The second language learner in a pandemic context: The teachers' challenges

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Abstract

English language training for Chinese children has been afforded for some time by so-called offshore schools. At the onset of the 2020 pandemic, the Chinese New Year celebrations had many foreign language teachers leaving China for holidays. Unable to return to their public school teaching posts for in-person instruction, these teachers were forced to undertake emergency remote teaching. The following mixed-method study of 25 teachers examined the factors that came to bear as they attempted to modify their pedagogy to assist their students with content learning in their second language, English. The study used a survey and standardized open-ended interviews in the collection of data. The results from the teachers revealed challenges in the categories of lifestyle, pedagogy, use of technology, and system support.

Keywords: Challenges; online learning; pandemic; second-language instruction.

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MacKinnon, G.R. & MacLean, T. (2024). The second language learner in a pandemic context: The teachers' challenges. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching* *14*(1), 1-6. https://doi.org/10.18844/gjflt.v14i2.9189

1. INTRODUCTION

Offshore schools operate under the auspices of provincial governments in Canada. These schools offer Chinese students in grades 10-12 an opportunity to study the provincial curriculum and graduate with Canadian diplomas while being schooled in China. The curriculum is standardized by each province and the teachers are carefully selected as native English speakers given that the students are learning content in their second language English.

With the confusion that accompanied the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, many foreign teachers were isolated away from their Chinese students as a result of the Chinese New Year holidays and their inability to return to China. Because there was an expectation that the students would continue to be schooled, foreign teachers were forced to use instructional technology from their home countries to lead the learning. The learning was mediated in two different contexts. In the first instance, students were in their home environments connecting with their teacher using available internet technology. In the second case, students moved to a chaperoned classroom where the teacher meeting was projected on the wall.

1.1. Purpose of study

It is important to note that the teachers in this context did not have adequate time to consider the nuances and qualities of online instruction but moreover were immersed in emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020; Pattnaik & Nath 2023). So, while studies have well established the challenges of generic online learning (Voogt & Knezek, 2021) this study adds to the literature by posing the question: given the onset of a pandemic, what factors might impact the quality of learning of core content in second language classrooms?

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS
2.1. Participants

A convenience sample of 26 teachers from Chinese offshore schools was chosen for the study. These teachers were hired from around the world and most had measurable teaching experience as they came to teach in China. The instructors were accustomed to teaching their core subjects face to face and were quite intimidated when presented with the prospect of quickly changing their pedagogy.

2.2. Data collection tools

The study accessed the results of a five-point Likert scale survey (n=26) posing statements regarding challenges in the area of professional pressures on lifestyle, technology constraints, issues of pedagogy, and institutional support. Based on survey trends, a standardized open-ended interview was piloted and then undertaken with seven teachers using the Zoom® software. The interview transcripts were coded in an iterative axial process to identify emergent themes (Gasson, 2004). The entire data set was revisited by a researcher unconnected with the project in a peer debriefing process to corroborate the analysis. The cumulative results were member-checked using a focus group to confirm the validity of the results (Guba, 1981).

3. RESULTS

The following abbreviated account was based on cumulative feedback from 26 teachers using a survey, interviews, and a focus group to identify factors affecting the quality of subject content delivery in a second language online.

3.1. Pressures on teacher lifestyle

Many of the teachers had returned to their home countries at the juncture of the 2020 Chinese New Year and the emergence of the pandemic. In some cases, this placed teachers in time zones 8- 12 hours removed (e.g. Europe and the Americas. For instance, a teacher from Canada, to match a Chinese school day, may teach online from 8 PM until 4 AM. The cognitive load of learning a subject in a different language and using technology to do so had students experiencing some confusion. Again, social media and email were useful for students to connect with the teacher for clarifications outside of school hours but this had dramatic effects on teacher lifestyle.

Being accessible around the clock was an exhausting process for teachers (Gao et al., 2022). These teachers were further required to find new accommodation and to live in a location that was much more costly based on their Chinese salaries. This financial stress continued for more than a year until teachers were able to return to China as travel restrictions were lifted. Parents of Chinese children had high expectations that learning would continue as usual and they were dissatisfied with the quality that could be offered online. This attitude was reflected in undue administrative pressure on the teachers to be innovative in their instruction; as the well-being and psychological satisfaction of teachers is a major determinant of knowledge transfer (Weißenfels et al., 2022).

3.2. Pitfalls of technology

Generally, during COVID-19 around the World, Technology became a savior in the education sector (Ito, 2023; McPherson & Pearce 2022). In the context of second language instruction of core subject content (Mathematics, Social Studies, Science, etc.), there were many technology challenges relayed by teachers that were particularly related to language. Poor bandwidth and muddy audio made it difficult for students to hear the teacher and vice versa. This sometimes led to a misunderstanding of the teacher's materials. Students independently attempted to mitigate this effect by using social media to clarify (among themselves) instructions for activities. While pronunciation was not formally evaluated, student expression, sentence structure, register, and argumentation patterns were all difficult for the teacher to assess as they navigated the core content and looked for signs of understanding. The instructors' emergency remote teaching displayed a dearth of student-centered activities because of the limitations in both technology and the teachers' knowledge of technology tools. Formative assessment of students' learning taps into teacher creativity in accessing indicators of understanding. In interviews, most teachers expressed a lack of strategies to scaffold learning or sample cognitive development. Testing in the online venue was particularly challenging as teachers could not be assured that students were working independently on their work.

3.3. Reactive pedagogies

Teachers were forthright in suggesting their knowledge of online pedagogies was minimal. Furthermore, the immediacy of the new pandemic setting did not give them time to build efficacy in this regard. Teachers communicated the discontent their students personally shared over a lack of variety in pedagogical approaches. Boredom with the online format became a problem and teachers felt tracking students on the learning continuum was difficult as the teacher-student relationship and communication is a key factor in learning (Tackie, 2022). In a focus group, it was communicated that the teaching bordered on distance correspondence learning. Part of the issue was catering the learning to the Chinese children by creating meaningful contexts. Because teachers did not have the opportunity to meet students in person and take note of their interests and aspirations, they felt it was difficult to create interesting contexts. This lack of formal contact also affected the teacher's ability to assess student development

both cognitively and from a language perspective. This precluded the teacher from having a foundation situated in the student's prior knowledge and experience. While there are no doubt strategies for both accessing students' prior knowledge and scaffolding instruction in the online setting (Al Mamun et al., 2020), this pedagogical knowledge was not immediately evident in this sample of teachers.

3.4. Teacher support

In this emergency remote teaching mode, teachers were tasked with finding not only communication tools open for use in China but also a digital repository for student resource documents. In surveys and interviews, it was clear that this was left entirely up to the teacher to leverage existing resources and be resourceful about free tools. Essentially, they used what was accessible. The individual schools and Canadian overseers of programs provided limited support for teachers in this process. Teachers shared the concern of students coping with attentional literacy (Pegrum & Palalas, 2021) when they were learning from home. The consensus was that learning at the school site while still online, benefitted from classroom chaperones that insisted that students remain on task as they viewed/listened to the teacher from a projected screen. Teachers felt some measure of support from their principals who themselves were part of the group of educators thrust into a unique distance leadership role. Chinese parents and educational authorities associated with the schools put considerable pressure on administrators to promote quality programming despite the pandemic dilemma. Principals were sympathetic to the pedagogical challenges faced by their teachers, but many themselves were not necessarily savvy with technological tools for teaching.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The worldwide restrictions on travel at the beginning of the pandemic necessitated that teachers make alternate arrangements to fulfill their job responsibilities, and this had far-reaching impacts including work schedules, finances, and general satisfaction with teaching and learning.

The pandemic forced teachers to think quickly about how they might change their traditional instruction to a web-based model. Most found this a difficult adjustment because of the lack of training in this modality and the scarcity of time to get professionally developed. Teachers felt like their rapid response didn't do the students justice in terms of their content learning or their English language growth. The poor quality of audio did not allow teachers to assess students' language development and students could also *hide* easily if they were nervous about speaking. By all accounts, the emergency remote teaching did not proceed based on quality pre- or ongoing interactions with students. It was suggested this lack of contact didn't allow teachers to build a rapport, seek out prior knowledge, find common interests, and construct meaningful learning spaces.

Finally, the support from the administration onsite (as well as provincially) to undertake the widespread change was minimal. Technology tools including communication, digital repositories, and testing were primarily the responsibility of the instructor. The pedagogical support in terms of, *teaching with technology* was not necessarily an expertise that principals or administrators possessed and teachers felt unprepared as well. The need for professional development around teaching online in a second language was well established at the onset but with little time or expertise available, teachers felt quite isolated in their practice.

Looking forward, all learning institutions must prepare for the real possibility that online technologies may allow us to pivot from traditional modalities of in-person learning. With this eventuality in mind, resources should proactively be accessed to supply technology tools and professional development in online language learning. Research on the impact on the students in this particular setting is ongoing.

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