

Online English Language Teaching and Learning: Psychological Implications on University Language Instructors

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Abstract: *University language instructors have been greatly impacted by the move to online English Language Teaching (ELT), which has brought with it both opportunities and challenges. The psychological impacts of online ELT on instructors are examined in this paper, with particular attention paid to stress, anxiety, burnout, and coping strategies. Stress levels have increased because of the shift, which was frequently unexpected and unintended. It has also increased workloads, presented technological difficulties, and created feelings of loneliness. In a virtual setting, many instructors have expressed difficulty juggling work and personal obligations, which can result in burnout and job displeasure. However, there have also been positive psychological impacts from the use of online learning, including greater digital literacy, pedagogical creativity, and flexibility in teaching methods. Instructors who participated in professional development programs and received a lot of institutional support were also better able to handle the difficulties of teaching online. The inadequacies in current research are highlighted in this review, especially the need for longer-term evaluations of psychological consequences and more culturally varied studies. It also highlights how crucial institutional rules and practices that put instructors' mental health first are. Better practices and interventions for teachers' well-being and professional sustainability will be the main focus of this paper.*

Keywords: ELT, English language, psychological effects

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered the educational landscape, forcing universities worldwide to adopt online teaching methodologies. English Language Teaching (ELT) was no exception to this rapid transition. While this shift ensured the continuity of education, it brought forth a multitude of psychological implications for university instructors tasked with adapting to virtual teaching environments (Dhawan, 2020).

Pre-pandemic challenges in English Language Teaching (ELT) often included large class sizes, limited access to teaching resources, and pressure to meet institutional standards for language proficiency outcomes (Kim, 2019; MacIntyre et al., 2020). These factors already contributed to stress and workload intensification. The abrupt move to online instruction further exacerbated these difficulties, introducing additional layers of complexity such as

technological demands and the loss of traditional classroom dynamics. This systematic literature review (SLR) aims to explore the psychological challenges and opportunities faced by university English language instructors during this transition, highlighting key themes such as stress, anxiety, burnout, coping mechanisms, and institutional support.

2. Methodology

This SLR follows a structured approach to analyze peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2024. Databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were searched using keywords like “Online English Language Teaching,” “Psychological Impacts,” “University Instructors,” and “Mental Health.” Studies focusing specifically on university-level ELT instructors were included, while those centered on K-12 education or students were excluded. A thematic analysis was conducted to categorize findings into stressors, coping strategies, and institutional interventions.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Psychological Challenges in Online ELT

The transition to online teaching has been widely discussed in recent literature, particularly concerning its psychological implications for university instructors. Stress and anxiety have been identified as significant challenges, often stemming from the rapid and unplanned shift to digital platforms. Bao (2020) noted that instructors experienced heightened levels of stress due to inadequate preparation and insufficient technological training. Similarly, Hodges et al. (2020) highlighted that the lack of familiarity with digital tools like Zoom and Moodle intensified feelings of inadequacy among educators.

In addition to technological challenges, workload intensification has emerged as a major stressor. Online teaching requires substantial time investments in creating digital materials, managing virtual interactions, and troubleshooting technical issues (MacIntyre et al., 2020). This increased workload has been linked to higher levels of burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion and diminished job satisfaction (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Rapanta et al., 2020).

Another recurring theme in the literature is the blurring of work-life boundaries. Cutri et al. (2020) observed that working from home disrupted the balance between professional and personal lives, leading to prolonged working hours and reduced opportunities for rest. Such circumstances have further exacerbated feelings of isolation, as instructors missed face-to-face interactions with colleagues and students (Rapanta et al., 2020).

3.2 Psychological Opportunities in Online ELT

Despite the challenges, the shift to online teaching has presented several opportunities for personal and professional growth. For instance, many instructors reported improvements in their digital literacy and technological competence. Gçlü and Uçan (2021) argued that mastering tools such as virtual whiteboards and collaborative platforms has enhanced instructors' adaptability and teaching efficacy.

Moreover, online teaching has fostered pedagogical creativity. Zhao et al. (2020) found that educators employed innovative methods like flipped classrooms and gamified learning to engage students in virtual environments. These practices not only benefited students but also reignited instructors' enthusiasm for teaching.

Flexibility is another advantage frequently mentioned in the literature. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) highlighted how asynchronous teaching allowed instructors to manage their schedules more effectively, reducing stress and enabling better integration of professional and personal responsibilities.

3.3 Coping Strategies and Institutional Support

The literature underscores the importance of effective coping mechanisms and institutional support in mitigating the psychological impacts of online ELT. Professional development programs have been particularly effective in equipping instructors with the necessary skills for online teaching (Baran et al., 2020). Nambiar (2020) stated that peer support networks have also provided emotional reassurance and a platform for sharing best practices.

Institutional interventions have played a crucial role as well. Universities that offered technological training, mental health resources, and incentives reported lower levels of stress and burnout among instructors (Hodges et al., 2020; Kim, 2021). These measures have been instrumental in fostering a supportive work environment and promoting professional sustainability.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Psychological Challenges

A. Increased Stress and Anxiety

The sudden transition to online teaching brought unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety among university ELT instructors. The unplanned nature of this shift left many unprepared, leading to feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure (Bao, 2020). Among the key stressors identified in the literature are:

i. Technological Challenges

According to Hodges et al. (2020), instructors had to rapidly familiarize themselves with new platforms like Zoom, Moodle, and Microsoft Teams, often without adequate training. Technical glitches during live classes exacerbated feelings of helplessness. This is due to the fact that instructors were forced to quickly learn and navigate new platforms such as Zoom, Moodle, and Microsoft Teams, often without receiving the necessary training or support to use them effectively.

ii. Workload Intensification

Online teaching often required more preparation time, such as creating digital materials and recording lectures. It also frequently demanded additional preparation time, as instructors had to develop digital materials, record lectures, and adapt their content for virtual delivery to ensure student engagement and accessibility. This increased workload contributed to higher stress levels (MacIntyre et al., 2020).

iii. Blurring of Work-Life Boundaries

According to Cutri et al. (2020), the home-based nature of online teaching blurred the lines between professional and personal life, leading to increased work hours and reduced downtime. It shows that the home-based nature of online teaching often resulting in extended work hours, constant availability, and diminished opportunities for rest and relaxation.

B. Burnout and Job Dissatisfaction

Prolonged exposure to stressors has led to significant levels of burnout among ELT instructors. Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Factors contributing to burnout in online ELT comprise of:

i. Isolation

The lack of face-to-face interaction with students and colleagues fostered feelings of loneliness and professional disconnection (Rapanta et al., 2020). This shows that the absence of in-person interactions with students and colleagues created a sense of isolation, making it difficult to build meaningful connections and maintain a sense of community. This lack of engagement also led to feelings of professional detachment, as opportunities for collaboration, informal discussions, and shared experiences were significantly diminished.

ii. Student Engagement Challenges

Instructors faced challenges in keeping students engaged and motivated during virtual classes, as the lack of physical presence often led to distractions and reduced accountability. This struggle to foster active participation and sustain student interest added to their frustration, ultimately amplifying feelings of job dissatisfaction and burnout. Instructors reported difficulties maintaining student participation and motivation in virtual classrooms, further contributing to job dissatisfaction (Kim, 2021).

C. Anxiety Over Performance Evaluation

According to Trust & Whalen (2020), the increased use of surveillance tools, such as learning management system analytics and session recordings, raised concerns about performance monitoring and professional autonomy. Instructors expressed anxiety over being constantly evaluated by both administrators and students. In addition, the growing reliance on surveillance tools, such as learning management system analytics and session recordings, sparked apprehension among instructors about being excessively monitored, potentially undermining their professional autonomy and trust in the workplace.

4.2 Psychological Opportunities

A. Enhanced Digital Literacy

Despite the challenges, the transition to online teaching improved instructors' digital literacy. Mastery of tools like video conferencing, virtual whiteboards, and collaborative platforms enriched their skill sets, making them more versatile educators (Gçlü & Uçan, 2021). This newfound proficiency does not only empowered instructors to integrate technology more effectively into their teaching, but also positioned them to navigate future innovations in education with greater confidence.

B. Pedagogical Creativity

Online teaching encouraged instructors to experiment with innovative teaching methods, such as flipped classrooms, gamification, and interactive quizzes. Furthermore, by exploring innovative methods and technologies, instructors discovered new ways to make learning interactive and dynamic, fostering a renewed sense of creativity and fulfilment in their professional roles. Zhao et al. (2020) stated that these approaches not only enhanced student engagement but also rekindled instructors' enthusiasm for teaching.

C. Flexibility in Teaching

The flexibility of online teaching allowed instructors to design asynchronous lessons, providing opportunities to manage their schedules more effectively (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). This flexibility enabled instructors to balance their professional responsibilities with personal commitments, reducing stress and promoting a healthier work-life balance while still maintaining high-quality instruction. As for some, this flexibility reduced stress and improved work-life balance.

4.3 Coping Strategies

Effective coping strategies played a crucial role in mitigating the psychological impacts of online ELT. The following approaches emerged as substantial:

A. Professional Development

Participation in workshops and training sessions equipped instructors with the skills needed for online teaching, boosting their confidence (Baran et al., 2020). This will boost their confidence and enabling them to effectively engage with students in a virtual environment.

B. Peer Support Networks

Regular communication with colleagues fosters a sense of community, helping individuals cope with challenges while improving professional growth through the exchange of effective strategies. According to Nambiar (2020), it will provide support and opportunities for sharing best practices.

C. Mindfulness and Self-Care

Craig (2021) stated instructors who practiced mindfulness, meditation, and other self-care activities reported lower levels of stress and burnout. Hence, they are likely to maintain better mental health and sustain higher levels of productivity and job satisfaction.

4.4 Institutional Support

Institutional policies and practices significantly influenced instructors' ability to cope with the challenges of online ELT. The effective measures include:

A. Technological Training

Universities that provided comprehensive training programs helped instructors adapt more quickly (Hodges et al., 2020). This will enable instructors to transition more efficiently, leading to improved teaching effectiveness and student outcomes.

B. Mental Health Resources

According to Kim (2021), access to counselling services and wellness programs alleviated psychological distress. This helps improve mental well-being, enabling individuals to perform better personally and professionally.

C. Recognition and Incentives

Acknowledging instructors' efforts through awards and incentives boosted morale and job satisfaction (Rapanta et al., 2020). It fosters a sense of appreciation, motivating them to maintain high performance and dedication.

5. Research Gaps and Future Directions

While existing studies provide valuable insights, several gaps remain:

- **Cultural Diversity:** Most studies focus on Western contexts, overlooking the unique challenges faced by instructors in developing countries.
- **Long-Term Impacts:** There is a lack of longitudinal studies examining the sustained psychological effects of online ELT.
- **Policy Implementation:** Limited research explores how institutional policies directly impact instructors' mental health.

Future research should address these gaps to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological implications of online ELT.

6. Conclusion

The shift to online English language instruction has had a significant impact on university instructors' mental health. Although there are clear obstacles like elevated stress, burnout, and anxiety, there are also chances to improve one's digital literacy, inventiveness, and adaptability. Effective coping mechanisms and institutional support are essential for reducing adverse effects and promoting instructors' long-term career sustainability. Universities can better handle the changing world of online education by filling up research gaps and prioritizing instructors' mental health initially.

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