

Article

A Pandemic in 2020, Zoom and the Arrival of the Online Educator

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Abstract

When Covid-19 spread and became a serious health threat to the world in the earlier part of 2020, many university English language teaching (ELT) practitioners moved their classes online. Not only did ELT practitioners have to master the technicalities of an online application (e.g., Zoom), they had to go ahead without much foresight; teaching a full module online was basically uncharted waters for many of them. Moreover, it was largely unknown what impact an online module might have on student learning. This paper is about an academic writing module that was fully taught online in the National University of Singapore for the first time. It presents some of the changes made in the online mode, feedback from students on their learning online and recommendations. The data comes from the four classes of students (58 responses) I taught in the first semester of academic year 2020/2021 (13 weeks, Aug - Nov, 2020).

Keywords

Content and language integrated learning, academic writing, Zoom, online educator, Covid-19

1 Introduction & Methodology

Most university ELT (English language teaching) practitioners would now, at the end of 2020, remember what happened earlier in the year. In January and February, people who had access to the internet heard about a certain coronavirus. Before long, the coronavirus, now known as Covid-19, started spreading, in Asia and other parts of the world. On March 11, WHO declared the Covid-19 outbreak a pandemic (WHO, 2020). At the same time, because Covid-19 was increasingly becoming a global threat to health and life, measures were taken by governments to protect people from the disease and one of the first lines of defense deployed universally was safe distancing. To maximize safe distancing, university ELT classes were forced to move online.

Obviously, given that the situation was unprecedented, the move online was not without challenges. At the most fundamental level, ELT practitioners had to learn how to use an online tool (e.g., Zoom) to replace the physical classroom. They had to conduct classes and organize activities online to replace onsite ones. Mastering the use of an online tool was daunting especially for older educators but the challenge could easily be overcome with a reader-friendly user manual, such as the Zoom user guide written by bin

Rosawi (2020) in response to the pandemic. As for other challenges, experience appeared to have been helpful. As is said, “Some areas were initially viewed as problems but became far less problematic as teachers gained experience, and thus appear to have been solved” (Watson Todd, 2020, p. 10).

While there is no “one-size-fits all approach to successful online transition” (Davies, et al., 2020, p. 43), there are abundant online resources for ELT practitioners to draw on (Rimmer, 2020). There are also many accounts of ELT practitioners producing and recommending ways to quickly adapt to the online mode of teaching. For example, teacher trainers Ersin, Atay and Mede (2020, p. 114) developed a e-practicum for pre-service teachers who would otherwise be deprived of the opportunity “to teach in the field” because of COVID-19. The e-practicum, in which pre-service teachers act as students, is “a new concept in pre-service teacher education” (Ersin, Atay, & Mede, 2020, p. 115). It involves “e-mentoring”, which opens “new possibilities for teacher support and guidance from a distance that eliminates space and time constraints” (Ersin, Atay, & Mede, 2020, p. 115). Bodis, Reed and Kharchenko (2020, p. 3) replaced their f2f (face-to-face) lectures with “online asynchronous interaction”; their new online module, unlike the pre-Covid-19 one, does not have a synchronous component. Loo’s (2020, p. 59) experience suggests that “when developing online grammar tasks, it would be very helpful if the instructor could create ample opportunities for students to notice particular writing features”. Chan and Wilson (2020) successfully adapted f2f EAP materials for an online module using Chakowa’s digitally enhanced learning model. For speaking assessments, Forrester’s (2020, p. 87) advice is to “keep things simple” and “opt for asynchronous assessments as this will lessen the impact of technical issues.” If an online synchronous assessment is required, then Forrester’s recommendation is to “reduce the number of participants to a minimum” (2020, p. 87). Even in a setting where funding is limited, there can be solutions. Without relying on sophisticated applications like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, Nkemleke and Leinyuy (2020) used Whatsapp to effectively organize summary writing tasks and give feedback. Nkemleke and Leinyuy (2020) show that when there is a will, there is a way.

Admittedly, problems can remain; Watson Todd’s study (2020), based on 52 English teachers in a respected Thai university and on seven weeks of online teaching, suggests that remaining problems for ELT practitioners include the suitability of online activities and how well they can stimulate student interest. Some of the teachers became “aware that simply converting their planned classroom teaching into an online format is not sufficient” (Watson Todd, 2020, p. 12). Moreover, zoom fatigue is real, and experienced by both educators and students (Brennan, 2020). Nevertheless, it would be unreasonable to expect teachers to fully resolve their problems in the short run and I believe that it is only a matter of time before the teachers can develop suitable and engaging online activities for their students. There are also documented ways to minimize zoom fatigue (Brennan, 2020; Florell, 2020).

From all accounts, it seems that ELT practitioners are managing well in the move online. For example, in the Centre of English Language Communication (CELC), National University of Singapore (NUS), where I am based, ELT practitioners do not seem to have been fazed in any major way by the move online. In fact, at the time of writing (December, 2020), they have successfully completed a full semester of teaching and conducted two major placement tests (involving over 1,900 and 400 students) online with no major hiccup (Luu & Goh, 2020). The ease of moving teaching activities online has partly to do with the e-learning week that took place very year in NUS in the past to prepare educators for such a situation. It has also to do with the accessibility of ideas generated by literature regarding online teaching in this time of the coronavirus, such as those referred to above; educators who need suggestions and solutions for online teaching could easily refer to literature. There thus seems to be abundant support for ELT practitioners during the current pandemic.

As a result of the online teaching strategies shared and adopted, student learning is not compromised, or minimally so. In fact, as we shall see, online teaching has created new ways of engaging students. Furthermore, in NUS for example, educators have become more accommodating (e.g., extension of deadlines) and more sensitive to the needs of students who may require pastoral care (Monbec, 2020).

However, it seems that far less attention is given to what students think about engaging in the various learning online. Do students prefer to undertake certain learning activities online and others in a f2f setting? I think it is important for educators to have some ideas, no matter how tentative, especially given that online teaching and learning may now be “the new normal” (Macnaught & Yates, 2020, p. 89) and may continue to be so in the foreseeable future.

The objective of this small-scale study is thus to find out, using a Google survey, for each of a number of class activities, whether students prefer doing it online or in a f2f setting. The class activities are:

- (1) Attending a mini-lecture;
- (2) Giving an oral presentation (with visuals);
- (3) Answering questions directed at oneself;
- (4) Answering questions directed at no one in particular;
- (5) Participating in small group activities;
- (6) Meeting the lecturer one-on-one for consultations;

The survey also asks students about their overall online experience.

The survey questions are straight-forward. They are mostly multiple-choice questions. The first set of questions ask if they find what they have learned or done useful, such as cross-cultural awareness, the ability to express complex ideas in simpler English, writing general-to-specific texts, how to contextualize a study, and how to connect sentences. It makes sense to ascertain that students find the learning of such things important before we discuss the importance of the activities that support the learning. The second set of questions mainly ask about the class activities. For each activity, the student respondent chooses one of the following three options:

- (1) I prefer doing it online;
- (2) I prefer doing it in a f2f setting;
- (3) Online or f2f is fine (i.e., neutral).

This means that for each activity, there are three figures (see table 1 below). Each figure represents the number of students as a percentage of the total of 58 survey respondents.

The final multiple-choice question is about their overall experience, and it again comes with three options, of which each student chooses one:

- (1) I am glad I read the module online.
- (2) I would have preferred to read the module in a f2f setting.
- (3) Online or f2f is fine (i.e., neutral).

The survey then concludes with an open-ended question that asks for general comments.

The survey was conducted at the end of my first fully online teaching semester (academic year 2020/2021, semester 1, August–November, 2020). It was administered to all my four classes of students, with an average of 15 students in each class. The number of students who answered the questions was 58.

2 The Module & Activities

Three colleges in the University Town of NUS offer their undergraduate student residents an academic writing program called “Ideas and Exposition” (IEM) that uses the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach associated with David Marsh (2008). The program has two tiers (IEM1 and IEM2). My module is a tier-2 module and it comprises three units, in which students write an annotated bibliography (unit 1), present a research proposal (oral presentation, unit 2) and write a 2,000-word research paper (unit 3).

The undergraduate student residents are mostly Singaporeans. The non-Singaporean students come from China, Malaysia and other parts of Asia such as Indonesia and Vietnam. Although most of the students speak a local variety of English, they generally do not have problems with proficiency, and can usually construct well-formed sentences. However, even Singaporeans, who live in a country where English is an official language, may not have a good grasp of English semantics and pragmatics (Wong J. O., 2014), and many are not good at constructing cohesive academic texts (Wong J. O., 2018). Many of the students are also unfamiliar with the academic register (Wong J., 2020). The IEM program can help them improve in these areas.

The content of my module (code: UTW2001Q), entitled “What’s in a word? Meaning across cultures”, is NSM (natural semantic metalanguage) semantics (Goddard, 2018). NSM semantics requires students to understand that most words in a language are language- and hence culture-specific, which means that these words have no exact semantic counterparts in most other languages (Wierzbicka, 1997). Using culture-specific words from one language to describe word meanings from another language, one ends up with an ethnocentric view of those meanings. However, NSM semantics also posits that every language has a set of sixty-odd semantic primes – i.e., lexical items that embody conceptual universals. In English, the set of semantic primes include *I, you, say, do, think, know, want* and *feel* (Goddard, 2018). Such words and their universal combinations constitute a mini-language called “natural semantic metalanguage” or “NSM” for short. Using NSM to describe word meaning, one minimizes an ethnocentric view of the object of study. Among other things, the module’s final paper tests the student writer’s ability to express complex meanings using simpler, non-ethnocentric NSM English. In general, the teaching of academic writing mainly commences after unit 1 and requires students to read extensively (Wong J. O., 2018), involves student presentations and engages them in a number of writing-related activities. The activities include:

- (1) Small group activities on how to contextualize a study (Wong J. O., 2020b);
- (2) Giving oral presentations;
- (3) Writing drafts;
- (4) Reviewing a peer’s drafts;
- (5) Revising one’s own drafts;
- (6) Attending mini-lectures (e.g., on how to connect sentences).

In the pre-Covid-19 version of the module, there were already online and offsite components. For example, the peer review of a written draft might be done online and offsite. The peer review of the oral presentation of the research proposal was conducted on a Google sheet, where every other member of the class was asked to comment on each presentation. The online LMS (learning management system) has been in place for many years. I have always required students to submit all their work (drafts and final papers) in the LMS. They have always received my comments on their papers and marks in the LMS. When we moved the module online, I mainly moved onsite activities such as mini-lectures, presentations and group work online. The many functions of Zoom allowed me to do that. For example, mini-lectures and student presentations were now delivered online using Zoom’s ‘share-screen’ function. Small group activities took place in the breakout rooms. Questions and answers could be organized with the chat function. The transition was not difficult.

As mentioned all the activities referred to in the survey take place in unit 2. In unit 1, students mainly learn about the content, which is NSM semantics. They learn ethnocentrism and what meaning is about. For example, they learn that emotion and colour terms (e.g., happy, anxious, troubled, red, blue, green) do not embody conceptual universals, but cultural constructs (Goddard, 2018). They learn about Anglo-centrism and how many of us wrongly assume that English can capture reality as it is, and are thus “imprisoned in English” (Wierzbicka, 2006; 2013; 2018). All these have implications for academic writing, since the students write in English in most of their disciplines.

3 Findings & Discussion

This section presents findings from the survey that is based on 58 students and discusses their implications. The first part of the survey asks the students about the importance of what they have learned or done (10 items). For each of the 10 items, the number of students for each option (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree) is presented as a percentage of the 58 students who responded in table 1 below. Note that no one strongly disagreed with the importance of any one of the items and so there are no figures for this option. The findings are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1

The Importance of What is Learned by Percentage of Students

Content	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Ethnocentrism: most words in a language embody a culture-specific meaning.	1.7	1.7	44.8	51.7
2. Many ideas, e.g., those embodied in colour terms, emotion terms and action verbs (e.g., eating, drinking) do not embody conceptual universals.	0	3.4	44.8	51.7
3. Cross-cultural awareness: people from different cultures categorize the world differently.	1.7	1.7	41.4	55.2
4. "Do not replace one unknown with another unknown"	0	0	50	50
5. How to express complex ideas in simpler English	0	10.3	48.3	41.4
6. How to write a general-to-specific text	1.7	5.2	46.6	46.6
7. What it means to contextualize a study	1.7	5.2	53.4	39.7
8. What goes into an introduction of a paper	1.7	1.7	50	46.6
9. Writing, reviewing and revising a text	1.7	15.5	36.2	46.6
10. How to connect sentences in terms of themes and rhemes	1.7	6.9	25.9	65.5

Combining the figures (percentages of students) for 'agree' and 'strongly agree', we arrive at the following figures in table 2.

Table 2

The Importance of What is learned by Percentage of Students (Who Responded Positively) in Descending Order

Content	Teaching methods & activities	Agree or strongly agree
1. 'Do not replace one unknown with another unknown'	Mini-lectures, student presentations & group activities	100
2. Cross-cultural awareness: people from different cultures categorize the world differently	Mini-lectures, student presentations & class discussions	96.6
3. What goes into an introduction of a paper	Mini-lectures & one-on-one consultations	96.6
4. Ethnocentrism: most words in a language embody a culture-specific meaning.	Mini-lectures, student presentations & class discussions	96.5
5. Many ideas, e.g., those embodied in colour terms, emotion terms and action verbs (e.g., eating, drinking) do not embody conceptual universals.	Mini-lectures, student presentations & class discussions	96.5
6. How to write a general-to-specific text	Mini-lectures, writing activities & one-on-one consultations	93.2
7. What it means to contextualize a study	Group activities	93.1
8. How to connect sentences in terms of themes and rhemes	Mini-lectures, group activities, writing activities & one-on-one consultations	91.4
9. How to express complex ideas in simpler English	Mini-lectures, student presentations & group activities	89.7
10. Writing, reviewing and revising a text	Individual & paired writing activities	82.8

As can be seen, in most cases, the percentage of students who agree that what is learned is beneficial exceeds 90% and in all cases 80%. The table also presents the teaching methods and activities associated with each item to be learned by students, which constitute my multi-pronged approach. The teaching and learning methods are diverse: mini-lectures (teacher-centred learning), student presentations (student-centred learning), group activities (hands-on), writing activities (hands-on), which include peer review (Wong J. O., 2020a), and one-on-one consultations. Some of these activities are organized in response to traits associated with students of Gen Z (born 1995-2010). Literature suggests that they share certain traits (Patel, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2017). For example, they tend to be tech-savvy, prefer hands-

on experiences, desire broader applicability on what they learn, and are interested in learning through observation. They “desire learning that is individualized, immediate, exciting, engaging, technologically advanced, and visually based” (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018, p. 181). Importantly, they “view peers and instructors as valuable resources” (Seemiller & Grace, 2017, p. 23). Notably, they have a short attention span. Thus, it is expected that they benefit from activities such as mini-lectures, peer review and group-activities in their learning.

Given that the methods and activities I use are associated with what students consider important in their learning, it seems to make sense that we know whether they prefer engaging in each activity online or in a f2f setting. For each of the six activities given in the survey, the number of students associated with each of the three options (f2f, neutral, online) is presented as a percentage of the total of 58 students. The findings are presented in table 3 below.

Table 3

Student Preferences (Online vs. f2f) by Percentage of Students

Activity	I prefer doing it in a f2f setting	Online or f2f is fine (i.e., neutral)	I prefer doing it online
1. Giving an oral presentation	12.1	32.8	55.2*
2. Meeting the lecturer one-on-one for consultation	27.6	32.8	39.7*
3. Attending a mini-lecture	15.5	48.3	36.2
4. Answering a question directed at oneself in class	22.4	41.4	36.2
5. Answering a question directed at no one in particular OR giving comments in class	31.0	32.8	36.2*
6. Participating in a small group activity	50	31	19

The figures for the survey question on the overall experience are presented in table 4 below. Again, the number of students associated with each option is presented as a percentage of the total of 58 students who responded.

Table 4

Overall Experience by Percentage of Students

I would have preferred to attend the module in a f2f setting	I'm glad I read the module online	Online of f2f is fine (i.e., neutral)
13.8	41.4	44.8

The survey yields interesting findings. Firstly, the neutral group (see table 3), although not particularly large, is often between 30-50%, which means that roughly one-third to half of the students are fine with

either an online or a f2f mode of learning. Even though it does not exceed 50% for all the activities and the overall experience, in some instances it is the largest group.

More interesting, however, is the finding that the group of students who prefer doing something online is always bigger than the group who prefer doing it in a f2f setting, except when it comes to small-group activities. This comes as a surprise, as I had previously expected the group who prefer the traditional f2f setting to be bigger in most cases than the other two groups; I had expected most students to dislike online learning because of the lack of physical presence, the social distance that is thus imposed on them, and zoom fatigue. After all, one student does say in the survey, “I would have much rather preferred a physical lesson (as with all other modules as well) as I find that Zoom doesn’t facilitate learning as well as classroom settings (other than being convenient).” Nevertheless, the same student adds, “Despite so, I have managed to learn a great deal from this module.” In fact, this student admits, “I think this module [has] genuinely given me a strong understanding not just in its content but also on the skills of how to write an essay.” This comment suggests that the online mode has not adversely affected student learning.

Let us now turn our attention to more specific findings. For three activities, the largest group of students are the ones who prefer doing it online (see single asterisks in table 3). The three activities are (i) giving an oral presentation (55.2%, the majority), (ii) meeting the lecturer for one-on-one consultations (39.7%), and (iii) voluntarily answering questions directed at no one and giving comments in class (36.2%). My interpretation is that such activities require the student to have a certain level of confidence. Standing in front of a class in a f2f setting to give an oral presentation, especially for the shyer students, and be subjected to scrutiny can be daunting for many students. As some students put it:

Personally, I am able to follow the lesson quite well online. It was easier for me to participate in class as well, since I’m usually a shy person.

As this is a presentation-centered module, doing this module online made it more comfortable for me to present as it does not seem as scary as doing it face-to-face.

Attending UTW2001Q online made it less scary and intimidating for me. I also enjoyed doing and having presentations online more because it was easier to interact (chat boxes) and we can write a script.

Meeting the lecturer for a one-on-one consultation is an important part of language learning (Schluer, 2020) but it can be unnerving too, because that is when the lecturer asks questions and tells the student what is not right about their draft. Perhaps that is why many students prefer to do it online. Voluntarily contributing to class discussion could take courage too. Generally speaking, such activities tend to subject the student to scrutiny either by the whole class or by the lecturer, and may thus be considered face-threatening acts. This probably explains why the group of students who prefer to engage such activities online tends to be the largest.

Obviously, of the activities listed above, the one that is least threatening is attending a lecture, a teacher-centred form of learning. The student only needs to pay attention and take notes. For this activity, perhaps unremarkably, the biggest group (close to 50%, the second largest figure) is the neutral group, representing students who are fine with doing it online or in a f2f setting. Interestingly, twice as many students prefer attending a mini-lecture online than in a f2f setting (36.2% vs. 15.5%). Perhaps students do not see the need to attend a lecture in a f2f setting, since there is minimal interaction in this activity.

On the whole, on the basis of my data, it would seem that the more an activity seems face-threatening, the higher is the general tendency for a student to prefer to engage in it online. This observation could be posited as a hypothesis to be subjected to further testing.

Table 3 also shows that 50% of the students prefer to engage in small-group activities in a f2f setting, compared to about 20% of the students who prefer to do it online (i.e., Zoom breakout rooms). This

represents the biggest group of students who prefer to do something in a f2f setting. Perhaps why this is so is not difficult to understand. According to one student:

There is physical connection. In a sense, you are interacting with someone in person. You get to see and speak to the person directly rather than peering through a webcam. This helps to make the interaction more personal. The camera places some sort of barrier for starting conversation and it makes it awkward to initialise any discussion. I don't feel this awkwardness when I am doing f2f lessons.

What the student says suggests that there can be communication barriers in the absence of physical contact. Just as the “student-teacher relationship might be amplified with physical distancing as cultural barriers to communication are difficult to change without physical contact” (Brooke, 2020, p. 34), the student-student relationship might also be adversely affected. In fact, the lack of physical interaction may be a concern. As Hartshorn and McMurry note, students can be “worried about their mental health largely because of the limited or non-existent face-to-face interaction with other students, teachers, and friends” (2020, p. 148). It is thus not surprising that among the given activities, small-group work, which involves student-student interaction, is associated with the biggest group who prefer a f2f setting.

As for the overall experience, the biggest group is the neutral group; almost 45% of the students are happy to read the module online or in a f2f setting. However, the group that is glad to have read the module online (41.4%) is three times bigger than the group that would have preferred to read it in a f2f setting (13.8%). This is clear indication that many students are comfortable with completing a module online. Looking it in another way, only about 14% of the students prefer to read the module in a traditional, f2f setting. Most of the students (over 85%) are fine with reading the module online and some of these students actually prefer it that way. This is certainly good news, given that ELT classes in NUS will continue to be conducted online for at least one more semester (the first half of 2021). The arrangement is fine with 85% of the students.

A number of students in their feedback assure me that they have learned much from the module, indicating that the online mode was not a problem for them. I need to know that learning is effectively taking place online and here is some evidence from students that it did for them:

It was quite a unique experience attending classes online and doing 100% e-learning for this IEM module. Though there were difficulties along the way (e.g., technical issues, connection issues etc.), I feel that it was a generally comfortable medium for this module, given that there wasn't elements of roleplay or anything which requires human interaction, hence the learning was still substantial.

I think the class has been handled well in an online setting, and everything that needed to be taught has been taught.

I still managed to learn a lot so I feel that the medium didn't have a huge impact.

The lectures on academic writing were very helpful because they actually explained and illustrated what ‘flow’, ‘contextualisation’ etc. meant rather than just listing dos and don'ts.

Overall, I think the lessons so far has been engaging. The activities given the current amount of resources available have been formulated out pretty well. (...) The module overall has been very enlightening. I enjoy doing the research and learning more about the language use. Like woman in film, this module has opened up my perspective on word usages.

There is a lot of things you get to learn that other modules don't have.

I feel that the online classes this semester went smoothly, and I was still able to learn and pick-up lots of information from the module.

The students also share with me what they think are the benefits of reading a module online. For example, more people could concurrently contribute to a discussion using the chat function. The shared

screen was helpful to facilitate discussion. It is convenient. One student even points out that online learning prevents ‘physical fatigue’ that comes from physical travelling. Here are some comments from the survey:

Attending this class online sort of made group discussions easier as in the breakout rooms, it was easier for us to work on the tasks together by viewing one person's shared screen. If it was f2f, we would have to discuss and work online at the same time.

Attending UTW2001Q online is actually very smooth and doing activities in small breakout rooms is smoother as compared to doing it in real life (in other IEMs).

I think having it online is great especially for an 8am class. It really helps to provide us with convenience and save us time and also being able to engage in class discussions more actively. I think I have learnt just as much even through this online class.

I also felt that with classes being online, it allowed me to better plan and use my time in whatever means I feel is most effective. I experienced more mental fatigue but I feel that it’s better than experience mental AND physical fatigue (from traveling to campus to attend classes etc.).

In fact, time saved in travelling seems to be an important advantage of teaching and learning online. Commenting on this point and quoting his survey respondents, Watson Todd (2020, p. 13) writes:

Although we have seen that online teaching may require more time than classroom teaching, this may be offset by travel time: “avoiding the commute to KMUTT potentially saves hours per day”. Similarly, although the move to online teaching may involve expenses for teachers (“I used my own money to solve my immediate problems with the Internet”), these may be recouped (“online teaching saves on traveling expenses and dressing costs”).

Time saved by not commuting is something my students appreciate. In the survey, they were asked if the online classes allowed them to save time and be more punctual for class more often. The findings are presented in table 5.

Table 5

On Whether Online Classes Save Time by Percentage of Students

Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
5.2	29.3	65.5

As can be seen, no student disagrees with the idea that online classes save time. In fact, around 95% of the students agree or strongly agree. I recall the pre-Covid-19 times when some students were perpetually late for classes. NUS is a big campus and some of them had to take a bus from where they previously were to attend my class. The buses were often full and they had to wait for the next one. Some of the lecturers did not respect time and often ended the previous class late. As a result, some students often came to my class late, panting as they walked in from running. I had to slow down whatever the class was doing to give these students time to catch their breath and get organized.

Many of my colleagues live near campus, and travelling to and from campus is not a problem. However, for people like me, who spend at least 2.5 hours commuting, online teaching is a blessing. While online teaching is associated with Zoom fatigue, travelling is physically tiring too. As one of the students puts it (see above), an onsite module can be associated with both “mental AND physical fatigue”. It is a wonder that educators are concerned about Zoom fatigue that one experiences in the comfort of one’s office or home but not fatigue associated with travelling.

The benefits that come with online learning cannot be denied. After all, many pre-Covid-19 modules, which were largely studied in a f2f classroom setting, had major online components. However, perhaps

few people at that time gave the idea of teaching a module fully online much thought or question the need for a f2f setting. Now that we are in it, it is time to contemplate the merits of running a full module online and the limited evidence that we have seems to suggest that it has important benefits. In fact, I am satisfied with the outcomes of running the module fully online and happy that we will do it for another semester.

The next section explores solutions to challenges associated with online classes, proposes solutions and offers recommendations. The challenges to be addressed include Zoom fatigue and emotional distance that comes with the lack of physical contact.

4 Solutions & Recommendations

The 2020 pandemic has led to a new normal in ELT and this new normal comes with the online educator. This online educator has the competence to teach online. It is thus imperative that ELT practitioners take it upon themselves to master the necessary IT skills to navigate in the virtual classroom. This is something that is taken for granted but needs to be emphasized. I agree with Loo (2020, p. 60) when he says, “To inspire confidence from students, the instructor needs to be confident with the use of online tools and seen to be in control.” Loo’s advice is consistent with a comment from my survey:

It is ok! I think Jock knows how to use technology (unlike quite a few other tutors) so I think it facilitated lessons. Oh, and he is funny and knows how to use the Zoom chat box.

It would seem that a teacher who is not fully IT-savvy does not go unnoticed by students; students noticed even my ability to use the Zoom chat function. I now consider common IT knowledge an indispensable part of an educator’s arsenal of teaching tools. That is why I approached a colleague to write a Zoom user guide (bin Rosawi, 2020) for part 1 of the special issue “ELT in the time of the coronavirus 2020” in this journal.

As mentioned, Zoom fatigue, caused by “digital eye strain” (Florell, 2020, p. 37), is a challenge. It is raised as an issue by some of my students. Here are comments from a few of them:

Zoom fatigue is real, especially with the timing of the classes being late afternoon.

It did get tiring if I had many back-to-back classes.

I did experience a bit of zoom fatigue since [it was] my last class of the day, but overall, it was not too bad.

I don’t really have any suggestions for zoom fatigue. It could be caused by the fact that some of us have lessons during the early part of the mornings.

Overall, online is fine. Except for a few days where there is zoom fatigue

The problem seems to be attenuated at the beginning of the day and magnified towards the end of the day, especially after several consecutive classes. However, I do believe that there are ways to minimize its effects. The instructor could, if possible, reduce class time, even by 5 minutes. Even though 5 minutes seems like a short time, some students could feel its effects. Two students comment:

Overall, the zoom fatigue was not as bad as expected, probably due to the shorter lesson lengths (~1.5 hours is good!). I enjoyed IEM2 this semester.

I'm okay with attending UTW2001Q online, however sometimes it can get a little dry with the long presentations and with zoom fatigue too; but it was good when lessons ended a little earlier sometimes as it gave me a short break before my next lesson.

Perhaps the effect is psychological; from a student’s perspective, an early release is welcome, even though I gave them more asynchronous work than before. For example, for the first time, I asked students to write metalinguistic comments in their final paper. Below is an example from a student paper

about the Mandarin *duibuqi* and *baoqian* (both, roughly, ‘sorry’). The parts in square brackets are the metalinguistic comments while the rest are paragraphs of the paper. The metalinguistic comments tell the reader what each paragraph is about.

[The opening paragraph dives straight into the topic and the focus of the paper. After providing the context which shows the difference between Standard Chinese and Singapore Mandarin, I bring in the focus of my study which is *duibuqi* and *baoqian*. Finally, at the end of this paragraph, I open with the problem after giving the context, which is that the distinction between the difference between the meanings of *duibuqi* and *baoqian* is lost in Singapore Mandarin.]

Singapore Mandarin is different from Standard Chinese in Mainland China. Due to Singapore Mandarin, many Singaporeans do not understand certain phrases in Standard Chinese well. One of such differences can be found in the meanings of the phrases that are used when apologising. In Standard Mandarin, one may say *duibuqi* (对不起) or *baoqian* (抱歉) when apologising to another person. However, it is evident that in Singapore, many speakers only use *duibuqi* when apologising in Mandarin. The distinction between the meanings of *duibuqi* and *baoqian* does not exist in Singapore.

[I then proceed with the next paragraph by expanding and elucidating the problem stated in the opening paragraph. I bring in the reason behind the aforementioned problem, which is due to the ancestry of most Singapore Chinese. I then end this paragraph by stating and emphasising the problem which is that Singapore Mandarin speakers do not understand the differences between the two phrases well.]

This can be attributed to the ancestry of most Singaporean Chinese, which is anchored in Southern China where languages such as Cantonese, Teochew and Hokkien are mainly spoken (Bokhorst-Heng & Silver, 2017). In these languages, the distinction between *duibuqi* and *baoqian* does not exist and hence Mandarin in Singapore is influenced correspondingly. Moreover, these two phrases are glossed as ‘sorry’ in English by Singaporean speakers whose first language is English. However, this gloss is highly ethnocentric and does not accurately capture the deeper meanings of the two phrases. Thus, due to the aforementioned points, Singaporean Mandarin speakers do not understand the difference between the meanings of these two phrases well.

There were additional activities that lecturers of other tier-2 modules in the same program did not require their students to do, such as the writing of a paper 2 (research proposal) and a reflective journal. All these were asynchronous activities and could sufficiently compensate for the early releases. In fact, instructors should consider converting some of the class time to asynchronous activities to help fight the effects of Zoom fatigue. As mentioned, some instructors have replaced all synchronous components with asynchronous ones for the purposes of online teaching in this pandemic (Bodis, Reed, & Kharchenko, 2020). However, not everyone has the luxury or liberty to convert a module into a fully asynchronous one but I think it helps to do it maximally.

In addition, the early release time also meant that there were more opportunities for students to ask questions on an ad hoc, one-on-one basis after class. In a f2f setting, this was not always possible, as some students had to leave hurriedly for another class, while others might be too exhausted. Online, it was convenient because they were not in a rush, for example, to take a bus to another location for class. My experience teaching the module online was that more students stayed behind after class to ask questions than in any f2f situation before.

Another activity that can minimize Zoom fatigue might be chat. The chat function is great for class discussion because, unlike a f2f setting, it allows a few students to speak at the same time. This can of course lead to unexpected turns, when what is meant to be a serious discussion turns into a jocular chat session. The following exchanges took place during a student presentation on the topic of Wierzbicka’s

(1984) paper on cups and mugs. Before the part that is shown below, the presenter showcased a series of items and asked the class what they thought each one was, a cup or a mug. The last item was a transparent glass mug that is used in Singapore for drinking coffee, tea or often beer. The beginning of the part below happened when various students started saying what they thought the last item was (e.g., “beer mug”, “beer cup”). The duration of the exchanges below was around 4.5 min. During this period, some students showcased related items on their webcam. Students started saying what each one was and carried the conversation further away from the topic, with some engaging in bantering.

(...)

JYZ: JUG (10:16:14)

SYXM: beer cup

NK: Beer mug

c!: BEER MUG

S: bear cup

TSY: mug

IC: Beer mug

SB: BEER CUP

TWYV: Beer mug

TSN: glass

SB: BEEER CUP

NK: yes

et: water cup..

PG: beer mug

JYZ: Beer jug HAHA

NK: [et] living life sia [possibly because ‘et’ seems to imply that beer is water to her.]

et: HAHA

PG: just is

SB: Coffee shop cup

SYXM: so wholesome

TSN: mugs are thicker and cups are thinner???

NK: [JYZ] ALSO LIVING THE LIFE [possibly because the implication is that ‘JYZ’ drinks beer from a jug.]

NK: Mug is more... cylindrical (???)

c!: That’s like... a pint right [‘c!’ digresses to talk about the capacity of the beer mug.]

SYXM: looks like the kopi mug also

C!: LOL

NK: LOL

SB: LOL

et: LOL

ENJL: alcoholic

S: prof judging hahaha

NK: HAHAHAHAHAHAHA

SYX: thats huge

NK: I love ur jug cylene ;) ['c!'] drinks water from a big glass bottle on webcam.]
 SB: Yes cylene that's a jug
 AL: alcoholic non anonymous ['AL' naughtily implies that 'c!' is drinking beer, which she is not.]
 et: wow [c!]
 SB: True alcoholic ['SB' joins 'AL' to tease 'c!'.]
 JYZ: i feel cheated
 IC: Look like cafe jug
 et: thank u for your demonstration
 NK: [c!] sized jug
 et: show and tell
 c!: [c!] sized jug
 Instructor: For me, a jug has a 'beak' (?) for pouring water
 SYXM: oh yes agree
 c!: Oh yes agree
 NK: Oh yes agree
 PG: yup
 SB Oh yes agree
 JYZ: My whole fam calls [c!]'s jug a big beaker ['JYZ' jokes about herself.]
 JYZ: my life was a lie ['JYZ' jokes about herself.]
 c!: BIG BEAKER
 et: omg
 et: creative
 c!: Ur family woke ['c!' moves away from the topic.]
 Instructor: [JYZ], that's very interesting to me
 NK: LABOV [The presenter makes references to Labov's definition of "cup".]
 S: wa maths equation [The presenter presents a mathematical equation from Labov.] (10:20:45)

Such exchanges from multiple students would not happen in a f2f setting, especially when there is a student standing in front of the class giving a presentation; it would be extremely disruptive and rude. If it happened in a f2f setting, I would stop it (although it never did). However, when the above exchange took place online, I did not stop it. Partly, I was paying attention to the presenter and did not realize at first what was happening in the chat box. When I finally saw what they were doing, I did not have heart to stop it, seeing they were not saying anything totally irrelevant and were having some light-hearted, harmless fun. Perhaps I felt sympathy in view of the current situation (i.e., the pandemic). I thought the exchanges were somewhat cathartic and might thus be beneficial to the students' mental and emotional well-being amid all the physical distancing to combat Covid-19. Commenting on the chat function, one student says:

It was good to have class online because I am able to take down notes during class and comment in the chat (input ideas). It also made the class more light-hearted when people commented in the chat in a more casual manner.

Such light-hearted moments may well help fight Zoom fatigue, or at least distract students from it.

Physical distancing is not inherently associated with online learning, but the two are now coupled because of Covid-19. Physical distance can lead to emotional distance (Brooke, 2020) and, I might add,

social distance, which needs to be addressed. There might be a way to bridge the emotional and social gap between teacher and student. According to Brooke, “a form of Socratic dialogue and modal verbs such as ‘may’ and ‘should’ for hedging” might help to “lessen the authoritarian tone of the discourse”, which in turn reduces emotional distance (2020, pp. 34, 35). Thus, most ironically, online teaching can become a kind of solution to a problem caused by physical distancing.

Interestingly, online teaching also has a way of narrowing the hierarchical distance between teacher and student. It is true the instructor’s position is inherently marked. In a f2f classroom setting, the instructor would be standing much of the time, looming large over the students, giving instructions. Even in Zoom, the instructor’s position is sometimes accentuated. As Ng (2020, p. 69) notes, the instructor’s entry into a breakout room “is marked by the students’ greeting as a mark of respect for the instructor.” However, there is at the same time something egalitarian about Zoom, as figure 1 (courtesy of Ng (2020, p. 70), used by permission) below demonstrates.



Figure 1. Egalitarianism in Zoom

As can be seen in the figure, everyone appears as an image of equal size, and the instructor does not tower over the students like they would in a physical classroom. This could make the instructor more approachable and can partly explain why many students had no qualms approaching me on a one-on-one basis after an online class was dismissed. Zoom could well complement the Socratic dialogue approach that Brooke (2020) recommends.

On the other hand, the emotional and social distance between students is more easily bridged and it may require no effort from the teacher. Isolation might be a big issue for students in a big country but in a small country like Singapore, where nowhere is more than an hour away by car, its effects do not appear very serious. During the semester in question, students were given the choice of living at home or on campus. Those who opted to live at home had family members with them. By contrast, those who opted to live on campus had to face zone restrictions. In a college, students were placed in zones according to their faculty and students from different zones were not allowed to meet except in public spaces such as the dining hall. Students from different colleges were not allowed to visit each other in a college either; if they wanted to meet, they had to do it outside campus. Moreover, in accordance to government ruling, not more than five people from the same zone within a college can gather. Some students were quick to take advantage of that. Students, not more than five, from the same college and zone might work or attend class in the same room; some of them even proudly showed each other off on their webcam. In other words, no one was truly isolated unless one wanted to.

In summary, here are my recommendations, where feasible, for ELT practitioners on the basis of my experience teaching a full module online:

- (1) Be highly competent in the use of the online teaching tool (e.g., Zoom) and the LMS;
- (2) Be keenly aware that Zoom fatigue increases with the passage of the day.
- (3) Release students earlier to minimize the effects of Zoom fatigue;
- (4) Replace online components with asynchronous ones;
- (5) Allow students to banter in the chat box every now and then, as long as it is not too disruptive;
- (6) Create an egalitarian environment to minimize hierarchical and thus emotional distance.

To conclude the discussion, I borrow a quote:

I think we are at the start of exploring many new opportunities with online assessments, and the coming years will see some subjects move away from the traditional writing and speaking assessments that have remained unchanged for decades. (Forrester, 2020, p. 87)

What Forrester says about assessment can be said about teaching. There are ways of teaching that have remained unchanged for decades but online teaching is giving us new opportunities. Even though in Singapore the government is easing the safe distancing rules and universities are encouraging smaller classes to return to campus, online teaching will become increasingly important. It is unlikely that Covid-19 will go away anytime in the near future and new contagions may emerge. Online teaching is the only way we can make sure education of any kind is not compromised when physical proximity is not an option. The year 2020 may thus be remembered for the arrival of the online educator.

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