Reading in a Foreign Language October 2022, Volume 34, No. 2
ISSN 1539-0578 pp. 378–399

IEP Reading Instruction During the COVID-19 Emergency Remote Teaching

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"Everyone sees this [online instruction] as the imperfect substitute"
(IEP instructor during emergency remote teaching)

Abstract

Using a mixed method explanatory sequential design, this study investigates intensive English program (IEP) instructors' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 emergency remote teaching on reading instruction. Forty-four IEP instructors completed an online survey, and seven of them participated in follow-up interviews. Both quantitative and qualitative results confirmed the impact on the teaching of reading. Some instructors reported having to leave out supplemental learning outcomes and focus on core learning objectives only. Most participants also experienced a decrease in student engagement and student-student interaction during reading and vocabulary instruction. However, student-teacher interaction did not seem impacted. This research supports the view that the teaching of reading is contingent upon multiple factors, particularly the instructional environment.

***Keywords*:** reading, ESL, Intensive English programs, COVID-19 pandemic, emergency remote teaching

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced many teachers to move to online instruction, schools went into a tailspin, and language instructors were in search of solutions and ideas. As institutions of higher education went into lockdown, instructors also began to explore how to maintain effectiveness via online instruction. Language teachers had to deal with a variety of methodological issues related to specific skills and find ways to promote student engagement

(Martin et al., 2022). Though second language acquisition specialists have been exploring the unique issues related to second language reading methodology since the early 1970s (see Goodman, 1970), few teachers had envisioned shutting down the classrooms and going online. It is fair to say that, until the recent health emergency, and despite the existing online courses, teaching reading had always been primarily an in-person activity. This statement is particularly true for U.S. university-based intensive English programs (IEPs), in which the students have historically had to fulfill a minimum of 18 contact hours of instruction weekly (Reese & Helms, 2018), hence the need for in-person learning for students in these programs.

Like many other language skills, reading is a complex process that is affected by many variables, including the readers' language proficiencies, age, motivation, linguistic-cognitive abilities, and learning environment. Given that the pandemic situation only started in March 2020, there has been a paucity of studies exploring the impact of remote instruction on teaching reading and the way IEP teachers addressed it. This study explores IEP teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and responses to the important demands of teaching reading remotely during the COVID-19 Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) period. To the authors' knowledge, this empirical study represents the first time that data from IEP reading and writing (RW) instructors have been gathered to specifically document and understand their experiences teaching reading online during the COVID-19 pandemic ERT.

Literature Review

A growing body of research dealing with the impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning is emerging. Although some studies have focused on students' access to technology, others have investigated the teachers' and students' attitudes towards remote instruction. The unexpected disturbance of the learning environment and pedagogical methodology has prompted researchers to try to understand the adjustments teachers had to make as they relied on computers and various tools to teach remotely. In one study, Nawastheen and Perera (2021) quantitatively assessed 613 Sri Lankan students' attitudes towards Remote Learning Activities. Although 60% of the respondents found these activities to be beneficial, "only half of the respondents agreed that they could understand the online lessons" (p. 40). These results may signal a contradictory aspect of online teaching. Read (2020) utilized a private educational technology firm to survey 3,000 Canadian students on their attitudes towards online learning and teaching during the pandemic. The study found that 85% of the respondents (n = 2,550) indicated they would have preferred to go back to face-to-face interactions, and 86% of the students (n = 2,580) missed seeing and interacting with other students in person. Gohiya and Gohiya (2020) reported that the undergraduate and graduate students in India were generally satisfied with the teachers' performance and the friendly atmosphere created by the remote classroom. However, when asked to compare online and face-to-face classes, of the 2,791 survey responses received from students, only 22.1% (n = 617) reported that online classes were superior, and 43% (n = 1,200) responded that both the online and offline worlds are similar. From the students' standpoint, the picture is somewhat mixed. As Lynch (2020) noted, teaching language skills online can be as tricky as learning them. Students' attitudes as well as the specific language skill taught online, among many variables, appear to affect the success or failure of remote teaching.

Sheerah et al. (2022) conducted a study on IEP students' and teachers' perceptions of the impact of online learning on writing skills. The researchers reported improvement in the students' writing performance amid the pandemic. However, as noted by Sheerah et al. (2022), it was not clear whether the improvement was the result of the online format itself or because of practice over time. As for the teachers, they believed that much could be accomplished through online learning. However, the teachers were quick to note that only students who were highly motivated seemed to benefit from online learning during the pandemic as this format required students to be disciplined and committed to the learning tasks. The flexibility of the online learning environment was an aspect that students perceived as positive. The asynchronous modality of learning apparently allowed them to work through the materials at their pace with very little pressure. One student of Sheerah et al.'s (2022) study noted, "I will be more responsible about my lectures and attend all my classes on time without waiting for anyone to tell me or encourage me because it is online, so it is easier to direct myself" (p. 74).

Despite students' satisfaction with online learning amid the pandemic (Çam et al., 2021), their engagement is an aspect that worried school officials and teachers who began thinking about the short-term and the long-term effects of prolonged periods of remote learning engagement. Students' apathy, their passivity, and their decreased sense of social interactions can increase their disengagement. Student engagement may be categorized into four components—skills engagement, "emotion engagement, performance engagement, and participation engagement" (Wu & Teets, 2021, p. 3,639). These researchers investigated the effect of remote instruction on students' learning and engagement in a large-format general chemistry course. They found that, due to remote instruction, student engagement "remained nearly constant or slightly decreased" (p. 3,639). The students did not, however, respond in a uniform manner to the sudden change. There were, for example, differences between the genders as the female students exhibited more engagement, particularly outside of the classroom. Wu and Teets (2021) reported that during emergency remote instruction, "student engagement decreased in three of the four components […], skills engagement, emotion engagement, and participation engagement" (p. 3,640). They also noted a decrease in motivation and self-regulation.

Teaching remotely: Considerations

From a methodological and pedagogical viewpoint, teaching students to read has mainly been a face-to-face activity. Typically, teachers are physically present in classrooms, monitoring their students' progress, gathering formative data to help them alter instruction, and providing them with appropriate feedback during the reading tasks. In addition, reading materials have generally been written words on paper in the form of organized texts, often in paragraphs. While the requirements reading instructors set through the course syllabus should foster student agency and accountability, they should also help students learn to engage with reading texts with purpose and intention (Altalouli, 2021). However, with the advent of technology and its applications to language teaching and learning, many aspects of reading instruction have adapted to this new reality. The ubiquitous use of computers and the proliferation of software programs, in conjunction with the availability of resources on the Internet, have enriched reading instruction and bolstered teachers' ability to assist students by employing innovative methodologies and approaches that integrate various aspects of language.

The use of technology has also introduced a set of challenges and opportunities into the profession of language teaching and learning in general and, in particular, into the teaching of reading. Teachers, course designers, and methodologists alike have been exploring the ways in which the technological tools could enhance the effectiveness of lesson delivery. The use of technology and its effectiveness can vary depending on the type of the lesson or the skill taught. Course management platforms or learning management systems have become mainstream, as well (Bentahar, 2022; Bentahar & Alalou, 2021).

Remote learning and reading instruction

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, online courses and remote learning platforms appeared to offer revolutionary improvements to educational practices (Omaggio & Terry, 2001; Rizvi & Horn, 2010; Shrum & Glisan, 2010). As remote learning was gaining more and more ground, even traditional institutions began to consider its merit by integrating technological tools into their courses. Until 2020, most remote learning was either an option or a component combined with face-to-face teaching in the language classroom. The use of technology provides opportunities for students to better self-direct their learning and to use their own learning styles at their own pace (Baxter, 2020). Thanks to modern technologies, the wide variety of online courses available to students now include synchronous virtual classes; virtual real-time lectures; asynchronous teaching and learning; archived videos with tasks for students to complete asynchronously; various multimedia to teach integrated lessons on reading, listening, grammar and vocabulary; and more (Shrum & Glisan, 2010). These options are becoming well integrated into higher education classrooms, where remote teaching seems to be a promising avenue that could enhance instructors' pedagogical tools and enrich the content of their programs, especially when the instructors actively engage with their students online (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021). Technology has been associated with boosting language learning (Shadiev & Yang, 2020) and improving reading proficiency (Shrum & Glisan, 2010). Yet, its integration during the COVID-19 pandemic has been imposed upon even those teachers who were skeptics of its usefulness before March 2020 (Bentahar & Alalou, 2021).

Exploring language teaching and learning during ERT

In March 2020, like numerous universities and colleges across the globe, intensive English programs (IEPs) transitioned to online instruction to finish an interrupted in-person semester. What seemed to be a transient online-instruction experience was shaped by much uncertainty and urgency. Regardless of their familiarity with technology, many IEP instructors had to abruptly migrate course content and instruction to online modalities, sometimes with little pedagogical training or sufficient time to prepare.

The first few months of the online shift are commonly referred to as Emergency Remote Teaching (or ERT). ERT designates "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances" (Hodges et al., 2020). This type of teaching generally requires using "fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face to face or as blended or hybrid courses" with the expectation of returning "to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated" (Hodges et al., 2020). The term ERT is used in the present study to refer to the first few months of shift to ERT (March through August, 2020), which is the period when almost all IEPs nationwide were providing English instruction entirely online (Baer, 2022).

This study empirically reports on IEP reading and writing (RW) instructors' perceptions of reading instruction during the COVID-19 ERT. The teaching of reading at this juncture required new attitudes, skills, and strategies. After more than twenty months of teaching online, many questions are still being explored by educational researchers. While many language teachers are attempting to learn the skills necessary to deliver online instruction effectively, others are wondering how this new environment has affected the reading skills of the students enrolled in IEPs. Research findings have begun to document the novel experience of teaching language in an environment beset by health concerns, perpetual uncertainty, and many difficulties. What follows is a summary of recently published studies documenting English learning in higher education contexts amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research on English learning during the COVID-19 ERT

A few scholars have investigated the impact of the online transition during the COVID-19 ERT on English learning both internationally and in the United States. Whether in Mexico, Malaysia, Japan, or Indonesia, researchers (e.g., Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021; Krishnan et al., 2020; Ohara & Ishimura, 2020; Yundayani et al., 2021) have examined such impact by collecting empirical data, both quantitative and qualitative, from instructors and students.

In Mexico, Juárez-Díaz and Perales (2021) collected data targeting 58 English as a foreign language (EFL) and pre-service teachers' experiences and emotions during ERT. Using a questionnaire, the researchers investigated "[EFL] learning experiences at the college level" (p. 124). Their research findings indicated negative feelings associated with "some faculty members' focus on delivering content without [considering] interaction" with their students (p. 121).

Other scholars have sought to understand the amount of support college students received during emergency remote support (not teaching), as Ohara and Ishimura (2020) described it. Using a mixed-method approach (survey and interviews), the researchers collected data from five Japanese peer advisors (PAs) who supported students through the self-access learning centers (SALCs) at several universities; Ohara and Ishimura (2020) concluded SALCs offered much individual support for students to learn and practice the language as well as psychological support through video-conferencing tools during the COVID-19 ERT. Ohara and Ishimura reported, however, that at a time characterized as an emergency, it might be challenging to "create an environment for socialization and social learning compared to the usual SALC in which students gather and socialize with others freely while developing their language and communication abilities" (p. 235).

Other scholars have focused on English as a second language (ESL) learning within IEPs internationally and in the United States. Krishnan et al. (2020) examined the perceptions of 51 international students enrolled in an IEP in Malaysia. After incorporating technology during their program of study, the students viewed the Internet as a useful source of learning English because it supplements and "enhance[s] better learning" (p. 10). While the students in the study stressed the importance of using online sources and technologies, they also raised the concern that for them to interact actively with online technologies and platforms amid the pandemic, their teachers' input was paramount. In the United States, Hartshorn and McMurry (2020)

collected data from 153 IEP students and 41 teachers using a Likert-scale survey. The researchers sought to better understand "the effects of the pandemic on students and teachers with a focus on the participants' "stress levels, learning and teaching English, and remote instruction" (p. 140). Their findings revealed an increase in students' and teachers' stress and decreased teaching and learning among practitioners and students during the pandemic due to a variety of new stressors. The pandemic seemed to have negatively impacted the students, who, unlike the teacher participants in the study, "experienced less language development for speaking than for writing" (p. 140).

The researchers' efforts to document English learning in higher education contexts during ERT are important, especially when empirical data comes from teachers and students themselves. However, during our review of available research, we were unable to identify studies that addressed U.S. university-based IEP contexts or IEP reading instruction amid the COVID-19 ERT. We therefore believe this exploratory empirical investigation will help fill this gap in the literature. Our study examined the impact of moving online on IEP reading instruction during the ERT. The methodology used in this study is described in the next section.

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore IEP instructors' perceptions of the impact of moving online on reading instruction during ERT. The researchers employed a mixed methods sequential explanatory design using an online survey and semi-structured interviews completed by IEP instructors nationwide. The use of both quantitative and qualitative data was intended to ensure a more complete understanding of the impact of teaching online on reading instruction during ERT using instructors' perspectives.

Four research questions guided this research:

1. In what ways did the online transition during ERT impact reading instruction in terms of planning, engagement, and interaction?
2. What (major) adjustments, if any, did the teachers make to their reading instruction during ERT?
3. What aspects of reading instruction did the teachers describe as more successful or more challenging teaching online during ERT than teaching face to face?
4. What was the number-one online tool the teachers used in teaching vocabulary, and how did they use it to help build student reading proficiency during ERT?

Mixed-methods sequential explanatory design

The integrative methodology used in this study is founded on the worldview of pragmatism. Within pragmatism, emphasis is on the problem in its social and historical context, not necessarily on the method of data collection employed (Creswell, 2007). In addition, a mixed methods study that is consonant with pragmatism values "action and reflection and recognizes that professionals from sundry disciplines "often operate in what Schon (1987) calls the 'low, swampy ground' where messy confusing problems defy rigorous technical problem-solving

based on specialized scientific knowledge" (Evans et al., 2011, p. 2). Finally, this study falls under mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, which entails the collection and analysis of quantitative and then qualitative data in two consecutive phases within a single study

(Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Ivankova et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2007). The researchers collected the quantitative data first using a survey before conducting semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data.

Priority designates which method (quantitative, qualitative, or both) receives more weight and attention during data collection and analysis. In mixed-method sequential explanatory designs (Creswell, 2003) it is typical that priority be given to the quantitative strand because quantitative data set the tone and inform the choice for follow-up questions asked during interviews. More specifically, in this study, the use of data from the survey allowed the researchers to gain key insights into IEP instructors' perceptions of the impact of teaching reading during ERT. However, the interviews helped elucidate the survey responses and fill in the gaps considering the survey findings and research questions. Therefore, while the mixed-method approach in this study was sequential in nature (i.e., survey responses were collected prior to the interviews), priority was given to the qualitative data, whereby the researchers focused primarily on the responses collected from both the survey's open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to gather the data: a survey (Appendix A) and an interview (Appendix B). The participants signed a consent form electronically before they were able to access the link to the survey. The consent form also included a question inviting them to voluntarily take a follow-up interview. The survey and semi-structured interview questions were piloted by IEP colleagues who examined them and discussed ambiguous or redundant questions. The feedback received from IEP instructors was helpful. One of the suggestions by these colleagues was to include vocabulary, which is an important sub-skill of reading instruction. Likewise, the use of the passive voice in "It was observed that …" structure in the survey was also suggested by a faculty member whose research and teaching practices center on foreign language education. Because the mixed methods design was sequential in nature, the interview questions were updated based on the responses to delve more deeply into information gleaned from the survey questions. Given the timing of the data collection (July and August, 2020) during the unprecedented times of the pandemic, the researchers hoped to receive at least 30 survey responses and to interview six to eight participants.

Survey. The survey consisted of 22 questions broken into three sections. The first part contained a question on the respondents' willingness to participate in the study and demographic questions on their genders and teaching experience in years. The second section (the focus of the quantitative method of this research) had 12 Likert-scale statements on a five-point scale, with 1=*strongly agree,* 2=*somewhat agree,* 3=*neither agree nor disagree,* 4=*somewhat disagree,* and 5=*strongly disagree*, following one guiding statement, "When I switched from face-to-face (f2f) to online instruction." The respondents completed 12 statements reflecting their perceptions of the impact of moving instruction online on reading with a focus on areas such as engagement, interaction, vocabulary, and online tools. The

survey included two reversed statements (2 and 5). The third section contained seven open-ended questions asking the respondents to give examples or share specific answers related to the Likert-scale statements (e.g., preferred online tool and preferred modality of instruction). Fifty participants responded to the survey, but only 44 surveys were complete and included in the final analysis.

Interview. Given the nature of this study design, the semi-structured interview questions were designed to better enlighten the quantitative data findings. The first author (the Principal Investigator) created and administered a semi-structured interview with nine questions. The goal was to collect additional details based on the survey responses while remaining flexible with follow-up questions and prompts. Seven interviewees participated, all in English using Zoom. The interviews lasted between 27 and 55 minutes.

Data collection procedure

The data were first collected quantitatively through a five-point Likert-scale survey and open-ended questions administered by email to all U.S.-based University and College Intensive English Program (UCIEP) members. Seventy-two directors of the UCIEP members received an email from the PI requesting them to share the online survey with their reading instructors who had taught reading face to face (pre-pandemic) and during the emergency remote teaching period. Given the critical timing of the data collection as all IEPs were grappling with the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, these directors were sent an email reminder to encourage them to recruit as many participants as possible; however, other than the 50 responses received, no identifying information on the survey respondents' affiliations is known, nor is there any accurate estimation of the response rate. For the interviews, those teachers who expressed interest in participating were invited.

Participants

In sum, 44 IEP instructors participated in this study. Tables 1 and 2 provide the respondents' demographic characteristics and the number of years of teaching experience. As the data in Table 1 describe, most of the respondents were female (67.44%). Of the survey respondents, seven volunteered to participate in a follow-up interview.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Survey Respondents (N = 43)

Answer	%	Count
Male	30.23%	13
Female	67.44%	29
Other	2.33%	1
Total	100%	43*

* One participant did not provide answers to the demographic question on the survey.

Table 2

Survey Respondents' Teaching Experience in Number of Years

Answer	%	Count
1-5 years	9.09%	4
6-10 years	31.82%	14
11-16 years	18.18%	8
17 years or more	40.91%	18
Total	100%	44

As described in Table 2, the IEP reading instructors who completed the online survey seemed to have extensive experience teaching language. While only 9.9% of respondents (n = 4) had four or fewer than four years of teaching experience, almost 60% of the participants (59.09%) had a minimum of 11 years of teaching experience, eighteen (40.91%) of whom had taught for at least 17 years.

Data analysis

After the quantitative and qualitative data were collected, the mixed-method results were merged in the interpretation phase. This step helped the researchers formulate well-informed comparisons of the responses in a more meaningful fashion (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) considering the research questions; the merging also enabled the researchers to examine any potential areas of data convergence and corroboration (Bowen, 2009).

In analyzing the qualitative data, we utilized a multi-step process, whereby the responses from the survey open-ended questions and interview questions were included. We began our analysis by reading and re-reading the open-ended question responses to garner a sense of the data collected. Afterwards, we used open coding to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for each question. We engaged in careful reading of the data line by line; this step was helpful in creating summary terms for each statement. Finally, we 1) summarized all of the responses to each question, 2) identified the common categories, and 3) shared only the categories that seemed to be prevalent enough to form themes and left out those themes that both researchers agreed were not significant.

Results

Table 3 describes the overall scores explaining the participants' responses to the Likert-scale survey statements.

Table 3

Summary of the Survey Responses (N = 44)

When I switched from face-to-face (f2f) to online instruction,

Field	Mean	Std Dev	Variance
1. it was necessary to adjust the learning outcomes for reading instruction.	2.98	1.2	1.43
2. it was observed that student-student interaction dwindled.	2.37	1.4	1.95
3. it was observed that student-teacher interaction increased.	3	1.07	1.14
4. it was easier to teach reading strategies more efficiently.	3.56	1.13	1.27
5. it was observed that students were less engaged during reading and vocabulary instruction.	2.63	1.28	1.63
6. it was observed that non-academic factors (e.g., homesickness or household issues) led to lower student engagement in reading.	2.63	1.03	1.07
7. fewer accommodations needed to be made (e.g., allowing more time for reading and use of dictionaries).	3.26	1.18	1.4
8. it was observed that teaching reading online presented more methodological challenges.	2.4	0.89	0.8
9. it was observed the main challenges in teaching reading were directly linked to technology.	2.98	1.11	1.23
10. I observed I was more successful at monitoring students' progress during reading instruction.	3.67	0.97	0.94
11. overall, my performance in teaching reading improved.	3.26	0.94	0.89
12. overall, it was observed that my students' reading proficiency improved (because of online learning).	3.16	0.91	0.83

Research Question #1: In what ways did moving online during ERT impact reading instruction in terms of planning, engagement, and interaction?

Planning: Time and technology as new considerations

Qualitative findings seem to align with the quantitative results in terms of the impact of the online transition during ERT on planning. Two themes emerged under the planning variable—time and technology.

The seven interviewees all agreed that planning for online reading instruction was overall similar to planning for face-to-face reading instruction. However, responses from instructors indicated that teaching online from March through August 2020 seemed to necessitate longer planning times. This finding might explain why only 13 (29.54%) of the 44 respondents thought it unnecessary to incorporate planning accommodations, such as allowing more time for students to read and use dictionaries while learning online. One of the respondents commented, "I [am aware planning] would take longer and [therefore] I wasn't going to accomplish as much in any [online] class period." This statement was confirmed by 5 of the 7 interviewees. Another theme related to planning focused on the need to consider technology as requisite practice before teaching reading online. Still another interviewee noted, "one of the biggest considerations in planning was just getting everything online, taking photos of the book [and] resources [materials]." Overall, time and integration of technology were important considerations which added to IEP reading instructors' workloads during ERT, or as another instructor put it: "I had to completely turn everything inside out, just so the planning took a lot longer with that, [but] how is this going to fit online? How is this going to fit with [students'] computer capabilities?" The theme of technology integration will be revisited in the discussion section below.

High engagement and interaction—or lack thereof

To most survey and interview respondents, student engagement in reading and writing (RW) classrooms was negatively impacted by the move to online instruction during the March-August 2020 period. Over 60% of the survey respondents (n = 26) agreed after they moved their instruction from face-to-face to online during ERT "students were less engaged during reading and vocabulary instruction." However, over half of the respondents did not ascribe lower engagement to external factors such as homesickness and household disruptions, with almost 35% (n = 15) of all respondents selecting "Neither Agree Nor Disagree" and almost 6% (n = 5) disagreeing that lower engagement resulted from external factors. Qualitatively, the majority of the interviewees (n = 6) believed external factors apparently interrupted student learning; these factors include household disruption, technology capabilities, and Internet accessibility, according to the interviewees. One of them commented that students did maintain their respect and positive attitude in the online classroom, "but mostly they [were] disengaged from me," which seems to be consistent with the quantitative findings in this regard. As this interviewee put it, the students' disengagement was more visible, especially when they turned off their cameras, participated inadequately, and missed the breakout-room interaction, which the students (particularly those taking the class from overseas) blamed on technology issues or, as the instructor noted, might have been the result of the students' distraction by other activities online.

Almost 63% (n = 27) of the survey respondents agreed that, "...student-student interaction dwindled." Zoom break-out rooms, for instance, offered an alternative to ensure student-student interaction. However, they also brought about some discomfort and shortcomings. One of the interviewees exclaimed, "I put [my students]...in breakout rooms, then...some of them I can see [are having] good [interaction] but [because] I'm in one [breakout room]...I can't see what's going on in the ...other ...rooms."

Unlike the student-student interaction, student-teacher interaction did not appear to be affected by the new modality of learning during ERT. According to the survey respondents, "it was observed that student-teacher interaction increased (compared to f2f)," a statement that left the respondents divided with 38.64% (n = 17) agreeing and another 40.91% (n = 18) disagreeing. The interview results were not different from those collected quantitatively, in that almost half of the respondents (n = 3) believed their interaction with their students was unaffected by the online mode of reading instruction. Overall, the respondents seemed to agree the physical presence of the students in a face-to-face classroom helped them better support student learning, which they missed in online classrooms during the COVID-19 ERT period.

Research Question #2: What (major) adjustments, if any, did the teachers make to their reading instruction during ERT?

Instructional adjustments: Amount and depth of reading at stake

Most of the interviewed teachers reported the need to revisit the learning outcomes during the first few months of online instruction (from the end of March through August, 2020). Others felt they had to leave out the reading and writing (RW) course supplemental learning outcomes at the onset of the online transition. Overall, 47.73% of the survey respondents (n = 21) agreed "it was necessary to adjust the learning outcomes for reading instruction."

Similarly, many of the participants thought the abrupt switch to online instruction directly impacted the amount of reading materials covered in the online classroom. According to the results, 60.47% of the survey respondents (n = 26) observed lower engagement in reading and vocabulary instruction after they switched from face-to-face to online instruction. Consequently, one of the interviewed RW teachers had to "cut back on the volume of reading, and we're spending more time on individual readings, [which also seemed to] impact [reading learning] outcomes." Except for one respondent, the six interviewees believed the change in the reading amount was ineluctable because teachers were supporting student access to technology while at the same time learning how to use it themselves for instructional purposes amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The added burden of leveraging technology to support teaching and learning apparently caused a reduction in the amount of in-class reading. For others, this reduction in the amount of in-class reading was the result of the need to ensure students covered the learning outcomes associated with grammar in their courses. One instructor noted, "You'd have to really strip down [reading because] our focus was mainly on grammar [which my students] really needed… to go up a level...[and as a result], less time was spent on reading."

While the amount of IEP in-class reading was affected during ERT, the depth of reading instruction was also impacted. It seems at a time when reading instructors were grappling with ways to migrate their course content (e.g., textbook readings, module pages, and activities) smoothly and successfully from face to face to online, many of them also felt the overall environment and conditions engendered less profound depth in student reading. On a related note, almost 63% of the survey respondents (n = 27) disagreed with the statement, "When I switched from face-to-face to online instruction, it was easier to teach reading strategies more efficiently." One instructor noted, "I had to sacrifice some [content] and focus more on others, which is why "I probably didn't go [in reading] as deeply."

Research Question #3: What aspects of reading instruction did the teachers describe as more successful or more challenging teaching online?

Teaching reading: What seemed to work during ERT

In addition to sharing their thoughts on planning, engagement, and interaction, the survey respondents answered this open-ended question: "What reading-associated areas did you find easy to teach online [but not in f2f instruction]?" Almost 72% of the respondents (n = 28) mentioned some uses of or advantages to teaching reading online, listing a range of answers. Their responses included, among others, annotations, library skills [information literacy], and the freedom to use online tools to learn vocabulary. Their students' ability to access reading texts online at the same time seems to be another appealing facet of online reading, regardless of how the students accessed the text, i.e., via an online textbook or via the use of a camera that enabled the IEP international students and the teachers to look at the text concomitantly, which apparently was not common practice before the pandemic.

Furthermore, based on feedback from IEP RW instructors in this study, highlighting and annotating text while learning in online RW courses appear to be advantageous. While some instructors would encourage students to highlight passages for the purpose of summarizing, others thought technology enabled students "to highlight text to demonstrate [their efforts to] guess vocabulary in context," especially when everyone was "focused on the same image at the same time." "[B]eing able to assign students to pre- and post-reading discussions in breakout rooms" was another advantage of technology reported in this study. It should be noted that while many instructors revealed positive aspects of using technology during ERT, of the 39 survey open-ended responses, 28.20% (n = 11) did not think technology was beneficial; their responses ranged from "None" to "Nothing is better online." To these IEP teachers, technology did not seem to offer much addition to the RW instruction during ERT (given their preferred face-to-face modality of instruction), which leads us to the next segment on what did not work when teaching reading online amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teaching reading during ERT: A look at the challenges

That 28.28% of the respondents (n = 21) disconfirmed the benefits of teaching reading online is revealing and needs further exploration. To delve into the perceived challenges or difficulties of teaching reading online, the respondents shared their viewpoints on the following survey open-ended question: "What reading-associated areas did you find more challenging to teach online?" Among the responses are teaching students higher-order reading skills and self-directed learning; bottom-up "skills like understanding vocab[ulary] without a dictionary, understanding word form without a dictionary, and pronoun references;" and teaching grammar.

Research Question 4: What was the number-one online tool IEP teachers used in teaching vocabulary, and how did they use it to help build student reading proficiency during ERT?

In the survey's open-ended questions, effective vocabulary instruction was reported as an important aspect that lends itself to online instruction. When asked about the challenges of teaching reading online, only 8% (n = 3) of the 37 respondents mentioned vocabulary.

Quizlet: IEP reading instructors' preferred online platform

When asked about their number-one technology tool used in vocabulary teaching, the RW instructors' responses focused on two main technology tools: Quizlet and Kahoot. Despite their familiarity with Perusall (an online platform that is gaining more and more ground in post-ERT IEP online instruction), the IEP instructors thought it wise to integrate Quizlet into their vocabulary instruction as a valuable tool for enhancing student vocabulary acquisition. Quizlet, which is "a study tool based mostly on flashcard- and quiz-style recall of facts" (Common Sense Education, 2021), was thought to be the number-one technology tool used because it enabled students to develop and review vocabulary, especially asynchronously. Likewise, all the interviewees (n = 7) listed Quizlet as their preferred technology tool in vocabulary instruction. It should be noted that despite its familiarity among IEP instructors, Kahoot was not as popular during ERT; only two interviewees reported using it in addition to Quizlet.

Discussion

One of the quotations that stood out during the interviews describes how some instructors felt during the emergency remote teaching period.

> [I]t takes a lot more time to do anything online; I find that not only do the students have all sorts of connectivity problems, and so at any point in time, I don't know if they can hear me; I don't know if they're following what we're doing, if they can see my shared screen or not [... they're in and out of the classroom; they tell me it's connectivity problems. I don't have any way to prove that it's not. (an IEP instructor of reading)

The quotation above might be misconstrued as an instructor complaining about their challenges, but this instructor's context, tone, and facial expressions during the interview reflected a heightened awareness of and empathy toward their students, who are non-native speakers of English. Like their instructors, many of these students were apparently struggling with all sorts of technology and accessibility issues, while still expected to master the language remotely and cope with online course requirements amid the pandemic. Many IEP instructors shared their concerns about the students' learning capabilities, especially those studying from overseas in different time zones (Bentahar, 2021). The question "How is [my teaching] going to fit with [students'] computer capabilities?" is an example of the kind of thoughts many instructors were grappling with. Nonetheless, instructors' awareness led some of them to devise well thought-out measures to support student learning (examples of these new measures are given at the end of Section "IEP Teachers' Support for International Students" below).

Given the scope of this study, and while there are other valuable findings, we now discuss how amid numerous challenges of teaching reading during the pandemic, IEP RW instructors did not hesitate to do their best to share their knowledge and skills with their students to help them navigate the online transition, which is indicative of their commitment to their students' success.

The online transition came at a price

The abrupt transition to online instruction apparently negatively impacted several facets of English language learning (Yundayani et al., 2021), including planning, engagement, and

student-student interaction. The findings from our study uncovered several challenges that might have caused interruptions and difficulties for many IEP instructors, most of whom were also learning how to teach remotely. The participants agreed that planning took much longer online compared to the face-to-face modality they were used to before the pandemic. They also confirmed that planning during ERT necessitated familiarity with technology, which they needed to both plan their RW instruction and support the students who were struggling online at the time (Bentahar, 2021). Sixty percent (n = 26) of the survey respondents reported lower student engagement during reading and vocabulary instruction, and 63% (n = 27) observed dwindling student-student interaction. Qualitative findings seem to align with the quantitative data as elucidated in the Data Analysis section above. But how surprising should these findings be?

To the authors of this study, the participants' perceived negative opinions of online teaching do not come as a surprise because the context was characterized by so much urgency and uncertainty, hence the term emergency remote teaching. Hodges et al. (2020) underscored the stark difference between online learning in regular times and ERT. The researchers explained the common misconception of "comparing a face-to-face course with an online version of the course" because such a comparison does not "constitute a useful evaluation" (para. 17). Therefore, it is important to note that what many language teachers might (have) describe(d) as online instruction (compared to their face-to-face teaching experiences) was in fact emergency remote teaching amid the pandemic. The 51 IEP international students who also learned English online made it clear that a successful transition into the online mode during the pandemic required input from their teachers for the students to interact smoothly with the online technologies and platforms (Krishnan et al., 2020), which brings us to the pivotal role that language teachers played during the March-August 2020 period to support their students' learning amid the pandemic.

IEP teachers' support for international students

Almost 60 percent of the participants (n = 27) had taught reading for at least eleven years, and over 40% of them (n = 18) had 17+ years of classroom experience. However, for most of the participants, the March-August 2020 period also marked their first time ever teaching remotely (amid the pandemic), which might not be as easy as it may sound for some colleagues with more familiarity with instructional technology. The need to teach IEP students online required new skill sets and knowledge, hence certain instructors' frequent questions about several areas, including their own logistics and preparedness. One of the important questions back then, according to our respondents, was how much time should be allocated to students' asynchronous work, which was another first in the history of IEP learning in the United States. Another decision teachers had to make was to design modules and online activities to balance students' asynchronous work without sacrificing interaction and engagement. Still another decision was the amount of time allocated to the synchronous-asynchronous weight (e.g., 60/40, 80/20, or 90/10). Another important question was whether or not this weight should vary depending on the instructor's availability or the students' proficiency levels.

In a pre-COVID-19 pandemic era, IEP RW instructors often used technology primarily as a supplemental component (Bentahar, 2022) because students mandatorily attended a minimum of 18 contact hours weekly (Reese & Helms, 2018). Regardless of the measures and decisions teachers have to make to support their students' accessibility to technology and content, it is

advisable that their approach be consistent, especially when the students are non-native speakers of the target language. As IEP international students were developing more familiarity with technology amid the COVID-19 pandemic, they were still engaged in English learning outside the synchronous environment. Student asynchronous engagement meant, inter alia, completing modules, participating in discussion boards, interacting with digital textbooks, and exploring Internet content such as videos and library resources (Caplan, 2020).

In addition, qualitative findings indicated IEP instructors' heightened awareness of the challenges which impacted learning as their students, too, were navigating the uncharted territories of online learning amid the pandemic. At a time when some teachers tend to focus more on teaching online (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021), it is important to remember that teaching should always center on international students' interests and abilities (Bentahar, 2021). At Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), for instance, a group of professors redesigned their curriculum so that their undergraduate students might take it completely online; nonetheless, even with the best practices and technologies in place, things might still go awry. VCU's research group tried various tools and methods to integrate digital sociology curriculum, but "[they] were stymied by something very basic: [their] students didn't know how to skillfully use a search function" (Cottom, 2019, Digital Sociology @ VCU). If VCU's online curriculum was implemented during a more favorable environment (pre-pandemic) and customized for undergraduate students with native or native-like English proficiency, what would the odds be for a similar integration benefiting international students in trying times? Because IEP international students are prone to elevated stress levels that might also hinder their language development as a result of the pandemic (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020), it becomes incumbent upon the entire IEP corps (not only instructors) to make sure their students are supported sufficiently because the focus should be on learning, not teaching. One of Cottom's (2019) takeaways is a reminder for teachers to always consider the audience for which an online education is designed or redesigned because "[i]t doesn't matter whether or not a [technology] tool can do something; it matters whether or not students can make sense of what the tool is doing" (2019, p. 27).

According to some interviewees, it was clear the onus of supporting students fell on the teachers who were still able to create practical ways to boost confidence and morale among their IEP students, especially those taking the courses from overseas. The online task force at the University of Delaware's English Language Institute, for example, made available audio and video troubleshooting documents translated into five languages to fulfill the needs of inclusivity and accessibility of their diverse student populations (Bentahar, 2021). Creating and mandating that students cover an orientation to technology module in every IEP course is another best practice reported by some interviewees as they navigated online ERT at the authors' university IEP.

Limitations and Future Research

There were several limitations in this study. First, it would be impossible to generalize these findings to the overall population of IEP instructors. Still, the data collected offers some initial findings which might present valuable insights into the progress (or lack thereof) IEP RW instructors have made while implementing an ERT. In subsequent studies, expanding the

participant pool could provide a much more accurate and valid representation of the challenges and benefits associated with reading entirely online during a non-ERT period.

Conclusion

The findings from this study offer insights into IEP instructors' experiences teaching reading online during the COVID-19 ERT. The participants reported lower student engagement in reading and vocabulary and decreased student-student interaction, which was not the case for student-teacher interaction. Considering the perceived challenges of the online transition back then, many participants expressed preference for face-to-face instruction; however, many of them were also able to capitalize on this opportunity by integrating technology during the emergency remote teaching. We believe one major takeaway from this study is the IEP instructors' support for and empathy toward their students, many of whom were taking classes from overseas. Such support, which comes as no surprise to us, reflects the power of teachers to overcome barriers and advocate for their students amid trying times. While the empirical data on the impact of moving online on IEP reading instruction has been underdeveloped in the literature, from a mixed-method approach, we hope this exploratory study will help professionals in the field gain an understanding of some of the challenges and opportunities associated with IEP reading instruction during the COVID-19 ERT and serve as a platform for further research investigating experiences of IEP reading instructors after they returned to their face-to-face instruction.

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Appendix A

Survey

Q1 Please choose ONE answer.

Yes, I agree to participate in the survey. (1)

Yes, I agree to participate in the survey and the interview. (2)

So that we can contact you for the interview, please enter your email address.

_____

Q2 Demographic Characteristics: Gender

Male
Female
Other

Q3 Experience teaching ESL reading in English language programs

- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-16 years
- 17 years or more

Q4 When I switched from face-to-face (f2f) to online instruction,

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
1. it was necessary to adjust the learning outcomes for reading instruction.	○	○	○	○	○
2. it was observed that student-student interaction dwindled (compared to f2f).	○	○	○	○	○
3. it was observed that student-teacher interaction increased (compared to f2f).	○	○	○	○	○
4. it was easier to teach reading strategies more efficiently.	○	○	○	○	○
5. it was observed that students were less engaged during reading and vocabulary instruction.	○	○	○	○	○
6. it was observed that non-academic factors (e.g., homesickness or household issues) led to lower student engagement in reading.	○	○	○	○	○
7. fewer accommodations needed to be made (e.g., allowing more time for reading and use of dictionaries).	○	○	○	○	○
8. it was observed that teaching reading online presented more methodological challenges.	○	○	○	○	○
9. it was observed that the main challenges in teaching reading were directly linked to technology.	○	○	○	○	○
10. I observed that I was more successful at monitoring students' progress during reading instruction.	○	○	○	○	○
11. overall, my performance in teaching reading improved.	○	○	○	○	○
12. overall, it was observed that my students' reading proficiency improved (as a result of online learning).	○	○	○	○	○

Q5 **The following questions will give you the opportunity to share more about your experience. Please answer openly and truthfully.**

What reading-related areas (e.g., reading comprehension, strategy use, vocabulary, etc.) lend themselves more to f2f instruction than to online instruction?
Q6 What reading-associated areas did you find easy to teach in online learning [but not in f2f instruction]?
Q7 What reading-associated areas did you find *more* challenging to teach online?
Q8 After things go back to normal, if you were given the option to teach a reading course either f2f or online, which one would you choose and why?
Q9 If you used any online tools to teach academic vocabulary, please list your preferred online tool (e.g., Kahoot) and explain how it helped.
Q10 What reading instructional strategies worked more effectively in the f2f environment?
Q11 What reading instructional strategies worked more effectively in the online environment?
Thank you for your participation

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions Administered to Reading Instructors

1. In what ways has teaching reading online impacted your planning?
2. In what ways has teaching online impacted the learning outcomes for your students?
3. How do you perceive student-teacher and student-student interaction using online platforms in reading classes (compared to face-to-face learning)?
4. What about student engagement, compared to face-to-face learning?
5. Please tell me about the adjustments to your teaching that you (have) had to make as a result of moving reading instruction to the online mode.
6. What instructional practices would you describe as being more successful, if any, teaching online than teaching f2f?
7. Have you experienced any major challenges? (If yes -- Please describe the major challenge(s) you faced while teaching reading online that you didn't experience teaching f2f.)
8. If you used any online tools to teach vocabulary, strategy use, or reading comprehension, please list your number one online tool (e.g., Kahoot) and explain how it helped build student reading proficiency.
9. What would you say to someone who is about to teach reading online? Any tips/advice/things to remember? considerations?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share with me related to reading instruction using online platforms? If so, please share.

Thank you for your participation.

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