

The challenges of dynamic teacher training for a short English for academic purposes course when using multimodal digital platforms: a case study

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Abstract. Despite the benefits of multimodal technology in the language classroom and common practice to introduce digital tools in language teaching, research has shown that many language teachers do not feel confident to engage with and create online multimodal learning resources and environments. This exploratory study examines data from five experienced English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers and discusses the dynamic challenges faced when training them to engage with multimodal teaching, learning, and assessment methods, such as digital learning, confidence and community building, and supporting them in creating multimodal learning resources. It also discusses the Dynamic Teacher Training model developed as a result of this experience to support teachers in developing the skills they needed to fully engage with the different digital teaching tools and teacher feedback on this.

Keywords: multimodal learning, online learning, EAP, digital skills, teacher training.

1. Introduction

Many EAP programmes, previously delivered only in-person in British Higher Education (UKHE) using more traditional pedagogical approaches, had to be reconceived and delivered virtually in a limited timeframe in 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the EAP pre-sessional case study in this paper. Consequently, several of these programmes were designed to include

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How to cite this article: De Lima Guedes, K. K., & Mar-Molinero, V. (2021). The challenges of dynamic teacher training for a short English for academic purposes course when using multimodal digital platforms: a case study. In N. Zoghلامي, C. Brudermann, C. Sarré, M. Grosbois, L. Bradley, & S. Thouéšny (Eds), *CALL and professionalisation: short papers from EUROCALL 2021* (pp. 69-74). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2021.54.1311>

multimodal learning objects. In second language (L2) education research, the term multimodality commonly refers to “the coordination of multiple different systems of signification to communicate a single, or at least a unified, message or meaning” (Dressman, 2019, p. 39), and this combination of modes produces a mutually reinforcing complex of cues to meaning making that can facilitate communication and aid comprehension (e.g. Hardison & Pennington, 2021). L2 research has shown the benefits of multimodality and students’ preference for it (e.g. Peng, 2019), and thus teacher awareness and understanding of these learning modalities are of great significance, in particular when teaching online.

Although using a range of semiotic resources and introducing digital tools into the L2 classroom are common practice, teachers often feel insufficiently prepared to engage with multimodal pedagogy and lack the skills to design and deliver multimodal practices (e.g. Farías & Véliz, 2019). Therefore, alongside the introduction of multimodal digital developments, curriculum designers also need to tackle the training and needs of the teachers who will deliver and engage students using these pedagogies. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the dynamic challenges faced when training EAP staff to engage with and create online multimodal learning materials, present the training approach used, and discuss teacher feedback.

2. Method

Participants in this study consisted of five EAP practitioners teaching an online five-week pre-session course, Prepare for Pre-session (P4P). Teachers were experienced EAP practitioners, but only one had online teaching experience. P4P aimed to introduce students to EAP and the university systems and used a combination of asynchronous and synchronous activities. Most asynchronous activities took place via Blackboard and used a multimodal learning approach by using a combination of text, video, audio, discussion forums, and H5P activities³. The synchronous activities consisted of one-hour daily lessons and weekly one-to-one tutorials. P4P used a flipped learning approach where students were asked to engage with the asynchronous activities before joining the interactive live lessons, which were used for further practice, content consolidation, and students’ questions.

Staff training took place over one intensive week’s induction where teachers were introduced to the course, the digital tools to be used, and online language

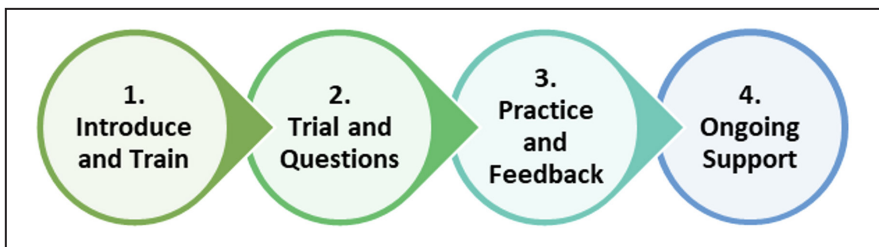
3. <https://h5p.org/>

teaching. In addition to engaging with the virtual learning environment learning materials and with students via different channels (e.g. Blackboard, discussion forums, and Collaborate), teachers were asked to take ownership of the course and contribute to the multimodal learning materials by creating engaging learning videos to accompany the weekly text-based and H5P activities. This, however, came with several challenges, such as training teachers on how to use the relevant tools, supporting them throughout this steep learning process, and building their confidence as online language teachers and content creators. An example of this was learning how to use the video recording tool Panopto⁴. Teachers were expected to use Panopto to create the aforementioned videos but were not familiar with it or with video recording themselves. We quickly realised the induction sessions would not be enough and had to design a training plan to support teachers. Data for this study were collected from team discussion notes and reflections from weekly meetings and post-course qualitative written teacher feedback.

3. Results and discussion

This section first discusses the training model developed for P4P – the Dynamic Teacher Training model (Figure 1), and then teacher feedback. The Dynamic Teacher Training model is made of four dynamic main steps. In Step 1, teachers were introduced to the tool(s) in a live session and given a step-by-step guide to using them independently. In Step 2, teachers were given the opportunity to have a go at using the tools and asking questions. Step 3 consisted of teachers being asked to use the tools independently and were given feedback by their coordinators and peers. Finally, in the last step, teachers started using the tools to create multimodal learning materials and were given support when needed.

Figure 1. Dynamic Teacher Training model



4. <https://www.panopto.com/>

Throughout the entire process, teachers were encouraged to share their experiences and contact coordinators via a group chat. From Step 2 onwards, peer support was encouraged, and teachers became gradually more independent, which was crucial to their digital learning, confidence-building, and community building process, as shown below.

“I enjoyed how we all helped and supported each other – it felt like a real team effort, with each of us contributing something different and everyone being able to play to their strengths” (T02).

“It was a steep learning curve during the induction week! [...] We were all learning together which again was a bonus” (T03).

This dynamic teacher training approach was used throughout the course, allowing teachers to feel supported in using the technologies they needed to teach online, develop their digital competencies, feel confident in creating asynchronous multimodal learning experiences, and become aware of using these modalities. Below are examples of teacher feedback regarding the training model used:

“Excellent training, support and communication which helped reassure and inspire confidence” (T01).

“Brilliant! [...] I always felt I could ask for help, which I think was one of the best things about having such a small and lovely team” (T02).

Feedback was also positive regarding the multimodal asynchronous activities team leaders and teachers created for the Blackboard. Teachers felt that “collectively [they had done] a good job of making some uninspiring materials more interesting and accessible to [students]” (T02) and that their “asynchronous videos and live classes enlivened the materials for the students” (T03), creating “[what] seemed [to be] a perfect combination of learning suited to all types of learners” (T04).

Despite the positive feedback from teachers on their training and the activities they created for the course, the initial steps were challenging for teachers and coordinators, in particular, due to time constraints:

“For me, the first couple of weeks were really hard work and even though I know I’m fairly slow (!), I don’t think I could have done everything necessary just working 9-5” (T02).

Both teachers and coordinators had to dedicate extra hours to develop the digital skills themselves and support teachers with developing theirs. In addition, team size was critical for this type of dynamic training and continuous peer support to take place. Teachers felt they “could ask for help, which [...] was one of the best things about having such a small and lovely team” and reported having positive teaching experiences as a result.

The fact that teachers had to take ownership of the course and create multimodal experiences themselves created an interest in digital development, a sense of curiosity, and a stronger community of practice. Teacher feedback suggests that applying the Dynamic Teacher Training model in bigger teams online would require not only a bigger support team but greater efforts in building a sense of community, peer-sharing, and camaraderie.

4. Conclusion

As many L2 teachers experienced teaching online for the first time in 2020, some noticed how unprepared they were and that their role had changed, and so had the digital skills they needed to teach effectively and confidently. Digital competence is one of the main challenges facing teachers today (Fernández-Batanero, Montenegro-Rueda, Fernández-Cerero, & García-Martínez, 2020); therefore, supporting teachers was crucial to developing an engaging language learning environment and building teacher digital teaching confidence. Our early findings suggest that it is imperative to not only make teachers aware of these modalities but also, and most importantly, support them in developing the skills they need to engage with different tools and environments fully. To ensure the quality of the delivery and of student (and teacher) experience, we believe training teachers to become confident in using multimodal approaches is crucial for them to thrive in the many new L2 digital learning environments they will be using with their students in a post-COVID-19 era.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

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CALL and professionalisation: short papers from EUROCALL 2021

Edited by Naouel Zoghalmi, Cédric Bruderemann, Cedric Sarré, Muriel Grosbois, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouéšny

Publication date: 2021/12/13

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ISBN13: 978-2-490057-97-9 (PDF, colour)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2021.