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## CHAPTER 18

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' CHALLENGES WITH ADAPTING TO REMOTE TEACHING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**Abstract:** Serbian teachers had to urgently adapt to new teaching circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The adaptation process involved accommodating and adapting teaching methodologies, teaching materials, grading and assessment, communication, and time and space management. This paper investigates how the English teachers' accommodation process went and how it affected teachers' attitudes and performance during emergency remote teaching. The data was analyzed using a mixed-methods design, and the results revealed that teachers underwent a challenging adaptation and accommodation process because of inadequate or lacking preparation and support. We propose possible solutions for the future in case remote teaching becomes a new reality in Serbian education and suggest further research on the current effects of the emergency transition from classroom instruction to remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** *online teaching, primary school, the pandemic, remote learning, COVID-19, Serbian education system.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Serbian education system faced a challenging situation when the COVID-19 pandemic required an urgent transition from offline to online teaching. This sudden shift happened without warning, impacting the teaching process and its stakeholders: teachers, students, counselors, and school administration (Jović 2023a).

The urgent transition from offline to online teaching required several kinds of adjustment: technical, communicative, interactional, methodological, curricular, spatial, and temporal (DeCoito and Estaiteyeh 2022). Given the urgency of the transition, there was not enough preparation and accommodation time, which also affected teachers personally, so they felt that they should have made some emotional adjustments that would have prepared them for the challenging experience of online teaching.

This paper researches teachers' perception of online English teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in grades 5-8 in Serbian public schools. It aims to present the challenges and problems teachers faced, and it uses teachers' experience and observations to define the strong and the weak sides of online teaching during the pandemic. It also aims to determine whether teachers' knowledge of English facilitated their navigation of the online world that abounds in teaching materials written in English. Teachers also shared how English helped their students adapt to the new teaching environment and context.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to explain the new context and teaching circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia, it is vital to compare emergency remote teaching with online teaching because the two are not the same except for the Internet and digital tools used to deliver classes and access learning materials. Online learning is planned with plenty of time in advance, while emergency remote teaching takes place in times of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. "Well-planned online learning experiences are meaningfully different from courses offered online in response to a crisis or disaster" (Hodges, Moore et al. 2020). It is vital to understand these differences when assessing and evaluating emergency remote teaching during the pandemic.

Online learning is a carefully designed process where a detailed plan is made for modality, pacing, pedagogy, instructors' role, students' role, online communication, assessments, and feedback (Means, Bakia and Murphy 2014). Timely planning and consideration have a positive effect on the design, delivery, and success of online learning.

Emergency remote teaching is "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances" (Hodges, Moore et al.

2020). Classroom teaching is urgently transferred to the online setting, which implies that there are not enough available resources for careful planning. Emergency remote teaching requires ad hoc solutions, creativity, and a high level of teachers' and students' adaptability.

One of the ad-hoc solutions for the Serbian context was “television distance learning in order to ensure proper and equal operationalization of educational institutions, in accordance with the decisions of the government of the Republic of Serbia” (Vasiljević, Bojović and Semiz 2022: 92). This allowed students without the Internet to access lessons that were available on RTS, one of the national broadcasters.

Given the difference between online learning and emergency remote teaching, we wanted to investigate how teachers felt about the urgent shift from classrooms to online platforms and televised lessons hoping that their experience can help in similar circumstances in the future.

## METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a mixed-methods design. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently, but they were analyzed separately in order to understand the research problem better. Then, they were integrated so that the qualitative data could provide more information and details about the quantitative data, ensuring the data objectivity. (Morgan 1998).

The informants of this study were English teachers who worked in the state primary schools in Serbia and taught English online in grades 5-8 during the COVID-19 pandemic. An email with the questionnaire was sent to the principals of the state primary schools. We asked the principals to distribute the questionnaire to their English teachers. The participation in this research was on a voluntary basis.

Teachers anonymously shared their online teaching experience through an online questionnaire (Jović 2024), which was sent to all state primary schools in Serbia via email, but not all English teachers working in the state primary schools responded to the invitation to participate in the research. This paper presents the results collected from 109 teachers. The questionnaire was made in Google Forms, and it included open-ended questions and dichotomous and Likert scales.

The questionnaire has 72 Google Form sections made for conditional branching, which is a feature that changes what question or page a respondent sees next based on how they answer the current question. The paper version of this questionnaire wouldn't work well because of conditional branching. Besides, there were sections that were not included in this particular research because they would deviate from the main research topic.

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The first set of questions was aimed at teachers' self-evaluation of digital competencies and their digital teaching experience before the pandemic started in Serbia in March 2020. We are sharing the list of questions from this set:

1. Evaluate your digital competencies.
2. Did you use digital tools before the pandemic?
3. What digital applications did you use before the pandemic?
4. What digital devices did you use before the pandemic?
5. What digital platforms did you use before the pandemic?

The second set of questions was about teachers' self-evaluation of their accommodation to the new circumstances. We are sharing the list of questions from this set:

1. How did you accommodate to the new teaching circumstances?
2. Describe the challenges you had during the accommodation process.
3. Did you ask for help during the remote teaching?
4. Who did you ask for help?
5. How did they help you?
6. Who provided you with the biggest support?
7. Who did you help during the remote teaching?
8. How did you help them?
9. How did you communicate with students?
10. Describe the challenges you had with communication.
11. Did you adjust your teaching methods, strategies, and materials during the remote teaching?
12. What was the outcome of your adjustments?
13. What was it like to teach reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar and vocabulary?
14. Did you notice a change in students' behavior and motivation?
15. Were you able to meet your teaching aims and goals?

The third set of questions targeted teachers' opinions about the organization and implementation of online classes and their recommendations and suggestions for improving online English teaching. We are sharing the list of questions from this set:

1. How would you describe your remote teaching experience?
2. Were you satisfied with the organization of the emergency remote teaching?

3. Do you think the remote teaching had an adverse effect on teaching in general?
4. Do you think your remote teaching experience will be useful in your teaching practice in the future?
5. Was your knowledge of English useful during the remote teaching?
6. Do you think your students' knowledge of English was useful to your students during the remote teaching?
7. What would you have changed about the remote teaching?

## RESULTS

### The first set of questions: digital competencies

Teachers evaluated their pre-pandemic digital competencies on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 stands for unsatisfactory and 5 for excellent. Almost 70% of the teachers rated their digital competencies as *excellent* or *very good*, while about 6% believed their digital competencies were *satisfactory* or *unsatisfactory*. See Figure 1 for details.

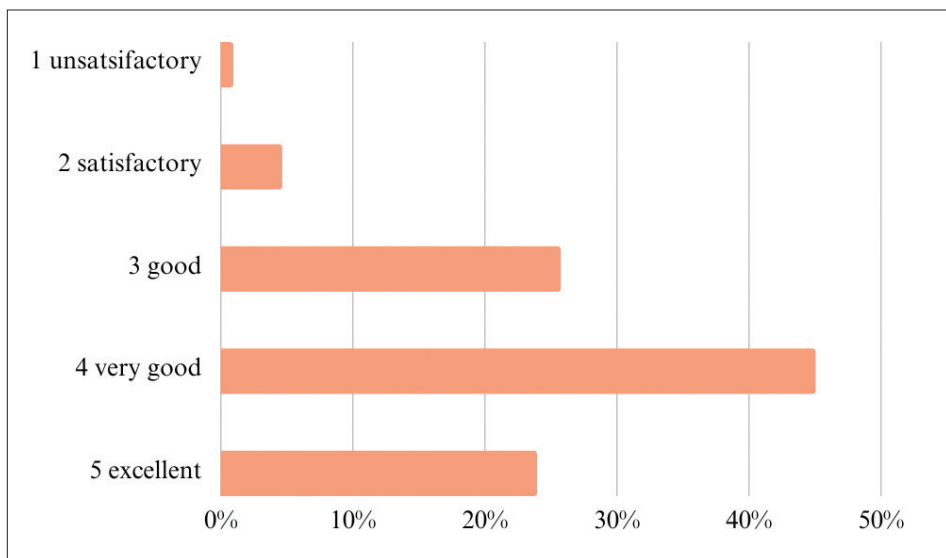


Figure 1. Teachers' self-evaluation of their pre-pandemic digital competencies

Considering the digital tools they used for their classes before the pandemic, 71.6% of the teachers listed Google Classroom, Google Meet, and interactive

electronic books as the most frequently used tools that allowed them to keep in touch with students outside classes, share schoolwork, and homework materials and enrich their classes with more interactive content. Besides these three, they also used Zoom, Viber, and Microsoft Teams to stay connected with students. They used PowerPoint, Edmodo, Kahoot!, Learning Apps, Oxford Learners' Bookshelf, Socrative, Wordwall, YouTube, and Quizlet to enrich classes.

Teachers used the following digital devices before the pandemic to make it possible for all these tools to function correctly: cell phones, overhead, laptops, and interactive boards.

### The second set of questions: The accommodation process

To describe their accommodation to the new teaching circumstances, teachers chose one of the four statements that best describe their accommodation experience: (1) *It was smooth*, (2) *It was challenging in the beginning only, and then it was smooth*, (3) *I needed lots of time to accommodate*, and (4) *I never accommodated*. The majority chose *It was challenging in the beginning only, and then it was smooth* to describe how their accommodation process developed. See Figure 2 for details.

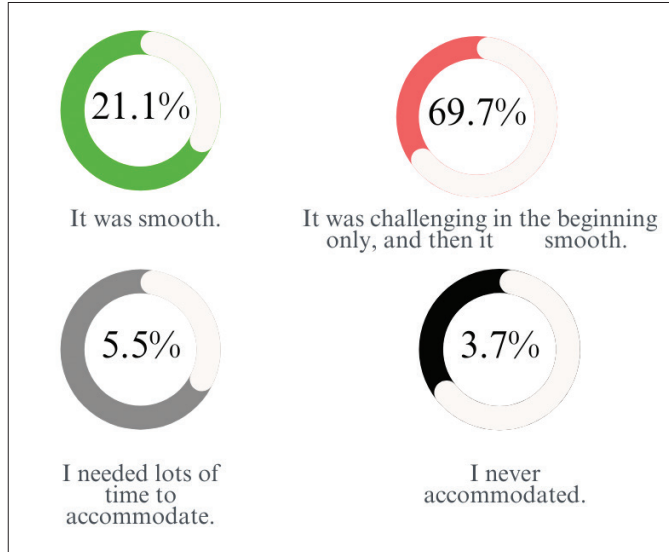


Figure 2. Teachers' self-evaluation of their accommodation process

Teachers were also asked about what presented a challenge during their accommodation. They listed the following in descending order: students' poor Internet or lack of technological equipment, lack of proper communication with students, time pressure, improper student evaluation and grading, new teaching methods, incomplete or missing teaching materials, lack of students' digital competencies, health issues, lack of working space, misuse of teachers' video or audio recording, and information overload, also known as infostress.

To overcome the challenges and accommodate more easily, 47.7% of the teachers asked for help from their colleagues, school principals, ICT teachers, their families, psycho-pedagogical counselors, technical support staff, students, and coursebook publishers.

Almost all the teachers believed that teaching methods had to be adjusted to the new teaching context, so 98.2% of the teachers made adjustments. While 73.8% believed the adjustment yielded results, 26.2% reported that these adjustments were unsuccessful and did not meet their expectations.

These are the reasons teachers listed as the leading causes of the failure to adjust teaching methods to students' lack of interest in online classes, students' absence, and students' refusal to turn on cameras and microphones. On the other hand, some students who were interested and present physically, visually, and auditorily in class would experience technical issues with their equipment or the Internet, which affected their motivation and persistence in class. Teachers also added that no accommodation of teaching methods to the new teaching circumstances could replace classroom instruction teaching and live contact with students. Tomović and Aleksić (2020) came to the same conclusion in their paper that investigated teaching English online in Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic from mid-March till the end of June 2020.

Besides their methods, the teachers were also adjusting their teaching materials. For the online classes during the pandemic, 80.7% of the teachers used supplementary teaching materials like quizzes, interactive worksheets, interactive coursebooks, YouTube, and coursebooks from other publishers.

Although they had made necessary changes and adjustments, the teachers noticed certain issues with students' language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and two important language components (grammar and vocabulary). Students struggled with writing the most and vocabulary the least. See Figure 3 for details.

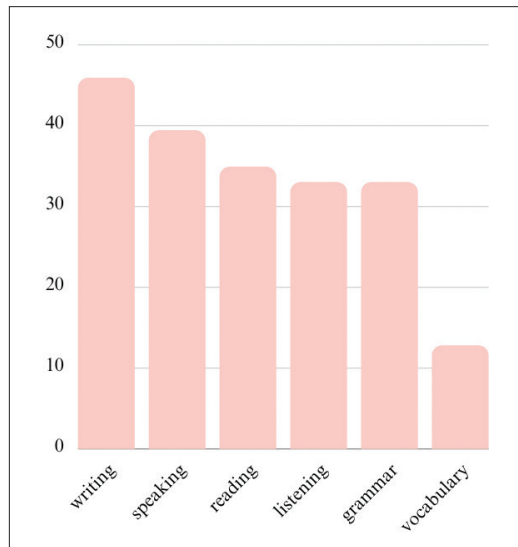


Figure 3. Problems and struggles with language skills and components

Teachers were asked what they thought caused students' struggles with these skills and components. The teachers explained that asynchronous classes incurred the lack of proper communication and that students' motivation, time, and continuity negatively affected their performance.

A little more than half of the teachers considered that learning goals and objectives were not met due to a lack of proper communication, students' technological problems, irregular attendance, lack of interest in the subject and classes, and lack of time.

### The third set of questions: Teachers' opinions and attitudes

Teachers were given 12 adjectives to choose from and describe their impressions of the online English teaching during the pandemic. There were five positive adjectives (*innovative, interesting, empowering, fulfilling, liberating*) and six negative adjectives (*exhausting, frustrating, unpredictable, chaotic, confusing, depressing*), and one neutral adjective with both positive and negative connotations (*challenging*). See Figure 4 for teachers' responses.

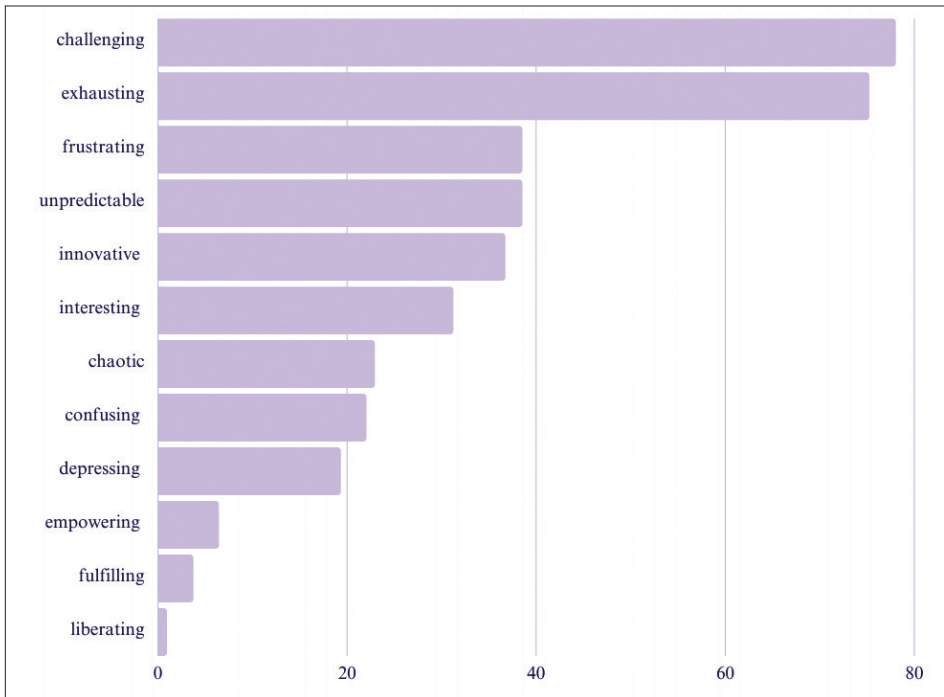


Figure 4. Teachers' opinions about the online classes during the pandemic.

Teachers expressed concern for the future of English teaching once the pandemic stopped and classes returned to physical classrooms. They believe that online classes during the pandemic would degrade the teaching profession, reduce students' interest in learning, decrease the level of acquired knowledge, cause students' unrealistic expectations for high grades, and lead to hybrid classes in the future.

Most of the teachers felt that the fact that they knew English during the pandemic made their classes easier, both for themselves and their students. A little more than 80% of the teachers claimed that English facilitated their accommodation to the new teaching context, given that most supplementary materials and online tutorials were mainly in English. Teachers also noticed that students were more comfortable with conferencing tools because they could understand simple instructions, commands, and prompts from the software. Students shared with their English teachers that they were able to help their teachers of other subjects who did not know English well enough to navigate the online teaching environment.

Despite all the reported difficulties and challenges of accommodation and implementation of the online classes, 82.6% of the teachers found this pandemic teaching experience invaluable, and 52.3% feel ready for a new round of online classes if necessary.

One of the questions asked teachers to summarize what they would have done if they had had enough time to prepare for the online classes. They believed previous proper training about online tools and teaching environment, better time management, and adequate working space would have been very helpful. They also added that they would have kept their patience, persistence, and motivation at a higher level to ensure they were emotionally equipped to endure the requirements of the online teaching context.

## DISCUSSION

From the results of the first set of questions, we learned that almost 70% of the teachers had rated their digital competency as excellent or very good. Almost the same percentage of teachers (71.6%) had previous experience with digital materials and digital devices. Teachers' self-assessed digital skills and familiarity with digital resources lead us to conclude that teachers would experience little trouble while accommodating to the new teaching context.

However, only 21% said that their accommodation process was smooth. Nearly 70% described their accommodation process as "*challenging at the beginning, but then it was smooth*", meaning that the accommodation did not go smoothly in the initial stages of the emergency remote teaching.

Besides technological and methodological problems that were directly related to teaching and were said to be the main causes of the previous problems, the teachers also talked about not having enough space to work, health problems, being afraid of audio and video abuse, and the stress of information overload, or infostress.

The lack of working space added more pressure and frustration because the teachers shared their lives and workspace with family members who were also forced to study or work from home at the same time. This situation did not provide the necessary working conditions, which affected teachers' performance in class and attitude towards online teaching.

Teachers' health issues manifested as headaches, sore eyes, and backaches due to the long sedentary time spent in front of screens. The teachers added that their health issues continued long after returning to classrooms, suggesting that they had developed chronic health issues due to the physical and mental stress that accumulated during the emergency remote teaching.

The fear of audio and video abuse seemed realistic to some teachers. It was beyond their control to prohibit students from recording their classes, so they feared having the recordings of their classes abused and distributed among students or on the internet with the purpose of mockery. This fear puts additional stress and anxiety on teachers.

Teachers were burdened with new information in emails and instant messages coming from school administrations, principals, colleagues, students, and parents. This information overload added extra pressure on teachers, who were also exposed to media information about the risks and dangers of the pandemic. The information overload caused infostress: “the disparity between the rapidly growing production of information and the limited ability of the human mind to process it” (Ledzinska and Postek 2017: 1). The confrontation of the mind with overstimulation from information leads to psychological consequences (Ledzinska and Postek, 2017), which explains why teachers reported infostress as one of the challenges of online teaching during the pandemic.

Faced with stress, teachers asked for help, coming from the school administration and colleagues, their families, and even students. The fact that their families and students acted as facilitators in the online teaching process is indicative of the lack of an adequate system of support, which should have come from those in charge of the school operations. The lack of suitable support exerted additional pressure on teachers who had to rely on family members or students to help them navigate the difficulties and challenges of the accommodation process.

The majority believed that their efforts to adapt the teaching materials were successful. Nevertheless, almost 30% believed that the accommodation and adaptation of the teaching methods was not productive due to students’ lack of interest and engagement in class. Teachers added that those students who showed interest and wanted to participate encountered technical issues that prevented them from engaging successfully, leading to decreased motivation. As the pandemic unfolded, there should have been a detailed plan on maintaining students’ interest in motivation and supporting students with failing technology so that the teaching process could flow as seamlessly as possible.

About 80% percent of teachers used supplementary digital and electronic materials for their online classes, which is about 10% more than in classroom teaching. Teachers continued exploiting these sources of materials after the pandemic, which is perceived as an improvement in teaching practices.

According to the teachers’ comments in the questionnaire, students underperformed in speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary compared to their performance in an offline teaching context. Teachers concluded that the necessary changes and adjustments they had made during remote teaching did not help students maintain their performance. It is advisable to consider how careful planning of regular, timely, and glitch-free communication between teachers and students, maintaining students’ motivation and attendance, and supporting students’ time management could mitigate the adverse effects of remote teaching on the language skills and components mentioned above.

Almost 80% of the teachers found the online teaching context *challenging* and *exhausting*. They also frequently used the adjectives *frustrating* and *unpredictable* to describe the online teaching experience. A few teachers described online teaching as *empowering*, *fulfilling*, and *liberating*. Based on these descriptions, we conclude that the teachers were mainly stressed and upset about online teaching during the pandemic and that providing primarily positive feedback on the new teaching context was hard for them. However, one adjective has both positive and negative connotations, and the teachers used this adjective the most frequently: *challenging*. Whether it was a positively or negatively challenging experience for teachers, we believe it took its toll on teachers' well-being as challenges are usually demanding and complex regardless of their connotation (Jović 2023a).

Both teachers and students found their knowledge of English helpful for navigating the challenging pandemic time. The emergency online teaching could be used as an opportunity to remind students of the importance of mastering a foreign language that can be used as a tool to facilitate demanding and taxing circumstances like the emergency remote learning during the pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

Despite self-evaluating their digital skills as *excellent* and *very good* and their pre-pandemic digital experience as *rich* and *solid*, teachers underwent a strenuous period of accommodation to the emergency remote teaching context during the pandemic. The demands and challenges stemmed from the unsystematic and inconsistent organization of the online teaching process, inadequate communication with students, incomplete or malfunctioning technical equipment, the lack of adequate working space, and the weak technical and psychological support system. All these added stress and frustration to teachers' daily lives during the pandemic, which took its physical and emotional toll on teachers' health.

Teachers' shared experiences revealed that most of them were equipped with technological and digital skills to sustain the flow of the teaching process. However, they all lacked emotional support and life skills for the online work setting. The online experience teachers gained from the pandemic could be used as a foundation for timely and careful planning of a strategy towards adequate training. Such training would provide teachers with tools that facilitate the management of time, space, personal resources, and teaching processes.

Additionally, we suggest further research be done about the future of the Serbian system in order to address teachers' concerns about the future of education, the reputation of the teaching profession, and students' level of knowledge acquisition and interests. The online teaching during the pandemic inflicted long-lasting

adverse effects on classroom instruction teaching today, so we suggest further investigation be done to prevent irreparable harm to the education system.

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