

Covid-19 as a Shock Event

Maintaining a Career in TESOL during a Global Pandemic.

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Abstract

Covid-19 has had a major impact on the education sector worldwide with many universities, colleges and private language schools being forced to close and, almost overnight, turn to online teaching. In addition, the economic impact of the pandemic has led to many of these organisations making some difficult operational and financial decisions to deal with such a challenging situation. These have included restructuring, initiating rapid changes to both courses and operating practices, reducing salaries, offering shorter contract extensions, and even laying off staff. Some educational institutions have since reopened but Covid-19 protocols such as mask wearing, social distancing and a limit on the use of paper-based resources have changed face-to-face teaching. For some researchers Covid-19 and an organisation's response to it is an example of a career shock defined as 'a disruptive and extraordinary event that is caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career' (Akkermans et al., 2018: 4). The purpose of this paper is to understand what influence Covid-19 has had on the career development of those working in TESOL and how individuals have dealt with all the changes

arising from an organisation's response to the pandemic. Through the presentation of 3 case studies involving a freelance teacher trainer, an academic manager, and a newly qualified teacher all employed at a large language school in North Africa, the author aims to investigate 4 important areas. Firstly, what key career competencies and personal attributes enable professionals to maintain a career in TESOL during a shock event such as a pandemic? Secondly, does this differ depending on a person's life and/or career stage? Thirdly, is it possible that the short-term negative impact of a shock event might, over time, turn out to have a positive career outcome? And finally, what can we learn from the experiences of these TESOL professionals that might support others when dealing with career shocks in the future?

Key words: Covid-19, TESOL, career development, shock events

Introduction

There is no disputing that Covid-19 has had a major impact on the everyday lives of millions of people worldwide over the last 2 years. Education has been particularly badly affected with many institutions being forced to close and deliver lessons online. Whilst much has been written and discussed about how this has impacted the way we teach and the possible effects on learning outcomes, little attention has been given to how classroom practitioners have dealt with such a radical change to their working lives. In addition, the pandemic has created economic uncertainty. Like most other public and private service enterprises, organisations within the education sector have needed to make some bold and dramatic changes to key areas such as recruitment, marketing, materials, course provision, building costs and product design to ensure survival. Again, whilst there has been considerable debate surrounding the economic impact of such measures, there has been little focus on how those working within the field of education have dealt on a personal level with so much upheaval and unpredictability.

The focus of this article is to understand what influence Covid-19 has had on the career development of those working within the educational field of Teaching English to Speakers of

Other Languages (TESOL) and how individuals have dealt with all the changes arising from an organisation's response to the pandemic. Based on the notion that this global health emergency represents what many researchers have described as a career shock event, the article aims to uncover how a small number of TESOL professionals have dealt with the impact of Covid-19 in the workplace. Through the presentation of 3 case studies involving a freelance teacher trainer, an academic manager, and a newly qualified teacher, the author aims to investigate 4 important areas:

Firstly, what key career competencies and personal attributes enable professionals to maintain a career in TESOL during a shock event such as a pandemic? Secondly, does this differ depending on a person's life and/or career stage? Thirdly, is it possible that the short-term negative impact of a shock event might, over time, turn out to have a positive career outcome? And finally, what can we learn from the experiences of these TESOL professionals that might support others when dealing with career shocks in the future?

The article will begin by summarising the main discussions, outlined in the existing literature, on what a career shock event is and the impact it can have on individuals and their careers. The article will continue with a brief outline of how my interest in this area evolved, the research methods used, and a summary of the research participants' stories. The article will finish with an analysis of key questions asked before presenting some conclusions.

Covid-19 as a career shock event – a definition and some perspective

A career shock event is defined as 'a disruptive and extraordinary event that is caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career' (Akkermans et al., 2018: 4). The definition put forward by Seibert et al. (2013) clarifies these thought processes by describing them as 'the prospect of a change in an important career-related behaviour such as seeking further education, changing occupations, or changing employment status.' Holtom et al. (2005) go further with their definition of a shock event referring to it as 'a particular, jarring event that initiates the

psychological analyses involved in quitting' (2005: 339). The use of words such as 'shock' and 'quit' suggest a negative concept. However, being head hunted by a prestigious company with greater opportunities for personal advancement is an example of a positive career shock which might lead someone to consider resigning from their current position. Indeed, shock events can be viewed as positive, negative, or neutral depending largely on the individual involved. A person's 'personality, career competences and adaptability, and agentic orientation have a significant impact on how individuals deal with shocks' (De Vos et al., 2020). A career shock involves 2 key elements – the event and a process of initial sensemaking by the individual impacted. In some cases, it is not the incident itself that leads to people reflecting on their position career wise, but an organisation's reaction to that shock event and how such measures affect those they employ. Natural disasters, civil unrest, sudden economic upheaval, and public health emergencies are all examples of shock events which usually require an immediate response from an employer. Generally, such shock events are difficult to predict, infrequent, out of the control of any individual and highly impactful. It is unlikely that any of these events will result in people thinking about leaving their posts immediately. However, changes to working practices, job losses, restructuring and the removal of training opportunities, all of which an employer might consider when dealing with the organisational and financial challenges arising from a shock event such as a global health pandemic, will certainly lead to some staff reviewing their career options. Seibert et al. (2013) argue that shock events can lead to a 'psychological analysis and reappraisal of the likelihood of goal attainment in the present work context' (2013: 172). If people conclude that their career outcomes are less viable or not possible due to a negative shock event, they may well 're-examine strategies and possibly engage in a new course of action' (2013: 172). In contrast, positive shocks, 'such as succeeding in a visible, challenging project or receiving a pay raise or promotion sooner than expected' (2013: 172), suggest that an individual's strategies are working and mean that he/she is less likely to leave their current employment. Most people experience career shocks at some point during their working lives and these can significantly influence the career development process (Bright et al., 2009). However, in terms

of research 'it is still a relatively new concept' (Blokker et al., 2019: 182) and literature in the field is scarce (Akkermans et al., 2018; Blokker et al., 2019). For example, it is generally assumed that negative career shocks have negative outcomes and positive career shocks have positive outcomes. However, more recently researchers looking into the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic as a career shock have argued for a more nuanced approach (Akkermans et al., 2020). Firstly, they suggest that career shocks may impact people's careers in different ways depending on the individual's career or family stage. For example, a career shock early on in an individual's career might have a more lasting impact due to that person's lack of experience in the workplace. Recent studies have also shown that 'career shocks impact young professionals' efforts to build their employability' (Blokker et al., 2019: 173). In contrast, people who are mid-career might have developed certain psychological resources – such as career competencies and resilience - to deal more effectively with career shocks due, in part, to a greater exposure to such incidents over time. However, this group is more likely to have children, a mortgage or other financial commitments which give them one more thing to be concerned about during a pandemic. For later career adults, the pandemic may be especially stressful due to the higher rates of more severe infection amongst the elderly within society and economic implications for pensions and investments.

Secondly, researchers suggest that for some people the short-term negative impact of a shock event might, over time, turn out to become a positive experience bringing about 'opportunities for changing work arrangements, career development and skills upgrade' (Akkermans et al., 2020: 5). For example, being required to work from home during a period of civil unrest might remove the time, costs and stress associated with travelling to the office and allow people greater flexibility when managing their working day. Similarly, whilst losing a job during an economic crisis might initially be viewed as a negative experience, it may, in the long term, enable an individual to make changes to their career path leading to more job satisfaction and greater work-life balance.

Corpus and background

In March 2020, I was working as an educational consultant at a large language school in North Africa. With less than 48 hours' notice the organisation was asked by the government authorities to close its five teaching centres in the country due to a national health emergency. Within the week all adult English language courses were being taught fully online with Young Learners courses moving to online delivery a month later. Face-to-face classes would not resume at the school until October that year. As a PhD student investigating how careers in TESOL unfold, I was already aware of the concept of career shock events. The onset of Covid-19 presented an ideal opportunity to explore the experiences of some work colleagues to understand how this global health pandemic had impacted on their careers. Given the personal nature of this research and the fact that I was limited to a specific context, I decided that the most effective way to conduct my research was to undertake a qualitative case study. Research that exploits such an approach 'centres on one or a few individuals' (Brown, 2000: 2) to obtain a detailed description of 'participants' lived experiences of, thoughts about, and feelings for a situation' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007: 254). Case studies are often 'tightly focussed and personalised' (Wallace, 1999: 170) and are a useful way to explore issues with a high level of human interest. Case studies also allow researchers to 'observe effects in real contexts, recognising that context is a powerful determinant of both cause and effect' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007: 253).

This case study was conducted throughout August and September 2021 and involved 2 semi-structured interviews with each participant. The first interview, which took between 60 and 90 minutes, was based on a list of 10 open-ended questions sent to the participants a week before we spoke. The second interview, which lasted around 30 minutes, was based on some follow up questions I wrote in response to the first meeting. All interviews were conducted using Zoom and recorded with the participants' permission. The information gathered from these interviews was written up in the form of a summary narrative before the analysis, which explored similarities and differences in their experiences of maintaining a career in TESOL.

during Covid-19, was undertaken using a coding technique related to the 4 key areas under investigation. The names of the 3 research participants have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Steve's story

Steve, a freelance teacher trainer in his late fifties, flew to the UK within days of the school closing. He was shocked by the speed of events but also felt a certain level of curiosity. Steve didn't experience a sense of desperation or concern about his future. He attributed this largely to his life philosophy of taking responsibility and looking positively at the road ahead with a focus on practical action. Throughout his career in TESOL Steve had embraced change and, with some money in the bank, felt financially secure in the short term. In addition, he'd experienced similar career shocks before, most notably as a school owner in Argentina during the economic crash of 1999 and unexpected redundancy when working as a Director of Studies at a language centre in the UK in 2016. Steve explained that whilst both these events had proved professionally challenging, new opportunities did emerge and he was able to maintain a rewarding career in TESOL.

Steve saw the sudden change to his working life arising from the pandemic as an opportunity to develop new skills and accreditation. He immediately signed up for an internationally recognised online training course to acquire a better understanding of how to deliver effective teaching and training using online tools. Steve commented that he considered this training course to be a very worthwhile investment, both in terms of time and money, and it gave him a sense of purpose during a period of uncertainty. He added that at no time did he consider re-training as 'he didn't want to throw away all those years of experience.' Having completed this certificate, he quickly continued with his life as a freelance teacher trainer but working online. Steve commented on how supportive and generous those within the profession were at this time. Many peers were open to sharing their knowledge, experience, and materials on a variety of online forums and there was a consensus that in these early days 'it was OK not to be perfect and everyone would make mistakes.'

Interestingly, Steve also revealed that much of his career in TESOL up to this point had been about 'planning ahead.' Years earlier he'd sensed that teaching English online was a possible way forward within this sector of education and he'd taken steps to do some background research. The idea of supplementing his regular income with online work was appealing and in 2017 he started giving English lessons online to a student in South America (which he continues to do to this day). In the early months of the pandemic, Steve also picked up some extra online teaching at a school in the UK where he'd taught face-to-face previously. Whilst working as an academic manager, Steve had thought about going freelance in the future to ensure more freedom and a better work-life balance. Whilst in full-time employment he took steps to get accredited as a tutor on an internationally recognised pre-service teacher training qualification. This ensured that he was able to secure freelance teacher training work within days of being made redundant in 2016. He acknowledged being unhappy in that role and losing this job unexpectedly had been the push he needed to 'face the universe.' In addition, he described freelance work as 'liberating' as it allowed him to 'pick and choose' what he did and ensured that he met a lot more people within TESOL globally.

Steve's experiences during the first 3 months of the pandemic of planning and delivering online teacher training courses were encouraging. Positive feedback from course participants, co-tutors and course assessors gave him a sense of reassurance. Steve commented that his background in academic management was important at this stage as he focussed on consistency, organisation and supporting fellow online tutors, some of whom were feeling insecure. He reacted positively to feedback from key stakeholders, made changes to the design of his online teacher training courses and, with continued offers of freelance work, felt his confidence grow still further.

Steve left the UK in the summer of 2020 and relocated to Spain. Despite being a little nervous about how much online training work might be forthcoming, he was able to secure employment. He didn't actively promote his availability on social media sites such as LinkedIn or Facebook preferring to network using existing contacts built up throughout his working life in TESOL. He described himself 'as a believer in hope and action.' Although expressing

moments of doubt during the second half of 2020, he added that 'life has shown me that there's always a solution.'

However, Steve's situation changed a little bit between January and March 2021, as online work dried up. Being alone in a small Spanish village during lockdown also led to some feelings of isolation and he started to appreciate the value of being connected and the need to be compassionate when dealing with others. However, Steve still didn't consider re-training preferring to see this period as 'a bit of a lull'. He also viewed this time as a 'window of opportunity' to buy a property in the country which gave him a renewed sense of purpose. In April 2021, Steve was offered some online teacher training work but asked for a role with a bit less responsibility. He admitted that during the first quarter of 2021, he lost a bit of self-confidence, and wanted to focus on his role as a teacher trainer without the added administrative duties. Steve also did some more online teaching for the school in the UK which, he acknowledged, gave him further experience of being inside 'an English language teacher's skin' and helped to make him 'a more empathetic teacher trainer.' In the summer of 2021, he was asked to do some face-to-face teacher training. He admitted that going back into a classroom was nerve-wracking and he had lots of questions about how things would work given the need to wear face masks, adhere to social distancing and avoid the use of course books and handouts. However, the transition to this form of training proved easier than he'd imagined and whilst it wasn't the same kind of working experience as before the pandemic, he felt positively about returning to a school setting.

Nancy's story

When the school closed all face-to-face adult classes went online within a few days. However, Nancy, an academic manager in her early-thirties, and her colleagues on the Young Learner programme were given a month to prepare for the transfer to online teaching as preparation work on key areas such child protection policies and parental consent was needed. Nancy's first recollection was the large number of online meetings she attended from home. These conversations were often long due to connectivity issues and participants, more used to face-to-face interaction, speaking over each other. The work situation was extremely fluid and not

always systematic. For example, there were security issues with the initial social media platform selected to deliver online classes. However, the replacement package proved unsustainable as it required massive internet speed. Therefore, the school reverted to its original choice with some modifications but little time to train teachers thoroughly. Nancy worried that such last-minute changes might be perceived by some teachers as management incompetence. She admitted to finding the first few months difficult as she tried to figure things out. Working up to 14 hours a day with no free weekends for 3 months meant that there was little time to do any research about online teaching. When supporting others with the planning and delivery of their online lessons, Nancy considered herself to be 'a fraud' as the teachers she was mentoring knew more about how to use the selected platform in class than she did. Despite being a task-orientated person who doesn't usually panic, Nancy admitted to feeling 'overwhelmed.' In addition, as everything was happening so quickly and mistakes inevitably occurred, she felt that others might start to question her professional abilities which only added to the stress levels. The established routine she'd previously enjoyed at work 'was out of the window' which made her feel unstable.

Nancy realised that to be effective in this new context, she had to 'get back to what I knew and trusted.' She decided to 'create a daily routine, exercise regularly and have meetings whilst walking' to ensure a sense of balance and maintain her well-being. Nancy established a designated office space at home, wore work clothes and make-up as if she were at school and started to adhere to strict time boundaries. Rather than work until 10pm she set aside evenings for cooking healthy food, watching movies, and talking more with family and friends. In addition, once the Young Learner classes went online, Nancy's working life became a bit more structured. She was able to observe some online lessons which made her more effective when supporting teachers in the planning process. She taught some cover lessons, did some background reading on areas such as classroom management and motivation and took on the challenging role of Starter Level lead with a focus on teaching literacy to the lower primary level online. Her confidence improved, and she started to feel more comfortable at work.

Nancy referred to several factors which helped her get through 2020. Firstly, there was a strong sense of unity within the Young Learner management team. Whilst working from home this group had a 'live' online meeting running throughout the day to help recreate the sense of a staffroom and enable them to communicate easily at any time. Secondly, each member of the Young Learner management team was given 2 weeks off in August as 'all our brains were fried' and she returned to work after this break with a renewed sense of energy. Finally, she had a contract which wasn't due to expire until September 2021 so felt quite secure employment-wise at the school. As a well-qualified teacher with several years' experience, Nancy was also confident in her ability to find teaching work in another private language school should her existing contract be terminated unexpectedly. With no financial commitments, Nancy simply needed to find a teaching position to cover the rent, utilities, and basic outgoings such as food and transport.

However, throughout this 18-month period, Nancy was impacted in her work by financial decisions taken by the organisation to deal with economic issues arising from the pandemic. Due to the fall in student numbers, the contracts of some teachers were not renewed. Others were only offered 6-month extensions. At one point there was even a rumour that the school might need to secure a bank loan to pay teachers' salaries. All this led to a widespread feeling of insecurity amongst the staff, not helped by a perceived lack of communication from senior management. When teachers raised concerns, the response was very much along the lines of 'you're lucky to still have a job' and a greater level of staff flexibility was expected during such difficult times. Nancy had a practical attitude towards this acknowledging that 'business comes first, this is the sad reality.' However, with limited experience of dealing with contractual issues and no up-to-date information to work with, it was difficult, as a middle manager, for Nancy to allay teachers' understandable anxieties. Although she personally didn't have to tell any teachers that their contracts weren't being extended due to the pandemic, some of her colleagues on the Young Learner management team had to deliver such news. On occasions Nancy felt that teachers blamed middle managers for not being offered contract renewals and

that such decisions were being taken based on personal preferences rather than economic fact. This created an atmosphere of mistrust and insecurity.

Nancy joked that she considered leaving her role 'at least twice a day.' However, she never seriously contemplated quitting due, in part, to her respect for the organisation and its commitment to her professional development prior to the pandemic. Face-to-face Young Learner classes resumed in October 2020 but went back online between January and March 2021 due to rising Covid-19 cases before returning to a mix of face-to-face and online classes in April 2021. Nancy commented that these changes were easier to deal with 'as it was old news. We'd done all this before and the challenges weren't as great. I knew what kind of problems would be thrown at me.'

Dina's story

When the school closed, Dina, who is in her mid-twenties, had just started as a newly qualified teacher on the school's 2-year, full-time in-house teacher development programme. Although her adult classes went online within a few days, she described this as the least stressful time throughout the whole pandemic. Firstly, all the teachers were in the same boat as none had taught online before. Secondly, level planning teams were set up, so she felt supported as communication amongst team members was frequent and targeted. It was also motivating to be sharing ideas and materials with others so freely. Dina added that having no online teaching experience meant that she 'was kind of excited about learning something new.' Although she wouldn't have chosen to teach online, as there was no alternative, she was happy to take on the challenge. In addition, she sensed that in the early days of the pandemic academic managers had realistic expectations of what teachers could achieve which minimised the anxiety.

However, there were a few issues during this period. Dina explained that there was a lack of training on how to use the online platform and 'I had to figure out everything for myself.' In addition, the self-study training packs with links sent to teachers were of poor quality and too long. Having finished her adult classes, Dina was asked to work as full-time, online placement tester for both the adult and Young Learner programmes but there was little training on how

to do this and Dina relied on colleagues to show her the testing procedures. However, overall, Dina concluded that March to August 2020 was a beneficial time as not only was she developing new skills, but she had the chance to observe some online teaching and working from her family home, 3 hours from the school, provided a sense of security and familiarity during the early days of the pandemic.

At the end of August, Dina was asked to teach adult classes online. Having not taught for a few months she was anxious about this and found the lack of preparation time and excessive number of emails from academic managers overwhelming. She was required to plan lessons during her weekend, struggled to communicate online with both her line manager and mentor and wasn't told of some of the key procedures relating to online course administration and the management of the in-house teacher development programme she'd joined in January 2020. This left Dina feeling isolated within the workplace and much of her professional development at this stage was self-directed. In September, the school went back to face-to-face delivery for adult classes. Dina was initially excited about getting back into the classroom even though it meant leaving her family home and finding a flat to rent near the school. However, she was asked by school managers to cut short her leave to complete some tasks related to her training programme. This included doing a formal observation with a group of students she borrowed from another teacher as she didn't have her own classes at this time. During this period, Dina struggled to complete some administrative tasks on time but felt that managers failed to provide sufficient support, lacked empathy, and avoided face-to-face communication. She sent emails asking for regular meetings with her line manager but these, plus phone calls, went unanswered.

Dina wasn't anxious about returning to face-to-face teaching, but she said that the Covid-19 protocols impacted negatively on fun and engagement within her classes. She enjoyed some of the training sessions provided to help teachers fully exploit technology when teaching face-to-face and found learners responsive when she applied these techniques in class. Dina taught adults at the school and Young Learners online which gave her a sense of professional development and personal achievement. However, work patterns, including weekends weren't

fixed, making it difficult to plan a life outside of school and Dina started to become disillusioned. Her health was suffering so she asked to teach more online classes and work less in the evenings, but these requests weren't actioned, and no explanation was provided. In April 2021, Dina volunteered to teach Young Learners face-to-face throughout the upcoming Summer Camps and applied to do a literacy course. She hoped that by having a fixed schedule of morning work, she could go to the gym, study, and travel within the country. However, she was asked to teach mostly adult classes with little work on the Summer Camp programme. By this time teaching on the adult programme had become less rewarding as the pre-prepared materials, being used, in part, to replace hard copies of course books and printed handouts, were dull and stifled creativity. In addition, changes to the timetable, often at short notice, were becoming more common, which added to Dina's sense of frustration. 'I was happy to be flexible and meet work needs,' she said, 'but my preferences were never considered.'

At this point, Dina decided to resign. She'd considered leaving previously, especially when doing full-time placement testing. 'The only thing I like about teaching is the classroom and I wasn't doing any of that.' Although she was learning new skills as a placement tester, she added that 'not teaching wasn't OK.' Dina briefly considered becoming a flight attendant but opportunities for overseas travel were severely limited by the pandemic. She also contemplated applying to teach at other schools, but Covid-19 meant that most employers had put a temporary hold on recruitment. In addition, she had a professional incentive for not moving explaining that she'd set herself the goal of graduating from the first year of the school's in-house teacher development programme (which happened at the end of May 2021) and quitting wasn't in her nature. However, by the autumn of 2021 she'd concluded that for the sake of her own well-being she should leave the school. This decision was based on practical considerations rather than emotions. She felt that the work environment was too stressful and uncomfortable, and she spent too much energy fighting the negativity around her. The freeze on teacher training courses to help reduce school expenditure also meant that Dina couldn't see any professional development opportunities. Her commitment to creative

teaching and working with English language students remained, but she wanted to find a less toxic setting.

Analysis and reflection

What key career competencies and personal attributes enable professionals to maintain a career in TESOL during a shock event?

Over the last 18 months, Steve, Nancy, and Dina displayed several similar career competences and personal qualities to deal with the impact of Covid-19 on their working lives. A key factor was that despite the suddenness of the move to online work, they all embraced this change viewing it as an unexpected opportunity for professional development. Notably both Steve and Dina talked of their excitement at learning new skills. On occasions they all took ownership of their professional development. For example, Steve completed a course to develop his online skills, Nancy volunteered to take the lead on teaching literacy to Young Learners online and Dina, in the absence of sufficient formal training, consulted peers to get an idea about online placement testing. They all proved able to adapt effectively to dramatic changes in working practices arising from the Covid-19 pandemic in a short space of time. They also displayed flexibility – for example, Steve moved from North Africa to the UK to Spain but continued to work throughout. Nancy took on a variety of tasks to support different departments who were overstretched due to additional tasks created by the school's response to the pandemic. And Dina went from teaching face-to-face, to teaching online, to doing online placement testing and to teaching both face-to-face and online classes simultaneously over a 6-month period. Steve and Nancy showed that they were able to reflect and make changes to their ways of working in response to challenging circumstances. For example, Steve chose to take on a training role with less administrative responsibility to help regain his self-confidence after a period of not working. Nancy realised that the best way to get some stability back into her life was to establish a routine when working from home. Dina tried to initiate changes by asking for fewer split shifts and more Young Learner classes to protect her well-being.

However, she was less successful in making things happen as she didn't have ownership of this process and had to rely on academic managers who were unable to accommodate her requests.

Steve, Nancy, and Dina all referred to the benefits of being part of a team during such a crisis, although their experiences were slightly different. Steve talked about the on-going support of his established network of friends and colleagues within TESOL. Nancy stressed the unity of the Young Learner management team and how they were in constant online contact when working from home. Dina praised the support provided by lesson planning teams but once she was asked to do full-time online placement testing, she noted that there was a lot less support and she started to feel isolated. There is a sense throughout Dina's story of someone fighting to be heard but having to rely very much on herself. Over time this experience became draining and led her to question the value of being employed at the school. Once a tipping point was reached, she made a rational decision to leave the centre and seek teaching opportunities elsewhere. It could also be argued that Dina had less invested in a TESOL career up to this point and so had little to lose. In contrast to this, Steve mentioned that he wasn't prepared to throw away everything that he'd worked for over his decades long career in the profession.

Does a person's ability to deal with a career shock event depend on their life and/or career stage?

Steve was the only person who referred to experiencing previous career shock events during the interviews. Having come through these situations and been able to maintain his career in TESOL had clearly given him an insight into how best to approach sudden changes in his working life. He also commented that Covid-19 was different to the career shock of the financial crash in Argentina as it 'brought up lots of opportunities.' His experience of academic management had taught him the value of looking ahead, especially in terms of trying to predict the next 'big thing' within the industry. This had led him to experiment with online teaching years before Covid-19. In addition, his extensive career also meant that he'd had plenty of

time to develop the professional contacts that would support him throughout the pandemic. As a highly experienced TESOL professional with a training background, some experience of teaching online and an established network of colleagues around the world, Steve was in a strong position to gain employment as a freelancer in the Covid-19 world. Gaining an international online training qualification so quickly and being open to working online only served to increase these opportunities. A level of financial security also served to reduce some of the initial anxiety and enabled him to make an investment in the online teacher training course without worrying too much about having to generate income immediately. Steve's story suggests that he saw the pandemic as another career shock event to overcome and was confident that he had the skills, knowledge, and personal qualities to achieve this.

Nancy's professional experience served her in a slightly different way to Steve. Her commitment to the organisation during such challenging times stemmed largely from an appreciation of all the professional development opportunities she'd been given by the centre prior to the pandemic. Having started as a newly qualified teacher on the same in-house teacher development programme as Dina but only years before, the centre had funded further teaching qualifications, provided opportunities to teach in a range of different contexts and ultimately afforded her the chance to get into academic management. Nancy felt secure in her employment during the time of the pandemic having signed a new, 2-year contract a few months earlier. She reasoned that the amount of work the Young Learner management team needed to do to get their courses online, together with her background and skills set, meant that she was unlikely to be made redundant. She also had the professional self-confidence to argue that even if she did lose her job, it would be possible, with her classroom experience and teaching qualifications to secure work as an English language teacher in an international school. Finally, Nancy took a pragmatic approach to the financial decisions taken by the senior managers at the school to deal with the economic fallout from the pandemic. Although frustrated by the lack of information and empathy provided by more senior personnel at the school, she was able to see the 'bigger picture'. Nancy commented that she didn't spend too much time or energy worrying about how staff cutbacks might affect her position at the school.

However, she was acutely aware of the impact poor communication was having on the teachers and felt, to some extent, that she was caught in the middle but powerless to address the situation. Nancy's story suggests that she saw the pandemic as a career challenge and, despite the many difficulties faced, wanted to embrace the situation head-on as a way of giving back to a school which had supported her career in TESOL for several years previously.

As a newly qualified teacher Dina had less work experience to fall back on. In terms of professional development, she was looking forward in hope rather than back in appreciation. Dina's employment position was quite secure having signed a 2-year contract in January 2020 and during the interviews she didn't express any concerns about being made redundant or experiencing financial issues. Nor did she mention any negative impact of seeing several colleagues leave the organisation during this period having not had their contracts renewed. However, it's clear that at times she felt extremely isolated in the workplace with only a small group of peers to turn to. Many of these colleagues were on the same in-house teacher training programme and, therefore, had limited work experience too. Dina's story reflects the importance of communication and transparency during periods of rapid change and uncertainty. It's clear that she struggled to get the training she needed at the time when it was most useful. Her working relationship with her line manager became strained, not helped by the fact that nearly all communication was done via email rather than on the phone or using a readily available communication platform such as Teams or Zoom. This, in turn, caused feelings of frustration and mistrust which started to impact on Dina's well-being, ultimately feeding into her decision to resign from the school. This move wasn't taken lightly and there's evidence to suggest that had academic managers been more supportive, explained why changes she requested to her teaching timetable weren't possible and received some reassurances about training opportunities in the future, she may have stayed longer.

Does the short-term negative impact of a shock event turn out to have a positive career outcome?

Steve, Nancy, and Dina agreed that in terms of their career development in TESOL, dealing with changes to their working lives brought about by the emergence of Covid-19, had been a positive experience. They all commented on the value of the new teaching and training skills they'd developed due largely to having to work online. Nancy also revealed that she now felt more confident in terms of operational management and had a better understanding of the challenges facing other departments. In addition, there was evidence that Nancy and Dina had taken time to reflect on future learning and professional needs. Nancy had decided to start an MA course to address a perceived deficiency in her mentoring skills and diversify her skills set in an ever more competitive job market. Dina, although disillusioned by her experiences at the school, remained committed to a career in English language teaching and was planning to join the Fulbright programme to teach in the United States. Nancy and Dina generally appeared positive about their future in TESOL. Steve, however, was less enthused having recently turned down freelance teacher training work due a low salary and poor working conditions which he perceived as disrespectful.

Finally, Nancy and Dina spoke about how their experiences of working throughout the pandemic had raised their awareness of the importance of maintaining a better work/life balance. Nancy explained that prior to the pandemic, she'd measured success in terms of qualifications, job titles, and promotions as part of a linear career trajectory. However, she currently views career success as combining work achievements with maintaining her physical and mental well-being, making time for family, and investing in relationships. Dina also discussed the impact of ever-changing work patterns, including last minute cover lessons, on her ability to do exercise and pursue her hobbies and interests. It's clear that this played a major role in her decision to resign from her teaching position with the school. She now spends more time reading around a range of topics and exploring other career options within education. Working during the pandemic 'changed the way I look at things', she explained. 'I

know more about what I want both professionally and personally. I've experienced the worst and better understand what I'm capable of doing.'

What can we learn from the experiences of these TESOL professionals that might support others when dealing with career shock events?

Steve's advice to others when facing a career shock event was to take a step back and consider what you need to do to survive. He felt that much depends on getting the training required to be effective in the new context and, if working as a freelancer, trying to make yourself stand out as much as possible in a highly competitive market. He also suggested that during such difficult times, we each need to consider what we're prepared to 'put up with' professionally and for how long. These points were echoed by Dina who stressed the need to get quality training that allows you to function as effectively as possible within the new working environment. Without training and continuous support from others, an already stressful situation can become even more challenging. She too suggested that when facing some of the challenges arising from a career shock event, everyone should carefully consider how far they're willing to sacrifice their own professional development and mental well-being for the sake of the organisation they work for. Looking back over the last 18 months, Nancy wished that she had neither worked so hard nor got so stressed. She also regretted not standing up for herself a bit more, especially on the issue of working hours. Her advice to others facing such career shock events was, where possible, to take a step back, think as rationally as possible and 'don't act out of fear or anxiety.' Sit down, reflect, and try to talk a bit of sense into your head as, inevitably, things will take their natural course and solutions do emerge.

Conclusion

Clearly, this is an extremely limited study in a highly specific context. However, the experiences and reflections of Steve, Nancy and Dina will resonate with other TESOL professionals who have faced a career shock arising from Covid-19. Given that Steve and

Nancy continue in the roles that they had before the pandemic and Dina remains committed to working in education, it's useful to consider how they were able to maintain their careers during such a challenging and uncertain time. Key personal traits emerge such as a willingness to embrace rapid change, a desire to learn new skills and the ability to be adaptable and flexible. Team working, accepting mistakes as part of the learning process and being able to reflect and make changes to working practices also come across as important. There is evidence to support the view that an individual's life and career stage does impact on their ability to deal with a career shock event such as Covid-19. Those who have experienced career shock events before are more likely to be able to address the immediate challenges with a positive mindset and a greater range of strategies. An academic manager with a strong sense of loyalty to their employer has more invested in searching for solutions to the business problems faced during an event such a global health emergency. However, those who are younger with less work experience don't, perhaps, have such a connection and may decide, when their needs are no longer being met, to seek out an alternative employer.

Looking back over the past 18 months, the stories provided by the 3 research participants confirm that, overall, they feel this shock event has had positive career outcomes. Not only have they all learnt new classroom skills in the form of online teaching and training, but they have developed personal qualities and a greater appreciation of the role of others in their working lives. There's also evidence of individuals reflecting on their work experiences during the pandemic and deciding on their future professional needs within TESOL. Finally, they have re-evaluated their approach to career and realised that success should be a balance between achieving work goals and maintaining the desired level of mental and physical well-being.

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