



Teaching English online at a center for foreign languages: Challenges and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of technology for the past decades, online instruction has emerged as an alternative mode of teaching and learning and a substantial supplement to traditional teaching. At the Center for Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, online teaching has been growing recently, particularly due to many schools' closures because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This small-scale study was conducted with a group of online teachers of English of the Center for Foreign Languages with the aim to understand the teachers' challenges as well as their opportunities to develop online courses. The results revealed that the primary challenge of online teaching was about technology impacts on both teachers and learners. There were also suggestions for both administrators and teachers for enhancing quality of online teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rapid advances in information technology for the past decades have presented new challenges and opportunities for teaching and learning in traditional classrooms. In many schools around the world, online classrooms have been a potentially powerful teaching and learning environment in which new practices can make significant contributions to teaching and learning. According to Allen and Seaman (2013), online learning is one of the fastest growing trends in educational uses of technology. The number of online students has risen every year for the past few years, and the most recent figures indicate that more than a quarter of all college students are taking an online class (Venable, 2019). This rapid expansion has prompted educational institutions to increase the number of online classes as well as the quality of online instruction.

At the Center for Foreign Languages (CFL), Can Tho University, online teaching and learning is still at an early stage. It has been growing recently, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic when most

schools are closing, forcing teachers to turn to online teaching. Despite several prominent advantages over traditional classrooms, online instruction has posed new challenges and such challenges may negatively influence the quality of teaching and learning. A study examining teachers' challenges as well as potential opportunities to develop online courses is important, especially in the context of English language teaching (ELT) as online instruction is a growing trend in this field (Hockly & Dudeney, 2018). The main objective of current study is to understand teachers' perceptions towards online instruction as well as their problems and potential opportunities for development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Online education and its characteristics

Online education generally refers to any kind of teaching and learning via internet connection rather than in person. With the development of online education over time, its definition has been evolved. Moore and Kearsley (2012, p.2) defined online education as "teaching and planned learning in which

teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organization". Regarding the aspects of being distant, Finch and Jacobs (2012, p.546, cited in Sun & Chen, 2016) defined it as "all forms of teaching and learning where the learners and teacher are separated geographically and temporally". In the research literature, online education is variously termed as "distance education," "e-learning," "online learning," "blended learning," "computer-based learning," "web-based learning," etc. In this study, these terms may be used sufficiently synonymous throughout.

While there are different ways of incorporating an online element into a course, there are design features that remain applicable to most online curricula. Vai and Sosulski (2011) outlined necessary aspects of online course design. The four aspects they highlight are learning space, planning and delivery of course content, communication, and delayed feedback. A clear difference between a traditional classroom and an online classroom is the physical location. The traditional course environment requires a building and students to meet together to receive instruction from the teacher. On the other hand, online classes are virtual. In a traditional classroom, students can talk to their teacher and other classmates face-to-face. However, online classes limit face-to-face interactions. Thus, most of the interaction that occurs between a student and a teacher is accomplished electronically through written communication or Internet Protocol Telephony software, such as Skype, or Google Meet. Most feedback from the teacher is delayed. However, the teacher is usually available to answer questions and to clarify directions and assignment details through email. Therefore, it is important that the teacher anticipates students' questions and addresses them in his or her lecture or written instructions for assignments.

2.2. Effective online teaching

Successful online instruction requires different teaching strategies (Dasher & Patton, 1998). Course design, interaction among participants and teacher preparation and support are some important considerations for effective online teaching.

Designing a course for the online learning environment requires significant planning time and effort (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012). The course design should begin with identifying learning outcomes, and also determine appropriate assessment methods and teaching and learning activities. In addition, teaching resources and materials and online learning

tools are important considerations. Technology selected should be compatible with varied student needs. Technical support should be available to both teachers and learners.

Engaging students in the learning process is as important in online education as it is in traditional education. Research has found that as the level of interaction in the course increases, so does the positive attitudes of the students in the course (Chang, 2008). The challenge for teachers is how they can develop appropriate methods to help learners feel truly engaged in the course. Research also supports the fact that course satisfaction is contingent upon course interaction (Brunet, 2011). Interaction is also important as a means to support the acquisition of knowledge. There is research evidence that suggests that the processes necessary for learning and knowledge retention occur in dialogues (Kreijns et al., 2003). Online learning often lacks the social interaction necessary for the development of these critical dialogues, so it is up to the teacher to use the computer creatively to provide continued interaction with all the participants in the course.

With regard to preparation and support for online teaching, most teachers new to online teaching begin with little or no training or preparation specific to this delivery mode (Balkin et al., 2005). Schrum et al. (2005) claim that online teachers need adequate preparation of adequate strategies for effective teaching. Teachers need support and training in the pedagogy of online instruction, especially they need support with technology (Gabriel & Kaufield, 2008). Teachers should be trained in how to use the functions of the online system and should know who to contact for technological help. Due to time constraints and modality of instruction, online teachers can become more isolated from colleagues and therefore miss out on meaningful discussions, constructive feedback, and a sense of collegiality. To help mitigate these potential concerns, Gabriel and Kaufield (2008) suggest forming teachers' communities where teachers can share ideas and assist each other in online teaching.

3. THE STUDY

3.1. Context and research aims

Online programs at the CFL began with more classes during the country's social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and many learners decided to choose online courses. With the aim to improve the teaching effectiveness of online programs, this

study focused on examining teachers’ major challenges and opportunities for further development.

3.2. Instrument

Teachers of the current online courses were invited to respond to an online survey. There are two sections in the questionnaire. The first section consists of 8 close-ended questions asking about the participants’ gender, online teaching’s experience, typical benefits and challenges of online teaching. The second section has 7 open-ended questions which aim to explore teachers’ perceptions toward different aspects of online instructions such as observed online classroom behaviors, major challenges, common types of online courses and ways to improve teaching effectiveness.

3.3. The participants

The study group consists of a total of 15 teachers who were teaching online classes. There are 12 female teachers and 3 male teachers. Most teachers are young in their career, and they are within the age range of 25 to 55 years. Seven of the participants did

not have previous experiences of online teaching, seven with little experience of teaching online for about 1 or 2 years. Only one teacher reported to have more than 5 years of online teaching.

The participants were invited to complete the online survey in the final week of their online courses. This time is appropriate for the study when the teachers mostly experienced major teaching challenges and could gain deep perceptions of their online teaching practice.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results and discussions are presented based on detailed analysis of two sections of questions in the survey. The participants both selected the answers for the closed-ended questions and provided information to the open-ended questions.

4.1. Advantages of online teaching

Most teachers expressed positive attitudes toward online teaching, indicating its typical advantages as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Advantages of online teaching

List of advantages	Percentage of responses
Flexibility	86.7
Appropriateness towards 4.0 teaching and learning styles	73.3
Increased autonomy, motivation, self-determination, self-regulation among teachers and learners	53.3
Usefulness	46.7
Wide range of tools	46.7
Accessibility (platform, materials, resources)	40.0
Ease of use	40.0
Engagement and enjoyment of learners	40.0
Innovation (i.e. freedom to experiment with teaching practice)	40.0
A collaborative relationship between teachers and learners	26.7

Of the ten suggested benefits of online teaching, flexibility of this mode of instruction delivery is the biggest advantage with agreement of 86.7% of participants. The result is in line with a study by Garrison (2011, cited in Kattoua et al., 2016) indicating flexibility is one primary reason for both teachers and students to choose online programs. Comparing with traditional classes which generally are in the same geographical location at the regularly scheduled sessions, teachers of online courses can have more choices of time and place for their teaching.

Teaching and learning styles appropriate for the fourth industrial revolution is another advantage with relatively high percentage of respondents

(73.3%). The result, to some extent, supports the study by Rose (2018), identifying the key attributes of effective online teaching and claiming that the teachers must vary their pedagogy in this new mode of instruction. Teachers should understand that online instruction is not merely uploading teaching materials, receiving and sending email messages, and posting discussion topics on the Internet; more importantly, it provides an environment for an interactive and collaborative learning (Ascough, 2002).

Increased autonomy and motivation and related aspects such as self-determination and self-regulation are also a clear advantage for online instruction. More than half (53.3%) of the respondents in the current study reported this advantage. The result is

relatively in line with the study by Zhong (2018) which shows that to be successful in online classes, both teachers and learners need to be able to manage their time, motivate themselves to work on schedule, and maintain good discipline during the program.

With the same 46.7% of responses, usefulness of the online programs and a wide range of tools are perceived as advantages for online instruction. There are various tools available which can be used for audio recording, video-production and editing, presentation, collaborative working and writing, video-conferencing, and website creation (Jabeen & Thomas, 2015). Teachers who teach online currently have various choices of technical tools to make classes more interesting and engaging.

Teachers of this study also perceive the accessibility of materials or resources for online courses, ease of use, engagement and enjoyment of learners, and freedom to experiment with teaching practice as being advantageous. These are also frequently mentioned benefits in online teaching literature (Al-Maqtri, 2014).

A collaborative relationship between teachers and learners is also a good thing of online classes, although the percentage of responses is not high with about 26.7% of agreement. The reason for this low response may be that in an online environment, the opportunities for spontaneous, formative feedback between a teacher and learners are relatively limited. In addition, learners in online classes are generally asked to read instructions for assignments and activities rather than hear these directions provided directly from teachers. This can become a frustrating disconnect between teachers and learners (Cela et al., 2016).

In the section of free responses about their most favourite things about online teaching, the participants

focused on flexibility and methodology. These answers are expected and are largely in line with the results in the previous studies (Kattoua et al., 2016, Li & Irby, 2008), indicating flexibility as the major advantage of online teaching. One participant mentioned about the convenience and flexibility of online teaching as “it is flexible and suitable for students who are too far from the center.” In a similar vein, another teacher remarked:

The convenience and flexibility are the things I like most.

Another commented:

– I don’t have to spend much time going to class and coming back home after class.

And another added:

– Teacher can work at home, and they don’t have to worry about the bad weather

Methodology for online teaching is also important that many teachers considered being advantageous. It is natural that most teachers are interested in a new mode of teaching delivery, when they deliver information, interact with students, and assess learning in much different way. Some typical responses are:

– It is an innovative teaching method at the present.

– The best thing I love about the course is that I can change my teaching behaviour and adapt to the new teaching style.

– I have an opportunity to learn something new in methodology/ using technology in teaching that I do not perform it before in my life.

4.2. Challenges of online teaching

Teachers were asked to select main challenges of online teaching. Common issues of online teaching are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Challenges of online teaching

List of challenges	Percentage of responses
Learners' access to technology	80.0
Teachers' access to technology	73.3
Maintaining learners motivated and engaged	46.7
Assessing learners' progress	40.0
Increased workload and stress from working at home	40.0
Low levels of teachers' pedagogical digital competence	40.0
Limited communication with learners	26.7
Preparing content for online learning programs	26.7
Tailoring the syllabus and designing online learning lesson plans	26.7
Roles of teachers	20.0
Time management and organization	20.0
Little direction or support given by the Center	6.7

The two major difficulties are learners' and teachers' access to technology such as computer competence or internet connection. These problems of online readiness have also been mentioned in several studies (Albirini, 2006, Muirhead, 2000, Palloff & Pratt, 2000). As a general advice, teachers should learn how to use technology, but not completely rely on the technologies. Instead, they should be able to identify and recognize the strength and weakness of technologies, and select the most appropriate delivery mechanism for their lessons (O'Quinn & Corry, 2002).

Teachers in this study also indicated the challenge of maintaining learners' motivation and engagement during the course. Just as motivation is a key factor in learning and achievement in face-to-face educational contexts, so it is in online learning environments. In online classes, teachers are trying to keep learners engaged and motivated in new ways, and it is challenging to utilize appropriate interactive learning activities and multiple ways of interacting to create effective learners' engagement and motivation (Dixson, 2010).

Some other challenges revealed in this study are about assessing learners' progress, workload and low levels of teachers' pedagogical digital competence. These barriers of teaching online are also reviewed in literature. Muirhead (2000) reported that all online teachers in his study worried if the completed assignments received through the Internet have been completed by students themselves. Cheating, plagiarism, and integrity in taking test are also other issues in ensuring quality online instruction (Simonson et al., 2000). Regarding workload for an online course, time commitment is generally a big challenge. Freeman (2015) found that it can take seventy to one hundred hours to develop a new

online course, and even though the course is already taught in-person, it can still be challenging to decide how to convert the activities into an effective online format. It is a common practice that online teachers generally devote more time and energy to online courses in comparison with their counterparts who teach in traditional classrooms (Sun & Chen, 2016).

With about the same percentage of responses (26.7%), limited communication with learners,

preparing content for online learning programs, and tailoring the syllabus and designing online learning lesson plans are some typical issues raised by the online teachers in the current study. The results relatively support previous studies on challenges of online courses. How to interact with online learners is always a challenge for teachers. Muirhead (2000) reported that the teachers he interviewed in his study noted their perplexity on how to initiate interaction with students to build relationship, because most teachers are mostly trained for direct communication in physical classrooms. For the course development, the task of generating new materials or adjusting the materials from face-to-face classes to an online setting can be very challenging (Li & Irby, 2008). Generally, content cannot simply be copied as teachers need to consider content, pedagogy, and technology when designing the course. The best practices recommended for developing content in an online course are a combination of collaborative activities, reflective activities, clear assessment criteria, and integration of technology (Niess & Gillow-Wiles, 2013).

New roles as well as new responsibilities and time management and organization are the other two difficulties of online teaching. The result relatively goes in line with previous research (Kebritchi et al., 2017), identifying four new roles of online teachers

including pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical responsibilities. Pedagogical roles refer to teaching methods; social roles are the way teachers establish social relationships with the learners; managerial roles include administrative and organizational tasks; and technical responsibilities are the technical support that teachers provide for learners.

In the section of free answers about major challenges of online teaching, most participants highlighted Internet connection failure as the most frequently occurred problem. This expected problem is also extensively discussed in literature (Kebritchi et al., 2017) as the biggest obstacle of online instruction. A teacher commented:

It is very difficult to hold online classes with weak internet connection.

Class size and teacher-learning interaction are also some issues as one teacher remarked:

- The big class is challenging for me. I have to make sure the learners understand the lessons clearly.
- Passive students are shy to share the ideas. Teachers and students do not interact with each other as much as in face-to-face class.

4.3. Ways to improve online teaching

Teachers in the current study were asked to propose effective ways to improve online teaching, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Ways to improve online teaching

Suggested effective ways	Percentage of responses
Diverse and available teaching material sources such as tutorials, video clips, lesson plans of good practice	80.0
Immediate pedagogical and technical supports from peer teachers confident with ICT use in teaching	60.0
Productive contact with experts (e.g. a more experienced online-learning teacher, an ICT/technician)	60.0
More free resources and low-cost tools from education technology companies	46.7
Clear guidance from the Center	26.7
Forum for teachers to share ideas and challenges	20.0

About 80% of the respondents indicated their teaching would be better with more diverse and available teaching material sources. It is expected that quality teaching is largely supported by the usage of numerous modern teaching aids and learning and teaching resources.

Pedagogical and technical support from peer teachers as well as productive contact with more experienced online colleagues are also important factors for effective online teaching as proposed by 60% of the participants. In the current study, as about half of the teachers are new with online instruction, it is natural that they need more training and support. The finding is in line with a study by Palloff and Pratt (2000, p.3) who noted that teachers must be trained “not only to use technology, but also to shift the way in which they organize and deliver material.”

More free resources and low-cost tools are also suggested to help effective online instruction. In the current study, teachers of online classes mainly use

Zoom software as the basic platform for class meeting. The platform is popular as the basic Zoom service is free with fundamental functions for conducting online lessons. Clear guidance from the Center is also very supportive for online teachers. Teachers should be informed of the course guideline, syllabus, as well as learners’ profile. As required in traditional classrooms, to ensure the quality of online instruction, teachers need informative course plan. The course plan should include class objective, selecting course materials, designing activities, projects and tests, envisioning any potential problems technically or academically, and testing the feasibility of the online course. It’s true that a lot of online teaching success is about course organization, like making sure content is clear, posted in the right place and linked to working supplementary materials (Ascough, 2002).

A forum for teachers to share ideas is also very practical way for teachers’ professional development. The result of the current study relatively supports that of a study by Prestridge (2010), emphasizing

that online teacher forums can provide opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction, exchanging knowledge and expertise and sharing teaching-learning issues. Forum members also can share resources such as lesson plans, activities and software.

In the section of free responses, the teachers of the study suggested various ways for improving the teaching quality, focusing on technical support and training, experience sharing and pedagogical change. These suggestions for improvement are not unexpected because with new mode of instruction, teachers need much guidance and support. Several teachers commented on the need of technical support and training:

- Teachers need to have more tips or skills in using technology as well as functions of online teaching apps to make the lessons vibrant.
- Teachers should be more aware of ICT in teaching and learning.
- Be prepared for technical problems which often occur by having a lot of online softwares for teaching we can use alternatively.

It is also necessary for teachers to learn from experienced experts or colleagues for effective online teaching. Some teachers remarked they should “learn experiences from colleagues and improve (themselves) after a course.”

Table 4. Level of teaching effectiveness

Level of teaching effectiveness	1	2	3	4	5
Percentage of responses	-	-	13.3	80.0	6.7

Table 5. Level of satisfaction

Level of satisfaction	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Percentage of responses	-	-	-	6.7	6.7	-	13.3	26.7	26.7	20.0	-

4.6. Future of online instruction

Online learning will surely continue to grow at a rapid rate. In this study, teachers anticipated future trends of online programs. It is interesting to note that more than half of the participants (53.3%) predicted that online courses will be as an alternative to face-to-face courses in the next 5 or 10 years; that is, learners will completely choose this type of online instruction. About 46.7% of the participants anticipated that online courses will be as a supplement to face-to-face classes. The findings are completely in line with a study (Hockly & Dudeney, 2018) about future digital trends in ELT, reflecting that new developments of technology will continue to affect English language teachers and learners.

Teachers also reflected the basic change of pedagogy in their online teaching. One suggested “combining face-to-face teaching and online teaching.” Another highlighted that “to teach effectively, we should change from teacher-centered to learner-centered classrooms.”

4.4. Types of online courses

On the question about “what types of courses do you think are well suited for online teaching?”, the teachers’ answers are various from exam preparation courses to language skill practice classes. The common comment is that all face-to-face classes can be converted and conducted on online environment.

4.5. Online teaching effectiveness and satisfaction

Teachers of this study were asked to rate their level of teaching effectiveness and satisfaction. Generally, the participants expressed their positive attitudes toward online teaching as shown in Table 4 and Table 5. The results relatively support previous research (Bolliger and Wasilik, 2009), suggesting that online teachers are generally satisfied, and that satisfaction is more likely if there is appropriate training and support, and if online teaching allows for flexibility in their schedule.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

5.1. Conclusion

This study has discussed major challenges and opportunities regarding online teaching at a center for foreign languages. Online education is here and is highly likely to stay and will continue to excel. The transition from the traditional face-to-face classroom to online instruction can be successfully achieved and quality can be ensured if teachers’ challenges as well as ways for improving online instruction quality can be closely examined. In this study, one of the primary challenges in online instruction is about technology impacts for both teachers and learners. Effective online instruction is largely dependent on well-designed course content,

motivated interaction between teacher and learners, well-prepared and supported teachers.

5.2. Suggestions

Based on the findings of the current study, the following suggestions are made for ensuring quality of online instruction.

5.2.1. For administrators

Administrators have the ability to create and support a foundation committed to academic excellence and critical improvement in an online program. The Center's administrators should play a central role in enhancing the quality of online education by providing support for both teachers and learners. Teaching training and support is critical component of quality online education, especially with new online teachers. The administrators can organize an online team who can share teaching tips and guide teachers along the program.

The administrator should provide adequate technical support for teachers. More importantly, the administrator should motivate teachers to teach online courses through intrinsic rewards such as good payment, workload adjustment or reduction in duties.

Online education is constantly changing, so administrators should make it a priority to provide teachers with regular access to professional development opportunities in their teaching practices.

5.2.2. For the teachers

Moving from traditional methods of teaching to online methods of instruction, teachers, especially novice teachers may find online courses more challenging with heavier workload, technology issues, a learner-teacher interaction. Teachers should apply an effective online pedagogy which emphasizes learner-centered learning and employs active learning activities. More importantly, the online teacher should use technology to enhance the course content. By utilizing the positive aspects of technology, the online teacher can provide a quality educational learning experience.

Teacher-to-learner and learner-to-learner communication play a vital role in an online environment. To ensure the quality of online teaching, the teacher should also develop an interactive online teaching-learning community. Email, threaded discussion, and chatroom can provide an efficient communication tool to build an effective online community. Setting online office hours may be a good practice

for teachers to increase the teacher and learner interaction.

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