



## Articles

# Adaptation challenges in learning to teach EFL in a VUCA world: What have we learned from the COVID-19 experience?

*Desafios de adaptação para aprender a ensinar EFL em um mundo VUCA: O que aprendemos com a experiência do COVID-19?*

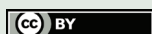
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### ABSTRACT

*The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted education in general and teacher education in particular in various ways around the world. As teachers have played a leading role during the crisis, it is key that their voices be heard. Drawing on Vygotskian sociocultural theory as a framework for teacher professional development, this exploratory study seeks to make sense of the main adaptation challenges faced by 18 Spanish EFL teacher candidates in their learning-to-teach process in a practicum setting during the pandemic. Based on a narrative qualitative research design, a thematic content analysis was used for the qualitative data gathered through open-ended questions. Findings revealed that the crisis has resulted in teaching adaptation challenges in terms of traditional expository teaching*

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*models, difficulty in understanding and being understood as well as a lack of interaction and relationship with learners. Adaptability and reflective practice have proven to be key strategic features of professional competence in a volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous (VUCA) world.*

**Keywords:** *VUCA world; learning-to-teach; adaptation challenges; adaptability; reflective practice.*

## RESUMO

*A pandemia de COVID-19 impactou a educação em geral e a formação de professores em particular de várias maneiras em todo o mundo. Como os professores desempenharam um papel de liderança durante a crise é essencial que suas vozes sejam ouvidas. Baseando-se na teoria sociocultural vygotskiana como uma estrutura para o desenvolvimento profissional do professor, este estudo exploratório busca dar sentido aos principais desafios de adaptação enfrentados por 18 candidatos a professores espanhóis de inglês como língua estrangeira em seu processo de aprender a ensinar em um ambiente de estágio durante a pandemia. Com base em um projeto de pesquisa qualitativa narrativa, uma análise de conteúdo temática foi usada para os dados qualitativos coletados por meio de perguntas abertas. Os resultados revelaram que a crise resultou em desafios de adaptação do ensino em termos de modelos tradicionais de ensino expositivo, dificuldade de entender e ser compreendido, bem como falta de interação e relacionamento com os alunos. A adaptabilidade e a prática reflexiva provaram ser as principais características estratégicas da competência profissional em um mundo volátil, incerto, complexo, ambíguo (VUCA).*

**Palavras-chave:** *mundo VUCA; aprender a ensinar; desafios de adaptação; adaptabilidade; prática reflexiva.*

## 1. Introduction

Over centuries global crises such as wars, pandemics, natural disasters, socio-political uprisings, financial turmoil, and other concurrent adversities have regrettably hit humanity. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was announced as a worldwide pandemic, as a serious and real threat to humanity by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. The most catastrophic global health crisis

in this century so far has likely come to stay for some time. COVID-19 has severely disrupted our daily routines practically in a matter of days, forcing us to live, work and interact in a different way with severe restrictions on individual liberty and mobility, constraining social interactions and relationships, perhaps as never seen before in modern history. The greatest challenge will undoubtedly be to return to ‘normal’ as soon as possible to be able to move forward with our lives.

During the *annus horribilis* of 2020, the pandemic unexpectedly affected almost all areas or sectors in a matter of few days. Of course, the education sector was not immune to the massive impact of the crisis - at all levels and in various ways - on a volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous (VUCA) world (Hadar et al., 2020), on a scale never seen before, as evidenced by the sudden massive closure of almost all educational institutions around the world to contain the transmission of this highly infectious disease. At the onset of the pandemic, the whole educational community faced the dilemma: *and now what to do?* and, most importantly, *how?* Then, the discussion of how to return safely to schools arose in the fall of 2020, which would bring about many substantial changes and challenges not only with students physically and/or socially distanced in classrooms (with the consequent lack of student interaction), but also with teachers managing high levels of stress and anxiety (Pressley, 2021). At the outbreak of the pandemic, remote teaching (both synchronous and asynchronous approaches) imposed itself as the only form of instructional delivery during the crisis to ensure the continuity of education. By mid-March 2020 the educational community was unexpectedly forced to transition from traditional face-to-face classroom instruction to an entirely virtual model with little or no prior preparation, and practically overnight, in most countries around the world (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). Most teachers were certainly unprepared to teach virtually as evidenced by their lack of knowledge, experience and control over online teaching platforms and applications. Although this forced transition to online education was perhaps the only available option or solution for ensuring the continuity of education at a critical time, experience has shown us that remote learning negatively influenced students’ learning outcomes and processes due to, among other reasons, the lack of teachers’ comprehensive training in the pedagogy of online education. Against this backdrop of global crisis, teachers were indeed forced to reinvent

themselves and adapt their teaching practices to the new emerging requirements, making every effort to support their students' learning process during lockdown, thus opting for prioritisation, adaptation and flexibility.

When we look back in time many lessons for education in general and for the teaching profession in particular can certainly be learned from this unprecedented crisis, as “While learning in the time of COVID has been challenging for students and prospective teachers alike, this moment of disruption has created the opportunity for rethinking and reinventing preparation, as well as schooling itself” (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020, p. 463). Be that as it may, the teaching profession has unexpectedly gone through such a profound change in such a short time that any discussion on the real impact, consequences and challenges faced by teachers and learners will take some time, as we are reminded by Karimanovic (2021). In the field of language teaching, MacIntyre et al. (2020) also remind us that the long-term impact and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for language teachers and teaching are still unknown, and will continue to be, even after the COVID-19 pandemic. All in all, the COVID crisis has disrupted, in a matter of days, the learning of a whole generation of students as well as the essential labour of teachers (Stanistreet et al., 2020).

The exploration of teachers' lived experiences in the context of a worldwide pandemic needs a frame of reference like Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to guide the interpretation of findings, as such theory situates the concept of learning in the socio-cultural context. Overall, the sociocultural perspective stresses the dynamic interplay between individuals, their social interactions, and the cultural context in which learning occurs. Bearing in mind Vygotsky's conceptualisation of learning as a socially mediated process that occurs through interactions and collaborations with others, this paper reports on the findings of an exploratory study which aimed at analysing the main adaptation challenges faced by Spanish EFL student teachers during their learning-to-teach process in a practicum setting in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. Learning to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in uncertain and challenging times

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected education in general, but also teacher education in particular, in various ways across the world (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Gao & Zhang, 2020). As teachers have played a leading role during the crisis, it is pivotal that their voices be heard. In general, teachers have been forced to face various adaptation challenges - improvising as they go at times - such as adjusting lesson plans, adapting activities and materials, changing assessment measures and procedures, and finally providing socioemotional support for students and their families so that no student was left behind, especially those most vulnerable and marginalised students (UNESCO, 2020). Teachers made every effort to make the most of their creativity, flexibility and adaptation so as to ensure the continuity of education both during and after COVID lockdown, striving to keep students engaged in learning and also fighting their lack of motivation, which has evidently led to a lower language competence. According to Farrell (2021), this new virtual world, which was unknown for many teachers, resulted in various adaptation challenges affecting instructional practices in terms of (i) method, approaches, activities, and planning, (ii) interaction, (iii) classroom management, and (iv) emotional reactions to the adaptation challenges. To understand the challenges faced by English teachers and teacher educators during the crisis, a report from the British Council (2020), which explored the immediate needs and experiences of both teachers and teacher educators (n=more than 9,600 replies from over 150 countries) working in different contexts in April and May 2020 during the pandemic, revealed that the main concerns expressed by teachers were: keeping student motivation, improving class management, assessing remotely, including disadvantaged learners, catering for mixed abilities, keeping student and teacher wellbeing, having poor internet connection/no access to the internet, preparing learners for exams, having fears about cheating, developing learner autonomy, lacking proper equipment for teachers and/or learners, getting advice on planning online lessons and on task design for distance learning, and spending more time preparing lessons for online instruction. Consequently, such associated challenges obliged teachers to reflect on and reconsider their own classroom practices practically

overnight, allowing them to (re)invent and (re)discover themselves as EFL teachers (Farrell & Stanclik, 2021).

The systematic integrative literature review provided by Erarslan (2021) analyses and synthesises the research studies (n=69) conducted between March 2020 and February 2021 to gain a better understanding of the global aspects of English language teaching and learning across the world during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many research studies were certainly conducted and published during the first year of the pandemic (see, for example, Farrell & Stanclik, 2021; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020), examining the impact of the crisis on English language development in terms of areas and skills as well as teachers' and students' perceptions and attitudes towards emergency online instruction, although the findings are conflicting. While language areas like grammar and vocabulary were unaffected (Hopp & Thoma, 2020), both oral abilities (especially, listening) were reported to be the most difficult language skills to develop through online instruction by university students (n=108) in Indonesia (Rifiyanti, 2020). In relation to this, the aforementioned report from the British Council (2020) also revealed that teachers found it difficult to scaffold speaking skills effectively given the impossibility of face-to-face interaction or immediate feedback in the case of asynchronous teaching. In the same vein, the study conducted in the USA by Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) concluded that university ESL students (n=153) experienced less language development for speaking than for writing during the pandemic since writing skills were mainly fostered through communication for homework and assignments in online environments (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020, Karatas & Tuncer, 2020). By the same token, the exploratory study conducted in Spain by Alcalde-Peñalver and García-Laborda (2021), which exclusively focuses on the impact of the pandemic on oral communication skills, revealed that the participating students from the Education Degree (n=19) faced the challenge of the lack of real communication in the online learning environment, which they perceived as artificial. Since Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has established that opportunities for social interaction with sustained comprehensible input are essential for L2 learning (Cummins, 2007), Sayer and Braun (2020, p. 3) remind us that, due to the massive closure of schools and the resulting enforced

home lockdown, “the main strategies for making input comprehensible such as the use of verbal and nonverbal cues and physical objects were largely lost”. Accordingly, the abrupt change from physical to virtual classrooms during the first weeks of home lockdown severely affected learners’ oral skills, as Sayer and Braun (2020, p. 4) pointed out,

The transition to remote learning also resulted in a shift in the L2 skills students were practicing. During regular classes, students routinely engage in listening and speaking, whereas the hastily assembled learning packets focused almost entirely on reading and writing. This affected ELs at the primary level who were emergent readers (...) Online instruction meant the loss of this type of differentiated learning supported through oral interactions.

Presumably, the above findings on oral skills development in EFL could also be transposed to the case of both primary and secondary education in view of the noticeable absence of oral practice and interaction in online settings and the resulting overemphasis on written communication skills through tasks assignment.

As might be expected, the social distancing imposed by the crisis made it difficult to carry out any type of interaction in classrooms, which seriously affected not only learners’ language development but also pre-service teachers’ professional learning. In this respect, the interpretative case study conducted in Chile by Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020), who aimed to explore the opportunities and challenges faced by 27 EFL teacher candidates in relation to virtual teaching experience, revealed that the lack of direct interaction with learners and the sudden change of instructional setting strongly affected their professional experience and learning, even though such exceptional experience has positively contributed, at least to a certain extent, to their professional preparation. Likewise, Farrell and Stanclik (2021) concluded that the interactive nature of classrooms changed with the crisis, which made it difficult to interact with students to build rapport. Specifically, the qualitative research by Farrell and Stanclik (2021), which reports on a case study of one EFL teacher’s reflections on his sudden transition into online teaching, stressed the importance of building rapport and relationships with students to lower the affective barriers so that they can progress in their language learning. In relation to this, the small-scale qualitative study conducted in England by

Kim et al. (2022), which focused on exploring 23 state primary and secondary school teachers' beliefs about what makes a great teacher during a pandemic, reported that the main qualities identified were as follows: caring for pupil wellbeing and dealing with uncertainty. The need to maintain the warmth of human relationships with learners as well as the ability to adapt to the ever-changing situation were intensified in the current circumstances. While the former relates to empathy and communication, the latter has to do with resilience and adaptability, which are both essential professional qualities at any time, not only in times of a pandemic. In the case of learners, the exploratory study conducted in Saudi Arabia by Hashmi et al. (2021) indicated that EFL teachers (n=265) from four major Saudi universities voiced their concerns regarding the students' psychology, anxiety and lack of motivation under new instructional conditions. By the same token, the study conducted in Indonesia by Atmojo and Nugroho (2020), which aimed at investigating how EFL teachers (n=16) carried out online EFL learning, concluded that the main challenges faced by the participating teachers were learners' low motivation, low English language proficiency, the difficulty of strengthening the emotional bond between the teacher and the students, the absence of physical touch and interaction in online learning settings, as well as teachers' lack of preparation in the pedagogy of online education, to mention only a few. In the same manner, the report of the British Council (2020) also revealed that younger learners' engagement and motivation were perceived as a problem in online interaction according to the participating teachers.

In short, the COVID-19 crisis has mainly taught us that the continuity of education must always be THE priority, no matter the circumstances and in what conditions. Perhaps the main lesson learned from the pandemic is that education professionals must be adequately prepared for online teaching, which suggests that the pedagogy of online education must be present from now on in any discussion of teacher education (Erarslan, 2021), although it is also true that online instruction may fail to achieve the expected instructional goals in terms of learner engagement and interaction. In this respect, Dvir and Schatz-Oppenheimer (2020, p. 641) remind us that



Technological knowledge is needed in the 21st century. Technology skills should be integrated into teachers' training in colleges and universities. Teacher training programs should provide all the necessary training so that their graduates can go out and cope with the technological-pedagogical challenges.

Given that digital technology is crucial for the future, integrating digital practices into language education and developing digital competence must be present in any discussion of teacher education and continuous professional development programmes. The qualitative study reported below addresses this and other issues.

### *Research questions*

As the teaching profession in general, and teacher education in particular, have faced countless challenges resulting from the conflict between expectations and reality in the uncertain and challenging times of the pandemic, which may have likely affected professional identity construction (Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2020), the research questions that motivated the present exploratory study were:

RQ1: What were the main adaptation challenges faced by EFL teacher candidates in learning to teach during their teaching placement in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What were the main lessons that can be learned from the crisis for professional preparation?

### **3. Method**

The research methodology followed in this paper is deliberately framed within an interpretive qualitative paradigm. Based on a narrative exploratory research design, pre-service teachers' narratives or reflections on their main adaptation challenges in a practicum setting in a time of crisis were analysed, which was mediated by reflection practice in line with the reflective framework (Farrell, 2015). Narrative inquiry is generally interpretive by nature and helps us explore, make sense of and better understand respondents' voices, stories and lived teaching experiences (Murray, 2009). The qualitative data gathered

through open-ended questions were inductively analysed by the researcher through theory-based content analysis, which is a widely used qualitative research technique (Cohen et al., 2007).

### *The research context*

Drawing on Vygotskian sociocultural framework which views learning to be socially mediated and embedded in a context, this study is situated within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like in many parts of the world, the Spanish government declared a national state of emergency on 14 March 2020 and accordingly imposed an enforced home confinement for several weeks (mid-March to mid-June 2020) to bring down high COVID-19 infection rates. As expected, all educational institutions were abruptly closed. At this juncture, the Ministry of Education ordered schools to deploy flexible online teaching arrangements wherever possible so as to offer virtual learning opportunities for all students and thus ensure the continuity of education. A few months later, in September 2020, most schools in Spain reopened, which led to a heightened uncertainty and anxiety among teachers when returning to schools during their adaptation to the *new normal* era. In particular, the study looked at the periods February-May of 2021, just a year after the pandemic outbreak.

The context framing this research is the four-year EFL teacher education programme at the University of Extremadura in Spain, particularly the second 15-week teaching practicum course in primary schools offered in the last semester of the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education, which aims at preparing EFL student teachers to become qualified language education professionals. Overall, the practicum (or teaching placement) experience in schools is generally viewed as an essential component of pre-service teachers' professional preparation. Such experiential learning is certainly of great value in their training process by developing pre-service teachers' professional competences. In the context of Spain, the practicum component includes two one-semester field experiences in which student teachers are expected to learn to teach in a real classroom setting where they can apply all the theoretical (content and pedagogical) knowledge assimilated during their training process, learn which teaching methods, strategies,

techniques, and styles to use in various situations, engage in teaching responsibilities (learning to design and adapt different teaching materials and resources when planning English lessons), successfully manage their classrooms and thus test their teaching abilities under the guidance of school mentor teachers and university supervisors.

### *Participants*

A convenience sampling procedure was followed to select the 18 EFL student teachers (STs) (12 females and 6 males, with an average age of 21.4 years) who voluntarily took part in this study. The participants were enrolled in their last year of the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education at the University of Extremadura (Spain) and were embarking on their second 15-week teaching placement in primary schools during the last semester of the degree programme (February-May of 2021). It needs to be made clear that the accumulated teaching experience (15 weeks) reported by participants corresponds to their first teaching placement during the third semester of the degree programme. When conducting this research during the fourth coronavirus wave, 7 online follow-up seminars were conducted, via Zoom videoconferencing, with the participating EFL teacher candidates and the researcher, as a university supervisor, to discuss and exchange views on their teaching practices. Ethical issues in research, confidentiality, and anonymity were ensured in the use and dissemination of the data.

### *Data collection instrument and procedure*

Insightful data were provided in the form of narratives written in Spanish, in which student teachers were asked to critically reflect on and articulate their views on the main adaptation challenges experienced in schools during the crisis. Data were gathered through a single open-ended question: *What were your main adaptation challenges in learning to teach EFL when returning to the school, and what were the main lessons to be learned from the pandemic for your professional learning?* Once the assigned task was completed, such written reflections were emailed to the researcher at the end of their second practicum placement in May of 2021.

As mentioned above, data analysis was conducted using thematic content analysis. The content of narratives was indeed analysed by the researcher using the following techniques: data organisation, inductive coding, classification, analysis, interpretation, and reflection. The teacher candidates' narratives were first transcribed and then subjected to categorical content analysis. The general themes were categorised for the frequency of their occurrence for further analysis to respond to the formulated research questions. Specifically, the most recurring emerging themes were first identified, then organised into common thematic categories, and lastly grouped at a more conceptual level. The results were then coded by inductive analysis procedures for interpretation of emerging themes.

#### 4. Results and discussion

This section is organised around the formulated research questions and discusses the main findings of the study in view of existing theory and research. A number of themes certainly emerged from the qualitative analysis of narratives.

RQ1 sought to understand the main adaptation challenges faced by EFL student teachers in learning to teach during their teaching placement in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For an overview of the top thematic categories identified in the narratives, please see Table 1.

**Table 1** — List of emerging themes from data analysis

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**Teaching adaptation challenges in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic**

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- Facing uncertainty and frustration at being unable to make the most of the practicum experience.
- Resetting educational priorities.
- Keeping children motivated and developing their sustained attention.
- Affected language competence and cultural awareness.
- Reinforcing previous knowledge.
- More individualised education.
- Traditional expository teaching.

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- Lack of interactive and dynamic activities.
  - Difficulty of understanding and being understood in English because of masks.
  - Problems in teaching and learning pronunciation.
  - Modified teacher talk.
  - Supporting the most vulnerable and disadvantaged students.
  - Adaptability and flexibility.
  - Lack of interaction and relationship with learners (limited rapport and empathy).
  - Heavy workload.
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The main findings that emerge from this study are reported and discussed below. For reasons of space here, the emphasis has been placed only on those most recurrent themes which are expressed through supporting transcripts below.

To begin with, it is worth mentioning that the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic caused — regrettably this is still happening — a highly stressful situation for teachers (and pre-service teachers as well) when returning to schools, as indicated in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1:

*This was an overwhelming and hard situation for everyone but schools have been able to adapt to the 'new normal' in the best way possible (...) Much effort was made to ensure some normality in these uncertain and complicated times (ST2)*

This finding is consistent with the exploratory study conducted in USA by Pressley (2021) concerning the amount of anxiety and stress reported by teachers when returning to schools during fall 2020 with students socially distanced in classrooms.

The crisis has also resulted in a noticeable lack of student motivation when returning to schools as a result of the alleged negative impact of online education on learning motivation and the absence of social interaction during enforced home lockdown, which posed a great challenge for teachers, as evidenced in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2:

*Many students returned to the school lacking willingness to work as well as low motivation (...) Many children feel uncomfortable when wearing masks which makes it difficult to sustain their attention. Teachers must strive to*

*motivate and engage students actively in the learning process (...) We are seeking to make lessons more innovative so that children feel more motivated to learn English (ST4)*

This result coincides with that obtained by Hashmi et al. (2021) who reported that the participating EFL teachers also voiced their concerns regarding the students' psychology, anxiety and lack of motivation in online learning settings. By the same token, the study by Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) also pointed out that other challenge faced by ESL teachers was learners' low motivation which also generated stress among teachers who found difficulties in engaging lesser motivated and passive students in online learning settings. Similarly, the qualitative study by Meşe and Sevilen (2021) concluded that online learning presents many challenges in terms of keeping EFL students motivated due to the absence of social interaction and lack of self-discipline to follow the course, among other reasons. According to the respondents in the present study, such demotivation or discouragement towards language learning has persisted even after COVID lockdown and indeed has been further exacerbated by the obligation to continue wearing masks inside classrooms, thus resulting in a great challenge for language teachers.

Undoubtedly, the pandemic has severely disrupted our teaching practices; above all in terms of instructional planning and delivery. During and even after lockdown, traditional expository teaching models emerged, which led to a more individualised, top-down education with hardly any interactive, dynamic, and cooperative activities, as we are reminded by Richards (2020, p. 333) "On-line lessons required more use of teaching in lecture or expository mode and offered fewer opportunities to employ the kind of activities for activity-based learning and collaborative learning they normally made use of". Such traditional instruction still prevails to some extent because of the social and physical distancing measures imposed by the crisis. These themes become evident in Excerpts 3 and 4.

Excerpt 3:

*English lessons have adopted a more expository approach as teachers returned to traditional styles of teaching when giving explanations in a formal way, overusing the coursebook and controlling and guiding the class at all*

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*times, all of which provoked frustration among teachers who felt unable to innovate in their lessons and carry out dynamic and interactive activities when adapting to the new reality (...) This also resulted in a greater discouragement towards language learning among children due to the classroom routine, which made English lessons boring (ST6)*

Excerpt 4:

*The lack of interaction due to social and physical distancing in classrooms makes it difficult to learn English in a fun way. Interactive communicative activities and situations are not allowed in classroom for fear of infection. The fact of not being able to interact with their classmates makes them become more individualistic and competitive and, consequently, unable to learn in a more effective way (...). This makes the learning process cooler and impersonal (ST1)*

This result is in line with what Coutinho and Buttros (2021, p. 532) concluded “Without interaction, classes get demotivating and tiresome and contribute to deepen social isolation”. The social and physical distancing constraints imposed by the crisis also led, as expected, to the avoidance of those activities which entailed some physical contact or interaction like role-plays, total physical response (TPR) activities as well as manipulative tasks to prevent the risk of infection, as evidenced in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5:

*Some movement-based songs like Shake it out in which children have to move various parts of the body seriously threatens safety distance as they dance very close each other and tend to touch each other (...) The COVID crisis has also affected the manipulation of objects which is essential in introducing new vocabulary and playing some games when learning English. Children usually find manipulative learning very fun (ST6)*

Predictably, oral communication development was seriously affected because of absence of communicative interaction during lockdown, which is shared by most respondents, as illustrated in Excerpt 6.

Excerpt 6:

*This has resulted in a substantial loss of language competence. Since English learning involves much communicative interaction, both listening and spe-*

*aking were the most seriously affected language skills during lockdown. (...) The noticeable differences in language competence posed a great challenge for language teachers (ST18)*

This finding is consistent with the view of Sayer and Braun (2020) who indicated that virtual classrooms seriously affected learners' oral skills during home lockdown since no or little communicative interaction occurred through online instruction. This result is also in line with that obtained by Rifiyanti (2020) who reported that both oral skills (mainly listening) were the most seriously affected language areas among university students in Indonesia. In the same vein, the study conducted in the USA by Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) also concluded that during the pandemic university students experienced less language development for speaking and that writing skills were fostered most in online communication. Similarly, the qualitative study by Karatas and Tuncer (2020), who explored the impact of online education on Turkish EFL pre-service teachers' language skills development, revealed that speaking skills were ignored during online courses, unlike writing, which was used for almost all homework, assignments and projects.

When schools reopened, the difficulty of understanding and being understood in a foreign language was especially aggravated by the communication barrier of masks as well as by background noise, which led to teacher talk modifications, especially when teaching pronunciation, as reported by all respondents in Excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7:

*I find it difficult to understand and be understood by students in classrooms because of masks, which seriously affects interpersonal communication in classrooms, making teachers increase the tone of voice and speak slower than usual, repeating a lot, vocalising in an exaggerated way and heightening the use of non-verbal communication to make themselves understood and accordingly reinforce mutual understanding (...) Even this situation of misunderstanding is further exacerbated by external noises resulting from the fact of constantly keeping windows open (ST8)*

Perhaps the main challenge faced by most student teachers was to keep social distancing with their learners but, above all, not to develop



a close relationship or rapport with them, which is deemed essential for successful language learning in the view of most respondents, as Excerpt 8 shows.

Excerpt 8:

*I found the absence of human contact with learners the hardest thing as I usually develop a close relationship with children (ST7)*

Another theme that also emerged from data was the concern shared by the majority of student teachers about the vulnerability of those students with special educational needs during the pandemic, as shown in Excerpt 9.

Excerpt 9:

*The most disadvantaged students were those with special educational needs who felt an increased anxiety as some hearing-impaired students found it difficult to read their teachers' lips and understand their explanations despite wearing transparent masks (ST12)*

This finding echoes what Karimanovic (2021) stated on disabled students who are fond of human contact and do not like changes, so transitioning to online education caused additional trauma, which meant that their improvement was “under a serious risk”. Kritzer and Smith (2020, p. 32) also pointed in the same direction by concluding that “very few students with special needs received support or most of them were not supported at all during the COVID-19 pandemic process”. Similarly, this concern is shared by UNESCO (2020) when they warned us of the risk of the most vulnerable students disengaging from education and dropping out of school.

RQ2 asked what were the main lessons that can be learned from the crisis for professional preparation. Unsurprisingly, the main lesson was the perceived lack of preparation in the pedagogy of online education. This theme was evident in Excerpt 10.

Excerpt 10:

*Not all teachers were adequately prepared for this unpredictable scenario who were suddenly forced to reinvent themselves and transition to online instruction in record time, reconsidering their own working schemes, habits and models although they also improvised along the way (ST4)*

Against this background of great uncertainty, teacher adaptability and creativity have become evident during the crisis, which led to work overload. This idea is reflected in Excerpt 11.

Excerpt 11:

*The pandemic has obliged teachers to take advantage of their imagination, adaptation and creativity more than ever before as they were forced to reinvent themselves by making use of online educational platforms such as Google Classroom and Google Meet (...) The key lies in our own effort and willingness to find new instructional alternatives or innovative ways of teaching to ensure the continuity of education (ST12)*

While most education professionals will likely continue to work the same way as before the pandemic, they must, now more than ever, be conscious of the need to integrate technology into their teaching practices and thus be adequately prepared for virtual teaching, especially for times of emergency, in line with what Coutinho and Buttros (2021, p. 533) suggested “to rethink teacher’s education, especially on what refers to digital literacy”. Likewise, the reduced student ratio (classes organised in bubble groups) resulting from the crisis is positively valued by most respondents, as can be seen in Excerpt 12.

Excerpt 12:

*A positive aspect of the new reality is the reduction of student ratio in classes which has contributed to the improvement of education. Such reduced student ratio leads to a more personalised attention, which allows to almost constantly observe/monitor the students’ learning progress (ST5)*

Another positive aspect stressed by respondents was the establishment of an ongoing communication or school-home connection between teachers and parents, as never seen before, during lockdown, as recognised by Sayer and Braun (2020). Now, more than ever, the key role played by parents in supporting the educational process of their children during the crisis is worthy of note, as displayed in Excerpt 13.

Excerpt 13:

*The pandemic has resulted in a greater involvement of parents in the educational process of their children when supporting their schoolwork (ST12).*

Lastly, Excerpt 14 summarises the overall evaluation reported by pre-service teachers regarding their practicum experience in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Excerpt 14:

*This pandemic has mainly taught us that we need to be well prepared to face future situations (...) We have been forced to adapt ourselves to a fully unexpected situation and live with great uncertainty as to what might happen next (...) I just hope that we can learn from the lived experience and that this lesson makes us stronger as Socrates stated: True wisdom is to know to recognize one's own ignorance (ST14)*

The overall evaluation of this exceptional practicum experience has been enriching but also challenging for student teachers. This finding is in congruence with the study by Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020), who reported that such exceptional experience has positively contributed, at least to a certain extent, to EFL teacher candidates' professional preparation. In the same way, the qualitative study by Farrell and Stanclik (2021) reported that the participating novice EFL teacher viewed teaching as an ongoing learning, not only an opportunity to share what he knows, but to learn as well. In short, the above narratives portray the subjective world of EFL pre-service teachers in learning to teach in a practicum setting in terms of personal and professional challenges lived during the uncertain and ever-changing reality of the COVID-19 crisis.

## 5. Conclusions

These are uncertain and challenging times for education in general, and for the teaching profession in particular. Although this worldwide pandemic has shown the fragility of education, teachers have played, and continue to play, a central leading role in ensuring continuity of educational processes during and after the crisis. Since much will be certainly written about the educational impact of the crisis in the coming months and years, the insightful reflections reported on in the present study offer a detailed snapshot of the main teaching adaptation challenges faced by EFL teacher candidates in learning to teach in a practicum setting in the context of the COVID pandemic. To capture

and deepen our understanding of their lived experiences and challenges under pandemic conditions, a narrative inquiry was undertaken. Based on EFL teacher candidates' narratives, the main findings that emerge from this qualitative inquiry can be summarised as follows: (i) the pandemic has resulted in teaching adaptation challenges in terms of traditional expository teaching models, difficulty of understanding and being understood because of mask wearing, as well as a lack of interaction and relationships with learners, and (ii) perhaps the main lesson learned from the crisis is that education professionals have shown themselves to be unprepared to effectively manage a crisis of this nature, although adaptability and reflective practice have proven to be key strategic features of professional competence in a VUCA world.

Generally, all studies have limitations, and this is no exception. Given that this exploratory study is based on a qualitative narrative research design, which means that it is subjective, descriptive and interpretative, the findings cannot be thus generalisable across all contexts. The study was also conducted in one particular instructional context in Spain, hence any generalisation of findings is not feasible as the idiosyncrasies of national contexts cannot be ignored. Additionally, the limited size of the sample (18 EFL pre-service teachers only) and the impossibility of observing teacher candidates' performance on the spot in schools also limit the validity and reliability of results. Similarly, for reasons of space here, this study has not addressed other factors that are likely to influence the learning-to-teach process nor included the views of the rest of educational stakeholders (school mentor teachers, university supervisors, learners, and their parents) who also played a meaningful role during the crisis. Despite such limitations, it is believed that the insights from this study have broad relevance and highlight potential areas of future research in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and TESOL teacher education.

Lastly, this study has made evident that the true extent of the impact of the crisis on language education and teacher education, which still remains unknown (Bryan & Cox, 2021), deserves further attention in future. Indeed, substantial efforts should be made to examine students' learning loss, teaching practices under stressful and challenging conditions, students' and teachers' psychological and socio-emotional wellbeing, quality of feedback and online assessment

in challenging times, among many other pressing issues. The different ways in which schools and teachers have actually implemented online instruction during the crisis will also be a highly promising research area (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). Whether the crisis affected student teachers differently than experienced teachers (Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2020) is also recommended as a topic for future research. According to the final report by the Council of Europe/ECML (2023), formal teacher education (both pre-service and in-service programmes) must include training in remote and socially distanced teaching. In this respect, further investment is urgently needed in teacher education to “facilitate remote teaching, redesign teaching, and reconsider technology in new ways which go beyond it being a simple tool for the transmission of knowledge” (Tonna et al., 2023, p. 117). In adapting to the post-pandemic era teachers reported a need for further pedagogical training in key areas of educational processes, in particular how to provide effective feedback and assess students’ learning, how to organise remote learning and implement differentiated learning strategies, and how to manage students’ wellbeing (UNESCO, 2022). After the challenging and stressful COVID-19 experience and with warnings about more possible challenges ahead, digital proficiency and ability to teach online should now become the first priority for teacher education programmes (Hargreaves, 2021). In addition, language educators’ social-emotional competences must be enhanced. This crisis has also stressed the need for further teacher collaboration and teamwork through reflective practice and dialogue to improve the quality of education. In short, the evident lack of preparation for online instruction urges to reconsider the priorities of teacher education curriculum since teacher candidates must prepare themselves for unpredictable and unknown scenarios such as pandemics or other natural disasters, which will require alternative pedagogical contingency plans to ensure the continuity of education in the future (Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2020). Accordingly, more efforts and resources should be invested in the professional capital of our teachers after the pandemic to ensure successful education for all students in times of crisis (Hargreaves, 2021).

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