

Did They Transform Their Teaching Practices? A Case Study on Evaluating Professional Development Webinars Offered to Language Teachers during COVID-19

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Received: November 25, 2022

Accepted: January 16, 2023

Online Published: January 18, 2023

doi:10.5430/ijhe.v12n1p36

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v12n1p36>

Abstract

Professional development webinars became very common in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following a case-study research methodology, this study explored the potential of professional development webinars offered to university language teachers in transforming their online pedagogies. A focus group discussion with four university language teachers was conducted. They attended several professional development webinars during the pandemic on online pedagogy, teaching platforms and course management systems, online assessment and research skills. Using transformative learning theory as a theoretical lens for data analysis, the results revealed that webinars enabled teachers to resolve some misconceptions about online teaching and learning, enhanced their critical reflection on their online teaching practices and formed some new practices of online pedagogy. The study provided some implications for higher education to enhance professional development webinars.

Keywords: COVID-19, higher education, teacher professional development, transformative learning theory, webinars

1. Introduction

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, most higher education institutions embraced emergency remote teaching (ERT) to provide educational services while maintaining social distancing (Crawford et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). This pedagogical shift posed several challenges to teachers, such as adapting content, learning new technological tools and following online pedagogy (Hartshorne et al., 2020) which created a serious demand for teacher professional development (Alvarez & Corcuera, 2021; Crawford et al., 2020; Dhawan, 2020). At the same time, there was a serious call for teacher professional development initiatives to provide psychological, technological and methodological support to reduce the negative impact on the educational process and ensure quality education (Almazova et al., 2020). Hence, to curb the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus responsible for COVID-19 disease, most teacher professional development provisions have been offered through webinars. Webinars are “digital tools to deliver training and education through synchronous audiovisual communication among remotely located training instructors and participants” (Gegenfurtner et al., 2020, p. 5).

Research concerning webinars for professional development during the pandemic is scarce, and the available research has only investigated teachers’ attitudes and the characteristics of webinars (Ancho & Arrieta, 2021; Gegenfurtner et al., 2020; Sakulprasertsri et al., 2022). The core argument made in this paper is that despite literature claims of the effectiveness of webinars in enriching teachers with required pedagogical skills, teachers participating in these webinars still find online teaching and learning complex and demanding. Hence, this study attempts to evaluate how the webinars offered to language teachers during the pandemic helped teachers transform their online teaching practices. The study is guided by the following research question: how did the professional development webinars help language teachers transform their online teaching perceptions/practices during the pandemic?

The study was conducted in an Omani higher education institution where a series of professional development webinars were offered during the pandemic. These webinars were delivered by teachers from the English Language Centre to their colleagues and a few webinars featured external speakers. Each webinar lasted between 25 to 45 minutes and attendance was obligatory. The webinars were about online pedagogy, teaching platforms and course management systems, tools for online teaching/learning, online assessment and a few on research skills. The

participants of the study were four language teachers with 9 to 15 years of teaching experience. They attended 16 webinars during the pandemic and one of them presented two webinars.

Apart from contributing to the literature, this study provides an opportunity to advance the understanding of how webinars can transform teachers' teaching perceptions and practices. Also, it presents guidelines on preparing effective webinars for teachers.

2. Literature Review

A search was conducted using the following search string: [webinars OR webinar-based learning OR web-conferencing OR webcast AND teacher professional development OR teacher training AND COVID-19]. Twelve additional papers were identified through snowball search. Title and abstract screening were performed to identify empirical and theoretical research related to teacher professional development and webinars for teacher professional development during the pandemic in higher education.

2.1 Professional Development during the Pandemic

Some research attempted to synthesise the effective characteristics, the covered content and skills and mediums of professional development programmes during the pandemic. Schildkamp et al. (2020) identified elements for effective professional development initiatives. Professional development content should focus on technological knowledge, should be based on active learning and should be contextualised and responsive to the situation and needs of teachers. Likewise, Al-Naabi et al.'s (2021) framework for preparing teachers for ERT has five design considerations for effective professional development programmes: delivered online, based on social learning and practice-based approaches to learning, contextualised and flexible.

In addition to equipping teachers with methods of online pedagogy, professional development programmes should provide psychological and technological support (Almazova et al., 2020). Psychological support might consider teachers' workload since they use significant time for preparing educational content whereas technological support might consider tools needed for online content creation and online teaching (Almazova et al., 2020).

To master online teaching, Albrahim (2020) classified skills and competencies into six categories: pedagogical skills, content skills, design skills, technological skills, management and institutional skills and social and communication skills. Along with the considerable importance of technological tools in professional development, there should be a consideration of how, why and when to apply them (Carmona et al., 2021). Basantes-Andrade et al. (2022) claimed that these programmes should guide teachers in developing digital competencies related to the creation of digital content and security.

Through an analysis of teachers' tweets during the pandemic to enhance their knowledge of online pedagogies, Trust et al. (2020) recommended social media platforms for creating learning spaces to aid cognitive development and well-being and for providing informal collaborative learning opportunities. Similarly, through an examination of educational tweets, Carpenter et al. (2020) concluded that Twitter can aid professional development, providing opportunities for collaboration and reflection. In conclusion, in addition to teachers' attitudes of attending the webinars and the essential components of these provisions, there is a need to measure their impact on transforming teachers' practices.

2.2 Webinars for Educational Purposes

There has been a growing interest in the use of webinars in education (Häkkinen & Järvelä 2006; Polanco-Bueno, 2013; Tseng et al., 2019) and this has been due to the ability to join webinars anywhere with computer devices (Gegenfurtner & Ebner, 2019). Although the studies reviewed in this section were not conducted during the pandemic, they outlined the use and features of webinars in educational settings.

Some research has focused on the effectiveness of webinars on learning. In their systematic literature review, Gegenfurtner and Ebner (2019) found that webinars were more effective than asynchronous learning platforms and regular classroom settings. In another meta-analysis research comparing webinars to face-to-face instruction, Ebner and Gegenfurtner (2019) associated webinars with students' higher satisfaction levels. Sweeney (2009) found that webinars had a positive impact on students' learning and led to high student/teacher approval rates. Furthermore, webinars prepared learners for exams and provided them with virtual synchronous opportunities to interact with the facilitator (Gegenfurtner et al., 2020).

Others investigated the cost-effectiveness, accessibility and convenience of webinars for educational purposes. Accessibility and a high level of geographical flexibility created a positive reaction from trainees on webinars (Gegenfurtner et al., 2020). Similarly, Toquero and Talidong (2020) claimed that webinars' cost-effectiveness, ease of

access and flexibility of learning supported professional development during the pandemic. Also, webinars empowered teachers with required knowledge and skills for online teaching and learning while they are at home (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

Apart from knowledge dissemination (Ahrens et al., 2016), webinars offer instructional features, such as screen sharing and facilitating class interaction through questions and answers, virtual group work, polls, immediate feedback and data to aid teachers' reflection (Cornelius & Gordon, 2013). Webinars can engage participants in problem-based learning, group reflection and shared-objective discussions (Häkkinen & Järvelä 2006). Webinars can also help learners understand e-learning tools and create e-portfolios, which support self-assessment and self-reflection (Polanco-Bueno, 2013).

Although the reviewed studies thus far reported positive views of webinars, various issues might negatively impact webinars, such as technical issues, poor internet connectivity and power supply (Ahrens et al., 2016; Olesova et al., 2011; Srichanyachon, 2014). Referring to the core argument made in this paper, despite the effectiveness of webinars for professional development highlighted in the existing literature, in reality teachers might have faced some issues that could have hindered transforming their online teaching practices.

2.3 Webinars for Teacher Professional Development during the Pandemic

There has been some research during the pandemic concerning the use of webinars for teacher professional development. Employing open-ended questionnaires, Ancho and Arrieta (2021) investigated 44 Filipino teachers' understandings and attitudes toward professional development programmes before and during the pandemic. Based on teachers' views, they reported that pre-COVID-19 professional development shed light on "content, pedagogy and technology, action learning, graduate studies, leadership and management, and action research" whereas professional development during the pandemic focused on "online teaching and learning, technological capacity, and mental health" (p. 25). They recommended that professional development webinars should allow teachers to collaborate, and they should be contextualised and based on the timely needs of teachers.

To measure satisfaction and usefulness of webinars on online toolkits, research publications and action research for English language university teachers, Sakulprasertsri et al. (2022) reported that the teachers demonstrated high satisfaction with webinars' content, the speakers and the format. They also found the webinars useful in enhancing their pedagogical, technological and research knowledge. However, the teachers reported that the webinars were not engaging because "the collaboration and interaction were limited because the webinars followed the conventional lecture format in which the talk and the discussion sections were separated" (Sakulprasertsri et al., 2022, p. 313). Also, knowledge application was limited due to a lack of hands-on practice engagement. To organise effective webinars, the study recommended contextualised webinars with a higher engagement level and practical knowledge application.

In a similar study, Gegenfurtner et al. (2020) explored the attitudes of 419 trainees towards participation in 48 off-the-job webinars in supply change management, industrial management, early childhood education and mathematics. Although the study was conducted in a training institute, it was included in this review because the institute is a part of a higher education institution responsible for the training programmes and the findings of the study have a similar practitioner implication for academic lecturers. The study concluded that a positive reaction towards webinars was achieved through ease of accessibility to training materials and a high level of geographical flexibility. The study recommended a higher level of interaction, using polls, breakout rooms and discussion boards, the length of each webinar should not be over 90 minutes and the availability of good internet connectivity.

Alvarez and Corcuera (2021) investigated the experiences of 10 higher education teachers in participating in in-service professional development webinars. They concluded that webinars provided flexible engagement in lifelong learning, openness to delivery of professional development programmes and improvement of teachers' digital skills. Likewise, Tanucan and Uytico (2021) claimed that teachers' participation in webinars enhanced their knowledge of synchronous and asynchronous teaching skills in addition to allowing formal deliberations and collaboration among teachers regarding online pedagogy. Despite some challenges faced during the beginning of the pandemic in attending webinars, they found webinars enriching and essential for professional growth in the future. Similarly, Toquero and Talidong (2020) argued that webinars can provide "theoretical knowledge and practical skills of the teachers" (p. 200) that are essential for quality online and remote teaching. Although they admitted the scarcity of research investigating the impact of webinars on teachers' learning, they claimed that webinars are useful for disseminating knowledge and promoting various learning engagement, collaboration and internationalization methods.

The studies outlined in this review have merely explored teachers' attitudes towards webinars, the characteristics of webinars for teacher professional development, the satisfaction and usefulness of webinars and their accessibility and convenience during the pandemic. Although, there seems to be a general conclusion based on teachers' views on the declarative knowledge enhancement from attending webinars, there is a dearth of empirical research on webinars impact on teachers' knowledge and competency of online pedagogy during the pandemic. Hence, through transformative learning theory as a theoretical lens, this paper seeks to contribute to this gap by investigating how webinars were helpful in transforming teaching pedagogies during the pandemic.

3. Methods

3.1 Theoretical Framework

On a relativist ontological basis, I viewed the teachers participating in this study to have the ability to interpret the world differently based on their social beliefs and assumptions. My epistemological perspective was that understanding the research phenomenon can be achieved through an interpretation of teachers' subjective meanings and assumptions which they ascribe to the actions based on their past experiences and collaboration with other teachers. Situated in an interpretive epistemological paradigm, I adopted a case study research methodology to allow the exploration of complex and embedded phenomena (Creswell, 2018).

Transformative learning theory aims to "understand the process whereby adult learners critically examine their beliefs, assumptions, and values in light of acquiring new knowledge and correspondingly shift their worldviews to incorporate new ideas, values and expectations" (King, 2002, p. 286). This process of examination requires a change to learner's frame of reference which is "their acquired coherent body of experience -associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses- that define their world" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). This change occurs during the interaction with others to construct personal meaning (Schols, 2012).

Mezirow (2008) viewed transformative learning as "a metacognitive epistemology of evidential (instrumental) and dialogical (communicative) reasoning" (p.93). Based on this view, he provided a five-step process of transformative learning:

- (1) reflecting critically on the relevant assumptions
- (2) in instrumental learning, determining that something is true by using empirical research methods
- (3) in communicative learning, arriving at more justified beliefs by participating freely and fully in an informed continuing discourse
- (4) taking action on our transformed perspective
- (5) acquiring a disposition – to become more critically reflective of our assumptions and those of others, to seek validation of our transformative insights through more freely and fully participating in discourse and to follow through on our decision to act upon a transformed insight (p.94)

Mukhalalati and Taylor (2019) suggested a three-stage process of transformative learning:

- (1) experiencing a confusing issue or problem and reflecting on previous perspectives about the event
- (2) engaging in critical evaluation and self-reflection on the experience
- (3) taking action about the issue, based on self-reflection and previous assumptions

The chosen theory guided the data collection and analysis. The pool of questions used for the focus group discussion included questions on the stages of transformative learning. Additionally, the stages of transformative learning guided the deductive coding of data.

3.2 Research Methodology

A case study methodology was deemed suitable and matched the nature of the investigation as it allows a deep exploration of significant features of the case and a creation of plausible interpretations of a case that is contextualised and localised within a bounded space and time (Tight, 2017). Also, it allowed the exploration of the phenomenon in its natural context (Algozzine & Hancock, 2017) because teachers were teaching online and they attended some webinars during the same time this study was conducted, while using other research methodologies might deprive the investigation of its natural context.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

A focus group discussion was conducted with four language teachers who participated in professional development webinars during the pandemic, identified through convenience sampling. This method was used for its suitability in

retrieving personal attitudes, views and beliefs (O. Nyumba et al., 2018), and in allowing teachers to share and reflect on each other's experiences (Dilshad & Latif, 2013). Also, it ensured eliciting rich data through group members' interactions (Hennink, 2013; Rabiee, 2004). The focus group discussion lasted for an hour, and it was conducted virtually on Microsoft Teams. A focus group discussion guide was developed and followed by the researcher to ensure coverage and saturation.

Grounded in the chosen theoretical framework, the study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach in six steps: data familiarisation, coding data, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up. Both inductive and deductive thematic analysis were followed. First, the transcripts were cleaned and imported into ATLAS.Ti® (Qualitative data analysis software). After successive rounds of readings, the data was coded, and some quotations were highlighted in the transcripts. Then, the codes were reviewed, grouped based on occurrences, and grounded in the data. Four themes emerged and explained the dataset, which are presented in detail in the next section.

4. Results

The thematic analysis identified four themes: the role of webinars in resolving misconceptions, the role of webinars in enhancing critical reflection, the role of webinars in forming new assumptions/practices of online pedagogy and recommendations for future webinars. This section presents the results of the focus group discussion based on the identified themes. Participants are identified as Teacher A, ..., and Teacher D.

4.1 The Role of Webinars in Resolving Misconceptions

The results indicated that the webinars helped teachers identify disposed assumptions regarding online teaching and learning difficulties. Teacher A, Teacher B and Teacher D mentioned some concerns and anticipated some challenges of teaching online. For example, Teacher A said, "... the first webinars which started immediately after the outbreak of the virus were very theoretical. However, I was able to foresee some issues that we might encounter while teaching online".

From the second webinar onwards, teachers started questioning their assumptions about online teaching methods. For example, Teacher B thought that group work may not be feasible in the virtual classroom before the pandemic. However, the webinar on using MS Teams (a video conferencing software) and on Google Docs (online collaborative word processing software) helped her to start thinking of planning group work activities for her class. Sharing a similar view, Teacher C commented on the webinar on Google Docs saying that "after the webinar, I started thinking of how to use Google Docs for group collaborative writing which I thought was not possible in a large class with mixed abilities students".

The results revealed that teachers were able to identify some misconceptions about online teaching platforms. For example, Teacher D thought that some online teaching platforms need specialised training, especially for creating online assessments, and knowledge of programming language. However, this misconception faded away after attending the webinar on preparing quizzes in Moodle and on using assignments in MS Teams. These pre-existing assumptions were questioned by teachers since all teachers had not taught online before the pandemic and only Teacher B studied an online course. Hence, cultural and educational reasons triggered the need for change in teachers' habits of mind.

4.2 The Role of Webinars in Enhancing Critical Reflection

The webinars enabled teachers to practice critical reflection on their assumptions and practices. Teacher A and Teacher B mentioned that the first webinars offered opportunities for discussing theories, platforms and issues of online pedagogy and remote teaching which paved the way for them to reflect on their beliefs and skills. Teacher C said that "although the first webinars were held before we began teaching, they helped me in reflecting on my own beliefs of online teaching and learning. However, as we started teaching online, the webinar become more practical and thus I started to self-reflect on my teaching practices". When asked to provide an example of self-reflection on teaching practices, she provided an example of how she implemented breakout rooms in her virtual class. She added, "I tried the strategy three times and each time reflected on the practice to avoid the issues encountered. I had to watch the recording of the webinar again when the first trial failed". Furthermore, Teacher D reflected on his strategies for selecting and adopting online content for his classes. He started to critically evaluate the existing materials and adapt them for the level of his students and online delivery.

4.3 The Role of Webinars in Forming New Assumptions/Practices of Online Pedagogy

The webinars guided teachers to form new assumptions and practices of online pedagogy. For instance, Teacher A

was able to form new conceptions about virtual flipped classroom methodology. Additionally, through the webinars, she was introduced to some technological tools for designing interactive videos for her virtual flipped classroom. Both Teacher B and Teacher C reported their intake of new strategies and techniques for facilitating online group work and discussions and online marking of written assignments. Teacher D learned how to better adapt/design teaching materials for his classes.

The webinars created opportunities for sustained discussions on online teaching and learning among teachers. Teacher D said, “when I meet with my officemates, they often discuss the software and tools that were introduced in the webinars and how they have applied them in the virtual classes”. Also, Teacher A mentioned that some colleagues approached her to ask for some clarification on how to use some tools that were discussed in the webinars.

4.4 Recommendations for Future Webinars

Although teachers were satisfied and were able to transform their assumptions and of online pedagogy, they recommended some changes to enhance the webinars. First, Teacher A recommended a need to select topics of webinars based on a systematic needs analysis because “the first webinars were general and useful, but the some of the latter webinars were not related closely to what we teach, so the centre should be selective on topics of external speakers”. Teacher B echoed a similar recommendation that “focused programmes will directly inform our everyday teaching practice”. Teacher A and Teacher D recommended follow-up webinars for practical and hands-on-practice to discuss the issues encountered in real practice with the presenter again. All teachers recommended a fewer number of webinars each semester considering their workload. They also recommended making the attendance of other departments’ webinars optional.

5. Discussion

Although the effectiveness of webinars for professional development during the pandemic was questioned for not enabling a professional upgrade in teachers’ online teaching skills due to the complexity of online teaching and learning, the study found these provisions somehow useful for teachers to transform their online teaching practices. The three-stage process of transformative learning suggested by Mukhalalati and Taylor (2019) was followed. First, teachers experienced an issue or dissatisfaction with an existing belief/practice of online learning. Then, they critically evaluated and reflected on the issue. Finally, they took action and formed a new belief/practice. Interestingly, the process was a cyclical process that was performed repeatedly during the process of teaching online and attending these webinars. Eventually, through attending webinars, the teachers created a new frame of reference based on an integrative set of experiences (Mezirow, 1997).

A key facilitator of the transformative learning was teachers’ ability to process a critical examination of their beliefs (King, 2002) based on the contents of the webinars. Additionally, they provided teachers with a platform for collaboration which conforms with the belief that dialogue is required for transformative learning to take place (Mezirow, 2008; Schols, 2012). This collaboration has increased teachers’ motivation and satisfaction in online pedagogy. The webinars did not only provide teachers with opportunities for dialogical (communicative) reasoning, but also provided them with instrumental learning (Mezirow, 2008). Dialogical learning occurred twice: with the speaker and the teachers during the webinars and between the teachers after the webinars. However, instrumental learning minimally occurred after the webinars when teachers determined the effectiveness of a teaching strategy/ a teaching tool using the scientific research methods (Teacher A and Teacher B); the heavy workload of teachers during the pandemic might explain this.

Teachers’ ability for transformation might reflect some of their personality traits, such as being inclusive in their perceptions, open-minded towards others’ points of view, and being able to integrate new perceptions into their daily lives (Dirkx, 1998). Additionally, the fact that they were new to online pedagogy and to participating in webinars can be attributed to their engagement in transformative learning. These facts increased their interest and curiosity for learning. The local demand and competition among private higher education institutions in providing quality education and meeting local quality assurance needs fostered teachers to reflect and transform their practices through their attendance of these webinars. Furthermore, the recent call to participate in scholarly activities and enrich research output at the language centre fostered teachers’ intrinsic motivation to both present in the webinars and become involved in instrumental learning and research activities, eventually contributing to transformative learning.

6. Conclusion

The study investigated the impact of professional development webinars on transforming teachers’ online pedagogy during the pandemic, initiated by the assumption that teachers’ practices in online teaching were not adequately developed despite their participation in professional development programmes. The findings generally suggest that

webinars enabled teachers to resolve some misconceptions of online pedagogy, enhanced their critical reflection and formed new practices. However, some webinars were not contextualised, some were not practical, and some were not related to teachers' everyday practices which somehow hindered the potential, maximum transformative learning to take place.

The evidence from this study suggests that for better and effective professional development webinars, higher education institutions should customise webinar provisions upon the needs and the teaching and learning situations of their teachers. Second, they need to ensure a better dialogical nature of webinars in which group activities, group discussion and group reflections are facilitated. In addition, there should be a follow-up webinar and continuous monitoring from the facilitator for practical sessions for participants to reflect after implementing the tools. A sustained discussion on the topics of webinars should be encouraged through social networks and discussion hubs.

Two limitations need to be considered. The study only examined the transformative learning impact of professional development webinars without analysing the content of the webinars. Also, the current investigation was limited to one higher academic institution and one specialisation.

Future research might investigate the content of the webinars using content analysis methodology. A further study may explore the potential impact of webinars on the professional growth of the presenters using autoethnography research. Further investigation is required to determine the value and the impact of these webinars on collaboration among teachers.

Acknowledgements

This research was undertaken as part of the PhD in e-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University. I am pleased to acknowledge the contribution of Dr Philip Moffit and peers in supporting the development of this study and its report as an assignment paper.

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