

Article

# Facing emergency remote language teaching: The attitudes and competences of future EFL teachers

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## CITATION

Palacios-Hidalgo FJ, Huertas-Abril CA. (2024). Facing emergency remote language teaching: The attitudes and competences of future EFL teachers. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 6(2): 1160.  
<https://doi.org/10.59400/fls.v6i2.1160>

## ARTICLE INFO

Received: 8 November 2023

Accepted: 20 December 2023

Available online: 1 April 2024

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 or Coronavirus health emergency brought about disruptions that highlighted the need to adapt education, especially language education, to secure students' learning process. In this light, new terms, such as Emergency Remote Language Teaching, arose to differentiate 'traditional' online education from what was done in classrooms when schools were closed during the pandemic. Teachers directed their efforts to guarantee the continuity of students' learning, which has been reflected in the increase in the number of studies examining how they have coped with this situation. In relation to the teaching and learning of English, however, there is limited research, up to the researchers' knowledge, that explores whether teachers feel prepared to teach in Emergency Remote Language Teaching situations. Therefore, this paper studies the attitudes of Spanish future teachers of English concerning their readiness and abilities for Emergency Remote Language Teaching situations. Findings show that participants have positive attitudes towards adapting content to Emergency Remote Language Teaching, giving appropriate feedback, and selecting proper assessment methods. Moreover, they consider their training at university has been appropriate. Finally, recommendations to include strategies for Emergency Remote Language Teaching in teacher training syllabi are provided.

**Keywords:** emergency remote language teaching; language education; language teaching and learning; student teachers; teacher training; technology enhanced language learning

## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of 2020, global education suffered from distressing disruptions caused by COVID-19 at all levels, which, according to UNESCO (2021), provoked that around 1.6 billion students and 100 million teachers were had to face the abrupt closure of primary, high schools and universities. By the end of October 2021 (more than one year after the first COVID-19 outbreak), although contagions and deaths in countries like Spain, France, Portugal, or the United Kingdom has been decreasing (Ritchie et al., 2020), experts from different disciplines agree that the world and education, as we know them, will not return to "normal" in the short term (Fenwick et al., 2021; Xiao, 2021). In fact, in response to the unprecedented COVID 19 pandemic, the world had to live in "the new normal" in many different sectors such as economy, social, politics and education.

With the start of the Fall 2021 term, Higher Education institutions in various countries around the world returned to face-to-face teaching as Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary schools already did back in 2020. However, the pandemic raised questions about the feasibility and potential of hybrid instruction, highlighted the need to look for and use alternative teaching practices, and emphasised the

importance of digital fluency skills among teachers and learners (Paris, 2021). In this line, scholars have reflected on how essential digital literacy has become in education (Crick, 2021; Lama, 2020), and especially among teachers (Girón-Escudero et al., 2019; Pozo-Sánchez et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Alayo and Cabell-Rosales, 2021).

At this juncture, international institutions and organisations, such as UNESCO and IESALC (2020), have stressed the need to adapt education to the new circumstances and to direct energies to deliver the best possible distance and/or hybrid instruction to secure the learning process of students across the globe. Among the different subjects and disciplines taught at schools, foreign languages were seriously disturbed by the effects of the pandemic, because school closures and the introduction of online teaching generally entailed a loss of orality and possibilities for teachers to interact with students and check their understanding (Cheung, 2021). As a consequence of this situation, terms like Emergency Remote Teaching (known by its acronym ‘ERT’; Hodges et al. (2020) as well as Emergency Remote Language Teaching (henceforth ERLT; Huertas-Abril et al., 2021; Huertas-Abril and Palacios-Hidalgo, 2022; Palacios-Hidalgo and Huertas-Abril, 2021) became relevant in the peak of the health emergency in an attempt to clarify the differences between ‘traditional’ online education and new methodologies and approaches implemented to secure students’ quality learning during COVID-related school closures.

Undoubtedly, teachers from all subjects and levels directed great deals of efforts to maintain students’ learning process, and several studies examined (and are still examining) how this was carried out at the different educational stages (e.g., Carius, 2020; Sintema, 2020). In relation to the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), initiatives were developed (e.g., Lisa et al., 2021; Naputi-Rivera, 2021); however, up to the researchers’ knowledge, there is limited research examining the attitudes of future teachers towards their university training during the COVID-19 emergency. Considering this, this paper studies Spanish future EFL teachers’ attitudes concerning skills to teach during ERLT situations.

## **2. Statement of the problem**

The increasing prevalence of ERLT in response to unforeseen circumstances, such as global health crises, requires a comprehensive exploration of language teachers’ perceptions regarding the challenges and prerequisites associated with this paradigm shift. As educators are compelled to swiftly adapt to online instructional methods, understanding their perspectives on the urgency, efficacy, and practicality of ERLT becomes imperative, nevertheless, research is limited in this field up to the researchers’ knowledge. This study aims to investigate Spanish EFL teachers’ perceptions, including their preparedness, technological skills, and pedagogical strategies in the face of unexpected shifts to remote language instruction. By delving into educators’ perspectives, this research seeks to provide valuable insights for educational institutions, policymakers, and instructional designers, thereby fostering a more informed and effective approach to ERLT in the contemporary educational landscape.

Ultimately, it intends to respond to the following study questions:

- Research question 1 (RQ1). How do Spanish future EFL teachers feel regarding

their skills to teach during ERLT situations?

- Research question 2 (RQ2). Does gender affect the attitudes of future EFL teachers towards how to deal with ERLT?
- Research question 3 (RQ3). How do Spanish future EFL teachers feel concerning their university training to teach during ERLT situations?

### **3. Teachers, distance education and COVID-19: The rise of ERT and ERLT**

Following the emergence of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, world education had to shift from face-to-face lessons and adopt “alternative distance-learning solutions to ensure the continuity of quality education” (Miao et al., 2020, p. 8). Schools and universities endured a shift to distance and/or hybrid instruction, and with it, they were also required to change their methodologies. Similarly, teachers and lecturers had to adjust their roles and functions so as to make sure their distance teaching solutions were efficient and effective for students. As Miao et al. (2020) explain, teachers were forced to become micro-curriculum planners and instructional designers in this new educational panorama:

Teachers have to plan curricular objectives and structure subject-specific knowledge, managing the timetable as well as the curricular resources and activities. Similarly, they also need to produce scripts for live or recorded programmes, design learning activities and formative assessment tasks, and administer formative and summative assessment. Moreover, they must deliver as tutors of live-streaming or asynchronous video-based lessons. They need to facilitate learners’ knowledge acquisition and advancement by encouraging higher-order thinking through question-based learning (p. 9).

Teachers had to therefore rely on technologies to continue teaching their subjects and facilitating the learning of their students both physically and virtually present in the classroom. Among the different technological solutions adopted, videoconferencing platforms like Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Blackboard, Moodle, and Zoom stood as some the most prominent (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2021), but also a wide variety of digital tools, such as Canva or Kahoot, social networks, like X (formerly Twitter), and messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, were used (Hart, 2021).

In an attempt to define and conceptualise this shift to distance education teaching, new terms and paradigms arose. Such is the case of ERT, coined by Hodges et al. back in March 2020 and amply discussed by scholars later (e.g., García-Aretio, 2021; Torras-Virgili, 2021).

In contrast to experiences that are planned from the beginning and designed to be online, emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. The primary objective in these circumstances is not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in

a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis (Hodges et al., 2020, para. 18).

Like other disciplines, language education was also affected by the shift to distance and/or hybrid teaching. However, the situation when teaching languages may have been more complicated because of the limited possibilities for teachers to interact with learners resulting from the implementation of online teaching (Cheung, 2021). Under these conditions and based on the notion of ERT, the concept of ERLT was also coined:

In ERLT situations language education is facilitated and/or supported by the use of technology, helping establish a temporary digital environment that promotes language learning and teaching in emergency situations. However, not only does ERLT involve applying technology to what in a non-emergency situation would be mainly delivered through face-to-face instruction, but it also means a resilient reflection on language teaching and learning, creative problem solving, and even a potential future requirement for education agents' skill set and competences (Huertas-Abril et al., 2021, p. 3).

As it has been already mentioned, ERLT, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has been the subject of several studies. For instance, Rathert and Ağçam (2023) and Huertas-Abril (2020) both highlighted the challenges of low attendance and a reduced classroom interaction in the context of EFL higher education in Turkey and Spain respectively, with the latter suggesting that “online/remote teaching-learning cannot replace face-to-face interaction in the classroom” (Huertas-Abril, 2020, p. 90) but that technology can help motivate and engage learners. Similarly, Can and Silman-Karanfil (2022) focused on the experiences of EFL instructors, noting the gradual adaptation to ERLT and the potential for a new pedagogy, whereas Ferri et al. (2020) identified technological, pedagogical, and social challenges of ERLT, including the lack of digital skills and the need for human interaction.

The fact that ERLT-related skills might become a requirement for teachers also suggests the need to analyse if universities and teacher training centres were (and still are) instructing education professionals in this respect, and if so, how they developed such training. Despite the generalised introduction of distance and/or hybrid teaching, teachers do not necessarily have the competences and support for this type of education and, indeed, the scientific literature shows that it is necessary to continue improving digital training in teacher education (García-Vélez et al., 2021; García-Zabaleta et al., 2021; Rando-Burgos, 2020). For these reasons, it appears relevant to examine how teachers perceive their preparedness to teach in ERLT situations.

## **4. Method and materials**

### **4.1. Research instrument**

The survey “Digital literacy and ERLT” was employed for the collection of data. The instrument was designed *ad hoc* and validated by a panel of two experts on the fields of language education, technologies for language teaching and applied linguistics. The experts were sent an anonymous initial version of the questionnaire and asked to provide their insights and the appropriacy of the included items in terms

of content, relevance, and written formulation. Then, following the feedback from the experts, the items were refined until the final version of the instrument was reached.

The final version of the survey presented two sections: one regarding demographic information, and one focused on the attitudes and self-perceptions of digital literacy for ERLT. Section 2 (see Appendix) included eight questions aiming to gather information about the perceptions and attitudes of the participants regarding digital literacy and ERLT, which were formulated following a Likert scale with four values: 1= “strongly disagree”, 2= “disagree”, 3= “agree”, and 4= “strongly agree”.

Before responding to the survey, participants expressed their written consent to take part in the study and were informed about the voluntary nature of their involvement, as well as the possibility of withdrawing from it at any time. In any case, answers were anonymous to guarantee confidentiality.

## 4.2. Sample and research context

Non-probabilistic sampling techniques were used to select the participants in the study. Eligibility criteria were based on proximity to the research team. Data were gathered from future bilingual primary education teachers ( $n = 66$ ) who were enrolled either in the Bilingual Degree in Primary Education or in the Double Degree in Primary Education and English Studies of the University of Córdoba (Spain). More specifically, all participants were studying the compulsory subject “English as a Foreign Language for Primary Education Teachers”. The average age of the sample was 20.35 ( $SD = 0.511$ ). Considering gender, 51 (77.3%) were women, and 15 (22.7%) were men.

## 4.3. Data collection and analysis

The study followed a quantitative research approach, and a descriptive and correlational method. The administration of the designed survey took part between April and June 2021, using Google Forms bearing in mind the considerations presented by Phellas et al. (2011). The obtained data were then dumped into a spreadsheet and analyzed using the software IBM SPSS v.24 for MacOS. Regarding the tests used, Cronbach’s alpha was employed to prove the reliability and internal consistency of the survey employed; the result of such test was .654, which showed the good consistency of the instrument (Haktanir et al., 2018; Karaman et al., 2019). Moreover, the parametric Student’s  $t$  test was used for investigating potential differences regarding gender in the attitudes self-perceptions of digital literacy for ERLT of the sample. In all cases, results were considered significant in cases when  $p < 0.05$  (Sokal and Rohlf, 1995).

## 5. Findings

**Table 1** shows a statistical description of future teachers’ attitudes toward their digital literacy for ERLT:

As shown in **Table 1**, the average response to items Q01 (“I can select the most appropriate online videoconferencing platforms according to my needs as a teacher during an ERT situation”), Q02 (“I consider synchronous (live) teaching to be essential in an online English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation”), Q05 (“I can involve

and motivate students to participate in a virtual English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation”), Q06 (“I consider feedback to be especially important in an English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation”) and Q07 (“I am familiar with the assessment methods that can be used in a virtual English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation”) are 3 or more. Nevertheless, the remaining items are lower than 3, being Q04 (“I know how to adapt content from the subject of English as a foreign language to use it online during an ERT situation”) almost 3, and having Q03 (“I consider asynchronous (not live) teaching to be essential in an online English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation”) the lowest score ( $M = 2.53$ ;  $SD = 0.980$ ).

**Table 1.** Statistical description of items.

Item	N	%				M	SD
		1	2	3	4		
Q01	66	0	6.1	56.1	37.9	3.32	0.586
Q02	66	0	4.5	50.0	45.5	3.41	0.581
Q03	66	13.6	40.9	24.2	21.2	2.53	0.980
Q04	66	0	24.2	56.1	19.7	2.95	0.666
Q05	66	1.5	15.2	54.5	28.8	3.11	0.704
Q06	66	0	4.5	39.4	56.1	3.52	0.588
Q07	66	4.5	16.7	47.0	31.8	3.06	0.820
Q08	66	7.6	27.3	48.5	16.7	2.74	0.829

1 = Totally disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Totally agree. Source: Authors’ own elaboration.

When studying the impact of gender on the attitudes of future EFL teachers toward their skills to teach during ERLT, no significant discrepancies were encountered except for Q01 (“I can select the most appropriate online video conferencing platforms according to my needs as a teacher during an emergency remote teaching situation”), where men scored higher than women (see **Table 2**).

Without statistically significant discrepancies, men also scored higher in Q02 (“I consider synchronous (live) teaching to be essential in an online English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation”), Q04 (“I know how to adapt content from the subject of English as a foreign language to use it online during an ERT situation”), Q06 (“I consider feedback to be especially important in an English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation”) and Q07 (“I am familiar with the assessment methods that can be used in a virtual English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation”). It must be mentioned, however, that women scored higher in Q03 (“I consider asynchronous (not live) teaching to be essential in an online English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation”), Q05 (“I can involve and motivate students to participate in a virtual English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation”), and Q08 (“I consider that my university training has provided me with the necessary knowledge and skills to carry out my work as a teacher of English as a foreign language/bilingual education during an ERT situation”).

**Table 2.** Student's t test by gender.

Item	Gender	N	M	SD	t	p*
Q01	Woman	51	3.24	0.586	-2.179	0.033
	Man	15	3.60	0.507		
Q02	Woman	51	3.39	0.603	-0.434	0.666
	Man	15	3.47	0.516		
Q03	Woman	51	2.59	0.983	0.884	0.380
	Man	15	2.33	0.976		
Q04	Woman	51	2.88	0.653	-1.644	0.105
	Man	15	3.20	0.676		
Q05	Woman	51	3.16	0.731	1.082	0.283
	Man	15	2.93	0.594		
Q06	Woman	51	3.47	0.612	-1.138	0.260
	Man	15	3.67	0.488		
Q07	Woman	51	3.04	0.871	-0.388	0.699
	Man	15	3.13	0.640		
Q08	Woman	51	2.76	0.839	0.400	0.690
	Man	15	2.67	0.816		

1 = Totally disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Totally agree. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

This paper has attempted to present the results of a quantitative study on the attitudes of Spanish future EFL teachers concerning their competences to teach during ERLT.

Regarding RQ1 (How do Spanish future EFL teachers feel regarding their skills to teach during ERLT situations?), the findings show that attitudes of future EFL teachers toward their abilities to face these situations is good. The participants claimed having used various videoconferencing platforms as learning tools not only during but also after the peak of the COVID-19 health emergency. Therefore, their answers regarding their skills to select the videoconferencing method were adequate. In this light, and as Çankaya and Durak (2020) point out, this choice entails an essential competence for today's teachers considering the great importance that the platforms that support distance education applications have acquired lately. This aspect is also linked to synchronous and asynchronous teaching, being the asynchronous preferred by respondents. This idea is in line with previous research revealing that educators consider that synchronous education is certainly the best teaching modality (Whittle et al., 2020). However, when thoroughly thought, planned, and designed, asynchronous or not live education can also be a useful learning opportunity for students and a great chance to engage them in activities that may be difficult to implement in the classroom because of the time restrictions (Whittle et al., 2020). Besides, not live teaching should be prioritized when not all students have access to the same quality of technological means (Rahim, 2020).

In relation to the necessary skills to adapt content to ERLT situations, the majority of the participants felt confident enough about this aspect. This corroborates

other studies that show that Spanish future EFL teachers are positive regarding their abilities to design digital resources for EFL teaching in elementary education during the lockdown declared to fight the pandemic (Huertas-Abril et al., 2021). Moreover, this is also connected with the perceptions of participants about learners' motivation and engagement in ERLT situations, in which addressing the socio-emotional needs of students is as important as fostering the learning of contents (Richardson and Swan, 2003).

Results also show the relevance of giving feedback, a valued element among participants. However, the findings are more moderate when the subjects are asked about assessing students' learning process in ERLT situations. In this sense, it should be borne in mind that online assessment methods reinforce learning when rich, constructive, and effective feedback is provided (Rahim, 2020). Moreover, teachers cannot obviate the importance of individualized learning in ERLT in order to guarantee the optimal acquisition and development of competences and contents among learners (Benson and Brack, 2010).

Furthermore, and answering RQ3 (How do Spanish future EFL teachers feel concerning their university training to teach during ERLT situations?), the participants emphasized the idea that more teacher training is necessary to prepare future teachers for ERLT. This corroborates the ideas of Hodges et al. (2020) and Huertas-Abril (2020), who consider that "the possible need for ERT must become part of a faculty member's skill set, as well as professional development programming for any personnel involved in the instructional mission of colleges and universities" (Hodges et al., 2020). In the same vein, these ideas also voice other research that suggests the potential of enhancing the curriculum by integrating substantial and top-notch technological encounters at both the program-wide and program-specific levels (Foulger et al., 2017; Trust and Whalen, 2020), as well as the possibilities of giving teachers chances to develop opportunities to cultivate their teaching capabilities, catering to both in-person and online teaching scenarios (Graham et al., 2019; Pulham and Graham, 2018; Zweig and Stafford, 2016).

As for RQ2 (Does gender affect the attitudes of future EFL teachers towards how to deal with ERLT?), it must be emphasized that no differences in terms of attitudes and perceptions regarding competences to face ERLT situations were found between males and females, except for the choice of the most appropriate videoconferencing tool. These findings contrast prior studies that examine the digital literacy of future educators and in which males tend to outperform females in terms of educational technology use (Casillas-Martín et al., 2019; Çebi and Reisoğlu, 2020), but also corroborates the results of similar research concerning the impact of the gender of future EFL educators (Huertas-Abril and Palacios-Hidalgo, 2022). This difference may be explained by considering the specific situation of ERLT, in which the digital abilities of teachers need to be put into practice and considering how much it differs from more 'traditional' online learning and teaching (Hodges et al., 2020).

In short, the attitudes of future EFL teachers toward their abilities to teach in ERLT were good as shown in the findings. Nevertheless, three key aspects need to be considered: i) synchronous teaching and learning are important, as they allow making online education to happen like on-site education (Rahim, 2020), and in words of Wintemute (2021), gives students "a structured and immersive learning environment"

(p. 8); ii) the significance of giving high-quality feedback, which facilitates the learning, allows students to correct themselves and fosters and maintains their motivation (Benson and Brack, 2010); and iii) the need for more teacher education in this field.

These findings, however, should be considered considering some limitations. As an exploratory study, only future EFL teachers from a very specific environment were considered, which may make the results difficult to generalize. Moreover, the study relies only on self-reported quantitative data, which makes the findings likely to be affected by respondents' subjectivity. Thus, prospective studies ought to recruit more participants and introduce additional information sources to obtain more data. In any case, this work yields several prospective lines of research in the field of teacher training and pedagogy, and it encourages the development of longitudinal on pre-service teachers' competences and perceptions.

Considering all the aforementioned, the following practical pedagogical recommendations could be borne in mind:

- It is necessary to provide language teachers with comprehensive training in the use of diverse digital tools and platforms to face ERLT situations effectively. This may include training on distance teaching, collaborative online tools, and other relevant applications to enhance their digital skills.
- It is essential for universities and teacher education institutions to develop training programs that specifically address language educators' preparedness to face crises. This may include protocols for a transition from onsite to remote teaching and strategies for preserving a positive learning environment despite unexpected disruptions, ensuring that teachers are equipped to effectively respond to emergency situations.
- It is important to promote continuous professional development opportunities for language teachers to stay updated on evolving technologies and teaching approaches. This may include online courses and collaborative projects that not only foster continuous learning but also the creation of a global community of educators that share and exchange their knowledge and practices.
- It is fundamental to develop specific training on how to adapt onsite pedagogical strategies for online learning environments. This may entail equipping teachers with innovative and interactive approaches that engage learners in virtual learning environments, emphasizing collaborative tasks, digital resources, and effective assessment methods appropriate for ERLT.
- It is crucial to establish suitable feedback mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of teacher training programs and collect insights from language teachers regarding their evolving needs. This may include regular evaluations on the part of institutions to respond to the challenges posed by ERLT.

**Author contributions:** Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing—original draft preparation, review and editing, supervision, FJPH and CAHA. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Conflict of interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## **Appendix: Questionnaire's questions**

- Q01. I can select the most appropriate online videoconferencing platforms according to my needs as a teacher during an ERT situation.
- Q02. I consider synchronous (live) teaching to be essential in an online English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation.
- Q03. I consider asynchronous (not live) teaching to be essential in an online English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation.
- Q04. I know how to adapt content from the subject of English as a foreign language to use it online during an ERT situation.
- Q05. I can involve and motivate students to participate in a virtual English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation.
- Q06. I consider feedback to be especially important in an English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation.
- Q07. I am familiar with the assessment methods that can be used in a virtual English/bilingual lesson during an ERT situation.
- Q08. I consider that my university training has provided me with the necessary knowledge and skills to carry out my work as a teacher of English as a foreign language/bilingual education during an ERT situation.