TELC-net COVID-19 Crisis and teaching in difficult circumstances: discussion 5 – 08 May 2020

Richard, Laurent, Hari, Elizabeth, Marisol, Jiacqi Li, Harry, Eric, Renu, Nadeem, Manjusha, Sudhakar, Samaneh, Yewei, Loreta

**Laurent (Rwanda)**: In Rwanda schools are closed until September. Lessons being broadcast on radio and TV. A few Unis are trying to organise distance learning online – very new to Ts and Ss. In his institution for past week been using LMS, Google drive (doc sharing) and WhatsApp for discussions (oral and written). But for most others, schools, not really working. Is having issues with language teaching online; contacting Ss if they’re not online.

**Hari (India)**: English teacher working in rural school. Ss were unable to take their exams in March and are very worried about their education and their futures. Technology not accessible by all Ss and Ts unable to teach online – quite poor context. He’s been using WhatsApp – time-consuming and challenging for him but feels sense of responsibility to teach his Ss even though it isn’t mandatory to do that - voluntary. In fact, many Ts are not teaching. Govt isn’t putting pressure on Ts to do what is not possible. Govt wasn’t ready for this (traditional classroom teaching context) and is working towards solution for future similar scenario, e.g. online platform

**Marisol (Mexico):** The govt using TV channels for basic ed. Kindergarten classes are at 7am, so unsure how many kids are watching at that time. There is some pressure on Ts to use tools but this may be a mechanical procedures, not focused on learning. Questions the value of the activities re learning – need to consider more reflection, motivation, interaction – engaging Ls, not just going through the motions of doing exercises..

**Harry (UK/Cameroon):** What is the pedagogy of online teaching? How to make learning happen? E.g. colleague teaching different kinds of greetings, but these were definitions of greetings/reading about it rather than doing it and difference between formal and informal, and H questioned the usefulness of this – why not just teach what they need now? But overall, the lesson was just a F2F lesson but done via WhatsApp – wasn’t appropriate to the mode, e.g. no opportunity for ss to ask Qs – pedagogy all wrong. So for Ts, the switch to technology is not really working if no understanding/awareness of the pedagogy of online teaching. Ls, on other hand, may benefit as they are more digitally aware/natives and will survive better than Ts from this online experience. Will this experience actually have a negative impact on classroom teaching when they get back to the classrooms?

**Elizabeth (Ecuador)** The NCHE in Ecuador has introduced changes – some staff have been dismissed, many put on part-time contracts and class sizes increased from e.g. 15 to 60 – in English lang class possible max of 100, so she will have to learn to manage 60-100 Ls in her class.

**Richard (UK):** Yes, job security big concern, and what will be our (Ts) role in the new normal? Btw this group is open to Ts who may have other difficult circumstances, not just large classes, but e.g. lack of textbooks, etc. to cope with, so all welcome.

**Jiaqi Li (China):** Interviewed a couple of teacher friends in elementary and secondary schools.

Advantages:

* They report that they can save time via online teaching and focus more on teaching, e.g. they don’t need to spend so much time on discipline/managing classroom behaviour/conflicts etc.
* Also save time on commuting so have more time for planning and preparation.

Disadvantages:

* Poor interaction e.g. T can’t see the Ls (40 per class) so even though they log in, the T doesn’t know what they are doing, e.g. could be playing with their phone etc. and their parents are at work so no monitoring. If T asks a question, they say that the online connection is poor/can’t hear you, etc. (give excuses). Also very difficult for the T to know if learning has taken place.
* Previous to this situation these Ls were not allowed to use devices but now it’s very easy for them to copy answers online, share answers etc and they cheat. Re homework – underachievers were threatened with ‘punishments’ e.g. go to the office immediately etc. if they hadn’t done h/w but now that isn’t possible, these Ls don’t do it. No reprisals.
* Ts have 2 groups of 40 Ss and they have to grade assignments for all 80 using mobile phone – very tiring and time-consuming on a small screen (vs paper).
* Ts do live teaching session and then there is the recording. But editing the recording afterward is time-consuming and very challenging to older Ts who are not familiar with the technology. Solution: older more experienced Ts do the lesson and younger newer Ts do the editing of these classes so the recordings can be used later by those Ss who had connectivity problems etc. Added benefit that the novice Ts can learn from the experienced Ts as they watch and edit.
* Elementary Ls need support in developing good study habits, but with the switch to online teaching, not prepared and more challenging.

**Harry:** Some very interesting areas there for possible research e.g. the opportunities for mentoring process going on there between experienced and novice Ts

**Richard:** Yes, opportunities for collaboration between Ts as in this example of sharing tasks according to skill/experience.

**Eric (Cameroon):** On top of already difficult circumstances, now added challenges of online/remote teaching, so need to ask: If this is how we need to work/the reality, how do we *make* it work (in the circumstances we are in)? How do we *make* it work with poor connectivity, e.g.? Good basis to build on for T prof devt and for building research.

Teacher-centred approach is an issue already, online teaching has complicated this further. Referred to Scot Thornbury saying ‘What is the problem to which technology is the solution?’ This question seems to be even bigger now!

What is happening now is creating a platform for research into this and other Qs/issues.

Re: feedback – Trains pre-service Ts. Knew group was big. About 10mins before going online with them, reflected on how to manage feedback, realised difficult so decided to get them to divide into learning groups of 6. They had to put their ideas together first, then send them, then he collated onto a pdf and sent back with feedback. An idea for more responsible Ls. With children more complicated.

[Kamran: Giving feedback on writing assignments online is extremely challenging. What can be some strategies to make it useful?]

[Renu: Nadeem: Use of assignments tab in MS Teams helps you manage and track assignments and give feedback.]

[Marisol: Kamran, there is an application called “CamScanner” that let you grade the document and send back with “written” notes :)]

**Richard**: (reflecting on these 5 discussions) We can start to reflect/wrap up on what’s been discussed as we come to the last of these online discussions for a while. Started by discussing how we can communicate/new ways of communicating with Ls and sometimes involving parents but these past 2 weeks moving into a more qualitative discussion in terms of how we can improve the quality of learning and teaching. Clearly haven’t solved all the problems but all of us moving toward quality – sustainable goals: quality rather than quantity of education – still a lot to work out, but have noticed a shift in focus. Any other reflections?

**Renu (India):** Thinking back to the start of online teaching and how unready Ts Ls and parents were so unready and reluctant about online learning but managed to download the Zoom app and then principal had to discuss with parents the pros and cons of devices and convince them of the benefits, but out of 80 only about 16 participated and Ts also had lot of difficulties. As a result, digital parenting training – advice and support/guidance e.g. how to block/allow sites but still parents not convinced of this mode of learning and Renu too felt learning wasn’t taking place. Parents didn’t trust the devices and the children weren’t focused on lessons but the devices e.g. at night using them and playing around with them. Finally, introduced a timetable and 1hour lessons and advised parents to use laptops and monitor their children during these, so limiting time on the device. Really don’t know how much they’ve studied/how much they know/have learnt. Don’t know how to assess that – very difficult. Plus in addition to teaching, had to handle so many complaints and queries as parents were so confused.

[Renu: In a large online class, gauging the mood of the listeners and their attention is challenging.]

[Harry: I agree Renu. The question in my mind is: should we be investing more on sharing responsibility for teaching/learning with students or investing on how best to make them attentive?]

[Marisol: This sudden need to use technologies is stressing teachers and learners. The learning process needs a social ingredient and parents are not always available or ready for that necessary scaffolding and also stress them. Here the importance to promote at least a degree of autonomy in the field of education :)]

**Richard:** All these practical insights over the past 5 weeks fascinating. But great communication developed with parents and can see how children are responding to this way of learning

**Harry:** Normal that kids go crazy with mobiles when lockdown is eased! ☺

**Nadeem (India)**: Still trying to find out how to work with Ss who don’t have smartphones. Can only talk and send text messages. Uses textbook and sets work and then deals with any problems via text or phone. Feels that L1 medium Ss are lagging behind the other-medium Ss and when school reopens the other-medium Ss will be far ahead.

**Manjusha (India)**: Using Zoom basic plan so can’t record the 40-minute sessions or use the break-out groups, but on the positive side many Ts have also joined and are eager to learn about online teaching and they are practising together, sharing ideas and cooperating

[Manjusha: Children are now curious to know more about online platforms. Thanks Renu.]

**Sudhakar:** Using WhatsApp groups to connect but this week also tried using Zoom. (Audio unclear at times.)

**Elizabeth:** We are generating so much data on online options. Would be good to summarise data and reflect on what works and what doesn’t work in order to report to ministries or authorities who are going to make online teaching a normal part of courses in the future. Think about how Ts went about this, how effective it was – this would help mentoring and action research in the future. This is a whole new world but just as in classroom research, we have generated a lot of data and maybe it’s worth pulling it together and passing it on as advice.

**Samaneh (UK/Iran)**: Some of her Ss are collecting data on Ts in China who are moving back into the classroom – reflections on what they have done during their time teaching online since January. Re: Elizabeth’s comment two weeks ago about using family resources when teaching YLs, how children could benefit from their grandparents – resources and knowledge/culture, bringing in info they have at home – so initially planned to have a group project on children and intercultural awareness but then changed to how Ts can/cannot draw on resources that they have now (at home). Haven’t started data collection yet but will. One student has created a questionnaire to find out what children think about this experience and what resources they use and hope they will get very interesting findings. These discussions helped her to come up with ideas for research but also to reflect on this situation and realising how it’s difficult for both Ss and Ts to adapt.

**Yewei (China)**: Yes, she did the questionnaire for students, got 30 responses. Asked what they liked most about that time learning at home and they said online teaching gives them more flexibility in their studies cos can adjust their timetable but largest challenge was lack of F2F time with teacher and felt online teaching can’t replace F2F instruction.

**Loreta (UK/Chile):** Has taken notes over the 5 weeks and has noticed how resourceful everyone has become with the limited resources they have, and particularly those with very large classes e.g. 65+ and as a result have become more resilient (both Ts and Ls) – mental health, well-being important and this is not normal and don’t have to pretend it’s normal (key point) E.g. trying to stick to a curriculum and doing tests at the end of the year is a nonsense in this situation. Has also noticed that Ts have survived and particularly when they have experienced pressures from heads or authorities e.g. to give grades (not right at the moment). What is one semester or a few months when you are in school for 12 years?! In the long term it’s very marginal what they will be losing. Very positive message – how parents have become so involved. Although at times they can hinder/limit their children’s access to technology, they have also learned along with their children – family activity. But again, key message is well-being, this is not normal and mustn’t pretend it is.

**Richard:** This, these discussions has helped well-being and remembers how happy they were just to see each other at the start of the first discussion.

**Harry:** What is the one thing now you want to learn to do as a teacher and what steps are you taking to learn that one thing? For him it’s technology. He has all tools/apps he needs to work online with his Ss although struggling, in conflict – does he need all this or not? What is all of this going to help him achieve? Is it worth spending more energy and time on learning how to use all these applications/tools, space or looking at his content and thinking of ways he can encourage more interaction before and after his sessions. On Tuesday after spending 2 hours training with a colleague on how to use software ‘Tophat’ and then everything went blank and he had to go back to the platform he had been using, calling for tech help and Ss joining the session – ended up confused, nervous – affected the session/couldn’t complete it, so what’s the point? Tech guys feasting on this pandemic! But not good for likes of us coming from low-tech contexts, striving to be the best Ts we can be, not the best tech experts.

**Richard:** The need for good pedagogy never dies, so will win in the end.

**Harry:** So can’t wait for time when the hype around technology dies down and we can focus on pedagogy again.

[Marisol: And having digital literacy does not warranty everything! Imagine that technologies collapse in the future hahaha]

**Richard:** We’ll take a break for time being, but many interesting ideas in these discussions and think about how we can take this forward in terms of research and finding out more about Ss perspectives. Perhaps meet again in a few weeks.

**Harry:** Meantime good to look again at recordings of these discussions. He noted things he missed during live discussion which he picked up on in the recording – listening again was refreshing and new ideas came – so maybe watch again and any new ideas share in comment box so the conversation continues.