Going Online! Teachers' Encountered Personal Challenges in Teaching in the New Normal: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

With most research mainly done on the challenges of students in online learning, this study is conducted to go to the personal level of struggles of teachers during the shift of teaching methods from traditional to online. Teachers from different countries (Ghana, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, the Philippines, Japan, and Pakistan) were personally interviewed about the challenges they encountered in the journey in online teaching. Using the qualitative analysis of data collected, this research presents a thematic organization of unique challenges to each participant. The results can be personal and validating to the teachers in the same situation until now.

Keywords: COVID 19, Narrative inquiry, New normal, Online teaching, Teacher training, Qualitative research, Professional development.

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Introduction

Teachers are the front liners of any educational system worldwide (Thomson, 2011). They are considered the system's backbone that drives the world to where we are now (Bedi, 2021). In some cultures, teachers are considered the kids' second parents outside their homes (Davis, 2021). They are the ones who actually shape the citizenry of a nation and guide generations of people to the goals of each land (UNESCO, 2021).

The worldwide lockdowns affected how we normally function as individuals and professionals, and the heightened reliance on technology has left many countries struggling to cope in educational setup. Educational institutions worldwide were left with no choice but to halt normal operations (brick-and-mortar) to online or distance education. This created a higher demand for computer skills, reliable internet connections, re-upskilling, and stable mental health status (Canonizado, 2021). The shift to online teaching presented many new challenges to already challenged educators back in the classroom days (Quevillon, 2021).

At the pandemic's start, schools were the first to close their doors to people so children would be immediately spared from the problem. This left schools to crumble on the implementation of induced online teaching. Many studies have been conducted in relation to the challenges that students or learners face in online learning, but little is known about how our beloved teachers also struggle behind the screen. Back in the classroom, the biggest challenge of a teacher lies in understanding the learning pattern or ability of the learners (Tadas, 2019; Kao, 2019). Learners learn in different ways. Some are good in sports, arts, languages, and so many more - hence the multiple intelligences. And this amplified when teachers turned to their computers to face their learners during the teaching process (Best, 2020). Without seeing the physical persona of their learners, teachers are left in the grey area of how these learners learn because of minimal resources and access to learners (Tadas, 2019).

According to Best (2020), one of the top challenges that teachers face while teaching online is the lack of motivation of learners. Best mentions, though it may seem that distance learning is difficult for learners, it doubles on the teachers' side. When they abruptly have the floor to teach, it has become their bedrooms, kitchens, or dining room as their floor in teaching, which they do not view

as conducive to teaching (Huang, 2020), not to mention those distractions on the side.

In an article written by Canlas (2021). There states that teachers also find it hard to communicate with younger learners using the technology, so they rely heavily on the parents and guardians in assisting them to relay the message. However, problems arise when the parents also do not know how to navigate on the computers or laptops with applications they are not familiar with (König, Jäger-Biela, & Glutsch, 2020).

Moreover, a study instituted by Kao (2019) mentions that it is not just the capacity of learners or parents to navigate the websites or apps provided for them. Kao (2019) states the loss of time in teaching them to navigate adds more burden to the teacher and being left out on the planned schedule for each lesson. She argues that a time lost in a very restricting screen time could add more stress on the teacher's end as proved by Johnson, Jacovina, Russell, and Soto (2016). The authors mentioned that any technology introduced could add more burden to educators.

This paper presents the personal challenges of teachers from different countries in continuing the online mode of education and the solutions they had to come up with to get past the difficulties they are facing.

Methodology

This study aims to determine the teachers' encountered challenges concerning synchronous teaching and learning online. This also identifies the solutions these teachers had to come up with to get past the teaching journey. This study focuses on teachers' experiences from different countries in Asia.

By comparing their online teaching journey. When the world has quickly shifted the educational setup to the online synchronous teaching method, teachers are left with no choice but to ride the trend wave. The results of this study may help readers and researchers on how they plan to continue implementing the teaching method.

The respondents are all teachers in respective fields, and they all have experience in teaching before COVID-19. There are eight participants in the research study. Hence it used qualitative interpretation instead of quantitative, which utilizes statistical treatment.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research was conducted through a series of online interviews via Zoom, Facebook Messenger, or Google Meet. Teachers come from different countries: Japan, the Philippines, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Ghana. Interviews were conducted to understand the recurring themes and patterns of the participants' experiences in the phenomenon. The identification of the participants was hidden to protect their privacy, so the researchers used code names to represent them.

There were only two general questions asked during the interview as it aimed to know the teachers' experiences on the setup. The interviewer follows those questions up with minor questions to guide them during the interview. The research questions: (1) What challenges did you encounter when conducting synchronous online teaching? (2) What solutions did you come up with to address them? These questions were used to obtain the participants' feelings, attitudes, or thoughts about the teaching method. And results are presented in qualitative narration.

Results and Discussions

Teacher Akane (Kasukabe, Japan)

One of the challenges that she experienced on the swift shift to online synchronous online teaching was the lack of confidence of her learners or the trust in online learning. She specifically mentioned that her learners have become so passive during the class due to parents' presence. It was a challenge to elicit ideas from her learners.

"Given the fact that my young learners were active and playful during our class hours back in schools, in front of camera their behavior turned upside down. I could barely make them talk."

Teacher Akane observed that it was more difficult for her to motivate her learners regardless of all her methods. Regardless of the state-of-the-art technology provided for them to conduct the class, it seemed that this would not entice kids to replace it with actual play.

"It is clear that my kids missed their mates socializing. It was also dragging on my part because engaging them could be exhausting while in front of the camera."

To address the issue, Teacher Akane made sure that she constantly made fun of online activities to engage her young learners to participate in the class.

"I feel like I am a rookie teacher again. I need to calibrate myself with computer skills and computer applications that I think would be great for my learners. Physically printed visual aids are practically not legible on the end of my learners, so I had to find a way to digitize them or apps to make original digital visual aids for my pupils."

Teacher Zain (Karachi, Pakistan)

The teacher from Pakistan handles adult learners in after-school classes and those professionals who intend to improve their English language skills or take the IELTS examination for further development. He mentioned that his main problem with the shift to this teaching method is the difficulty of monitoring the progress during activities. He mentions:

"Given the fact that these are adult and professional learners, they require immediate feedback on the things that they do. I find it hard to provide them when they are miles away from me, as compared to when we were sitting in one class that I could easily say my comments on their performance."

Aside from this main challenge he encounters, technical challenges also occur on both sides such as internet problems, computer problems, and low proficiency in technology usage.

"Technical difficulties just add to the loss of class time because I had to deal with them even in the middle of class, otherwise one of the class members would have problems or I am."

For Teacher Zain to address the problem in feedbacking, he lessens the number of his participants per class time to focus more and provide individual attention. Though it got him to teach longer hours, he didn't want to lose clients.

"I need to work for longer hours and schedule my class well so I could give them the worth of their payment. In addition, I just don't want to be a random teacher who just does it just for the sake of compliance or anything else."

"In terms of tech problems, it was just at first and eventually my learners were able to adjust and got the hang of using them."

Teacher Benedict (Sharjah, United Arab Emirates)

In the middle east, Teacher Benedict handles diverse learners in junior high school of an international school. He mentioned that technology and the internet had not been his problem in the entire course of the teaching method. He mentioned that his top challenge in this class is the complacency of his learners.

"When the pandemic hit, the UAE government immediately ordered the suspension of all classes. Students saw this as a big break from school. Almost two years have passed, I can see that their outputs are stagnant, they rarely open their cameras even the rules have to open them. They claim, their parents did not want to."

Another problem that Teacher Benedict encounters is the authenticity of the assessment. Back in the classroom, where teachers and learners can freely converse simultaneously, it had become a challenge for him to do it online. To allow his class to have a more authentic experience, he uses the Breakout Group feature of Zoom where small groups of students can freely do discussions amongst themselves. In addition, the government also provided them with premium subscriptions on websites to aid teachers in coming up with assessment tools to be delivered to the learners.

Teacher Budi (Jakarta, Indonesia)

Teacher Budi teaches in a language institute just outside the busy city of Jakarta. He handles students who plan to take TOEFL IBT, TOEIC, and professional ESL learners. In the interview, he mentioned that his main problem is the lack of equipment used for online learning. Most of his learners do not have laptops and only rely on their smartphones to study.

"Though my students are much willing to learn. Their motivation dwindles due to the lack of suitable technology for online learning. Reading texts on a smartphone is twice difficult as on a computer screen. You know that these tests require more reading and practice, and smartphones aren't just built for it. Not to mention the fluctuating internet connection!"

More on the technological problems, Teacher Budi strives to deliver justice on his teaching methodology by keeping himself updated in mobile learning techniques.

"Since many of my learners do not have access to computer laptops, I have to look and utilize sites or applications that mobile-friendly in order to be inclusive especially since my learners are largely dependent on their smartphones."

Teacher Michelle (Ilocos Sur, Philippines)

In the interview, she opened that teaching in a remote secluded high school in the northern Philippines has already been a challenge whether there is a pandemic or not. More than three-quarters of her students do not have access to reliable internet connections due to the location of their respective residences. With that, her learners have an option to take physical modules from our schools and accomplish it alone in their time.

"The challenge is during our online synchronous consultations, we need to schedule it ahead of time so our students can prepare and go to a location where internet connectivity is stable. Our time is mostly spent answering questions from the module. Many of my students even drop the connection in the middle of their talk. We mostly use SMS or the free Facebook Messenger to communicate. Once call or video chat is featured it just does not work well."

Teacher Michelle could not do anything about the infrastructure problem, however, with the printed modules and SMS, she could at least augment the learning process even though it is time-consuming.

She adds that, generally, her learners are willing to learn and really eager to accomplish tasks given to them regardless of the situation. It makes her strive also as a teacher not to give up in the situation.

Teacher Marvin (Rizal, Philippines)

This teacher is the complete opposite of Teacher Audrey. His situation is way better because he is close to the National Capital Region. In the interview, he mentioned that the internet has never been his problem because he teaches in a private school and the school pays for everything. His students are also from middle-class and well-off family meaning internet access is common in their households. However, the problem he identified that is most difficult for him is teaching methodology itself.

"I wasn't prepared for this method of teaching. Basically, until now I still find it inconvenient to teach like this. I am a traditional teacher and I adhere to do person-to-person teaching. It frustrates me when I could not see well the body language of my learners. Also having a bigger class does not help. The transition is on the top of my list."

Teacher Prince (Jocobu, Ghana)

This interview is rather short but Teacher Prince clearly said that the absence of internet connectivity topped everything on this challenge.

"My learners basically do not have access to the internet. Even smartphone is a luxury for them. I feel sorry that they need to go downtown to computer cafes to do their work. Government support is available but rather very limited. We just got to do what we can to deliver whatever they can access from the limited time they have in computer cafes."

Teacher Price is much less confident in this type of methodology because access to the internet is the main method for this, that is why he is hoping that everything would go back to normal and children will be able to study back in the classrooms.

Teacher Andrew (Khobar, Saudi Arabia)

Teacher Andrew is an expatriate professional who teaches in Saudi Arabia. He handles teaching English in the teaching department. During his interview, he mentioned that his number one challenge is not seeing his learners.

"Since all of my students are women, both single and married conducting online classes without seeing them is my challenge. This country is conservative and women don't show their faces to the public, let alone online. So, every day for 45 minutes, I do not see them and I feel like just doing a podcast."

The conservative culture hurdled him to deliver classes efficiently. He was never sure if the actual students are available or just logged in and doing something else.

"I do not have any problem teaching online. The internet is superb here I have all I need. However, if this kind of teaching mode continues, I would never be sure if my students are even engaged anymore or whatever because I never see them and I could not do anything about it."

Overall, all respondents mentioned that accessibility to a reliable internet connection and infrastructure is a key player in online teaching. They also observed that learners' problems mostly deal with motivation to startup their eagerness to study due to lack of socialization with their friends from school or direct interaction with their classmates.

On the teachers' side, stress has added to the their as to how they are going to navigate in the new normal of teaching or if it will be a long-term setup for them. They view it as limiting the experience of their learners in the actual teaching process and separation from work and home resulted in more difficulty focusing on their professional setup.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic has turned us all into stay-at-home teachers rather than working right in front of our learners. Though problems have quadrupled especially when technological trends have been introduced to us and we cannot cope as it progressed. Our resilience and versatility allowed us to thrive in this new normal of teaching and learning. Will this go away? I don't think so. It will keep improving and improving along with the face-to-face when we resume. This will stay and maybe in the future more learners will choose distance learning as their primary way of achieving their academic success.

Teachers in any other teaching institution should also be researched concerning their struggles. Those teachers may also need extra support from well-trained online teachers to transition and navigate emerging online learning methodology smoothly.

The experiences of these teachers in their respective teaching situations are validation that worldwide our problems are the same or interconnected. Our job is to make an avenue for these teachers

to assure them that they are not alone in this journey and all their experiences are valid.

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