ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN TIMES OF CRISIS: TEACHER AGENCY IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC-FORCED ONLINE EDUCATION

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Abstract

Teacher agency occurs when teachers demonstrate a capacity to solve pedagogical and curriculum challenges. This article delves into how tertiary English teachers in Thailand practice their agency in response to the abrupt conversion to online teaching amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This study drew on teachers' responses to a questionnaire (n=162) and semi-structure interviews (n=3) to identify their positioning and agentic actions. The results suggest that teachers' positioning as being professionally responsible for students' learning outcomes remains intact, even though the situation restricted them from going beyond their fundamental responsibilities. From a pedagogical standpoint, teachers' agentic actions identified were endeavoring to create an interactive learning environment; implementing social media platforms to compensate for the loss of face-to-face communication; working with students to adjust their teaching practices; promoting autonomous learning; and incorporating formative assessment approaches. Teachers might find themselves struggling to achieve their pedagogical goals, but once they become familiar with the new learning environment and master suitable teaching methods, online learning can be a viable option for formal language education, even in the normal situation.

Keywords: teacher agency; English language teaching; online teaching; higher education; COVID-19

1. Introduction

The outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO). At the time of writing, COVID-19 is responsible for the loss of millions of lives and disruption to billions. UNESCO reported that schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) in 185 countries were temporarily shut down in an attempt to control the spread of the disease, affecting 90% of all enrolled students. The disruption of learning was unforeseen and posed challenges for governments, education administrators, teachers, students, and parents on a continuity of learning during the closure. The Thai Ministry

of Education (MoE) urgently requested teachers at all levels of education to implement remote learning. Teachers were demanded to teach via the "tube" regardless of their qualifications and prior experience.

Distance education is not a new concept but implementing it with limited preparation time and resources is a daunting task. For K-12 education, the MoE launched a strategic plan for the academic year of 2020, with an emphasis on on-air learning. This involved collaborating with Distance Learning Foundation Under the Royal Patronage (FURP) to render classes on Distance Learning Television (DLTV) with the support of the MoE online platform, Digital Education Excellence Platform (DEEP). With the aim to deliver a quality learning experience, teachers were expected to be "lead learners" who initiate steps toward innovative instructional approaches. Which approach to use depended on the availability of tools, content, access, and timeframe. While K-12 education is fully supported by the government and other sectors, the policy to assist higher education remains in question. In accordance with the MoE Notification on Vigilant Measures against COVID-19, each HEI issued its own measures and recommendations on teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic as classes could no longer be delayed. Since the government did not release a standard protocol for higher education, the institutions devised their own protocols for teaching and learning utilizing available resources. Tertiary teachers had to think on their feet to deliver effective remote learning, though many of them completely lack experience.

Research on language teaching and professional development has gone through a period of rapid transformation over the past decades, with expanding acknowledgment of teaching as personally practiced and socially established (Borg, 2006). Defined as "agency exercised by teachers actively working to make choices, conduct intentional actions, exert control, and bring about change in a given context" (Ruan, Zheng, & Toom, 2020, p. 2), teacher agency has been playing a crucial role in the process of educational changes (Buchanan, 2015). Despite the potential benefits of implementing new policies, teachers often receive insufficient information about changes or limited support, making it difficult for them to meet policy objectives and social expectations (Wedell & Grassick, 2018). As education continually changes in line with trends, teacher educators have raised concerns over how to embed a sense of teacher agency within teachers and how teacher agency guides education policy (Coffman, 2015). Although there have been many attempts to determine the role individual experience plays in the vast range of contexts that language teachers encounter – such as English department teachers in a changing curricular landscape (Ruan et al., 2020) and English primary teachers in language policy reform (Le,

Nguyen, & Burns, 2020) – there has been an absence of documentation on how tertiary English teachers practice their agency in these unusual times.

Given the importance of the agentic role of teachers, the interplay between educational changes and teaching practices, and the education landscape in Thailand, the current study is devoted to investigating the agency of tertiary English teachers during the COVID-19 crisis. More precisely, teacher agency in terms of their beliefs and teaching practices that facilitate "social-distancing" learning and attempt to provide an explanation as to how such conditions influence on their practices were probed into. This study is guided by the question: "How do tertiary English teachers practice their agency during the COVID-19 crisis?" Since the teacher agency model can bridge the void between teacher professional development and educational changes (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020), this investigation will contribute to the understanding of teacher agency under the unique circumstance and cast some light on how to prepare teachers and students for unforeseen situations in the future.

2. Literature review

2.1. Agency

Agency is a multifaceted concept. As an agent, one deliberately takes actions to make things happen (Bandura, 2001). From the sociological perspective, agency is defined as the interim engagement in different structural conditions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Biesta and Tedder (2007) assert that agency is what one tries to attain in specific situations under specific ecological circumstances. To put it differently, agency is an attempt to make concrete contributions to a particular setting, influenced by a particular solitary event. Drawing from the commonalities of previous works, Ruan et al. (2020) concluded that agency demands both one's cognitive process and action. Belief and willingness alone are not considered as achieving agency; performing the task is required to fulfill one's agency. This is probably the reason why previous works on the subject of agency tended to focus on both the cognitive aspects and actions taken to achieve certain goals. It is also essential to address the rationale behind practicing agency. Since agency is socio-culturally oriented, it is meant to mediate between individuals and social contexts (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013). In this respect, one's actions need to be justified not only by one's capabilities but also by structural contexts and culture.

Agency has been approached across various disciplines, enabling the further development of concepts and methods that significantly complement and extend the existing ones. When agency is linked to professions, the spotlight is often on what professionals contribute to making

their practices fit conditions assumed to be unavoidable at all costs. The above discussion on agency from the sociological viewpoint helps provide an understanding of teacher agency. Teacher agency is regarded as a form of professional agency. Bounded by socio-cultural constraints, teacher agency is exercised in connection with, for example, curricula, relationships with peers and administrators, dominant culture, available resources, and educational changes. In line with sociologists who count individual characteristics in addition to socio-cultural constraints as providing insight into agentic behaviors, teacher agency can be explored through teachers' personal attributes at work, socio-cultural constraints, and the actions they take, especially in troubled times (Toom, Pyhältö, & Rust, 2015). Therefore, to yield a better understanding of how teachers practice their agency, it is essential for the current study to develop an understanding of not only cognitive aspects but also contextual conditions and teachers' practices.

In surveying previous studies, it was discovered that there are different ways in which teacher agency can be manifested. Le et al. (2020), for example, explored how English teachers in Vietnam practiced their agency in response to the new language policy by looking into their classroom practices. This included how they made pedagogical decisions within the teaching context. Since Vietnamese English teachers played no role in the policy development and were expected to serve only as implementers of the policy, which they did based on existing knowledge. Another example is Schweisfurth's (2006) study examining how teachers took global citizenship issues into account when teaching in the context of curricula demands. The researcher reported that teachers successfully adjusted their instructional approaches to meet curricular expectations because they were supported by their institutions. Both studies demonstrate that to act or not to act is entirely up to teachers per se. This is a vivid indication that teachers always practice agency, even when they "passively accept" policies and practices (Brodie, 2019, p. 3). The cases above, however, are different from the context of the current study. It is important to note that the COVID-19 situation did not offer teachers as much freedom as policies or educational trends do. Nevertheless, teacher agency can still be examined since changes have already been applied, and teachers must make pedagogical decisions to some extent. In the current study, therefore, teachers are considered as agents who enact agency at their own will despite limited freedom.

In connection with organizational changes, it has been theorized that the process of such enactment gives teachers opportunities to mediate between individual pathways and rudimental changes that occur within their organizations (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). Teachers' enactment can also be seen through the way they (re)invent the context, thrusting constraints

upon themselves (Weick, 2001). In this sense, it is also crucial for this current study to address how teachers interpret the situation and position themselves within the situation.

2.2. Positioning

Understanding how teachers position themselves in a particular context contributes to the construction of teacher agency since self-positioning closely interacts with teachers' positioning of students and teaching practices (Kayi-Aydar, 2015). Agency is immanent in everyone, but activating it depends on individual decisions (Redman, 2013). On account of a moral order, agents may decide whether to create, adapt, or ignore the moral implications of their actions (van Langenhove, 2017). This implies an interplay between social structure and agency within the trajectory of positioning theory. Positioning Theory (PT) (Davies & Harré, 1999) seeks to explain the construction of identities and the world through the lens of discourse, which refers not only to language in use but also interpreted language in an authentic context (Cameron, 2001). PT is useful in teacher agency research in a way that it can be used to explore personal agency. That is, it is theorized that the number of chances to act varies from person to person (Le et al., 2020). People, therefore, find themselves in different positions. They may either embrace their rights or distributions of rights and services or challenge the rights and services they distributed (Davies & Harré, 1999). It has been argued that roles and positions are different. While roles are steady, positions are dynamic (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Positioning is understood as one setting for a position for oneself or others. Via such (re)positioning act, agency can be demonstrated. The most common key elements of PT include rights, duties, and obligations (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). These elements are carried out in relation to personal attributes such as being rational and open-minded and the moral order of teacher service (Langenhove & Harré, 1999). The (re)positioning act can be performed in numerous ways. Some examples of such include direct positioning (e.g., praising someone as a great teacher), indirect positioning (e.g., Thai references to a teacher as a "boat"), moral positioning (e.g., teachers' feeling of being responsible for students' learning outcomes), and personal positioning (e.g., a teacher's personal feeling of resisting policy changes). Davies and Harré (1990) recommend that one has to enter discursive processes to examine the (re)positioning act. That is, one may be required to explore discourse at either the individual, group, or institutional level. For this reason, the current study draws on discourse at the group and individual levels.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative data – the Explanatory Design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). As suggested by Yin (1994), researchers should involve a variety of sources to provide a means of data triangulation. Figure 1 presents the workflow of this study.

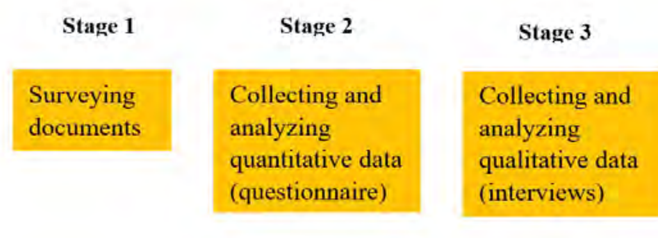

Figure 1. Research workflow

3.1. Documentation

This study began with a survey of pedagogical guidelines issued by HEIs across the country. Efforts were made to collect as many documents as possible, and since HEIs were not fully operative at the time of conducting this study, a web-driven approach was used to gather documents. Only notifications posted on HEIs' official websites were collected. A corpus of 50 notifications issued by 50 HEIs was compiled, yielding a wide variety of pedagogical guidelines. The purpose of this analysis was to gain an overall picture of teaching tools and methods that tertiary teachers were expected to employ during the crisis. Only guidelines related to teaching, learning, and evaluation were considered. Most of the notifications were written in Thai, but some HEIs provided an English version as an alternative. It is worth mentioning that the guidelines were only one of several measures HEIs took to provide safe education and support for students (e.g., measures to alleviate the impacts of COVID-19, precautionary measures).

The notifications were treated as a single unit for the reason that this study did not focus on differences between HEIs. The analysis began with reading through the notifications and then extracting relevant guidelines. The guidelines were categorized into teaching methods, teaching platforms, and evaluation tools. After that, a list of each was created and expanded as new elements emerged. These lists would serve to categorize the general pedagogical perspectives into which teachers' perceptions and insights were placed.

3.2. Questionnaire and respondents

In this study, the questionnaire served two purposes: to collect quantitative data and select cases. It was designed in conformity with the first three cores of the activity system proposed by Engeström (1987): subject, tool, and object. To illustrate how these three cores operate in the context of this study (see Figure 2), it is important to consider the extent to which the outbreak of COVID-19 started to affect the educational sector. Educational institutions were forced to close; however, teaching and learning continued. Pedagogical guidelines for teachers under social-distancing conditions were issued. Teachers at this point became the subjects or actors as they mediated between the situation and teaching. Different teaching methods and evaluation tools are the approaches used by the teachers to mediate distance learning, and which teaching method and evaluation tool to use and how they are used may depend on personal and/or institutional objects. In this respect, the questionnaire was designed in the way that it focuses on three elements: teachers themselves (e.g., experience, beliefs, interpretation), teaching methods and evaluation tools, and learning outcomes. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: background information, interpretation, and teaching practices. The second section asked respondents to describe how they feel about the abrupt changes that the COVID-19 pandemic had brought to English language education, whereas the third section employed multiple-answer items to elicit information regarding teaching practices.

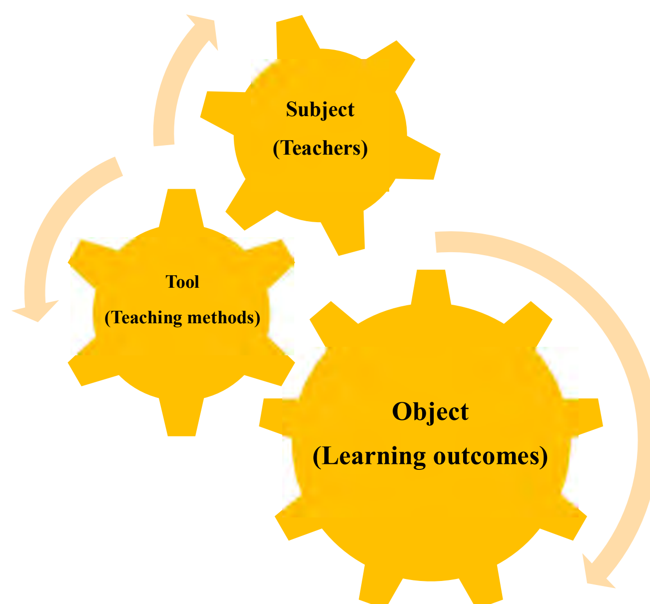

Figure 2. The first three cores of the activity system

The questionnaire respondents included 162 tertiary teachers of English who taught at least one

English course during the closure of HEIs. The respondents were recruited by using snowball sampling with an online survey platform, and thus the response rate could not be identified. In accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, the respondents received information regarding the objectives of this study and were assured of their confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the respondents

Demographic variables	Number (n=162)	Percentage
Age		
21-25	3	1.9%
26-30	34	21%
31-35	59	36.4%
36-40	30	18.5%
41-45	22	13.6%
46-50	12	7.4%
51+	2	1.2%
Nationality		
Thai	146	90.1%
Non-Thai	16	9.9%
Experience in teaching English at the higher education level		
Less than 1 year	10	6.2%
1-3 years	21	13%
4-6 years	34	21%
7-9 years	44	27.2%
10+ years	53	32.7%
Employment status		
Full-time	138	85.2%
Part-time	24	14.8%
Course taught during the COVID-19 pandemic (multiple answer)		
General English	122	75.3%
English for Specific Purposes	46	28.4%
Skill-specific courses	37	22.8%
Other	11	6.8%

3.3. Interviews

The cases were selected using the purposive sampling technique. Three teachers, who had earlier completed the questionnaire, were selected since they differed in their teaching modes. The names *Ali, Pimpa,* and *Saran* are all pseudonyms (see Table 2). To allow them to share their thought and insights freely, they were interviewed in Thai, their first language. The interviews

lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. The participants were interviewed individually by telephone on September 28th-30th 2020, and the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis – verbatim transcriptions allow researchers to document the actual representation of verbal contributions of participants (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). Some responses were translated into English, but only for the purposes of reporting data. The interviews were threefold: general beliefs about English language teaching, positioning, and teaching practices. More questions, however, were added to elicit more in-depth information.

Content analysis and thematic analysis were used because both approaches pay attention to contextual description and interpretation of data and cut across the data to identify cultural-contextual ideas or underlying messages. Whenever ambiguity in their responses was encountered, the participants were contacted for clarification.

Table 2. Demographic profile of the interview participants

Pseudonym	**Teaching Experience**	**Highest degree**	**Nationality /L1**	**Course**	**Employment status**	**Teaching mode**
Ali	7	Master's degree	Thai/Thai	General English/English for Specific Purposes	Full-time	Synchronously
Pimpa	11	Doctoral degree	Thai/Thai	English for Specific Purposes	Full-time	Asynchronously
Saran	15	Doctoral degree	Thai/Thai	General English	Full-time	Synchronously and asynchronously

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Pedagogical guidelines

In this section, the lists of teaching methods, platforms, and evaluation tools recommended by HEIs for teaching and learning were presented (Table 3), although some HEIs that did not suggest specific tools and methods for remote teaching and merely suggested "online teaching". Both synchronous and asynchronous approaches were recommended. While some HEIs demanded the teachers be prerecorded, others encouraged teachers to teach remotely via a group meeting application (GMA) such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and the like. In the former case, students could watch the recordings as often as they wished, and those who had no Internet

access at home could study whenever the opportunity arose. It should be noted that, in addition to closing educational institutions, the spread of COVID-19 prevented people from traveling to other provinces. As a result, many students did not have access to the resources (technology and connectivity) required for online learning. Given such circumstances, students could significantly benefit from asynchronous classes.

In contrast, synchronous teaching allows students to interact with their teachers and classmates online, although they need quality Internet access to join live-stream classes. Some HEIs, nevertheless, suggested ways to connect with those who did not have the basic tools such as requiring teachers to record the live stream classes and then upload them for students to access on demand. In fact, teachers had to always bear in mind that some students might not be able to attend the live sessions due to the lack of technology and connectivity.

Although some HEIs did not provide specific pedagogical guidelines, several of them recommended particular teaching methods, platforms, and evaluation tools. In general, the teaching methods recommended by HEIs were meant to promote autonomous learning and learner-centeredness. As for the teaching platforms, HEIs encouraged teachers to use GMAs and live-stream their classes and interact with students. Concerning evaluation, both summative and formative assessments were recommended. The former included online testing and take-home exams. The latter included reports, projects, clip presentations, and assignments. Despite all the above-mentioned recommendations, HEIs did not give specific detailed information regarding the implementation.

Table 2. HEIs' guidelines for teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

Mode	Method	Platform	Evaluation
Synchronous	Active learning	Learning Management System	Online testing
Asynchronous	Self-guided lesson	Zoom	Take-home exam
	Project-based learning	Microsoft Teams	Report
	Problem-based learning	Google Meet	Clip presentation
	Case-based learning	Echo360	Project
	Task-based learning	MyCourseVille	Assignment
	Research-based learning	Blackboard Collaborate	
	Assignment-based learning	LEB2 Live	
	Simulation-based learning	Google Classroom	
	Self-directed study	Facebook Live	
	Discussion-based learning	Cloud Meeting	

Discovery learning	Moodle MOOC i-Classroom OBS Studio

4.2. Pre-pandemic phase

Prior to the pandemic, most of the respondents had never taught remotely (n=139) and had not received training or attended a workshop on distance education or related areas (n=146). The most common goal of teaching English was to improve students' communication skills with the mean score (M) of 4.06, followed by fulfilling course objectives (M=3.29). Helping students pass exams as a goal of teaching English was the least perceived goal (M=2.89). The majority of the respondents agreed that English can be learned anywhere (M=4.53). This implies that teachers believe that learning of English should not be restricted to the classroom, and students should be encouraged to learn English even when they are not in the classroom. When participants were asked: "What do you try to achieve when you teach English?", *Ali* and *Pimpa*'s responses indicate that they wanted to help students communicate effectively. They were then encouraged to briefly describe how they promote English communication in their face-to-face classrooms. *Ali* explained:

> (1) I want to help my students to be able to express their thoughts and ideas. I am not good at standing in front of the classroom and spending the whole class giving a lecture. I often spend a little time introducing the topic and ask students to participate in an activity in which they have to talk with their friends or present something to their class. (Ali)

Since the focus is on building communication skills, she spends most of her class time on activities that allow students to practice their English communication skills rather than on traditional one-way lecturing. *Pimpa* illustrated:

> (2) My students do not have a chance to use English outside of the classroom, so in the class time, I make sure that they use English as much as possible. I try to use English in the classroom, and my students are expected to use English as well. (Pimpa)

Pimpa, by way of an alternative, uses English as a medium of instruction (EMI) and encourages her students to use English in class. *Saran*'s aim, on the other hand, was to prepare his students for undergraduate study and further courses that would be given in English. He stated:

> (3) I expect my students to improve the English skills that are useful for further undergraduate study. Although it is a foundation course, we do not focus on general English. (Saran)

Based on both the questionnaire and interview data, teachers considered improving communication skills as the ultimate goal of teaching English.

4.3. Pandemic phase: Teachers' positioning

This section presents and discusses teachers' positioning and reactions to the situation in relation to teaching and learning within the context of higher education. Their agentic behaviors became observable as they dealt with the situation and responded to the abrupt changes. The questionnaire respondents were encouraged to write a few words describing how they felt about the abrupt changes that the COVID-19 pandemic had brought to English language education. The data were divided into positive (e.g., challenging, convenient, enjoyable, opportunity), neutral (e.g., hectic, tough, different), and negative responses (e.g., difficult, inconvenient, ineffective, time-consuming, energy-consuming). Although many of them committed to either feeling positive, negative, or neutral toward the situation, some expressed mixed feelings. It is worth noting that that the number of responses (n=131) is not in parallel with the number of respondents because some of them did not respond to this item. As shown in Figure 3, about 40% of the responses were purely negative, suggesting that teachers are not likely to be in favor of remote teaching. The negative interpretations, however, may not reflect teachers' actual performance or quality of their instruction but rather their personal feelings toward the situation.

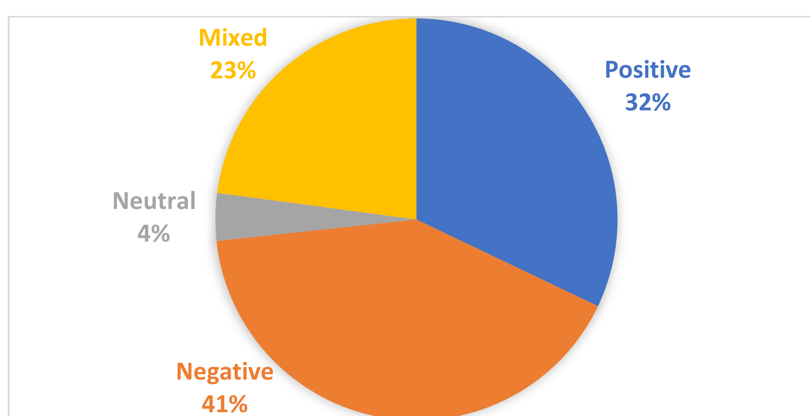

Figure 3. Teachers' interpretations of the situation (n=131)

The following item asked if they received any forms of support from anyone at the planning and teaching stages. Figure 4 shows that teachers were mainly supported by internal resources. More than half of the respondents received support from their colleagues. About one third were supported by their institutions and staff. Students also played a supportive role here as around 20% of the participating teachers reported that they were supported by their own students. However, some of them revealed that they were not supported by anyone at all. The rest of the support was from teachers from other institutions, friends, and family members. Support from government bodies and other agencies was completely absent.

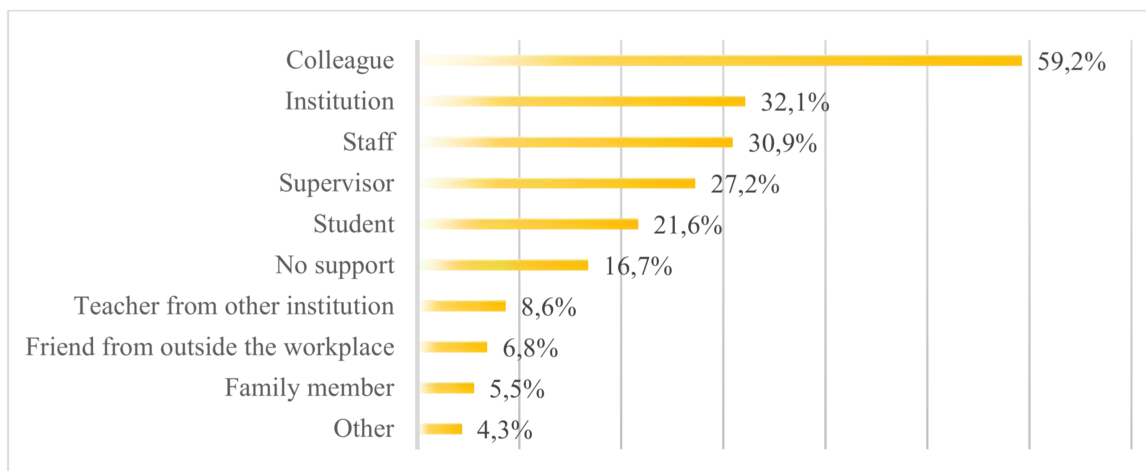

Figure 4. Support received in planning and teaching (n=162) (multiple answer)

The participants were asked to justify their interpretations of the situation. *Ali* and *Saran* were optimistic about the situation. They said:

> (4) I think the situation gives us the opportunity to learn new things. I feel that it is good that we were forced to do it. We can now teach from anywhere and students can also learn from anywhere. The incident brought new teaching ideas and approaches. (Ali)

> (5) We got to step out of our comfort zone. We were forced by the situation to learn more about online teaching and to develop other skills that will be important in the future, such as making videos and operating online teaching applications. (Saran)

They considered the situation as an opportunity to acquire new skill sets despite being otherwise coerced into an unfamiliar mode of teaching. Although making videos and using teaching applications are not a regular part of traditional face-to-face classroom instruction, teachers may need such skills as the trend of formal education moves toward remote teaching. *Pimpa* illustrated:

> (6) To be honest, I did not directly interact with students while I was teaching. For me, asynchronous teaching is difficult when you want to help them improve their language skills. I had to change my teaching style. I often got students to do things that allowed them to practice their communication skills, but I was not sure if they actually did what I asked. (Pimpa)

Asynchronous remote teaching during the crisis posed some specific obstacles. *Pimpa* was forced to change her teaching style because her teaching mode did not encourage direct teacher-student and student-student interaction during class time.

The responses presented above can only inform of how they felt toward the situation, which were found insufficient to identify their positioning. They were then asked if their responsibilities related to teaching and learning changed as a result of the crisis. All of them

admitted that their teaching workload increased because they had to (re)design lessons to suit the situation. *Saran* raised concerns about his role as follows:

> (7) In the normal classroom, I would also give my students advice about other things. I think I gained more trust and respect when I was teaching in a normal situation. When I taught online, students never met me in person. Apart from teaching, I did not interact with them. (Saran)

His response implies that teachers play various roles in a typical classroom in which they also contribute to the non-academic side of students' lives. Apart from academic results, they are accountable for their students' mental health (Pillay, Goddard, & Wilss, 2005). Nevertheless, remote teaching redefined the role of tertiary teachers because teacher-student interaction did not occur in person. Therefore, the teachers' role was limited to teaching subject content, and it became more difficult to develop a deeper relationship with students, not to mention those who taught asynchronously. This is not to say that they curtailed their non-instructor roles or resisted keeping their previous roles. Unlike other cases of educational change, the COVID-19 crisis did not offer many options to tertiary teachers. During the crisis, the cutting back of supplementary roles that teachers normally engage in should not be considered as what Buchanan (2015) refers to as "pushing back" for the reason that it was not the result of rejection or resistance.

Consistent with the questionnaire, the participants were asked to describe the forms of support they received. Supported by his colleagues, *Ali* elucidated:

> (8) My colleagues helped me a lot. One of the teachers in my department was good at operating computer stuff, so he taught me how to use the application and make my online classroom look more attractive with the background and other things. Lecturers in my team also helped each other in selecting supplementary materials. I had not collaborated with others like this for a long time. I do not know about others, but for me, it was a great experience. (Ali)

Despite having to rely on themselves, *Ali* and her team collaborated to complement their skills and knowledge. Colleagues seemed to be the closest and most accessible source of support for teachers in these unusual times. Aside from course-related support, colleagues could provide tech support, which contributed greatly to the success of remote teaching. According to a number of professional development studies, collaboration among teachers is regarded as a crucial means of fostering professional growth (Hargreaves, 2003) and students' achievement (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), even if it is often viewed as an "elusive", "inconsistent" and "theoretical" practice (Woodland, Lee, & Randall, 2013, p. 443). Situations like this promote collaboration among teachers, especially when inadequate assistance is provided by the institutions or where there is a lack of the wherewithal to make meaningful interventions.

Pimpa admitted that she did not get significant support from anyone in particular, but her institution assigned a group of staff to facilitate uploading teachers' recordings onto the university's online learning platform. On the other side, *Saran* mentioned that in addition to institutional support which was delivered in the form of equipment, application subscription, and tutorial sessions, he realized that he was strongly supported by his students. He explained:

> (9) My students shared with me how they felt about my approach, what they were comfortable with, and how they were doing in other classes. Their feedback helped me adjust my teaching. One of my students said she had no choice but to help her parents because they were financially affected by COVID-19, so she could not attend some sessions. (Saran)

The practice of regularly gathering students' feedback for immediate changes was not perceived as course evaluation but a form of teacher-student collaboration which could be beneficial for both teachers and students. Teachers no longer had to wait until the completion of the course to collect students' feedback. Listening to students periodically during the course may help eradicate barriers that prevent them from learning. Although accommodating students' feedback is an unsettling task, UNESCO (2020) suggests that educators must find "flexible forms" and "flexible times" to adapt to the changing society (p. 16).

4.4. Pandemic phase: Teaching practices

Synchronous teaching was the most common approach (n=76), followed by a mix of synchronous and asynchronous teaching (n=62). Only some teachers (n=24) used the asynchronous teaching approach. The dominance of synchronous teaching could be due to the nature of English courses, which rely heavily on classroom interaction rather than leaving students to take advantage of the available resources independently. When teachers were required to interact with students virtually, GMAs were the most common tools used by teachers (see Figure 5). This means that teachers adapted to the situation by learning to use new teaching tools. Slide presentations were also commonly used in remote teaching, either as a standalone tool for asynchronous teaching or in combination with other tools such as GMAs, Learning Management Systems (LMSs), and social media platforms. When teachers become accustomed to their new teaching routine, opportunities for more advanced use of integrated technology solutions arise, and thus it would appear that the post-COVID-19 education will likely benefit from the integration of new technology into the traditional classroom. However, the LMS (e.g., Blackboard, Google Classroom, Moodle) was used by only about 30% of the respondents, notwithstanding the general acknowledgment that such combinations provide easy communication and support for active engagement (Rubin, Fernandes, Avgerinou, & Moore, 2010).

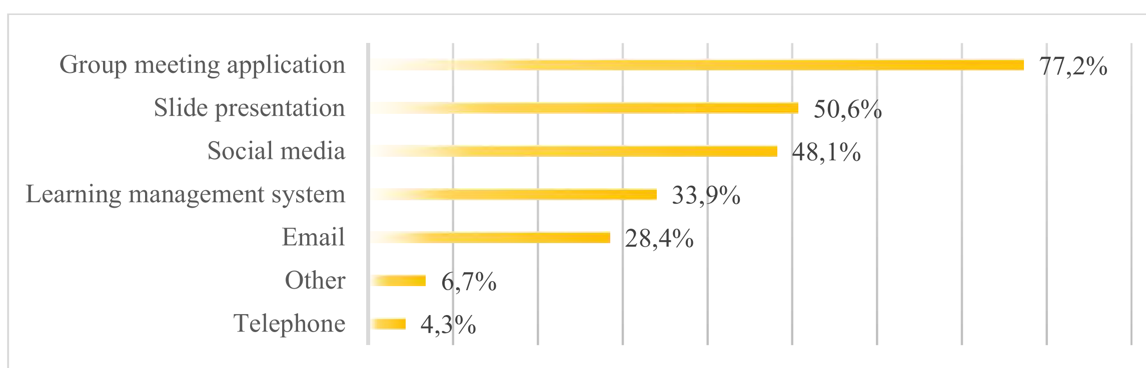

Figure 5. Teaching tools (n=162) (multiple answer)

Figure 6 shows that the most commonly used teaching method during the crisis was lecture-based learning. Although lecturing is the most employed teaching method in higher education, the isolated use of lecture-based learning has been severely criticized for not promoting critical thinking and cognitive engagement (Schmidt, Wagener, Smeets, Keemink, & van der Molen, 2015). For the teaching and learning of English in any context, lecture-based learning is not an ideal method. When the focus is on improving communication skills, students are expected to play an active role and be given sufficient opportunity to practice the language. Moreover, the method was not at all recommended by HEIs (revisit Table 3). The overreliance on lecturing, nonetheless, was foreseeable as they were adjusting to unconventional teaching conditions. The amount of time devoted to lecturing could be reduced once they became familiar with remote teaching. Assignment- and project-based learning were the second most preferred methods, with almost half of the respondents using them. Recommended by many HEIs, such methods are sensible, especially when the focus is on promoting autonomous learning. However, the methods used in face-to-face classrooms like active, task-based, and discussion-based approaches were used by a number of respondents. This means that there were teachers who made efforts to use interactive teaching methods in spite of the limitations.

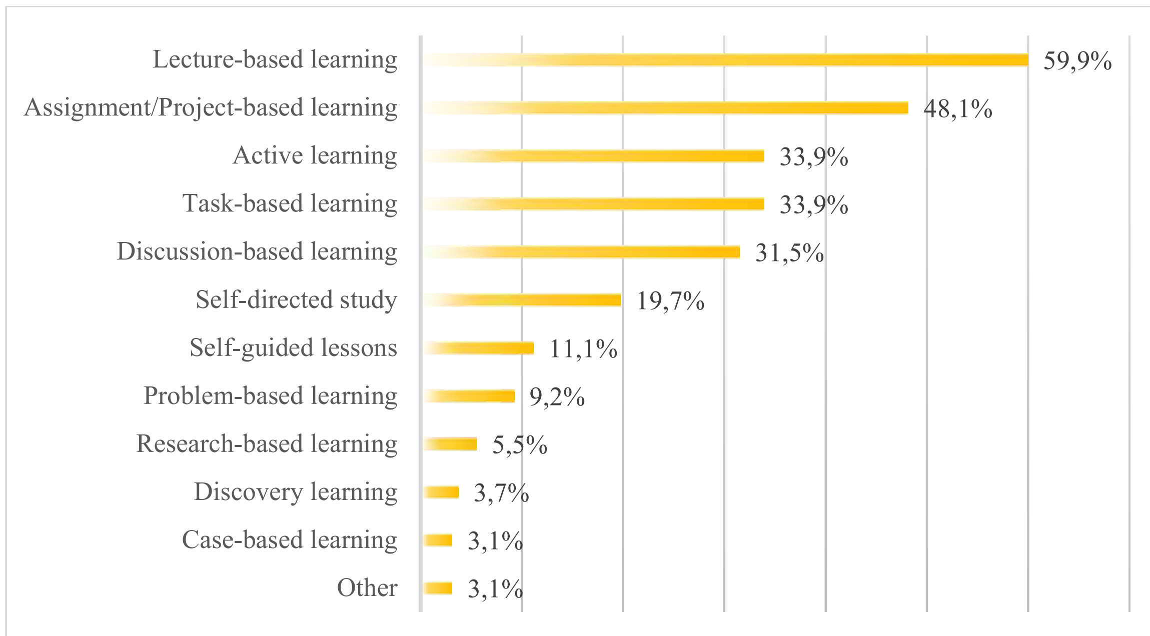

Figure 6. Teaching methods (n=162) (multiple answer)

Assignments, projects, and reports were the most common tools used to evaluate students' learning outcomes, with 69% of the respondents employing these means (see Figure 7). The midterm and final exams could be replaced by a series of assignments which was recommended by HEIs. Assigning students to do a project or write a report on their own can greatly promote autonomous learning among students because it transfers the responsibility of learning to students. However, the findings suggest that summative testing was still very much preferred by teachers, with almost half of the respondents using online testing platforms, 23% using take-home exams, and 9% administering exams at their institutions. It is worth mentioning that some HEIs delayed the exam until the situation became manageable. Therefore, some teachers could decide whether to use alternative evaluation tools or wait until they were able to administer the on-site exam. Another evaluation tool identified here is phone call which was used to assist in the evaluation of oral skills.

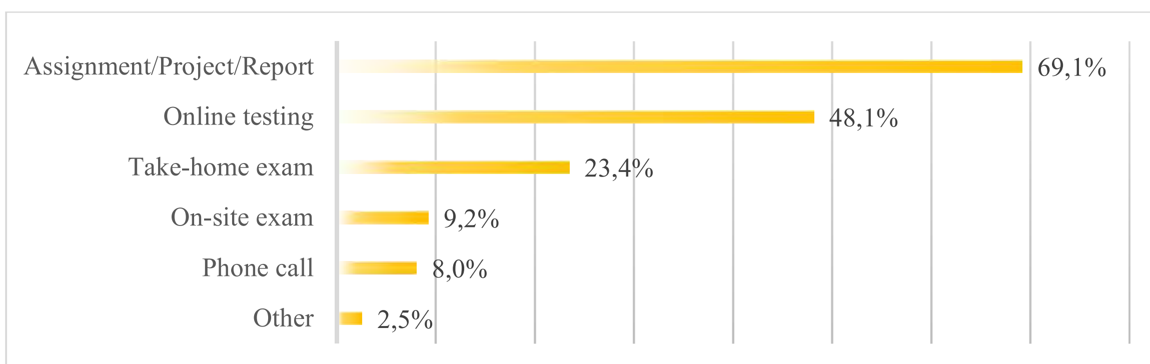

Figure 7. Evaluation (n=162) (multiple answer)

The most common challenges faced by teachers were led by classroom management factors: organizing activities and administering exams (see Figure 8). It is well established that communicative activities are an essential element in any English classroom. Although remote teaching tools like GMSs and LMSs can facilitate interactions, teachers do not have the same amount of freedom they have in face-to-face classrooms. They might find it difficult to organize activities that promote communicative interactions between students. Teachers might also be frustrated at not being able to give paper-and-pencil tests in person. Operating devices and applications might have posed some challenges because teachers had only limited time to learn to use them. Even among tertiary English teachers, using EMI can be challenging. Previous scholarly discussions have concluded that, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, using EMI put tertiary teachers of content courses under enormous stress (Byun et al., 2011; Kang, 2012). When class time was mostly devoted to lecturing, teachers turned an English course – which is interactive in nature – into one that was more content-based, leading to difficulty in using EMI.

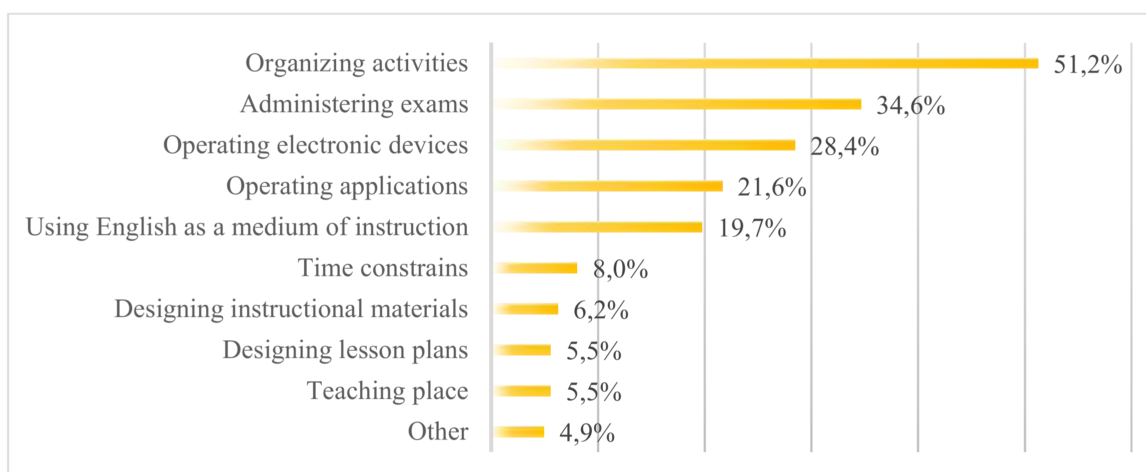

Figure 8. Challenges in emergency online teaching (n=162) (multiple answer)

The participants used different teaching methods during the crisis. All the participants admitted that they had to break their old teaching habits and make adjustments to their lessons. *Ali* described her teaching method as a "link". She explained:

> (10) I did not use drills and practice as much as I do in the normal classes. I provided links between ideas and assigned students to work by themselves. I somehow got so frustrated because I did not get to see students practicing in person. I did try to use activities at first, but students hardly responded. I found myself spending more time talking. I no longer used activities like role play, games, and co-work. (Ali)

Her class time was mainly devoted to introducing and explaining points, and students were expected to study independently at their own pace. Since her usual practice had been to use drills and activities, her tension was built around not being able to organize activities in her online class. It can be observed that the situation somehow constrained teachers' freedom to use communicative approaches. In this way, the success of learning depends substantially on students' ability to adjust to the new learning environment. *Ali*'s frustration can be best explained by reference to MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer's (2020) study. They found that the abrupt conversion to online teaching was one of the crucial factors that produced significant levels of stress. Since she mentioned students' responses to her classroom activities, she was further asked about her students' reactions to online teaching. She added that her students were unusually quiet and barely responded to her questions. It was not just teachers who struggled to foster classroom interactions but students who had to adjust to remote learning.

As regards *Pimpa*, her teaching was recorded by a slide presentation tool. Her students were invited to a group chat on a social media application through which she stayed in contact with them during the remote learning period. Once a video was posted on the website, she asked her students to watch it. She explained:

> (11) When I was recording the videos, I felt so strange. I did a lot of talking, but students were asked to practice as well. For example, I remember asking students to repeat after me and to answer simple questions. When I asked a question, I told them to pause the video and answer it. I hoped that they would do what I asked. Follow-up questions and assignments were posted in the group chat. (Pimpa)

When it comes to an asynchronous class, teaching and learning become more complicated. It is clear that *Pimpa* made efforts to create an interactive atmosphere. She tried to interact with students and gave them chances to practice using the language. She added that her teaching became more of a lecture, and she seemed to focus on grammar and vocabulary. Her lessons tended to be more language-oriented, increasingly focusing on elements such as grammar, structure, and vocabulary. Like *Ali*'s students, her students did not respond much in the group chat.

As he constantly received feedback from students, *Saran* said that he decided to change his teaching approach during the course. He elaborated:

> (12) I normally use the PPP [present, practice, and perform] method in normal classes. At first, I used it in my online class. Students were assigned to complete tasks independently because I thought it would be convenient for them to do assigned works by themselves. My students then commented on the unusual amount of workload, which is understandable. I decided to use more collaborative tasks. I divided students into groups by using the collaboration feature of the

> application. It was much easier than I expected. My students then created their own group chats and worked on their tasks with their group members. (Saran)

In *Saran*'s case, the PPP method was replaced by collaborative task-based learning, which was appropriate for his academic-focused course. With such a method, students collaborated with their peers to complete academic tasks during both class and out-of-class time. He seemed to be satisfied with his students' performance and ability to work collaboratively without relying solely on him. His response suggests that collaborative online learning is possible with students' willingness to cooperate and technological support.

For evaluation, several adjustments were reported. *Ali* and *Saran* no longer relied predominantly on summative tests. Since their institutions had given them freedom regarding teaching and evaluation, they reduced the weight of summative tests like final exams and added more value to a series of assignments. *Ali* assigned her students to do individual video presentations instead of role play. However, she was a bit concerned about not being able to give immediate feedback and talk with them in person about their work. The situation restricted teachers from providing spontaneous correction and feedback, and thus the shift from in-class to remote evaluation may impede meaningful feedback.

Saran administered the final exam on an online testing platform. When an exam was not proctored, cheating was one of the major concerns among teachers. *Saran* said:

> (13) I heard that many teachers complained about cheating in online exams. I did not worry too much about how they got the answer. Getting the correct answer meant they knew the answer. Knowing the answer means they fulfill the objective. It was just one part of the evaluation. They still had to submit their assignments. (Saran)

Instead of worrying about how students got their answers, *Saran* focused on fulfilling course objectives. A well-designed test on an online platform can still yield useful information for evaluating students' learning outcomes. Also, reducing the weight of mid-term and final exams gave teachers more confidence in using online testing.

5. Conclusion

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic witnessed agentic actions of tertiary English teachers. The abrupt transition to online teaching created challenges as well as opportunities in pursuing their goals. Notwithstanding all the negative feelings, when the time came, they played an active role in battling the disruption to learning by collaborating with their peers and thinking on their feet to facilitate online learning with tools available to them despite limited support and preparation time. It is fair to say that teachers struggled but embraced opportunities to learn novel teaching approaches and reinvent English language education. Since teachers could only interact with

students online, their roles as a teacher were reduced to the point that their contribution to students' extra-curricular development was limited. Teachers' positioning as being professionally responsible for students' learning outcomes remains intact, even though the situation restricted teachers from going beyond their fundamental responsibilities. As mentioned earlier, this does not mean that they resisted adopting their usual advisory role, rather the situation made it difficult for them to fully provide non-academic support.

From a pedagogical perspective, the combination of lecture-based and assignment-based learning is likely to be the most common short-term solution. The prevalence of lecture-based learning does not suggest that they refused to implement the teaching methods recommended by their institutions. Indeed, they clearly demonstrated a great deal of endurance and effort to overcome impediments to online learning and provide classroom-like interaction between teachers and students and among students. Several agentic actions of teachers were identified: endeavoring to create an interactive learning atmosphere, using social media platforms to compensate for the loss of face-to-face communication, collaborating with students to adjust their teaching practices, implementing different teaching methods, promoting autonomous learning, and incorporating formative assessment approaches to instruction and evaluation. In times of chaos and tension, teachers did not abandon their goals and ideals with respect to English language learning, which requires a measured aggregate of interactions, activities, and practice.

In addition, the success of remote English learning also depends on the students themselves. The teaching and learning of English become far less complicated with students who adjust well or take responsibility for their own learning. Teachers may find themselves struggling to achieve their goals and desirable learning outcomes, but once they are familiar with the new learning environment and master the teaching methods suitable for remote learning in their context, distance language learning can be a viable option for formal education. This study shows that in times of crisis, tertiary English teachers were brave participants who used their expertise to practice their agency so as to benefit their students.

Some implications can be drawn from this study. Teachers' personal efforts alone may be insufficient to achieve desirable results, and thus institutions and government should provide them with concrete support and "detailed" pedagogical guidance. Teachers should never give up communicative approaches despite the difficulties they may encounter. They are encouraged to work collaboratively with their colleagues during the planning and teaching stages. With vigorous working relationships with their colleagues, they are enabled to establish agency by gearing the change requirements to match their practices (Robinson, 2012). Learning activities and pedagogical methods that motivate students to take responsibility for their learning should

be implemented. Last but not least, training programs on online education should be offered not only to teachers but also to students.

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