

EFL Teachers' Perception on Challenges of Online Teaching during Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study



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ABSTRACT: Undeniably, the spread of COVID 19 pandemic has badly affected many sectors, and education is not the exception. It has led to the temporary closure of most educational institutions and the remarkable rise in online learning worldwide, where teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. The paper mainly aims at identifying challenges that teachers faced when teaching online EFL classrooms. The participants of this study are 6 teachers of English Department of Ba Ria – Vung Tau University (BVU) who have been teaching English language for years. The data was collected by using tool of questionnaire made online by using Google form. Descriptive method is employed to establish the existence of challenges; quantitative analysis method is used to analyze the data. The findings of the study reveal that many challenges faced by EFL teachers related to their lack of proper training for doing online class and related issues, lack of computer and digital technology competency, lack of time for online course design and online test preparation as well as student's learning facilitation, motivation and interaction. Some recommendations, therefore, are also presented in this study.

KEYWORDS: online learning, online teaching challenges, Covid-19, EFL classrooms

1. INTRODUCTION

A novel corona virus, known as Covid-19, was discovered in Wuhan, China in the last month of the year 2019. Since then, indeed, it has been becoming the 21st century global crisis. In March, 2020, the Director General of WHO declared that Covid-19 is a pandemic for human beings due to its rapid spread and severity across the world with the additional announcement of social distancing. Following this warning, almost countries have strictly implemented lockdown that people are forced to stay at home, which has negatively influenced many sectors, including education. According to statistics of UNESCO (2020), globally, 1.5 billion children and youth were out of schools in 195 countries, from pre-primary to higher education. In order to prevent the spread of Covid-19 pandemic as well as ensure the continuation of teaching and learning process, most educational institutions across the world, including in Vietnam have decided to temporarily close and switch the teaching modes from face-to-face traditional classes to online ones via collaborative online platforms.

In 2020, Computer Aid eLearning (CAE), the USA – an expert in training supported by online content and technology with more than 34 years of experience and more than 10 million students all over the world, lists benefits of online learning during Covid-19 pandemic as follows: (i) offer an effective learning environment, (ii) reinforce the 24/7 access to education platforms at their preferred time and pace; (iii) ensure flexible scheduling and availability in any location; (iv) allow the students to provide their feedback to their teachers; (v) motivate the educational centers to show how they are well prepared to deal with the crisis and their performance level. Nevertheless, the unexpected shift of teaching method, obviously, has made teachers in general, and EFL in particular encounter many problems during online teaching.

This paper, therefore, is conducted to examine the application of online teaching among EFL teachers at BVU; the platforms or applications frequently used by instructors in online classrooms and discover challenges EFL teachers have faced when teaching in virtual classes at Ba Ria - Vung Tau University (BVU). Some feasible recommendations to overcome the difficulties are also suggested in this case study.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Online Learning (OL)

Online learning is thought to be the medium for delivering material between teachers and students during a pandemic emergency moment.

According to Clark and Mayer (2016), OL is related to “guidance conveyed on an advanced gadget that is expected to uphold learning”. Imania (2019) views online learning as “a form in the delivery of conventional learning which is reflected on digital

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format through the internet". The accesses for interaction are taken place in many places or meeting venues which could be held out or in school (Watson et al., 2012). The other names of online learning which is used interchangeably covers e-learning, cyber learning, or even virtual learning (iNACOL, 2011).

E-learning is defined as "learning facilitated by the use of digital tools and content that involves some form of interactivity, which may include online interaction between the learner and their teacher or peers" by Ministry of Communication and Technology of New Zealand or "the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services, as well as remote exchange and collaboration" by The European Commission. Similarly, Clark and Mayer (2016) view e-learning as instruction delivered by any technological mode intended to promote learning.

Online Learning (OL) or E-Learning (EL), in this paper, is regarded as a form of distance education in which a course is intentionally designed in advance to be delivered fully online through the Internet. Teacher's instruction, learner's engagement, and the interaction between the students and the teachers or peers are included in a virtual learning environment.

2.2. Types of Online Learning (OL)

Online learning (OL) has gained the remarkable popularity over the past decade. There are common types or approaches of OL investigated in the previous researches, including: synchronous, asynchronous, blended, and massive online open courses (MOOC).

In synchronous approach, teachers and usually have online meeting at a predetermined time. Watts (2016) states that live streaming video and/or audio are used for synchronous interaction. However, Keegan (1980) argues although video conferencing enables participants to see each other this is not considered a face-to-face interaction because of the physical separation.

Asynchronous approach means that teachers and students do not have regular classes, and students are able to have access to the course through the Internet at any convenient time. Communication among the participants occurs mainly through email and online forums and is typically moderated by the instructor Watts (2016). Additionally, Garrison (2000) state "Asynchronous collaborative learning may well be the defining technology of the postindustrial era of distance education."

The approach of blended learning (BL) is referred to combining face-to-face classroom time with online learning experiences by Garrison and Kanuka (2004). In the BL classrooms, different teaching strategies and instructional technology can be used to help individuals who have different learning styles, needs and interests (Tseng & Walsh Jr., 2016).

Massive Online Open Courses (MOOC) was first introduced in 2006 and offers open online courses without cost to a large number of participants (Cormier, McAuley, Siemens, & Stewart, 2010). By providing educational opportunities, MOOCs can address the increasing demand for training and education (Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016).

This study focuses on the synchronous approach - the dominant approach that BVU has utilized during the period of lockdown in Vietnam due to Covid-19 pandemic. Teachers and students work asynchronously in open scheduled online courses. Almost materials will be also uploaded and downloaded digitally on online learning platform.

2.3. Platforms/ Applications used commonly in online classrooms

UNESCO (2020) lists most frequently used collaboration platforms supporting live-video communication:

- (i) DingTalk (online platform for video conferencing, attendance tracking, sharing information and instant messaging)
- (ii) Lark (collaborative eLearning platform)
- (iii) Hangouts Meet (Video calls tool)
- (iv) Microsoft Teams (Chat, meet, contact and collaboration feature integrated with Microsoft Office software)
- (v) Skype (Video and audio calls with talk, chat and collaboration features)
- (vi) WeChat Work (video sharing and calls for Chinese)
- (vii) WhatsApp (Video and audio calls, chat and content share)
- (viii) Zoom (Video and audio calls with talk, chat and collaboration features)

2.4. Challenges in teaching online

Over the past decades, online learning has been occurring in some global institutes. However, many schools, colleges, and universities do not frequently use this education mode, so their staffs as well as students do not have much experience of online teaching and learning. It is unexpected that Covid-19 pandemic forces almost teachers and students suddenly change the ways of teaching and learning, try to adapt to the new situation without having much time to make a preparation.

According to Clark and Mayer (2016), teaching and learning in an online environment is different from in the traditional classroom and can present challenges to instructors and learners. Sun (2011) claims that online learning has dramatically changed the way people learn. Furthermore, time zones, Internet access and bandwidth, technological breakdowns, individual student schedules (work vs. study), are all real problems both teachers and learners face during online classrooms. Coverdale-Jones (2000) and Hampel & Stickler (2005) share the same view that things like lack of lip coordination and verbal clues, time lags, bad sound and pictures, turn-around, etc., become major challenges even if an instructor manages to get all students to come to virtual classrooms at the same moment. Also, Martin (2009) regards student motivation as one of the challenges faced by E-instructors. "In

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today's online environments there is a lack of teacher presence, face-to-face (f2f) interaction, and tech support." The most well planned and explicitly laid out online instructional environment is not enough to sustain learner interest or support intrinsic motivation. In the research, Archambault (2010) indicates that insufficient time spent on creating online courses including new content, new technology, and new ways of engaging online learners is a major challenge for teachers.

Nevertheless, most previous researches were conducted before Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, this paper will find out challenges EFL teachers encountered when teaching online during the pandemic.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The main research method employed in this study is descriptive analytic method. The online questionnaire is conducted to examine the percentage of EFL teachers who are teaching online and are given proper trained for this mode of teaching; the frequently applications used in online classrooms as well as the challenges faced by EFL teachers when teaching during COVID 19 pandemic.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. The application of online teaching among EFL teachers at BVU

Statement of the question	Response			
	Yes		No	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Are you teaching online EFL classes?	6	100%	0	0%
Have you been properly trained about online teaching?	2	33.3%	4	66.7%
Have you got experience of online teaching before Covid-19 pandemic?	1	16.7%	5	83.3%

Table 1. Application of Online Teaching among EFL teachers

The table above shows that although 100% teachers are online teaching EFL classes, 33% of them have been properly trained and 83.3% of them have not had experience of this mode of teaching. This might make teachers face challenges during online teaching.

4.2. Platforms/ Applications used by teachers in EFL online classrooms at BVU

Platforms/ Applications	Frequency	Percentage
Microsoft teams	6	100%
Zoom, Skype	2	33.3%
Google apps (Google classrooms, Google meets)	1	16.7%
Others (Zalo/ Facebook/ Messenger/ etc.)	5	83.3%

Table 2. Platforms/ Applications used by teachers in EFL online classrooms

It is found from Table 2 that 100% of teachers are using Microsoft teams to teach scheduled online EFL classes as their school requires. Teachers show the lessons, share useful videos made by themselves or on YouTube, etc., then directly give explanation and make communication, interaction with students during online learning hours through this application. It is noted that other applications like Zalo, Facebook, Messengers, etc. are the favourite ones. The majority of the teachers (83.3%) use them to send notes, reminder or announcement or communicate with their students outside classroom. Whereas, only 2 participants (33.3%) use Zoom, Skype and just 1 participant (16.7%) employs Google apps (Google classrooms, Google meets) for online teaching in case they get problem with Microsoft team's log in.

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4.3. Challenges faced by EFL teachers in online teaching during Covid-19 pandemic

Challenges faced by EFL teachers in online teaching during Covid-19 pandemic	Not at all		To some extent		To great extent	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of proper training for doing online class and related issues	0	0%	4	66.7%	2	33.3%
Lack of computer and digital technology competency	3	50%	3	50%	0	33.3%
Lack of time for online course design and online test preparation	3	50%	2	33.3%	1	16.7%
Difficulty in following up the student's achievement	2	33.3%	4	66.7%	0	0%
Typical English courses	4	66.7%	2	33.3%	0	0%
Student's learning facilitation (<i>internet connection, students' gadgets specifications</i>)	2	33.3%	3	50%	1	16.7%
Student's motivation	1	16.7%	3	50%	2	33.3%
Student's interaction	0	0%	4	66.7%	2	33.3%

Table 3. Challenges faced by EFL teachers in online teaching during Covid-19 pandemic

As can be seen from the table 3, all teachers believe that they lack proper training for doing online class and related issues (with 66.7% to some extent and 33.3% to great extent). It is noticeable that half of participants do not face the lack of computer and digital technology competency while the other half view them as challenges to some extent (50%). Similarly, lack of time for online course design and online test preparation is the challenge for 50% of the participants (33.3% to some extent and 16.7% to great extent). Furthermore, whilst four teachers (66.7%) find it difficult to follow up the student's achievement to some extent, other two teachers (33.3%) do not. Importantly, although 66.7% of EFL teachers do not experience challenges in online teaching English courses, the others (33.3%) meet some difficulties in teaching English language skills such as writing challenges, speaking challenges and other typical linguistics courses such as phonetics and phonology challenges where the teacher needs to teach phonemes, allophones, morphemes, etc. face to face.

Other challenges related to learners that EFL teachers face in online teaching during Covid-19 situation at BVU are also shown in the table 3 above. Firstly, the problem of learning facilitation like the quality of internet connection, students' gadgets specifications is encountered by two third of the participants (50% to some extent and 16.7% to great extent). It reveals that not all learners have good internet connection. Some students without reliable internet access or some from disadvantaged background lack high-quality learning devices, they often struggle to participate in online courses. Secondly, as Brown (2001) claims, "Often, intrinsic motivation is a big issue, since students may have difficulty in seeing the relevance of learning English", the great percentage of EFL teachers face the challenge of student's motivation to some extent (50%) and to great extent (33.3%). Finally, student's interaction also hinder the process of online teaching for all EFL teachers in this study to some extent (66.7%) and to great extent (33.3%). Even when the instructor prepares a well-planned online lesson, but cannot encourage interaction from learners, it is still not an effective and successful.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The way to overcome the challenges of lack of proper training for doing online class and related issues, lack of computer and digital technology competency and lack of time for online course design and online test preparation is that instructors should devote more time discovering useful knowledge or tips for effectively online teaching by joining, sharing and collaborating often with others in e-learning professional communities all over the world. It is also suggested that the institution should initiate the professional development programmes on e-learning such as seminars and workshop led by experts in online teaching from many institutions;

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or trainings that guide teachers to convert traditional lessons to electronic format, to get familiar with different functions, tools of the e-learning platform or include further information related to online course design, multimedia production which can involve both teachers and IT staff and they can be offered anytime when need arise. As a result, teachers can improve knowledge and experience of online teaching practice, increase computer, technology literacy and reduce the time spent on planning and designing online lessons or tests.

For instructors who find it difficult to follow up the student's achievement, they ought to divide the class into pairs or small groups to interact, control and support when necessary, which helps teacher assess their students' performances or abilities more easily.

So as to deal with the difficulty of teaching some typical linguistics courses such as phonetics and phonology challenges, EFL teachers should provide students with detailed, lively videos related to the linguistics aspects instead.

For other challenges related to learners, only institutions and government can handle the problem of learning facilitation like the quality of internet connection, students' gadgets specifications; for example, giving free high speed internet for educational platforms or applications or offering financial support for those students to have better learning devices.

Besides, without the buzz of the classroom setting and the company of their peers, it's no surprise that some students can begin to feel a strong sense of demotivation. Consequently, instructors are suggested to create positive online learning environment where students are interested in learning, freely sharing their opinion, and communicating with not only their teacher but their peers. One of the effective ways to promote student's motivation is increasing communication with students through applications they frequently used such as Zalo, Facetime, Facebook, etc to remind, encourage them to learn hard or listen to and try to solve their problems. Another way is that teachers need to offer more attractive learning activities or mini games, which can motivate the learners join the class eagerly and actively.

In order to encourage student's interaction, instructors are recommended to use problem-based learning strategy that requires collaboration among students. They will work, discuss with each other in small groups to analyze, synthesize and then present their result. The teacher also asks other students to listen to the presentation carefully, then give constructive feedback on it or do "Q&A". In that case, all learners can comfortably interact with their peers and teacher, which will maintain the online classroom dynamic like offline one. Additionally, teacher should show their faces, let students hear their voice, and ask some questions to check student's understanding, increase personal interaction in class, especially in theory lessons.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The research findings shown that many EFL teachers have not been properly trained nor had much experience of online teaching. But, in fact, to deal with Covid-19 pandemic, all teachers of BVU are asked to use Microsoft teams to teach scheduled online EFL classes. Also, they tend to communicate with their students outside classroom through other applications like Zalo, Facebook, Messengers, etc.

The study also discovers EFL teachers' challenges toward online learning in the pandemic. They are (i) lack of proper training for doing online class and related issues, (ii) lack of computer and digital technology competency, (iii) lack of time for online course design and online test preparation, (iv) difficult to follow up the student's achievement, (v) teaching some typical English language courses and challenges related to learners, including (vi) learning facilitation (internet connection, students' gadgets specifications), (vii) student's motivation, (viii) student's interaction.

Teachers, consequently, are expected to improve knowledge and experience of online teaching practice, increase computer, technology literacy and be able to plan and design lessons or tests effectively as well as recognize speaking skills problems faced by students so that they can seek solutions to maximize the effectiveness of their speaking classes, which enhances students' speaking ability. Besides, EFL instructors should apply a variety of method of teaching, class organization to overcome difficulties in following up the student's achievement, teaching typical English linguistics class or other challenges from learner's attitude.

Further studies are suggested to investigate the effectiveness of online education against traditional face-to-face interaction.

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