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Digital learning and the ESL online classroom in higher education: teachers' perspectives

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Abstract

This study explores teachers' perspectives with regards to teaching English in virtual classrooms, specifically with regards to teaching English as a second language within the context of emergency remote learning in Hong Kong during COVID-19. Through undertaking thematic analysis of six interviews with English language teachers at a university in Hong Kong, this study explores how teachers view the benefits, challenges and personal and professional consequences of the shift to emergency remote teaching during the pandemic. Taking a social constructivist approach to the topic, the study also seeks to uncover how teachers view such provisions as being improved under future emergencies and with respect to online English language teaching moving forwards generally. This research topic contributes both to a longstanding debate on the ways in which digital technologies can enhance education and language learning, as well as the emerging body of literature examining how teachers and students have responded to the implementation of digital learning in online classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Digital learning, English teaching, Higher education, Social constructivism, Teacher-centric model

Introduction

This research paper explores the experiences, attitudes and perspectives of English as a second language (ESL) teachers regarding the shift to online education as brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study utilises primary qualitative research consisting of interviews with six ESL teachers from higher-education institutes in Hong Kong in order to gauge their experiences, attitudes and perspectives on the shift to online learning with a view to exploring the efficacy and sustainability of online learning moving forward. This is undertaken with a view to contributing to the longstanding debate on the ways in which digital technologies can enhance education and language learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 onwards has instituted an unprecedented shift to education and language learning. At a global level, the necessity of closing schools and restricting access to face-to-face teaching in order to minimise viral exposure has seen education across a number of contexts move towards online platforms and spaces (Chen

et al., 2020). Although online education has been practised for some time and is a highly theorised and studied topic, these shifts to teaching and learning in online environments largely took place without pre-existing plans for online learning on this scale in place (Chang & Fang, 2020). The rapid nature of this transformation in the learning environment means that educationalists are still assessing what the consequences of online learning under these conditions have been for teachers and students alike (Pandit & Agrawal, 2022).

As such, there may be said to be two distinct bodies of literature covering related but distinct phenomena with respect to online teaching and learning. In terms of online teaching and learning generally, there is extensive research dating back some 30 years that has produced well-established principles and best practices regarding online teaching and learning. However, with respect to emergency remote teaching and learning, the absence of a comparable phenomenon to COVID-19 over this period means that there is much less research on emergency remote teaching prior to the outset of the pandemic. As a consequence, online teaching principles and best practices during the pandemic may not match those established on the basis of research over the past 30 years. This distinction in part motivates this research insofar as it is essential to understand the difficulties that teachers have experienced in understanding and implementing these principles and practices under the context of emergency remote teaching.

There have been a number of challenges to arriving at assessments as to what the virus has meant for learners and teachers. The highly localised nature of the response to the pandemic across national education systems means that the provisions for online education varied significantly across regions and states (Aguilera-Hermida et al., 2021). This means that generalisable findings have been difficult to arrive at, necessitating further research into the consequences of online education at regional, national and local levels. It is only through research carried out within these contexts that overall approaches to online education may be assessed and compared across contexts.

Fortunately, there is already a substantial body of research into online education that may be drawn upon in order to guide research in this regard. Online education has been suggested by past researchers to hold significant potential in enhancing the experiences of teachers and learners alike (Livingstone, 2012; Sun & Chen, 2016), suggesting that there may be much to gain from utilising online education further. However, researchers have also suggested that there may be limitations or obstacles to the utilisation of online learning with regards to second language acquisition (SLA) (Lin, 2014). There is therefore an ongoing debate within the area of ELT research regarding the suitability of online teaching for learning English as a second language, as well as with regards to best principles and practices in this area.

Beyond this, online teaching under pandemic conditions likewise engenders conditions for online learning that have not been present in prior research carried out into online learning and ELT/SLA. Understanding how these conditions have been navigated by teachers and what specific or unique challenges the rapid shift to emergency online teaching brought about requires research into teacher perspectives and experiences. For these reasons, new research on the outcomes and experiences of online learning during COVID-19 may be used to assess to what degree the approaches, methods and practices pursued in online contexts cohere with either perspective on the potential for online

learning with regards to English language teaching (ELT). This research seeks to enter into the aforementioned literature on online education in ELT.

These aims and objectives are informed by the findings of the literature review below, much of which is summarised here. As much of this literature now focuses upon how online learning may be better designed and implemented (Groves, 2020), this research is designed to contribute towards this area of the literature on the topic. Critical to ascertaining how online teaching may be improved upon are the ways in which teachers have responded to the shift towards online education given that they are central to its implementation and to the delivery of content (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Therefore, this research is motivated by gaining first-hand accounts and experiences on the advantages and challenges presented by online learning during COVID-19 to ELT. This serves as the primary aim of this research.

As the literature review below also demonstrates, however, the development of an entirely new classroom environment has brought about new demands upon teachers in terms of their pedagogical approaches, available resources and teaching practices (Rapanta et al., 2020). In addition, there is the prospect for the shift to online learning to compound the ongoing issues facing teachers—such as stress and burnout—through negative impacts on the work-life balance and isolation of teachers from school support networks (Mheidly et al., 2020). Assessing how teachers view their own experience of teaching to be impacted by online education serves as a secondary aim to this research, as is reflected in the design of the research outlined in methodology.

In brief, these research methods are designed to attain the objectives of this research in ascertaining how higher-education English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Hong Kong have responded to the shift to teaching in online classrooms during the COVID-19 crisis. Through undertaking semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with teachers, this research utilises a phenomenological approach to thematic analysis in order to arrive at findings regarding the experiences and attitudes of teachers towards the online ESL classroom.

Literature review

This section outlines the literature relevant to the topic of investigation reflected in this study. Dealing first with a broad overview of the literature regarding online education during COVID-19 and its trends, the review then elaborates upon the relevance of this to ELT and SLA, as well as covering the impact upon teachers as well as specific research carried out within the context of higher education institutes in Hong Kong. This review identifies a gap with regards to the extant body of research that this study is designed to close.

Theoretical framework

Before delving into the literature review, it is important to provide an overview of the theoretical framework that serves as the foundation for this research. First, the study utilises a social constructivist approach to understanding learning within an educational context that is in itself related to a social *constructionist* approach to knowledge more broadly. Dealing with the latter first, social constructionism holds that beliefs about physical reality are established through collaborative consensus rather than

reflecting individuated inferences about objective phenomena (Jung, 2019). In engaging with the external world, individuals make meaning out of this world not within a vacuum but against social backdrops, producing meaning through their social interactions with others (Kritt, 2018). As such, at an ontological level, it makes sense to speak of 'social reality' and to understand meaning-making from within this environmental context (Shotter & Gergen, 1994). Naturally, this has certain connotations with regards to how individuals interact and form opinions, views and attitudes from experience of this interaction that are relevant to the design of this study. These factors are considered in more depth at the outset of the methodology section below.

With regards to social *constructivism*, this is a theoretical perspective that is related to but not identical with social constructionism. Describing to some degree social constructionist assumptions within the context of educational learning and research, social constructivism is a theory about the ways in which individual learners make meaning out of social interactions. This moves beyond a solely cognitivist approach to understanding how individuals learn new information—which would be compatible with wholly individuated learning—and holds instead that these cognitive processes often require social interaction for learning to take place (Cobb, 1994). Based on this rationale, it is not engagement with objective natural phenomena that is key to producing mental artefacts, but rather engagement with other individuals. This renders social and cultural backdrops incredibly relevant with regards to how individuals learn and likewise *what* they learn.

The relevance of such a perspective to online learning and emergency remote teaching lies in the substitution of a physical and in-person social environment for one that is abstracted and virtual. Whilst there is the translation of social interactions from the physical to the virtual to consider in itself, there are also potential consequences in terms of the mechanisms of learning associated with the classroom. For example, some studies undertaken from a social constructivist perspective have highlighted the importance of oral communication to learning (Reznitskaa et al., 2007), raising questions regarding the extent of provision for oral communication in virtual classrooms. Other studies have highlighted the importance of group discussion to the learning process (Corden, 2001), again prompting questions regarding how far this may be accommodated in online classrooms. From a social constructivist perspective, there are important questions regarding how learning might take place in online classrooms given the assumptions of the theoretical approach.

There are also further questions specifically relevant to SLA prompted by the communicative of communicative learning theory (CLT) within ELT. CLT holds that second languages are acquired through using language for everyday communicative purposes rather than through overtly instructional methods (e.g., such as the grammar-translation method) (Nunan, 1991). At a practical level, the dominance of CLT as a perspective necessitates frequent oral communication and the use of the target language within naturalistic everyday discussions. Again, the extent to which this can be incorporated into online teaching provides a quandary that researchers may be tasked with resolving. The prospect of incorporating a CLT approach to online teaching and emergency remote teaching, in particular, is expanded upon in more detail below.

Online education

Providing justification for an emergent field of online education, McKnight et al. (2016) originally identified five primary roles of technology in developing the learning environment, including improvements to teacher and learner access to e-resources, improving communication between teachers and learners, providing flexible time arrangements, expanding learner skill sets and discipline, and creating new, innovative roles for teachers and learners. Whilst the literature on online education prior to the pandemic may be characterised by theoretical perspectives combined with smaller scale studies, it has since the pandemic become a rapidly growing area of investigation. As some have observed, however, it is also a highly asymmetrical area, with research at the level of higher education being comparably neglected compared to research into online education at the level of primary and secondary schooling (Carrillo & Flores, 2020).

This asymmetry is reflected in the experiences of students in many instances as well. Whilst many students have been able to utilise online education to its fullest, others may have been inhibited by family circumstances, such as a lack of suitable technology, connectivity, or study space at home (Roberts & Danechi, 2021). Nevertheless, online education has permitted hundreds of millions of students to continue to receive an education where otherwise this would not have been possible in conjunction with mass school closures (OECD, 2020). Whilst an interpretation of emergency remote learning as being 'better than nothing' is very likely warranted, there still remain concerns about these asymmetries in experiences among teachers and students alike.

The persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic has either enabled or forced higher learning institutions and stakeholders to adopt contemporary technological tools for education delivery. There is a significant amount of literature that has suggested the potential for improvements to SLA as a consequence of the pandemic. For one, some proponents of 'deschooling' education have argued that the pandemic has presented an 'opportunity' for maximising the benefits of moving education outside of the traditional classroom environment (Groves, 2020). For example, online education might make classes more inclusive by allowing students who may not attend in-person classes for whatever reason an opportunity to engage with online lessons (Campbell, 2021).

Conversely, there is also a significant body of literature emerging that suggests that there may be negative results to moving education online. Some, for example, have highlighted the reduced role of the teacher in online education, such as through the increased propensity to deliver pre-recorded lectures and lessons (Ambler et al., 2020; Konig et al., 2020). Others have found that English lecturers at a university level were poorly prepared for transferring classes to online platforms, with uncertainty also about how to rapidly translate their curriculum into an online lesson (La Velle et al., 2020). For this reason, some such as Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) have argued that 'emergency' online teaching may fail to carry with it many of the alleged benefits of online education noted in prior research.

From a social constructivist perspective on teaching, this is potentially problematic given the construction of knowledge taking place through social interactions themselves (Hamat & Embi, 2010). For instance, some research has indicated that there are barriers to teachers implementing scaffolding through emergency remote teaching, with teachers perceiving there being insufficient scope for taking such an approach in the applications

used for emergency remote teaching throughout the pandemic (Donham et al., 2022). On the other hand, a review of the literature on emergency remote teaching conducted from a social constructivist perspective presented such challenges as ‘teething problems’ and argued that many teachers had successfully created online communities of learners throughout the pandemic (Agopian, 2022).

In the context of ELT, there have been concerns expressed regarding how a communicative approach to language teaching (CLT) might function in online environments (Teh, 2021). For instance, one study carried out in China found that college-level English courses moved to emergency remote teaching suffered from both instability of network platforms as well as a lack of sufficient teacher–student interactions (Sun, 2022). These perspectives may be contrasted with those of emerging pro-online education theories, such as connectivism, which conceives of learning taking place across increasingly online networks (Siemens, 2005). How conducive online environments are to SLA is therefore a question to some extent mediated by theoretical perspective.

Online education and EFL

With regards to EFL courses, Hazaymeh (2021) observes that there are multiple functional advantages ranging from accelerated distribution of course content to innovative learning materials to knowledge sharing and social information exchange. In an evaluation of available technologies, Lo (2020) highlights the advantages of authentic language learning using visual cues, digital audio, and artificial intelligence (AI) supported assessments to test student abilities. This supposedly corroborates pre-existing research regarding the potential for online education to enhance language teaching and learning. Whereas traditional lecture-based classrooms rely upon teacher demonstration and student exercises, digital learning supposedly has the potential to provide a more immersive experience through innovative modules, educator creativity, and interactive student experiences (Lo, 2020; McWilliam & Dawson, 2008).

Similarly, Kodrle and Savchenko (2021) suggest that the conversational and interactive advantages associated with multimedia EFL applications are conducive to ‘favourable communication’ practices that are not only integrative but are directed towards a practical translation of knowledge into meaningful real-world outcomes. Others have suggested the utility of ‘gamification’ towards L2 acquisition (Lo & Mok, 2019). From word association to goal execution to dialogue construction, the familiarity of digital natives with the paratextual experience in online gaming allegedly has a direct and transferrable relevance in digital L2 learning experiences (Lo & Mok, 2019). Similar recommendations for an emergent digital ecosystem in EFL learning proposed by Rahimi and Yadollahi (2017) suggest that digital storytelling and exchanges allow learners to ‘develop their language literacy’ by engaging in collaborative reinforcement exercises and ‘constructive dialogue with teachers and groupmates.’

However, there is also a significant amount of research that indicates potentially negative outcomes in relation to the implementation of online education with regards to SLA. The sudden shift from traditional to digital learning was surprising to many higher education students, with Rahman (2020) reporting that despite their experience with digital technologies (e.g. home computing, mobile applications), many adjustments to behaviours, awareness, and skill sets were needed during this process. In a small

sample interview of students at the higher education institution, UKI Toraja, Allo (2020) observed a variety of responses to the sudden shift from traditional education to online learning. Whilst some students reported experiencing cost and resources-related challenges, the acknowledgement of the advantages of persistent digital learning despite widespread disruption during the pandemic in other industries was viewed as positive (Allo, 2020). Students reported a need for instructor awareness regarding technological, material, and access-based challenges in relation to the online curriculum and course scheduling; however, through social networks and peer support, many hurdles were overcome (Allo, 2020).

Despite positive assessment of students' ability to adapt to the digital learning experience by Allo (2020), other evidence in this field suggests that the transition has been challenging for both students and teachers. For example, Pobegavlov (2021) reveals that due to the switch to online education, instructors have been unable to 'provide their educational influence' and leverage their pedagogical skill sets to instruct students via online courses in the same ways that they would have demonstrated in traditional classes. Students without the prerequisite skill sets, alternatively, have found their transition into digital learning a difficult process, one which has resulted in frustration, poor performance, and pathway uncertainties (Pobegavlov, 2021). Similarly, Hava (2019) has identified as frustration, discontentment, negativity, and resistance to change among students. Key concerns such as the time-consuming nature of the educational process, the difficulty of the digital ecosystem, and the meaning versus value of the digital content were suggested to lead to student frustrations and an inability to transition into more productive EFL outcomes (Hava, 2019). There is therefore a lack of consensus across the literature as to the suitability of online education with regards to EFT and SLA.

Teacher experiences during COVID-19

An aspect of the literature that has emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the extent to which teachers and lecturers have been impacted by the move to the online classroom environment. With respect to workload, research is largely split as to whether the shift has positively or negatively impacted the workload of teachers. Some studies have indicated that teacher workload has reduced due to reduced contact time with students following school/university closures (Kaden, 2020). Alternatively, other studies have found that 72% of lecturers found remote working stressful, with even those with prior experience of online teaching finding it more stressful than anticipated (Fhloinn & Fitzmaurice, 2021).

The risk of the prolonged stress associated with periods of increased workload is the phenomenon of 'burnout' among teachers. Burnout refers to teachers becoming overcome with stress to the degree that it impacts their well-being and was among the most prevalent concerns of teachers prior to the onset of the pandemic (Ekinci & Acar, 2019). It is also a factor highly associated with teachers and lecturers leaving the profession (Bruce & Cacioppe, 1989), a concern given the continuing high demand for EFL teachers in Hong Kong (Copland et al., 2020). One study of university lecturers in Malaysia found a high degree of burnout among personnel who worked at home during the pandemic as compared with prior to the onset of the pandemic (Fitriasari et al., 2022), indicating that it may produce negative outcomes for teachers and lecturers.

A further cause of teacher attrition that may be relevant is the impact of teaching workload upon work-life balance (Buchanan et al., 2013). Some studies have found that work that 'leaves the classroom' is a major source of stress and worry to teachers as it reduces the time they have for activities outside of work (Ovendon-Hope et al., 2018). A meta-analysis of research into work-life balance throughout the pandemic found that the transition to online learning was associated with a decline in the quality of work-life balance among lecturers, resulting in poorer psychological well-being (Susilaningsih et al., 2021). However, other studies have indicated that experienced lecturers were far less likely to struggle in transitioning towards online education, indicating that years of experience may be a relevant factor in teacher experience of online education during COVID (Rapanta et al., 2020). This suggests that experiences may vary between teachers contingent upon certain variables that provide resistance or susceptibility to the stresses associated with online teaching.

The context of Hong Kong

Research within the context of Hong Kong exclusively has produced findings relevant to this study's topic. Pre-COVID studies were largely positive regarding the potential for the outcomes for online education as compared with face-to-face lectures (Evans et al., 2020; Kekkonen-Moneta & Moneta, 2002). However, research carried out during the COVID pandemic and since has been less positive regarding its evaluations of the outcomes of online education. One survey of over 1200 university students found that a majority were dissatisfied with their online learning experiences (Mok et al., 2021). Others have found subject-specific problems with recreating learning experiences in online environments (Gamage et al., 2020). Some studies have attempted to analyse the impact and its direction with regards to ELT. One study found that an ESL teacher had fewer interactions with students (Cheung, 2021), though it is notable that the study only utilised interviews with one teacher. Another study of primary-level ESL teachers found that ICT self-efficacy was correlated with an intention to continue using technology in post-pandemic teaching practices (Bai et al., 2021), though similar studies at the level of higher education have not been carried out. This indicates a gap in the literature with regards to the challenges ESL teachers may face at a university level.

With regards to teacher experiences, some studies have noted impacted psychological well-being in the adaptation to online teaching (Cheng & Lam, 2021; Kong & Moorhouse, 2020; Yau et al., 2022). Others have noted burnout among teachers caused by stresses associated with the transition to online teaching (Lau et al., 2022). However, few primary qualitative studies appear to have investigated the impact upon English language teachers specifically at the higher-education level within Hong Kong. One study, for example, utilised in-depth interviews with teachers, but only included two teachers in the study's actual findings (Teng & Wu, 2021). However, research at lower levels of school suggest there may be negative outcomes for EFL teachers (Wong et al., 2022). Likewise, research on EFL teachers from other states indicates that there may be negative consequences for the well-being of teachers under the conditions of online teaching during COVID-19 (Morska et al., 2022), implying the need for more investigation into these factors in the context of Hong Kong.

Research gap

As this study has indicated, there is a gap in the literature with regards to the perspectives of ESL teachers at the higher-education level in Hong Kong as to their experiences of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature review has revealed generally apparent challenges in translating classroom ELT into a virtual environment both generally and especially within the context of emergency remote teaching, given the apparent lack of preparedness of institutions, teachers and students for this transition. The vaunted benefits to online teaching generally and the conditions and caveats for its successful practice were not necessarily met under the conditions of remote emergency teaching as a consequence, though whether this is the case has not yet been established in the context of Hong Kong. Though some research indicates difficulties in transitioning to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges facing teachers within other contexts have not been established on the basis of primary qualitative research into the experiences of English language teachers in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, there is the need to close the gap in this topic area in order to arrive at recommendations that might improve principles and practice in this area under similar future conditions.

Research questions

Identifying that there exists a research gap regarding the experiences of English language teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic mandates generating research questions designed to close this gap. Taking a social constructivist perspective to this also requires formulating a research question that attempts to close the gap on the types of teaching practice related to a social constructivist approach to learning. As such, the following research questions have been devised towards these ends:

What do university-level EFL teachers in Hong Kong view as the advantages and disadvantages of teaching English in an online classroom?

What did teachers feel were the challenges to implementing online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with regards to practices associated with a social constructivist approach?

What was the experience of teachers of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and how do they feel this impacted them both professionally and personally?

How do teachers envisage online education being improved in order to better benefit both EFL teachers and students moving forwards beyond the pandemic?

How these questions might be answered forms the focus of the following section outlining this research study's methodology.

Methodology

This section outlines the design behind this research study, justifying its methodological decisions in terms of the theoretical and practical motivations behind its design. This discussion is carried out through the presentation of the rationale behind the

design of the study's data collection and analysis methods, the considerations regarding ethics, reliability and validity that were factored into the study's design, as well as describing the actual processes of data collection and analysis themselves.

Design philosophy

With regards to the theoretical framework behind this study, as stated above, this research is carried out within a social constructivist paradigm. Whilst social constructivism in education is associated with Vygotsky (1978) and learning through interaction with the social environment (1994), social constructionism describes a broader ontological and epistemological position regarding how individuals make meaning out of their environment (Gergen & Gergen, 2007). In either case, these theories hold that social practices shape institutions such as schools and are in turn shaped by these cultures (Witkin, 2012).

With regards to how individuals view the online classroom, it is important to understand that their views will be mediated by the social practices of themselves and others due to how social reality is constructed (Shotter & Gergen, 1994). It is worth noting that—epistemologically speaking—this process of meaning making is also a subjective process (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Understanding why teachers might deliver content through certain practices requires understanding how they make meaning out of their interactions with the social environment and likewise how this translates into practice. At its core, then, social constructivism implies the need for an interpretivist paradigm to understand how teachers process information and make decisions on the basis of it (Pulla & Carter, 2018).

There are therefore both theoretical and practical reasons for taking a qualitative approach to research in order to address the research questions above. For one, empirical methods of data collection typically focus on material data such as practices themselves rather than how individuals interpret them (Given, 2008). Similarly, quantitative methods of data analysis are better suited to data that may be quantified and examined for correlations with other sets of data, a process by which individual voices and perspectives may be lost (Yilmaz, 2013). By way of comparison, qualitative methods can yield more personalised and detailed data regarding attitudes and experiences (Baxter & Jack, 2008). For this reason, qualitative methods of data collection and analysis ought to prove conducive to answering this study's research questions.

Data collection

For similar reasons, interviews have been chosen as a method of data collection. Though surveys were explored in a pilot study, it was decided that interviews were able to offer more individualised experiences and perspectives (Peters & Halcomb, 2015). One-to-one interviews were selected due to the potential for group biases in conducting focus groups (Frey & Fontana, 1991) and the propensity for participants to be more forthcoming in their answers in one-to-one settings (Marvasti, 2004). Interview questions were designed to be open in order to allow participants freedom in answering, as closed questions can sometimes be leading or discourage detailed responses (Allen, 2017; Baxter & Jack, 2008). Questions were semi-structured so as to allow the researcher to encourage

participants to offer more detail on areas of relevance without leading them in the content of their answers (Marvasti, 2004).

Sample

In terms of the sample size, six participants were selected for interviews. As the above literature review observed, previous studies utilised smaller samples, which may impact the validity of findings (Secor, 2010). Six participants have been argued to be within the recommended range for undertaking thematic analysis of interview data (Fugard & Potts, 2014). The participants are all ESL teachers at higher education institutes in Hong Kong with at least 4 years' experience so as to control for this variable. There are three male and three female participants and all are Hong Kong nationals, so as to control for nationality as a variable.

Data analysis

This study utilised thematic analysis for its approach to data analysis, a process by which the themes raised across a text are identified and used to generate results and findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As Kiger and Varpio (2020, p. 2) state, thematic analysis 'is a method for analysing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyse, and report repeated patterns' and involves 'interpretation in the processes of selecting codes and constructing themes'. Coding therefore largely takes the form of generating themes themselves, especially themes that may be generalised across an entire interview or selection of interviews (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The process of coding utilised was that of inductive coding, by which the researcher generates codes/themes as they encounter the data, rather than coding according to a predetermined set of codes for themes they expect to find (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). This has the advantage of reflecting accurately the themes actually raised across the text (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019), though does also involve comparably more labour than compared with deductive coding (Thomas, 2013). In generating themes inductively, researchers are therefore more able to identify patterns across a text, as well as to emphasise any outliers or particularly emphatic points raised by individual participants (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

Ethics

Before undertaking the data collection, certain ethical concerns were taken into account. First, the relevant permissions were sought from the institution with regards to undertaking primary research. Central to the efficacy and reliability of the research, Wallen and Fraenkel (2001) observe that ethical responsibility is of paramount concern, directing oversight and administration to protect the rights and welfare of the sample population. Nonmaleficence, the prevention of harm to participants in a given study, is identified by Punch (2014) as a core expectation of any primary research techniques.

As undertaking primary qualitative research may be impacted by ongoing or new COVID restrictions on face-to-face interactions (Tremblay et al., 2021), it was resolved to use video messaging software to conduct and record interviews. Participants were informed regarding the purposes of the research and how their data would be stored and used, with informed consent being collected verbally after this (Oliver, 2010). Data

was designed to be stored securely and anonymised at the point of transcription so as to protect the identities of the participants from any personal or professional repercussions to their participation in the research (Saunders et al., 2015). This also has the effect of encouraging more honest and open responses from participants (Babbie, 2015).

Reliability and validity

As has been discussed above, there are a number of factors that may impact the reliability and validity of such research. For one, carrying out primary qualitative research on the experiences of teachers at one institution in Hong Kong impacts the generalisability of results as compared with undertaking surveys of teachers from various institutions. Whilst triangulating results through mixed-methods research often provides a means of improving the reliability of the findings of small-scale interview studies (Ivankova et al., 2006), the small-scale nature of this study placed certain practical limitations on its methods, whilst prioritising the emphasis on teacher experiences and perceptions took precedence over generalisability. As such, pursuing qualitative methods in isolation was undertaken at the expense of triangulation (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012).

A further factor that may impact reliability and validity is in terms of the influence of researcher bias on qualitative studies of this kind. In terms of data collection, there is the potential for the role of the interviewer to skew the responses of participants given their role in the research instrument (Cypress, 2017). Here, using open-ended questioning was selected as a means of offsetting bias through asking leading questions (Rapley, 2001), as open questioning allows less scope for interviewers to influence participants (Clark et al., 2019). Nevertheless, taking a semi-structured approach to questioning can still have this effect and interviewers therefore must be tasked with taking a reflexive and self-aware approach to the interviewing process (Chenail, 2011).

In terms of data analysis, the role of the researcher can contribute towards bias in findings (Mackieson et al., 2018). Furthermore, thematic analysis has been criticised for lacking rigour and for being more open to bias than other approaches to data analysis (Holloway & Todres, 2003). A potential solution to this is to use an analysis method that involves more than one researcher and that synthesises their findings (REF); however, this was not possible in this instance due to practical limitations. Instead, other approaches designed to improve reliability and validity were pursued. For instance, the process of constant comparison was used when undertaking coding so as to ensure a thoroughly rigorous approach to the identification of themes across the data (Thomas, 2013). As Nowell et al. (2017) remark, it is also possible to demonstrate the trustworthiness of thematic analysis through describing in detail the decision-making process underlying the analysis process itself. For this reason, the processes of data collection and analysis are described in depth below.

Processes

This research was undertaken according to the following processes. First, participants were invited through an open advertisement placed in teaching groups on social media internal to the institution where the research was to take place. The advertisement provided basic information about the study and included a brief demographic survey at the point of application. From this, potential participants were manually scoped according

Table 1 Excerpt from participant B’s interview

	Q: In what ways do you feel that your students benefitted from the online classroom environment?	
	A: You mean in terms of uh English acquisition or more broader or-	
	Q: Either or	
No benefit to SLA Difficult to CLT Tech problems	A: I think they probably did <i>not</i> benefit in terms of what they learnt in English. Because there was only so much they could speak to each other in that environment. We had many problems with technology, with the breakdown of technology but there were also some benefits	SLA neg CLT neg Tech probs
	Q: Such as?	
Accessibility good Attendance good	A: Uh, so I think that it was very accessible for people. We had more people in a lesson sometimes than I might get in a lecture. So attendance was actually very good and I think that they like attending from home. [...]	Access pos Atten. pos

Table 2 Thematic cluster grid for participants

<i>Advantages and benefits</i>			<i>Disadvantages and challenges</i>		
Accessibility	Motivation	Attendance	Communication/ interactivity	CLT difficulties	Informal assessment
Online/digital resources	Recorded lessons		Tech capabilities	Tech literacy	Tech problems
<i>Personal experience</i>			<i>Improvements</i>		
Workload	Work-life balance	Stress	Blended class- rooms	Pedagogical guid- ance	Tech training
Burnout	New skills		Tailored platforms		

to the criteria set out above. Prior to the interview, all relevant information was given and verbal consent was received. Interviews took place through video messaging software and audio recording software was used to record the interviews. At the point of transcription, all personal information was anonymised.

The processes of data analysis were carried out by a sole researcher and followed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) model set out by Smith et al. (1999). Each transcript was read twice prior to any coding, with initial thoughts being recorded in the left column of the transcript. Following this, the transcript was re-read again, with thematic codes for that participant being recorded in the opposite margin (Table 1). Once this process had been completed for all participants, the codes generated for each participant were sorted into themes and subthemes, recorded in a ‘cluster grid’ (Table 2). This cluster grid serves as the themes found through the process of thematic analysis and is used to structure the section on findings that follows.

Findings

This section presents the findings of this research as generated through the thematic analysis of interviews with six teachers. The themes generated through coding these interviews have been sorted into a thematic grid reflecting the prevalent and pronounced themes across this body of data (Table 2). The thematic categories for these themes form the structure to the presentation and discussion of findings that follows.

Advantages and benefits

The teachers interviewed were asked about the advantages that they felt the online classroom provided to learners and the benefits they felt they accrued from it as teachers. The teachers broadly agreed that an advantage to the shift to online learning was that it allowed for greater accessibility for students and teachers alike. One teacher stated that it cut down on her journey to work, making it easier for her to work long hours. Another felt that 'lazy' students were more likely to attend when they could access education online. Five of the six teachers stated that they felt that students were motivated by the opportunity to use online learning, though one argued that this motivation was in fact detrimental:

I don't believe that they engage in the same way when utilising the online classroom because I think they're probably watching TV or something at the same time. I'm not sure they deal well with the distraction even though they may be 'present'. (Teacher C)

However, the majority of the teachers agreed that attendance had improved during the move to online education and cited improved accessibility and student motivation as the reason for this.

Regarding the benefits that they themselves felt online education brought, convenience was again brought up by a majority of teachers. Participant A argued that though they struggled initially to adapt to the online platform, there was a plethora of ready-made digital resources they could employ in their teaching. This, they felt, reduced their need to plan lessons so thoroughly, such as through transferring content onto multimedia platforms for delivery in the physical classroom. Two other participants (B and D) stated that they used pre-recorded lessons on a couple of occasions and found this was beneficial in that they could refer students back to timestamps in their lectures. Recording and uploading lectures was a practice they believed to be beneficial, and they felt it was worth continuing even when transitioning back to the physical classroom due to the positive impact it had on students.

Disadvantages and challenges

All six teachers cited interactivity as a potential obstacle to implementing online education successfully. Three of the teachers stated that there was difficulty in undertaking speaking and listening exercises, which they felt were essential to taking a communicative approach to teaching English. One stated that she felt the limitations of the platform were such that she was forced to resort to a 'grammar/translation' method in order to teach English. She elaborated on the reasons for this:

So there are problems with the platform—the online platform we used that are inherent to it. Like, we cannot actually have clear back-and-forth discussions because the audio keeps cutting out. I can't have little groups of people chatting and I can watch and interject, the conversation cannot naturally flow, even in breakout rooms and that's because of the technology limitations (Participant E).

Another teacher cited difficulties in conducting informal assessments of the students in his class:

I cannot judge where their English is up to because I do not hear them all talking English together. If we are trying to do something immersive, how can we do that if only one can talk? (Participant F)

All teachers were therefore broadly agreed on the communicative/interactive limitations of the technology they were being asked to use. This constitutes a finding of this research that has not previously been reported by research carried out into the emergency remote teaching of ESL in Hong Kong.

Teachers also stated that they lacked confidence in using the available technology to the utmost of its capabilities. One teacher stated that as an older teacher she wasn't as 'confident' in utilising technology as other teachers. However, a relatively much younger participant also stated that they weren't as 'tech literate' as their students and that this presented a barrier to using the platform:

In the first weeks, I had to rely on my students to tell me how to operate the platform and how to use breakout rooms and things. And that's not a great look as a teacher, it's not very professional. (Participant E)

The teachers also all stated that their lessons were disrupted by technology issues throughout. Frequent interruptions in tasks and discussions were caused by issues such as computers freezing, crashing, and internet disconnections experienced by the participants. Participant A stated that one of his classes refused to use their cameras—using technology difficulties as an 'excuse'—making it difficult to know who was speaking or who was even present in the class. Such problems interrupted the teaching process and made the online classroom frequently disruptive.

Personal experience

The teachers interviewed were prompted as to how the shift to an online classroom had impacted their workload and work-life balance. The participants were largely split on their answer to this question. Some such as Participant A felt that their workload was initially greater due to the struggles of adapting to the online classroom but then found that the availability of digital resources reduced their workload as the weeks went by. Others such as Participant F felt that their workload had increased due to the unfamiliarity of planning classes online, as well as the absence of informal chats after lessons, requiring more correspondence via email than normal.

The participants were also split with regards to how the change had affected their work-life balance. Two felt that there was no change at all, with Participant E stating that she was 'still busy' regardless of teaching online or in person. Whilst participant A felt that their workload had decreased as they became accustomed to teaching in the online classroom, participants B and D stated that it had eaten into their work-life balance through removing the barrier between classroom and home environments. Participant B summarised their feelings on this topic:

I have two young children and I've no means for separating that home life and work life. It just compounds the stress, I'm dealing with work and home stresses at the same time. I've coped with it but I would rather not have to do it.

Participant D stated very strongly that they would retire if they felt the future of teaching was online education due to the amount it was impacting their work-life balance. The feelings and experiences the teacher described are akin to that of the 'burn-out' phenomenon described in the literature review above.

However, all teachers did state that they had acquired new skills through the shift to online education. One felt that they would be better equipped for a career outside education due to improved technology literacy and three others stated that they felt they were better teachers as a consequence of having to adapt to this environment. There were therefore indications of professional development instigated by the shift to the online classroom.

Improvements

When asked about the ways in which online education could be improved, all six responded by stating that it ought to be balanced with in-person learning in future.

I feel that totally online all the time is only appropriate in such an emergency and even then only when it is actually required. The transition to and from online learning should have been smoother, it was not I believe sufficiently guided in research and planning. (Teacher C)

Whilst two went as far as to state they'd prefer never to teach online education, they were all agreed that any future for online learning required a blended approach rather than teaching solely online.

Another avenue for improvement shared among the teachers was that better training and guidance ought to be offered for teachers.

Yes, in-service training is essential. This should be part of CPD [continuous personal development] and I don't understand how we were not given more instruction and support. It was just a sort of 'oh, you'll figure it out approach'. That's not good enough. (Teacher E)

Whilst some stated they felt the resources were adequate, there was agreement that there was insufficient guidance as to how to adopt the approaches and methods to teaching expected of them to an online environment. Similarly, they felt that it was assumed that they would easily adapt to teaching online, assuming a higher level of technology literacy than actually existed among teachers. Improved training and clearer pedagogical guidance were therefore themes across the participants' responses.

Finally, there was also broad agreement with regards to the need to improve the online platforms themselves. Two participants suggested creating brand new software tailored for teaching that included more reliable and suitable methods of communication. Participant C thought it might be useful to recreate the traditional classroom's layout in the application, with a teacher screen and virtual whiteboard dominating the screen, so as to recreate the teacher experience. Participant A also stated that technologies such as virtual reality headsets ought to be explored to recreate the physical classroom in the virtual world. It is clear from this that the teachers broadly felt

that the online classroom ought to mimic the layout and experience of the traditional classroom as far as possible and that technologies ought to be adapted to this end.

Discussion

The above results from the data analysis provide some answers to the research questions of this study. For one, it is clear that the participant teachers view online education as entailing both advantages and disadvantages. For example, accessibility and student motivation to attend classes appear to be a consequence of the shift to online education. This corroborates existing research that indicates that greater accessibility may be able to offset deficits some students have in attending lectures, such as mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (AlAzzam et al., 2021). This study therefore corroborates the findings of extant research in this regard and establishes that they hold true within the context of ELT in Hong Kong.

However, the disadvantages are focused largely in terms of difficulties communicating utilising current information communication technologies. Indeed, communication issues have served as a focus of previous research in this regard also (Baker, 2004). When taking into consideration the high proportion of teachers in Hong Kong that support CLT (Miller & Aldred, 2016), these technological limitations may be viewed as an insuperable barrier to effective SLA through online platforms. The finding from this study that English language teachers in Hong Kong may view online teaching as insufficiently adapted to permit the implementation of CLT in the virtual English classroom is a finding unique to this study and represents a novel contribution to this area of the literature. The degree to which teacher perceptions in this regard is related to their holding social constructivist perspectives was not itself a focus of this study, however, though invites further research in this regard from future studies.

On the other hand, it is possible that the online environment is not itself perceived as a barrier to implementing CLT into English language teaching, but rather that other factors serve as barriers to this. For example, it may be that teachers' self-reported low levels of technology literacy and proficiency may be serving as a barrier. Alternatively again, poor internet connectivity may be to blame here, as has been indicated by previous research in Hong Kong (Yeung & Yau, 2022). This is to say that the research corroborated previous research in this area in finding that there are many related issues perceived by teachers as providing challenges to implementing English language teaching in virtual classrooms. Differentiating between these causes and ranking them goes beyond the scope of this study, though it is clear that perceived issues in implementing CLT serves as a common complaint among ESL teachers within this context.

It is little surprise then that the teachers broadly agreed that the platforms ought to be redesigned to accommodate the communicative demands of ELT. Interestingly, the suggestion that the online classroom ought to be tailored to mimic the physical classroom suggests that teachers generally do not agree with the democratised nature of the layout and turn-based speaking format of the online meeting software generally adapted for teaching throughout the pandemic. It instead suggests that teachers prefer a teacher-centric model for the classroom and would prefer to see this structure reflected in the online classroom environment. This is supported by evidence in favour of such an

approach among teachers in Hong Kong (Wong, 2015). The call for using virtual reality headsets in teaching may also be considered against existing research into the feasibility of this technology (Chessa & Solari, 2021).

There is therefore a potential avenue here for future research into the perceptions of English language teachers in Hong Kong towards both the role and status of the teacher in the classroom and the translatability of their favoured role to online teaching. It may be that criticisms of online teaching or perceived shortcomings are related to ideological or cultural perceptions of the ideal role of the teacher in the classroom. Though this study's findings cannot themselves support such a conclusion, further research in this regard may be sparked by the revelations of the interviewed teachers' opinions and attitudes presented above.

Finally, teachers were split as to whether their personal experience of online teaching was a positive or negative one. Some teachers viewed online teaching as freeing up more time for them due to an abundance of online resources, whereas others saw online teaching as eating into their work-life balance. This reflects a split in the literature observed in the literature review, with previous research indicating either point of view (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2021). It ought to be noted that one of the six respondents was particularly emphatic with regards to experiencing stress as a consequence of the move to online education and they related this to a desire to leave the profession, in-keeping with the assumed mechanisms of burnout and teacher attrition observed elsewhere (Madigan & Kim, 2021). However, online teaching did also provide opportunities for professional development, a touted advantage claimed by advocates of online education (Abaci et al., 2021). There is therefore the potential for adaptation and growth among teachers, though the barriers and sticking points that discourage teachers require understanding and addressing also to prevent losses in teachers from the profession.

Conclusion

This research study has explored the attitudes, experience and perspectives of in-service higher-education ESL teachers in Hong Kong towards online education during COVID-19. Using a thematic analysis of interview data, this study has found that teachers view both advantages and disadvantages to the online classroom, emphasising its accessibility for learners but also the difficulties in communicating and teaching in an interactive way. This has been attributed to shortcomings in the existing technologies available. Teachers envisage potential improvements such as developing a tailored teaching experience that can recreate the physical classroom experience in the virtual environment as far as possible, as well as through making online communication more reliable.

Teachers were split in their personal experience of online teaching, with some viewing it as reducing their workload and others seeing online education as eroding their work-life balance. How factors such as teacher experience, ICT literacy, and age factor into these experiences may serve as a focus for future research to evaluate why views varied so much over the course of this research. It is worth noting there is also the prospect for professional development as instigated by experience of adapting to online teaching. However, teachers generally view the future role for online teaching as limited to part of a blended classroom and requiring adequate resources, pedagogical guidance and

training in ICT. Meeting these conditions may offset some of the challenges and stresses of teaching experienced by some participants in the study.

In terms of the study's implications, the study corroborates past findings regarding the benefits of online learning towards promoting greater accessibility, as well as with respect to the perceived need among teachers for further support and in-person training with respect to emergency remote learning. From a personal perspective, the teachers broadly agreed that there was a need to strike a better work-life balance when undertaking remote emergency teaching and this provides insight for developing contingency plans for implementing online teaching in response to crises such as COVID-19.

In addition, novel findings include the revelation that English language teachers in Hong Kong may view online teaching platforms as not adaptable to the adequate implementation of CLT in the virtual classroom. The extent to which this reflects social constructivist principles on behalf of teachers may serve as a fruitful question for future research in this area. Additionally, how far teacher experiences, opinions and attitudes are influenced by broader cultural and personal valuations of the role of the teacher in the classroom may benefit from further research given the findings of this study.

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