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**Master's Thesis in English Language Teaching Methodology:**

**Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences on Teaching English in Primary Schools (age 6-10)  
during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

**(Percepcije i iskustva nastavnika o podučavanju engleskog jezika  
u osnovnim školama (6-10 godina) tokom pandemije COVID-19 u Bosni i Hercegovini)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

After the outbreak of coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, in December 2019, countries all around the world proposed certain measures in order to minimize the possibility of virus transmission. Governments focused on health and safety of all citizens, so they imposed several restrictions. One of the proposed measures was suspension of traditional model of teaching and closing of educational institutions. Teaching process has been converted into online space and the most affected students were the youngest ones. COVID-19 has proved to be an extreme challenge for education sector.

The aim of the study is to explore what perceptions and experiences of English language teachers in our country in lower grades of primary schools are, primarily for students 6-10 years old, regarding teaching during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the aim was to explore what tools, applications and platforms English language teachers have used during this period, what challenges were faced and what perspectives were made, whether they have experienced increased workload or not and, in the end, what their opinion on distance learning in general has been. The study is quantitative and qualitative in nature, and the data were collected from 55 respondents, through an online survey.

The results show that EFL teachers who have taught children 6-10 years old during the pandemic have experienced increased workload and stress. By all means, the overall experience is not negative, since the study also confirmed that EFL teachers have learnt a lot and gained useful new experiences.

This study has been conducted during the pandemic period, in order to get direct information from the field and to estimate the current situation.

**Keywords:** English Language Teaching, Education, Primary Schools, COVID-19 Pandemic, EFL, Distance Learning

## SAŽETAK

Nakon izbijanja koronavirusa, poznatog i kao COVID-19, u decembru 2019. godine, države širom svijeta su predložile određene mjere kako bi smanjile mogućnost širenja virusa. Vlade su se usredotočile na zdravlje i sigurnost svih građana, stoga su uvele nekoliko ograničenja. Jedna od mjera bilo je zatvaranje obrazovnih ustanova, tako da se nastavni proces prenio u internetski prostor. Ovom mjerom su najviše bili pogođeni najmlađi učenici. COVID-19 se pokazao kako izuzetno težak izazov za obrazovni sektor.

Cilj istraživanja jeste da otkrijemo kakve su percepcije i iskustva nastavnika predmeta Engleski jezik u našoj zemlji u nižim razredima osnovnih škola, prvenstveno učenika starosne dobi 6-10 godina, u vezi s nastavom tokom krize uzrokovane pandemijom COVID-19. Pored toga, cilj je bio istražiti koje su alate, aplikacije i platforme nastavnici Engleskog jezika koristili u tom razdoblju, sa kojim izazovima su se susreli i koje perspektive su iz toga proizašle, da li se njihovo radno opterećenje povećalo tokom ovog perioda ili ne i, na kraju, kakvo je njihovo mišljenje o učenju na daljinu općenito. Istraživanje je kvantitativne i kvalitativne prirode, a podaci su prikupljeni zahvaljujući 55 nastavnika putem online ankete.

Rezultati pokazuju da su nastavnici Engleskog jezika koji predaju učenicima starosne dobi 6-10 godina iskusili povećan obim radnih obaveza kao i količinu stresa. Svakako, istraživanje je pokazalo i da cjelokupno iskustvo nije negativno, obzirom da su nastavnici naučili mnogo i stekli korisna nova iskustva.

Ovo istraživanje je provedeno tokom trajanja pandemije, kako bi se doznale informacije direktno s terena i procijenila trenutna situacija.

**Ključne riječi:** podučavanje engleskog jezika, obrazovanje, osnovne škole, pandemija COVID-19, EFL, učenje na daljinu

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The new coronavirus, also called the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), first appeared in December 2019. SARS-CoV-2 has led to a pandemic and over 2,000,000 cases were confirmed together with 100,000 deaths, according to the survey conducted by Blekić, Miškić & Kljaić-Bukvić, published in May 2020. The disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, called the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), is characterized by general symptoms of infection, which are accompanied with inflammatory changes in the lower respiratory tract (Blekić, Miškić & Kljaić-Bukvić, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, that has struck the world since the end of 2019, has affected all areas of human life including education and teaching process. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic affected about 1,6 billion of students worldwide, in 195 countries. Many schools have suspended their teaching processes, closed their classrooms and converted the process into distance online learning, mostly via different internet platforms. The students were denied the possibility of going to schools, and that will leave long-term consequences, in social as well as economical terms (Tonković, Vrsalović & Pongračić, 2020). Online learning and teaching are terms that are used internationally, but they can be interpreted differently. Many authors describe them in different ways, by giving descriptions and opinions based on their own research field or experience. To put it simply, online learning is a way of learning where instructions, content and materials are delivered through internet, fast and easy. It also gives learners the opportunity to learn without their presence in the classroom and that is why it is also called distance learning (Ramadani & Xhaferi, 2020).

Our country, being also affected by the virus, has introduced a variety of measures and far-reaching restrictions and closed many institutions, including the educational facilities. People were encouraged to do their activities from their own homes by using technology, in order to minimize social contacts. English language teachers, as well as all the other teachers and professors had to convert their classes into distance learning and conduct them via internet platforms and applications. While doing that, they faced significant challenges. According to teachers, students and their parents who participated in a study conducted in our country regarding online teaching and learning during the period April – August 2020, online teaching in our country was conducted more or less successfully. Namely, the general grade of online teaching, which ranged between 3.40 and 3.90 (on 1-5 scale), largely depended on students being

able to solve tasks and obligations independently as well as students' opportunities to establish contact with teachers, get additional instructions and information and to feel that someone actually cares about them. Factors such as platforms and applications used, ways of communication, duration of classes etc. influenced this grade to a much lesser extent than factors related to relationship and communication between students and teachers. Teachers rated online teaching as good ( $M = 2.93$ ). Around 50% of students and their parents stated that students progressed and acquired useful knowledge and numerous skills during online classes, and that they invested a lot of effort and time in learning (COI Step by Step, proMENTE socijalna istraživanja & FOD BiH, 2020).

Using online platforms in our country was very demanding because of many factors that influenced the whole process. According to the abovementioned study, the most dominant problem was difficulties related to access to technology and internet connection for both students and teachers (COI Step by Step, proMENTE socijalna istraživanja & FOD BiH, 2020). School closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have also shed light on several issues that affected teaching process and teachers even before the pandemic and that only increased after the pandemic has started. Hence, the present study's objective is to explore the perceptions and experiences of English language teachers during the pandemic period, over a time span of over a year, since March 2020 until the end of summer semester in 2021, in our country. The focus of the research are teachers who teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to young learners, 6-10 years old.

This paper is structured as follows: after the *Introduction* is presented, the following section, *Bosnia and Herzegovina's response to the Pandemic*, deals with the theoretical framework related to our country's immediate response to the pandemic and how teaching process was adapted to the teaching during crisis. Some of the topics and questions also discussed in this part are how 6-10 years old students learn English, what their habits and strategies when teaching English are and what role of their parents regarding learning English language in schools has been. The next chapter, *Teachers' Experiences in Converting EFL Classes*, also provides theoretical framework, with special focus on English language teachers' experiences on teaching during the pandemic and it is based on six important aspects: *Teachers' experiences*, *Instructional technology*, *Students' experiences in the eyes of teachers*, *School support*,

*Curriculum integration, Difficulty*. These aspects also comprise the core constructs for the research. That part is concluded with the chapter titled *Limitations of the study* and it clearly indicates what obstacles were faced while conducting the study, what challenges in interpretation were faced and what possible limitations in general were encountered. That chapter is followed by the analysis of the study on teachers' perceptions and experiences, with hypotheses, explanation of research method and instruments and final results and discussion. After study is being presented, advice and recommendations are proposed for EFL teachers in chapter named *Recommendations for Schools and Teachers*, based on the synthesis of teachers' experiences from different countries worldwide and based on the conducted study as well. In the end, the *Conclusion* chapter consists of the main information presented in the paper, and *Appendix* offers insight into research questions presented in tables together with numeric results.

In conclusion, by focusing on the bright side, as it is stated in the UNICEF & UNESCO (2020) report, although the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruptions in education, at the same time it has proven to be a unique opportunity for all countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, to reconsider some of the traditional educational practices and accelerate innovations in this sector and the goal of this study is to contribute to this positive change.



## **2. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA'S RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC**

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all spheres of life and fundamentally changed the daily lives of the inhabitants of the entire planet. The governments focused on protecting people's health and lives, at least at the very beginning of the pandemic. As expected, the pandemic has also greatly affected the functioning of education systems. School buildings were closed, and the teaching process, almost overnight, switched to various online platforms, TV screens, Viber groups and other media. From the very beginning, it was clear that no country, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, was sufficiently prepared for this situation, neither technically nor professionally, so the solutions and models used to continue the teaching process were more than diverse (COI Step by Step, proMENTE socijalna istraživanja & FOD BiH, 2020). Before we offer an insight on situation in our country, the global perspective on the pandemic as well as measures that have been introduced worldwide will be presented.

### **2.1. The Overview of the Pandemic and the Immediate Responses: Global Perspective**

According to the definition of the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) (cited in Lazić N., Lazić V. & Kolarić, 2020) the confirmed case is “any person meeting the laboratory criteria, where the needed laboratory criterion is the detection of SARS CoV-2 nucleic acid in a clinical specimen” (p. 44). The International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) named this virus SARS CoV-2, due to the fact that the virus is a variant of the virus that caused SARS. Its spread among humans is still ongoing, it is developing rapidly and the final extent of the pandemic is questionable and still unknown (Blekić, Miškić & Kljaić-Bukvić, 2020).

COVID-19 is a type of virus mainly transmitted through droplets. It exhibits a wide range of clinical symptoms, from asymptomatic to mild symptoms such as fever, sore throat, headache and cough, to severe cases of pneumonia. The first case of a patient suffering from COVID-19 in our country was confirmed on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020. In short notice, the number of confirmed cases greatly increased and certain measures had to be taken all around the world. The uncertainty surrounding the emerging coronavirus urged our country as well to adopt various disease control measures (DCMs). Eleven days after the first confirmed case, all education institutions in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina suspended their educational process,

including kindergartens, primary and high schools and universities, in order to prevent the transmission of the coronavirus among students. Five days later, the official COVID-19 epidemic was officially declared in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Half a million children and youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina were affected by the suspension of traditional in-class education during the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 (Lazić N., Lazić V. & Kolarić, 2020).

However, it has been noticeable that children mostly have had less severe symptoms. Studies have also confirmed this statement, by saying that:

“Epidemiological reports, however, show a small percentage of children among the sick: up to 5%. Children tend to have laboratory evidence of virus infection or mild to moderately severe clinical presentations, with slightly milder radiological changes in the lungs than adults, and with rare lethal outcomes. It has been observed that children are as susceptible to infection as adults, but it is not fully understood why they remain asymptomatic, or have mild forms of COVID-19” (Blekić, Miškić & Kljaić-Bukvić, 2020, p. 64).

Dušanić-Gačić and Agić (2021) have stated in their article that the obstacle to a quality education system that could be systematically regulated is the institutional arrangement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is legally regulated in different ways in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the Republika Srpska. In the Republika Srpska, all levels of education are legally regulated by entity legislation, and special laws have been adopted for each of the four levels of education. In Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, education is legally regulated at the cantonal level. Each of the ten cantons has its own law on pre-school, primary and secondary education, and the cantons where universities are located have their own laws on higher education. District Brčko, as a special organizational unit in Bosnia, has its own laws that regulate each of the four levels of education. So, there are more than thirty laws on various levels governing the field of education. It is stated further in the article that this has been an obstacle even before the emergence of the virus, and it only got more complicated during the period of pandemic and organization of distance learning (Dušanić–Gačić & Agić, 2021).

According to the UNICEF report, published in June, 2020, comprised of questions and answers related to education process during the pandemic, it is known that children and schools are not the only virus transmitters. The report further states that there is no known evidence of a

correlation between disease transmission rates and open or closed schools. In the same report, as an answer to the question whether or not UNICEF suggests re-opening of schools, the answer is yes. The strongest argument supporting this answer is the fact that there is evidence of the negative effect of school closures on physical and mental health of children, their nutrition, safety and learning (UNICEF, 2020). UNICEF & UNESCO report from August, 2020 also tackles this topic. It states that the detrimental effects of school closures on learning and well-being of children and young people are clearly documented. Children and young people at all levels of education are at risk of missing course materials and learning losses. Suspension of schooling can further increase inequalities, given the increased risk of vulnerable groups of children and young people dropping out of school. It is also stated in the report that children with disabilities, children on the move, girls and boys from ethnic minorities and children living in poverty may be denied access to education significantly more during and after COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2020).

On the other hand, one of the reasons for introducing such radical measures was a lack of scientific data on the emerging COVID-19, but also lack of protective equipment and shortage of disinfectants. Still, it remains unknown to what extent the early adoption of measures has affected the spread of virus in our country (Lazić N., Lazić V. & Kolarić, 2020).

## **2.2. Primary School Students' EFL Learning Habits and Strategies**

Before discussing the role of school in lives of 1-5 grades students, it is important to consider their mental and social skills. According to American Psychology Association, children ages 6 to 10 can concentrate on what they do for longer periods of time, unlike their younger peers, and they are aware that others can have opinions different from theirs. They can also communicate better and longer with others, express themselves and understand multiple things. By the age of 10, children have a vocabulary of 20,000 words and learn 20 new words a day in average. They also realize that a word may have different meanings. Regarding social skills of children 6-10 years old, American Psychology Association states that children become intensely interested in peers but they mostly prefer same sex friends. More often children this age choose rules-based games where the rules are the key element and winning the game is more frequently the

objective. The reason for that is their perception of play, since it is no longer just fantasy play where imagination is the key element. Another important social characteristic is that they develop friendships marked by give and take, mutual trust and shared experiences. This period is marked by development of social skills, such as empathy and compassion. At this age, children start to feel that belonging and acceptance by peers is very important and they may look more for peers than to adults for gratification (APA, 2017).

School, as an educational institution, has multiple functions in students' lives. Besides being a place of formal education, it is also a place of social contacts and relationships (keeping company with peers and playing with them, chatting, having lunch together etc.) and collaborating (sharing ideas, studying together etc.). Those are the elements that traditional model of schooling provides and they greatly influence students' wellbeing. On the other hand, these elements have not been present enough during distance learning (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). All of the elements are especially important when speaking of young, primary school students, who has just started to expand their views by learning a foreign language.

As Shamir & Johnson (2012) state: "English is the customary language for international communication and for overcoming barriers to the flow of information, goods and people across national boundaries. For these reasons, it is the foreign language for which there is the strongest demand" (p. 52). According to the last modifications in educational system in our country, English language teaching starts in the first grade, primary schools. This research is focused on EFL teachers' experiences on teaching English in first few years of schooling, from first to fifth grade, namely to students 6-10 years old. Butler & Le (2018) have reported that even though the starting age for learning English as a Foreign Language has lowered in the past in many countries worldwide, it is still not confirmed what age is the best for starting teaching EFL and our knowledge on how young students learn English over time has remained limited. As it is stated in the official Curriculum for English language for the Sarajevo Canton, published by the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth (*Stručni aktiv nastavnika engleskog jezika Kantona Sarajevo*, 2018), children are considered to fully adopt the mother tongue system by the age of five and that is the best time to start learning a foreign language. By all means, children continue to learn the mother tongue even after that period, but it is a matter of perfecting the already well-adopted phonetic-phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic system.

Children at the age of five or six can master the phonetic-phonological system of a foreign language very successfully, even up to the level of competence of the native speakers. Lightbown & Spada (2006) have stated that even though children develop the ability to understand a language and to use it to express themselves as early as in the pre-school years, during school years, these abilities expand and grow. The most important factor that impacts this development is reading, since learning to read gives a major boost to this aspect of language awareness. Reading helps them to understand that a 'word' is separate from the thing it stands for. Also, it greatly impacts the astonishing growth of vocabulary.

Beside many young learners being intrinsically motivated to learn English language, there are several important factors that determine young students' attitudes and extrinsic motivation to learn English, and to mention few of them: parents, teachers and favorable learning conditions and activities. Students' attitudes are usually mostly positive toward learning English, and singing songs and playing games are their favorite activities when it comes to English language learning (Asmali, 2017). According to National Reading Panel Report from 2000 (cited in Shamir & Johnson, 2012), reading ability in early grades has been the primary focus of computerized instruction for a long period of time, mostly because reading acquisition has proven to be closely related to later academic achievement in a variety of subjects. Results of these studies have shown that computerized instructions can be effective in supporting reading and phonological awareness development. Still, any use of computerized instructions must be complemented by a strong instructor, namely a teacher, and school support.

One of the possible obstacles for teachers is unequal readiness level of learners of the age group analyzed in this paper. Asmali (2017), who observed English language teaching to second grade students, came to the conclusion that students of this age group differ greatly from each other, when speaking of some of the basic abilities such as writing, reading, cutting and pasting, painting etc., which might be a problem since the more successful ones are mostly bored while waiting for their colleagues to finish. Due to this, they can lose attention and motivation. For traditional model of conducting classes, the author suggests that students from different classes are divided into groups according to their abilities, so that teachers can plan learning activities that can be finished in an optimal period. On the other hand, during home schooling and online teaching and learning, teachers may come across the same obstacle, depending on teaching

model (e.g. if classes are conducted via video meeting). One of the advantages of online teaching is that internet and online world offer many possible solutions, depending on the activities, so teachers can find already prepared activities for different levels of students' knowledge, or if there are students who cannot finish a task in allocated time, they can make breakout rooms and partner them with more successful students to help them finish the task.

### **2.3. Technology in education and approaches to teaching during pandemic**

Even before the occurrence of pandemic, technology has been greatly introduced in EFL teaching, due to the advancement in computer technologies, especially the internet and all its facets, which changed the ways how foreign language skills are acquired and learned. Not only does it provide excellent, authentic and abundant learning resources, but it also serves as a mean to connect EFL learners with native English speakers across the globe (Alberth, 2013). Still, Shamir & Johnson (2012) argue that, while there is a great number of software and programs for foreign languages learning and while they have met a great success, only a small percentage of such programs have been designed specifically for young students. An issue related to the existing software designed for young students is that it has not been subjected to an adequate empirical testing. The greatest advantage of these programs is that they combine audio and visual elements and they can be adapted to students' competencies and abilities, therefore the promise for the programs' success is considerable.

The school closure introduced as a restriction due to the COVID-19 pandemic occurred during an era that has been shaped by many transformations, digitalization and technological innovations. The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) has become a prominent issue even before the pandemic, but, in many countries in Europe, the implementation of ICT in education lagged behind with respect to the expected ICT transformation progress (König, Jäger-Biela & Glutsch, 2020). According to Prensky (2001) (as cited in Roistika, 2021), decades ago, different types of technology were introduced to children, such as computers, video games, cell phones and many more.

Consequently, students have been exposed and presented with various ideas, information and knowledge nowadays. This advancement of science and technology affects the sphere of

education, and teaching English as a Foreign Language in primary schools as well, because the media used for teaching is developing greatly. The transfer of information in the education process is also very complex today because of the development of communication channels and technology and it involves multiple modes such as image, video, sounds, graphics etc. The use of technology in education has a number of benefits and to mention few of them: attracts students' interest and attention; increases students' motivation to learn given materials; leads to simplification of the materials and that leads to better comprehension and achieving better learning goals and, eventually, it develops students' individuality (Roistika, 2021).

Shamir & Johnson (2012) have stated that:

“Computer technology has changed education by allowing students and educators access to a wider range of resources to suit their needs. Computer-assisted instruction (CAI) in the classroom allows for a dynamic presentation of material, individualized instruction, and a level of engagement in the learning process that may not be possible in a more traditional classroom setting. CAI can provide immediate feedback regarding correct responses, reinforcement where appropriate and modelling when needed.” (pp. 49-50)

After the limitations and restrictions started, countries around the globe suggested many strategies and methods to teach students and learners through distinctive materials and turned to technology and online platforms, but this time because they were forced to.

Beside all the advantages provided by technology, there are also several shortcomings worth mentioning. Namely, miscommunications have been more often during online classes than in the traditional classroom, due to the way teachers or students express themselves by written communication or due to poor internet connection. Some teachers have also reported having struggles with setting boundaries in their online classroom. Another issue that should not be neglected is internet and screen addiction and problems that can be caused by spending a lot of time using gadgets and technology, especially when speaking about young students (Cendana & Winardi, 2020). Octaberlina & Muslimin (2020) have argued that online learning can result in eye strain or other Computer Visual Syndrome (CVS), if students do not adjust their visual background light of their device and their room.

Screen addiction is a problem that affects not only students but also teachers, due to the fact that online teaching has demanded a great amount of time spent on computers, either preparing or conducting classes. On the other hand, it helped teachers who previously had had struggles with the simplest tools such as Word to improve themselves in the field of technology and change their attitude towards technology in education in general (Hebebcı, Bertiz & Alan, 2020). Besides the possible problem of screen addiction, there is also the topic of online safety, especially for younger students, who are not well aware of all the dangers present on the internet. According to a study conducted in India, 39% of teachers mentioned internet safety as one of the problems of distance learning. Namely, they consider online classes as not very safe and secure medium for students (Nambiar, 2020).

According to the UNICEF (2020) report regarding the situation with the use of ICT in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the pandemic, the abrupt and accelerated introduction of online education required teaching staff to make a switch from physical to online classrooms in short term. Certainly, working in an online environment requires certain skills for which majority of teachers were not fully trained. Trainings were mostly organized by UNICEF and Ministry of Education, through online platforms. The report stated that, according to the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of the Sarajevo Canton estimate, 4,400 teachers were included in the training through 22 two-hour webinars, which is 80% of the total number of teachers in the canton. Therefore, with all the limitations of online professional development programs, online modalities provide an opportunity for large coverage with fewer resources.

In addition to the need to educate teachers on how to use technology, it is necessary to work on the promotion of digital literacy in general. Vajzović, Turčilo, Osmić, Silajdžić & Cerić (2020) have conducted research on self-assessment of competencies related to digital and media literacy of teachers and librarians in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They came to numerous important conclusions, to mention few of them: teachers are aware that media and information literacy present an important competence for life in the modern age; they also know the very concept of media and information literacy, but in terms of teaching students, they still need additional education, especially for some specific segments of media and information literacy; media and information literacy should be part of the existing subjects and not a separate subject, i.e. they see it as a way of teaching competencies, not content; to a certain extent, a part of the content



from the field of media and information literacy is already taught in schools, but often not in the way it would have desirable learning outcome for students.

Efforts to implement media and digital literacy into education system in our country were made even before the pandemic. In research on media and information literacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the same group of authors have also presented an overview of works that have dealt with this topic in our country during last decade. As some of the most important works and authors, they have mentioned Lea Tajić, author of the book named “Medijska pismenost u Bosni i Hercegovini” published in 2013. This book has provided an overview of the situation, i.e. the presence of media literacy in the curriculum of formal education. In the collection of works "Medijska pismenost u digitalnom dobu" (Internews 2015), the concept of media literacy and the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina in terms of media literacy in primary schools and the habit of using technology and media among teachers are analyzed. Report on the representation of information literacy in teacher education (Dedić-Bukvić according to Hodžić, 2019) and a report on information literacy among teachers (Vehab and Mavrak according to Hodžić, 2019) were published in the magazine *Obrazovanje odraslih* (Vajzović, Turčilo, Osmić, Silajdžić & Cerić, 2020).

#### **2.4. Distance learning as a teaching model during the pandemic**

Distance learning is a form of learning in which teachers and students are spatially separated. Communication between them and between students themselves is enabled by different types of technologies. In order to be successful, distance learning requires structured planning, well-structured teaching units, special didactic strategies and communication via electronic or other technology. Distance learning requires a high level of self-regulation and life skills, which would make teachers support new teaching, learning and guidance strategies (Frangž, 2021). There are several synonyms used for this model of teaching, such as: distance education, distance learning, e-learning, online learning and online education. Some authors identify some of these terms as synonyms, while others consider some of them as broader (e-learning). One group of authors emphasizes information and communication technology, while another group of authors places emphasis on the pedagogical aspect (Tonković, Vrsalović & Pongračić 2020).

At the beginning, it is important to mention the key distinction between two types of distant teaching, synchronous and asynchronous teaching:

“A key distinction in the kind of remote teaching taking place is between synchronous and asynchronous teaching. Synchronous teaching involves the teacher and learners being online at the same time, using an online video or audio platform, for example, while asynchronous teaching is where teachers make learning resources available and students can access these at their own pace and according to their own schedule” (British Council, 2020, p. 10).

There are several key points that are important for quality teaching and for both students’ and teachers’ satisfaction: quality and timely interaction between student and professor, technical support availability, structured online class modules and modifications to accommodate conduction of practical classes (Nambiar, 2020). Quality of online learning depends on a variety of factors, involving not only students and teachers but also some other sides and factors. In order to ensure quality teaching and learning, it is necessary to maintain cooperation between various parties, teachers, students and their parents on one side, and on the other side with both, the government as the regulatory holder and the community as policy users, so that they can synergize and maximize the academic potential of students (Dewi & Wajdi, 2021).

Differences in the quality of teaching conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic stemmed to some degree from preexisting differences in access to such resources as high-speed internet and computing devices (e.g., laptops or tablets) (Hamilton, Kaufman & Diliberti, 2020). Most of the platforms used for distance learning require large internet bandwidth (e.g. Google Classroom). It means that, in order to load the page used for classes, students must have stable internet connection. Additionally, if teachers upload a huge number of files for a class or a large file, students with unstable internet connection may have a problem while opening or downloading them (Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020). In order to prevent these obstacles, teachers may discuss internet access and bandwidth with students or, even more preferably, with their parents. This might be a problem especially for students who live in rural areas in our country where internet connection is unstable or for students from low socio-economic background, so teachers should bear that in mind. Numerous studies have also shown that this has been the most dominant problem regarding online teaching in our country. More precisely, 45.1% of the responding

students reported that they have had problems with unstable internet connection, according to the study conducted by COI Step by Step, proMENTE socijalna istraživanja and FOD BiH (2020).

There are several factors that affect students' satisfaction with online teaching, and the most important are: quality of instructor, course design, prompt feedback and expectation of students. All of the mentioned factors positively impact students' satisfaction and, consequently, student's satisfaction positively impacts their performance (Gopal, Singh & Aggarwal, 2021).

The closing of classrooms due to the pandemic in Bosnia and Herzegovina brought some new issues and questions, and one of them was how to organize teaching process within the online space, using available technology. Since the teaching process stopped abruptly, teachers were not prepared for distance learning and there was no uniform solution offered for the whole country. Due to the fact that the educational system in our country is decentralized, types of distance learning sometimes varied even within one municipality, city or canton. Some of the models that were implemented during the pandemic in our country are: schooling via TV, communication via mobile applications such as Viber, SMS, e-mail etc., use of learning platforms such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams etc., and some other models that were less used such as school pages, official page of Ministry of Education, Facebook closed groups etc. (COI Step by Step, proMENTE socijalna istraživanja & FOD BiH, 2020).

Most schools used the communication application named Viber for online learning, while other more advanced tools were used to a lesser extent. TV classes were conducted in seven administrative units and were mainly intended for children in the lower grades of primary school. For children who did not have access to internet, teachers distributed materials, either by parents picking them up in person or by mail. A number of teachers gave instructions for working using their phones. Education authorities mobilized existing resources in their own communities to procure ICT devices and the Internet for children who did not have access to online classes, such as contacting telecoms to provide free internet, engaging international donors and partnering with the private sector and parent associations (UNICEF, 2020).

Gopal, Singh & Aggarwal (2021) stated that teachers who wanted to deliver their courses online efficiently had extra obligations, because they had to adapt to the changing climate, polish their technical skills throughout the process and foster students' technical knowledge at the same time.

## **2.5. The role of students' parents in teaching EFL during pandemic**

Creating and developing partnership between schools and families is necessary in order to raise the quality of education, since students' family plays an important role in their process of learning, development and growth. Cooperation between teachers and parents is also necessary for achieving sustainable success, good socio-emotional behaviors and cooperation between students. Schools have to find ways to attract parents to be actively involved. In order to do so, they should develop a plan for cooperation between parents and school. Before the occurrence of the pandemic, this cooperation was mostly based on several scheduled meetings for reporting on students' success. This partnership proved to be even more necessary after the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the scheduled meetings have been just a part of the increased interaction between teachers and parents (Buza & Hysa, 2020).

Speaking of the importance of parents in children's lives, parents' lifestyle can also affect and determine their children's life and education as well. Even though we can say it does influence it, our knowledge of how and to which extent parental socio-economic status influences their children's English learning is limited. A survey conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic showed that there is a significant relationship between parents' socio-economic status and their attitudes towards the role of English. Other factors that may impact children's success in EFL learning are parenting styles, books available at home, parental involvement in children's English learning and parental beliefs and expectations toward their children's English learning ability (Butler & Le, 2018). As Asmali stated (2017), parents' influence is especially important because children tend to adopt their parents' attitudes. Therefore, parents support and encourage their children to learn EFL at their young age by showing their contentedness and by emphasizing the importance of learning a foreign language at that period. This study also showed that, even though half of the parents who responded to the research instrument did not speak English, their positive perspective on their children's learning of English language positively impacted their children and increased their intrinsic motivation.

Types of information that teachers shared with parents during the pandemic greatly varied. According to a study, teachers have mostly spoken to students' parents about how to help their children with given instructions, how to support their children social and emotional needs, importance of physical activity for children but also how to access services outside of school,

such as healthcare services. Teachers also reported that they have made effort to provide guidance for parents on how to talk to children about COVID-19 (Hamilton, Kaufman & Diliberti, 2020).

Speaking of distance teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in our country, one study showed that both parents and students extremely appreciate all the effort that teachers put in the implementation of online teaching and more than 80% of them consider that teachers have borne the greatest burden. Although they note that the quality of the teachers' work was not uniform, over 70% of respondents emphasize that students received regular feedback from teachers, consisting information on learning progress, and over half of respondents (54.2%) from both groups agreed that teachers took care of and encouraged their students, and 57.7% of the respondents from both groups agreed that teachers worked hard to make it easier for parents to work with their children. Around 90% of parents agreed that they can rely on their children's teachers. These facts consist very important data and they present a chance for further development of partnership between teachers and parents based on mutual respect and trust. On the other hand, it was not easy for parents as well during online classes. 77% of parents think that too much was expected from them and not everyone was able to provide the necessary support to their children every time they needed it (COI Step by Step, proMENTE socijalna istraživanja & FOD BiH, 2020).

During the online classes, a great part of what previously had been teachers' job in handling and supporting teaching and learning processes, suddenly moved to parents, with the help of technology devices and internet connection. Younger students especially needed their parents' help, hence parents fully directed, explained and supported teaching and learning from home. Therefore, parents appreciated and preferred teachers who provided detailed instructions and teaching materials. Also, in this outbreak era, parents highly acknowledged teachers who have been flexible, creative and innovative while conducting their classes (Roistika, 2021).

On the other hand, teachers having difficulties communicating with parents as mentors at home has been one of the problems that occurred since the beginning of the pandemic era. Not all parents have been willing to accompany their children while studying at home, or simply they did not have that possibility, due to long work hours or other responsibilities. Parents have had difficulties in motivating their children to study and in understanding certain lessons and learning

content (Dewi & Wajdi, 2021). The last one mentioned should be especially borne in mind when speaking about EFL classes, since not all parents had learned English and, possibly, they do not know even the basics so they could not help their children even if they were willing to. There are also examples of negative behavior noticed regarding students' parents and online teaching. Ramadani & Xhaferi (2020) reported that sometimes there are parents behind cameras that help their children during evaluations or tests, or they do all the work instead of their child, just so they can get a better grade.

Based on the discussion above, it is important to emphasize the increased importance of cooperation and partnership between teachers and students' parents, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The partnership required understanding, effort and commitment of both parties involved. Eventually, both parties have greatly appreciated effort and time invested by the other party. Although several obstacles have emerged in the way of that partnership, they are insignificant in comparison to the great work that teachers and students' parents have jointly performed during online teaching, serving the mutual goal to help students learn, acquire useful knowledge and gain new, positive experiences. In the end, even though individual differences were noticeable, teachers have noticed that most students and their parents worked hard in order to complete the course with good results.

### **3. TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN CONVERTING EFL CLASSES WORLDWIDE AND IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: COMPARATIVE RESEARCH**

As we have already stated, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected education process everywhere in the world and no country was spared. This part of the paper deals with the theoretical framework regarding changes introduced in education process during online teaching, with special focus on EFL teachers' perspective. Using numerous studies conducted in different parts of the world and in our country, theoretical part will be discussed and comparative research will be presented. The comparison will be made by focusing on six important aspect of online teaching that will be used for the research instrument as well: Teachers' experiences, Instructional technology, Students' experiences in the eyes of teachers, School support, Curriculum integration, Difficulties met by teachers.

#### **3.1. Teachers' experiences**

Educational institutions across the country have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in a variety of ways, depending on their resources and policymakers. Consequently, EFL teachers from different parts of our country have had different experiences with online teaching. The unexpected shift from traditional way of English language teaching to online model of teaching using internet and digital platforms has resulted in a number of challenges for students, as well as for teachers. This experience was especially challenging for teachers who teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in primary schools, to the youngest students 6-10 years old. As Frangež (2021) stated, in addition to technical knowledge that has been necessary during this period, it has been utterly important for teachers to maintain constant contact with their students. During distance learning, teachers have developed a teaching routine at home that literally became part of their daily lives. According to a British Council (2020) survey, for majority of teachers who responded to the survey, remote learning has been a completely new model of teaching and learning. Still, most of them responded positively when it comes to their readiness to do their job remotely, saying that they are reasonably confident in their ability to do so. They

have been also strongly focused on their professional development in order to improve themselves in distance teaching.

Gopal, Singh & Aggarwal (2021) have argued in their study that teachers' efficiency and effort are the most prominent factors that affect students' satisfaction during online classes. It means that, if teachers are able to understand students' psychology, work efficiently and deliver course content properly, students' performance and satisfaction will improve. Therefore, teachers' perspective is critical because their enthusiasm will affect the complete process of online teaching. But, in order to achieve better results, both teachers and students have equal responsibility. Cendana & Winardi (2020) have stated that: "Teachers were challenged to think outside of the box in how they can equip the students to absorb the learning process." (p. 7).

Speaking of traditional classroom, English language classes require authenticity, small class is preferred, abundant feedback is expected and it is necessary to consider the affective filter factor. EFL primary teachers have to demonstrate high English proficiency, consistent foreign language pedagogy and authentic assessment in order to teach English effectively (Cendana & Winardi, 2020). One of the greatest challenges that teachers have faced during the pandemic era has been maintaining at least a minimum of communication with students and supporting their learning and development. But, the extent to which teachers have been successful at overcoming the difficulties and which factors have been the most significant in doing so will probably remain unknown (König, Jäger-Biela & Glutsch, 2020).

After the abrupt suspension of face-to-face classes due to the pandemic, teachers who had had previous experiences teaching online, before pandemic, had less difficulties converting their classes and they have taught their online classes with more ease and comfort (Marek, Chew & Wu, 2021). Hebebcı, Bertiz & Alan (2020) mentioned that teachers have reported that distance learning was the best possible solution for education process during the pandemic, since there was no other alternative. Still, several problems have occurred, and as it is mentioned in the study, due to the fact that teacher and students cannot share the same physical space, their communication and interaction is limited and the level of efficiency is reduced. The conclusion is that distance learning proved to be a good alternative, but it can never be as effective as traditional, classroom environment.



Octaberlina & Muslimin (2020) have proposed several points in regard what teacher can do in order to meet the students' needs and overcome barriers caused by online learning. The first important step that EFL teachers can take is to consider the overall learning goals of the subject. In order to create an effective online learning methodology, teachers should make arrangements that would constantly mix online learning course fundamentals with students' needs. The second piece of advice for teachers is to take into consideration a variety of students' distinctive learning styles. Teachers may solve this by incorporating a wide scope of online exercises and activities into their online classes, so that students' with different learning styles can pick what works best for them, whether it is a virtual talk for auditory students or pictures and recordings for visual students. The next point stated by the authors of the study is to offer quick feedback to students. The key is to offer students the helpful analysis of their work so that they can learn from their mistakes, as quickly as time permits. Additionally, teachers may require students' feedback and criticism in order to improve communication and adjust their teaching to students' needs. The last one suggests that teachers should maintain more interaction with their students. This may be done by using a platform different from the one used for regular classes, so that teachers and students can feel connected.

Finally, it is important to emphasize the importance of teachers' perspective on online teaching. Namely, according to Nambiar (2020), in most studies related to evaluation of distance learning and teaching that have been conducted earlier, it is noticed that students' perspective is given more importance over teachers' perspective. The point is that teachers' perspective should be equally important, because if they, as provider of education, find distance learning as unsatisfactory, educational base itself will become weaker. Distance mode of learning and teaching has been equally challenging for teachers as it has been for students and therefore their experience and perspective is equally valuable.

### **3.2. Instructional technology**

Technology-enhanced learning has a great potential to offer in facilitating the development of English language proficiency of EFL learners through computer-mediated communication. Speaking of the positive sides of online learning and using the technology in EFL classroom, if used properly, internet and technology in general can potentially address most, if not all, of the

shortcomings inherent to the traditional EFL classroom, including lack of exposure to the target language, lack of practice and lack of learning resources (Alberth, 2013). Therefore, teachers have agreed that: “ICT integration in education, especially English language teaching, should not only perform during the global pandemic, but also should be conducted consistently since nowadays we are in the era of industrial revolution” (Nugroho, Ilmiani & Rekha, 2021, p. 286). Eventually, many teachers have recognized distance learning as one of the indispensable models of learning in the future (Hebebcı, Bertiz & Alan 2020).

Teaching media has played a significant role in the pandemic period. The ways in which teachers have been delivering teaching materials and content during the pandemic period had to be varied, engaging and attracting, and by utilizing multiple modes. Thus, teaching media should preferably be the integration of images, moving images, sounds, gestures and text (Roistika, 2021).

Authorities in our country have been investing very little in information technology in educational institutions, since they have been relying mostly on the support of the international community and the mobilization of local resources. It should be stated that the education authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina noted that 523 teachers who work in primary and high schools in our country did not have access to needed devices or internet, which comprises 1,4% of the total number of teachers (Dušanić–Gačić & Agić, 2021).

The most dominant problems that occurred during the pandemic period were related to access to technology and internet connection. It is important to mention that in our country, only less than half of the children have had access to adequate devices, while a significant number of them shared devices with family members, used only mobile phone or waited for parents to return from work so that their phone would be available to them. There were also children and families to whom the access was completely denied. The most significant technology related difficulties that teachers faced during online teaching are the impossibility of direct communication with students, keeping double documentation and impossibility to explain the material to all students. A study conducted in our country showed that more than half of the teachers, 59% of them, used their own computer/laptop/tablet for the preparation and implementation of teaching. Significantly smaller number of teachers shared technological equipment with another household member (19.4%) or more household members (15%). The

smallest percentage of teachers said that they prepared and realized online teaching using only phone because they did not possess computers/laptops/tablets at home (6.6%) (COI Step by Step, proMENTE socijalna istraživanja & FOD BiH, 2020).

Converting traditional classes to online learning brought several problems related to economics as well, because of the necessity of technology and devices. Speaking of students who have had access to distance learning by any means, the abovementioned data expressed in the exact percentage says that 92.9% of households have access to a mobile phone at least and that the percentage of households that have internet access has been 72.8%. Also, 35% of students have faced difficulties in terms of access due to the lack of devices and the internet, but also due to the need to share devices with other members of the household and lack of adequate learning space (Dušanić–Gačić & Agić, 2021). Also, digital access to the education during distance learning deepened the gap between students in socio-economic terms and created greater inequality. As a consequence of this, education efficiency might be reduced among students who belong to the lower level of socio-economic scale (Tonković, Vrsalović & Pongračić 2020).

### **3.3. Students' experiences in the eyes of teachers**

Students have also experienced many challenges during the distance learning and teaching. Some of the challenges were common for students as well as for teachers, such as problems with internet access or technology. On the other hand, there are many challenges experienced only by students and many that are individual. Young students, 6-10 years old, have also experienced difficulties in learning due to the school closing and distance learning. For them, the challenges were even greater because, as it is stated by American Psychology Association, they have a strong need to belong to a peer group and to be accepted (APA, 2017).

Authorities should bear in mind wealth of experiences that students acquire from traditional model of education, which are beyond the scope of the actual classes. Although many students were either neutral or ready to change their learning behaviors in light of the pandemic, many students disengaged from online classes because they missed having a face-to-face conversation and learning in a classroom setting (Marek, Chew & Wu, 2021). Roistika (2021) implies that online teaching and learning has been impeding children's basic right to education, limiting their

social and emotional learning engagement with teachers and with their colleagues, limiting their chances to play outside and other essential developmental segments important for their growth and education, during the period of social distancing.

Distance learning is proved to be a specific experience for younger primary school students. Students barely entered the school space and immediately, in addition to basic knowledge, they had to acquire knowledge of basic digital skills and learning via technology as well. Distance contact with teachers is also specific and quite different from face-to-face contact during everyday school hours. At the same time, it has been important for them to have planned meaningful activities in order to maintain continuity of learning (Frangež, 2021).

Some studies have reported that teachers noticed lack of students' motivation and engagement to join online learning activities. According to the students' responses, the main reason for this decrease in motivation and engagement were ineffective learning activities. As a consequence, some students have not been punctual to attend the classes as they were scheduled, and the main reason for that was not unstable internet connection or any type of technical issues, but lack of motivation to join and engage in online classes. Another issue reported by students was lesson type. Namely, students have reported that, during online classes, the teaching was mostly teacher-centered and they would soon get bored watching videos and materials (Nugroho, Ilmiani & Rekha, 2021). According to the study conducted by Hebebcı, Bertiz & Alan (2020), some students have reported that some of the issues that appeared during the distance learning have been: absence of a teacher who would be present and constantly available during the class, problems with focusing, lessons that are not appealing, shortened classes and longing for classroom environment. There have been also advantages reported by students, such as: possibility to study more efficiently, comfort, development of self-control skills, access to different tools etc.

### **3.4. School and Government Support**

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the context and media of English language teaching and learning in primary classrooms at present. Therefore, there is a need for EFL teachers to be equipped by ways and opportunities in professional development that suit the existing context

and available media. In some countries, English language teachers have received professional development in a variety of ways, such as attending workshops and conferences, team teaching, developing brochures or modules and so on. Being an English language teacher in primary school during pandemic has been actually a unique experience (Cendana & Winardi, 2020). Trainings and workshops that schools provide for teachers are highly necessary, and during the pandemic, this necessity has been even greater. This type of support could have solved several problems. In the first place, teachers have had difficulties in designing appealing online content and materials. Workshops, seminars, trainings and other internship programs about digital learning are needed, not only to teach educators about creating creative materials and learning content, but also to help and teach teachers how to solve problems caused by technology that commonly happen during online teaching (Nugroho, Ilmiani & Rekha, 2021).

König et al. (2020) state an important fact: “Although technical infrastructure is required to implement ICT in instructional contexts, teachers and students must also be encouraged and supported in using digital tools” (p.610).

The abovementioned quote means that, in order to ensure the best opportunities for learning English language and acquiring positive experiences among primary school students in the online classroom, EFL teachers need internal and external support from schools and local authorities, mainly in infrastructure, but also in terms of training and workshops. The British Council (2020) study states several types of support: support in terms of trainings for teachers on how to teach online; then, support in terms of clearer guidelines from their Ministries of Education; support in how to adapt to supporting teachers who are teaching online and lastly, support in terms of creating a web of teachers who would share their experiences and knowledge, possibly through forums and communities of practice. As it is reported by Supriyanto et al. (2020), students have also needed guidance and support in the form of school counseling. School counselors can provide individual as well as group counseling for students, regarding different types of issues they may have meet during the online learning. Possible problems may be related to mental health, misinformation issues, technological or educational issues or coping strategies. This type of counseling is beneficial for students, their parents and teachers as well. Individual counseling aims at changing students’ personal behavior in dealing with any type of issues, whether they are related to students’ environment and everyday life or to the problems arising

from the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Even though counseling as a type of support was highly necessary, it was not widespread and, unfortunately, it was offered in schools only in some parts of the world.

Working in an online environment requires specific set of skills, for which a number of teachers in our country were not fully trained at the beginning of the pandemic. During the suspension of classes, UNICEF and UNESCO organized a teacher training in six regional units (Brčko District, Sarajevo Canton, Tuzla Canton, Una-Sana Canton, West Herzegovina Canton and Herzegovina-Neretva Canton), in coordination with the Ministries of Education. Unfortunately, administrative units could not estimate how many teachers were trained because the training was organized on an online platform (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2020).

Majority of teachers in our country pointed out that they did not get support from NGOs (76%) and education authorities (57.8%) during online classes. On the other hand, teachers have mostly received support from principals and professional services (46.8%) and from the staff (42.1%) (COI Step by Step, proMENTE socijalna istraživanja & FOD BiH, 2020).

Beside the support that was expected from school authorities and governments, EFL teachers could have get the much-needed support from NGOs, language centers and on a variety of websites and platforms. One of them that is worth mentioning is the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML). The Centre's headquarters are in Graz, Austria, and its main focus is to help its member states effectively implement language teaching policies. In order to do so, the Centre makes different steps, such as focus on the practice of language learning and teaching, promoting dialogue and exchange among those active in the field and supporting program-related networks and research projects. Additional information can be found on the Centre's official website<sup>1</sup>. During the pandemic time, the Centre has organized a variety of webinars covering different topics related to foreign language teaching, and teachers all around the world could have signed and attended, since the webinars were delivered in English as well as in some other languages. One of the webinars held in March this year has covered the topic 'Covid-19 and language education: Making home schooling motivating and fun'. The main speaker of the webinar was Déirdre Kirwan, ECML expert within the project named Inspiring Language Learning, and she offered some important and inspiring viewpoints and ideas. The title reminds us that we are still

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ecml.at/Home/tabid/59/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

in the middle of the pandemic crisis and that a large number of children are in homeschooling, either full time or part time. Parents and caretakers, and life of the home in general, are part of their children's schooling even though they are not substitute for the school teachers. Kirwan reminded us of the importance of listening, emphasizing that only by listening to the children, we will hear their problems and questions. The webinar is still available on YouTube<sup>2</sup>, as well as other webinars on similar topics hosted by the ECML.

### **3.5. Curriculum Integration**

The teachers and educators in our country faced many problems while shifting from offline to online mode of teaching. One of the problems that English language teachers have had is the adaptation of the existing curriculum used in traditional classroom setting to online teaching.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges requiring teachers to adapt their curricula to teaching online. Before the pandemic has occurred, the traditional face-to-face teaching implied students being in their classrooms according to their timetables and teachers presenting their standard content according to the school curriculum, something what we know as formal lecturing. The use of information and communications technology (ICT) was limited. But, with the pandemic occurring worldwide, they had to switch to online teaching and adapt their curricula to the use of ICT (König et al., 2020). As Marek, Chew & Wu (2021) stated, switching traditional face-to-face classes into online required considerable modification of lesson plans, schedules and learning activities.

One of the solutions proposed by Dewi & Wajdi (2021) is development of an emergency curriculum. The emergency curriculum would be a simplified curriculum, expected to facilitate the learning process during the pandemic. There are numerous expected impacts and advantages that would be achieved by implementing the emergency curriculum, not only for teachers, but also for students and their parents, and to mention few of them: reduced teaching burden for teachers and students since they would no longer feel burdened with demands to complete all curriculum expectations; teachers and learners can focus more on essential education and contextual learning; it would be easier for parents at home to accompany their children while

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAEZO\\_zPQVc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAEZO_zPQVc)

studying and eventually the psychosocial welfare of teachers, students and parents would be far improved. The implementation of the emergency curriculum requires teachers to change their previous paradigm for planning and implementation of learning as well as for assessment of learning outcomes.

Only 20% of countries had used digital teaching aids in teaching before the pandemic. According to the World Bank, no country has a universal digital curriculum for teaching and learning in this way (Tonković, Vrsalović & Pongračić 2020). There are some other significant factors that have influenced the curriculum coverage during online teaching. Namely, a study conducted in the USA showed that curriculum coverage during the pandemic greatly varied depending on geographic differences: 14% of teachers in cities and suburban areas claimed that they have covered all or nearly all of the curriculum, which was twice the percentage of teachers in town and rural schools who reported doing so. On the other hand, the difference in providing the review also existed, whereas teachers in town and rural schools reported providing “all or almost all review” at higher rates than their city and suburban counterparts (Hamilton, Kaufman & Diliberti, 2020).

According to a study, EFL teachers claim that they have worked according to their curriculum and lesson plans, which include particular English books, workbooks from which they have provided the lesson, textbooks in PDF and video tutorials. Online teaching also provided the opportunity to use other illustrative elements if they wanted to make their lesson more attractive, while at the same time it made monitoring students’ engagement easier for teachers (Ramadani & Xhaferi, 2020).

In the end, it is important to emphasize that curriculum integration should be implemented and adapted to both teachers’ and students’ needs. As Nambiar (2020) stated: “Investigating and analyzing how online classes should be designed and arranged by taking into consideration the students’ and teachers’ perspective should be an integral part of building online teaching methodology as well as learning.” (p. 784). A good example of a reform of curricula where both perspectives were taken into consideration has been the curricular reform in the Sarajevo Canton. The new curricula are available on the official site of Ministry of Education of the Sarajevo



Canton<sup>3</sup>. This site itself is a part of the curricula reform along with all the other improvements and it presents a modern communication channel for informing the general public and transparency of work. The platform contains twenty-two subject curricula and it stores the fruits of the hard work of top professionals gathered along the path that Sarajevo Canton has taken since 2016 in its efforts to reform education. The members of the expert teams who prepared the documents presented the elements of the curricula and the presentation was held through a webinar, now available on the official YouTube channel of the Ministry<sup>4</sup>. They have also pointed out the difference between the current way of subject teaching and the curricular approach.

### **3.6. Difficulties met by teachers in virtual teaching**

As it is stated by Hamilton, Kaufman & Diliberti (2020): “Schools faced a wide variety of potential challenges to providing distance learning to students, including financial, technological, and policy-related factors” (p. 3). Results of a study conducted in our country regarding online teaching and learning in general, where all three groups have participated: students, teachers and parents, show that over 80% of participants agreed that the teachers experienced increased workload and stress during the pandemic. The adaptation process to online teaching itself was not easy at all for teachers. Majority of teachers, 71.4% of them to be precise, have felt as if they have to be constantly available to students and their parents, while 62.3% of teachers believe that online teaching takes too much time (COI Step by Step, proMENTE socijalna istraživanja & FOD BiH, 2020).

According to a study conducted worldwide by the British Council (2020), teachers have agreed that online teaching and learning have been more tiring for both themselves and students than face-to-face interaction. Difficulties met by teachers have been also connected to students’ self-discipline, since efficient online learning also depends on students’ understanding of importance of online learning, cooperation with parents and their supervision and government support and guidance. Nambiar (2020) states that difficulty can occur due to the fact that traditional classroom offered immediate response and feedback from students to teachers about

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<sup>3</sup> <http://kurikulum.ks.gov.ba/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3NM9LTYjfwKp4Cpg8qAILg/videos?view=0&sort=dd&flow=grid>

the quality and efficiency of their lesson, by observing students' body language and other non-verbal cues. Teachers could also make immediate adjustments in their teaching approach in order to suit their students' needs. Therefore, what was easily perceived in traditional classroom required more effort and alertness in online classes.

Some teachers have also reported that they have difficulties and problems in evaluation and assessment part, since it was very difficult for them to evaluate learners through technology instruments and grade them correctly (Ramadani & Khaferi, 2020). English language teachers worldwide have faced many difficulties while converting their traditional classes into online, and amongst main problems are: the absence of a representative e-learning platform, time consuming preparations of online teaching materials, unstable internet connection and limited quota and need for professional development and training. Another difficulty faced by EFL teachers has been lack of time and criteria for providing feedback on students' work (Nugroho, Ilmiani & Rekha, 2021). One important aspect of teaching that has been pretty much neglected during the online teaching is teachers' inner well-being. Namely, researchers predicted that teachers' as well as students' inner well-being might be critical during distance learning. Therefore, besides providing training for virtual learning scenario, schools and government should provide training and workshops about teachers' self-growth and handling their individual professional struggles (Cendana & Winardi, 2020).

To summarize, teachers have encountered numerous difficulties during the process of online teaching. Teachers, both worldwide and from our country, have agreed that online teaching has been tiring and time consuming. This is actually closely related to teachers' mental health that was mostly neglected during this period. Because of that, many teachers have experienced problems with stress management and professional burnout. Technology issues are another type of difficulties encountered by teachers, mostly because of lack of quality equipment or internet access. A majority of teachers started teaching online without previous experience or training and with little knowledge about internet platforms used for online teaching or about methodology and pedagogical approaches adapted to online teaching. As a final point, it is important to state that even though the challenges were numerous, distance learning and teaching has been a dynamic process, and of course, not all effects and impacts are negative, as we have also seen in this paper.

## **4. THE STUDY ON TEACHER'S EXPERIENCES ON TEACHING EFL IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA DURING COVID-19**

As it has been mentioned previously in the paper, the abrupt suspension of face-to-face learning in Bosnia and Herzegovina due to COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected everyone involved in education process, including EFL teachers. This survey was conducted in order to explore the experiences of English language teachers who work in primary schools with younger students, ages 6-10, all across Bosnia and Herzegovina. Our goal was to find out what obstacles and problems EFL teachers have encountered during this period and what their opinion on digital learning has been. Since there are only few resources related to this topic and very few surveys have been conducted in our country since the beginning of the pandemic, the main reason for choosing and focusing on this topic was to find out about EFL teachers' experiences in order to recognize the problems they have encountered, devise recommendations for improvement and initiate necessary changes.

### **4.1. Hypotheses development**

Assumptions had been made that EFL teachers working with younger primary school children have faced many obstacles and increased workload but they have also acquired useful knowledge. The development of these two hypotheses will be furtherly discussed in the following paragraphs.

#### **4.1.1. Difficulties experienced by EFL teachers during the pandemic**

Most teachers have experienced increased workload and stress during the period of pandemic in comparison to traditional classes. The reason for this is that most of them were forced to convert their English language classes to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic by themselves, without strong support by school system. Supposing that many teachers have never taught online previously, this experience demanded a lot of time and effort. According to Niemi & Kousa (2020) some of the main challenges for teachers included non-authentic interaction and a lack of the spontaneity that in-person teaching provides. According to the British Council (2020) study, it has been more tiring and time consuming for teachers to plan remote learning

rather than traditional classes. Teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina agreed with this statement. Namely, the majority of teachers (71.4%) have felt as if they have to be constantly available to students and parents, while 62.3% of teachers state that online teaching takes up too much of their time. Furthermore, 32% of responding teachers fully agreed that they have been feeling professional burnout, while 40% of teachers agreed with this statement to some extent (COI Step by Step, proMENTE socijalna istraživanja & FOD BiH, 2020). Hence the hypothesis that the teachers experienced increased workload and stress was included in this study.

**H1: EFL teachers have experienced increased workload and stress during the distance learning**

#### **4.1.2. Positive impact of distance learning on EFL teachers**

Even though it caused a variety of difficulties for English language teachers, online learning process and distance learning has had many positive impacts on EFL teachers as well. It is very important for the educational system in general that teachers possess different qualities and constantly learn new things, and it was especially important during the pandemic. According to Gopal, Singh & Aggarwal (2021), teachers' performance and quality of teaching in the end positively affects the satisfaction of their students. Marek, Chew & Wu (2021) argued that this period proved to be a good time for teachers to learn the importance of adaptability, good planning and doing what it takes to serve their students. Regarding teachers' opinions on the benefits of online teaching for teachers, research showed that more than half of teachers who responded to the study instrument pointed out that the advantages of online teaching are manifested in learning new ways of using ICT tools (62.6%) and having a resource base that can be used later (53.4%). 66% of teachers, expressed the view that they had learned a lot from teachers outside their team through partial or complete agreement and 64.4% stated that online teaching is well organized (COI Step by Step, proMENTE socijalna istraživanja & FOD BiH, 2020).

**H2: EFL teachers have learnt a lot from their experiences on distance teaching English classes.**

## 4.2. Participants

The data were collected from 55 teachers who teach English language in primary schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina to young learners ages 6-10 years old, who answered the questionnaire. The data were collected in the pandemic period of COVID-19, more than a year after the occurrence of the first confirmed case in our country. This was the best time to collect data related to the given topic, since the school year was over, and teachers had enough time to observe and reflect on their experiences on teaching during the pandemic period. The research was conducted online using Google Forms survey, and the questions were related to the period of distance learning, since the start of the pandemic restrictions in our country until today, meaning from March 2020 until the end of the summer semester this year, June 2021. Four of the participants who answered the questionnaire also answered five open-ended questions, for the second part of the research instrument. All of the respondents were informed about the objective of the study and information gathering process. They were also assured about the confidentiality of the data. The first part of the research instrument was conducted anonymously so we have no information from which parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina our participants have been. Unlike the first part, the second part of the research instrument involved direct interaction with respondents so we can conclude that respondents who participated in the survey are from different cities, such as Jajce, Sarajevo and Vareš.

## 4.3. Research methods and instruments

This study uses quantitative and qualitative types of research method. For the purpose of the study in this paper, two instruments were designed. The first research instrument used in this paper is a questionnaire that consists of quantitative questions based on a worldwide survey<sup>5</sup> and adapted for the purpose of this paper, since the survey was originally designed for high school teachers. The survey was based on six constructs and the participants answered 15 questions based on these six constructs. The number of questions varied from one to six per construct.

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<sup>5</sup> Marek, M. W., Chew, C. S., & Wu, W. C. V. (2021). Teacher experiences in converting classes to distance learning in the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Distance Education Technologies (IJDET)*, 19(1), 40-60.

Most of the questions were formed so that there were two opposed answers to a statement, positioned on a linear scale, and the participants could choose whether they agree or disagree with a statement on five-point Likert scale (1-5). The analysis of the results presented at the end of the paper was also based on the structure of the analysis of results in the abovementioned study. The second part of the instrument was a qualitative study, written as an analysis of several open-ended questions answered by four participants in oral and/or written form. The questions for the interview were based on the five categories that were found in the teachers' qualitative responses, taken from a survey conducted in schools in Finland.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4.4. Results and Discussion**

The first part of the instrument has been a questionnaire and it consisted of six constructs and each construct together with the answers to its questions will be discussed in theory and numeric results will be presented as well. The second part has been an interview with teachers, and their answers together with further explanations and comments will be also presented in this part.

##### **4.4.1. Quantitative analysis**

In the present study, we have evaluated different factors directly linked to teachers' perceptions and experiences on teaching English language in primary schools in our country during the period of COVID-19 pandemic. There was high variability in most answers, indicating that the experiences of individual teachers ranged widely between positive and negative. The overall structure of the instrument, the research questions and related construct names, the individual survey questions grouped in each construct, along with the calculated means and standard deviations of each are all presented in *Table 2 in Appendix*.

##### ***Teacher Experiences***

To answer *Research Question 1*, about the experiences of EFL primary school teachers on converting classes to distance learning, the construct 'Teacher Experiences' included three

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<sup>6</sup> Niemi, H. M., & Kousa, P. (2020). A case study of students' and teachers' perceptions in a Finnish high school during the COVID pandemic. *International Journal of Technology in Education and Science (IJTES)*, 4(4), 352-369

questions. Question 1.1 asked about EFL primary school teachers' readiness to switch their classes to distance teaching. The answers indicated that the respondents were mainly neutral about their readiness to convert their classes (M=2.93). On a 1-5 scale, from *not ready at all* (10.9% of teachers) to *perfectly prepared* (6.5% of teachers), the greatest number of teachers, 54,3% of them, responded as being *neutral*. The second question in the 'Teacher Experiences' construct, 1.2., asked how hard or easy the conversion process was in terms of planning and implementing the changes. The answer was between 2, *somewhat hard*, and 3, *average* (M=2.71). Only one respondent chose 5, *really easy*, while four respondents chose 1, *extremely hard*. Question 1.3. was about how hard has distance learning been after converting the EFL classes for the responding teachers. The mean answer lay between 2, *somewhat hard*, and 3, *as usual* (M=2.84).

The mean of all three questions in the first construct were below 3, meaning that they averaged on the negative side and it implies that the overall teacher experience was slightly on the negative side. Because each of the questions in the construct treated the value 3 as *neutral* or *average*, and since this value was the most often chosen by respondents, we can present the answer to *Research Question 1*, as the following statement: the EFL primary school teachers in our country had some experiences and influences that were negative or undesirable, balanced by some that were neutral and some that were positive or beneficial.

### ***Instructional technology***

To answer *Research Question 2*, about the instructional technology that EFL primary school teachers have used in the classes they converted to distance learning, the construct 'Instructional Technology' included two questions. Question 2.1. asked to what extent the instructional technology the EFL teachers ended up using was familiar to them and to their students. The answers were between 3, *somewhat familiar* (43.5% of teachers) and 4, *mostly familiar* (28.3%). Only one of the respondents reported that the instructional technology was *not familiar at all*. This question averaged on the positive side (M=3.36). Question 2.2. asked the participants to select check-boxes or enter free text to describe the categories of technology and platforms they used in their converted EFL classes. The respondents could check more than one box, since many of them used more than one tool or application. The largest number of respondents, 74.5%

of them reported that they were using chat applications, such as Messenger, Viber etc. Audio or video class meetings were used by 70.2% of the respondents, and one respondent specifically mentioned Zoom application for this purpose. 31.9% used email, 29.8% used social media platforms, and 4.3% used Google Classroom. Personal phone calls were used by 25.5% of the respondents. Learning management systems (LMS) such as Moodle were used by one respondent, and two respondents entered *Platform* and *Educational Platform* which can also be categorized as LMS.

The answer to *Research Question 2*, therefore, is that the respondents used a wide range of technology systems and platforms in their converted classes. It also shows that they usually were not designed nor provided by the schools. EFL primary school teachers also reported that they were mainly familiar with the technology they ended up using.

### ***Student experiences***

To answer *Research Question 3*, about the experiences of students with classes converted to distance learning, as perceived by their teachers, the construct ‘Student Experiences’ included five questions. Question 3.1. asked the respondents how ready they thought their students were to change their English language learning behaviors to distance learning after the COVID-19 restrictions. The answers indicated that the EFL teachers perceived that their students were not ready (M=2.27). Twelve respondents or 25.5% of them voted as *not ready at all*, 38.3% voted as *somewhat ready*, while 21.3% chose *average*. Only seven respondents voted on positive side. Question 3.2. was about the teacher’s understanding of how many students owned a computer and had home internet access when distance learning began. The teachers perceived that *all but a few* (84.4%) of their students had the computer or home internet access they needed, while four respondents (8.9%) have reported that *only few had*. The respondents were also offered a box to enter their own observations, and one of the respondents reported that *only few students had computers while others were using mobile phones during online classes, and parents needed to help them with using phones*. Question 3.3. asked to what degree students participated or stopped participating in the converted classes. The answer was between 3, *no change* (37.5%), and 4, *participated somewhat more* (39.6). This question also averaged on positive side (M=3.72). Question 3.4. asked whether EFL primary school teachers tried to ease the concerns of students



and encourage them to persist with their English language learning. The answer indicated that in general, teachers applied themselves to addressing the concerns of their students (M=4.64). Only one answer was on the negative side, and two voted *neutral*. Our results corroborate other data sources that show that as school buildings closed their doors, EFL teachers across the country pivoted rapidly to address their students' needs. The final question in the construct, Question 3.5., asked about the participant's perception of how hard English language learning had been for their students after the conversion of their classes. The teachers perceived that the converted classes were 3, *as usual* (42.2%), and 4, *easy* (31.1%). This question's mean equals 3.06.

The overall construct 'Student Experiences' leaned somewhat toward the positive side (M=3.42). The answer to *Research Question 3* therefore is that diverse factors, ranging from technology access to motivation and teacher support, positively influenced the experience of the students, as perceived by their English language teachers. Although these factors leaned toward positive side, students have also had some negative experiences.

### ***School Support***

The construct 'School Support' answered *Research Question 4*, containing only one question. Question 4.1. asked to what degree the teachers' school provided sufficient training and mentoring during the class conversion. The response indicated a wide range in answers, averaging between 2, *not enough support* (22.4%), 3, *enough to get by* (28.6%), and 4, *good support* (22.4%). Since there was only one question involved, the overall construct 'School Support' slightly leaned toward negative side (M=2.95), meaning that the answer to *Research Question 4* is that training, mentoring, resources and support from the schools were provided to a certain extent, but still, most teachers believe that they had not received sufficient support.

### ***Curriculum Integration***

The construct 'Curriculum Integration' answered *Research Question 5*, about whether the courses converted to distance instruction might remain in the long-term curriculum, with two survey questions. Question 5.1. asked respondents about the chances that their converted EFL

class format(s) would be in the long-term curriculum after face-to-face classes resume. The results fell between 2, *somewhat unlikely* (26.1%) and 3, *unknown* (39.1%), with wide variation in the answers. Only two respondents voted as *highly unlikely*. Still, the mean of the question slightly averaged on the positive side (M=3.04). Question 5.2., about how much change and improvements the EFL primary school teachers would make in their converted classes, if they were to be taught again via distance learning in the future. On the scale between 1 - *everything will be the same* and 5 - *change completely*, the largest number of respondents chose values 3, *unknown* (50%) and 4, *partially change* (23.9%). Only one respondent chose 1, as well as only one of them chose 5. This question also averaged slightly on positive side (M=3.02).

The answers to the construct ‘Curriculum Integration’ mean that the overall answer to *Research Question 5* is that the respondents perceived that there was potential for their classes to be taught via distance learning after face-to-face classes resumed (M=3.03).

### ***Difficulty***

The construct ‘Difficulty’ answered the final quantitative research question, 6, with two survey questions. In Question 6.1., about stress experienced by the respondents after transitioning to distance teaching, the answers were between 1, *highly stressful* (37%), and 2, *quite stressful* (34.8%). The mean of the question equals 2.06, meaning that distance learning was quite stressful for most of the respondents. Question 6.2 about the teacher’s workload after converting the classes compared to regular face-to-face teaching showed that the teachers have struggled with increased workload during the pandemic. On the scale between 1 - *same or less than previously* and 5 – *more than in the past*, 28.3% of the respondents chose value 4 and 45.7% chose 5 (M=4.10). The answers to the construct of ‘Difficulty’ mean that the overall answer to *Research Question 6* is that the respondents experienced high stress and most experienced moderate to considerably increased workloads while preparing and teaching their EFL classes after the abrupt conversion to distance learning. This question also directly confirmed the Hypothesis number 1 proposed at the beginning of the research that stated that EFL teachers have experienced increased workload and stress during the distance learning.

#### 4.4.2. Qualitative analysis

The following categories were found in the teachers' qualitative responses:

1. Interaction with students
2. Evaluation of learning
3. Workload of teachers
4. Students' motivation
5. Technology

The categories were presented as open-ended questions, and participants provided their own comments and experiences on given categories. Within each of the categories, two questions were provided as guidelines, but the respondents were told that they are not obliged to strictly answer the questions. In all these categories, the respondents described both positive and negative experiences, and even though respondents seemed worried, the general tone is optimistic.

##### *Interaction with students*

Teachers reported that interaction greatly depended on technology. Economic aspect, which resulted in technological issues such as broken connections, weak internet signals and poor devices, has proved to be a great obstacle. When talking about development of skills such as listening, speaking and reading, it also depended greatly on the abovementioned. Writing skills could easily be followed. Discipline and boundaries on the other hand proved to be a problem, as one of the teachers reported:

*The biggest problem in teaching this age group of students online is keeping them quiet and concentrated. Young students like to talk a lot, usually about the things not related to the lesson and 30 minutes is a very short time. (Teacher B)*

Another issue that teachers reported has been lack of real interactive relationship with students. On the other hand, online classes proved to be a good opportunity for students who were not active in traditional classroom settings. One of the respondents said:

*I have to admit it was far better than I expected. I believe that students participated in classes more, especially those who were not so active when we had "normal" classes.*  
(Teacher D)

### ***Evaluation of learning***

Teachers were worried about issues related to assessing learning and learning outcomes. They also expressed that they needed new kinds of evaluation methods. Still, the teachers reported that most examinations were successful. One of the respondents reported that she decided not to do any tests in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, because of the specific conditions, and the examinations were done viva voce i.e. orally, but then again, students had ‘helpers’ whose voices could be heard whispering in the background. Teachers have also reported that some students had technical issues during written examinations (e.g. camera or microphone not working), and teachers could not control that.

An interesting viewpoint came from one teacher’s observation:

*I think that examinations can still be taken as ‘reliable’. One may get some help for a test and get a better grade, but surely, they will not remain on that level in other types of examinations. Control is easy when you know your students. I know my students and I know what to expect. So, if I have had any doubts, I would personally easily clear them.*  
(Teacher A)

Also, one of the teachers commented that it does not have to be a problem if students use course materials during tests:

*Using materials while doing tests can be part of innovative learning process if we construct tests appropriately.* (Teacher C)

Even though the overall tone of the responses in this category is positive, teachers agreed that they do not know how much students have learned. This clearly indicates that assessment tools and grading system used during the pandemic were not adequately adapted to online teaching. It also shows us that the majority of teachers have encountered obstacles related to continuous monitoring of development and skills in digital environment due to unpreparedness for online teaching and poor support in this segment.

### ***Workload of Teachers***

The respondents have strongly agreed that they have experienced increased workload during this period. One teacher reported that:

*Preparation for the classes was exhausting. Each and every minute had to be effectively used, usual class duration was shortened. Paperwork was enormous. And there was all this 'Corona' pressure. Stress management was one of the most needed skills. (Teacher A)*

Instructions from authorities also affected the workload, and one respondent said that:

*During the year, we got various instructions from the Ministry of education to cut down on material, adapt the lesson, the number of grades, tests, etc. It made life a bit easier for all of us, but the pressure was (and still is) high on both sides. (Teacher B)*

On the other hand, some teachers did not have problems with increased workload, only with adapting to the new ways of teaching. As one of the respondents said:

*Workload hasn't increased, only the way of presenting and evaluating our work has changed and only this change was hard since it increased the demand for learning and adaptation. (Teacher C)*

Teachers' answers on this question add to the confirmation of the Hypothesis 1 that stated that EFL teachers have experienced increased workload during the distance learning.

### ***Students' motivation***

The respondents have agreed that decrease in students' motivation was noticeable, not only for English language but for all subjects. The respondents have also noticed that young learners were active and interested in English language classes and warmly welcomed their English teachers. Still, general situation caused most of them to be slightly confused, and majority left technically unsupported, which caused moral to lower as well. One of the teachers reported:

*Most of the time I felt like I was talking to myself. A few students kept the lesson alive and the rest were 'muted' - online but not there. I tried various methods, often changed topics*

*and adapted lessons to their age to make it more interesting, but nothing worked for too long. (Teacher B).*

It was expected that the students' motivation will decrease, because the pandemic has been a challenging period for everyone. As one of the respondents said:

*Pandemic decreased motivation in general, and it was challenge in all spheres of life, in teaching and learning as well. (Teacher C)*

### ***Technology***

Questions that we were dealing with in this part are whether or not English language teachers were previously acquainted with the technology that they have used in their teaching during the pandemic, their level of preparedness for the online classes and students' response to the used tools. As we have mentioned earlier, the technology used in schools in our country varied from one school to another. One of the respondents reported that she attended a training for teachers:

*When 2020/2021 school year began, we had some training provided by the Ministry of education in my Canton. Education was good; I have improved some of the things, started using some options and applications better and made my lessons more effective and interesting. I learned how to create quizzes, tests, how to quickly transfer files, how to limit students to manipulate with technology and use some excuses, how to present PPPs, use audio etc. (Teacher A)*

As it was mentioned previously in the paper, due to the differences in policies that vary in different parts of our country, some teachers have not received any type of training. One of the respondents said that:

*I did not have any training. I had to look for everything on my own. I was not familiar with certain platforms that were used in my school. But it was not so difficult to become familiar with it, so I become quite comfortable with it. I hated technology before the pandemic and my biggest challenge was to get used to it. (Teacher D)*

The teachers' answers presented in this part directly support the Hypotheses 2 that argued that EFL teachers have learned a lot from their experiences on distance learning English classes.

### *Summary of Teachers' Responses*

Distance teaching and learning required EFL teachers to adapt rapidly. Even though many teachers were not prepared for distance learning in terms of technology, they quickly learned to use technological platforms, and technology was not a problem, but the quality of interaction was not satisfactory. Teachers missed spontaneity and face-to-face communication that traditional classroom offered. The respondents have agreed that the pandemic brought many challenges and issues, but they have overcome them more or less successfully. Students' role in this research is also very important. As we have previously stated in the theoretical part, online teaching during the pandemic has greatly affected students and their physical and mental health, and our respondents' confirmed this statement. Children' problems with concentration and decrease in motivation mentioned by respondents appeared as a result of already mentioned impediment of children's basic right to education, by limiting their social and emotional learning engagement with teachers and with their colleagues and by limiting their chances to play outside and other essential developmental segments important for their growth and education (Roistika, 2021).

To conclude this part, it should be stated that several parallels can be drawn between our study results and results of studies conducted worldwide that have been presented in the theoretical part of the paper. Regarding interaction with students, our study supports conclusion that younger primary school students are not disciplined enough for remote learning (Marek, Chew & Wu, 2021). When it comes to evaluation and assessment of students' learning, teachers agreed that they need new evaluation methods and test designs adapted to online teaching (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). The amount of time needed for classes preparation during online teaching greatly increased for teachers worldwide (Nugroho, Ilmiani & Rekha, 2021) and for our study respondents as well. This segment, together with variety of others, resulted in increased workload of teachers. Lack of students motivation and low engagement is another obstacle mentioned in studies (Nugroho, Ilmiani & Rekha, 2021; Roistika, 2021) and also confirmed in our results. The majority of teachers who participated in the study conducted by König, Jäger-Biela & Glutsch (2020) reported having introduced new learning content during online teaching. This result matches with our study results. Furthermore, our respondents' opinions match with the statement saying that, since technology has been a crucial tool for online teaching, it is

necessary to provide learning opportunities in terms of professional development and training for teachers (König, Jäger-Biela & Glutsch, 2020).

#### **4.5. Limitations of the study**

The conducted research has its several limitations that are important to mention, and that could have influenced the process or affect the results to some extent. First of all, the method of the questionnaires distribution via social networks and other similar communication channels disabled any control of the respondents, thus it was possible for the questionnaires to be filled in by a person who does not fall into the target group of this research. Another important limitation to mention is that, due to the fact that the questionnaire was distributed online and the answers as well as teachers' identities were anonymous, we have no information from which parts of our country the participating teachers are, and teachers from certain parts of the country probably did not participate in the study at all. Since the schooling process varied from one city to another, this fact may have affected the results. Some respondents skipped some questions, hence the number of teachers who responded to the questionnaire varied from one question to another. Also, in some areas of our country, during the COVID-19 pandemic classes were not officially called online teaching, which could have had an impact on the very understanding of the issue or claims in the questionnaire. Speaking of the theoretical framework in the paper, one of the main limitations of the study is that few resources related to English language teaching in primary schools during the pandemic were available. Because of that, the theoretical framework of this paper is mostly based on studies and facts about general process of schooling and education during pandemic in our country, or it is based on studies conducted internationally.

Even though the abovementioned limitations should be taken seriously, this paper sheds light on several issues and challenges encountered by EFL teachers and also presents an important first step in examining the situation and experiences with online teaching in our country regarding EFL primary school teachers. This study's results also present valuable information to the EFL teachers and future researches because there is a limited number of studies in this field in our country.



## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS

In this part of the paper, we will try to offer some of the possible solutions for existing issues and recommendations for further practices related to English language online teaching and learning. The recommendations are based on the abovementioned findings.

First of all, even though we cannot predict when a crisis will occur, readiness for exceptional teaching arrangements and online teaching should be part of schools' strategy. Since online learning greatly differs from traditional in-class learning and teaching, teachers need methods and tools to follow how students learn and what kind of support they need, and this is not as easily recognized online as it is in classroom. Therefore, teachers should be timely prepared and informed about other kinds of pedagogical and evaluation methods regarding teaching in crisis (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). Having in mind that the period of the pandemic is very challenging for students in terms of their well-being, one of the recommendations is to pay closer attention to students' mental and physical health, but also mental and physical health of parents and teachers. This could be done in several ways, by offering professional help, reaching out to support groups and programs, talking with experts about emotions and fears and different ways to deal with them etc. (COI Step by Step, proMENTE socijalna istraživanja & FOD BiH, 2020).

Speaking of cooperation between teachers and parents, the recommendation is that: "schools should keep parents as close as possible by providing information about the orientation of students towards the goal of learning through activities relating to the facilitation and acquisition of student learning." (Buza & Hysa, 2020, p. 77)

Educational institutions should provide theory-based training and mentoring for teachers, not only focusing on the practical part such as hardware or software for distance learning, but rather concerning online and distance learning pedagogy and instructional design, since many teachers did not base their converted online classes on any theory or research-based approach. This training should be provided not only for the purpose of teaching during pandemic, but also as a long-term professional development. There is an evident need for more training in the field of use of technology for teaching purposes as a part of standard curriculum, rather than just waiting for a crisis to strike again (Marek, Chew & Wu, 2021). One of the solutions proposed in

UNICEF and UNESCO report (2020) for teachers is to share experiences with other teachers and educational authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina on good practices and lessons on education learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the main aim to further improve education sector responses.

These recommendations, obtained from different works and sources, should be taken into consideration so that eventually teachers get appropriate trainings and preparations for distance learning in the future. In the following table, summary of all the recommendations obtained from the abovementioned studies and sources will be presented.

*Table 1 – Recommendations for teachers, schools and governments*

<b>Recommendations for teachers</b>	<b>Recommendations for schools, school staff and governments</b>
Teachers should maintain regular contacts with students and establish a relationship of mutual trust, support and care for students' welfare.	Determine the exact number of students in need and provide technical support to students who need it, but in a way that does not endanger nor encroach on family privacy or affect the dignity of children and families.
Teachers should not necessarily shorten the time spent working during classes, but instead, they should make their classes more interactive and dynamic.	It is necessary to additionally and continuously train both teachers and students to use different ICT tools and platforms.
Work on further development of mutual support, partnership and open communication with students' parents, in order to ensure students' progress.	Examine the reasons for parents' dissatisfaction or mistrust regarding the work of teachers or school administration and set goals for improvement.
Exchange experiences on good practices and learned lessons related to education during the COVID-19 pandemic with teachers from different parts of our country.	Authorities should further develop online teaching modalities using advanced software solutions and increase the number of schools trained to use advanced software.

<p>Create individualized tasks and homework that would enable children to follow their own pace of development, apply what they have learned in other situations and explore.</p>	<p>Develop approaches for further use of online teaching for the purpose of planned development of information and media literacy of students, as well as the development of teachers' competencies for adapting content to online platforms</p>
<p>Define measurable learning outcomes for each area and introduce them to children in order to make learning process more meaningful and purposeful.</p>	<p>Create security protocols and clear rules for school staff, students and their parents in order to ensure internet safety for children.</p>
<p>Continue to develop innovative assessment methods that could be applied both in online and hybrid teaching and learning.</p>	<p>Mobilize resources for education budget in order to ensure safe re-opening of schools and strengthen schools' resistance to disturbances in learning.</p>
<p>Adapt content and materials to children who use only mobile phones or provide printed materials that would be delivered to children.</p>	<p>Assess the impact of school closures on students' learning, with special reference to vulnerable students, such as young children, Roma students and children with disabilities.</p>
<p>Devise ways for students' development of teamwork competencies and cooperative learning in online space.</p>	<p>Provide the necessary support and formal recognition of teachers' effort and work.</p>

## 6. CONCLUSION

The outbreak of COVID-19 has heavily changed the way of teaching and education in our country. English language teachers, as well as all other teachers, had a difficult task of switching traditional face-to-face classes into online space in short notice, and they have been conducting classes in that manner since March, 2020. This research was aimed at investigating the experiences of English language teachers in our country on online teaching during COVID-19 pandemic, with special focus on the teachers who work with the youngest students in primary schools, namely students 6-10 years old.

Several important conclusions can be brought from the data obtained by the instruments of this research. The findings revealed that, even though the distance learning has started abruptly, with no previous preparation, it has been maintained more or less successfully in our country. Our first hypothesis, stating that EFL teachers have experienced increased workload and stress during the distance learning, has been confirmed since all the respondents, in the questionnaire as well as in the interview, stated that their workload has been more or less increased and that they needed time for adaptation. The second hypothesis, that has suggested that EFL teachers have learned a lot from their experiences on distance teaching English classes, has also been confirmed. Namely, teachers who responded to the instruments presented previously in the paper have reported that they have gained valuable experience from online learning. Even though their experiences were quite different, having in mind that some of them attended trainings for online teaching while others did not and some of them were more successful and content than the others, they all have benefited from this experience.

It should be also noted that teachers have participated and responded to the instrument gladly and with the fullest transparency, hence their contribution is greatly appreciated. The instruments helped in gaining reliable and truthful results. The goal of this research and the presented results, beside its primary purpose being written as a master thesis, is to contribute to the dialogue related to the improvement of the quality of EFL education on a primary school level in our country, and to enable the voice of teachers in the first place, and then voices of students and their parents as well, to be heard and taken into account when making decisions and planning

future activities regarding use of technology in schools and distance teaching and learning in general but also English language as a subject in particular.

This study has given me useful insights on EFL teachers' experiences during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic period proved to be a challenge for teachers of all ages. As a novice teacher, I had a chance to learn a lot from the literature that I have covered in the study as well as from my future colleagues' experiences. Even though distance learning has been an alternative model of learning during the period of crisis, as it is stated in the paper, it is a model that will be used more and more in the future. Personally, I believe it offers many possibilities, especially for English language teaching; therefore it is one of the tasks of our generation of teachers to implement technology in regular curricula, so that both students and teachers benefit from it. As a student of Teacher Education Program at Faculty, I had an opportunity to teach online during our practical classes, and even though I conducted an EFL class for high school students, I saw and experienced some of the obstacles that EFL teachers have met on regular basis during the pandemic period such as low engagement of students, problems with discipline and boundaries etc. This study has motivated me to educate myself even more about all the advantages and disadvantages that technology offers, especially for young learners, since their needs and interests are quite different than older students' needs. As we have previously stated in the paper regarding children's social and mental developmental stages, this age level students possess a high-level activity and an extreme need for their peers' approval and gratification so it is important to bear that in mind while planning activities using technology. Also, children's development of important social skills such as empathy or compassion is way harder if children cannot see or interact with each other. While implementing distance learning in standardized curricula, all of the abovementioned developmental obstacles as well as possible impacts on students' mental and physical health should be borne in mind and further research in this field is necessary.

Finally, the time of final return to schools is still unknown. It is important to mention that the return to schools will be marked by gaps in students' knowledge and skills and teachers will have task to fill the gaps and help their students overcome the possible difficulties in learning caused by teaching and learning during the crisis.

## APPENDIX

*Table 2 - Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences on Teaching English in Primary Schools (age 6-10) during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bosnia and Herzegovina*

Questions	M	SD
<b>RQ1: What were the experiences of teachers in converting classes to distance learning? (Construct: <i>Teacher Experiences</i>)</b>	<b>2.83</b>	<b>0.114</b>
1.1. As an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher, how ready were you to switch your classes to distance teaching?	<b>2.93</b>	<b>0.997</b>
1.2. How hard or easy was the conversion process in terms of planning and implementing the changes?	<b>2.71</b>	<b>0.886</b>
1.3. How hard has distance learning been for you, as a teacher, after converting your EFL classes?	<b>2.84</b>	<b>1.114</b>
<b>RQ2: What instructional technology did teachers use in classes that were converted to distance learning? (Construct: <i>Instructional Technology</i>)</b>	<b>3.36</b>	<b>0.951</b>
2.1. To what extent was the instructional technology you used familiar to you and your students?	<b>3.36</b>	<b>0.951</b>
2.2. Which technology tools are you using in your converted classes (check all that apply)?	-	-
<b>RQ3: What were the experiences of students as perceived by teachers, in classes converted to distance learning? (Construct: <i>Student Experiences</i>)</b>	<b>3.42</b>	<b>0.157</b>
3.1. As an EFL teacher, how ready do you think the young students were to change their English language learning behaviors to distance learning after the COVID-19 restrictions?	<b>2.27</b>	<b>1.057</b>
3.2. How many of your students owned a computer and had home internet access when distance learning began?	-	-
3.3. To what degree have your students participated or stopped participating in your distance learning English classes?	<b>3.72</b>	<b>0.818</b>
3.4. To what extent did you try to ease the concerns of students and encourage them to persist with their English language learning?	<b>4.64</b>	<b>0.679</b>

3.5. How hard has English language learning been for your students after converting your classes?	<b>3.06</b>	<b>0.889</b>
<b>RQ4: To what extent did schools provide support for the transition of classes to distance learning? (Construct: <i>School Support</i>)</b>	<b>2.95</b>	<b>1.240</b>
4.1. To what degree did your school provide sufficient training and resources during the conversion of your classes?	<b>2.95</b>	<b>1.240</b>
<b>RQ5: To what extent do the teachers think the changes will become part of the curriculum in the long term? (Construct: <i>Curriculum Integration</i>)</b>	<b>3.03</b>	<b>0.146</b>
5.1. What are the chances that your converted EFL class format(s) will be in the long-term curriculum after face-to-face classes resume?	<b>3.04</b>	<b>1.010</b>
5.2. If you were to continue to teach your EFL classes via distance learning, how much would you change what you have done so far to make improvements?	<b>3.02</b>	<b>0.802</b>
<b>RQ6: How difficult was teaching your class after it was converted to distance learning? (Construct: <i>Difficulty</i>)</b>	<b>3.08</b>	<b>0.061</b>
6.1. To what extent did you experience stress after transitioning from the conventional classroom to distance teaching?	<b>2.06</b>	<b>1.103</b>
6.2. What is your workload for your EFL classes by distance teaching, compared to when you were teaching face-to-face?	<b>4.10</b>	<b>1.016</b>

Table 3 – Questions for the interview

<b>Category</b>	<b>Questions</b>
1. Interaction with students	Have students participated in your classes as much as you have expected? Did you have difficulties teaching certain language skills or creating interactive relationships with all students?
2. Evaluation of learning	How reliable are students' performances when they are doing examinations and tests at home? Do they use materials, e.g., textbooks, when that is not allowed, and teachers cannot control it?
3. Workload of teachers and students	Did you experience increased workload during this period? Do you think that the students' workload also increased?
4. Students' motivation	Do you think that the pandemic decreased your students' motivation for English language learning? In case your students experienced a lack of motivation, did you feel that as a challenge?
5. Technology	Did you have any training for the technology you have used? Speaking of technology, what were the challenges that you faced?



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