

The COVID aftermath: Re-imagining the English Language Classroom

By Moira R. Ncube

COVID 19, without a doubt, left a very bitter taste in our mouths as teachers of English. The pandemic definitely caught us all unawares. We were not prepared for the 'new normal'. Some of the tricks we thought we had in our bags and had been waiting to pull out in worst-case scenarios proved useless and, probably, outdated in the face of the new normal. The early forms of intervention from the powers that be were inadequate for the mammoth task that lay ahead of us.

What kind of a teacher of English did we have after the pandemic? Undoubtedly, one that was confused, frustrated, overwhelmed and almost at his or her wit's end. A human being, who, like every other being, had probably suffered severe losses or had been a victim of the pandemic as a patient or otherwise. I remember being one of the three people who caused the temporary closure of my school, after being named a 'close contact' to an infected colleague and later becoming a 'patient' or victim of Covid 19 two times.

I guess all teachers of English wished they had a magic wand in their hands and, at the click of a finger, send the virus away, complete all teaching plans, meet all objectives and have learners ready for what was meant to be the exam or exams for that particular term or year. One cannot underestimate the anxiety and frustration experienced by the teachers as the entire world braced itself for life in the new normal.

Picture this, a confused and frustrated teacher meets an equally confused and frustrated learner, and yet the two of them have to create a normal teaching and learning environment respectively. What is normal when you have to deal with a learner who has gaps in knowledge?

Here is a teacher who has to work abnormally to obtain normal results. Mind you this teacher is working with groups of learners who miss writing an essay over 10 days because now they have to do it in 50 minutes or an hour, under supervised conditions.

This overwhelmed teacher has to deal with learners who are techno-savvy. Most probably, the teacher cannot operate anything beyond his or her cellphone contacts and WhatsApp messages. The teacher is probably proudly BBT, Born Before Technology. How does this teacher match a learner who can use ChatGPT or Cambly to download essays, transactional texts or any other research work? This learner can plagiarize without getting caught, he just slips through the teacher's fingers and aces an A+.

The teacher has to deal with learners who were promoted to the next grade based on a few, probably sub-standard tasks, which were done with the help of the whole clan.

The teacher has to deal with learners who, in most cases, were cut off from any social interactions, had very little access to books, technology and other important resources. The

teacher has to deal with learners who consumed a lot of negative news from the media, their families or from their community. Who would forget the much dreaded opening statement to most presidential addresses at the height the pandemic, 'Fellow South Africans...' That statement instilled fear in all of us because it preceded a ban, an extension of the lockdown or shocking mortality statistics. Our minds, teachers and learners alike, were overwhelmed with sad news on a daily basis.

As teachers, we found ourselves having to deal with learners who were socially disoriented, culturally isolated, cognitively challenged and emotionally depleted.

In the aftermath of this ruinous pandemic, teachers of English have had to think out of the box. The new English classroom calls for adaptation, creativity and communication. Sadly, most teachers fail to rise to the occasion, they feel trapped, betrayed by a system which offers them zero to very little support in order for them to find the 'lost souls' in their classrooms. The rapid development and inception of Artificial Intelligence has heightened the already soaring anxiety levels in some teachers.

In order to bridge the gaps created by COVID 19, the teacher has to develop him or herself and be in tune with new technology so as to be fit enough to handle the new crop of learners produced by the pandemic.

Re-imagining the language classroom is inevitable. I remember so many years back, I sat in a biology class and learnt about natural selection and survival of the fittest. In order to survive in today's English classroom, the teacher has to be 'fit' in every way or else... early retirement or resignation will draw closer and faster than anticipated.

COVID 19 favoured social and physical isolation, and this seems to have been carried over into the 'new normal' classroom. The teacher has to come up with new strategies that will make learners work together, converse, open up and share their pre and post COVID 19 experiences. The new language classroom must be an expression room, where learners have opportunities to listen, speak, read and write about topics that they can relate to or ones that can give them vicarious experience.

As we re-imagine the English classroom room in the COVID aftermath, let us engage our learners cognitively, socially, emotionally, culturally, physically and behaviourally.

As we seek to bridge the gap, learners need to be emotionally engaged so that they are motivated to learn. As teachers, we need to be mindful of how we approach our learners if we are to win them over. They need to feel emotionally safe, to understand that they are important and to know that their views and emotions matter. They also have stories to tell. Do you know that some of them lost their parents or guardians? Some of their parents lost their jobs, life changed completely. A kind word would cheer them up. Learners need to be given an

opportunity to put their feelings on paper, read their and others' stories, speak about their experiences while listening to others' as well.

Learners also need to engage on a social level. The teacher can achieve this by creating groups that encourage team work. The groups should create a sense of belonging. Activities such as designing advertisements, analysing elements of a short story, a play or a novel, summarising or analysing a cartoon in groups can instill a sense of belonging, which some learners lost due to social isolation during COVID times.

It is important to make sure that whatever text the learners produce is relevant and contemporary. What excited you then may not excite the new crop of learners. I remember watching MacGyver with my children, trying to hype them into enjoying the science fiction TV show of my time. My eldest son, about 10 years then, looked me in the eye and said, 'What a boring childhood you had, mom, sorry.' Moral of the story, get in touch with current trends, research what young people are reading, viewing and listening to and get texts that are going to engage them.

Remember Pavlov's classical conditioning theory? In my first year at the teacher training college, I wondered why we had to learn about Pavlov's dogs, how he would ring his bell and they would salivate. We were not going to train dogs, for crying out loud!! The long and short of it was that the theory had educational implications. It is better to reward good behaviour than to punish bad behaviour. Why not commend that learner for completing his task on time or praise the class for following instructions? When they read the whole Act and Scenes in a play, or several chapters in a novel, appreciate them. While we know that it is expected of them, that compliment, that praise, may be the difference between a rotten attitude and an improved participation.

Most importantly, our learners need to be engaged on a cognitive level. If we really want our learners to acquire language and learn effectively, we must enhance cognitive learning. Let us create more opportunities for learners to recall and re-organise the information that they would have read. We must teach our learners to infer, read between the lines and not take everything literally. More opportunities should be given for learners to evaluate, justify, reason and analyse certain views. As they develop critical thinking skills, they will reach a point where they will be able to appreciate, appraise and critique information given to them. Then and only then, can a teacher celebrate and sleep well, knowing that he or she has just accomplished a great feat.

In conclusion, English language teachers, the children out there are waiting for you. You hold the master key they need to open every door ahead of them. If you take time to re- imagine the English classroom post COVID 19, trust me, you would have pulled out many out of the miry clay, stabilized others on a sure foundation and given others the wings to soar high above the clouds. I dare you, take time to re-imagine the English language classroom!!

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