seven teacher educators were based in a number of countries, including the United Kingdom (n = 16), the United States (n = 9), Spain (n = 3), Brazil, China, Ecuador, India, Myanmar, Russia, Serbia, Italy, and the UAE (n = 1 teacher educator in each of the nine countries). Six teacher educators wrote more than one blog (ranging from two to five blogs). The fifty-one blogs chosen for inclusion in this study were all posted on the four websites between early March and late October 2020, and most of them were written on an unsolicited basis. All the writers of the blogs had English language teacher training experiences, but their main positions and professions varied. Each blog writer was mainly belonging to one of the following language education communities: university faculty members, textbook writers, teacher trainers, senior teachers, and language assessment experts. The blogs vary relatively in their text length; most of them are around 1,000 words, but the British Council blogs are relatively longer and the TESOL International Association ones are relatively shorter than this mean word count.

In order to locate the blogs discussing the COVID-19-related online English teaching issues, I searched the four websites using keywords such as blog, COVID-19, pandemic, Coronavirus, and online teaching. The blogs were initially checked for their relevance to the target topic and those found irrelevant to COVID-19-related online teaching were excluded. The search process resulted in locating a total number of fifty-one blogs (see the Appendix), all of which addressed issues related to some challenges of online teaching during the pandemic and the suggested ways to overcome them.

In analysing the fifty-one blogs, I depended on the thematic analysis of their contents. This involved reading and re-reading the data, generating initial codes from it, refocusing the analysis to identify the broader themes
and subthemes in it, reviewing and refining the data analysis categories, and defining and naming the analysis categories (Braun and Clarke 2006). I read each blog a number of times to find the relevant themes in it. The emerging themes from the analysis of all blogs were initially organized in tables. The initial categorization of the challenges and coping strategies was reviewed and subjected to further cycles of analysis. These several cycles of the data analysis resulted finally in developing more solid categories of the themes and subthemes found in the blogs. Recognizing that my interpretations may not have been the ones intended by the bloggers and that such individual analysis may be marred by potential bias, I consulted an expert researcher who read a seven-page part of the coded data and agreed with the analysis categories given in it.

In line with the purpose of the study, the two main issues analysed in the fifty-one blogs were the challenges of online English teaching during the COVID-19 crisis and the coping strategies proposed for teachers. In the following subsections, these two issues are discussed and explained.

The teacher educators mentioned nine main COVID-19-related challenges of online English teaching in their blogs. Collectively, these challenges relate to the teacher, the learner, and online instruction implementation. Table 1 gives a summary of the three types of challenges.

The two teacher-related online instruction challenges discussed in the blogs are: teachers’ unpreparedness for online teaching, and the increasing workload caused by the multiple tasks of online teaching. The first challenge was only mentioned in the blogs posted in the early weeks of the pandemic crisis; this indicates that teachers were encountering

| Perceived challenges                                      | Number of blogs discussing them |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. **Teacher-related challenges**                         |                                 |
| Teachers’ unpreparedness                                  | 11                              |
| Increasing teaching workload                              | 6                               |
| 2. **Learner-related challenges**                         |                                 |
| Students’ demotivation and emotional well-being problems  | 12                              |
| Students’ poor autonomous learning skills                 | 3                               |
| Difficulties in communicating with families               | 3                               |
| 3. **Online instruction implementation challenges**       |                                 |
| Technical and technological obstacles                     | 11                              |
| Problematic learner behaviours and distraction in online environments | 7 |
| Reduced classroom interaction                             | 6                               |
| Difficulties in assessing learner language performance    | 3                               |

TABLE 1
The COVID-19-related online English instruction challenges discussed in the teacher educators’ blogs
many difficulties in coping with the early stage of the transition to online instruction. The educators who referred to teachers’ unpreparedness (e.g. Graeme Harrison, Will Rixon, Madhu Tiwari) congruently attributed it to the sudden transition to online teaching, which is particularly more problematic to those teachers having neophobia and technophobia or no previous online instruction training, and those who were not expecting to teach online for such a long time. As for the increasing workload of teaching, six educators (e.g. Anna Hasper, S. Akilandeswari) attributed it to factors such as the preparation for the new online teaching tasks, the longer time taken in checking technical issues, and the greater amount of teacher talk needed in online language classes.

On the other hand, the learner-related challenges highlighted in the blogs include: students’ demotivation and emotional well-being, poor autonomous learning skills, and difficulties in communicating with families. The twelve blogs which discussed the first challenge (e.g. Jade Blue- B, Jennifer Lowe) indicate that during the COVID-19 crisis, students experienced demotivation, anxiety and emotional well-being problems due to spending long hours taking their classes before the screen, doing much homework independently, and experiencing distracting family or environmental issues.

Like teachers, many English language learners worldwide were not prepared for this remote learning experience. The main problem related to students’ unpreparedness lies in their poor autonomous learning skills (e.g. Andres Paredes, Judit Kormos-C). This problem is particularly more challenging to young students and those with special needs, given that they have not yet reached an appropriate metacognitive awareness level. While guardians can play a compensatory role in fostering young students’ learning autonomy skills, three teacher educators (Karen Elliot, Judie Haynes-C, and Milica Vukadin) reported that in some contexts schools have difficulties in communicating with families to understand the way they perceive children’s needs.

Compared to the above two types of challenges, the online instruction implementation ones are more frequently mentioned in the blogs. These challenges are: technical and technological obstacles, problematic learner behaviours and distraction, reduced classroom interaction, and difficulties in assessing learner language performance. The technical and technological concerns discussed include: the need to frequently check technical issues, internet access and connectivity problems, and the incompatibility of some devices and the unaffordability of others (e.g. Lindsay Clandfield, Madhu Tiwari). Regarding the problematic learner behaviours and distraction problems highlighted, these include: the noise coming from multiple students’ microphones, students’ abuse of chatrooms, and distracting behaviour such as playing games or browsing entertainment websites during online classes. Some educators (e.g. S. Akilandeswari, Kimberley Silver) consider that these problems are more likely to occur in younger learner online classes than in older learner ones.

Another main challenge is the reduced student–teacher and student–student interaction caused by the communication constraints in remote classes. Some educators (e.g. Jade Blue-A, Kirsteen Donaghy) think that
such reduced interaction has negatively influenced students’ opportunities to build relationships with their teachers and classmates, to acquire some knowledge and skill features through teacher body language, and to learn informally through chats and conversations. The limited communication problem is more challenging in the online classes of deaf students (see Robert Adam). Moreover, this reduced classroom interaction has hindered teachers’ ability to assess students’ language performance. According to Julia Yu, the assessment challenge is not limited to the formal testing of students’ English language performance, but also includes the way teachers check students’ understanding in online classes.

| Suggested online teaching coping strategies                                                                 | Number of blogs discussing them |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Planning for online English teaching                                                                   | 10                             |
| 2. Supporting students’ mental and emotional health                                                       | 8                              |
| 3. Enhancing students’ ability to use/access technology                                                   |                                |
|     Familiarizing students with the use of online tools                                                   | 6                              |
|     Understanding the technological difficulties students encounter by means of observation and surveys    | 6                              |
|     Enabling particular categories of learners to access technological aids                              | 2                              |
| 4. Managing online classrooms effectively                                                                 |                                |
|     Setting clear online classroom management rules                                                       | 5                              |
|     Making sure all students are engaged in the activity being taught                                     | 3                              |
|     Protecting students’ privacy and online safety                                                        | 2                              |
| 5. Fostering students’ active language learning engagement and motivation                                  |                                |
|     Enhancing students’ autonomous learning and collaborating with parents for this purpose               | 15                             |
|     Making use of other technologies in classroom activities                                               | 12                             |
|     Staying connected with students                                                                      | 6                              |
|     Teaching lockdown-related language                                                                    | 5                              |
|     Varying assessment methods and depending more on formative assessment                                 | 4                              |
|     Maximizing the use of visual aids                                                                    | 3                              |
| 6. Promoting teacher professional practices and wellbeing                                                 |                                |
|     Sharing technological and pedagogic experiences with colleagues                                       | 10                             |
|     Engaging regularly in online teaching rehearsing and pedagogic reflection                             | 3                              |
|     Practising self-care                                                                                  | 3                              |

Table 2
The teacher educators’ suggested coping strategies for overcoming COVID-19-related online English teaching challenges
In their blogs, the teacher educators suggested seventeen main coping strategies for overcoming the perceived online English teaching challenges. As shown in Table 2, the coping strategies proposed by the teacher educators can be grouped into six categories which are explained below.

**Planning for online English teaching**

Ten teacher educators (e.g. Kirsteen Donaghy, Ceri Jones-B & E) regard planning for online English instruction an essential coping strategy for overcoming remote teaching problems. According to them, the issues that need much planning from language teachers are: choosing the appropriate teaching platform and communication type (i.e. synchronous versus asynchronous), prioritizing teaching needs, managing distance learning environments, deciding upon the nature and types of the activities students will be doing, and predicting the contextual factors potentially hindering online teaching.

**Supporting students’ mental and emotional health**

In eight blogs, the teacher educators suggested some strategies for helping students overcome COVID-19-related mental and emotional health problems. The main strategies proposed for supporting students’ mental and emotional health include: providing them with a welcoming online classroom atmosphere, giving them brain breaks, and sharing COVID-19-related experiences and feelings (e.g. Karen Elliott, Chris Sowton).

**Enhancing students’ ability to use technology**

The teacher educators also mentioned three main strategies for enhancing students’ ability to use technology. According to six educators (e.g. Kirsteen Donaghy, Milica Vukadin), teachers need to start their remote teaching by familiarizing students with the use of online platform tools. Such familiarization could take the form of training students in using these tools, or drawing their attention to the guides or videos showing them how to use the platform and troubleshoot technological problems. Alternatively, teachers can create their own video tutorials for helping students how to use the platform. According to two educators (Robert Martínez and Madhu Tiwari), teachers should adopt a simple approach to using technological tools in the chosen platform. This simple approach is not only good for students but also helps teachers gradually develop their own abilities to use technology efficiently.

The second main strategy in fostering students’ technology literacy is diagnosing their technology use difficulties through observation and surveys. Regarding observation, it could take the form of noting the technological difficulties students encounter during classes, or (as Raquel Ribeiro-B explains) it could be done by experimenting with the technological devices they use in order to understand their user experiences. On the other hand, four other educators (e.g. Chris Sowton, Madhu Tiwari) explain that teachers can diagnose students’ technology use difficulties through surveying their experiences and perceived challenges in using the platform tools. A final coping strategy highlighted
Managing online classrooms effectively

The following three strategies were suggested for managing online classrooms: setting clear classroom management rules, checking students’ engagement in the activity being taught, and protecting their privacy and online safety. In reaction to the perceived problematic learner behaviours in remote teaching, five blogs (e.g. Cambridge English-A, Kimberley Silver) discussed the importance of setting clear online classroom management rules. According to them, students’ active engagement in online learning activities is contingent upon setting appropriate and clear basic classroom management rules. Meanwhile, one teacher educator (Madhu Tiwari) warns that overusing online classroom instructions could result in detrimental effects.

Three blogs (Kirsteen Donaghy, Cambridge English-B, and Robert Martínez) explain that online classrooms can be managed effectively through making sure students are engaged in activities, and frequently checking their engagement in the learning content being explained and in the collaborative classroom activities assigned. Finally, two blogs (Paul Braddock and Cambridge English-A) highlighted the importance of protecting students’ privacy and safety in online environments. Paul Braddock thinks that this issue is particularly important when teaching students with special needs. According to the Cambridge English-A’s blog, teachers need to protect students’ personal information, videos, and images, and prevent any cyberbullying behaviours.

Fostering students’ active language learning engagement and motivation

Of all the six main coping strategy types proposed, most strategies relate to fostering students’ active language learning engagement and motivation. In their blogs, the teacher educators proposed six key strategies for engaging students actively in learning activities and fostering their language learning motivation. The most frequently mentioned coping strategy in this category is enhancing students’ autonomous learning. Ten teacher educators (e.g. Andres Paredes, Judie Haynes-D, Olha Madylus) discussed the importance of helping language learners become more autonomous during the crisis, and suggested different ways to enhance learning autonomy. Some proposed strategies for enhancing students’ learning autonomy are simple, such as helping them access ebooks through replacing printed books with digital versions, and creating a learner community through the blogs in which they can share their study experiences and learn from each other; whereas the more complicated procedures include engaging students in project-based and flipped classroom study experiences.

Four teacher educators (e.g. Paul Braddock, Karen Elliott) call for collaboration with parents as they can play an important role in
fostering their children’s autonomous language learning, and helping them complete asynchronous activities. According to these educators, collaboration with families requires adding them to their children’s school accounts, sharing with them study materials through emails or messaging services, and understanding the difficulties they face in their home-schooling experiences. One teacher educator (Judie Haynes-B) believes that effective collaboration with language learners’ parents can be accomplished through finding ways to communicate with them about effective remote learning, and providing them with ideas for activities they can do with children.

According to twelve educators (e.g. Niall Curry, Betsy Gilliland, A.C. Kemp, Olha Madylus), students’ language learning engagement and motivation can be fostered if teachers make use of other technologies while delivering lessons on a particular platform. The technologies they mentioned include: presentation software, Google Classroom and Zoom tools (e.g. breakout rooms and commenting features), virtual whiteboards, chat forums, voice recording, and flashcard and game generators. It is noteworthy, however, that two teacher educators (Kirsteen Donaghy, Larry Ferlazzo) warn against the student confusion that may result from using a large number of platform tools. Therefore, teachers need to use only the digital tools that work for them and their students (see the above related suggestions for enhancing students’ ability to use technology).

A third strategy some teacher educators deem essential to learner active engagement in online classes is staying connected with students and also connecting them to learning resources (e.g. Ceri Jones-A, Ilka Kostka). According to one educator (Larry Ferlazzo), the importance of this coping strategy lies in fostering students’ positive attitudes towards attending online classes. Another proposed strategy for fostering students’ learning engagement and motivation is teaching them the lockdown-related language. Five educators (e.g. Raquel Ribeiro-A, Madhu Tiwari) proposed supporting students’ engagement in online classes through using learning materials and/or activities with lockdown-related linguistic features (e.g. newspaper articles), or getting students to perform relevant writing or speaking tasks.

On the other hand, three blogs (Cambridge English-A, Judie Haynes-D, and Jennifer Lowe) also discussed the importance of maximizing the use of visual aids to engage students actively in online classes and lighten the learning atmosphere. Not only should variation be considered in online language learning environments, but it needs also to be taken into account in assessing students’ performance. This was emphasized in four blogs (e.g. Paul Braddock, Cambridge English-A) in which the teacher educators call for greater dependence on formative assessment tools such as course projects, progress tests, assignments, and quizzes.

**Promoting teacher professional practices and well-being**

In their blogs, the educators also provided some suggestions for fostering teacher professional practices and well-being. Collectively, these suggestions can be grouped into three main coping strategies. The first strategy is teachers’ sharing of online technological and pedagogic
experiences with their colleagues and professional community (e.g. Nina Koptyug, Andrew Nye, Tim Phillips). Milica Vukadin believes that teachers could interact with their professional community by using specific social media channels such as Twitter. Paul Braddock also emphasizes the important role teacher educators can play in enabling teachers to share their own professional experiences during the crisis.

On the other hand, three educators (Paul Braddock, Anna Hasper, and Stephanie Marcotte-B) believe that teachers can overcome online teaching challenges through engaging regularly in rehearsing virtual classes and reflecting upon their pedagogic practices. They particularly suggested teacher individual and collaborative reflective practices as a coping strategy for determining what is working properly in online classes and what adjustments need to be made.

Finally, three educators (Christina Gkonou, Judie Haynes-A, and Stephanie Marcotte-B) draw English language teachers’ attention to practising self-care by suggesting some pertinent tips for teacher well-being, such as: avoiding negative news, doing some self-enjoyment activities, and getting connected with work colleagues and friends. These suggestions aim at helping teachers enjoy a good level of well-being, which will in turn positively influence their students’ mental and emotional health.

This study examined COVID-19-related online English teaching challenges and coping strategies in teacher educators’ blogs. When comparing the COVID-19-related online English teaching challenges mentioned in the teacher educators’ blogs to those reported in previous research (e.g. British Council 2020a,b,c; Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison 2020), we can note they are generally similar and support each other. However, when compared to the results obtained from questionnaires and/or interviews in previous studies (e.g. MacIntyre et al. 2020), using the teacher educators’ blogs as a data source helped in revealing details about the online teaching challenges as well as providing a much wider range of coping strategies. It is noteworthy that there remain certain underdeveloped online language-teaching areas in the teacher educators’ blogs analysed, such as how to teach and assess language areas (grammar, vocabulary, listening reading, speaking, and writing) in online environments. However, webinars, recorded seminars, and videos may be more suited for discussing these issues.

Future studies need to document and understand how the international language teaching community has reacted to the pandemic crisis. It may be interesting to conduct a follow-up study of language teacher educators’ COVID-19-related blogs in later stages to examine any changes in such challenges or coping strategies. Furthermore, researchers may examine whether or not language teacher educators’ recorded videos and webinars include different coping strategies suggested for overcoming the COVID-19-related online instruction challenges. We still also need survey and qualitative research that focuses mainly on the challenges of online teaching of English language skills during the pandemic crisis.

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Appendix: The blogs analysed in the study

British Council blogs

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