THE EUROCALL REVIEW

The EuroCALL Review
Volume 32, No. 1, 2025, 29-42
ISSN: 1695-2618
https://doi.org/ 10.4995/eurocall.2025.19331

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE PAPER

Redesigning an Online English as Second Language Course during (and for after) Emergency Remote Teaching

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How to cite this article:

De Lima Guedes, K.K. (2025). Redesigning an Online English as Second Language Course during (and for after) Emergency Remote Teaching. *The EuroCALL Review, 32*(1), 29-42. https://doi.org/ 10.4995/eurocall.2025.19331

Abstract

Online language teaching has become a reality for many second language (L2) programmes that were delivered remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many L2 tutors had to redesign their courses for online delivery and explored a range of online learning and teaching tools, designs, and platforms. This paper discusses how a language module has been redesigned in response to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). The initial reason for this migration was due to the pandemic, but it has provided an opportunity to review the teaching and learning methods used in the module, its course structure, design, and learning materials, and to improve their accessibility. Student engagement and interaction with course content, instructions, and other learners were also reviewed. Two years after the course first moved online, the module convener and students have settled into the new digital environment and explored ways to maximise the technological affordances in ways that can enhance students' learning experiences and digital literacies. This paper presents the tools, methods, and techniques that have been implemented in this course, alongside relevant literature, and student feedback. Results highlight the significance of a well-structured and multimodal VLE that fosters student interaction in the L2, but also that achieving this requires ample time for tutors to reconsider and adapt various aspects of the course.

Keywords

Online learning; Emergency Remote Teaching; Course Design; Second Language Learning; Higher Education

1. Introduction

In 2020, universities around the globe switched to remote delivery formats to ensure the safety of their communities in the face of a global pandemic. This meant that many educators, including second language (L2) tutors, had to teach online. For many tutors and students this was their first experience of remote education. This crisis prompted me to explore the literature to gain insights into online course design, language teaching and learning methods and practices, learning materials, and student engagement. This was done to redesign a university undergraduate module, namely English Language Stage 3 (ELS3), to best support students in their L2 learning process in a fully online environment.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Hodges et al. (2020) distinguished online learning from the grand Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) experiment that was taking place worldwide. According to them, ERT is "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances", and such hurried transitions cannot fully take advantage of the affordances of the online education format. In addition, it can also perpetuate the perception of online learning being of poor quality when using ERT approaches as a means of online learning quality measurement. It is important to understand that the primary goal of ERT was not to re-create robust educational ecosystems, despite educators and institutions' best efforts at the time. Instead, it was to provide temporary access to education in a way that could be quickly set up and accessible to most teachers and students during a crisis.

The pandemic meant that physical teaching spaces where people could meet in person were absent, and this absence fundamentally alters the classroom. This includes modifications in course structure, how interaction occurs (Vai & Sosulski, 2011), the necessary skills for learning, and the methods used for teaching, supporting, and evaluating students. Therefore, during ERT, it was critical to consult the literature on remote and online education to understand the changes that were necessary for successful online learning, both those that could be implemented in a short period of time and in the long term if the pandemic were to continue (as it did).

The focus of this paper is to present the literature used in the redesign of ELS3 during the ERT period and discuss the tools, methods, and techniques that were implemented in this English as a second language (ESL) course. It also discusses the changes that were made to this online course and the rationale behind them. Lastly, it shares student feedback regarding the new course design.

2. Online education literature for L2 emergency learning

There is a wealth of research on remote and online education and instructional design spanning several decades (Clark & Mayer, 2016; Dziuban et al., 2015; Garrison, 2011; Mayer, 2021; Means et al., 2014; Moore, 1989; Picciano, 2018, to name a few) which has shown that it can be efficient, convenient, and flexible, allowing teachers and learners to choose between synchronous and asynchronous learning options. Online education has been found to promote learner autonomy, self-efficacy, and digital skills; however, it can also lead to social isolation and it requires learners to possess strong self-motivation and time management skills (Almahasees et al., 2021; Ferri et al., 2020; Michael, 2012).

Successful online learners typically possess a range of skills and traits that enable them to thrive in a digital learning environment. These may include strong communication, time-management, and digital skills. They are often self-directed and intrinsically motivated learners who have a strong academic self-concept and the ability to work independently, and are less location-bound than traditional learners (Dabbagh, 2007; del

Valle & Duffy, 2009). However, university students experiencing emergency remote transition can exhibit distinct needs and characteristics compared to those who typically choose online courses and have prepared for them. Consequently, these students may require additional guidance and support to navigate remote learning. Therefore, it is vital to consider aspects such as course design and structure, students' use of and interactions in the L2, their digital literacies, and how they can easily find support online.

2.1. Online course design

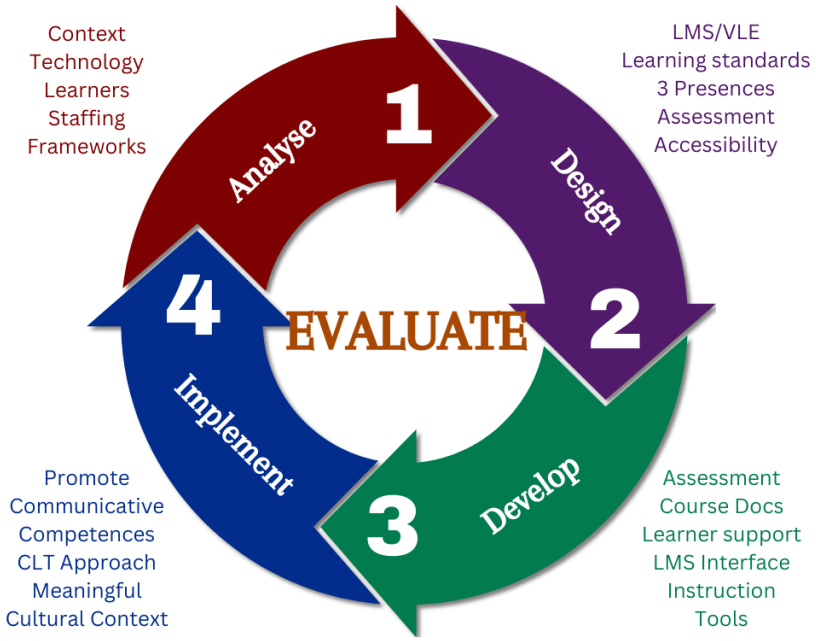
Effective course design is a critical aspect of creating successful online learning experiences. Online course design concerns the processes and methods used to create quality learning environments and experiences for students (Nguyen, 2020). This is done through careful planning and analysis of the learning context, including the selection of appropriate learning environments, instructional materials, learning activities, types of media, and providing student support and interaction formats that help students achieve their learning goals. A well-designed online course should feature a multimodal and flexible learning environment, offering diverse interaction spaces and formats. It should support various collaboration patterns and cater to different learning preferences. Additionally, the course should incorporate a clear and user-friendly virtual learning environment (VLE) to facilitate navigation and comprehension, to provide ample opportunities for feedback, and to foster teacher presence and a strong sense of community within the online learning context (see Dabbagh, 2007; Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Mayer, 2021; Moore, 1989; Vai & Sosulski, 2011).

The instructional design process model of Analyse, Design, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate (ADDIE) offers as a reminder of the foundations of good online design (

Figure 1). Analysis (A) involves analysing the context and needs of learners. Design (D) refers to establishing outcomes, structuring instruction, and deciding on assessment and technologies to be employed. Develop (D) focuses on refining, drafting, and developing the course components in alignment with the analysis and design. Implement (I) means testing the course, and Evaluate (E) involves reviewing the course to determine its effectiveness and make changes as needed (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021).

Figure 1.

ADDIE model adapted for online language design (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021)



2.2. Interaction and L2 skills development online

The online content design is an important contributor to student learning and satisfaction, and the organisation of content, document layout, and easy access to online content can influence learners' interaction with the course content (Keeler, 2006; Kuo et al., 2013). Research highlights that incorporating media tools and interactive videos as methods of helping learners understand content can increase their interest in and interaction with the content (Alqurashi, 2019; Anderson, 2008; Jaggars & Xu, 2016). Interaction is critical to developing L2 skills and a crucial element when learning online, especially since developing spoken skills can be more challenging if there are limited interaction opportunities (Sit et al., 2005). Moore (1989) identified three essential types of interactions required for effective online education: learner-content, learner-learner, and learner-teacher interactions. Research has demonstrated that technology-mediated collaborative tasks can facilitate learner-content and learner-learner interactions, leading to improved spoken and written language output (González-Lloret, 2020). Consequently, L2 courses must consider, and include, the different types of interactions and design opportunities for students to engage with both course content and peers.

While online learning may offer advantages for developing writing skills, it can be more challenging to develop students' speaking skills. This is because writing becomes the new primary mode of communication between tutors and students and therefore more used than spoken communication (Karataş & Tuncer, 2020). However, research has shown that regular text chat sessions conducted in the target language (TL) can have a positive impact on learners' oral performance while reducing anxiety levels when speaking in the L2 (Satar & Özdener, 2008). Furthermore, technology-mediated activities and environments have the potential to facilitate meaningful L2 language learning, extending beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom (Bailey et al., 2021; Huffman, 2011; Kato et al., 2016). This extension allows for the creation of language development opportunities outside of traditional classroom settings. Therefore, a good online language learning design should include opportunities for students to develop their spoken skills.

Research has shown that effective sequencing and preparation in asynchronous and synchronous activities can significantly enhance student motivation and reduce cognitive load in online language learning. Students who take part in asynchronous collaborative activities are more likely to enjoy online learning in general and be more motivated to take part in video-synchronous speaking practice (Bailey et al., 2021). Payne (2020) has considered the importance of sequencing language production activities to minimise cognitive load and maximise impact on language development, student performance, and self-efficacy. Payne states that temporality must be considered when sequencing language production, which refers to the time learners have available to engage with the input and plan output. The less time learners have available to engage with these, the greater the cognitive burden. Learners are then more likely to feel anxious and struggle to express themselves due to the increased cognitive load (Payne, 2020). Payne then suggests a sequence of activities starting with those that have lower cognitive load and progress to those with higher-cognitive load (Figure 2). One example to reduce this is allowing time for students to prepare and plan for tasks before joining in synchronous discussions, essentially flipping the classroom.

Figure 2.

Payne's (2020) Cognitive load continuum for digital learning activities

More Cognitive Load ---------- Less Cognitive Load					
Video Chat	Text Chat	Video/Audio Presentation	Video/Audio Discussion Forum	Text Discussion	Long-Form Writing

2.3. Digital literacy

Students require appropriate digital skills to fully engage and succeed when learning online. Digital literacy is frequently discussed in the literature with different definitions (Gilster, 1997; Martin, 2013; Pangrazio et al., 2020), but here it means not only having the capability to understand and use information in multiple online formats but also the ability to access, engage with, and communicate in different multimodal formats at a technical and critical thinking level. Digital literacy is also seen as a developmental process involving the acquisition of skills that one becomes proficient in over time (Sharpe & Beetham, 2010). Digital literacy can significantly contribute to self-efficacy, peer and tutor engagement, and online interactions (Prior et al., 2016). Without these skills, students may lack the confidence to learn online or feel overwhelmed by the learning process and environments, which can have a negative impact on their motivation and performance (Maphosa & Bhebhe, 2019; Mohammadyari & Singh, 2015). Another advantage of developing digital skills is the fact that they are key to the future employability of most graduates (Bejaković & Mrnjavac, 2020; Coldwell-Neilson, 2021). Thus, course design, interaction, and digital literacy were key areas considered when redesigning the ELS3 course during ERT.

3. Method

3.1. The course

ELS3[1] is a year-long credit bearing ESL module (30 CATS) offered to undergraduate students from across a UK university. Its main aims are to enable students to communicate in English on a range of topics and contexts, analyse the cultural contexts in which English is used, and understand how language is used in them. Its successful completion is equivalent to reaching Level B2 of the CEFR[2]. This module had always been taught in-person but had to be redesigned for online delivery in 2020. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach was used in this module pre-pandemic, which focuses on developing students' communicative competence through preparing them to communicate in the TL in real-life situations. CLT makes use of activities that foster interaction and collaboration, and positions the teacher as a facilitator rather than an instructor (Canale & Swain, 1980; Littlewood, 1981; Savignon, 1991, 2005). The goal of the redesign was to use this same approach online.

3.2. The students

ELS3 learners are typically ERASMUS[3], undergraduate, or other exchange students who speak ESL and have been placed at this stage due to their linguistic level. Groups are usually between 10-17 students who are studying a range of degrees within the university and have selected an English language module as part of their programme. There were 14 students in the 2020-2021 cohort and 17 students in the 2021-2022 cohort. Students were between the ages of 19-25 and from Japan, China, Belgium, France, Switzerland, and Spain, with some located in the UK and others based abroad.

3.3. The VLEs

Blackboard was the institution's VLE, and before the pandemic, it primarily functioned as a learning repository space for ELS3, providing students with convenient access to essential module information, documents, and relevant weblinks. In 2020, Blackboard Collaborate was the main institution's video conferencing tool, but MS Teams was also available and chosen for ELS3 due to its additional interactive functionalities. The goals set for the VLEs included being visually friendly, accessible, easy to navigate, consistent

[1] This module won the 2022 best fully online course Excellence in VLE awards at the University of Southampton https://www.southampton.ac.uk/digital-learning/what-we-do/vle-awards.page
[2] Common European Framework of Reference for Languages https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages
[3] European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/

throughout the course, and providing spaces that allowed students to work independently and collaboratively with multimodal materials that were not location-bound.

3.4. Procedures

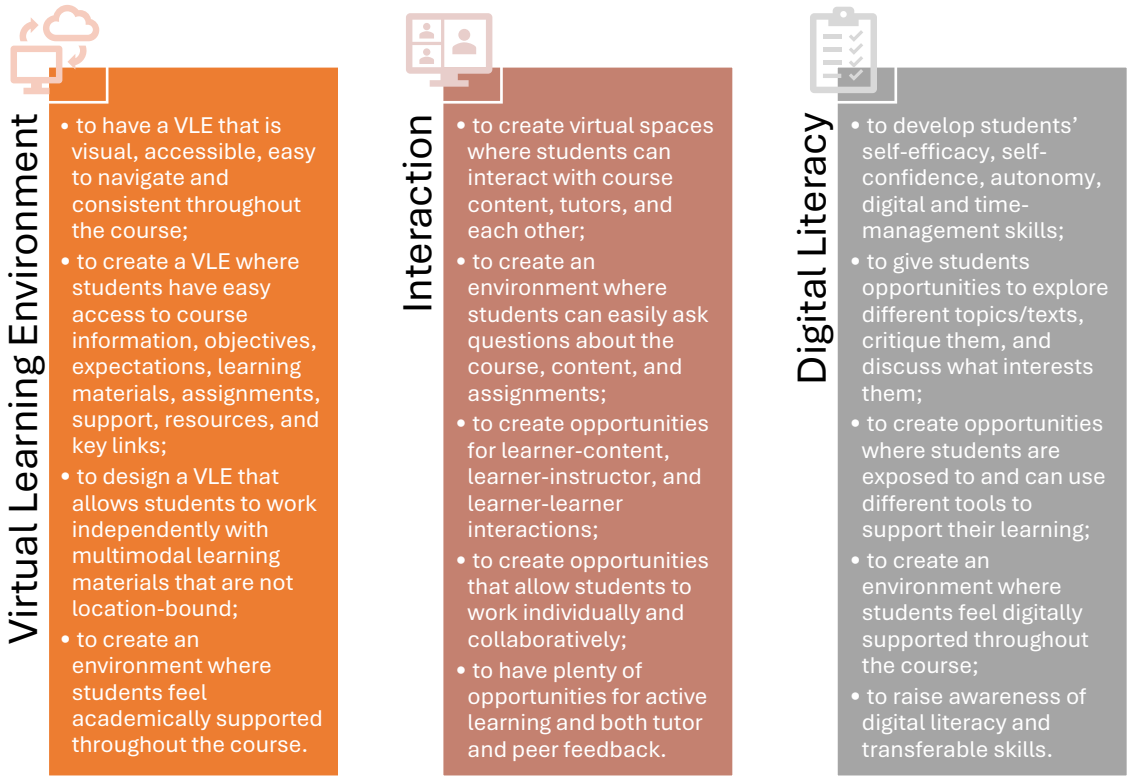
Some amendments were made to the course during the academic year 2019-2020, but further revisions drawing upon the literature, the ADDIE model, and student feedback were implemented in 2020-2021, and this is the focus of this paper. A set of objectives was established to construct an online learning design for 2021-2022, which not only facilitated students in achieving the course aims but also fostered digital skills and addressed the previously identified challenges. In the subsequent sections, these objectives, the course design changes, and student feedback are discussed. The data used here derive from the literature, ELS3 design, tutor reflections on the digital elements, tools, and teaching methods employed in the online course, as well as subsequent feedback from student end-of-term questionnaires.

4. Results and Analysis

When the literature was analysed, objectives were set to change the ELS3 course design, teaching and learning approaches, and assessments. The objectives were categorised into three areas – VLE design, interaction, and digital literacy, and subsequently framed as the Online Language Learning Design Objectives (OLLDO) (Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Online Language Learning Design Objectives (OLLDO)



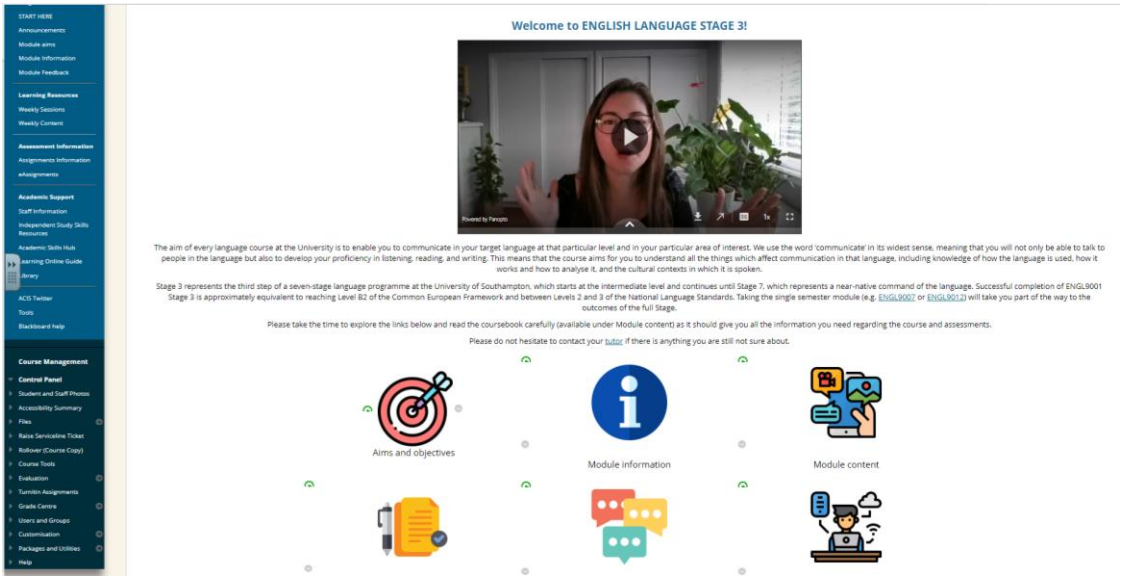
4.1. The Virtual Learning Environments

Blackboard was the primary VLE for this module. The first change implemented was to create a visual and well-organised Blackboard site as this is a key factor that can

contribute to student success in online courses (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). Students were provided with a starting point, including video and written introductions to the course, where they could access links to key course areas (Figure 4). On the left side of the page, there was a navigation panel to the main sections of the VLE which included the module announcements, aims, structure, content, and assignments information. Students could also access information on the learning and teaching methods used in the course and student support and provide feedback. To bring consistency and familiarity, the same layout and icons were used each week so students could easily navigate the pages, e.g. same icon for assessments and lesson slides. Each week started with a video introduction supported by a text setting out the learning objectives. The week was divided into steps with tasks students were encouraged to do as preparation for the synchronous sessions, and these steps followed Payne's cognitive load continuum (Figure 2).

Figure 4.

The VLE introductory page



The course used a Flipped Learning Model (FLM) with active learning strategies (Adams & Gingras, 2017; Sams & Bergmann, 2013) where students were asked to engage in activities before joining the interactive synchronous lessons. Course materials, learning tasks, and instructions were all available on Blackboard. In addition, a multimodal learning approach was used through a combination of text, video, audio, and embedded interactive activities using Wikis, H5P[4], Padlet[5], FlipGrid[6], and Thinglink[7] (see Figure 5 and Figure 6).

Teams was used as the video conferencing tool for the synchronous sessions, for tutor-student and student-student interactions, and as a community building space. On Teams, students were asked to introduce themselves at the beginning of the module and could contact each other. They could also use Teams to contact the tutor, attend the live sessions and tutorials, share their work, work collaboratively, record themselves, and to ask and discuss questions. Students were often asked to work collaboratively on a range of written and spoken tasks both in and outside the classroom. In Weeks 0-1, students were informed how these two platforms would be used and were signposted to training and support links. Time was allocated for them to explore the VLEs and ask questions via Teams, which was linked directly from Blackboard.

[4] https://h5p.org/
[5] https://en-gb.padlet.com/
[6] https://www.flipgrid.com/
[7] https://www.thinglink.com/

4.1. Interaction

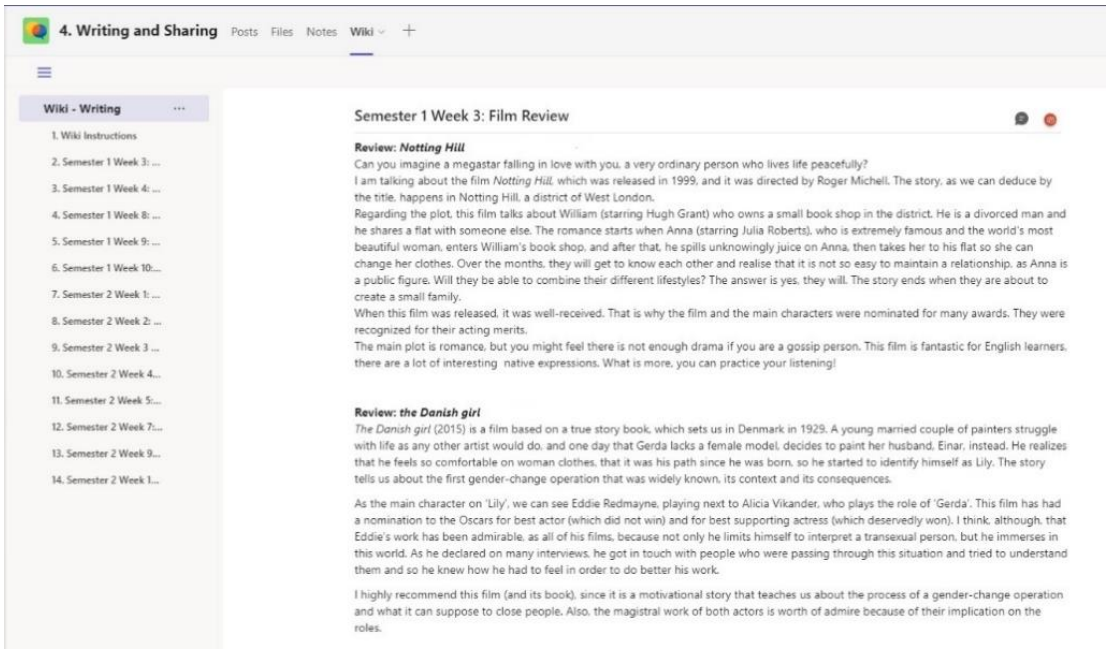
When ELS3 was redesigned for ERT, keeping frequent interactions in the TL was imperative, especially as most students were not in the UK and, therefore, did not have the immersive language experience outside the classroom. To do this, the course design included weekly opportunities for learner-content, learner-instruction, and learner-learner interactions. It also included active learning tasks, individual and group work, and opportunities for tutor and peer feedback. Students were asked to actively engage with course content on Blackboard by taking notes, answering questions, and participating in asynchronous written and spoken tasks. An example of this included students engaging with a Thinglink map on the history of technology (Figure 5) and a Padlet wall as a follow-up. After these, students used what they had learnt in activities with higher cognitive load, such as synchronous presentations, discussions, group projects, problem-solving tasks, or follow-up collaborative tasks. An example of these was students jointly writing a review, posting it on the Teams Wiki, and getting peer and tutor feedback (Figure 6).

Figure 5.

Example of interactive map on Blackboard using Thinglink

Figure 6.

Example of Wiki used on MS Teams



4.1. Digital literacy

When teachers first moved online in 2020, there were concerns over whether they and their students would have the confidence and skills to work online. During the first weeks of ELS3 online delivery in 2019-2020, digital skills were constantly developed and negotiated for both the tutor and students. During this period, the changes were small, and the focus was on getting students through the course. In the following semester in 2020-2021, the OLLDO (Figure 3) was established, and the course design focused on developing students' self-efficacy, self-confidence, autonomy, and digital and time-management skills to enable effective online learning. Opportunities were created for students to be exposed to and critically use various multimedia resources and tools in support of their L2 learning. The course also included signposting students to instructional pages and workshops to ensure that they felt digitally supported throughout their learning experience. Moreover, there was an emphasis on the importance of peer support and developing rapport with students so they would feel comfortable raising questions and asking for digital support when needed. Learning tasks and assignments were designed to raise students' awareness of digital literacies and to illustrate how these skills could be transferable to other areas of their lives or boost their CVs.

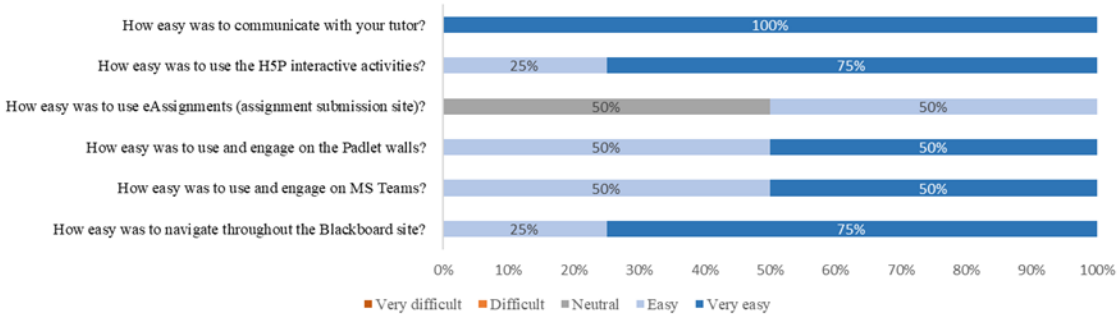
An example of this was a group project assignment where students had to submit a TV show video. In this assignment, students had the chance to develop their speaking skills outside the classroom, be creative, plan and deliver a TV show, develop their time management and digital skills, and work cooperatively as a group. Students were given a training session by the university digital learning team on how to record and edit videos, how to place themselves in front of a camera, what to do and avoid when recording themselves, and what tools to use for these. This assignment has not only enabled the development of their L2 skills but also enhanced their overall skillset and changed their mindset regarding the digital competencies they possess and require for their future careers.

4.2. Student feedback

Students were invited to give feedback on the course, and examples from the 2021-22 feedback are shared here. Students were asked to rate different areas of the course on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Very bad/difficult) to 5 (Very good/easy). The responses were positive, with most students rating areas such as online resources and activities, access and navigation, communication, and feedback as good or very good (Figure 7).

Figure 7.

Student feedback



Qualitative responses were positive regarding student-tutor communication, course content, VLE activities, navigation, engagement, and overall course accessibility.

> *This course is well-structured, the Blackboard site is organised and easy to access, and the contents were related to current issues on our lives locally and globally, which were very interesting to explore.* (Student 3)

> *It was easy to find the learning material, communicate with the tutor and classmates online.* (Student 1)

These areas underwent the most significant changes during the course redesign. The primary goals of the ERT course design were to ensure that students could easily access all course components, provide varied and accessible materials and resources, and facilitate easy communication with the tutor and peers.

> *I like that the teacher provided a lot of different resources for us to learn the language properly.* (Student 5)

Half of the students stated that if they were to take this module again, they would choose to do it online. The other half, who demonstrated a preference for a blended model, stated that this was for social rather than language learning reasons, such as meeting students in person, socialising, and developing closer friendships.

> *I miss interacting with classmates in-person. Since we have online sessions, it's difficult to make friends.* (Student 2)

Students were also positive about group work and feedback included one of the students reporting that small group activities added dynamism to the lessons. Students not only engaged in group work in every synchronous class but also outside the classroom. This, however, was also an area they suggested for improvement, "more group work" (Student 4). Another suggestion made was to have "more resources [for] self-study" (Student 1), which have been incorporated into the 2022-23 design.

The provision of positive feedback by students concerning their online learning experience and course design is indicative of an effective digital redesign. It implies that the course has been crafted in a manner that is significant to the learners, while also providing them with the necessary resources, interactions, and competencies to achieve success. This

feedback offers valuable insights to the instructor for the development and refinement of the course by highlighting areas of strength and opportunities for improvement.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper discussed the redesign of an ESL course with a focus on three key areas: VLE, interaction, and students' digital literacy. These were derived from the literature and categorised under the Online Language Learning Design Objectives (OLLDO). The VLE was improved with a visual and organised Blackboard site, providing easy access to course materials and support, and the course used a FLM and a multimodal approach. Interaction in the TL was emphasised, with weekly opportunities for learner-content, learner-instruction, and learner-learner interactions. The digital literacy aspect focused on developing students' self-efficacy, autonomy, and digital skills. Student feedback was positive, highlighting a well-structured and easy to navigate course, accessible resources, opportunities for interaction, and effective communication with tutor and peers. However, there is a need for greater emphasis on facilitating more group work and providing opportunities for students to foster meaningful friendships within the course.

Changes made to ELS3 generated a learning design that worked effectively during ERT and much of it will continue post-ERT. This experience has also highlighted that in-person courses cannot be quickly moved online. Transitioning to teaching online requires reimagining how to support students in achieving learning outcomes in new environments and under a different configuration of competences and constraints (Payne, 2020). Designing online L2 learning opportunities that are rich, engaging, and enjoyable for both tutors and students requires rethinking various aspects of the course, such as structure, design, accessibility, communication, interactions, multimodality, community building, and considering students and tutors' digital capabilities.

ERT has led both educators and learners to acquire new skills, experiment with innovative teaching and learning methods, and embrace flexible and adaptive approaches to assessment. It has also fostered digital engagement and co-creation in the educational process. As we transition to a post-pandemic world, universities cannot simply revert to their pre-pandemic practices. The teaching and assessment innovations prompted by the pandemic are likely to bring about significant and enduring changes in Higher Education (Contact North, 2022). The changes described in this paper, which have been incorporated into ELS3 using a blended format in 2022-23, exemplify this trend. Thus, in an age of changes and uncertainties, universities need to continue to invest in their online, blended, and hybrid courses and instructors' professional development in these areas.

Ethical statement

The study was part of author's teaching and learning design work. Students were invited to voluntarily provide feedback, and all data was anonymised. Ethics application has been approved by the Ethics and Research Governance Online (ERGO No: 80457). The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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