

Transitioning to Emergency Remote Teaching in the ELI during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Transitioning to Emergency Remote Teaching in the ELI during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic caught the world completely unaware and unprepared. Education was one of the sectors hardest hit, as the pandemic completely overthrew established models of teaching and learning. In the ensuing confusion, some educational institutions emerged successful, while others struggled. Kanda University of International Studies responded to the pandemic by quickly forming online support teams, tasked with finding a way to deliver quality communicative language lessons to the student population. In the English Language Institute (ELI), a cross-organizational team was established to support the ICT and professional development needs of the teachers as they moved to an emergency remote teaching format. Various support initiatives were implemented and teacher feedback was collected. This paper outlines the support services offered and the teachers' perceptions of said services.

Introduction

In 2020, the global Coronavirus pandemic caught many institutions woefully off-guard and unprepared for the rapid changes they would need to undergo to continue to offer quality education. Kanda University of International Studies found itself in a similar situation, but due to crucial factors involving both good fortune and good decisions, emerged as a successful case study of emergency remote teaching (ERT). Herein, the authors who held a unique position overseeing professional development and technology support in the English Language Institute (ELI) chronicle their approach to providing support in this period of transition. At the onset of the pandemic, the authors were instructed to prepare a system for conducting quality online lessons during this period of

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uncertainty. The authors started by administering a needs analysis, gathering input from ELI teachers, and establishing a dynamic framework that could adapt to changing needs.

This paper focuses on the support system created and how it was received and evaluated by the teachers who took part in it. It is the hope that the lessons learned from this time of rapid change, challenges, and innovation can influence the future of educational offerings of KUIS and the greater academic community.

Literature review

One of the key defining aspects of the approach adopted by the authors was that it was grounded in key literature and theory concerning teacher development (TD). Effective TD in second language education recognizes that content and pedagogical knowledge are critical (Crandall & Christison, 2016; Richards, 2010), though teacher cognition (e.g. teacher education, prior language learning experience, etc.) has also been connected to the implementation of effective programs (Borg, 2003). TD's core implementation is heavily dependent on the contexts in which it is applied. Effective TD in education, as described in international literature, must be context-specific and oriented around the needs of the school and students (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Guskey, 2003; Kinugawa & Tachi, 2003; Arimoto, 2005). Drago-Severson's (2009) work is an important way of framing TD practices. The core practices of mentoring, collegial inquiry, creating leadership roles, and teaming, set up a TD model that is not centralized or top-down. Instead, effective TD takes place as all parties are involved in a community-driven, often democratic process (Raelin, 2016; Spillane, 2006). This manifests itself in an approach that values distributed leadership and champions leadership-as-practice.

Models of ICT-focused TD were also considered due to the ICT-heavy demands of ERT. These models were important for their clear demarcation of the role and purpose of technology. TPCK (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), SAMR (Puentedura, 2006), and Bloom's Digital Taxonomy (Churches, 2010) provided insight into how technologies can be used to enable higher-order, transformative experiences. Furthermore, the authors looked to

other models of ICT literacy, such as the ETS model (Educational Testing Service, 2002), which highlights the need for both cognitive and technical proficiency as components of ICT literacy. In line with this model, the TD model described in this chapter strove to foster the growth of ICT literacy through higher order creation and evaluation activities using digital technologies.

Context & Background

A special cross-departmental team was formed composed of principal lecturers from the ELI and members of Center for Learning and Teaching Innovation (CLTI). This team developed, administered, and managed the support system described herein.

Preparation

The support team began preparing a plan by evaluating other educational institutions' ERT initiatives. The team was careful to consider both teacher and student needs. In particular, there was a need to make sure that teachers and students of all technological proficiency levels would be able to make the transition to a purely online learning environment.

A plan was drafted based on a review of literature to adapt the curriculum for an online format by employing a combination of asynchronous and synchronous online delivery. This combination of methodologies was adopted to mitigate the potential negative physical and mental demands that online education brings. Once a plan was chosen, video conferencing software and a learning management system were needed. The video conferencing software *Zoom* was chosen for its breakout room feature, which allowed core activities from the existing curriculum to be carried out with minimal changes due to its ability to organize participants into separate independent meeting rooms. *Google Classroom* was selected for both its simplicity and existing popularity among teachers.

Implementation

ELI lecturers were instructed on the suggested format for online lessons and feedback was collected on their reactions to the initial plan. Ultimately, the decision was made to

adopt a 50% asynchronous/synchronous allocation of lessons. Teachers were requested to limit their synchronous sessions to a length of 45-60 minutes, which is in line with research conducted on Zoom fatigue (Wiederhold, 2020) and online learning's cognitive demands (Hollis & Was, 2016). Additionally, the online support team provided the ELI with workshops, support sessions, and individual consultations. The team also distributed resources for familiarizing lecturers with online teaching and learning. These steps were aimed at prioritizing autonomy by providing a basic framework for adapting and planning lessons. This plan avoided being overly prescriptive while also giving a structure to work within. Next, orientation sessions were conducted on how to use Zoom and Google Classroom. Subsequently, support was also provided on how to adapt course materials to fit the online context.

The course coordinator structure within the ELI was used to gather feedback and disseminate information to the lecturers. This structure encouraged distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), which by allocating responsibility amongst a wide group of lecturers allowed for better utilization of different teachers' skills.

The workshop series began with sessions introducing basic use of online tools for teaching, focusing on peer-led sessions to build a base of expert knowledge. The sessions focused first on what were considered the 'essentials', tools or apps that all teachers would need to conduct their classes, such as Google Classroom and Zoom. Following these, additional workshops focused on tools that could be used as approximations for activities that took place in the face-to-face classroom but were difficult to transition into either synchronous or asynchronous online teaching modes. For example, workshops on tools such as *Flipgrid*, a platform for posting and commenting on short videos, was included as it would allow for speaking activities even in an asynchronous format. Teachers trained in one session thereafter led question and answer sessions for other teachers. In conjunction with this, an English-medium support Google Classroom was set up as a hub for questions and materials sharing. By participating, teachers learned how to use Google Classroom more effectively, building skills they would eventually need for their lessons when they

Transitioning to Emergency Remote Teaching in the ELI during the COVID-19 Pandemic

used this tool with students. After the workshops were completed, the authors determined that more individualized sessions were needed to help teachers consider how they would apply these tools in their classes. Finally, sessions were scheduled for every teacher to practice teaching online lessons, with other teachers filling in as students.

The support team needed to balance the needs of the institution, teachers, students, and curriculum, while adapting to the unpredictable conditions brought on by the pandemic. These workshops, skill development opportunities, and resources were aimed at helping teachers meet these needs. The support team was aware that once the semester started, teachers would need even more support due to their increased workload. This required rethinking a system that had been based on reliable face-to-face contact, but now required deliberate asynchronous and synchronous online interactions.

In addition to the English-medium support Google Classroom and email, the team decided there needed to be a real-time support system that took advantage of the wealth of knowledge and skills in the ELI. This would allow for both a dedicated teacher to be available during class hours to provide support, and for teachers with specific skill sets and knowledge to also provide input. To facilitate this, the most popular mobile messaging application in Japan, *LINE*, was chosen as most, if not all, teachers already had it installed on their smartphones. The application's *OpenChat* feature allowed for the creation of an easily shareable group that hides user private information from other users, preventing unsolicited direct messaging, thereby encouraging more privacy conscious teachers to participate. Information was also provided on how to use this application in teachers' own courses to provide additional communication options for students during the online semester.

The online support team managed the OpenChat for the first week of lessons, handling all time-sensitive questions and providing tech support. After the first week, the team sought the support of the ELI's computer committee, a group that supports the learning of computer skills for teaching and learning. Committee members made sure there was at

least one person available during every class period in the OpenChat to assist teachers with time-sensitive issues. The computer committee also provided regular assistance with the English-medium support Google Classroom, which was used by many teachers to share ideas and get advice about specific issues relating to the teaching and learning process.

The online support team organized online private sessions for teachers to seek advice one-on-one to accommodate teachers' longer term goals and assist with professional development. Adapting a standing practice of offering consultations to the online context, the professional development specialist in teacher development was available for a total of six hours across each five-day work week for regularly scheduled "drop-in" office hours. These synchronous online meetings held each week provided a venue for teachers to not only discuss curriculum and classroom issues, but also ways to continue participating in the academic community through publishing and presenting. Listening to teachers and responding to their needs was critical to making sure that everyone felt heard and that their needs were being addressed.

Survey results

Three confidential surveys were conducted via Google Forms. Once the surveys were administered, the results were shared amongst all the teachers. This helped teachers working at home to better understand the experiences of their coworkers. The surveys helped the support team to understand teachers' perceptions of the support system and to what degree teachers felt successful in their shift to online teaching.

42 people responded to the survey (57%), indicating that overall they were satisfied with their shift to online lessons (extremely satisfied 2.5% (1), very satisfied 40% (16), somewhat satisfied 55% (22), somewhat dissatisfied 2.5% (1)).

One of the positive trends in the data was an appreciation for the additional three week preparation period, with 82.5% (33) of respondents indicating that it was really useful. However, teachers understood that no amount of preparation could adequately prepare

them for the unknowns they would experience. One teacher commented, “It was enough to get a plan ready, but it was hard to then always feel comfortable...now with experience and having a better idea of what to expect, three weeks would be ample time.” Teacher responses seem to indicate that, unsurprisingly, teachers with different teaching and planning styles responded differently, though, on balance most were positive about the experience.

Issues Experienced During the Online Semester

Teachers had a variety of opinions on what they considered significant issues. Concerning adapting materials for online learning, responses indicated that 59% (23) had little to no issue. Similarly, 62% (24) indicated they rarely (28%, 11) or never had issues (33%, 13) creating asynchronous materials. However, one-third (7 out of 21) of the respondents commented in the open-ended questions that they had underestimated the time it would take to prepare, adapt, or create materials from scratch for the online context (see Table 1).

Table 1. Example open-ended responses concerning issues over the semester.

“I am trying to re-think the course from the ground up for online-only. It takes time.”

“I think rather than adapting materials to online contexts, I tended to create new materials instead. It was easier to start from scratch...than to try to change something intended for a traditional classroom to an online medium.”

“Preparation [*sic*] class materials was very time-consuming.”

“Workload. Workload. Workload. It took hours and hours to make materials and transfer things to the online context. While...better for students, it was really tough for me personally as a teacher.”

Reflections on Successes and Challenges

There were a number of positive reflections from teachers on their classes and their use of technology. Several examples include: “The semester went better than expected”, “[I was] pleasantly surprised”, and “by the end of the semester, most things [were] going

well”. Others remarked that the two main applications recommended and supported by the online support team, Google Classroom and Zoom, worked well and that, as they adapted, they experienced “smoother integration of technology [as they] became far more adept at using existing tech”. Another instructor commented, “I was able to think about new ways of learning. Google Classroom was particularly useful in getting me to document everything used in lessons”.

Of course, there were also many challenges and difficulties voiced in the survey’s comments. Many teachers noted that without sufficient experience, they felt like they were playing “catch up”, constantly trying to prepare for just the next lesson. Indeed, the time needed to convert materials and plan for a new medium of instruction was a common theme that affected both lecturers personal and private lives. Many found as well that marking assignments was extremely time consuming, with many teachers wondering whether they had given sufficient feedback and individual time to their students. The authors learned from this that in any time of change, the burden on teachers should be anticipated and support should be developed to help mitigate it.

Perceived Helpfulness of Activities and Level of Support

In general, the lecturers felt that they were well supported (extremely supported 10% (4), very supported 59% (23), somewhat supported 26% (10), somewhat unsupported 5% (2)). Teachers were also asked to rate the level of helpfulness of the services provided by the support team (see Table 2).

Table 2. Helpfulness of professional development support.

	Extremely helpful	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Did not participate
Google Classroom	2	8	17	0	11
LINE OpenChat	7	7	3	0	22
Workshops	3	16	11	0	8
Zoom practice sessions	7	13	5	0	13
Open PD office hours	6	2	3	1	26

Transitioning to Emergency Remote Teaching in the ELI during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Teacher surveys	6	5	23	0	0
Student survey results	6	5	24	0	0

There are several interesting trends readily apparent in the data. In general, all services were rated positively, though to varying degrees. The teacher surveys, student survey results, and Google Support Classroom were all predominantly described as only “somewhat helpful” by at least 60% of survey respondents who participated. On the other hand, LINE OpenChat, workshops, Zoom practice sessions, and Open PD Office hours were rated much more positively, with at least 60% of respondents indicating that they were either “very helpful” or “extremely helpful”. Finally, the activities that had lower numbers of participants, OpenChat and Open PD Office hours, also received the most positive evaluations. These findings suggest that an effective approach to TD is giving teachers opportunities for guided practice as well as incorporating just-in-time support to address emerging technical issues.

Teachers identified several support services as being helpful over the course of the semester. The English-medium support Google Classroom and workshops on Zoom and Google Classroom were described as “helpful, especially at the beginning of the semester”. One teacher said, “I was very keen to learn more about Zoom and Google Classroom, so the workshops and peer support were incredibly valuable”. The just-in-time tech support provided through the highly-rated LINE OpenChat was “extremely useful in helping to solve tech issues in a timely manner” and even considered “a good idea” by those who didn’t participate. Another felt that “teacher surveys helped me to reflect on how things were going and...reaffirm that things were progressing positively”. One person, however, did comment that “when the online shift started, there was an overabundance of articles published on how to adapt...many were commonsensical, vague suggestions that didn’t actually help with developing an online curriculum”. This highlights the importance of institutions carefully curating the type, quality, and quantity of tools made available when providing information and resources.

The survey results were used to improve the support systems during the first semester and informed their design for subsequent semesters. The surveys helped inform a reflection document, which was distributed to teachers at the end of the semester. This document provided information about teaching from home, solving classroom issues, and ways to make online activities more interactive. The document also provided resources and advice on maintaining physical and mental health.

Lessons Learned

Overall, the online support team was able to successfully help the ELI's teachers adapt their materials and develop the necessary expertise to teach interactive, communicative lessons during the pandemic. Distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and teaming (Drago-Severson, 2009) were key principles that allowed a small team of three to successfully support the 78 members of the ELI and SALC. It was important for the support team to provide many support options available in a variety of ways. For example, offering LINE OpenChat, email, and the English-medium support Google Classroom as venues for teachers to get help from their peers was instrumental in providing the largest possible support coverage. It is easy for people to fall through the cracks in these kinds of online working environments. If a variety of communication and training methods are conducted through various channels, the chances of reaching all members significantly improves.

In the future, it is clear that online education will have a central role in the university's approach to language learning. Many of the core principles utilized during the pandemic will be incorporated into the regular PD support system. While the pandemic placed a great burden on the university as a whole, this trial-by-fire has promoted innovative practices that will ensure that future professional development will meet the demands of the world's shifting educational needs.

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