

Introduction



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Abstract The spring of COVID-19 forced teachers to restructure learning materials, content delivery, and learning environment, this leading to utilizing innovative course designs, high-tech learning tools, and engaging web-based learning environments. This shift affects, on the one hand, the perceptions of teachers and learners, and on the other hand, instructional practices, resulting in learned lessons and future envisions about the feasibility of utilizing the web in the context of English language education. In this introductory chapter, we present the background of this special collection on online English language teaching and learning, provide a summary of the expanding corpus of research on online English language education, and introduce the studies published in the collection. This collection of chapters covers the perspectives, implications, challenges, and opportunities of digital transformation in English language education prompted by the increasing accessibility of technology and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords Online language learning · Online language teaching · COVID-19 · Online assessment · Web-based instruction · Online learning environment

The advent of the Internet and the accessibility of technology led to the rising of online teaching and learning, which refer to education taking place over the Internet. Online learning, often referred to as ‘e-learning’ or ‘web-based learning’, poses a series of challenges for both teachers and learners. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, an urgent need for a more robust understanding of designing and maintaining an engaging and flexible digital classroom environment has emerged. Coronavirus has indeed led to a critical shift to online learning mode. Consequently,

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teachers are facing many challenges concerning choosing appropriate web tools for presenting the content either synchronously or asynchronously, motivating students to participate, and assessing students' learning. Focusing on English as a Foreign Language (EFL), this book offers chapters that provide wise advice coming from real practice or grounded theory on how to approach EFL teaching in this 'new normal' situation, maximizing e-learning environments.

Despite the difficulties it brought about, the COVID-19 crisis gave language teachers many chances to experiment with synchronous or asynchronous online learning tools and gain useful knowledge for their future incorporation in instructional practices. Thus, it is crucial for scholars to record the worthwhile lessons of this historically unprecedented move toward using technology in language education given that online teaching may continue to be a part of language education landscape in the post-pandemic era (Tao & Gao, 2022).

Optimizing Online English Language Learning and Teaching serves as a compendium of theory- and concept-based practice chapters addressing practical strategies, techniques, approaches, and methods from theoretical or conceptual perspectives. Besides, it includes research-based chapters with strong pedagogical implications for online English language learning and teaching. Covering topics such as flipped teaching, scaffolded technology-enhanced tasks, MOOCs, online classrooms, digital gaming, mobile learning, and online assessment, this book is an excellent resource for educators of both higher and K-12 education, educational administration, pre-service teachers, educational technologists, and instructional designers, government institutions, policymakers, researchers, and academicians interested in digital English language learning and innovative pedagogies.

This book has multiple objectives: (a) to present an overview of tools, designs, and strategies utilized in providing online teaching and assessment of the English language; (b) to share findings of research on using digital technologies for supporting English language learning; (3) to provide educators with evidence-based online practices for online English language learning and teaching; and (4) to identify promising areas and directions for future innovations, applications, and research in online English language learning and teaching.

This book is divided into two major sections: (a) Issues and Perceptions, covering the most personal side of the learning and teaching experiences through the pandemic and offering an overview of perspectives, factual data, and issues stemming from the pandemic situation; and (b) Practices and Future Envisions, presenting teaching practices that are compatible with online facilities and enhance online learning, outlining online instructional designs and assessment practices covering diverse models and tools for online delivery and assessing learners' performance, and providing implications for structuring a conducive online environment for English language education.

Due to the COVID-19 situation, many teachers have been obliged to engage in emergency remote teaching without any or hardly any prior training. Although the circumstances were difficult, many teachers were able to come up with solutions that resulted in a sense of empowerment (Appel & Robbins, 2021). Additionally, though many students initially struggled with anxiety and a sense of detachment due

to a lack of prior experience with online learning, well-designed pandemic-initiated online English activities provided flexible access to related materials, and built connections between student-teacher and student-student resulting in increased sense of achievement and satisfaction, and becoming able to acknowledge the advantages and challenges of face-to-face and online learning (Kim, 2021; Resnik & Dewaele, 2021). *Part I of this book (Chapter 2 to Chapter 9), “Issues and Perceptions”* sets out to explore how COVID-19 affected EFL learning and teaching overnight, with the pressure to adjust what used to be face-to-face or, at most, blended learning contexts, to fully online situations, going through an unavoidable mid-way phase of emergency remote teaching. This section covers issues and perceptions from two integral points of view: that of learners and that of teachers.

Chapter “[Adapting English Language Teaching: Moving Online During the COVID-19 Crisis](#),” by Inmaculada Fortanet-Gómez and Noelia Ruiz-Madrid, adopts an institutional perspective, showing how institutions that were already into blended learning options found themselves forced to go fully online. The authors focus on the changes that this new context meant in relation to the use of multi-modal digital genres and tools. Their results show that while the necessary technology might be at hand of many teachers (and learners), the change in teachers’ philosophy of learning and teaching has stayed, oftentimes, in the past. Therefore, technology might be key, but not enough for the optimization of online EFL, according to these authors.

While the first chapter focuses on higher education institutions, chapter “[Exploring Teachers’ Capacity to Engage with Remote English Language Teaching Environments: The Interface between Theory and Practice](#),” by Kevin Balchin, Antonia Linehan-Fox and Dina Norris, adopts a similar perspective but focusing on secondary schools in Asia (India, Malaysia, and Taiwan). This qualitative study using questionnaire and interview data shows ELT teachers’ capacity to teach remotely had to be modeled overnight and how this might have affected both teacher and student wellbeing. Consequently, the authors claim there is a need to make remote teaching sustainable so as not to overlook the emotional side.

Students’ identities were also affected by this sudden change to forced lockdown study time. More specifically, as explained in chapter “[Positive Surprises and Particular Struggles: A Case Study Exploring Students’ Adjustment to Online Learning and Associated Emotions](#),” by Mari Alger and June Eyckmans. The authors present questionnaire data collected from 40 students enrolled in an EFL university course in Belgium regarding their adjustment process to the role of online learner across six core themes: social, teacher, self, course, technology, and others. Alger and Eyckmans manage to offer, from the findings observed, practical recommendations which go beyond technological dexterity and tackle online learning from a global, human perspective.

Technology is key, for obvious reasons, in an online EFL context. The sudden move to online-only contexts put both teacher’s and students’ digital communicative competence to test, as expounded in chapter “[Students’ Perceptions of Digital Oral Skills Development in University Students of English for Specific Purposes: Strengths and Weaknesses in Digital Communication in the COVID World](#),” by

Jelena Bobkina and Elena Domínguez Romero. The participants in their study, Engineering ESP students, self-assessed their level of digital communication skills in five areas of knowledge: building communication skills (content/cognition and linguistic area), performing communication skills (physical and socio-emotional areas), and creating digital content skills (technical area). The results reveal that nearly half of the students did not consider themselves proficient enough to manage in an online learning environment. This chapter aims to offer solutions to help students overcome their communicative strengths and weaknesses, not only in digital environments, but also in face-to-face ones.

Creating a positive technology-mediated learning environment is critical to achieving a successful digitized learning process. Chapter “[Language MOOCs as an Emerging Field of Research: From Theory to Practice](#),” by Elena Martín-Monje, highlights the importance of Language MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) as an emergent and expanding field of research. The authors provide an overview of the state of the art in LMOOCs. The authors present theoretical and practical ideas for incorporating MOOCs in English language learning.

In theory-driven chapter “[A Model for Scaffolded Technology-Enhanced Oral Communicative Tasks](#),” Austin Kaufmann, Luca Giupponi, Adam Gacs and Koen Van Gorp describe a model for the design and implementation of oral communicative tasks under the task-based language teaching model combining asynchronous and synchronous online language instruction to foster communicative language learning through incremental task progressions. Although their model was born in pre-pandemic times, it ensures optimal use of online environments in synchronous times, which became primal in pandemic times. In addition, they include a sample lesson on the topic of online furniture shopping and decision-making and suggestions for optimizing the model for different instructional contexts and pedagogical approaches.

In accord with shifting learning and teaching practices into online settings, assessment as an integral component of any pedagogical program was affected creating a number of pedagogical barriers for the teachers. Chapter “[Transition to Online Assessment: Challenges and Issues for Language Lecturers](#),” by Ferit Kılıçkaya, provides new insights on online assessment practices highlighting the major challenges and barriers experienced by EFL lecturers in Turkish tertiary contexts during their transition to online/distance learning and teaching during the pandemic. The chapter concludes with implications for practice and future directions. Specifically, the author recommends more training for enhancing the digital competences of teachers’ educators and pre-service language teachers, particularly in terms of technical and practical aspects of assessing language online.

Though this shift to remote online learning represents a challenge for students, particularly with managing their own learning, such challenges are maximized in deprived environments and students with special needs. Thus, chapter tackles an often-disregarded community in EFL handbooks: students with specific learning difficulties. Danielle Guzmán-Orth, in her chapter “[Designing for Equity: Opportunities for Online English Language Instruction via Accessible Instructional Design](#),” reviews online contexts from an equity and accessibility perspective and

highlights key interdisciplinary frameworks and principles commonly used in education and digital information settings that could impact equitable instructional access to conclude that there is a need to align policy, research, and practice.

After dealing with the most personal side of what the COVID-19 pandemic meant in EFL contexts, *Part II of this book (Chapter 10 to Chapter 18), “Practices and Future Envisions”* delves into the changes that came together with remote teaching in a wide array of contexts. The sudden shift into emergency remote teaching made language teachers grapple with online platforms trying to incorporate principles of communicative language teaching with quality digital language learning applications, online teaching platforms, learning management systems (LMSs) in order to deliver engaging instruction utilizing a mixture of asynchronous and synchronous online language learning models (Pedrotti et al., 2021).

A high-quality online learning environment depends mainly on the teacher who develops adaptive and innovative learning scenarios, establishes engaging and flexible mediums, and selects appropriate tools, platforms and apps using robust criteria to reinforce learning outcomes. The emergent situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic accelerates educators’ migration to virtual platforms. Chapter “[Flipped Teaching through a Massive Open Online Course and a Debate Project for Learners of English at University: A Case Study](#)” by Ana Gimeno-Sanz, goes mainstream though dealing with a very specific innovative methodology: flipped teaching. She administered pre- and post-course surveys, the results of which show how learners were happy to be able to learn autonomously and collaboratively in an online environment.

Moodle is the focus of chapter “[Exploring Moodle Effectiveness in Fostering Online ESP during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Analysis of Task Performance and Students’ Perceptions in Online Language Learning Contexts](#)”, by Antonio-José Silvestre-López and Carolina Girón-García, who examine the Cybertask model for designing an ESP online task about psychotherapy integrated into the Moodle platform at a Spanish university. The authors explore the effectiveness of this asynchronous ‘Cybertask-based Lesson’ as compared to an equivalent synchronous online task guided by the teacher during a live online session by assessing the students’ achievement in learning new specialized content as well as their impressions on the tasks regarding perceived interest and usefulness.

Communication is also key in chapter Robb M. McCollum’s “[Developing Speaking Proficiency in Online Courses through Tabletop Role-playing Games](#)”, where the author displays the effectiveness of games in varied domains: to motivate learners, to build rapport, and to encourage learners to practice the target language without overlooking the potential problems coming along with the use of games for language learning. The author also offers recommendations on how games can be adapted to online English language teaching and learning contexts and supports it with the results of an investigation comparing tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) with Intermediate and Advanced level speaking functions of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines.

Speaking is also the focus of chapter “[Digitalizing a Multimodal Genre-based Approach to Teaching Elevator Pitch: Pedagogical implications and Students’ Experiences](#),” by Vicent Beltrán Palanques. In his study, he focuses on the digitalization of a multimodal genre: Elevator Pitch presentations in the ESP context and on the adaptations needed in the transition to an online environment. The survey administered in this study provides the students’ insights in relation to the classroom dynamics, the digital resources used, and the presentation format of this genre.

Chapter “[Optimizing English Pronunciation of German Students Online and With Praat](#),” by Marcel Schlechtweg, outlines how the phonetic software Praat can be used to improve the pronunciation of German learners of English in an online-based environment. The author presents a detailed plan, in a step-by-step manner, of how the phonetic program Praat can be used in the virtual foreign language classroom to analyze and improve one specific piece of English pronunciation. Praat is used to tackle a known source of inaccuracy for German learners of the English language and optimize the realization of the voiceless interdental fricative /θ/, and to distinguish this sound from the common /s/. The author recommends pedagogical implications as Praat offers visualizations to illustrate aspects of speech from a different, namely visual, perspective, which can help understand the accurate articulation of foreign language speech and improve pronunciation.

Chapter “[Developing L2 Reading Skills: The Advantages of Teacher-Algorithm Collaboration in Digital Learning Games](#),” by Roger Gilabert, Matthew Pattemore and Judit Serra, looks at the potential integration of a serious game that uses an algorithmic sequence for the presentation of some linguistic units to promote reading skills. In this mixed-methods study, the authors explore the gameplay behavior and teachers’ perceptions of the learning potential of adaptive technologies in the context of a serious game Navigo: Pyramid of the Lost Words as part of the European Union’s Horizon 2020 innovation program iRead project.

Additionally, switching to the online mode of delivery requires more efforts to fulfill a degree of constructive alignment between the learning outcomes, the assessment strategies and the feedback strategies that focus on improving future students’ performance and enhancing the self-learning aspect of their education (Gkasis, 2021). Chapter “[Assessing L2 English Writing in an Online Environment: A Two-Stage Approach Using Comparative Judgment and Benchmark texts](#),” by Vanessa De Wilde, Geert De Meyer and Pedro De Bruyckere, focuses on the development of an online tool utilizing a two-stage approach combining comparative judgment and benchmark texts for rating beginners’ L2 narrative writing in Flanders.

Also revolving around assessment, chapter “[Using Speech-to-Text Applications for Assessing English Language Learners’ Pronunciation: A Comparison with Human Raters](#),” by Akiyo Hirai and Angelina Kovalyova, presents a study that focuses on the use of speech-to-text (STT) applications, a variety of automatic speech recognition technology, to explore the potential of using such applications to evaluate the pronunciation of adult EFL learners.

Finally, chapter “[A Checklist Proposal for Assessing the Potential of Language Teaching Apps](#),” by Gloria Luque Agulló and Encarnación Almazán Ruiz, highlights the widespread use of mobile applications in EFL teaching and learning at all

educational levels and the increasing difficulty in identifying the most technically and pedagogically suitable application for a specific teaching context. The authors discuss the need to purposely design a functional, accessible checklist to evaluate apps, enabling EFL prospective and novice teachers to incorporate them into their teaching practices.

The transformation into digitalization and the intra-pandemic learning experiences presents challenges and opportunities to both teachers and students. It manifests that students need to be trained on utilizing coping mechanisms and stress management strategies in order to engage in digital classroom activities utilizing various technological resources and tools. Furthermore, this abrupt turn from the conventional physical classrooms to virtual environment settings reflects educators need to incorporate flexible multiple layers of pedagogy into the educational process including group work, direct discussions, video lectures, and summary insights (Lo & Chan, 2022). Also, this digital transformation reinvigorated insights about the professionalism of teachers reclaiming teacher professional identity as instructional designers and implementers of technology rather than positioning them as mere deliverers of the curriculum (Heggart, 2021). This offers the calls for shaping future research trajectories in teacher education programs and renewing teacher professional identity and considering teacher-as-designer in a blended learning environment (Hoffman, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted educational institutions to adopt teaching and learning strategies that reduce face-to-face interaction and guarantee a smooth transition to the implementation of online and/or blended learning using learning management systems (LMS) (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas) and video-conferencing software (e.g. Microsoft Teams, Zoom) (Kohnke, 2022). Such intra-pandemic learning and teaching experiences highly affect education in the post COVID-19 era by presenting innovative teaching and assessment paradigms and more flexible and personalized delivery modes (e.g. MOOCs and the HyFlex model) that require further research to explore its features and examine the feasibility of these practices particularly in the context of English language education.

This is a book about the perspectives, implications, challenges, and opportunities of digital transformation in English language education prompted not only by the COVID-19 pandemic, and equally valid beyond such dramatic situation worldwide. Written by authors from eight countries across three continents, it is hoped that this book serves as a valuable resource for educators and aid them in creating learning environments that inspire and engage English language learners. Additionally, this book may serve as a primer for new ESL/EFL teachers because it provides principles for selecting and designing technologies, strategies, assessments, and tasks that are well-suited to a varied spectrum of educational settings, always with the aim to enhance learners' satisfaction (Lee, 2021), and thus, hopefully, their whole learning process.

Adopting contextualized perspectives on technology-mediated language learning and teaching in ESL/EFL classrooms, this book establishes a theoretical framework and sheds light on innovative practices within and beyond English language education. We expect that this book delivers what it promises, the optimization of,

until 2020, a voluntarily chosen learning and teaching context which welcomed masses of teachers and learners overnight: the online teaching and learning EFL world.

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