

Challenges and opportunities of Covid 19 pandemic - A case study on the ELT practitioners of the Open University of Sri Lanka

Abstract

Covid 19 pandemic and the post pandemic situations have created many challenges and opportunities for the educators and learners across the globe. The tremendous adaptability and resilience shown by the education systems and stakeholders were a testimony to the untapped potential and scope for innovation in education. The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is no exception. Specifically, in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) in which interaction and creativity are key factors for success, the experiences of the ELT practitioners and teacher trainers during and post pandemic state is worth exploring. As such, this research focuses on the sudden shift of pedagogy and practices in the EAP/ESAP courses of the OUSL from more traditional, face to face interactions to technology aided remote learning and the resultant transformation in the teacher's role. The study specifically focuses on the challenges faced by the ELT practitioners and how their role was redefined. Data were collected by administering a questionnaire and conducting a semi structured interview for both ELT practitioners (20) and teacher trainers (04). Data were analysed qualitatively. The outcome of the study has indicated the resilience ELT practitioners built up through the pandemic and the positive changes in their role as teachers.

Key words: ELT practitioner, resilience, ELT, OUSL, pandemic

Introduction

The Covid 19 pandemic and the post pandemic situations have necessitated higher education to rely more or entirely on technology based learning, specifically, online learning. This situation common across the globe has created many challenges and opportunities for learners and teachers. Though this had been the target of the institutions and educators, the process was slow to be implemented due to limitations in resources and personnel. But the need was much felt as evidenced by the previous research on this focus area.

As observed by Raheem (2014), the new trends in language teaching are more focused on the authentic language use and incorporation of technology has become an integral part of education in the 21st century. Distance Education faces specific challenges in catering to a large student population distributed over vast geographical boundaries, thus enhancing the outreach becomes a necessity (Abeysekera, Wijesinghe and Satharasinghe, 2020). Further, "the distance mode education places huge demands on the students in the form of requirement to engage in self-learning and to use more innovative, interactive and experimental methods for learning" (Satharasinghe, 2012). The DELT, OUSL has been planning and developing courses in line with those concepts, to make language learning interactive and interesting. But the pandemic related circumstances have accelerated the process in an unprecedented manner.

However, students have expressed stress related to online learning and difficulties when completing college work (Hermida, 2020). The same situation is more or less experienced by the learners at tertiary level in Sri Lanka and specifically in the OUSL. In spite of the difficulties and stress created by resource limitations, it can be observed that pandemic situation has accelerated the process of technology aided second language learning. At the same time, it could be observed that ELT practitioners in general and specifically in the OUSL context experiencing difficulties, challenges as well as transformative experiences through this sudden shift to online teaching. As such, it is worthwhile exploring the factors affecting the teacher role and agency during and post pandemic and how it has transformed them as teachers.

National policy on education stresses the fact that higher education must focus on student centred learning which allow independent thinking that leads to new knowledge and innovation (National Policy on Education-2009). It further states that the government has recognized that the education system must provide an adequate degree of competence in the use of English Language in the world of work and in the technological international environment of the 21st century. All those initiatives are geared towards achieving this end in English Language Education in Sri Lanka.

Thus, online learning, specifically 'zoom' sessions became a mandatory requirement in the context of OUSL as a measure of addressing the pandemic situation (Abeysekera, Wijesinghe and Satharasinghe, 2020). This has exposed the learners and teachers to a learning environment associated with new teaching and learning experiences. As such,

this research was conducted to explore the experience of ELT practitioners in the pandemic and post pandemic state in order to develop strategies and methodologies for teachers and learners to cope with the current situation and to be better equipped to deal with similar experiences in the future. Hence, this study focuses on the perceptions of teachers and observations of Trainers of Teachers (TOT) on the 'online teaching ' experience in OUSL pertaining to ELT.

Research Objectives

1. To find out the challenges and possibilities experienced by the ELT practitioners in OUSL during pandemic and post pandemic situations.
2. To find out the affective factors which reshaped the approaches and procedures in ELT in the context of OUSL
3. To explore the impact of those factors in redefining the role of the ELT practitioners in the OUSL

Research Questions

1. What were the challenges brought about by the pandemic to ELT practitioners in OUSL?
2. How effectively were they addressed?
3. What were the opportunities created by the pandemic in the OU context?
4. What factors had an impact on the teachers and the teaching procedures in ELT/OUSL?
5. How did those factors re-defined the role of ELT practitioners in the OUSL context?

Review of the literature

As pointed out by White (2003), there is relatively little published research in distance language learning and most of these exist as accounts of practice or descriptions of language programmes. In particular, there is an absence of the kind of 'close' research to investigate what language teachers and learners actually do and how this relates to the development of language skills. It should be further noted that the immense variability within and across different distance learning settings define and create the learning spaces specific to the context.

Resilience, the ability to withstand difficulty and bounce back, is among those features that closely appertain to the fast-growing province of teacher efficacy (Masoometh and Rahimi, 2014). It is resilience that represents the capacity of instructors to rebound and understand the necessity for change and adaptation despite being through difficulty. According to this definition, teachers with characteristics of resiliency are far more prone to persevere in adverse situations, are far less likely to consider quitting the profession, and find it easier to adapt to change (Day & Gu, 2007; Howard & Johnson, 2004 cited in Masoometh and Rahimi, 2014). These findings related much to the outcome of the current research in which teachers displayed a notable connection between experience and level of confidence to the success in online teaching process.

Materials in DE is a defining factor which influence the success of the learning outcome. Further, learner traits are a significant attribute in the learning outcome, given the diverse nature of the learners and their requirements. Shankar (1997), in a research conducted on the 'processes of language learning and the problems faced by learners in comprehension', claims the many problems in comprehension are due to drawbacks in the materials as well as the inadequacies shown by the learners. The study further suggests that the problems faced by the learners could be addressed effectively through modifying the materials and also by directing the distance learners towards an autonomous and skillful mode of learning. This emphasises the complementary nature of materials and learner traits in DE and the necessity to balance both aspects to enhance the efficacy of the learning process. Online learning can play a significant role in developing learner autonomy thus promoting the learning process.

Learner support is an integral part of a distance education context. The nature, suitability and effectiveness of learner support can have a huge impact on the quality of the learning outcome. Support can be in the form of academic support and the administrative support. Academic support includes the additional materials and methodological support whereas administrative support can include other resources, information and infrastructure facilities. Kumar (1999) observes a mismatch between the support provided and the needs of the English language learners in a distance mode university. This aspect became even more evident in current scenario of sudden shift to teaching entirely online. This relates to the current study in terms of additional support and flexibility that can be provided through online resources and zoom application to second language learning. Further, teachers being the main element of support for learners,

the focus of this addresses the teachers on different aspects pertaining to online learning and the challenges faced by sudden adjustments.

A study based on technology acceptance model to gain insights into the user reactions to technology adopted for language learning (Alfadda and Mahdi ,2020), reveals a strong correlation between students' actual use of zoom and students' attitudes and behavioral intentions. Further, the study reveals a positive co-relation between students' computer self-efficacy and experience.

Methodology

The research was conducted as a case study as it explored the perceptions of the ELT practitioners and the teaching procedures pertaining to English language teaching under the COVID 19 pandemic at the OUSL.

English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) , English for Academic Purposes (Legal Studies) and English for Social Sciences are service courses offered by DELT. EGAP is offered to undergraduates of all 6 Faculties (around 12000 students) of the university through the Department of English Language Teaching. This programme runs in three cycles per year in all Regional and Study Centres.

Sample

The method of convenient sampling was adopted in order to collect data representing the above three English language courses offered by the Department of English Language Teaching (DELT) , OUSL. The two samples selected constituted of 20 ELT practitioners who teach on those courses and four trainers of the ELT practitioners.

Two different questionnaires questionnaire with open ended questions was administered to both samples separately and semi- structured interviews were conducted for both samples. the data collected through questionnaires were coded and analyzed qualitatively under different themes. The data obtained through interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed qualitatively.

Results and discussion

Results indicated many views expressed by teachers and teacher trainers

Responses of the teachers

Responses of the teachers were categorized under the given sub themes

Accessibility -

Many of the teachers had digital devices whereas a few had problems in accessing digital devices. They too in the long run managed to purchase and get adjusted to the devices and related technology. Connectivity issues were prevalent among many teachers mainly due to the prevailing circumstances which could be addressed to a satisfactory level with the intervention of DELT, OUSL. Accessibility and connectivity issues of learners were a major concern of many teachers as the learners were widely distributed across the island and their circumstances varied. This was addresses mainly through the recordings of the zoom/Microsoft-teams sessions made available on LMS and the additional resources provided through the same.

Agency

The freedom given to the teachers within a common broader framework to make independent decisions and plan their own teaching proved to be effective to a great extent. Many teachers had implemented new teaching approached, use of digital aids (breakout rooms, padlet, etc..) to teach and give feedback to the learners. Further, they had initiated student support mechanisms like WhatsApp groups, giving feedback via emails, etc. which facilitated more interaction between the teachers and learners. The freedom and responsibility exercised by the teachers in decision making had helped to improve their level of confidence and enhance agency to uplift their efficacy.

Resources-

Many limitations were observed in terms of resources. Functioning from home restricted the teachers and learners from accessing the physical and human resources provided by the university (OUSL). This could be overcome to a certain extent by providing zoom links from the university, providing technical assistance via online modes, etc. Teachers expressed their satisfaction on the resources provided but highlighted certain areas which need more improvement (i.e; additional zoom links, better communication and additional training and guidance)

Views of the TOTs

The views of TOTs mainly included their observations on the gradual development of teachers' capacity to teach online how they overcame many challenges created by the sudden shift from F2F to online teaching. Further, they collectively acknowledged the benefits of effective exercise of teacher agency and resultant efficacy in their teaching. One common factor TOTs emphasized on was the requirement for more streamlined procedures for teacher training and their professional development.

Findings and recommendations

ELT practitioners

- It could be observed that there was a relationship between teacher's experience and their level of resilience in adjusting to the new learning environment. Further, experience had a positive impact on the level of agency they exercise through the learning process.
- The teachers' familiarity with the online teaching platforms made the process much easier and faster.
- The experiences and innovative teachers could make effective decisions on their choice of relevant technological aids in teaching.
- For those who were less familiar with technology, the support from their families as well as the training given by DELT proved to be quite useful and effective.
- The teacher's level of resilience could be attributed to many factors; their commitment, necessity for adjustment to overcome challenges, creativity and innovation, guidance provided by the relevant department (DELT), the additional resources provided (on LMS and as common guidelines) and their gut feeling as teachers on what needs to be done to address the given situations.
- The teacher perceptions indicated their progress as teachers, the kind of transformations and resultant sense of achievement and experience.
- Problems on accessibility to devices and connectivity were experienced by certain teachers at the beginning but gradually they managed to find solutions for those as well

Trainers of Teachers (TOT)

- Initial drawbacks in adjusting to the new learning- teaching environment were gradually phased out with the exposure, training, experience and effective decision making.
- In general, teachers have been quite receptive to guidance and support given by the trainers.
- The transformation shown by certain teachers (who did not have an adequate exposure to technology aided teaching) was remarkable.
- Certain teachers were dedicated to the extent to provide additional support to students through WhatsApp groups and additional feedback on their work. This factor is noteworthy in a low resource context where the teachers need to handle 50- 300 students in a session.
- During the course of 2 years (pandemic and post pandemic conditions), the teachers displayed an increased level of confidence, an increased capacity to make decisions (agency) and an improvement in their efficacy as ELT practitioners (in online teaching).
- At the same time it could be noted that they still held the view that face to face interaction is essential for language teaching and this needs to be incorporated back in ELT procedures once the conditions are favourable.

Recommendations

- Teacher training in online and face to face ELT procedures need to be a mandatory component in course planning and delivery. This should be further expanded and improved to include the current requirements of the teachers, learners as well as the evolving field of ELT.
- Accessibility to digital devices and connectivity needs to be addressed effectively pertaining to student requirements as well as teacher requirements.
- Forums to share experiences of teachers and other stakeholders need to be facilitated for co-creation of knowledge and to enhance the learning environments and experiences.
- Student experiences in online learning needs to be investigated and the findings to be aligned with teacher experiences to create more effective and harmonious learning processes.

This study was limited in certain ways mainly the inability to include all the teachers who taught in the said courses who may have had many different experiences as teaching and learning can be quite unique to individuals. This may be addressed in the future through a broader study which may include the experiences and perceptions of a wider teacher and a student population. The findings of the current study will directly contribute to the future online, blended and teacher training programs offered by DELT.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate the experiences and views of the ELT practitioners of OUSL on the sudden shift of mode of delivery from a more face to face interaction to online delivery. The specific focus was on the factors that had an impact on teachers and the teaching procedure and how those factors influenced a change in the role of teachers. The findings indicated the teachers' initial preference for face to face interaction and their gradual adjustment to online delivery via zoom and Microsoft teams. The findings further illustrated initial challenges faced by teachers in adjusting to online etiquette, use of the online platform and the technological aids. According to the perceptions of the teachers, the gradual transformation has given them the opportunity to learn and be more confident in using technology and make independent decisions in the process of teaching. Further, this experience has shed light on certain features of online learning that can be retained in the future to improve teacher efficacy.

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