

The Challenges of Teaching Second Language Students at a Distance

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Abstract.

Countries including Canada have entered into interesting partnerships with distant nations such as China to create “offshore schools”. In these schools, indigenous children learn traditional subjects in English such that they can write matriculating examinations set by Canadian departments of education. The obvious benefit is that these Chinese students will hold a Canadian diploma easing the application process for entry into North American universities and colleges. At the onset of the pandemic, many teachers with instructional posts in offshore schools returned home during the Chinese New Year break. These same teachers then experienced insurmountable difficulties getting back to China to continue their face to face instruction. Many of the offshore schools then asked these same teachers to continue teaching their students in China using the online environment. This request posed many challenges to the teachers considering their students’ first language was not English. This paper will describe mixed methods research intended to identify the challenges experienced by a cohort of teachers who found themselves in this uncomfortable situation. Categories of technology, lifestyle, pedagogy and support emerged from electronic surveys and follow-up interviews.

Keywords: online learning, ESL, technology

Introduction

The onset of the covid-19 pandemic in early 2022 had dramatic impacts on educational systems across the world. Many jurisdictions required that teachers with little background in technology assisted pedagogies transition to preparing their students with online learning. Mayer (2019) suggested “Online venues allow for many innovative approaches to support learning, but what is needed are research-based principles for how best to take advantage of these new possibilities” (p152). He posits that this takes a careful consideration of the science of learning, the science of instruction and the science of assessment. Unfortunately, this depth of investigation would benefit from clear pedagogical exemplars and professional development of teachers, a developmental timeline which for most contexts was not feasible. The challenges of online learning during the pandemic have been aptly categorized at the micro, meso and macro levels (Voogt & Knezek, 2021). Furthermore, the lessons learned by teacher educators during the pandemic has been well articulated (Ferdig & Pytash, 2021).

A transitional context that has been less studied (Atmojo, & Nugroho, 2020; MacIntyre et al, 2020) is that of English as a Second Language learning (ESL).

The Pedagogical Challenge and Research Question

Canadian provinces, including Nova Scotia (see: <https://internationalprograms.ednet.ns.ca/ourschools>) have established international schools in China where students study Canadian curriculum Grades 10-12. In these schools, students would engage English, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies in the English language. Upon graduation students receive a Canadian High School diploma. This allows matriculating Chinese students, to apply seamlessly to North American colleges and universities. The teaching staff that populate these schools are typically from North America, the United Kingdom and Malaysia to name a few.

The Chinese New Year of 2020 saw these teachers on holidays, many having returned to their home countries. The pandemic thus had them stranded away from their students as travel restrictions prevented their return to China. Their respective schools require that they continue teaching their Chinese students from afar using whatever technology at their disposal for online learning. This task of pivoting to online pedagogies created immediate angst and challenge. This mixed method study sought to answer the following research question. What are the factors that impact the teaching practice of ESL teachers forced to take up online teaching as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic?

The Sample and Research Methods

The research entailed a blend of survey and interview feedback. The electronic survey was completed by 26 teachers. The sample was drawn purposefully from those teaching grades 10-12 in a range of Canadian-curriculum schools across China. Of that group, 54% were teaching at the grade 10 level, arguably the most difficult to teach given lack of English language proficiency. For 69% of the convenience sample, this was to be their first online teaching experience. The survey included 36 questions (primarily five-point Likert scale) that addressed technology, lifestyle, teaching practise and teacher support. Results were averaged for each question to establish trends. No effort was made to make causal statements based on a statistical treatment considering the response variables were not strictly continuous. Nonetheless, the emergent trends served as a basis for designing a standardized open ended interview scheme. The survey sample was invited to participate in an interview to elaborate on the survey results. One-hour recorded Zoom® interviews were conducted with seven randomly invited participants. The interviews were transcribed, then coded using an inductive and axial process. The reliability of the research was enhanced by practicing reflexivity and peer debriefing. The cumulative results of survey and interviews are reported here,

Results

Teachers found the technology to be a key determinant in the perceived success of their teaching. They were largely left un-aided to access online tools to connect with their students. This was met with varying success because of three factors. First, some familiar online tools

would not function in a Chinese context, so teachers were forced to use Chinese-friendly alternatives the potential of which had to be investigated. Second, teachers were not familiar with the pedagogies for teaching online, especially second-language learners. Students accessed learning from home and at their schools at different times during the pandemic. Therefore in third instance, connectivity issues, lack of adequate audio-visual quality and intrinsic distractions were all reported as factors that mitigated preferred learning environments.

Teachers were challenged by the fact that most were teaching in a time zone quite opposed to the scheduled Chinese class meetings. North American teachers for instance typically taught between 8 PM and 4 AM in order to accommodate students. This did not include the social media support of students after hours. This change in lifestyle was particularly difficult for teachers particularly since the teaching was predominantly passive in front of a computer screen. The displacement of teachers from their accommodation in China had two obvious and problematic implications. Teachers needed to find long-term housing in their remote locations. The uncertainty associated with their date of return to China made such arrangements even more complicated. Applying their Chinese salaries to living expenses in other parts of the world (i.e., their home countries) represented a costly venture.

In the realm of teaching, participants in the study suggested that communication with students was strained. It was difficult for them when technology was unpredictable, and their delivery was interrupted. They also recognized the inherent value of social construction of knowledge between students for the most part was diminished. Students did use social media to interact during instruction. This, however, was not the same as students physically working together in the same space especially as it related to understanding/decoding teacher instructions. Formative feedback and more summative assessments were not easy to undertake. Developing systems of collection and distribution of homework feedback were cumbersome at best. The learning feedback loop issues were exacerbated by concerned parents who were demanding of evidence of their child's progress. There was consensus amongst the interview group that the cognitive demands on students were significant considering they were learning elevated concepts in a second language over poor communication venues. It was also held by teachers the feeling they were in need of extensive professional development in order to be effective educators online. The onset of the pandemic did not allow for that preparation and most felt personal responsibility for a substandard education of their students.

The leveraging of technology to offer students an interim access to learning required an abundance of problem solving on the teachers' part. It was widely held that support from the school was crucial. Teachers needed assistance with technology, not just for communication but also repositories for resources and assessment items. The interview group largely felt isolated in this regard. They received some suggestions and direction from governmental sources but still felt wholly inadequate in their instructional constraints and ultimate choices. When students returned to the classroom in China and their teachers communicated to whole classes at once over the internet, the audio-visual systems were inadequate for students learning in a second language. Students often expressed frustration not hearing the teacher much less understanding their instructions. The schools onsite offered Chinese classroom

chaperones, but they had little to no role in the learning process; basically, they maintained the attention of the students.

Conclusions Moving Forward

This introductory study has examined challenges associated with the specific context of online learning in a second language. Emergent challenges with technology, lifestyle, pedagogy and teaching support have been discussed. The complexity of such systems of ESL learners in these unprecedented pedagogical contexts requires further study. In particular, the range of stakeholders can be extended to included students, parents and school leadership. The researchers remain convinced of the value of a mixed methods approach to triangulating the many factors that impact such systems. The limitations of the current study include the very specific types of schools, the socio-economic background of these privileged students, the cultural propensity for assessment driven instruction and the range of instructors involved in this ESL context. The anticipated cognitive load on students is worthy of further investigation as is, a systems approach to supporting teachers that find themselves in these pedagogically challenging settings.

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