

# **Online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic: an exploration of the nature and quality of teacher-student communication**

Conference abstract

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted education in major ways. The most important manifestation of this disruption has arguably been the closure of schools, an emergency measure implemented by many governments across the world as part of efforts to curb the spread of coronavirus. School closures resulted in teaching moving online, a change that had important implications for student learning (see e.g. Barron Rodriguez et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2021; Muñoz-Najar, 2021; Stringer & Keys, 2021). One aspect of teaching that was directly impacted by this change was the interaction between teachers and students. Given that high-quality interaction lies at the heart of a successful pedagogical process, this study sought to explore the nature and quality of teacher-student communication during the period(s) of online teaching.

To illuminate the nature of teacher-student interactions during online teaching, this research drew on data collected as part of a mixed methods investigation. The data consisted of questionnaire responses and in-depth interview accounts obtained from 404 and 13 teachers respectively from across the world. The teachers who completed the questionnaire came from 38 different countries, and represented a variety of subject backgrounds (e.g. Art, Music, English, Literature, Science, Mathematics) and education sectors (i.e. primary and secondary). This diversity in teacher background was also reflected in the interview phase. The present study was mainly informed by the interview data, with the questionnaire responses providing additional information that helped to situate the qualitative observations within the broader context of the educational challenges created by the pandemic.

The interview data were subjected to a bottom-up thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2022), which was used to identify the various manifestations of teacher-student communication during online teaching. The outcomes of the thematic analysis were then viewed through the lens of a linguistic framework, namely, Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, which was used in this study as a tool for exploring the quality of teacher-student online communication. According to this framework, effective communication requires cooperation between the interlocutors. This cooperation typically takes the form of adherence to a number of principles, or 'maxims' (Grice, 1975): (a) Maxim of quantity: Be sufficiently informative ('Make your contribution as informative as is required' and not 'more [or less] informative than is required', p. 45), (b) Maxim of quality: Be truthful ('Do not say what you believe to be false' or 'that for which you lack adequate evidence.', p. 46), (c) Maxim of relation: Be relevant, and (d) Maxim of manner: Be clear ('Avoid obscurity of expression' and 'ambiguity', and be 'brief' and 'orderly', p. 46). Given that the Cooperative Principle was developed at a time when online communication was not yet possible, Grice's framework was slightly extended to account also for the characteristics of online interaction.

The participants' experiences of online teaching during the pandemic and the various instances of ineffective communication they reported in the interviews and questionnaire, rendered the Cooperative Principle a useful lens through which to examine teacher-student online communication. Apart from serving a practical function, the choice and use of this framework to analyse teacher-student interaction in this study was also intended to serve an ideological, or transformative, role by helping to recast, or reconceptualise, the relationship between teachers and students as one between collaborators working towards a shared goal.

The use of the Cooperative Principle as an analytical and interpretive tool in this study helped to uncover a 'cycle of ineffective communication' between teachers and students during online teaching, while facilitating the exploration of the interrelationship between communication and learning in educational settings. For example, students' reluctance to activate their camera during the online lessons resulted in a violation of the maxim of quantity ('Be sufficiently informative') which, in turn, may have had implications for learning: as teachers were not able to see students and 'read' their body language, they were under-informed about the extent to which students could follow the pace of the lesson and understand their instructions and feedback.

Drawing on the findings of this study, this paper will present the 'cycle of ineffective communication', the factors that seemed to trigger and sustain it, the various direct and indirect ways in which it may have compromised learning, as well as possible directions for breaking this cycle in the future.

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