

Online learning impact on transitioning to ERT: Mexican ELT experiences

Impacto del aprendizaje en línea en la transición a ERE: experiencias mexicanas de ELT

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Abstract:

This project set out to scrutinize the experiences of a group of students pursuing an online B.A. in English Language Teaching (ELT) at four different public universities in Mexico while being in-service English teachers at different levels in the public and private sectors. Their teaching practice was given in face-to-face settings; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these teacher-students were required to migrate their practice to remote teaching. It is in this line of arguments that the researchers, as the participants' ELT teachers, were interested in knowing if any strategies from the online-learning student role were useful to transition as remote ELT-teachers. As a follow-up method to questionnaires administered to 55 online ELT students, semi-structured interviews were conducted to a total of 11 participants, from the participating universities. Findings indicate that online learning experience does have a positive impact when transitioning from face-to-face instruction to remote teaching. Regardless of the participants' ICT skills development, there was evidence of soft skills fostering. Moreover, the challenges and limitations they faced inevitably led to a fruitful reengineering process.

Keywords:

online learning, ERT, in-service teachers, COVID-19, transition

Resumen:

Este proyecto se realizó con el propósito de analizar las experiencias de un grupo de estudiantes de una licenciatura en línea en Enseñanza del Inglés en cuatro distintas universidades públicas en México, estudiantes que al mismo tiempo son profesores de inglés en servicio en diferentes niveles de los sectores público y privado. Su práctica docente se llevaba a cabo en contextos presenciales; sin embargo, debido a la pandemia por COVID-19, estos profesores-estudiantes tuvieron que migrar su práctica a enseñanza remota. Por ello, las investigadoras, como profesoras de licenciatura de los participantes, se interesaron en conocer si las estrategias como estudiantes en línea eran útiles en la transición a profesores de inglés en la modalidad de Enseñanza Remota de Emergencia (ERE). Como seguimiento a los cuestionarios que contestaron 55 estudiantes de las licenciaturas en línea en Enseñanza del Inglés, se llevaron a cabo entrevistas semi-estructuradas con un total de 11 participantes de entre estos estudiantes. Los resultados indican que la experiencia de aprendizaje en línea sí tiene un impacto positivo al transitar de instrucción presencial a enseñanza remota. Independientemente del desarrollo de las habilidades tecnológicas de los participantes, se encontró evidencia del fomento a las habilidades blandas. Asimismo, los retos y limitaciones que los participantes inevitablemente enfrentaron los llevaron a un proceso de reingeniería didáctica muy provechosa.

Palabras Clave:

Aprendizaje en línea, Enseñanza Remota de Emergencia, maestros en servicio, COVID-19, transición

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic altered the educational domain drastically and as such it has been claimed by UNESCO (2020) as the largest disruption of educational systems in history. The pandemic impacted the teaching and learning experience of teachers and students since education had to be imparted through online learning platforms (Almomani et al., 2020). This migration in which technology assists the learning delivery has been regularly known as online learning (Gonzalez & Louis, 2018); however, in the current context, in which a crisis accelerated the use of technology for education provision is referred as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). The argument in favour of this definition is that the systematic months of planning that a successful online course requires have been omitted (Hodges et al, 2020). The underlying conditions of this sudden change, make the current experience of students and teachers different to previous experiences with online learning. For instance, literature states that teachers facing ERT have felt “overwhelmed and unprepared” (Trust & Whalen, 2020) as they struggled to quickly adapt their teaching materials to the challenging situation.

The latter raises the question if training on ERT is necessary as part of the curriculum in higher education institutions. In this regard, Martin (2015) claimed, “new teacher education graduates (...) should be confident in embracing the ever-changing world of technology in education as this will play an integral role in their future classrooms” (p.18). Nonetheless, due to the pandemic of COVID-19 educational practitioners, regardless of their technological expertise, were forced to change and implement digital technologies in their classes overnight. Research is therefore needed to analyse how traditional teachers coped with the transition to remote teaching and to what extent their technological expertise from being online bachelor’s students assisted them. That is therefore the aim of this study.

Literature Review

Information and communication technology (ICT) has taken a leading role during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. It exceeded the expectation of playing “an important part of education for the next generation” (Bingimlas, 2009, p.235) by becoming a key component for the dissemination of information and an essential tool for teaching as of March 2020, when the World Health Organization (2020) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global epidemic.

Research studying the integration of ICT in education has been developed in different contexts; despite different nations’ socioeconomic status, findings have indicated that lack of hardware resources is not the only impediment for

the under-utilisation of ICT in the classroom. For instance, research by Gil-Flores et al. (2016) analysing the factors that explain the use of ICT in secondary-education classrooms in Spain found that despite ample information and ICT infrastructure, there were low levels of ICT classroom use. Thus, school hardware and internet connection were less significant than other factors like teacher ICT training, collaboration among teachers, and perceived self-efficacy. Likewise, in Cyprus, an empirical study researching the teachers’ beliefs and practices concerning classroom use of ICT concluded that “limited technological equipment does not always hinder purposeful employment of technology” (Mama & Hennessy, 2013, p.386). Similarly, in Syria, as a developing country, the lack of teachers’ technological competence featured as a main hindrance to the adoption of ICT (Pelgrum, 2001). In the same line of arguments, a meta-analysis of literature related to the perceived barriers to technology integration in science education conducted by Bingimlas (2009) reported not only lack of resources (software and hardware), but lack of confidence and of competence as obstacles to the implementation of these technologies in schools. Lastly, Mama and Hennessy (2013) included teachers’ beliefs about ICT in the list of factors that obstruct the effective integration of ICT in education; according to them, “understanding teachers’ pedagogical beliefs and practices in depth is crucial for the successful implementation of any initiative” (p.381). In this regard, the central difference between their teacher participants who directly used ICT related to the lesson objectives and the rest of their participants who used it moderately, occasionally or purposefully avoided using it, laid with their beliefs about the role of technology.

The former factors concerning the use of ICT in different educational contexts around the globe refer to research conducted in typical scenarios and not in unprecedented circumstances like the one the world is going through due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is for this reason that we were interested in researching what we consider, in the current context, are teacher-level barriers such as lack of access to resources, lack of confidence, lack of time, and lack of knowledge that the teacher participants faced when regardless of receiving or not institutional ICT training and technical support, had to integrate overnight ICT in their teaching practice. It is noted that lack of access to resources and lack of time have been classed by Bingimlas (2009) as school-level barriers and not as teacher-level factors. However, due to the present circumstances, these two barriers warrant a change in their conceptualization as they do not precisely refer to not having time to schedule a computer class or to not being provided equipment by their institution, but during the confinement they refer to individual limitations such as having to take much more time to plan digital lessons

(Sicilia, 2006), and to have no home access to a computer or to the internet. Furthermore, the research is situated in Mexico as a developing country, where ICT in education is still at an early stage and studies in the area are limited.

In the face of COVID-19, and aiming to ensure the health and wellbeing of their entire community, many institutions around the world made the massive move from traditional face-to-face teaching to online learning (See Bao, 2020; Kulikowski et al., 2021; Osman, 2020). However, opposite to the months of full-fledged planning, preparation, and development that an online course requires, teachers had to virtualise their didactic materials and teach online courses in a very short, if not immediate period of time (Bao, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). This swift instructional change has been referred to by Kulikowski et al. (2021) as “pandemic-forced e-learning” whilst the most common term in the literature is Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), and this is the term we embraced for the purposes of this study. ERT is fundamentally differentiated from effective online learning in that there is usually not a systematic design involved, rather there is a narrow preparation window. Thus, it is a quick temporal change from traditional teaching to remote instruction in response to an emergency situation for the sake of continuing education (Affouneh et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). Given the unplanned and sudden nature of this ERT migration during the COVID-19 outbreak, which implied moving instructors out of their on-site teaching comfort zone; different levels of digital literacy, stress, awareness, willingness, and acceptance of remote teaching among faculty members was to be expected (Hodges et al., 2020; Osman, 2020). In this sense, it is important to document how instructors from different levels of education and different countries, in this case Mexico, transitioned into ERT, so that policymakers are aware of internal and external aspects that influence teachers’ transition into a remote teaching mode in a time of crisis.

The impact of COVID-19 has led to conversions in economic, social, health, and cultural domains; education is not the exception (Kulikowski et al., 2021; Osman, 2020; Singh et al., 2020). These transformations refer to the staggering challenges faced in almost all sectors in order to get things running. For instance, in finance, the coronavirus pandemic has been defined as an “acid test”, in which institutions have been thrust to discover strategies to keep operational, business, and economic activities flowing amidst the outbreak (Singh et al., 2020). This restructuring process in which alternative courses of action were sought and implemented during COVID-19, has been defined in different disciplines (Masocha, 2020; Shewale et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020) as “re-engineering” and we will draw on this concept for the purposes of this study. Re-engineering took place in education when face-to-face teachers, playing a dual role: as course designers and

course instructors had to modify and redesign their pedagogical materials into ERT (Kulikowski et al., 2021). Thus, faculty members had to restructure in a matter of days, their teaching scenarios to continue education during the current trying times. The approaches that educators followed to re-engineer their teaching practice is of interest for this research.

Finally, related to the sudden re-engineering process that COVID-19 teachers went through, it is a fact that instructors lacking technological expertise faced more challenges than educators with online teaching experience (Bao, 2020). Although the participants in this study were not online teachers before the pandemic, they did have the experience of being online students. This means there was some familiarity as to how to operate an online learning platform, which may have aided their transition to teach under an educational system based on information and network technologies. Bearing this in mind, we were interested in finding out what elements from the participants’ online professionalization assisted, or not, their unexpected shift to ERT. As a result of the previous engagement with literature in the field, the research question that drove this study is: How did in-service English teachers transition from being digital students to becoming digital teachers in the time of COVID-19 crisis?

Research Method

This paper is part of a larger mixed method (Creswell, 2014) study which collected quantitative and qualitative data by means of two instruments during the second semester of the academic year 2020. The first instrument was a multiple choice and Likert-scale questionnaire, from which only the demographic information, to contextualize the profile of the participants, is presented in this paper. Therefore, information about gender, age, teaching experience, progress in their studies, levels they teach, as well as the LMS and the communication methods used to teach remotely in this COVID-19 time were collected. The second instrument applied, and from which most of the data for this paper derived, were semi-structured online interviews that gathered the participants’ experiences in transitioning from onsite teaching to remote teaching. The interview was done following an interview guide that consisted of three sections. The introductory section elicited information about the participants’ general teaching context. This was followed by a set of key questions that aimed to gather data about the most important changes that the participants, in their teaching practice, had experienced during the pandemic. It also asked the respondents for the most valuable aspects of their online professional development, as students, to face the current situation. Finally, the closing section collected the participants’ thoughts about what could help them to

improve their teaching practice in their current circumstances.

The setting chosen for this research was four public universities in Mexico; two located in Central Mexico and two in the South East, although each one in different states. The regions in which these institutions are located differ in terms of population, main economic activities, sociocultural context and levels of bilingualism due to the existence of several original languages. However, these universities were purposely chosen as the researchers work in them and they all offer a distance B.A. in English Language Teaching (ELT) (Creswell, 2014). These four online ELT programmes embrace as their vision to prepare in-service English teachers to become critical professionals as well as proactive and socially responsible individuals. Furthermore, these programmes share similar characteristics in their curricula such as a strong emphasis on linguistic and pedagogical knowledge and a scant focus on technology proficiency.

Convenience sampling was used to select the participants for this paper; however, this selection derived from purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) employed in the first stage of the data collection process, the questionnaire. The participants were 11 (6 females and 5 males) in-service English teachers undertaking an online B.A. in ELT at the former universities in Mexico. Related to the participants' profiles, there are some important considerations to make. First, in alignment with the literature that states online programmes are normally taken by adults who face competing demands which can result in challenges to their ability to work (Redmon et al., 2018); this study's participants were playing a dual role as B.A. online students and as in-service teachers. Accordingly, the term teacher-students is used to refer to the participants. Second, all the participants were mature-aged students since they were older than 30 years old at the time data were collected (Richardson, 1994). Third, like many other educators around the world, they were teaching face to face before the COVID-19 disease and had to, in a matter of days, transition to ERT (Affouneh et al., 2020; Bao, 2020). Lastly, the participants' progress in the online BA programme varied as there were four participants at the beginning of their studies, six in the middle of their study time, and one about to finish the degree. Their teaching level was evenly distributed as we could find teachers educating from kindergarten to university levels.

Concerning the data collection recruitment strategy, since the researchers were part of the students' academic formation, the participants were initially approached, and invited to respond to the questionnaire, by means of an institutional e-mail. For the mechanics of the interview, zoom was chosen as the viable platform to conduct them given its relative ease of use, cost-effectiveness, data

management features, and security options (Archibald et al., 2019). Online students who volunteered to participate in individual interviews were asked to send a mail to the research group email account. Then, a researcher made contact and agreed on the time and date suitable for the participant. In order to create a conducive atmosphere for the students to express their opinions (Ozfidan, 2017), they were given the choice to answer in the language of preference, and most of them (10) opted to have the interviews in Spanish. At the beginning of the interview the researcher asked the participant's permission to record it, and only when the permission was granted did the recording begin. Further ethical considerations include reassuring the participants about the anonymity and confidentiality of the information they would share with us (Hennink et al., 2011), via a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) made available before the interview. The PIS also informed the students about the aims of the research, the relevance of their contribution, and their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Furthermore, to protect and respect the participants' identity, pseudonyms were allocated, so that their responses could not be related when reporting the findings. Finally, the names of the participating universities have not been disclosed and hence, replaced by the acronyms: U1, U2, U3, and U4.

Data were transcribed and analysed inductively using thematic analysis (Miles et al., 2014). Each researcher individually and manually coded the transcriptions, which may allow for a deeper engagement with the data than when coded with software (Hernández López, 2021). Then, the researchers met via Zoom to analyse the codes and create homogenous codes across all interviews. Therefore, a second-level coding scheme was developed categorising the participants' insights into: lack of face-to-face interaction, reduced teaching time, screen-limited strategies, limited ICT resources, lack of ICT skills, excessive workload, time investment, low learning autonomy, parents' presence, ICT implementation, students' engagement, and empathy. Finally, the next level of analysis was performed by grouping the agreed codes into three broad categories: limitations of transitioning from face to face to ERT, challenges of ERT, and pedagogical re-engineering. These three categories frame the presentation of findings and their conceptualization is explained in the following section. Additionally, findings and discussion are presented in one section to allow for a rounded understanding of the data and their relationship with the literature.

Findings and discussion

A forced and rapid switch to remote teaching derived from the COVID-19 pandemic led to a series of improvised initial adaptations in our participants' teaching practice. They were primarily concerned with achieving effective and

efficient communication to ensure their courses continuity, relying mainly on WhatsApp and Google classroom: "I started to learn how to use classroom by myself, how to make video phone calls, how to set up WhatsApp business to maintain contact with my students, a few weeks before [schools were closed because of the] pandemic" (Martha, U1). This rapid switch to remote teaching in the middle of their courses also made them adjust their lessons to an asynchronous format. Ana (U3), for example, worked with "only assignments, practically no classes", and for Ernesto (U4) everything "was completely asynchronous".

They had experienced, however, online education as learners, and they did resort to it in order to transition into this new Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) scenario as online teachers. Most participants reported that, in their transition, their previous experience as online learners had been very useful in that they were already familiar with asynchronous and synchronous communication, the use of ICT, and online platforms. Moreover, these teacher-students address autonomy to learning as the main aspect that they transferred to the current ERT situation,

...as [an online] BA student, I have been able to use aspects that have been helpful when teaching my students the basics [such as] time management, which is essential... second, self-regulation, as you can't conform to what you are being taught, you have to look for more information. (Ernesto, U4)

As previously stated, three broad categories in transitioning from face-to-face lesson to ERT emerged from the analysis of the interviews: limitations, challenges and pedagogical reengineering. Limitations refer to those components inherent to face-to-face classrooms which simply cannot be delivered or experienced in online learning environments. Challenges comprise problematic circumstances, partly derived from these limitations, for which participants had to adjust their teaching practices by developing a contingency plan. Pedagogical reengineering refers to these adjustments in the teaching-learning processes of planning, implementing, and evaluating that participants engaged in because of the changes in educational needs. As a result, the teacher-students had to resort to digital technology, draw on alternative learning opportunities, and deal with the emotional dimension of this pandemic. In other words, they reinvented their teaching practices to adapt to unexpected circumstances.

Limitations in transitioning from face-to-face lessons to ERT

One of the limitations that the teacher-students experienced when faced with this rapid transition to remote online teaching was the lack of face-to-face interaction. They report missing the in-person classroom, where they can actually see the students' faces and not only "fifteen

squares in your screen" (Ernesto, U4), where they can play games and do activities that involve some sort of physical contact, where they can go around and visualize whether or not their students are learning. In fact, this has been reported by many language teachers as "the biggest felt loss in their emergent digital language classrooms" (Guillén et al., 2020, p. 320).

I think working face to face is always necessary. You need face-to-face contact with the students, and those experiences. What we miss the most about our jobs is being able to share with them the learning experiences, and not just doing so through a computer. (Carlos, U2)

Therefore, participants experienced limitations about explaining certain topics, establishing rapport, and monitoring progress. All in all, they missed the way they experience the process of learning a language during onsite lessons and the human connections that can be established within, along with "gestures, body language [...] and often even facial expressions," all of which are missing in online environments (Gacs et al., 2020, p. 382). Another limitation perceived by our participants was a reduction in their teaching time. Typically, these teacher-students rely on a certain number of hours a week of classroom instruction. During the COVID-19 outbreak, synchronous instruction time was reduced by half or even less, which they deeply resented, "in face-to-face lessons you can have a warm-up to engage students, but online, we were asked to reduce our teaching time from 8 to 4 hours a week" (Sergio, U3). While teacher-students were expecting to teach the same number of onsite hours when teaching remotely, a large number of hours of synchronous online interaction is not desirable (Ross & DiSalvo, 2020). It then may be the case that their background as online learners did not necessarily fully prepare them for weaving synchronous and asynchronous interactions in online instruction.

Screen-limited strategies were a third constraint derived from not working in the classrooms as felt by the participants:

Students work and learn in different ways, some are kinaesthetic, others visual, spatial or musical, and now, even when we are using different tools, such as YouTube, and different Learning Management System platforms, they are limited to learning through a computer. (Carlos, U2)

This common feeling among participants came as no surprise, since, within the four walls of the typical classroom, "language teachers are often masters of using the physical space [...], rearranging furniture, groups, and artefacts to facilitate meaningful encounters with and among learners" (Guillén et al., 2020, p. 320). Overall, these teacher-students regretted not being able to resort to the variety of activities and teaching techniques, as simple as the use of the whiteboard (Reyna, U4), that they

were used to implementing when giving face-to-face lessons, feeling even 'disabled' by the screen (Laura, U2) and incapable of making students enjoy the class (Sergio, U4).

Challenges of Emergency Remote Teaching

In this second broad category, the first challenge during ERT reported by our participants was, unsurprisingly, related to the use of ICT. Teacher-students from all four higher education institutions in this study had to cope with their students' poor or even total lack of internet connectivity, especially in remote areas where many of them live. Accessibility to equipment was also a major issue, as many of the participants' students had only one computer or no computer at home.

...more than 50% of our students live in rural areas and there is no internet there, so it is far too expensive for them to find a place with internet connectivity; for some others, it was the lack of equipment. It was a reality check. I thought most of our students would have at least one computer at home, but it turned out this wasn't the case. (Ernesto, U4)

Another ICT-related challenge was the lack of advanced digital skills some of our participants acknowledged to have. In the educational domain, digital literacy is not only about knowing how to use computers but possessing a range of skills for creating and processing an efficient learning activity through digital tools (Sara & Oifaa, 2020). Our participants' use of web-based resources was not varied nor broad, as some of them admitted, "there are so many online tools, but we don't know how to use them" (Martha, U1) and "I am sure I don't make the most of the platforms available" (Oscar, U3).

The second major challenge faced by this group of teacher-students was an excessive workload resulting from the time needed to assure the continuity of the courses they were teaching. Excessive workload has actually been reported by language teachers around the world as the most stressful experience during the COVID-19 pandemic (MacIntyre et al., 2020). The number of activities and amount of feedback that our participants were expected to design and provide considerably increased when transitioning into ERT, and thus "it felt like a never-ending story" (Martha, U1). Being now both online students and teachers, they spent all day long in front of a computer, which led to feelings of stress and burnout, as they expressed in the interviews, "it was so tiring and difficult for me (Laura, U2), "I am working so much more now that I feel stressed and overwhelmed" (Ana, U3), "there were times when I even felt like collapsing" (Oscar, U3), and "it was simply insane" (Ernesto, U4).

Closely linked to the teacher-students' workloads, there was the issue of an increase in time investment in planning and teaching. When a course is designed for blended or

online purposes, planning for learning time must be adjusted since an onsite hour is "not simply as something that will be moved online" (Stein & Graham, 2014, p. 20). The participants of our study were already working face-to-face while studying online before the COVID-19 pandemic, and they were perfectly able to manage their time. During the pandemic, however, they had to invest more time in adapting their courses to ERT and spent even more time in front of a computer. Despite saving time in commuting, they concurred that preparing courses to be delivered online required much more work, and thus more time, than doing it for face-to-face lessons, since "one thing is to plan for face-to-face teaching, and quite another to plan for an online platform. It's so much harder, an online form they answer in five minutes takes me three hours to design" (Teresa, U1).

Unexpectedly, only two of our participants addressed their students' learning autonomy. They referred to their experience as online students, in which they take responsibility for their own learning, and compared it to the unfavourable circumstances for their students during ERT regarding autonomy. "I must tell them what to do and how to do it", said Ana (U3), and "because of their context and age, it is very difficult for them to be autonomous learners and work on their own", declared Lupe (U4). Of those teacher-students working with children, two also mentioned the presence of parents as a challenging situation to deal with during their synchronous online lessons.

...because the parents are right there with the kids because they are little, they have to sit with them, so I am not only preparing a class for my children, my students, I'm preparing a class for their moms and dads too. (Claudia, U2)

Parents' presence, in fact, was inevitable, as "young children's online learning, as well as online access, requires adult supervision and, therefore, adult availability and involvement also" (Kim, 2020, p. 148). Yet, although this situation was a logical consequence of children learning from home, it was unavoidable to sense it as intrusive parental supervision.

Pedagogical reengineering

The nature of a pedagogical re-engineering process involves the enhancement of educational activities to meet new learning needs. ERT precisely implies making adjustments to all instructional and assessment components to help students achieve the previously set learning outcomes, which now must be done under different capabilities and constraints imposed by the online learning environment (Payne, 2020). Thus, during COVID-19 ERT, the teacher-students participants of this study struggled to find tools and techniques that would enable them to maintain the students' engagement in their classes and continue with their learning process despite the lack of

on-site teaching. They expressed their own re-engineering struggles in terms of three main areas: implementing ICT, enhancing students' engagement, and developing empathy:

I had to learn to be more flexible [...] you don't know what is really going on with them. So, it has been a very interesting experience in terms of infrastructure and development; we [teachers] were forced to develop new material, find apps, and all sorts of digital resources so that students would engage with the course. (Ernesto, U4)

With regard to the implementation of ICT in both synchronous and asynchronous teaching, the teacher-students had to resort to digital technology they were not used to for educational materials development, communication, and management of activities. Oscar, Ana, and Sergio (U3), for example, had to adapt to the use of different platforms, such as Teams, Lirmi, and SM. In Laura's (U2) case, using this type of LMS platform meant re-inventing herself, "my colleagues helped me in this learning process, it was like a new beginning for me". Ernesto (U4) implemented the use of the institutional e-mail and Google Meet groups, and Teresa (U1) resorted to Google forms for assessment purposes. "Everything changed completely", said Oscar (U3), who started using Word documents as a whiteboard and looking for as many interactive websites as possible.

Enhancing their students' engagement was also an area of concern that our participants revisited. They generally agreed that, more than ever, lessons and activities should be designed to raise the students' interests and be attractive and enjoyable, so as to retain their attention. Therefore, adding creativity in designing learning opportunities was crucial. Teresa (U1) "had to take ICT courses so as to include games and videos to make classes as engaging as possible". Guadalupe (U4) found it particularly difficult to develop speaking and listening, yet she prepared audios with short conversations and asked her students to record themselves so as to get them more involved. Claudia (U2) admitted it was really difficult for her to find a way to be more creative and "come up with activities that would be attractive for the kids".

Finally, Ernesto (U4) pointed out that "it has been a lot of work as you have to become more visual, more concrete, and quit beating around the bush" in order to foster students' engagement, and despite his views against the inclusion of playful activities in the lesson, he admitted that games were key in maintaining students engaged under these unexpected circumstances. Although researchers have recently questioned the benefits of making learning fun (Nerantzi & James, 2015), well-crafted games can actually foster students' engagement and lead to effective learning (Gee, 2005; Whitton, 2011). This group of teacher students embraced the long-lasting view of using games

in the classroom and adapted it to the emergent teaching-learning conditions.

With all these new ways of planning, implementing and evaluating online instruction, the teacher-students' lives became more hectic, "it's been really difficult to separate my work, my student life, my mom life, because I feel it's all like in the same place" (Claudia, U2). This, however, did not prevent our participants from developing empathy towards their students, which also played an important role in their pedagogical reengineering. Ultimately, as Dubreil (2020) notes, one of the educational challenges posed by the pandemic was "to mitigate the circumstances that have affected all of us" (p. 51).

Even though a teacher's role would typically involve dealing with students' emotional load, showing empathy during this unprecedented situation became significantly more important. "There's so much going on out there that you have to make it an academic oasis here, where they can quietly and peacefully immerse themselves," said Ernesto (U4). Teresa (U1) made it part of her job to support those students whose family members had passed away. In some of the participants' contexts, a situation derived from the pandemic was children working because their parents or grandparents had lost their jobs, and "you can't demand too much from these students" (Guadalupe, U4). Sergio (U3) also shared these views, "this was unexpected for everyone, so you have to understand them," as well as Reyna (U4), "it's important to try to make them participate, but also to be more tolerant."

Looking into the bright side

There were evidently major limitations to overcome, great challenges to face and significant adjustments to make. This does not mean that there was no blue sky whatsoever. After all, "these unique times offer opportunities for ELT instructors who have grown used to face-to-face settings to take a closer look at online teaching with fresh eyes and revitalize their teaching repertoire" (Pu, 2020, p. 347). In this sense, some of the teacher-students did share some positive insights regarding the ERT pandemic experience. Carlos (U2), for instance, talked about an online learning-teaching balance, 'I am learning online and now I am teaching online, I never thought I would be able to put into practice this online experience as a teacher so soon'. For him, this represented a huge opportunity in terms of professional development.

As an online learner, for Ernesto (U4) 'it was heaven on earth,' as his BA instructors were more understanding than ever, there was more collaborative work among his classmates implying less work for each student, and also more teacher synchronous presence, since coursework was predominantly asynchronous before the pandemic. As an online teacher, he was pleasantly surprised that

despite the many difficulties and shortcomings experienced by his students, their engagement in synchronous lessons was noteworthy. Moreover, whereas most complained about the considerable increase in workload and time investment despite saving commuting time, Ana (U3) could dedicate more time to her BA assignments because she did not have to travel to the rural school where she worked, and she felt this as 'a great help indeed.' She also expressed having enhanced her use of ICT, especially LMS platforms, and feeling much more self-confident about using them to teach online.

Conclusion

Summarising how the participants transitioned from being digital students to digital teachers during the COVID-19 outbreak, it was found that unsurprisingly they were already familiar with online learning; despite this, they responded to the unexpected circumstances in similar ways to those teachers without previous online engagement, as there was no time for syllabi and curriculums planning adjustments. Moving from an on-site setting to an online space due to the pandemic brought with its limitations, challenges, but above all a pedagogical reengineering. Generally, in agreement with the literature, pedagogical reengineering involves a systematic process of analysis, design, and implementation (Hodges et al., 2020). However, under these pandemic circumstances, this was not the case. Evidence of that was that the teacher-students of this study did not necessarily follow a systematic process, but designed and implemented innovative and creative solutions to maintain the continuity of their courses.

Furthermore, unlike the typical online learning scenario, teachers and students did not purposefully choose this format (Gacs et al., 2020). Thus, the participants were thrust into ERT. Additionally, when transitioning to remote teaching, in spite of the participants' knowledge about the use of at least an online platform, and their being used to technological work due to their role as online learners, it was noticed they made minimal use of online affordances such as websites, blogs, and apps. This leads us to suggest that although it is a common assumption that those who have been exposed to online learning can easily transfer their skills to online teaching, one thing is to be a student of an online programme, and quite another is to be trained for online teaching. Supporting this claim, the programmes the teacher-students were studying did not seem to necessarily equip them with tools and skills to effectively teach remotely as ICT classes were the lowest component of their curriculum.

Related to the use of technology, it was equally observed that the participants' technological expertise was not homogeneous. We found participants who were technologically savvy while some others possessed only a

set of basic digital skills. Thus, there was a wide range of computer literacy. In this sense, the pedagogical reengineering that emerged from the forced and swift change to remote teaching, not only helped those participants with elementary technological competence to reinforce it, but most importantly this crisis fostered the development of the participants' soft skills since teacher-students with more expertise played the role as mentors of their colleagues' with less digital literacy. We suspect this action was influenced by the participants' adherence to a humanities-related discipline. It would therefore be interesting to further research whether students ascribed to other disciplines adopted this role or they focused only on their own competence development.

In a nutshell, it is stated that the participants transitioned in different ways in accordance with their own hard and soft skills. Nonetheless, they seemed to have had a well-rounded experience in which they achieved a balance between their digital skills, their teaching methods, and the socio-emotional dimensions of teaching during this ERT. Accordingly, they appeared to understand the role of their students due to their own experience as online learners, which encouraged their empathy. It was also noticed that this online learning experience allowed them to adapt to remote teaching more easily. Additionally, findings suggest that there is a lack of understanding of what online learning implies by most education authorities at schools since during ERT some institutions forced teachers to move all their face-to-face class hours to online synchronous sessions. In this sense, the teacher-students of this study, despite their online learning experience, found it challenging to reduce the amount of time dedicated to synchronous work.

Changes in educational needs occur as constantly as the world and society in general evolve, and thus, educational actors continuously have to adapt themselves in order to converge within this ongoing process. In this sense, the restructuring process that pedagogical reengineering entails is not exclusive to the current transition from a face-to-face delivery format to online instruction due to COVID-19. Nevertheless, the challenge of ERT lies in the suddenness with which teachers had to switch to it, making this form of instruction very different from online teaching, which has actually been planned this way from the beginning (Hodges et al., 2020). Moreover, unlike online learning, ERT was not an option for any of the educational actors either; the circumstances forced everyone to adopt it. Therefore, findings from this research are especially significant in that they may contribute not only to widening the general perception of online learning environments, including the current ERT situation, but also to future online synchronous learning environments, since the experiences with ERT will one way or another "influence

the perceptions of teaching and learning online for generations to come” (Stewart, 2021, p. 98).

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