Teachers' Perspectives on Emergency Remote English Language Teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study focuses on a relatively new aspect of English language teaching (ELT), which has resulted from the impact of the transition to emergency remote classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In view of the fact that, during the pandemic, new circumstances have posed additional challenges and significant limitations on teachers and students, and have impacted all aspects of teaching and learning, this thesis aims to investigate teachers' perceptions on the shift from face-to-face classes to emergency online teaching, and the perceived benefits and challenges of this transition.

First, important aspects related to teaching English today prior to the pandemic are analyzed, which is followed by insights into online language delivery and the pedagogical shift in ELT. Next, the introduction of emergency online teaching in Croatia is described and earlier studies on teaching English during the COVID crisis are reviewed. This study is presented and the results obtained from a survey conducted among English language teachers in Croatia are analyzed to provide information about their experience with teaching English remotely. Drawing on the findings, the study also provides insights into possible measures for improvement of teaching English remotely.

The results of this study indicate that emergency remote teaching increased teachers' workload, but that, in the process, they gained a new set of skills and competencies. The main problems they encountered were low student engagement and motivation, and a lack of face-to-face interaction. They also indicated that it was more challenging to teach productive skills in an online setting than receptive skills, and to teach grammar implicitly. Creating an interactive environment in which students would collaborate, checking understanding and assessing their knowledge also proved to be difficult for teachers.

As for the strengths, the participants singled out the possibility of using new digital tools and online materials, accessibility, comfort and safety. Also, they feel their students had more time so they could learn on their own pace and be more independent. The results demonstrate that better support should be provided and a pool of materials and guidelines for online activities should be developed in order to help teachers engage students and avoid the challenges of teaching and assessing EFL online. What they would also appreciate are examples of best practices and effective online assessment.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

It is estimated that approximately fifty percent of the students across the world were influenced by partial or full school closures because of the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2021). The most obvious change was the moving of traditional face-to-face classes to the virtual environment, an endeavor many teachers had not experienced before. In Croatia, it was expected that the transition would go smoothly as the Ministry of Science and Education (MZO) had initiated the national curricular reform 'School for Life' five years earlier. One of the main goals of 'School for Life' was to train all elementary and secondary teachers and digitalize all schools (MZO, 2021). As a result, when distancing measures were introduced and schools went into lockdown, the MZO did not expect major challenges and believed that the reform would pave the way to a smooth transition from face-to-face teaching to emergency remote teaching. However, this was not the case, as numerous factors affected the process, many of which were not accounted for. This topic will be dealt with in greater detail in Section 3.1.

Prior to examining online teaching during COVID-19, it might be useful to first look at the terminology. In the context of distance education, two main terms are used interchangeably, namely *online learning* and *remote learning*. However, the literature differentiates between the two. If we consider the concept of *online learning*, we are faced with many different definitions, but also many different names for the term itself, such as *e-learning*, *distance-learning*, *computer-based-learning* and many others (Baksa & Luić, 2020). Singh and Thurman (2019) define *online learning* as asynchronous learning through the Internet where students engage with instructors and fellow students at a time of their convenience and do not need to be co-present online or in a physical space. *Remote learning*, on the other hand, means virtual classes which are organized in a similar way to traditional

ones as they take place at the scheduled time and the goal is to create a classroom atmosphere with the computer as a medium of instruction (Baksa & Luić, 2020). For the purposes of this study, the term *remote learning/teaching* will be used to refer to teaching carried out during the pandemic. However, given the fact that the remote teaching was not planned and the courses were not originally designed or accredited for online delivery, the temporary shift of instructional delivery due to the pandemic actually is *emergency remote teaching* (ERT). The term "emergency" reflects unusual situations such as wars, catastrophes, and pandemics (Hazaea, Bin-Hady & Toujani, 2021). Therefore, in this study the term emergency remote learning is used to indicate the temporary transition to remote learning during COVID-19 lockdown.

As for the teaching of English, in the past several decades, technology has played an important role in ELT and contributed to the development of computer assisted language learning (CALL), a term coined at the 1983 TESOL convention (Chapelle, 2001). Since then, teachers have used computers to aid in their instruction, making lectures interactive and fun for learners, retrieving material from the Internet, engaging students through game-based learning platforms and social media. Despite the dramatic rise in the use of computers and the Internet, transferring teaching to an online context is an entirely different matter which inevitably posed challenges for numerous teachers as successful online teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) requires knowledge of IT and teaching platforms, course design for online classes, and a positive attitude towards technology, among other things (Alberth, 2011). Therefore, there are a multitude of factors besides teachers' skills and attitude that influence the quality of learning outcomes achieved in an online setting.

Among the most common and worrying problems is the fact that communication, which is the core of language learning and teaching, is limited in a virtual context. Even though millions of social interactions take place online on the daily, the quality of

communication is undermined because of many factors, such as lack of nonverbal cues and delayed responses. The second most common challenge encountered by teachers is assessing student learning in an online environment, as integrity is brought into question (Abduh, 2021). There seems to be consensus that dishonesty, inadequate infrastructure, difficulty assessing the learning outcomes and students not submitting their work are a cause of concern for many teachers (Guangul, Suhail, Khalit & Khidhir, 2020).

In light of the aforementioned challenges and the general lack of research on emergency remote teaching of EFL in schools, this study aims to fill the gap by offering insights of Croatian EFL teachers who switched to emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Much research data on remote learning has been gathered in the higher education context yet there is little research on remote learning in primary and secondary education. Needless to say, the contexts are hardly comparable in terms of students, teaching, learning and assessment. Furthermore, to my knowledge, no prior (published) studies have analyzed this topic in the Croatian context. Therefore, this study seeks to make a contribution to the field of ELT by investigating Croatian EFL teachers' view of emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to identify the challenges and obstacles they encountered and share their suggestions on how ERT can be improved.

The thesis consists of 7 sections. Section 2 gives a brief overview of teaching English today. In section 3, the focus is on online English language delivery. Specifically, the implementation of ERT in Croatia is presented and the literature on teaching English during the COVID crisis is reviewed. The fourth section focuses on the present study, while sections 5 and 6 present the findings and discuss the results. In the final section, I summarize the major findings and propose implications and suggestions for future research.

2. ELT today

As English is today the language of science, technology, international business and academic publication, the teaching of English is, and will remain, a subject of great interest and a popular topic for discussion (Heng, 2020). The key terms related to teaching and learning English today are: communicative competence, the four |skills (i.e. listening, reading, speaking and writing), grammar, vocabulary and English as an International Language (EIL). In the 21st century, this has been expanded to include the development of skills needed for success in today's modern world. These kind of skills have been dubbed 'global skills' as they include: "communication and collaboration, creativity and critical thinking, intercultural competence and citizenship, emotional self-regulation and wellbeing, and digital literacies, which should also be taught in English classes" (Mercer and Hockly, 2019). The approach that an EFL teacher uses to teach these skills depends on their competences, interests, resources, and constraints of their school (Mercer and Hockly, 2019). Here, it should be noted that digital literacies are a central component of 'global skills', and should be developed in the EFL classroom.

If we take a look at the not so distant past, it is evident that until the late twentieth century, the language teaching profession was involved in a "search" for a single, ideal method teachers would use to successfully teach students a foreign language. The focus was on teaching rather than on learning. Using a single golden method that would yield the expected results was not feasible because the methods were too prescriptive and could not be empirically tested (Brown, 2002). Therefore, today we are in a so-called "post-method era", in which *communicative approach* is the main rationale in teaching a foreign language, along with maintaining the balance between fluency and accuracy (Ur, 2014). According to Hymes (1972), who looks at EFL from a sociolinguistic perspective, *communicative competence* is the goal of language teaching. The *Communicative Language Teaching* approach emphasizes

that English language learning is not only about constructing correct sentences (i.e., grammar) but also about the achievement of communication skills (Savignon, 2001).The emphasis is on using authentic materials and real-life tasks which make language learning engaging and motivating for students. Ur (2014) argues that most teachers today use the *post-communicative approach*, which means that the primary function of language is to communicate effectively, but that explicit language instruction, grammar exercises and translation are also important in language teaching practices.

Canale and Swain (1980) identified the three-component framework of communicative competence used to negotiate meaning, namely *strategic*, *grammatical* and *sociolinguistic competence*. This framework was subsequently used by Savignon (1983) who elaborated an approach to classroom practice based on the underlying concept of communicative competence. Savignon (2001) proposed an "inverted pyramid" representing the communicative competence which consists of four key elements and gradually develops as we encounter new contexts. The elements of communicative competence are: *grammatical competence* - knowing and using language features on the four levels - phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic; *discourse competence* - using cohesion and coherence and understanding the connection between certain utterances or sentences which comprise a meaningful whole; *sociocultural competence* - understanding the context in which language is used and adapting to specific situations, along with considering cultural differences; and *strategic competence* - using effective strategies when misunderstandings or unfamiliar contexts occur.

In Croatia, as in many other countries, English is an obligatory subject in schools and approximately 30,000 students take the EFL school-leaving examination (i.e. 'državna matura') (NCVVO, 2021). According to the newest English Language Curriculum (MZO, 2020), the goal of teaching English is to develop interest and motivate students to master the

language, which contributes to their personal and social development. The English language curriculum is divided into three domains: Communicative language competence, Intercultural communicative competence and Independence in language acquisition or learning strategy development (MZO, 2020).

The four language skills as the core of communication are nowadays widely accepted and serve as a framework for teacher education programs, methods manuals and learner course materials (Savignon, 2001). Earlier, speaking and writing were labeled active skills, and reading and listening passive skills. However, in recent years, listeners and readers are no longer considered passive, but rather as active participants in the collaborative negotiation of meaning. Listening and reading are therefore described as *receptive skills* because learners receive and comprehend the language. On the other hand, speaking and writing are labeled *productive skills* because learners produce language. The outcomes for the domain *Communicative language competence* in English language course in Croatia are organized according to these four skills (MZO, 2020),

Regarding teaching grammar today, most educators think grammatical forms should be taught. However, this should be done by presenting the items within a meaning-based or communicative approach rather than in decontextualized language forms (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). In line with that, students feel that learning grammar out of context is boring (Navaz & Sama, 2017). Therefore, it is teacher's role to choose the right approach in order to raise awareness of the importance to use grammatical forms both accurately and meaningfully so that students do not see grammar only as a collection of rules they have to memorize. One such possibility is learning grammar inductively and practicing through authentic activities and task-based learning activities.

When it comes to vocabulary, it was not always a priority in language teaching, but now it is generally agreed that "lexical competence is at the very heart of communicative

competence" (DeCarrico, 2001, p. 285). Although there have been debates on whether vocabulary should be taught explicitly or implicitly, today, most researchers recognize that "a well-structured vocabulary program needs a balanced approach that includes explicit teaching together with activities providing appropriate contexts for incidental learning" (DeCarrico, 2001, p. 286).

In the context of globalization, one cannot ignore the question - what kind of English should be taught by schools in the expanding circle (Melchers, Shaw & Sundkvist, 2019)? McKay (2002) considers English as an international language and claims that for a language to be international means that it has developed to where it is "no longer linked to a single culture or nation but serves both global and local needs as a language of wider communication". Jenkins (2009, p. 200) uses the term "English as a lingua franca" to refer to the "common language of choice, among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds". The majority of these learners are from the expanding circle and they need English to communicate with others from the global community, rather than solely for communication with native speakers of the language or just for personal development and cultural awareness. Similarly, Sharifian (2009) emphasizes that the aim of English instruction is to make EFL learners competent communicators with all kinds of world English users, and not merely with native speakers of English or competent interlocutors like teachers. Therefore, EFL teaching should be focused on English as an international language (EIL) or English as a lingua franca (ELF) as knowledge of English as a global language is key to "active and responsible participation of children and young people in everyday life in the local and global community" (MZO, 2020, p. 5). Hence, learners should be exposed to a range of styles and varieties of English, not just native ones.

Lastly, the huge development that started recently in the area of teaching and learning English is "the dramatic increase in the use of computers and other digital resources"

(Ur, 2014, p. 9). Technology enables teachers to use different kinds of games and collaborative activities, as well as quality subject delivery, all of which boost student engagement. To this day, numerous studies have been carried out on the use of technology in ELT. Technological tools, such as PCs, laptops, or mobiles are used by English language teachers frequently and effectively (Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2011). It is important to note here that, in Croatia, program "e-škole" is implemented since 2015. Its' goal is to make schools more digitally mature by systematic and regular use of modern technology in learning and teaching, ensuring the establishment of an adequate school infrastructure, including the equipping of classrooms and staff (e-Škole, n.d.). It is advisable that English language learners make use of the technology and technological devices at their disposal such as tablets and smart phones to improve their English (Heng, 2020). Nevertheless, using computers is not a methodology, but a medium that can be integrated into methodological practice. With almost every student possessing a personal mobile phone, tablet or laptop, learning has never been more accessible and dynamic. Still, "many students have never been taught on how to use a tablet or laptop for academic purposes", but rather just for leisure (Louis-Jean & Cenat, 2020, p. 2).

Given the above, teaching English today revolves around aiding students to achieve communicative competence in order to be able to communicate across the globe. The cornerstones of learning English are four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The goal of learning a language is not just fluency, but also accuracy, so explicit instruction of grammar and vocabulary is also significant. Teaching materials and tasks should be authentic and technology should be regularly used as an aid in English classrooms. Students do not learn only from teacher's instruction, but through interactions with others and technology as well. They also learn how to think critically and gain intercultural and digital competencies. The central question that now arises is whether, and in what ways, can such

interactive activities and communicative competence be equally well developed in the virtual classrooms.

Let us now briefly examine how the Internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are reflected on the EFL classroom and ELT.

3. Online English language teaching

The Internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are developing rapidly and are widely used in many domains, including education. There are many terms for online instruction, such as *virtual learning*, *remote learning*, *web-based learning* (WBL), *distance learning*, *online learning* (OL), *e-learning* etc. (Hossain, 2021). Hodges, Moore, Locke, Trust & Bond (2020) differentiate between *online instruction* and *emergency remote teaching* (ERT). They suggest that *online instruction* has a deliberate and advanced design which often takes six to nine months to plan. On the other hand, *ERT* is a temporary and sudden shift to remote delivery due to crises such as weather, war, or health. A commonality between the two modes of teaching "is the distance between learners and others (educator and/or peers) through geographical space and/or time during the educational process" (Moser, Wei & Brenner, 2021, p. 3). However, one of the key differences is the preparation, planning and training involved in the online teaching. Furthermore, Ray (2020) points out that in *online learning*, a student decides when and what to learn, while in *remote learning* there is a schedule that must be followed, such as a lesson plan (Ray, 2020).

In ERT, a Learning Management System (LMS) is used for delivery. Such systems "can contain instructional material and content developed by the institutions or packages of learning materials developed by publishing houses" (Montiel-Chamorro, 2018, p. 25). The materials are usually designed to develop and enhance all four language skills: listening,

reading, writing, and speaking. The advantage is that "learners can replay, revisit, and revise content easier than in face-to-face settings", but it requires a lot more activity and independence from them (Montiel-Chamorro, 2018, p. 25).

Since different subjects have different characteristics, technologies may be more appropriate for teaching certain subjects, but less suitable for teaching others (Alberth, 2011). When planning online language teaching, certain factors need to be taken into account. Alberth (2011, p. 30) identifies "student characteristics, instructional design, provision of support to both instructors and students, teacher characteristics, technology, and language skills characteristics" as factors for successful implementation of online language delivery. Teacher characteristics include "positive attitude to technology, teaching styles that promote interaction among students and between the students and the teacher, sound facilitating skills, and mastery of basic IT survival knowledge" (Alberth, 2011, p. 24). Teachers who have positive attitudes towards new technologies are more likely to be more enthusiastic and motivated in their teaching than those who do not (Alberth, 2011). Subsequently, they "have greater capacity to endure the challenges of online learning" (Alberth, 2011, p. 23). Kessler (2006) found that language instructors new to online teaching face many challenges in implementing courses and that those who have unfavorable views of technology are likely to experience more difficulties.

In online delivery, both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools should be made available. Synchronous means that students and the teacher engage in the learning activity at the same time, while asynchronous indicates that students learn at the time of their convenience (Astuti & Solikhah, 2021). Interacting synchronously can help students feel less isolated due to the absence of face-to-face communication. Asynchronous activities, on the other hand, are beneficial because they potentially reduce anxiety since learners have more time to think, repeat, replay, and produce language (Meskill & Anthony, 2015). Additionally,

both group work and individual learning activities should be involved in order to benefit a diverse array of student characteristics (Alberth, 2011).

Although language is most widely taught face-to-face, online delivery of language learning can be beneficial for a number of reasons. Using classroom experiences that require students to interact with others through an online environment potentially prepares them for jobs of the future (Knight, 2015). Krishan, Ching, Ramalingam, Maruthai, Kandasamy, De Mello and Ling (2020) state that online learning creates a genuine platform and learning space for EFL learners since there are many free online resources that are authentic and useful for learning English. This is important because some learners may have limited opportunities to develop their language proficiency in an authentic environment.

However, learning a language online has potential drawbacks. Unlike face-to-face learning, when working in virtual contexts, speaking practice is often not provided or is limited to repetition and the learners' progress is rarely followed up on (Díaz & Miy, 2017). Another possible issue is developing listening skills. In Montiel-Chamorro's (2018) study, both students who were taught online and the ones who participated in face-to-face classes performed more poorly in the listening section of the posttest compared to the other three skills. It was noted that this might be due to the fact that the content was too challenging for students' level and the recordings were too long. Assessment is also a source of the possible difficulties. Abduh (2021) found that the most critical challenge that teachers face is how to ensure the integrity of online assessment.

Harrison (2020) writes that English language teachers have had a difficult relationship with technology since its rise in the 1990s. The most common problems with introducing technology into teaching are that is isolating and teachers have to be highly skilled to conduct their role as facilitators through technology. Also mentioned is that technology might soon make teachers redundant because of AI, which will replace many

professions. However, it seems fair to state that ERT, in particular language teaching, as English is both a means and an end, requires a complex range of skills for this to happen (Harrison, 2020). This will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections. Now we will take a look at the switch to emergency remote teaching of EFL in the Croatian context.

3.1 Implementation of ERT in Croatia

In March 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic changed almost every aspect of our lives. Since social distancing is a traditional and most effective technique for preventing virus transmission, lockdown was introduced as a precautionary measure in some countries, including Croatia. Overnight, students and teachers had to adapt to a whole new mode of delivery and web-based distance learning, which was challenging for all stakeholders. In other words, everyone resorted to *ERT* (Hodges et al., 2020). Facing this reality, the Croatian MZO issued several reports and guidelines, specific rules and diverse recommendations that could be followed by teachers, headmasters, students and their families, in order to achieve effective online learning (Bautista & Lissen, 2020). This however, was not always the case.

Mention has been made that in 2015, the Croatian MZO initiated the national curricular reform 'School for Life' (MZO, 2021). The aim of this experimental project was to check how were the new curricula, methods and teaching aids applied in order to attain the following objectives: increasing students' competencies in problem solving, and increasing student satisfaction at school and motivating their teachers (MZO, 2021). The curricular reform was divided into two stages. The first stage was from 2015 to 2018 and the focus was on digitalizing schools, which meant equipping students, teachers and other educational staff with technology (tablets, laptops, etc.) (MZO, 2018). The second stage started in 2018, and

will last until 2022 (MZO, 2020a). The aim is to train teachers online, via virtual classrooms on the Moodle platform (Loomen), to apply and create digital content, as well as to implement such digitalized content in their teaching. The basic assumption is that teachers who attend workshops create their own digital content using the Moodle system and other tools for creating digital educational content (Loomen, n.d.). In almost two years more than 50.000 teachers participated in such training (MZO, 2020b).

Digital literacy was introduced in 2017 to various subjects and after-school programs with emphasis being on problem-solving, programming and online security. Information Technology was introduced in 2018 as a compulsory subject in the 5th and 6th grades of primary school (MZO, 2020b). Surprisingly, however, the official documents make no mention of training students and parents on the usage of technology and digital tools for online education.

According to the MZO's document 'How have we introduced distance learning?' (2020b), the reform contributed to the swift and effective establishment of distance learning when the COVID-19 crisis began. Online learning was officially launched in March 2020, based on two key principles: 1. Access has to be provided for every student, taking into account student age; 2. Backup for every solution needs to be prepared (MZO, 2020b). Regarding the first principle, tablets were distributed to most of the students who had not already received them as part of the reform, and "mobile network operators joined the initiative by providing all students who received tablets with SIM cards enabling free access to digital educational content and additional 2 GB of Internet traffic per month" (MZO, 2020b, p. 3). The principle of always providing backup meant that multiple channels for publishing and sharing information were used: three TV channels - HRT3, SPTV, RTL2; several websites: MZO, "School for life", agencies; YouTube channels; mail; messaging apps; social networks. In addition, different platforms accessible with AAI@Edu.Hr (nation-

wide authentication protocol used by all education institutions in Croatia) were used: Moodle, Teams, Yammer, Google classroom, Edmodo (MZO, 2020b).

After two weeks of ERT, a short online survey was conducted by the MZO (MZO, 2020b). It included a total of 4139 teachers. The results showed that nearly all teachers (95%) were entirely or mostly satisfied with the way they conducted distance teaching, and 93% of the teachers thought that they had managed better than they had expected before the beginning of distance teaching. As many as 90% thought that their students managed well or mostly well with ERT and learning, but 58% of participants thought their students were more active at schools. On the basis of these positive results, the MZO advised teachers to give marks for student activity in the online environment.

In June 2020, an action plan for the following academic year 2020/21 was published. It comprised three possible models of teaching: 1. mainly face-to-face teaching, 2. blended learning and 3. mainly ERT. Given that classes were taught both face-to-face and online during this academic year (2020/21), we can say that the model used was blended learning. Throughout the academic year, decisions were made locally, depending on the epidemiological situation in certain counties in Croatia. Work in face-to-face situations was organized according to the document *Models and Recommendations for Work in Conditions related to COVID-19 Disease in the Pedagogical/School Year 2020/2021* (MZO, 2020c).

3.2 Teaching English online during lockdown

A review of the literature indicates that there are few available publications on the topic of teaching English during the pandemic. It is likely that more studies will be available in the near future, once the research has been carried out, and the papers have been accepted

for publication. As Lin and Warschauer (2015) point out, a research study on online language learning carried out during a pandemic is very rarely found, especially in the EFL context in secondary school settings since most online language learning research studies have been done in tertiary education level, and there would need to be a pandemic to move classes online. Similarly, Fu and Zhou (2020) indicate that little has been reported on how EFL teachers have responded to such a drastically challenging and evolving teaching and learning environment. Only a few research studies related to ERT during the pandemic were conducted in Croatia, however, their focus is on ERT in general.

The British Council published two global snapshots of Ministries of Education (the first in April/May, and the second in September 2020) in order to assess how they responded to the challenges of the educational crisis in respect to English language teaching and learning (British Council, 2020; British Council, 2020a). Interestingly, in these studies, the three most significant challenges identified at the beginning of school closures - ensuring access, assessing and developing teacher competences, providing teacher support - are identical to those identified in the second snapshot. The respondents highly agreed that, when compared with learning other subjects, the learning of English remotely posed a greater challenge overall, and posed a greater challenge for parents who were expected to support their children's learning (Ministries of Education responses during COVID-19, 2021).

The British Council also carried out online surveys to look at the experiences of English teachers and teacher educators during the pandemic (British Council, 2020b). The main findings of this survey were that ERT was new for the majority of teachers and teacher educators who responded to the survey, but that they were reasonably confident in their ability to do their job remotely. However, the respondents indicated that they needed more training and support and clearer guidelines from their Ministries of Education. The challenges they faced include inequalities in access to and participation in online education (e.g., due to poor

connectivity), developing and maintaining the engagement of students in remote learning and cooperating with parents.

In a research study by Atmojo & Nugroho (2020), 16 EFL teachers recorded their reflections about their practices while carrying out online EFL classes during the pandemic and the challenges they encountered. The participants came "from 11 different cities and 16 distinct secondary schools in Indonesia" and "had experience in teaching English as a foreign language which ranged from 1 to 18 years" (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020, p. 55). Five of the teachers were also later interviewed since they had provided valuable insights and ideas in the written reflections, which opened up avenues for further investigation. The study revealed that problems may stem from various sources - students, teachers, and students' parents. The challenges related to students include difficulties participating due to unstable internet connection, financial issues and low digital literacy. This was corroborated in a study by Shahzad, Hussain, Sadaf, Sarwat, Ghani & Saleem (2020) who found that poor internet connectivity and lack of knowledge in technology use were some of the greatest challenges students faced. Furthermore, unstable network connection was identified as an issue in Mishra, Gupta & Shree's (2020) study. Absence from class, submitting work after the deadline, extensive workload, low awareness of online learning (they perceive it as unimportant and informal) and absence of parents' guidance were also deemed as issues faced by teachers (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). It is important to emphasize here that it cannot be expected that parents will replace teachers, as the teacher is a professional who has specific and structured pedagogical knowledge, developed through daily practice and formal education (Lima, 2021). However, this was sometimes the case. As for problems faced by teachers in online EFL teaching, they primarily include the following: creating and adapting materials, lack of experience and knowledge, giving personal feedback, absence of adequate facilities

for high technology integration, difficulties engaging unmotivated and passive students, lack of preparation and willingness to carry out online learning (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020).

In a study by Gao & Zhang (2020) based on in-depth interviews with three EFL teachers from a Chinese university, the main challenge reported by the participants was that their IT literacy is limited to face-to-face teaching, which makes them uncertain when teaching fully online, as they lack specific skills for an online setting. Secondly, ERT requires a lot of data which is costly for both teachers and students. The third challenge is inadequate classroom management because the teachers "are not able to observe the students and give spontaneous timely feedback through non-verbal means such as eye contact" (Gao & Zhang, 2020, p. 9). Similarly, Mishra et. al. (2020) revealed that the major challenge for teachers while teaching online was lack of meaningful interaction. Teachers were unable to see facial expressions and students' mood, and it was thus difficult to change the teaching pattern. Furthermore, students faced difficulty understanding complex concepts and would benefit from more discussions and activities.

A virtual Focus Group Discussion with Indonesian English teachers was conducted by Astuti & Solikhah (2021). The purposes of teaching, as stated by the teachers, were to develop students' four language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. The authors concluded teaching English online had been perceived problematic, with general obstacles being the availability of support systems and students not having enough internet quota to run the online learning process. As for the platforms used, the teachers said Google classroom (90.9%) and Google meet (81.8%) had been the main ERT platforms, and Google form had been the dominant evaluation technique. In line with this, Fitria's (2020) study also found that Google classroom was an online learning system used by the highest number of participants.

A study by Hossain (2021) provided insights into the experience and perceptions of 50 teachers and 50 students who teach and learn English through online classes at various institutes in Bangladesh. The goal was to find out what makes emergency remote teaching/learning of English a challenge and how it can be reduced. According to the teachers' point of view, the positive aspects of ERT are that it is time- and space-saving, i.e. can be done anywhere and at any time. These findings are supported by Shahzad et al. (2020) who found that students perceive virtual teaching as saving their time and money. Another advantage is that audio-visual lessons can be uploaded, and the recorded classes can be re-utilized. On the other hand, some obstacles faced by the teachers in online education in Bangladesh include: insufficient logistic support from the institutes, unavailable and slow internet supply, students" want of required technological devices, students" unaffordability to purchase internet connection/data, learners" disinterestedness in virtual classroom, lack of sufficient financial support to the teachers, insufficient technological support, distant learners" inability to connect, family issues and kids (Hossain, 2021, p. 49-50). The researchers also attempted to find out how the four skills were taught in online classes. Figure 1. shows respondents' perception of teaching the four skills.
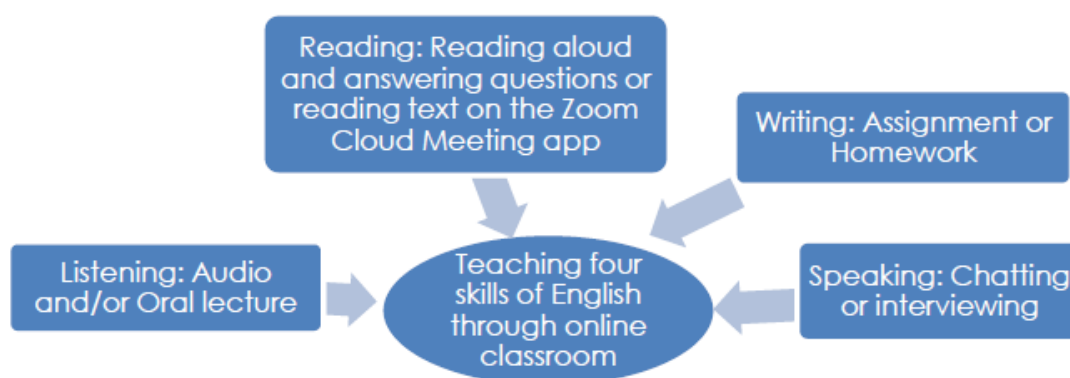
Figure 1: How the four language skills are taught through online EFL classes (Hossain, 2021, p. 51).

In Rifiyanti's study (2020), out of 108 learners, the highest number of respondents (36% of them) perceived that the listening skill was the most difficult to learn in online English class, followed by the speaking skill (perceived by 33% of the participants)., Susilowati (2020) also elaborates on the challenges of conducting online learning in listening class at university level. The challenges include: choosing the suitable technological devices, system and its application in class; simplifying the content material, but keeping its quality; and choosing the most effective teaching method and strategy.

In a case study carried out in Indonesia, it was found that there were no significant differences between teaching writing online and face-to face (Setyowati, Sukmawan & El-Sulukkiyah, 2021). In both cases, students practiced essay writing preceded by reading. The reading section included the silent reading activity, scanning and skimming technique. The writing section implemented the process approach - students planned, drafted, revised, and published their essays. The conclusion drawn is that the teaching and learning process in the blended learning setting still follows the typical face-to-face teaching stages, namely the pre-activity, whilst activity, and post-activity. The authors note that "even though the students felt discouraged in the beginning, they felt more positive about the hybrid model" later in the course (Setyowati et. al., 2021, p. 16). What was emphasized is that they had improved, not only in terms of the knowledge of materials and language skills, but also in their technology skills.

Moser et al. (2021) conducted a national survey in 45 U.S. states to explore the changes in the perceptions and practices of PreK-12 and post-secondary language teachers' instruction during COVID-19. The authors pointed out that given that little is known how language educators had realized emergency remote language teaching in spring 2020, such research has a great value. In this study, only a small number of language educators were positive about teaching online before the pandemic. Even though they reported their courses

were well-designed, preK-12 teachers and those that lacked experience with ERT were least confident that the goals of their course were met. They expressed concerns about student learning outcomes, but were aware that safety was a priority in this crisis situation.

A survey conducted among teachers by Abernathy and Thornburg (2021) showed schools should focus more on teacher training for effective online instruction, particularly on making instruction more engaging for students. Stakeholders, namely students and parents, did not show high levels of seriousness regarding online education. More than half of participants did not agree that their online instruction was effective. The authors concluded there should be more observations of online lessons by administrators who will provide appropriate feedback (Abernathy and Thornburg, 2021).

In terms of studies conducted in Croatia, Damić, Radić and Naletina (2020) used an online survey tool to investigate how the perception of e-learning quality affects cognitive and affective learning outcomes. The tool for assessing the perceived service quality in higher education is the SERVQUAL model which "measures the gap between user expectation and user experience thus providing a perception of satisfaction concerning the services provided" (Damić et. al., 2020, p. 3149). The participants in this study were 250 students from the University of Zagreb. It was confirmed that e-learning quality strongly influences cognitive and affective learning outcomes.

In a research study by Baksa and Luić (2020) secondary school teachers and students were surveyed about their satisfaction with the platforms chosen by the schools, ICT tools used and whether they thought learning outcomes were achieved in remote learning. The study was conducted in Croatia in June and July 2020 and involved 74 teachers and 58 students. Most teachers (more than 1/3) work in vocational schools, as languages teachers (almost 50%), and with 5-15 years (43,2%) work experience in education. The platforms

mostly used by the study participants were Loomen, (31,1%), MS Teams (28,4%), Yammer (21,6%) and Google Classroom (16,2%). Some of them used a combination of two or more platforms. If given an option during the COVID-19 crisis, most teachers (62,2%) would choose face-to-face teaching with epidemiological measures instead of ERT. This study showed that the most frequent problems were technical glitches disrupting learning on the platforms and students not submitting their work regularly.

Marković, Sudarić & Ravlić (2021) studied students' (N=326) and teaching staff's (N=85) level of satisfaction with remote education during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. Most students were satisfied with the organization and implementation of remote learning and teaching at their Faculty of Agrobiotechnical Sciences in Osijek. Teacher-student interaction and teacher presence during remote education were highlighted as important factors for ERT. More than 80% of teaching staff declared that they had not used any e-platforms before the coronavirus pandemic.

From these studies, it follows that the major challenges in online teaching during the pandemic were technical problems with internet connectivity, students' engagement, provision of feedback, insufficient interaction and cooperation with parents, among others. Given that these problems were identified in all the studies, it seems fair to assume that similar problems were present in English courses as well, coupled with issues caused by the specifics of teaching and learning a foreign language in an online setting.

In contrast, positive aspects include efficiency in terms of time, place and finances and improvement of technological skills. Although these studies have made significant contributions to the field of ERT and learning during the COVID pandemic, we can compare their findings to the Croatian context only to a limited extent because the results were gained from relatively small samples and additional research is needed to provide EFL teachers with

strategies for supporting learners engaged in remote education. Therefore, in order to fill the gap in the field, in this study, I will focus on the experiences of English teachers in Croatia.

4. The present study

4.1 Research context

This study investigates the perception of primary and secondary school teachers towards teaching English online during the COVID-19 crisis. Its purpose is to identify the benefits and the challenges of online language teaching, as well as to find out what teachers identify as possible measures for improving teaching English online.

To my knowledge, so far, no research on Croatian EFL teachers' experiences with ERT during lockdown has been undertaken, or at least, has not been published yet. In view of this, there is a genuine need to carry out research in this area to gain insights into teachers' experiences. Furthermore, a thesis investigating the perspective of teachers could be of relevance to future encounters with online English language education since the situation with COVID-19 holds much uncertainty for our future.

4.2 Aims

The aims of this research study are to examine English teachers' attitudes towards:

a) Teaching English remotely

b) The strengths and weaknesses of teaching English remotely

c) Possible measures for improving teaching English remotely

4.3 Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are English language teachers' experiences with emergency remote teaching of English as a foreign language during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What do English language teachers perceive as the advantages of emergency remote teaching?

RQ3: What are the perceived disadvantages of emergency remote teaching?

RQ4: How were different aspects of ELT affected by the shift to emergency remote teaching?

RQ5: What measures could be taken to improve emergency remote teaching of EFL?

4.4 Participants

The participants in this study comprised primary and secondary school EFL teachers in the public and private sector from all Croatian counties. In total, 85 EFL teachers completed the survey. As can be seen in Figure 2, the majority of the participants (N=37, 43.5%) are aged 35-44, followed by 24 of them (28.2%) who are aged 25-34. Fifteen participants (17.6%) are aged 45-54, 6 of them (7.1%) are older than 55, and 3 participants (3.5%) are younger than 25. The highest number of respondents (N=37) has 5-15 years of experience in teaching English, followed by those who have 16-25 years of experience

(N=22). None were novice teachers. The distribution of participants according to years of their experience is shown in Figure 3.
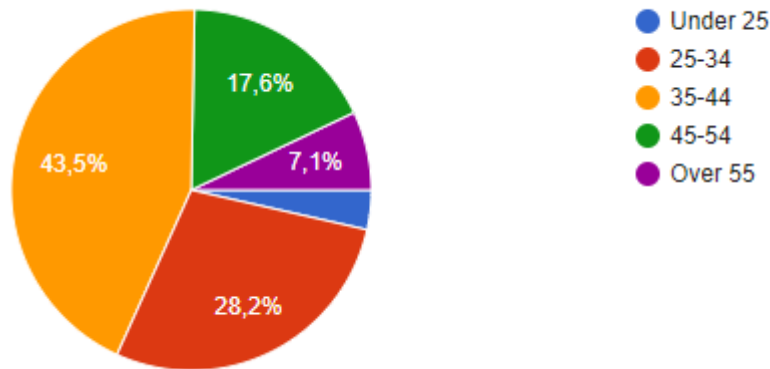
Figure 2: Participants' age
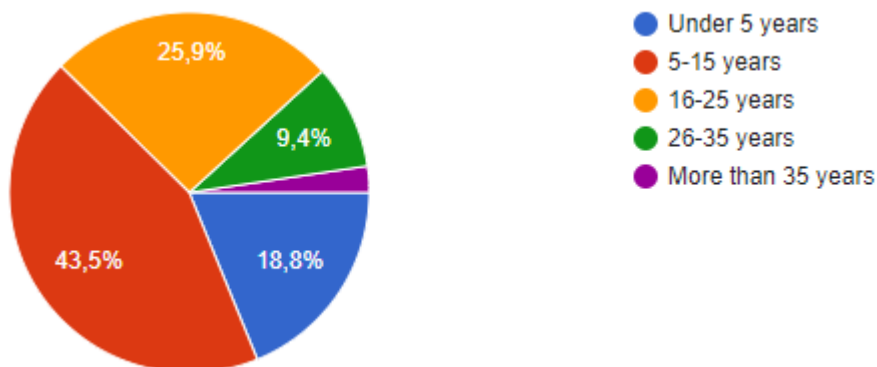
Figure 3: Participants' years of experience in teaching English

Regarding their sex, the vast majority, 92.9% (N=79), of participants are female while only 7.1% (N=6) are male. Most participants work at a primary school (N=59; 69.4%). One participant reported working at a university, one in a foreign language school and one in a private language school. The rest (N=24, 28.2%) are employed in a secondary school, with 56% of them working in a vocational school and 44% in a grammar school. The vast majority (N=79; 92.9%) describes their teaching setting as public.

Only three participants have taught an English language class fully online (not hybrid) prior to COVID-19. The platform that the majority reported as used in online lessons during lockdown is MS Teams (N=58, i.e. 68.2%). Other platforms used by the respondents were ZOOM (N=34), Google (N=26), email (N=20), Yammer (N=5), and other platforms, which were mentioned by three or less participants, such as Loomen, Padlet, Wizer.me, Moodle, Skype, Classdojo, etc.

4.5 Research method

An online questionnaire written in English was used as a means of collecting data. Prior to administering the questionnaire, it was piloted on a small sample of EFL teachers, whose feedback was taken into consideration in the final version. The research instrument was partially based on a questionnaire designed by Moser et al., 2021, which surveyed language educators from 45 U.S. states about their earlier, intended online courses and emergency remote classes during the pandemic. The questionnaire was designed on Google Forms and was distributed electronically to EFL teachers in Croatia via e-mail and social media, i.e. Facebook, where it was posted in several groups (Nastavnici.org, Nastavnici engleskog online, UČITELJI / PROFESORI - stručni skupovi, Engleski jezik u OŠ, Anketalica - podijeli svoju anketu). It was also sent to HUPE - Croatian Association of Teachers of English. All English language teachers who were responsible for teaching EFL class online during the COVID-19 lockdown were eligible to participate in the study.

The questionnaire comprised three parts. The first part enquired into the participants' demographic data and the contextual factors. They were asked about their age, gender, type of school they work at, years of experience in teaching English, tools they used in ERT and whether they taught online classes prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This part consisted of

six multiple choice questions, one dropdown question and one Yes/No question. In the four multiple choice questions an "Other" textbox was added.

The second part investigated the participants' experience with teaching English online during lockdown. A Likert-type question consisting of 59 items looked at different aspects of teaching English online, including teachers' attitudes and skills towards online teaching, learning outcomes, students, support received, course design elements, assessment, classroom interaction and provision of feedback. One short response question was included to find out which aspects of online teaching the students found to be the most challenging. Two ranking questions were used to investigate which skill and which English teaching domain posed most problems for the respondents. Lastly, four open-ended questions enquired into the main strengths and the main challenges of teaching English online and the things that participants liked the most and the least about it.

The third part investigated the participants' view on the measures that could be taken to improve online English teaching. A Likert-type question with ten items asked the respondents to rate the extent to which they would find helpful particular resources for ERT. An optional open-ended question was added for the respondents to provide suggestions for improving online English language teaching. At the end, space was provided for additional comments on any aspect of teaching English online that was not covered in the questionnaire.

5. Results
5.1 Teaching English online during lockdown

The results of the section on teachers' experiences with ERT are summed up in terms of mean scores for Likert scale questions and presented in Table 1. The highest mean scores

are for the statements concerning being available to students, increased workload and learning about online teaching during the pandemic. The lowest average scores are related to not believing that language learning outcomes can be attained better in an online setting, not choosing online teaching if given an option to choose between online and face-to-face and ERT not saving time.

When asked if they had had positive attitudes towards teaching English online prior to COVID-19, more than half of participants (N=47; 55.3%) chose "neutral". Some (25.9%) agree about having a positive attitude, while 18.9% disagree about it. On the other hand, 23.5% agree about having a negative attitude towards remote teaching of English before the COVID-19 pandemic and 29.4% disagree they had a negative attitude. Regarding the skills for ERT, a large number of participants (N=80; 94.1%) report that they learned how to teach online, by teaching online during the pandemic. The majority of the participants (N=65; 76.4%) do not think ERT saves time. Moreover, 69.4% reported strong agreement about it increasing their workload and, 82.3% agree about needing more time to prepare for remote classes compared to face-to-face classes. If they had the option to choose between online and face-to-face teaching during lockdown, 78.8% of the participants would not choose online. Despite this, as many as 68.2% feel that they acquired new skills as a result of online teaching.

When it comes to language learning outcomes, almost all the participants (96.5%) believe that they can be attained better in a face-to-face setting. The mean score for receiving support for ERT is relatively low (M=2.48). As can be seen in Table 1, the highest level of agreement in the statements related to support provided is for the one about mainly receiving support from co-workers (N=58; 68.2%). Most participants found their students to be more anxious (N=46; 54.1%) and less motivated (N=66; 77.6%) than prior to COVID-19. Some

participants (N=18; 21.2%) informed that their students did not have access to technology needed for online classes.

In the matter of course design, the participants (N=49; 57.6%) generally agreed that they included opportunities for students to practice all four skills and designed their lessons according to typical stages of teaching (N=64; 75.3%). Many teachers were not able to organize collaborative activities online (N=44, 51.8%). A large number of participants regularly uploaded the content they taught to a learning management system (N=63; 74.2%) and were able to include authentic examples of language and/or culture in their teaching (N=73; 85.9%). However, they expressed having more difficulty with managing online classes compared to face-to-face classes (85.9%). Many participants (77.6%) had to reduce the amount of content they might normally cover in a typical semester.

The vast majority (75%) reported there was less interaction between them and the students compared to face-to-face classes. Most included both synchronous (N=64; 75.3%) and asynchronous (N=64; 75.3%) communication between them and the students, but fewer participants reported that synchronous (N=35; 41.2%) and asynchronous (N=32; 37.6%) communication was included between students themselves. As far as assessment is concerned, the participants expressed diverse opinions about the best option. Alternative assessment is the best choice according to 55.3% participants, oral assessment is found to be more convenient by 51.8% of participants, while only 24.7% think written is suitable for online assessment. Furthermore, 60% state that they had difficulties with students cheating on online exams, 69.4% altered their grading rules or methods during COVID-19 and 70.5% had to extend the deadline for submitting work. High levels of agreement are reported regarding giving feedback. Teachers (75.3%) provided written or oral feedback at least once every week. Also, their students knew when/how frequently they are online to help them and/or

provide feedback (90.6%), but many (78.8%) felt they needed to be available to their students 24/7.

Table 1: Teaching English online during lockdown - Mean scores

#	Statement	Mean	SD
	ATTITUDE		
1	Prior to Spring 2020, I had positive attitudes towards teaching English online.	3.09	0.97
2	Prior to Spring 2020, I had negative attitudes towards teaching English online.	2.8	1.07
18	I think remote teaching saves time.	1.73	1.02
19	I think remote teaching increased my workload.	4.54	0.82
20	I needed more time to prepare for online classes than I need for face-to-face classes.	4.34	0.92
57	If I had the option to choose between online and face-to-face teaching during lockdown, I would choose online.	1.69	1.08
59	As a result of this transition to remote teaching and learning, I returned to face-to-face teaching with a stronger set of instructional skills and knowledge.	3.93	1.03
	LEARNING OUTCOMES		
3	Prior to Spring 2020, I believed that students could do equally well or better when learning English online than in a face-to-face/school setting.	2.31	1.11
4	Prior to Spring 2020, I believed that students would do worse when learning English online than in a face-to-face/school setting.	3.59	1.00
5	I now believe that language learning outcomes can be attained equally well in an online and in a face-to-face setting.	2.18	1.14
6	I now believe that language learning outcomes can be attained better in an online setting.	1.53	0.72
7	I now believe that language learning outcomes can be attained better in a face-to-face setting.	4.67	0.59
	TEACHERS' SKILLS FOR REMOTE TEACHING		
8	When I started teaching online, I had all or most of the necessary skills to carry out online lessons.	2.65	1.24
10	I learned how to teach online, by teaching online during the pandemic.	4.53	0.81
11	I did not face any major obstacles when conducting online classes.	2.69	1.25

12	I am satisfied with how I carried out online English lessons during lockdown.	3.91	0.93
16	During the COVID pandemic, I was equally confident teaching in an online setting as I was in a face-to-face setting.	3.05	1.43
17	I prepared for my online classes in detail.	4.52	0.68
25	I rarely experienced problems with the technology I used.	2.92	1.24
	SUPPORT		
9	I received formal training for remote teaching during the COVID pandemic.	1.79	1.11
21	Adequate support was offered by the school for remote teaching.	2.67	1.32
22	Adequate support was offered by AZOO for remote teaching.	1.99	1.07
23	Adequate support was offered by MZO for remote teaching.	2.12	1.05
24	Support for remote teaching was mainly provided by peers.	3.89	1.07
33	My school's professional development and teacher support has adequately prepared me for a seamless transition to remote teaching.	2.42	1.22
	STUDENTS		
26	My students adapted well to online lessons.	3.08	0.90
27	My students appeared more anxious than prior to COVID-19.	3.58	0.99
28	The majority of my students took the transition to remote teaching and learning seriously.	2.79	1.11
29	The rate of students' absence was higher compared to face-to-face teaching.	3.26	1.36
30	My students had the digital skills needed to participate in online lessons.	2.81	1.18
31	My students had access to technology needed to participate in online classes.	3.44	1.11
32	My students seemed less motivated during online lessons.	4.18	0.86
58	As a result of this transition to remote teaching and learning, my students gained additional skills and competences for their future education.	3.38	1.26
	COURSE DESIGN		
34	My online courses included opportunities for students to practice all four skills.	3.46	1.17
35	I designed my online lessons according to typical stages of teaching (i.e. pre-activity, whilst-activity and post-activity).	3.98	0.94

36	I reduced the amount of work during COVID-19 that my students might normally complete in a typical semester.	4.11	1.14
14	I was able to organize collaborative activities (pair or group work) online.	2.61	1.33
15	I generally held synchronous classes.	3.52	1.22
39	I regularly uploaded the content I taught to a learning management system.	4.04	1.17
44	My course included authentic examples of language and/or culture.	4.32	0.88
45	It is more difficult to manage online classes compared to face-to-face teaching.	4.46	0.93
CLASSROOM INTERACTION			
13	I was able to engage students in classroom discussions online.	3.47	0.98
37	There was less interaction between students and me (the educator) in online classes compared to face-to-face classes.	4.05	1.21
38	There was less interaction between students in online classes compared to face-to-face classes.	4.4	0.88
40	My course included opportunities for students to interact with one another synchronously.	3.21	1.17
41	My course included opportunities for students to interact with one another asynchronously.	3.16	1.06
42	My course included opportunities for students to interact with me (the educator) synchronously.	4.14	0.93
43	My course included opportunities for students to interact with me (the educator) asynchronously.	4.14	0.95
ASSESSMENT			
46	Written exams are more convenient than oral for online assessment.	2.59	1.38
47	Oral exams are more convenient for online assessment.	3.45	1.29
48	Alternative assessment is the best choice for online lessons.	3.72	0.87
49	I have had difficulties with students cheating on online exams.	3.75	1.08
50	I have altered my grading policies or procedures during COVID-19.	3.76	1.17
51	I often had to extend the deadline for submitting work.	3.89	1.15
FEEDBACK			
52	I provided written or verbal feedback at least once per week.	4.13	1.06
53	I could give less feedback to my students compared to face-to-face teaching.	3.12	1.52

| 54	My students were aware of when/how frequently I am online to assist them and/or provide feedback.	4.58	0.75
55	I felt I needed to be available to my students 24/7.	4.12	1.22
56	I communicated regularly with students' parents during lockdown.	3.59	1.39

The responses for the following question, in which respondents were asked about the most challenging aspects of learning English online for their students, are organized into categories which are summarized in Table 2. N indicates the number of respondents who mentioned a certain aspect in their answer. For some answers, participants elaborated further on why students found it challenging. The elaborations are also presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Aspects of learning English online that respondents' students found most challenging to do

Aspects	N	Quotes
Speaking	16	*Speaking - because they were not attentive enough.* (P 7) *My students had problems with oral tasks because they felt uncomfortable recording themselves while presenting.* (P 10) *Speaking (they were not participating enough in speaking activities).* (P 23)
Independent work	8	"*Doing tasks alone without any help from family members.*" (P 58) "*Learning alone without being able to ask the teacher a question when we did not have.*" (P 71) "*Independent work, as they had to do more on their own than they usually do.*" (P 77)
Technical difficulties	8	"*Using some new digital tools.*" (P 6) "*Technical difficulties, as a number of them experienced lag during online school which prevented them from hearing what was said. And some of them had very bad internet connections. We wasted half the time on checking if someone had heard something and if they are present at all.*" (P 42) "*Coping with internet connection, lack of technology.*" (P 57) "*Managing the MS Teams Learning Tool (parents rather than students because I teach first graders).*" (P 79) "*(...) sending assignments mostly because of poor ICT skills.*" (P 81)
Motivation	8	"*Motivation, as the surroundings were pretty cosy for some of them.*" (P 42) "*(...) finding enough motivation to do the assigned work according to deadlines.*" (P 68)

Writing	8	"(...) *lack of written exercises (I simply could not check every single exercise by every student if we did them all, they wrote less, made and reinforced their mistakes...*" (P 67)
Concentration	7	*Having to sit in front of their computers for 90 minutes, lacking in motivation.*" (P 31) "*Avoiding distractors (people / pets / other screens) during lessons. It was also hard for them to sit down for a long time (...)*" (P 41)
Grammar	6	"*Grammar exercises.*" (P 28) "*Understanding grammar.*" (P 49)
Listening	4	-
Assessment	3	-
Understanding the tasks/lesson	3	"(...) *underperforming students who were unable to follow anything* (...) (P 42)
Face-to-face interaction	3	"(...) *not to be able to talk to the teachers (the correspondence seemed endless and extremely time-consuming) and to be away from their peers.*" (P 41) "*They missed natural interaction of the classroom, little things that can't be delivered online.*" (P 59)
Time-management	2	"(...) o*rganising their time and obligations* (...) (P 68)
Reading	2	-
Other (consistency, cheating, project work, pair work, meeting deadlines, feeling more controlled in their work, using the camera, everything (5), don't know (4))	9	-

The participants were asked to rate the four language skills according to the level of difficulty to teach online. Number 1 indicated the most difficult skill and number 4 the least difficult. Responses are demonstrated in Figure 4. Average ranking analysis is used to analyze the ranks given by the respondents for each of the skills. Weights are applied in reverse, which means the respondent's most preferred choice (which they rank as #1) has the largest weight, and their least preferred choice (which they rank as #4) has a weight of 1. The ranks are allotted according to the average ranking scores. The data are presented in Table 3.
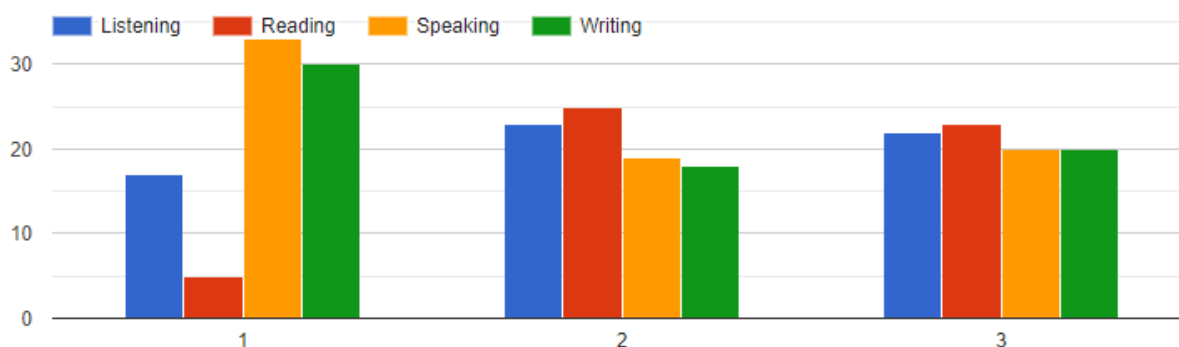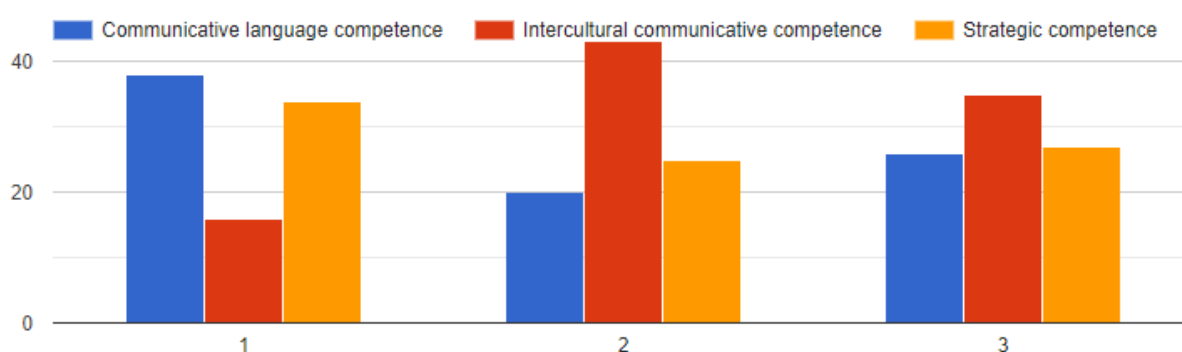
Figure 4: Ranking of language skills according to difficulty for teaching online

Table 3: Teachers' Perception of the Level Difficulty of Teaching Four Language Skills Online

Skill	1	2	3	4	Total	Mean	Rank
Listening	22	23	23	17	85		
Score	22	46	69	68	205	2.41	**3**
Reading	23	32	25	5	85		
Score	23	64	75	20	182	2.22	**4**
Speaking	20	13	19	33	85		
Score	20	26	57	132	235	2.76	**1**
Writing	20	17	18	30	85		
Score	20	34	54	120	228	2.68	**2**

The three domains of English language teaching were also rated by the respondents, with 1 being the most difficult and 3 the least difficult to teach online of the three. Figure 5 presents the distribution of responses. In the analysis, 7 answers are disregarded because the participants chose either more than one domain for the same level of difficulty, or the same domain for two or all three levels. Table 4 summarizes the data. Communicative language competence is rated first by the highest number of participants, closely followed by

independence in language acquisition, and, lastly, by intercultural communicative competence.

Figure 5: Ranking of ELT domains according to difficulty for teaching online

Table 4: Teachers' perception of the level difficulty of teaching English language domains

Domain	1	2	3	Total	Mean	Rank
Communicative language competence	24	17	37	78		
Score	24	34	111	169	2.16	**1**
Intercultural communicative competence	30	39	9	78		
Score	30	78	27	135	1.73	**3**
Independence in language acquisition	24	22	32	78		
Score	24	44	96	164	2.1	**2**

5.2 Benefits and Challenges of ERT

When it comes to strengths of delivering English lessons online, the most frequent answer was the possibility of using various digital tools and online materials (N=24, 28.24%):

"*Digital tools which can make classes more fun.*" (P 2)

"*I could use much more materials than in face-2-face teaching. I used many online digital tools and in that way made their learning process more interesting. Many things were more available while working (teaching and learning) online.*" (P 10)

"*Plenty of online materials can be prepared in advance and are available in just a second.*" (P 61)

"*Using different online tools that are interesting to students, like quizzes, multimedia etc.*" (P 81)

Several teachers (N=14; 16.47%) made reference to the benefits of accessibility, comfort and safety when teaching from home:

"*(...) We can all be wherever we want and wear wherever we want, so everyone is more relaxed. Last but not the least, more sleep for everyone and no tiring daily commute for teachers. My students loved it.*" (P 14)

"*Learn from the comfort of your own home, feeling safer than at school due to Covid (...)*" (P 27)

"*Reaching students wherever they are.*" (P 35)

"*Students are in the safe environment of their homes which can boost their confidence.*" (P 79)

Easier time-management for students was also brought up by a few participants (N=11; 12.94%):

After classes students have access to the materials all the time, they can adjust pace of work to their needs and have teacher's support all the time. (P 59)

Watching videos is easier. Pupils can watch prerecorded video lessons as many times as they want. (P 60)

Students had more time to finish the tasks. (P 62)

Slower learners can take their time doing core tasks and I can assign extra tasks to faster learners; they can learn in their own pace while in classroom setting that rarely the case

because the class is optimized for an "average learner" meaning slower learners struggle and the best are bored. (P 68)

Some other benefits reported by less than ten participants include: developing ICT competence (N=7; 8.24%), easy classroom management (N=4; 4.71%), the possibility for students to practice speaking (N=4; 4.71%), enhancement of learner autonomy (N=3; 3.53%), usage of various topics and methods (N=4; 4.71%), beneficial for shy students (N=3; 3.53%), easier feedback provision and grading (N=4; 4.71%), etc. However, as much as N=12; 14.12% teachers do not see any strengths of such teaching.

On the other hand, the main challenges of teaching English online according to participants are related to engaging and motivating students (N=28, 36.47%):

Motivating students to speak during a video call. This is not a natural environment for communication so students feel reluctant to speak. (P 37)

Students not being motivated in general. (P 54)

Concentration and motivation of the pupils. (P 58)

Lack of face-to-face interaction was also reported as one of the challenges (N=23, 27.06%):

Not being able to see the students and interact with them immediately. (P 24)

Not being able to see and help everyone enough. (P 43)

The lack of real-time reactions and spontaneous questions if something is unclear. (P 83)

Some respondents also brought up technical difficulties (N=15, 17.65%):

(…) sometimes their internet connection is crashing or they don't have a microphone. Sometimes, also, they miss a part of the class because the application we are using crashed, or they've lost their internet connection and then they do not know what has been done and have difficulties in following the rest of the lesson. (P 2)

Students who live in the areas with a bad Internet signal could not connect. (P 41)

Lack of control over students' work was also reported as an issue by some (N=12, 14.12%):

Not having control over Ss in terms of knowing if they are actually doing the task or just chilling. (P 21)

It's so much easier for them to say "I have camera/mic problems" and disengage completely. Also, there was always someone who couldn't open the page, install the app or write a post or a comment according to instructions, and I had no way of checking if they really had technical issues or if they were only saying it to avoid work. (P 44)

Other answers included: workload (N=10, 11.76%), assessment 7 (N=10, 11.76%), digital incompetence (N=7, 8.24%), giving feedback (N=6, 7.06%), group work (N=3, 3.53%), parents (N=2, 2.36%), working with SEN students (N=2, 2.36%).

Teachers were also asked to indicate what they liked the most and the least about delivering lessons online. The most common answer regarding aspects they liked was once again the ability to use online tools and materials (N=31; 36.47%):

I got to expand my knowledge of online teaching platforms and other useful apps and sources. (P 31)

I liked the choice of so many online materials. (P 61)

Using different gadgets online that I never heard of before. (P 81)

Comfort and safety of the home setting was mentioned by some respondents (N=14):

I slept better. I could take care of my home and own children better. Less stress. (P 14)

The fact that we were less exposed to Covid-19 by being at home. (P 19)

Being safe at home and knowing that my students were safe. (P 35)

Grabbing a bite from the kitchen in between lessons. (P 21)

Some also stated that online teaching saved their time because they did not have to commute (N=13; 15.29%):

Saved time because I did not have to travel to work and change classrooms, liked having two lessons in a row with a class. (P 36)

If the class starts at 8am, I could get up at 7.30 and I'm home immediately after class. --> no commute. (P 68)

Tracking students' progress (N=11; 12.94%) and no noise during lessons (N=3; 3.53%) were also reported as aspects they liked. Nonetheless, 16 (18.82%) participants did not like any aspect of ERT.

Time management and increased workload are what the highest number of respondents liked the least about ERT (N=26; 30.59%):

More time to prepare for lessons, but not very satisfying results. (P 16)

It was extremely time-consuming, I couldn't interact with students as we had all been used to, it was impossible to achieve any kind of work - life balance. + Working from home where 5 other residents live. (P 41)

It took me twice as long to prepare online lessons (both synchronous and asynchronous), and then, in asynchronous learning, double to give feedback to all the students who handed their work in. (P 44)

Students not respecting my time and time frames in general, behaving as if we are available to them as the internet connection is, which is 24/7. (P 81)

The lack of face-to-face interaction was also singled out as a disadvantage (N=20; 23.53%):

I didn't like the lack of face-to-face interaction and seeing their body language (e.g. in the classroom you can see on their faces if they understood the concept or, at least, which part confuses them) or their level of involvement in the lesson because not all students had cameras on and even if they did, I couldn't see all of them because of the platform which we chose on the school level. They would rarely say that they don't understand something or they didn't pay attention and they realized it only when we finished and started with practice. (P 8)

The fact that I could not do everything I wanted to, I could not see the students' reactions to my teaching, I couldn't see if they were following my pace adequately, I couldn't evaluate appropriately, the list is long. (P 67)

The teachers also expressed concern about assessment (N=17; 20%):

Correcting homeworks especially essays. Their photos were often not clear and I was spending a lot of time trying to see every letter. (P 61)

(…) *hard to track actual learner progress (they often copy from each other), testing is of questionable reliability. During oral exams and unsatisfactory grades* (…) (P 68)

In addition, other responses included: lack of students' motivation (N=14; 16.47%), cheating (N=9; 10.59%), parents (N=7; 8.24%), how they felt (N=5; 5.88%), technical difficulties and lack of IT knowledge (N=4; 4.71%), student-related problems (N=2; 2.36%), everything (N=1; 1.18%).

5.3 Measures for improvement of ERT

The respondents rated certain measures that could be undertaken to improve the teaching of English online. As presented in Table 5, teachers would benefit from all the measures since the mean scores for their answers are relatively high. The ones they feel would help them most are suggestions for online games and short activities (M=71; 83.5%) and guidance about assessing learners in ERT contexts (N=58; 68.2%).

Table 5: Mean scores of measures for improvement of ERT

#	Measure	Mean
1	Suggestions for online games and short activities	4.34
2	Guidance about assessing learners in remote teaching contexts	4.07
3	Technical support for remote teaching	3.96
4	Training on how to engage students	3.92
5	Webinars about remote teaching techniques and ideas	3.85
6	Pedagogical /methodological support for remote teaching	3.8
7	Video observations of online lessons	3.65
8	Rules and regulations for online classes	3.62
9	Ready-made lesson plans for remote teaching	3.46
10	Guidance about online safety and child protection policies	3.36

Lastly, an optional open-ended question yielded some suggestions for improving online ELT: providing access to students, learning about emergency remote teaching, having less students in classes, creating a pool of materials for teaching and assessment, making tools

available, students taking ERT more seriously, more cooperation between teachers, creating a safe platform for testing, receiving support from institutions, such as AZOO and MZO.

Students' motivation, online grading, large number of students in classes, technical issues, teachers' well-being, teachers who do not take ERT seriously and additional financial support were some important aspects and issues mentioned by the participants, which had not been covered in the questionnaire.

6. Discussion

In this section, the results of the study are discussed with respect to the research questions and the findings of earlier studies. The first research question aimed to find out English language teachers perception of ERT during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most findings are in line with the study by Moser et. al. (2021), whose instrument (i.e. questionnaire) was adapted for the purposes of this study.

A little less than a third of the participants (25.9%) had a positive attitude towards ERT prior to COVID, whereas, a slightly higher number of English teachers had a positive perception of ERT in Moser et. al. (2021) (N = 154, 40.8%). As can be expected, the present study also corroborated the findings from Moser et. al. (2021) about teachers' lack of prior experience with remote teaching. In fact, in Marković et. al. (2021, p. 102), more than 80% of teaching staff stated that they had not used any e-platforms before the pandemic, but it must be pointed out that the participants are faculty teachers, so the context is different to an extent. Given that in "School for Life" (MZO, 2021) teachers are expected to be digitally competent, the low figures are rather surprising. This could be due to the fact that 'School for Life' trained teachers to use technology to support face-to-face teaching rather than remote learning of

EFL. Nonetheless, even though experience with planned online teaching would certainly benefit teachers, it likely still would not prepare them specifically for the context of teaching during a health emergency crisis. Another positive outcome of remote teaching is the fact that teachers might have improved their digital skills, which was also confirmed in Erarslan's study (2021).

In spite of the rapid transition to remote leaning, and lack of preparation, the majority of participants are satisfied with how they managed the online lessons (N=64, 75.29%). This is consistent with the opinion of the vast majority of teachers who filled out the MZO survey (95% were entirely or mostly satisfied with the way they conducted distance teaching) (MZO, 2020b). Furthermore, in Marković et. al. (2021), 77.6% of teaching staff stated that they are satisfied/very satisfied with the quality of their remote classes. One possible reason for higher levels of satisfaction is that teachers feel they did their best in such pressing circumstances, where everything had to be transferred online and organized in a short period of time, which required a lot of effort from them. On the other hand, they possibly wanted to report more positively than they actually feel, or they may have overestimated their ability (British Council, 2020). In spite of their general satisfaction, if given an option during the COVID-19 crisis, 63.5% of teachers would choose face-to-face teaching instead of ERT, which confirmed the finding by Baksa and Luić (2020) - 62.2% reported the same position.

Great majority of participants (96.5%) believe that language learning outcomes can be attained better in a face-to-face setting. In Moser et. al. (2020), 68.7% (N=259) believed that students could not learn a language better online than in a traditional, in-person setting. However, this might be related to prior experience since, in their study, teachers (N=43) who had prior experience with remote language teaching declared as more confident about their students' learning, unlike the ones without experience. In Baksa and Luić (2020), both teachers and students thought that a smaller number of outcomes were achieved than in a face-to-face context.

Lin and Warschauer (2015) emphasize there is a lack of data about the effectiveness of online learning in K-12 contexts. They mention Cavanaugh's study (2001), in which, among all subject areas, only online foreign language courses yielded negative effects. These findings should, however, be taken with a grain of salt because they may be obsolete due to dramatic changes in K–12 online learning over the past 20 years and lack of certainty about what caused these negative effects (Lin and Warschauer, 2015).

As for the platforms used, the majority reported using MS Teams (N=58), ZOOM (N=34), Google (N=26) and email (N=20). MS Teams is a collaboration and communication ICT platform, which enables communication with other group members, forming class groups and organizing online classes easily (Baksa and Luić, 2020). In Baksa and Luić (2020), 28.4% of participants used MS Teams and were satisfied with the possibilities and functionality of that platform. This is not surprising since the platform has many features useful for teaching a language. Oliveria (2020) describes it as "a lifeline for English Language Learners during remote learning". He goes on explaining that MS Teams provided him and his students with the opportunity to safely communicate face-to-face. The students could turn on captions to also see what is being said, repeat a recording of the lecture or conversation when necessary, and use the private channels option in Teams for small group work. Students were assigned to groups which could meet and collaborate simultaneously. Progress monitoring was enabled by moving from one group to another and joining their conversations (Oliveria, 2020). In the current study, mention is made that live lessons via MS Teams resemble the traditional, face-to-face setting to an extent.

A larger number of participants in the present study reported their students were aware at which time teachers were available to provide assistance and explanation if something is unclear. This finding is in accordance with findings reported by Baksa and Luić (2020, where students, 75.9% of the sample said their teachers were always or mostly at their disposal for

extra explanations or questions. Many teachers in the present study pointed out that their students expected them to be available 24/7 and that they felt like they needed to be on their disposal all the time.

The research question concerning the strengths of ERT of English yielded some interesting findings. One of the advantages discovered in the study is the possibility of using new digital tools and online materials. This is a bit surprising since it implies that teachers are only now learning more about digital tools and using online resources, something one would think is already present in their work as a result of the ongoing reform "School for Life". Nevertheless, this finding indicates that teachers are generally open to and want to learn about how to make use of technology in their classes, but perhaps did not have time or neglected it prior to the pandemic for some other reason.

The fact that ERT is accessible, and provides comfort and safety is another advantage according to participants. For example, lessons can be uploaded and re-utilized at any time (Shahzad et al., 2020). Similar results were obtained in Hossain's (2021) study, where 64% of the participants emphasize that teaching through online classes is time-saving, while 42% mention that it does not require a lot of space and can be done from home, where they can relax. However, it should be noted that EFL lessons are quite different from other subjects as English is both the means and the end, and language is not learned by rereading available lessons, but rather through interaction, negotiation of meaning, focus on and practice of language. Even though some students might prefer learning on their own, many are in need of teacher guidance, explanation and opportunities for practicing language.

The third research question aimed to find out the challenges faced by teachers. One of the greatest challenges of online teaching is the increased workload and more than half of participants (69.4%) think that ERT increased their amount of work, and that they needed more time to

prepare for classes (N=49, 57.6%). This result ties well with the Nugroho et. al.'s (2020) study wherein most of the participants informed that they had to invest a lot of time to develop materials for online classes. In view of the fact that there was no adequate preparation or support for online teaching, teachers had to develop and design new materials and activities that would foster interaction and student engagement. Many teachers had to choose and acquaint themselves with the tools and platforms they will use, which took additional time. The teaching strategies teachers usually employ might not have been sufficient for the situation of remote teaching so they had to be creative and adaptable, which, in fact, some participants pointed out as the positive side of ERT. Furthermore, a great majority of teachers managed to include authentic examples of language and/or culture in their teaching materials.

The finding that students are less motivated in an online setting is broadly in line with Atmojo & Nugroho's (2020) findings. They emphasize that teachers must be able to recognize when students are disengaged, use ice-breaking activities to maintain their engagement, provide meaningful activities and include question and answer session (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). This however entails extensive knowledge of technology, ability to manage classes online and design interactive EFL activities. Keeping up student motivation was also identified in British Council's study as a concern expressed by teachers (British Council, 2020b). Hossain (2021) lists learners' disinterest as one of the challenges that teachers face.

Closely related to students' engagement is more workload for teachers than in a face-to-face setting, which was highlighted by EFL teachers taking part in this study. This is hardly surprising as EFL cannot be taught by simply lecturing to students. Role play exercises, task-based activities, discussions and debates, have to be integrated into the lesson, but are difficult to organize online, and require time, planning and preparation. In British Council's survey (British Council, 2020) many teachers mention that lesson preparation time is longer for

distance learning. Teachers need to skillfully plan the activities and materials they will use. They have to identify suitable applications and use them based on the objectives of their lessons (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). However, for this to be successfully done, they need to participate in professional development concerning the integration of technology in language teaching, which, in this emergency situation, was not possible.

One of the key problems reported by a significant number of participants was also lack of face-to-face interaction in online lessons. This basic finding is consistent with previous research in the field (Gao & Zhang, 2020, Mishra et. al., 2020). As mentioned earlier, it is difficult to engage learners in natural conversational turn-taking and the non-verbal aspect of communication is neglected. Being able to read the face and mood of students enables changing the teaching pattern, and this can be even more problematic when students do not have their cameras on and teachers are not even sure whether they are present, let alone whether they understand the material. This cases challenges with classroom management because the teachers are not able to see student reactions and give spontaneous timely feedback. However, this study also found that an online setting favored some shy pupils who participated more actively in online lessons, possibly due to lack of direct peer pressure. This is associated with individual differences, a significant component of ELT.

If teachers cannot monitor students' work, additional problems appear, such as absence from class, submitting work after the deadline and low awareness of online learning, which is often perceived as unimportant and informal (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). Baksa and Luić (2020) found that during ERT, students often times did not submit their work regularly. Teachers think it is easier for students to say they have "camera/mic problems" and disengage completely. One teacher wrote: "(...) *there was always someone who couldn't open the page, install the app or write a post or a comment according to instructions, and I had no way of checking if they really had technical issues or if they were only saying it to avoid work (...).*

Some teachers experienced problems with checking understanding because the learners would hesitate to say they did not understand something or there was no time to use concept questions. All this adds to reduction in students' learning.

Lack of control also leads to one of the major problems in online environments, assessment. More precisely, there is a high risk of cheating and plagiarism, or technical difficulties interrupting the process, as well as not being able to supervise students in large classes (Abduh, 2021). As assessment becomes "less tenable", it is more difficult to judge whether learning is taking place, and reliability is reduced because students might rely on others to do their tasks (Hazaea et. al., 2021). Regarding the ways in which assessment is conducted, more than a half of participants agree that alternative assessment is the best choice for an online context. Oral assessment is found convenient by 51.8%, while only 24.7% participants think written is the best option. A possible explanation is that in written exams integrity often tends to be questionable. The participants indicated that they would profit from guidance on assessment, which confirmed the findings from the British Council's survey (British Council, 2020b).

The fourth research question was focused on the influence of ERT on particular aspects of ELT. About half of participants in the study did not organize collaborative activities or classroom discussions. In this case, 50% is a worrying figure as collaborative activities, such as group and pair work, are key components of ELT and conducive to developing the students' communicative competence. Some participants elaborated that it was challenging to make individuals work as a group when they are not physically at the same place. A few teachers also reported that they did not include chances for students to interact with one another either synchronously (27%) or asynchronously (22.3%). This might be due to absence of access to technology needed for online lessons, which about a quarter of the

participants mentioned in their responses. This is a matter of great concern, as those students were unable to follow classes and attain the learning outcomes.

The development of the four language skills is essential for learning English, and should likewise be developed in the online environment. Since different techniques are used to teach each of the skills, some may be more appropriate for an online context while some, such as discussions for teaching speaking, might require an additional effort. English language teachers rated the skills in the following order of difficulty to teach online: 1) Speaking, 2) Writing, 3) Listening, 4) Reading. Diaz and Miy (2017) describe speaking as a complex skill and point out that most online courses focus on reading, writing, and listening instead. Speaking is challenging to teach in a virtual context because communication does not feel spontaneous, students need to pay attention to turn on their microphone or wait for their turn. Meaningful activities such as role-play, task-based learning and project work are difficult to organize and monitor since everything could easily get interrupted by disconnection. Surprisingly, however, in this study the number of teachers who find speaking to be the most difficult (N=33) is only slightly higher than the number of those who think writing is the most challenging to teach (N=30). In speaking activities, students are put on the spot, while in writing they are given some time to do the tasks. Nevertheless, this could pose a problem for the teacher in terms of monitoring students when doing the writing tasks. If students share their screens, it cannot be expected that the teacher can focus on 20-30 windows, and if the cameras are not on, someone else might be doing the tasks instead of students. As can be expected, it would appear that the productive skills are a bigger challenge than receptive skills for online delivery. Teachers' perception of speaking and writing as more challenging to teach online could be due to the fact they require students to be more active. During listening and reading, students only receive and understand the information so the anxiety is possibly reduced (Moser et. al., 2021), but the outcomes are not immediately

noticeable. With productive skills, on the contrary, students could simply feel uncomfortable when speaking online, or as one participant wrote: "*This is not a natural environment for communication so students feel reluctant to speak.*" Participants also could not include a lot of written exercises because they did not have time to check every single exercise if they did a lot of them, so students wrote less, made and reinforced their mistakes.

When it comes to teaching grammar remotely, it was reported as the second biggest challenge for the students. It seems that the virtual environment may be more suitable for using the explicit approach to teaching grammar since implicit instruction requires learners' involvement, interactive and communicative learning activities, all of which were reported problematic to achieve by the participants. However, implicit instruction is important, too, because it gives autonomy to learners. Ultimately, the current trends in teaching grammar are to use both approaches interchangeably so that both accuracy and fluency are achieved.

As for the key domains of ELT, participants think teaching communicative language competence poses the most challenges. What may explain this ranking is that, since students were unwilling to participate in activities in an online context, the development of their communicative competence was neglected. Independence in language learning is rated as the second most challenging domain. Remote learning, in fact, should contribute to the development of independence in learning, as they had to do more on their own than they usually do - as mentioned by some participants. Some teachers, however, informed that their students did not take enough responsibility for their learning. Intercultural communicative competence seems to be the least problematic to teach remotely of the three. This domain might have been taught through usage of a variety of authentic materials available online. Such materials are believed to be the best types of materials for developing intercultural communicative competences of foreign language learners and exposure to them allows

learners to get in touch with the authentic language, customs and way of life of the target culture (Reid, 2014).

Regarding the last research question, related to measures for improvement of remote teaching, one of the interesting findings is that the teachers indicated they had not received adequate support for ERT during the pandemic. This result is also obtained in Astuti & Solikhah (2021). Abernathy and Thornburg (2021) suggested that schools should focus more on teacher training for effective online instruction. AZOO should provide specific training in online teaching of specific subjects. Therefore, it would be paramount for EFL teachers to learn, not only how to use technology for teaching, but how to design and deliver online EFL courses. Ministries of Education should, on the other hand, provide explicit guidelines for future emergency situations (British Council, 2020b). Teachers who took part in the present study feel that they would benefit from suggestions for online games and short interactive activities. This would probably foster learner engagement and motivation, which are perceived problematic in online interaction (British Council, 2020b).

7. Conclusion and implications

Taking into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and the shift from face-to-face to virtual classrooms, the main goal of this study was to investigate English language teachers experiences with emergency remote teaching (ERT). The goal was to gain a better understanding of what teachers perceive as the benefits, the challenges and the measures that should be taken to improve the teaching of English remotely.

The findings suggest that the participants are mostly satisfied with how they carried out ERT of English. Still, many of them express concern that ERT took more of their time than face-to-face teaching and increased their workload. What is also worrying is that the

respondents do not believe students can attain language learning outcomes equally well as in a traditional setting. One unanticipated, yet worrying finding that emerged from the data is that 21.2% of teachers reported their students did not have access to technology needed for online classes, and cannot even take part in online classes, let alone learn EFL in an online environment.

As for another discouraging finding, most participants complain about the students' low engagement and motivation, which could be partially due to a lack of face-to-face interaction. The other difficulties related to remote teaching of English include lack of collaborative activities and implicit teaching of grammar, provision of feedback, checking understanding and classroom management and assessment, especially written. To an extent, productive skills are perceived to be more problematic to teach than receptive skills. Difficulties with reading and listening are more difficult to perceive and identify, while the outcomes of productive skills are immediately noticeable.

As for the strengths of ERT, they are not directly linked with language learning outcomes. Among the benefits reported are the use of new digital tools and online materials, accessibility, comfort, safety, development of ICT skills. Although the teachers attempted to replicate in the online environment classes that were designed for face-to face instruction by including authentic materials and organized lessons according to three stages of teaching, the majority were not able to organize collaborative activities, which are paramount in language teaching.

One limitation of this study is that the majority of participants teach in a primary school so there is some likelihood that the results would be different if more secondary school teachers were involved in the study. The research has thrown up many questions in need of further investigation and future studies could explore the following areas: secondary school

teachers' experiences with online learning, students' experience with online learning of English, and research into the efficacy of online teaching of EFL, among others. Future research should also be qualitative to gain more in-depth insights about the subject.

Taken together, these results suggest that greater attention should be devoted to online teaching and training programs in two areas - use of technology and teaching EFL online. Furthermore, given that the participants feel they would benefit from suggestions for online games and activities and guidelines for online assessment, it would be useful to create an online pool of such materials and a network where teachers would share their materials and examples of best practices. The training of teachers within the Curricular Reform should be expanded even further now that the digital skills are a necessity. Teacher education programs at universities should offer courses on the use of technology in teaching in the general teacher education module and on teaching EFL online, as part of the ELT methodology courses. Most importantly, the MZO should be committed to advancing equity in education by ensuring that students have the necessary technology and means for online learning and are able to take part in remote learning, if the situation arises.

Collectively, the results of this study appear to demonstrate the complexity of teaching English remotely and the need for developing strategies to tackle issues that may arise in the online environment. Evidently, there is still a long way to go in order to make the transition from face-to-face to online teaching a sustainable success.

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Appendix

<u>**Research questionnaire**</u>

This research is part of my master's thesis in TEFL at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka, Croatia. The questionnaire has been developed to gather information on English language teachers' experiences with online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and to analyze the strengths and challenges of teaching English online.

I would be grateful if you could complete the following questionnaire, which should take about 15 minutes of your time. Your responses are completely anonymous and will be used only for the purposes of this study.

Thank you for your participation.

<u>**Section I. Demographic and Contextual Factors**</u>

1) What is your age?

a) Under 25

b) 25-34

c) 35-44

d) 45-54

e) Over 55

2) What is your sex?

a) Male

b) Female

c) Other

3) In which school are you currently employed?

a) Primary school

b) Secondary school

c) Other

4) If your answer to question 3 is *b) Secondary school*, please choose the type:

a) Gymnasium

b) Vocational school

5) How would you describe your current teaching setting?

a) Public

b) Private

c) Other: _____

6) How many years of experience in teaching English do you have?

a) Under 5 years

b) 5-15 years

c) 16-25 years

d) 26-35 years

e) More than 35 years

7) Which tool did you use for teaching online?

a) MS Teams

b) ZOOM

c) Google

d) email

e) Other (please specify): _____

8) Have you ever taught an English language class fully online (not hybrid) prior to COVID-19?

<div align="center">Yes   No</div>

Section II. Teaching English online during lockdown

9) On a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 indicates that you strongly agree with the statement and 1 that you strongly disagree, please state the extent to which you agree with each statement.

1 - strongly disagree, 2 - disagree, 3 neutral, 4 - somewhat agree and 5 - strongly agree

#	Statement	Level of agreement				
1	Prior to Spring 2020, I had positive attitudes towards teaching English online.	1	2	3	4	5
2	Prior to Spring 2020, I had negative attitudes towards teaching English online.	1	2	3	4	5
3	Prior to Spring 2020, I believed that students could do equally well or better when learning English online than in a face-to-face/school setting.	1	2	3	4	5
4	Prior to Spring 2020, I believed that students would do worse when learning English online than in a face-to-face/school setting.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I now believe that language learning outcomes can be attained equally well in an online and in a face-to-face setting.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I now believe that language learning outcomes can be attained better in an online setting.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I now believe that language learning outcomes can be attained better in a face-to-face setting.	1	2	3	4	5
8	When I started teaching online, I had all or most of the necessary skills to carry out online lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I received formal training for emergency remote teaching during the COVID pandemic	1	2	3	4	5
10	I learned how to teach online, by teaching online during the pandemic.	1	2	3	4	5
11	I did not face any major obstacles when conducting online classes.	1	2	3	4	5
12	I am satisfied with how I carried out online English lessons during lockdown.	1	2	3	4	5
13	I was able to students to engage students in classroom discussions online.	1	2	3	4	5
14	I was able to organize collaborative activities (pair or group work) online.	1	2	3	4	5
15	I generally held synchronous classes.	1	2	3	4	5
16	During the COVID pandemic, I was equally confident teaching in an online setting as I was in a face-to-face	1	2	3	4	5

	setting.					
17	I prepared for my online classes in detail.	1	2	3	4	5
18	I think remote teaching saves time.	1	2	3	4	5
19	I think remote teaching increased my workload	1	2	3	4	5
20	I needed more time to prepare for online classes than I need for face-to-face classes.	1	2	3	4	5
21	Adequate support was offered by the school for remote teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
22	Adequate support was offered by AZOO for remote teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
23	Adequate support was offered by MZO for remote teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
24	Support for remote teaching was mainly provided by peers.	1	2	3	4	5
25	I rarely experienced problems with the technology I used.	1	2	3	4	5
26	My students adapted well to online lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
27	My students appeared more anxious than prior to COVID-19.	1	2	3	4	5
28	The majority of my students took the transition to remote teaching and learning seriously.	1	2	3	4	5
29	The rate of students' absence was higher compared to face-to-face teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
30	My students had the digital skills needed to participate in online lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
31	My students had access to technology needed to participate in online classes.	1	2	3	4	5
32	My students seemed less motivated during online lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
33	My school's professional development and teacher support has adequately prepared me for a seamless transition to remote teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
34	My online courses included opportunities for students to practice all four skills.	1	2	3	4	5
35	I designed my online lessons according to typical stages of teaching (i.e. pre-activity, whilst-activity and post-activity).	1	2	3	4	5
36	I reduced the amount of work during COVID-19 that my students might normally complete in a typical semester.	1	2	3	4	5
37	There was less interaction between students and me (the educator) in online classes compared to face-to-face classes.	1	2	3	4	5
38	There was less interaction between students in online classes compared to face-to-face classes.	1	2	3	4	5
39	I regularly uploaded the content I taught to a learning management system.	1	2	3	4	5
40	My course included opportunities for students to interact with one another synchronously.	1	2	3	4	5

41	My course included opportunities for students to interact with one another asynchronously.	1	2	3	4	5
42	My course included opportunities for students to interact with me (the educator) synchronously.	1	2	3	4	5
43	My course included opportunities for students to interact with me (the educator) asynchronously.	1	2	3	4	5
44	My course included authentic examples of language and/or culture.	1	2	3	4	5
45	It is more difficult to manage online classes compared to face-to-face teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
46	Written exams are more convenient than oral for online assessment.	1	2	3	4	5
47	Oral exams are more convenient for online assessment.	1	2	3	4	5
48	Alternative assessment is the best choice for online lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
49	I have had difficulties with students cheating on online exams.	1	2	3	4	5
50	I have altered my grading policies or procedures during COVID-19.	1	2	3	4	5
51	I often had to extend the deadline for submitting work.	1	2	3	4	5
52	I provided written or verbal feedback at least once per week.	1	2	3	4	5
53	I could give less feedback to my students compared to face-to-face teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
54	My students were aware of when/how frequently I am online to assist them and/or provide feedback.	1	2	3	4	5
55	I felt I needed to be available to my students 24/7.	1	2	3	4	5
56	I communicated regularly with students' parents during lockdown.	1	2	3	4	5
57	If I had the option to choose between online and face-to-face teaching during lockdown, I would choose online.	1	2	3	4	5
58	As a result of this transition to remote teaching and learning, my students gained additional skills and competences for their future education.	1	2	3	4	5
59	As a result of this transition to remote teaching and learning, I returned to face-to-face teaching with a stronger set of instructional skills and knowledge.	1	2	3	4	5

10) Which aspects of learning English online have your students found most challenging to do?

_____

11) Please rate the following language skills in the order of difficulty for teaching online from 1 to 4 where 1 is most difficult and 4 is least difficult.

___ Listening

___ Reading

___ Speaking

___ Writing

12) Please rate the following three domains of teaching in the order of difficulty for teaching online from 1 to 3, where 1 is most difficult to you and 3 is least difficult

___ Communicative language competence

___ Intercultural communicative competence

___ Independence in language acquisition

13) In your opinion, what are the main strengths of delivering English lessons online?

_____

14) In your opinion, what are the main challenges of delivering English lessons online?

_____

15) What did you like the most about teaching English online?

_____

16) What did you like the least about teaching English online?

_____

Section III. Measures for improving online English teaching

17) On a scale of 1 (not very helpful) to 5 (very helpful), which of these resources would you find most helpful for online teaching?

1 - *not very helpful*, 2 - *slightly helpful*, 3 - *neutral*, 4 - *helpful*, 5 - *very helpful*

Resource	Options				
Ready-made lesson plans for remote teaching	1	2	3	4	5
Suggestions for online games and short activities	1	2	3	4	5
Webinars about remote teaching techniques and ideas	1	2	3	4	5
Video observations of online lessons	1	2	3	4	5
Guidance about online safety and child protection policies	1	2	3	4	5
Guidance about assessing learners in remote teaching contexts	1	2	3	4	5
Training on how to engage students	1	2	3	4	5
Rules and regulations for online classes	1	2	3	4	5
Technical support for remote teaching	1	2	3	4	5
Pedagogical /methodological support for remote teaching	1	2	3	4	5

18) Please provide suggestions for improving online English language teaching:

_____

19) Please comment on any aspect of teaching English online that you feel is important and has not been covered in the questionnaire.

_____

Thank you for taking the time to complete the questionnaire.

If you want to be informed about the results of this survey, feel free to contact me: Mirela Babić (mirela.babic27@gmail.com).