CHAPTER 12

Reflecting on Pivoting to Emergency Remote Online Teaching and Learning during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown: Feedback from three English Second Language (ESL) teachers

Shannon Bishop-Swart
Stellenbosch University
sbishop@sun.ac.za

Abstract

This small-scale reflective study provides an analysis of the reflections made by three English Second Language (ESL) teachers teaching in the Intensive English Programme (IEP) offered by Stellenbosch University's Language Centre as they navigated the changing context from face-to-face instruction to online teaching, during a pandemic lockdown. Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Feedback Cycle was used to analyse the three ESL teacher reflections over an eight-week teaching block in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the strategies, adjustments and decisions made as the teachers navigated the changes that had to be made to the IEP during the initial Covid-19 lockdown. The ultimate aim of this reflective study is to gain insight into how ESL teaching staff understand and conceptualise this situation that resulted in pivoting an ESL Programme from in-class to fully online teaching. It is hoped that the results of this study could offer practical suggestions of how to continue to support ESL teachers and their professional development in future emergency remote online environments and could assist in providing recommendations to motivate ESL programme coordinators and managers to continue to successfully navigate future online, blended and augmented learning environments as a result of changes to traditional teaching.

Keywords: English Second Language (ESL), teacher reflection, Intensive English Programme (IEP), online teaching and learning, Covid-19, lockdown.

Background

The Stellenbosch University (SU) Language Centre offers international students the opportunity to study English in South Africa through the Intensive English Programme (IEP), a comprehensive English language course delivered in 8-week blocks from Beginner to Advanced English levels. The first 8-week block of 2020's IEP was in its eighth (assessment) week when South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced the initial 21-day, nation-wide lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic to begin at midnight on Thursday, 26th March 2020. Seven international IEP-registered students opted to stay in South Africa and continue their English language classes delivered by three English Second Language (ESL) teachers, despite the uncertainty of a global pandemic affecting their personal and academic lives.

As the IEP Coordinator at Stellenbosch University's Language Centre, I am responsible for the management and delivery of the English Portfolio which includes the IEP. This chapter reports on an element of the case study data collection of my PhD titled: A study of teachers' emotions in a unique online learning environment due to a pandemic lockdown. It provides an analysis of the reflections made by three English Second Language (ESL) teachers teaching in the IEP, as they navigated the changing context from face-to-face instruction to online teaching during the pandemic lockdown.

Why ESL teacher feedback?

English Second Language (ESL) teachers play an indispensable role in language teaching (Sadeghi and Khezrlou 2016) as they are dynamically

involved in the process of decision-making in classroom teaching and simultaneously challenged to provide English language tuition to ESL students from diverse backgrounds and with a variety of needs (Czerniewicz *et al.* 2020). The disruption to education brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020) added an additional challenge to ESL teachers who were suddenly thrust into an emergency online teaching and learning situation (Hodges *et al.* 2020). According to Simpson (2002), students studying online require two types of support: academic support, which includes the knowledge relating to the specific course and general academic skills, and non-academic support which includes the affective and organisational side. However, our knowledge of the support needed for language teachers as they pivot from contact to online learning is limited. This study uses the feedback from ESL teacher reflections to identify the specific challenges faced by these teachers as they navigated the changing context from face-to-face instruction to online teaching during the education disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns.

As the lines between traditional and online language learning contexts become increasingly blurred (Goodfellow and Lamy 2009; Carrillo and Flores 2020), using teacher reflections as a tool to inform online curriculum design and assessment practices in the ESL classroom seems more important than ever (Willis 2001; Hubbard and Levy 2006; Pegrum 2009; Strydom *et al.* 2020). According to Farrel (2015a: 123) reflective ESL practice is "a cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and, while engaging in dialogue with others, use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom". Wärnsby, Kauppinen and Finnegan (2021) suggest that teachers who carry out continuous reflective writing practice are better

able to construct and reconstruct their own beliefs and practices and are more equipped and able to offer optimal learning conditions for their ESL students. Regular reflection from ESL teachers is essential in assessing and understanding not only their perception of their ESL students' online learning experience, but also in informing their own online teaching experience (MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer 2020: 5). ESL programme coordinators and managers providing teachers with opportunities for continuous reflection is a way to enhance ESL teaching practice, allow ESL teachers to rethink philosophies to remain relevant to today's ever-growing ESL student population and to be better prepared for future education disruptions (Moayeri and Rahimiy 2019).

Research design and methodology

As I manage the ad hoc teachers teaching these ESL programmes, I was particularly interested in analysing and reporting on what strategies and subsequent adjustments the teachers in this study implemented (MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer 2020) when contact classes moved to emergency remote teaching (Hodges *et al.* 2020) due to the pandemic lockdown (Strydom *et al.* 2020). A descriptive qualitative study design was used (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). The participants are three ESL teachers who work at Stellenbosch University's Language Centre and teach international ESL students in the IEP. Qualitative data was derived from the weekly reflective writings of these participants (ESL teachers N = 3) during an 8-week IEP course that pivoted online as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. I asked the three ESL teachers to provide me with regular feedback (Ghaye 2011) by posting weekly reflective posts on our shared online MS Teams platform. The three questions the participants answered each week were:

1. What do you feel went well when teaching online this week?

2. What do you feel was a challenge when teaching online this week?

3. What suggestions would you like to share with your colleagues about teaching online?

With the verbal and written consent from the three ESL teachers, I collected and recorded this data along with the adjustments they made in their planning, preparation and delivery as we pivoted our teaching delivery towards an audience that was now learning English solely online (Khoo and Cowie 2010: 48; Bozkurt and Sharma 2020: 3).

The Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle model was specifically chosen as it is a circular six-step critical reflection process which lends itself to learning from experiences over time. The Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle includes the following steps: Step 1: Description, Step 2: Feelings, Step 3: Evaluation, Step 4: Analysis, Step 5: Conclusion, Step 6: Action Plan. As this was a reflective study with the intent of informing future practice, the unit of analysis was a sentence or paragraph from the teacher reflections. The teacher reflections were first read through several times (Graneheim and Lundman 2004) then inductive content analysis was used for coding in which each unit of analysis was categorised under one of the six steps of the Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle identified from the deductive phase (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

Results and discussion

A summary of the data analysed is represented below under the six steps of the Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle, accompanied by examples of selected teacher reflections as they appeared on the shared Microsoft

Teams platform. The three ESL teachers are represented as Teacher A, Teacher B and Teacher C.

Step 1: Description

As Stellenbosch University uses Microsoft Teams as its online platform, the three ESL teachers were encouraged to use the platform as a communication tool to minimise the number of emails being sent and to have one shared space for resources as there were still many uncertainties regarding how we would administer the Intensive English Programme online (Li 2013: 218) as we moved to an emergency remote teaching environment (Hodges *et al.* 2020).

The shared MS Teams platform quickly became an administrative space, housing templates, rubrics, level descriptors and observation feedback (van der Spoel *et al.* 2020: 625). This became crucial to the programme as a central, shared space where all administrative essentials could be found, downloaded and used without the need to contact me or each other.

> *[2020/04/16 2:08 PM] Teacher B: I feel for the next block we might need to consider doing only one unit per week and doing it more slowly and more thoroughly, adding lots of extra practice from the workbook and lots of extra exercises, videos, games, etc. from our online resources.*

Step 2: Feelings

Generally, teachers reflected that their main concern when teaching online was feeling isolated from their students due to the remote nature of the online teaching and learning environment, especially during the lockdowns.

[2020/05/11 1:35 PM] Teacher A: Isolation is taking its toll, psychologically, as well as in [Student 2] and [Student 3's] cases due to the lack of exposure to an English Environment and English conversations. Progress is therefore slower than in the contact classes and I have opted for quality over quantity, also in review exercises and homework.

Teachers found the sudden move from face-to-face to online teaching jarring and missed the nuances of an in-person classroom setting.

[2020/04/17 3:47 PM] Teacher A: Mine prefer to keep their video picture switched off, which makes it more difficult to engage with them and keep their attention.

Teachers were concerned that students were not performing optimally as the IEP is already challenging to lower-level ESL students in person. By shifting the teaching and learning environment online, many adjustments had to be made to the content delivery and teaching approach (MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer 2020).

[2020/04/16 2:08 PM] Teacher B: Challenges this week: The amount of work we need to get through. Lower-level students, combined with a student that has a low motivation and is often absent and almost always late, as well as online teaching.

Teachers expressed their concern about managing academic expectations as a result of the physical distance between them and their students, as well as the differences between in-person and online assessment (Li, 2013).

[2020/05/15 1:21 PM] Teacher C: [Student 7] rewrote his first language assessment yesterday and failed again (crying emoji). This concerns

and worries me a lot and is the only bad thing about my week. Did I fail in teaching him? Did I do enough? What more could I have done? He blames Lockdown which I understand - not the best environment to study in.

Teachers also struggled with managing their own and their students' changing emotions (Badia, Garcia and Meneses 2019; Chen 2019), often brought on by the uncertainty of their daily situation, in addition to personal concerns regarding mental and physical health.

[2020/05/15 1:21 PM] Teacher C: I set up a whole new assessment and all the questions came from his Workbook...if he practised like I suggested he could have gotten easy marks...So I'm lost and disappointed - I know he is too, which breaks my heart.

Despite these concerns, all three ESL teachers expressed that they had experienced both personal and professional growth (Alves, Lopes and Precioso 2020).

[2020/05/22 8:28 AM] Teacher B: You're doing great, don't worry! This is uncharted territory for our specific programme and I think we should be proud of what we've managed to do with the students! That "teaching yourself the grammar first" is not a bad thing at all! Even if you know the grammar rules well, it's a whole different ball game teaching them online and especially teaching them at the right level (you can't overwhelm lower-level students with all the uses of certain tenses at once, for example).

In addition, the teachers were willing to constantly upskill themselves using online professional development sites or sharing best practices with each other.

[2020/05/22 5:36 PM] Teacher C: The videos are great! I've incorporated them into my listening assessments. They are very interesting and informative and I've gotten positive responses from my students when we use them. It will make them more tech-savvy - crucial to have these skills nowadays.

Step 3: Evaluation

Teachers expressed that being allowed the opportunity to learn 'on the job' and at their own and their students' pace, through trial and error, made a significant improvement in their technology skills as well as their understanding of the additional applications and tools available on the shared platform. As a result, teachers became more aware of their limitations and strengths regarding online teaching (Fuchs and Akbar 2013) and were quick to point out in teacher meetings and check-ins what they felt confident with and what they felt they still needed to practise (Chen 2019).

[2020/05/15 4:11 PM] Teacher A: I feel that continuing at the students' pace is sensible as well as keeping up the conversations during lessons. We are in an environment that we cannot control. My aim remains quality over quantity and they are quick to tell me when they need more practice, which is a positive thing!

Having a digital bank of resources that was constantly being updated by teachers meant that they were able to download the resources they needed daily, and check that they had the appropriate level of skill and the correct understanding of the technology to use the specific resource effectively (Phelps and Vlachopoulos, 2020). The ESL teachers and I would regularly upload links of new or effective resources we discovered to the shared platform.

[2020/05/29 4:09 PM] Teacher A: The big positive is that I now have a much better idea of how to plan the block and which aspects of the unit are must-haves vs. nice-to-haves. I will most definitely have to work hard during this coming week to get my ducks in a row regarding better utilisation of technology.

Teachers spent a significant amount of time moving assessments to a digital format, however, once all the paper-based quizzes, tests, assignments and assessments were moved to this format, the resultant marking time was significantly reduced. Teachers initially used Google forms and then Microsoft forms as templates to create these digital assessments. The settings allow teachers to choose the best format (multiple choice/short answer/long answer) for each question and to include a marking memorandum. Teachers could also choose whether the results were made available immediately to students or later with teacher feedback.

Step 4: Analysis

Moving classes online immediately brought with it several assumptions (Jansem 2019: 62). One was that teachers would need less time to prepare as everything was now digital. Teachers, however, reported the opposite, that they felt they needed even more planning and preparation time as they were simultaneously learning to use a new digital platform, adapting existing resources to digital formats and creating interactive and engaging lessons (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020: 3).

[2020/04/17 3:47 PM] Teacher A: Students need more clarification and guidance with tasks and exercises, which eats time. I think the reason is because it is more difficult for them to concentrate online.

In order to better manage their teaching time, teachers often divided the usual 4-hour, in-person IEP classes into smaller, more manageable chunks of time to assist with both students' and teacher concentration. Most reading, listening and writing exercises were presented as self-paced, asynchronous activities to be done in preparation of the online classes, while the synchronous sessions had a strong focus on communicative activities and vocabulary acquisition.

> *[2020/04/16 1:56 PM] Teacher B: I've started using screen sharing this week and it's been working really well. I use it to show the students pictures, to let them read parts of articles on the web, project the student book content on the screen so that they can follow without having to open their own documents on their computer, and to even play short videos that we watch together. It is also a very useful tool to show them around Teams and help them to understand how the app works.*

Another assumption was that teachers would begin to work more and more in isolation. However, the posting of feedback on a shared platform allowed teachers to not only communicate with each other, but to share best practices, advice, teacher resources and provide each other with assistance (Finlay 2008: 5; Picton 2019: 2).

> *[202/05/22 8;49 AM] Teacher C: Zoom has great annotations that you can use with a PowerPoint presentation or whiteboard. I should actually show you guys what I've learned. I'm definitely going to look into this as an option.*

A third assumption was that international students would be well-resourced and have access to digital equipment. The reality was that most ESL students had access to at least a smartphone, so keeping the

content in a digital format seemed the most effective and efficient way to deliver lessons. It was also easier to update digital content in order to stay relevant. The teachers agreed that PowerPoint presentations accompanying the coursebook and digital components of the coursebook such as audio and video files would be the best way to present content going forward, either projecting videos onto a screen or audio through a microphone.

> *[2020/04/16 2:09 PM] Teacher B: Another positive: Using the chat box along with the video chat to write down examples, or type something if a student can't hear properly, etc. also works very well. I also use it when we're discussing vocab and to give info on, for example, test dates.*

Step 5: Conclusion

The ESL teachers' responses provided me with an opportunity to research and include relevant professional development in our teacher meetings and to better assist me to guide the teachers (Pratt 2015: 20; Tull *et al.* 2017: 64) with difficulties they were experiencing each week due to the sudden move to emergency remote teaching (Hodges *et al.* 2020). Teachers quickly realised that planning online classes takes longer as teachers need to make the content 'come alive' on screen (van der Spoel *et al.* 2020).

> *[202/05/22 5:11AM] Teacher B: It is so hard to monitor students' understanding in the current format that we're teaching in - online. Interactive, online grammar and vocab exercises where we can see the results will definitely be the next step! As we know, "Do you understand?" and "Do you have any questions?" are not really effective in an ESL class and this is something I've been struggling*

> with as well since we went online, even though I'm good at eliciting, and identifying and targeting students' weak spots in a normal class setup.

Finally, the weekly teacher reflections were essential to me as the programme coordinator as it gave me a way to understand where my teachers were on a personal level (Moayeri and Rahimiy 2019: 131) and allowed me to know when and how to approach my teachers in any given week.

Step 6: Action plan

In future, the IEP will continue to use the digital resource bank attached to the MS Teams platform as a shared space for administration, a resource hub, and as our main form of online communication (Picton 2019), almost entirely replacing the need for email. The platform will remain a place to store all our programme templates, rubrics, observation guides, level descriptors, assessments, assignments, quizzes, presentations and anything that we as a group need to access for the programme. Additionally, the shared online space will continue to house professional development and teacher resources, as well as provide a space for teachers to post examples of technological tools and applications that worked for their lessons (Phelps and Vlachopoulos 2020: 1514).

Whether future content delivery is contact, online or blended, the IEP will continue to create digital assessments and assignments to keep the printing low, the marking time reduced, and to provide students with more timeous responses and feedback (Murphy 2020a: 497). ESL teachers will continue to intermittently use digital tools and applications for individual and small group student activities and

games, for warmers and as interactive tools for students, in order to engage with the content and with each other (Badia 2019: 458-459). As an additional resource, should there be technology disruptions (Tull *et al.* 2017), we will order a reduced number of paper-based course books that teachers and students will have access to.

Conclusion

The feedback in this study collected over 8 weeks, informed my own and the three ESL teachers' planning, preparation, curriculum creation and design, as well as the future presentation of the IEP as it entered the 'new normal' of online delivery as a result of the initial Covid-19 lockdown. Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle proved to be a helpful aid for the programme coordinator when analysing the participants' reflections of their feelings, emotions, thoughts, and resultant actions related to the challenging situation of moving from in-contact lessons to fully online teaching and learning. The participants' weekly feedback was integral to understanding the challenging situation of a lockdown from the teachers' perspective, navigating their own personal challenges while adapting to online teaching. The participants' reflections further contributed to programming decisions made in the English programme and provided additional opportunities to review their professional practice (Moayeri and Rahimiy 2019). This study further highlights, for programme coordinators and managers, the need for regular teacher reflection, especially during an education disruption such as the Covid-19 pandemic (MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer 2020), as an effective tool to manage and develop ESL teachers holistically.

References

Alves, R., Lopes, T. and Precioso, J. 2020. Teachers' well-being in times of Covid-19 pandemic: factors that explain professional well-

being. *International Journal of Educational Research and Innovation*, (15): 203-217.

Badia, A., Garcia, C. and Meneses, J. 2019. Emotions in response to teaching online: Exploring the factors influencing teachers in a fully online university. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 56(4): 446-457.

Bozkurt, A. and Sharma, R. C. 2020. Emergency remote teaching in a time of global crisis due to Corona Virus pandemic. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1): 1-6.

Carrillo, C. and Flores, M. A. 2020. COVID-19 and teacher education: a literature review of online teaching and learning practices. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4): 466-487.

Chen, J. 2019. Exploring the impact of teacher emotions on their approaches to teaching: A structural equation modelling approach. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89(1): 57-74.

Czerniewicz, L., Agherdien, N., Badenhorst, J., Belluigi, D., Chambers, T., Chili, M., de Villiers, M., Felix, A., Gachago, D., Gokhale, C., Ivala, E., Kramm, N., Madiba, M., Mistri, G., Mgqwashu, E., Pallitt, N., Prinsloo, P., Solomon, K., Strydom, S., Swanepoel, M., Waghid, F. and Wissing, G. 2020. A wake-up call: Equity, inequality and Covid-19 emergency remote teaching and learning. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2(3): 946-967.

Farrell, T. S. C. 2015. *Promoting teacher reflection in second language education: A framework for TESOL Professionals*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Finlay, L. 2008. Reflecting on 'Reflective practice' *Practice-based Professional Learning Centre*, (52): 1-20.

Fuchs, C. and Akbar, F. S. 2013. Use of Technology in an Adult Intensive English Program: Benefits and Challenges. *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(1): 156-167.

Ghaye, T. 2011. *Teaching and learning through reflective practice: A practical guide for positive action*. Oxon: Routledge.

Gibbs, G. 1988. *Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Oxford: Oxford Further Education Unit.

Goodfellow, R. and Lamy, M.N. eds., 2009. *Learning cultures in online education*. A&C Black.

Graneheim, U. H. and Lundman, B. 2004. Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today*, 24(2): 105-112.

Hodges, C. B., Moore, S. L., Lockee, B., Trust, T. and Bond, M. A. 2020. The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educause Review*, 27. Available: https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning

Hsieh, H. F. and Shannon, S. E. 2005. 'Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis'. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9): 1277-1288.

Hubbard, P. and Levy, M. 2006. *Teacher education in CALL*. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Jansem, A. 2019. Teaching Practices and Knowledge Base of English as a Foreign Language Teachers' Communicative Language Teaching Implementation. *International Education Studies*, 12(7): 58-66.

Khoo, E. and Cowie, B. 2010. A framework for developing and implementing an online learning community. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 15(1): 47-59.

Li, N. 2013. Seeking best practices and meeting the needs of the English language learners: Using second language theories and integrating technology in teaching. *Journal of International Education Research*, 9(3): 217-222.

MacIntyre, P. D., Gregersen, T. and Mercer, S. 2020. Language teachers' coping strategies during the Covid-19 conversion to online teaching: Correlations with stress, wellbeing and negative emotions. *System*, 94: 102352.

Moayeri, M. and Rahimiy, R. 2019. The significance of promoting teacher reflection: A review *article. Latin American Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning*, 12(1): 128-143.

Murphy, M. P. A. 2020a. COVID-19 and emergency e-learning: Consequences of the securitization of higher education for post-pandemic pedagogy. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41(3): 492-505.

Pegrum, M. 2009. *From blogs to bombs: The future of digital technologies in education*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press.

Phelps, A. and Vlachopoulos, D. 2020. Successful transition to synchronous learning environments in distance education: A research on entry-level synchronous facilitator competencies. *Education and Information Technologies*, 25: 1511-1527

Picton, I. 2019. *Teachers' use of technology to support literacy in 2018*. London: National Literacy Trust.

Pratt, K. 2015. Supporting distance learners: Making practice more effective. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 19(1): 12-26.

Sadeghi, K. and Khezrlou, S. 2016. The experience of burnout among English language teachers in Iran: Self and other determinants. *Teacher Development*, 20(5): 1-17.

Simpson, O. 2002. *Supporting students in online, open and distance learning*. 2nd ed. London, England: Kogan Page.

Strydom, S., Herman, N., Adendorff, H. and de Klerk, M. 2020. *Responding to the necessity for change: Higher Education voices from the South during the COVID-19 crisis*. SUN Centre for Learning Technologies and the Centre for Teaching and Learning [e-book]. Available at: https://www.sun.ac.za/english/learning-teaching/ctl/Pages/Short-online-publications.aspx [2021,15 July].

Tull, S. P. C., Dabner, N. and Ayebi-Arthur K. 2017. Social media and e-learning in response to seismic events: Resilient practices. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 21(1): 63-76.

van der Spoel, I., Noroozi, O., Schuurink, E. and van Ginkel, S. 2020. Teachers' online teaching expectations and experiences during the Covid19- pandemic in the Netherlands. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4): 623-638.

Wärnsby, A., Kauppinen, A. and Finnegan, D. 2021. Reflective Writing on an ESL Writing Course: Accessing Metacognition to Inform Curriculum Design and Assessment. *Educare-Vetenskapliga Skrifter*, 1: 38-56.

Willis, J. 2001. Foundational assumptions for information technology and teacher education. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 1(3): 305-320.