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Coping with English for Academic Purposes Provision during COVID-19

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Abstract: COVID-19 and the shift to online teaching necessitated a change in approach for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers in preparing their students for university studies. This study explored how EAP instructors coped with and adapted their provision for emergency remote teaching. The study was conducted at an English-medium university in Hong Kong and a qualitative case study approach was adopted. The results revealed two overarching themes of opportunity and challenge. While the sudden shift to online teaching forced innovation and fostered collaborative learning and feedback, teachers experienced difficulties in communicating with students and monitoring their learning. The study voices teacher perspectives in delivering EAP courses online and highlights important implications for the successful delivery of future online EAP provisions.

Keywords: COVID-19; English for academic purposes; higher education; English-medium instruction; emergency remote teaching; challenges; opportunities; teachers; Hong Kong

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the educational landscape. Higher education institutions around the world were forced to close their physical campuses to slow or contain the spread of the virus [1], with many adopting emergency remote teaching through learning management systems (e.g., Blackboard, Moodle, Canvas) and video-conferencing software (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Collaborate Ultra) [2,3]. The rapid, unexpected, and forced transition to emergency remote teaching has been especially challenging for second-language learners who rely on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses to help them transition from secondary school to higher education and succeed in their academic studies. In universities that use English-medium instruction (EMI), second-language learners are often enrolled in pre-sessional or in-sessional EAP courses to advance their English language development [4] in ways that expand their academic lexical range and build their proficiency in academic writing conventions [5]. Through these courses, they can more successfully cope in the EMI environment. While blended, online, and distance learning are routinely integrated in EAP courses in Hong Kong and elsewhere to increase language exposure, this sudden transition to emergency remote teaching has presented a number of challenges and constraints for EAP practitioners, as well as opportunities. This research studied EAP practitioners in the Hong Kong higher education context and their efforts to transition to emergency remote teaching during COVID-19 while simultaneously preparing their students for EMI studies.

2. Literature Review

The post-pandemic move to online facilitation has only hastened the digital transformation of higher education. The integration of online and blended learning has become the new normal [6,7]. Previous studies have established that online and blended learning facilitate language learning [8–10], provide an authentic and engaging learning experience [11],

and support pedagogical innovation [12]. Moreover, technology-mediated instruction can help EAP practitioners to deliver interactive, flexible, and individualised online education [13] while fostering student autonomy [14]. In Hong Kong, most EAP programmes incorporate some blended elements (e.g., wikis, forums, blogs) [15]—however, the current situation is unique. The courses delivered online during emergency remote teaching were not purposefully designed to be delivered entirely online, and, thus, did not focus on quality course design, teaching, and learning [16]. Instead, these courses were solely intended to maintain the academic calendar during the crisis [3].

EAP programmes play an instrumental role in the implementation of EMI by delivering the necessary English provision as learners transition from secondary to higher education and providing systematic second-language instruction. Although English language development is not the primary role of EMI, it remains an expected outcome as well as one necessary for academic success [17]. EAP targets the specific needs of learners in a way that general English secondary school classes do not [18], cultivating both academic language proficiency and communicative competence [19,20]. Earlier studies have demonstrated that students with a lower English proficiency struggle to attain EAP language skills more than those with a higher proficiency [21]. Still, there is a need for all second-language learners to enroll in EAP courses [22,23], particularly when it comes to an EMI setting where courses are delivered with a focus on content and not language. A substantial amount of research has found that EAP faculties and their courses are integral to addressing the challenges of EMI instruction and increasing the rates of academic success for second-language learners [5,17,24]. Accordingly, EAP teachers and researchers have focused on bridging the gap for these students to facilitate their academic success.

Previous studies investigating readiness and competence found that participating in online courses can be particularly challenging for students due to their differing learning styles [25,26], a lack of self-motivation, and difficulties taking the initiative required for success in self-directed learning [27]. Additionally, students may lack technical skills [28] and time-management skills [29–31], leading to negative outcomes in an online learning environment. Moreover, the quality of virtual instruction is often perceived as dependent on the interactions that occur during online sessions [32]. Several researchers have focused on the affordances of video-conferencing software in promoting interaction [33]; specifically, the use of built-in functions such as chat, breakout rooms, and polls to support a variety of exchanges (e.g., student–student, student–teacher, student–content) [34]. EAP teachers have utilised student response systems (e.g., GoSoapBox, Mentimeter) to encourage interaction, increase satisfaction, and foster a sense of community among learners, leading to better learning outcomes in the online classroom [2,35,36]. Consequently, developing effective online teaching methods and strategies that aid EAP students' learning in emergency remote teaching is a crucial matter. In the transition to emergency remote teaching, EAP teachers had limited time to create, shape, and integrate course materials specifically for online learning. One seminal study [37] found that effective online learner-centred courses take content, pedagogy, and technology into account. Research into online pedagogy also established that collaborative activities, pair and group discussions, automated feedback, online tutorials, and a supportive learning community are vital to successful online learning [38,39]. Additionally, though teachers often design supplemental materials for their face-to-face classes, another study established [40] that the development of new materials for online settings is very challenging and requires a novel skillset. Thus, the teaching and learning environment created by COVID-19 should be distinguished from high-quality education, as the focus is on neither quality nor effective learning [41].

Transitioning to emergency remote teaching revealed a lack of digital competency and readiness amongst instructors [42]. In the necessitated rush to offer such courses, teachers were provided with limited or no training or support in delivering their courses online [2]. Accordingly, they found it challenging to provide engaging and interactive lessons. To this end, [43] proposed four strategies: (i) managing the online classroom, (ii) setting up group and pair work, (iii) using a text chat feature, and (iv) using an interactive whiteboard. Video

conferencing software such as Zoom can offer effective and interactive online learning; however, teachers must be aware of how to take advantage of its affordances. For a successful transition to online teaching, institutional support must be provided through professional development in both technology and pedagogy [44–46] to help teachers adapt existing face-to-face pedagogical strategies to the online learning environment.

Technology has been integrated into language teaching since the 1960s and has been embraced by particular pedagogical theories such as behaviourism and constructivism [47]. Computers, laptops, and smartphones can be integrated into EAP instruction to promote target language interaction (interaction between people, person–computer, person's mind) [48] and negotiation of meaning which is "an important factor for successful L2 acquisition" ([49]. Additionally, the use of computers can provide students with a "freer space" in a non-threatening environment [50] and allow them more time to focus on form in their communicative output [51].

Technology affordances in the EAP classroom, likewise, can take many forms—from drills and practice around specific skills to reading and writing to sharing screens, images, and artifacts to facilitate linguistic acquisition [52]—while working on authentic tasks [53]. Teachers must be provided with the support and information necessary to feel confident in using the affordances of technology to facilitate EAP language learning.

Given the rapid international growth of EAP emergency remote teaching, it is imperative to understand what pedagogically technology-mediated strategies EAP teachers utilise in delivering effective lessons that will prepare students for EMI instruction in the 'new normal' higher education landscape.

3. The Study

This study explores the teacher perspective on the effect of emergency remote teaching on offering quality EAP provision to second-language students and preparing them for their university studies. The study was conducted at an English language centre in an English-medium university in Hong Kong in Spring 2021. The study addresses the questions:

RQ1: To what extent are EAP teachers able to prepare students for university studies in English within this online mode?

RQ2: What activities or approaches do the EAP teachers think work best in online EAP teaching?

In order to answer these two questions, we interviewed seventeen EAP instructors from the selected university in March and April 2021.

3.1. Participants and Context

The participants in this study taught mandatory EAP courses to undergraduate students of various majors at an English language centre at an English-medium university in Hong Kong. As the transition from secondary school to university is critical—especially so in an English learning environment for second language learners—all students are required to enroll in a core EAP course during their first or second semester at the university. The course focuses on developing students' written and spoken academic competencies over thirteen weeks. Participants were recruited by both authors, who are EAP teachers at the same university, and all agreed to participate. In total, eight female and nine male teachers were interviewed, and their experience ranged from 7 to 18 years of teaching. All held a master's degree and a teaching certificate; two held a doctorate. When the data were collected, the instructors were teaching, on average, four or five EAP classes, with around 20 students in each class. All participants signed a consent form and were assigned a pseudonym. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, their EAP courses were offered face-to-face with some blended components (e.g., discussion forums, quizzes, accessing online materials on the learning management system). Participants had received no formal training in pedagogical strategies or software for online EAP teaching.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This research draws on an interpretive/constructive paradigm to gain an understanding and insight about the perceptions of the lived experiences of the EAP teachers in relation to emergency remote teaching and EAP teaching. A qualitative research design was employed to gain a broad overview of the issues pertinent to the two research questions through individual, semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom to facilitate in-depth exploration and rich insight into participants' lived experiences and perceptions [54,55] of emergency remote teaching and EAP teaching. The study employed a purposive sampling approach in selecting the participants to provide information-rich cases [55]. The following open-ended questions were asked in the interviews:

- What do you like or not like about teaching EAP online?
- Which activities/approaches do you think work best in online EAP teaching?
- Are you able to prepare your students for their university studies in the online mode?
- Do you think EAP can be taught in an online only mode?
- What could be done to help you better teach EAP online?
- What are your thoughts on the possibility of teaching EAP exclusively online in the future?

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and manually analyzed according to [56]'s six-step thematic analysis framework. In addition, to improve the stability of findings over time and dependability, this study employed a code-recode strategy [57]. After the first round of coding performed by both authors, the data were set aside for two weeks, and then re-coded a second time. The results of the two rounds of coding provided nearly identical findings which demonstrate dependability. In the final stage, representative quotes were selected for the findings and discussion section. The study also employed two-member checks to increase the data's trustworthiness [58]. First, each participant received a copy of their transcript, and then a copy of the final themes with the representative quotes. No teacher requested any additions or offered any suggestions. We obtained written consent from all participants, and participants received pseudonyms to safeguard their anonymity.

4. Results

Four themes emerged during the analytical process, addressing the two research questions through an even divide between opportunities and challenges (see Figure 1). Broadly, the data revealed that teachers find it challenging to facilitate emergency remote teaching and prepare students for academic studies while it is ongoing. By taking advantage of collaborative software and activities, they were able to mitigate some of these difficulties. Excerpts from the seventeen teachers are presented below, revealing their experiences coping with EAP provision during COVID-19.

4.1. Opportunity 1: Innovative Practice

Teachers agreed that the transition to emergency remote teaching provided opportunities to enrich their lessons with individual and collaborative activities, and created a sense of community within the class. Their comments provided important information about their perspectives on the opportunities of online EAP teaching. One teacher, Marvin, commented:

> *I like the fact that we can use a variety of tech tools to create many opportunities for activities and practice . . . and we can create a mutually aiding community.*

A frequently mentioned point was the innovation of their teaching practices as compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants reflected on the need to alter their pedagogical approaches to engage learners in the online classroom. The majority of the participants brought up student response systems such as Kahoot! and Mentimeter in the interviews as examples of technological tools not previously employed in their teaching. Julianna shared, "*I used Mentimeter to check students' understanding of the objectives*."

All participants mentioned that the transition to online learning and teaching made them aware of what approaches and activities were effective for delivering EAP classes. In their efforts, teachers pushed themselves to learn how to use tools such as Google Docs, student response systems, e-books, and Flipgrid. Dennis said, in this regard, "*this switch made me change my teaching approach and adapt [to] technology a lot faster than I would have otherwise*." This excerpt illustrates what many teachers indicated in the interviews: that the change *forced* them to develop and innovate their pedagogical practice to facilitate learning in the online mode. Though many noted this as an opportunity, it became clear in the interviews that teachers were unprepared both in terms of their digital pedagogical skills and their ability to adapt existing materials for online use. Rachel, for example, stated,

> *In the regular face-to-face classroom, it was already quite challenging to introduce new EAP elements such as academic style, citation, and paraphrasing. Now, I need to take care of three layers of new elements simultaneously . . . new students . . . new online environment... and new academic content.*

Determining how to manage the transition and capitalise on the opportunities provided was seen as important in developing students' academic language proficiency.

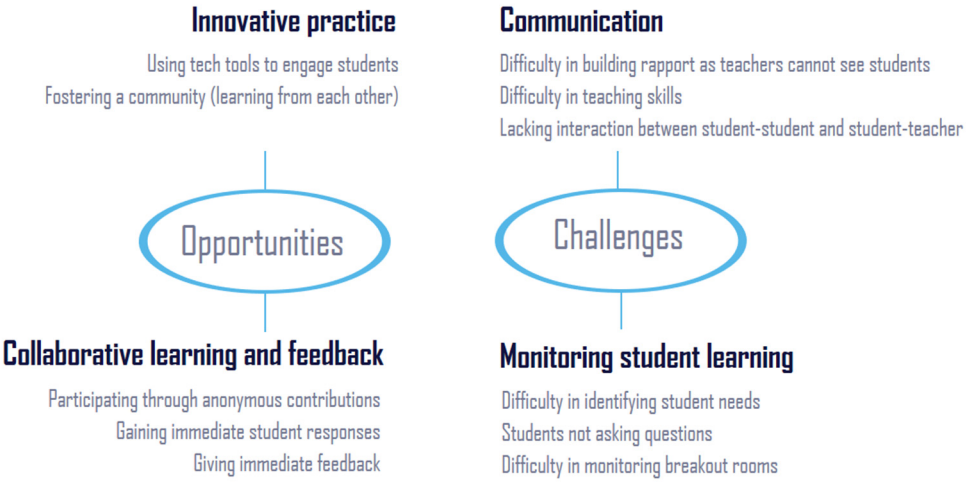

Figure 1. Thematic map.

4.2. Opportunity 2: Collaborative Learning and Feedback

Teachers noted that students appeared to be more motivated when writing collaboratively using Google Docs, easily sharing ideas and files. In a similar vein, Josh said that the students seemed to be more responsible and completed their writing tasks on time. Julie noticed that students contributed "*more ideas during brainstorming sessions using the online whiteboard*" and attributed this to the possibility of their being "*anonymous*." The teachers commented on how useful the collaborative software was in engaging learners in productive activities. Phrases given, such as "*type answer immediately*," "*students are being proactive*," and "*greater sense of control*," reflect the possibilities of incorporating collaborative activities in virtual EAP teaching.

Teachers also expressed that students' writing development benefited from the increased ease of providing feedback. For example, Alfonso recounted:

> *I can provide students with immediate feedback. For the pen-and-paper mode of writing, I would usually collect the students' written work, read it after class, and then return it to them in the next class. In the online environment, this can all be done in one lesson using Google Docs, and students receive feedback while their ideas are still fresh in their minds.*

Although these comments reflect positive elements to online learning, the teachers also discussed the challenges at length.

4.3. Challenge 1: Lack of Communication

While teachers acknowledged that online learning provided opportunities for EAP provision, the majority considered preparing students for academic English in an English-medium environment through technology to be an uphill battle. One teacher, Monica, commented, "*The problem at the moment is the impersonal nature of online learning*." It became clear in the interviews that the teachers were concerned about a lack of interaction on the levels of student–student, student–teacher, and student–content, which affected the extent to which they were able to prepare their students for their academic futures. One of the most frequently mentioned points in the interviews was the teachers' desire to see their students and for them to use their microphones to communicate. Instead, as shared by Eric, "*most students didn't turn on their camera or use their microphone*," which, according to Ken, led to a "*lack of personal touch with students*." This limited natural interaction troubled the teachers, and in Steven's mind, felt like "*teaching blindly*." Rachel added that "*online lessons de-personalise teaching*" and "*EAP is a skill-based course, and it is difficult to teach skills without seeing the student*." The inability to visually and vocally participate in two-way communication appeared to obscure teachers' ability to teach EAP effectively.

Others reiterated these points, adding that they felt increasingly frustrated in their efforts to facilitate communicative language learning when students had an "*aversion to appearing in front of the camera*," as Julie described. Teachers missed the physical, social environment of the traditional classroom. Many participants echoed these sentiments, Sara noting how this "*led [to] a lack of rapport and interaction*," which resulted in what was perceived to be limited engagement in learning.

4.4. Challenge 2: Ability to Monitor Student Learning

Other teachers commented on the significance of EAP as a subject and the importance of being able to monitor learning progress. Generally, they agreed that online learning requires more motivation from students, and that, in this mode, it was easier for less proficient students to fall behind. The inability to identify student needs came up often in the interviews. Daisy, in particular, expressed concerns for students who had to "*mostly rely on their poor listening skills and wouldn't ask questions in an unfamiliar environment*." While it was clear students were hesitant to turn on their cameras and communicate vocally, nine teachers expressed that students did communicate using the chat function in Zoom. Carmen commented, "*students seem fairly confident to use the chat function to express their thoughts a lot*." Though this was a positive development, the distraction of continuously monitoring the chatbox was reported as a negative consequence.

Adding to this problem was the fact that, as mentioned by David, assigning students to breakout rooms left teachers unable to monitor each group and was considered "*time-consuming and inconvenient*." Alex noted that, in the face-to-face classroom, he integrates pair and group work in each lesson. In the online classroom, however, he is hesitant to do so, as he "*can't fully monitor the situation*" and "*make sure they are using English*."

The challenge of monitoring student learning and identifying any deficit to address in upcoming lesson(s) was mentioned often. In their attempts to do this, teachers turned to student response systems to gauge student understanding. Julianna said:

> *In face-to-face classes, I tend just to ask a concept-check question, but this doesn't work online as students are hesitant to contribute.*

When asked to elaborate on a successful strategy, she added, "*I use polling to check if they have understood the knowledge*." Another teacher, Shawn, used Mentimeter and the word cloud function to evaluate understanding. Though the teachers initially felt uncertain of how to assess students' learning, as they became increasingly comfortable with online learning, they learned to facilitate ongoing needs analysis by incorporating student response systems, helping them to better prepare their students for English in an academic setting.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

We explored how EAP teachers at a higher education institution in Hong Kong prepared their students to study in an English-medium environment during emergency remote teaching. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the higher education landscape. Teachers were unprepared for the rapid transition from face-to-face to online learning [59], although the use of technology in higher education is not a new phenomenon [7]. Instructors and institutions have employed blended approaches [10,60] and fully online courses designed for synchronous delivery [61]. However, the migration to emergency remote teaching brought new and unexpected challenges [16,62], and teachers had to adjust their pedagogical practices [2,44–46]. This study allowed us to explore how EAP teachers coped pedagogically with the transition. All of the teacher-participants agreed that the migration to emergency remote teaching presented both opportunities for innovation in their pedagogical practices and challenges in reaching and motivating students. Each teacher shared rich experiences in the interviews. By thematising their contributions, we were able to identify positive outcomes and consider how EAP teachers can continue to provide high-quality and effective EAP instruction in an uncertain and unpredictable future.

Our analysis revealed a range of factors that affected teachers' experiences. All were faced with the necessity of integrating new technologies into their courses. In their attempts to offer interactive and engaging online lessons, teachers were proactive in identifying tools that would facilitate learning. Student-response systems (e.g., Mentimeter, Kahoot!), collaborative activities using Google Docs, and the integration of e-books and widgets appealed to teachers because they were easy to use and provided pedagogical benefits such as interactivity, flexibility, and learner autonomy. Teachers reported that some students were more proactive in participating in the online sphere than they had been in the face-to-face classroom; they speculated that this was due to the opportunity to be anonymous. Additionally, teachers found that online learning facilitated their ability to provide feedback to students. The students acted upon the online feedback, which had a positive effect on their academic writing [63].

The participants reported that the most challenging aspect of teaching EAP online was the lack of face-to-face interactions with students, which teachers valued highly and could not replicate online. This hindered students' development of interactional skills and spoken English. The limitations on teacher–student, student–student, and student–content interactions led to a perception among instructors that the teaching and learning were of lower quality [32]. Furthermore, students' communicative competence, a vital component of EAP [19,20], lagged compared with face-to-face instruction. Teachers also expressed concerns that less proficient students were falling behind, and they found it challenging to adapt content and strategies to address the needs of specific learners see [64]. However, emergency remote teaching offered rich opportunities for pedagogical innovation. We found that the most important elements in delivering EAP during emergency remote teaching were student-response systems, collaborative writing and feedback, and the use of multiple means of interaction.

5.1. Pedagogical Implications—Contribution to Practice

The findings of this study have several important implications for EAP practitioners. First, to promote social engagement and interaction between student–student and teacher–student, teachers should take advantage of student response systems (e.g., Mentimeter, GoSoapBox, Kahoot!) and their multiple functions (quizzes, rankings, word clouds, Q&As, etc.) to ensure that all participants can participate equally and anonymously. Second, to promote collaborative learning during live sessions, teachers should use Zoom features regularly in their online lessons (polls, screen sharing, annotations, emojis, chats) [33]. They should employ Google Docs as well, which not only permits students to collaborate on activities and projects but also allows teachers to provide timely feedback directly in student documents. Finally, to promote face-to-face learning in the virtual environment, teachers should strongly encourage the use of cameras and microphones by all participants.

If students are uncomfortable with others seeing where they live or work, teachers should encourage them to use the blur function on Zoom to obscure their environments.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research Direction

Although this was a relatively small qualitative case study, its findings provide important insights into EAP provision during emergency remote teaching. Future studies could incorporate questionnaires, observations, and reflective accounts to gather additional data points. Additionally, a larger sample could be examined with a quantitative or mixed-method methodology.

Overall, successful EAP emergency remote teaching was influenced by teachers' willingness to experiment with new pedagogical practices, students' willingness to interact, and the integration of engaging software and activities. Future research could investigate whether the pedagogical innovations brought about by the pandemic were sustained, adapted, and blended into a technology-enhanced EAP provision.

We hope that the findings of this case study will inform EAP delivery during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. We fully recognise that the results achieved will depend on teachers, students, and the technologies available to them.

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