Technology Expenses and Education among University English Language Teachers

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Abstract

Due to the international COVID-19 pandemic, many universities worldwide are moving from face-to-face to online remote teaching. This anonymous questionnaire study seeks to find the extent to which English language teachers bear the costs for this and to what extent appropriate education has been made since the beginning of 2020 and what education prior to this may help in a major change of teaching modality. The findings are rather bleak; however, recommendations are made that could alleviate the situation.

Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, many educational organisations worldwide have turned to online learning as a solution to the problem of enrolled students unable to travel to a physical location. However, it appears to me as a teacher staff that much of the decision making in the profession is occurring without consideration of the skillsets of the individuals within our organisations and institutions to implement computer-assisted language learning (CALL) solutions to facilitate remote teaching.

Literature review

CALL skillsets and ICT literacy

It should be obvious that “our students can not only access a vast amount of content, but, critically for TBLT, they can create it, share it, like or dislike it, comment upon it; in short: engage in it thorough language use. Digital outlets for doing so are numerous, but it is perhaps social media such as Facebook, You Tube, Twitter, WhatsApp, Skype, and Instagram that offer the most opportunities.” (Jarvis, 2015. p.7.) However, there are privacy issues as well as issues of technological haves and have-nots and the assumptions that can be made regarding device ownership and specifications. Furthermore, it may not be the case that pedagogical implications are fully considered before technological decisions are made.

Hedayati, Reynolds and Bown (2018) reported “A majority of the interviewees (6) reported that they had not received any type of CALL training, either during their university studies, or in their workplace. These teachers were reported to be self-trained in CALL; except two of them, Navid and Ava, who had the experience of attending CALL workshops.” (p.1131). However, even beyond workshops and formal education, teachers using CALL need to keep abreast of the field. As Hedeyati et al. (2018) report a participant stating that “a lack of instructional design knowledge for

the implementation of CALL left teachers puzzled about answering what, how, when and where questions regarding the use of new technologies.” (p.1131). Participants also said that instruction in CALL was also highly theoretical, therefore it is likely that applying CALL in teaching contexts would still be difficult.

Not only is instruction using computer-mediated communication an issue. With student work requiring feedback, the modality of the feedback is also at issue. Synchronous work conducted as an ersatz face-to-face assessment as well as asynchronous work such as submitted recordings and/or written artefacts present problems. Ryan, Henderson and Phillips (2019) found that students have reported finding unimodal annotations and marking rubrics less useful as feedback on work than digitally recorded (oral) feedback, and that students are more satisfied with feedback in more than one modality (p.1516-7). However, it must be made clear that this is for general education in Australian universities, and may not hold true for English Language Teaching (ELT). Nevertheless, if such feedback is valued by students and we as a profession seek to provide multimodal feedback as good practice, the question is how do we do this while we are off campus, and teaching remotely? Is the onus upon the teacher to provide the technology? This is clearly an important question to research.

However, not only is technology availability important, but teacher’s technology skills. As Stockwell (2009) found, teachers with minimal guidance in implementing CALL in their classroom practices may have problems and depending upon the teacher and support network available, may simply give up on any kind of effective integration or integrate technology at a minimal level. Yeh & Tseng (2019) found that rather than initial implementation in a lesson that “It was when the teachers actually conducted and then revised their CALL lesson in an authentic setting, which was the third and fourth stages of the ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation) model, that they perceived that their CALL professional knowledge had grown tremendously.” (p.98, parentheses mine) while Whyte (2011) states more cautiously “Teachers can and do self-train with new technology, but cannot identify the affordances of the new tools unless they receive help in identifying effective language learning practices.” (p. 291), and Comas Quinn (2011) reports participants in her study feeling resentful at too much to learn. This suggests that implementing minimal training in a hurry to deal with a crisis situation is less fruitful for teacher

education than using a small array of technology tools and facilitating experimental practice and reflection with a knowledgeable trainer or peer as part of continuing professional development.

Teacher identity

It may appear at first consideration that teacher identity is irrelevant to teacher education and expenses regarding the preparation for teaching online. However, it is arguable that teacher self-efficacy plays a role in the motivation toward paying for expenses out of pocket, in that it is often more difficult to claim expenses for classroom materials or technology than it is to make the purchase oneself. Additionally, the need to be seen ‘doing a good job’, may lead teachers to make purchases or spend time on their own professional development outside of contracted time or beyond reasonable preparation time.

As Jacobs (2012) states “in general, professors are used to being “the smartest person in the room.” Learning a new tool can be extremely disempowering to people accustomed to this position, and if the introduction to a new tool is not handled properly the resulting alienation from digital media can be very difficult to repair.” (n.p.) It is likely to be a similar situation for instructors, who are accustomed to being able to go about their jobs with few unexpected obstacles. Jacobs (2012) continues: “By monitoring challenging projects and tending to the most tentative individuals you can solve problems before they generate dissatisfaction and become deterrents to further digital work. Projects should be well supported and platforms should be well explained.” (n.p.)

Teacher expenses

Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion (2009) boil down their opinion of the current mindset in higher education as “‘Good’ education might be based on economic growth, ‘profitable’ HEIs (higher education institutions) and satisfied student-consumers rather than, and regardless of, ideas of sound pedagogy.” (p.281, parentheses mine.) In such a situation, where institutions are prioritising income over teaching and learning, costs are likely to be cut unless they can provide a definite return on

investment. Additionally, any costs that can be passed on to other parties than the university will logically be passed on. Following this logic, the candidates to bear such costs are teaching staff and students. Given that students are viewed as customers in neoliberal higher education (Molesworth et al, 2009) and a source of competition for institutions, the only candidates left are teaching staff.

There is a gap in the scholarly literature regarding teacher expenses and teacher purchases in online education. A notable presence is Schifter (2000), who found that in university distance education in the USA, 24% of teaching staff were never compensated for computer costs involved in teaching distance learning courses and 38% were never compensated for Internet Service Provider (ISP) costs. McFadden (1999) stated that synchronous distance learning costs were more expensive due to the need for “television production studios, transmission (e.g. fiber, satellite, microwave), and related equipment”, “Numerous cameras, editing decks, special equipment, uplinking”, and “Designers, video/camera operators, editors, support personnel, consultants” (no pagination). However, due to modern technology, high quality cameras are ubiquitous in laptop computers and smartphones, and software for webcasting or videoconferencing can be found for free. However, someone needs to pay for the hardware; I would argue that if staff are expected to use their own computers and/or mobile devices and internet services for institution-directed work, the institution should provide a stipend for this. This is unlikely to be the case for English language teaching staff, many of whom are adjunct and part-time. As Johnson (2016) recalls from a colleague’s conversation with a secretary in charge of stationery that providing supplies to everyone would be untenable. It may be assumed that if there are situations where inexpensive stationery is restricted, a contribution to the cost of electronic equipment is futile. However, all of this occurs in a situation where teaching staff are far from wealthy and secure. Walsh (2019) details various aspects of English Language Teaching (ELT) precarity, in general ELT as well as in English for Academic Purposes.

The emergency situation we are in should be an exception but what concerns me is the potential that this sets a precedent for negligent attitudes to funding infrastructure necessities for staff. If a computer is so important for staff members, institutions should either provide or subsidise them. Additionally, if online lesson provision is important, sufficient education in provision ought to be provided. There is a tension between commercial aims for students (getting a job and return on investment of fees) and for universities (funding new ways to gain students) and providing learning

for learning's sake. However at odds these both at first seem, if we view high-quality learning as an intangible asset, investing in the people working to build learning and the tools they require would be an obvious necessity.

Research questions

Based on the above literature findings, I wished to investigate:

1. What education have English language teachers at universities received prior to 2020 (i.e. the de facto onset of COVID-19), and afterwards to facilitate online teaching and learning?
2. How are English language teachers at universities compensated for equipment use?

Method

A Google Form (Google, 2020) was set up to collect answers to the following questions:

- In which country do you mainly teach?
- What is your employment situation? Check all boxes that currently apply.
- What training or education have you received from your employer(s) to assist in teaching online? Describe in as much or as little detail as necessary.
- What training or education have you received prior to 2020 in teaching online? Please check all that apply.
- Who owns the equipment you will use to teach online?
- If you use your own equipment, does your employer pay for wear and tear expenses?
- What types of software does your employer provide?
- Who pays for the internet connection you will use?

Neither email addresses nor names were collected in order to ensure participant anonymity due to the sensitive nature of researching teachers' working conditions and the financial relationship with their employers. The data were then exported to a private Google Sheet (Google, 2020) and coding

information added. The details of the coding, where different from the answers given in the questionnaire will be explained as and when necessary or practical in the course of the primarily qualitative analysis of the data. Due to the ongoing nature of the current online teaching situation, the questionnaire is still accepting responses and further iterations of this preprint will be updated as required.

Results

Participants from around the world, with the exception of the continent of Africa, answered the questionnaire. The majority of respondents are employed at one institution at the time of answering the questionnaire.

Table 1: Country of employment

Country	Frequency
Japan	3
USA	3
Spain	1
Australia	1
Thailand	1
Canada	1
South Korea	1
Italy	1
Saudi Arabia	1
Vietnam	1
Greece	1
France	1
England	1

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Hungary	1
No answer	2

Table 2: Employment status

Employment status	Frequency
Full time at one institution	10
Full time at one institution and part time at one institution	1
Part time at one institution	4
Part-time at several institutions	3
Full-time for an agency or service provider	1

Not one single participant reported that their university paid for their internet service. 17 respondents reported that they paid for their internet access and 2 respondents said that somebody else that they live with paid for it. 14 people use exclusively their own equipment, while 3 use some provided by themselves and some provided by their employer, and 2 participants use equipment entirely provided by their employers. Of those who use their own equipment, only one is compensated for wear and tear by their employer, two do not know whether they will be compensated and the 14 are to be uncompensated according to the participants. The software for providing these lessons is paid for by approximately half of employers paid for some software licences.

The employers did provide training for the most part. Only three participants reported no training; two reported minimal training (answers “minimal” and “A lot of advice links to different platforms to use (Zoom, Uni e-learning platform, Google Classroom etc) all sent out with hyperlinks to text and video, all in Hungarian. No English instructions for teachers [or students]”); one reported a meeting. Others reported a mixture of training on software, LMS, or ‘general’ training.

Table 3: Participants answering ‘training’ to the question “What training or education have you received from your employer(s) to assist in teaching online?”

Training	Frequency
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Assessment	1
General	4
Software	6
LMS	1

Training or education received prior to 2020 was, most frequently, short course and webinars). A small minority had education as part of a teaching licence, Master's degree, and two participants with part of a PhD.

Table 4: Education received prior to 2020

Education prior to 2020	Frequency
Short online course	7
Webinar	4
In-service training	3
Self-directed	3
Doctorate	2
Master's degree	1
Teaching licence/diploma	1
Institutional resources	1
Support	1
None	2
No answer	2

Conclusion

The picture painted by examining the data provided by the respondents is bleak. The intervention by employers seems rather unsubstantial, in that teachers are expected to provide remote teaching despite a distinct lack of training in distant learning, CALL, instructional design, and all while using their own equipment unless they are part of the lucky minority whose employers provide all the equipment, with no compensation for wear and tear or internet service charges. While employers are providing software licenses, perhaps, it is the case that these paid licenses are part of the institutional licences, so they may not be doing anything monetarily beyond what is normally the case in providing lessons to students. This would be occurring while continuing to take the funding or fees from students for their course, while teaching staff take on more work and responsibilities in order to provide students with adequate service under the current circumstances.

Therefore, to answer the research questions, English language teachers in the sample have generally received little education or training before 2020 or since to deal with the move to online teaching. Additionally, the costs are generally being borne by English language teachers rather than their employers, even while ELT and EAP is taught by those in precarious circumstances (Walsh, 2019).

Discussion

While the current study is limited in its sample size and by the nature of self-report being reliant on participant bias, the view of the data is largely pessimistic. With English language teachers providing the bulk of the technology and infrastructure to go about their teaching online, with minimal or insufficient training, the role of the university is called into question. Is it simply an accrediting organisation, with employees operating as ersatz teaching franchise owners, plying their instructional wares under the university banner? Additionally, given the small amount of training and education provided to English language teachers, it appears this is a further slide toward what Gray and Block (2013) term “a skilled technician” (p.119) providing instruction rather than a prepared scholar of the subject.

It is not entirely negative, however, because there is still so much that can be done to alleviate the situation the profession has found itself in. Employing organisations (be they universities themselves or outsourced agencies) should provide teachers with either the technology to perform teaching duties to their satisfaction, or appropriate compensation to cover wear and tear of their employees’ devices and internet services. Additionally, in dialogue with the teachers, employers should allocate sufficient time to undertake training and/or self-directed study to become familiar enough with the technology to be used.

In spite of those recommendations, I still believe that as a profession we ought to be cautious. If employers’ forgoing technology provision or appropriate remuneration for this becomes ‘the new normal’, this is likely to result in further decay of working conditions in a situation that is already precarious for far too many.

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