



Digital language teaching after COVID-19: what can we learn from the crisis?

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures have confronted the educational sector with numerous challenges. This study focuses on how teachers faced these challenges and examines what we can learn from the crisis for prospective digitally-enhanced English language teaching (ELT) and teacher education. It follows a qualitative research design and is based on semi-structured interviews with 20 foreign language teachers. The transcripts were analysed using qualitative content analysis to investigate teachers' perspectives on their work during the pandemic and to describe needs concerning their professionalisation. First results suggest that Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) needs to be integrated better in teacher education to foster teachers' competences for teaching languages online.

Keywords: emergency remote teaching, COVID-19, English language teaching, teacher education.

1. Introduction

The developments during the COVID-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented shift of learning and teaching: the related school closures forced teachers to transfer their teaching online at short notice. In Germany this meant teachers had to deal with many pre-existing challenges such as a missing infrastructure or educational inequalities regarding the integration of digital technologies in the educational system (Eickelmann et al., 2019). To distinguish this process from carefully planned concepts such as distance or blended learning, the term Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) has emerged, which relates to

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“a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face” (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 7).

This study aims to focus on the experiences of language teachers to investigate how they dealt with this exceptional situation and what happened in digital language classrooms during the pandemic. Based on the teachers’ perspectives we would like to bring the needs and challenges of ERT into focus. Further, we would like to examine which competences teachers found most important and what we can learn from this time for teaching languages online. It is our understanding that we can use lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to bring teacher education closer to the needs of prospective digital teaching practice. Following this goal, we aim to answer the following Research Questions (RQs).

RQ1: What challenges do teachers describe as most prevalent while teaching during the pandemic?

RQ2: Which competences are described as most important in dealing with the arising challenges?

2. Method

Due to the novelty of ERT implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic, we decided on a qualitative approach to answer the research questions. From the beginning of May 2021 to the end of July 2021, shortly after schools in Germany were reopened, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 secondary-school English as a foreign language teachers. The interviews lasted between 17 and 45 minutes and totalled 508 minutes of recorded material. We then transcribed all interviews to prepare them for qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014).

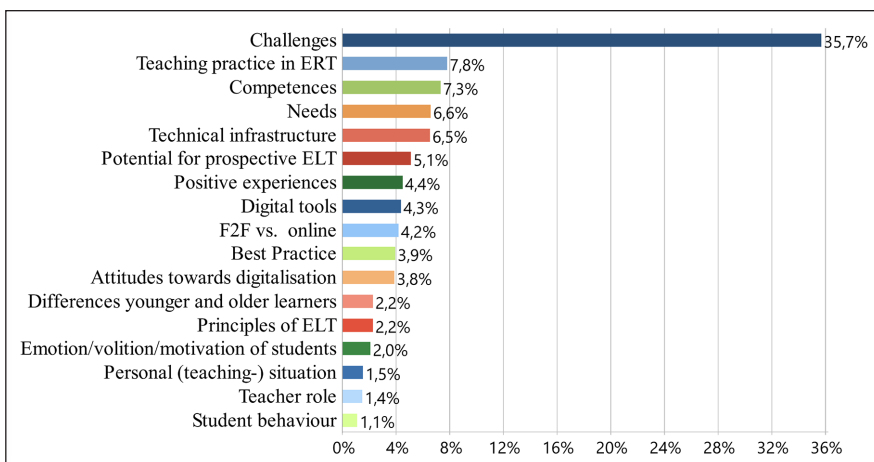
With the help of the data analysis software MAXQDA2020, we coded and categorised the transcribed material. To ensure intercoder reliability we first coded one of the interviews independently with our initial coding system. After comparing results and testing for Cohen’s (1960) Kappa we found the intercoder reliability to be satisfactory ($K=0.68$) and continued by coding the remaining 19 transcripts.

3. Results and discussion

The initial coding process produced a total of 1,127 codes which comprised 17 (main) categories (Figure 1). By far the most prominent category was ‘challenges’ with 402 codes. Additional salient categories identified in the initial coding process were the general description of ‘ERT teaching practice’ (88 codes), ‘needs’ regarding educational policies (74 codes), and ‘technical infrastructure’ (73 codes).

Further examination of the two categories most closely related to our research questions – ‘challenges’ and ‘competences’ (82 codes) – revealed additional subcategories which we will present in more detail below. Additionally, the category ‘potential for prospective ELT’ (57 codes) emerged as a point of interest for the overarching question of what we can learn from the crisis and thus will be discussed briefly.

Figure 1. Distribution main categories (1,127 total codes)



Closer analysis of the category ‘challenges’ produced 137 codes containing interdisciplinary challenges and 67 ELT-specific codes. Interdisciplinary challenges included issues of (a lack of) social interaction, increased workload, and less control of student output. According to the teachers, ELT-specific challenges particularly arose regarding the fostering of speaking competences and the progression in grammar and vocabulary learning due to organisational problems and/or the teachers not knowing any suitable online tools.

When being asked what competences teachers found most relevant for teaching languages during the pandemic they again mainly focused on interdisciplinary

aspects. The most frequently mentioned competence was the ability to integrate digital tools into language teaching. The participants also recurrently considered open-mindedness and frustration tolerance as fundamental. Other interdisciplinary skills that were highlighted included the ability to organise and structure workload in ERT.

The integration of digital tools was the most frequently mentioned aspect in the category ‘potential for prospective ELT’. Teachers also described the new setting as beneficial for individualising learning since students could decide on their own how much time they would spend on tasks. The analysis further showed that the mixture of asynchronous and synchronous teaching was considered a positive aspect of ERT. Some of the participants observed that individual students were more active in video-conferences than in class. Due to more flexibility in structuring their teaching, teachers saw more opportunities to integrate (international) projects as well.

Considering the 17 main categories, we believe that the prominence of the category ‘challenges’ can be in part explained by the experiences of ERT. Had the shift to distance teaching been planned out more sufficiently, the category would have been less outstanding since problems such as inconsistent organisation and a sudden increase of workload could have been less severe. However, the prominence of the category ‘challenges’ appears to also be connected to general issues in infrastructure as well as a lack of expertise when it comes to using digital tools. Following previous CALL research, at least issues of grammar and vocabulary progression as well as giving feedback could have been improved by adequate usage of digital potential (e.g. Fang, Yeh, Luo, & Chen, 2021; Sarré, Grosbois, & Brudermann, 2019). An additional result, especially of the three categories analysed, is the general focus on interdisciplinary aspects across categories as compared to subject-specific ones. This suggests the importance of transferable skills, such as digital literacy, media competences, as well as soft skills such as frustration tolerance and organisational talent in distance teaching scenarios.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, results can only be seen as first impressions that could be investigated further with quantitative data. While the approach allowed us to generate in-depth, data-driven categories and subcategories, the sample of $n=20$ is not representative for language teachers at secondary schools. This could be an opportunity for additional quantitative studies that follow-up on categories identified to further explore whether the findings can be transferred to other contexts.

4. Conclusions

Given the initial results, RQ1 can preliminarily be answered with a focus on interdisciplinary challenges that may be organised in two broad categories. On the one hand challenges that arose from the unique situation of the pandemic and the resulting emergency shift to online learning, such as inconsistent organisation and social isolation. On the other hand, we can identify challenges that arose from a lack of digital expertise, which resulted in an overwhelming workload, difficulties to engage students in speaking activities, and problems to provide students with feedback. This might indicate a need for better integration of CALL-related competences (e.g. using automated feedback, teacher dashboards, and learning platforms) into ELT school practice in Germany.

RQ2 can be answered by highlighting the teachers' emphasis on interdisciplinary skills and competences required. We believe that this might suggest the need for an even stronger integration of transferable soft skills such as organisational talent and frustration tolerance into language teacher education.

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