Insights into emergency remote teaching in EFL

Iclal Can and Leyla Silman-Karanfil

The transition to emergency remote teaching (ERT) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has spawned many research studies. However, studies exploring EFL instructors’ emotions, in-class experiences, and relationships with their students and their colleagues during the pandemic are scarce. This mixed study captured nineteen EFL instructors’ emotions on ERT, their transformation of classroom practices, and how they related to students and colleagues during this period in North Cyprus. Data were gathered through a qualitative survey, supplemented with quantitative data from a technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) scale. Our findings revealed that the instructors gradually adapted to ERT despite the challenges that hindered their classroom practice transformation. The findings further suggest that if the instructors develop their TPACK and relatedness with their students and colleagues with the support of their institutions, teaching in a remote environment in the ‘new pedagogy’ contributes to establishing a possible way forward in EFL.

Key words: Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), Covid-19, EFL, TPACK, New Pedagogy

Introduction

When the World Health Organization classified COVID-19 as a worldwide pandemic in March 2020, schools and universities in about 130 countries closed, and educational institutions experienced a digital transformation (UNESCO 2020), switching to emergency remote teaching (ERT). Educators mainly were unprepared, as was the case in the EFL context where technology had previously been chiefly integrated to supplement teaching (Gao and Zhang 2020). They had to seek ways to fit technology-led teaching into their education ecosystem. This created a whole new reality, giving birth to a new pedagogy in EFL (Atmojo and Nugroho 2020). Because this a new research area and due to the uncertainty about the duration of the pandemic, we consider it significant to develop insights into EFL instructors’ emotions and in-class experiences. Our research questions are as follows:

1. How did instructors’ emotions change during ERT?
2. How did instructors adapt their instructional practices to ERT?
3. How did instructors’ relationships with their students and their colleagues change during ERT?
Transitioning to ERT to continue with education amidst the COVID-19 pandemic disturbed the educational equilibrium and has led stakeholders into uncharted territory (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020). The Higher Education Institution in Turkey urged universities to move teaching and assessment online (HEI 2020), which they did by adapting existing platforms or adopting new ones, as was the case in EFL (Karataş and Tuncer 2020).

During ERT, EFL students lost focus in live lectures and reported struggling without peer support. Many lacked motivation, keeping their cameras off and being less active during live sessions (Karataş and Tuncer 2020). Some struggled with limited ICT skills and language barriers (Atmojo and Nugroho 2020). Although such problems echo those of online EFL learning (e.g. Satar and Akcan 2018), lack of alternatives and preparation turned ERT into a burgeoning educational crisis (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020). The switch accentuated the digital divide (UNESCO 2020) whereby students with limited access to technology are marginalized. Students longed for personal contact from their peers and teachers as a sign of solidarity since they were less concerned with the content of the lesson (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020).

ERT posed a challenge for EFL instructors who lacked the required technological skills (Gao and Zhang 2020). They scrambled to gain familiarity with online platforms and deliver effective asynchronous/synchronous lessons beyond replicating face-to-face classes online (Atmojo and Nugroho 2020). Teacher talk time increased (Karataş and Tuncer 2020) and they struggled to find ways to support the interaction desired in EFL classes (Atmojo and Nugroho 2020).

Teachers’ personal life was under strain. Their workload skyrocketed. Conducting synchronous lessons often took longer than expected due to connection issues. Furthermore, giving punctual feedback to students’ written work was challenging (Atmojo and Nugroho 2020) and time-consuming. Many suffered from low self-esteem and feared losing control over their classes or being evaluated (MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer 2020). Coupled with stressors that arose from the nature of ERT itself, teachers had health-related concerns and reconciling the demands of work and family was a juggling act for them (MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer 2020).

However demanding it was for most initially, teachers acted quickly and responded effectively. They considered exploring this new pedagogy involving the development of professional digital skills for ELT rather than sticking with traditional methods (Farrell and Stanclik 2021). Those with this mindset soon utilized more technology in the classroom (Gao and Zhang 2020) (e.g. PowerPoint voiceover slides for uploading lesson content, DingTalk as a teaching platform), incorporated engaging and meaningful activities (e.g. using the breakout room function in videoconferencing to encourage dialogue among students, social networking apps such as Wechat for class discussion) and built rapport with students to boost motivation (Farrell and Stanclik 2021). Some also tried communicating with their students personally, catering to their students’ psychological needs. The use of the students’ L1 as a translingual...
activity promoted class discussions (Atmojo and Nugroho 2020). As seen with studies in online EFL teaching, taking a leading role increased teacher presence, promoting student participation (Satar and Akcan 2018).

The study
Method

We utilized a mixed research design to answer our research questions. We used a qualitative survey as the primary data collection instrument and supplemented it with quantitative data from a technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) scale.

The setting

The research was conducted in North Cyprus at the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) of an internationally recognized English-medium private university with a broad representation of nationalities in both staff and students. All language instructors have an excellent command of English (i.e. TOEFL IBT 108 or equivalent). CEFR B2 level (i.e. TOEFL IBT 75) is the threshold to study on the modern languages programme; students below this study on the preparatory programme.

Sampling strategy and participants

We sent an invitation email to instructors to participate in the study. Out of forty-seven English instructors, nineteen (thirteen female and five male) voluntarily participated; these were aged between twenty-nine and sixty-four years. One participant preferred not to provide gender information. The participants’ teaching experience ranged from two to twenty-plus years: two had between two and five years; five had between six and ten years; four had between eleven and twenty years; and eight had more than twenty years. Ten had master’s degrees, eight had bachelor’s degrees, and one had a Ph.D.

Data collection instruments

Data were collected via a demographic questionnaire, a qualitative survey, and a TPACK instrument. The demographic questionnaire included questions about the age, gender, teaching experience, highest qualification obtained, and teaching certification of the participants.

The qualitative survey focused on the instructors’ emotions, teaching and learning practices, and perceptions about their students’ attention, participation, and language development during ERT. We developed the qualitative survey in parallel with our research questions, the related literature, and our own ERT experiences as educators. Before finalizing the survey, we obtained expert opinions from a university professor with a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction, an English preparatory programme coordinator, and a language instructor with an extensive background in technology use in education. An example survey item was: ‘Please describe how you adapted your teaching method to fit ERT during the pandemic.’

To explore the instructors’ current technological pedagogical content knowledge, we used a slightly modified version of the TPACK subscale (Schmidt et al. 2009). The modified TPACK subscale included five items with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, 3 being ‘neither agree/disagree’. The reliability of the scale was 0.71, acceptable for social sciences. We used the results from the TPACK to better understand our participants’ responses to the open-ended questions.
We emailed the participants, including information about the study and the link to the Google form we used to collect data. The first part of the survey comprised a consent form including information on the study’s purpose, the researchers’ contact information, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Those who agreed to participate in the survey answered the questions anonymously. The second part included demographics. The third part and the final part consisted of the TPACK scale and the qualitative survey questions, respectively.

We analysed the qualitative data using inductive content analysis (Patton 2015) on NVivo 11 Plus. We first worked on the coding scheme individually, and then discussed the similarities and differences (Patton 2015), enhancing trustworthiness. We developed a codebook considering the related literature and our research questions and revised the codebook as we worked on the data analysis. We double-coded the qualitative data to discard unnecessary or overlapping codes and combine our final codes into themes (Creswell 2011). Among our codes were ‘abrupt shift to ERT’, ‘student relatedness’, and ‘development of TPACK’.

We applied descriptive statistics and calculated the means and standard deviations of the scale items to explore instructors’ TPACK level and items to the technological tools the instructors utilized as part of their classroom practice, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 25.

The results from the quantitative data were integrated into the three interrelated themes which had emerged from the qualitative data analysis: a shift in emotions, a shift in classroom practice, and a shift in student relatedness.

The findings indicate that most instructors initially experienced negative emotions (e.g. sadness, anger) and mainly were shocked, stressed, or panicked, and some felt lost/isolated. Consistent with the literature (e.g. MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer 2020), the negative emotions mainly resulted from one or a combination of two or more of the following:

- uncertainty about the duration of the pandemic;
- COVID-19 restrictions;
- health-related concerns;
- the abrupt shift to ERT;
- a perceived low level of TPACK or confidence in teaching remotely;
- increasing workload (e.g. preparing PowerPoint voiceovers);
- lack of or limited context-specific EFL resources and infrastructure for ERT;
- concerns about students’ online learning readiness and autonomy level.

Intrigued to update their TPACK, however, a few EFL instructors also experienced positive emotions to a certain extent in anticipation of the switch to ERT. To illustrate, highlighting his excitement and flair for new opportunities in EFL, P6 stated that: ‘Remote teaching was the new thing. This might also explain why I did not panic much about having to teach remotely.’
In time, the negative emotions the instructors experienced at the beginning of ERT intensified as they started to experience time-management problems while trying to establish a work–life balance during the lockdown, be available for their students, and transform their classroom practice. Nevertheless, as they developed their TPACK, incorporated more interactive lessons (see examples under the following theme), and worked collaboratively with their peers, they started to experience an increased sense of achievement, confidence, and joy in teaching. For example, P14 stated that:

> It turns out that taking one step at a time, spending extended hours in front of the computer and investing in a lot of collaborative effort into it, I have found myself in a position where I feel much more confident about using educational technologies. This could be the greatest benefit of this turmoil.

Our results corroborate with the findings of previous studies in that teachers lacked confidence and experienced negative emotions at the beginning of the ERT (MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer 2020) as they were mostly unprepared but were able to respond swiftly to the challenges brought by the pandemic (Flores and Gago 2020).

Most EFL instructors started teaching students asynchronously and then moved to a combination of asynchronous and synchronous teaching, parallel with the institution-based requirements during ERT. The findings demonstrated that managing asynchronous lessons was less challenging as most instructors were already familiar with the learning management system (LMS) to a certain extent. The instructors initially converted the materials they used in face-to-face instruction (e.g. reading texts, quizzes) to online interactive learning environments through Google Forms, adapting them when necessary. They prepared lessons, short videos, online quizzes, assignments, extra materials, and practice activities to be uploaded to the LMS. Most instructors also prepared links to practice English from websites (e.g. BBC News page) and resources (e.g. Kahoot) to support learner autonomy and interaction. As the literature highlights (e.g. MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer 2020), preparation was stressful and tiring as instructors spent immense time and effort while trying to establish a sustainable work–life balance.

The data show that the initial weeks of ERT were mainly teacher-centred. However, as instructors started to hold more synchronous hours and gradually integrated their new knowledge and skills in ERT into practice, the language classes became more engaged and interactive, consistent with the literature (e.g. Gao and Zhang 2020). Among the techniques that the instructors used to enhance interaction in the language classes were breakout rooms for pair/group discussions, public chat, whiteboards for multiple users, and online polling. This seemed to affect instructors’ emotions in return positively. For example, reflecting on the shift from asynchronous to synchronous lessons, P18 stated that:

> I started to feel better because I could experience ‘real’ (to some extent) teaching then. There was ‘interaction’ in the sessions, which both parties felt happy about.
One reason teachers felt positive towards the switch to synchronous sessions could be the sense of solidarity they received once they started meeting their students, which is significant during the pandemic (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020). Echoing the literature, instructors being present seemed to have boosted teacher–student relationships, providing a sense of interaction in ERT, which in return increased satisfaction (Rapanta et al. 2020) and hence, in our case, positivity. Another reason could be regaining their confidence by creating an interactive environment that somewhat replicated face-to-face teaching.

The practices that helped instructors develop their TPACK and classroom practice during ERT included self-directed studies such as joining webinars and tutorials, working hard to master the online tools learned, exploring different classroom tools, and actively using student feedback to develop instruction. Working in collaboration with their colleagues in informal and institution-set small groups also seemed to boost most instructors’ TPACK and their motivation, enthusiasm, and confidence during ERT. A representative quote by P9 echoes this:

*I feel much more confident now as I had to experience remote teaching over several weeks with the opportunity to gain familiarity and control over many tools. There is also a nice flow of information and guidance among the teaching staff which increases one’s confidence.*

The data from the TPACK scale supplement the findings from the qualitative data in that instructors now felt confident in integrating technology into their instruction. The means for items 1, 2, 3, and 5 ranged between 4.11 and 4.26, indicating that the instructors were confident that they had an adequate level of TPACK (see Table 1). The fourth item’s mean score, which was 3.37, may suggest that they needed more time and reflection to provide professional guidance to their colleagues.

The qualitative findings reveal that instructors with a high level of TPACK, or who had supported their instruction with technology before ERT, had fewer problems adapting to ERT than those who reported having a moderate or a low level of TPACK. However, almost all instructors were

| Q1. I can teach lessons that appropriately combine content, technologies, and teaching approaches | 4.26 | 0.45 |
| Q2. I can select technologies to use in my classroom that enhance what I teach, how I teach, and what students learn | 4.21 | 0.42 |
| Q3. I can use strategies that combine content, technologies, and teaching approaches that I learned about elsewhere, in my classroom | 4.11 | 0.66 |
| Q4. I can provide leadership in helping others to coordinate the use of content, technologies, and teaching approaches at my university | 3.37 | 0.50 |
| Q5. I can choose technologies that enhance the content for a lesson | 4.16 | 0.38 |

**TABLE 1**
Results of the TPACK
(n = 19)
motivated to develop their TPACK. Similar to studies on EFL in ERT, they considered exploring the new methodologies in EFL as positive (Farrell and Stanclik 2021).

Instructors used various technologies during ERT, considering learning outcomes of the language courses, students’ current language-related needs (e.g. writing an effective paragraph), and their own technological competencies. Almost all instructors utilized the university’s LMS and supplemented it with other technological tools (see Figure 1). The tools with the highest frequency were the university’s LMS ($n = 18$), Zoom ($n = 17$), and Screencasting ($n = 16$). The findings show that despite the highly structured and centralized syllabus, they found opportunities to develop some tailor-made materials based on their students’ language needs and proficiency levels.

Although teachers started changing their practices, they also highlighted that developing their TPACK still required time as it involved trial and error and continuous feedback. To illustrate, reflecting on the change in her teaching P6 noted that:

> the change was rather slow, not because I resisted to it. ... Rome wasn’t built in a day. Neither was my traditional teaching method. In the same way, it did not change over a week. I must say my teaching method is still under construction; it is still being shaped by the new tools and equipment that remote education keeps offering.

![Figure 1](image-url)

**Figure 1**
Technologies Used by the Instructors.
Note. Technologies with a frequency of 1 are not shown.
Consistent with this, the results indicate a need for more opportunities among instructors to collaborate through virtual focus/mini-group meetings, focusing on sharing and reflecting on ERT experiences and best practices. Findings also indicate that a comprehensive needs assessment and well-designed mini-workshops/seminars were necessary to help instructors adapt to the ‘new normal pedagogy’. Emerging professional development issues included:

- making more effective use of the university’s LMS and free teaching and learning platforms;
- exploring distance learning methods (e.g. creating engaging and interactive lessons, giving technology-enhanced feedback using screencasting);
- increasing learner autonomy and motivation;
- managing workload and work–life balance.

Results demonstrate that students’ not turning cameras on and lack of participation negatively affected instructors’ motivation and thus teaching. For example, P6 recalls ‘feeling lost and helpless’ due to not being ‘supported by the crucial existence of motivated students’. In line with the literature (Guidote 2020), our results indicate that some were student-related: not signing up for ERT, lack of facilities for ERT (e.g. reliable technology), low learner autonomy, and limited digital literacy. Others pertained to the pandemic: the lockdown and the uncertainty of its duration. Although we did not collect data from the students, the qualitative data show that the lower the students’ proficiency level, the less their motivation and desire to act autonomously, corresponding with the EFL literature (Atmojo and Nugroho 2020). They needed more guidance as well as more structured and less challenging online language tasks. Creating differentiated interactive learning environments to accommodate proficiency levels served as a means to motivate students and increase student participation. Enhancing student relatedness was another effective means, which appears in the next theme.

The findings show a shift from traditional student relatedness to a new type of relatedness during ERT. Almost all instructors tried to stay connected and establish rapport with their students and enhance their students’ social-emotional well-being (Rapanta et al. 2020) and academic achievement. They reported empathizing with their students and being patient and understanding towards them. The practices to increase relatedness included: always being available (e.g. online office hours), holding remote ‘care and share’ sessions with students, and spending extensive time giving feedback to students. Echoing the literature (e.g. Atmojo and Nugroho 2020), the results indicate that these interactions were carried out either in L1, L2, or both, depending on the students’ language proficiency level and motivation to use L2 or student-related factors. Instructors who were native speakers of English and international students used only L2 throughout. Reflecting on student relatedness P8, noted that:

\[\text{After academic questions were answered and tackled, I found myself just chatting with students about their worries and concerns about the shock factor of the pandemic, fights with siblings or parents, being locked up in their homes, being stuck in a lonely dorm room, not having any money etc.}\]

Similarly, P13 stated:
I’ve maintained a very positive attitude towards my students, encouraged them never to give up but keep going, ensured them I was always available when they needed my help. I’ve been very responsive to their needs both academically and psychologically.

Although our study took place within national boundaries and is limited to the EFL context in higher education, it offers several practical implications for similar remote language teaching and learning settings globally in EFL.

Our results suggest that the instructors became their own champions by developing their TPACK and classroom practice in a very limited time despite the uncertainty about the pandemic, challenges they met, and their TPACK-related concerns. Thus, it is essential to provide instructors with self-reflection opportunities that help them notice and appreciate their strengths as educators. A further multiple case study could explore instructors’ self-development trajectories during the pandemic.

Enhancing student relatedness is one way to maximize effective teaching during ERT. Instructors should be provided with strategies on how to boost students’ social and emotional well-being. Further studies are needed to understand the transformation of student relatedness during the pandemic fully.

Collaboration among instructors within the same programme/department should be enhanced through different channels (e.g. care and share sessions) as it contributes to instructors’ TPACK, motivation, enthusiasm, and confidence to teach during the pandemic.

Creating engaging and interactive EFL learning environments increases student engagement and motivation during ERT. To achieve this, instructors should enhance their repertoire of remote teaching methodologies and be encouraged to incorporate synchronous lessons, including interactive tasks where teacher talk time is reduced. The use of L1 to encourage interaction should also be considered when necessary as language proficiency is a possible barrier in conducting effective lessons. For the sustainability of technology-led online classes, it also seems sensible to promote learners to become more self-directed and digitally competent as well as encourage institutions to invest in an efficient LMS and digital tools that will support EFL learning.

It is important to conduct a well-designed and comprehensive needs assessment to identify EFL instructors’ needs for the new pedagogy and organize tailor-made mini-training programmes accordingly.

This paper offers insights into EFL instructors’ emotions, the transformation of classroom practices, and relatedness with their students and colleagues during ERT initiated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It suggests that instructors gradually adapted to ERT despite the uncertainty about the pandemic and challenges that hinder their classroom practice transformation. It further indicates that if EFL instructors develop their
TPACK and relatedness with their students and colleagues with the support of their institutions, teaching in a remote environment in the ‘new pedagogy’ in EFL may shift from a ‘remote possibility’ to a ‘potential reality.’

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