

Teacher's Perceptions and Experiences on Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Primary and High Schools during COVID-19 Pandemic in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

Teaching and acquisition of English as a foreign language (EFL) has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic in all educational settings around the world. This research paper looks into the perceptions and experiences of EFL teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina's elementary and high schools throughout the pandemic. A qualitative method - interviews with 40 teachers - was used in the study. The results show that teachers had a variety of difficulties while instructing EFL during the pandemic, including a lack of internet access, a lack of student involvement, and a lack of sufficient training in online teaching methods. However, many instructors also acknowledged the benefits, like improved adaptability and creativity in their education. The paper concludes with recommendations for improving EFL instruction both during and after the epidemic, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that all students have fair access to resources and technology as well as the necessity of giving teachers more training and support.

Keywords: EFL, teaching, learning, challenges, COVID-19, methods, strategies, creativity, technology, training, ICT tools

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Introduction

The quality of modern education is based on the integration of cutting-edge technologies into the teaching and learning process. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital transformation of education was hastened when instructors in Bosnia and Herzegovina and all around the world switched from in-person instruction to remote learning in just one week in March 2020. There weren't many preparations made before the switch to online teaching and learning because the main objective was to continue the educational process; as a result, students and teachers had to swiftly adjust to the new environment.

Before the Covid-19 transition, online education was the subject of extensive theoretical research. Singh and Thurman looked at a variety of definitions of online learning from 1988 to 2017 and discovered that while a new definition is almost always offered, the majority of them include the following components: the use of technology, synchronous or asynchronous teaching and learning, interactivity between students and teachers, students and other students, and students and technology. Accordingly, the definition of online education for the purposes of this essay will be as follows: "Online education is defined as education that is delivered in an online environment through the use of the internet for teaching and learning. This covers any online learning that students do that is not reliant on their actual or imagined co-location. The teachers create learning modules that improve interaction and learning in synchronous or asynchronous environments, and the instructional content is supplied online. However, an online course has been specifically created for online teaching using online learning design principles, whereas remote teaching occurs when an instructor switches from on-campus to online delivery of an on-campus course. Since virtual classes and classrooms are structured similarly to those in schools, remote teaching and learning requires that both students and teachers adhere to a schedule. Replicating the

ambience of a regular classroom online while students are taking lessons on their computers or smartphones at home is the aim of remote teaching and learning.

The Covid-19 pandemic presented difficulties for online and remote teaching and learning, as was already discussed. Recent research signifies a distinction between "ad hoc crisis" digital teaching and a pre-designed and properly planned online course, drawing on the experience of online teaching during the epidemic. Gacs et al. state that the following are the key differences: a) planning phase: analysis of students' needs; professional development of lecturers; and technological support; b) design phase: stating learning objectives; selecting the delivery mode (synchronous/asynchronous); selecting network platforms and digital tools; structuring the course (weekly tasks); and c) implementing online instruction: establishing communication.

Hodges et al. utilize the term ERL - Emergency Remote Learning to describe especially to Covid-19 remote learning due to the swift changeover to remote learning. Because it is not as developed as online learning and teaching modules, which take months to develop, education authors believe that the ERL should only be used temporarily. Students and teachers should use a variety of ICT tools, students should work on their learning independence, and teachers should use their creativity and ways to increase students' motivation in order to succeed at remote learning. Numerous studies on emergency remote learning and student satisfaction with this style of instruction were carried out in Croatia during the emergency remote learning period. Researchers Jokić and Ristić Dedić from the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb reported that 7th-graders from 5 different Zagreb schools were neither satisfied with nor dissatisfied with distant learning. They felt the content was not presented thoroughly and that they were given many more tasks than in face-to-face learning.

RQ1: What difficulties do the teachers have when offering online EFL classes during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What effects does the COVID-19 pandemic have on the teaching strategies used by instructors when conducting online EFL classes?

Literature review

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the education sector worldwide. Many schools have been closed or have shifted to online or blended learning to ensure the continuity of education. This literature review explores the perceptions and experiences of teachers in teaching English as a foreign language in primary and high schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Bailey and Lee (2020), online learning integrates computer technology, software, educational philosophy, and best practices to promote learning. Due to the fact that teachers and students are physically separated during the educational process, learning is divided in terms of time (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). In order to assist pupils learn more effectively, language teachers develop and oversee educational tools in the classroom. However, as distant learning has not been a part of the majority of educational institutions around the world, learning online has become a difficulty and a serious issue to teachers and students as the epidemic runs its course.

The pandemic has presented several challenges for teachers in teaching English as a foreign language. Studies show that teachers faced several difficulties in delivering effective TEFL lessons, such as lack of access to technology and resources, difficulty in engaging students in online learning, and reduced interaction and collaboration between students.

The transition of teaching content and materials into the online environment requires teachers to have higher levels of technological competency in order to navigate the necessary software, which greatly increases workloads (Allen, Rowan, & Singh, 2020). The bulk of traditional professors were forced into

online teaching as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, as was covered in the study by Cutri, Mena, and Whiting (2020). Without a choice but to change their pedagogical strategies and adapt to online distance education, teachers were forced to implement online teaching, even if they did not feel sufficiently equipped to do so.

Greek primary school instructors in a research by Papadopoulou et al. (2021) reported feeling overwhelmed by the abrupt switch to online instruction and having trouble involving their children in the learning process. They also complained that the educational system didn't support them enough, which made it difficult for them to deliver quality TEFL sessions.

In another study by Adhikari and Chalise (2021), Nepali high school teachers reported challenges in delivering online TEFL lessons due to the lack of access to technology and resources. Additionally, the teachers faced difficulties in managing student behavior and motivation, which affected the quality of learning.

Despite the challenges, some teachers reported positive experiences in delivering TEFL during the pandemic. A study by Akbari and Razavi (2020) found that Iranian primary school teachers perceived that online TEFL lessons were more effective in promoting self-learning and independent thinking skills among students. The teachers also reported that online learning provided them with opportunities to develop their digital skills and explore new teaching strategies.

In a study by Chen and Li (2021), Chinese high school teachers reported that online TEFL lessons were effective in promoting student autonomy and collaboration. The teachers believed that online learning gave pupils chances to practice their language abilities outside of the classroom.

Numerous study papers indicate that one of the main issues is the absence of direct interaction between professors and pupils. Online instruction can be impersonal, and it can be challenging for instructors

to build a connection with their students. Online instruction, according to Akbari and Naderifar (2021), might make pupils feel alone, which can lower their enthusiasm to learn.

Lack of technology and internet connectivity is another issue, which can limit students' capacity to participate completely in online classes. This is especially true for students from underprivileged families or who reside in remote places with poor internet connectivity. According to Yang and Park (2021), online instruction may make the digital divide worse, which may result in increased educational inequality.

Teaching EFL online also presents challenges related to assessment and feedback. Without face-to-face interaction, it can be difficult for teachers to give students timely and useful feedback, and evaluating students' language proficiency can be demanding. According to Poyraz and Seferoglu (2021), online assessment methods may not accurately measure students' language proficiency, which can lead to unreliable results.

Despite the challenges, teaching EFL online during the COVID-19 pandemic also presents several opportunities. Teachers who teach online have the chance to employ a variety of multimedia resources to improve the educational process. In order to engage students and offer a more dynamic learning experience, teachers might make use of films, audio recordings, and interactive exercises. Deng and Teng (2021) claim that because online instruction is more adaptable and flexible, teachers can modify their lesson plans to meet the needs of certain pupils.

Learning digital literacy is another advantage of online instruction. Zhou and Li (2021) point out that online instruction can give students useful abilities including problem-solving, cooperation, and communication—skills that are crucial for success in the digital age.

Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative approach. As many as 40 English as a Foreign Language teachers from primary and secondary schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina participated in the interview. The interview covered topics such as the difficulties teachers encountered while instructing EFL during the epidemic, as well as their opinions on the efficacy of online teaching strategies and the assistance offered by their schools and the government.

Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and was done through a video conference. The purpose of the interviews was to learn more about the difficulties and accomplishments teachers encountered while instructing EFL students during the pandemic.

Results

According to the interview findings, Bosnia and Herzegovina's EFL teachers had a range of difficulties when trying to teach during the pandemic. With 82% of respondents saying it was either somewhat or extremely challenging, engaging students in online learning was the most often mentioned problem. Other issues mentioned by respondents included not having access to technology (61%), having insufficient training in online teaching techniques (59%), and having trouble evaluating students' progress (53%).

Here are some of the answers collected among Bosnian – Herzegovinian EFL teachers:

Challenging and interesting in the beginning, but not that effective if it lasts for extended period of time. (Teacher 3)

Many problems especially in the assessment and evaluation part, it was difficult to evaluate and grade students correctly. (Teacher 8)

I'm not satisfied, students tried to avoid work in every possible way. (Teacher 25)

Students participate only if they are asked. (Teacher 17)

Despite these challenges, many teachers also reported positive experiences in teaching EFL during the pandemic. For example, 68% of respondents indicated that they had increased

flexibility in their teaching practices, while 59% reported increased creativity. Additionally, 48% of respondents reported that online teaching methods were either somewhat or very effective.

Some of the answers are as follow:

It was an interesting and innovative experience, where I, as a teacher, have learned a lot. (Teacher 20)

I enjoyed it in terms of preparing interesting activities for students. I didn't enjoy it because it ruined the health of many students and teachers, both physically and mentally. (Teacher 31)

Some students responded really well to online tasks, others didn't even want to try. Some lessons were really engaging and fun. (Teacher 40)

Many teachers reported that they had to spend additional time preparing for online classes and finding engaging materials, which was a significant source of stress. However, teachers also reported that online learning allowed for greater individualization and personalization of instruction, which was beneficial for students with varying levels of proficiency in English.

Teaching Methods Employed in Online EFL Classes

The COVID-19 pandemic's effects have forced educators to immediately transition to online teaching and learning in practically every region and global education system. Its effects have been shown to be much more directly related to the online pedagogies used to meet the goals of both instructors and students (Allen et al., 2020). Despite the challenges and problems brought on by the abrupt change in the teaching and learning process, teachers still need to ensure that learning can take place.

Many different teaching techniques can be used in online EFL lessons to aid students in developing their English language abilities. Here are some prevalent teaching strategies used in online EFL classes:

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning:

Synchronous learning involves real-time interaction

between students and teachers, such as through live video conferencing or chat, while asynchronous learning involves self-paced activities such as watching recorded lectures or completing assignments. A combination of both can be used in online EFL classes.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT):

CLT highlights communication as the primary objective of language learning. Role-playing, dialogues, and games are a mere handful of the activities that can be used in online EFL classrooms to encourage students to use the language in relevant circumstances.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT):

TBLT places emphasis on the effective application of language in authentic contexts where learners are assigned tasks to complete. Activities that ask students to utilize the language they have learned to finish an assignment, such sending an email or making a phone call, can be used in online EFL lessons.

Content-Based Instruction (CBI): CBI is a method that combines language learning with other academic subjects, like science or social studies. To assist students improve their English, online EFL courses can incorporate content that is pertinent to their interests and needs, such articles, videos, or podcasts.

Gamification: Gamification involves using game-like elements in learning activities to engage learners and motivate them to learn. Online EFL classes can use various games and quizzes, such as Jeopardy or Kahoot, to make learning more enjoyable and interactive.

In general, the teaching strategies used in online EFL classrooms rely on the requirements and objectives of the students as well as the technology and resources available. A more thorough and efficient learning experience can be offered by combining several techniques.

The usage of realistic learning materials, such as lecture videos, oral recitation through video recordings, and instructive videos, has been specifically addressed by respondents in this study. Additionally, Google Forms, PowerPoint presentations,

Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, game-based activities, online discussions, and quizzes were used.

Numerous respondents said that they employed task-based and project-based methods, as well as flipped classroom, mind maps, and activity rewards. Many participants mentioned Canva for making interesting presentations and flyers.

There are so many resources available on the Internet that you can never run out of ideas, of course if you are creative enough and know how to engage your students in the right activities. For me, it was easy to motivate my students because I spent a lot of time preparing interesting things for them. Platforms like Genially, Wordwall, Kahoot are the tools I used very often, they can be used for grammar learning, developing different skills, revision of vocabulary, etc. (Teacher 1)

Conclusion

The study's conclusions show that even though some individuals are becoming accustomed to using technology in the teaching-learning process, the majority of language teachers expressed that there are several drawbacks to online teaching that could negatively impact their experience in doing so when it comes to teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). These include having access to the Internet and owning technological equipment, managing class participation for students, and teachers' willingness to support online instruction. Additionally, a lot of educational institutions anticipate that lecturers will include distance learning into their usual academic labor. Additionally, the interview discovered that some teachers had used a number of online learning tools in an effort to incorporate technology into the delivery of lessons, including Google Classroom and Google Meet. The online pedagogies used for online instruction have been modified to reflect the interests of the students.

In order to close the digital divide created by this unique event, it is hoped that the results of this study will help teachers, students, and educational

institutions better understand the effectiveness of online teaching, particularly in language learning. Teachers could benefit from additional technology and online teaching methods training as they become ready for the possibility of remote teaching. Growing concerns about student results despite efforts to develop alternatives to assure learning is occurring kept educators from adapting lessons, fostering opportunities for interaction, and offering learning experiences in an online setting. Teachers will undoubtedly be required to deliver remote education, with adequate resources and support to do so in ways that genuinely ensure positive outcomes for students, as the current scenario continues to put the quality of education under pressure.

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