Constraints in language education during the pandemic in junior high school

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Abstract

The pandemic has prevented language learners worldwide from getting the right education. English is just one of those subjects in which this has been remarkably significant due to the lack of classroom interaction and the reduced amount of input students have received. The current study explores 14 EFL teachers' reflections on the main challenges they have been facing. Their responses were given in an open-ended survey. The Content Analysis carry out aimed at identifying the main constraints primary and secondary EFL teachers have faced while teaching during the first months of the pandemic. It also addresses the possible solutions they have used to address the input scarcity due to the current situation. The paper stresses that it is clear the role that input and strategies have in language learning. The paper concludes that the gap in learning may require additional teaching support in the incoming years.

Keywords: Covid-19; emotional intelligence; online learning; teacher's reflections.

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1. Introduction

In mid-March 2020, the world changed dramatically due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Humankind had to adapt to the challenges brought by this unprecedented situation (Feldmann et al., 2021). Every aspect of our daily lives had to adjust to the health requirements of social distancing, gathering reductions, and uncertain interactions. The teaching and learning processes were also affected by these measures. Subjects requiring explicit teachers' feedback and social interactions, such as English as a Foreign Language, have been deeply affected by the new circumstances. Several studies have been conducted to describe the difficulties faced by EFL teachers and learners.

A student-centered learning environment facilitates the language learning process. This environment provides students with opportunities to practice the language while developing their communicative competence and L2 Motivational Self (Junn, 2021). Researchers have claimed that the Communicative Approach, Explicit Instruction, Formative Assessment, and L2 Motivational Self theory are elements of a teaching approach focused on students.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Communicative Approach

The Communicative Approach can be used for Unit design and teaching the language. This approach provides students with communicative tasks which challenge learners to practice the language to fill in a communication gap (Sárosdy et al., 2006). Krashen (1982) mentions that communicative tasks should not discourage students by too easy or too difficult requirements, they should challenge them.

1.1.2. Explicit Instruction

Studies have shown that learners' performance is improved when they understand what they are required to do (Farahian et al., 2012). Explicit teachers' comments also contributed to students' assessment and motivation (Punhagui & De Souza, 2013).

1.1.3. Formative assessment

Student-centered learning environments also provide formative assessment or feedback of students' progressive improvements. Teachers' role in formative assessment is pivotal for the learning process. Their use of formative assessment increases students' academic achievement, motivation levels, and self-regulation skills (Ozan & Kincal, 2017). In addition, students prefer to be evaluated by their teachers rather than by themselves or by their friends (Handayani & Aisah, 2013). Punhuagui and De Souza (2013) also found that appropriate teachers' guidance might help students develop their self-assessment skills.

1.1.4. L2 Motivational Self

Designing and teaching classes with the communicative approach while using direct instruction and performing formative assessment might not be enough if teachers do not address students' L2 Motivational System. Dornyei's system suggests students develop an L2 identity while learning the language (Dörnyei, 2013). This identity is based on students' experiences which reinforce or modify self-efficacy beliefs. According to Bandura (1997), positive self-efficacy beliefs can be developed by personal experiences, other experiences, other verbal persuasions, and physiological and affective attitudes. These aspects can be found and promoted during learners' interactions with their teachers and peers.

1.2. Related studies

Mahyoob (2020) studied the 184 responses of EFL university learners in Saudi Arabia to a survey-based questionnaire about the challenges of e-learning during the pandemic. Results showed that students' main difficulties were related to the internet speed connection, access to materials, online exams, and the absence of practical sessions. These issues negatively affected their learning experience.

Hijazy and AlNatour (2020) explored the responses of 1200 EFL university students enrolled in the summer semester in 2019/2020. Participants pointed out their struggles with the poor infrastructure, computer skills, social aspects, and teaching methods. High-speed connections and appropriate devices made it complicated to follow e-learning. Based on students' responses, 67% would prefer face-to-face classes since their computer skills were not ready to be used for learning, and they did not feel their critical thinking skills and their problem-solving skills have been developed during online classes. Participants also showed isolation feelings since they have had fewer opportunities for peer interactions and their teachers could not interact with 300 students in each class.

Pasaribu and Dewi (2021) also found students' isolation feelings when describing twenty EFL Indonesian students' reflections on online curses during the pandemic. The Appraisal Analysis showed that although some students were enjoying online classes, in general, they had positive inclinations to return to face-to-face classes. The reason for this attitude were the challenges experienced when following the classes and the number of tasks given by teachers in the new learning environment. Students also highlighted their satisfaction with their own IT skills development and their gratitude to those teachers who managed to deliver their classes with clarity.

Aboagye et al. (2020) studied the questionnaire responses of 141 EFL university learners from Ghana about the challenges faced during this learning period. Participants claimed that accessibility, social issues, and lecturer issues were the aspects they struggled with the most. The accessibility issues involved unavailable or incompatible resources, speed connections, and internet costs. The social issues students missed the most were the interactions with their peers which caused them to feel isolated since they could not discuss ideas or provide support as in face-to-face classes. Lecture issues refer to teachers' complications to deliver their classes with appropriate resources and with the clarity required in this learning environment.

As it can be observed current studies reveal EFL students' and teachers' struggles to adjust to the online learning environment to provide an appropriate education. The studies show that both learners and educators are facing difficulties to get an equal internet connection and access to resources that could allow them to do their best. The studies demonstrate students' dissatisfaction with the new situation since they cannot catch up with their learning as they were used to.

According to the responses given in different studies, it seems that teachers have not been able to deliver their lessons using the elements of the so-called Communicate Approach which promotes active learner's participation. In addition, EFL learners do have not as many opportunities to communicate as before, which is having a negative impact on their motivations to learn the foreign language. More teaching training is suggested to manage the challenges brought by the pandemic. However, the findings have only considered the learning experience at the tertiary level. As a result, the present study explores the constraints experienced in the primary and secondary levels where teachers have also had to emigrate to the online setting. The study aims at determining teachers' reflections on the main constraints and if they are similar to the ones described in tertiary scenarios.

1.3. Purpose of study

Even though teaching English in a student-centered environment might be desired by many EFL teachers the Covid-19 pandemic has made it complicated to include all the elements needed for this purpose. This paper explores the main constraints students and teachers have been facing during the pandemic. It also analyses the teaching techniques teachers have been employing to overcome those difficulties. Regarding Hypothesis, it is believed that students' main constraints would be related to the students' distractions originated by social distancing, the challenges of the new learning scenarios, the complication to follow the new teaching units, and the dealing with their motivational levels.

2. Materials and Methods

The study followed a qualitative approach to explore teachers' perspectives of the constraints of language learning during the pandemic in junior high school.

2.1. Data Collection Instrument

An online open-ended questions survey was carried out to collect teachers' comments on the main struggles they have been identifying and facing during the last twelve months while teaching English as a Foreign Language. This instrument was developed to get insight into students' constraints during this period. The open-ended survey was designed using Microsoft Forms and it was sent to participants, so they could fill in it by filling it directly online. Participants were chosen using the snowball method and they were given two weeks to send their responses back to the researcher. Fourteen EFL teachers participated in the study.

The survey had seventeen items organised in five sections. The first section provided general information about the number of years they have been teaching, the grades they were currently teaching and the learning setting they are facing because of the pandemic. The second section focused on the Unit Design and Teaching Approach before and during the pandemic. The section also paid attention to the resources teachers would employ in their classes and how they had been adapted to the pandemic requirements. The third section addressed teachers' strategies to ensure Classroom Management and Feedback Delivery. This section aimed at determining the main sources of students' distractions due to the learning settings. It also allowed teachers to describe the actions taken to facilitate the learning process and feedback delivery despite the challenges imposed by the pandemic. The fourth section inquired about teachers' approach to promote Students' Motivation. The main purpose of this section was to learn about the difficulties students and teachers have been facing when sustaining students' motivation to learn a foreign language. Finally, teachers were allowed to share more comments on the fifth section.

2.2. Participants

The participants for this study were 14. There were 7 Primary EFL teachers and 7 Secondary EFL teachers.

2.3. Analysis techniques

Descriptive Analysis was performed to describe participants' general background. Content Analyses were carried out to identify and count the main constraints and ideas mentioned in the survey and the interview. Thematic analyses were also conducted to highlight the main themes in the responses. Quotations of participants' responses were included in the narration to give more significance to the findings.

3. Results

Responses to the online survey revealed the actions teachers have been taking to ensure a student-centered learning environment during the pandemic. To explore the different aspects of the student-centered learning environment, the survey was divided into five sections.

3.1. Teachers' Background

The Descriptive Analysis of the 14 teachers' responses of the first section showed that participants have been teaching English for an average of 12 years. According to their responses, they have been in different teaching environments during the pandemic. Figure 1 shows the number of teachers who have remained in face-to-face classes, who have emigrated to online classes, and who have been combining both modalities.

Figure 1

Teaching Modalities in Primary and Secondary Schools
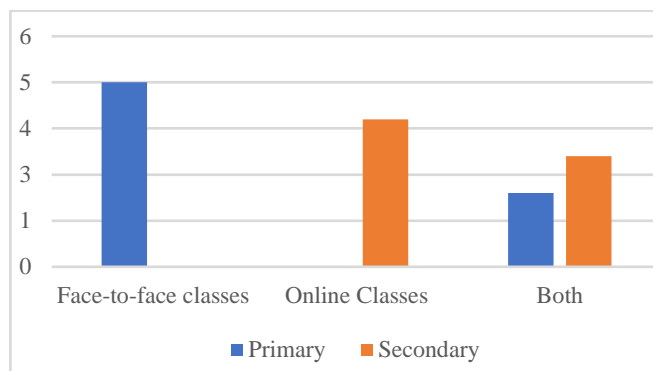
Five Primary EFL teachers have been able to remain in face-to-face classes while four Secondary EFL teachers have emigrated to online settings. Only two Primary teachers and three Secondary teachers have had to adapt their teaching practice to online and offline settings. The differentiation of the teaching modality and level was necessary for the understanding of participants' responses in the other sections.

3.2. Unit Design and Teaching Approach

The second section inquired about the teaching resources and approach students were receiving during the pandemic depending on the class setting. This section sought to determine if the pandemic has prevented students from receiving a variety of language input. It also explored to what extent social distancing has been affecting the design and approach of the teaching practice.

Teachers' responses about the resources they would use during the pandemic were classified into seven categories: audio-visual, traditional, kinaesthetic, hardware, software, reading materials, and writing workshops. Audio-visual material were mainly songs, videos, flashcards, and teachers' voice and body language. Traditional resources included students' textbooks, activity books, bilingual dictionaries, and additional practice worksheets. Kinaesthetic resources were the materials that some teachers would employ to make their classes more didactic by physically involving students. For example, they mentioned papers, plastic, realia materials, games, and riddles. Some teachers pointed out hardware resources, such as the computer, the projector, the digital board, and the camera were necessary for their teaching practice.

Software resources or digital resources were related to the Apps, platforms, and software that teachers would apply during classes. Teachers would mainly use the school platforms, educational videos, YouTube, Drive, Moodle, and different applications for teaching and doing videoconference. Ten teachers were using these resources to develop their materials. They would create presentations, worksheets, and videos, they would also allow learning by playing. Some teachers also wrote about the specific reading materials that they would work with in class (e.g., novels, short stories). Writing workshops were mentioned as a teaching resource.

The Content Analysis of participants' responses to the teaching resources they were using during the pandemic revealed that the teaching setting might have influenced teachers' choices to work with some resources (See Figure 2). Face-to-face classes would allow the use of traditional resources as well as kinaesthetic resources. Audio-visual materials, reading resources, hardware, and software were mentioned less frequently. In online classes, teachers would take advantage of the available software and hardware together with audio-visual materials and traditional materials. Kinaesthetic resources, reading materials, and writing workshops were not mentioned. EFL teachers who have been teaching both online and offline named a richer variety of resources in this modality. They would work with audio-visual materials and reading materials together with hardware and traditional resources. One

EFL teacher wrote that they would use writing workshops as one of the resources of their teaching practice.

Figure 2

Number of teaching resources by teaching modality
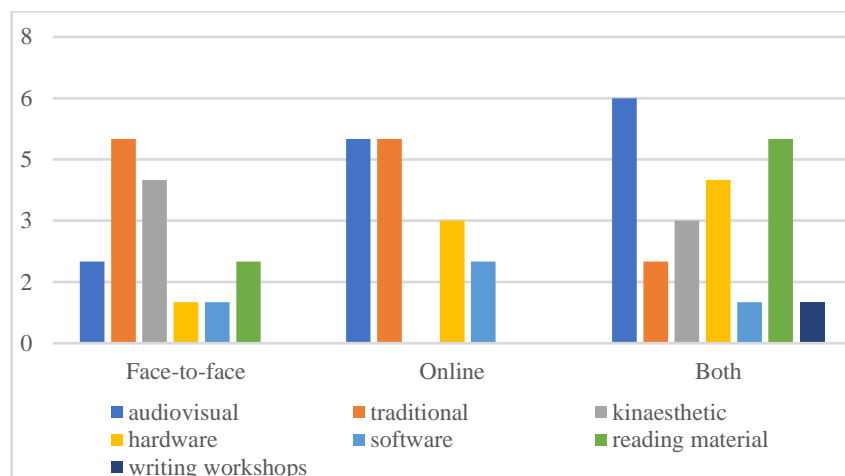
Social distancing has influenced learning in different ways. Some EFL classrooms can practice it inside their school, others have had to be separated into smaller groups or they have had to emigrate to online settings. The Thematic Analysis of how social distancing has influenced the EFL classroom shows that students' learning and teachers' teaching practice has changed in three main aspects. One modification caused by social distancing is group work organisation since students cannot move around the class or be close to their partners. The social distancing requirement has also made it difficult to establish, strengthen, and improve teacher-student interactions as well as teacher-parent interactions. The third aspect influenced by social distancing is that teachers have had to adapt the contents of the teaching units. These adaptations would depend on the uncertain timing of the pandemic, resulting in the reduction of content and delays in achieving learning goals.

Similar responses were found in the Content Analysis of teachers' responses to the challenges they are facing when designing their teaching units (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Constrains in EFL learning and teaching
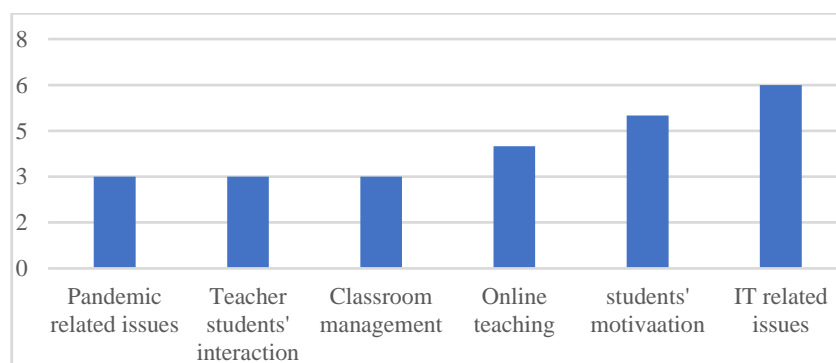
3.3. *Classroom Management and Feedback Delivery*

The third section searched the challenges that teachers have been facing when managing their classrooms. Teachers' responses show some of the constraints students are dealing with during this pandemic period. The response also clarifies what strategies and possible solutions teachers are using. The four primary teachers who have continued in the face-to-face modality revealed that students are facing distractions and boredom. One teacher pointed out that social distancing and bubble groups

imply that students are spending more time alone while doing individual work or interacting with the same group of friends. According to their opinion, this might affect students' performance and attitude towards learning. Thus, there is a *"necessity to promote emotional intelligence in the classroom"*. The pandemic situation has also caused some students to miss classes. This not only affects absent students but also delays some activities inside the classroom. Teachers mentioned they are trying to help students get access to the new digital resources so that they continue with their classes from their homes.

The four secondary teachers in the online classes identified students' lack of self-discipline as the main source of distraction in this setting. Online learning requires students to use the Internet to follow classes, but they might get easily distracted by "*chats, the social media, playing and even listening to music*". One teacher highlighted that some students would be reluctant to turn their cameras on while other teachers recognise that internet connection problems also distract students. In order to address these challenges, teachers are looking for interactive websites that could catch students' attention, they are also encouraging class participation by *"changing tasks from time to time"*.

Teachers who are teaching with the two modalities explained that students are also distracted by their mobile phones and internet websites. Some teachers suggested that being separated from their classmates also distracts them. One teacher even reflected on how their own teaching pace might get students to lose their attention. These teachers also claimed that they are making attempts to include activities with mobiles. They are also trying to be more patient and flexible, and they are working to provide brief explanations to adjust to their students' attention span.

Regarding feedback delivery, the Content Analysis of participants' answers indicates that giving feedback in a formative assessment environment has become a challenging experience. Teachers who are in face-to-face classes wrote that they would use personalised feedback directly or indirectly. Most of them would use the school platform (e.g. Google Classroom) to send students written comments or audio comments to their tasks. One teacher would provide face-to-face feedback to the oral and written skills weekly. Other teachers would phone call their learners and write emails with feedback. Teachers in online settings would also write personalised comments through emails or the school platform. Other teachers pointed out they cannot provide individual feedback online, but they would give feedback during homework correction or reinforcement tasks. Similar ideas were found in the responses given by the teachers in both modalities. They would also use rubrics and follow-up conversations. One teacher mentioned that they had to ask the school for a video call with the student or that they can talk with them respecting the social distances.

3.4. Students' Motivation

Teachers in Online classes have found that some students seem to be more motivated to participate in the English classes. One teacher mentioned that learners had been amotivated before the pandemic and "now their condition has intensified". Some learners like the interactive online tasks and others interact more in groups since *"they are not being observed by their teacher or classmates"*. One teacher explained that their students would prefer to go back to face-to-face classes. Teachers who are part of the two teaching modalities have different opinions. Three of them have identified a lack of motivation from their learners due to the uncertainty of the pandemic situation, the longing for face-to-face classes, the lack of responsibility to attend online classes, and the worsening of pre-existing amotivation levels.

The Thematic Analyses of teachers' responses to the difficulties in addressing motivation individually and in groups show teachers' concerns about how to reach their learners. On the one hand, teachers have found it challenging to motivate students individually. They are struggling with establishing teacher-student relationships that could allow them to encourage students' collaboration. Some teachers can only get in contact with their students through their platform or by a third person who is generally the tutor. Teachers wrote that new scenarios make it more difficult to identify and follow

amotivated learners. These learners are not seeking help and some of them have even given up trying or they want to be left alone.

On the other hand, teachers have been also dealing with promoting students' motivation as a group. The common challenge is to assess their whole group motivation levels in the different teaching scenarios. Educational Platforms in online settings and facemasks in face-to-face settings make it difficult to have a one-glance view of the class. As a result, teachers cannot see the body language that could help them to identify the actions and comments that students are giving during classes. Another difficulty is the organisation of groups, not only because of diverse English levels but also because of social distancing and internet connections. This has also delayed students' teamwork skills development.

This last section of the survey aimed at allowing teachers to write their final reflections. English teachers pointed out the importance of addressing the new challenges with a humanistic approach. They also mentioned that *"students emotional and spiritual part was more important"* than our concerns about the pandemic or the worries of *"meeting learning objectives."* Teachers stressed the influence of pandemic stress, face-mask use, and social distancing in the design of their teaching units. They also seemed to struggle with *"finding ways for teacher-students interactions"* and classroom management in the new scenarios.

4. Discussion

Most of the teachers agreed that students' attitudes towards learning English have changed during the pandemic. Teachers' perceptions might vary depending on the teaching modality. Teachers in face-to-face modality recognised students have been struggling to be motivated as was found in Hijazi & AlNatour (2020) and Pasaribu & Dewi (2021). Nevertheless, teachers in this study were asked about the solutions they have been applying to this issue. For example, they have encouraged group work, when possible, they also started using online programmes to keep them engaged. Teachers have also been practicing their patience and comprehension for students to get used to the new scenario.

Some teachers mentioned they would find it more difficult to motivate students nowadays. However, the most frequent challenge was related to IT issues. Several teachers pointed out the difficulty of finding "available resources for students", a stable internet connection, and user-friendly programmes or websites. This finding is consistent with Aboagye et al. (2020), Hijazi and AlNatour (2020), and Mahyoob (2020) since participants also pointed out the complications to the accessibility to the teaching and learning resources and connection.

The new course design requirements involve online planning and teaching, getting used to new digital resources, and giving students access to digital resources. Teachers recognised it has been challenging to establish teacher-student interactions if they are not in face-to-face classes. These findings are similar to previous studies in tertiary education which also found teachers and students struggle with accessibility, social issues, and lecturer issues (Aboagye et al., 2020; Hijazi & AlNatour, 2020; Mahyoob, 2020; Pasaribu & Dewi, 2021). Nevertheless, the main contribution of the present study is a) that it has been done with primary and secondary EFL teachers, b) it includes teachers 'reflections on the situation and the possible solutions based on their own experience.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored teachers' perceptions of the main aspects that might influence EFL learners' learning process. Teachers' approaches to these aspects have been changing because of and during the pandemic resulting in some constraints in students' learning experience. Teachers agreed that the main constraints EFL learners have been facing during the pandemic are the new course design learning requirements, the new features of teacher-student interactions, and students' motivations for learning.

As a result, it can be concluded that building teacher-student relationships are necessary to adapt the unit design and teaching approach to students' needs and to address students' motivation levels

individually and as a group in online learning environments or blended-learning environments. This study has shown the difficulties in providing explicit communicative activities, formative assessment, and L2 Motivational Self-support. Fortunately, it also suggests some pedagogical ideas for improving the teaching practice in the present circumstances.

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