# Teaching With Covid: Within and Without

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*The COVID-19 pandemic that was initially believed to be a health crisis not only encouraged most organizations to revisit and re-adjust their working mode and style but also brought drastic changes into the work of educational institutions. The onset of pandemic paved ways for modern technologies and classroom routines to make language teaching compliant with certain preventive measures. Preliminary research into the successes and failures earned throughout online teaching in Armenia may provide a solid background for identifying which language teaching practices that started during COVID-19 would be retained or dismissed. The paper looks into some instructional changes that might impact the planning and delivery of in-person lessons after the retreat of the pandemic.*

*Keywords: online teaching, teaching English as a foreign language, COVID-19 pandemic*

## INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic, initially believed to be a health crisis, extended its influence across all life spheres and industries: it had its negative impact on tourism, obliged businesses, offices, and companies to revisit and re-adjust their working mode and style. Needless to say, the confusion caused by the pandemic disrupted the standard procedure of educational institutions to a great extent (O'Hagan, 2020; Hyslop, 2020). The learning process took a compulsory shift to online mode of teaching and learning, which gave a great opportunity to disseminate and acquire knowledge virtually. As it is, no matter how disruptive and distressing the effects of the pandemic might be, the COVID-19 lockdown constraint paved a way to virtual instruction or online learning in the countries where, to put it mildly, it was not very popular. Armenia was one of them. Apparently, challenges with language teaching in Armenia like in many other countries are not a new concern, but the move to virtual learning space created some additional complications in the academic context.

This paper seeks to inquire into the development of online language teaching in a higher educational context in Armenia during the lockdown caused by COVID-19 in 2020 -2021. The research, which was conducted at the Department of English for Cross-Cultural Communication at Yerevan State University, is based on a survey aimed at identifying the challenges the teachers experienced when moving to online teaching, and the successes they had in addressing those challenges. The qualitative and quantitative analysis of data helped us keep track of the new classroom practices that emerged as a result of online teaching and decide how these practices can find their way to face-to-face teaching.

**SURVEY RESEARCH**

In March 2020, there was a rapid shift to online learning in all higher educational institutions in Armenia because of coronavirus pandemic. Making a fast transition from traditional in-person classes to virtual instruction was a particularly challenging experience for students but more for teachers, since they were making this shift unexpectedly, out of emergency. This was an uncommon and new experience, gained through force rather than choice. It led to some teachers maintaining the same teaching practices they did during in-person teaching, which in its turn jeopardized student engagement, teacher motivation, and integrity in student assessment.

To identify the challenges experienced by University teachers during the shift and to assess the impact of online teaching on English language teaching, a survey was conducted in 2021. There were two components to it - an online administered questionnaire among 50 female teachers at University and an exercise featuring a retrospective technique.

The first part of the survey featured questions asking the teachers to assess their level of preparedness back in 2020, first when they assumed the role of an online teacher, and later on when they had been teaching online for ten months. As depicted in Figure 1, the findings showed that initially most language teachers and educators in the country were not ready to teach online because of insufficient training and limited access to digital devices and tools.

**FIGURE 1**
**TEACHER READINESS FOR ONLINE TEACHING AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC**
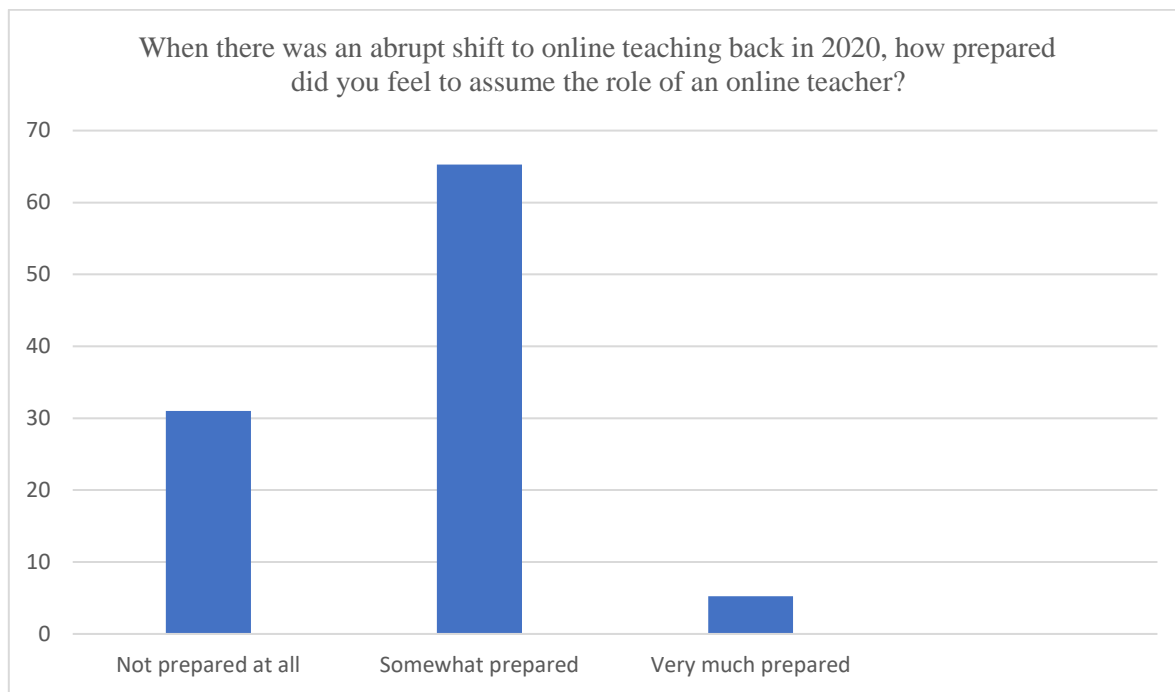


The bar chart above illustrates how prepared the teachers at Yerevan State University were to teach online. As depicted on the chart, 31 % of the University teachers were very much prepared to teach online, with 63.26 percent being somewhat prepared, and 5.26 percent being not prepared at all.

However, when we look at the respondents' answers related to the post-pandemic period in Figure 2, we can trace a change of mood and patterns.

**FIGURE 2**
**TEACHER READINESS FOR ONLINE TEACHING  IN THE MIDDLE OF**
**THE PANDEMIC**

| | |
|---|---|
| I now believe that I should interact more with my students in online environments | 36.84% |
| I have started giving tasks that can be completed online | 63.16% |
| Online teaching has encouraged me to integrate more digital resources in my teaching | 78.95% |
| I feel more empowered about digital integration | 63.16% |
| I feel more professionally experienced in the use of technology | 73.68% |
| I feel emotionally exhausted since I had to use technology all the time | 10.53% |

One of the questions in the survey asked the respondents to choose from the provided statements how they felt about online teaching in the post-pandemic period. It is encouraging to see that although there have been justifiable complaints, especially on social media, about the impact of consistent technology use on teaching in general, only about 11 percent of those polled feel emotionally exhausted. The vast majority started integrating online tasks and digital resources into their classroom teaching after the pandemic, and it is commendable to see about 74 percent of teachers of English becoming more confident about their use of technology in work throughout pandemic teaching.

As stated above, the second part of the survey was conducted in the form of retrospective evaluation of online teaching practice during pandemic. The exercise was built on 'roses, thorns and buds' format and encouraged the respondents to reflect on the Zoom teaching period they experienced during pandemic. The participants reflected on both the merits and challenges of online teaching, identified the aspects in need of support, and listed what they were looking forward to experimenting with while teaching.

The word cloud in Figure 3 features the challenges experienced by language educators during their online teaching and identified throughout the survey.

**FIGURE 3**
**CHALLENGES OF ONLINE TEACHING**



A metacognitive dive into the nature of the listed challenges enables us to see that they can be classified into generic and specific ones.

We define generic challenges as issues that may pertain to any kind of online administered activity, not necessarily a language lesson, while specific challenges relate to areas common to a language class.

For instance, generic challenges may include Zoom fatigue, the physical impact of online teaching on wellbeing, and the absence of non-verbal communication cues. Specific challenges imply language teachers

having difficulties with engaging students, administering writing tasks and assessing them. The survey also identified plagiarism as one of the main specific challenges experienced by language educators.

In the next part of the research, we will address the challenges identified in the survey and propose some practical solutions that might be supportive for online classes conducted in post-pandemic period.

## GENERIC CHALLENGES

### Zoom Fatigue

Research by Stanford University in 2021 suggests that the amount of eye contact one is exposed to during Zoom sessions is the key reason for Zoom fatigue (Ramachandran, 2021). During a regular meeting or a regular face-to-face lesson, the listeners usually do not stare at the speaker, whereas in a Zoom-setting the amount of eye contact that is engaged in on video chats, as well as the size of faces on screens is unnatural. In a setting where everyone is looking at everyone, a listener is treated nonverbally as a speaker, which means that even if the students do not speak during the online lesson, they are still looking at faces staring at them. There is a certain way of thinking in human nature: when someone's face is that close to ours in real life, our brains interpret it as an intense situation that might lead to conflict. This excessive amount of eye-contact most probably produces a negative psychological effect and drains the students during Zoom class easily. In order to overcome this inconvenience, we think it would be helpful to remove the full-screen option for Zoom and go for breaks at least every 45 minutes. Hiding self-view would bring the experience of an online class as close to an in-person setting as possible and, furthermore, would considerably reduce the amount of screen time for students.

### Physical Impact on Body

Most instructors who have been teaching online for an extensive period have noted the impact it has on the human body: stiff shoulders, slouchy posture and eye strain. The list does not end here. According to Krys Hines, a wellness and ergonomics educator, the recent shift to remote work has aged our bodies by about 10 to 15 years (Thompson Payton, 2022).

Truly, online education dramatically reduces the usual mobility of teachers and students which affects not only their wellbeing but also attention span. The term "text neck" or "techno neck" had been around for a few years before the pandemic and was coined by New York spine surgeon Kenneth Hansraj to refer to the increase in neck and upper back pain due to the increased use of technology (Hansraj, 2014). In online classes, this forward head posture stands out even more.

With respect to this generic challenge, when the teachers see students showing a techno neck, or feel that students somehow are losing their concentration due to insufficient mobility, it might be helpful to ask them to take a break. It is another good idea to ask them to stand up and do some light but effective exercises that can ease the tension in their upper back and aid their focus.

One particularly effective exercise is YWTL suggested by chiropractitioners, depicted in Figure 4. It involves positioning one's arms in the position of Y, W, T, L letters and holding each position for some time trying to stretch the arms back and chest forwards (Salman, 2021).

**FIGURE 4**
**YWTL**
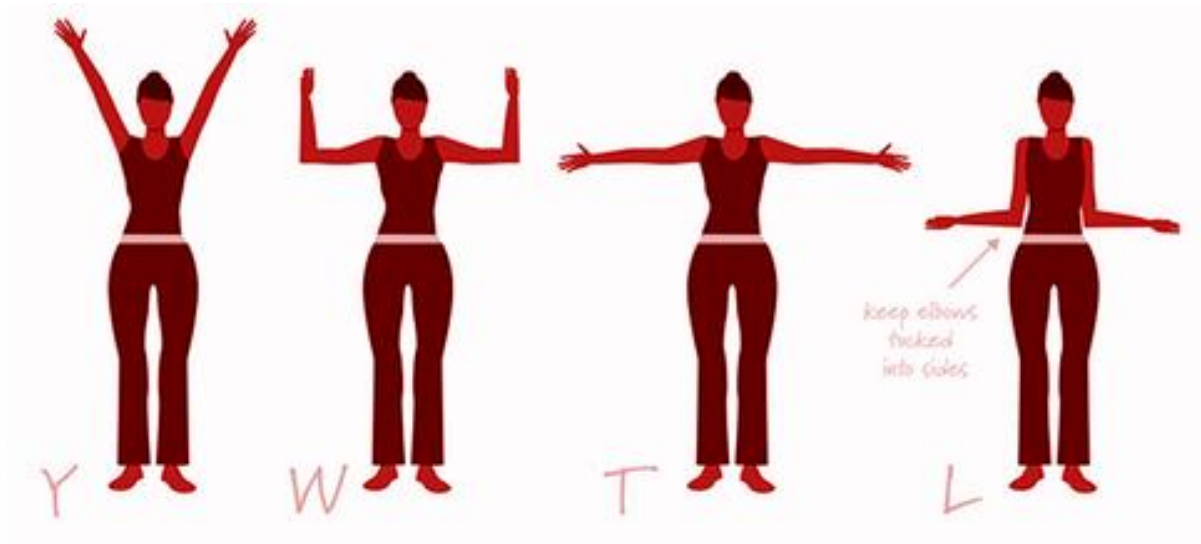


## Absence of Non-Verbal Cues

During virtual classes teachers usually get very few nonverbal cues or none at all and, as a result, they may lose a neural basis of real-time social interaction. This means that they do not acquire any information about the students' intellectual needs beyond the visual information of their face. Actually, when teaching an in-person class, it is easier for teachers to offer support since they can always follow the face expressions and gestures of the students that express the need for correction or further explanation. This practice is harder to achieve in Zoom since this online platform often automatically spotlights the speaker's video and teachers, in general, pay little or no attention to the rest of the participants who are muted. However, to enhance collaborative classroom learning, it is preferable to guide the students even on mute. In order to overcome this inconvenience, the teachers may spotlight their videos as a teacher to make sure that the screen shows not only the prime speaker's video but also theirs, and silently guide the speaker with gestures and non-verbal communication signals if necessary.

## SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

## Administering Writing Tasks

One of the specific challenges experienced by Armenian teachers during pandemic concerns developing the writing skills of the students. Some teachers find it challenging to set up writing tasks in an online classroom given the absence of facilities and the impossibility to monitor the students' writing activities. A possible solution to this problem might be setting asynchronous writing tasks that can be hosted on a common platform and can allow all the participants to see the work of the whole group. Padlet or Wakelet feature convenient dashboards that can be used to host all student-generated written content throughout the course. Rich in layouts, both tools have been around for more than ten years quite a long time but became increasingly popular over the past three years. Their benefits also include enabling the users to comment on each other's work or 'assess' it by giving likes and stars. Teachers can further build on this feature by asking the students to provide written feedback on the posts of their classmates and allocate fifteen minutes of their classroom time to reading the submissions and sharing feedback. Not only will this activity develop students' critical thinking skills, but it will also develop their creative thinking.

**Engaging Students**

One of the frequent challenges that the survey respondents listed was engaging students in an online class. Back in 1971, Herbert Simon, the developer of attention economics, explained how a wealth of information can create a poverty of attention. (Simon, et al., 1971) This thought gained even more validity in the 21st-century classroom, where classes are fraught with so many 'smart' distractions that teachers often have to compete to earn their students' attention. In an online class, this challenge is even more visible, since students already have the teacher's green light to use technology. It is hardly possible to control all their activities in an online class. They might be checking their email during the class, sending someone a Facebook request, or surfing through one of the multiple tabs open on their screen. Fortunately, most of the strategies that work in a standard classroom setting can affect student engagement in online learning, too. These include staging the lesson in an interactive rather than lecture mode, asking questions every 2-3 minutes to check in with students and to test their comprehension of the target material, making unexpected pauses encouraging the students to supply the missing word or phrase, and elicitation.

When setting up an online classroom, we suggest starting by creating a safe and well-structured learning space for the students and the key rule is having the teacher's camera on. When the teachers have their cameras on, they can communicate not only through words but also non-verbal communication signals. These signals create a supportive learning environment and help students know if they are on the right track. Likewise, students should keep their cameras on to stay focused and participate fully. This is particularly important in a language class, since the teacher can see whether the students articulate the sounds clearly and can use hand gestures to guide them with correct pronunciation and intonation.

Using name cards is another strategy that can help strike balance in nominating the learners for answers. In a Zoom session, the sequence of cameras on the screen tends to change when speakers take turns speaking. In this respect, it helps to have the name cards of the attendants handy to encourage turn-taking in class and to make sure that every student has contributed to the discussion. Name cards might not work for larger classes with thirty and more students since the time of the student whose name card is at the bottom of the stack might not even arrive. This is where polling tools like AnswerGarden or Mentimeter may be used to test the students' comprehension of the target content or to see what their take is on the topics discussed.

**Administering Assessment**

The informal interviews with teachers revealed that one of the most discouraging challenges they had to cope with during online teaching in pandemic period was related to administering assessment online. Interestingly enough, our research shows that Armenian teachers tend to favor objective tasks, such as multiple-choice questions, true and false statements, or filling in the gaps with correct words more than subjective or productive tasks like writing analytical essays, designing summaries, building arguments or developing content. Truly, the online format of assessment is not considered to be the best one for online education, since, as most of the teachers note, it affords cheating options. Productive tasks in this respect afford less space for cheating since they encourage students to produce the language in a specific context and are more reliant on the learners' critical thinking and researching skills, as well as their ability to produce the language accurately. Admittedly, these tasks also make it harder for the students to consult each other or other sources during the midterm written test or examination. They contribute to learner autonomy and produce evidence that can be used to assess learner progress towards learning goals.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

Our mini-research on online language teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the successes earned throughout teaching English online in Armenian higher education system and helped identify which of them would be retained. Some of the answers include flipped classroom, which implies expecting students to acquaint themselves with the academic content before the face-to-face sessions, setting extensive listening tasks offline and keeping in-classroom listening tasks short, providing constant feedback to boost student engagement in the classroom.

Informal conversations with the language educators at Yerevan State University helped project how the instructional changes will later on impact the planning and delivery of in-person lessons in terms of such components as interaction patterns, student engagement or materials design. For example, 25 out of fifty teachers agreed that they would rather opt for open class discussions than closed pair work or group work to make their classroom teaching compliant with COVID-19 preventive measures, 40 per cent of the teachers were consistent about not giving handouts to the students during a class and would prefer to use slides or ask the students to take photos of the classroom materials either in advance or during the class. Whether these minor but consistent changes will affect teacher motivation and jeopardize student engagement is a matter of time.

Another significant outcome was related to how effective Zoom teaching was as compared to face-to-face teaching in a low-resource setting. Judging by the answers of the respondents, the emergence of online teaching was a blessing for low-resource higher educational contexts with insufficient equipment and resources like Yerevan State University. When in the past, in an in-person setting, the teachers had to rely on their personal resources or those shared by their students to administer a listening or a viewing activity in class, in the COVID-19 teaching period, with technology at fingertips, projecting a slide, screening a video, or playing a podcast took just a few seconds and became a routine. To add to that, online teaching created a vast room for creativity, encouraging language teachers to think how they would re-design the activities they normally hosted in face-to-face settings to meet the requirements of online teaching.

## CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has not been officially declared over. No matter how intimidating it may sound, a new wave might be on its way. The research clearly shows that a number of solutions can be offered to overcome the negative impact of long-lasting online sessions. Furthermore, the research findings can be invested in addressing the challenges language teachers experience when teaching online, as well as generating opportunities for making teaching COVID-compliant in face-to-face learning environments.

In conclusion, though the effects of the pandemic were disruptive and distressing, we cannot but admit that the lockdown constraint opened up new opportunities in different spheres of life as well as in the teaching process. This definitely gave way to creativity, encouraged teachers to explore more digital tools and hence enhanced their teaching capacity and professional growth. COVID19-induced online teaching was not lost on life skills either. The unprecedented uncertainty posed by the pandemic made the teachers more agile and responsive both to the learners' emergent needs and the changing needs of the time.

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