



A phenomenological insight into the use of pandemic pedagogy in the primary English Language Arts Grammar class

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Abstract— *The Covid-19 Pandemic led to online teaching at all levels of education in Trinidad and Tobago. The teaching of all subject areas, including Grammar, had to be adjusted to suit this new educational paradigm. This study seeks to examine the pedagogical approaches to the teaching of Grammar at the primary level in Trinidad and Tobago during the Covid-19 period. The study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological approach wherein the teachers were given an open-ended questionnaire covering aspects of teaching strategies employed during this pandemic. The findings reveal that while online teaching allowed for diverse teaching strategies, students' over reliance on the grammatical tools made it challenging for teacher to determine whether they really grasped the concept.*



Keywords— *teaching strategies, pandemic, pedagogy, phenomenology, Grammar teaching*

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the world was unexpectedly confronted with the Covid-19 pandemic which led to an unexpected upheaval to all societal structures. Smith and Hornsby (2020) averred that Covid-19's appearance resulted in the abrupt halt to normal activity in every sphere stemming from efforts to stop or limit its spread. Almost every sector was thrown into confusion, having to restructure internal systems in an effort to keep their operations functioning to near capacity. Because of the contagious and deadly nature of the virus, many public and private sectors resorted to conducting their work affairs online to prevent individuals from connecting with one another.

The education sector was one of the major national institutions in almost every country that were foremost in switching to full online operations from the early childhood to the tertiary level. These operations were both administrative and pedagogical. The unprecedented global pedagogical shift resulted in over 1.57 billion children being unable to attend classes on a regular basis (UNESCO, 2020). This number accounted for approximately 90% of

the total number of students who were legitimately enrolled in over 190 countries (United Nations, 2020).

This irregularity in attendance was generally due to a lack of devices to access online education and the inability to access the Internet via WIFI, ethernet or mobile data due to a lack of resources. It also resulted from a number of parents being ill-equipped and unable to supervise their children's educational pursuits at home because of inexperience with supervising learning, having to work, a lack of devices, an inability to manipulate the devices or even a reluctance to engage in the unfamiliar task of being engaged in their children's learning. As such, a vast number of students would have experienced some level of learning loss during the pandemic.

Reimers and Schleicher (2020) indicate that when students take an extended break from education, this suspends their learning and causes the loss of acquired knowledge and skills. Needless to say, this novel shift had proven to be a rather stressful and even negative experience for a number of educators and students. As mentioned by Zara et al (2022), numerous teachers encountered a high

level of “stress, anxiety, and depression” (p. 1) during the period of Covid-19.

As obtained globally, Trinidad and Tobago also implemented a number of stringent measures to mitigate the spread and effects of the Covid-19 virus. This included the immediate shut-down of schools on March 13th, 2020, one day after it was announced that Trinidad and Tobago had its first Covid-19 case. This led to a similar nationwide panic with regard to education as a number of families were not technologically equipped. While the percentage of technologically disenfranchised students was not as high as the average global statistics indicate, with a reported Internet penetration of 77.3% in December 2018 (Sanatan, 2020; Chevalier, 2020), there have been challenges with the unexpected educational paradigm shift in the pedagogical operations in the nation. For the most part, the shift was unanticipated and, therefore, by and large, persons were unprepared for what can only be described as the abrupt closure of schools.

The lack of preparedness included the extra financial demands that parents had to face as a result of having to ensure that their children were suitably equipped with devices and Internet connectivity to pursue their education. As asserted by Kalloo, Mitchell and Kamalodeen (2020, p. 453), “Disparities in household income and resources led to an estimated sixty thousand students without the necessary hardware or social support to access online education” (as cited in Parsanlal, 2020). They further declared that the figure accounted for nearly 20% “of the total school population between the ages of 3–18 years” (Kalloo, Mitchell & Kamalodeen, 2020, as cited in UNESCO, 2020; MOETT, 2016).

This unforeseen and unexpected mandate to conduct online classes instilled a significant amount of panic and excitement on the part of parents and teachers, because the pedagogy deviated from the norm. Moreover, the cessation of face-to-face classrooms posed logistical problems with regard to pedagogy and the delivery of the curriculum to all students from the early childhood level to the tertiary level. The entire student population had to adapt to online teaching being moved from a peripheral support system to becoming the central system of learning. This adaptation and implementation of pedagogical approaches to “teach and foster learning in a context of a serious health crisis and the spread of a new disease” were referred to as pandemic pedagogy (Smith & Hornsby, 2020, p. 1).

At the primary schools in Trinidad and Tobago, the immediate switch over to a number of online platforms, including ZOOM and Google Docs, was problematic for many teachers and students, in light of the fact that many had never taught or learned via online platforms. Some of

the senior teachers and younger students were totally unfamiliar with computer technology and interacting on social media. This required a crash course in computer literacy, especially for the teachers who would then guide their students. Thus, there ensued a nationwide emergency online learning in March 2020 in Trinidad and Tobago to ensure that as many teachers were able to use engage in online teaching (Bleeker and Crowder, 2022); however, there were limits to this training. As described by Sanatan (2020), “teachers in Trinidad and Tobago’s public education system are being trained to make the transition through piecemeal “emergency” online workshops and tutorials” (para. 9). While the training was able to help teachers with some technological knowledge, it was reactionary and not in-depth enough for most teachers to feel a sense of comfort and confidence.

The Ministry of Education’s (MOETT) challenge went beyond training and encouraging teachers to use and develop pandemic pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning. It also included having to develop online policies to protect the privacy of both the teacher and student and to ensure that measures were in place for the smooth and safe conducting of classes. Such policies would help to mitigate some of the teething problems that had occurred with the onset of online teaching and learning, including having to establish boundaries and classroom netiquette, for example, how and when to use the camera, and finding a relatively quiet background to conduct or attend classes.

The change to online learning also meant that there needed to be an adjustment of the schemes of work, task analyses, teaching/learning strategies and assessments. It necessitated a change in attitudes, including the exercise of patience, understanding and empathy towards students, parents and fellow pedagogues as they sought to manoeuvre the online platforms. However, as posited by the United Nations (2020), this full online teaching and learning paradigm led to a digital divide in the nation wherein students who were without Internet services, digital systems and home supervision found themselves at a disadvantage. In essence, this online system highlighted the acute difference between those who were able to afford that means of education and those who were not able to do so. As such, the poignant disproportionate differences were underscored.

At the primary school level, the teaching of Grammar in the English Language Arts (ELA) subject area during the Covid-19 pandemic posed a number of challenges with teachers having to adapt teaching/learning strategies to fit the online platforms. While media literacy is on the rise in modern society, and while it is the one of the major strands in the MOE ELA Curriculum, many

teachers were not au courant with or knowledgeable of many of the media platforms and technological devices. Many were also unaware of the number of Grammar tools that were available online, far less how to access them and incorporate them into their pedagogical practices.

With the online mandate having been put forward by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, teachers of the ELA at the primary school level had to adjust to the new paradigm and emanate teaching/learning strategies in the teaching of the grammar, such that students' normal classroom experiences were not disrupted by too wide a margin. However, teachers' online teaching/learning strategies depended on the strength and extent of their ability to interact with the technological devices, their knowledge of the online platform, their level of comfort with the ELA syllabus and their ability to adapt their face-to-face teaching of the syllabus requirements to the online teaching/learning environment. Thus, teachers would have encountered new and varied experiences in the teaching of grammar during the lockdown period. This study seeks to use a phenomenological case study approach to track the essence of a group of teachers' lived experiences with the online teaching of Grammar during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Pandemic Pedagogy

Pandemic pedagogy can be described as the development and implementation of teaching/learning strategies by the educational administrators and pedagogues in the time of widespread health crises to ensure the continued access to educational pursuits by as many students at all levels as possible. Smith and Hornsby (2020) describes it as "the approaches we employ in our learning environments to teach and foster learning in a context of a serious health crisis and the spread of a new disease" (p. 1). This aptly applies to what transpired in the education sector worldwide, including Trinidad and Tobago, where teachers were forced to adjust their pedagogical approaches to fit the 'new normal'.

Hollweck and Doucet (2020) also discussed pandemic pedagogies, defining this simply as the practice of teaching in a crisis. They further state that implemented systems that are quickly calibrated and implemented, usually from the top down, "are certainly not as straightforward as repositioning a course or class onto a video conference website or a learning management system (LMS)" (p. 297). This implies that pandemic pedagogy that is rushed into might not always be organized and robust.

Khanal (2021) used the synonymous term crisis pedagogy, which he explained as being "the emergency remote learning and teaching task that occurred to minimize the impact of the pandemic event while educational institutes are on forced shutdown and social distancing measures are in practice" (p.1). Like Hollweck and Doucet (2020), he highlights the sense of emergency that obtains with regard to the abrupt reorganizing of educational systems to ensure as seamless a transition as possible while shifting learning from the known practices.

However, Hornsby and Smith (2020) had somewhat of a varied view of pandemic pedagogy. They posited that it went beyond just adjusting to teaching in a crisis. In their estimation, it included looking within and interrogating who we are as teachers and how we have been approaching the teaching of our subject areas. This reflection was necessary during the lockdown period in Trinidad and Tobago as some teachers had to examine to what extent they really understood the essence of pedagogy and whether they could establish pedagogical approaches that could cater to varying aptitudes, economic backgrounds, social situations and learning styles.

Ramifications of Online Instruction

While online teaching and learning was the only viable option to keep the education system going if face-to-face teaching is suspended, it comes with a number of health and social challenges. According to Lordan, Fitzgerald, and Grosser (2020), "Operating schools during the pandemic entails balancing health risks against the consequences of disrupting in-person learning" (p. 1146). In the case of Trinidad and Tobago, there was a social divide between those who preferred to teach the students face-to-face and those who were in favour of the online teaching.

Teaching Grammar Online

Sadana (2020) posits that "Grammar is the primary concern in teaching English because understanding language structure is essential in improving those four skills for students" (p. 1). While grammar is taught formally in schools, children unconsciously learn the grammar of the language that they acquire (Tabbert, 1984). Since the grammar unconsciously acquired through repetitive use and practice generally clashes with grammar of the target language that is focused on in formal education, the school language arts curriculum needs to ensure that strategies are used that would enable students to engage in meaningful practice. This practice, which primarily involves the modes of reading, writing, speaking and listening, is more effective when conducted in face-to-face sessions. However, with the MOETT's mandate for all educational institutions to engage in online, teachers were faced with the task of teaching a

subject, which thrives on face-to-face communication, online.

While there may be the notion that the teaching and learning of grammar should benefit from online teaching because of the use of multiple online tools, Halim, Wahid and Halim (2021) purported that it can actually be quite difficult. In fact, having students do online grammar prevents the teacher from monitoring their progress, in terms of focus and meaningful learning. This is in stark contrast to the benefits derived from face-to-face instruction. In Halim, Wahid and Halim's (2021) estimation, "taking online lessons requires a lot of time, skill, practice, and patience" (p. 213). Thus, while the online platforms are fraught with tools and activities which would assist with the teaching of grammar, the irony is that without the teachers' physical presence, it proves difficult to guide most of the students' grammar learning experiences.

III. METHODOLOGY

In order to meet the objectives of this research, a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative methodology was utilized (van Manen, 2016). Laverly (2003) asserted that hermeneutic phenomenology was particularly concerned with how human beings experienced the world, hence its usefulness when trying to capture what teachers experienced as regards teaching grammar using an online platform. Hermeneutic phenomenology also includes the facet of interpretation, which van Manen (2016) describes as the embodiment of "a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld" (p. 18) with the actual lived life being far more complex than "any explication of meaning can reveal" (p. 18).

In this study, five primary school teachers who switched to online applications, including Zoom and Google Classroom, to teach Grammar were purposely chosen. These teachers were given an open-ended questionnaire on which they related their experiences teaching Grammar online during the pandemic. None of these teachers had previously engaged in online teaching. These five teachers all work in different primary schools in Trinidad. The study aimed to capture and examine the essence or meaning of these teachers' pedagogical experiences as they shifted from the regular face-to-face teaching to the unforeseen online platform as abruptly mandated by the Ministry of Education, Trinidad and Tobago. The study aims to elicit meaning from the responses given to the open-ended interview and to extract the patterns or themes that would have emerged from the experiences of these teachers (participants) (Cresswell, 2012).

The five teachers, who have done primary teacher training, have been purposefully selected to share how they adjusted to and used the online platforms to teach their students during the Covid-19 lockdown. Purposive sampling is considered by Welman and Kruger (1999) as the major type of non-probability sampling which can be used to identify primary participants in a study. Also, Palys (2008) asserted that using purposive sampling allows the researcher to be connected to his objectives, and that purposive sampling is "virtually synonymous with qualitative research" (p. 697).

The researcher is acquainted with all the purposefully selected teachers. Two of them were her students, and three were fellow teachers. They are all employed in various public primary schools and have a combined teaching experience that spans from three to twenty-eight years.

Their classes range from the infants to the upper primary school: Second Year, Standard Two, Standard Three, Standard Four and Standard Five. The teachers have different levels of experience with the use of technology, with four of them having done an Educational Technology course in their Bachelors of Education (B.Ed.) training. The schools at which they teach all started their online classes when the Ministry of Education issued the mandate in March of 2020.

Prior to this mandate, these teachers have all been engaged in face-to-face teaching only. As such, the five participants, along with their schools, had to embrace the proffered platforms that were available to the public schools by the MOETT. Most of the online classes conducted at the five schools were conducted using *Zoom* and *Google Classroom* (see Table 1).

In order to gain the essences of the participants' experiences, they willingly responded to an open-ended questionnaire that allowed them to share and explain their lived experiences in their own words. The questions were as follows:

1. *How has online teaching affected your teaching of grammar?*
2. *Which face-to-face grammar teaching strategies were difficult to incorporate in the online teaching environment?*
3. *What are some strategies that you now use for online grammar teaching?*
4. *How successful do you think the online strategies were for teaching grammar?*

Stages of Data Analysis/Explication

Five stages of data analysis/explication have been used in this study (Groenewald, 2004; Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). These stages entailed systematically isolating data and extracting common themes. These five stages also aided the researcher in interpreting and finding meaning in the statements given by the participants. These five stages are as follows:

- (1) *epoché* or bracketing, which consists of separating one’s experiences from those given by the participants. Fischer (2009) deems it the “temporary suspension of the researcher’s assumptions” (p. 583);
- (2) delineating units of meaning, which entails drawing out the essence of the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon under investigation or isolating pertinent statements;
- (3) clustering of themes, which incorporates the grouping of similar themes after reading depending on their similarities;
- (4) summarising clustered themes, which involves giving an overview of the main ideas emanating from

the clustered themes while disregarding any redundancies;

- (5) interpreting data (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), which entails discerning and reconstructing what has emanated from the clustered themes with respect to the phenomenon being studied. Interpretation as an integral aspect of hermeneutics is fundamental to one’s understanding of the world (Heidegger, 1962/1927, as cited in Keshavarz, 2020).

To ensure the integrity of the phenomenological strategy of bracketing, the researcher suspended her views, preconceived notions, assumptions, biases and attitudes by focusing on the experiences of the participants by reading and reviewing their responses at least three times (Finlay, 2012). The researchers also extracted the respondents’ ‘examples’ about what they encountered and experienced. As postulated by van Manen (2016), “examples in phenomenological inquiry serve to examine and express the exemplary aspects of meaning of a phenomenon” (p. 814).

Table 1 Information on teachers

Names	School	Class Level	Number of Years Teaching	Online Platforms
Teacher 1	Carapichaima ASJA Primary	Second Year	3	Google Classroom Zoom
Teacher 2	Laventille Girls’ Government Primary	Standard Two	9	Google Classroom Zoom
Teacher 3	Brasso RC Primary School	Standard Three	28	Google Classroom Zoom
Teacher 4	Montrose Government Primary	Standard Four	19	Google Classroom Zoom
Teacher 5	Don Miguel SDMS Primary School	Standard Five	15	Google Classroom Zoom

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Effect of Online Teaching on Grammar

Over dependence on online writing tools.

In terms of question One, “How did online teaching affect your teaching of grammar”, the general response revealed that when students studied grammar online, they had the tendency to pay less attention to rules of grammar such as grammar mechanics and spelling. The trend was to depend heavily on grammar autocorrect and spell check rather than using the prescribed rules to write sentences and other types of discourse. This behaviour by

the students is understandable and realistic, since for many the goal is to successfully complete the given exercises and assessments. If they are not supervised, most students at the primary school level, will find the simplest way out.

As stated by Teacher 3, “Students have seen the learning of grammar and spelling rules to be unnecessary and irrelevant.” This might be tantamount to them wondering why they learn when there is a dictionary. At their fingertips, they had all the assistance they needed for mechanics and structures which they were expected to learn and internalize. Teacher 5 also asserted that “Students have become very dependent on auto correct as assignments were

submitted via MS word or google Docs”, and that there was “little opportunity to learn from mistakes made and self-correct as this was done automatically.” Thus. It would not be strange to find that while students were getting their online exercises correct by virtue of using the online tools to predict and correct their grammar exercises, their actual spoken and written use of the target language without the aid of the online tools may most likely have experienced some arrested development. This would be especially likely with the automatic corrections where students are unaware of what has been corrected and why.

While these teachers viewed the dependence on online tools as a disadvantage, other teachers highlighted some positive facets. Teacher 2 regarded the students’ ability to use online tools as a “success”, while Teacher 4 lauded the class’s “ability to interact and use the computer technology more efficiently and independently for communicating in real time.” These findings focus more on the students’ ability to manipulate the devices and the tools. This is a positive element of the online teaching of grammar. However, it needs to be complemented by the teacher’s expert guidance and assisted by the parent or guardian in the home to help the student to keep on task,

Teaching Strategies Difficult to Incorporate Online

Authentic Writing.

Four of the teachers found that it was challenging guiding the students through authentic writing. They felt that the distance and actual lack of face-to-face human interaction made it difficult to connect to the students and help them to actualize their own authentic writing at varying levels. For two of the teachers, the issue was how to teach punctuation and get the students incorporate it into their writing. Teacher 4 stated succinctly, “I was unable to effectively administer punctuation topics.” Teacher 3 also focused on punctuation, although he was more specific. He asserted that his challenge was determining which strategy to use to teach the students ‘how to punctuate dialogue[s]’; he also shared that he had an issue “teaching authentic writing.” Again, these responses underscore the difficulty that the primary school teacher has in using the online platform to teach grammar. Grammar is not just about rules and repetition. It is a dynamic, creative and alive, aimed at achieving automaticity and meaningful learning (Brown, 2015), where the students can express themselves independently having achieved the objective of being able to communicate fluently and precisely, whether orally or written.

Teacher 1 likewise attested to the fact that she had issues with “in-class writing” which affected “group collaborative [writing] projects.” Moreover, Teacher 5 posited that she found “using the writing process to plan and

write essays was also difficult” while using the online platform. Teacher 5 added that “the drill and practice of completing the timed practice tests was extremely difficult to incorporate in the online environment.” Bearing in mind that each student is a creative sentient being, it would be difficult for the teacher, especially one who is not versed in online pedagogical operations, to achieve the focused guidance of her students in such a dynamic content area. Even in the classroom when the students are face-to-face, the teacher of grammar has to be flexible in her pedagogical approaches, because grammar is very much reflective of the cognitive make-up of each individual (Evans & Tyler, 2003).

Strategies for Online Grammar Teaching

Video Viewing

Teacher 1 and 2 both indicated that they used the viewing of videos as a strategy for teaching grammar. These videos were used at various points in the lesson including at the set induction, teaching of the content or closure. This coincides with how videos are used in the face-to-face classrooms. As such, there was nothing novel in that experience per se except that the students were now viewing them from their own devices. Needless to say, the viewing of these videos would vary based on the availability, types of devices and WIFI connectivity.

Teacher 2 specified that “You Tube is a medium that is utilized in my online classes.” These could be used to show first-hand pedagogical approaches used by the author of the video. They also break the monotony of the teacher speaking in a forum where the students cannot connect with them in person, and allow the students to engage with a mode that they use for entertainment.

Online Quizzes.

Teachers 3, 4 and 5 all submitted that they used online quizzes as a major strategy for teaching grammar online. Teacher 3 clarified that she utilized “Online quizzes. Games, and interactive worksheets.” This can ensure that students enjoy the class and feel comfortable in the virtual space. It also ensures that students connect with their peers from whom they would have been estranged when the curfew instilled during the pandemic. Teacher 4 expanded on the use of online quizzes, purporting “I now am able to use the technology online quizzes and online portfolios in my teaching.”

Thus, this teacher expanded the strategies to incorporating a variety of quizzes, whether individually or within groups. Teacher 5’s lived experience revealed, “I used a lot of gamification and game-based learning to teach grammar. This was done by using quizzes and live worksheets with the results being added to a leader board.”

Success of Online Grammar Teaching Strategies

In spite of the challenges and novelty of doing full online teaching, all participants indicated that they experienced a measure of success. According to Teacher 1, “The use of textbooks, worksheets, videos and online games have provided a complete and effective educational experience for all students.” In this case, it is apparent that the teacher embraced online teaching as part of a holistic strategy for teaching grammar to the students. Teacher also indicated that “the online strategies that have been employed, thus far, for teaching grammar have been very successful.”

Teacher 3 was particularly pleased with students’ “ability to interact and use the computer technology more efficiently and independently for communicating in real time.” Teacher 4 responded that the online strategies have been 95-100% successful. She indicated that “there was a wide range of examples and techniques to utilise in the delivery of each topic taught.” Teacher 5 was more reserved with regard to the level of success, averring that the online strategies “have been successful to some extent.” However, these comments were contradicted later on in the interview as she declared that when the students “returned to the physical classroom, [she] had to start over from square one.”

Implications for Curriculum and Teaching

This study has highlighted a few implications for curriculum and teaching. For one, it was clear that the crash courses for online pedagogy, which were provided by the MOE, while it served the purpose of getting the online classes implemented, were not given long enough in advance to prepare teachers for the massive upheaval to their classroom practice and the stark dissonance which many of them were about to experience. This lack of internalized preparedness implied that long term planning and reconnaissance are critical if meaningful success is to be achieved in the online teaching of grammar during a pandemic.

What stood out in the responses was the fact that online grammar pedagogy goes beyond using tools and strategies provided by various links and websites. Teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge, skill and confidence to utilize the online resources that were available and be able to incorporate the tools based on the needs and skills of the students in the class. While the tools are helpful, the aim is not for students to over rely on technology to the detriment of the own creative and critical thinking skills. It is hoped that the students would use the tools to engage in authentic writing that can reflect their ability to produce ideas, which is one of the goals of the English Language Arts programme in the primary school. If the use of online

tools is not managed in the grammar classrooms, one may find that students never reach the point of mastery in the target language in either speaking or writing.

Secondly, the findings show that all the stakeholders need to work together if there is to be continuity in the teaching service during a pandemic. While no one can predict a pandemic emergency, all parties involved need to ensure that the massive fallout does not reoccur.

V. CONCLUSION

Covid-19 caught the world unprepared, causing the education system to abruptly mandate a shift to online teaching and learning for the first time in modern history. In Trinidad and Tobago, although the Internet penetration was 77.3%, this did not mean that the teachers and students who fell within this category were equipped and qualified to use the online tools for teaching and learning, particularly in the area of grammar. Furthermore, there were 22.7% of the population that would have been at a gross disadvantage academically. Their technological lack exacerbated the gap in the nation’s social fabric, as each person in that group represented a home that was being set back academically, thus affecting their contribution to nation building.

While those with Internet connections and devices would have had some advantage, without the proper pedagogical guidance, students would not have fully grasped and practised the grammatical concepts being taught. Even with the gamut of online strategies for teaching and assessment, teachers found the monitoring of primary students’ grammar learning to be challenging, since it was difficult to gauge the extent to which they were receiving and following the instructions.

It is clear that a reactionary approach to the pandemic met with a wide gulf between the students who were privileged enough to have online access and parental support during the Covid-19 pandemic and those who did not even have a device or Internet access to ever participate their classes. Based on the number of students whose learning experiences declined academically, the MOETT needs to ensure that relevant and meaningful ongoing workshops and training in online grammar teaching and learning pedagogy are conducted. This would ensure that there is continuity in grammar education should there be a pandemic or other catastrophic event in the future.

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