Language Teaching and Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Language Teaching and Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic:

A Shift to a New Era

Edited by

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IN MEMORY OF ELENI

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AA: Alternative assessment
ALT: Adult Learning Theory
BALEAP: British Association of Lecturers of English for Academic
    Purposes
CALL: Computer-Assisted Language Learning
CEFRCV: Common European Framework of Reference Companion
    Volume
CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning
CMC: Computer-mediated communication
EAP: English for Academic Purposes
ECML: The European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of
    Europe
EFL: English as a Foreign Language (teaching and learning)
ELT: English Language Teaching:
ERT: Emergency Remote Teaching
ERLT: Emergency Remote Language Teaching
ESP: English for Specific Academic Purposes
F2F: Face-to-face
FOMO: Fear of missing out
ICT: Information and Communication Technology
INDIRE: National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, Educational
    Research
KWL – Know, want-to-know and learned
L1: First language
L2: Second language
OPD: Online Professional Development
PD: Professional Development
PPP – Presentation, Practice, Production
SAMR: Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition
SCMC: Synchronous computer-mediated communication
SIG: Special Interest Group
TELSIG: Technology-enhanced Learning Special Interest Group

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PREFACE

As coronavirus escalated into a global pandemic in spring 2020, all aspects of human life, including education, have been severely affected and challenged. Educational institutions worldwide were compelled to shut their doors while face-to-face education was suspended, forcing an abrupt shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT), which has led to a considerable rise in e-learning and the use of video conference platforms. Virtual classrooms and platforms, which were not even on the agenda of many institutions before COVID-19, were established globally with the pandemic outbreak.

This sudden shift has led to fundamental challenges and has therefore proved disruptive for teachers and students alike. While the former had to reshape and adapt their instructional approaches and material to the new learning requirements, the latter found themselves out of their comfort zone, trying to find new ways to manage their learning and overcome the new-found challenges. With this shift, it became clear that online teaching was no longer an option but a necessity (Andriivna, Vasylivna, Pavlivna, & Mykhaylivna, 2020). This new normal has urged policymakers and educators to move towards providing solutions to continue teaching without any disruptions in an attempt to make the learning process sustainable (Sintema, 2020).

English language education took its share in this transition and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on English language teaching and learning have become an area of intense interest within the research community. Alongside teachers' struggle to rapidly shift to unfamiliar learning methods and environments, research has been conducted aiming at exploring how the global English language teaching (ELT) community has experienced and responded to the pandemic. Several studies have focused on the ways teachers and learners utilised digital technologies to engage in teaching and learning through asynchronous and synchronous online teaching (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021); others explored the adaptations made to the language assessments (Blume, 2020), while some other studies were more concerned with the support provided to teachers, their professional development and well-being (Lockee, 2021).

The volume is a collection of nine papers, some adapted from presentations at the annual CyTEA conference in November 2021. This collection provides educators with guidance, recommendations, and

suggestions supported by evidence-based research or long experience on topics pertaining to aspects of language teaching and learning as well as on language teacher education, training, and development related to emergency remote teaching. It aims at bridging theory and practice in an accessible and practical way with an emphasis on useful pedagogical implications and future areas of research that can put theory, practice, and challenges in dialogue. The intention is to open up reflection in the field of online ELT and inspire its practitioners to revisit and reshape their teaching practices. To this end, each chapter will be introduced in a way that helps to motivate the need for relevant ideas, techniques, and digital resources in online English language teaching and learning, while each will finish with a set of reflective questions for language educators, practitioners, and researchers to consider.

Certain words stood out in all these chapters which mainly centre on engagement, interaction, assessment, and digital literacy. Specifically, they focus on the application of innovative approaches to teaching and assessment supported by the use of digital tools which aim at engaging learners and teachers in the learning process, enhancing online interaction, and ultimately helping them to acquire the necessary skills required to meet the challenges framed by the emerging changes in the post-pandemic era. The nine papers presented here reflect the ideas, experiences, and challenges of individual educators and address the aforementioned concepts through the use of digital applications, webtools, and digital games, the exploration of limited student-teacher interaction, the investigation of teachers' and students' attitudes towards online learning and alternative assessment, and the examination of the interrelated components of engagement. Some of these concepts are also addressed through teachers' attitudes towards online professional development, and through delving into the challenges encountered and lessons learnt during the pandemic.

The first chapter, authored by **Sophia Mavridi**, examines the lessons learned during the pandemic and highlights the need to rethink and re-envision language teaching, language learning, and assessment. It discusses the ways in which the lessons learned can contribute to actionable and sustainable improvements in language education by providing directions for digital strategic thinking which can assist teachers, teacher trainers, and policymakers in making informed decisions in the post-pandemic era. The chapter concludes with a suggestion of four key areas on which language education digital strategies should focus while going forward. Digital strategies are also related to the next chapter by **Carlos Lindade**, who considers how free apps can empower and support English language learners in their attempts to become more agentive as they develop

meaningful language skills inside and outside the classroom. Through considering published contributions and his own teaching experiences, learner agency is explored and discussed in relation to various apps that can be used in and outside the classroom in an attempt to facilitate teaching practices. The chapter concludes with an emphasis on promoting language acquisition by accommodating a wider learning context which can be approached as a social activity in which learners can be prepared for the real world. In a similar context, focusing on different learning technologies, **Letizia Cinganotto** addresses how EdMondo, e-Debate, and HyperDocs, introduced by the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, and Educational Research (INDIRE) in Italy, have helped English language teachers to overcome challenges faced during the pandemic. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, EFL teachers' attitudes and experiences are explored and discussed providing insights into ways in which they have succeeded in reshaping and innovating their teaching practices. The chapter concludes with the lessons learned during the pandemic, the importance of teaching awareness, and its relation to online interaction in the post-pandemic era. Online interaction is the focus of the next chapter by **Dimitris Evripidou** and **Stella Kourieos** who drew on social presence theory to identify the factors which impede EFL learners from engaging in synchronous oral interactions in online lessons. Through the use of focus groups and thematic analysis, factors related to eye contact, gestures, and tone of voice appeared to contribute to reduced interaction. These social cues were perceived not only as ways with which verbal messages can be enriched but primarily as cues whose absence online deterred teacher-student closeness and ultimately discouraged interaction. The chapter concludes with several recommendations for fostering interaction online within the Cypriot context. Within the same context, **Sophia Charalambous – Philippides** investigates students' engagement in online teaching during the pandemic. Drawing on the efficacy of reflective narrative, observations made during online lessons in terms of the students' behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement, are discussed in relation to two groups of language students: university students and working professionals. The importance of class community is emphasised by illustrating how a sense of belonging can positively affect students' performance during extraordinary circumstances. The chapter concludes by identifying aspects that merit further investigation as to the different ways the two groups of students engaged in learning English online. One of these aspects is students' attitudes towards online teaching and learning, which is the aim of the next chapter authored by **Eftima Khalil** and **Çise Çavuşoğlu**. Specifically, it examines EFL students' attitudes towards emergency remote education

during the pandemic in a Libyan context. The study used a qualitative approach by employing semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students focusing on what contributes to the development of negative attitudes (the difficulties they encountered), and on their recommendations for the enhancement of online learning environments. The chapter makes reference to student-initiated recommendations regarding the local government and technology industries to ensure more effective practices in English language teaching and learning. In an attempt to investigate how teaching practices can be improved, **Panagiota Tzanni** concentrates on the importance of teachers' online professional development (OPD) and the ways it has helped teachers during the pandemic. By using the Adult Learning theory as the main framework of the study, EAP teachers' attitudes towards OPD events were examined providing ways with which EAP teachers can improve their teaching practices in terms of using technology in the language classroom. The chapter highlights how the pandemic has changed EAP teachers' attitudes towards OPD events and how useful the latter were for improving their students' performance during the pandemic. Enhancing students' performance is the focus of the next chapter, authored by **Ariadni Kyriakidou** and **Loukia Taxitari** which focuses on the use of digital-game-based language learning in teaching Greek as a foreign language. A pre-/post-testing intervention design was used to investigate the impact of this approach on lexical, grammatical, and syntactic aspects of language. Through inferential statistics, a significant effect was found on the learning of grammar emphasising the efficacy of digital games in language teaching. Through a scoping review, the last chapter by **Iosif Gidiotis**, shifts our attention to the issue of assessment prior and during the pandemic. It deals with the extent, range, and nature of integrating alternative assessment techniques in online English language teaching by identifying the gaps in the existing literature and suggesting future areas of focus. After a detailed screening process, teachers and students' patterns and behaviours are analysed providing their preferences in relation to alternative assessment methods. The chapter concludes by highlighting the need for further teacher training and support for a more widespread approach to implementing formative assessment in foreign language teaching.

Teaching online and engaging in abrupt remote teaching during COVID-19 has caused divergent challenges. English language educators have had to adapt instruction, creating opportunities for student engagement, ensuring positive learning experiences. Within this upsurge of interest in online education, this volume approaches the profound impact of the pandemic on language teaching and learning as a unique opportunity to understand the potential affordances of synchronous and asynchronous online English

language education through a broad spectrum of teacher-researchers',
practitioners', and students' perspectives and experiences in teaching and/or
learning English as a foreign language.

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CHAPTER ONE

LANGUAGE EDUCATION DURING
THE PANDEMIC:
LESSONS LEARNED AND DIRECTIONS
FOR CHANGE

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Abstract

In response to COVID-19 disruption, a new approach to education has emerged: Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). This abrupt transition from the physical classroom to the virtual one has presented educators with both opportunities and challenges, including embracing new technologies and modes of instruction to maintain continuity for students. While educators generally displayed considerable determination and resilience, the crisis showed that current learning infrastructures are highly vulnerable to disruptions. The purpose of this chapter is twofold. The first part examines the lessons learned during the pandemic and their impact on language education. The second part explores how these lessons can contribute to the development of actionable and sustainable improvements in language education and gives directions for digital strategic thinking. As such, it can provide a framework for reflection on action and future planning in the aftermath of the pandemic and beyond.

1. Introduction

With COVID-19 forcing schools and institutions to move their classrooms online, a new approach to education has emerged; Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). This quick transition out of the physical classroom and into the virtual one has presented most educators with both opportunities

and challenges, not least of which was familiarising themselves with technologies, adapting their courses to remote delivery, and maintaining continuity for their students. Research on ERT (Gacs, Goertler, & Spasova, 2020; Moser, Wei, & Brenner, 2021) indicates that despite the overwhelming constraints, language educators have stepped out of their comfort zones and remained dedicated to supporting students' academic goals. As such, it proved to be a good response to the crisis but there are concerns that, in the long run, ERT (or improved versions of it) may not be pedagogically sustainable.

This was not the first time that education systems had to come up with creative solutions in response to a major disruption. For instance, during an outbreak of tuberculosis in the early 20th century, classes were held in open-air schools despite freezing temperatures (Spielman & Sunavala-Dossabhoy, 2021). The Spanish Flu occurred simultaneously with the development of postal and railway services, making distance education via mail correspondence possible. Similarly, COVID-19 brought remote learning to the forefront of education, at a time when technology is enabling greater connectivity.

This chapter will primarily draw on a large-scale research project carried out by the author (see Mavridi, 2022) during COVID-19. Its purpose is twofold. It first examines the lessons learned during the pandemic and their impact on language education. Next, it discusses how these positive and negative lessons can inform the development of sustainable improvements in language education, whether in-person, online, blended, or hybrid. It can therefore be used as a starting point for reflection on action and digital strategic thinking and planning as language education recovers from the pandemic.

2. Lessons learned during the pandemic

COVID-19 has tested education systems in entirely new ways. This section presents the key lessons learned that can help to inform the long-term rebuilding and recovery of language education systems following the pandemic. As already stated, these lessons are mainly drawn from the main findings of a large-scale, mixed-methods study published by the British Council (Mavridi, 2022). A total of 1102 language educators from 49 countries around the world participated in the study at the height of the pandemic, sharing their experiences, perceptions, and beliefs when language instruction moved from face-to-face to remote modalities. Almost half of them were based in Europe, more than a quarter in South America, and the rest in Asia, North America, Africa, and Australia. A

broad spectrum of learner ages is represented in the results, with 51.4% of educators teaching young learners and teenagers, 34.7% teaching young adults (18-22 years old), and 13.9% teaching adults.

For the purpose of this chapter, the term ERT (Emergency Remote Teaching) will be used to distinguish between online courses that were purposefully and carefully designed to take place online by a team of specialists in online learning and those which were originally designed for face-to-face teaching but switched to remote modalities because of the emergency (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). According to the study, language education adopted an Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) approach during the pandemic marked by trial and error, resilience, and innovation. In their steadfast commitment, language educators made outstanding efforts to adapt to online teaching modalities, but their teaching experiences were adversely affected by a number of issues; some pre-existed and were exacerbated by the pandemic, while others emerged as a result of ERT. Six lessons can be drawn from this dark and creative period that can help us identify future directions for language education. Namely, innovation, insufficient preparation and ongoing support, student engagement, assessment, student digital literacies, and digital divides.

2.1 Innovation

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that "this crisis has stimulated innovation within the education sector" (United Nations 2020, p. 2) with educators around the world demonstrating their determination to change collectively and continue to teach in an entirely different way. In terms of language education, there are three main areas that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the study that are particularly encouraging in this regard; namely, teacher informal professional development, supportive teacher community, and willingness to continue using technology after the pandemic (Mavridi, 2022, p. 40, 41).

To begin with, the transition provided language teachers with an opportunity to step out of their comfort zones and upskill themselves. Educators showed remarkable resilience in adapting to new teaching modalities through trial and error, and they believe this enhanced their digital literacies, self-efficacy, and career prospects. As a result of this experience, they pointed out that they are now more open to using technology in the language classroom and have a different perception of its potential. Ultimately, the pandemic acted as a catalyst for professional development, helping even those resistant to change to want to evolve into 21st-century educators and embrace growth. Furthermore, language

educators explained how the teaching community as a whole supported the transition. By sharing resources, good practices, and encouragement, their teaching communities (work colleagues, social media networks, publishers, and teacher associations) provided them with valuable support, development, and inspiration. Finally, a clear vision has emerged for continuing online or blended language education after the pandemic with educators foreseeing that both the use of technology and remote teaching are here to stay. Nevertheless, some pointed out that more work needs to be done on quality digital learning, especially in terms of teacher training and institution-wide pedagogical and technical readiness.

2.2 Insufficient preparation and ongoing support

There seems to have been a clear lack of readiness and awareness of remote teaching both on a macro level (e.g., state-level entities, policymakers) and micro level (e.g., managers, administrators) in language education. According to the study (Mavridi, 2022, p. 21, 22), the overwhelming majority of the respondents (90.4%) had very little preparation time before they transitioned online, ranging from less than a week to two weeks. Also, 91% of the teachers had never taught online before the pandemic, and most (83%) received very little to no training before moving online. As this evidence is crucial to understanding the situation educators found themselves in, below is an analysis of the training educators had received before they moved online:

- Almost half of the respondents (49%) self-organised their training through webinars, videos, and other online resources. Certainly, language teacher communities were especially supportive during this transition, sharing knowledge and resources (LT, 2020), but perhaps not all of this content was pedagogically accurate (Rapanta et al., 2020).
- About a fifth (18%) of the participants received less than five hours of training before transitioning online, most of which focused on technical aspects of the technologies used (e.g. how to use Zoom, Teams, Padlet, etc.).
- An alarming 16% of participants reported not receiving training before transitioning to remote teaching.
- Finally, 8% of respondents reported receiving substantial training from their institutions, while 6% said they did not require training because they were experienced, online teachers.

In addition to the insufficient training that language educators had received before they transitioned online, the findings indicate that the vast majority lacked ongoing specialised support for improving their remote teaching, often due to a lack of relevant expertise (see Mavridi, 2022, p. 24). In this context, *specialised support* refers to support provided by trainers and consultants with an extensive background in educational technology and digital pedagogy, rather than support provided by those who focus on how digital tools work. More specifically, while most respondents highlighted that they were provided with technical troubleshooting and non-interactive materials, they admitted that there was no ongoing support with regard to pedagogy and that they had to teach one another or learn 'on the job'. More tech-savvy teachers were often assigned or assumed responsibility for training the less tech-savvy ones, but it is unclear whether these ad hoc efforts effectively met pedagogical needs. In addition, the more tech-savvy teachers appeared overwhelmed since they had their own classes to teach.

There were many instances in which the institution provided ad hoc assistance. For example, by figuring out how remote teaching works and then training teachers, finding freely available webinars and resources, and sharing them with teachers and supporting them when connectivity issues occurred. Although this was clearly classified as institutional support, most educators acknowledged that it did not assist them in improving their pedagogical techniques for remote teaching.

Ultimately, the lack of robust preparation and ongoing support appears to have impacted teachers' experiences negatively. This does not suggest that the informal, self-organised, or peer forms of training were not valued, but rather that teachers needed more solid support and guidance on what works or does not work when teaching online.

2.3 Student engagement

Student engagement in online modalities was an area that presented significant challenges for most educators (Mavridi, pp. 25-27, 32). Over half of them (51%) rated student engagement as average to very poor and only 21.6% rated it as very good or excellent. In the qualitative part of the study, teachers reported that synchronous online classes became more teacher-centred and students struggled with digital distractions. Some of them said that the asynchronous materials they used were not engaging enough and that the technologies were not clearly designed for language learning. More importantly, many emphasised that the lack of physical proximity and embodiment can adversely affect language teaching since it can impede authenticity, communication, and student bonding. According

to these teachers, online spaces lack opportunities for paralinguistic and kinaesthetic features commonly found in face-to-face classrooms (such as body language, eye contact, and mingling), which can hinder online language users' communication and interaction. These perceptions correlate with other studies (e.g., Hazaea, Toujani, & Bin-Hady, 2021) which illustrate, that language teachers do not perceive online modalities as providing authentic communication opportunities for effective language learning.

There are some interesting points to be made here about physical proximity and embodiment in relation to language learning. First, it is important to acknowledge that the pandemic highlighted the importance of social learning, emphasising the positive effects of students sharing their physical space with their classmates and teachers. Furthermore, there are indeed certain pedagogical language practices that can be significantly enhanced by embodiment and proximity like kinaesthetic activities, Total Physical Response, mingling, etc. However, it can also be argued that authenticity and communication are not exclusive features of the physical world. Therefore, it may be inaccurate to suggest that, in an increasingly digital and interconnected world, digital communications are not authentic. Understandably, face-to-face educators are trained to identify engagement through embodiment, so online modalities (and the lack of physical proximity) may often be viewed as less engaging.

White (2020), nevertheless, notably warns that "embodiment is powerful, but a false proxy for engagement'' meaning that just being in the same physical space or even looking at the teacher does not mean that students are engaged with their learning. Instead of compensating for the loss of physical proximity, online teachers need to concentrate on how presence can support learning. In fact, Garrison et al. (2000), in their *Communities of Inquiry theory*, had highlighted - long before the pandemic - the importance of presence, pointing out that it is the social, cognitive, and teaching presences that enable learning, not necessarily the physical one. Similarly, for teachers to develop and maintain these presences online, different pedagogical decisions and instructional designs must be applied; it is not enough to use face-to-face pedagogies and just move them online. However, the main study this chapter draws upon as well as other literature (e.g. Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020) indicate that instructional design changes have been limited, which negatively impacted student engagement.

Overall, teachers perceived the shift to online instruction as having a negative impact on student engagement. While some attribute this to the lack of physical proximity, this section argues that it may have been more

due to a lack of pedagogically informed approaches to engaging language students online.

2.4 Assessment

Assessment (both formative and summative) raised considerable concerns, with teachers expressing difficulty in assessing, evaluating, and monitoring students' performance when teaching language online (Mavridi, 2022, pp. 28-30). More specifically, 60.6% of the respondents express serious concerns about how best students' language learning can be assessed and evaluated online while only 16.1% found that it can be straightforward. There were three main challenges revealed in the qualitative data, namely integrity issues; lack of visual and sound feedback; and organisational issues.

Integrity issues: plagiarism and standardisation
Generally, teachers agreed that it is difficult to assess language skills online, especially when it comes to reading and writing, where students can easily check vocabulary secretly or copy chunks from the internet and pass them off as their own. Some teachers fear that search engines like Google and translation software can give a false impression of students' learning, undermining the integrity of summative and formative assessments. In fact, some consider this as cheating. Additionally, they find that these technologies can interfere with concept checking, making teachers unable to determine whether students have understood concepts. For example, a few participants reported that students tended to instantly look up the answers to comprehension or vocabulary questions, giving them a false impression of what they actually know or have understood.

Lack of visual and sound feedback
The absence of visual clues was another concern, especially when cameras were turned off for privacy or bandwidth reasons. Many teachers found that this prevented them from observing, monitoring, and evaluating students' performance. It was also reported that having recurring technical issues can make evaluating students' performance difficult, especially when the sound lags or breaks up.

Lack of institutional procedures and criteria for online assessment
The data indicate a significant level of uncertainty (both at the state and institutional level) about guidelines, criteria, and standardisation procedures for online delivery. As a result, language teachers argued they

either had to assess using the same criteria they used for face-to-face instruction, or assessment was discontinued until in-person teaching resumed. The same was evident for language certification programmes (e.g., certificates, diplomas), with trainers admitting that they were asked to evaluate online teaching practices by applying criteria designed for face-to-face observations.

Overall, the overwhelming majority of participants expressed difficulty assessing whether curricular objectives and students' learning needs were met. There was, however, some evidence that institutions were experimenting with more online-friendly assessment solutions e.g., alternative assessment, open-book exams, and proctoring software.

2.5 Student digital literacies

It was evident in the majority of teachers' qualitative descriptions that student digital literacies were insufficient for online learning; specifically, students struggled with digital distractions, lack of digital criticality, insufficient online study and collaboration skills, plagiarism as well as lack of digital etiquette e.g., students attending in their pyjamas or not turning off their mics (Mavridi, 2022, pp. 27, 32, 39).

Digital literacies here do not just refer to the ability to use computers but to "the skills to use, create and critique digital technologies and the knowledge to critically understand the structures and syntax of the digital world, and to be confident in managing new social norms" (House of Lords, 2017, p. 25). This deep knowledge "is by no means a by-product of access to technology" (Mavridi, 2020, p. 90); students may be fluent users of technology, but this does not necessarily mean that they have the skills and competencies to learn online. For example, many participants repeatedly mentioned that students were distracted by their phones during class and that this interfered with their learning. Indeed, the literature suggests that this constant need to stay connected – also referred to as FOMO (fear of missing out) – is a form of anxiety that borders on obsession or compulsion (Rosen & Samuel, 2015). As a result, managing digital distractions is both a digital literacy and a learning skill, which students should be supported in developing in the classroom (Mavridi, 2020).

To conclude, many of the difficulties teachers expressed in the study were related to students' limited digital literacies, which, according to the teachers, affected both student engagement and learning. This negative impact may not be surprising, considering that online education "relies on the ability to read, listen, view, comprehend, and critique complex

information online" (Mavridi, 2022, p. 51).

2.6. Digital divides

Another concern was the issue of access to reliable technology (internet and devices), especially among students (Mavridi, 2022, pp. 23-24, 34). It was clear that teachers from all over the world (not just from low-connectivity contexts) felt that better technological provisions should be made to enhance the teaching and learning experience. Specifically, only 35% of the respondents consider students' connectivity as good or very good and only 28% believe that their students have access to good or very good quality personal computers. Quite alarmingly, a large majority (44%) think that students' access to quality laptops or desktops is poor or very poor, and so they use their phones to do their coursework or attend their live sessions.

The study acknowledges that this was largely a temporary issue; for instance, bandwidth infrastructure was unable to keep up with a sudden surge in demand for fast internet; households did not have the devices and bandwidth to support all family members working from home. For some teachers, however, especially in places with limited connectivity, the reasons reflected existing digital divides primarily associated with poverty and location. Indeed, several studies confirm that low-connectivity contexts had far more severe challenges, seriously disrupting or interrupting the learning experience (Hazaea et al., 2021) with common factors including region (rural vs. urban areas) and socioeconomic status (UK Parliament, 2020; eLearning Africa & EdTech Hub, 2020). Aside from access to technology, several studies indicate that students from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds were less likely to engage in remote learning. According to OECD's (2020) study in schools across the UK, 62% of vulnerable students and 58% of students with special education needs were less engaged with remote learning than their peers.

Overall, the pandemic seems to have exposed existing inequalities and divisions, demonstrating that certain groups were indeed more digitally excluded than others. Therefore, it is urgent that the broader community acknowledges and addresses the fact that, more than two decades into the 21st century, some people are able to continue their education during disruptions while others are not.

3. Directions towards the *next normal* in language education

Globally, as education strives to recover from the pandemic, with mutations and fluctuating infection rates, mask requirements, or a lack thereof, the future is filled with uncertainty. For some stakeholders, the need to recover the education system and return to *normal* is becoming increasingly urgent. Others describe this ever-changing landscape as the *new normal* or the *next normal* (Moore, Trust, Lockee, Bond, & Hodges, 2021).

Arguably, while the current language education system has strengths that should be preserved or restored, it also suffers from many flaws that predated (and were exacerbated by) the pandemic. As language educators, we now have a unique opportunity to reflect on these flaws and think about how we can create the next normal in language education. In the part that follows, the term *stakeholders* refers to state-level entities, institutions, managers, policymakers, trainers, and teachers themselves. Although every stakeholder's context is different, what follows will attempt to describe mindsets and discourses around *normality* into three broad categories.

First, there are stakeholders - arguably those that resisted online learning for years or only invested sparingly - who still see digital and online learning as an emergency response and desire to go back to how things were before the pandemic. For such stakeholders, face-to-face modalities seem to be *the norm*, with faculty required to teach face-to-face when national lockdowns are lifted, and students prohibited from choosing the modality (or modalities) that best suits their needs (Moore et al., 2021). As Moore et al. (2021) assert, such an outlook envisions *normal* as an ideal state which is rooted in nostalgia and focused on the past rather than the present or the future. Another problem with this approach to *normal* is that it seems to ignore the fact that the world has changed and turning things back to how they were before the pandemic is utopian at best.

The second group of stakeholders seems to have embraced the affordances of online and blended language learning and wants it to remain in some form or another post-pandemic (Mavridi, 2022; Gacs et al., 2020). There lies a danger, however, that some systems in this category may fall into the trap of using "improved versions of emergency remote teaching" (Mavridi, 2022, p. 8); thus, they are likely to maintain undesirable effects such as improvising pedagogical practices, not investing in robust teacher training, and struggling with student engagement and assessment. Rather than assuming that what was improvised or learned 'on

the job' during COVID-19 was necessarily pedagogically sound, these stakeholders must move away from emergency practices and develop more informed and solid approaches to digital and online learning.

A final group of stakeholders seems to be paying attention to the lessons learned during the pandemic and looking at ways to leverage digital language learning strategically going forward. Their discourses reflect a recognition that the world has changed by the pandemic and education systems need to move beyond simplistic dichotomies (online vs. in-person) to more comprehensive and meaningful reflections on effective teaching and learning (Moore et al., 2021). In essence, institutions in this category seek to establish a new paradigm of *normal* that encompasses flexible and inclusive learning ecosystems in terms of modalities, technologies, and assessments.

It is important to note that these classifications are only intended to broadly describe mindsets and discourses around *normality* and do not claim to account for every specific context and infrastructure of language education systems around the world. Even so, they may still serve as a springboard for creative reflections and discussions. In essence, it is critical that the lessons learned during the crisis are not forgotten, but used to re-imagine normality for language teaching, learning, and assessment. As Quilter-Pinner and Ambrose (2020) posit, the key question after the pandemic should not be whether we should use technology but rather when and how we should use it to the best effect.

The following sections examine four key directions digital strategies should focus on in their quest for the *next normal* in language education; namely ongoing professional development and support; formal teacher education; digital assessment; and student digital literacies.

3.1 Professional development and support

Many of the challenges teachers faced during emergency remote teaching (e.g., difficulty engaging students in communicative language practice, perceived lack of authenticity when teaching a language online) would be easier to overcome if teachers had a better understanding of digital pedagogies and their role when teaching online. These include how and when to facilitate online interactions; how to assess students' learning despite the lack of visual clues; and how to evaluate the affordances and limitations of different technologies.

Without a doubt, since the beginning of the pandemic, educators have made remarkable progress and developed useful skills. However, most of this development has been ad hoc or self-organised, and research suggests

that possible pedagogical and assessment issues still exist (Mavridi, 2022b; Ofsted, 2021).

It is therefore imperative going forward that in-service professional development and teacher support be provided in a more comprehensive, informed, and language-specific manner. This professional development should focus less on the technology itself and more on the digital pedagogies that underpin classroom practices. For example, in what ways can principles of digital learning enhance the instructional design of language courses? How can synchronous and asynchronous interactions be meaningfully maintained online?

In terms of support mechanisms, research shows that many innovative communities of practice emerged over COVID-19 (Bruce & Stakounis, 2021) such as webinars, online conferences, WhatsApp, and other social media groups, as well as informal peer support groups within institutions. Maintaining, strengthening, and systematising these mechanisms is essential going forward.

3.2 Teacher education programmes

With technology radically shaping how languages are learned, it seems that there is a need to reconsider teacher education programmes (undergraduate and master's degrees, diplomas) and take into account the actual expertise of teachers. ERT has revealed several pedagogical weaknesses in this regard that may reflect a broader gap in the way language education has handled digital learning for years. Almost two decades ago, Kessler (2006) found that language teachers primarily obtained their digital learning knowledge from informal rather than formal instruction. Hubbard (2008) attributed this to a lack of specialised modules in CALL (computer-assisted language learning) and a shortage of teacher educators with relevant expertise.

Recent research overwhelmingly highlights that in-service teachers went into the pandemic with staggering gaps in digital and online teaching (Mavridi, 2022; Moser et al., 2021). Without a doubt, a lot of informal learning has been achieved during ERT with teachers exhibiting incredible determination and resilience. However, going forward, formal teacher education systems (e.g., TESOL & Applied Linguistics undergraduate and postgraduate programmes) must identify digital learning as a key priority and integrate specialised modules in technology-enhanced language learning into their curricula. Essentially, if we wish to better prepare the next generation of language teachers, digital language learning must become a prominent part of such programmes.

3.3 Online assessment

During the pandemic, assessment raised serious concerns, highlighting an opportunity to question and re-evaluate whether the same assessment and accountability systems are appropriate post-pandemic (Quilter-Pinner & Ambrose, 2020). While the assessment approaches that emerged during the pandemic were interim measures and institutions may have moved on to solutions that are more online-friendly (Mavridi, 2022), it would be wrong to ignore the major challenges that language education faced; in particular, ensuring the integrity of assessment and preventing bad academic practice. Unsurprisingly, systems whose assessments solely relied on exams struggled significantly more than those that had already integrated formative and alternative assessments.

Going forward, it is urgent to rethink, revise and design assessment guidelines, criteria, and standardisation procedures specific to online modalities. Alternative assessments such as project-based language learning or integrated performance ones could also be considered in place of traditional achievement tests (Link & Li, 2018). It is also important to explore and implement innovative forms of testing, such as open-book exams.

Contrary to what occurred during emergency remote teaching, this cannot be left up to the teachers and managers to improvise; it should rather be jointly undertaken by experts in assessment, digital learning, and quality assurance to ensure accuracy, consistency, and fairness in a systematic way.

3.4 Student digital literacies

Among others, the pandemic has highlighted the need for a conversation about how education can prepare students "for life, not just exams" (Quilter-Pinner & Ambrose, 2020, p. 3). Evidently, many of the challenges language teachers experienced during ERT can be attributed to students' insufficient digital literacies e.g., difficulty assessing online content reliability, synthesising online information without plagiarising, managing digital distractions, and dealing with e-safety issues. These digital literacies encompass "new functional, sociocultural and transformational literacies that allow people to effectively navigate an increasingly multimodal and digital world" (Mavridi, 2022, p. 50) and are essential both, in and out of the classroom.

More specifically, language students need both the competencies and mindset to participate and collaborate effectively online; understand

different genres and codes of digital interaction; assess source reliability and interpret multimodal information (e.g., text, image, sound, video); create and critique digital content without plagiarising and be resilient and proactive to reputational risks related to digital identity (Mavridi, 2020).

Going forward, integrating these literacies in language education is essential regardless of the modality (online, face-to-face, hybrid, or blended), and there are several frameworks available to support this (see, for example, Dudeney, Hockly, & Pegrum, 2013; Jisc, 2015; Mavridi, 2020; Sharpe & Beetham, 2010).

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the opportunities and challenges that occurred during the transition of language education to remote modalities and discuss what can be learned in light of this. Based on a large-scale study (Mavridi, 2022), four key areas are suggested on which language education digital strategies should focus going forward; namely, ongoing teacher professional development; formal teacher education; digital assessment; and student digital literacies.

As language education recovers from the effects of the pandemic, it is critical that the lessons learned are not forgotten, but used to re-imagine how language teaching, learning, and assessment should work post-pandemic. It is important to maintain or restore the strengths of the current language education system while acknowledging the many weaknesses exposed by the pandemic. As educators, we now have a unique opportunity to reflect on these weaknesses and envision the *next normal* in language education; an ecosystem of learning modalities, technologies, and robust, flexible, and inclusive assessments. Taking this approach will require a deeper dialogue on both, research and practice as well as the active participation of all stakeholders involved in language education, including the teachers themselves.

Reflection questions

1. Have stakeholders taken note of the lessons described in this chapter? If so, which ones and how have they responded to them?
2. In what ways have language educational systems moved from emergency remote teaching to more robust digital pedagogies and modalities? For example:
   - Has professional development been facilitated by online learning professionals or are teachers and managers still left alone to