Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.
Research article

Negotiating pedagogical positions in higher education during COVID-19 pandemic: teacher's narratives

Sajjadllah Alhawsawi*,a, Sabria Salama Jawharb

a College of Science and Health Professions, King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences, King Abdullah International Medical Research Center, King Abdullah Medical City, Ministry of National Guard Health Affairs, P.O. Box 22490 - Mail Code 3124, Riyadh 11426, Saudi Arabia
b Department of English, College of Science and Health Professions, King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences & King Abdullah International Medical Research Center, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Teachers’ assumptions, Higher education, Synchronous teaching, Teaching English, Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT

Based on a qualitative semi-structured interview, this paper argues that pedagogical positions can be negotiated and adjusted once a policy is introduced and a safe space for negotiation is created. It is a case study where we cite evidence from a Saudi university that shows the change in teachers’ assumptions and, consequently, the negotiation process they had gone through within their institution due to a sudden policy shift. The paper highlights the importance of policies and the surrounding circumstances when it comes to negotiating pedagogical beliefs. This paper challenges the long-established assumption that age and much experience make it difficult for teachers to adapt their face-to-face educational activities to online platforms. We argue that institutional policies play a crucial role in shaping and reshaping teachers’ assumptions and practices when the following conditions are met: sound IT infrastructure, technological support, and continuous training.

1. Introduction

Pedagogical positions are the subjective assumptions that teachers hold about teaching and learning (Means et al., 2013; Lederman 2018; Rasheed et al., 2020). These assumptions are mostly a product of their education and lived experiences, the training they may have received, or institutional policies (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Trigwell et al., 1999; Ashwin 2009; Alhawsawi 2017; Rasheed et al., 2020). Shifting such positions is not something that can be easily negotiated as they take time and experience to be constructed (Martin et al., 2019; Rasheed et al., 2020). One such position is the way that teachers perceive teaching and learning. They often hold the view that teaching is an act that happens through/by a teacher with the students in educational halls where teachers and students are expected to engage in face-to-face interactions (Brinkley-Etzkorn 2018). Using Learning Management Systems (LMS) as a mode of instruction has been perceived by some teachers as less favorable than a face-to-face traditional real-time interaction (Lederman 2018). They have even negatively characterized the integration of technology into teaching as being time 'fillers' or 'wasters' that teachers use to supplement their instruction (Woodard and Ellis 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Lederman 2018). They saw such integration of technology "as a distraction and disruption to instruction" (Rasheed et al., 2020: 10).

Such assumptions have been truly tested during the current (March/2020) outbreak of the CORONA virus, also known as the COVID-19 disease. The pandemic has taken the world by surprise and left many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers with no choice but to accept online teaching with all its forms as the sole method for teaching. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, a Royal Decree was issued to suspend face-to-face teaching in all academic institutions effective from Monday, March 2nd, 2020. All educational activities had to be provided online with a quality similar to that provided through traditional face-to-face interactions. The Royal Decree allowed only three days for this transition, which is not much time. By Thursday, March 5th, 2020, teaching activities were expected to resume online, and the teachers had to be ready to engage in 100% online pedagogical activities. Although the Royal Decree was meant solely to protect the nation from the widespread COVID 19, it also acted as a real test of many current educational assumptions.

Informed by Bourdieu’s relational theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979), which suggests that the relationship between structure and agency helps understand social phenomena (Ashwin 2009; Alhawsawi 2014), this paper adopts sociological stands that view teaching as a negotiation between a teachers’ agency and the surrounding structure. Teaching is a set of assumptions that a teacher adopts. Those assumptions

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: hawsawi@ksau-hs.edu.sa (S. Alhawsawi).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07158
Received 19 July 2020; Received in revised form 13 March 2021; Accepted 25 May 2021
2405-8440/© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).
are influenced by the teachers’ individuality and the structure in which the teaching happens (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Ashwin 2009; Alhawsawi 2014; Brinkley-Etzkorn 2018; Rasheed et al., 2020). Thus, this paper aims to present how EFL teachers negotiated their pedagogical assumptions when they were required to shift their teaching from the traditional face-to-face mode to a completely online mode within three days. It outlines individual and institutional challenges as well as how participants have devised ways to address those challenges. The data were collected from the narratives of the participants. We hope that this paper offers learning opportunities for teachers and space for policy discussion in higher education. It is essential to mention that the literature uses the term ‘online teaching’ to refer to different teaching modes implemented in the interim. However, in this paper, it refers to synchronous teaching that takes place online and in real-time and is used interchangeably.

2. Background

The recent outbreak of COVID-19 has left the whole world in a state of alert and panic. Different countries have taken various measures to control the spread of the disease. On Monday, March 2nd, 2020, a Saudi Royal Decree was issued to suspend all face-to-face educational activities and shift the entire education provision online within three days. At this particular university, the EFL department held emergency meetings to address the issues presented by this Royal Decree. The department encouraged all its members to think about ways of delivering online education. Fortunately, most of the faculty members already had computers and Internet connections at home, and the university provides the faculty members with open access to Blackboard, an LMS. However, up to that point in time, LMS or online teaching was not compulsory, and the development of skills in these areas was generally left to each individual. In addition, although the IT infrastructure was very robust, the Internet speed was not always fast, and most of the computers in the college were outdated. These limitations did not have a detrimental impact on the delivery of face-to-face sessions. However, when this crisis hit, taking everyone by surprise, the teachers’ readiness and technological infrastructure became critical. The severity of this crisis’s impact on the country’s academic institutions can mainly be determined by both the preparedness of technological infrastructure and the teachers.

This study reports how school suspension has influenced teaching in an EFL program at a Saudi university. It explores the participants’ pedagogical negotiations while dealing with the new challenge of moving the education provision to online platforms. The teachers’ narratives were used as primary data and were subjected to thematic analysis, as explained in the methodology section.

3. Review of the literature

Schooling or provision of education can be interrupted or ceased for many reasons, such as extreme weather or threats. In such situations, when students cannot attend the traditional brick-and-mortar schools, education and teaching can be delivered using online platforms (Dorsey 2020; Rasheed et al., 2020). This type of teaching and learning may include packaged self-directed learning materials and learning activities in numerous LMSs, and interactive online sessions using numerous tele-technologies. Dorsey (2020: online page) believes that utilizing such technology for distant learning helps “retain valuable instructional time and reduce makeup days at the end of the school year.” On the other hand, Martin et al. (2019) and Rasheed et al. (2020) argue that this type of education can be a real challenge for teachers’ long-standing academic positions and associated practices.

Teachers’ pedagogical positions are subjective systems of different teaching and learning assumptions (Martin et al., 2019; Rasheed et al., 2020). These include assumptions about teachers’ and learners’ roles, the available pedagogical resources such as IT, books, classrooms, and teacher training (Leibowitz et al., 2015; Brinkley-Etzkorn 2018; Rasheed et al., 2020). Institutional and individual aspects influence such assumptions. Institutions are seen as an existing social structure, whose norms, regulations, and rules influence individuals’ cognitive processes, actions, and behaviors (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Ashwin 2009; Ahmed 2012; Alhawsawi 2014). Leibowitz et al. (2015) and Brinkley-Etzkorn (2018) suggest that institutional policies influence the type and the quality of professional development courses offered to university lecturers. Rasheed et al. (2020: 10) believe that “institutional culture and practices contribute to teachers’ negative perception and repulsiveness toward the use of technology for teaching.” Drent and Meelissen (2008) associated those policies with teachers’ use of technology, adding that a lack of emphasis on IT in institutional policies deprives teachers of opportunities to utilize technology in teaching and learning.

Institutional policies are not the only influence on teachers’ assumptions about teaching and learning; as social actors, teachers play roles in shaping and reshaping their views (Brinkley-Etzkorn 2018; Lederman, 2018). In addition, their previous experiences and practices contribute to shaping their feelings toward/stance on online education (Martin et al., 2019).

In their taxonomy of challenges in online education, Rasheed et al. (2020) argued that teachers’ lack of technological literacy and competency, their inability to create quality online videos, and technological operation challenges are among the many issues influencing teachers’ adaptation to online education. Furthermore, their previous education and teacher training and the broader social context in which teachers have lived play significant roles in shaping their views about teaching, the teacher’s role, the choice of class activities, and the instructional strategies (Alhawsawi 2017; Rasheed et al., 2020). Trigwell, Prosser (1999), and Alhawsawi (2017) explain that when teachers believe that knowledge is immutable and fixed, they are more likely to enact that in their teaching, the tools they use, and the instructional strategies they apply. Conversely, if teachers believe that knowledge is constructed, they are more likely to enact that in their roles and use different tools and instructional strategies that enable students to co-create knowledge (Trigwell et al., 1999; Alhawsawi 2017). However, these educational assumptions are a field of a constant battle between structure and agency (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Ashwin 2009; Alhawsawi 2014). The context may stimulate or suppress previous experience and offer space to negotiate and assume certain positions (Trigwell et al., 1999; Brinkley-Etzkorn 2018).

Thus, the discussion about using online teaching and learning is viewed here through a lens of structure and agency (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Ashwin 2009; Alhawsawi 2014). Discussing such complex relationships can help us understand our participants’ experiences and unpack the challenges they face. The literature about online pedagogy discusses institutional policies that need to be in place to encourage teachers to deliver teaching and learning online, e.g., the provision of Internet, devices, electronic sites, and teacher training (Martin et al., 2019; Abe 2020; Dorsey 2020). Teachers must have access to functional devices, the Internet, and a shared online space to connect with their students and deliver their lessons online (Brinkley-Etzkorn 2018; Stetter 2018).

In addition to the institutional logistics, teachers must reflect deeply on their roles and their relationships with students when thinking about delivering online pedagogies (Martin et al., 2019; Kears 2016). Rasheed et al. argue that “teachers’ skepticism about the effectiveness of online instruction in improving learning” could hinder their adoption of online education (Rasheed et al., 2020: 9). Abe (2020: 1) adds that “a majority of faculty continue to hold skeptical attitudes toward the newer teaching modality, with many expressing that online classes are less rigorous and effective than traditional classes in engaging students.” Before providing online pedagogical activities, teachers need to determine the essence of their teaching by asking themselves what they want to deliver, how they want to offer it, and how the students will interact with it (Kears 2016; Hathaway and Norton 2012). Answering these questions helps to chart a logical lesson...
plan that must be clearly articulated in online activities (Boelens et al., 2017).

The transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to online teaching is not a seamless task. This is particularly true when teachers do not have enough time to adapt and adjust their pedagogical assumptions (Martin et al., 2019; Woodard and Ellis 2019; Rasheed et al., 2020: 12). Rasheed et al. (2020: 8) argue that teachers are often worried about the amount of time that will be spent in learning the new technology, the “troubleshooting of technical problems,” “resolving technical difficulties,” as well as the “difficulty in designing and managing online courses.” Such challenges can be worse if the changes are suddenly introduced (Brinkley-Etzkorn 2018; Wasik et al., 2019). While enhancing technological literacy seems to be more easily achievable, changing teaching and learning assumptions might be the real challenge (Alhawsawi 2017; Lederman 2018). With the sudden introduction of online education, teachers are expected to swiftly develop the relevant technology and adopt pedagogical skills to successfully convert to a virtual classroom format (Wasik et al., 2019). In doing so, the faculty are expected to rapidly “reconsider and recon- struct their conceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about how they teach and how students learn within online environments” (Baran and Correia 2014: 97). This transition includes reddefining their roles and rethinking how they interact with their students and how their students interact with each other in the new online environment (Martin et al., 2019; Brinkley-Etzkorn 2018; Woodard and Ellis 2019). Fish and Wickersham (2009: 279) emphasize that “teaching online requires a faculty member to think differently about teaching and learning, learn a host of new technological skills, and engage in ongoing faculty development for design and development of quality online instruction.” However, a lack of resources, time, training, and experience can be a burden when teachers are asked to shift their teaching online. The availability of institutional support and resources is critical at this stage to create a safe space through which teachers can negotiate their pedagogical positions and subsequently ease the transition (Baran and Correia 2014; Martin et al., 2019; Rasheed et al., 2020).  

4. Methodology

This study can be described as a narrative qualitative case study. It explores the personal meaning that teachers attribute to the events (i.e., narratives) and the environment in which they work and highlights the impact of the environment on their behavior (i.e., case study) (Creswell and Poth 2016; Cohen et al., 2018; Bryman 2016). The data were collected using semi-structured interviews to describe teachers’ initial responses in written forms or recorded stories after three days of battling using LMS to shift their pedagogical activities to synchronous teaching (Suryani 2013). The following two questions guided the interviews:

1. How does the suspension of school due to COVID-19 and the shift to synchronous teaching influence English teaching?
2. What learning opportunities did teachers encounter with the suspension of studies due to COVID-19 and the move to online platforms?

It is critical to mention here our position as insiders to enhance the research’s trustworthiness (Alhawsawi 2014; Flyvbjerg 2006; Fossey et al., 2002; Winter 2000). The authors’ observations were used to describe the context. Three days after the Royal Decree announcement, the participants were invited to write their narratives by answering the above questions voluntarily. Their informed consent was obtained in compliance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations in King Abdullah International Medical Research Center (KAIMRC), Saudi Arabia. Some of the respondents preferred to tell their stories in person rather than writing them down. The total number of respondents was fifteen (five females and ten males). The participants were faculty members in an EFL department in a Saudi university with a wide range of qualifications and teaching experience, as seen in Table 1 below. Their responses were transcribed, manually coded, grouped, organized and then condensed into themes prior to carefully analyzing, interpreting and extracting meaning from them (Patton 1990; Kvale 1996; Adu 2019) (see appendix I for an example matrix for the process of the analysis). The themes were divided into two: individual and institutional challenges. These themes were either related to individual or institutional issues. Such division of the themes at the analysis phase was informed by the relational theory adopted in the research. Then the interpretation of these themes was presented in the findings section to address the research questions. The data analysis yielded a considerable number of comments, but only the answers that best represent the argument were quoted. The name of the university and the participants were kept anonymous to sustain the participants’ confidentiality and anonymity in compliance with the ethical considerations of the IRB in the King Abdullah International Medical Research Center (KAIMRC). Native and non-native English-speaking teachers were given western and Arabic names to conceal their identities. The only identifiable aspects used in the coding process were the general measures such as gender, the longevity of experience, and the department’s ranking. The emerging themes from the analysis were presented to different university audiences and shared with participants for feedback to determine the trustworthiness of the

| Pseudonyms     | Age   | Gender | Degree in EFL | Years of experience | Ranking in the department |
|----------------|-------|--------|---------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Muhammad       | Late 50s | Male   | BA            | 30-40               | Senior member             |
| Sam            | Late 50s | Male   | MA            | 30-40               | Senior member             |
| Shuran         | Early 40s | Male   | BA            | 15-20               | Coordinator               |
| Abdul          | Late 30s | Male   | MA            | 10-15               | Coordinator               |
| Gabriel        | Mid 40s  | Male   | PhD           | 20-25               | Instructor               |
| Joseph         | Late 30s | Male   | PhD           | 10-15               | Instructor               |
| Adam           | Late 30s | Male   | MA            | 10-15               | Coordinator               |
| Khalid         | Early 40s | Male   | MA            | 15-20               | Instructor               |
| Musa           | Mid 40s  | Male   | MA            | 20-25               | Instructor               |
| Saleem         | Mid 40s  | Male   | PhD           | 20-25               | Senior member             |
| Alicia         | Mid-30s  | Female | MA            | 10-15               | Instructor               |
| Aisha          | Early 40s | Female | PhD           | 15-20               | Coordinator               |
| Cora           | Late 50s | Female | MA            | 25-30               | Senior member             |
| Gabriela       | Early 40s | Female | PhD           | 15-20               | Senior member             |
| Lin            | Early 30s | Female | MA            | 10-15               | Instructor               |
findings. The feedback on the findings helped to refine and continually restructure the conclusions. Although the methodology used in this study may not provide generalizable results, the richness and the depth of the data offer useful reference, comparison, and development evidence for practitioners and researchers in other similar contexts and situations (Flyvbjerg 2006; Alhawsawi 2014). We are also aware that our position as insiders in the research context could influence how the participants' reality is being presented (Greckhamer and Cilesiz 2014). We have used what Hammersley (2006) called “the radical critique of interviews.” Using such a technique allowed us to be constantly aware of our insiderness and focus our interpretations on what the participants said.

5. Findings and discussion

This section presents the main findings that emerged from the analysis of the teachers’ narratives. Acknowledging the viability of the relationship between the structure and agency in explaining changes (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Ashwin 2009; Alhawsawi 2014), the results are divided into two main themes. The first theme describes structural issues exemplified by the institutional challenges that the participants needed to deal with when converting their pedagogical activities to online. The second discusses the agency’s issues related to negotiating, shifting academic positions, and mindset shifting.

5.1. The institutional challenges

The first challenge that the participants faced when requested to shift their pedagogical activities to the virtual world was related to technological literacy. Many of the participants had not previously developed the needed technological literacy, and technical support was scarce. This section discusses how the participants’ technological literacy and the support available influenced their pedagogical practices and experience.

5.1.1. Technology literacy

Higher education institutions mostly tend to put academic-related skills such as face-to-face teaching strategies and research productivity in the center of the faculty’s continuous professional development (Alhawsawi 2017; Alexander et al., 2017). Teaching online requires a different mindset and significant pedagogical adjustment. Due to such focus on face-to-face, teachers such as Muhammed, a senior member in the department, faced difficulties adjusting to online teaching. The teachers addressed the notion of technology illiteracy and its impact on their teaching as follows.

*I am a very competent grammar teacher, and I can teach monkeys the most complicated grammatical rules, but not all the teachers are comfortable with using IT for remote teaching. I can barely check my emails and type... this is going to be an excellent recipe for disaster. How do you want to deliver these grammar charts without a teacher? This is a tough situation, and I feel sorry for the students.*

Sam, another senior member in the department, expressed a similar sentiment of confusion and the feeling of being challenged.

*I did not know what they wanted me to teach online. I need to see the students and interact with them. The students need me to talk to them and show them how to do things. I need to read to them and explain the passages as we read. This is not going to work.*

Developing technological skills required for synchronous teaching seems to have never been a priority in Muhammed’s and Sam’s contexts. The above quotes express their discontentment with delivering synchronous teachings. It shows that they both held certain assumptions about teaching and learning that could not be significantly reflected in online education. They were used to having students in front of them in physical classes, where they disseminated knowledge. The lack of technological skills to handle teaching online demands seemed to have prevented teachers such as Muhammed and Sam from engaging with synchronous teaching.

This is in line with literature that argues that longevity and duration of teaching using traditional methods of face-to-face often make it difficult for senior teachers to acquire the needed technological skills (Akgayır et al., 2016). For senior teachers like Muhammed and Sam, the lack of such relevant skills seems to have questioned their assumptions about what constitutes teaching and taken away the one thing they were certain of, i.e., their pedagogical skills. Interestingly, young EFL teachers like Shuran also shared a similar sentiment of uncertainty, which questions the impact of age and teaching duration on technology adaptation. In discussion with a colleague from whom he requested help, Shuran said:

*I am very good at preparing reading materials, quizzes, worksheets, and assessments, but do not ask me to teach online. I am not ready; I am not prepared. Look, why do I not prepare the materials that go online and find someone to convert it to a PowerPoint presentation for the life sessions?*

This suspension of real-life sessions has highlighted the gap in technological literacy among teachers, senior and junior alike, and left them exposed and challenged for not being up to date with the latest online pedagogical technologies. It also challenged their assumptions about teaching and learning. Before the pandemic, teaching skills did not require many sophisticated technology-related skills but abilities to interact face-to-face with students in classrooms. Consequently, having advanced or even novice technology skills or online platforms knowledge was not a necessity. Some teachers even perceived the whole online pedagogical business as time “fillers” or “wasters” that distract and disrupt the instruction (Woodard and Ellis 2019; Rasheed et al., 2020). However, this crisis has brought to light the discussion about how technological literacy could help teachers negotiate their pedagogical assumptions and adjust their teaching, should this be required.

Academic positions, though, could be understood as a personal choice, influenced by institutional decisions (Medina 2018). This idea was clearly reflected in Abdul’s quote below.

*The main challenge I had was that we never used Blackboard before in our teaching. The main issue for me was that I was not familiar with how to use it. I have been trying to familiarize myself with it for the past few days, and I feel a lot more comfortable now.*

The quote shows that the hesitation was not because some teachers were unwilling to adjust to online teaching but because they were not previously subjected to such demands. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of exposing all teachers in higher education to online teaching platforms and making it part of their teaching practices and training, as suggested by Medina (2018) and Baran and Correia (2014). It is “the responsibility of academic institutions to provide the necessary training and technical support to both teachers and students to ensure effective utilization of the available technology, and also, to utilize the online component efficiently” (Rasheed et al., 2020: 2). Therefore, having the appropriate technical skills required for synchronous teaching increases teachers’ readiness to negotiate and adopt their teaching assumptions. It also highlights the importance of increasing teachers’ willingness to deal with unforeseen circumstances by diversifying their teaching approaches (Dorsey 2020; Alhawsawi 2017; Alexander et al., 2017).

5.1.2. Technology infrastructure

The adequacy of the technological infrastructure, which includes the availability of computers and associated devices (e.g., microphones and
cameras and reliable internet connection), is vital for delivering online education (Mayes et al., 2011; Stetter 2018; Dorsey 2020). The availability of such resources often encourages teachers to rethink their teaching beliefs, keep abreast of the continually changing nature of education, propel them to interact with technology, and perhaps utilize it in some teaching aspects (Alhawsawi 2017; Martin et al., 2019; Rasheed et al., 2020). Thus, it was not surprising that technological reliability was commonly referenced in the teachers’ narrative when asked to shift their pedagogical activities online. Many participants used the lack of technological infrastructure as a rationale for their reluctance to use online platforms. This sentiment is captured in Gabriel’s statement below.

We have been asking for some time to use the online platform and to post some assessments online, but no one has listened. I have complained about the slowness of the internet, but no one paid attention. The department has always underestimated the importance of using technology in teaching.

The quote shows that such support’s availability and quality may help create a space for teachers to negotiate their pedagogical assumptions and try to integrate these technologies into their teaching. However, the infrastructure’s shortfalls seemed to have exacerbated the participants’ situations when the school was suddenly suspended. Therefore, in their initial response, most of our respondents, even the willing ones, complained about their computers’ slowness and the lack of cameras and audio ports. Most participants reported that the quality of technological resources and online courses’ delivery are usually underemphasized in the EFL department as the emphasis had been on teaching techniques in face-to-face classes. Hence, advanced and stable technological provision had previously never been a priority. The speed with which COVID-19 hit the world and the impact it has had on education has made the department rearrange its priorities, especially when it comes to technological provision. Ultimately, all that was needed was an executive decision to improve the situation overnight, as suggested by Joseph, a junior member in the male EFL department, who eloquently said:

It is probably a blessing that such suspension had happened. It propels the whole university to act fast to address the shortcoming in IT. I have been given a headset, and the audio setting was enabled on my computer in less than 24 hours... it is a blessing, but it should have happened earlier when there was enough time to prepare and be ready to deliver courses online.

The quote above shows how institutional policies can help change teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning. It is often the case that higher education changes require the institutions to provide incentives and an environment that induces and motivates such changes (Leibowitz et al., 2015; Alhawsawi 2017; Medina 2018). Before the outbreak of COVID-19, many teachers were reluctant to explore online platforms. However, when the institution made the decision and created the space, most teachers were left with no option but to use it. Such policy shift stretched the provision of technological advances under the current crisis and the support available from the educational technology specialists (Edutechs). Although the Edutechs specialists were trying their best, there were not enough of them to handle the suddenly increased demands for support and training. Such policy shift and the shortage of support increased the pressure on the teachers to the extent that they felt intensive training was needed, as stated by Adam, a coordinator in the department:

The most prominent challenges were technical support and training. Some possible solutions could be more assistance from tech support with troubleshooting and providing the proper equipment necessary to complete audio/video recordings. Weekly or daily training sessions would be beneficial for instructors to ensure flawless lesson delivery.

Although the quote highlights the need for technical training, as expressed by many teachers, the real need was for comprehensive pedagogical training that places technology in the heart of all teacher training. This type of training could have helped teachers build bridges between their current educational assumptions and the ones proposed by the shift to online education (Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2018). Stover and Veres (2013) argue that having different training types does not connect the pedagogical, content, and technological skills but often creates binaries between them. The division among them “results in unrelated separate professional development programs that do not emphasize the importance of the relationship between technology, pedagogy, and content” (Stover and Veres 2013: 94).

The dissatisfaction, the skepticism, and the fear expressed in the previous quotes highlighted the critical role of institutions in shaping and reshaping teachers’ assumptions. The participants discussed the nature of their beliefs regarding teaching, but for the most part, they separated their teaching skills from their technological literacy. They also negotiated their unpreparedness to use online platforms to deliver information due to lack of training and lack of demand by their institution. They also discussed the importance of the availability of technical resources and support staff. Furthermore, the participants discussed the importance of institutional policies and their impact on the extent and speed of their online teaching adaptation. The lack of initial pedagogical and technical support made our participants feel as if they were battling the crisis alone and shed light on the importance of IT support staff and the educational technologists when a change is introduced. This crisis has proven that both the IT support staff and the educational technologists, as part of the institutional jigsaw, have a vital role in creating a safe pedagogical space through which teachers can negotiate their academic positions.

5.2. The individual challenges

The second challenge that the teachers faced was when they were asked to fully adapt their pedagogical activities to E-education, acting as agents for change. This section discusses the importance of mindset shift and the space allowed to teachers to rethink their academic positions concerning online education.

5.2.1. Mindset shift

The first three days of school suspension truly tested our participants’ pedagogical assumptions. It unsettled some and made others question their teaching assumptions, seeking ways to adjust their instructional tools and academic positions. Shifting mindsets is probably teachers’ main challenge to produce and deliver online components (Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2018; Martin et al., 2019; Rasheed et al., 2020). Teachers’ cynicism about the usefulness of online instruction to influence students’ learning is hard to shift. Our participants did not have much choice but to jump aboard the online-train. Despite their skepticism, they had to rapidly adapt their pedagogical position and tools, as well as their technical skills required for successful online teaching while moving at a similar pace as during face-to-face instruction. The participants discussed this dilemma.

Cora, a senior member in the female section, and Lin, a female EFL instructor, expressed their perceptions of online teaching adaptation. They explained that their classrooms’ interactions are different and that they are not pedagogically and technically similar. They stated that they had to reflect on what needed to be delivered and their roles in the delivery. Cora, for instance, talked about those moments of pedagogical imbalance:

I did not know what to do; everybody in my team called me and asked me for directions and guidance. I had to Google and YouTube ways of teaching [skills] online. I had to learn how to focus on what needed to be delivered online and how it should be addressed. Though it was shocking for everyone, I was lucky to have had previous experience using Blackboard, which helped me a lot.
On the other hand, Lin described the initial response of many English instructors as follows:

It happened suddenly, so many teachers had an extremely negative attitude, and they were not willing to learn how to adapt. It was a great challenge for me, but I tried my best to ignore them and adapt.

Such a reflection was a moment for re-evaluating educational assumptions, as stated by another participant, Musa:

*Doing business, as usual, ain’t gonna work with online. We need to think differently. I have dealt with online education as a teacher and also as a student. Things are done differently there. Let me show you on my laptop how Blackboard materials are used. You present the content in advance to the students and then follow up with a live session to discuss. Both students and teachers need to be re-educated on using the online platform.*

Although different techniques can be used with synchronous teaching, the focus is mostly on shifting the power of learning to students, requiring both teachers and students to be “re-educated” (Alhawsawi 2017; Hathaway and Norton 2012). Brinkley-Etzkorn (2018: 29) argues that “effective training can influence the quality of one’s teaching, and instructors who teach online need thorough and continued support.” Such support is expected to enable teachers to negotiate four different challenges: “incorporating flexibility,” “facilitating interaction,” “facilitating students’ learning processes,” and “fostering an effective learning climate” (Boelens et al., 2017: 4). This pedagogical adjustment helps create flexible learning for the students, facilitate their interaction and learning process, and create an environment conducive to learning. This notion of educational adaptation was articulated by Saleem, a senior member in the department, when commenting on the online transition progress. He stressed that:

*At a time like this, having been asked to completely move to online delivery, we need to think about our teaching with different views. We need to think about the fundamental role teachers play in students’ learning and focus on the essence, not the fillers. We need to be able to hit the target directly; our online materials need to reflect that. Both teachers and students have shared responsibilities in the learning process.*

Many remarks in the earlier sections discuss pedagogical chaos and uncertainties caused by the suspension of face-to-face schooling as well as the three-day period during which teachers were expected to completely transition to online education. However, the above account of a senior faculty member seems to give direction and assurance. It outlines the need for a philosophical change in teaching and learning, calling for reflection on teachers’ and students’ roles. It also conceptualizes learning as a shared responsibility between teachers and students. This account of the senior faculty member and the other remarks in this section help to unpack the participants’ coping mechanisms. The sole reliance on virtual platforms and online delivery of educational materials is a new idea in EFL teaching in the Saudi higher education context and a game-changer for teachers. Moments of pause and reflection are vital in understanding how to handle online education pressure (Martin et al., 2019). Through such calls for reflections, many of the participants were able to create a safe space where they could negotiate and readjust their assumptions about teaching and learning. With the pressure of the tight three-day deadline, the participants had to reflect on their pedagogical assumptions while trying to pick up skills outside of their normal sphere of learning and experience. Though instructors like Muhammed, Shuran, and Sam were initially against synchronous teaching because of their pedagogical positions informed by their previous experience, they gradually started to accept the concept and manage to adjust to it within three days. With the help and support they got from their peers, they began to prepare materials and upload them to the online platforms. On the third day, they showed signs of pedagogical adjustment through their readiness to live-stream their courses, as indicated in Muhammed’s quote below.

I didn’t know that it was going to be fun recording my lessons using a PowerPoint recorder. I have been doing it for hours, and I am enjoying it. I didn’t know why I was saying no to Blackboard. I have managed to create files on Blackboard and upload materials in them with help from Mr [a junior colleague]. I should’ve learned about it earlier.

The quote shows that when senior teachers like Muhammed were given the opportunity and, undoubtedly, propelled by the policy shift, they could negotiate their views about teaching. However, with help and support, senior teachers could buy into the new pedagogical demands despite the longevity and duration of teaching in face-to-face contexts (Alçay et al., 2016). By the third day, junior and IT-skilled teachers like Musa and Abdul also started to show more appreciation for online learning as they became acquainted with the technological requirements. In appreciating the difference between online and physical face-to-face education, Musa, for example, stated:

*In online courses, you are not expected to spoon-feed students. The whole idea here is to empower the students by providing them with materials they can use because of your clearly written instructions. They don’t really need your presence to tell them what to do at every single step. It would be best if you allow them room to make mistakes and learn.*

“Empowering the students” through “clearly written instructions” shows how teachers were shifting their views about teaching and learning. The teachers started to rethink their roles as knowledge “dispensers,” becoming knowledge enablers and facilitators. Aisha, a coordinator, commented on the positive side of synchronous teaching from the teachers’ and the students’ perspectives. She stated that online platforms minimized the amount of time she usually spent on the administrative work related to her role as a coordinator. It also, she added, allowed her to understand her students better. In her words:

*I am using tracking statistics to monitor who is viewing the slides, and I am also monitoring interactions in the discussion group. If any student is not accessing this, I intend to email her personally to make sure she has access and does not encounter any difficulties. As I have said, I want to make sure I allow all students to interact.*

This remark illustrates that shifting institutional policies created a space for teachers to engage with the technology to improve such practices as monitoring and supporting the students.

5.2.2. A space for negotiating assumptions

Despite the initial panic, the skepticism, and the uncertainty, the crisis seems to have created a learning community among the participants as a safe space to negotiate their pedagogical assumptions. Such a space helps “to reduce online transactional distance; the foreseen harms of isolation and alienation; and lack of motivation for students to study in the online component” (Rasheed et al., 2020: 10). Martin et al. (2019: 42) argue that such instructional support helps as it “is an essential ingredient to understand the phenomenon of effective online learning fully” and provide the needed technical support. Thus, the community and collaboration in the department helped the teachers cope with the pressure of learning new skills while adjusting to synchronous teaching. Technologically skilled teachers volunteered to teach their colleagues how to navigate online platforms, develop online components, and engage with them in challenging discussions about teaching philosophies. The following narrative of Alicia, a female instructor, demonstrates an example of how people were sharing experience and trying to help their colleagues:

*Based on my experience, Zoom is more stable than Blackboard Collaborates Ultra; it can be downloaded on any device easily. However, the only drawback is the duration of the recording. I have been showing my colleagues how to use it and recorded YouTube videos to explain it.*
This section about individual challenges highlights the mindset shift the participants had to undergo while changing the educational mode to online. Changing deep-rooted pedagogical assumptions is not always an easy nut to crack. However, this school suspension crisis has created space for our participants to debate, discuss, and adjust their instructional practices and pedagogical beliefs. Such a change validates the importance of space given to the teachers to successfully adapting to the online teaching model.

Collectively, the shift in the university IT-related policies, teachers' willingness, and the pressure of time stimulated our participants' pedagogical adjustment. Although the panic of performing under pressure, negotiating assumptions about teaching, and learning new skills was immense, the EFL department teachers seemed to have coped well and adapted their teaching to overcome the challenges. The current suspension of face-to-face teaching has made many academic institutions in Saudi Arabia, and probably the world, rethink the importance of such online pedagogical activities and the importance of retraining teachers to adapt to new philosophies.

6. Conclusion

COVID-19 is a pandemic that has hit the world hard and led to a paradigm shift in all aspects of life, including education. Since the beginning of this epidemic, education has changed from the traditional face-to-face classroom to online platforms worldwide. Saudi Arabia is one of the countries that moved the educational provision to online platforms over three days. That shift profoundly impacted teachers' assumptions and practices, as witnessed in our context. Change in teachers' educational views usually takes time and is associated with "personal factors as well as the professional context in which teachers work" (Richards et al., 2001: 1). Nevertheless, what marked the change that impacted the educational provision in Saudi Arabia was how teachers dealt with the requirements of change within a short period, regardless of their long-standing beliefs about what constitutes an effective teaching method or context.

This paper is a snapshot of teachers' assumptions in the top-down mode of innovation (Richards et al., 2001). It showcases the impact of change in policy on teachers' beliefs and, hence, practices. It challenges researchers' traditional view that teachers' age and length of experience impact the speed with which change in their beliefs occurs. Additionally, the findings of this paper offer evidence for how change can be negotiated, encouraged, and managed in higher education at all levels. Although the focus of this paper was about EFL teachers negotiating their pedagogical positions, issues presented in the paper apply to teachers in other disciplines. Lessons obtained from this paper transcend the boundaries of higher education and inform different frameworks for change. Although the sample size was limited and the data was single-source, the findings and the conclusion help enrich the current work that looks at teachers' assumptions, organizational policies, change and shift to online teaching. The study presents additional evidence that shows how teachers' practice changes when their views change, regardless of the elapsing time or the length of their experience.

6.1. Recommendations

Since their agency and the surrounding structure influence teachers' educational assumptions, this paper suggests the following:

1. Higher education institutions must rethink their policies regarding online education.
2. They must actively participate in creating a space through which teachers are stimulated to experiment with online education by providing the necessary infrastructure, e.g., updating computers, ensuring there are video and audio ports, and providing reliable internet connection.
3. Teachers' professional development training must emphasize technology-related practice and integrate pedagogical training with the online. The training must combine pedagogical and content knowledge with technology-related knowledge to connect teachers' previous experience with the updated synchronous teaching.
4. Additionally, institutions must devise ways to intensify using online learning, celebrate their best practices, and research its prospects and challenges. Such a contextual adjustment will help teachers diversify their online education provision and find ways to adapt their teaching to accommodate such demands.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Sajjadullah Alhawsawi, Sabria Salama Jawhar: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Funding statement

This work was supported by King Abdullah International Medical Research Center (RC20/277/R).

Data availability statement

Data included in article/supplementary material/referenced in article.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

Supplementary content related to this article has been published online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07158.

References

Abe, J.A.A., 2020. Big Five, Linguistic Styles, and Successful Online Learning. The Internet and Higher Education, p. 100724.
Adua, P., 2019. A Step-by-step Guide to Qualitative Data Coding. Routledge, New York.
Ahmed, S., 2012. On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life. Duke University Press.
Akçayr, M., Dündar, H., Akçayr, G., 2016. What makes you a digital native? Is it enough to be born after 1980? Comput. Hum. Behav. 60, 435–440.
Alexander, B., Becker, S.A., Cummins, M., Giesinger, C.H., 2017. Digital literacy in higher education: In: Part II: an NMC Horizon Project Strategic Brief. The New Media Consortium, pp. 1–37.
Alhawsawi, H., 2017. Teacher Educators' Approaches to Teaching Islamic Education at a university in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Doctoral dissertation. University of Sussex.
Alhawsawi, S., 2014. Investigating Student Experiences of Learning English as a Foreign Language in a Preparatory Program in a Saudi university. Doctoral dissertation. University of Sussex.
Ashwin, P., 2009. Analysing Teaching-Learning Interactions in Higher Education: Accounting for Structure and agency. Continuum International Publishing Group, London.
Baran, E., Correia, A., 2014. A professional development framework for online teaching. TechTrends 58 (5), 96–102.
Boelens, R., De Wever, B., Voet, M., 2017. Four key challenges to the design of blended learning: a systematic literature review. Educ. Res. Rev. 22, 1–18.
Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J.-C., 1979. The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
Bryman, A., 2016. Social Research Methods. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Cohen, L., Manion, L., Morrison, K., 2018. Research Methods in Education. Taylor Francis, London.
