

Teaching English when schools are closed

Experiences & lessons learned

AUGUST 2021

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- develop research capacity by involving postgraduate students and early career researchers
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Summary

Building on early studies that found significant variation between schools in terms of their approaches to and priorities for remote learning during Covid-19 school closures, this report investigates how these variations manifested at subject level, focusing on secondary-school English teaching. Through interviews with school leaders, heads of department and teachers, it considers issues such as:

- how teachers' online pedagogy is affected by their ability to use technology for learning, and the questions and opportunities raised by this
- the contrast between traditional forms of literacy and the broader, multimodal literacies that operate in digital environments
- differentials between synchronous and asynchronous learning
- the approaches and activities that most effectively promoted student engagement and understanding.

It offers recommendations for policymakers and teachers on how to develop online learning and pedagogy in future.

1. Introduction

When schools in England closed to most students in March 2020, teachers and school leaders faced an immediate pedagogical challenge. While the use of digital technology is increasingly common in schools (Starkey, 2020), teachers were required to teach most students remotely for the summer term. Early surveys indicated that schools varied in their approach according not only to school culture but also to dimensions of broader school advantage and disadvantage. A Sutton Trust report highlighted differences between fee-paying and state schools, particularly in the use of synchronous ‘broadcast’ lessons and the extent to which students had individual contact with teachers (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). Another survey indicated that schools in geographical areas of disadvantage focused on ensuring student wellbeing and access to online provision, while those in more affluent areas focused more on student engagement and ‘making the most of the opportunities for children to learn differently’ (Moss et al., 2020, p. 9). Our study considered how such variation manifested at subject level, focusing on secondary-school English teaching.

2. Literature review

2.1 THE SHIFT TO ONLINE EDUCATION

Moving learning online was an emergency response. The foremost concerns of teachers, school leaders and parents were student welfare and wellbeing (Moss et al., 2020; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2020), with schools playing a vital community role. To write of ‘school closure’ is misleading, as most schools continued to provide on-site care for vulnerable children and those of key workers. Although not all off-site learning took place online, the majority of schools used some form of online provision (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020).

Concerns about students’ access to and engagement with online learning during lockdown have been widely reported (Lucas et al., 2020; Scully et al., 2021; Babinčáková & Bernard, 2020). However, early surveys also indicated rapid development in teachers’ understanding of how to use technology to support learning at a distance. Our previous research showed that whether teachers had a positive or negative initial experience of off-site teaching was predicted by their confidence in using technology, their training and the availability of technical support. Over 70 per cent of teachers in our survey thought that their experience of off-site teaching would enhance their teaching skills when full on-site teaching resumed (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2020; see also Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

Numerous studies have indicated the potential of technology to support online learning in sophisticated ways, including opportunities for collaboration, creativity, interactivity, problem-solving and personalised formative assessment (Schleicher, 2020). However, with the sudden shift to online provision, teachers were immediately forced to work in unfamiliar ways, with inadequate preparation (Doucet et al., 2020). Knowledge of technology, by itself, is not enough to teach online: teachers also need the specialist ‘assessment and pedagogical skills’ required to use technology effectively for teaching and learning (United Nations 2020, p. 23). Mainstream classroom pedagogies cannot translate straightforwardly to online environments (Scully et al., 2021; Doucet et al., 2020;

Morgan, 2020). Teachers who are used to inhabiting their classrooms as embodied, dialogic spaces will have developed skilful ways to orchestrate face-to-face interaction, but this is no preparation for designing online courses and managing on-screen interaction. There is a relational challenge to connecting remotely which might affect motivation and engagement (Doucet et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020). Teacher-centred pedagogies are likely to be less effective (Doucet et al., 2020; Morgan, 2020). It can also be difficult to assess students effectively (Doucet et al., 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

The framework of technological pedagogical and content knowledge (TPACK) indicates how different domains of knowledge intersect when teaching with both digital and analogue technologies (Koehler et al., 2013). Drawing on Shulman’s concept of ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ (Gudmundsdottir & Shulman 1987), TPACK adds knowledge of technology as a separate component, introducing the concept of ‘technological pedagogical content knowledge’ to describe teachers’ knowledge of how to use technology pedagogically within a particular subject discipline. The shift to remote provision required teachers to almost instantly adapt to use of new – and in this case digital – technologies. Effective online pedagogies need to be tailored to the demands of the subject discipline. As Doucet et al. suggest, ‘there is no one-size-fits-all in distance learning’ (2020, p. 15). At present, the knowledge base for subject-specific online pedagogies is limited (Voogt et al., 2013), and this represents a significant gap.

2.2 ENGLISH ONLINE

We focus on ‘English’, a discipline with a contested nature (Bleiman, 2020; O’Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020). UK research consistently finds that teachers of English tend towards a ‘student-centred ideology’ (O’Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020, p. 225). Internationally, however, research suggests that teachers tend to use technology ‘in a predominantly teacher-led way’ when provision is suddenly moved online (Scully et al., 2021; Tandon, 2020). Yandell (2020) captured the complexity of the interaction between pedagogy and curriculum by interrogating how one widely used lockdown teaching

resource – online lessons provided by Oak National Academy – presents a narrow, prescriptive model of English. The voices of English teachers presented in Evans et al. (2020) echo his perceptions, and highlight 'the loss of classroom social interaction' (p. 252) that many of them suggest is fundamental to the nature of English teaching.

3. Research design

Most studies of remote provision in 2020 used online surveys. We aimed to complement these by constructing a deeper, holistic and contextual understanding of how particular schools taught English. We adopted an interpretive approach to present an emic perspective, probing teachers' perceptions and presenting these as descriptive case studies.

Through interviews with teachers and school leaders, we developed three case studies, each focusing on an English department within a secondary school. The University of Exeter granted ethical approval. We adhered to BERA (2018) guidelines. Given concerns about wellbeing and workload during the pandemic, we paid particular attention to the voluntary nature of participation and participants' right to withdraw. We conducted interviews online according to participants' availability, and offered either individual interviews or focus groups, according to preference. Many participants enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. We conducted the interviews and focus groups in autumn 2020, with participants discussing their experience of teaching in the summer term.

3.1 CASES

We worked with an opportunity sample of schools in south west England, using our professional networks to invite English departments to participate. We selected cases on the principle of maximum variation in order to understand how schools in different circumstances, working with different resources and student populations, responded to the crisis. This resulted in the cases that follow (pseudonyms have been used).

As illustrated in table 3.2, we interviewed leaders, heads of department and teachers. All leaders and heads of department were interviewed individually, while some teachers opted to be interviewed in focus groups of two or three participants. The respondents represented a mixture of seniority and experience, with some leaders having worked in the profession for more than 20 years and

some class teachers who were newly qualified when the pandemic struck. A total of 16 teachers participated. Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. They were conducted and recorded on Microsoft Teams, with the audio content transcribed and imported into NVIVO for analysis.

The interviews aimed to understand how schools taught English through remote teaching. The questions focused on pedagogy; teacher knowledge and confidence; opportunities and risks; and disadvantage.

We coded interviews inductively through constant comparison, and refined a coding framework which could be applied across all cases while still allowing for variation (see appendix). We used the top-level themes (see table 3.1) as headings for writing detailed individual case studies that described perspectives and practices within each case. A cross-case analysis revealed points of similarity and difference, as summarised in table 3.1.

Table 3.1
Top-level coding themes

Coding themes	
1	Description of remote teaching
2	Who made decisions
3	Factors influencing decision-making
4	Pedagogical knowledge
5	Opportunities & risks
6	Lessons for the future

Table 3.1
Cases

	Rivermead	South Town	Fernwood
Characteristics	<p>State school</p> <p>Non-selective</p> <p>Mixed, 2–16 years</p> <p>Size: smaller than national average</p> <p>English as an additional language (EAL) lower than national average</p> <p>Free school meals (FSM) slightly higher than national average</p> <p>Education health and care plan (EHCP) & special educational needs (SEN) support higher than national average</p>	<p>State school</p> <p>Non-selective</p> <p>Mixed, 11–16 years</p> <p>Size: in line with national average</p> <p>EAL lower than national average</p> <p>FSM in line with national average</p> <p>EHCP / SEN in line with national average</p>	<p>Independent (fee-paying) school</p> <p>Non-selective</p> <p>Mixed, 3–19 years</p> <p>Size: smaller than national average</p> <p>EAL data unavailable</p> <p>FSM data unavailable</p> <p>EHCP lower than average; SEN support higher than average</p>
Participants	<p>Deputy head (also a teacher of English)</p> <p>Head of department</p> <p>Focus group: 2 teachers of English</p>	<p>Head of department</p> <p>Focus group 1: Second in department, 2 teachers of English</p> <p>Focus group 2: 3 teachers of English (one of whom joined the school in September 2020)</p>	<p>Deputy head</p> <p>Head of department</p> <p>Teacher of English</p> <p>Focus group: 2 teachers of English</p>

Note: student population data is taken from the latest information on gov.uk, which covers 2018/19.

4. Findings

4.1 DELIVERY & DECISION-MAKING

The difference in provision between independent and state-sector schools, outlined in table 4.1, reflects wider trends (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020; Moss et al., 2020). The difference between synchronous and asynchronous teaching is important as live lessons have been associated with greater engagement (Lucas et al., 2020). While synchronous lessons are not innately better, teachers who are used to face-to-face interaction may find live lessons more aligned to their usual methods and thus easier to teach effectively (Scully et al., 2021). In all cases, considerations of student wellbeing, staff workload and wellbeing, parental wellbeing, and the equity or parity of student experience were foremost in decision-making. The independent school had the additional financial concern of needing to justify its fees, while the state schools were working within broad parameters set by their multi-academy trusts (MATs). The head of English at Rivermead also reported wanting to be careful not to widen the gap between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged students. Teachers felt supported by leadership and reported that expectations of them had been manageable.

4.2 PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

All teachers found that they initially tended towards a didactic model of delivery, with an emphasis on teacher explanation and modelling, and limited opportunities for student–teacher or student–student talk. In the state schools, pedagogy continued to focus mainly on direct explanation, modelling and knowledge-based quizzes, in opposition to the student-centred project-based approach that researchers often suggest is optimal for online learning (Morgan, 2020; Doucet et al. 2020). Staff at Rivermead noted the impact of this on textual analysis: with activities focused primarily on lower-order cognitive skills and ‘the blunt instrument of the knowledge tests’, they found that students returned to school less confident than before when analysing and interpreting texts. Staff reported wide variation in how students engaged in writing tasks, with some students flourishing without classroom distraction, but more students producing rushed, minimal work. All teachers found it hard to assess student understanding and to identify misconceptions, missing the ease of assessment in live classroom interaction. Teachers at both state schools also noted the lack of opportunity to offer

Table 4.1
Approaches to online delivery

Rivermead	South Town	Fernwood
Predominantly asynchronous, on Google Classroom.	Predominantly asynchronous, on Moodle.	Predominantly synchronous, on Google Classroom.
Amended timetable generally following existing curriculum.	Amended timetable generally following existing curriculum.	Followed existing timetable and curriculum.
External resources widely used, including extensive use of Oak National Academy online lessons as the main teaching input from May half term onwards. Intervention platforms such as Bedrock Vocabulary, Seneca and Century were also used.	Standardised sequence of weekly learning: (1) engagement with a resource establishing the learning focus; (2) reading task; (3) recorded lesson with a PowerPoint and embedded questions; (4) students produce and upload written work; (5) round up quiz.	Synchronous online lessons, often with students moving between live interaction and independent work. Moved towards project-based learning with more time off-screen.
Teachers created additional resources such as short Loom videos, annotated texts and PowerPoints. Teachers also uploaded recordings of books they read aloud.	Teachers sourced, created and sequenced resources including worksheets, videos, recorded PowerPoints and quizzes. Teachers also uploaded recordings of books they read aloud.	Teachers taught live according to the timetable and included resources such as videos, PowerPoint or worksheets. They also used YouTube videos.
Interaction included written and video feedback, email and Google Chat.	Interaction primarily through written feedback using rubrics and email.	Interaction included live online discussion and live and asynchronous written feedback.

feedback as they would usually do when circulating the classroom – particularly about writing. Adaptive teaching was also a challenge, with differentiation primarily by resource (for example, providing annotated texts). There was a notable difference at Fernwood: in the independent school, teachers were able to incorporate live discussion; use online tools to comment while students wrote; and to use breakout rooms to allow students to access support from teaching assistants.

Despite the challenges, participants were pleased with levels of student engagement and proud of the teaching content. Particular successes included student engagement in independent research (in all schools), and use of text models and recorded modelling to scaffold students' writing and presentations. South Town teachers reported that recording lessons had made them more aware of their use of language as they explained and modelled, helping them to become more explicit and precise. All schools monitored student engagement closely, though in the state schools this tended to focus on completing tasks rather than on the quality of work produced.

All teachers indicated that any future online teaching would build on their new experiences and skills. Rivermead teachers said that they intended to include live lessons should schools close again. Fernwood staff suggested that they might adjust the curriculum and take a project-based approach in order to continue developing the independence offered by online learning and to limit screen fatigue (see Doucet et al., 2020; Morgan, 2020).

4.3 OPPORTUNITIES, RISKS, & LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Participants suggested that their knowledge of and confidence in using technology improved rapidly. This transferred into greater use of technology in face-to-face and blended teaching (for example for self-isolating students) during the autumn term, and creating online materials suitable for independent study.

Teachers reported that 'being online' had affected student engagement and learning. With bounded time and space for learning lost, routines and learning habits disrupted, and screen-fatigue affecting focus, students' concentration levels were noticeably affected when they returned in autumn 2020. Handwriting had deteriorated, as well as punctuation and grammar, which had been automatically corrected when students

wrote online. Individual students were affected in a range of ways. Students with special educational needs (SEN) and Pupil Premium students were mentioned, as were children whose parents were key workers on night shifts. Teachers noted that lack of routine or stability at home may have affected the extent to which children were supported with their school work, and that children in 'large families' struggled to access computers and quiet work spaces. Wellbeing continued to be a concern after schools reopened, particularly for those in exam year groups. 'Catch up' interventions were considered important, but also a potentially dangerous burden for students under stress.

Finally, epistemological beliefs about the purposes of education were challenged. One school leader wondered whether the 'closures' were a missed opportunity to do something 'different', such as building 'cultural capital'. Another school questioned the nature of what they were 'trying to achieve' in English, and the importance of teaching interpersonal skills as opposed to an examination syllabus:

'Should we emphasise more about the class, the group work, the sharing, the inter-human skills, the listening to others?'

'[This] very logical linear way that you do online, might free up, I hope, more space to think, well, what was the bit that was missing?'

5. Implications & recommendations

The challenges that teachers encountered were not absolute constraints. Rather, they signalled the need for teacher development that focuses on how to broaden the repertoire of online provision, particularly in using technology to support interaction and student-centred pedagogies. Teachers thought that their confidence and knowledge of technology had grown. Nonetheless, they also mentioned considerations for the future, which we offer as recommendations.

5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Capitalise on the current appetite among teachers for professional development (see also Scully et al., 2021, Kim et al., 2020) by funding high-quality training in using technology for teaching and learning. This training should focus on:

- how to use online tools in dialogic, non-didactic ways, including online collaboration and dialogue
- effective approaches to asynchronous learning, including student-centred approaches, and consideration of how to adapt the curriculum to suit online learning rather than attempting to replicate face-to-face activities
- online assessment and feedback
- targeting higher-order skills rather than simply factual recall
- subject-specific online pedagogies.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS PLANNING ONLINE OR BLENDED DELIVERY

Consider expanding the repertoire of online delivery to include:

- greater opportunities for student talk, including student–student talk
- more freedom for students to work offline and to explore topics independently
- use of a ‘flipped’ approach to consolidate independent learning

- assessment activities that target higher-order skills, not simply factual recall
- ‘home-made’ rather than sourced videos, to help maintain relationships between teachers and students.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH

- A focus on developing higher-order skills, including textual analysis and evaluation.
- Opportunities for extended writing and live online feedback on writing.
- Online spoken English student presentations.

In addition to those points raised by participants, we recommend that researchers investigate online pedagogy with a phase- and subject-specific lens, developing a better understanding of the particular disciplinary opportunities and challenges created by online teaching.

6. Conclusion

Teachers' online pedagogy during lockdown is closely linked to their understanding of how to use technology for learning. As schools return to 'normal' teaching, there is an opportunity to use the impetus generated by the rapid development of teachers' knowledge to expand repertoires of technology-enhanced learning, whether as an alternative or a supplement to face-to-face teaching.

There are questions about the nature of online teaching and the subject of English: all our participants were targeting traditional forms of literacy in their teaching, following a national curriculum which is at odds with the broader, multimodal literacies that operate in digital environments (Gillen, 2014).

In recognition of the exceptional work that teachers produced during this period, we would like to end with the words of one participant:

'What this has shown is the flexibility of teachers and English teachers, the thirst for pedagogical knowledge, which I think has increased exponentially as well. And I just think, we're a resilient bunch, aren't we?'

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Appendix

CODING FRAMEWORK

Codes in italics (in tables for themes 4 and 5) were used as subheadings to cluster child nodes.

Theme 1

Description of remote teaching

Rivermead	South Town	Fernwood
Curriculum content	Curriculum content	Curriculum content
Distribution of responsibility	Distribution of responsibility	Distribution of responsibility
Live or asynchronous	Live or asynchronous	Live or asynchronous
Resources used/created/not used	Resources used/created/not used	Resources used/created/not used
Teacher-student interaction	Teacher-student interaction	Teacher-student interaction
Timetable	Timetable	Timetable
	Differentiation	

Theme 2

Who made decisions

Rivermead	South Town	Fernwood
Who made decisions	Who made decisions	Who made decisions

Theme 3

Factors influencing decision-making

Rivermead	South Town	Fernwood
Collecting evidence	Collecting evidence	Collecting evidence
Existing curriculum alignment	Existing curriculum alignment	Existing curriculum alignment
Impact on parents	Impact on parents	Impact on parents
Parity of experience	Parity of experience	Parity of experience
Rigour	Rigour	Rigour
Staff wellbeing workload	Staff wellbeing workload	Staff wellbeing workload
Student wellbeing	Student wellbeing	Student wellbeing
Timing	Timing	Timing
Existing technologies	Existing technologies	
Quality of available materials		Quality of available materials
	Safeguarding	Safeguarding
Student progress		Student progress
The attainment gap		The attainment gap
Access to technology		
Engagement		
Multi-academy trust		
	Making resources for the future	
		Attendance
		Financial considerations

Theme 4

Pedagogical knowledge

Rivermead	South Town	Fernwood
<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Challenges</i>
-Assessment for learning	-Assessment for learning	-Assessment for learning
-Interaction	-Interaction	-Interaction
-Reading	-Reading	-Reading
-Spoken language	-Spoken language	-Spoken language
-Writing	-Writing	-Writing
-Facilitating not teaching		
-Knowledge vs analysis		
	-Explanations	
	-Motivation	
	-Streamlining content	
		-Feedback
		-Judging time
		-Marking
		-Modelling
<i>Successes</i>	<i>Successes</i>	<i>Successes</i>
-AfL	-AfL	-AfL
-Differentiation	-Differentiation	-Differentiation
-Direct instruction	-Direct instruction	-Direct instruction
-Feedback	-Feedback	-Feedback
-Independent research	-Independent research	-Independent research
-Reading	-Reading	-Reading
-Revision	-Revision	-Revision
-Exemplars	-Exemplars	
	-Spoken language	-Spoken language
	-Writing	-Writing
-Relationships		
	-Modelling	
	-Quizzes	
		-Flexibility
		-Interaction
Curriculum adaptation	Curriculum adaptation	Curriculum adaptation
Knowledge of specific technologies	Knowledge of specific technologies	Knowledge of specific technologies
Teacher confidence	Teacher confidence	Teacher confidence

Theme 5

Opportunities & risks

Rivermead	South Town	Fernwood
Parents	Parents	Parents
School	School	School
-Tracking or monitoring	-Tracking or monitoring	-Tracking or monitoring
<i>Students</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Students</i>
-Being online	-Being online	-Being online
-Engagement	-Engagement	-Engagement
-Factors influencing progress	-Factors influencing Progress	-Factors influencing Progress
-Wellbeing	-Wellbeing	-Wellbeing
-Specific students	-Specific students	-Specific students
	-Behaviour management	
		-Differentiation
<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Teachers</i>
-New knowledge of technology and related pedagogy	-New knowledge of technology and related pedagogy	-New knowledge of technology and related pedagogy
-Support and collaboration	-Support and collaboration	-Support and collaboration
-Wellbeing	-Wellbeing	-Wellbeing
-Workload	-Workload	-Workload
-Workspaces	-Workspaces	-Workspaces
	-Connectivity	-Connectivity
-Freedom, time and space		-Freedom, time and space
-Reusable resources	-Reusable resources	
	-Improvements to practice	
		-Control of image

Theme 6

Lessons for the future

Rivermead	South Town	Fernwood
Impact on attainment	Impact on attainment	Impact on attainment
Pedagogy	Pedagogy	Pedagogy
Preparation for another lockdown	Preparation for another lockdown	Preparation for another lockdown
Resourcing	Resourcing	Resourcing
Teacher critical reflection on practice	Teacher critical reflection on practice	Teacher critical reflection on practice
Exam year groups		Exam year groups
		Reconsidering purposes of education
		Technological adaptation



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