Coping with the Challenges of Teaching English Online: Lessons from the Newbies

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Abstract. The COVID-19 school closure has forced teachers to move classes to virtual settings. For teachers who have never experienced teaching courses online, this technology-mediated teaching presents several challenges that could prevent them from delivering the teaching material effectively. This study employed an open-ended questionnaire to explore the main barriers faced by four English teachers who were new to remote teaching and the steps they did to transform face-to-face (F2F) classes into functioning e-learning courses. The paper showed the teachers' perspectives that might be useful for other novices in preparing for virtual classes. Findings showed three major points related to participants' attempts to overcome the limitations of technological competency and social barriers, the instructional strategies they used to develop the content for online classes through multimedia integration, and their reflections on teaching English online. Finally, the findings shed light on how to prepare and implement effective online teaching that meets the needs of beginning online teachers.

Keywords: Beginning online teachers · online teaching · technological competency

1 Background

In the midst of 2020, the spread of coronavirus or COVID-19 had globally shaken up almost all sectors, including education. Due to the requirement of social distancing to save the students, academic staff, and the nation as a whole from this deadly infectious disease, thousands of schools and universities were forced to discontinue in-person teaching temporarily. This unparalleled challenging situation compelled the educational units to embrace remote teaching as an option.

Remote teaching is also known in many terms such as distance learning, online learning, e-learning, virtual learning, open learning, web-based learning, computer-mediated learning, blended learning, and m-learning [1–3]. It involves the use of computers or other devices which are connected to a network that enables learning from anywhere, anytime, and in any rhythm [3–5]. With these features, the online mode of learning serves as a victor ludorum [3] which suitably supports the scenario of distance learning unavoidably implemented for the maintenance of education during the lockdown.

Although many teachers have been familiar to use technology for learning enhancement in the last decade, shifting from traditional face-to-face classes to entire online

teaching was such a revolutionary change that they might not be ready for without any preparation. Several previous studies [3, 6, 7] acknowledged that teachers face challenges in transitioning from offline to online. An expert [3] found that teaching preparation, teaching style, and communication are included as the obstacles inherent in online teaching as they are separated from learners in location, time, and distance. The study which focused on higher education indicates that supporting factors such as provision on teacher professional development and improvement of internet infrastructure may better the online learning environment, especially for faculty members who are responsible for service delivery. Others [4, 8] lend support by revealing that insufficient or unstable internet connectivity, inadequate computer laboratories, a shortage of computers/laptops, and technical issues were the most significant barriers to e-learning acceptance. Further, they found that this acceptance was affected by teachers' age, teaching experience, and gender. Other previous research [9] also adds to the studies linked to teachers' issues in online learning. Teachers' lack of preparation for remote learning was found to have an impact on their ability to use ICT tools and online learning platforms. Their knowledge of how to use ICT in the classroom in regular circumstances may not be applicable during the school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study shows that the strong commitment of the instructors and education administrators at schools as well as clear technical guidelines and instructions should be offered for references to implement appropriate distance learning.

In brief, the COVID-19 incident has forced education institutions around the world to make an emergency shift to virtual learning, resulting in a flurry of arguments regarding digital infrastructure, digital divide, digital literacy, teacher technical and pedagogic abilities, digital content, and so on. Regardless of the abovementioned encounters, resistance to change is not a choice as all education components are struggling to deal with this challenging situation. Due to the benefits of online learning that cannot be disregarded in times of such crisis, any issues attached to it should be managed for its successful implementation. In addition, as a full return to normal is still subtle and the adoption of online learning may continue to persevere post-pandemic, the study on how teachers handle the challenges of online learning practices may bring advantages to the wide-reaching education market. Hence, given the conditions of e-learning implementation with various challenges faced by teachers, there is a need to establish new pedagogical models for online learning as this method of learning contains a distinct educational experience with its own set of conditions and affordances for learning and interaction [10].

In order to build new patterns for online pedagogy, an in-depth analysis of teachers' online teaching experiences and changing roles is required. Teachers are the focus of this study because they have a better understanding of the accounts and can thus make a more up-to-date assessment of their future professional practices and nature-institution-discourse-affinity identities. With this respect, the primary goal of this research is to learn more about teachers' transition to online teaching, with a particular focus on successful strategies used by novice online teachers. The research was guided by the following questions: 1) what are the main barriers faced by English teachers who are new to remote teaching? and 2) how do these teachers manage the shift to online teaching so that their practices are successful?

2   Online Learning and Its Implementation During the Pandemic of Covid-19

During the Coronavirus pandemic, online teaching that integrates the use of technology has become a critical component of maintaining educational activities. The three types of online learning are described as follows by experts [11, 12]. Synchronous learning, which includes live-streaming courses, video, and teleconferencing, is a type of online learning that takes place in real-time. It allows interactions between teachers and students to take place simultaneously. Teachers can monitor the learners' answers during the learning process and improve the quality of the learning process using live communications, which increases student engagement and motivation. Asynchronous learning, on the other hand, does not require teachers and students to meet online at the same time. It allows for more flexibility in terms of time, location, and classroom. The courses are provided via email, blogs, online modules, and any social media platforms because lecturers and students do not meet in a live forum. Teachers can also blend the two forms of online learning to create the programs they want. In addition, a hybrid learning environment combines synchronous and asynchronous learning.

Technology has also become increasingly important in the execution of curriculum in English language teaching (ELT). Teachers can offer new uses of ideas, resources, and tools that are relevant to English instructions and lead to the attainment of the desired goals by using technology in their English classes. A study [13] back this up by claiming that using digital resources and the internet in English learning increases students' motivation and engagement, supports different learning styles, and improves teaching and learning quality.

Echoing an expert [14], teachers at all levels may find the transfer from traditional classrooms to distant and online learning to be a novel experience, and it may be seen differently depending on their past individual views, professional practices, and institutional contexts. However, given the pandemic's abrupt onset and the limited resources and skills available to affected individuals, it is fascinating to learn how they interpret their experiences and respond to the situation. With this respect, the current study was conducted to examine the primary challenges faced by English teachers who are new to remote teaching and how they manage the transition to successful online teaching practices.

3   Methods

The current study implemented the qualitative phenomenological research design. Using the perspective of those who have experienced a thing, phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of that phenomenon [15]. Here, the meaning of the phenomenon from the standpoint of the participants in this technique was explored. Hence, the goal of this phenomenological study was to learn more about successful strategies employed by rookie online teachers in teaching English online.

Table 1. Participants of the Study

Teacher	Gender	Age	School	Length of Teaching Experience
Teacher A	Female	27 y.o.	Elementary	8 years
Teacher B	Male	31 y.o.	Junior High	6 years
Teacher C	Female	29 y.o.	Senior high	2 years
Teacher D	Female	30 y.o.	Senior High	6 years

3.1 Participants and Research Site

For this study, a purposive sampling technique was adopted to suggest three to ten participants for the phenomenological study. Dealing with this, four English teachers aged 28–30 years old (Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, and Teacher D, respectively) were recruited to participate in the study. These younger teachers may utilize technology more frequently than older teachers, which would boost their ability, willingness, and acceptance of e-learning technology. Nevertheless, they may not be prepared for such a radical transformation. As online teaching and learning diverged from its face-to-face predecessor, their functions and qualities as teachers may also alter. Participants were chosen based on their approval to participate in the study, their knowledge of the topic under investigation, their ability to be reached online, and their willingness to fill in the questionnaire. The Table 1 summarizes the data of the four participants.

From Table 1, it can be seen that the participants, who were in-service teachers, were not only from different schools in East Java Province, Indonesia but also from different education levels. Although Teachers C and D taught at the same level of schooling, their schools had different focuses. Teacher C was in a national senior high school, while Teacher D worked for an Islamic senior high school. Four of them were novice online teachers as they had no experience in teaching English online before. Due to the lockdown, schools were compelled to shift their whole curriculum to a digital platform with no prior planning. Thus, researching their experiences as early adopters of online education can help us better understand how they deal with the problems they confront during its implementation.

3.2 Instrument

A questionnaire was provided to the four selected teachers in order to collect data. This open-ended questionnaire, adapted from [16], included ten questions to assess teachers' initial opinions, attitudes, and experience with online learning. The questions were written bilingually, in English and Indonesian, so that respondents could comprehend and interpret the questions and instructions better to provide responses. They were also allowed to answer the questions in the language they were most comfortable with.

The personal data of the participants were obtained from the first part of the questionnaire. It included participants' gender, age, level of schooling, and length of teaching experience. The conclusions of the study were determined by coding and sorting the results.

3.3 Data Collection

After the participants verified their willingness to participate in the study, the questionnaire which was administered in a Google Form was sent to them via WhatsApp chat to obtain their initial impressions of the English online teaching phenomenon. The questionnaire was returned to the participants for further research in response to their prior responses in order to gather richer data. In other words, teachers completed the form in two rounds: first, answering the questions, and then, in response to their first answer, completing the follow-up questions. Additionally, online communication was conducted simultaneously to develop interpretation and add to existing information at the same time.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed consisting of six steps [17]. Familiarization entails jotting down initial thoughts, coding intriguing data aspects, grouping codes into prospective themes, and checking or revising themes. It goes on to define themes, which includes continued investigation to fine-tune the specifics of each theme, identifying each theme, and generating an academic paper on the findings. Besides enlisting an expert to double-check the coding themes in order to give the study credibility, the participants were also asked via WhatsApp chat to confirm or verify whether the coded answers reflect their experiences.

4 Findings and Discussion

As mentioned in the previous section, participants answered ten questions in the questionnaire. The first, second, and third questions reflect the challenges each teacher faced in conducting online classes. The fourth and fifth questions address how they incorporated multimedia into online classes. Questions six to ten capture their reflection on English online teaching. The numerous quotations of respondents' online teaching experiences indicate that individual teacher accounts depicted their distinctive transition to online teaching experiences influenced by a variety of professional, personal, and organizational variables. The three major themes that emerged from the teachers' comments are presented as follows.

4.1 Technical and Social Barriers

The information gathered from the instructors' comments reveals two primary challenges: technological and social obstacles. Even though the participants in this study were young teachers, aged 27 to 31, who were considered capable of handling technology, they had not become accustomed to the modalities of communicating with students and delivering lessons virtually. The following quotations show the challenges that teachers faced related to technology and how they coped with them for quality online teaching.

Teacher A: *Before the pandemic, I was never familiar with the application. Initially, several junior high school students around my house showed me how to easily collect*

assignments with the application, which inspired me to apply it in elementary school. I learned about the application from several sources, such as reading articles, asking fellow teachers at the Vocational High School who are already proficient in using it and learning from high-class younger siblings who live near my house.

Teacher B: *I learned how to use the tools for teaching online through YouTube. I also participated in various special pieces of training provided by the Education Office through the Regional Coordinator relating to e-learning. One form of school support is regular in-house training and education. The things discussed in these activities vary, such as; obstacles in conducting learning, the use of the latest learning media, how to develop learning with technology, and much more. In fact, several times, we have invited resource persons who are experts in their fields to be speakers. With this activity, it is hoped that all teachers will be able to develop the learning process in their respective fields.*

Teacher C*: The year 2021 was my first-time experience teaching online. There are lots of new things I have learned from this way of teaching, especially keep upgrading and updating digital learning media and teaching methodology. I studied various Google features such as Google Classroom and Google Forms that I had never/rarely used before. Besides that, I also know various platforms that can be used for assessment such as Quizziz and Kahoot. I learned from several webinars and also found how to use them by myself. In addition, the school provides me with a good internet connection, references, and peer support. Some teachers often share webinar info on the school's official WhatsApp group to make us, teachers, have better ICT skills for teaching and learning.*

Teacher D: The school provides internet and laptop facilities (assistance from the ministry of education) for teachers at school so that we can carry out learning easily. We can bring the laptop by registering the laptop's serial number to the office first before taking it home.

From the above comments, it can be seen that the participants had never experienced this new learning modality. These early adopters claimed to be an autodidact who picked up the features of online teaching platforms on their own and took part in webinars to stay current with technology-related knowledge and abilities. The responses above also indicate that the government and school realized that not all teachers were self-taught, thus support is provided in the forms of professional development for establishing effective forms of online education and the facilities and tools to deliver e-learning. Therefore, it can be concluded that despite the fact that e-learning is not a new phenomenon, several teachers encountered difficulties due to their unfamiliarity with the medium. As it has been a challenging period for all educators, support such as training provided by schools and the government is crucial to equip them with skills for this new-fangled learning method as the effectiveness of online education depends heavily on their capacity to instruct [3, 11].

Besides their lack of technological expertise and skills in translating in-person educational systems to virtual learning, these teachers also faced social challenges in their online classes as quoted below.

Teacher A*: To deal with online teaching is not easy. I usually had a special approach with some students. I position myself as a friend so that they will share about the obstacles*

they had. So far the problem has been resolved, although there are still one or two students who are still moody, they still did the assignments well. For students like this, I usually give extra time in collecting the work.

Teacher B*: As I teach in a rural area, weak internet connection often impedes online distance learning. This issue sometimes becomes the bane of student studying and working on their assignment. Students are less responsible for doing assignments and collecting assignments punctually because of it.*

Teacher C: Sometimes I barely know my students (students' faces) because most of the time they are reluctant to open their cameras. This frustrated me at first because I used to have direct communication with students and I know whether they listen and pay attention to my lesson or not. Other than that, the students' discipline is very much my attention, particularly the punctuality of submitting assignments and attendance in the virtual meeting. Well, for camera problems, I try to understand my students' situations because sometimes they told me that they have technical issues with their gadgets or internet connection problems. For attendance and punctuality, I keep in touch with their homeroom teachers to keep reminding them and if it is necessary, I call up their parents to school to get to know their children's problems.

The responses above prove that social obstacles exist in online classes due to a number of reasons. Both Teachers B and C informed the researcher that the internet connection may be one of the causes of the late submission of students' work. Although this case seems trivial, punctuality can affect the flow of the scheduled lesson, obstruct learning, and generally lower class morale [18]. Reluctance to turn on the camera has also been a problem during the synchronous class. Furthermore, it was found that teachers are also concerned about students' attention such as willingness to turn on the camera during synchronous class and motivation to participate in online class activities. These findings are in line with the previous studies [19, 20]. Because teachers cannot even see the students' gestures while the class is in session, they found it difficult to maintain the students' attention during synchronous classes. Particularly in courses that need longer hours and computations, they were unable to determine whether the students were still engaged during the duration of the lessons. In conclusion, it is not easy for teachers to keep students' attention on online learning. Thus, to continue educating students during distance learning, teachers need to enhance current teaching techniques to meet learners' expectations and deal with the shorter attention spans that are typical among today's learners [21].

In addition, as communication has altered from direct to the virtual mode in online learning, teachers' responses above show that crafting sensible, appropriate, and convenient communication with online students is not always a simple task. Since the success of online learning strongly depends on teachers and parents working together [22], Teacher C's actions to monitor students' attendance and performance and inform parents of their children's performance are crucial. This finding agrees with the earlier studies [14] which posit that a classroom presence and motivated students are the results of effective communication in an online course.

4.2 Incorporating Multimedia into Online Classes

During distance learning, teachers cannot illustrate the teachings offered in person. They must prepare the learning materials and update the technology utilized for online instruction. In addition to devices with greater specifications, teachers also need to meet the requirements of the applications used in online learning. Given the situation, they struggle with having to spend more time preparing for digital presentations that will be utilized in online classes. Teachers also need cultural awareness to guarantee that their curriculum and teaching practices are relevant and sustainable, as well as content expertise to ensure that students can gain proper conceptual understandings through technology-rich activities [23]. Isolated technology abilities that are not aligned and incorporated into the teacher's decision-making basis are frequently underutilized in the classroom. Below are teachers' answers related to how they employed multimedia in online classes.

Teacher A: *There are many applications that we can use in online learning, for example, zoom, Google meet, Google classroom, etc. But as I said at the beginning, every teacher has a different way of teaching online. Here I use the Google Classroom application to deliver and collect student assignments because I think this is easier. Plus, I make learning videos for students to make the material easier to understand. To make it more interesting, I also use the Capcut and Picsart applications to edit videos and their icons. Students feel they are entering a special class when accessing this application so they can access assignments and not worry if the assignments they submitted will be lost because they are directly included in my drafts. I also often use the Google meet application to conduct synchronous classes. However, sometimes the network is not smooth so some students cannot join the meet. Therefore, the delivery of English material is mostly delivered in mp4 videos, handouts, worksheets, etc.*

Teacher B: *At first, my students submitted and collected their assignments via What-sApp only. I finally realized that it is less efficient because I teach 12 classes and usually messages get stacked easily and make memory fill up faster. Then, I looked for information about Google Classroom. The problems we encountered while using this application are the e-mail address that cannot access the link, the network not being smooth, and students who do not know how to collect assignments. Due to these difficulties, I invite parents and students to learn to use this application together so that they are familiar to use this application. Finally, it only took us less than three months to study together and everything went smoothly.*

Teacher C*: I had many problems with the online teaching program, especially in the assessment and evaluation part, it was very difficult to evaluate and control learners through technology instruments and grading them correctly.*

Teacher D: *All English assignments are submitted through Google classroom and I give each assignment a time limit before 3 p.m. (except for those whose parents work and come home late at night). I can check the submitted assignments and give them grades according to the date listed on the server. I can also use this to see the percentage of student attendance in online classes. Usually, I check students' work at night.*

From the responses above, it can be seen that the teachers use a variety of multimedia tools to teach English online. Due to the obstacles to conducting synchronous classes regularly, Teacher A delivered the materials in mp4 videos, handouts, and worksheets.

She even tried to create exciting ways to attract students to learn English by providing interactive videos using Capcut and Picsart applications. The previous study [13] lends support by positing that technology is influencing communication and motivating progress in students.

In addition, Teacher C claimed that she faced some difficulties in evaluating students during online learning. This teacher probably is not the only one who questions this. Online instructors must find out the assessment strategies they feel work best in the virtual classroom. Dealing with this, teachers should assign a variety of regularly scheduled exercises and provide fast, helpful feedback based on the data they gather [24].

Teachers B and D informed that they struggled to find the most accommodative tools to support the curriculum and enable students to truly use technology in their own learning. As concerns, their efforts to find ways to integrate technology into the learning process are part of their responsibilities to better help their learners even if they do not have prior knowledge.

4.3   Reflection on Teaching English Online

The pandemic of COVID-19 has indirectly brought a unique challenge to teachers as schools closed and learning moved online. Nevertheless, these unprecedented conditions have shone a light on some aspects of students, their learning, and the teaching and learning process that teachers might not have otherwise noticed as quoted below.

Teacher A: Of course, I have experienced many changes during online learning, such as how to use classroom resources (the importance of using a variety of interesting learning media such as videos, music, educational movies, and others), expert communication skills (Initially more often communicate with students, but now it is required to build good communication with parents), the ability to build a caring relationship with students (teachers must have a strategy so that the material is conveyed easily without having to burden students).

Teacher B: It is very impressive because there is a new atmosphere in the teaching and learning process and the use of media that makes the KMB process easier but it is difficult to get students who are truly honest in carrying out their assignments.

Teacher C: Honestly, I have learned a lot during this online teaching and learning, especially honing my ICT skills. I realize that as a teacher I cannot sit still and do the same thing over and over again because students are prone to boredom throughout this type of learning process. I try to keep in contact with my students whenever they need me, so at least I know quite much about them. I learn a new perspective and new methodology regarding online teaching which had never come to my mind or taught during my university years. It really improves me a lot. And I must say that I also grow up a lot more during this online teaching era. Grow up as an individual and as a teacher.

Teacher D: *Teaching online has brought an opportunity to recognize and develop creativity in making learning materials to create meaningful learning.*

The responses above prove that the COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges in teaching and learning for teachers worldwide, including the ones who participated in the study who are trying to cope with these new challenges.

All of the teachers reported that despite the pedagogical and technological challenges, they maintained online teaching in a connective way with their students. All participants

stated that they had been introduced to new teaching and learning content for online classes. However, despite the difficulties that teachers encountered when teaching online due to their lack of digital competence, this method of teaching has given the teachers a chance to transform, adapt, and learn new skills and knowledge to better themselves for the post-pandemic environment and their upcoming face-to-face classroom settings. The pandemic's online teaching experience has been able to change the teachers' professional knowledge of how to function and react in any challenging scenario. Given the condition, we can now add one more justification for online education—that it is a lifesaver in times of crisis [2].

5   Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed the three dominant themes, which are the technical and social challenges teachers faced in teaching online, multimedia integration, and e-learning reflection. The difficulties that participants described are also seen in other related research, which teachers have frequently encountered in online teaching. This study can aid early adopters of online teaching and educational institutions in gaining an understanding of the instructional perspectives in online education and in realizing that, despite taking a lot of time to develop, design, plan, and prepare online instruction, it can also be a rewarding experience. In light of the kinds of teaching practices participants encounter when teaching online, the present research can also assist teachers in reevaluating their duties. The support of the schools, parents, and other relevant stakeholders often allowed teachers to find their jobs satisfying despite the personal, technological, and pedagogical hurdles they faced when teaching online. All participants in online learning communities should be aware of the need of encouraging sympathy and support for the educators. In order to deliver high-quality education, including English learning, stakeholders should be inspired by teachers' experiences with online learning to work harder and investigate various online learning activity patterns. Finally, they will become adaptable to adjust and accept virtual education as online teaching obstacles emerge.

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