

Learning to adapt, adapting to learn: redefining online EFL teachers' roles

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Abstract. The paper investigates Greek online students' and instructors' beliefs on the role that online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers play in synchronous online courses delivered through Skype. Fifty-six online teachers and 93 online adult learners participated in a quantitative research project answering two different online questionnaires. The results showed that most online teachers and learners are satisfied with their technological expertise. Students' levels of satisfaction with online courses is greater than teachers', while there is significant association between teachers' technology familiarization and their satisfaction with online instruction. Teachers' technological expertise is strongly associated with their opinion on the effectiveness of online language courses. Finally, both groups agree that it is primarily the teachers' responsibility to be familiarized with technology to support online education.

Keywords: online learning, EFL, teachers' role, synchronous lessons.

1. Introduction

Implementing technology in traditional educational contexts has caused a re-imagining of education and educators' roles. The latter are required to adopt different responsibilities to adjust to the demands of the new online reality (Söderström, From, Lövgvist, & Törnquist, 2012).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of EFL teachers as it has been (re) defined due to the introduction and spread of online learning. The research was conducted in Greece and is based on two research questions:

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- to what extent can participants' familiarization with technology affect their views toward online education; and
- what expectations do students have from their online instructors?

2. Method

Fifty-six online Greek EFL instructors and 93 online Greek adult EFL learners participated in a quantitative research and answered two separate anonymous questionnaires developed by the researcher and distributed through Google forms.

The final form and content of the questionnaires was decided after the researcher conducted a small pilot survey with 20 participants. Once the data collection was completed, the responses were imported on the IBM SPSS statistics software. Mann-Whitney and Chi-square tests were conducted for the purposes of the research. The participants were attending or delivering synchronous online lessons on Skype. Both freelance and teachers who work in schools regardless of the number of students who attend their courses were eligible participants.

3. Results

Seventy-seven percent of teachers and 65% of students were female. Fifty-two percent of the teachers were 31-40 years old, while students' ages varied from 18-25 to more than 50. Sixty-eight percent of teachers have been teaching online for less than two years and 7% for five to ten years. Four percent had their first teaching experience through online courses. Online teachers characterize their familiarization with technology as 'very good' (59%) or 'good' (32%). Learners regard themselves as 'very good' (41%) or 'good' (40%) users of technology.

A Mann-Whitney test (Table 1) indicated that the level of satisfaction with online courses is greater for students than for teachers ($U=1921.5, p=0.003$).

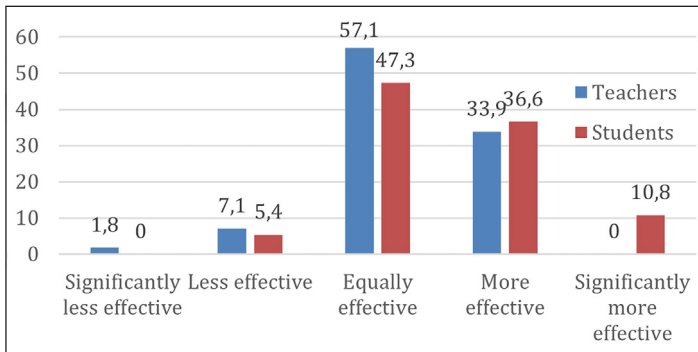
Table 1. Mann-Whitney test

	Groups	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Satisfaction	Teachers	56	62.81	3517.50
	Students	93	82.34	7657.50
	Total	149		

A Chi-square test showed a statistically significant association between teachers' technology familiarization and their satisfaction ($\chi^2(4, N=56)=13.792, p=0.008$); however, no association was found between students' familiarization and satisfaction ($\chi^2(9, N=93)=13.792, p=0.963$).

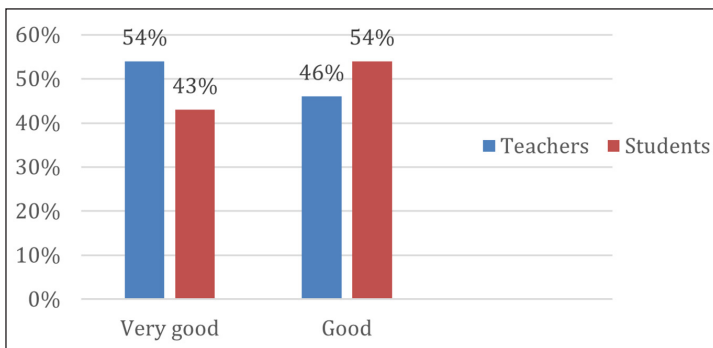
Teachers and students support the effectiveness of the online EFL courses compared to the 'traditional' format as the following chart shows (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Online lessons' effectiveness



A Chi-square test indicated a statistically significant association between teachers' technological expertise and their opinion on the effectiveness of online language courses ($\chi^2(6, N=56)=20.821, p=0.002$). Therefore, the more comfortable teachers feel with technology, the more effective they regard online courses. Both groups have high expectations from teachers regarding their tech skills as the chart indicates (Figure 2).

Figure 2. How good with technology should teachers be?



Since students' technical problems (71%) are online lessons' biggest disadvantage, they probably expect from their teachers to be able to provide them with solutions.

Forty-three percent of teachers recognize their increased responsibilities and highlight their need for specialized training to improve the quality of online courses in Greece. The second most popular opinion (36%) was their need for those courses to be more advertised in order to increase their popularity. Students agree on the importance of advertising (46%), while 25% highlight the necessity of teacher training. A chi-square test was performed to determine any association between teachers' years of teaching online and their views on what needs to change in order for online language lessons to improve. No statistically significant association was found ($\chi^2(8, N=56)=2.961, p=0.937$).

Nevertheless, online teachers still hold more 'traditional' responsibilities, as their students' learning goals indicate. They are still expected to help their learners with their professional development (33%), provide assistance to students living in a foreign country or planning to do so (28%), prepare them for language proficiency tests (19%), or support their desire to learn English for pleasure (18%).

4. Discussion

The present research showed that a teacher's responsibility is to monitor, guide, and help students achieve their goals while making sure that the lesson aims are achieved. Nevertheless, in an online context, those roles take up additional meanings.

As facilitators, teachers need to be ready to provide solutions to technical problems and assist students who have a hard time handling tech devices. In such cases, "redundancy is often better than elegant succinctness" (Ko & Rossen, 2010, p. 125). Any barriers imposed by traditional learning can be overcome thanks to the personalization that online instruction offers, as long as the educator is able to offer such assistance (Hetzner & Leen, 2012). Besides, the results indicated that the more familiarized with technology teachers are the more satisfied they are with online education and the more they believe in its effectiveness.

Despite students' high expectations from their teachers, this should not entail that a good online teacher equals a tech specialist. Teachers and students sometimes

forget that, resulting in the former feeling pressure to live up to the latter's expectations (Chun, Kern, & Smith, 2016). Educators should not believe that they are expected to provide a lesson that resembles a social networking site (Ko & Rossen, 2010). Instead, students' high expectations should connote the teacher's duty to be adequately familiar with technology in order to inspire trust and guide students out of technical inconveniences.

As it has been argued, online teachers should “keep up with the latest communication and content-creation trends and [...] judiciously choose those that [...] harbor a promise of enhancing their instructional strategies” (Ko & Rossen, 2010, p. 395). The word ‘judiciously’ encompasses the true meaning of this new educational reality which provides new tools to teachers and encourages them to assess and adopt the ones suitable to their own and their learners' needs.

To save educators from pressure and inspire more teachers to embrace online teaching, it is important to emphasize that teaching online is not for the elite of educators. It is from and for everyone. The diversity of the participants' ages and proficiency levels attests that. This inclusion is what charges educators with the roles of leaders and explorers, making them responsible for encouraging learners to embrace the potential that modern technologies in language classes offer.

This can be achieved if students are aware of the importance of using technology properly and safely. As teachers are entrusted with the role of safeguarding and warning learners against improper use, online courses promote multi-literacy and render language learning only one of the educational aims, along with I.T. and other skills.

Finally, the teacher develops a different kind of relationship with their students due to the distinct characteristics of online and distance education in general. Since the teacher does not share the same physical space as the students, it is the former's job to inspire autonomy and responsibility in a more crucial way than in an offline classroom.

The afore-mentioned roles have taken a toll on teachers who are asking for more substantial support in the form of specialized training. Therefore, universities need to consider including relevant courses in their curricula to increase teachers' confidence. Similarly, seminars and training programs on advertising specifically addressed to online educators could potentially increase the popularity of online lessons.

5. Conclusion

Considering that technology is “so pervasive [...] that to teach language without [it] would create a very limited and artificial learning environment – if it were even possible at all”, teachers are called to take up the tedious task of adjusting and catering for the demands of today’s EFL learners (Chun et al., 2016, p. 65). Their roles as facilitators, moderators, and explorers have not ceased being applicable, yet they have taken up additional meanings.

Since – to the researcher’s knowledge – no previous research has been conducted on online EFL teaching in Europe, it is hoped that the present research will be valuable for teachers, students, and researchers who are interested in online foreign language education and pedagogy.

Despite the changes and developments that the teachers’ roles are going through due to the spread of online instruction, it is important to remember that a good teacher will always be a good teacher – whether online or offline.

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