

Chapter 75

The Potential of English for Social Purposes and Cooperation for Emergency Remote Language Teaching: Action Research Based on Future Teachers' Opinions

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ABSTRACT

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to explore new practices in language teacher education. English for Social Purposes and Cooperation, a socially-responsive and technology-friendly approach to English language learning, may help students around the world continue learning from home. This chapter analyzes the perceptions of a group of pre-service teachers after designing socially responsive materials specially created for the COVID-19 crisis. Action research is employed to improve teacher educators' activity and pre-service teachers' training, and a mixed-method approach based on grounded theory and content analysis is performed. Findings show that the experience has provided participants with meaningful examples of material design. This encourages teacher educators to include the proposed approach in their teaching and reveals the need for specific training in material design. Results may help prove the potential of action research for improving the teaching practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Although distance education has existed for nearly three centuries (Clark, 2020), it has rapidly grown in the last decades (Richards & Guzman, 2016; Simonson et al., 2019) due to the increasing number of digital technologies that are taking over the world at different scales. In simple words, Milman (2015) defines distance education as “the practice of delivering education and instruction to students not physically present but interacting with the instructor and the educational process remotely (usually by computers and the Internet these days)” (p. 567). In the same way, the author points out at the very fact that this type of learning and teaching allows increasing flexibility of the learning process (for instance, students can decide to what extent they are going to participate according to their own learning schedule and not the teacher’s) and entails the opportunity to make education available and accessible to those who cannot physically participate in it for any reason. At this juncture, e-learning education has become the most extended way of distance education (Negash & Wilcox, 2008).

In addition to these decades of rapid technological development, distance learning is filling a new gap in today’s education. The widespread concern about the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the consequent state of alarm and lockdown established by governments from every country is affecting all educational stages. With most of the world’s schools closed, educational administrations are facing unprecedented challenges and, in turn, taking measures to ensure learning continuity and guarantee that the learning process of millions of students is minimally affected. In this light, Chang and Yano (2020) developed an overview of nations’ policy actions since early March 2020 in an attempt to build a world-wide community of practice; this monitoring has revealed how all countries are employing their already existing technology-enhanced distance education modalities. However, the report also highlights that one of the governments’ major concerns is to secure equity when accessing this technology-based learning environment. Despite the attempts of many countries to provide families from low-SES backgrounds with devices and mobile data packages to face these new learning solutions, the digital gap is yet to be bridged, and guaranteeing equity still requires efforts from stakeholders (Giannini, 2020).

Likewise, there is no doubt that language learning, and more specifically learning English, has become essential in the 21st-century society (European Commission, 1995) and in educational systems around the world, acquiring great relevance both in international organizations and in the labor market (Madani, 2017). In this line, new methodologies and approaches to English teaching and learning have been developed in the last years with the premise to guaranteeing meaningful interaction environments and real-world-based contexts for students to become highly competent in the respective language (e.g., Huertas-Abril & Gómez-Parra, 2018b; Slapac & Coppersmith, 2019). Nevertheless, in the context of the aforementioned COVID-19 situation, it is necessary to seek new, motivating practices that not only allow a flexible language learning process but also make education available and accessible to those who cannot physically participate in it for any reason (Milman, 2015). In this light, English for Social Purposes and Cooperation (ESoPC) seems worth considering, a technology-friendly approach aiming at providing learners with effective learning of English paying special attention to 21st-century social issues and cultural values (climate change, immigration and refugees, and health emergencies, among others; Huertas-Abril, 2018). This approach, coined by Huertas and Gómez in 2018, is based upon “encouraging learners to think critically and challenge common assumptions in order to develop their English language level while increasing their social awareness”, considering “both local and global issues from a social perspective” (Huertas-Abril & Gómez-Parra, 2018, p. 76).

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