

**An exploration of EFL teachers' challenges and strategies during the pandemic:
A case of emergency blended synchronous education**

Abstract

Abstract

With the lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions had to make swift educational decisions such as emergency blended synchronous education without thoroughly scrutinizing its effects. This study explored the experiences of a group of seven EFL teachers of a blended learning model during the pandemic in Northern Cyprus higher education. The study adopted a qualitative design by interviewing 7 teachers on their experiences during the pandemic by particularly focusing on a blended instructional mode of education over the fall academic semester in 2020. The results of the study revealed that the study participants employed various strategies to cope with the challenges ascribed to the blended mode of delivery. The findings of the study offer some implications for second language teachers and the use of technology in second language education.

Keyword: EFL teachers, challenges, strategies emergency blended synchronous education, blended education

Introduction [P1]

After the WHO Emergency Committee announced a global emergency state in January 2020 due to increasing COVID-19 cases (McAleer, 2020; Velavan & Meyer, 2020), the world has encountered enormous challenges such as restriction of movement, social distancing, lockdown

and quarantine as well as unprecedented economic and psychosocial consequences. The COVID-19 related policies and regulations not only have impacted the livelihoods of people around the world but have also affected students' education and teachers' lifestyles and practices. One importance change was in the delivery mode of education from on-campus to online, which has not been a very smooth process for students and teachers alike all around the world. In Northern Cyprus, after the identification of a few COVID-19 cases in March 2020, educational institutions and organizations transitioned their academic activities to virtual platforms (COVID-19 pandemic in the TRNC, 2021). However, on 11th of May 2020, after the last coronavirus patient was discharged from hospital and after announcing no active cases (COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Cyprus, 2021), some of the universities on the island decided to offer a blended education, giving options to the students to follow their lessons either on campus or online synchronously or asynchronously. Thus, this study attempted to explore the experiences of a group of seven English language teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Cyprus by focusing particularly on the emergency blended synchronous mode of education they undertook. The paper also intends to add to the existing literature on the use of technology in education and particularly second language teacher education as well as to shed some light on the use of the mixed mode of education as a new model of instruction of the current era [P2].

Literature review [P3]

According to a survey conducted by UNESCO (2021) between 15 December 2020 and 12 February 2021 with 220 university students in 64 countries, the participants' education was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The most noted changes were reported in the delivery mode of education from in-person to remote teaching and challenges and opportunities that students experienced as a result. Like students, the role of teachers has also been remarkably

changed since the start of the pandemic, possibly making the task of teaching even more challenging than the face-to-face mode. Barron et al. (2021) see this change of teachers' role in two main ways. The first change has been in the form of pedagogical adaptations since traditional models of education did not meet the demands of the new mode of education in the remote learning environment where every household has become a classroom. The second change has been in the teachers' time allotment for teaching, students' engagement and administrative duties. According to the same source, 83% of Brazilian teachers surveyed during the pandemic did not feel ready to teach remotely, 67% felt anxious, 38% expressed tiredness, and only less than 10% felt ready and satisfied. The pandemic seems to have impacted teachers' wellbeing, which was a topic of interest even before the pandemic. For example, McCallum et al. (2017), in their review of relevant literature, found that most of the studies investigating teachers' wellbeing focused primarily on teacher burnout and stress and as such identified several factors that impact teachers' wellbeing, namely resilience and self-efficacy; social-emotional competence/emotional intelligence; personal responses to their work such as burnout, fatigue, exhaustion, stress; and relational factors. There is, however, little research on EFL teachers' challenges, strategies and experiences during the pandemic. In what follows, a number of studies investigating the experiences of English Language teachers will be reviewed.

MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer (2020) view teaching as normally a challenging profession by listing several factors that trigger stressors for teachers such as workloads, time constraints, administrative obligations, managing innovation and change, dread over losing control of the class, fear of evaluation, and several others. They also add challenges that are specific to language teachers such as "self-doubts about one's own language ability; coping with the emotional anxieties of learners; heterogeneous proficiency in learner groups; threats to sense of

self and identity; energy intense teaching methodologies; intercultural components to teaching; and precarious working conditions” (p. 2-3). With the pandemic, even further challenges have been added to the list: “health concerns for self and others, changes brought on by working from home, threats to the current job and future career, new family and domestic responsibilities, and often being confined to their home” (p. 2). In another study conducted by Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) on the difficulties of ESL students and teachers in the United States during the pandemic, the respondent teachers perceived a reduced importance for the role of teaching English and mentioned several challenges namely concern for their students’ wellbeing, concern for family, social and mental health, transition to online classes, employment and finances, physical health and school work. It is apparent that the language teachers experience psychological, social and physical challenges during the pandemic, which potentially influence their wellbeing (Dodge et al., 2012).

Finally, a study by National Geographic Learning English Language Teaching (2020, as cited in Hughes, 2020) on around 6800 people of whom 87 percent were English teachers from 123 countries during the pandemic revealed three most cited challenges of online teaching for teachers as maintaining and engaging learners (around 80%), providing interactive lessons (66%) and using technology effectively (26%).

Because of the perceived challenges, countries took some actions to support teachers during the pandemic. According to a survey conducted by UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank (2020), for example, 90 percent of the respondents from different countries involved stated that they supported their teachers in various ways during the pandemic by providing various guidelines and workshops as well as combining high-tech and low-tech approaches to better assist their students’ learning.

Nevertheless, the teachers also had to face the challenges daily and handle them with their own coping strategies. Focusing on psychological challenges such as increased stress felt by language teachers during the remote teaching, MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer (2020) worked with 634 language teachers from around the world and identified two major types of coping strategies: approach strategies and avoidant strategies. The first one, considered to be the healthier option, relies on the acknowledgment of the stressors and attempts to eliminate them. The other one is related to acts such as denial or substance use. In their study, they found that the most important stressors were workload, family health and loss of control over work during the pandemic. They also found that the language teachers mostly preferred approach type coping strategies such as “acceptance, followed by advanced planning, re-framing, actively doing something about the situation, and using work or other activity as a distraction” (p. 7). Yi and Jang (2020), on the other hand, report two EFL teachers’ specific experiences in an elementary school in South Korea and identified two main coping strategies employed by these teachers in this EFL environment: translingual practices and collaborative teaching. They observed that these teachers used L1 and L2 as semiotic recourses and used them in a hybrid and dynamic manner to support literacy and learning. Since one of the teachers was a native speaker and the other was non-native, they observed that collaborative teaching allowed them to employ various linguistic and cultural knowledge during their teaching, which seemed to the researchers as a negotiated and planned collaboration to make effective use of remote teaching. Another study by Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) on 16 EFL teachers’ activities and challenges during COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia reported that the study participants carried out a series of activities in online lessons such as taking students’ attendance and scoring or grading their students’ works synchronously

or asynchronously. In the process, the teachers benefitted from different applications and platforms and encountered several problems from the students and their parents.

Overall, as these studies demonstrate teachers and specifically second language teachers have encountered numerous challenges during the pandemic and hence have adopted different strategies to cope with the challenges. Despite the difficulties faced by students and teachers alike, online learning has received a “messiah” status during the COVID-19 pandemic (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2021). The current study focused specifically on the experiences of a group of seven English language teachers in a blended learning mode during fall 2020. Common definitions of blended learning (e.g. Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Graham, Woodfield & Harrison, 2013; Whittaker, 2013) focus on the combination of traditional face-to-face and computer-mediated instruction; hence in this study we used the terms blended learning interchangeably with hybrid learning or mixed-mode learning (Hrastinski, 2019; O’Byrne & Pytash, 2015).

Methodology [P4]

This research adopted a qualitative design (Patton, 2015) by collecting data through both written reflections and face-to-face interviews [P5] with seven English teachers’ regarding their teaching practices during the pandemic in a private university in Northern Cyprus [P6]. The data collection took place between December and January 2020-2021 by asking the study participants to reflect on their experiences and practices of a blended mode of education during the fall semester 2020 [P7]. The collected data were transferred to a Microsoft word file and each researcher independently went over the data set several times, categorizing and tagging the emerging themes (Patton, 2015). Subsequently, after several cycles of discussions we decided on the cohesive, overarching themes that emerged out of the data set by unanimously categorizing the themes into two groups: challenges and strategies, further divided into other subcategories.

Research Context and study participants [P8]

The context of this study was a private university with a student population of around 2800 students and around 87 academics and instructors of whom 19 were working in the School of Foreign Languages at the time this study was conducted. After obtaining the consent to conduct the study from the ethics committee of the university in question, we approached around 15 English Language instructors of whom seven agreed to take part in our research. However, due to the lockdown implemented towards the end of the fall semester, we could only collect four reflection accounts and three interviews conducted in a semi-structured manner. The study participants (T1, T2, ... hereafter) ranged in age from 30 to 45 with varying teaching experience and were from four different nationalities, Iranian, Turkish, Cypriote and Pakistani.

Study Findings [P9]

The findings of this study revealed that the study participants encountered various challenges and had to adopt different strategies to cope with the challenges during the pandemic. The challenges identified in the study were related to four issues namely change and adaptation, classroom practices and logistics, workload, and students' attitude and behavior; while the coping strategies involved increasing social presence, engagement with the system, and practical strategies. These findings will be discussed in details below:

Challenges

Change and adaptation [P10]

Since blended education was introduced in an untimely and unexpected manner, the teachers in this study were not prepared for it. Thus, the first challenge was related to the change and the difficulties of adapting to the new system. This abrupt switch without adequate training resulted in a feeling of lack of self-worth for the study participants since they felt inadequate while teaching via the blended model, as indicated in the following extracts:

- (1) *Cant think of many at the moment apart from feeling incompetent while teaching online, due to talking to the smartboard and not receiving any responcees from the students. (T1)*
- (2) *I felt like I was inadequate. I was techno-literate, yet there was a problem with the process itself. (T4)*

Thus, due to this unexpected and abrupt shift to a blended educational model as a reactive solution to a global crisis, and hence little or no training at all, the study participants made a point to this issue as the following remarks demonstrate:

- (3) *Teachers were asked to download and save the online attendees names and do the same for the face-to-face students. However there was no training to show teachers how to properly name and organise the online attendance properly. (T2)*

This mixed model also came in with challenges in terms of adaptation; initially, all that was done was to migrate the content and practices of face-to-face education into the blended synchronous mode. Such challenges were highlighted in the comments made by the study participants below:

- (4) *In fact, what I/we do is just integrating the syllabus of face-to-face education into online education. (T5)*
- (5) *I cannot really say that the nature of the courses were different. We basically moved our face to face classrooms into an online platform. (T4)*

As these remarks suggest, the institution and thus teachers simply switched to a blended mode of education without making any adjustments. However, the language teachers in this study believed that in the new model adjustments and alterations needed to be made. They stated, for example:

- (6) *we need to adapt the syllabus according to online education requirements. ...we have to change all of our teaching styles and even the course content to be able to talk about an effective online education. (T5)*
- (7) *We have had to adapt mixed model teaching strategies to suit and support our students learning. (T1)*
- (8) *The methods of online teaching, assessing and evaluation must be different (T7)*

Classroom practices and logistics

In addition to the challenges of adaptation and change, the instructional model in question provided several other challenges with regard to classroom practices. One of the challenges was to do with dividing their teaching between the face-to-face students and online students. They had to remember constantly that they were teaching two cohorts of students and not forgetting their online students. This was perceived as an important challenge as evident in the following remarks:

- (9) *Dividing my attention into two was very challenging to be honest. I needed to make sure both students in class and online are listening to me but like really. (T4)*

- (10) *Teacher has to check the online students ...Frequently checking up on the online students during the class (to see if they have written anything in the chat box). (T1)*

For these language teachers, maintaining the balance between the two cohorts and ensuring fair treatment of the both groups was another challenge. It was hard to be fair and the teachers believed that keeping that balance was somewhat not possible.

- (11) *The first challenge for me is to make sure that like face to face students, online ones are also involved in the activities that we are doing in the class. But unfortunately, It is almost impossible to make that balance. (T7)*
- (12) *frankly found it challenging to be completely fair with tasks/assignments to all students, online and face-to-face, (T2)*
- (13) *I think it significantly reduced the opportunity for online students to participate and hence the writing classes suffered as students were unable to participate in activities like planning and classroom writing tasks. (T3)*

There were also logistical challenges with respect to classroom practices such as time-management and the awkwardness imposed by the physical (virtual) environment. The teachers experienced difficulties in managing their classroom time as the new instructional model turned out to be time consuming: the teachers had to run the smartboard, sign into the system, sign into the online learning management system, sign into the virtual classroom platform, constantly checking the internet connectivity, camera and sound and during instruction waiting for online students' contributions.

- (14) *The challenge is with the content, the syllabus of the course. Sometimes I had some difficulties to catch up the syllabus since it takes time to collect the online students' answers. (T5)*
- (15) *Time management during the class. (T1)*

The study participants also stated that they experienced some challenges with the way they stood in front of the classroom traditionally facing the students, as in the new model the camera was positioned in a way that directly faced the stalls in the classroom where students sat. Thus, when they stood in the front facing their students in the classroom, their virtual students would be seeing the back of their heads.

- (16) *While looking at the audience and making eye contact and having to have the online students behind me because of the positioning of the camera in the classroom was in my opinion the biggest cause of that. In my opinion they felt they were not really the center of attention and may have even felt shy to speak to the teacher on his back or facing the other students. (T2)*
- (17) *Keep them motivated and in the zone. Both f2f and online students (turning your back to the class to get the online st's involved). (T1)*

Another problem that the study participants in the new model experienced was the reliability of the exams. The teachers were not sure if they were able to administer valid exams because of the possible factor of cheating, as indicated in the following extract:

- (18) *The other challenge was the exams' reliability. Although I am sufficient with most of my students exam results, there are some results which I questioned. (T5)*

Since the new model was an emergency remote teaching rather than a planned online education where servers and necessary equipment and technology were optimized for such an education, technological or technical issues were inevitable, as demonstrated by the following comments:

- (19) *The main challenges faced by my students included the availability of electronic gadgets (laptop, computer, etc) and a good internet connection. (T3)*
- (20) *I had students who emailed me about the things that they did not understand, or sometimes could not attend the courses because of electricity or internet cuts, apologizing and making up their absenteeism via emailing the classwork assignments after they watched the session. (T4)*

Workload

Another challenging dimension of the instructional model in question was the additional workload that the new system imposed on the study participants. Some of the workload was due to extra preparation time for the classes in the form of lesson planning and materials that would be used in a mixed teaching environment, as indicated in the following extract:

- (21) *Preparing materials for both in class and for LMS. ... More lesson planning. ...Lesson and exam preparation on Moodle. (T1)*

Part of this extra workload was to do with the constant communication between teachers and their students and teachers themselves. Because of having a cohort of virtual students, they also had to be available virtually through various communication channels, which, for some teachers, was the “biggest challenge” (T1).

- (22) *But I can say that there were quite a few physical challenges as we were constantly txtng and mailing colleges, working long hours after coming home, trying to addap and learn a new way of teaching and to prepare lessons and so on.(T1)*

Students' attitude and behavior

Apart from the challenges that these language teachers experienced with regard to adaptation, classroom practices and workload, some challenges were attributable to the students themselves. The teachers mentioned frequently that they had a difficult time engaging students in the class as there was a “lack of motivation” (T1) and students were “unwilling to participate” (T1). Some also highlighted that there was a general attendance problem. The following statements depict the point better:

- (23) *Attendance during this semester was a bit of a challenge because of the mixed model implemented. (T2)*
- (24) *This year's student group had lack of motivation, attention and contribution. It was not easy to draw their attention. They had great difficulty to follow the courses*

and fulfil the requirements. ... I had some students that I never saw their faces or heard their voices. (T4)

This perception of motivation by the study participants seems to be associated with the general laidback attitude or relaxed mood of the students observed during the pandemic as shown in the following quotes:

(25) *Due to the current situation with the pandemic we are going through, I have realized that online and face-to-face students are more laidback. (T1)*

(26) *.... students are so relaxed about classroom participation and I can say that more than 80% of them do not have active participation. ...This year students are not responsible. They don't take the online or hybrid way of teaching seriously. (T7)*

Some of the study participants also ascribed this relaxed attitude to the nature of the educational model that offered students options of either attending face to face or online, or reviewing recorded lessons later which consequently led to a lower desire to attend the classes. The teachers also observed that some students took advantage of the general conditions in the pandemic not to come to the campus.

(27) *Some to use it as an excuse not to come to classes. (T1)*

(28) *Since the students had the option to attend the classes asynchronously, many chose not to join the classes during the class times. (T6)*

(29) *Even though I tried my best to include online students and encourage them to join the discussions they usually had excuses. (T4)*

Coping Strategies

Increasing social presence

The language teachers in this study recounted a variety of coping strategies to overcome the challenges of the blended education model. These strategies mostly centered on increasing social presence, engagement with the system, and practical strategies. When it comes to increasing social presence, these teachers adopted various practices to increase their social presence. Some, for example, assigned roles to students and encouraged their students to call each other's' names during interactive tasks. The following remarks demonstrate this point:

(30) *I usually ask the students to come to the board, act like a teacher and get their classmates' answers. While doing this, in each task, the student who is on the board always chooses one or two people from online. The student called their names; most of the time I had volunteer students, but I asked the students to call different names. (T5)*

(31) *This semester I tried to integrate more student-student interaction. The reason for that is the fact that I have many times experienced the negative effects of having social walls between students in the same class. In other words getting the students mix with each other and get to know each other, at least in class, usually contributes to having a class that is more fun and where there is more 'learning'. (T2)*

The teachers also attempted to increase their own social presence. One way they did it was to make themselves available through multiple channels, which of course increased their workload; yet they still resorted to this strategy to make the teaching-learning more effective by engaging both the face-to-face and online students during the pandemic; as shown in the following remarks:

- (32) *Personally, I tried to do my best to be able to help with any questions over emails, on LMS or even through my mobile phone. (T2)*
- (33) *First, I make sure that they have created a group on any of the available platforms. This way they are in connection with each other and me anytime they need help. (T7)*

The study participants also changed the dynamics of their classes to increase social presence for both the face-to-face and online students. They tried to include more pair work, group work, discussion and collaborative tasks so that students would be present and interact with the others both in the physical and the virtual environment. The teachers commented:

- (34) *Since some students are in class and some online, I try to group them for their activities so that they can use the most of the experience and those who are joining the class from different platforms help each other adapt. (T6)*
- (35) *In terms of course content, with my academic English class in particular, I applied more group work and in-class research work into my lessons and found out that it was more useful and fun for students. (T2)*

Engagement with the system

Apart from increasing social presence to maximize students' learning or engagement in the blended model in question, the study participants also attempted to engage students with the system. These strategies varied from giving assignments through the learning management system to adding extra practice activities on the system.

- (36) *I gave the parts that I couldn't cover in the classroom as an assignment and some extra practices have been uploaded on LMS. ...The number of questions in the question bank have been added as a solution. (T5)*
- (37) *I suggested them to stay updated and keep an eye on new posts/announcements/notifications on the LMS, email, or WhatsApp groups. (T3)*

Practical strategies

The teachers in this study also employed various in-class practical strategies to overcome the issues triggered by this new educational model. To illustrate, some allocated specific portions of class time to online students, others extended deadlines, while some others gave extra marks for participations. The following quotations illustrate these strategies:

- (38) *Or if it's a whole class discussion, I asked the online students to type their ideas and sometimes share them orally. ...The online students needed some extra practices and I provided them. I also guided my students to improve their speaking with the help of ELT students. (T5)*
- (39) *And my solution to it is to give the last 10 minutes of each session to the online students to make sure that they have not missed any points. they are fully aware of the fact that, if they don't have active participation in the sessions they won't get any points from that part. (T7)*
- (40) *I extended some deadlines (T2)*
- (41) *Constantly asking online student if they have any question or if they want to express their opinions and if they would like to answer any of the questions asked. (T1)*

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that the new instructional blended model of education presented several challenges for the study participants in the context of the study and that the study participants also adopted different strategies to cope with the presented challenges. The challenges that teachers in this study experienced were change and adaptation, classroom practices and logistics, workload, and students' attitude and behavior; while the coping strategies involved increasing social presence, engagement with the system, and practical strategies. Some of the challenges identified in this study have been previously found as possible stressors for teachers such as change and workload (e.g. MacIntryre, Gregersen & Mercer, 2020; Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020). The first set of challenges were related to the delivery mode of education from traditional face-to-face or online-only (the study participants experienced online teaching a semester before the blended education mode in the context of this study) to the blended mode, which required pedagogical adaptations and modifications by the teachers (Barron et al., 2021). However, part of the challenges in this regard was due to the lack of training by the teachers and their unpreparedness for such an abrupt switch during the pandemic within a short period of

time, which resulted in a feeling of inadequacy or unimportance (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020) while teaching via the blended model.

In addition to the challenges of adaptation and change, the blended mode presented several other challenges with regard to classroom practices such as time management, teachers' physical positions in the classroom (whether facing the online or on-campus students), fair and equal treatment of both online and on-campus students as well as fair assessment or evaluation of both cohorts.

Apart from challenges of adaptation and classroom practices, increased workload during the pandemic was another pressing challenge the participants recounted frequently in their interview insights. The workload increased as part of extra time spent on lesson planning and material preparation and adaptations as well as increased communication between the teachers and students and teachers themselves. This finding echoes the results of Kim, Oxley and Asbury (2021) who listed workload as a negative factor influencing teachers' mental health and well-being.

Further, teachers' perceptions of students' lack of motivation and nonchalant attitude towards their study and classroom participation during this period was another challenging aspect of the blended mode of education. Some of the research participants ascribed this relaxed attitude or lack of seriousness of the students to the nature of the educational model that offered students options of either attending face to face or online, or reviewing recorded lessons later, which consequently led to a lower desire to attend the classes.

The challenges encountered by the participants of this study forced them to adopt various coping strategies such as increasing social presence, increasing engagement with the system and other

practical strategies. Of interest in this regard was that the teachers did not employ the coping strategies to resolve their own personal challenges, but rather to provide an effective instruction which could indicate how new challenges influenced the pedagogical practices of the teachers in this study. In this respect, our findings deviate from the findings of previous studies (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020; MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer, 2020) that identified personal factors. This could, of course, be due to the specific focus of this study on the emergency blended synchronous education.

To engage students more in learning and to adequately socialize them into the new model, the teachers increased their social presence by assigning extra online interactive activities or tasks for their students. They tried to achieve this by employing more interactivity into their activities and by making themselves available through multiple channels like e-mail, text-messaging and the like. Another major strategy adopted by the participants aimed to engage the students with the content and the system through online assignments, exercises, announcements, posts and feedback. The adopted strategies by the study participants in this context, although possibly intuitive rather than informed choices, are compatible with the conceptualizations of effective online education (e.g. Anderson, 2008; Dixson, 2010; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999).

Conclusion^[P11]

The results of this study indicated that the teachers in this study adopted different strategies to cope with the challenges that they encountered during the blended mode of education offered in the context of this study during the pandemic. A few final remarks need to be made in this regard.

One issue with the emergency nature of the new educational model was the unpreparedness and thus unfamiliarity with the blended mode of education. This exerted increased pressure both physically and psychologically on the teachers as they had to make pedagogical adaptations by tailoring their materials to the needs of both online and on-campus students, by involving students more in the learning process and even trying to motivate especially online students to participate more in the classroom activities. Thus, for any future decisions concerning blended synchronous education or any other novel models, adequate training needs to be provided and professional, socio-emotional support should also be made available in order to reduce teachers' burnout or quitting the profession.

Moreover, flexibility in the form of options or choices offered to the students in the instructional mode in question also translated itself as stressors or anxiety for teachers hence negatively impacting the teachers' well-being (MacIntryre, Gregersen & Mercer, 2020). [P12] Thus, flexibility should also be provided for the teachers as well by the higher education institution since flexibility and well-being might be mutually interdependent concepts at times.

Finally, this study is novel in the sense that it shed some light on the practices of a group of English language teachers using various local initiatives to tackle a global crisis during the blended mode of education, which is likely to become a popular trend within the years to come. Thus, it is critical to investigate the necessary skills development and capacity building that English language teachers need especially in the online blended learning.

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