Early-career international academics' learning and teaching experiences during COVID-19 in Australia: A collaborative autoethnography

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Practitioner Notes

1. This reflection shows the need for host institutions to provide learning and teaching support mechanisms, such as peer-reviewing of teaching, participation in professional teaching development activities, coaching and mentoring schemes aimed at enhancing and supporting early-career international academics' teaching-related capabilities.

2. It is vital for international academics to feel comfortable and to adjust to the new learning and teaching environment, especially during times of crisis, so that they are able to provide the best learning experience to students and also to the institution.

3. As international academics have vast global knowledge and experience, it is important to integrate and leverage their perspectives in the learning and teaching environment in the host country.

4. Early-career international academics are encouraged to meaningfully adopt the varied learning and teaching strategies discussed in this reflection.

5. Academics are empowered to take agentive action through flexible, adaptive, quick and innovative online pedagogical practices, addressing students' assignments queries promptly, and consciously addressing language-related issues to ensure high teaching commitments and engagement with students, as well as to meet student learning outcomes at their host institutions.

Keywords

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Introduction

English-speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States have been attracting international academics to contribute to their higher education institutions (Balasooriya et al., 2014; Hsieh, 2012). According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020) data, in 2019 there were nearly 30% (approximately 300,000 people) of staff born outside Australia working in the Australian education and learning sector. Song and McCarthy (2020) report that in Australian universities around 15.4% of academic staff are Asian academics in teaching and research positions. For our purposes, international academics are individuals born overseas, "educated and enculturated in one system of education and currently teaching and researching in another" (Walker, 2015, p. 61). All here are migrants who have transitioned to Australian universities because universities attract international academics for international reputations in rankings, to fill gaps due to an ageing academic workforce, declining attractiveness of academia as a profession and lack of succession planning (Loomes et al., 2019).

At the macro (government) and meso (higher education institution) levels, international academics are welcomed in higher education institutions because their presence counts for international rankings (Gao & Liu, 2020; Larbi & Ashraf, 2020). At the micro level, students benefit from international academics' learning, teaching and research experience (Jepsen et al., 2014; Minocha et al., 2019). Although international academics tend to be highly motivated, committed and satisfied with their jobs (Wilkins & Neri, 2019), they face professional challenges in coping with the host-country teaching and learning environment which is different from that of their home country (Collins, 2008; Green & Myatt, 2011). These challenges were exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis as universities abruptly changed their learning and teaching practices to online delivery. While international academics' commitment to their work is high and their benefits to the Australian higher education system are acknowledged, the experiences of early-career international academics during a crisis like Covid-19 remain largely unexplored. To the authors' knowledge, this is one of the first studies that highlights learning and teaching experiences of international academics from Malaysia and Bangladesh in an Australian university during COVID-19.

The paper is organised into four key sections. Section one situates the profession-related challenges faced by international academics based on prior research. Section two provides details of the research design and methods. Section three presents key findings based on thematic analysis derived from collaborative autoethnography data and a discussion of the four-key teaching-related challenges and strategies. The final section provides a conclusion, practical implications of these findings, limitations and future research directions.

Literature review

The internationalisation of higher education not only relates to international students but also to academic mobility. Numerous studies have explored international students' and graduates' learning and teaching challenges, employability, academic success, adjustment and experiences (Pham et al., 2019; Singh, 2020, Singh & Jack, 2018; Singh et al., 2014) but with less emphasis on exploring international academics' learning and teaching experiences before and during Covid-19. These challenges are mostly attributed to and underlined by culture, educational traditions and personal values and beliefs (Rao et al., 2018). Cishe (2014) argues that academics who discuss their challenges and proactively explore solutions through seeking advice are assumed to be devoted to their students and their teaching career.

Although there are studies on such experiences, they are skewed towards understanding personal and professional challenges during conventional times (i.e., before COVID-19). Personal challenges include financial hardships (cost of moving), uncertainty of Permanent Residency (PR) or citizenship, isolation, cultural and identity differences (Collins, 2008). Professional challenges refer to language issues, cultural differences in teaching and learning, such as unfamiliar academic standards, grading systems, students' expectations and behaviour, and lack of acknowledgement of their arrival by their heads of department or senior colleagues (Collins, 2008; Green & Myatt, 2011). Others include issues related to technology adoption among staff in the learning and teaching space (Martin et al., 2019), diversity and multilingual difficulties with students and colleagues (Barker & Mak, 2013; Henderson et al., 2016; Yanaprasart & Lüdi, 2017), dealing with uncertain external environments due to political changes (Cassell, 2019) or global issues such as the global financial crisis (Galbraith, 2013) or the recent global pandemic (Wilson et al., 2020; Armoed, 2021), and developing appropriate curriculums to link global classrooms to global workplaces (Ramburuth & Welch, 2005).

In subsequent paragraphs, specific professional challenges such as the language proficiency issue, cultural differences and uncertain external environment (i.e., the recent COVID-19 crisis), which gained much attention in the scholarly press, are elaborated upon.

Language proficiency

Challenges associated with English language proficiency are one of the most important sources of stress. Most academics from non-English speaking countries pursue their careers in English-speaking countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US). Issues arise not only from an inferiority sense but also from judgemental perceptions of co-workers and students (Green & Myatt, 2011). Problems include proficiency and accent (Henderson et al., 2016). One of the main difficulties experienced with language for international academies is conveying the teaching message clearly, encoding intended messages such that students can decode them and learn accordingly (Henderson et al., 2016; Yanaprasart & Lüdi, 2017). In order to cope, academics must make extra efforts to develop their English-language proficiency: for example, being conscious of accent, pronunciation, expression and grammar. They can also obtain feedback and assistance from native English speakers (Śliwa & Johansson, 2013).

Cultural differences

International academics' pedagogical approaches are deeply rooted in their home-country culture and therefore foreign country teaching differs notably (Green & Myatt, 2011). Cultural differences can make teaching and learning significantly challenging when there are culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students in a single classroom (Ramburuth & Welch, 2005; Henderson et al., 2016). For example, UK universities are very focused on "independent learning": academics provide guidance only to students, in contrast to learning and teaching cultures that adopt traditional modes (Minocha et al., 2019). Students from English-speaking countries prefer to critique and question staff, which might be considered disrespectful by academics from cultures where power distance is high and students 'respect' academics by merely listening to learn (Barker & Mak, 2013). Minocha et al. (2019) further argue that the relationship between students and staff depends on cultural background. For instance, UK students hold a more consumerist attitude in terms of high expectations about grade explanations and more intense feedback (Minocha et al., 2019). Such cultural differences make it more challenging for international academics to grow cross-cultural

learning and teaching competency effectively within a setting offering less guidance from host institutions (Ramburuth & Welch, 2005).

Uncertain external environment

The pandemic has changed not just economies but also the higher education systems in developing and developed countries including Australia (Wilson et al., 2020). The year 2020 presented challenges to rethink learning and teaching practices, especially for international academics. Cassell (2019) acknowledges the many challenges experienced but emphasises the continuous challenge of dealing with uncertain external environments such as global issues that impact higher education, the teaching evaluation mechanisms and appropriate curriculum development. Due to the unpredictable external environment in 2020, the traditional landscape was disrupted for learning and teaching experiences. The introduction of full digitalisation of learning and teaching was evident globally (Wilson et al., 2020; Armoed, 2021).

The pandemic forced higher education to shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching and learning (OTL) almost overnight (Scherer et al., 2021). This unpredicted transition challenged international academics regarding their readiness in teaching, requiring sudden shifts and major changes in teaching practices (Scherer et al., 2021). It added a multifaceted challenge (Martin et al., 2019) because the willingness to engage in such drastic change was complicated (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012). Ensuring quality teaching to garner appropriate learning outcomes involves numerous dimensions, such as designing effective course content and curriculum, using constructive assessment, feedback and learning outcomes (Cishe, 2014) – all challenges to practice skewed towards face-to-face delivery. The transition to OTL has thus put international academics in a unique, demanding situation requiring fast responses in adapting to and adopting technological-based teaching and online collaboration platforms new to many of them (Scherer et al., 2021). Academics had to deal with the challenges of undergoing urgent training remotely to continue technology-based teaching and learning (Armoed, 2021).

Given that previous literature mainly reveals learning and teaching challenges of international academics during conventional times, this research paper fills a gap based on collaborative autoethnography of learning and teaching difficulties faced by international academics in Australia during COVID-19.

Method

Research design

Autoethnography falls under the interpretivist research paradigm to illustrate an individual's personal experience in a systematic manner in order to develop a sociological understanding (Farrell et al., 2015). Collaborative autoethnography is an approach where two or more researchers collaborate to share their personal cultural stories, insights, mutually interpret their autoethnographic data and address their common methodological and ethical issues (Lapadat, 2017). It is more reliable in terms of shifting the focus from the individual to collective approaches, which is nonexploitative, accessible and rigorous in comparison to autoethnographic approaches (Lapadat, 2017).

In this research, collaborative autoethnography is adopted by two international early-career academics in Australia to highlight teaching-related challenges, strategies and opportunities experienced in unprecedented times, as strongly suggested by Roy and Uekusa (2020). This allows

us to reflect on our teaching practices through self-observation, investigate the relationship with students based on feedback surveys, and reflect on the impact of our adopted strategies to deal with challenges to the overall teaching and learning environment. This method also provides us with the opportunity to go beyond the mere autobiography of learning and teaching efforts by merging our autobiographical description with significant analysis, clarification and interpretation in addressing these research questions:

1) What were our teaching-related challenges during COVID-19 as international academics?
2) What strategies were initiated to overcome challenges?

Data collection

We collected data from ourselves: one an early-career international academic from Malaysia, the other an early-career casual international academic from Bangladesh, both in an Australian university. We both have a combined 11 years' teaching experience at this university. Early-career teaching academics are usually within their first ten years of teaching (Rao et al., 2018) – hence we both are in this category. Prior to 2020, we had never taught a subject together but in Semester 1 and Winter 2020 (March to August) we were provided with opportunities to work with one another to co-ordinate and teach a subject. Since then, we both have reflected on our personal teaching experiences as international academic staff members at this university. The experiences include teaching challenges we faced as early-career international academics, strategies adopted to overcome teaching challenges and teaching-related opportunities.

We deliberately wrote our own individual recollections independently to minimise the groupthink phenomenon. We reflected on our teaching experiences relevant to the research questions we proposed. Once we finalised our own reflections, we then shared these sources of data and conducted the analysis using thematic analysis.

Data analysis

There are three common approaches available to analyse collaborative autoethnography data: narrative, thematic and structural analysis (Farrell et al., 2015). For this research, we adopted thematic analysis. Data analysis sought to identify emerging themes from the collected data. This involved both individual and group coding: we brought together our individually created codes and discussed commonalities and divergences in the themes to make meaning. We both read the data multiple times and coded the main events using simple phrases. During our several Zoom meetings, we focused discussion on the research questions and agreed on the codes. The intense Zoom dialogues facilitated us in reaching several common themes answering the research questions.

Our efforts to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of data collection and analysis were embedded in our research process in three meaningful ways: (1) triangulating a variety of data from different sources and types (individual data of personal memory, self-reflection and group reflections, and external data such as student feedback), encompassing intersubjectivity, as recommended by Hernandez et al. (2017); and (2) challenging and further examining each other's views and experiences through several intense group discussions to engage in "collective analysis and interpretation/meaning-making" (Hernandez et al., 2015, p. 537). This process enabled us to be both more self-reflexive and rigorous in our meaning-making, "allowing us to probe deeper into individual narratives and co-construct meaning about the unique and common experiences that we

shared" (Hernandez et al., 2015, p. 537). Third, we placed our experiences within the larger body of scholarly studies (Hernandez et al., 2015).

Findings

Based on our deliberations, there were four major themes: transition to online learning and teaching, learning and teaching online practices, relationship issues between students and academic staff, and language-related issues. There were specific strategies to overcome those challenges that led to our overall teaching success. The Malaysian-born academic received a Fellow title from the Advance Higher Education from the UK and both received high student feedback based on the online teaching initiatives.

Challenges

We identified four significant teaching-related challenges experienced during COVID-19 as early-career international academics. Figure 1 presents the thematic map of these challenges and is used to structure the findings.

Figure 1

Detailed themes related to online teaching challenges
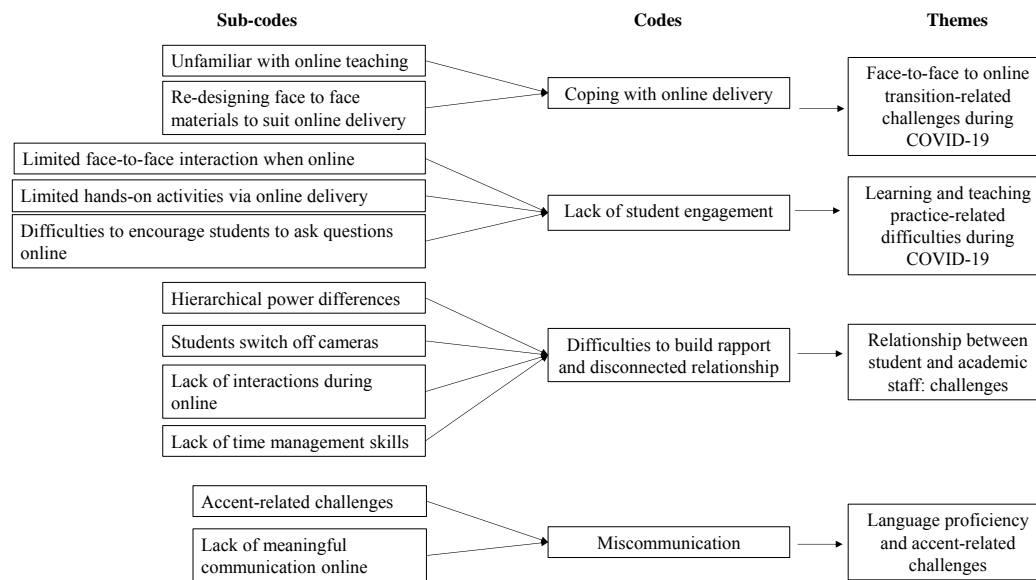
Face-to-face to online transition-related challenges during COVID-19

As we both are from South-Asian countries, our teaching and learning cultures are quite different from Australian-born academics. Adapting to the Australian style of teaching and learning norms, traditions and techniques were always challenging. The challenges were exacerbated because we

had to deal with added teaching challenges. At our university, we were given a week to reorientate our face-to-face teaching to wholly online. As the subject coordinator, the Malaysian academic had to revise all the face-to-face teaching materials to suit online delivery. It was a considerable task, as she observed:

> *Teaching culture was based on face-to-face back home and in Australia pre-COVID-19. I had to adjust to the online teaching mode during COVID-19 as I have never taught online classes or taken online classes before. I had to first learn how to teach in an environment that is different from Malaysia when I first came. Actually, day-to-day reality of teaching such as administration of courses, curriculum design, assessment and approaches to teaching styles reflected my Malaysian practices but I had to adjust to Australian ways of teaching face-to-face and then blended learning at Australian universities and now, in COVID-19, online. It was not an easy task to do as you are set in certain ways.*

As a casual staff member new to teaching in Australia, the Bangladeshi academic said:

> *Pre-Covid 19, it was easy to upgrade myself with the Australian style of teaching norms as there were sufficient time and support available. As an international early-career academic, teaching facilities in Australia were fascinating to learn, as back home the teaching environment does not have facilities such as the Learning Management System (LMS), Turnitin, Echo360 lecture recording and so on. I attended several teaching-related workshops to adopt the Australian teaching techniques. Before COVID-19, I adapted accordingly and was comfortable. But when we had only a week to transfer our teaching online, it added extra challenges. I was unfamiliar with the OTL as I have never taught an online class before and it was not a norm in my country to learn online as well.*

We both had difficulties in transiting to OTL because we both had limited experience teaching or having taken online classes ourselves back in our home countries or Australia. It was an added issue for us as international academics to understand how to teach students in an online delivery mode.

Learning and teaching practice-related difficulties during COVID-19

We both are innovative in our learning and teaching practices where we share our international perspectives and examples while teaching in Australia. We both acknowledge that students do appreciate these international stories and experiences of ours in the classroom sharing sessions, based on the formal and informal feedback received. The Malaysian academic clearly remembers:

> *When I used to share an example from Malaysia or from other countries that I have visited or studied, I can see my students' eyes brighten up, as they can relate to the concepts learnt in the classroom. And they too will start sharing their own personal experiences which will stir further face-to-face discussions. But during online delivery, it was so hard to even gauge if they understood the examples that were provided as I could not see their faces – there were just black screens with their names. I really felt that I was not doing enough to gain their attention to learn.*

The Malaysian academic usually provided worksheets for students to complete during face-to-face delivery because hands-on activity stimulates student learning. However, when online, she noticed changes:

> *I usually design my own worksheet based on the weekly concepts. That's what I learnt from Malaysia's academic system. I notice that students are engaged with the activity and at the same time they do remember the concepts learnt. To make it interesting, I provide stamps/stars on their paper if they get the answer right and that really has a fun learning notion. But during online, I just could not provide those stamps or go around the classroom and check their answers. Only a few students used to share their worksheets via Zoom to check and I do not know about the rest. I really felt uncomfortable.*

The academic from Bangladesh said that, during face-to-face delivery, she used to provide assessment-related instruction to groups to encourage shy students to ask questions but online she found it difficult to continue the same practices through Zoom sessions initially. She added:

> *I feel it is beneficial for the students if I divide the whole cohort into sub-groups and asked them to discuss among peers the assessment requirements. I have noticed that students do feel comfortable to ask any assignment-related questions. Based on their facial expression, it was easier for me to individually identify students who were still confused. But during online, I could not continue the same practice. Accommodating large groups of students into online platforms was easy but engaging them in the activities, grabbing their attention, was not my cup of tea at the beginning.*

We had differing challenges in OTL practices. The Malaysian academic was frustrated with not having emulated the hands-on activities online and the Bangladeshi academic was uncertain how she could encourage the students to ask questions.

Relationship between students and academic staff: Challenges

We felt that our relationship with students was very unfocussed, because we both come from countries where power distance is very high, which means there is a wide hierarchical divide between lecturers and students. We are not our students' friends because we have an authority position and therefore, they must listen to us. But in Australia students do feel that they are our friend or colleague and they are able to challenge and critique our teaching. For example, the relationships between student and lecturer are quite different due to hierarchical power differences: in Malaysia and Bangladesh high; in Australia very low (Hofstede. 1980). This means we still have that concept embedded within us that students need to respect us as lecturers due to our position.

We further reflected on this student-staff relationship online:

> *It is hard to establish trust and rapport with students virtually as it makes the relationship more distanced. I felt disconnected when students preferred to switch off their cameras during the online classes. It seemed to me that some of the students were not even in front of their devices and might be logged into Zoom sessions for attendance only. It was frustrating and disrespectful.*
> (Bangladeshi academic)

> *I felt that my relationship with students was very blurry during the online mode. I could not see their faces and they were not polite in terms of switching on their cameras. Many students were just quiet while on Zoom and when I asked them questions no one answered. That is so disrespectful. It was just a one-way teaching street. Students used to email me at odd hours or during weekends for assignment assistance only and they expected answers straightaway. This means students were not interested in learning but only in assignments. Malaysian students are much more respectful, and they know their boundaries.* (Malaysian academic)

The Malaysian academic further stated that Australian students were especially demanding around assignment due dates. Students wanted flexibility around assignments and examination hints during face-to-face teaching and this was exacerbated during COVID-19:

> *I notice students demand flexibility during assignments or exam periods. In Malaysia, students will rarely seek assignment extensions or extensive exam hints. In Australia, although assignment help is provided a few weeks prior to the due date, students will still ask for extensions for various reasons. They will ask a few days before the due date and I find that they lack time management skills. Students also demand to only read certain weeks' materials for exams, so I must provide very specific instructions on what to read for the exam. I found this to be very bizarre and inappropriate as they are at university to learn, not to just do assignments and exams. These issues were intensified during the online teaching phase.*

Language proficiency and accent-related challenges

Since we are Asian academics, we do not have Australian accents. This had a negative impact on our learning and teaching practices:

> *Being a Malaysian, I do not have an Australian accent. Pre-Covid, students at times did not understand my accent and they struggled to understand the learning material. I could see it on their faces when they did not understand what I was saying. I would then rephrase my words so that they were able to understand better. Therefore, I am very conscious about my accent. When online, I did not know if they were able to understand my accent as I could only see black screens, which intensified this challenge. Students also did not normally ask questions during the Zoom sessions so I really could not gauge their understanding.* (Malaysian academic)

> *As I am from Bangladesh, my students at times cannot understand my accent. What makes it worse is that I tend to talk fast during the lecture as I am always concerned that I must complete the lesson plan within the timeframe. This time pressure makes me talk faster in the classroom. In the online setting, it was further aggravated, as we needed to complete our activities in less than the timeframe given due to 'Zoom fatigue'.* (Bangladeshi academic)

Hence accent-related challenges worsened during OTL: we could not determine if students really understood our delivery because their faces were not visible and they asked fewer questions than when in face-to-face teaching mode.

Strategies to overcome online teaching challenges

We devised several strategies to minimise online teaching challenges identified and experienced by us as early-career international academics in order to promote learning and subject engagement. Figure 2 encapsulates the thematic map of these strategies and is utilized to structure the findings.

Figure 2

Detailed themes related to online teaching strategies
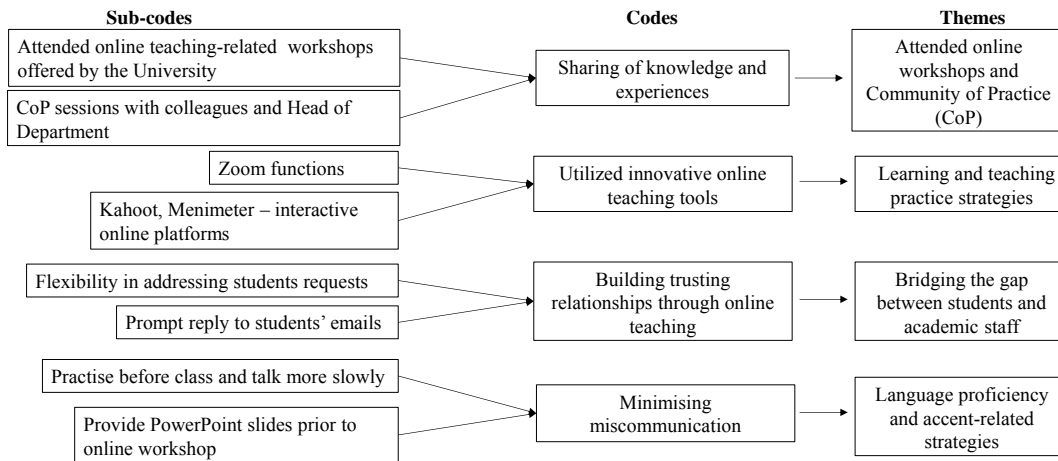
Attended online workshops and Community of Practice (CoP)

Lacking substantial experience in OTL, it was vital for us to gain appropriate training in delivering our teaching online. We attended online workshops offered by the university during the pause week:

> *I religiously attended workshops offered by the university. I had to learn how to use Zoom to engage students. I also had to learn how to provide materials on the LMS to test students' understanding. I also used to attend the bi-weekly CoP sessions with the Head of Department and other colleagues. We shared what worked and what did not work in the online setting.* (Malaysian academic)

In terms of OTL, the Bangladesh academic commented on coping with technological tools to engage students in the digital world:

> *For casual academics, like me, we only had a one-day workshop to attend. In this workshop, basic information like how to use Zoom functions such as the breakout room tool is taught to us. I also found that the subject coordinator shared some tips on how to engage students via online interactive platforms*

> *such as Mentimeter and Kahoot. I was also blessed in having some wonderful casual academics who were extremely helpful to share knowledge on how to engage students online.*

We successfully adopted the teaching online skills from attending workshops, CoP sharing sessions and colleagues' advice. As a result, students acknowledged in their formal Student Feedback on Subject (SFS) that we successfully incorporated technology in our teaching:

> *Kahoot quiz was used which was engaging and fun and should be continued.*

> *Breakout room is a really great tool. Breakout rooms allow students to connect with other students and feels like they are in a normal class.*

Learning and teaching practice strategies

We were committed to ensuring students understood the subject content. Hence we adopted innovative initiatives via Zoom and other online tools. The Malaysian academic adopted several online approaches:

> *I have learnt different Zoom functions and also used Kahoot – an interactive quiz platform – to engage students online. Kahoot has been the favourite of students as they were engaged and competed with one another. I have used Mentimeter – an interactive platform – to capture students' attention in providing short answers to my questions via the Word Cloud function.*

The Bangladesh academic upgraded her skills:

> *I incorporated several Zoom features such as screen sharing with students, the use of whiteboard and annotation during class discussion, the breakout room function, the use of poll to ask questions anonymously and seeking students' opinions using the Mentimeter Word Cloud function.*

Bridging the gap between students and academic staff

After so many years of teaching at several Australian universities, the Malaysian academic has adopted the Australian way of dealing with students:

> *I am much more flexible with students' requests, especially during the pandemic. I understand that students had a lot of issues of their own during COVID-19. I always replied to their emails instantly – at night or even during weekends. I was supportive of them. Although it was extra work for me, I just wanted to be there for them. My extra working hours were not reflected in my pay but I noticed students were happy and felt secure. I also noted that there were not many assignment extension requests by students, which means they were good in their time management skills and received the required assistance.*

The Bangladeshi academic had her own interesting strategies to overcome the gap:

I continuously encouraged students to seek help when needed. Generally, I prefer to address students' email within 24 hours but during Covid-19, as we were not having sufficient interaction with students, I tried my best to be active on email and replied to their inquiries within 3 to 4 hours. It was not an easy task but there were no other alternatives that I could have utilized to establish trust. I had to accommodate some extra working hours which were not included in my pay as a casual, but it gave me a mental peace that I built the required trust and rapport with students which were reflected in their feedback and gratitude emails towards the end of the semester.

Students did appreciate our availability, that we responded to their questions promptly, according to formal student feedback:

She was a wonderful teacher and was always available to us when we needed assistance with online materials in addition to completing tasks.

The teacher was supportive and always available to provide help.

Language proficiency and accent-related strategies

We are aware that our accent creates issues for students when relating subject materials to them, especially online – a challenge to be overcome:

I know I cannot change my accent overnight. It takes a lot of practice and time. The realistic strategy that I have applied to overcome my tendency to talk fast is that I practised before class and asked students to remind me if I am going fast so that students can catch my Asian accent. (Bangladeshi academic)

I always remind myself to speak slowly. I pronounce words clearly to the best of my ability so that students understand what I am saying. At times, students do clarify with me on what I have said and I like that, as I can paraphrase and make it clearer to the students. I usually provide slides with instructions prior to the breakout room activity and I usually join their breakout room so that I know that they are doing the right activity. (Malaysian academic)

Students were clear about activities and assignment instructions and performed very well in assignments. Almost all passed the subject, which was an achievement for us too. We received high student feedback on teaching (SFT) scores despite being new to online teaching. As we are highly motivated, confident, committed and substantially satisfied with our jobs (Wilkins & Neri, 2019), we were able to be successful in teaching our students online.

Discussion

The main purpose of this paper is to explore two international academic staff members' reflections on online teaching during the COVID-19 crisis in Australia. The reflections have highlighted four major challenges related to online teaching and also provided four strategies to overcome online teaching issues. The underlying issues stem from differing culture, educational traditions and values and beliefs around higher education (Rao et al., 2018). This paper contributes to empirical insights on teaching and provides insight into the Australian higher education learning and teaching space.

The first issue was around the speedy transition to OTL. We had limited exposure to teaching online and were not exposed to it in our home countries. Hence, we faced initial difficulties in transiting to teaching and engaging students online due to lack of awareness. We were uncomfortable teaching online as well as converting the face-to-face teaching material online instantly. International academics in Minocha et al. (2019) found that there are a "number of differences in the way curriculum is shaped and delivered in other countries" (p. 949). Although international academics have limited control over curriculum design, we could adopt a flexible and innovative approach in pedagogical practices. Since the university provided workshops on OTL, we took the opportunity to attend and learn the delivery methods and share experiences in the CoP meetings with other colleagues.

The second challenge relates to online teaching practices. As international academics may have wide international experience (Minocha et al., 2019), the Malaysian-born academic provided international examples related to the topic during face-to-face teaching and students could relate and provide their experiences in the discussion. International academics in the UK also provided problem-based examples and case studies to promote better levels of interaction and engagement among students (Minocha et al., 2019). According to Luxon and Peelo (2009) and Tebbett et al. (2020), deliberately providing examples based on experiences from different contexts is a core competence of international academics and should be valued because it enriches learning and teaching. The Malaysian academic also provided hands-on worksheets for students to work on in face-to-face teaching to improve engagement. However, during online teaching, students were less engaged and rarely provided any experience relating to the topic. To overcome this, the staff member learnt to use Zoom functions to engage them online by providing online game-based worksheets, which provided students with practical examples "that students believed could be applied to their future learning" (Cooney & Darcy, 2020, p. 12). She also learnt how to promote students' interactions with the subject materials and other students via interactive game-based platforms such as Kahoot and Mentimeter. The interactive technology has been shown to engage students in the OTL environment (Plump & LaRosa, 2017). The Bangladeshi academic provided assessment-related instruction in groups instead of the whole class during face-to-face teaching. She believed that it had a positive impact on encouraging students to ask questions. During the online workshop, she utilised the pre-assigned breakout room option in which she could emulate the same practice of face-to-face provision of assessment instructions in groups.

The third issue is the relationship between students and international academics. In Asia, a teacher-centred approach is adopted but in English-speaking countries, a student-centred approach is evident (Walker, 2015). The difference in these approaches needs to be acknowledged by international academics so that the academic transition is smooth and contributes to the learning and teaching environment in the host institution (Balasooriya et al., 2014). We felt that some Australian students are disrespectful and demand flexibility, especially around assignment submissions or examinations. Similarly, international academics in Minocha et al. (2019) and Walker (2015) believed that United Kingdom students are disrespectful, rude and have attitude problems. This situation is caused by the consumerist attitude of students, especially when students have a "sense of power to appeal against assessments of their work [that seems] greater" (Minocha et al., 2019, p. 950). International academics in Balasooriya et al. (2014) also argued that the student-lecturer relationship in Australia is non-hierarchical and students are less polite, and that is our experience too.

Since we are from Asia, we felt that in Australia students behaved as friends and they could demand as of right to email at odd hours seeking clarification on tasks. These issues intensified during COVID and we understood because these were unprecedented times. We became very flexible with our students' requests and demands. We tried to accommodate queries on assignments promptly.

We noticed that over time we were developing confidence in teaching and managing students' queries and issues more efficiently, similar to academics in Balasooriya et al. (2014). This led to higher-quality work and better recognition from students and management. We observed that students truly appreciated the frequent feedback provided to them via email.

Lastly, we reflected on our language-related issues, especially concerning accent. As non-native speakers, this impeded online teaching delivery. As Luxon and Peelo (2009) argue, language in teaching and learning situations is indeed a source of anxiety for international academics and has a direct influence on pedagogy. International academics in Luxon and Peelo (2009) were exhausted speaking in English for more than 20 to 25 minutes, but we did not experience that, although we had other language-related issues. One tended to talk very fast and at times mumbled due to time pressure to complete the set of online activities. Neither of us could gauge if students understood the subject materials as faces were unseen during weekly Zoom sessions. Students normally switched off their Zoom video function for varied reasons. However, some did seek clarifications during the sessions which were addressed appropriately by us. One strategy was to provide slides with activity instructions prior to the Zoom activities and keep reminding students to stop us if we were talking very fast unconsciously.

Conclusion

Early teaching international academics did face online teaching-related challenges during COVID-19 because of culture and educational traditions but, due to resilience, experience and job satisfaction (Rao et al., 2018; Wilkins & Neri, 2019), they were able to strategize to overcome those challenges. With these successful strategies, opportunities for success were evident in acknowledging innovative online teaching practices. Both were successful in gaining excellent formal and informal feedback from students and very high SFT scores: 4.72/5.00 (Malaysian academic) and 4.43/5.00 (Bangladeshi academic). In addition, the Malaysian academic received a prestigious teaching recognition as a Fellow from the Advance Higher Education from the UK.

In the main, literature on international academics is focused on challenges in teaching and research in conventional times but very rarely during COVID-19. For international academics, negotiating pedagogical issues in terms of approaches to teaching and personal values and beliefs of higher education due to different educational traditions and culture (Rao et al., 2018) was very difficult, especially during the pandemic. This reflective paper has contributed to the literature on the teaching of early-career international academics in Australia during COVID-19. To the authors' knowledge, this is one of the first papers that has explored teaching-related challenges, strategies and successes of early-career international academics in Australia.

In terms of implications for practice, this reflection shows the need for host institutions to provide learning and teaching support mechanisms, such as peer-reviewing of teaching, participation in professional teaching development activities, coaching and mentoring schemes aimed at enhancing and supporting early-career international academics' teaching-related capabilities. It is vital for international academics to feel comfortable and to adjust to the new learning and teaching environment, especially during times of crisis, so that they are able to provide the best learning experience to students and also to the institution. As international academics have vast global knowledge and experience, it is important to integrate and leverage their perspectives in the learning and teaching environment in the host country. Early-career international academics are encouraged to meaningfully adopt the varied learning and teaching strategies discussed in this reflection. For instance, they are empowered to take agentive action, such as being flexible, adaptive, quick and

innovative in adopting online pedagogical practices, addressing students' assignments queries promptly, and consciously addressing language-related issues to ensure high teaching commitments and engagement with students, as well as to meet student learning outcomes at their host institutions.

The obvious major limitation of this collaborative autoethnography study is the small sample size. It is vital to note that the emergent challenges and strategies themes are neither definitive nor comprehensive because they only reflect the individual accounts of two early-career international academics from Asia and in a single Australian higher education institution. Hence, they are not generalisable, they are less objective and unmeasurable (Roy & Uekusa, 2020) because they do not represent the totality of international early-career academic staff members in Australia, but it does offer a justification for potential transferability. Future research might include other methods of data collection, such as surveys, observation or focus group interviews, and larger samples of international academics, cultures, and institutions.

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