

# Emergency Remote Language Teaching and Learning in Disruptive Times

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## 1. Introduction: Teaching in Disruptive Times

As we complete the editing work for this special issue in the fall of 2021, it is still unclear when the COVID-19 pandemic will end. In response to the third (and fourth) waves of increased cases of COVID, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) strengthened its recommendations for wearing masks only two months after relaxing them (CDC, 2021). Although many universities anticipating a post-pandemic fall term require or encourage all employees and students to get vaccinated when attending in-person classes, the Delta variant is posing increasing risks to even the vaccinated population. Whether or not returning to in-person teaching this fall will result in another state of emergency remote teaching (ERT) is on everyone's mind. How to maintain education continuity in a prolonged pandemic is back on the table again.

In order to maintain continuity of education in disruptive times such as national disasters or pandemics, ERT has been practiced around the globe for decades (e.g., Gordon et al., 2010; Houston, 2016; Lorenzo, 2008). This term gained prominence in spring 2020 due to the academic interruptions at the global level caused by COVID-19. Instructional technology researchers (Hodges et al., 2020) stress the differences between ERT and regular online education in the hope of clarifying the distinct purposes, contexts, processes, and outcomes involved in the two types of teaching despite the perceived overlap. In a nutshell, this term refers to temporary alternatives for

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delivering course content that would otherwise be delivered face to face (F2F) or as blended or hybrid courses in crisis circumstances. Emergency remote teaching has entailed radio education and DVD distribution (e.g., Davies & Bentrovato, 2011), and now more mobile and computer-assisted course delivery (Hodges et al., 2020). Despite the increasing frequency of disasters such as hurricanes, wildfires, social and political unrest, and pandemics that interrupt teaching and learning, research shows that faculty lack readiness for ERT, due to either negative attitudes toward online education (e.g., McMurtry, 2013; Ortagus & Stedrak, 2013) or lack of training and support for online teaching (e.g., Houston, 2016; Trust & Whalen, 2020).

In the field of language education, experts in online language education (e.g., Gacs et al., 2020; Paesani, 2020) also highlight the differences between well-planned online language education and crisis-prompted remote language teaching. Prior to the pandemic, research demonstrated an upward trajectory of online language education at K–16 institutions across the United States (Murphy-Judy & Johnshoy, 2017). In the past decade, online language instruction has been adopted for a variety of reasons such as financial and enrollment concerns, technological advancement and accessibility, student demographic change, as well as empirically proven pedagogical effectiveness (Blake & Guillén, 2020; Hubbard, 2019; Kessler, 2017; Plonsky & Ziegler, 2016; Sanz-Sánchez et al., 2017). Despite the enthusiasm for online language education by researchers and informed practitioners (e.g., our *CALICO* members) and administrators, research consistently uncovers reluctance and unpreparedness among language educators (e.g., Kessler, 2017; Winke et al., 2010). In addition, researchers (e.g., Goertler et al., 2012; Hubbard, 2013, 2019) have also cautioned about the lack of student training for effective online language learning. The digital divide is another perpetual issue causing more equity issues in increasingly digitized educational contexts (Ortega, 2017, 2020). Therefore, it was foreseeable that language educators and students would largely experience chaos, anxiety, and stress when schools around the world asked F2F classes to transition online swiftly, in some cases in a couple of days (Paesani, 2020), following the COVID-19 outbreak in spring 2020 (WHO, 2020).

Previous studies (e.g., Hubbard, 2008; Shelley et al., 2013; Winke et al., 2010) have uncovered that both language educators and learners' past experience with technology influences their future technology use. Many CALL researchers (e.g., Gacs et al., 2020; Oskoz & Smith, 2020) have predicted that the field of language education may be forever changed after the pandemic. It is imperative for CALL researchers and language educators to understand whether and how more than one year of emergency remote teaching and learning has impacted language teachers and learners' perceptions and knowledge about online language education. The primary purpose of this special issue is

to report on empirical studies that document and analyze language educators' and learners' experience during the pandemic. We hope the findings in these studies can help to extrapolate important insights into potential changes that may shape the future directions of computer-assisted language teaching and learning, and more importantly, language education in general.

## 2. Emerging Research on ERLTL

Previous research on ERT has focused primarily on how to upgrade institutional-level infrastructure needed for education continuity following disruptions caused by crises (e.g., Baytiyeh, 2019; Rush et al., 2014, 2016). The past year has witnessed an emerging line of research on emergency remote language teaching and learning (ERLTL) —namely, remote language teaching and learning during the pandemic—which investigated and documented how language educators and learners around the world have responded to the COVID-19 outbreak since the spring of 2020. Aside from this special issue, few academic journals in language education have published invited commentaries or dedicated a special issue on online language teaching during the pandemic; *Foreign Language Annals*' summer 2020 issue (Sykes, 2020) and *International Journal of Chinese Language Teaching*'s COVID-19 special issue (Wang & Zhao, 2020) are two such examples. Additional empirical studies have also appeared in various reputable journals dedicated to technology and language education. These empirical studies reported on challenges and reflections mostly based on language teachers' and learners' self-reported experiences. Here, we will provide a brief review of articles published in select refereed journals, in order to show what has been investigated in this line of research.

Regardless of where an educator was located in spring 2020, it was a stressful time to teach in the middle of an unprecedented pandemic. MacIntyre and colleagues' (2020) large-scale questionnaire study confirmed that language educators from elementary to post-secondary levels across the globe experienced substantial levels of stress in early 2020. The study uncovered the top two stressors to be an increased workload and concerns about family health, and revealed that language educators who used coping strategies tended to feel more positive about their teaching online. Moser and co-workers' (2021) study compared the ERT experience of K–12 language educators and their counterparts at the post-secondary level in the United States. Their findings showed that language educators made numerous adjustments in their course policies and expectations; K–12 language educators and those without prior experience of online teaching were less confident in the ERT outcomes, despite reporting well-designed courses. Focusing on college-level world language educators in the United States, Jin and associates' (2021) study investigated

how the ERT experience affected language educators' perceptions of teaching language online in post-pandemic times. The results showed that the surveyed participants were generally positive about adopting online teaching after the pandemic, and their perceived values of online language teaching and self-confidence in online teaching were the leading significant predictors of their intention to teach online in post-pandemic times. There were a number of studies focused exclusively on college-level Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language ERLTL experiences in Western countries, including Australia, Denmark, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These studies analyzed Mandarin Chinese educators' beliefs in technology use (Zhang, 2020), the influence of perceived values about and self-confidence in online character teaching on adjustments to character teaching during the pandemic (Xu et al., 2021a), intention for technology-enhanced character teaching in post-pandemic times (Xu et al., 2021b), students' perceptions of online character learning (Gao, 2020), and factors influencing student participation and educators' content delivery in general during the pandemic (Wang & East, 2020; Zhao et al., 2020).

In nearly all the aforementioned empirical studies, data were collected from either online questionnaires or interviews with language educators and learners. In other words, the current understanding of ERLTL is primarily based on language educators' and learners' self-reported experiences during the pandemic. In particular, the aim of most existing studies (e.g., Moser et al., 2021; Wang & Zhao, 2020) was to uncover how educators and students perceived the sudden changes in ERLTL environments, with the exception of two studies, which investigated language educators' perceptions of online language education in general and how the ERT experience influenced their intention for future online teaching (Jin et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021b). As noted by Oskoz and Smith (2020), many researchers had to pause or make drastic changes to their research projects due to the challenges to data collection posed by an unexpected pandemic. Thus, it is understandable that few researchers were able to collect data directly reflecting language educators' and learners' actual ERLTL practices while battling the pandemic-induced stress and chaos themselves. However, as in any field of scientific study, the many challenges and opportunities posed by a period of prolonged ERT merits more systematic investigation, in order to learn meaningful lessons and develop actionable strategies to cope with a pandemic we may need to live through for a longer time. There is an urgent need to better understand how primary stakeholders of language education (i.e., the teachers and learners) in diverse languages and contexts have handled the ERLTL so far—what worked, what didn't work—and how they should prepare for either prolonged remote teaching or a return to

normalcy in which there is “the right mix of online vs. F2F instruction” (Smith & Oskoz, 2021, p. ii).

This special issue presents four new empirical studies with data sources from Hong Kong, Peru, and the United States during the pandemic. Adopting various theoretical frameworks, these studies analyzed both quantitative (e.g., students’ online performance) and qualitative (e.g., interviews) data collected from language learners, as well as K–16 language educators, in order to shed light on how language teachers and learners at different geographical locations responded to the pandemic in their unique ways, due to their distinct historical, educational, and political realities. In the next section, we will introduce the goals, research methodology, and primary findings of each study.

### 3. Contributions to this Special Issue

The first three studies in this special issue focus on how language educators and learners in Hong Kong and the United States made pedagogical and learning adjustments to cope with their distinct ERLTL environments, highlighting their positive experiences during the pandemic. The final study investigates discriminative educational ideologies relating to indigenous learners in the Peruvian government’s multimodal remote Spanish as a second language educational program, which was exacerbated by the digital divide during the pandemic.

Dennis Fong, Julia Chen, and Linda Lin compare the online performance of English for academic purposes students in two types of courses at a Hong Kong university: one using the hybrid modality in a pre-pandemic semester, and another that switched from the hybrid modality to 100% online modality following the pandemic outbreak. The authors adopted an analytical-based approach to analyze 469,286 data logs recorded in a learning management system. The findings reveal that students’ online engagement in both types of courses was primarily assessment driven; however, those in the pandemic cohort demonstrated more self-directed behavior and managed their learning more effectively, possibly benefiting from their prior experience with ERT as a result of several years of political unrest in Hong Kong. Based on the findings, the researchers offer curriculum and pedagogical suggestions for language programs based on their ample experience with blended education.

The second article reports on Ellen Yeh, Grace Choi, and Yonty Friesem’s study, which adopts a community of inquiry theoretical framework with social presence as a key construct to examine weekly online social interaction on Flipgrid, a video-based asynchronous communication tool, by university-level English as a second language (ESL) learners who were located mostly outside the United States during the pandemic. The researchers conducted content

analysis of 198 video journals posted by 10 ESL learners and video responses by their classmates. The results showed that the learners were able to use various features afforded in Flipgrid to establish social and emotional support and a sense of community, although some of the digital features were still underused. Based on the research findings, the researchers advocate integrating Flipgrid as an effective asynchronous communication tool in online language education, and offer suggestions as to how to foster student social presence in video-based asynchronous online communities.

In the third article, from a crisis sensemaking lens, Jillian Conry, Ann Marie Wernick, and Paige Ware's study presents the perceived challenges and opportunities for 10 in-service teachers and five pre-service K–12 teachers who were also enrolled in a master's level ESL certificate course in the United States during the pandemic. Based on thematic analysis of in-depth interview data, the researchers discovered that these participants' unique teacher/student dual role positively influenced their online teaching experience by fostering greater empathy, providing increased facilitation to help their own students use technology, and creating a growing support network of fellow teachers. The researchers observed the acute need for connections between teacher educators, language educators, language learners, and learners' families to handle pandemic-induced social, technological, and pedagogical interruptions, and emphasized the importance of technology-integrated language pedagogical training, as well as sensemaking-based metacognitive reflections for in-service and pre-service teachers to prepare for future crises.

The final study differs from the previous three in its focus on language program design issues facing indigenous second language learners. Connecting Warschauer's digital divide theory with increasing concerns for digital equity issues by computer-assisted language learning (CALL) researchers (Ortega, 2017, 2020), Michele Back, Virginia Zavala, and Raiza Franco investigated the emergency multimodal programs produced by Peru's Ministry of Education, which were launched in spring 2020 to help K–12 indigenous learners of Spanish as a second language in Peru. By analyzing the radio broadcasts, educational materials, and interviews with primary school teachers who facilitated the radio broadcast-based emergency language learning, the researchers criticized the inscribed discriminative historical ideologies and deepening digital inequality in Peru's K–12 emergency multimodal programs. While recognizing the creative ways in which the teachers assisted their students and family members in accessing the curriculum during the pandemic, the researchers highlight the urgent need for fundamental ideological changes in remote education facing indigenous language learners at the levels of policy planning, curriculum design, and pedagogical implementation.

In sum, these four articles offer insights into the ERLTL experience of language educators and learner populations from distinct social, historical, and educational contexts. Through diverse data sources as well as both epic- and emic-level analyses from distinct theoretical lenses, the studies show that some language teachers and learners have discovered effective strategies or resources to cope with certain aspects of online language education, whereas other language learners (i.e., in Peru) experienced a poorly designed remote language curriculum that was plagued by outdated educational ideologies and pervasive digital equity issues. However, despite their distinct foci, there is a common theme shared among these studies, which is the realization by the educator and student participants through this unprecedented experience that language learning can be facilitated by effective use of technology, and that improved training in online language education is an important and even imperative step to in preparing for future crises.

#### 4. Closing Words

We are very fortunate to have researchers from three continents share their studies in this special issue. We hope the findings and discussions shared by these researchers enrich an expanding literature documenting how language teachers and learners around the globe took agency to manage their ERLTL experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, and deepen our understanding of effective approaches and strategies to facilitate online language learning in disruptive times. We also hope that this can stimulate more conversations on how to normalize integration of partial or 100% online teaching at all levels of language instruction, so that the key stakeholders are prepared for future local or global disruptions. Finally, we would like to thank all the authors who contributed to this special issue. Despite the unprecedented chaos and stress in their personal and professional lives, they continued their research, in some cases adapting their research during the peak of the pandemic outbreak. Their dedication and effort deserve our utmost respect and gratitude.

This special issue is rounded off with three book reviews and one learning technology review. *Academic Writing with Corpora: A Resource Book for Data-Driven Learning* is reviewed by J. Elliott Casal. Kathy Murphy-Judy reviews *Creating Effective Blended Language Learning Courses: A Research-Based Guide from Planning to Evaluation*, and Ananda Astrini Muhammad reviews *Open Education and Second Language Learning and Teaching: The Rise of a New Knowledge Ecology*. Crystal Rose-Wainstock reviews the online annotation platform Hypothesis.



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