

Teaching EFL/ESL in the Digital Age: Education Post COVID-19 Pandemic

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Received 2 March 2023 | Received in revised form 26 March 2023 | Accepted 28 March 2023

APA Citation:

Sherif, N. M. (2023). Teaching EFL/ESL in the Digital Age: Education Post COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics*, 8(3), 2023, 237-247. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21462/jeltl.v8.i3.1033>

Abstract

The education industry is one of the sectors heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to the advancement of educational technologies and global collaborations, teachers managed to shift to distance teaching to mitigate the effect of the worldwide school closures. This sudden shift revealed the glory of the Digital Age and the need to upskill teachers and learners to compete in the future job market. This paper discusses the emerging skills needed for the future and investigates the perceptions of EFL/ESL teachers about their current education environment status post-COVID-19 pandemic along with their student's digital skills. This study adopts a descriptive quantitative approach. The research instrument used is a survey to collect the perspectives of non-native EFL/ESL teachers and instructors working in developing countries about their current education environment post-COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was in the form of a close-ended descriptive questionnaire including four sections. The findings reveal that future jobs are based on high cognitive skills that need to be implemented in today's learners. High awareness of the importance of continuous professional development and the need for further digital up skilling of learners, practitioners, and workspaces were also reported. Further studies with broader samples of EFL/ESL teachers are recommended.

Keywords: *21st-century skills, COVID-19 pandemic; Digital Age; EFL/ESL; emerging skills; Future of Jobs report*

1. Introduction

Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented situation that would have been impossible without the technological advancement we have in the Digital Age. Despite all the challenges teachers and learners faced and are still struggling with, emergency teaching and learning was a strong call for change. Exploring the opportunities offered by online learning and education technology was a

must, even among the most vigorous opponents of change, due to the worldwide compulsory school closures. Besides, it became apparent that even in the most developed countries, technology cannot replace teachers, but teachers who use technology can replace teachers who do not (Arora, 2020; Collinson, 2001; Gloria & Benjamin, 2018; Ibikunle, 2020).

According to the United Nations Children's Fund et al. (2022), "the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the education of children, youth and adults worldwide." At the peak of the crisis, its dramatic effect affected over 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries (UNESCO, 2021). However, it was a loud call for all the stakeholders to start collaborating to shape a better education future. UNESCO launched a Global Education Coalition that called for "coordinated and innovative action, seeking solutions that will support not only learners and teachers but also governments throughout the recovery process, with a principal focus on inclusion, equity, and gender equality" (d'Orville, 2020). Teachers, especially EFL/ESL practitioners, created various communities to mitigate the devastating consequences of the urgent shift to online teaching without proper training in most cases, especially in developing countries. Multiple institutes like IATEFL, NileTESOL, and the British Council held free webinars, workshops, courses, and other events to train teachers on using modern teaching approaches and utilizing the available educational technology resources and tools to deliver their online classes effectively. The inefficiency of the traditional Factory Model of education was proven in such a crisis.

Schools organized on the orthodoxy Industrial Age model are not meeting the learning needs of 21st-century learners (Kivunja, 2014). Students of the digital Age think differently and should not be taught using the traditional approaches (Ibid). Therefore, the Future of Jobs report included active learning and learning strategies among the required competencies in future occupations (World Economic Forum, 2020). Since one of the roles of teachers in general and EFL/ESL educators, in particular, is to prepare the student for the future and job market (Hussain, 2018), attention should be given to whether or not teachers are capable of conducting this mission effectively.

Many researchers tackled the importance of implementing 21st-century skills in EFL classrooms (Albahlal, 2019; Erdoğan, 2019; Şahin & Han, 2020; Saleh, 2019). However, this paper examines the emerging skills needed in the future job market in light of the World Economic Forum (WEF) Future of Jobs report (World Economic Forum, 2020). Additionally, it aims to investigate the perceptions of teachers of EFL/ESL working in developing countries about the facilities offered by their institutions, online teaching, the current status of their professional development after the COVID-19 pandemic, and their students' digital skills. This will help us shape the future of the EFL/ESL classroom based on the learners' needs and develop the teaching materials and curriculums accordingly.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Age and its Learners

Today, we live in the digital age, often known as the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) or the digital transformation (DT) era. The fundamental drivers of 4IR are technologies, but DT is based on the convergence of not only advanced technologies but also concepts and strategies (Lee & Trimi, 2021).

According to Theodore B. Creighton (2018), the terms "Digital Learner" or "Learners of the Digital Era" (LoDE) are more accurate terms for the current learners in the modern age. He argued that terms like "Digital Natives" are scientifically inappropriate and that "the debate has to go beyond the characteristics of the new generation and focus on the implications of being a learner in a digitalized world" (Ibid). One of these implications is that this age is high-demanding and that LoDE needs to have high cognitive skills to be able to compete in the future.

Some claim that LoDE has a very short attention span. Neil A. Bradbury (2016) elaborated that “interestingly, the most consistent finding from a literature review is that the greatest variability in student attention arises from differences between teachers and not from the teaching format itself. Certainly, even the most interesting material can be presented in a dull and dry fashion, and it is the job of the instructor to enhance their teaching skills to provide not only rich content but also a satisfying lecture experience for the students.” These findings emphasize the role of teachers to upskill their learners and urge them to find motivational approaches.

2.2 21st-century Skills

Despite the lack of consensus about what 21st-century skills really mean and what skills they exactly refer to, the recent literature on education reforms and curriculum development focuses on the demand for them and their integration and implications in classrooms (Saleh, 2019). Several organizations and institutions distinctly describe and categorize 21st-century skills (e.g., P21, NCREL, ATCS, NETS/ISTE, EU, OECD, ASIA Society) (Şahin & Han, 2020). Some researchers, such as Vacide Erdoğa (2019), focus on the 4Cs of communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking skills as the central learning and innovation skills in the 21st century. Others like Fahad Saud Albahlal (2019) investigated various definitions of these skills and possible ways to integrate them into EFL classrooms. This study will investigate Emerging skills according to the World Economic Forum report about the future of jobs.

2.3 Emerging Skills

The WEF Future of Jobs report (World Economic Forum, 2020) indicates that the emerging skills needed for the future are as follows:

1. Analytical thinking and innovation;
2. Active learning and learning strategies;
3. Complex problem solving;
4. Critical thinking and analysis;
5. Creativity, originality, and initiative;
6. Leadership and social influence;
7. Technology use, monitoring, and control;
8. Technology design and programming;
9. Resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility;
10. Reasoning, problem-solving, and ideation;
11. Emotional intelligence;
12. Troubleshooting and user experience;
13. Service orientation;
14. System analysis and evaluation;
15. Persuasion and negotiation.

The report also mentioned a list of emerging and declining jobs. “Unsurprisingly, the ranking of in-demand jobs corresponds closely with each role’s requirement of critical thinking, judgment, creativity, and analysis. This also means that the level of demand for jobs facing displacement can be closely correlated with its repetitiveness, simplicity, and lack of critical thinking” (Hall, 2020).

Hence, using modern learner-centered approaches and adopting the techniques of Project-Based Learning, Content-Based Instruction (CBI), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), etc., in EFL/ESL classes are crucial. They will not only enhance the learners’ language proficiency by providing hands-on practice of authentic English but will also implement high cognitive skills that they need for their future life.

2.4 From English Class to the Job Market

English is the de facto lingua franca of the global economy, modern sciences, and technology. Therefore, the need for preparing and improving the students' ability to cope with the job market is always present in EFL/ESL classes. Teaching Business English and developing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses and materials are not the only paths available. In their papers, Marcus Otlowski (2008) and Paulus Widiatmoko (2016) elaborated on the effectiveness of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in preparing university EFL students for job interviews in English. Otlowski clarified that "when students are able to create an entity of the fragments dealing with language learning and the other (often more important) dimensions of their lives, language learning/using becomes authentic and responsibility is truly lifted from the teacher to the students." On the other hand, the course Widiatmoko's study did not only focus on writing resume and interview skills, but aimed to develop the learner's "life skills" as well. The study also showed how with the help of ESP, TBLT, and blended learning "real world tasks of applying for a job transformed into pedagogic tasks require scaffolding activities and enabling skills."

Lasekan Olusiji Adebola (2019) highlighted that teaching is an industry and that "the common primary motivation for the enactment of every national English language policy in EFL countries is anchored on economic growth." Hence, he sees an urgent need to analyze the degree of preparedness of English practitioners to meet the industry's job demands, drawing on English teachers' work as a service for consumption that is responding to the new economic realities.

2.5 Education Post COVID-19 Pandemic

According to Lee & Trimi (2021), the global pandemic of COVID-19 is just an example of how the changes in the digital age are "complex, turbulent and massive in scale." Unfortunately, other unexpected crises, such as market gyrations (e.g., economic recessions), political uncertainties (e. g., geopolitics and trade wars), climate change, wars, and health issues put organizations to the ultimate test of sustainability (Ibid). Lee & Trimi believe that Sustainable innovation has become imperative to survive in a time of crisis (Ibid).

Teachers, learners, parents, and other education stakeholders proved that point during the COVID-19 crisis. Despite all the challenges they faced, they managed to cope with the new norm of distance education (DE) and online learning. The key findings of the Best Colleges' eighth annual Online Education Trends Report (OETR) (Venable, 2022), which provides the latest online and remote learning experience data with insights from 1,800 students and 351 school administrators based in the USA, are somehow similar to those reflected in other studies conducted in various developing countries. The OETR 2022 findings are presented in four categories: the learning experience, marketing and recruitment, the continued impact of COVID-19, and student satisfaction.

Concerning the learning experience, financial challenges, indicated by one-quarter of online program graduates, continue to be the primary roadblock to graduation (Ibid). According to St. Amour (2020), "37 percent of today's students are older than 25, according to information collected by Higher Learning Advocates. Almost two-thirds, 64 percent, work while in college. Another quarter or so is parenting. About half, 49 percent, are financially independent. Almost one in three, 31 percent, live at or below the federal poverty level". Similar concerns among some Indonesian learners were reported by Markus Allo (2020) and Leli Efriana (2021). Allo deduced that "if decisions about choice of learning mode were to be made based on cost most of the respondents will go for fully classroom learning than e-learning." Learners suggested the use of free online services "such as free Messenger application" to reduce the costs. Efriana reflected the parents' complaints about the additional costs of providing internet and electronic devices for their children. Financial unpreparedness was also reported on the teachers' side (Nugroho et al., 2021).

Another concern is finding a work-life-school balance which is, according to OETR, the biggest concern prospective students have about enrolling in an online program. Palestinian learners also

believe that having other responsibilities (e.g., work, being a housewife) beside being a student negatively affects E-learning (Farrah & al-Bakry, 2020). “One in five remote learners anticipates that the changes they’ve experienced in their education due to COVID-19 will have lasting effects on their mental health” (Venable, 2022). The nature of distance learning and having to work from home affected teachers and parents as well.

Despite the challenges, most studies reflected positive perceptions about online learning (Allo, 2020; Farrah & al-Bakry, 2020; Ghoniem & Elghotmy, 2020; Mahyoob, 2020; Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020; Nugroho et al., 2021; Saeed et al., 2022). In the student satisfaction section, OETR reported that “seventy percent of students said that online education is better than or equal to on-campus education, which is a slight decrease from the previous year (74%). However, 95% of online program graduates said they would recommend online education to others. This year 90% of online program graduates said that their degree has had a positive return on investment (ROI), which is down from 93% last year but up from 82% in 2018.” Additionally, “a majority (60%) of remote learners said they were likely to enroll in online courses or programs after their campuses return to normal operations, which is an increase from the previous year (49%)” (Venable, 2022). On the contrary to these views, a study about the EFL teacher education program at a state university in Istanbul, Türkiye showed that the “prospective teachers and teacher trainers in the ELT department continued their studies and seemed to appreciate online education during the pandemic. However, analyses of their experiences showed that only some of them were actually content. Half of PSTs had negative feelings about DE and preferred face-to-face instruction, and few even conveyed feelings of inadequacy as future teachers” (Çamlıbel-Acar & Eveyik-Aydın, 2022).

Regarding the continued Impact of COVID-19, OETR concluded that “forty-three percent of administrators reported that their institutions will continue to offer both remote and online format options for students in the future, up from 33% last year. Administrators shared that their institutions are taking steps to build long-term flexibility into course design, facility design, student support, and remote work due to their experiences during the pandemic. Top priorities for the coming academic year for a majority of institutions include providing a variety of student services – including academic (87%) and non-academic (86%) support” (Venable, 2022). These steps acknowledge that blended and hybrid learning are here to stay. Consequently, educational institutions should transform and train their staff on the new norm.

According to Saeed et al. (2022), “Online teaching and learning contributed to enhancing a number of 21st-century skills like computer literacy and independent education. It supported lifelong learning by encouraging the use of technical tools in researching, sharing experiences, and presenting assigned activities. Instructors and students became technically adept and were able to cope with the assigned online tasks.” Hence, educational stakeholders should consider solving the challenges facing embracing educational technologies and implementing them in teacher training programs and curriculum designs.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive quantitative approach. The research instrument used is a survey to collect the perspectives of non-native EFL/ESL teachers and instructors working in developing countries about their current education environment post-COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was in the form of a close-ended descriptive questionnaire, including four sections.

3.2 Participants

This study observed 59 participants to gain their comments and statements related to education post-pandemic. There were several data about the participants.

Table 1. The number of participants and the countries they work in.

	Country	No. of Participants
1.	Egypt	27
2.	Indonesia	11
3.	Pakistan	5
4.	Azerbaijan	3
5.	India	2
6.	Iran	2
7.	Saudi Arabia	2
8.	Ghana	1
9.	Iraq	1
10.	Peru	1
11.	The Philippines	1
12.	Rwanda	1
13.	Tunisia	1
14.	Yemen	1
Total		59

3.3 Instruments

The first section included a welcoming statement. The second was arranged to gather data about demographic questions: country of work, being a native or non-native speaker of English, gender, age, academic qualifications, students' age group, and teaching experiences. The third section was a 5-point Likert scale (16 items) ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The fourth section was to thank the participants by providing them with links to sites for free educational resources and tools, continuous professional development, and online dictionaries. Three versions of the same questions were written in Arabic, English, and English/Indonesian, created by Google Forms, and posted online on Facebook and WhatsApp groups for teachers from 18/5/2022 to 23/5/2022.

3.4 Data Analysis

After excluding results from native EFL/ESL teachers, the study sample included a total of fifty-nine participants from fourteen different countries (Table 1). Thirty-two participants were females, twenty-six were males, and one was unidentified. Three were older than fifty, seventeen were between forty and fifty, twenty-four were between thirty and forty, and fifteen were between twenty and thirty. The educational background of the participants varies between holders of a PhD (6), a master's degree (14), a diploma (10), and a bachelor's degree (29). Twenty-seven participants teach young learners, twenty-one teach adult learners, and the rest, eleven teachers, teach both. Thirty-five participants have more than ten years of experience, nine with more than five years and less than ten, and fifteen with less than five years of experience.

4. Results

This questionnaire aims to investigate the views of EFL/ESL teachers working in developing countries about the facilities offered by their institutions, online teaching, the current status of their professional development after the COVID-19 pandemic, and their students' digital skills. Table 2 reveals the findings on the teachers' perceptions through sixteen questions and 5-point Likert-scale items [ranging from strongly agree to disagree strongly]. The frequencies of the teachers' answers according to the scale on the questionnaire were counted.

Table 2. The questionnaire statements and response percentages

Statement	SA	A	Agreeing Sum	N	D	SD	Disagreeing Sum
1. My classroom supports the use of digital tools.	23%	46%	69%	24%	7%		7%
2. I feel confident using digital tools while teaching.	44%	42%	86%	9%	3%	2%	5%
3. My school/ institute is open to new ideas and change.	44%	27%	71%	20%	5%	4%	9%
4. My students' parents oppose the use of modern teaching approaches.	25%	19%	44%	29%	19%	8%	27%
5. I have a positive experience teaching online.	39%	39%	78%	12%	8%	2%	10%
6. I have received formal training on using educational tools.	31%	29%	60%	20%	12%	8%	20%
7. My students can use digital educational tools easily.	29%	37%	66%	22%	7%	5%	12%
8. My students have more technological skills than me.	25%	15%	40%	39%	7%	14%	21%
9. I feel the need to develop my digital skills.	58%	25%	83%	10%	7%		7%
10. I feel the need to develop my students' digital skills.	64%	24%	88%	7%	5%		5%
11. I have enough educational resources to use online.	27%	41%	68%	22%	8%	2%	10%
12. I find it easy to turn into active learning.	31%	39%	70%	20%	10%		10%
13. I use modern curriculum and/or course books that cultivate the learners' 21st C skills.	41%	35%	76%	19%	3%	2%	5%
14. I can easily seek continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities (e.g., training, courses, webinars, etc.)	46%	36%	82%	13%	3%	2%	5%
15. I have attended online CPD opportunities.	42%	41%	83%	15%	2%		2%
16. I can financially afford CPD opportunities.	32%	27%	59%	27%	5%	9%	14%

The facilities offered by the EFL/ESL teachers' institutions

71% of the teachers agree that the educational institutes are open to change despite some resistance (44%) from the parents. Technology-friendly classrooms are available for 69% of the teachers. 86% reflect their confidence in exploiting digital educational tools, and 60% have received training on using them. Moreover, 70% of the participants believe they can adopt active learning easily and that the curriculum and/or course books 76% of them use are modern and cultivate the learners' 21st C skills.

These results reflect that the educational institutes are currently preparing to cope with the new educational norm. Lessons from “the states of emergency in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century” (Brehm et al., 2021) were harshly taught, and all possible measures are being taken to avert the recurrence of these states.

In addition, providing modern curriculums and course books helps the teachers adopt modern teaching methodologies and up skill the learners. Regardless of the different categorizations and definitions of the 21st C skills, highlighting the emerging skills is crucial for preparing the learners for the future.

Online teaching

Similar to previous studies (Allo, 2020; Farrah & al-Bakry, 2020; Ghoniem & Elghotmy, 2020; Mahyoub, 2020; Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020; Nugroho et al., 2021; Saeed et al., 2022), most teachers (78%) reflected a positive online teaching experience. Besides, 68% have enough educational resources to use online.

Continuous professional development

Regarding continuous professional development (CPD), most of the participants expressed that they can easily seek these opportunities (82%) and that they have already attended such activities online (83%). Around sixty percent of the participants (59%) expressed their financial ability to afford CPD opportunities. These results reflect the EFL/ESL teachers are keen on their professional development and are working hard to seize available opportunities.

Learner's digital skills

66% believe that their students can easily handle digital educational tools. Still, the view of whether their skills exceed their teachers or not fluctuates (40% agreeing and 39% neutral). Nevertheless, the educators expressed high awareness of the need to develop both their digital skills (83%) and those of their learners (88%).

5. Discussion

United Nations Children's Fund et al. (2022) concluded their Mission of Recovering Education under three main priorities: "all children and youth are back in school and receive tailored services needed to meet their learning, health, psychosocial well-being, and other needs; all children receive support to catch up on lost learning; and all teachers are prepared and supported so they can address learning losses among their students and incorporate relevant and accessible digital technology into their teaching." Hence, the factory model education of the Industrial Revolution is not reliable anymore. Embracing educational technologies and working on providing them to all learners regardless of their social standards can mitigate education inequality and fulfill the students' current and future needs. Providing low-cost or free educational resources and tools are also crucial.

The questionnaire results reflect a rising awareness of the importance of digital transformation. This finding is in line with the findings of Fauzan & Pimada (2018) that English teachers should start using ICT in teaching English. Lessons from emergency teaching and learning are well received. Teachers are keen on their continuous professional development and on upskilling their students (Fadhliyah et al., 2020; Lestariningsih et al., 2018; Masadeh, 2022; Nurhayati, 2018). Schools and educational institutes are embracing digital transformation and have started training their employees on the use of modern technology (Bygstad et al., 2022; D'Ambra et al., 2022; Raza & Hasib, 2022; Sadovets et al., 2022). Besides, they are trying to adapt the classrooms to be technology-friendly (Anas & Musdariah, 2018; Bryan & Charles, 2022; Fadila et al., 2021; Janah et al., 2022; Tuzahra et al., 2021) and adopt modern curriculums and approaches. However, more efforts should be exerted to engage the students' guardians and enlighten them on the importance of modern techniques to ensure more efficient results and less resistance to change.

To conclude, George Couros, an innovative teacher, says, "Technology will not replace great teachers, but technology in the hands of great teachers can be transformational" (Badamkhand et al., 2021; Ibikunle, 2020).

6. Conclusion

The Digital Age is highly demanding, and its changes are drastic. Survival in the future is based on high cognitive skills and abilities. Innovation, collaboration, resilience, problem-solving, and flexibility are just examples of the skills that enabled the world to mitigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, teachers need to instill these skills along with all the other emerging skills to raise the competencies of future workers and leaders. Modern educational technologies offer endless opportunities for EFL/ESL teachers and learners to fulfill their aims. Therefore, digital literacy and emerging skills should be integrated into all modern curriculums and become an essential component of all teacher training programs. To summarize, online, blended, and hybrid learning are here to stay. It

is better to be trained and prepared to exploit their merits and understand the new educational norm than to be forced to adopt them amid an emergency or a crisis.

Despite this study's optimistic results, some limitations should be considered. One of these limitations is that the questionnaire was only posted online. Hence, all the participants have proper access to the internet. Additionally, most of the pages and groups where the links of the Google Forms were posted are mainly for teachers concerned with their professional development. Hence, a more comprehensive range of participants needs to be questioned to form a broader view of the current situation of EFL/ESL educators.

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