

Organizing and Hosting Virtual PPTELL 2020 During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims at answering the “how” questions about organizing and hosting an online conference during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 3rd International Pan-Pacific Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (PPTELL) Conference and Critical Thinking Meeting (hereafter PPTELL 2020) hosted from June 29 to July 1, 2020, on Zoom is the example conference used in this paper to illustrate the challenges and approaches adopted before, during and after the conference. The mentioned conference was supposed to take place physically at the University of North Texas during the same period but was transformed into an online virtual conference due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020. It was an urgent decision, along with many unknown situations, such as the attendees’ different time zones and “Zoombombing.” A three-staged and target-action process guided the preparation and organization of the online conference, i.e., pre-, during, and post-conference. According to the live meeting results and the post-conference survey, PPTELL 2020 has earned a reputation from its quality and the satisfaction of the participants and attendees. Therefore, the experience shared in the current paper seems to be a good reference for the organizers and hosts of international conferences.

Keywords: Online conference, COVID-19, Zoombombing, PPTELL 2020 and Critical Thinking Meeting

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

COVID-19 seems a “bomb” to the globe this year. It has been changing and influencing the world since early 2020, starting from Asia, Europe, Pan Pacific, and then America, and finally, it has become a global pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). The outbreak has affected busy and frequent international communication (Verbeke, 2020). Globalization in the recent decade has fostered the spread of COVID-19. To reduce its damage and spread, social distancing is one of the most important measures. Consequently, imposing a shutdown seems to be a quick and effective approach to dealing with the plague (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). Starting with Wuhan, China, several big cities in Europe, and then almost all the States in the U.S. declared a shutdown. The world seems to have come to a halt.

Following the shutdown and social distancing in many areas worldwide, many activities are hugely affected. In addition to the global economy (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020), education and academia (Crawford et al., 2020) are also among the most affected fields. According to the report of United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020), “the COVID-19 pandemic has globally affected the educational system, leading to the near-total closures of schools, universities, and colleges.” The closures have impacted over 60% of the student population worldwide, reaching 1.725 billion students. To help continue students’ learning, remote instruction, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Educational Resources (OER) (Miró, Baquero-Arnal, Civera, Turró, & Juan, 2018) have become the potential approaches to providing students with learning opportunities during the pandemic (Hartshorne, Baumgartner, Kaplan-Rakowski, Mouza, & Ferdig, 2020).

Similar to the closure of the educational system, holding academic activities, especially international conferences, requires new approaches to dealing with the chaos caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. Interpersonal interaction is the main features of such academic activities, but it is strongly prohibited for slowing the spread of the plague. In the fact of the pandemic, many international conferences in 2020 have been cancelled (Klöwer, Hopkins, Allen & Higham, 2020). Some are rescheduled (e.g., CALICO 2020 and CALL 2020) and transformed (e.g., from Teaching Professor Conference 2020 to Teaching Professor Virtual Conference).

The 3rd Pan-Pacific Technology-Enhanced Language Learning International Conference and Critical Thinking Meeting (hereafter PPTPELL2020) faced the same dilemma as many other international conferences mentioned above. PPTPELL was first organized in 2018 to respond to the rising trends of modern technologies for competency-oriented language learning. PPTPELL Conference connects researchers, educators, and the front-line teachers to have conversations on the huge potential of integrating language learning theories and advanced technologies for cultivating learners' critical competencies for pursuing success in the 21st century. PPTPELL 2020 was co-hosted by the University of North Texas (UNT) and National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) from June 29 to July 1, 2020 and was supposed to take place at the UNT campus. Around early February, the preparation for the event was almost done. The flight tickets for the keynote speakers and the invited speakers were already booked; the conference venues, the hotels, the on-campus accommodations, and the catering plan were all set. At the early stage of COVID-19, in February 2020, the most affected areas were China and Europe. The PPTPELL 2020 committee paid close attention to the development of COVID-19 but believed that it would be alright in the U.S. However, from March 2020, the spread of COVID-19 reached the U.S., which then imposed a shutdown and a curfew. Then, the PPTPELL 2020 committee received the announcement made by UNT on March 22, indicating that large gatherings were prohibited. The worst was that the closure might continue for the whole spring semester and summer in 2020.

The bolt from the blue urged the committee to decide whether to cancel PPTPELL 2020. If not, how could we host PPTPELL 2020 and provide the attendees with a safe opportunity for successful interpersonal connection and experience sharing under the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.2. Moving PPTPELL 2020 online as a virtual international conference

A thorough discussion of the abovementioned issues was conducted to help the committee make a better and appropriate decision. The discussion covered the budget, the potential and inevitable loss, the approaches to dealing with the cancellation of the already-booked items such as the keynote speakers' flight tickets, the proceedings publishing plan which was under the contract between the editorial team and Springer, the approaches to reaching the general purposes of an international conference and the expectations of the participants and attendees of PPTPELL 2020, etc. After a careful analysis of the pros and cons, the committee decided to continue hosting PPTPELL 2020 on the same dates by transforming it into an online conference. An urgent question following the decision needed to be answered was "Which platform should be chosen for the online conference?" It must be an easy-to-use, stable and secure one. Additionally, it should be affordable and should not cost more than that originally planned for hosting the conference. Based on the following reasons and the other conference organizers' experience (e.g., Misa et al., 2020), Zoom was chosen as the platform of PPTPELL 2020 although the other suitable online platforms are also available: (1) given Zoom has been widely used for synchronous meetings in different domains (Wiederhold, 2020), such as business and education, it was supposed that most of the participants were familiar with the platform; (2) several registered participants were based in China and they might have difficulty using some other online platforms, such as Google Meet; (3) Zoom allows the conference to accommodate a large group of participants; (4) Zoom provides participants with two-mode chat function, both private and public; and (5) Zoom allows for recording and automatically transcribing the meeting.

One basic but serious challenge accompanied this decision: How to prevent Zoombombing (Marotti, 2020) during the conference? To learn about the real situations of a Zoom conference, one of the committee members attended an international conference on Zoom after it was chosen to run PPTPELL 2020. She experienced an example of the unwanted Zoombombing, filled with endless bloody and pornography bombing, during the conference. Consequently, that meeting was forced to be terminated not long after its beginning. The unpleasant experience shocked the committee of PPTPELL and reminded them that a series of actions had to be adopted to avoid similar attacks during PPTPELL 2020.

1.3. The challenges

As mentioned in the previous section, the committee of PPTPELL made a quick decision on responding to the influence caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e., replacing the physical PPTPELL 2020 with the virtual PPTPELL 2020 on Zoom. The goal of PPTPELL 2020 was the same as that of the original one: to reach a resounding success and make a valuable contribution to the academic community despite the Zoombombing threats. Additionally, more challenges emerged once Zoom was chosen as the platform of PPTPELL 2020. Some

of the challenges were also discussed with the organizers or hosts of other conferences, such as the 2020 edition of the Passive and Active Measurement (PAM) conference (Misa et al., 2020). Table 1 lists the challenges faced by the committee in different stages, i.e., pre-, during, and post-conference.

Table 1. A list of challenges in different stages

Conference organizing stages	Possible challenges encountered
Pre-conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to arrange a program that is appropriate for the attendees in different time zones? • How to include all the essential elements of an international conference in an online one, such as the opening and the closing ceremonies, and the Q&A sessions following a speech or a paper presentation? • How to organize the team and assign duties to cover all the tasks needed to be completed in an online conference?
During conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to guarantee the program goes smoothly and safely? • How to reach the speakers or the presenters if they do not show up? • How to keep the meeting going when the key persons, such as the speakers and presenters are unexpectedly disconnected during the meeting? • How to build an inter-personal connection among the attendees as it is expected in a physical international conference?
Post-conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to build an inter-personal connection among the attendees as it is expected in a physical international conference? • How to obtain the participants' perception and evaluation on PPTTELL 2020?

The challenges listed above concerned the following four main categories: the security issue in a Zoom meeting, the arrangement of the conference program, troubleshooting during the conference, and sustaining relationships between the participants, and collecting the participants' perceptions and evaluation on the conference. What's more challenging was that none of the main members of the organizing team had the experience in organizing an online international conference. Due to the lack of the practical experience of organizing an online conference, the team members learned by doing and constantly reflecting on what they did. The following sections briefly describe the targets and the corresponding actions to achieve them, as well as the feedback and comments given by the participants and attendees. Finally, a brief conclusion will provide the readers with suggestions for organizing an online conference.

2. The pre-conference stage

This stage included the steps to transform PPTTELL 2020 from a physical conference to an online one. The main tasks in the pre-conference stage included (1) arranging an appropriate program to accommodate all the activities, (2) studying the functions of the Zoom platform, and (3) organizing and training a Zoom-monitor team.

Considering more than 100 attendees of PPTTELL 2020 came from 12 countries/areas across ten time zones, arranging a program which included all the sessions allowing almost all the attendees to attend the program at a suitable time became the first challenge faced by the program committee. The first step was to confirm the number of attendees from each country/area and found that most of the attendees were located in the U.S. and Taiwan; some were in Canada and Chile, others were from Australia and New Zealand, and still others were from Japan, India, South Korea, Mainland China, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Next, the committee created a table of multiple time zones in which most attendees were located. Figure 1 shows the time table and the chosen time slots.

As shown in Figure 1, only 4.5 hours per day (marked in red) were appropriate for almost all the attendees, except one from India; thus, his session was arranged in the last hour within the 4.5 hours.

The second step was to squeeze all the events into the compact timetable, from at least 8 hours a day in a physical conference to 4.5 hours a day. The PPTTELL 2020 events included the opening, the closing, four keynote speeches, two invited speeches, four workshops, 29 paper presentations, and several breaks. Considering the limited time available each day and the rich events, four Zoom rooms were needed and only 15 minutes allowed for each paper presentation. The conference structure of PPTTELL 2020 was similar to that of the T6SymptoZOOM conference (Salomon & Feldman, 2020) except that the former conference involved many

more activities than did the latter. Additionally, both types of the program of PPTTELL 2020, the finalized program at a Glance and the detailed daily program, can be found on the official website of PPTTELL 2020.

India+5.5	Taiwan, China, Singapore+8	Japan, Korea+9	Australian Eastern+10	New Zealand+13	USA CA-7	Canada Central-6	USA TX, MI-5	USA Mi, PA-4	Chile-3
22.5	1	2	3	6	10	11	12	13	14
23.5	2	3	4	7	11	12	13	14	15
24.5	3	4	5	8	12	13	14	15	16
1.5	4	5	6	9	13	14	15	16	17
2.5	5	6	7	10	14	15	16	17	18
3.5	6	7	8	11	15	16	17	18	19
4.5	7	8	9	12	16	17	18	19	20
5.5	8	9	10	13	17	18	19	20	21
6.5	9	10	11	14	18	19	20	21	22
7.5	10	11	12	15	19	20	21	22	23
8.5	11	12	13	16	20	21	22	23	24
9.5	12	13	14	17	21	22	23	24	1
10.5	13	14	15	18	22	23	24	1	2
11.5	14	15	16	19	23	24	1	2	3
12.5	15	16	17	20	24	1	2	3	4
13.5	16	17	18	21	1	2	3	4	5
14.5	17	18	19	22	2	3	4	5	6
15.5	18	19	20	23	3	4	5	6	7
16.5	19	20	21	24	4	5	6	7	8
17.5	20	21	22	1	5	6	7	8	9
18.5	21	22	23	2	6	7	8	9	10
19.5	22	23	24	3	7	8	9	10	11
20.5	23	24	1	4	8	9	10	11	12
21.5	24	1	2	5	9	10	11	12	13

Note: red, synchronous time; green, testing time 1; blue, testing time 2; 24, Time NG (unsuitable for arranging activities)

Figure 1. Finding the best meeting time across different time zones through a table

As mentioned in 1.3 The challenges, the committee was most concerned about the security issue during the conference that has been challenging many Zoom users (Secara, 2020). By carefully studying the functions and referring to the others’ experience (e.g., Berkeley Information Security Office, 2020; Vigliarolo, 2020), the team identified some Zoom functions to ensure security in the Zoom rooms for online meetings as listed below.

- Waiting room (The Waiting Room feature allows the host to control when a participant can enter the meeting): Allow join with the host’s confirmation
- Password required (For security’s sake)
- Audio (To avoid influence from unexpected noise or background sound): Off when entering; Video (For security’s sake): Required for identification
- Sound notification when someone joins or leaves (To avoid influence from unexpected noise or background sound): Host and co-host only
- Screen sharing and start sharing (To ensure all the presenters/chairs are allowed to share their screens with the participants and attendees): All participants
- Allow participants to rename themselves (For security’s sake): Disable
- Co-host is needed (The Co-host feature allows the host to share hosting privileges with another user(s))

To handle the possible technical issues, a team in addition to the committee of PPTTELL 2020 was needed. The team’s missions were to help monitor the Zoom rooms during the conference to make sure the meetings go smoothly. Consequently, a volunteer team was formed. The criteria for recruiting the volunteers were that they must be capable of attending several training sessions. We did not, however, limit their nationalities or locations, since having volunteers from only certain parts of the world would not form any challenges as long as the volunteers could find mutual times for discussion. The team members were from the U.S., Taiwan, New Zealand, Singapore, and Mainland China. Four of them were set as the hosts of the Zoom rooms in advance while the others served as the co-hosts to co-monitor the meetings. Soon after the volunteer team was formed, a

series of trainings on Zoom usage and monitoring meetings were arranged. The following tasks were necessary to hold Zoom meetings smoothly and all the volunteers were asked to practice repeatedly until they were familiar: check the attendees' identity through their full names and decide whether to permit their entry into the "room" instantly, monitor the progress of the meetings, and guarantee they went smoothly under a secured space.

Moreover, in addition to training the volunteer team, a tutorial on using Zoom, especially the screen sharing function, was also arranged for all the attendees. The tutorial information was sent to the attendees two weeks before the conference via a Google Form titled "The Survey of using Zoom in PPTCELL2020" before the tutorial. Considering some attendees were unavailable, some videos for self-learning were also created and shared with the attendees.

During the volunteer training, a new issue raised: how to deal with the no-shows or an unstable Internet connection? "No-show" has been a serious issue existing in many international conferences (Gobert, 2020) while the quality of internet connection greatly influences the progress of an online meeting (Bonifati et al., 2020). To deal with abovementioned issues, three tasks were completed at the preparation stage. Firstly, all the attendees were asked to join a private group on a real-time social media for receiving all the information or reminders sent by the committee and most importantly for an easier contact during the conference. Consequently, rather than setting up an additional Slack channel as Misa et al. (2020) did, the committee chose WhatsApp in this conference since it was used by most of the attendees of PPTCELL 2020. Secondly, the slides and videos of the speeches and the presentations were collected and shared with the Zoom-monitor teams. The team also tested all the collected materials beforehand. Lastly, two reminders were sent to all the attendees in the last week of preparation stage: the general information and the information about the Zoom rooms. The reminder with the general information was sent out twice, one week and five days before the event, respectively. This reminder emphasized: (1) when and how the reminders will be sent to the attendees, (2) a must that everyone joins the WhatsApp group with the REAL names, (3) a must that everyone joins the Zoom meetings with the REAL and FULL names, and (4) the conference program.

On the other hand, the reminder with the detailed Zoom login information was sent out to all the attendees two days before the conference. This reminder provided the passwords and the links to the Zoom rooms. It also emphasized that the login information must not be shared with others. Besides, it contained information about the opening and the closing ceremonies.

After a three-month preparation, the committee welcomed all the attendees online and started the 3-day adventure, which will be described below, the during-conference stage.

3. The during-conference stage

As listed in Table 1, a progress being smooth and secured are the two major elements at the during-conference stage. Although many organizers of virtual conferences shared their experience in 2020 (e.g., Rose, Mott, Alvarez, & Lin, 2020; Veldhuizen, Slingerland, Barredo, & Giller, 2020), some unexpected situations would possibly happen and provide the committee with new lessons to learn from. Therefore, the committee and the Zoom-monitor team wrote down what happened within the three days, especially the unexpected events.

In totally, there were 43 sessions in PPTCELL 2020, including the opening ceremony, keynote speeches, invited speeches, workshops, panels, paper presentation, and the closing ceremony. The most-attended event was the opening ceremony; more than 80 people attended it, while the less-attended one was one paper presentation session with fewer than 20 attendees. Except for the opening ceremony, the plenary sessions which included the four keynote speeches attracted most of the attendees and participants. Regarding the security issue, the three-day events went without any problems. No any cases of zoombombing were found during the three-day events. But some common issues encountered by many other online conferences were also found in PPTCELL 2020, such as the no-show issue and the poor quality of an Internet connection. Table 2 lists those issues, the frequencies and the percentages, and the descriptions of the matters.

It can be found that with the support of the Zoom-monitor team, the security aspect was not an issue during PPTCELL 2020. However, although some videos were recorded beforehand, playing those videos, except those lasting within 2 minutes, did not go smoothly such as the welcome speeches given by the two Presidents of UNT and NTNU. What we experienced is different from that described in reports of Salomon and Feldman (2020) and Misa et al. (2020). According to the experiences obtained from this conference, therefore, it is suggested that the pre-recorded videos, except the very short clips, should be shared with the attendees and the participants in

advance, rather than playing the recorded presentations during the conference. The limited session time should be used for interactive discussion, rather than for video watching, especially when the Internet quality at the presenter's side does not allow playing the video. Additionally, the issue of disconnection of the talks given by the invited speaker and the workshop organizer was resolved thanks to the session chairs' quick-witted action. Although the Zoom-monitor team's help did not work, the session chairs led the attendees and the participants through an interactive discussion over their research experience in the topics of those sessions. Furthermore, neither of the issues, the no-show and the platform usage, influenced the event much. With the support of the Zoom-monitor team, the three sessions mentioned in Table 2 turned out very smooth.

Table 2. The unexpected situations during the 3-day events

Unexpected matters	Frequency (percentage)	Event descriptions
No-show	2 (4.65)	1. One session chair who was also a presenter did not show up. 2. One presenter did not show up.
Platform usage (Zoom usage)	1 (2.32)	1. One presenter did not use the function of screen sharing appropriately at the beginning of the presentation.
The quality of internet connection	4 (9.30)	1. The pre-recorded videos of one panelist stopped during the session 2. The playing of a keynote speaker's pre-recorded videos was unstable. 3. One invited speaker disconnected at 15 minutes after the session started. 4. One workshop organizer disconnected 10 minutes before the session ended.

In sum, the overall activities of PPTTELL 2020 went smoothly. According to the immersive observation, although some unexpected events occurred, the Zoom-monitor team played their role well. Additionally, the guidance given by the experienced session chairs helped resolve the issue of no-show and a poor Internet connection at the presenters' side.

4. The post-conference stage: Feedback from the participants and attendees

It was the very first experience for the committee to organize an online international conference as described in *section 1.3*. To make improvements based on the attendees' feedback, a post-conference survey was sent to all of the attendees via WhatsApp and emails. A total of twenty responses were collected. The results obtained from the questionnaire mainly fall into five categories: the participants' backgrounds, their opinions on the activities conducted before, during and after PPTTELL 2020, and their overall satisfaction. Below is a brief description of the survey results.

4.1. Respondents' backgrounds

To learn more about the participants, the researchers included questions about the participants' locations while participating in PPTTELL 2020, their roles in PPTTELL 2020, research fields and their experience of using Zoom. The results show that during PPTTELL 2020, 75% of the participants were in North America, while 20% of them were in Asia and 5% were in Oceania. When the participants filled in their roles in PPTTELL 2020, they were allowed to select as many options, e.g., Chair, Presenter, Speaker and Attendee as they thought applicable from the list. Among the twenty responses, about 60% were provided by the presenters; the speakers and attendees each contributed about 16% to the responses, and one response was received from a session chair of PPTTELL 2020.

Most of the respondents were researching either digital learning or language learning or both. Specifically, almost half of the participants who have submitted their responses were working on technology-enhanced language learning (TELL). About 20% of the respondents were researching e-Learning, followed by linguistics (17%), critical thinking (7%), information science (4%) and second language learning (3%). While 95% of the respondents have experienced using Zoom before attending PPTTELL 2020, as few as 30% of respondents used Zoom for attending an online conference. Most of them used it for online meetings and online courses.

4.2. Comments on the actions taken by the committee before PPTTELL 2020

Before PPTTELL 2020, the organizing committee used multiple resources to disseminate information, to stay closely in contact with the speakers and participants and to provide solutions to any problems arising before the conference. These resources included a WhatsApp group, emails, Zoom tutorials, an electronic program booklet and a website.

Six questions concerning whether those ways of keeping the participants informed were helpful were answered with yes, no or not applicable. Over 80% of the respondents agreed that emails, the program booklet and the website were helpful, while only 60% and 35% of them considered a WhatsApp group and Zoom tutorials, respectively, as useful. Even though WhatsApp allows for instant messaging, some of the participants had some concern over revealing phone numbers. One respondent described it as “nosy,” probably due to the constant and sometimes personal updates running in the group. As high as 65% of the respondents chose not applicable when asked about the Zoom tutorials since few of them had participated in one, for they considered themselves familiar with the platform.

4.3. Comments on the events during PPTTELL 2020

During PPTTELL 2020, various events happened. To begin with, for security concerns, the participants had to wait in the virtual waiting room before they were granted access to the “room.” As many as 95% of the respondents were satisfied with such a decision and did not have to wait long, mostly for less than a minute. In terms of the length of the conference per day, i.e., 4.5 hours, some suggested it be slightly shortened. The organizing committee was originally planning to open extra rooms for the speakers and presenters to rehearse but later changed the decision to reduce complexity and avoid confusion. However, 25% of the respondents disagreed with their decision, stating that it would be better to have such an opportunity for rehearsing, for getting familiar with presenting works on Zoom and for resolving potential technical issues.

In general, PPTTELL 2020 met the respondents’ expectations. They were satisfied with the quality of networking, though relatively limited in an online format. Particularly, the respondents enjoyed the exchange of knowledge and information and the “close” connection with each other. As an interdisciplinary conference, PPTTELL 2020 brought together scholars from different yet related fields. It seems the participants liked the idea of gaining exposure to knowledge drawn from different disciplines which could then be linked to their original research fields. Results also show that the participants especially enjoyed the opportunity of “seeing” and “meeting” each other online, forming a genuine atmosphere. This feedback reflected the current situation affected by the pandemic when most people had to maintain physical distance, but at the same time seeking ways to stay in touch, intellectually and emotionally.

The respondents also provided valuable suggestions for handling technical issues. These suggestions can be divided into those that could be carried out by the committee and those by the presenters themselves. The organizing committee was praised for their timely assistance but was suggested to have a troubleshooting guide ready beforehand. On the presenters’ end, many of the recommendations point to the idea of having their talks pre-recorded as videos in case of heavy bandwidth load. This way of presenting works, however, drew different opinions. Thirty per cent of the respondents reported that such an approach should not be encouraged unless there was no any other option, while some took advantage of it, stating that the videos could be re-watched, which was useful when there was more than one session of interest at the same time. The respondents also appreciated the arrangement of the opening and the closing ceremony. They described these two events as short but necessary.

4.4. Comments on the follow-up connection after PPTTELL 2020

The participants were also asked to indicate, based on the experience of attending PPTTELL 2020, their willingness to tell the other scholars about PPTTELL 2020 and to attend the next one online. Over 85% of the respondents provided positive responses. The reasons provided mainly center on great flexibility, mobility and connectivity, i.e., PPTTELL 2020 on Zoom broke the barriers of time and space, which was essential especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were free from the risks imposed while taking flights or during face-to-face connections. Meanwhile, social networking was still made possible, though in a different form from what was often seen during an on-site conference, or in a physical space. The responses show that the quality of this new form of social networking was not compromised despite the difference.

4.5. Overall satisfaction with PPTTELL 2020

The researchers designed twelve closed-ended questions on the overall satisfaction, including the time arrangement, each session, the selection of platform, (i.e., Zoom), etc. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very dissatisfied and 5 being very satisfied, the respondents rated each item. On average, all the twelve items received at least 4.00. The Opening ceremony received the highest score (4.90), while the arrangement of session breaks is rated the lowest (4.25). It seems the respondents were mostly quite satisfied with all the conference sessions, e.g., the keynote speeches, workshops, panels, paper presentations, etc., the rating of which reached 4.50 and above. On the other hand, the time arrangement for each day of PPTTELL 2020 and the breaks was rated slightly lower. It was reported that PPTTELL 2020 was quite intensive.

4.6. Interim summary

It can be found that the participants were satisfied with most of the events of PPTTELL 2020, especially the Opening ceremony. However, the respondents also pointed out what the conference organizers should have paid attention to, along with some solutions to make the next online conference more successful and to reach more participants' expectation. Below are what should be considered when organizing the next online conference, in addition to what was described in the previous sections.

- There should be multiple platforms for contact and they should not involve the collection of any personal information, such as phone numbers.
- Although almost all of the respondents expressed that they were familiar with the Zoom platform and so they did not participate in the tutorials, some of the presenters and panelists were not familiar with Zoom according to what happened during the conference (see 3. *The during-conference stage*). Therefore, a strong team of hosts/co-hosts should be organized to handle well when the presenters have problems handling the platform.
- A troubleshooting guide should be prepared beforehand for the event to go smoothly.
- A preparation room should be available for the presenters to get familiar with the platform and rehearse before their presentations.
- A longer break should be arranged to allow for more interaction between the participants or more rest after looking at the screens for too long.
- The length of the meeting time for each day should not be too long.

5. Lessons learned from organizing and hosting PPTTELL 2020

After the 3-day adventure in organizing and hosting PPTTELL 2020, some valuable lessons were learned from the experiences obtained from both stages, the during- and post-conference. Below briefly describes the lessons learned from this event.

- **Zoom hosts and session chairs:**

A well-trained team with dedicated members to serving as Zoom room hosts is necessary in addition to session chairs. The Zoom room hosts helped monitor the meeting, as well as deal with the unexpected situations. By doing so, the session chairs can focus on introducing the speakers/presenters and leading an interactive discussion. This requirement is also mentioned by Bonifati et al. (2020).

- **The length of a virtual meeting within a day:**

This seems to be one of the most concerned issue faced by most of the virtual conference organizers if they have participants from areas across multiple time zones (Wang, Vishwanath, Sitaraman, & Mareels, 2020). This conference took at most 4.5 hours for a one-day program, while the other conferences took longer (e.g., Bonifati et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2020) or shorter (e.g., Salomon & Feldman, 2020). It is found that the decision depends on both the numbers of the zoom rooms from which the participants came and the events accommodated in a conference.

- **The time allocated for each session, either a paper presentation or a keynote speech:**

A keynote speech was allocated one hour while each paper presentation was allocated 10 minutes in PPTTELL 2020. Compared with the face-to-face and physical PPTTELL conferences in 2018 and 2019, the length of the keynote speech in PPTTELL 2020 remained the same due to the valuable experience shared by the speakers and

the attendees' expectation. However, the time slots were shorter for paper presentations, compared with those at a regular conference due to the shorter conference duration. Many other conferences took the similar approach to accommodate more sessions in a virtual conference (e.g., Rose et al., 2020). Considering the two-way discussion among the attendees was necessary, additional time was allocated for the Q&A activity in each paper presentation session. The participants enjoyed the time arrangement and the opportunity for experience sharing and a discussion as they expressed in the post-conference survey (see Section 4.3).

- **The time for social networking:**

Due to the very tight schedule, there were only 10 minutes for the between-session break. It was found that although additional time was given for Q&A and the interactive discussion, there was still a need to arrange some time for social networking and refreshing. As described in Donaldson's (2020) report on the first virtual PLDI conference, many attendees would have appreciated some planned periods for gathering them for experience sharing. Similar feedback was also given by the attendees of PPTTELL 2020 as described in Section 4. However, the attendees of PPTTELL 2020 mentioned that the longer breaks would allow them to rest their eyes from staring at the screens for a long time.

- **The pre-recorded videos:**

Given that the quality of an internet connection is one of the major technical issues in an online environment (Rasheed, Kamsin, & Abdullah, 2020), some virtual conference organizers suggested that all the presentations should be pre-recorded and replayed during the conference (Bonifati et al., 2020; Misa et al., 2020). However, the suggestion mentioned above is not the case in what we learned from holding PPTTELL 2020. Except the two pre-recorded welcome speeches given by the Presidents of UNT and NTNU, which went smoothly, all the videos recorded by the keynote speakers or the invited panelists failed during the conference, regardless of whether those videos were played by the speakers or the IT team of PPTTELL 2020, which was located in a central place with a high capacity Internet connection. However, the session Zoom recordings did provide the attendees with an opportunity to review the event after the conference. Regarding the issue, the suggestion given here is to share the links to the pre-recorded videos with the attendees in advance. By doing so, the discussion can be led even if video playing is not smooth during the session.

- **The opportunity for professional development:**

PPTTELL 2020 reached out more people than in the first two PPTTELL conferences. In fact, a number of them could not attend the event if it was conducted physically at the UNT campus. This problem is in line with the experiences shared by many other virtual conferences, such as PLDI 2020 (Donaldson, 2020). Additionally, more graduate students participated in PPTTELL 2020. It was also found that some presenters who are not native English speakers performed well without having to worry about their English oral skills. Presenting in English online seems to lower the presenters' anxiety. It echoes studies about foreign language in virtual environments (Wu, Lan, Huang, & Lin, 2019). Additionally, PPTTELL 2020 functioned as the other virtual conferences in providing the attendees with a platform to enjoy the exchange of knowledge and information (Black, Crimmins, Dwyer, & Lister, 2020) and the "close" connection with each other as described in Section 4.3.



Figure 2. The goals and elements of online/virtual conferences

In sum, based on the lessons learned from organizing and hosting PPTCELL 2020, the goals of holding online/virtual conferences should be knowledge and experience sharing, professional development, community building, and interpersonal connection. All the goals can be achieved only when a SAFE environment is created. As shown in Figure 2, in such an environment, the activities will go stably (stability); the information and expertise will be accessible (accessibility); the approaches to sharing knowledge and experience are flexible (flexibility); and all the events will be engaging (engagement).

A virtual conference seems to be a trend for academia now and in the future not only due to the COVID-19 pandemic but also for other considerations, such as decarbonization (Klöwer, Hopkins, Allen & Higham, 2020) and cost-saving (Bhargava, Farabi, Rathod, & Singh, 2020). Additionally, it amplifies social learning, professional development, and the role of technologies to enrich and expand the learning space (Spilker, Prinsen, & Kalz, 2020). The lessons learned from organizing PPTCELL 2020 serve as the know-how for the next virtual international conference.

6. Conclusion

When “going online” becomes the most chosen or must-take option during the global pandemic, satisfaction, efficiency, and flexibility are as important as availability.

Organizing and hosting the PPTCELL conference online was an unexpected plan for the committee, but the experience obtained from the process was beyond the challenges. It was appreciated that all the challenges turned into lessons and helped the committee get clearer about holding a satisfactory online conference. The feedback given by the participants and attendees through the post-conference survey also provides many insights for improving. It is of the authors’ great pleasure to share the success and struggle of the PPTCELL conference. What is shared in this paper can serve as a practical reference not only for the organizers/hosts of an online conference but also for online educators.

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