

Researching English Language Part-Time University Lecturer Voices During ERT

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As the coronavirus pandemic unfolded, Colin saw that many of his part-time university teaching friends were having experiences he was not. This prompted a Facebook post by Colin in late March with a call for collaboration about researching part-time teachers' reactions to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020). Three other researchers responded to the initial post. Chiyuki, a part-time lecturer, was interested because she wanted to investigate what other part-time teachers felt and share insights from ERT. As the full-time teacher with experience using educational technology at her university, Wendy was tasked with supporting the teachers in her department. As a result, she wanted to find out about part-time teacher experiences and reflect on ways she could better support the teachers at her university. As a teacher educator and researcher, Bill had been interested in teachers' emotional experience of their work and saw ERT as a unique experience that needed to be documented.

We created an initial survey with the aim to better understand the working situation of part-time university English teachers at the beginning of ERT and to gauge participating teachers' emotional well-being. This was followed up with weekly surveys throughout the 2020 academic year. From this initial survey which is discussed in this paper, we learned the beginning of ERT created drastic changes for part-time teachers' working conditions. We also learned about the relationships these teachers had with their universities, with other teachers, and with themselves.

Objectives

- To reveal themes found in the data regarding part-time university instructors' experiences during ERT.

- To give a voice to part-time instructors and shed a light on their working conditions.

Practical Implications

Relationships Teachers had with their Universities

For this theme, we discovered four interconnected subthemes, one of which (issues relating to compensation and job security) is discussed here. Teachers signalled that they felt they would be the ones to bear the brunt if students complained, and also that they were ignored when compensation was handed out.

I think for part-time teachers, too, we worry that we'll get fired if we don't perform well. We have little job security. (Teacher 39)

One of my schools... offered all students 50,000 [yen] to make sure they could cope with the tech challenges they face. All of us part-timers are left scratching our heads that they would ignore us so completely. (Teacher 28)

One implication we drew from these and other statements is that universities often focused on students' needs while disregarding those of part-time teachers. These actions led part-time teachers to feel neglected and not inspired by their employers to face the challenges of ERT.

Relationships Teachers had with Other Teachers

We found that many teachers were not only worried about the lack of stability and support offered by their institutions, but that they were also worried about learning to use the technology needed to provide acceptable classes during the ERT situation. Because many universities were not technologically prepared for the situation, they were also not prepared to provide the training necessary to help teachers prepare for their online classes. Therefore, some teachers took it upon themselves to help their colleagues.

I have been involved with educational technology for many years, taught blended learning, and I have been using Moodle for more than 15 years, I am confident in my ability to teach classes online. I have been spending a lot of time helping others to get the basics down. (Teacher 61)

I was terrified, confused and dumbfounded. Some assistance by a couple of other teachers and online instructions got me to the point where I felt I could deal with the situation to an acceptable degree. (Teacher 66)

Despite not feeling fully confident, the assistance provided by colleagues seemed to help some teachers overcome their initial stress about the prospect of ERT. These types of informal networks strengthen bonds between co-workers, and show the innovative ways instructors find to cope with difficult or unexpected situations by supporting each other and working together. Institutions need to recognize the efforts part-time teachers have made during ERT to provide effective instruction. They also need to pay more attention to the conditions of part-time teachers and more explicitly support those who often make up the bulk of the foreign language teaching staff.

Relationships Teachers had with Themselves

During ERT, part-time teachers in this study showed their vulnerability as they faced many uncertainties, anxieties, and mental as well as physical concerns. They also faced professional issues, yet at the same time, they showed resilience and steadfast professionalism towards their teaching.

I feel quite nervous, but I am doing my best and it is working out so far. I feel that if I do end up having problems, the proper support will not really be there for me. (Teacher 3)

This is a huge learning curve, I will come out of it with a new set of skills but I'm experiencing a lot of anxiety. However, I do feel like it's sink or swim, and I mustn't sink. (Teacher 40)

Under excessively stressful working conditions, educators tended to seek the positive aspects of the situation, such as learning new technological skill sets, and went forward from the insights gained in doing this. As Kelchtermans and Strittmatter (1999) assert, vulnerability can be the birthplace of resilience. Such resilience can be enhanced through collaborating with empathetic and supportive

colleagues, being proactive in problem-solving and self-care, and by embracing positive yet realistic perspectives.

Reflective Conclusion

From conducting the survey and then reading pertinent literature to understand some of the data collected, we unexpectedly saw snapshots of the lives of part-time university instructors in Japan. We learned about their working conditions, concerns related to integrating technology into teaching, and a need for greater support from institutions. We also learned about issues related to physical and mental well-being during the initial shift to ERT. In spite of the importance of their presence as a moving force of tertiary education in Japan, it is also apparent that part-time teachers' needs are a neglected topic, which made us aware of the need for faculty development specifically to support them. This could entail teacher training, discussion forums, and regular distribution of information in concise language (either Japanese or English) that is understood by all. For those looking to do masters or doctoral research, this is an area in need of further exploration.

References

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About the Authors

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Wendy M. Gough primarily researches academic writing curriculum and developing communities of learners in writing classes.

Link to presentation on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_Dgml0AGq8

