An Investigation into the effects of COVID-related school policies on the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of COVID-related campus access restrictions on the teaching and learning of English as a second or additional language. A mixed-methods survey of ESL teachers, followed by optional structured interviews, was chosen as the research design. Results showed that the requirement to move instruction wholly, or partially, to an online format created emotional and cognitive hardships for students, but a rich professional-development opportunity for teachers as they dealt with the challenges of online instruction. The author concluded that both teachers and students of English need to develop the digital literacy skills in order for the latter to develop the sufficient language skills needed both inside and outside classroom environments.

Keywords: ESL, online instruction, digital literacy

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a report on the impact of COVID-triggered campus access restrictions on the teaching and learning of English as a second or additional language across a range of educational contexts: K-12, settlement English, English for academic purposes, post-secondary English courses and language-school based classes for a variety of ages. Learners in these courses represented the full range of CEFR proficiency levels from pre-A1–C2. The breadth of this study, in terms of the teaching contexts presented, separates it from other COVID-focused studies conducted thus far, the latter featuring learners in single contexts; as such, its findings provide a broad picture of the challenges experienced by English teachers and learners worldwide, as well as the implications of these challenges and the lessons learned by the teachers involved. In particular, the importance of digital literacy on the part of both teachers and learners in a blended or online teaching environment can be seen in the discussion of the findings.

Four research questions were posed this study:

1. What has been the impact of COVID-related access restrictions on the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language in different educational settings?
2. How have teachers responded to this impact in their courses?
3. What have been the effects of the pedagogical strategies teachers have employed?
4. What recommendations do teachers have for dealing with extended periods of access restrictions in the future?

Literature Review

The impact of campus-access restrictions imposed by educational institutions in response to government policies designed to prevent the spread of COVID in cities, states, provinces, and countries worldwide has clearly been significant. Numerous studies have been published on the effects of these restrictions on the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language, most often with learners at the post-secondary level. Mahyoob (2020), Munni and Hassan (2020), Sim et al. (2020), Khafaga (2021), Oraif and Elyas (2021), Parasibu and Dewi (2021) conducted studies in the Middle East and Asia, while Ross and DiSalvo (2020) and Drucker and Fleischhauer (2021) conducted studies in North America and Europe respectively, all in post-secondary contexts. Meanwhile, Kim and Padilla (2020), Ntombela et al. (2020), and Khamsuk and Whanchit (2021) focused their studies on the impact of access restrictions on English L2 children in American, Thai, and South African contexts. While these studies featured a range of research designs, what each of them lacks is breadth of coverage in terms of the variety of teachers involved, and the ages and English-proficiency levels of the learners being studied. Moreover, while undergraduate-level contexts have received a great deal of attention from researchers examining the effects of COVID, the studies above reflect the relative lack of attention paid to young English learners, and the lack of focus on adult immigrant learners, as well as those learners in many programs worldwide studying academic English in hopes of gaining admission to an English-medium university or technical school. The current study seeks to address these gaps as it focuses on the perspectives of English teachers working in each of these areas, teaching not only learners of various age levels, but also those whose English-proficiency levels range from pre-beginner to advanced.

Methods

The study used a mixed-methods design featuring an anonymous survey as the main instrument (refer to Appendix A following the References), followed by an optional semi-structured interview conducted by the researcher for those respondents who agreed to participate. The study respondents were current and former students in a Master of Arts in the TESOL program at a Canadian university in which the author of the study works as an instructor. The survey consisted of items eliciting information about each respondent's language background and teaching contexts(s), including details about the types of courses taught, the age ranges, and the English-proficiency levels of their students, followed by several open-ended items focusing on the impact of campus-access restrictions on teaching and learning, as well as respondents' recommendations for preparing for similar access restrictions in the future. Since the proposed research involved students connected to the university, permission to carry out the study was sought from the institution's human research ethics board. Once this permission was granted, the survey was distributed using Survey Monkey as the server. The survey itself was preceded by a

recruiting letter; consent to participate in the survey was indicated by a respondent completing and submitting the survey through the Survey Monkey site. Agreement to participate in the interview was done by privately contacting the researcher by email. Each interviewee received a promised $25 Amazon gift card. The main focus of the interview was on the research questions posed for the study (See Appendix B).

Results

The chosen participants for the study, ESL teachers, were selected on the assumption of the researcher, himself a former ESL teacher, that they could provide a rich, emic perspective on the impact of COVID-related campus access restrictions on both teaching and learning across a range of educational settings. The emic perspective was provided through responses to the open-ended questions in the survey, as well as the dialog generated during the interviews. The richness was evident in the number of respondents to the survey (51), the number (6) who participated in the interview stage, as well as in the wide range of educational settings represented by the respondents and the proficiency and age ranges of the learners in these settings. Additional richness was provided in responses to the open-ended questions in the survey and the responses of the interviewees. This breadth of coverage among the respondents and the students, supported by the range and depth of emic perspectives expressed in the survey and interview responses, lend strong credibility to the conclusions discussed in the next section.

The researcher sought to understand the types of restrictions imposed by institutions, teachers' responses to these, and the impact on teaching and learning as teachers dealt with pedagogical limitations resulting from the restrictions. In a majority of cases (one case = one location in which a respondent was working; See Appendix C), respondents reported that their institutions mandated a shift to complete online delivery of their courses, while a hybrid model of delivery (blended classroom and online delivery) was required in over 40% of cases. As a result, respondents reported that these changes in delivery had a significant impact in 55% of cases on the teaching and the learning that took place in their courses (See Appendix D). These changes included adjustments to materials' presentation, assigning of homework, doing activities, and conducting assessment. In many instances, progress was slow and assessment was simplified or even abandoned. There was often a significant emotional impact on learners: stress and anxiety were widespread, and some "disappeared" once their classes moved online. Among older learners, particularly those whose English proficiency was low, their lack of digital literacy further impeded their progress in the language.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study was not without its shortcomings: as with any survey research, the researcher had no control over how many recipients of the survey would actually participate, nor how representative they would be of the overall demographic of those who were invited to complete the survey. In this case, a larger proportion of L2 speakers of English would have potentially shed more light on the challenges faced by both themselves and their learners in light of the restrictions imposed. As well, about a third of survey respondents did provide answers to the open-ended items; what was their experience of the restrictions, and that of their students? Further research to elicit the opinions of ESL and EFL teachers of English could provide additional light regarding the challenges of access restrictions; additionally, since the study did

not elicit the opinions of learners themselves, research to glean their opinions on the issue would also be helpful, as would research to glean the perspectives of educational assistants in K-12 settings who work not only with immigrants, but also with other students with special needs who have likely faced especially severe challenges, due to the lack of access to classroom instruction.

       Nevertheless, analysis of responses to the open-ended items, as well as responses of the interviewees provided much information that was notable in its consistency. Based on qualitative analysis of the survey responses and recorded interviews, the researcher concluded that digital literacy is a core requirement, on the part of both teachers and learners, to enhance the chances of learners meeting their needs, and achieving course aims when instruction is moved partially or fully online. This would apply not only to ESL, but also content-based courses both at the K-12 and post-secondary level. In addition, learners whose proficiency is low in the language of instruction need to become more proficient in that language before they can develop in their digital literacy. Finally, teachers need to strengthen their digital-literacy skills so as to become more adept at developing, selecting, and using helpful materials, providing both synchronous and asynchronous instruction, and using both modes to be able to assess students in ways that are practical and reliable to obtain credible results. As some respondents mentioned, TESOL programs need to challenge and equip their students to grow in these areas.

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Survey: An Investigation into the effects of COVID-related school policies on the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language

Part 1: Background information

Please check the appropriate boxes below:

1. Are you a current or former student in the MA TESOL program?
☐ Current   ☐ Former

2. What is your native or dominant language?
☐ English   ☐ other

   1. Are you currently teaching English?
☐ Yes   ☐ No

   1. Please identify the teaching context(s) in which you are currently or have most recently worked. (Check all that apply.)
☐ LINC (Settlement English program in Canada)
☐ EAP program (Canada)
☐ EAP program (overseas)
☐ K-12 school (Canada)
☐ K-12 school (Overseas)
o University or college (Canada)
☐ University or college (overseas)
☐ Language school (Canada)
☐ Language school (overseas)

5. What is the age range of students you are currently teaching or most recently taught? (Check all that apply.)
☐ 3-5 years old
☐ 6-8
☐ 9-11
☐ 12-14
☐ 15-17
☐ 18-24
☐ 25 and older

6. What is the skill focus of the courses you are currently or have most recently taught? (Check all that apply.)
☐ listening
☐ speaking
☐ reading
☐ writing

☐ integrated skills (single course)
☐ grammar
☐ Other

7. What proficiency level(s) were/are your students? (Check all that apply.)
☐ CEFR pre-A1 (CLB literacy/Level 1)
☐ CEFR A1 (CLB 2)
☐ CEFR A2 (CLB 3-4)
☐ CEFR B1 (CLB 5-7)
☐ CEFR B2 (CLB 8-9)
☐ CEFR C1
☐ CEFR C2

8. What policy did your school(s) or program(s) implement in response to COVID?

☐ continue meeting on campus as before
☐ continue meeting online as before
☐ suspend on-campus classes indefinitely
☐ move on-campus classes entirely to an online format
☐ implement a hybrid class format: partially online, partially on campus
☐ Other (Please specify)

9. What has been the impact on teaching and learning in your class(es) of the policy/ies implemented?

o There has been no change.
☐ There have been minor changes.
☐ There have been significant changes.

Part 2: Questions on the effect of COVID-related policies

Please answer each of the following questions using either bullet points or full sentences. If there has been no change in teaching and learning in your class(es), please write N/A (Not Applicable) for any of the following questions.

10. What changes, if any, did you make to your teaching schedule, in response to COVID?

11. What changes did you make in your use of materials and lesson content?

12. How did you change your class activities, if at all?

[ ]

13. What changes, if any, did you make in the way you assign homework?

[ ]

14. How did you change your assessment method, if at all?

[ ]

15. What effects, if any, did these changes have on your students' success in learning?

[ ]

16. What effect did these changes have on your students' emotional and mental wellness?

[ ]

17. What have you learned about your own teaching as a result of COVID?

[ ]

18. What have you learned about your students?

[ ]

19. What positive effects, if any has COVID had on teaching and learning in your class(es)?

[ ]

20. What strategies do you believe ought to be implemented now or in the future in order to enhance teaching and learning under conditions when access to campus is restricted or discontinued for an extended period?

[ ]

*Time permitting, would you be interested in doing an online interview to discuss this topic in more detail? If so, please email me at Gordon.Moulden@twu.ca. Be careful **not** to include your name or email address in this survey. The interview is expected to take 20-40 minutes depending on the depth of discussion.*

Thank you for your participation in this study!

Appendix B

Interview script

"Hi, thank you so much for contacting me to participate in this interview. As I mentioned in the consent letter, you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time. Note that the transcript and all recordings from this interview will be kept in a private location on my computer and you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript before any findings are reported based on analysis. In fact, once the transcript is available, I will forward it to you. You are free to request a revision of any information which is incorrect and to request deletion of any portion of the transcript which contains information which you do not wish to be made known. As well, you have the right to request removal of the transcript and all recordings before analysis is conducted.

As I also mentioned, a $25 gift certificate will be made available to you once the full interview has been completed.

Do you have any questions?

Participant response. The investigator may ask and answer additional questions here for clarification.

Let's begin then.

1. First, please describe the type of course(s) and the learner group(s) you were working with at the time COVID restrictions were initiated. Where were you teaching and in what type of program? What was the ranges of ages and English proficiency levels you were working with?

Participant response. The investigator may ask and answer additional questions here for clarification.

Thanks.

The study was based on four research questions. These were the basis for the questions in the survey. I'd like to discuss each of the research questions in turn. I am rephrasing them slightly since I am asking you directly.

RQ 1. What has been the impact of COVID-related access restrictions on your teaching and on your students' learning in the course(s) you were teaching when restrictions were implemented?

Participant response. The investigator may ask and answer additional questions here for clarification.

RQ 2. How have you responded to this impact in your course(s)?

Participant response. The investigator may ask and answer additional questions here for clarification.

RQ 3. What have been the effects of the pedagogical strategies you have employed?

Participant response. The investigator may ask and answer additional questions here for clarification.

RQ 4. What recommendations do you have for schools/programs like yours for dealing with potential extended periods of restricted access in the future?

Participant response. The investigator may ask and answer additional questions here for clarification.

One final question:

How can we in the MA TESOL program prepare our students to deal with potential access restrictions in the future?

Participant response. The investigator may ask and answer additional questions here for clarification.

Thank you so much for your time, today. I will send you the gift certificate shortly and a copy of the transcript soon.

Appendix C

Institutional Response to COVID

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Continue meeting on campus as before.	15.22%	7
Continue meeting online as before.	6.52%	3
Suspend on-campus classes indefinitely.	15.22%	7
Move on-campus classes entirely to an online format.	63.04%	29
implement a hybrid class format: partially online, partially on campus.	41.30%	19
Total Respondents: 46		

Appendix D

General impact of the Response on teaching and learning

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
There has been no change.	6.12%	3
There have been minor changes.	44.90%	22
There have been significant changes.	55.10%	27
Total Respondents: 49		