

Teaching Through Turmoil: A Collaborative Autoethnographic Exploration of Emergency Remote Teaching in Malaysian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic forced traditional higher education institutions to switch to Emergency Remote Teaching through internet platforms and traditional modes which created significant disruptions. Language educators also were required to conduct online assessments. Using a collaborative autoethnography, we analysed our experiences on Emergency Remote Teaching as three language educators at three Malaysian higher education institutions during the COVID-19 epidemic. We were experts in traditional face-to-face classrooms but novices in online learning environments. The framework for our research was resilience theory. Resilience describes our ability to alter and adapt in the face of adversity. We employed theme analysis to evaluate our self-reflective field notes, which were supplemented with social media posts, from April 2020 to April 2021. Our findings indicate that four themes arose from our research. The findings suggest that four themes emerged from our study; i. strategies used during Emergency Remote Teaching, ii. multiple roles, iii. resiliency, and iv. challenges. The findings give insights into educators' tactics for adapting to the Emergency Remote Teaching environment, their many responsibilities, their resiliency, and the problems they experienced. We feel that our experiences with Emergency Remote Teaching have helped us become better competent language instructors who advocate the synergy of online and offline language study. Our research adds to a better understanding of the experiences that language educators had during Emergency Remote Teaching and the use of these experiences in higher education professional development. These findings are important for policymakers, administrators, and educators as they develop strategies and policies to assist educators in times of crisis.

Keywords: *assessments, collaborative autoethnography, emergency remote teaching, language educators, learning, pandemic*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused enormous changes in conventional face-to-face instruction at higher education institutions across the world. To combat the virus's spread, several nations established measures including as lockdowns and social distance standards, which had a substantial impact on how education is provided. During The COVID-19 pandemic, Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) is employed as a temporary educational delivery strategy. The use of entirely remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be offered face-to-face, as blended or hybrid courses, and will return to that format after the crisis or emergency has passed (Hodges et al., 2020). As a result of these developments, Emergency Remote Teaching, which incorporated the use of online platforms and other kinds of technology, allowed higher institutions to continue offering high quality education while assuring the safety of students and instructors. This transition to remote teaching pushed educators to adapt to new technology and reconsider their methods to teaching and learning. Thus, educators were forced to adopt new techniques to assess their students as part of this transformation. Traditional assessments were replaced with online assessments. This transformation presented difficulties for both educators and learners as they traversed new platforms and technology, adjusting to new modalities of instruction, academic integrity and assessment validity.

Our paper aims to provide insights and recommendations for improving remote teaching practices in the future by examining our experiences as educators at Malaysian higher education institutions of teachers and their students during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this setting, collaborative autoethnography helped us explore and made sense of our experiences as English language educators at three higher education institutions in Malaysia during this period of uncertainty using Emergency Remote Teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers study the culture or phenomenon through autoethnography which is the study of the self (Ellis et al., 2011). According to Chang et al. (2013), while investigating the impact of a crisis, the researchers serve as both the instrument and the data source. This viewpoint emphasises the significance of the researchers' personal experiences, biases, reflexivity, self-awareness and subjectivities in the research process. When researching the impact of a crisis, the researchers' own crises may affect data collection and analysis, and their own thoughts may give useful insights into the phenomena under examination. In conducting research, the setting in which the researchers live or work plays a crucial role. Researchers often draw on their own experiences and knowledge of the setting to collect various materials for research purposes. By using their familiarity with the setting, researchers gather rich and nuanced data that may not be available through other means.

Understanding language educators' viewpoints, experiences, and transformations is critical for comprehending Emergency Remote Teaching (Mavridi, 2022). It is essential for educators to highlight their journeys in transforming their traditional practices to online classes or remote teaching (Quezada et al., 2020). Autoethnography is a popular research method carried out by academicians to investigate and refine their academic practices (Olmos-López & Tusting, 2020). Many autoethnographic research are conducted by solo researchers (Paukova et al., 2019). Collaborative autoethnography allows researchers to share their own personal thoughts to support their understanding of the phenomena they were generating produce and describes unified unique narratives of challenges and practices of a profession (Chang et al., 2013; Olmos-López & Tusting, 2020). In addition to drawing on their own experiences and perspectives, researchers may also engage in collaborations with other individuals or groups in the setting being studied (Chang et al., 2014). Autoethnography enables researchers to share their reflections of daily teaching practices and strategies to other practitioners which can enhance the quality of teaching English language (Muhaim, 2023). However, during the pandemic, not many researchers concentrated on personal narratives on daily teaching challenges faced by English language educators (Muhaim, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Our study employed analytic autoethnography to explore cultural events through the prism of personal experience, emphasising objective analysis and the significance of human interpretation in constructing our worldview (Anderson, 2006). Analytic autoethnography prioritises scientific rigour and impartiality. Resilience theory was used as the framework for our study to describe our ability to change and adapt to challenging situations (Masten, 2001). It contends that resilience is a dynamic process that is influenced by both internal and external variables.

Data Sources

Our study investigated data from several sources: i. researcher's journals, ii. WhatsApp and Telegram groups, and iii. digital workplace artefacts - memos, emails, and reports.

Lecturers' Background

Latisha: I am an English language educator with 23 years of experiences teaching at an institution of higher learning. I believe that students will learn when they have supportive learning environments. I was comfortable with my classroom teaching and learning practices until I had to use Emergency Remote Teaching.

Rozilawati: Being an educator myself, I am enthusiastic and highly spirited to give the best and meaningful learning experiences to my students. I believe that if I teach them well, they will be able to adopt and adapt themselves in whatever learning environment they must face, name it physically or virtually.

Aidura: I really enjoy being a teacher. I am friendly with my students, and I respect them. I go into my classes with enthusiasm, hoping to spark their interests and I want them to be high spirited and have the enthusiasm to participate in my class. I really love my students.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection procedure for this study began by identifying starting points through reflective writing. This process involved remembering and reflecting on events, stories, cases, and challenges that occurred. The aim was to identify relevant narratives and events to be analyzed to identify key themes, patterns, and meanings. Data were collected from three sources to ensure of comprehensive understanding of the events.

Data Analysis

Several steps were involved in thematic analysis, such as familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing a final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis procedures were exercised following Miles, Huberman and Saldana's method (2014). This method consists of numerous processes, including data reduction, data visualisation, and conclusion drawing/verification so that the obtained data were properly analysed, and that the findings reached were valid and dependable.

Credibility

Peer debriefing is a form of quality control in qualitative research and is recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a means of enhancing the credibility and dependability of the research

findings. The current study employed two experienced senior lecturers to discuss the research process, data collection, analysis, and findings with other researchers to obtain feedback and insights.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion section of this study identified four themes related to the experiences of educators during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme 1: Strategies of Emergency Remote Teaching

Theme 1 focused on the strategies used by educators to adapt to the Emergency Remote Teaching environment.

Strategy 1: Engage with Learners

Educators engage with their learners by building a learning community and a good learning environment for effective remote teaching with a variety of communication strategies (White, 2020). Educators can employ synchronous and asynchronous teaching approaches to encourage learners' active engagement and cooperation by using interactive tools such as online quizzes, polls, discussion forums and multimedia materials. Educators can create supportive learning environments by providing learners with clear instructions, resources, guidelines, feedback, support and opportunities for learners to interact with their peers. Rozilawati said:

Extract 1

The use of google classroom seems to be very helpful in making teaching and learning less burdening. Google Meet, Zoom, Webex are the most popular teaching and learning platforms that I used to be personally connected with my students. Kahoot, Edmodo, Quizzes, and many more are some of the technological tools which would be helpful in the process of teaching and learning during this pandemic.

Aidura shared her experience to engage her learners:

Extract 2

First and foremost, when there was a Google Meet, I would always ensure that, they would at least turned on their camera so that we would see each other and eyes met (even for a very short while). WhatsApp group was also essential for discussions and instructions (the easiest and cheapest way of communication). Longer notes were pasted in Google Classroom.

Strategy 2: Prepare Appropriate Assessments

Additionally, educators can use appropriate assessment methods to ensure their learners' work is assessed fairly and accurately. By ensuring academic integrity, educators promote the credibility and validity of the learning outcomes and ensure that learners are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge. Hence, higher education institutions should consider when implementing online assessment, they should consider the capabilities of educators and learners (Topuz et al., 2022). Rozilawati shared how appropriate assessments were accomplished during the pandemic:

Extract 3

Even during the pandemic, I still implemented both types of assessments: formative and summative to maximize student learning. The different is just the way the assessments were conducted. ...now it turned out to be paperless, where they highly need to depend on their devices to take the exams. Questions were administered via google form, and google classroom etc. Students normally get their results and feedback immediately after the tests or exams.

Following extract illustrates how Aidura implemented the assessments at her institution:

Extract 4

During the pandemic, the students at my college were left with several assessment (Reading and Speaking tasks) and they were in the form of MCQs. The tasks were in the form of Google Form (this is a life-saver) and were given to the students through Google Classroom. A student who was registered at a later intake (he missed speaking Task); this was carried out via Google Meet.

Strategy 3: Ensure Academic Integrity in the Remote Learning Environment

Educators must ensure academic integrity in the remote learning environments to ensure their learners' work is original. Educators can use a range of tools and techniques, such as plagiarism detection software, to check for plagiarism. They can also provide learners with guidelines to avoid plagiarism and promote academic honesty. In her classes during the pandemic, Rozilawati implemented the strategies as illustrated in Extract 5:

Extract 5

The students were given open book tests where they can use online resources to complete the tasks. Plagiarism and copy paste are strictly prohibited. Somehow the questions asked were also something that the students couldn't even find in any google search because they need to give and provide their reflective thoughts.

Similar policy was implemented by Aidura who explained to her expectations of her learners in the following vignette:

Extract 6

Of course, I kept reminding them not to cheat and TRUST (such a cliché). The task had specific duration; eg: 1 hour. Technically, students are allowed to take the assessment ONCE. Backtracking was prohibited. They really had to focused and hoping they had no chance to ask their family or friends or browse for the answers (due to time limitation as well). Score availability was also delayed until everyone sat for the task.

Educators' clear expectations of their learners to be ethical learners in remote learning contexts were clearly expressed in Latisha's classes as described in Extract 7:

Extract 7

The students were exposed to academic integrity. They understood the concept. They could take the test only once during a specific time given. I could check their answers using Turnitin and I know their levels.

It is essential to maintain academic integrity in online assessments by having educators' guidance on learners' assessments and using open-book tests that challenge learners to use their critical thinking abilities (Bhattacharya et al., 2022).

Theme 2: Multiple Roles

Theme 2 highlighted the multiple roles played by educators during the pandemic. The findings indicated that the multiple roles played by educators had a significant impact on their personal and professional lives.

Lifelong Learners

The first role played by educators is being lifelong learners. Apart from being subject matter experts, we as educators had to learn new skills. For example, Latisha and Rozilawati had to improve her digital skills during the beginning of the pandemic.

Extract 8

It was overwhelming in the beginning. It was a good exposure. The university did a good job exposing lecturers to video-conferencing platforms by providing e-training on high and low technology teaching tools via webinars. There were so many platforms and tools to cater for various needs and different levels of educators and students.

Extract 9

I would say, during the pandemic, educators are demanded to have both digital literacy and digital competency.

Emergency Remote Teaching has successfully encouraged lifelong learning. Educators who resisted using technology in their teaching have become receptive in enhancing their technological skills for their classes (Xie et al., 2021).

Student Advocates

Understanding learners' emotional state to ease the turmoil during the pandemic is essential for successful language learning. Rozilawati and Latisha emphasised on giving support not only academic matters but also personal conflicts as illustrated in Extract 10 and 11 :

Extract 10

The use of YouTube video, voice text, recorded lecture video helps to maintain a human touch with my students. The synchronous teaching platforms (google meet, zoom etc) also help in creating a collaborative and interactive learning environment where students can ask queries, discuss and get immediate feedback from me. (Rozilawati)

Extract 11

I would be 10 minute earlier before I started my class. We would exchange opinions on food and movies. The last 10 minutes of my class would be spent on personal and academic problems that students wanted to ask. I find that investing in personal time made the students more invested in my class. (Latisha)

Technologists

The need to be master online contexts in remote teaching during the pandemic required educators to be technologists where the educators spent time learning technological skills mastering the applications or platforms they used. Aidura remembered:

Extract 12

I no longer had the comfort being in the classroom with my students.. (I used to call my class My Kingdom). Hence, learning to conduct classes through my computer and using suitable applications has become the main way of reaching to my students.

The role of being technologists consumed educators' time. Rozilawati highlighted how she sacrificed her time preparing for her classes in the following vignette:

Extract 13

I must be digitally savvy during this pandemic. More time is needed on the preparation part. I must ensure that I am well prepared with my content lessons, make sure my slides and digital resources that I plan to use during my google meet session are presentable so that I can deliver my lectures and lessons without disruption.

On the other hand, Latisha realised she needed certification courses on technological skills as described in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Certification courses

The findings of this research are aligned with Mavridi (2022) who highlighted Emergency Remote Teaching experiences propels language educators to enhance their technological skills and to incorporate these skills in their teaching practices.

Theme 3: Resiliency

Theme 3 focused on the resiliency demonstrated by educators during the pandemic.

Accountability

Accountability is one of the aspects in being resilient (Hellsten et al., 2011). Aidura and Latisha advocated being accountable for their teaching decisions and responsibilities. Even though they were overwhelmed with sudden changes and academic demands, they took the responsibilities. The following vignettes show how they were being accountable for their remote teaching:

Extract 14

I no longer had the comfort being in the classroom with my students. (I used to call my class My Kingdom). Using various apps as simple as WhatsApp, if I could reach my students and disseminate information and contents. Thus, using the simplest application with the least data was one of the options. But the greatest challenge to me was having to correct papers digitally... most importantly, my students learned and received what they were supposed to. (Aidura)

Extract 15

I had to be the steady one. Everything that I was good at such as class management, the books and the jokes were gone. I was back to the beginning of my career. How do I close the gap? How do I tackle the weak students? How do I interact with students' miles away from me? How do I teach online? I knew I had to be the calm one. (Latisha)

Communication Skills

Effective communication skills increase resilience because they allow people to connect, seek assistance, and express their needs and feelings. Educators were aware that during the pandemic, they had to increase the level of resiliency among the learners and themselves, they needed to have good communication skills. Having good communication skills, they were able to build supportive relationships, express emotions, solve problems and manage stress. Rozilawati, Aidura and Latisha described their communication skills practices in Extract 17, 18 and Figure 2:

Extract 16

I also interact with my students after class with follow up questions and reflective feedback which I normally gathered via WhatsApp group as to ensure they successfully learnt. (Rozilawati)

Extract 17

I would always ensure that, they would at least turn on their camera so that we would see each other and eyes met (even for a very short while). This was to ensure keep the bonding between the teacher and students. For them to feel that I care even though it was distance learning; (a sense of belonging) (Aidura)



(Latisha)

Figure 2: Communication skills during the pandemic

Figure 2 illustrates how lecturers and learners were given adequate interactional opportunities to communicate with others by participating in virtual activities and meetings using cloud-based video conferencing services like Google Meet and WebEx during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participating in international collaborations led to international collaborations which intensified academic resiliency among lecturers and learners. In addition, engaging in virtual learning activities strengthened learners' communication skills which led to improved abilities to express their feelings and opinions. According to Ding (2021), learners need to have adequate interactional competency between learners and instructors to improve their English language proficiency. They also verbalised their thoughts, which enhanced their resiliency.

Support

Learners and educators were stressed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Having many types of support such as emotional support, practical support, social support and informational support built resiliency among educators. Latisha, Rozilawati and Aidura received many types of support from various sources which enhanced their resiliency during the pandemic in the following vignette:

Extract 18

Local and international personal and professional communities: subject-matter experts, interdisciplinary, non-academic, creative writing, professional interests & management, WhatsApp/Telegram groups, Online & F2F meetings, email, social media sites, cloud sharing & file-sharing (Latisha, Rozilawati & Aidura)

The need for emotional, practical, social and informational support were iterated by Rofiza (2022) when she explained how the support, she received during the pandemic revitalised her and made her more resilient in overcoming her professional challenges.

Theme 4: Challenges

Theme 4 highlighted the challenges faced by educators during the pandemic, such as lack of resources, inadequate training, and increased workload.

Technological Challenges

The shift from traditional F2F learning to remote learning which involved technical tools and skills presented technological challenges to educators and learners (Farrah & al-Bakry, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Yusuf, 2020). Rozilawati and Latisha recalled their technological challenges during the pandemic as shown in Extract 19 and 20.

Extract 19

During pandemic, both educators and students alike have faced different obstacles in remote teaching due to the existing limitations related to technological (Rozilawati)

Extract 20

We had to have our group presentations at 11.50 p.m. One of my students presented his speech in a car because he had to drive to find a good Internet connection. (Latisha)

Pedagogical Challenges

It is expected that when educators are forced to use remote teaching during the pandemic, they will face pedagogical challenges (Nae, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Yusuf, 2020). The sentiments were echoed by many language educators globally as there they were given general technology-enhanced professional development (Moser, et al., 2021). Rozilawati and Aidura were confronted with pedagogical challenges in their English language classes in the following vignettes:

Extract 21

The COVID-19 crisis is presenting different challenges that should be addressed to develop new methodologies and pedagogical approaches... specifically designed for online teaching and learning.... anticipate potential implications and social expectations of both educators and learners. (Rozilawati)

Extract 22

My online class teaching also turned out to be my learning about how to adapt to a new teaching situation. More time was put in preparing for the classes. I have to learn a lot about new applications to be used with my students; to ease their learning and most importantly for them to be able to grasp what was being taught and shared. (Aidura)

Individual Challenges

Emergency Remote Teaching requires educators to consider individual challenges of their learners (Ferri et al., 2020). Many learners were forced to study at their homes with limited resources. In addition, the learners needed to adjust to drastic new learning environments. These individual challenges were recognised by Latisha and Rozilawati as illustrated in Extract 24 and 25:

Extract 23

My students did quit from their studies due to financial problem and mental health. My colleagues and I faced challenges at home when we were forced to work from home in the beginning. ...especially those who had children who needed to use the Internet and computers for their learning and teaching. (Latisha)

Extract 24

During pandemic, both educators and students alike have faced different obstacles in remote teaching due to the existing limitations related to social challenges (Rozilawati)

CONCLUSION

Overall, the four themes identified in this study highlight the unique experiences of educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings provide insights into the strategies used by educators to adapt to the emergency remote teaching environment, the multiple roles played by educators, their resiliency, and the challenges they faced. This study used collaborative autoethnography to comprehend Emergency Remote Teaching experiences of three experienced English language lecturers at three higher education institutions in Malaysia. The findings indicate that as effective English language lecturers, we strengthened our resiliency as we confronted and embraced our professional and personal challenges. In addition, we used multiple teaching strategies while playing multiple roles as educators at higher education. We believe that our experiences with Emergency Remote Teaching make us become more qualified language educators who support the synergy between online and offline language learning. Our research contributes to understanding the experiences language educators faced during Emergency Remote Teaching and using these experiences in professional development of language educators at higher education. These findings have significance for policymakers, administrators, and educators as they establish strategies and policies to help educators in times of crises. However, this study employs a collaborative autoethnography which focusses on the experiences of three lecturers. Thus, the findings cannot be generalised to all language educators. Future research can be conducted by involving more practitioners in the study.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Latisha Asmaak Shafie, Rozilawati Mahadi and Aidura Aiyub planned and carried out the study. Latisha took the lead in writing the manuscript. Rozilawati and Aidura provided critical feedback and helped shape the research, analysis and manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

We certify that the article is the Authors' and Co-Authors' original work. The article has not received prior publication and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. This research/manuscript has not been submitted for publication nor has it been published in whole or in part elsewhere. We testify to the fact that all Authors have contributed significantly to the work, validity and legitimacy of the data and its interpretation for submission to Jurnal Intelek.

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