Teaching EAP and ESP to Undergraduates During COVID-19 in Hong Kong

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter reports on how two university courses (EAP and ESP) adapted to online and hybrid learning through a combination of technology-mediated and blended learning strategies. This is followed by an examination on issues associated with online instruction from data collected through focus group interviews (N=14) involving teachers and students and a discussion on how students and faculty members feel about the prolonged use of technology in EAP and ESP courses. It is hoped that this chapter will enrich our understanding of delivering EAP and ESP courses in EMI contexts during these challenging times and learn about the struggles students and teachers went through.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused chaos worldwide. In the wake of lockdowns and school closures, educators in many higher education institutions (HEIs) naturally resorted to using existing LMS such as Blackboard to continue teaching and assessing online as students stayed home to learn. In addition, many HEIs have used video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and MS Teams as alternatives to a learner management system (LMS), primarily for synchronous classes. This was initially

seen as a short term emergency solution by most HEIs as a way to minimize the disruption.

Amid a myriad of terms describing the situation, this chapter uses the term emergency remote teaching (ERT) coined by Hodges et al. (2020) to describe the mode of delivery under the current pandemic, which encompasses a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning delivered either entirely online or through hybrid mode. The reason is that this is viewed as a mechanism to handle the situation in a transient manner rather than suggesting a permanent migration to a rigid online distance learning model. Further, the ERT model allows flexibility on delivery methods, which is important since learning activities and assessments often require different strategies in light of the fluidity of the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

ERT is considered by some as much an opportunity as it is a threat when it comes to online learning using technologies. Regardless of readiness and competence, tens of thousands of teachers worldwide were forced to teach online as a temporary measure. This has inadvertently become a mass global experiment in virtual schooling which in turn accelerated its realization in some sectors such as HE where there is already a strong desire to adapt blended or hybrid learning mode for their programs.

While ERT might have been a sensible substitute for face-to-face instruction, switching a course to online delivery unexpectedly without careful consideration is far from being ideal. To begin with, many teachers worldwide have inadequate ICT skills for online teaching (Lukas and Yunus, 2021). Delivering a language-based subject is particularly challenging as it demands much more student-centered strategies than a content-based subject. Online teaching, or distance learning, traditionally depends predominantly on asynchronous learning. Synchronous meetings are rare. This move is therefore unprecedented with unknown efficacy and drawbacks. It has been a common occurrence for English teachers to incorporate blended learning strategies to improve quality of teaching and learning, to prioritize higher order learning activities such as discussions over gap fills (Hockly and Dudeney, 2018). In a blended setting, using video conferencing tools for instruction can aid learning since face-to-face interaction, even delivered virtually, is invaluable when it comes to building rapport between learners and teachers (Jones, Kolloff, and Kolloff, 2013). More recently, Kohnke and Moorhouse (2020) reviewed and considered Zoom as a suitable synchronous meeting tool for teaching live ERT lessons as functions such as whiteboard, polls, and breakout rooms afford the opportunity for authentic and meaningful interaction in a language classroom.

Nevertheless, if the blended learning tasks are to be delivered synchronously, it is almost certain that teachers prepare for online teaching prior to its execution which inevitably will require even more of their time. Lominé, Warnecke, and St. John (2011) illustrated in detail the keys to planning a successful online conference are (i) anticipating technical difficulties, (ii) the role of teacher and participants,