

Editorial

ELT in the Time of the Coronavirus 2020: Introductory Remarks

Dedicated to the memory of my aunts Pey Lian (1929-2018) and Poi Sheow Wong (1932-2017), who taught me the values of a good education and
未雨綢繆 (*wèi yǔ chóu móu*; 'be prepared for a rainy day')

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I think it is not an exaggeration to say the coronavirus (i.e. COVID-19) came upon us like a thief in the night, making the year 2020 a year to remember for many professions, not least of all EL educators. The almost sudden onslaught of the dangerous and highly contagious coronavirus in many parts of the world has made online teaching and learning a necessity almost overnight. I remember in February 2020, even though there was already news about the coronavirus, I travelled overseas for leisure. At that time, the threat of the virus was not obviously imminent. There was little fear anywhere. Nevertheless, around the same time in February, physical distancing and other measures were increasingly implemented at my workplace, the National University of Singapore (NUS). Soon after that, however, things began to escalate very quickly.

As the coronavirus increasingly became a threat to health and life, the NUS took a number of preventive and distancing measures. They included (in the earlier part of February) the mandatory taking and recording of temperatures twice a day for all staff members and students, the avoidance of large gatherings, (in late February) the initial option of moving classes online to increase physical distancing, (in early March) the taking of photographs of the seating arrangement of each class for contact tracing purposes should the need arise, (in late March) the banning of any class size of over 25 students in a f2f setting, and eventually (in early April) the moving of all classes online. Many of these measures were supported by the university's IT department, who emailed staff information on what IT resources they could use (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams) for online teaching, and invited staff members to approach their helpdesk if necessary.

Although in early April all classes in NUS had to move online, it affected me minimally because by then, my module was approaching the end, with a few presentations and mainly one-on-one consultations left. These were easily accomplished using Zoom, where a presenter could 'share' a document for others to see. However, colleagues who were more concerned about contracting the virus and decided to move their classes online earlier faced time-related challenges. Fortunately, from all accounts, transition was rather smooth for many of my colleagues. Partly, it was because NUS was prepared for this unexpected event. For many years in the past, the university had designated one week per year as an e-learning week. During this week, all f2f classes were suspended and teaching had to take place online. It was foresight that had helped the university.

Nevertheless, there is no room for complacency. There is evidence that the coronavirus could

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become seasonal (AFP, 2020; Bloomberg, 2020) like many other coronaviruses and is thus here to stay. Furthermore, no one knows what other dangerous contagions might emerge in future that would require physical distancing. Online teaching and learning could become a norm or at least a regular occurrence. Thus, it is important for the international community of EL educators to come together and share their pedagogic ideas, methods and resources used in response to this pandemic with one another and, in doing so, learn from and support one another. This is what this special issue ‘ELT in the time of the coronavirus 2020’ is about. Each paper presents teaching methods that allow EL educators to meet the need for physical distancing and offers suggestions to colleagues worldwide. The special issue does not publish all papers at the same time; it publishes the first set of papers submitted, and continues to publish papers received subsequently, expanding the collection possibly until later in the year.

The themes covered are diverse. Some authors are EAP teachers, while some others are teacher trainers. Some authors teach undergraduates, while some others, postgraduates. Some authors write about how they teach academic writing online, while others focus on oral communication. The approaches and methods are diverse too. Some authors use a predominantly synchronous mode of teaching, while some others either a predominantly asynchronous mode or both. Some authors use the ‘Communication Language Teaching’ (CLT) approach, while some others the ‘Content and Language Integrated Learning approach’ (CLIL). The online tools that the various authors use for pedagogic purposes are similarly varied – e.g. Zoom, Padlet, Blackboard, Whatsapp, podcasts. The special issue thus presents to EL educators a banquet of ideas on online teaching.

The first batch includes papers written by contributors based in China, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand and the UK. It includes a paper by Richard Watson Todd, whose study involves a survey of 52 English language teachers at King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi and their reactions to the shift to online teaching during the current pandemic. Among other things, Watson Todd’s findings show that the teachers were able to solve a number of perceived problems with support from various parties, including students. However, the findings also suggest that there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution for online teaching. It is best to equip each teacher with a “broad repertoire of solutions” for “improving their online teaching”.

Wayne Rimmer (Manchester University) promotes the use of Open Educational Resources (OER), such as MERLOT and OpenStax, for TESOL purposes as they are “accessible to the public and licensed”. His paper uses a case study approach to demonstrate “a variety of scenarios in which OER are partial solutions to coronavirus-affected TESOL instruction in university settings.” He hopes that more EL educators will know about OER and make good use of them.

Davies et al. present an overview of how 5 EAP courses in two Sino-US and two Sino-UK universities based in China respond to the current pandemic. The key themes that emerge from their study are interaction, learner autonomy, feedback, and leadership and institutional support. On the basis of their experience running the courses during this period, the authors also present areas of good practice, key challenges faced when transforming the EAP courses from face-to-face to online delivery, and practical implications.

Daron Benjamin Loo showcases his three online tasks, with synchronous and asynchronous components, that can be used to engage postgraduate students of the National University of Singapore in critical thinking and to increase their grammatical competence. One of his recommendations for teachers is to be IT-savvy so as to boost student confidence in online learning and thus increase their willingness to participate in it.

Chiew Hong Ng, an English language teacher trainer at the National Institute of Education Singapore, discusses the challenges of training preservice teachers in the CLT approach with synchronous distancing pedagogic practices using Zoom, and how she addressed some of the challenges.

Adam Forrester, who teaches in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, explains why they replaced a group speaking assessment with a one-to-one discussion assessment when they went online. He then

presents evidence to suggest the possibility that “the one-to-one assessment better reflected the student’s performance than a group assessment”.

Macnaught and Yates’ study reports on their design of “one-off” synchronous online writing workshops for postgraduate students at Auckland University of Technology. They showcase an “online participation matrix” to identify five types of student participation: observant, anonymous, episodic, concealed, and discursive participation. They then discuss how each type of participation is sequenced across a whole workshop.

These are just summaries of some of the papers published in the first batch to whet the reader’s appetite. More papers will appear in the months following so please check this space regularly.

As the guest editor, I would like to say that working on this special issue with the various contributors has so far been a very rewarding experience. Among other things, it has given me the opportunity to become acquainted with and learn from them. I admit that when I first raised the idea of such a special issue with the Chief Editor Kevin Liu, I did not expect to be met with this high level of enthusiasm from the various contributors, all of whom are willing to share their expertise with colleagues worldwide. Kevin, on the other hand, was confident and encouraged me to proceed with the idea. The response has been very heartwarming and I would like to thank Kevin and all contributors for their enthusiasm. In fact, at the time of writing, I am still expecting abstracts and submissions, so it has been a rather exciting time as well. Hopefully, this special issue will in a small way also bring the international family of EL educators closer in this time of the coronavirus 2020 and beyond.

Bon appétit!

References

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