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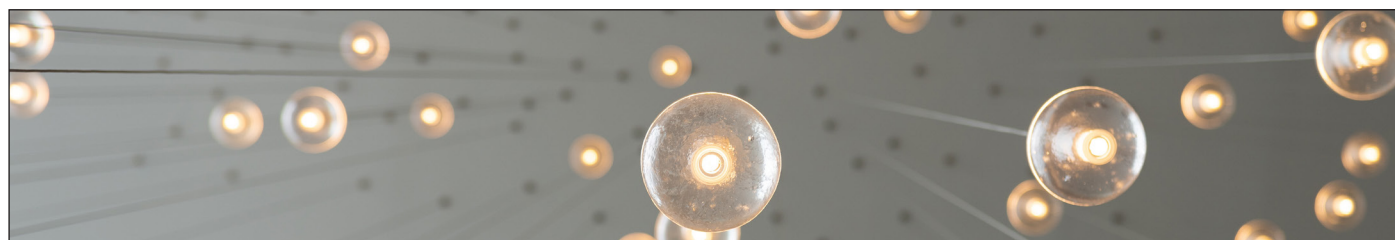
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Emergency Remote Teaching and me: An autoethnography by a digital learning specialist during Covid-19

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Abstract

In March 2020, WHO (2020) declared Covid-19 as a pandemic and most institutions embarked on Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). Central to ERT have been Digital Learning Specialists (DLS) who have been actively supporting teachers to make and sustain the transition. However, there has been limited research on their own experiences and perceptions during ERT. This autoethnography employs Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory as a conceptual lens, to look at ERT through the perspective of a DLS working in language education. The findings indicate that ERT challenged me to reconsider my premises and beliefs and grow as a professional. I also acknowledge that ERT, despite the challenges it presented, had a positive effect on digital language learning during the pandemic. Yet, concerns remain about whether education systems will embrace more pedagogically sound online learning approaches post-pandemic or whether they will settle with ERT.

1. Introduction¹

Covid-19 was declared a worldwide pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020 after the number of cases outside China had risen alarmingly and Europe had become the epicenter of the pandemic. Globally, many countries imposed

lockdowns to stop the spread of the virus, and, by March 2020, 144 countries were estimated to have suspended face-to-face education, affecting approximately 1.2 billion students (UNESCO, 2020). Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) emerged as a new teaching practice, making it possible for education systems worldwide to quickly switch to online classes.

My context, language education, was also affected by the pandemic, with remote instruction becoming the predominant teaching mode (British Council, 2020), at least for those with Internet access. I work as a Digital Learning Specialist (DLS) and lecturer in English Language Teaching (ELT) for a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the UK; I am also a freelance DLS who supports language institutions around the world with Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL). Since March 2020, this expertise has allowed me to assist both my department and other language teachers worldwide to implement and sustain remote teaching. Through this role, I witnessed the daunting challenges and transformations teachers experienced while adjusting to new teaching modalities and developing new skills (Rapanta, 2020; Moser et al., 2021). However, I feel that my own challenges and transformations as a DLS remain obscure.

Indeed, while the role of Digital Learning Specialists in teacher transformation during the pandemic is well documented in the literature (Xie et al., 2021a), there is relatively little research on their own experiences and transformations. Yet, due to their central role in ERT, understanding their perspectives, experiences, and transformations is crucial to better understand the phenomenon of ERT. To this end, this study will use autoethnography to explore whether and in what way Emergency Remote Teaching has been a transformative experience for me as a Digital Learning Specialist. Autoethnography is a research methodology that places the self at the centre of cultural analysis in order to understand a social phenomenon (Adams et al., 2015). Through self-reflexive inquiry on their lived experiences, researchers can provide important insights into sociocultural contexts and issues (see section 4.1 for more details). By using the self as my focal point in this study, I aim to shed light on how my experiences during ERT have changed the way I see myself and my professional context (language education). As such the overarching research question is:

- To what extent has my work as a Digital Learning Specialist during Emergency Remote Teaching transformed me as a professional?

Throughout this paper, the term *Digital Learning Specialist* is used as synonymous to that of educational technologist, instructional designer, digital learning coordinator, and head of digital learning and teaching (JISC 2017; University of Oxford, 2021) working in-house or as a freelancer.

2. Literature review

This section will examine the literature surrounding ERT. After looking at ERT in its broader educational context, it will explore how it relates to language educators and DLS.

The term Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) arose from discussions among online education researchers and specialists on Twitter to make a clear distinction between intentional high-quality online education (Hodges et al., 2020) and the temporary transition from in-person instruction to alternative remote deliveries during Covid-19. According to McCarty (2021) the term was coined to “non-judgmentally describe the circumstances of educators mostly unprepared to cope with the new necessity to teach online, relieving them of unrealistic expectations as to learning outcomes” (p.4). However, not all references to ERT have been non-judgmental. Schlesselman (2020) refers to ERT as “chaotic” (p. 1043) pointing out that institutions and teachers relied on quick fixes and transitioned their courses without adequate adaptations to online modalities. Similarly, Rapanta et al. (2020) assert that because of their pedagogical unpreparedness in online teaching, most institutions and teachers resorted to “tips and tricks” (p. 924) rather than pedagogically sound guidance and “little time was devoted to reflection-in-action” (p. 941). The literature also provides explicit and implicit critique about institutions and teachers’ resistance to technology before the pandemic pointing out that this was a significant barrier to designing quality remote instruction during ERT (Schlesselman, 2020; Thompson & Lodge, 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020).

Apart from the general educational scene, there are several studies associated with the challenges that language teachers experienced during ERT. For instance, it has been pointed out that there has been a shortage of language specific professional development during ERT (Moser et al., 2021) which may have led language teachers to resort to low-quality drills or easy-to-find but ineffective activities available online (Guillén et al., 2020). Hazaa et al. (2020) found that students’ and teachers’ “digital illiteracy” signif-

¹ Please note that a number of acronyms are used in the paper, such as ERT (Emergency Remote Teaching) and DLS (Digital Learning Specialist), and are spelt out in places to help the reader remember what each stands for.

icantly reduced the effectiveness of the online experience. Perhaps more importantly, it has been pointed out (Hazaa et al., 2020; Cheung, 2021) that the lack of authenticity in online interactions may be hindering teachers' efforts to foster students' communicative competence; authenticity is a feature underpinning Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Thornbury, 2016) and lack of it is believed to affect students' engagement and language learning.

Central to ERT have been Digital Learning Specialists (DLS) who have been actively supporting teachers to make and sustain the transition to online modalities either institutionally or via online knowledge communities (e.g., social media fora, blogs, webinars). While the role of DLS varies significantly between organisations, it generally bridges technology and pedagogy by "supporting or enabling learning with the use of learning technology" (Association for Learning Technology, 2020, para. 3). Under normal circumstances, DLS are responsible for assessing and implementing new technologies, as well as creating courses that integrate effective instructional design (Kanuka, 2006; Reiser & Dempsey, 2011). However, in this time of crisis, DLS have been "frantically assisting" teachers and students to shift online (Schlesselman 2020, p. 1042), sometimes almost overnight (Kilgore & Diaz, 2020), as well as offering training, materials and even IT assistance (Bal et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2021a).

While the literature clearly acknowledges DLS' integral role during ERT, most empirical studies have been focusing on how their work supported teachers and students to develop new skills while there has been limited research on their own learning and transformations. Xie et al. (2021a) do acknowledge that DLS had to learn new skills to support teachers and students, but they are more concerned about how they reached out to the teaching faculty and built relationships. Also, Xie et al. (2021b), look at DLS shifted thinking during the pandemic but again this concentrated more on the professional learning they were providing for teachers and institutions, and less on their own shifts during ERT.

However, given the key role of DLS during ERT, it is worth exploring both their own learning and shifting professional perspectives. Having a deep understanding and appreciation of these perceptions is critical not only to shedding light on their vital role during ERT but also to making better sense of the phenomenon of ERT itself. After the pandemic, the demand for online or hybrid courses might continue (Xie et al., 2021b; Ofsted, 2021), which may increase the need for DLS professionals as well. It is therefore of utmost

importance to have a thorough understanding of their shifting learning and thinking during the pandemic.

3. Theoretical framework

In this research, I employ Mezirow's (1991, 2000) Transformative Learning Theory as a conceptual lens through which to understand my transformative learning experiences during Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). This theory aligns with my study in that ERT was drastic and transformative during the pandemic for both teaching and learning. I therefore use this lens to understand the transformative impact of ERT on me as a Digital Learning Specialist (DLS).

According to Mezirow (2000), transformative learning takes place when adults engage in activities that cause them to see a different worldview from their own and then "make an informed and reflective decision" (p. 23) to integrate this realisation into their own worldview. He describes this learning as a process of adults modifying their assumptions, beliefs and expectations of themselves and others.

According to this theory (Mezirow, 1991), the following elements are key to bringing about transformative learning:

- *Disorienting dilemmas* i.e., a significant stimulus or cognitive conflict that takes place when individuals realise that their current understanding of the world does not fit with the current evidence. The sudden, unplanned, and rapid transition to online learning triggered by Covid-19 caused this cognitive imbalance, because as Eschenbacher and Fleming (2020) put it "individuals were unable to make sense of the experience within their current pre-pandemic frame of reference" (p. 662).
- *Critical reflection* i.e., the process in which a person intentionally constructs new meanings through critically examining their own beliefs; in my case, my reflections and shifts over the last year as well as this autoethnography. This process involves systematic reflection on underlying premises, beliefs and assumptions that can lead to a *perspective transformation* which the individual will then act upon.
- *Rational discourse*, i.e., discussing with others the newly discovered incompatibility between your premises and the world and exploring, logically and objectively, your personal and social beliefs and assumptions. For me, this was expressed through public speaking and private or public discussions on social media teacher communities and fora on the topic of ERT.

Several studies have used Transformative Learning Theory to understand teachers' and students' experiences and perceptions about online learning. For example, Andrews Graham (2019) examined faculty members' transformative learning as they transitioned from a face-to-face to a distance modality and then returned to the face-to-face classroom again. The results show that the shifts led teachers to reassess their own beliefs, roles, interpretations, and assumptions with the author concluding that Transformative Learning Theory is a useful lens when examining these changes. Also grounded in transformative learning, recent research by Kim et al., (2021) investigated teachers' experiences of online instruction during Covid-19 while Almusharraf and Khahro (2020) examined adult students' satisfaction and transformative experiences when instruction moved online.

Although transformative learning has been widely accepted as an important theory for adult learning, it is not free of criticism. Usually, critics believe it places an excessive focus on individual learning, neglecting social interaction and transformation (Şahin & Dogantay, 2018). However, other studies (e.g., Finnegan, 2019; Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020) challenge this notion, contending that Transformative Learning Theory does emphasise interpersonal learning, i.e., when people communicate to build understanding through *rational discourse*. Similarly, scholars maintain that Transformative Learning occurs when the individual and the social intersect to help adults transform their perspectives on both themselves and the world (Fleming 2002). With regards to Covid-19, Eschenbacher and Fleming (2020) argue that Transformative Learning Theory could provide adults with a useful framework for reflecting on the global crisis and for initiating a dialogue that could be useful in confronting it, both individually and collectively. Certainly, the pandemic has affected people on both a global and personal level, making transformative learning very relevant to the situation.

4. Methodology

4.1 Autoethnography

This study uses autoethnography, a research methodology that enables individuals to adopt self-reflexive inquiry and use their lived experiences to understand a social phenomenon (Adams et al., 2015). For Anderson (2006), this involves "understanding our personal lives, identities, and feelings as deeply connected to and in large part constituted by—and in turn helping to constitute—the sociocultural contexts in which we live" (p. 390).

Stemming from the field of anthropology, autoethnography shares some features of storytelling and self-narrative but goes beyond "mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (Chang, 2016, p. 43). Through the use of autobiographical stories and self-reflection on these stories, researchers are able to access and explore their complex inner thoughts and emotions and, thus, gain an understanding of social phenomena (Lee, 2020).

Anderson (2006) identifies the following five key features of analytic autoethnography:

1. Complete member researcher (CMR) status, which requires that the researcher be a full member of the social world under study.
2. Analytic reflexivity, which involves self-introspection directed by a desire to understand both the self and others, as well as sustained awareness of one's positionality.
3. Narrative visibility of the researcher's self i.e. enhanced textual visibility through field notes and other analytical evidence demonstrating the researchers' own experiences and thoughts.
4. Dialogue with informants beyond the self. Unlike evocative autoethnography, analytic autoethnography is not limited to self-experience. Thus, to avoid self-absorption the researcher should engage with informants beyond oneself.
5. Commitment to theoretical analysis. Analytic autoethnography is not concerned with recording personal experiences, but rather with using empirical data to draw insights into social phenomena. Because of this, Anderson (2006) recommends that autoethnographers remain "committed to an analytic research agenda" (p. 375) aimed at better understanding social phenomena.

Similarly, Chang (2016) calls for "autoethnographies that are ethnographic in their intent" (p. 49). In other words, autoethnographers (unlike ethnographers) use their personal experiences as primary data, yet, just like ethnographers, they are expected to treat their data critically, analytically, and interpretively in order to detect its cultural significance.

The benefits of reading and writing autoethnography are numerous. When a topic is personally meaningful and the study is contextualised appropriately in the researcher's sociocultural context, readers can gain a deeper understanding of social phenomena (Chang, 2016). This deep understanding of oneself and others can help build more successful and empathetic cross-cultural relationships. For the researcher, the process of self-reflection and self-understanding can also

lead to self-transformation (Chang, 2016). Finally, from a methodological perspective, the ease of access to data is an important advantage since the researcher draws on their own experiences as the basis for investigating a particular phenomenon.

However, it is precisely this strong emphasis on the self that has created some resistance to accepting autoethnography as a valuable research method. For example, autoethnographies are often criticised for showing self-indulgence, narcissism, introspection, and individualism (Atkinson, 1997; Sparkes, 2000).

Chang (2016) warns that if the following pitfalls are not avoided, autoethnography may indeed become a research method of limited social significance (Chang, 2016, p. 57):

1. Excessive focus on self in isolation from others;
2. Overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation;
3. Exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source;
4. Negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; and
5. Inappropriate application of the label autoethnography.

Set in a global pandemic, my research topic is at the intersection of self and social inquiry and using an autoethnographic lens will help me to better understand both my own experiences and the phenomenon of ERT. Furthermore, autoethnography seems closely related to my theoretical framework. As Lee (2020) asserts, by analysing their shifts or emotional struggles, the researcher may identify new perspectives and actions, making autoethnography an effective approach to research transformative learning.

Considering the above, I will take a rigorous approach to my inquiry; because my dual role (as both a participant and researcher of this autoethnography) requires self-reflexivity and detailed textual visibility of the self (Anderson, 2006), I will openly illustrate my experiences and insights and systematically identify embedded assumptions. I will then consider these assumptions in an objective and rational manner and discuss changes in my premises and beliefs during my engagement with ERT and this autoethnography.

4.2 Research questions

This research seeks to shed light on my transformative learning experience as a Digital Learning Specialist (DLS)

during Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). As such, the overarching research question (RQ) is *To what extent has my work as a DLS during ERT transformed me as a professional?* To answer the RQ, the following sub-questions will be employed:

- RQ1. What were my experiences during ERT as a DLS?
- RQ2. What was the impact of these experiences on my self-perceptions?
- RQ3. What was the impact of these experiences on my perceptions of teachers?
- RQ4. What was the impact of these experiences on my perceptions of language teaching and learning?

Understanding my shifting perspectives towards the self, teachers, and language teaching will provide insight into the impact of ERT on myself as a DLS and my professional context (language education).

4.3 Data collection and analysis

To answer my RQs, I collected data from March 2020 until April 2021 e.g., my own and others' social media posts, blogs, talks, emails, messages, and field notes (from instructional design, teacher training and class observations) which:

- a. refer to my work during ERT e.g. the roles I took on; the activities I engaged in.
- b. show my positionality and stance e.g. evidence of my feelings towards ERT when I first engaged with it.
- c. show my shifts and transformations e.g. evidence of changes in the way I felt over time.
- d. show the perceived impact of my work on teachers e.g. comments, tweets, and emails from teachers about my work; criticism I received, etc.

This formed *Data Set 1* which comprised a total of 10,120 words. During data collection, I used Chang's (2016) "inventory activity" (p. 76) which involves not only collecting but also evaluating and organising data. I used the above categories (a-d) to organise my data set but additional thematic categories were also born in the process of data evaluation.

This process brought back memories and feelings which enabled me to write story-based, narrative reflections which comprised my *Data Set 2* - a total of 7,185 words.

More analytically:

To answer RQ1, I used Chang's (2016 p. 73) autobiographical timeline and listed significant events and experiences related to my involvement with ERT in chronological order. I then selected the most prominent experiences, described its circumstances in a narrative format and explained why they were important.

To answer RQ2, RQ3 and RQ4 I read Data Set 1 closely and recorded my reflections to these questions:

- How did these incidents make me feel then? How do I feel about them now?
- What were my assumptions of teachers at the beginning of ERT? What were my assumptions about ERT as a teaching approach? To what extent are they different now?

To check my memory-based recollections and validate my findings, I also invited three "co-informants" (Chang, 2016, p.65); a DLS (co-informant 1), a teacher trainee (co-informant 2); and a critical friend with whom I frequently discussed my experiences with ERT (co-informant 3). I shared relevant parts from Data Set 2 and asked them to add comments. Where relevant, I included their contributions to my analysis and asked them to review and validate it.

During the initial reading of the datasets, I followed Chang's (2016) recommendation and made notes of my "impressions as to repeated topics, emerging themes, salient patterns, and mini and grand categories" (p. 131). I then worked systematically back and forth between the data sets coding interesting features and repeated patterns (Creswell, 2014) until I established a comprehensive set of 10 initial

codes and 25 sub-codes (see Appendix). At this stage I examined the relationships between the codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The ones that bore little relevance to my research questions, were excluded e.g. *theoretical terms*, while others merged together e.g. *doubting myself* into *feelings*. After multiple reviews, four refined themes and sub-themes emerged (Table 1).

As a way of validating what I had done thus far, I compared it with Chang's ten strategies' framework (2016, p.131):

- (1) Search for recurring topics, themes and patterns;
- (2) look for cultural themes;
- (3) identify exceptional occurrences;
- (4) analyse inclusion and omission;
- (5) connect the present with the past;
- (6) analyse relationships between self and others;
- (7) compare yourself with other people's cases;
- (8) contextualize broadly;
- (9) compare with social science constructs and ideas, and
- (10) frame with theories.

For Chang, there is no specific order in which the strategies need to be followed except that the earlier ones are more analytical in nature and the later ones are more interpretive.

4.4 Ethics

I decided from the outset to stay true to myself without exposing confidential information from the HEI I still work in. I therefore excluded data from management meetings as people would be easily identifiable. However, I included my field notes from trainings, instructional design and class observations as people's anonymity could be protected. In my freelance role, people's identities could hardly be identified

Table 1. Refined themes

My experiences during ERT as a DLS	• Adjusting to ERT • Exposing my positionality • Researching
The impact of my experiences on my self-perceptions	• Finding my DLS voice • Self-validation
The impact of my experiences on my perceptions of teachers	• Through my teacher lens • Through my DLS lens
The impact of my experiences on my perceptions of language teaching and learning	• Positionality shift • Opportunities • Fears

as I had worked and interacted with a significant number of people worldwide. I did, however, pay close attention to remove any information that would risk their being identified through deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009). Any public tweets and posts were also anonymised and identifying characteristics, such as geographical location and ethnic background, were removed.

Regarding procedural ethics, I obtained signed consent from my three co-informants to use data from their contributions and where relevant, I asked them to read my analysis and validate it.

5. Findings

Overall, the findings of my analysis show that my experiences since March 2020 led me to undergo a *perspective transformation* (Mezirow, 1991) with regards to ERT and its impact on my professional self (DLS) and the context I work in (language education). While I actively engaged in helping teachers move online, I did not really approve of it and feared that the unprincipled shift to online teaching would have a negative effect on language education. ERT and the emotions it triggered acted as disorienting *dilemmas* (Mezirow, 1991) that forced me to challenge my beliefs and assumptions and engage in *critical reflection* and *rational discourse* in order to find creative solutions. Below, I present the findings for each research question structured according to the themes that emerged from my analysis (see Table 1).

5.1 RQ1. My experiences during ERT as a DLS

When Covid-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020, and lockdowns were announced almost overnight in many countries, educators with no prior experience in online teaching were asked to move online urgently to ensure continuity of instruction. My social media feed was being flooded with educators' posts desperately asking for help to move online. I was angry! I had spent years working with technology. I had a master's degree in digital learning and years of teacher training, reading, and researching. How could they even think they could achieve this overnight? Why are they asking for help on social media? Aren't their institutions supporting them? Can this lead to a decent learning experience for the students?

The findings show that the following three facets triggered my *disorienting dilemmas* and encouraged me to engage in *critical reflection* and *rational discourse* (Mezirow, 1991), shaping my experiences with ERT from March 2020 until the time of writing.

5.1.1 Adjusting to ERT

The first lockdown in the UK took effect on 16 March 2020, and all unnecessary social contact ceased immediately. In the HEI where I work, my role as a DLS was adapted one week prior to the lockdown to encompass online instructional design, consultation and academic staff training while my teaching hours would be reduced to allow time for my new responsibilities. Meanwhile, in my freelance capacity, the demand for keynotes, training and consultation was rocketing and I would receive requests from around the world on a daily basis.

I was in demand, and it was all exciting, but I would soon be overwhelmed with troubleshooting, multimedia design, tight deadlines, and a constant feeling that I was taking part in an experiment where everyone assumed that I had all the answers. I didn't. When I designed online courses in the past, I didn't have the current time restrictions; I would also recruit teachers with advanced digital skills, and I would have designers create multimedia. None of this was currently in place so no, I was struggling to strike a balance between what was realistically possible and what was pedagogically sound.

In practical terms, I had to get used to training teachers exclusively remotely. In the past, I would train face-to-face in a lab where I could offer trainees hands-on support when required. Managing a group of 20 digitally-novice teachers remotely was beyond chaotic. For some of them, even basic software navigation such as finding the right button was a challenge, but I was unable to go next to them and show them where to look. I don't know how they really felt during the sessions as their feedback was always appreciative. Deep down inside though I feared that I was an awful trainer and that my sessions made them feel overwhelmed and inadequate.

Things gradually improved as I developed new strategies. I would include more step-by-step software walkthroughs, ask a lot of concept questions and offer one-to-one support slots for teachers. I found this last one to be less intimidating for both novice teachers and myself.

5.1.2 Exposing my positionality

Discussions on social media were buzzing among the academic community, with DLS, including myself, hotly debating the terminology for this new type of Covid-19 teaching to draw a clear contrast with principled online education. The term *Emergency Remote Teaching* first

Figure 1. Tweet, March 2020



Sophia Mavridi @SophiaMav · 21/3/20

Yes, it could be but it would need expertise in #elearning and instructional design. What we actually see at the moment is what I would call emergency remote teaching, not quality online learning. With this in mind, I think it would be safer to keep changes to the minimum.

appeared in Hodges et al. (2020) on 27 March 2020 but there is evidence that I was confidently using it before that (see Figure 1).

Feelings of frustration were overflowing each time I heard digitally-novice educators referring to what they were doing as *online teaching*. What they were actually doing was scramble their way onto Zoom and then try to make it more exciting by incorporating one hundred tools such as Kahoot, Quizlet, Flipgrid and loads more. To me, who had been working on digital learning for years, who had bothered to take it seriously, read the literature and do research on it, it was all an absolute hypocritical slap in the face.

Perhaps I was not so angry with the teachers; teachers were asked to build the plane while they were flying it and in a way, I sympathised with them. I was angry with the EdTech providers who had found a golden opportunity to sell their products; I was angry with the institutions which wanted to salvage the semester at all costs; and I was angry with the self-proclaimed trainers who after their own scrambles on Zoom they were training teachers to 'teach online' despite zero educational background in TELL. It was painful to see *online learning* becoming a caricature in their hands and so I challenged them in my keynotes and social media.

Quite a growing number of self-proclaimed, self-accredited experts in online learning lately. We really need to be careful about what we consume. These are difficult times for education. Teachers need support. Misleading them with inaccuracies is not helping.

(My facebook post, November 2020)

5.1.3 Researching

Despite the feelings of frustration described above, I found ERT intriguing. Never before had I seen the world of language teaching being so involved with technology. I

wanted to dig deeper and know more about ERT. Is it as bad as I think? How do language teachers - from all educational contexts, across all five continents - feel? What support do they need? And this was how my research project was born on 11 April 2020. In less than three months it received more than 1000 responses - an unprecedented number for me. And as I was reading the responses that were pouring in, I could hear the teachers' voices, fears, excitement, and struggles, and ERT started taking a clearer shape in my mind and in my heart.

Based on a mixed methods approach, this paper is now set to be published (see Mavridi, in press). However, even at the early stages of data analysis, the preliminary results were an emotional punch in the stomach; out of 1102 valid responses, 91% of the participants had never taught online before and very few (13%) received substantial training to transition online. Almost half of them self-organised their own training via freely available webinars and resources while 65% lacked ongoing training and support over the first months of the transition (March to June 2020). It was all shocking; and the more I immersed myself in the data analysis, the more my empathy for these teachers deepened.

5.2 RQ2: The impact of these experiences on my self-perceptions

5.2.1 Finding my DLS voice

As described above, ERT triggered me to expose my positionality and engage in public and private *rational discourse*. Evidence from early data, however, shows that this was not an easy endeavour. Were teachers ready to hear my criticism? Do I sound too unsympathetic and harsh? Will they hate me?

Signals from Twitter were mixed. Some teachers would find my tweets thought-provoking and insightful, but some

Figure 2. Tweet, March 2020



Sophia Mavridi @SophiaMav · Mar 25, 2020

...

A good read on why good online pedagogy matters. Students will learn via ANY platform as long as our teaching approaches allow this to happen. Pls stop focusing on Zoom and screencasting > Lecturing into your laptop is not nearly enough [timeshighereducation.com/opinion/lecturing-via @timeshighered](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/lecturing-via-timeshighered)

others insensitive and counterproductive as the following comment on my tweet (see Figure 2) suggests:

Sometimes you do just want to say give us a break! This stuff takes years to perfect. At the moment, zoom and screen casting seems enough to me...

(Anonymised comment to my tweet, March 2020)

This was disheartening. I was only trying to help but it felt like educators were not ready to hear the truth. Should I join the popular voices in language education which cheer teachers' scrambles in remote teaching? I didn't want to lie to teachers but neither did I want to appear unsympathetic among new 'online learning' enthusiasts. What if I'm wrong? What if they hate me?

All these questions, which I now see as *disorienting dilemmas*, would haunt me even more in mid-April 2020. A global association for language teachers had invited me to take part in a panel discussion on Covid-19 teaching. Over 1000 language teachers were expected to attend, which made me even more nervous and uncertain of what to say. I took issue with institutions, tech-providers, and publishers who were cheering teachers for stumbling on Zoom and urging them to keep it up because 'students need a teacher'. This was not true. Students didn't sign up for this; what they really needed was a good learning experience, not continuity at all costs.

I decided to first share my views with my co-panellists as we were preparing for the big day.

The trend is to support people with lies but I'm not sure I can jump on this bandwagon. I fear these fast food pedagogies will result in poor teaching, poor learning and an even poorer ELT sector.

(Email to co-panellists, April 2020)

I'm grateful for this private group discussion because I can now realise that my co-panellists helped me to reflect on my underlying beliefs and assumptions (critical reflection), crystallise my voice and get it out there (rational discourse).

We are not exactly in a position to put everything on hold while we plan a perfect (or less imperfect) plan for education in general.

I certainly don't think you should be sugar coating things. The voice of real experts like you who have been working on remote learning for years is REALLY important right now.

(Co-panellists' advice in April 2020)

On the day of the panel my heart was beating fast as I was trying to find the right words to say. I started off with the bravery of the educational community to step out of their comfort zones and just get on with it despite the steep learning curve. I emphasised that this should be celebrated because it shows determination and resilience. At the same time, I did introduce the term *emergency remote teaching* and stressed that what was currently happening was not online teaching but an ad-hoc, unprincipled approach that tries to simulate face-to-face pedagogies on online platforms. I used examples from my ongoing research to alert teachers of the issues with the pedagogy, teachers' workload and students' engagement and point out that ERT is not sustainable in the long run.

I could feel the vibes from the audience as comments in the chat were pouring in and my Twitter notifications were flooding my timeline. I couldn't believe my eyes. I had uttered my truth and teachers found it thought-provoking. I was in awe. Teachers WERE ready to hear the truth after all.

5.2.2 Self-validation

Many expressions of my positionality followed and evidence from the data shows that my educational community appreciated my voice; some said it helped them immensely with their remote teaching, others that I was influential. I had never experienced such public self-validation before, and I found this recognition motivating and inspiring.

Having attended some of your online talks and seminars, I think you are one of the most insightful academics with an eye on the reality of our teaching practices. Your saying “We are building the plane while we are flying it” couldn’t describe better the reality we have been experiencing since last March in our teaching practice.

(Private message from teacher, Greece, February 2021)

Thanks for all your work Sophia! It’s incredibly helpful for me and it gives me courage to go on trying new practices and developing new skills despite the great effort and time required! You’ve been a great inspiration to me!

(Private message from teacher, Italy, January 2021)

Perhaps the most surprising perception regarding my voice was that it was *compassionate* for teachers. I had no idea I was compassionate! In fact, I thought I came across as critical and unsympathetic.

If at any time today, you have the sense that your ears are burning, it is because you are one of the experts supporting my decisions in my Course Design rationale. Your compassionate defence of teachers at this time is greatly appreciated

(Private message from teacher, UK, May 2020)

These experiences helped me to find my voice as a DLS shaping not just how others see me as a professional but, perhaps more importantly, how I see myself.

5.3 RQ3. The impact of these experiences on my perceptions of teachers

5.3.1 Through my teacher lens

I was teaching a group of postgraduate students in October, when everything that could go wrong did. Some students were losing connectivity and would drop in and out

of the platform. I had to troubleshoot for them while keeping the rest of the class engaged. The breakout rooms would not work so I had to ditch the lesson plan and improvise an activity in the main room. Platform glitches would not allow my pptx to display on screen, so I had to convert it into a PDF while keeping students busy with something else and while repeating instructions for those who had sound issues. I just wanted to scream. The end of the lesson found me utterly stressed and drained. How on Earth do digitally-novice teachers manage these hiccups? Do they lose face? I went back to my survey data collection and read through some teachers’ answers and this one brought tears to my eyes.

I feel like no matter what I do, it is never enough. Not enough for me, as I would like to give my students much more and for the school that is always demanding something better.

(Language Teacher, Brazil)

5.3.2 Through my DLS lens

Quite recently, I made a post on social media about institutional decisions that add unnecessary tasks to teachers’ heavy workloads. The post, perhaps unsurprisingly, resonated with a lot of teachers but it also received replies from students and one of them almost broke my heart.

Teachers have had it easy, the students are paying the same 9K while not even receiving proper education.

(Instagram, February 2021)

Seriously? Teachers had it easy? The remote courses that institutions offered during the pandemic lacked on many levels, but teachers tried very hard and, in many cases, they developed remarkable skills. Teachers are the frontline workers of a system that left them alone to look for answers on social media. They are the buffer that absorbs most of the stress generated by ERT: students’ complaints, pedagogical concerns, technological issues, institutional demands.

And I felt at peace with these perceptions of teachers and glad that I could eventually hear and understand their voices. The truth is I was probably never against teachers; but over the first phases of ERT I had not realised who I was against. If teachers were indeed not able to provide ‘proper education’ as the student above asserts, it is the decision makers and the education systems which did not prepare them properly; and, perhaps, Digital Learning Specialists like me as well.

Co-informant 3 (critical friend) reassuringly notes that they had noticed this shift.

Yes, you were defending them quite strongly after a point. I remember you saying once that teachers can't be blamed for everything that goes wrong in education during Covid.

(Co-informant 3, April 2021)

Overall, the findings show that my experiences during ERT as well as writing this autoethnography brought about a clear *perspective transformation* with regards to teachers. Not making sense of my experiences within my pre-pandemic frame of reference triggered cognitive conflicts (disorienting dilemmas) which in turn led me to engage in *critical reflection* and *rational discourse* regarding my underlying premises and assumptions.

5.4 RQ4. The impact of these experiences on my perceptions of language teaching and learning

5.4.1 Positionality shift: Opportunities and fears

I feel that another major perspective transformation was with regards to the effect of ERT on language teaching and learning. While I initially took a very negative stance, I realised that ERT improved teachers' perceptions of technology, and in doing so, it opened up the possibilities that we - DLS - have been advocating for years.

It seems that co-informant 1 (DLS) shares my current view on ERT.

Absolutely. Teachers are finally listening and want to get their hands dirty and like you I feel this is preparing the ground for something good in the future.

(Co-informant 1, April 2021)

Although I now see ERT as a stepping stone to more innovative pedagogies in the future, the data also reveal some concerns. What if it's not a stepping stone but the final destination? There seems to be an emergence of self-proclaimed experts in digital learning, and evidence from the data suggests that one year into the pandemic, the pedagogy of language teaching is still struggling. For example, relatively recent field notes from freelance i) lesson observations suggest that teacher preparation programmes (BAs, MAs) are taught by lecturers who do not know how to teach

online; ii) ESL (English for Specific Purposes) classes raise concerns about engagement and assessment.

- T [the teacher], presenting slide after slide; interaction with sts [students] is minimal;
- T shows sts how to teach vocabulary. Some pictures are pixelated; all seem to be grabbed from Google without attribution.

(Notes from BA in ELT class observation, January 2021)

- Instructions before breakout room activity were only oral. T gives sts 10 min. Too short? Sts do not fully engage in the breakout room. There is no follow up in the main room.
- End of term reading comprehension exam. Exam is set to take place asynchronously; once started, it needs to be completed within an hour but sts can download the text anytime before they begin the test. Wonder how many sts had it translated on Google, then began the test?

(Notes from ESL class observation, March 2021)

Even so, there are some rays of hope captured in the data, as four language educators (from Korea, New Zealand, Greece, and UK) have contacted me asking for directions and postgraduate degrees that specialise in digital learning. This seems to be signalling an important opportunity for the world of language learning to develop more innovative pedagogies post pandemic.

6. Discussion

This study has found that my experiences during ERT challenged me to go through a *perspective transformation* in the way I see my professional self (DLS) and the context I work in (language education). This section will discuss how these findings fit with existing literature and what the implications are both for the professional self and context.

The literature tends to identify DLS as experts who knew what they were doing throughout ERT. For example, according to Schlesselman (2020), DLS "offered workshops, provided one-on-one consultation, and developed resources in the same way and with the same standards that they were used to" (p. 1042). However, the findings of this research align more with Xie et al. (2021a) who point out that DLS were themselves "in new territory" (p. 72) and had to

develop new skills. There were often compromises in key areas of their practice, but according to Gacs et al. (2020), these compromises are not necessarily negative if they promote “a rapid response” (p. 383). It could also be argued that DLS have the pedagogical and technical expertise to take such risks effectively. However, it is fair to admit that it was not only the teachers who had to compromise, improve, and learn new skills during ERT. It was all stakeholders, including DLS.

With regards to professional identity, Xie et al. (2021a) point out that the visibility and status of the role was boosted institutionally with Digital Learning Specialists (DLS) admitting that they now receive more respect from teaching faculty. As I already had my feet in both camps (by being both a DLS and a lecturer), I cannot entirely identify with this shift. The data shows, however, that ERT helped me significantly to find my voice as a DLS and feel more confident as a professional. It also connected all the different dots of my professional identity together into a more coherent whole; my institutional, freelance, and social media identities are now painting a more unified picture of my professional self.

With regards to digital learning, this research showed that ERT acted as a *disorienting dilemma* (Mezirow, 1991) that forced educational systems to step out of their comfort zones and find creative solutions. In doing so it provided a significant boost to online and digital learning paving the way to the possibilities that we, DLS, have been advocating for years. There is also evidence in the literature to support this; for example, Ferri et al. (2020) indicate that European educational systems are already planning to incorporate digital teaching into their annual teaching plans. Additionally, school leaders in the UK hope that some aspects of remote education can be maintained when schools return to physical classrooms (Ofsted, 2021). ERT has also inspired educators to pursue professional development related to digital learning and to appreciate its educational potential. According to Xie et al. (2021a), even those who were resistant to technology became more willing to acquire new skills. Even if this shift was because teachers did not have a choice but to rely upon technology during ERT (Brereton, 2021), it does signal an important opportunity for digital learning in the post-pandemic era as institutions and teachers are becoming potentially more receptive to the use of technology.

Indeed, the literature predicts “an increased synergy between online and offline learning” (Xie et al., 2021a, p.79) with the two modalities complementing one another after the pandemic (Ofsted, 2021). However, this research

captures concerns over the quality of this synergy in the language education sector. With most language institutions relying on quick fixes over the first phases of ERT (Moser et al., 2021; Mavridi, in press) and with this research showing that there are still significant pedagogical issues in language education, I fear that the less pedagogically sound practices that have been adopted during the pandemic may settle after it.

The literature seems to suggest that these pedagogical inadequacies may reflect a broader gap in the way language education has been approaching digital learning for years. For example, more than a decade ago, Kessler (2005, as cited in Compton, 2009) found that most language teachers seemed to gain their digital learning knowledge from informal rather than formal instruction; according to Hubbard (2008) the reason for this was a shortage of specialised Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) teacher educators and modules in teacher preparation programmes. During the pandemic, the literature confirms that language teachers were provided with generic technology-enhanced professional development rather than specifically designed for them (Moser et al., 2021). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the void was filled by self-proclaimed experts, technology vendors, or companies offering opinion-based, rather than evidence-based solutions (Rapanta et al., 2020; Thompson & Lodge, 2020). Moving forward, language education systems may need to identify TELL as a key priority in both teacher development and teacher preparation programmes in order to enable a more pedagogically informed approach to digital and online learning.

7. Conclusions

This study used autoethnography to understand Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) through the experiences and transformations of a Digital Learning Specialist (DLS). The findings show that ERT had a transformative impact on me as a professional, challenging me to find my inner voice, expose my positionality and develop new skills. The findings also show a clear *perspective transformation* towards ERT itself; As a DLS, I initially thought that the improvised and unprincipled nature of ERT would negatively impact language education. I now believe that ERT has been a beneficial approach for language teaching during the pandemic with the potential of acting as a stepping stone to more pedagogically sound digital instruction in the future. At the same time, I fear that if Technology Enhanced Language learning does not take a more prominent place in teachers’ professional development, ERT may establish itself as a new paradigm of online language learning after the pandemic.

The significance of the research is therefore two-fold:

First, it sheds light on a central but rather under-researched role during Emergency Remote Teaching, that of Digital Learning Specialist. Through supporting teachers to switch to online modalities and develop new skills, DLS also underwent important shifts and transformations. It is likely that after the pandemic the demand for online, hybrid and blended courses will continue, increasing the demand for DLS as well. Therefore, the significance of understanding their perceptions and transformations during the crisis is immense as we move forward.

Second, from the perspective of a DLS who has been actively involved in language education during Covid-19, it sheds light on the implications of ERT for language teaching and learning. Understanding ERT's potential opportunities and challenges is key for both effective action and strategic planning.

An important limitation of this study is that, as an autoethnography, it is informed by the experiences of an individual DLS. Although the breadth of the data was quite extensive both in its qualitative form and geographical contexts, generalising the findings should be handled with caution.

The next step for future research would be to build upon the findings of this paper by bringing in more DLS voices to explore their experiences and perceptions of ERT as we move out of Covid-19. I am also strongly motivated to continue monitoring how ERT develops post-pandemic and how it may prompt me to undergo further transformations as a DLS. After all, as Mezirow (2000) emphasised, transformative learning does not end, but rather inspires the learner to continue learning and transforming.

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Appendix A

Figure 3. Initial codes

