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# The Challenge of Distant Teaching for Primary School Teachers of English during the Covid-19: The Cases of Spain, Italy and Romania

*Mireia Canals-Botines, Marius-Mircea Crişan, Raffaella Leproni, Nüría Medina-Casanovas, Miquel Pujol Tubau, Angel Raluy Alonso\**

## *Abstract*

This paper illustrates some teachers' perspectives, beliefs and experiences as to distance learning before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. A specifically designed online survey was administered to a hundred primary-school EFL teachers in some regions of Italy, Romania, and Spain in May/July 2020, and a comparative analysis of the responses was conducted to examine how teachers bore the brunt of the pandemic in areas that were severely affected by it. Results suggest that educators were somehow prepared to face distance learning in terms of resources and materials. During the lockdown they used synchronous video-conferencing tools and online games more extensively. Although they struggled to monitor children's progress and to maintain motivation throughout the school closures, educators seem ready to implement these tools and strategies in future blended teaching. However, educators admit to lack specific training aimed at learning how to implement EFL online teaching, and they are concerned about its efficacy with young learners.

**Keywords:** COVID Pandemic, Distant Teaching, EFL, Teachers' Beliefs

## *Introduction*

It is estimated that around 138 countries around the globe have closed schools during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, and these closures have affected the education of around 80% of children worldwide.

\* The authors contributed to the paper as follows: Mireia Canals-Botines (Universitat de Vic – Universitat Central de Catalunya, <mireia.canals@uvic.cat>): Abstract, Introduction, Conclusions; Angel Raluy Alonso (Universitat de Vic – Universitat Central de Catalunya, <angel.raluy@uvic.cat>): Abstract, Introduction, Conclusions; Raffaella Leproni (Università degli Studi Roma Tre, <raffaella.leproni@uniroma3.it>): Abstract, all parts concerning Italy; Marius-Mircea

Quarantines have somehow attracted attention from the medical field during the past decade. Earn (2012), for instance, advocated for school closure to reduce transmission in school-aged children during the 2009 Ebola and influenza's outbreak and, in the same line, Faherty, Schwartz, Ahmed, *et al.* (2019) stressed the importance of closures to stop the spread of the illness. On the contrary, Uscher-Pines *et al.* (2018) expressed doubts about the effectiveness of these measures and emphasized the key role of school preparedness in terms of social distancing and physical re-arrangement of classes as temporary solutions to shield from the virus.

The above-mentioned studies may have tackled the issue of quarantines from a medical perspective but fail to address the impact of confinement on schools, students and teachers (Basilaia, Kvavadze 2020). By and large, the effects of pandemic diseases appear to have been overlooked in the educational context until the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the early Chinese experience, Huang, Liu, Tlili, *et al.* (2020) insist that teachers play a vital role in "steering students' learning" in a context of online education. It is thus critical that they are familiar with online strategies, resources and technological applications so that they can keep abreast of their students' learning needs: "The supports for teachers include how to use the synchronous cyberlearning software, how to utilize the learning management system, how to conduct learning activity design etc." (32).

Likewise, the Chinese report suggests that educators should be trained extensively to be able to implement distance learning and a quick crash course delivered in a short period of time does not seem to be the optimal option to help teachers engage in distance teaching.

This study wants to offer an overview of the experience of some primary school teachers of English in specific regions in Spain, Italy and Romania, particularly affected by the early pandemic. The main focus is to examine the methodologies, the strategies and the challenges that educators have faced in distant teaching during the 2020 lockdown.

## *1. The Challenge of Distant Teaching in Spain, Italy and Romania*

### *1.1 Spain*

Since the World Health Organization declared on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020 that the situation in relation to the COVID-19 represented a public health emergency of international importance, a series of measures were adopted to protect the health and safety of Spanish citizens in order to contain the progression of the disease. These measures were expanded as required by the evolution of the pandemic, and included the declaration of the state of alarm throughout the national territory (Real Decreto 463/2020, March 14). Some of the state regulations heavily impacted the educational field. The most relevant decision was the suspension of all educational activity in primary, secondary and tertiary education and simultaneously the adoption of distance learning for all academic levels to replace face-to-face learning until the end of June 2020. Schools still needed to complete the minimum number of school days (175) per year and therefore classroom activities were required to continue with suitable online adjustments.

As for the impact of COVID in the Catalan Schools, Muñoz and Lluch (2020) speak of a threefold scenario. Some schools have elaborated full schedules for their pupils by adapting face to face teaching to virtual classrooms and the transition has been quite smooth since students were technologically prepared. Other schools have decided to aim attention at the children well-being and have encouraged their learners to carry out collaborative tasks within their own families. A last group of primary schools have opted for lowering the workload for their students in the belief that the complexity of the situation was a hurdle to their progressing in the school curriculum. Besides, these schools had learners from low-income families that in some cases did not have access to broadband internet or did not have the devices to use it appropriately.

Those different responses might also stem from the vague guidelines given by the Catalan Department of Education (2020) in its confinement document. The document endorsed school autonomy on how to implement their distance learning in terms of procedures, scheduling and assessment and just insisted on prioritizing tutorial action plans and emotional support measures over subject syllabus completion. As mentioned before, an important factor that could have contributed to putting on hold school programs was the digital divide. Indeed, the unequal access to internet devices and connectivity has been acutely revealed among disadvantaged households and these technological woes have burdened a percentage of pupils who felt that they were lockout of the virtual classrooms. Additionally, Cabrera, Nieves and Santana (2020) refer to the “family gap”, that is, the difficulties that single parents or immigrant families tend to face in order to give support to their children’s school assignments due to time or knowledge constraints. Undoubtedly, the financial hardships that those families have endured in the context of COVID-19 have not favoured a higher-level involvement in their children’s education (Burgess, Sievertsen 2020).

### 1.2 Italy

As for Italy, the lockdown lasted from March 9<sup>th</sup> to May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020. All schools were closed at the very beginning of the lockdown, to be reopened only on the next September 14<sup>th</sup>. The Law Decree 22/ April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020, concerning the *measures of emergency for the regular conclusion and the orderly beginning of the school year*, states that “in correspondence to the suspension of the didactic activities in presence due to the epidemiologic emergency, teachers ensure didactic activities in at-distance modality, using all informatic/technology instruments available”.<sup>1</sup>

Even if schools in Italy are allowed an ample independency in complying with the terms set by the national decrees, the great majority of Italian schools opted for distance teaching (“Didattica a distanza” – DAD). As results from a CISL questionnaire sent to 2600 schools, about a third of the total of the state schools in Italy – equally encompassing the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> education cycles (Infancy/Primary school and Lower Secondary school, and Upper Secondary school, respectively) – endorsed distance learning.<sup>2</sup> In order to sustain school institutions, the Ministry devised a system of scaffolding (“Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale” – PNSD, within Law 107/2015),<sup>3</sup> which is specifically committed to the development of distance learning, and to the support of the many stakeholders involved in school education through sharing of

<sup>1</sup> Decreto-Legge 8 aprile 2020, n. 22, art. 2 comma 3 (my translation). Full text in Italian available at <<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/04/08/20G00042/sg>> (09/2021).

<sup>2</sup> Full results available at CISL Scuola (2020), <<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1103zD8sRX4qfRJC74LGBtiii05RNStkJ-/view>> (09/2021).

<sup>3</sup> See <<https://www.miur.gov.it/scuola-digitale>> (09/2021).

experience and peer-to-peer training. Primary and secondary schools activated or enhanced different formats for distance learning through virtual classes and other online instruments or channels. The Ministry also established a task force to answer questions and help requests coming from the schools, while the Regional School Offices kept (and still keep) monitoring the actual state of enactment of all actions so as to grant distance learning during school closure.

UNICEF Italia developed an *ad-hoc* proposal, dedicated to students and teachers, containing video-pills on different topics (i.e. children's rights and the goals for Sustainable Development 2030), creative ideas and animated readings, focussing on both the educational and the emotional dimensions' crucial role in making learning effective, to foster attention to the pupils' need for listening.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.3 Romania

With regards to Romania, the first case of COVID-19 appeared on February 26th 2020, and, after two weeks, on March 11<sup>th</sup> (when a total of 47 confirmed cases were reported),<sup>5</sup> the Ministry of Education and Research decided to suspend the face-to-face courses, recommending online learning. Although this change came somehow unexpectedly, some of the previous digitization initiatives undertaken by the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research have prepared, at least partially, the transition to online education. By way of illustration, projects such as ROSE – Romania Secondary Education Project,<sup>6</sup> or CRED, which provides a collaborative website dedicated to online teaching, have been implemented in the past years in order to develop the teachers' digital skills. Additionally, the Order of the Minister of Education 4135/21 April 2020 mentions the main directions that should be followed in the online education and recommends some resources such as the portal *Digital pe educared.ro*, which contains the e-learning platforms and online resources recommended for the Romanian schools.

The transition to digital training occurred in a flexible manner so that each school could opt for the most suitable online environment for teaching. Like anywhere else, in Romania not all educational institutions have the same technical equipment and not all teachers have the same digital competence. Furthermore, not all pupils were equally prepared for this change, because there were many cases of families unable to provide children with digital learning tools (namely large and low-income families). In this context, some state institutions have taken steps to provide students from those at-risk families with digital learning equipment (especially tablets).

The shift to online education has been monitored from the start of school closures. A group of researchers developed a survey which was answered by 6,436 teachers from pre-university education, from the entire territory of Romania, in the period between 25<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> March. Published as an e-book by the University of Bucharest Press (Botnariuc *et al.* 2020), this report on the first month of online teaching in the pre-university system offers a complex perspective

<sup>4</sup> In consequence of the pandemic, for the school year 2020/2021 UNICEF and the Ministry of Education have proposed a special version of the project "Scuola Amica delle bambine, dei bambini e degli adolescenti", aiming to involve headmasters, teachers and pupils in actively implementing the right to learning of all kids. The project establishes specific Province Commissions, with the task of sustaining the schools in adopting the necessary measures towards a "Friendly School", monitoring and assessing the activities developed and the achieved results. In May 2021, the schools involved will submit their reports to their respective commissions. All proposals and information available at <<https://www.unicef.it/doc/9831/proposte-educative-coronavirus.htm>> and <<https://www.unicef.it/italia-amica-dei-bambini/scuola-amica-bambini/progetto-scuola-amica-bambini/>> (09/2021).

<sup>5</sup> <<https://covid19.geo-spatial.org/>> (09/2021).

<sup>6</sup> <<https://www.edu.ro/etichete/proiect-rose>> (09/2021).

of the initial reactions of the Romanian teachers. One of the main remarks is that the “more prominent discrepancies between teachers appear in the ‘technical’ area and include equipment and Internet access” (13). This study also identifies discrepancies between urban and rural areas regarding the access to digital learning resources such as access to high-performance computers or a good internet connection. Regarding the learning aids used by teachers during the first two weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown, the study established the following top: 1. Applications for group communication, such as Whatsapp, Facebook messenger, etc.; 2. Telephone calls / SMS / communication channel with each student; 3. Use of educational resources open to digital content, as educational websites or online libraries; 4. Specialized e-learning platforms (Moodle, Google classroom, Edmodo, Easyclass etc.); 5. Applications for synchronous communication via video conferencing such as Webex, Zoom, Meet, Teams, Skype (*ibidem*).

## 2. *Methods & Materials*

A questionnaire was devised and shared among the EFL teacher population in Catalonia (Spain), Lazio (Italy) and the West Region of Romania (Timiș, Hunedoara, Caraș-Severin and Arad) to obtain meaningful data on teachers’ distant teaching experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown and their choices of methods and tools in their EFL classes. The questionnaire comprises 22 questions organized in four different sections: 1) Professional background questions; 2) Before the COVID-19 pandemic; 3) During the COVID-19 lockdown; and 4) After the COVID-19 pandemic.

Technically, the questionnaire is composed of two types of questions: multiple choice (11) and open questions (2). In turn, the former can be divided in three subtypes: standard multiple-choice questions (6); multiple choice questions organized as a time or intensity gradation (2); and multiple-choice questions where more than one answer is accepted or expected (3). The latter subtype encompasses those questions about types of resources and materials used, successful strategies and top challenges under the lockdown context.

The initial section deals with the teacher’s professional background and aims at providing contextual information on the teacher’s profile in terms of origin, gender, teaching experience, education level and their confidence in online teaching skills.

The second section intends to illustrate the practitioners’ teaching experience and training on online teaching prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In that respect, this section includes an initial question about the teacher’s previous training on certain online learning for young children, crisis management and online support for parents and guardians. The following questions ask the teachers about their previous experience on online synchronous lessons.

The third section encompasses questions about the teacher’s performance during the COVID-19 lockdown. In order to follow the evolution of their teaching experience, the teachers were asked again three questions from the previous section related to their implementation of synchronous sessions in their teaching during the pandemic lockdown. This section was complemented with questions about the teachers’ use of online tools (video conferencing programs, forums, screencasts or slide presentations among others) and their perception of how helpful these resources proved to be in their online classes. Two further questions were asked in which teachers were invited to share successful strategies and choose the main challenges they had faced during the lockdown from a short list that included resource restrictions, lack of training or communication and motivation issues, among others.

The final section of the questionnaire is devised as a reflection and perception stage upon the lockdown experience in order to report the possible evolution of the teachers’ performance during the school closure and their use of online tools.

In Spain, the survey was administered to 60 chosen teachers in the Catalan region who teach in state and state-funded primary schools. 35 responses were collected, practitioners with various grades of experience (0- 2 years: 1; 3-10 years: 9; 10-20 years: 14; 20+ years: 11) answered all the questions (6 males and 29 females). The questionnaire was sent online in May and June 2020.

In Italy, the survey was administered on a voluntary basis to teachers of English as a Second Language working in schools of the I cycle (Infancy and Primary) in the Lazio Region, between June and July 2020. 31 responses were collected (2 males and 29 females), encompassing teachers with various grades of experience (0-2 years: 10; 3-10 years: 7; 10-20 years: 6; 20+ years: 8).

In Romania, the survey was answered between June and July 2020 on a voluntary basis by thirty-three EFL primary school teachers that taught in four counties from the Western part of Romania (Timiș, Hunedoara, Caraș-Severin and Arad): 33 responses were collected (31 females and 2 males), from teachers with various grades of experience (0-2 years: 7; 3-10 years: 14; 20+ years: 12).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Digital competency

The comparison of teachers' digital competency at the beginning and at the end of the first 2020 lockdown offers manifold causes for reflection, highlighting how some instances have been felt in the same way in different countries, as well as similar counter-measures have been adopted in distant teaching in different contexts.

##### 3.1.1 Spain

The results on digital competency in teachers can be inferred from a number of questions from the questionnaire. As an initial standpoint we can observe the results from Question 5 (*How confident are you in your online teaching skills?*). All 35 teachers, who answered this questionnaire, coincide in having quite a lot of confidence on their online teaching skills. Thus, we can assume they are familiar with a number of resources and abilities, even if a margin of learning in both of them can be noted.

Despite their overall good online teaching skills, prior to COVID-19, teachers' training on topics related to online teaching has been rather low. Indeed, as it can be seen in Question 6 (*Prior to COVID-19, did you have any training on some of the following topics?*), only 17% confirm having had training on online learning for young children, 3% on crisis management and 3% on online support for parents and guardians. Most teachers' answers show thus a lack of training on areas that are key to implementing distance teaching.

As a complement to the previous question, Question 7 (*Prior to COVID-19, did you teach synchronous (live) online lessons?*) demonstrates that only 11% had taught previous synchronous (live) online lessons before the COVID-19 pandemic, and just 8% had had previous training on online learning for children. However, this situation dramatically changed during the lockdown. Question 8 (*During the COVID-19 lockdown, have you taught synchronous (live) online lessons?*) proves that the number of teachers using this resource in their classes raised up to 34%, three times higher than before. It is, however, noticeable that still a relevant number of teachers did not use this resource during the lockdown.

In order to obtain further detail on the types of resources applied in classes during the lockdown, Question 9 asked: *During the COVID-19 lockdown, which tools have you used for online teaching?* The answers indicate a prominent use of video conferencing tools, recorded videos and screencast together with an average use of virtual classroom management systems and online games. On the other end of the scope, we observe a testimonial use of social media. Six teachers stated they had used other resources for specific types of activities, such as Padlet to work on riddles, interactive worksheets or Lyricstraining, to name a few.

As a supplement to the previous answers, Question 10 (*Which resources have you found helpful for your online teaching?*) provided the following options in their answers: webinars, forums, video guidance, online games, resources form mixed ability classes and websites on how to create activities. The answers suggest teachers opted for online games and resources for mixed ability classes as the most significant tools for their online teaching, followed by websites to create activities.

The teachers' initial perception on having proper digital skills is clear in a number of answers to Question 11 (*Can you share any other successful strategy that you are using for online teaching?*). Most of the qualitative answers deal with teachers recording videos for their students, whereas 3% mention using very specific tools in the initial cycle, such as Flipgrid, Genially or Liveworksheets.

In order to complete the questions on digital competency during the COVID-19 lockdown, Question 12 (*What are the top challenges you have faced in your online teaching?*) intended to shed some light on the obstacles of distant learning. The highest number of answers coincided on three obstacles: 1) monitoring children's progress; 2) lack of training and support; and 3) maintaining students' motivation.

As a final reflection on the digital resources used during the process, Question 13 read: *After the COVID-19 lockdown, which tools would you be willing to keep using?* If we compare the results to those in Question 9 (*During the COVID-19 lockdown, which tools have you used for online teaching?*), we may observe a rough match in the answers. Thus, the most recurrent tools they would like to keep on using include video recording and screencast software and online games, and also, in a lower number, virtual classroom management systems and video conferencing programs. As in Question 9, social media are the last option in the teachers' choices. We would like to also note that, 8% of teachers have mentioned they would be willing to keep using the additional resources they named in Question 9 (Lyricstraining and Genially). Therefore, it could be stated that specialized online tools seem to be an option for certain practitioners.

### 3.1.2 Italy

The major challenges which teachers faced during lockdown seem to concern different aspects of the teaching activity, as they had to sustain the educational dimension of their proposal while handling the emotional side of distance learning and teaching. Educators were asked to cope with an abrupt situation of emergency in which, being themselves in quarantine and at a distance from their colleagues as well as from their pupils, they had to devise, structure, and deliver their lessons on their own, through instruments that they had seldom (if ever) used before. At the same time, they were required to address to their students' anxieties and the concerns of many parents about both the content and the format of the lessons. The survey shows that, despite the efforts of the Ministry, the digital divide ("lack of equipment and connectivity"), worsened by "lack of training and support" in the very first phase, deeply affected the teaching performance (32% of participants emphasize these aspects), even if the

main issues concerned “maintaining learners’ motivation” and “monitoring children’s progress in learning” (51% teachers highlighted both aspects).

Although all participants declare some degree of confidence in their digital skills (only 22% “not much”, the lowest grade registered: 6% in the 10-20 years of experience group, 10% in the 3-10 y. of experience teachers and 6% in the 0-2 y. of experience group), only 3% per group (3-10 y. of experience excluded) had had a training on “Online learning for young children” prior to COVID-19 lockdown; the same percentage per group, (20 y. of experience excluded) had also had training on “Crisis management”.

Prior to lockdown, only 13% participants had taught synchronous online lessons, while during COVID-19 only 29% did not. A somersault confirmed by the ability gained by teachers in using the electronic register to monitor and communicate with parents the pace of their children’s performance, and the topics or tasks they should carry out. It is also remarkable the educators’ progress in integrating different tools to support their online teaching: recorded video and/or screencasts (68%), virtual classroom management systems (52%), slide presentations (48%), and video conferencing and online games (39% each). Some of the most experienced teachers also experimented with different instruments (Kahoot, Bamboozle, Padlet, Emaze, Powtoon, British Council videos), which are considered to improve the online learning experience.

### 3.1.3 Romania

Most of the 33 teachers who answered the survey express their confidence in their online teaching skills: 6% of teachers declare they are very confident in their online teaching skills; 64% state that they are quite confident, and 30% consider that they are not much confident in that area. This positive attitude towards online teaching seems to have been consolidated during the experience of teaching online over the COVID-19 pandemic. A reason for that might be that the online teaching experience was encouraged in Romania before the lockdown too, and both pre-university and university teachers had attended courses on online teaching and blended learning. Thus, as of the Romanian sample, before the COVID lockdown, 18% teachers attended classes of online learning for young children, 8% of crisis management, 8% learnt about the online support for parents and guardians, while 76% have had no training in any of the above topics.

If before the COVID pandemic, only 12% of teachers had taught synchronous (live) online lessons, during the sanitary crisis 79% taught their online lessons synchronously, while the others opted for different ways of interaction (for instance, some teachers recorded their lessons and then posted the videos so that their pupils could watch them).

In spite of the significant difference between the sample of teachers who contributed to the National Romanian research study in March, cited above, and the sample of EFL primary school teachers examined in this article, a few comparisons may suggest an evolution in the teachers’ preferences for online teaching tools. The first difference to be taken into account is the period when the surveys were administered: March 2020 vs. June and July 2020. A shift between the online synchronous teaching via videoconference and social media (Facebook messenger, Whatsapp, etc.) may be observed. Since March was the first month of online learning, teachers kept in touch with their pupils via social media. However, after two months, the most popular channel of teaching was videoconference (preferred by 85% of teachers). The study on the English teachers also indicates that online gaming is specific and quite widespread in English classes. Social media also seems to have been an efficient tool for communicating with pupils and parents during the quarantine.



After the COVID-19 lockdown, the Romanian teachers express their willingness to keep using some digital tools, the most favourite tool being video conferencing (chosen by 57% of respondents). Other tools which will be used by the Romanian teachers are virtual classroom management systems (Moodle, Google Classroom, Blackboard Collaborate, Teams, etc.) – preferred by 51% of respondents, online games (51%), slide presentations (51%), social media (Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok, Edmodo, etc.) 42%, and recorded video and screencasts (33%). Regarding the top challenges which the teachers have faced in their online teaching, monitoring children's progress in learning seems to be the greatest concern, since it was chosen by 76% of respondents. Maintaining learners' motivation is also an important challenge, according to 60% of respondents. Other challenges are the lack of equipment and connectivity (45% of teachers), while 20% of respondents had to find solution for the scarcity of teaching materials. Finally, 30% of respondents concluded that communicating with parents had also been a top challenge in distance teaching.

### *3.2 Online Teaching Methods*

#### *3.2.1 Spain*

The results on online teaching methods, can be inferred from a number of questions from the questionnaire. Spanish teachers discovered new communication tools and some of these have come to stay for good. Question 10 (*Which resources have you found helpful for your online teaching?*) focuses on the strategies used for distance learning. Websites on how to create activities and forums for communicating with other teachers ranked at the top whereas webinars and video guidance tools appeared to be less popular amongst educators.

Question 13 (*After the COVID-19 lockdown, which tools would you be willing to keep using?*) confirms that most teachers are willing to continue using video classroom management systems and recorded video and screencasts after the COVID-19 lockdown (75%), which means that these methods have come to stay for good. The percentage decreases slightly when asked about the teachers' willingness to continue using other online methods like video conferencing, slide presentations, online games, or social media when they return to face to face teaching. In fact, only 50% of the teachers admit they are eager to keep them.

#### *3.2.2 Italy*

Italian teachers sought out different kinds of resources in order to match their didactic style to the peculiarities of new online methodologies. Online games and resources (42%) and Webinars (32%) have been marked top grade on a 1-5 Lickert scale, immediately followed by Video guidance (32%), which was graded 4. Nevertheless, the majority of participants stated to be willing to keep using Virtual classroom management systems (Moodle, Google Classroom, Blackboard Collaborate, Teams, etc.) (64%), recorded video and screencasts (58%), Slide presentations (55%) and Video conferencing (Zoom, Skype, Teams, etc.) (48%) when face-to face teaching is re-established. Online games (52%) will probably be kept too. However, 1<sup>st</sup> cycle teachers apparently do not deem Social media as really functional to the activities they foster: only 22% would use them, possibly because their pupils' age make this tool unsuitable for their teaching.

Also, Italian participants have used different strategies to involve pupils; namely, 13% have indicated in their open responses to have opted for “Powerpoint presentations, accompanied by digital books/videos”; “toys to learn new words and communication skills”; “reading illustrated stories in a dynamic way”, and involving parents. 3% have used WeTransfer and email to send audio tracks to their pupils. While some teachers experienced trouble in using videos (both live and recorded), some found the creation of audio tracks and short videos (using Powtoon and the like) very helpful and they even created stories about cartoons, songs and animals. Both children and parents positively responded to those tasks proposed as post-activities reinforcement.

### *3.2.3 Romania*

As the suspension of face-to-face teaching activity came unexpectedly, the teachers had to adapt quickly to the online teaching. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the most frequently tools used by the Romanian teachers were related to video conferencing, preferred by 85% of teachers. Social media (Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok, Edmodo, etc.) were used by 61% of teachers. Online games also proved to be efficient in teaching English, since it was used by 57% of teachers. Virtual classroom management systems (Moodle, Google Classroom, Blackboard Collaborate, Teams) were accessed by 45% of teachers. Slide presentations were used by less than half of the teachers (42%), and recorded video and screencasts were only embraced by 33% of teachers.

Among the resources which the teachers of English found helpful for their online teaching, online games and resources are the top option, since they are considered to be very helpful by 51% of teachers, followed by video guidance and resources for mixed ability classes (both being considered as very helpful by 36% of respondents). Websites on how to create activities and forums for communicating with other teachers are preferred by 24% of teachers, and only 21% of respondents consider webinars as a very helpful resource.

### *4. Limitations*

This study had several limitations; in the first instance, the low response rate from teachers to the survey. Primary school teachers suffered a great amount of public pressure during the lockdown and the completion of a voluntary online survey may not have been regarded as a top priority given the stress that many practitioners were experiencing during the school closure. Secondly, the different education realities in the three countries have hindered the obtention of more elaborate results and therefore more detailed statistical adjustment in the comparison has become infeasible.

### *5. Conclusions*

The survey was answered by teachers of English as a Second language working in 99 primary schools in Catalonia (Spain), Lazio (Italy) and Timiș, Hunedoara, Caraș-Severin and Arad (Romania) between May and July 2020. 99 responses were collected, 89 females and 10 males, from teachers that encompassed different seniority: 11 have been teaching for a maximum of 2 years; 23 between 3 and 4 years; 34 teachers from 10 to 20 years and 31 teachers for more than 20 years.

The results on teachers’ digital competency at the beginning and at the end of the 2020 lockdown in the three areas show that prior to COVID-19 teachers’ digital competency was

rather low. Most teachers' answers show a lack of training on online learning for young children, crisis management or online support for parents and guardians. The situation changed during the lockdown, since the number of teachers who used live lessons tripled. The answers also indicate a prominent use of video conferencing tools, recorded videos and screencast, together with an average use of virtual classroom management systems and online games. Teachers opted for online games and resources for mixed ability classes as the most significant tools for their online teaching, followed by websites to create activities. In terms of the challenges faced during the lockdown, the highest number of answers coincided on three obstacles: 1) monitoring children's progress; 2) lack of training and support; and 3) maintaining students' motivation. After the COVID-19 lockdown, the most recurrent tools that teachers would like to keep using included video recording and screencast software and online games, and virtual classroom management systems and video conferencing programs.

In terms of the methods used for online teaching, websites on how to create activities and forums for communicating with other teachers ranked at the top whereas webinars and video guidance tools appeared to be less popular amongst educators. Furthermore, most teachers are willing to continue using video classroom management systems and recorded videos and screencasts after the COVID-19, which means that these methods seem to have been adopted by educators on a permanent basis. Moreover, social media are also said to boost parents' involvement in the teaching-learning process of their children and, consequently, they may continue to be used to foster the pupils' motivation to learn a foreign language.

Despite the initial difficulties that teachers faced in coping with distant teaching, the survey shows how positive attitudes, especially regarding the role of the "school-family alliance" proved to be fundamental in building a cooperative environment, which definitely helped children in their new learning experience. However, teachers have faced enormous challenges when teaching online, the most relevant ones were overcoming their lack of training and support, monitoring children's progress to reach their learning goals, and maintaining the students' motivation. All in all, educators appeared to have reacted timely to the school closure and have managed to continue teaching in such an adverse situation for both learners and their families.

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