



COVID -19: Pedagogical shift, and the rise of divergent approaches

Shifan Thaha Abdullateef ^{a1} 

^a*Department of English , Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University , Alkharj, Saudi Arabia*

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Abstract

The show must go on. Though the integration of technology into the learning process has been on a rise over the last decade, COVID-19 has made a dependency on technology inevitable as educational settings change from in-person instructions to virtual instructions. Due to sudden and challenging demands, the virus factor should not be considered a hindrance to the teaching and learning process. In fact, COVID-19 provides an opportunity to rethink and transform the conventional mode of teaching and learning. Thus, in this challenging era, it is imperative to shift from convergent pedagogical approaches to divergent approaches to promote active learning. The study aims to find the prevalent gap in the EFL context between online learning and instructional activities. The study adopts a mixed approach. First, it takes us through the journey of fifteen faculty members from the Department of English at Prince Sattam University, KSA in three stages: the Initiation stage (readiness), the exploration stage (pedagogy, student engagement, and assessment), and the adaptation stage (coping strategies). Second, it interprets data on the usage of digital tools by fifteen faculty members from the department during a span of ten months. The study relies on an open-ended questionnaire and data documented by the quality committee. Participants were provided with six open-ended questions that were analysed using thematic analysis, adopting a semantic coding approach. The results of the study point towards transforming pedagogy to face the challenges of online learning. The study suggests adopting divergent approaches to engage EFL learners and make the learning process effective and productive.

Keywords: COVID-19; divergent approaches; EFL; pedagogy; virtual learning

1. Introduction

EFL students across the globe face many learning challenges. Since they started studying EFL at a later stage, a good number of them do not have adequate language proficiency skills. As a result, they struggle to improve their language skills. Motivation, both intrinsic as well as extrinsic, plays a very significant role in the learning process. It has also been observed that due to a lack of confidence, they easily get distracted. As a result, some learners need a push from the teachers. However, the closure of educational institutions due to COVID-19 has aggravated the problems of EFL teachers and learners. The learners who looked up to the teacher for comfort and acknowledgement of their efforts with a pleasant smile and a gentle pat, miss the emotional gestures of their teachers. Thus, the shift in place has resulted in the lowering of affective filters and has thrown challenges before the teachers to rethink the appropriateness of the existing conventional pedagogies. Virtual learning has necessitated

¹ Corresponding author

E-mail address: s.abdullateef@psau.edu.sa

instructors to decide on suitable pedagogies by accepting or ignoring different learning theories. Since active learning forms the crux of virtual learning, it is important to discuss various theories that promote active learning.

The theory of cognitive constructivism advocated by Jean Piaget (1957) supports student-centered learning and stresses the importance of active learning. Piaget considered schemata, or previous knowledge, to be instrumental in creating something new. He states that since the schemata of learners vary, each learner will come up with something different and new. The theory of cognitive constructivism considers learning as a social activity, and the learner's environment plays a crucial role in the learning process of the learner. Thus, group activities or peer learning can be beneficial to a great extent. Since it promotes student-centred learning, extrinsic motivation is equally important as intrinsic motivation.

Social constructivism theory, or Collaborative Learning Theory, advocated by Vygotsky (1978), encourages learning in pairs and groups as faster and longer. Since collaboration is an important 21st century skill, this theory gained prominence in the twentieth century. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development includes contributions from the learning environment. According to social constructivism theory, discussions, debates, individual learning projects, etc., promote active learning.

"Community of Inquiry" (CoI) is another theory that promotes active learning through collaboration. Peirce and Dewey (1997) claim that when learners work in groups, they are emotionally connected to each other because of their collective identity. This reduces peer pressure and brings in positivity. At times, healthy competition among group members is witnessed, resulting in increased productivity. In addition, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) consider peer acknowledgement as a great source of extrinsic motivation as a sense of belonging, course satisfaction, and actual learning are interrelated.

Problem-based learning (PBL), a by-product of collaborative learning, encourages analytical reasoning to solve "real-world problems," thus stressing the significance of active learning. Knowledge and skills are demonstrated through real-world solutions or by answering complex questions. PBL gives importance to the 21st century skills: communication skills, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. PBL supports providing creative opportunities to students while they respond to real-world issues (Savery and Duffy, 1995). Douch et al. (2001) suggest that in order to make PBL effective, teachers should choose interesting situations that can motivate students to analyze. They also state that real-life situations should be provided to the learners to come up with authentic solutions. In addition, the problems should be based on the schemata of the learners to enable them to think logically and co-relate. Finally, they claim that a few open-ended questions could point the learners in the right direction.

The Online Collaborative Learning Theory advocated by Harasim (1996) is based on constructivist approaches and the impact of technology. More than the textbooks, the theory gives importance to discussion as it is considered central to learning. Harasim advocated student-centered learning and strongly claimed that collaborative learning can be very productive, hence learners should be encouraged to solve problems through brainstorming. According to Harasim, knowledge is constructed in three phases: the first is the "brainstorming phase," where divergent thoughts are gathered. The second is the "discussion/argument phase," where ideas are compared, analysed, and categorized. The last phase is the "Intellectual convergence phase," where "intellectual synthesis" and consensus take place. Online Collaborative Learning encourages online discussion forums. The main advantages of online discussion forums are: First, it is asynchronous, and second, the threaded connections provide accessibility to multiple discussion topics. Thus, from the theories discussed above, it is evident that in

student-centred online learning setups, four types of interactions take place: learner-instructor, learner-learner, learner-content, and learner-interface.

The sudden shift from in-presence to online instructions has caused chaos. Many challenges arose as a result of the rapid transition, including psychological, technological, and pedagogical issues. Teachers, especially teaching English as a foreign language, find it challenging to keep the learners motivated and introduce interesting ways to deliver content and increase student comprehension and participation. Islam et al. (2015) stated that "dumping large amounts of text onto a website" will not make learning effective. Hence, the need of the hour is to evolve new pedagogical approaches with a range of structured options to engage EFL learners and provide suitable platforms for interaction, collaboration, and participation. In lieu of the new challenges, this paper identifies the problematic areas and offers pedagogical strategies to engage the learners in active learning.

1.1. Literature Review

The abrupt shift from in-person to online sessions has a profound impact on the facilitators. There has been confusion about using different online tools as most of the teachers are not trained enough to handle online sessions. The confusion is marked by psychological stress and anxiety. Kamenetz (2020), in the study based on the experience of the Faculty of Education at the University of Colorado, calls their teaching "Panic-gogy," a combination of the teachers' state of mind and the process itself. As most of the teachers lack higher technological skills, it is hard to adapt easily. This statement has been summarised by Collie et al. (2020) as a situation wherein teachers are thrown into "uncharted territory". The transition is sudden, and the institutions are forced to shift to virtual sessions without prior training and strategies to be followed. The teachers struggle for the first couple of weeks as they are ill-equipped and lack confidence and motivation. Mailizaret al. (2020) state that teachers struggle to acclimate to the new online platforms. Moreover, Lynch, Turner, et al. (2020) state that it has become essential to develop teachers' sense of online competence and confidence as a core skill set for teaching and learning in the on-going, and even post-COVID-19, world of education. Thus, the teacher's readiness is a matter of great concern.

Another crucial factor that requires consideration is pedagogy. Alaghbary (2021) states that online learning has necessitated a digital update of Benjamin Bloom's original taxonomy of educational objectives (1956) and of Anderson and Krathwohl's revised taxonomy (2001), thus emphasizing project-based learning to facilitate the acquisition of specialized content and skills. Orlando and Attard (2016) stated that a shift in pedagogy is inevitable as a "one-size-fits-all" approach will not work out in online sessions. Al-Khresheh (2021) suggested focusing on a special skill set that includes presuming, planning, preparing, and performing in order to reconceptualise teaching methods to sustain effective EFL teaching.

The need of the hour for the teachers is to find creative and innovative approaches, thus demonstrating adaptability and flexibility in the contents and design of the courses. Today, there is a need to be more flexible and develop more didactic and structured content and adopt a modular teaching method. In lieu of the changing demands of remote teaching, the UNESCO Director-General has very aptly stated that this is a "new era" of teaching and learning. Al-tameemy and Alrefaee (2021) suggest that though English language teaching underwent an abrupt change due to the pandemic, if necessary changes are made to the curriculum, students' performance evaluation, and pedagogy, the online learning of the English language will be successful.

Though resolving academic challenges is given top priority, the facilitators cannot ignore the lowering of the affective filters of the learners in this gloomy phase. Virtual sessions have been shown to have a negative impact on not only academic growth but also mental health (Fordjour et al.,

2020). The physical isolation has proved to be distressing, resulting in anxiety. A recent study conducted in Greece by Karalis and Raikou (2020) found that the whole process of remote teaching had an overall significant negative effect on students' motivation and emotions. Similar observations have been made by Meo et al. and Charles et al. (2020). Research suggests that motivation among EFL learners in today's scenario is crucial. First, acquiring language skills is a major challenge, and the shift in place has aggravated the situation. The participants were unhappy and unsatisfied and, instead, shocked by the quick closure of educational institutions, McCoole et al., Kedraka and Kaltsidis (2020). Moreover, managing the virtual sessions has become challenging. Dealing with students' misbehaviour was difficult, particularly when students were late to enter the program or forgot to enter. Mailizar et al. (2020).

Just as teachers take time to adapt to new ways of teaching, so is the case with students. Hence, another challenge for the teachers is to compensate for the lack of physical presence and set up a virtual environment where all learners are made to feel comfortable and motivated. Studies indicate that students are uncomfortable and distressed by online learning strategies. In addition, the facilitators have to persuade the learners to take up the responsibility of their learning more seriously and get them accustomed to the "new situation". It has been observed that due to reduced instruction time and limited opportunities for personalized interaction, there has been learning loss or Covid-19 slide. Kuhfeld and Tarasawa (2020). At times, teachers find it difficult to make the learning process effective due to timely disruptions and have a hard time retaining the focus of the learners. However, some facilitators consider online teaching to be daunting, while others are taking it in their stride. They consider the shift to be a blessing in disguise. The shift is proving advantageous for independent learners who are getting opportunities to personalize their learning. (Redmond et al., 2018). Online sessions provide independent and self-directed learners the opportunity to take control over their learning, understand what they want to learn, what they like, and what kind of support they need. Herold (2017). However, the biggest challenge for the facilitators during the pandemic is the online assessment. Replacing traditional exams with online assessment tools requires awareness and a lot of preparation. Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) state that internal assessments are perhaps thought to be less important and many have been simply cancelled. Most of the facilitators fear grade inflation. They feel it is better to call it an open book exam. Due to network issues and the potential for copying, the syllabus had to be curtailed to some extent, and the range of testing had to be reduced. Farrington (2020) states that many institutions have adopted qualitative assessment scales to categorize learners as having passed or failed. However, Dilanchyan (2020) comments that the qualitative assessment scales would lower the motivation level of the learners to achieve high grades. One potential alternative to the cancelled assessments is to use "predicted grades," but Murphy and Wyness (2020) show that these are often inaccurate. Piopiunik et al (2020) claim that 'this is a new area for both teachers and students, and assessments will likely have larger measurement errors than usual'. From the research cited above, it is evident that the transition from face-to-face to virtual sessions has many issues that have to be addressed at the earliest, as online learning may stay for a time still unknown.

1.2. Research Questions

- How prepared were the teachers and learners to shift to online teaching?
- What changes did the teachers make in the teaching methodology?
- What coping strategies did the teachers formulate from their experiences?

2. Method

The study documents the experiences of fifteen faculty members at PSAU's Department of English in Alkharj, Saudi Arabia.

Instrument(s)

The study relies on an open-ended questionnaire and data documented by the Quality committee. Fifteen participants were provided with six open-ended questions that were analysed using a thematic analysis, one of the methods used in the analysis of qualitative data, and adopting a semantic approach to coding, Braun and Clarke (2017). One of the most important strengths of qualitative research approaches is that they enable researchers to photograph and document social processes and attitudes, as in this particular study, in order to draw a clear picture of their experience in the new situation and to understand their attitudes towards all its different aspects, such as: how was the experience of shifting to the online mode? How did they try to engage the students? What did they do to become emotionally connected with the learners? What changes did they make in the teaching pedagogy? What kinds of difficulties did they face while assessing the students? What are their learnings ? The study compared the data related to the usage of interactive tools by the fifteen members.

2.1. Data collection procedures and Analysis

Thematic Analysis of an Open-ended Questionnaire

2.1.1 Period of Initiation

As discussed in the theoretical background, most educational institutions have been adopting convergent teaching approaches as their primary goal is to transfer knowledge to the learners and gauge how much they have acquired. The teacher, in such approaches, is considered as the "sage on the stage." Thus, what is being transferred is considered more important than how it is being transferred. Traditional teachers were compelled to quickly adapt to online teaching irrespective of their perceptions, as there was no other alternative left. It took the teaching fraternity by storm as it was a sudden shift and required immediate technological up-skilling.

Table 1. Period of Initiation

Themes	Sub-themes	Statements
Readiness	Technological	- <i>needed some more technical knowledge</i> - <i>tutorials and consultation with colleagues</i> - <i>to some extent I was ready.</i> - <i>felt directionless and needed guidance</i> - <i>unprepared due to the sudden shift.</i>
	Psychological	- <i>lot of stress</i> - <i>difficult to accept change of place</i>

As shown in Table 1, the thematic analysis for the "period of Initiation" reveals that all the participants have had similar experiences. "too sudden," "difficult," "stress," "challenges," "consultation," "unprepared," "needed," "directionless" reflect their unprepared state of mind and confusion. Teachers' preparedness and positive attitude are key elements for the success of online learning platforms. However, teachers were lacking both the prerequisites.

2.1.2 Period of Exploration

The next stage included identification of appropriate and effective teaching methods to engage the learners in active learning and simultaneously train the learners in 21st century skills, thereby preparing current learners for future market demands. Since these skills include collaboration, creativity, communication, problem solving, and digital skills, to mention a few, Student participation had to be enhanced and a shift from traditional to divergent approaches was observed to increase student participation and make assessment more reliable. Thus, it is evident that the dependency on technology has increased the use of divergent approaches, thereby shifting from conventional, teacher-centred approaches.

Table 2. Period of Exploration

Themes	Sub-themes	Supporting Statements
Teaching Pedagogy	Student Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>student-centred teaching</i> - <i>more dependence on online resources</i> - <i>Project Based Learning Assignments</i> - <i>use of Interactive Blackboard options</i> - <i>short learning modules of 20-25 mins.</i>
	Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>limited types of assessment</i> - <i>cannot answer the subjective questions</i> - <i>more chances to cheat and pass.</i>

As shown in Table 2, the thematic analysis for "student engagement" reveals that the participants in the exploration stage faced different types of challenges while engaging the learners. "not sufficient," "problematic," "technical issues," "not well aware," "challenging," "passive learning," "laidback attitude." These situations made them rethink the teaching methods.

As shown in Table 2, the thematic analysis for "methods used" reveals that the participants during the process of exploring shifted to divergent approaches to encourage active learning. student-centred, "online resources", "Project-Based Learning", "Interactive Blackboard", "short learning modules", "group activities", "Gamification", "Flipped classroom". The saying "Necessity is the mother of inventions" proved to be true in the case of introducing divergent approaches that promote constructive learning. For most of the faculty, this phase became a turning point.

As shown in Table 2, the thematic analysis for "assessments used" reveals that the participants in the exploration stage considered assessments to be their biggest challenge. "limited", "can not answer", "complex", "cheat and pass", "not reliable", "harder". Assessment is an important component of measuring learning, and trial and error methods can have a negative impact on both the teacher and the learner.

2.1.4 Period of Adaptation

It has been observed that over a period of time, uncertainty has been minimized as the teaching fraternity has identified means for making the teaching/learning process effective. The members tried out ways to provide a meaningful learning environment. Most of the measures proved to be beneficial, while a few had to be discarded. The limitations of convergent approaches were identified, and a shift towards divergent approaches is evident as learners are being encouraged to generate ideas rather than merely analyse them. Strategic measures are being adopted after innumerable suggestions on social

media, research findings, brainstorming sessions, and trial and error measures. Thus, the fraternity is moving forward with new experiences and a willingness to accept change is quite evident.

Table 3. Period of Adaptation

Themes	Sub-themes	Statements
Readiness	Technological	- <i>needed some more technical knowledge</i> - <i>tutorials and consultation with colleagues</i> - <i>to some extent I was ready.</i> - <i>felt directionless and needed guidance</i> - <i>unprepared due to the sudden shift.</i>
	Psychological	- <i>lot of stress</i> - <i>difficult to accept change of place</i>

As shown in Table 3, the thematic analysis for "coping strategies" reveals that the participants in the adaptation stage seem to be more confident and experienced in handling challenges. "Upgrading", "new ways", "engaging content", "new skills set", "interesting tools", "control", "question pools", "two attempts", "overcome," "recording sessions," "reflective teaching," "extending deadlines". The usage of positive words indicates their willingness to accept change and learn from their experiences.

3. Results

Period of Initiation: As shown in table 4- 350 online sessions were conducted. Only 9 assessments were conducted for the learners. Interactive tools were used for 19 activities, and 19 assignments were submitted by the learners. Thus, it is evident that it was a period of uncertainty.

Period of Exploration: As shown in table 4- 411 online sessions were conducted. Twenty assessments were conducted for the learners. Interactive tools were used for 72 activities, and 67 assignments were submitted by the learners. Thus, this period was a period of experimentation and innovation.

Period of Adaptation: As shown in table 4- 429 online sessions were conducted. 60 assessments were conducted for the learners. Interactive tools were used for 113 activities, and 99 assignments were submitted by the learners. Thus, this period was a very successful and satisfactory phase. The pros and cons were carefully calculated and observed, and divergent methods were adopted.

4. Discussion

During the period of initiation, the abrupt shift from in-presence to online settings was marked by unpreparedness, lack of training, and awareness. Faculty members hardly used the interactive tools. The findings of the study are in line with the observations made by Kamenetz and Collie and Martin (2020). As a result, the teacher-centred sessions were neither motivating nor engaging. The attendance records showed that students were not comfortable in a virtual setup. This is in agreement with the observations in the research (Meo et al.; Charles et al.2020). Moreover, assessment seemed to be a challenge for the faculty as there was no training given to them. Students who were unable to upload their assignments were able to submit them through Whatsapp. Due to Internet issues, many students could not take the sessions continuously and complained about inaudibility. Many a time, teachers had to repeat the same content more than once. In the exploratory stage, progressive trends were imminent. The faculty attempted to explore various possibilities for motivating and engaging the learners. The

sessions gradually shifted from teacher-centred to student-centred. Teachers started giving more interactive activities. The results are similar to the statements made by Orlando and Attard (2016) and Piopiunik et al. (2020). There was an increase in attendance and teachers conducted different types of assessments as they were familiarized with the assessment tools in a short workshop conducted online by the quality committee. During this period, virtual learning gained momentum. Teachers and learners become more confident and comfortable with technological tools. After experimenting, the teachers adapted many coping strategies. Thus, the study analyses the evolutionary process of learning and teaching during the pandemic. The journey, which began with confusion and anxiety, evolved into something more productive and satisfying.

5. Conclusions

Online learning has revolutionized the teaching and learning process to a great extent. Technological dependency has proved that pedagogy has to undergo transformation to meet the new requirements. Challenges created by COVID-19 have been instrumental in shifting from conventional and convergent approaches towards divergent approaches, thus providing more opportunities with the assistance of a variety of digital tools for collaboration, communication, and creativity. Moreover, online learning has increased student responsibility, and learners have more opportunities to apply their metacognitive strategies, thus leading to learner empowerment.

More research is required to find strategies to minimize passiveness among EFL learners and raise their affective filters to boost their confidence and increase their involvement, thereby preparing them for a better tomorrow.

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AUTHOR BIODATA

Dr. Shifan Thaha Abdulateef is an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at Department of English Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Alkharj, Saudi Arabia. She holds rich experience in diverse educational setups. Her research interests include EFL, methods of teaching, Curriculum Designing and CALL.