EAP in a time of crisis: Preliminary perspectives on emergency remote teaching

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The COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated an unprecedented and mandatory shift from face-to-face to online education. This has occurred in numerous contexts worldwide, including language education. Little research, however, has investigated language education under such conditions of emergency remote teaching (ERT). This article focuses on the transition experience of five English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers in geographically diverse contexts. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect verbal accounts of the teachers' experience transitioning to ERT. The accounts were analysed qualitatively to produce vignettes of each instructors' experience. Further analyses were made to identify similarities and differences across cases. Their experiences have implications for others facing similar challenges and for educators striving to readjust their teaching post-pandemic. Language teaching in ERT is inextricably intertwined with educational technology, and the pandemic and resulting ERT will shape language education for years to come.

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has precipitated a surge in online instruction that few were prepared for. Although resources exist on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) (e.g., Dashtestani & Krajka, 2020) and online course design (e.g., Vai & Sosulski, 2011), including resources specifically for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) (e.g., DuBravac, 2013; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2020), the mandatory transition to remote instruction—what has been called 'emergency remote teaching' (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020)—is something altogether new, and as of yet, not fully explored nor understood. Hodges et al. (2020) describe ERT as:

> A temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate [online] delivery mode due to crisis circumstances . . . The primary objective in these circumstances is . . . to provide temporary access to instruction . . . in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis. (para. 13)

While articles about pre-COVID ERT, such as Czerniewicz et al.'s (2019) study on the pivot to online teaching amidst student protests in South Africa, or Husnawadi's (2021) investigation into EAP writing pedagogy after a 2018 earthquake in Indonesia, often focused on one specific geographic area, the onset of the pandemic has made ERT a global phenomenon. During the pandemic, educational researchers and practitioners have documented the implementation of ERT in higher education (e.g., Egan & Crotty, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021). Some of these studies (e.g., Johnson et al., 2020) involve participants from hundreds of institutions and attempt to portray stakeholders' experience of ERT at the national level; others (e.g., Egan & Crotty, 2020) portray the experience at an institutional level. Still other reports—many written in blogs and popular news venues (e.g., Inside Higher Ed)—give voice to individual academics and include their recommendations concerning how to navigate the online pivot (e.g., Lederman, 2020). Regardless of the specific context, current research and writing about ERT provide 'an early snapshot' (Johnson et al., 2020, p. 6) of the phenomenon, indicating a variety of challenges associated with the pivot, but at times, unexpected advantages as well. However, a more thorough understanding of the impact of ERT on teaching and learning requires further investigation and analysis. Careful documentation of the experience of practitioners in specific subfields of education may provide valuable insights.

The practical and affective impacts of ERT on TESOL practitioners is of particular importance, considering the unique nature of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instruction, which involves not only teaching new content (i.e., language items), but doing so in a way that is comprehensible to learners with diverse linguistic repertoires—a task that is further complexified by the online modality (Mayer, 2017; Sweller, 2020). While teacher cognition has been a growing area of research in second language teacher education (e.g., Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015), including the place of emotion in language teacher experience (e.g., Prior, 2019), with few exceptions (e.g., Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004; Hayes, 2010), practitioner experience in crisis situations has not been sufficiently explored.

This paper reports preliminary findings from a larger qualitative study that aims to better understand how EAP practitioners in diverse institutional/geographic contexts cope with the transition to online teaching (i.e., ERT). We present findings from the initial qualitative analysis in the form of five vignettes. Each vignette provides a snapshot of one EAP teacher's experience of the transition to ERT. Taken together,

the collection indicates some of the common challenges and facilitating factors that these teachers encountered when transitioning to remote instruction, as well as what remains uncertain.

Methods

In the present study, we qualitatively analysed verbal accounts of EAP teachers' experience transitioning to remote instruction. Data were collected through qualitative interviews, which were transcribed, and then analysed using an open-coding procedure (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Open coding, which is similar to 'first cycle coding' described by Miles et al. (2014, pp. 71-74), is a technique for gaining an initial sense of what stands out in a data set and is usually followed by additional rounds of pattern or thematic coding. The process typically involves successive readings of the data and the attaching of descriptive labels (i.e., codes) to sections of text that are noteworthy in some way to the researcher—often with regard to the study's research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). During open coding for the present study, labels such as 'grassroots leadership,' 'resilience,' 'catharsis, and 'survival' were used to describe sections of participants' accounts. Each researcher engaged in open coding of the data independently, then codes were compared, discussed, and refined. As Barbour (2001) notes, 'The greatest potential of multiple coding lies in its capacity to furnish alternative interpretations . . .' (p. 1116). Thus, in cases of disagreement or divergence in coding, we went back to the data set to re-read and discuss until an agreement was reached. The comparison, refinement, and convergence of our respective interpretations of the coded data thus allowed us to attain greater fidelity to the data, as well as to establish inter-coder agreement (Miles et al., 2014, pp. 84-85).

Through ongoing dialogic engagement, we refined our initial open-coding scheme and produced various memos (an example of which is given in the Appendix), which were used analytically for our initial interpretation of interview accounts (Emerson et al., 2011; Ravitch & Carl, 2020). These were materialised into 'vignettes' through a process of synthesising and summarising our ongoing interpretations captured in the memos (see also Analysis below). These vignettes form the data set we present and analyse in this paper.

Participant, Settings, and Selection Criteria

Participants for this study included five EAP teachers whom the first researcher knew through previous professional and academic work, and who currently work in university contexts across five geographic locations. The number of participants selected was appropriate for the multiple case study approach taken in the larger study, which privileges rich description in the pursuit of complexity within and across

cases (Creswell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Relevant demographics are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Country	Sex	Education level
Tim	USA	Male	MA
Jiyeon	South Korea	Female	PhD
Aye	Japan	Female	MA
Sara	Colombia	Female	MA
Ellen	Macau	Female	MA

Note: All teachers are in their early to mid 30s and have approximately 10 years of teaching experience.

Participants were purposefully selected (Maxwell, 2013), which refers to the deliberate selection of 'particular settings, persons, or activities . . . to provide information that is particularly relevant to [one's] questions and goals, and that can't be gotten as well from other choices' (p. 97). Selection was based on the following criteria:

1. *Close Personal Relationship*. Trust, friendship, and collegiality were already well established between the target participants and the first author, which were believed to encourage greater authenticity and depth of the accounts achieved in the interviews.

2. *Teachers' History of Teaching Excellence*. The participants all had extensive teaching experience (approximately 10 or more years each) and were considered exemplary teachers, as evidenced by the positions of prestige they held within their local teaching communities (e.g., curriculum coordinators, senior instructors), as well as their professional activities (e.g., regular presentations at professional conferences; publications in English language teaching journals). This exemplary status among participants was believed to allow for greater common grounds of comparison, in order to add to the study's dependability (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

3. *Geographic Representativeness*. Given the global dispersal of EAP teachers, including teachers from geographically disparate contexts was thought to better reflect the diversity of cultural and institutional settings that exist across the globe; thus, increasing transferability and representativeness of the accounts given.

After receiving ethics approval, potential participants (n=8) were contacted and informed about the nature and aims of the study; informed consent was obtained from the final set of participants who agreed to participate in the study (n=5).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted remotely via video conferencing software (Zoom) and audio-recorded using an external device (the first author's mobile phone). The audio recordings were transcribed using the transcription software Temi, then proofread and corrected for orthographic and sequential errors (e.g., overlap). Interviews were conducted using an interview protocol at the beginning[1] of participants' first semester of remote instruction and took approximately one hour each. During the interviews, the first author deliberately presented himself as an interested and familiar peer (i.e., a 'critical friend'; Farrell, 2007; Poehner, 2011) actively engaging in a goal-oriented conversation about a topic of mutual interest.

Analysis

As part of data collection and analysis for the larger study, vignettes were written reflecting emerging interpretations of each participant's account. Ravitch and Carl (2020) define a vignette as 'a carefully selected moment, event, piece of data, or reflection on the research process that you write up in a short piece of text . . . for reflection and discussion about its meaning' (p. 291). Following open coding, each author independently drafted a vignette for each participant. To corroborate our interpretations (Creswell, 2013), we then compared our respective drafts to cross-check for areas of overlap and discrepancy, which were resolved through dialogic engagement. The final result was a single, synthesised vignette for each participant. In service to the larger study, these vignettes have been used for member validation purposes, as well as for within- and cross-case comparisons during data coding and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014). As an indication of preliminary findings, below we present these vignettes, followed by our initial interpretations (see Discussion below), in order to identify some of the common challenges and facilitating factors related to ERT that emerged across cases. This first vignette comes from Tim—an EAP instructor who works at a large public university in the southwest of the United States.

[1]With the exception of one participant, whose interview took place in the 13th week of her semester.

Vignette 1: Tim

'That first stage where you're almost learning what not to do versus in the second stage, which… is probably a chance to refine'

Tim's account comes two weeks into his transition to remote teaching. At this point, Tim is facing great uncertainty but is armed with a clear understanding of ERT, extensive educational technology skills, and a clear awareness of the interaction between technology and pedagogy. He is mindful of the privilege that his prior training and position of formal leadership convey. Tim mentions several facilitating factors related to his transitional experience, including his reduced teaching load (due to his institutionalised leadership role), the institutional support he receives, and his experience in online course design.

During the initial shift to ERT, Tim indicates that the immediate priority was to 'survive.' He characterises the situation as a state of flux, where teachers experience 'a steep learning curve.' The university provided extensive online workshops and seminars, which Tim attended, passing on key information to his colleagues. Unlike many other instructors, his use of Zoom predated COVID; he had been using Zoom for office hours during the previous semester. Tim sees great potential in educational technology. During ERT, however, he notes that various obstacles will impede its full potential, including instructors' comfort and skill level with new technology, as well as attitudinal barriers. In particular, Tim describes the emotional response of students, noting they are dissatisfied with the current arrangement and that the situation also leaves many teachers feeling defeated.

Tim is aware of the distinctions between online learning and ERT—the unplanned, mandatory switch to online instructional delivery. As Tim notes, the first stage, 'where you're almost learning what not to do,' is about the continuity of education; until the situation stabilises, educators must prioritise continuity over the quality of pedagogy. The second stage, which Tim's program has yet to reach, is 'probably a chance to refine.'

Vignette 2: Jiyeon

'Now I realised that online teaching and learning is definitely possible'

This vignette comes from Jiyeon, a professor at a science and engineering university in South Korea. Jiyeon is three weeks into the semester, and though the shift to ERT has involved various challenges—especially in terms of technology—she is adapting well so far. Jiyeon's initial concerns were technological and included students' unstable internet connections, and some professors' unfamiliarity with educational technology. Nevertheless, these issues were resolved quickly, thanks to her students' collaborative disposition and her institution's provision of training

sessions to facilitate the transition. Her position as curriculum director and her prior experience with educational technology positioned Jiyeon as both a formal and informal leader during this crisis; at the same time, she expresses a strong sense of community support, with all teachers working together to help one another through the transition. Additionally, technical issues have been dealt with efficiently by dedicated IT support at her university. Jiyeon has emphasised the positives of online learning, such as the opportunities it presents for shy students to speak more and for students to learn to do online presentations. One relatively minor issue that has not been resolved is the physical discomfort associated with extended online delivery; wearing a headset and sitting for hours on end have resulted in some aches and pains.

Though she describes the remote pivot as 'still something very different and new,' Jiyeon has maintained a positive outlook during the transition to ERT. She praises her students' motivation and the willingness of her colleagues to discuss problems and arrive at solutions. While ERT is not ideal, Jiyeon is making the most of this situation and supporting those around her to do the same. Jiyeon's experience differs in some notable ways from the next participant, Aye, who works in a small, specialised EAP program at a public university in the south of Japan.

Vignette 3: Aye

'I know for a fact that everybody's just scrambling around'

At two weeks into the semester, Aye is trying to stabilise after the abrupt transition to ERT. Her university made the official decision to switch to online instruction at short notice, leaving little time for preparation. At this point, Aye expresses a sense of isolation, with limited support from co-workers and a lack of institutional support. Her language program—a small unit on campus—did not receive specific guidance on how to make the transition, and in Aye's immediate context, no informal leaders have emerged to fill this void.

Despite these difficulties, Aye seems confident in her ability to deal with the situation. She has a good sense of how to construct remote lessons, thanks to her familiarity with educational technology, and her close interpersonal connection with her students is helping to ease the transition. Aye points to novel pedagogical challenges introduced by ERT, including increased susceptibility for student dishonesty and the need to employ a complex intertwining of technologies to accomplish tasks that are normally straightforward in person. In this regard, Aye notes the unique plight of language teachers, whose lesson planning, teaching, and communicating may be demanding in ways distinct from mainstream content teachers.

Aye sees some positive aspects of the transition, noting the affordances of the remote environment, which may encourage otherwise 'quiet' students to speak

more in class. She also expresses the belief that 'anything is possible,' holding that the modality itself does not determine the outcomes of a class. Nevertheless, she describes how changes in the embodied aspects of teaching are affected by the online modality and expresses concern over how these changes will affect students' learning in the long run.

Despite the challenges related to ERT, Aye is confident in her ability to adapt and respond. She perceives a way forward, though it is not an easy one. Some similarities with Aye's experience emerge in the next vignette from Sara, an EAP instructor working in a large private university in Colombia.

Vignette 4: Sara

'We're social creatures... you have to give them time to be human'

Sara is three weeks into the academic term and is slowly but surely adapting to ERT. While she did feel relatively prepared for the transition, she expresses a deep concern for the well-being of others, and herself, in the current situation and advocates strongly for fairness and justice for all involved in the transition. Sara's account is marked by an empathetic realist perspective, which is at once critical yet balanced, and at times optimistic about the transition and all that it implies. She sees socialising and socialisation as essential to education and is concerned that online education, including ERT, is not conducive to facilitating meaningful interaction (and thus, learning). While some students' internet access or sufficient bandwidth are concerns, Sara is doing her best to meet students' needs within the constraints imposed by the transition to ERT. She has limited the number of new online tools that she integrates into lessons and sticks to the platforms with which she and her students are most familiar. Sara provided a 'three-pronged' definition of 'preparation,' which included (1) acquiring the necessary technological know-how, (2) consciously taking up a philosophy of 'less is more' and accepting that this was the most logical and compassionate course of action, and (3) having faith in herself that she'll 'figure it out' (i.e., learn by doing).

Sara values the informal, interactive, and 'human' aspects of education, and she recognises the importance of human relationships for mental health. She is concerned that online instruction lends itself to a teacher-centred learning environment, and teachers as well as students suffer due to this. In presencial (i.e., in-person) classes, teachers receive immediate feedback about students' emotional states and comprehension; in online instruction, this feedback loop is often broken. Sara is managing her expectations for ERT and awaiting the abatement of the pandemic and return to presencial classes.

Vignette 5: Ellen

'So, I tried my best to look positive'

The final vignette comes from Ellen, an EAP instructor at a public university in a special administrative region of China[2]. Unlike the preceding instructors, Ellen is in the thirteenth week of her first semester of ERT, notably later than the other participants.

Ellen indicates that, despite the abrupt transition (which took place two weeks into a semester that began face-to-face), she felt prepared, had sufficient support, and was comfortable with the technical skills needed to manage the pivot. At the same time, she acknowledges that everything was, in some sense, unexpected and difficult to anticipate, noting several challenges introduced by remote instruction, such as not having access to students' embodied actions, increased fatigue, and technological difficulties. Ellen believes the quality of teaching has declined due to these challenges, especially because of the lack of in-person interaction; however, she has 'tried [her] best to look positive' and persevere in the face of these constraints. The ERT that Ellen has experienced has taken the shape of a 'curve,' improving after the initial transition, peaking after several weeks, then declining thereafter. As a result, she has 'lowered [her] expectations' regarding student responsiveness as the term has progressed.

Ellen's empathy and concern for the well-being of her students and co-workers, as well as her awareness of the toll of the transition on herself, is prominent throughout her account. Though she notes challenges brought about by the transition, she does not present these as insurmountable; rather, she considers herself lucky, positions herself as capable, and expresses gratitude for her community's relative security and well-being.

Overall, Ellen indicates a strong sense of community support, through which information is exchanged formally and informally (often through novel means, such as WhatsApp groups), and within which she has played a leadership role (e.g., by hosting workshops and making videos to train teachers in the use of Zoom for online teaching). Her sense of community, leadership, and the factors that characterise her teaching context paint a picture of a 'tricky' yet tractable transitional period.

Discussion

The preceding vignettes give an indication of five EAP instructors' initial experience transitioning to remote instruction in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. From these preliminary accounts, a number of patterns emerge. Firstly, all of the EAP

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[2] *i.e., Hong Kong and Macau. For reasons of anonymity, we refer vaguely to Ellen's institutional location.*

teachers noted several challenges (unsurprisingly) related to the transition to remote instruction. These included the loss of 'the human element' (i.e., the lack of embodied/nonverbal elements that normally accompany instruction) and issues of student motivation, engagement, and academic integrity. Difficulty finding motivation to study and lack of personal contact with classmates was a challenge also noted by Egan and Crotty (2020) within the context of an undergraduate design programme in Ireland. Such challenges have likely been widespread but may have differential impacts on students and instructors depending on the subject matter and educational level of those involved (i.e., undergraduate vs. postgraduate). Another commonality among accounts was the need to adapt lessons, materials, and curriculum. In this sense, the EAP teachers' accounts were similar to the experience of 'juggling blindfolded under pressure' expressed by the faculty in VanLeeuwen et al. (2021, p. 1313). Curricular modifications were also noted by 93% of the 897 faculty who were surveyed in Johnson et al. (2020). Further challenges mentioned in the interviews included the physical discomfort of remote instruction and the unique plight of language teachers, sometimes stemming from institutional negligence. To varying degrees, participants also expressed concern regarding the emotional and/or psychological well-being of stakeholders involved in remote instruction, which resonates with the 'sadness and loss' experienced by participants in VanLeeuwen et al. (2021, pp. 1315).

It is clear from these vignettes that ERT is distinct from more traditional online instruction, which normally takes place under voluntary conditions, with sufficient time for course planning and curriculum development, and where students [typically] choose this modality, as noted by Hodges et al. (2020). In the case of remote EAP, the challenges may be even more pronounced due to the additional cognitive demands placed on L2 students by the remote modality (Mayer, 2017; Sweller, 2020), which ultimately makes teachers' tasks more demanding.

For these instructors, many challenges remain to be resolved. However, there were several facilitating factors that at least partly helped ease the transition, as well as some noted advantages of ERT, including the encouragement of greater oral participation among 'shy' students due to the change in interactional ecology. On a practical level, facility with educational technology was a notable trait among the participants in this study, and whether or not remote teaching and learning continue in force, this aspect of teachers' 'toolkits' will likely become increasingly relevant in the coming years (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2020). Another facilitating factor was teachers' community support. Where support existed, it seemed to make a substantial and positive impact on teachers' transition experience; where it lacked, it was a practical and emotional hindrance (cf. VanLeeuwen et al., 2021).

Several commonly held attitudes or mindsets can also be gleaned from these vignettes, such as a sense of resignation or acceptance of the situation, a certain tolerance of ambiguity, and even a sense of optimism about what this non-ideal situation might also afford. Such optimism among instructors in the face of adversity can also be inferred in Egan and Crotty's (2020, p. 3) study, in which 86.7% of the faculty surveyed reported that, after having made the pivot to ERT, they would prefer the inclusion of some online component to their teaching in the future. Informal leadership also appears to be a key factor that facilitated several teachers' transition experience. In this time of crisis in particular, taking the initiative to help oneself and others can make a substantial difference in how the transition to ERT is perceived and experienced (i.e., 'pedagogies of care'; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021, p. 1309). Importantly, though, this depends on the positive receipt of such informal leadership moves, which may not be universally accepted, as was the case with a teacher interviewed in the larger study (not reported here).

Conclusion

The institutional and geographic diversity of the participants was implicated in the varying accounts given by each participant. Such heterogeneity of experience reflects the variation that is sure to exist in how EAP teachers are adapting to the 'new normal' across the globe. Nevertheless, the findings presented here are tentative and should not be generalised beyond the specific instructors who participated in this study.

Furthermore, while the vignettes presented here provide some insight into the range and variation of EAP teachers' transition experience, many questions remain. In particular, the question of how EAP teachers' experience of remote teaching evolves over time is yet to be seen. This is one of the questions we hope to address in our longitudinal study, of which the data presented here is but one part. Other research needs to investigate students' experience of and performance within ERT—both in the short and long term. Ultimately, we may wonder how remote instruction may shape future ESOL teaching and learning in the 'post-pandemic era'—that is, what might endure from this experience? Could remote instruction, in some shape or form, be used strategically for specific language learning activities or tasks (e.g., those involving speaking)? Though only time will tell, the changes currently taking place are bound to leave an indelible mark on education broadly—perhaps even more noticeably within the realm of TESOL.

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APPENDIX

On the ontological status of the interview and the research project: How its instantiation as such brought to light/life or brought about a certain metapraxis among the teachers (some more than others) in regard to what this all means: They were brought to consciously reflect on and interpret their own thoughts and beliefs—their lived experience of this transitional period, thus contributing to their construction of the social world (in this case, their professional lives). A certain self-consciousness was possibly brought about.

Discussion last night about the effects of the interview process itself and how it contributed to participants' experience / perception of reality: It brought to conscious attention their involvement in a highly significant, historically unprecedented, emotionally and professionally challenging transition period.

Ellen's reaching out to me – the action and the content of that contact – as a significant event signaling a new meta-awareness of the current state of affairs.

The interview as a venue for the expression of voice; a venue for narrative expression; a venue for catharsis.