

Chapter 8

Foreign Language Education Through Online Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 affected some facets of daily lives including politics, finances, and education. Increasingly, educational institutes turned to online education following the pandemic. Due to this sudden shift, the stakeholders were not ready to fulfill the outcomes and face the challenges that it brought. Foreign language teaching context poses separate challenges to the learners and the teachers due to limited language input and output. Considering the significance of teachers and the effect of teacher education on student achievement, this study focuses on the reflections of teacher candidates on online language teaching practices in an EFL context. The participants attended an online practicum course where they observed online English classes offered at the high school level for 14 weeks and designed tasks to improve pedagogical practices. By analyzing the reflections and the tasks designed for language teaching, the study offers the challenges of online EFL classes and presents practical tasks to address them. The study also offers implications for online language teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

With the outbreak of COVID-19, the established systems in all aspects of life have been revised including education, economics, health, lifestyles, etc. The frame-breaking innovations have been introduced to maintain our lives during the lockdown and restricted period. For education, the most obvious and practical solution is online education. Considering the in-class applications and the cumulative literature

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about the subject, education seems to be prepared for distance or remote, online processes. The blended and online courses have been popular for the last two decades as in parallel with the growth of technology, thus the use of ICT tools and the effectiveness of online interactive tools and courses have been conducted and examined in many different learning contexts (Fu, 2013; Dziuban, Graham, Moskal, *et al*, 2018). Even so, the school lockdown period all over the world faced teachers, students, and parents with an unexpected situation. Owing to this, a new, alternative way of schooling has been adapted: online teaching. Teachers had to use a variety of digital tools and resources and implement new approaches to teaching and learning (Eickelmann and Gerick, 2020).

Like all education levels, higher education, specifically teacher education, had to keep up with this unexpected situation and apply the ‘forced’ transition from face-to-face to online teaching and create learning environments for pre-service teachers (Carillo & Flores, 2020). The biggest challenge for the teacher education programs was to arrange and apply school-based teaching practicum courses. Practicum courses offered at teacher education programs are significant for the development of pre-service teachers since they provide real-life language teaching experience through observations and teaching tasks. The literature states that these programs signal the quality of future teachers and the achievement rate of the learners (Çepik & Çepik, 2015; Hanushek, 2002; Ingvarson & Rowley, 2017; Musset, 2010). During teacher education, future teachers gain the skills and knowledge required for the profession. Thus, the practicum is a vital component of teacher education and it is the cornerstone of teacher education where the pre-service teachers experience a transition from learning-to-teach to teaching-to-learn (Herrington, Herrington, Kervin, & Ferry, 2006).

The pandemic has led to the need for different approaches to the practicum. In the traditional (face-to-face) practicum process, the pre-service teachers would attend the assigned schools on a regular basis to observe the mentor teacher and engage in active teaching. The participants of the process interact with each other face-to-face. For instance, during the lessons, the pre-service teachers, the mentors, and the pupils are in the same room engaged in the teaching and learning process. The prospective teachers can receive feedback from their mentors on their in-class performances and they can collaborate to plan the following lessons. However, during online lessons, different types of interactional tools and patterns are required. In other words, a social online platform in which pre-service teachers can observe, practice, discuss and share their teaching experience is advised to compensate the pre-service teachers’ lack of interaction and practice as expected in the traditional face-to-face practicum environment to scaffold their professional development. On that point, as a model to pre-service teacher’s professional development, online communities of practice (CoPs) for collaborative professional learning have gained considerable interest nowadays. The great potential of online CoPs for teachers and pre-service teachers to share their resources and their experiences about teaching and to communicate with each other has been approved by many studies (Sim, 2006; Zhang, Liu & Wang 2016).

In spite of rich literature on conceptual and theoretical issues to CoPs (Hafeez, Alghatas, Foroudi, Nguyen & Gupta, 2019; Queen, Cook & Rowland, 2019; Watson, Bentley, Eppley, & Lin, 2020; Xue, Hu, Chi, Zhang, 2019), very few empirical studies have been conducted on how CoPs work during online teaching practice and what challenges occur from pre-service teachers’ views. In this chapter, the implementation of online CoPs for practicum processes of ELT pre-service teachers is investigated, probing the challenges that the pre-service teachers detected and presenting the practical examples that enriched the online communities of practice process.

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