

**Pre-service students' experiences at Teacher Training Programmes during the Covid-19 pandemic: what teacher trainers should know**

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**Abstract**

The world has been undergoing one of the most dramatic changes ever experienced by humanity due to COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, teachers have adapted to this unforeseen situation, trying to tackle the new challenges. Being English as Foreign Language (EFL) Teachers, we carried out a survey to obtain data about students' experiences in the context of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). As a result, an online survey was administered to students from four different EFL teacher training programmes in three provinces of Argentina at the end of the first semester in 2020. The information included in this article might shed light upon trainees' perspectives and give higher education teachers the possibility of reflecting on their academic and pedagogical practices.

*Key words:* English as Foreign Language (EFL) teacher trainers - COVID-19 - Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)

**Resumen**

El mundo ha evidenciado uno de los cambios más dramáticos jamás experimentados por la humanidad debido a la pandemia del COVID-19. Por consiguiente, los docentes debieron adaptarse a esta situación inimaginable y hacer frente a los nuevos desafíos. Como docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera llevamos a cabo una encuesta para obtener información sobre las experiencias de los estudiantes en el contexto de la Enseñanza Remota de Emergencia (ERE). Es por eso que diseñamos una encuesta para estudiantes de cuatro Profesorados de Inglés en tres provincias argentinas, administrada al finalizar el primer semestre del año 2020. Los datos de este artículo describen las perspectivas de los estudiantes y podrían brindar a los docentes de educación superior la posibilidad de reflexionar sobre sus prácticas académicas y pedagógicas.

*Palabras claves:* Formadores de docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera – COVID-19 – Educación Remota de Emergencia (ERE)

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected millions of students and teachers worldwide, forcing governments to temporarily close educational institutions. Undoubtedly, this unprecedented situation has transformed the teaching and learning processes. Thus, Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) modalities were developed in order to avoid the spread of the virus and continue the academic courses of study.

In Argentina, COVID-19 started spreading rapidly in March 2020. To prevent the proliferation of the virus, some national regulations were passed, imposing compulsory work and study from home to control contagion. Full mandatory lockdown, daytime curfews, closure of schools and universities as well as non-essential businesses, transit control on the streets, and prohibitions on public gatherings were some of the decisions taken by the government.

As regards education, students from all levels in Argentina were affected in different ways due to the sanitary restrictions that prevented them from attending face-to-face lessons. Therefore, a plan of action was necessary and the Ministry of Education implemented some policies for state-run and private institutions. For instance, the beginning of the academic year was delayed, the syllabuses were adjusted to meaningful contents and lessons were taught online. It is important to mention that the pandemic also altered the teaching practices. Some teachers did not have access to computers or Internet connection, while others were not prepared nor well-equipped to deal with the challenges that COVID-19 presented.

After a few months of teaching online, we agreed on the fact that it was necessary to gather data concerning students' perspectives on ERT. For that reason, a survey was designed to obtain information from students taking teacher training programmes in three provinces of Argentina. The survey included questions about challenges students had faced so far, the applications they had been using, the linguistic skills that they considered had been affected in any way in this new scenario, and their appreciations of the experience of learning virtually. The data gathered allowed us to reflect upon our lessons, giving the opportunity to make necessary adjustments to our teaching practices. In this spirit, we would like to share the findings since the ELT community might consider them useful if we are to continue working this way in the future.

### **Survey**

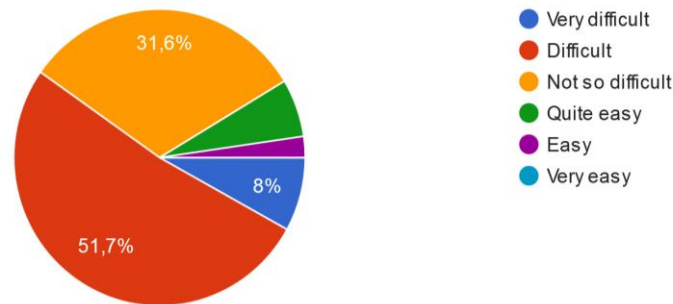
The survey was conducted to 174 pre-service teachers of English who were attending teacher training programmes at the end of the first semester of 2020 in four different institutions, state-run and private, in three provinces of Argentina: Entre Ríos, Santa Fe and Buenos Aires.

Trainees answered an anonymous Google Forms Questionnaire which contained seven questions; five of them were multiple-choice questions and the other two were open questions to give students the opportunity to express themselves and expand their points of view when necessary. Trainees could answer in English or Spanish according to their linguistic competence or preference. We should mention that 56,6% of the population were taking their first year of the teaching training programmes, whereas the rest were in the second, third or fourth year. This fact is important since students in the first year of higher education programmes might not have enough experience to compare their learning processes in a context of ERT and also because their number is generally larger than those finishing the teaching programme.

### **Presentation of results**

#### *Students' perceptions on their learning experience during ERT*

The purpose of this section is to share the findings obtained from the survey in appropriate figures and descriptions. First of all, it can be seen in Figure 1 that 51,7% of the trainees considered the teaching and learning processes during lockdown difficult, 8% very difficult while 31,6% thought it was not so difficult. The rest of the population found the processes easy (6,3%) or very easy (2,3%).



**Figure 1.** Students’ perception of the teaching and learning processes in lockdown.

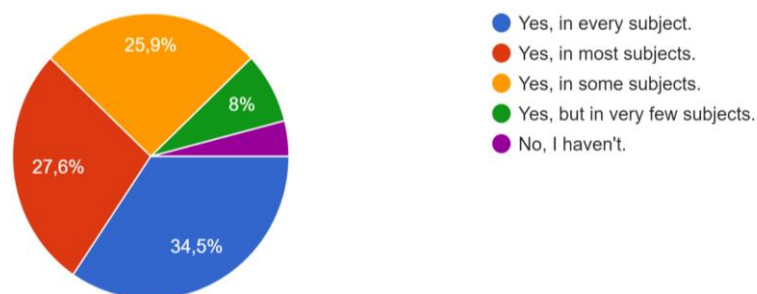
Trainees were also asked about the frequent problems they had faced during the pandemic in question 2. The choices given include different options: internet connection, time management, the context, stress, lack of energy or none. 25,7% of the population chose Internet connection as the main problem whereas 25,1% selected stress. 18,9% stated that the context had been the main problem and 14,3% felt a lack of energy. 13,1% had problems regarding time management and only 2,9% of the population had not had any problems. Figure 2 shows the answers to Question 2.



**Figure 2.** Students’ difficulties during the pandemic

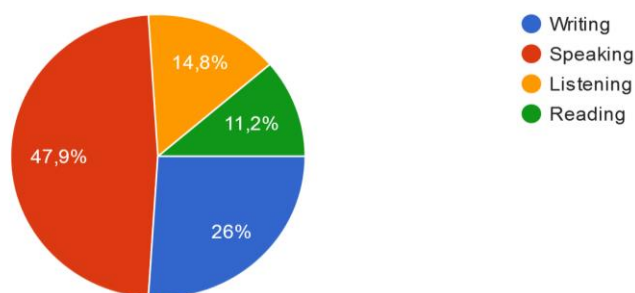
*Synchronous learning*

The data gathered in Figure 3 refers to the different Web 2.0 applications teachers used in order to continue teaching synchronically. 34,5 % of students mentioned that they had online synchronous lessons in every subject, 27, 6 % stated they had them in most subjects, and 25,9% had lessons through Zoom, Meet or Jitsi in some subjects. However, 8% had online lessons in very few subjects and 4% of students had never had online lessons so far.



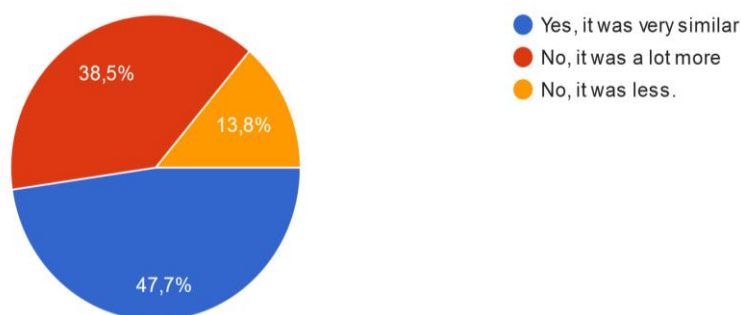
**Figure 3** Online lessons via Zoom, Meet, Jitsi or any other app

Figure 4 shows that 47,9% of students recognized that speaking was the least practised skill whether in synchronous or asynchronous lessons. 26% chose writing, 14,8% selected listening while 11,2% decided on reading.



**Figure 4.** Least practised skill during synchronous or asynchronous lessons

Figure 5 shows that 47,7% of the students found the amount of material and homework given by teachers to be very similar to face-to-face lessons while 38,5% recognized it had been more than usual, and only 13,8% answered it had been less. It is important to remember that the percentages might be affected by the fact that 50% of the respondents were 1st year-students.



**Figure 5.** Students' opinions on the similarity of the amount of material and homework given by teachers in face to face and online lessons

### *New ways of learning*

Questions 6 and 7 from the survey were open, not compulsory and students had the opportunity to answer in Spanish or English. Question 6 aimed at gathering data about new activities or e-learning tools that pre-service teachers used and enjoyed during the pandemic. From 174 students who completed the survey, only 118 answered this question. The activities that students mentioned as enjoyable were games and online interactive activities. 28 (23,7%) students preferred online crosswords, puzzles and quizzes. The applications they used most frequently were Kahoot, Mentimeter, Paddlet, Wordsearch, Spin the Wheel, Jamboard, Quizzes, Word Cloud and Liveworksheets. Students emphasized the importance of using games during the lessons to foster motivation and have fun while developing their language skills. 16,1% students did not mention specific activities but they expressed they realized this experience had revealed the potential of virtual learning environments to enhance the teaching and learning processes. They appreciated the possibility of having organized lessons and materials to consult whenever they needed to. Besides, they highlighted that using Information Communication Technology (ICT) to do homework or assignments allowed them to save time. They found out that, by being users of different platforms and applications, they had become familiar with their interfaces and advantages, so they would be able to create their own virtual learning environments. 12,7% trainee teachers mentioned that using video conferencing

to teach synchronically was a great asset for teachers since they had the possibility of emulating face-to-face lessons by interacting with teachers and peers. In videoconferences, students could listen to subject contents and ask questions to clarify their doubts. One student mentioned: "I really enjoyed the experience, although we've all been quite shy and didn't speak too much, but I think that it's great to have the opportunity to speak about subjects, like having casual conversations in English. Online classes are new for us, even if we have experience with video calls with our friends and family."

26,7% students found watching or making videos and PowerPoint presentations a great way of learning the subject contents and being exposed to the language. According to students, videos gave them the opportunity to reflect, debate and interact with their classmates. The most used applications to create videos were PowerPoint, Screencast-O-Matic and Inshot. Some students said that the process of creating a video or presentation helped them organize information, use the language communicatively and check their mistakes because they could watch and edit the videos as many times as it is necessary. Four students found Zoom breakout rooms really engaging as a means to practise speaking. Finally, 17,7% students agreed on the fact that they had not enjoyed new online activities nor learned how to use new Web 2.0 apps.

Question 7 gave students the opportunity to describe their own experience of emergency learning during lockdown. From the 174 students who have participated in the survey, only 138 completed this question. 34,7% students gave entirely positive comments and 42% students had negative views on the experience. 22,4 % of all the answers showed mixed views, not being entirely positive nor negative.

The positive answers emphasized the fact that even though the experience was challenging, students considered studying from home had been "an overall good experience," "a different one, but enriching" or "an interesting process." Trainees mentioned they had developed digital literacy skills of Web 2.0 applications they could use when planning their own lessons in the future. Some of them realized that they would not have learnt so much about ICT if they had not been forced to go on studying virtually. However, they reflected upon the fact that not all of them had the same opportunities to go on learning this way. As regards time management and autonomous learning, these students believed there had been an improvement. They expressed they had learnt how to organize their routines and had found strategies to go on improving their foreign language skills on their own despite the fact they had been working alone and asynchronously most of the time. One student says that "it is important that you can adapt your daily work to your routine and the part of the day that is better for you" and another added that "at first, it was tough, but now I'm more used to the language in terms of listening, reading and analyzing things. I didn't know how to do it before."

Another important issue mentioned is the fact that virtual distance learning had allowed some students to go on studying even though they had been working at the same time. Students revealed they had some difficulties during synchronous lessons because they were not confident enough to participate in speaking activities but, once they started doing it, they got used to the new modality. In general, they considered that the contents of the subjects were covered and that most teachers had done their best to manage the unprecedented situation. Most of them emphasized their appraisal for the teachers' efforts to go on teaching virtually without being specialized in this field.

As regards the negative views on the situation, most students recognized having suffered problems related to emotions. They had experienced anxiety and depression. Others had cried or felt the need to sleep the whole day. The salient adjectives that were used by students to describe the experience were "stressful", "overwhelming", and "boring". It is interesting to mention that these feelings were in relation to the pandemic in general and not to their studies in particular. Another negative aspect that can be analyzed in their answers is related to time management and organization of the assignments they completed. The majority of the students expressed that they had had problems finding time to be alone and calm enough to concentrate on their studies. It had not been easy for them to get moments of silence to devote to their work. In relation to the language itself, it can be highlighted that most of them felt they had not had the necessary exposure to improve their language. Apart from

that, they felt they had not had enough contact with trainers and classmates, too. Consequently, they had solved their doubts by surfing the Internet or asking their partners. Some students remarked that remote teaching had been less demanding than traditional lessons. It is also vital to mention that first-year-students answered that distance learning had been really difficult for them as they had not had the opportunity to meet their partners which caused them to have less opportunities to be accompanied when dealing with some lessons or assignments. In some situations, students referred that the number of assignments and reading material to deal with had been excessive and, consequently, demotivating.

### **Discussion**

Data collected in the survey reveals the experiences of students from four different teacher training colleges during the pandemic situation in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Entre Ríos and Santa Fe, in Argentina. Even though their contexts were different, their perceptions and feelings about online emergency learning as a consequence of universities or colleges closure were quite similar. Connectivity and technical problems, stress and burnout, not having a comfortable space at home, among others, were some of the recurring issues trainees suffered during 2020.

It is evident that despite the obstacles the academic community encountered, online teaching was the logical answer to cope with the crisis, and with its implementation, the concept of traditional education was transformed. This rapid change did not only help teacher trainers go on with the contents of their subjects, but it also compelled them to adjust their pedagogic strategies, adapting and adopting the use of technology to deliver their lessons. In this spirit, we consider that 2020 has become memorable and iconic since education will not be the same any longer.

Along with these lines, one of the most salient aspects to consider is the affective domain, since almost 60% of students believed learning in pandemic times was difficult and it affected them in different ways. The affective domain (Anderson et.al, 2001) includes the manner in which people deal with things emotionally, such as feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasms, motivations, and attitudes. In that respect, some students expressed they felt overwhelmed, stressed and bored, having the feeling of not improving or learning anything at all. However, some others were able to adapt to this new situation, doing their best to cope with the conditions that had arisen in their lives, such as family, work or health problems.

In the open questions students acknowledged that they had suffered from stress and anxiety not only due to COVID-19 threat and the lockdown consequences, but also because they did not feel comfortable enough at home having their relatives, pets or neighbors around while studying on-line. Terigi (2020) describes this as the invasion of intimacy, one in which the boundaries of the public and intimate world are blurred, and that inevitable fact overloads an already stressful situation. In some cases, learning mediated through a computer might have reduced intimacy making students feel uncomfortable when connected to lessons.

Another problem students faced was the unstable Internet connection and lack of the necessary equipment for virtual learning. Even though ICT has expanded the boundaries of the classroom, allowing students to communicate with foreigners, listen to native speakers in podcasts and videos, use different applications to study or practise the target language, some students were deprived of the same opportunities to have online lessons, regardless of the technological devices they may have since some teachers did not give synchronous lessons. Apart from that, some students' learning processes might have been seriously affected or, at least, a breach between students opened up or widened due to the differences among teachers and institutions that have experience in using ICT and those who did not. It can be observed in the survey that 61,5% of students had lessons by using different platforms such as Zoom, Meet, etc., in most or every subject while 26% had them in a few subjects and almost 20% never had that possibility. This clearly shows the disparity that existed among different institutions and within the same institution as well.

During lockdown, some students lost opportunities to interact with others synchronically. This lack of exposure could be one of the reasons that might have affected the development of some of the

four macro skills. Along with this idea, it is interesting to mention that in the survey, 47,9% of students identified speaking as the least practiced skill while studying from home and this might severely influence their fluency.

As regards the amount of homework and materials given, 47,7% of the students considered it was very similar to face-to-face lessons while 38,5% thought it was much more. This fact is relevant if we take into consideration Mariana Maggio's (2020) suggestions and students' report that their academic workloads increased in times of the pandemic. She considered that teachers must adopt a "minimalist curriculum," one that is centered on what is really relevant, updated and essential to the core of the discipline. In this regard, the author mentions that this does not imply less contents or easier assignments; on the contrary, it means reflecting upon the subject-content and being able to select meaningful knowledge students vitally need. Maggio (2020) considers that this should have been done before the pandemic, but this situation forced teachers to rethink the curriculum. She suggests that instead of bombarding students with content, files, synchronous lessons or assignments, teachers should design a proposal that avoids fragmentation, collection and accumulation of content. Such a proposal should integrate all relevant and meaningful aspects of the subjects, even though they do not correlate necessarily with the face-to-face lessons. All in all, breaking down extensive assignments, outlining formative assessment and requiring more scheduled activities are all effective teaching practices teacher trainers should adopt to help students make a profit from the lessons they have.

### Conclusion

In the light of the pandemic, working on a survey in which nearly 200 pre-service teachers participated was crucial to have the opportunity to reflect upon students' needs and demands in the ERT scenario. It cannot be denied that COVID-19 has certainly transformed the world of education, and no teacher trainer has ever thought about such a radical change. Nevertheless, teaching and learning processes could be innovated and online learning has come into the spotlight.

Lockdown and the emergency context provoked different feelings such as uncertainty, fear, isolation, anxiety, stress. Nevertheless, many innovative teaching and meaningful learning experiences could also take place. In a conference, PhD Melina Furman (2020) remarked that there is an analogy between the eruption of COVID-19 and the metaphor of the tide; as the sea covers the shore, whether smoothly or dangerously as a tsunami, people cannot help but feel at loss, uncertain of the horizon ahead of them, not being able to follow a path. However, when the tide is out, they are given the possibility of discovering the treasures the water has uncovered. Accordingly, in this context of ERT, teachers were given the chance to find the treasures hidden in their routines or to rediscover inspirational ideas. To conclude, having the opportunity to listen to students' voices might help teacher educators collect those hidden treasures and build a new path, feeling heartened by the challenge the pandemic has presented.

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