

Editorial

ELT in the Time of the Coronavirus 2020 (Part 2): An Introduction

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Like everyone else, I presume, I have been hoping that COVID-19, similar to SARS in 2003, would suddenly disappear and everything would return to normal, the old normal, that is. However, it has not happened. In fact, there have been warnings of a second wave of COVID-19 infections in many parts of the world. We thus cannot be sure that, worldwide, the disease will abate any time soon. Safe distancing and hence online teaching will continue in many places until at least the end of the year 2020.

Having a major, let alone exclusive, online component in a module is not what many ELT practitioners have dealt with before and I believe many of us members of the ELT community are anxious about the prospect of going and staying online for the foreseeable future. That is why, more than ever, we members of the ELT community need to come together and share our expertise and experiences going online. This is what this special issue ‘ELT in the time of the coronavirus 2020’ is all about.

The good news is, since the first batch of papers on online ELT was published in early July, more papers have been received; interest in contributing to the special issue has not waned. Kevin the Chief Editor thus suggests that, instead of publishing a big special issue, we publish two special issues on the same theme. There are about twelve papers in the first issue and hopefully around the same number in the second one. Thanks to Kevin for this suggestion.

The papers that have been published since I wrote the first set of introductory remarks are written in countries which include Australia, Cameroon, Singapore, Turkey, and the United States. The papers published in the first issue include one written by Pinar Ersin (Marmara University, Turkey), Derin Atay & Enisa Mede (Bahçeşehir University, Turkey). The authors document how they boost pre-service English language teachers’ readiness for online teaching through synchronous e-practicum and e-mentoring. During the e-practicum sessions, six pre-service teachers take turns to conduct a class before students played by fellow pre-service teachers. Their findings show that the pre-service teachers find the e-practicum sessions useful because it helps them overcome the fear of teaching online. Chun Chuen Billy Chan and Owen Wilson (The University of Sydney, Australia) review Chakowa’s Digitally Enhanced Learning (DEL) model and showcase their use of the model to adapt face-to-face EAP materials for online teaching. That is what Chan and Owen recommend too. Addressing the effects of the pandemic on ESL learners and TESOL practitioners in the USA, K. James Hartshorn and Ben L. McMurry (Brigham Young University) present findings from their survey, which among other things suggest that ‘although students continued to make progress in their language development during the pandemic, their speaking skills lagged behind their writing skills during the pandemic’ as a result of online teaching – something ELT practitioners who teach oral skills might want to note. Laetitia Monbec,

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who teaches a CLIL (content and language integrated learning) module at the National University of Singapore, details her use of the Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) dimension of semantic gravity, which ‘conceptualises content knowledge in terms of levels of abstraction’, to guide her in scaffolding content when the module went online. The helpfulness of the idea of semantic gravity is evidenced in Monbec’s observation of the level of engagement of the students with the online content, and in the students’ strong performance in the following assessment despite the shift to online teaching. The first issue ends with a Zoom user guide, complete with visuals, prepared by Khairul Anwar bin Rosawi (National University of Singapore). Technophobes like me would appreciate bin Rosawi’s guide!

The first paper in the second issue comes from Agnes Bodis, Melissa Reed & Yulia Kharchenko, teacher trainers at Macquarie University, Australia. The authors approach online teaching through the concept of Learning-Oriented Assessment by using ‘VoiceThread’, a ‘multimodal asynchronous interactive platform’, to create a series of asynchronous microteaching activities to develop learning autonomy. As part of the activities, students record themselves teaching, post the videos online, and receive feedback from their instructors and peers. An interesting aspect of Bodis et al.’s approach is that, unlike Ersin et al.’s, it has no synchronous component. WhatsApp is something many of us use unremarkably on a daily basis to communicate with people at home and overseas. However, for Daniel A. Nkemleke and Lynda Tume Leinyuy (University of Yaoundé 1, Cameroon), it is a teaching tool for their academic writing class as well. Their paper tells readers about their use of a WhatsApp forum for the purposes of giving instructions and feedback to students. Findings suggest among other things that students communicate with each other in ways that do not happen in a face-to-face setting. As the authors note: ‘An interesting finding was that students complemented each other whenever the teacher posted positive feedback on their work. This is rare in a face-to-face class.’ It is a fact that physical distancing can be isolating. Mark Brooke deals with this problem by changing the way he provides written feedback to his students when teaching online. Unlike in the past, when he tended to use imperatives (e.g. ‘change to ...’, ‘look at ...’), which sound authoritative in text-based communications, Brooke focuses on using different moves such as clarify, prompt, and encourage from a typology developed by S. A. Walker; he also uses modal verbs like ‘may’ and ‘should’ to soften his tone. This seems to have the effect of narrowing the social/psychological distance between teacher and student during this time of the coronavirus. At the time of writing, more papers are coming in and under review.

Once again, I thank all the contributors for coming together during this pandemic to offer ideas to fellow ELT practitioners. It has been a difficult time for us, to say the least. However, there is a silver lining in how we now deal with the situation, not as individuals struggling on our own, but as members of a community supporting one another across the miles.

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