



## **“I Didn’t Even Know if My Students Were in Class”: Challenges of Teaching English Speaking Online**

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### **Introduction**

To successfully teach language online, teachers often need to acquire a set of new skills that may differ from what is required in conventional face-to-face classroom teaching (Baumann et al., 2008). However, the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 forced many universities across the globe to switch to a fully online teaching mode without much preparation (Gacs et al., 2020). Thus, language instructors, especially those with little previous experience or training in online teaching, found themselves underprepared, psychologically and pedagogically, for this sudden demand to teach language online (Khan et al., 2020).

While some studies may have started examining the challenges of teaching languages online, very few, if any, focused on the challenges faced by novice language teachers who have to teach speaking online. Teaching speaking online via video-conferencing platforms can be especially challenging due to the lack of a physical communicative context and the limited peer interactions available on the online platform. To fill this gap, the current study seeks to examine the challenges that novice language teachers observed or encountered when teaching English speaking in real-time online classes conducted via video-conferencing platforms during COVID-19. Potential pedagogical suggestions are then offered to address such challenges and inform future online speaking instruction in a similar context.

### **Literature Review**

Real-time online language teaching and learning has become an increasingly promising business opportunity in recent years, due to the flexibility of time and space it allows and the increasing number of available video-conferencing platforms (e.g., Skype, Zoom). Compared with asynchronous teaching modes, real-time/synchronous online language teaching has the advantage of enabling rapid negotiation of meaning and timely responses, enhancing interactivity between interlocutors, and better sustaining



interpersonal communication (O'Rourke & Stickler, 2017). Probably due to such benefits, teaching speaking online via video-conferencing platforms has recently gained popularity, leading to an observed boom of various for-profit online English training programs that feature one-on-one paired speaking instruction with native English-speaking teachers interacting virtually with EFL learners.

Despite such promises, a review of the literature into online language teaching indicates that language teachers would often experience difficulties when adapting to an online teaching environment, especially for the crisis-prompted situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, teachers may experience difficulty integrating technology and instruction. Gao and Zhang (2020), for example, interviewed three university EFL teachers and revealed that they often faced great psychological pressure while preparing for online English teaching due to the lack of proper information technology literacy, insufficient network conditions, and the invalid class management in remote teaching. In addition, to truly produce improved learning outcomes, teachers have to make extra efforts to make best use of the available technological platforms and design the most appropriate and practical teaching activities within the functions. Pu (2020), for example, revealed that he strived to redesign feedback provision forms, teaching plans, and assessment means during the pandemic to align with functions of the virtual learning platform. The crisis-prompted online teaching increased language teachers' workload and posed an especially stringent challenge for them to effectively integrate technology and instruction in an online environment.

Another challenge posed to language teachers while teaching online is to engage students in online interaction. Kohnke and Moorhouse (2020), for example, revealed that due to the lack of paralinguistic cues (such as direct eye contact) in online environments, students may be less willing to respond to questions or express opinions on Zoom, which impeded natural interaction and communication among teachers, students, and their peers, leaving students feeling alienated oftentimes. As reported by Nunan (2002), to avoid discursal chaos in his online TESOL class, he often had to revert to the traditional teacher-fronted mode and arbitrarily decide who gets to speak, which deprived students' learning agency. Students' willingness to talk may also decrease due to the unfamiliarity with each other in online teaching environments where the social bonding between students does not emerge as naturally as in face-to-face teaching environments (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Sun (2011), for example, reflected on the failure to engage students in real-time online mini-lectures and noted that due to the tight class schedule, students were deprived of the opportunities to get to know each other. Therefore, they felt awkward to speak up in class and preferred small-group discussions with fixed peer groups, instead.

A brief and focused review of relevant literature clearly shows that language teachers face various challenges when teaching languages online. However, few studies, if any, seem to have contextualized such discussions in skill-specific language courses, despite that many tertiary-level EFL programs actually feature skill-specific language instruction. As a response, this study examined the specific challenges faced by novice EFL instructors who were forced into teaching English speaking courses online during the pandemic without much preparation.

## Methodology

### Context

The online speaking course relevant to this study was a 10-week compulsory course (also known as the "Talk Time") offered to low-proficiency undergraduates at an English-medium university in Macau. In this course, instructors were responsible for multiple sections of the course (3-5 parallel sections, with each accommodating 12-15 students), and were paired up to organize speaking activities designed by the university's English language center based on its curriculum. The purpose of the speaking course was to create opportunities for students to practice their English speaking skills in class. Teachers usually play a facilitating role in class, while students are expected to engage with various activities through active interaction and communication with peers. Both students and teachers were required to speak English

only in class. The course was traditionally delivered once a week in a face-to-face classroom setting. However, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, classes had to be conducted online via Zoom in 2020.

## Participants

The study purposively recruited ten EFL teachers representative of the talk-time instructor population at this local site (five males and five females, all in their late 20s or early 30s). Three additional criteria were applied for the actual recruitment and selection of participants: (1) they were responsible for the online English speaking classes when the online teaching policy was first implemented at the university in 2020; (2) they had taught the same course face to face for at least two years, but had no prior experience with online instruction; (3) they share the same L1 background and had similar advanced-level English speaking proficiency.

## Research Procedures

Due to the access restriction posed by the pandemic and other ethical considerations, the researchers were unable to observe the actual conduct of the online classes. Instead, shortly after the 10-week online English-speaking course ended, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher participant to elicit their recollections of this online teaching experience and reflections on the challenges they faced while teaching speaking online. During the interview, each participant was first invited to share their experiences teaching speaking online and the challenges they faced in this process. Then specific questions were raised to elicit more in-depth discussions about the online teaching environment, the design and implementation of teaching activities, and the engagement of students in the online speaking class. Whenever relevant, follow-up questions were used to seek clarification from the teachers and/or further probe into their experiences and reflections. Such retrospective interviews were conducted in the participants' native language for better and more precise communication, and each lasted about 50 minutes. All the interview data were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim afterwards, giving rise to approximately 40 pages of transcripts.

## Data Analysis

All the interview transcripts were imported into the NVivo 11.0 software and coded inductively. Following Elo et al.'s (2014) suggestion, the principal researcher is mainly responsible for the inductive analysis while the other researchers "carefully follow-up on the whole analysis process and categorization" (p. 5). Specifically, the principal researcher read the transcripts iteratively, compared and contrasted each case, referred to previous literature that documented the challenges of online language teaching in general, and summarized segments of data into meaningful codes, such as, "the unwillingness to talk in front of the strangers," and "lack of natural interaction with classmates." After a preliminary list of codes was established, the principal researcher reexamined the interview data to verify and revise the coding list. Then the updated list of codes and corresponding excerpts were read and discussed in a team and clustered into more meaningful categories (i.e., the subtitles in the Findings section) to represent what challenges the teachers faced in teaching speaking online and how such challenges affected their instruction.

## Results and Discussion

Analysis of the interview data revealed three main types of challenges involved in teaching speaking online, including an increased anxiety due to technical breakdowns, sense of alienation and the lack of spontaneous interaction, and unsuitable offline instructional activities for online use. While almost all the

participants reflected on these three types of challenges, we quoted only from a few due to space constraints.

### **Challenge 1: Technical Breakdowns and Anxiety**

Technical issues were identified first and foremost by all the teachers as an apparent challenge for online instruction, particularly for teaching speaking online. Due to the sometimes-unstable Internet connection, abrupt log-offs frequently occurred; thus, the teachers had to repeatedly check whether their students were still online. The Internet instability also impeded the successful real-time communication. Instructor 2, for example, mentioned that one of his students, due to technical issues, was unable to engage in speaking activities, and eventually had to express opinions in writing using the chat-box for a whole semester. As he shared with us during the interview,

*[The student] tried to speak, but due to internet issues, her voice sounded broken and none of us could clearly hear her. ... To ensure her participation, we had to ask her to type up her opinions in the chat-box when she wanted to talk.*

Even the instructors themselves often felt insecure about whether the information was successfully conveyed in the online teaching environment, so they frequently asked students whether they could be heard clearly. All these technical breakdowns and anxiety increased students' and teachers' frustration with online speaking classes, leading to students' reluctance to participate in class activities. Instructor 7 reported on the frustration he observed in this class:

*For students who originally looked forward to this speaking class, too many technical problems made them gradually lose their initial enthusiasm. One of my students ... wrote to me privately that he felt very bored and frustrated when I frequently checked internet connection with the other students.*

In response to such difficulties, the teachers had to resort to other popular social media platforms used among the local communities to ensure successful communication with students and to troubleshoot whenever necessary. Instructor 9, for example, reported that she had to switch between the WeChat group (a local social media), Zoom, and emails to help the off-line students reengage in the speaking class. Instructor 7 also organized an additional WeChat social group with each class and encouraged students to keep their channels of communication open and actively seek help when needed.

The Zoom video-conferencing platform was initially adopted to mimic real-time conversations and help create an authentic learning context for the online speaking class (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020). However, due to the frequent technical breakdowns as well as users' insecurity and anxiety with technology, natural conversation was often interrupted. Even worse, sometimes the target of learning changed completely, as in the case of the speaking class being converted to a writing/typing class for some students in this study. The frequent technical issues experienced by both teachers and students also led to frustration and even demotivation (Sun, 2011), creating further challenges for the teacher to manage class and support students both technologically and psychologically in such an online teaching environment.

### **Challenge 2: Sense of Alienation and Lack of Spontaneous Interaction**

All the instructors in the interview also reported their frustration with the lack of responses from their students in the online class. As a result, they were often unsure whether their students understood the tasks they assigned. As Instructor 3 reported,

*In an online environment, the sense of interaction is quite weak. When teaching face-to-face, we can clearly observe each student's response and learn about whether they understood our task instructions. However, it is quite difficult to gain such information behind the screen.*

Such physical alienation between teachers and students was further exacerbated by some students' unwillingness to turn on their camera during class, making it difficult to establish the social bond between each other in the online environment. When teaching in the dark, the instructors were unable to engage students through eye contact or ensure students were following their instruction. Similarly, hiding behind the screen, students could easily idle away. As a result, teachers reported that they often had to repeat instructions on how to complete a speaking activity to students, which significantly slowed down the pace of their teaching.

In addition to the sense of alienation between teachers and students, instructors also reported difficulty in eliciting spontaneous interactions among students themselves. Unlike in traditional face-to-face teaching contexts, students were generally unwilling to interact with their classmates in the online speaking class due to their unfamiliarity with each other. In response to such difficulties, the instructors had to give up pair activities, but divide the students into two big groups, with each instructor facilitating students' discussions in each group (Zoom breakout room). However, even in such group activities, students were found to only talk to the teacher and seldom listen or respond to their peers. Thus, students' speaking activities were often reduced to either short responses to teacher-initiated questions or relatively longer planned monologues. Seldom did students converse for transactional or interpersonal communicative purposes, although they were strongly encouraged to do so. Instructor 3 specifically pointed out this problem in the interview.

*In face-to-face teaching environments, peer interactions transpired frequently, because they felt they were familiar with the peers sitting next to them. However, in online environments, the students became strangers. They only talked to the teacher, although they were divided into different groups ... I tried to talk less and give them opportunities to talk. But I almost never saw my students responding to their peers. They were all waiting for my cue.*

In line with the findings of Kohnke and Moorhouse (2020) and Gao and Zhang (2020), the instructors in the current study also reported a lack of non-verbal communication in online teaching environments and the corresponding difficulty of engaging students in online classes. The consequences of such loss, however, are much more severe in an online speaking class than in other language classes. More specifically, students would lose opportunities to practice the proper use of nonverbal cues (e.g., facial expression and body language), along with verbal language, to convey meaning and maintain conversations with interlocutors as in real-life situations. As a result, teachers faced greater challenges of teaching conversational skills in the online setting, especially when students rarely initiated questions or negotiated meaning with their peers (Nation, 2013).

### **Challenge 3: Unsuitable Offline Instructional Activities for Online Use**

As the English-speaking course was originally designed for in-person instruction, authentic meaning-focused communicative tasks (e.g., a simulated job interview with one group of students acting as candidates and the other group as interviewers) were adopted in the curriculum to help students develop conversational competence. Games that involve multisensory design (e.g., working in pairs to describe and draw pictures) were also frequently implemented in traditional offline classrooms to better stimulate students' interest in practicing speaking skills.

However, when the speaking course was suddenly switched to the online mode, the meaning-focused and task-based interactive teaching activities went through some adaptation, but also created more challenges for effective instruction and learning. Thus, their previous teaching experience and instructional activities suddenly failed to support their online teaching. Instructor 8 reported the problem as follows.

*Without realia, you can only play a video or show students some pictures in an online environment. ... But I couldn't distribute different pictures to different groups of students like in face-to-face classes. Nor could I allow one group of students to see one picture and describe its content, and then have the other group of students take a guess.*

Although online games (e.g., Zork, Battleship) were integrated into the ELT curriculum during the pandemic with good intentions, their actual implementation was often problematic. Instructor 4, for example, criticized the unnecessarily complicated design of such games and, more importantly, highlighted a lack of meaningful focus on language-specific constructs.

*I felt so confused about the pedagogical intention of the game. It seemed to help students practice direction giving. However, the students actually had no idea about what they should do in such a game. And it took me quite a long time to help students [on both sides] to locate their opponent's battleships.*

Similarly, Instructor 3 also noted the unfriendliness of the online game design and argued that speaking tasks for online classes must be easy to understand and execute, closely connected to students' life and reflect their interest. "Or, students could easily lose interest in the activity while I am taking efforts to explain the rules," said Instructor 3.

Such results highlight the fact that effective online language teaching cannot be achieved with a simple addition of technology; instead, it requires thoughtful design and selection of relevant materials that suit the target language skills being taught, and instructional goals for a particular class, as well as the online learning context. In addition, adequate training (or on-demand support, when training cannot be offered due to practical constraints) should be offered to language teachers to facilitate the effective integration of technology and pedagogy in an online learning setting.

## **Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, language teachers had to adapt to online language teaching all of a sudden. Such crisis-prompted online teaching posed great challenges to the language teachers who were not fully prepared or well-supported. The current study drew on interview data with a particular group of EFL teachers who had little prior exposure to online language teaching and revealed the challenges teachers faced when teaching English speaking classes online.

Our research findings revealed that due to the frequent technical breakdowns in the online teaching environment, both teachers and students experienced increased anxiety about technology and struggled to adapt to the online environment. Thus, when teaching speaking online, it is necessary for teachers to pay more attention to learners' affective factors (Nation, 2013), reduce learners' anxiety and unfamiliarity about learning in the online environment, and form a supporting and engaging learning community (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). To achieve such purposes, firstly, teachers may need to set clear expectations and provide rationale at the very beginning of the courses, preparing students psychologically for the online speaking class. For example, teachers could encourage students' online presence with camera on during class, introduce the potential technical problems and corresponding solutions, clarify their expectations about students' active participation in an online speaking class, and emphasize the collaborative relationship between teachers, students, and their peers. In addition, teachers could increase their presence in and outside of class to better support students psychologically and technologically (ibid.). For instance, teachers could maintain timely communication with the whole class via multiple platforms (e.g., email, Moodle, and WeChat), and learn about students' learning needs and difficulties when adapting to the online environment by frequently sending online surveys. Prior to class, teachers could share video tutorials to better help students get familiar with the basic technical operation for engaging in corresponding teaching activities. During the implementation of teaching activities,

teachers could also take use of short online surveys to quickly learn about students' readiness for engaging in speaking tasks in an anonymous way and provide corresponding support. Through showing care to students and being organized in instruction, teachers could better help students engage and enhance their confidence about learning English online (Lim et al., 2021).

Our research findings also indicated that in the online environment students were less likely to maintain their focus, especially when hiding behind the screen. To better help students engage in interactive speaking activities, teachers could provide clear task instructions, hopefully via multiple channels too (Wigham & Satar, 2021). Instead of providing ephemeral spoken instructions only, for example, teachers may consider providing written instructions on the screen as well, making instructions accessible at all times during the task completion process. In addition, adding multimodal elements, such as using pre-recorded videos for task instructions that can be made available at all times and on different platforms (e.g., Moodle & WeChat group in the case of the present study), could also be an effective means of tackling such challenges. In so doing, teachers could achieve increased modal density and thus more effectively capture and retain students' attention (Norris, 2004). To confirm students' understanding of task instructions, teachers could try asking students to re-explain the instructions to the whole class to identify and address potential misunderstandings among students. Teachers could also consider providing short video clips as an example and elicit students' evaluation of the speaking performance. Such scaffolding strategy could better help students understand what they are expected to do and what constitutes good performance. Although such scaffolding strategy may be time-consuming, it also promotes authentic natural interaction and enhances students' meaningful engagement in the subsequent meaning-focused speaking tasks.

While the current research revealed some salient challenges faced by EFL teachers while teaching speaking classes online, it should be noted that due to the strict pandemic control policies implemented during that particular period and the many practical constraints we faced, only teachers' self-reported data were examined in this preliminary study. Future research should certainly include more data sources, such as observations of instructors' actual teaching behaviors (e.g., giving task instructions, providing feedback, and offering technical support), and students' perceptions of and reactions toward such teaching behaviors, to explore how teachers and students could be better supported in online speaking classes.

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