

Learning Technologies in the EFL Class after the Pandemic: Lessons Learned and Future Directions

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(Received: September 19, 2022; accepted: November 19, 2022)

Abstract

Moving our EFL classes online with little or no time due to the pandemic meant an unprecedented change in our ways of teaching and a possible challenge in our future practices. Now that the pandemic is over, it is important to rethink and shape our EFL classrooms beyond ERT (Emergency Remote Teaching) considering the lessons learned on the way. This reflective article starts with a historical overview on CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) to understand how it has affected L2 teaching and learning for more than 40 years and paved the way to deal with the pandemic, it then raises awareness on some issues related to ERT and reflects on the lessons learned in three areas: live sessions, digital tools/games, and metacognitive skills. We contend that, by reflecting on where we have been and what we have learned, we will be able to make informed decisions to continue integrating learning technologies in our English classes.

Keywords: CALL, Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT); post-pandemic teaching

Resumen

Mudar nuestras clases a entornos virtuales de un día para otro debido a la pandemia significó un cambio sin precedentes en nuestras maneras de enseñar y un posible desafío para nuestras prácticas futuras. Ahora que la pandemia ha quedado atrás, es importante repensar y modelar nuestras clases de ILE más allá de la enseñanza remota de emergencia y tomando en cuenta lo que hemos aprendido en el camino. Este artículo se inicia con un panorama histórico de CALL con el fin de comprender cómo este ha afectado la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras por más de cuarenta años y abierto camino para abordar la pandemia; luego busca crear conciencia sobre algunas cuestiones relacionadas con la enseñanza remota y reflexiona sobre las lecciones que hemos aprendido en tres áreas: sesiones en vivo, herramientas/juegos digitales y habilidades metacognitivas. Sostenemos que a través de la reflexión sobre dónde estábamos y qué hemos aprendido seremos capaces de tomar decisiones informadas para continuar sumando las tecnologías del aprendizaje a nuestras clases de inglés.

Palabras clave: CALL, enseñanza remota de emergencia, enseñanza postpandémica

Introduction

Moving our EFL classes online due to the Covid19 pandemic meant an unprecedented change in our ways of teaching. Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), the term introduced in March 2020 by Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust and Bond (2020) refers to:

a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances [Covid-19]. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated (n.p.).

From this definition we can infer that the sanitary crisis forced us to find ways to move our face-to-face classes to online settings in no time and to adapt to this new scenario overnight (Sagol, Magide, Rubini & Kantt, 2021) to continue teaching and keeping in touch with our students. What nobody had anticipated was the length of time that going back to “normal” would take. The definition also implies that the training required to move classes online relied on what we, EFL teachers, had known about online teaching before the sanitary crisis impacted and what we started to learn after it hit (Mavridi, 2022). Thus, words such as “conference room”, “muted” and “Zoom” became part of our new school days. Without even noticing, we added many learning technologies to our EFL classes and gained first-hand experience in CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) through participation in webinars and exchanges with colleagues in learning communities. In our language classes we may probably be still using the EdTech resources we became familiar with during the pandemic. However, in order to rethink and reshape our teaching practices, it is important not only to know a few digital tools to implement in class but also to learn about the main developments, discoveries and current trends in CALL and the main lessons learned in the pandemic when using technology to teach the EFL classes online.

This article touches upon the reflections of the webinar *Lessons Learned from the Past in Unprecedented Times: Rethinking and Shaping Online Language Education* given by the authors as part of the LatinCALL webinar series in 2021 (Orgnero, Simón & Spataro, 2021). It starts with a historical overview on CALL to understand how it has affected L2 teaching and learning for more than 40 years, it then raises awareness on ERT and the new teaching scenarios in Latin America and it finally reflects on the lessons learned from ERT in three main areas: live sessions, digital tools and games, and metacognitive skills.

A brief but rich history of CALL

The history of ELT has been shaped by the integration of technology into the language class for more than 40 years. The pandemic accelerated the incorporation of language learning technologies as we were forced to move our classes online by using the many or few devices and resources available in our local contexts. Though brief, we need to know about the history of CALL to understand how its focus has shifted over time, where we were before the pandemic and what are some of the changes that may be here to stay (Beatty, 2003; Dudeney & Hockly, 2012; Hockly & Dudeney, 2018; Mavridi, 2022).

One of the major technological events that impacted language education was the shift from macrocomputers to microcomputers. Large mainframes had been used since the 1950s to develop some language programs and projects. PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations), for example, was a drill-practice-based system developed by the University of Illinois and used first to teach Russian using the grammar

translation approach and then other second/foreign languages (Beatty, 2003). However, macrocomputers were only available at universities which made it difficult for teachers and students to access them regularly. In the 1980s, the introduction of microcomputers facilitated the use of desktop or personal computers in the classroom. They were used for simple and sequenced drills and also for simulations giving ESL/EFL teachers and students a more active role (Healey, 2016).

To describe this new way of teaching with computers in the English classroom, the term CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) was coined at the 1983 TESOL Convention in Toronto (Chapelle, 2001). At that time, CALL was defined as “any process in which a learner uses a computer and, as a result, improves his/her language” (Beatty, 2003, p.7). Different journals and associations picked up on the term CALL and used it to start disseminating and sharing ideas and practices in the use of technologies for language teaching (Healey, 2016). For example, the first journal on language and technology, CALICO (The Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium), appeared in 1983; *ReCALL* in 1988; the professional organization EuroCALL in 1993; and the CALL Interest Section of TESOL in 1985. Though other acronyms and terms like Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) or Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) were used, CALL remains the most widely used term to refer to the different uses of learning technologies to teach languages (Dudeny & Hockly, 2007).

In the early 1990s, the advent of the internet was another major event in language teaching and learning (Dudeny & Hockly, 2012). The web, first described as Web 1.0, was mainly a read-only platform. This meant that the internet user was mainly passive, limited to reading information provided by content producers. The change to Web 2.0, also referred to as social web or read-write web, happened gradually as the internet became more interactive giving EFL teachers and students a new world of possibilities not only as consumers but also as producers of content (Dudeny & Hockly, 2012).

The new realities created by the Web 2.0 shaped the English class. Online videos, e-mails, forums, wikis, blogs and concordancers were introduced. Access to authoring tools, i.e., programs that allow users with no programming or design skills to produce electronic materials, offered EFL teachers the opportunity to create content tailored materials to suit their learners’ needs (Dudeny & Hockly, 2012). Moreover, Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) emerged thanks to platforms like WebCT (1995), Blackboard (1997), Moodle (2002) or Edmodo (2009).

To refer to any combination of teaching with technology, in 2007 the term “blended learning” became widely known in ELT with the publication of the book *Blended Learning* by Sharma and Barret (Whittaker, 2013). In the same year, when smart mobile technology appeared with IOS and Android operating systems, “mobile learning” became another option in the English class. This also led to a rekindled interest in L2 gamification, the use of games to teach languages (Reinhardt, 2017), with digital tools and applications like Padlet (2008), Wordwall (2008), Kahoot (2012), Mentimeter (2014), Quizziz (2015), among others. This brief account, illustrated in the timeline below (Figure 1), shows how the field of ELT had been using technology with different degrees of integration in the classes before 2020.

We may argue that the pandemic forced us to use technology to teach online leaving ELT teachers with an array of new tools and some understanding of the potential of the learning technologies we can eventually choose. What we still do not know, as we are entering the post-pandemic era, is what changes will prevail.

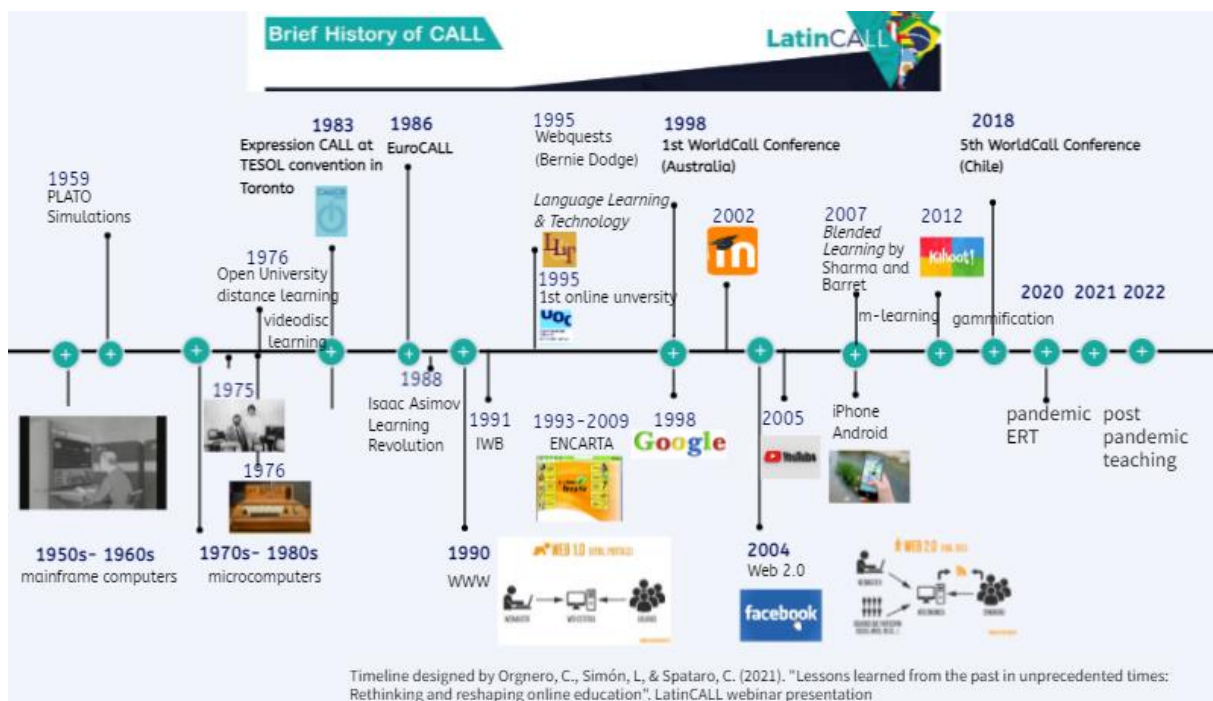


Figure 1 - *Timeline with a brief history of CALL (from LatinCALL 1st webinar series)*

ERT or online learning?

In 2020, we had to move our classes online due to the pandemic. As a result, Emergency Remote Teaching was a quick response to the health crisis that allowed teachers and students to continue with their education using different forms of technology (Hodges, et al., 2020; Sagol, et al., 2021). This form of instruction was carried out overnight, though the great majority of teachers had had no training in online learning and had few or no resources in the Latin American region. Yet, the resilience and efforts teachers showed were incredible and “heroic” as Mavridi (2022, p. 8) described in her report and this applied to teachers worldwide.

ERT was a temporary solution while the pandemic lasted; however, we should not equate ERT with online teaching and learning. It is true that the use of videoconferencing, apps, and pdf materials are present in both concepts. Yet, teaching online involves careful planning over a long period of time (Hodges, et al., 2020) with a focus on activities (Gross, 2011) that are precisely at the heart of the learning experience. In online learning, there is no “teaching” in the traditional way but, instead, content is shared in multimedia formats with activities that provide learners with plenty of opportunities to engage and interact to construct meaning. It is then meaningful interaction with materials, peers and teachers a key factor in online learning (Jalley, 2018).

New scenarios, new issues in times of ERT

The pandemic gave rise to new teaching scenarios. Terms like “hybrid”, “face-to-face rotation”, “blended” and “hybrid rotation” were used in different contexts to refer to the new realities. “Hybrid”, for example, was used to refer to “simultaneous face to face and online classes” and “hybrid rotation” to the new scenario implemented in our country where half the class attended the face-to-face classes and the other half worked from home asynchronously (Hockly, 2021, n.p.). Though the scenarios in times of ERT may have varied, and some may still continue, there were some common issues in Latin America related to roles, screen fatigue and digital divide.

1- Roles

Since ERT meant a quick shift to an online environment with the use of a videoconference system, we tended to go back to a more lecture mode. Thornbury (2021) explained that teachers may have focused on “transmitting” at a distance, with no dialogical approach to the detriment of constructing language learning jointly between teachers and students. This could be attributed to the lack of technological maturity of some teachers and their students at the beginning of 2020. According to the British Council report (2021), 40.9% of the 5,218 teachers from 11 countries in the Americas surveyed at the end of 2020 and beginning of 2021 reported that they carried out their tasks in environments with limited technological capacity for teaching. However, the report also showed that there was a sudden rise in teacher development as 90.8% participated in courses to learn how to use digital tools. This reflected the interest and urge we felt to help our students take a more active role behind the screen through live sessions and games.

2- Zoom Fatigue

During the pandemic, “Zoom” became one of the favorite videoconferencing systems we used to connect to others because it was easy to set up and use. Since we spent long hours doing our regular jobs zooming, we started to experience fatigue. We felt we had no more energy after back-to-back videoconferences as we needed more cognitive effort than during a face to face meeting to process non-verbal behavior, a person’s tone and pitch voice (Jiang, 2020). This was due to the delays in the conversation or even silence caused by the so-called micro internet cuts (Ibañez, 2021). The decoding of the message was not so simple and we experienced anxiety or literally felt that the videoconferencing system drained our energy (Jiang, 2020). Since Zoom was the app associated with this phenomenon, the expression was described as “Zoom fatigue” (Ibañez, 2021) though it applies to any videoconferencing tool. Understanding this phenomenon has implications for the design and planning of our online encounters with our students.

3- Digital Divide

Internet access, use of electronic devices and quality in online learning were not the same in all regions and social classes making the digital gap wider in times of ERT (British Council, 2021). Digital divide, then, is defined in terms of two main issues: access to technology and the ability and/or skills needed to use it (UNESCO, 2014). The digital gap was an issue that was present before the pandemic hit but it became more obvious during it making inequality more visible. For example, some of us were able to use our virtual classrooms that were set up in VLE such as Moodle and Google Classroom before 2020. Thus, the transition to ERT was quite smooth for some of us. Many of our students had the resources (e.g., internet access and devices) to continue with their education. Unfortunately, this was not the case for a lot of teachers in the region and they found no other alternative but to use Whatsapp to send messages and some instructions to ensure that their students could continue studying. This form of instruction was described as the “whatsappization of teaching” and it reflected the difficulties many teachers experienced in contexts of inequality (Abizanza et al., 2022, p. 79). Thinking ahead, teachers and students in teaching training colleges need access to virtual learning environments so they can become familiar with virtual classrooms as part of their training since it can ensure quality education that will ultimately enable students to bridge the digital divide.

Lessons learned

The issues that we may have experienced when teaching remotely may have hindered our job but they may have also helped us find new ways of teaching online. The following are some of the lessons learned in times of ERT that may be useful to plan our future practices:

1- *Live sessions*

When we started using videoconferences, we noticed that many of our adult students' cameras were off. There were several explanations for this fact, such as poor internet connection (Ibáñez, 2021), Zoom fatigue as we explained above (Ibáñez, 2021), or the lecture mode we tended to use at the beginning of ERT that could have led our students to feel overwhelmed, not confident enough or simply without the motivation to turn their cameras on.

It became apparent that we had to do something different to help our students learn and give them a more prominent role. At a teacher training college, for example, some EFL teachers opted to call their online encounters *live sessions or interactions* and not classes and we adopted a structure as a guide. For example, it was useful to include a flipped classroom model (for a brief description of the concept see Nik Peachey's paper in the reference section) and assign materials and tasks that students were expected to cover before the meeting. Once in the session, it was also necessary to follow some kind of organization so we set up three main moments: warm up, development of ideas and wrap up (Furman, 2021) that guided the use of the apps that we implemented. This idea of live sessions can still be implemented in videoconferences that happen in any format (hybrid, blended, etc.). When we integrate live sessions with face to face classes, we might need to think about the structure described above to ensure that our students are actively engaged during the learning process.

2- *Digital tools/games*

We may argue that ERT increased our search for tools and games to engage our students remotely. After experiencing the use of digital games and tools in our classes online, we may probably want to continue using them in our face to face classes. However, as we may have learned when using them in times of ERT, it is crucial to take some practical tips into consideration.

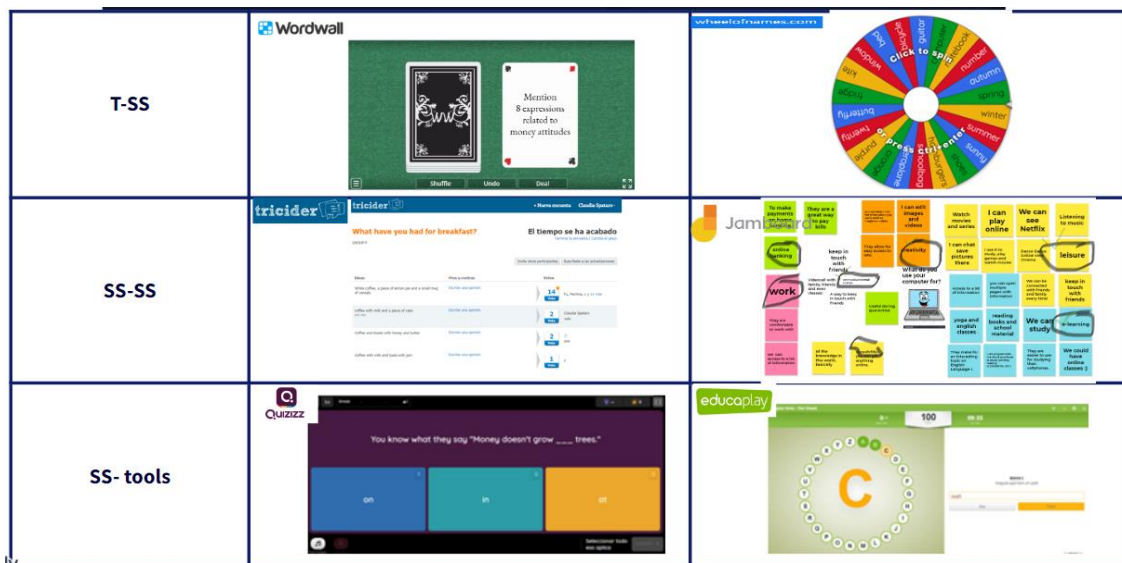


Figure 2 - Digital games for different modes of interaction

Digital tools and games are just that, tools for teaching (Peachey, 2017). We need to design the tasks or activities considering the teaching methods and approaches that guide our practices and we should also draw on our own creativity. It is better to know how to use a few tools very well than to use many tools that we cannot properly master (Stannard, 2021). Technical problems usually come up, so we need to be confident enough to be able to sort them out and still find the activity enjoyable. It is important to take our time to discover the intended purpose of the tool and its possible potential. With a bit of imagination, we may even exploit a tool in more than one way but it will be really difficult to try to force a tool to achieve a purpose for which it was not originally designed. Our students need to perceive the games as playful and not as endless language activities or tests in the form of games. Finally, it could be really useful to include, in each of our sessions, games and activities that combine the three modes of interaction in distance education (Moore, 1989): teacher-student, student-student and student-tool as shown in Figure 2. To learn more about gamification and second language learning, see Jonathon Reinhardt (2017) and Deborah Healey (2016) in the reference section.

3- Metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive strategies provide students with ways to reflect upon their own learning as they are “general skills through which learners manage, direct, regulate, guide their learning” (Wenden, 1998, p. 519). In times of ERT, offering some tasks that enhanced metacognitive awareness was extremely important to scaffold online learning for our students, help them reflect on their planning and time management and show them ways to regulate their own learning. For example, in one class for undergraduate students at a teacher training college, at the end of each online session, students shared a summary of the class including “what was important for you” as a wrap-up task. This also worked as a way of “taking the temperature” of the class because the ideas that students shared provided some insights into what they had understood, what called their attention or what questions they still had to plan for the following class. Another way to implement metacognitive strategies during the pandemic was through the use of e-portfolios in VLEs at a teacher training college.

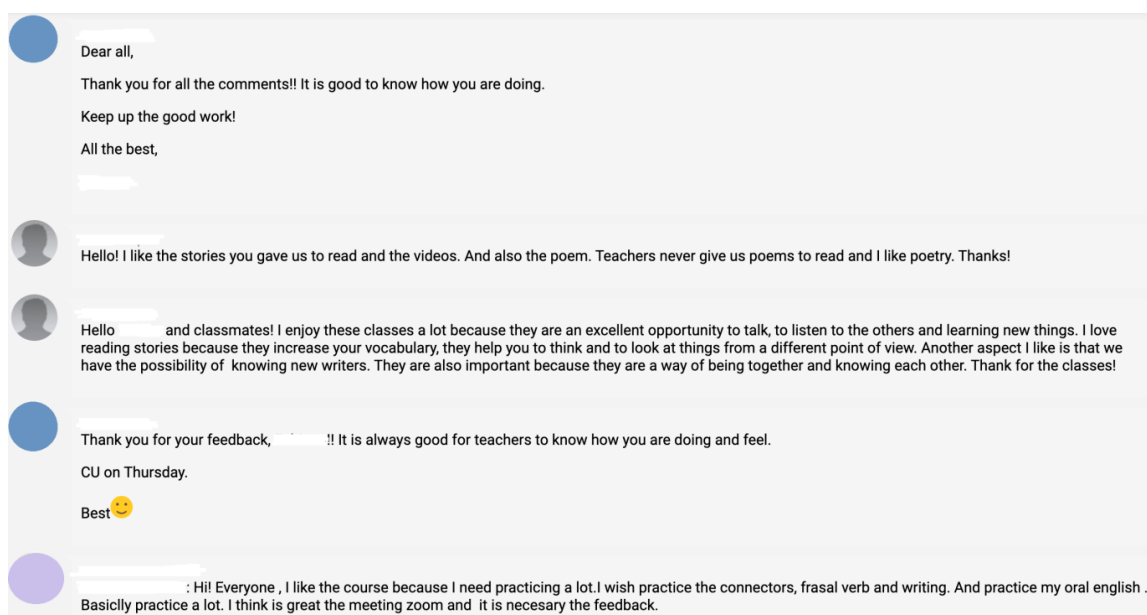


Figure 3 - A student's online portfolio with comments and reflections on his/her own learning and progress in 2020.

Figure 3 shows an example of how a student reflected upon her learning after the online sessions and how the EFL teacher interacted to prompt deeper reflections. During the pandemic, the use of technology helped design and implement activities with a focus on metacognitive awareness. Now that we are back to classes, we can continue developing metacognitive strategies among our students with simple tools such as a forum, a blog or apps or websites for digital portfolios. To learn more about metacognition and self-regulation, see Panadero and Alonso Tapia (2014) and Zimmerman and Moylan (2009) in the reference section.

Final reflections

Now that the pandemic is over and we are back to face to face classes, it is important to rethink and shape our future EFL classrooms beyond ERT considering the lessons learned on the way. Tenti Fanfani (2020) uses the metaphor of the fire in Notre Dame to reflect on the future of education after the pandemic. When Notre Dame burned down in 2019, funds were raised worldwide to rebuild and preserve this historical landmark and its value. Tenti Fanfani (2020) questions if this is the same case with education. Some of his questions are: Do we want to preserve education as it was before the pandemic? Or did the pandemic help to speed up a process of renovation that requires more than just rebuilding the place? Will we resume our practices exactly as they were before the pandemic hit? What has the pandemic taught us about teaching and learning? This article aimed at helping reflect upon these questions by analyzing how CALL has evolved and changed in the last 40 years, how ERT forced us to use different technologies to teach and what were the lessons learned on the way were. The pandemic has taught us that using technology is not enough. The use of technology cannot be limited to learning about a thousand new applications, but to learn how technology can be helpful and useful when it is clearly connected to pedagogical goals (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). It has been 40 years since the use of technology started shaping the field of ELT and now, by sharing our first-hand experience with ERT and learning from our colleagues and experts in CALL, we can continue integrating learning technologies in our English class.

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