

Experiencing emergency remote teaching as an EFL educator in Chile at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic

Nicholas Scarlota

Universidad de Talca, Chile

Rocío Knipp

Universidad de Chile, Chile

In this qualitative study, we seek to explore the experiences of English as a foreign language (EFL) university teachers in Chile during the first semester of emergency remote teaching (ERT) in 2020. We conducted 17 semi-structured interviews and analysed them using qualitative content analysis. Emergent themes were divided into two general categories as perceived from the teacher's point of view, advantages and disadvantages. Among the results were a perceived decrease in participation and interaction, and time and health issues. Convenience, accessibility of information, increased flexibility and adaptability of teachers emerged as positive elements. This study sheds light on ERT and its repercussions for university EFL teachers during the early days of the pandemic. Ultimately, providing an in-depth look at what Chilean teachers experienced as Covid-19 pandemic shook up higher education with teachers at the forefront of this disruption.

Introduction

The change from face-to-face classes to virtual ones forced teachers to reflect on their pedagogy and possibly forced some to the edge of their comfort zone. Across the world and in Chile, many researchers have looked at how university students have viewed the pandemic during confinement (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Álvarez & Sepúlveda, 2021; Mishra et al., 2020). Simultaneously, there has been significant interest in understanding the ways university teachers dealt with this transition (Can & Silman-Karanfil, 2022; Hodges et al., 2020; Fuentes-Hernández & Silva-Florez, 2020). As of 2022, many studies have examined insights from both university teachers and students during the shift from offline to online, but only a handful of studies have addressed the way English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Latin America, particularly in Chile, have experienced emergency remote teaching (ERT) (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020).

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a global public health emergency on 30 January 2020, then on 11 March it was considered a global pandemic (Cucinotta, & Vanelli, 2020). Later in March, UNESCO estimated 850 million students worldwide had transitioned to alternative forms of learning (UNESCO, 2020a) and by the end of March approximately 83% of total enrolled learners had been affected (UNESCO, 2020b).

In Chile the school year typically commences at the beginning of March. In 2020 this coincided with the unforeseen outbreak of Covid-19 and subsequent nationwide response to contain the virus by closing all schools on 15 March of that year, universities followed suit (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). This transition online came about abruptly

and with little time for preparation. UNESCO has recognised it is well aware of the difficulty and challenges it takes to make this large transition to distance education (UNESCO 2020c). Under normal circumstances, teachers need time to prepare for online classes and feel discomfort teaching online until they have gained experience with this divergent method (Hodges et al., 2020).

As a unique event, it is relevant to know how teachers coped with the transition and how they implemented their online language classes to inform future practices. Bailey and Lee (2020) have shown how experienced online language teachers were better suited to make the change, due to previous experiences, by having an array of activities to choose from; awareness of challenges to teaching online; and increased communication opportunities with students. For those without previous experience it was a venture into the unknown as many were lacking online teaching experience, preparation for the change and/or support to make the change (Bao, 2020). This paper is precisely focused on the standpoint of university teachers, particularly, those teaching EFL in the Chilean context. Our research question, thus, is: How do EFL university teachers view their experiences of English classes online during the pandemic? In that sense, we sought to explore the perceptions of EFL university instructors during the first semester of 2020 in full-blown ERT. From this stemmed two specific objectives:

- (a) identify the challenges of ERT experienced by EFL university teachers in Chile; and
- (b) describe the positive impact of ERT experienced by EFL university teachers in Chile.

Theoretical framework

Online education and ERT

As an area of research, online and distance education have been around for a long time (Kentnor, 2015) and there is currently an extensive body of literature that sheds light on this modality. In order to be considered distance education the class must be technologically mediated as it spans the geographic and perhaps temporal distance between learners, teachers, and institutions (Anderson & Dron, 2011). There are three different ways to teach: synchronous, asynchronous or a combination of both (blended). In synchronous distance learning, both the teacher and student are interacting at the same time from different geographical locations whereas asynchronous distance learning takes place on a more individual level and provides greater degrees of flexibility, participants do not have to connect at the exact same time (Murtiningsih et al., 2020). Synchronous classes can be designed and implemented similarly to the traditional face-to-face class (Keegan et al., 2005; Midkiff & DaSilva, 2000). Nevertheless, teaching online involves competencies and specialised strategies for the development of curriculum and its implementation in pedagogical terms (Carrillo & Flores, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the digitalisation of higher education in an unparalleled manner, bringing a number of challenges, advantages and disadvantages to the teaching of languages (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021; Mishra et al., 2020; Murtiningsih et al., 2020). As a transitory shift in the delivery of education to an alternative way caused

by a crisis scenario (Hodges et al., 2020), ERT must be distinguished from online education. It is understood that typical online classes are based on careful planning, design, and development. However, in ERT, this thorough design process is often absent. Planning an online course is a lengthy endeavour and the overnight switch and lack of online teaching experience may have led to “suboptimal implementation” (Hodges et al., 2020). As only two years have passed since the onset of the pandemic, the literature on ERT is still preliminary, specifically within the field of language teaching. However, it is possible to ascertain both the advantages and disadvantages experienced by teachers in this mode, drawing upon existing international studies on online education as a starting point combined with the latest studies on ERT.

Advantages

Virtual classrooms provide teachers with new opportunities to help enhance their EFL classrooms. A significant advantage for teaching online in a language learning classroom is that technology can help reflect current linguistic changes compared with printed sources, which are much more static (Weyers, 1999). Synchronous teaching exposes language learners to more listening and speaking activities, while writing in chats or emails develops students' writing and reading skills. Moreover, in the context of the pandemic, teachers found that synchronous classes were much better than asynchronous for encouraging student motivation (Fuentes-Hernández & Silva-Flórez, 2020). Online classes have also been shown to improve language learners' grammar as they provided them with additional opportunities to practice (Kris & Wong, 2009).

Asynchronous work, on the other hand, provides students with more time to formulate and reflect during online writing, compared to the instantaneous production and feedback in synchronous classes. All in all, these varied forms of communicating might feel safer and build a more comfortable learning space than others (Murtiningsih et al., 2020).

Other positives to arrive from online courses include flexibility, the ability to share knowledge and experience with peers, and promoting cognitive presence through live sessions (González & Herrera 2015).

Disadvantages

Apart from technical issues, especially Internet and platform instability, which are critical drawbacks in online courses during the pandemic (Liu et al., 2021; Mishra et al., 2020), one of the most significant changes in transitioning to an online environment is the pedagogical and instructional challenges (Ali, 2020). The switch to the online classroom forces teachers to alter their course management techniques, communication with students, time spent teaching, and personal pedagogy (Easton, 2003). Teachers need to be aware that “the face to face class is difficult to replicate in the online environment” as teachers need different pedagogical and technological tools (Ray, 2009, p. 273). One of the problems that Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) discovered was that many teachers wanted to use the same activities/strategies they used in a face-to-face class in the online class. Educators need to consider that an online class is not just adding technology to their

previous pedagogical and content knowledge. Thus, the activities and guidance they provide to online exercises will most likely differ from those provided in a face-to-face setting (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014).

Aside from adapting activities and learning new pedagogies, it is essential to be cognisant that the time demands for online courses exceed those of face-to-face courses (Cavanaugh, 2005). Lessons need to be replanned to add new strategies and pedagogies. Reusing material used in face-to-face classes may not be possible, and therefore more time will be spent creating new (digital) material. Besides this, teachers have to rethink the pacing of activities as it is difficult to estimate the correct timing for the design and organisation of tasks in an online class (González & Herrera, 2015). If that were not enough, teachers have also reported that online teaching was more demanding because of the “non-stop nature of online teaching, constant feedback and clarification” (De Gagne & Walters, 2009, p.581). These substantial transformations take time for teachers to learn and implement, not to mention the information and communications technology (ICT) support required in terms of infrastructure and tools (Ali, 2020).

In terms of language, it has been noted that oral skills have been the most affected by online lessons (Zamborová et al., 2021). With fewer face-to-face interactions, feedback may be more challenging to understand, ultimately complicating learning a second language (L2) (Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020). Studies have shown that online communication can become confusing, and students can lose focus due to less eye contact, gestures, and a new class atmosphere (Mohammed et al., 2020). Teachers use eye contact, body language, facial expressions, and voices as tools in the classroom to draw attention to specific phrases or words (Bao, 2020). Gestures and eye contact become overly critical when students are learning a L2, to help prove a point or describe a vocabulary word.

The switch to online classes has also affected the quality of life and mental health of teachers. In a longitudinal study of high school teachers in Chile it was shown that teachers - especially women and people who were 45 years old and older - saw their quality of life further deteriorated during ERT (Lizana et al., 2021). MacIntyre et al.'s (2020) large-scale questionnaire study revealed that language educators around the world experienced substantial levels of stress in early 2020, with the top two stressors identified as an increased workload and family health. On top of all this, teachers not only have to worry about their own needs but must be aware of students' social needs and support as well (Durak & Çankaya 2020).

Method

In order to gain insights into Chilean EFL university teachers' experiences of ERT during the Covid-19 pandemic in the first semester of 2020, the study used a qualitative and exploratory approach (Taylor & Bogdan, 2000). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Each of the interviews was conducted with informed consent of the participants. In total, seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted online via

Zoom with university teachers in the northern, central and southern regions of Chile (the three macro zones of the country) between the months of May 2020 and July 2020. Each interview lasted between 40 to 60 minutes.

The participants were selected following a snowball sampling and diversity criterion, in the sense of different university settings (public/private) and different locations in Chile. This criterion is relevant to obtain a wide range of experiences. The study recruited teachers aged between 27 to 60 years old, who were working at various Chilean universities teaching EFL during the pandemic. All of the participants had been working at least four years prior to the start of ERT, while none of them had ever taught online classes before 2020. A total of 12 females and 5 males participated, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants in the study

Participant	University	Region	Experience
P1	Universidad Mayor Universidad Católica Silva Henríquez Universidad Autónoma	Central	23 years
P2	Universidad de Concepción	South	12 years
P3	Universidad de Tarapacá	North	20 years
P4	Universidad de las Américas Universidad Mayor	Central	12 years
P5	Universidad de Tarapacá	North	4 years
P6	Universidad de Tarapacá	North	4 years
P7	Universidad Católica Silva Henríquez	Central	28 years
P8	Universidad de Tarapacá	North	6 years
P9	Universidad de Tarapacá	North	18 years
P10	Universidad Andrés Bello Universidad de Santiago	Central	14 years
P11	Universidad Católica del Maule	South	28 years
P12	Universidad de Chile	Central	30 years
P13	Universidad Católica del Maule	South	10 years
P14	Universidad Mayor Universidad Autónoma de Santiago	Central	18 years
P15	Universidad de Concepción	South	4 years
P16	Universidad de Concepción	South	10 years
P17	Universidad de Concepción	South	21 years

The interview questions were based on the main issues explored in the literature review regarding online teaching. Semi-structured questions were chosen as they provided a structured guide but also the freedom to deviate and ask follow-up questions for clarification and exploration of an interesting point (Newby, 2014). The interview guideline consisted of approximately 15 questions that focused on the experiential aspects of online teaching in an emergency context (Appendix 1). All of the interviews but one were carried out in Spanish as Spanish is the native language for all of the interviewees

except one. For the outlying interview, the teacher felt more comfortable conducting the interview in English.

The recorded interviews were then transcribed and the data was analysed using a qualitative content analysis strategy (Canales, 2006). Following an inductive analysis, the data were coded and organised into emergent themes (Newby, 2014). In order to ensure reliability, the two researchers coded the transcripts separately and compared their results, ultimately combining and rearranging themes as deemed appropriate. Following the specific objectives, the results are divided into two broad categories: perceived challenges and perceived advantages. Within the challenges three themes emerged: (a) lack of interaction and participation; (b) time issues; and (c) health issues. While within the advantages, the three main themes that arose were: (a) accessibility of information and convenience; (b) flexibility; and (c) teacher motivation.

Results

Perceived challenges

(a) Lack of interaction and participation

One of the most salient disadvantages was the perceived lack of teacher-student and student-student interaction in the online classes. All of the teachers experienced hindrances when it came to making students participate, comment, and interact. The largest hurdle was that students did not turn their cameras on during class, provoking a sense of not being able to control the class. As one participant stated: “one does not really know if they are there or not, they are not connected” (P3). Overall, a pervading sense of talking to “a void” was highlighted by the teachers. One teacher stated: “[the students] are there, but they are like ghosts, and you are not even sure they are there because the microphone is turned off and the camera is turned off” (P15). Some teachers could not get their students to speak at all in what was supposed to be a communicative English class. Indeed, this was the most repeated experience.

Not only did cameras being turned off pose a limitation for communication but it also posed a limitation for teachers seeking to read students’ facial expressions: “because [in face-to-face classes] you look at their faces and you know they have doubts” (P4). Thus, teachers mentioned being doubtful and suspicious as to whether the students really understood the content of a lesson. The limited engagement in class was seen by teachers as extremely negative for learning to take place and create rapport. Overall, it was a shared opinion that ERT became much more teacher-centred than their typical teaching style.

Microphone use was an additional obstacle inside the online language class. As the students kept their microphones turned off during synchronous classes, teachers felt they had to speak to the entire class. One participant noted how she asked questions to the students and would end up answering them herself as no one would respond. Teachers hypothesised that students felt shy to use L2 in the online class; that, in some way, they felt more exposed than in a face-to-face setting.

(b) Time issues

The teachers interviewed had little to no previous experience or training in online instruction, and thus it is not surprising that time issues were reported as an obstacle. Extra preparation started with the learning about a specific platform during the first days of confinement in March. Teachers who worked in more than one university had to learn two or more platforms at the same time. Although the affordances of most platforms mentioned (Zoom, Google Meet, Teams, Blackboard, LMS) were similar, using one or another meant more time in front of the screen because of the required learning time. Teachers have different levels of comfort with technology which may have posed a challenge when making the transition to online classes (Bauer-Ramazani, 2006). It was notable how all the participants mentioned undergoing a very difficult time at the beginning of online classes and how, as time passed by, they became more and more accustomed to using the platforms. However, all in all, most teachers preferred carrying out their classes face-to-face compared to online.

Aside from learning to work with new technology, teachers also had to devote considerable time and effort to restructuring and replanning their classes as soon as they realised it was not just a matter of transferring the lessons to an online modality. One participant stressed how her planning workload doubled:

[online classes meant] transforming and searching and creating all over again, because you couldn't use the same PPT that you would use in class. I couldn't use the same handout that I would use in class, I had to use something else. So, it was kind of starting again from scratch. It was a lot, a lot, a lot of work (P1).

During the first weeks of classes, it became clear that time management was an issue. Modifications of lesson plans and activities led, in turn, to time management issues. One participant noted: "At the beginning, I had a lot of activities for the online classes, and in the end, I realised that I could only do three or four activities, not all the ones I had planned" (P6). Pacing of the class changed as teachers felt time passed much more quickly in remote classes than in a normal classroom setting. This was exacerbated by varying speeds of Internet connections, all kinds of technical problems, and latecomers, among others. Additionally, university authorities requested teachers to deliver shorter synchronous lessons, leaving teachers without sufficient time to cover the course programs wholly. Aware of this, teachers had to prioritise content:

... both students, so to speak, from online class and classroom class, deserve to have a quality education, so I had to somehow manage to do that, reducing some things, trying to focus on the essentials [...] *But I still lacked time* (P9, our emphasis).

In addition to this, teachers faced the challenges of assessing the course objectives: designing and applying reliable evaluation instruments. Using a platform to create an evaluation, in the words of a participant, "was very, very time-consuming" (P14). Added to this, correcting and giving feedback could take very long, the same participant mentioned, "it could take [me] half an hour. If I had 30 [students], imagine that" (P14). As a result, some teachers opted to design evaluations that were easier to correct and less complex.

Overall, the new and improvised nature of online teaching proved to be exhausting for teachers as they struggled to adapt their lesson plans, materials and assessments in a short period of time. Working from home might have been comfortable for some as they saved time commuting, yet there was a prevalent feeling of never-ending work:

Now I feel that work has increased strangely, now you feel that you work more because we are connected 24/7, so it is not like when you were at university, and you go home, and you somehow forget about work. Here work is always there, and that is still a psychological pressure (P7).

(c) Health issues

Taking into consideration the added workload, long hours in front of the computer, tablet or mobile phone, it was not surprising to find out that teachers experienced a range of ailments (both physical and mental) that affected their quality of life. All of the participants reported some kind of pain in one or more body parts: lower back, neck, wrist, hand, and leg. Headaches and eyestrain were, by far, the most prevalent health issues mentioned:

The physical side affected my eyesight - that was the first thing. The first effect I felt was eyestrain. I felt it strongly and I had to go to the ophthalmologist to check my eyes and change my glasses, because being in front of the computer for hours on Zoom especially really does affect my vision. Then, the other consequence that I have felt is in my back because I spend a lot of time sitting (P3).

One teacher revealed how he taught classes standing as it was no longer comfortable to sit all day and thus had to adapt his workstation (desk height).

Regarding mental health issues, not all the participants stated having been affected by the circumstances surrounding online teaching, yet those who did reported high levels of burnout and anxiety which led to a lack of sleep and an overall sense of uneasiness, "it's been terrible because in terms of mental health it got to a point where I collapsed, I was crying, crying, crying and as I never finished working" (P10). External conditions of the pandemic such as the confinement, isolation and health concerns surely added to this perceived anxiety. Isolation had additional consequences:

So it has been extremely negative and from a psychological and emotional point of view, I think that being with little direct interaction with people has affected my communication with my colleagues, for example (P7).

Overall, teachers had to cope with the frustration from the lack of communication with students and an increased workload while at the same time addressing emotional needs caused by the pandemic. It was emotionally exhausting for many participants.

Perceived advantages

(a) Accessibility of information and convenience

While the pandemic has brought on many "adjustments" for teachers in terms of methodology and teaching strategies, some positive aspects did emerge. Teachers were

quick to point out that recorded sessions were supportive, they helped remind students of what was done in class and students could go back and review the class at a later time. One teacher described how tardy students in a face-to-face class would miss material, but now, with the recording, they were able to go back and watch the class. Another teacher shared that “students can access the class anytime they want, at their own pace, if they need to stop, you know, [...] let's say that they are struggling with, I don't know, something, they can stop the class in the middle” (P13). Another teacher utilised the recordings as a way to cover material they were unable to finish in the synchronous lesson.

In addition to the use of the recorded video, teachers used the chat function of Zoom to save students' answers and provide feedback based on their written responses. It was found to be a useful way to help correct students' mistakes and errors. Similarly, another teacher took advantage of the tools available online by uploading a YouTube video before a synchronous class with a description of the content to be covered. The YouTube video was then supplemented with a PPT in synchronous classes, explaining the same content, but in another way. While overall teachers saw the recordings as a plus, one teacher was quick to comment that “the recordings and revising them is good for theoretical classes, but I don't think it's very good for more practical and participatory classes” (P3).

In addition to taking advantage of the platforms, many of the teachers were able to utilise the Internet to provide access to links, videos, to “review the online dictionary” (P6) or material online in real time. They were able to share this information with students much quicker than in a face-to-face class, “in terms of learning you might have the most immediate access” (P14). Another commented, “for that matter, the transfer of information was much faster [...] you have immediate access” (P6).

Besides the accessibility of information, teachers found other aspects of ERT convenient. One teacher in Santiago said:

[the online class] facilitates or it makes your life easier in the sense that you don't have to leave your house, if you have a class at 8 o'clock, you can be up at ten to eight if you want, in the midst of the cold and winter (P 14).

A teacher from the south of Chile added:

I have some classes that start at eight o'clock [...] and many students who sometimes had problems attending, with the traffic or the distance and ended up arriving late for classes. Now you don't have those displacement conflicts or it was too early that now they could probably fall asleep totally. Now it is not necessary to travel (P16).

In addition to not having to travel to classes, one teacher commented “I have been able to be at my house every day, prepare breakfast for my children and have lunch with them” (P1). There was also more flexibility in terms of using down time to do domestic work around the house:

... when I don't have to be in class, I can coordinate housework, something that with face-to-face classes I was [unable to do]. I was in the classroom all the time and then

back at the office and in the office, sometimes there was no work to do. I just had to be there completing my schedule. And housework was put off until the weekend, because during the week it was very difficult to arrive at eight or nine in the evening to even want to try to do something, there was no desire (P16).

One final convenience mentioned was not having to carry materials (laptops, books, etc.) around campus:

It suits me so I don't have to move or carry the materials. In some places where we have classes, the classrooms do not have a computer, they do not have the resources we need and we have to carry those resources and go around the campus carrying everything we need (P16).

(b) Flexibility

Apart from being more convenient and having more accessibility, teachers also noticed themselves becoming more flexible during online classes. One teacher “chose to agree on everything with the students, that is, not to impose things, but rather with them, to reach our agreements on how we were going to cover the contents” (P3). Another teacher confessed that:

... when I feel bad, I tell the students, today I'm not in the best of spirits, so I'm going to put in all my effort and for you too, if you don't feel well, I understand [...] So we have a very close relationship and that helps a lot (P17).

He went on to explain that some students would comment that they did not want to participate and he had no problem with that. He tried to develop a good relationship with students, focusing on the emotional side, and felt that the close relationship had helped with his classes. He included:

In fact, one day we had a class to talk about our emotional dramas. It was cathartic. I said, the content of the class will be asynchronous. I'm going to upload material and, in this class, let's use it to discuss what is happening to us (P17).

Another teacher commented how:

I integrated the fact of connecting earlier because before I just connected and I kind of realised that that was a bit impersonal. That there was no room for the student to open up a bit and say to me, miss, I'm having a hard time or I need support [...] if I connect five minutes before, [...] it can give me time to talk to the student and for the student to express a little more and also trust you and see that I am also a person just like them [...] The emotional element is very important, many times one is worried that the class turns out well, because you are worried that everything works like the Internet, the PowerPoint, everything, sometimes we forget that we also have to be empathetic and that the student trusts you (P2).

Several teachers explained how they focused on the emotional aspect during ERT. They left an opening at either the beginning or end of class to give students time to discuss their problems and provide advice without taking up class time. One teacher who left time at the end of class explained how he did it.

... suddenly the recording is over, the requirement of the university [...] and I ask them, what's going on guys? Are you understanding me [...] those conversations were not super conversations but it was a relevant theme once we finished the recording, to ask them. Those were in Spanish (P14).

While some teachers found it difficult to be flexible in the beginning (P14), others were quick to comment the opposite, “my personal relationship with students improved a lot because I was much more empathic and much more flexible [...] it brought me closer to them [the students]” (P1). In addition, she explained:

My role as a teacher went beyond delivering content, it was also one of containment, as I fulfilled a role beyond delivering knowledge, but I feel I was also there to be able to attend to other things of the students and that's how I feel that it humanised the role I had more (P1).

She relayed how she believed that her students had noticed the change and appreciated it. Overall, she found it to be a significant experience and “what I mainly can take from this whole situation was [...] having been forced to be more flexible, empathise, be much more human and prioritise other things beyond the disciplinary content” (P1). In general, many of the teachers described being more fluid and connecting to students on a more personable and equitable level.

(c) Motivation

Even though many of the teachers encountered struggles, all but one commented that they still felt fully dedicated and involved in their classes. One teacher related, “you had to make them understand without being with you there, from a distance, from a screen, a PowerPoint projected on the entire screen and make them really understand” (P4). This specific circumstance made her feel:

... motivated and kind of happy, but I did have the motivation that they understood. It was like a very important goal. So, I think I took great care in trying to find all the possible methodologies to achieve understanding through this environment (P4).

As pedagogues, many of the professors felt that the students deserved their full attention, “the class had to be done the same and be done well, because whoever gets up or turns on the microphone is worthy of that” (P15). Another positive outlook by one of the teachers was, “I know that I'm not going to change the world. But if I help one or two or three of them, I'm happy” (P13). Even though this teacher was close to a breakdown she was able to motivate herself to overcome the situation. A fellow teacher commented that, “I try to make the class quick so that the student does not get bored” (P11). He understood the need to change activities frequently for students online as it was commonplace for them to become distracted or uninterested.

A different teacher explained, “it has been difficult and it has been a challenge. I think that when at least I learn new things, like from some application or new resource, that motivates me to motivate my students” (P8). Finally, another teacher shared, “it may be like this atmosphere of informality that has developed because of all this, but they (my

students) motivate me a lot” (P5). Even though some teachers had to put in “double or triple the effort”, most of them felt that it was worth it, “if the teacher is having a good time, some of that will also be transmitted to the student” (P17).

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the experiences of EFL university teachers in Chile who faced a sudden digital transition due to state and institutional regulations to contain the Covid-19 outbreak. This study shows a range of experiences, approaches, and perceptions of ERT that can be understood along a continuum from negative to positive experiences.

In general terms, the first semester of 2020 was very taxing and complicated for all the participants in the study, as they had to quickly adapt to mostly new digital tools and methods. Universities and English departments provided guidelines for teachers to follow in the online setting, but not all of them offered formal training to help with the transition. Thus, teachers were mostly on their own to learn the affordances of specific video conferencing platforms and learning management systems that were used to carry out classes (both synchronous and asynchronous). Unfamiliarity with digital tools did not last long though and soon enough teachers became accustomed to using them. However, other issues arose along the way, such as a lack of interaction and participation, time issues and health complications.

Synchronous teaching, the most common method of delivering English lessons, was problematic due to many factors mentioned in the interviews: Internet instability, lack of participation and interaction from students, time management issues, among others. These findings are in line with the drawbacks reported in the literature on both ERT and online education (De Gagne & Walters, 2009; Dossari et al., 2022; González & Herrera, 2015; Mishra et al., 2020; Mohammed et al., 2020).

A general sense of work overload was prevalent among the participants, and this, in their opinion, resulted in a decline in their mental and physical health as they had to spend a greater amount of time preparing lessons, materials and assessment instruments. These difficulties, combined with the issues and anxieties brought about by the pandemic, such as isolation, social distancing, personal health issues, health issues of family members, personal responsibilities, etc., led to an increase of stress on educators. Other studies have collaborated the significant levels of stress placed on educators during this time (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2020). In addition, juggling remote work and household responsibilities was seen as a blurring of boundaries between personal time and work time which proved exhausting for some teachers.

Language instruction had its own unique challenges during ERT as teachers had to deal with the complexity of implementing a communicative approach to a group of rather passive students. These teachers indicated that the inability to get immediate responses from students and give personalised feedback were barriers for meaningful learning to take place, which corresponds to the experience in other countries such as Indonesia

(Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020). Although language input was constantly maintained in online synchronous lessons, language output, specifically oral output, was severely diminished as student participation drastically decreased. Surveys have pointed out that this might have a detrimental effect on the acquisition of oral skills (Zamborová et al., 2021).

Not everything was negative, however; teachers identified some pleasant aspects to working online, the convenience of having their classes recorded, the possibility of using innovative digital tools and the ease of not commuting. Undoubtedly, the first two elements were identified as advantages for the learning process of a foreign language as both synchronous and asynchronous lessons could be helpful to develop different sets of language skills. Online teaching provided the opportunity to communicate through other media, such as via chat, and this was perceived as a positive aspect by some teachers as students showed more self-confidence. This finding is similar to Murtiningsih et al. (2020).

Teachers also acknowledged that they became more flexible and reflective in their teaching style, adapting themselves to unaccustomed situations and engaging in an open dialogue with students. Oftentimes, displaying a remarkable level of adaptability in their educational practices (re-designing their classes, overall courses and instructional methods) in an attempt to put the well-being of students and the learning process at the forefront.

Despite being under great stress and anxiety, teachers reported being highly motivated and committed to providing their best effort to deliver quality lessons while also supporting their students emotionally in the midst of the ongoing crisis.

Conclusions

From the emergent teaching demands, it is possible to open the discussion of potential future practices in digital education and foreign language teaching. Some of the implications for teaching practices that can be drawn upon relate to the importance of providing training to language teachers for effective and sustainable digital practices that encourage teacher to student and student to student participation. Providing access to digital tools that are specifically focused on EFL learning processes to boost participation of students and take further advantage of the affordances of digitally-mediated communication, such as implementing international tele collaboration programs. Additionally, the use of blended learning could be introduced more into EFL higher education programs as several professors did mention how theoretical courses were more suited for online work (Mohamed, 2022; Rianto, 2020). The use of flipped classrooms is a further option, some teachers utilised strategies of a flipped classroom during the Covid-19 pandemic, by providing materials and content beforehand, then doing practical activities in class (Al-Naabi et al., 2022). Adapting to these types of digital education programs might be easier now due to the trial-and-error forced upon everyone by Covid-19. From the lessons learnt of this critical period it becomes crucial for higher education policy-makers and those in managerial roles to listen to the voice of experience of teachers who were on the frontline during ERT.

As for the limitations of the study, it is important to mention that this study did not consider variables such as gender, generation and type of university in the analysis. Including a follow-up interview to see if the participants' views have changed with the experience gained in ERT and expanding the analysis to consider other dimensions could help to shed light on additional variables. Further research could be done focusing on the experiences of administrative personnel and decision-makers within different institutions to see if it mirrors that of the teaching staff.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Background questions

1. How old are you?
2. Where is your place of employment?
3. What is your official title in this institution?
4. Do you have any children? How many? Who do you reside with? How many people live in your current residence?
5. Where do you conduct your classes from in your house? What device do you use to conduct your classes?
6. How long have you been teaching English?
7. Have you ever taught an online class before?
8. What would you rate your level of computer expertise as? How comfortable do you feel teaching online classes? How comfortable do you feel with technology?
9. What platform do you use to teach your class online?
10. What programs did you use to present your classes?

Teaching at home: drawbacks and advantages

11. How often did you communicate with students?
12. How did changing to an online platform affect your communication with students?
13. How do you feel the peer interactions/responses were during presentations online in comparison to in the classroom?
14. What are the advantages and disadvantages to presenting online as compared to face-to-face?
15. How has your mental and physical health been affected?
16. How would you compare your experience teaching a class online to teaching a class face-to-face?

Face to face versus online

17. What differences occurred in regards to your planning? How were you able to maintain the quality of what you presented (content) online as opposed to in class?

Experience

18. How engaged do you feel when teaching a class online?
19. Would you rate your experience to date with your course as successful? Why/why not?
20. When face-to-face classes resume, would you like to continue teaching online? Why do you feel that way?
21. What suggestions or adjustments would you make in order to improve your online course?
22. How did you deal with technological difficulties in your classes?

Learning skills and teaching styles

23. In what ways does teaching online facilitate your teaching style? Does teaching online fit your teaching style? Why/why not?

Nicholas Scarlota is currently a professor at Universidad de Talca, Linares, Chile. He holds a Master of Education from Cabrini University, United States, and has over ten years of English language teaching experience throughout Chile. His professional interests include teaching English to young learners.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9679-4903>

Email: nicholasscarlota@gmail.com

Rocío Knipp is a PhD candidate in Social Sciences at Universidad de Chile, Chile. She is a scholarship recipient from ANID Becas/Doctorado Nacional No21201525. Her current research interest is digitalisation of higher education. She holds a MA in Linguistics and Literature: English from KU Leuven, Belgium, and has worked as an English language instructor for over ten years.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2426-2518>

Email: knipp.rocio@gmail.com

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