

# What do teachers do in the age of Zoom? The Covid-19 crisis and the role of the language teacher

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## Summary

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The Covid-19 crisis generated an unprecedented challenge for educational systems across the globe, obliging many teachers to rapidly shift from traditional classrooms to the online environment. This article describes a qualitative research project based on the resulting hypothesis that teacher roles were significantly displaced.

Previous studies in the field identified key changes in teacher roles, but few focused specifically on language education, which is uniquely complex due to the importance of non-verbal communication and social interaction for language acquisition. In contrast to previous research, this study took a socio-material approach, which sought the examination of the emerging relationships between human and material actors grounded in an understanding that humans are just one constituent part of messy phenomena.

In this study, experiences of educators of the changing role of the teacher in relation to the Covid-19 crisis were examined. The *Cambridge Assessment English MOOC: Teaching English Online* was used as a means of recruiting participants from mainstream education settings. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were carried out and included questions aimed at foregrounding digital things based on the Adams and Thompson (2016) publication *Researching a Posthuman World: Interviews*

with *Digital Objects*. The interviews were then analysed inductively following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework.

Participants described digital invitations in which technology positively impacted the teacher's role, with successful socio-material entanglements interpreted as drawing on the combined strengths of the human and material. Certain positive experiences were noted to do 'double duty' by combining a focus on the facilitation of interaction with socio-affective presences, often involving the effective use of multimedia and *multimodality*. A need for more systematic Continuous Professional Development (CPD) was noted as well as an urgency for a global levelling up of digital services. Finally, the study demonstrated that the teacher and technology were experienced as completely co-dependent, pointing to a need to revise the perception of teacher roles as independent from technology.

Findings from this study may support learning and assessment providers in improving digital education provision for educators, thus enabling teachers to find new ways to harness the potential of online teaching, and reducing anxiety surrounding this learning environment and the role of the teacher within it.

## Introduction

By April 1 2020, more than 1.5 billion learners across 165 countries were affected by Covid-19 school closures (UNSECO 2020). The unprecedented educational crisis obliged significant numbers of teachers, with minimal warning and little or no online teacher training, to rapidly shift their teaching to the online environment (Carrillo and Flores 2020). This sudden redirection, arguably, no longer allowed teachers the choice 'either to embrace the new media enthusiastically or stand aside watching its inevitable unfolding' (Clegg, Hudson and Steel 2003:39) – a phenomenon observed by Clegg et al in relation to earlier phases of digital education. Indeed, according to Comas-Quinn (2011), while many factors affect successful online language learning, success is strongly linked to the ease with which teachers transition to the complex teacher roles associated with this environment. As such, the Covid-19 crisis provided an unparalleled opportunity for research into teachers' experiences of their roles.

## Focus of the study

Even before the Covid-19 crisis, Zheng, Lin and Hsu (2018), drawing on data from Zandberg and Lewis (2008) and Watson, Pape, Murin, Gemin and Vashaw (2015), reported ever-increasing numbers of US K-12<sup>1</sup> students participating in online language courses, yet research indicated lower student satisfaction in these courses than other subjects (Oliver, Kellogg and Patel 2012). Despite the overt challenges of teaching a language online, including constraints in terms of body language and social interaction (Jabeen and Thomas 2015, Lin and Warschauer 2015, Lin and Zheng 2015), most research into teacher roles in online education does not

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1 US publically-supported schools from kindergarten (K) to 12th grade (12).

relate to language education. Similarly, online language education from K-12 has been recognised as both under-theorised and under-researched, with teacher-level factors largely ignored (Lin and Zheng 2015). As a result, this study focuses specifically on English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers working in mainstream secondary and tertiary education, arguably a particularly interesting context given that class sizes tend to be larger and student abilities more mixed than in Private Language Schools (PLS).

In 2002, Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter (2002) proposed a conceptual framework based on research into teachers' perceptions of the changes deemed necessary for shifting to an online asynchronous environment. Despite the importance of their study to later work, their conceptual framework did not fully account for technology, solely considering the human's enactment on, or agency over, the technology (Knox 2014). This research study, therefore, attempts to move beyond this perspective by taking a socio-material approach, aiming to 'destabilise the widespread account of technology as stable singular tools separate from and under the control of human beings' (Sørensen 2009:32). A socio-material perspective contends that it is in the relationships across the human and the material that the ability to do things arises: '[a]ll things – human and non-human, hybrids and parts, knowledge and systems – emerge as effects of connections and activity' (Fenwick, Edwards and Shawchuk 2011:3).

Given the present study focuses on language education, it is important to acknowledge the well-respected Communicative Approach (CA) to language teaching with its focus on fostering 'communicative competence' in students (Hymes 1972): 'language learning may be seen as a process which grows out of the interaction between learners, teachers, texts and activities' (Breen and Candlin 1980, cited in Kim 2015:2). The teacher's role is described as twofold, being that of a 'facilitator of communication' and an 'independent participant' with the focus on facilitating student interactivity and acting as a knowledgeable peer. According to Breen and Candlin (1980), the double role presupposes secondary roles such as organiser of resources, guider of activities, monitor, feedback provider, researcher, and learner and co-participant (Breen and Candlin 1980).

In 2003, Stephen Bax extended the CA through proposing the Context Approach, in which educators carefully select methodology based on a prior analysis of students' individual needs, classroom, and local and national cultures (Bax 2003:287). While context is generally understood to be critical for effective language teaching, Fenwick (2015) warned that 'to treat context as an abstract container is to miss the turmoil of relationships among these myriad non-human as well as human elements that shape, moment to moment, particular dynamics in context' (Fenwick 2015:83). Indeed, the Covid-19 crisis, which constitutes a complex entanglement of many actors (nature, humans, media, politics and technology) is perhaps a fitting exemplification of sociomaterialism, demonstrating how humans are only one constituent part of messy phenomena in constant flux. So, while acknowledging the widespread adoption of the Communicative and Context Approaches that provide steadfast pedagogical frameworks for language education, the socio-material perspective adopted in this study aims to allow for teachers' experiences to emerge in relation to the socio-material entanglements they experience.

## Participant profiles and methods

With this socio-material stance in mind, the following research question was formulated: *What are teachers' experiences of the changing role of the teacher during the Covid-19 school closure crisis?*

The first stage of the research involved recruiting participants from a broad spectrum of countries and teaching situations through targeting educators undertaking the *Cambridge Assessment English MOOC: Teaching English Online*. Purposeful criterion sampling was used to source 14 in-service ESL teachers who were proficient users of English and who were forced to shift their teaching online as a direct result of Covid-19. They were sourced from secondary schools (7), universities (5) and further education colleges (2) in: Argentina (2), Iraq (1), Italy (1), Mexico (1), Oman (1), Romania (1), Russia (1), Peru (1), Spain (2) and the UK (3), included four L1 English speakers, and eleven female and three male participants. Teaching platforms included *Zoom, Teams, Campus, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Telegram* and *WhatsApp*. Participants ranged in their experience of working with technology and one described prior experience teaching online in a different context. All data relating to the participants was anonymised and treated as confidential, so participants in this report have been given pseudonyms (Patton 2014).

Semi-structured interviews were carefully designed both 'to journey into another's perspective' (Arthur, Waring, Coe and Hedges 2012:171) and to make online teaching the subject of the inquiry. This was attempted by employing two heuristic techniques taken from the Adams and Thompson (2016) publication *Researching a Posthuman World: Interviews with Digital Objects*, described as 'specific tricks' to invite non-human things to speak to us (Latour 2005:79). The two heuristics were 'gathering anecdotes' (2016:24) and 'listening for the invitational quality of things' (2016:40), and an additional heuristic of 'studying breakdowns, accidents and anomalies' (2016:49) was included when suitable. According to van Manen (2014:250), 'the "anecdote" lets one grasp meaning experientially', detailing what occurred and not why it occurred, aiming to describe and show rather than argue or explain. Despite attempts to foreground online teaching, the interview question relating to anecdotes about good/bad online lessons did not always foreground the technology, and some participants interpreted the question to focus solely on their teaching methodology. The second heuristic, 'listening for the invitational quality of things', was selected to focus on the positive and negative agency of technology in influencing teacher roles, with questions on what technology invited/prevented and encouraged/discouraged them from doing. These questions appeared more fruitful, with participants describing how the technology provided opportunities to work in new ways.

A step-by-step process was employed as well as an interview guide, which listed and grouped themes for exploration with the aim of providing focus for the interviewer (Patton 2014). I was also aware of the potential weakness of the 'interviewer effect' (Denscombe 2017), in which participants' responses are affected by both their perception of the interviewer and the requirements of the situation. To mitigate this, the research purpose and topics were shared before and at the start of the interview. As a researcher, I was aware of my unconscious bias affecting

the credibility of my interpretations, so ‘member checking’ was employed to check participant interpretations during and post-interview.

The final stage involved in-depth data analysis. Firstly, the digital transcriptions automatically produced by voice recording software were carefully checked, allowing for early data analysis and the emergence of initial thoughts and interpretations. Thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework was adopted to analyse interviews inductively and extract themes to illustrate key findings, portraying the relationships across the social and material. Main themes and sub-themes emerged inductively, sometimes linking tangibly to the interview questions and therefore to the Adams and Thompson (2016) heuristics. Other themes related the traditional roles of the language teacher that were in my mind when analysing the data, as well as teacher feelings and types of technology. Reviewing these themes allowed for common threads to be drawn out which then merged, and the active process of writing and reflecting allowed for more connections to be deciphered and interpreted.

## Findings, discussion and implications

### Constraints

The first theme, ‘constraints’, aims to explain some of the limitations experienced by participants given that they directly impacted the scope of teaching experiences.

*All of a sudden they removed the group from me and put them in these small windows. (Inga, Russia)*

Participants generally felt underprepared for online teaching and were disproportionately affected by the unfolding medical emergency. Most notably, participants were heavily constrained by digital inequality. According to van Dijk (2020), the digital divide stretches beyond a lack of digital access but is magnified where there is also a shortage of technological knowledge and skills, and according to Robinson (2009), a propensity to adopt an instrumental approach to using computers, which might involve presenting existing materials rather than engaging students in deeper learning through technology. In this study, teachers in lower- and middle-income countries and institutions were greatly impacted by digital inequality, being limited to teaching via *WhatsApp* or *Telegram* with no possibility for audio/video-conference-enabled classes.

*We use basically text messages, and uploading videos and pictures, because they don’t have the technology or a good Wi Fi to sign up with a better platform. (Rosa, Argentina)*

Rosa described a typical lesson which started with a text message to say ‘good morning’, and included sending a video to explain a grammar point and requesting students copy out a task, provided by text message, onto paper to complete. She then requested students answered questions via the chat function and provided feedback using typing, symbols and emojis. Photos were used instead of uploading documents, and voice recordings used for listening and pronunciation exercises.

Teaching via *WhatsApp* was described as accessible to the largest number of students possible, being both familiar and authentic, and while Rosa reported numerous students not engaging in the lessons, she was thankful to be able to continue providing education.

Even participants working in higher-income institutions experienced unequal digital access, as well as technical problems, with many participants reporting a lack of digital confidence particularly at the outset of the crisis. Despite enrolling on the gratis *Cambridge Assessment English MOOC: Teaching English Online*, none of the participants described having received more formal training in teaching online, and many noted how the unpredictability of technical issues and user errors continued to negatively impact their teaching some 11 months after the first lockdown in Spring 2020.

*If something goes wrong, it goes very, very wrong; we're depending on the technology to work, the lessons are unsavable if it doesn't. (Steph, UK)*

Some participants noted the learning environment itself as a constraint, which became a key concern when considering teaching options, for example noisy siblings and pets were sometimes present during lessons. Finally, many teachers described restrictions imposed by institutions and administrations in response to the pandemic, such as a reduction in weekly English classes, large class sizes, no camera policies or removal of official student grading. A requirement to continue preparing for standardised tests (such as IELTS) placed notable pressure on one teacher. Indeed, assessment was noted by some teachers as the most challenging aspect of their job when teaching online.

## Digital invitations

Across the data, an overarching critical theme of digital invitations emerged, highlighting the ways in which teachers were positively influenced by entanglements with technology to alter their teaching roles. Crucially, however, not all digital invitations were universally perceived as positive. These digital invitations will now be explored in relation to five other key themes which emerged: preparedness, shifted communication, facilitating interaction, monitoring, and socio-affective presence.

### Preparedness

The 'preparedness' theme encompasses the role of preparing for and organising lessons and has been divided into four sub-themes: planning, professional development, preparing to mitigate technical difficulties/user errors, and organisation. Participants in this study noted these roles as more involved, especially at the start of the school lockdown period, and they often described a steep augmentation in workload because of this. Indeed, US research from 2012 found more than half of American public institutions reported the additional time and effort required to teach online compared to teaching corresponding face-to-face courses (Allen and Seaman 2012).

Firstly, participants reported less improvisation and more systematic lesson planning, and for some this was experienced as an invitation to return to the fundamentals of lesson planning. More systematic planning was described as dividing lesson stages into sub-stages, and thinking more carefully about questioning, checking for understanding, and leading students in meaning making. This finding aligned with Coppola et al (2002) who referred to teachers becoming more involved in facilitating the cognitive process through targeted, deliberate questions to help students think and make meaning.

*You need to think how you're going to ask something, how you're going to make them think. I need to divide all the different steps very carefully to make sure that they will understand. (Rosa, Argentina)*

*It's difficult online to create a lesson out of nowhere. (Valentina, Italy)*

Similarly, for many participants teaching online provided a positive invitation in terms of professional development, and participants reported attending more webinars and searching for new resources and methodologies online to help prepare lessons.

However, although participants noted being invited to spend extra time learning how to use digital resources and planning digital interactions carefully to mitigate user error, many experienced what Ross and Collier described as the 'tensions between the complexities of online teaching and learning and the rigidity of the technologies and environments they must use to teach' (2016:20). Examples included students finding themselves in a breakout room without their peers; on-screen annotations being transferred automatically from one screen to the next; and being unable to share screens across multiple breakout rooms. Helen (UK) described wanting to teach her students to highlight key words in texts as part of an IELTS reading preparation class and noted the activity was less successful because she hadn't planned exactly how the highlighting would happen.

*The lessons that don't go well are because you're still trying to use the materials you've been using in the classroom, and you haven't really thought through how these are going to work online. (Helen, UK)*

Finally, various participants noted being invited by technology to organise teaching/ learning materials differently, experiencing a shift in the teacher's organisational role from being mainly the teacher's responsibility to becoming more distributed across the different actors (e.g. digital tools, physical materials, students, parents etc.).

Entanglements with technology which built on the strengths of digital tools were most favourably regarded, such as using virtual learning environments like Google Classroom, which were reported to increase transparency, immediacy and accuracy and save the teacher time through helping organise materials and enabling their easy retrieval, as well as supporting with the delivery and submission of student tasks.

*I used to have like a folder full of their essays and everything was everywhere, and since I've been working with Google Classroom, I have everything in one place. I am learning to be more organized thanks to those tools. (Elena, Mexico)*

In terms of the implications for language education, there is perhaps a need to address the augmentation in planning and preparation for classes through ensuring ring-fenced, non-contact time is set aside. Similarly, deeper levels of more systemic CPD would better support teachers to ‘understand how to shape instructional practices in which technological, content and pedagogical knowledge are embedded’ (Voogt and McKenney 2017:70). By redefining certificated pre-service teacher training, to give the virtual environment as much importance as the face-to-face context, new teachers could complete their pre-service training empowered and equipped to teach across varied, changing learning environments.

### **Shifted communication**

All participants noted a shift in communication with their students, which for some was experienced as less effective, especially for those with younger and lower-level students. Verbal communication was noted as feeling less natural, more time consuming and as requiring a specific, learned etiquette in the online environment.

*The pace of the lesson can be a bit slower and it's not such natural communication because you have to really respect turn taking. (Kate, UK)*

Generally, communication was noted to have become more written than in the traditional classroom and included, for example, the use of the chat function instead of requesting verbal responses from students. Despite this, for some participants, a shift to more written communication implied an invitation to supply students with more individualised feedback; in fact, some participants noted students paid more attention to this feedback than the informal, transient spoken comments of the face-to-face classroom. Furthermore, several participants reported this in turn improved their own teacher reflections on students’ performances.

*I think feedback is often better because I can focus on every assignment, although it takes a lot of time. (Alexandra, Romania)*

*I had to give feedback to each of them and that was a lot of work, but I think that many students really took advantage of that because they paid more attention. (Rosa, Argentina)*

The implications of a shift to more written communication are particularly interesting given that language teachers traditionally take advantage of verbal interactions to allow students’ opportunities to practise speaking. Given this finding, more research into student and teacher interactions in the online classroom would help determine whether there is any impact on the student’s acquisition of the productive language skills of writing and speaking.

### **Facilitating interaction**

*I use breakout rooms and it's not like a lot. I try to minimize that, so I am working with whole group doing one activity that I would normally do in pairs. (Elena, Mexico)*

The lack of shared physical space associated with teaching online was noted by nearly all participants as impeding traditional communicative activities, especially those involving mingling like running dictations. Teachers of younger and lower-level



students, who tend to incorporate such activities more readily, reported being more acutely impacted. While attempts were made to bring movement into lessons, such as an activity described by Elena in which students took photos of things from their bedroom and returned to the computer to discuss them, activities of this nature were reported to be limited in scope. Helen noted how students may switch their cameras off and not engage, commenting that students were more easily managed in face-to-face movement activities.

Despite the complexities of facilitating interaction in the online environment, many participants described digital invitations to partner with multimedia, which was reported to take over much of the traditional 'knowledge giver' role, aligning with the findings of Moreno and Mayer (2007) who reported the usefulness of multimedia for fostering learning. In this study, Amir (Iraq) uploaded simple grammar explanations to *Telegram* that he had recorded using his mobile phone, and Inga used Ted Talks to provide authentic, meaningful input to familiarise students with language typically elicited in the IELTS exam. Other participants described students watching videos and playing interactive games asynchronously, allowing more in-class time for peer-peer collaboration and ironing out misunderstandings. Indeed, a shift away from 'knowledge giver' to a 'knowledge guide' was described by DiPietro (2010:336), and Lin and Zheng (2015) reported the utility of multimedia for self-study so that lesson time could be dedicated to the resolution of student problems and communicative language practice. In this study, Daniel (Argentina), whose students' standardised tests were put on hold, experienced a complete shift in his beliefs about his role as a teacher. He adopted a new 'facilitator' role, with hierarchical and generational barriers broken down. His students determined the direction of learning, choosing to focus on life skills such as university interview techniques. Indeed, a similar finding was noted by Baran, Correia and Thompson (2013), who reported a flattening of hierarchy when teaching online.

*I would totally leave out these kinds of discreet activities where you would practise something and just fill in gaps. They would do those independently at home and then we engage in more meaningful activities in class. (Daniel, Argentina)*

Finally, various participants described digital invitations focusing specifically on multimodal composition, which they noted fostered student interaction and metacognition, 'the knowledge and awareness of one's own thinking processes and strategies' (Flavell 1976, cited in Iftikhar 2015:191). *Multimodality* is understood to mean employing multiple modes to express meaning simultaneously where language itself is not the only communication mode (Early, Kendrick and Potts 2015, Kress 2010); mode is understood to mean a 'set of resources for meaning-making, including image, gaze, gesture, movement, music and sound-effect' (Kress and Jewitt 2003:1). For example, Daniel requested his students produce short communicative videos, allowing for the combining of spoken English with text, stickers, drawings, and annotations using the video recording/editing software *Flipgrid*; he reported a high level of student motivation with students engaging in self-regulation to perfect their videos and provide one another with feedback. Notably, he perceived multimodal composition as more natural for his students than in-class communication, enabling shy students to participate fully and maximising

opportunities for English communication beyond the classroom itself. Similarly, Inga described having students listen to podcasts, then recording or writing summaries to upload to *Padlet* before commenting on their peers' uploads. Indeed, Wang and Liu (2020), in their recent study on teaching presence, suggested that a high level of student knowledge construction emerged from dense collaborative interactions, and therefore discourse should be carefully designed, planned for, and promoted to ensure increased interactive opportunities. Daniel and Inga's multimodal activities were also generative, non-linear, and determined by student choice (Edwards, Ivanič and Mannion 2009). While there is an 'implicit suggestion embedded in the design of tools' which influences the actions and perceptions of the teacher and students (Carvalho and Yeoman 2018:1,128), clearly it was not the technology by itself which produced opportunities for metacognitive learning (Kozma 2001); effective instructional design was required.

In summary, despite some participants experiencing socio-material entanglements which positively impacted the facilitation of interaction, this theme appeared complex for many, with the challenges more acutely experienced by those most affected by the digital divide and those teaching lower levels and younger learners. The finding suggests an urgent need for digital levelling up, as well as more research and CPD specifically in teaching younger and lower-level learners online. Furthermore, given the importance of multimodal communication in young people's lives and its utility in facilitating language communication, CPD should also include the systematic teaching of multimodal literacy and how it can support designing and implementing interactive communicative activities. This would allow teachers the opportunity to explore entanglements with multimodality and to support fostering metacognitive skills, which are understood to be important for life-long learning and are linked to self-determination and success in second language learning (Cornford 1999, Vandergrift 2005).

### Monitoring

Many participants described how a lack of physical presence, non-verbal language and truly 'seeing' their students were key limitations to the teacher's monitoring role; for example, being unable to glance round to check facial expressions, look over a student's shoulder, attend to multiple groups simultaneously or overhear conversations. Interestingly, these limitations were described regardless of whether classes were synchronous or asynchronous, or whether cameras were used by students or not. Some participants reported that the challenges of monitoring led to a greater need to trust their students and look for evidence of learning outside breakout rooms, such as when they returned to the main room. Indeed, a couple of participants described a sense of 'hoping for the best' when students were in breakout groups. Helen, who was teaching video-enabled synchronous lessons, noted the absence of non-verbal cues:

*The quality of what you are checking, or the quantity, is much less .... Even though I can see the students on Zoom, some of the body language is lost. (Helen, UK)*

*When they start looking at each other, or when they look at you with this 'look', you immediately know that they didn't get it, but online it's difficult to see. (Elena, Mexico)*

A recent case study by Cheung (2021) focusing on an English teacher teaching online during the pandemic reported very similar findings, with the participant describing monitoring student communication as her greatest challenge.

To mitigate the perceived visibility challenges, participants described experiences which often weighted towards greater human involvement. For example, Helen called on a trainee teacher to monitor certain breakout rooms so she could concentrate on others. Mike (Oman) monitored student participation through ticking names off a physical checklist, deemed useful due to the unpredictable way student profiles shifted on the *Zoom/Teams* screen. Crucially, participants also described digital invitations, for example using automarkable digital quizzes such as Google forms, which were reported to reduce time spent marking and producing tests. Steph described digital invitations to video-record her students more often, allowing them to replay their speaking outputs multiple times and press pause when needed. She described students' self-reflections as markedly less basic when video was employed, commenting how readily available and unobtrusive the video function on *Zoom* seemed in comparison to face-to-face recordings. She also described using the polling tool *WooClap* to check for understanding, which facilitated anonymous polling among her risk-averse students. Particularly noteworthy was Marina's (Peru) description of using Google Docs to monitor students collaborative writing in real time. Marina noted the technology enabled her to view multiple students' writing simultaneously, something impossible in the face-to-face classroom:

*I think it's even better because when you're monitoring in a classroom you can see them write but you cannot actually see what they are writing. But since they are typing and I have the same document they are typing in, I can actually see what they are doing, how they think. (Marina, Peru)*

In summary, participants described the importance of socio-affective presence and trusting their students more, as well as finding new ways to monitor students through altering their monitoring role and partnering with technology. Despite this, the experiences of the participants show a mismatch between the challenges of visibility in online teaching and the crucial role of monitoring in language education. This points towards to a need for greater CPD to help teachers overcome these challenges.

### **Socio-affective presence**

Finally, the theme of 'socio-affective presence' emerged encompassing two sub-themes of 'becoming more human' and 'becoming more present'. Once again, the digital divide was starkly apparent. While university teacher Alexandra reported a greater sense of connection with students due to an increase in digital communication and a lack of strict university office hours, Amir, who was working without video or audio-conferencing, described the impossibility for connectedness with his students.

Firstly, the idea of trying to 'become more human' was mentioned, with numerous participants, reporting students requiring greater socio-emotional support due to the unfolding pandemic causing anxiety and isolation. Some teachers described needing to behave differently to show their 'more human' side and break down

hierarchical boundaries, reporting a strengthening of the teacher councillor/psychologist/friend role. Indeed, DiPietro (2010) noted the importance of positive relationships when students were in crisis. Similarly, in this study, Daniel described working with a student who was experiencing suicidal thoughts and unable to cope with the lockdown. He described how his students' emotional needs had to be fully addressed through open empathetic discussion before learning could take place.

*When students have a difficult situation at home, they go to school to forget about that. But now they are home all the time, and you need to make them feel that like they are in a different place and that they can feel confident to talk to you. (Elena, Mexico)*

Secondly, nearly all the participants noted a distinct barrier to social interaction and closeness, aligning with Corry, Ianacone and Stella (2014), who reported the critical role of building trusting relationships to overcome the physical distance between educators and their students. Participants reported varying degrees of success in methods to 'become more present' and build strong relationships. These included more one-to-one catch ups, instant group messaging chats and designing content to focus on the sharing of personal experiences. Helen described opening a Zoom meeting room for informal chats before class but found the conversation to be unnatural. Conversely, Kate experienced a notably successful class in which students took control of the screen to share happy memories through photos and videos. Inga reported how a survey of her students revealed they found collaborative activities such as commenting on one another's task submissions helped build successful peer relationships and group cohesion. Additionally, teacher attempts to become co-participants in breakout rooms were also noted to help build trust, mutual respect, collaboration, and presence:

*At the very beginning, I remember students saying, 'oh the policeman has come'. Yeah, because, they thought that I was actually checking if they were interacting with each other. (Daniel, Argentina)*

In summary, the most positive experiences appeared to involve creating a sense of presence, community and trust and 'becoming more human'. This aligned with Carrillo and Flores (2020), who posit that social and collaborative components of learning should be a starting point for all online teaching. Indeed, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen 1982) argued that language acquisition is increased when students' affective filters are low enough to allow the target language input 'in', in essence when students feel relaxed, motivated and confident to be able to take risks (Du 2009, Krashen 1982). In this study, injecting a human touch into lesson content as well as carefully designing, planning, and directing collaborative communicative activities were experienced as increasing socio-affective presence. The implications of these findings are that teachers need more preparation time built into their teaching schedules as well as support in creating online communities which allow students and teachers to gel and build trust.

## Conclusion

The study provided a small-scale investigation into teachers' experiences of the changing role of the teacher during the Covid-19 school closure crisis. The research was based on a sample of teachers who self-enrolled on the *Cambridge Assessment English MOOC: Teaching English Online* and their experiences were likely influenced by their motivation to participate in the MOOC, and in this study. Furthermore, each teacher was interviewed only once, which is unlikely to have been sufficient to fully capture experiences over the 11-month period. As a result, and given the limited scope of the research, the study should be regarded as a point of departure rather than arrival, providing a modest contribution to research. Indeed, the findings are unlikely to be generalisable to a wider population of language teachers.

Nevertheless, it has thrown up interesting insights. Across the data, an overarching theme of digital invitations emerged, highlighting the ways in which teachers were positively influenced by the agency of technology to alter their teaching roles. Indeed, the most successful socio-material entanglements were interpreted as drawing on the combined strengths of the human and material.

*Well, it invites me to be creative, I'd say ... and it helps me to teach the students better and more efficiently and faster. (Inga, Russia)*

*I discovered that I really love my job more than ever, because even if I work a lot more than before when using technology ... I try to evolve, to improve my skills and to find better ways to teach. (Valentina, Italy)*

Furthermore, positive teacher experiences often involved a role of 'doing double-duty' through addressing both socio-affective presence and facilitating interaction, and involved carefully designed, planned out and prepared collaborative interactions (aligning here with the work of Wang and Liu 2020). Such activities, which sometimes included the effective use of multimodality, were noted to help build connectedness and trust, provide communicative pathways, and were highly motivating and collaborative, empowering even the shyest students to take linguistic risks. These activities were also viewed as meaningful and relevant to the communication methods used by today's students and were often linked to improving students' metacognitive skills.

Crucially, a significant digital divide was noted beyond the disparity in teachers' knowledge and confidence working online, but also in relation to the scope of the possibilities available to participants due to a lack of digital access. This digital inequality was experienced both across country borders and within countries themselves, demonstrating an urgency for a global levelling up of digital services.

Finally, findings in this study demonstrate that the teacher and technology were experienced as completely co-dependent, pointing to a need to move beyond understanding teacher roles as independent from technology. Such a redefinition requires a shift in belief systems to one in which the digital is no longer a tool or an add-on, but central to all language education, with the digital, the teacher and other actors co-present in shifting and evolving role enactments.

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