OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF VIDEOCONFERENCING-BASED TEACHING AMONG ENGLISH TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, online English as a foreign language learning courses have become increasingly popular since teachers and practitioners have realised the benefits of synchronous, video conferencing-based learning activities for their learners. Not all teachers (especially pre-service teachers) are, however, sufficiently well-versed in implementing video conferencing-based English teaching to use its benefits effectively. A qualitative research study aiming to investigate the opportunities and challenges experienced by six pre-service teachers of English as a foreign language in their video conferencing-based praxis was thus devised. It included a five-week, practice-based teacher training course for video conferencing-based English teaching followed by a five-week teaching practice. The study's findings revealed several opportunities, such as video conferencing-based English courses effectively facilitating productive skills (e.g., speaking and writing) by implementing collaborative learning strategies that support cognitive processes and promote social interaction. Furthermore, the nature of video conferencing-based English teaching encouraged the pre-service teachers to utilise more active learning approaches to keep learners' interest and engagement in class, potentially leading to longer retention of vocabulary, enhanced comprehension, improved motivation, and critical thinking skills. There were also several challenges. For example, not all pre-service teachers found video conferencing tools engaging or easy to cope with due to limited internet speed, which may affect the quality of video and audio communication. Additionally, instructional design should be tailored to learners' physiological and psychological needs, including fatigue, technology-related stress, and anxieties. The findings from this study provide valuable insights for educators, policy-makers, and researchers and contribute to the ongoing discourse on the use of technology in foreign language education.

Keywords: teacher training; future teachers; online learning, foreign language education; videoconferencing

Introduction

Video Conferencing (VC) tools have become increasingly popular among learners worldwide due to their potential benefits, such as providing opportunities for individuals with severe health conditions or physical disabilities to attend educational institutions remotely (Mallow et al., 2016). VC-based learning also offers the convenience of allowing learners to connect from the comfort of their homes and manage their schedules more effectively without the need for transportation (Mader & Ming, 2015; Pandey & Pande, 2014). In addition, the use of VC tools can facilitate the participation of guest speakers from any part of the world, which can enrich learners' confidence and expertise (Kamal & Szczerba, 2009). However, VC-based English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching may not be engaging or accessible for all learners, as some may face challenges related to limited internet speed, resulting in poor video and audio communication quality. Additionally, some young learners may misuse the option to turn off their cameras or microphones for non-educational purposes, such as chatting with friends, playing games, or opening other distracting tabs (Tacker, 2021). To take advantage of the available VC-based EFL affordances and address the challenges that learners face in this medium, a teacher training programme should be designed to effectively implement the advantages and minimize the drawbacks of this medium as much as possible. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the opportunities and challenges encountered by six pre-service EFL teachers in their VC-based teaching practices and identify potential ways to overcome the challenges in future VC-based teaching practices.

Literature Review

VC-based courses for EFL teaching have been shown to effectively utilise collaborative learning strategies, enabling learners to engage in tasks and receive feedback from teachers despite physical separation (Ertla et al., 2006). Breakout rooms integrated into the VC platform promote independent work with peers and social interaction, enhancing comprehension and EFL development, particularly for beginner students.

Wei-Li, et al., (2016) have suggested a correlation between VC-based EFL teaching and learner-centred education. VC-based EFL teachers tend to encourage active learning in VC classes more than face-to-face classes, maintaining learners' interest and engagement, which may result in longer-lasting knowledge, improved comprehension, and increased motivation. Moreover, interactive teaching strategies are strongly associated with VC-based EFL teaching, resulting in relatively high levels of learner satisfaction (Kim, 2020). VC-based EFL courses have unique features, such as screen sharing, annotation functions, and the ability to ask and answer questions through the Zoom chat window, which can assist learners in comprehending newly introduced information.

Formative assessment is considered more suitable for VC-based EFL courses compared to summative assessment (Setyowati et al., 2021). This type of assessment allows EFL teachers to evaluate learners' gradual progress by utilizing various activities or tasks related to all English skills, including reading, speaking, writing, and grammar.

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The advantage of formative assessment is that it enables instructors to comprehend the most effective and efficient approaches that can aid students in comprehending and learning more, improving the learning process by striving to provide maximum learning outcomes (Agah et al., 2021). Due to the specific nature of the VC medium for EFL teaching, VC-based EFL teachers require specialized training in the instructional design and planning of VC-based EFL classes, as well as the effective use of various online tools for teaching different second language (L2) skills (Carrillo & Flores, 2020).

Prior research has examined the benefits and challenges of VC-based EFL courses for learners. Among the benefits, studies have indicated that learners in VC-based EFL courses can enhance their L2 interactive skills through small group communication in breakout rooms, increasing their self-confidence and speaking performance. VC-based EFL courses also offer unique learning-related features, such as recording and playback, annotation tools, polling, and question and answer tools, which promote active learning experiences and multi-modal communication using breakout rooms, chat, file transfer, emoticons, captioning, and video and audio sharing (Correia et al., 2020). These features are embedded in many VC tools and can also be supported by other external online tools and platforms including YouTube videos, podcasts, Google Docs, Voice thread, Wordwall activities, LearningApps activities, wikis, online websites, and social media, etc. (Asoodar et al., 2016; Yu, 2022). Another benefit is the ability to switch off the camera during speaking activities, which can improve student motivation and confidence (Lee, 2021).

However, there are also drawbacks to VC-based EFL teaching. Learners may experience increased distractions due to technical or internet failures, and EFL teachers may need to incorporate instructional design for VC-based EFL classes that consider the cognitive load of the intended content and technology use (Nunneley et al., 2020). Furthermore, learners may get bored easily during VC-based EFL classes, and some young learners may misuse the option to turn the camera or microphone off for non-educational purposes (Tacker, 2021). Additionally, testing via VC tools may not be perceived as valid by some educational institutions, as learners may blame technical issues for speaking mistakes during online tests (Vujnovic & Medic, 2021). Some VC tools have embedded proctoring features to detect cheating, but further research is needed to explore this topic (Bruce & Stakounis, 2023).

Methods

Research Aim and Questions

This study explored the experience of six pre-service EFL teachers using VC-based teaching practices by examining the opportunities and challenges they encounter. Additionally, the study aimed to identify effective strategies to overcome any challenges that arise to enhance future VC-based teaching practices. Based on the aim of the study, the following research question was formulated:

RQ1: What opportunities and challenges do pre-service EFL teachers encounter when using VC-based teaching practices?

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Research Design

A qualitative case study approach, as outlined by Creswell (2007), was employed in this study to address the research question. Qualitative research methodologies require a multitude of information sources to generate comprehensive and nuanced data (Mason, 2002). Consequently, the participants were requested to furnish their responses via diaries, a focus group interview and researchers' observation notes that provided a detailed account of participants' VC-based praxis experiences, thereby facilitating the production of in-depth and rich data.

Participants

The research sample consisted of six pre-service EFL teachers from Syria, consisting of four female and two male teachers with a mean age of 23. These individuals volunteered to participate in the study for a period exceeding two months. The participants were selected through convenience sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) based on their minimum English proficiency level of B1, access to a high-speed internet connection, and availability of a laptop computer. The participants' English proficiency level was assessed using the "English score" online mobile-based placement test designed by the British Council. Based on the participants' recounts, none had prior experience with VC-based EFL teaching or received any EFL teacher training. Although some pre-service teachers had limited English teaching experience, their EFL teaching techniques were largely spontaneous and lacked adequate pedagogical knowledge.

The study's ethical framework strongly emphasised maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of participants' data. Before their participation, the six pre-service EFL teachers from Syria were provided with clear and comprehensive information about the study's purpose and procedures, ensuring their consent to participate was fully informed and voluntary. Rigorous protocols were employed to ensure that any personal information shared by the participants remained strictly confidential and was protected from unauthorised access. Additionally, measures were taken to mitigate any potential risks to the privacy of participants' data throughout the study.

Procedure

The study consisted of four phases. The first phase involved designing a five-week need-based teacher training course for six Syrian pre-service EFL teachers on VC-based EFL. The course comprised self-paced, asynchronous learning material provided through Google Classroom and synchronous VC-based sessions conducted via Zoom. The VC-based training sessions were held once a week for two and a half hours. During these sessions, the pre-service teachers discussed suggested topics and performed mock lessons for teaching all four macro skills. In the second phase, the pre-service teachers were tasked with teaching a group of learners for another five weeks after the training. Each pre-service teacher independently taught a group of learners with a specific English language proficiency level. The practicum commenced six weeks after the training, allowing the participants to find a group of volunteer students and design their

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five-week course. They created personal Zoom and Google Classroom accounts. They utilised various online features and tools such as 'Google Docs,' 'Google Slides,' 'Nearpod,' 'Kahoot,' and 'Quizlet' based on their pedagogical needs to achieve their course outcomes. The third phase contained conducting a Zoom-based focus group interview with the six pre-service EFL teachers after the five-week teaching practice. The final, fourth phase was concerned with the analysis of collected data.

Data Collection Tools

The data for this study were gathered from various sources, including a Zoom-based focus group interview, diaries submitted by participants and observation notes prepared by the researchers during the VC-based teaching practice. An online group interview, which lasted for about two hours, was conducted with all six pre-service teachers after the practicum. It used semi-structured questions (Dörnyei, 2007) to examine their perceptions of the opportunities and challenges six pre-service EFL teachers encountered in their VC-based teaching practice. The aim was to identify potential ways to overcome the challenges in future VC-based teaching practices. All six pre-service teachers submitted their teaching diaries ($N = 30$) using 'Google Forms' after the teaching practicum. Additionally, the researchers observed 12 random classes of participants and made observation notes for analysis.

Data Analysis

After researchers completed the data collection, all collected data, including a verbatim transcription of a two-hour focus group interview, participating pre-service teachers' diary entries ($N = 30$), and researchers' observation notes ($N = 12$), were compiled into a single Word document. The researchers then analysed the three datasets using an open-coding approach. This method, as described by Silverman (2011), allowed the researchers to conduct a more comprehensive analysis by clustering and organising the open codes into broader themes that accurately described the data. Through thoroughly analysing the three datasets, the researchers presented their findings under five headings that covered opportunities and three headings that addressed challenges (see Table 1).

Table 1   Coding Scheme for opportunities and challenges of VC-based EFL teaching

Opportunities	Challenges
• Facilitating the delivery of productive skills (e.g., speaking and writing) [1.2 & 3] • Promoting collaborative learning and social interaction [1.2 & 3] • Promoting active learning [1.2 & 3] • Supporting critical thinking skills [1.2 & 3] • Increasing motivation, interest, and engagement [1 & 2] • Longer retention of vocabulary learning [1 & 2]	• Unstable or limited access that affects the quality of video and audio communication [1.2 & 3] • Zoom fatigue due to long lecture hours [1 & 2] • Some students' expectations of deductive grammar and teaching from their teachers [1 & 2]

Note. 1. Teacher's Diary, 2. Focus group interview, 3. Observation notes

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Results and Discussion

Opportunities of VC-based EFL Teaching

The opportunities of VC-based EFL teaching are delineated through six primary themes, which are explicated in Table 1 and have arisen from a meticulous analysis of the data. The subsequent sections provide comprehensive definitions and illustrative examples of each of these themes.

Facilitating the delivery of productive skills refers to the potential of VC-based EFL teaching to provide opportunities for students to practice and develop their productive language skills, such as speaking and writing. For example, breakout rooms in VC-based platforms increase EFL learners' self-confidence and speaking performance. Moreover, Google Docs enable teachers to monitor their students' writing processes through the history feature of Google Docs and provide immediate feedback using the comment feature. Participant 2 explained: *"I have noticed a significant improvement in my students' speaking and writing skills since we started using VC-based teaching tools. The breakout rooms feature has been especially beneficial for my students to practice their speaking skills in a comfortable and safe environment. Additionally, Google Docs has been a useful tool for me to monitor and provide timely feedback on my students' writing tasks, leading to an improvement in their writing skills over time"* (diary entry, 4).

Promoting collaborative learning and social interaction highlights how VC-based EFL teaching can promote collaboration and social interaction among students, enhancing their communicative competence and fostering a sense of community in a virtual classroom. One participant in a focus group interview commented: *"Implementing writing is relatively more straightforward in VC-based classrooms because teachers can directly observe what and how students write, especially in pairs or groups. Google Docs, for example, is a helpful platform for a collaborative writing activity since students can produce a text in English during their discussion and negotiation. Also, I have noticed that students showed new ways of presenting and organising their ideas and showed new ways of approaching writing in English"* (participant 3). This finding concurs with the result of Selcuk et al. (2019) for promoting collaborative learning and social interaction in web-based collaborative writing among EFL learners. Other participants highlighted that *"At the beginning of my teaching practice, I avoided using Arabic even though students were beginners struggling to understand my instructions in English. However, thanks to the training, I implemented new strategies such as motivating students to use online dictionaries and organising breakout rooms in a way that more knowledgeable students can guide less knowledgeable students, which enabled them to discuss any issues in their L1 and try to speak English only with the teacher"* (Participant 6, diary entry 5).

These strategies enabled students to engage in discussions, improve their language skills, and feel more comfortable in a virtual classroom setting. Overall, VC-based EFL teaching provides opportunities for collaborative learning and social interaction, enhancing the learning experience for both teachers and students.

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Promoting active learning describes the potential of VC-based teaching to promote active learning by using interactive tools and activities requiring students to engage actively with the language and take responsibility for their learning. One participant said, "*I've seen how VC-based teaching can encourage students to actively engage with the target language [English] and take ownership of their learning. For instance, interactive activities in Wordwall, Learning Apps, and Kahoot have allowed the students to practice using English in a meaningful way. They have shown greater interest and motivation when undertaking those activities*" (participant 4, focus group interview).

Supporting critical thinking skills refers to how VC-based EFL teaching can provide opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking and problem-solving activities. This approach can help students to develop their analytical and evaluative skills, as well as to apply these skills to real-world situations. Participant 1 explained, "*VC-based has a unique opportunity for students to provide feedback to one another in breakout rooms without feeling self-conscious with the presence of a teacher. Such feedback has potentially enhanced the critical thinking skills of the students*" (diary entry, 4). This finding is consistent with Akatsuka's (2020) research, which suggests that online EFL classes that incorporate interactive activities designed for the online learning environment can promote critical thinking among students.

Increasing motivation, interest and engagement emphasises the potential of VC-based EFL teaching to increase students' motivation, interest, and engagement in the language. This can be achieved using interactive and engaging materials, as well as through the provision of personalised feedback and support. Participant 5 reported: "*We started using different strategies for teaching grammar that are more engaging and interesting for students. For example, we were encouraged to give students a list of examples with which students should elicit the grammar rule in a group discussion. This strategy increased students' interest and engagement in the lesson*" (diary entry, 3).

Longer retention of vocabulary learning highlights the ability of VC-based EFL teaching to promote longer-term retention of vocabulary learning. This can be achieved using interactive tools and activities that provide multiple opportunities for students to encounter and practice new vocabulary, as well as through the provision of personalised feedback and support. Participant 4 expressed: "*While doing listening activities, teachers can send the links of audio materials to students in breakout rooms to enable them to pause, rewind and repeat the audio materials so that students can identify new vocabulary items and repeat them in different discussion activities, including the breakout rooms and the main discussion room… Another advantage for students is the transcription option in VC tools such as Zoom or MS Teams, which allows beginner students to follow the spoken discussion and notice new vocabulary items they can use later in their writing and spoken activities*" (diary entry, 4).

Challenges of VC-based EFL Teaching

The challenges associated with VC-based EFL teaching are categorized into three primary themes, which are elucidated in Table 1 and have emerged from a rigorous data

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analysis. The following sections offer detailed explanations and illustrative instances of each of these themes.

Unstable or limited access that affects the quality of video and audio communication refers to the challenges that arise when students do not have stable or reliable internet access, which can affect the quality of video and audio communication in the virtual classroom. Participant 2 commented in the focus group interview that *"It was time-consuming for me to design activities for online lessons because I had to design many asynchronous activities to keep all students involved even in time; there was a power cut. Otherwise, I would lose my students' attention and interest in continuing the course... Especially considering that the course was free to students."*

Zoom fatigue due to long lecture hours describes how the need to spend long hours in front of a computer during VC-based EFL teaching can lead to Zoom fatigue among students, which can affect their attention and retention of information. Participant 5 commented: *"I have observed that two and a half or three hours of VC-based teaching can cause Zoom fatigue among students, resulting in decreased attention and retention of information. To address this issue, I have started incorporating more interactive and engaging activities in my virtual classroom to break up the monotony and keep my students motivated and focused"* (diary entry, 5).

Some students' expectations of deductive grammar and teaching from their teachers highlights how some students may have expectations of deductive grammar instruction and traditional teaching methods, which may make it difficult for them to adjust to the more student-centred and communicative approach that VC-based EFL teaching often involves. Participant 3 explained: *"I have noticed that some of my students come to my VC-based EFL classes with the expectation of traditional deductive grammar instruction and teacher-centred teaching methods. However, I believe that a more communicative and student-centred approach is more effective for developing their language skills in real-life situations. To help my students adjust to this approach, I have been providing clear explanations of the benefits of communicative language teaching and engaging them in interactive activities that allow them to use the language in a meaningful way"* (diary entry, 3).

Conclusion

The study's findings suggest that VC-based EFL courses have the potential to enhance productive skills like speaking and writing by utilising collaborative learning strategies that support cognitive processes and encourage social interaction. In addition, VC-based EFL teaching motivates pre-service teachers to adopt active learning methods, leading to improved vocabulary retention, comprehension, motivation, and critical thinking skills.

However, the study identified some challenges. For instance, some pre-service teachers found VC tools unengaging or difficult to manage, primarily due to limited internet speeds, which may compromise the quality of video and audio communication. Furthermore, instructional design should account for learners' physiological and psychological needs, such as fatigue, technology-related stress, and anxiety.

To overcome these challenges, it is essential to provide adequate training and support for pre-service teachers and learners to adapt to the VC-based EFL learning environment. Additionally, instructional designers should consider the constraints of VC technology and develop interactive and stimulating learning materials that enhance learners' motivation, interest, and active participation. This study is small in scale and explores the features and drawbacks of VC-based EFL classes conducted by pre-service teachers while doing their first practicum. Therefore, in order to explore the affordances and drawbacks of VC-based EFL teaching, another study should be conducted after a year from the practicum as teachers will have had more experience in conducting VC-based EFL courses and might have learned to overcome some drawbacks by experience. Another thing to consider is that the participants in this study were from Syria and it is interesting to conduct a similar study for the future in a more developed country such as Finland. Furthermore, it would be interesting for the future to study in depth the online tools being used in VC-based EFL courses and their individual impact on EFL development.

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