

# Identity Construction during Emergency Remote Teaching Reflections of Novice Teachers in a Teacher Education Program<sup>1</sup>

*Irasema Mora-Pablo<sup>2</sup>, Universidad de Guanajuato, Guanajuato, Mexico*

*Douglas Goodwin<sup>3</sup>, Southwestern Oregon Community College, Coos Bay, Oregon, USA*

## Abstract

This study describes the experiences of ten English as a foreign language (EFL) student-teachers constructing their professional identity while experiencing Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the global outbreak of COVID-19, Mexico was not the exception, and almost overnight it became necessary to change to a virtual instruction modality. These participants experienced this sudden change as teachers did, but also as students of a BA in English language teaching in central Mexico. Based on a qualitative case study, we analyzed journals, reflective activities and conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants for a period of eight months. Our findings suggested that their experiences were permeating their professional and personal domains. This symbiotic relationship has been emphasized, if not seriously put to the test, during the pandemic and the implementation of ERT, as the data from our research suggests elevated levels of feelings and emotions related to student-teachers' experience with ERT in their individual contexts as students and teachers. They felt empathy for their professors as well as their own students, in that they were sharing the ERT/COVID challenges with them in real time, all the time. Suggestions for further research imply more emphasis on the development of technological skills and call the attention of teacher education programs to (re)design curricula based on students' needs and contextual factors in the world, paying special attention to the socio-emotional competencies.

## Resumen

El presente estudio describe las experiencias de diez profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera construyendo su identidad profesional mientras experimentan la Enseñanza Remota de Emergencia (ERT, por sus siglas en inglés) durante la pandemia de COVID19. Con el brote global de COVID19, México no fue la excepción y, de la noche a la mañana fue necesario cambiar a una modalidad virtual de enseñanza. Estos participantes experimentaron este cambio repentino como maestros pero también como estudiantes de un programa de licenciatura en Enseñanza del Inglés en el centro de México. Basado en un estudio de caso cualitativo, analizamos diarios, actividades reflexivas y llevamos a cabo entrevistas semi-estructuradas con los participantes en un período de ocho meses. Nuestros resultados sugieren que sus experiencias estaban permeando sus dominios profesionales y personales. Esta relación simbiótica fue enfatizada, y puesta a prueba durante la pandemia y la implementación de ERT ya que los datos revelan elevados niveles de sentimientos y emociones relacionados con su experiencia con ERE en sus contextos individuales. Los participantes muestran empatía con sus maestros así como con sus estudiantes ya que, al mismo tiempo, se enfrentaban a retos de ERT/COVID19 todo el tiempo. Esto llama la atención a los programas en formación de profesores a enfatizar el desarrollo de las habilidades tecnológicas, pero también a (re)diseñar sus currículos basados en las necesidades de los estudiantes y los factores contextuales en el mundo, prestando especial atención a las competencias socio-emocionales.

## Introduction

Teacher education programs have gone from being product-oriented to process-oriented (Da-Silva, 2005; Nguyen & Abbott, 2016), and it has become crucial to understand how future teachers go through different stages. For example, some stages include how they learned how to teach (theoretical/content knowledge), their first teaching experiences (practical knowledge), experiences and knowledge they bring to their learning, and teaching context and the critical incidents they experience, to mention a few (Farrell, 2009, 2012, 2019; Freeman, 2001; Lengeling- Mora Pablo, 2016). There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the importance of understanding how pre-service language teachers manage to learn and develop (Jiang & Zhang, 2021, Johnson, 2006, Varguese et al., 2016). Johnson and Freeman (2001) suggest

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<sup>2</sup>[imora@ugto.mx](mailto:imora@ugto.mx), 0000-0001-8532-5522. Correspondent.

<sup>3</sup>[dgoodwin@socc.edu](mailto:dgoodwin@socc.edu), 0000-0002-9178-2452

that it is of utmost importance to understand the act of language teaching from the teacher point of view of the teacher. Therefore, it becomes essential to get “descriptive accounts of how teachers arrive at what they know, how they use that knowledge in classroom and school contexts, and how they make sense of and reconfigure their classroom practices over time” (p. 63). This process of teacher learning involves not only acquiring new knowledge and skills, but also requires developing and adopting, probably a new whole identity (Clarke, 2008). In this sense, Varguese et al. (2016) advocate for paying more attention to language teacher identity in teacher education programs as a lens to reconceptualize teacher identity as a pedagogical tool to show contextualized, holistic, and situated framings of teacher learning (see Menard-Warwick, 2013). Johnson (2006) acknowledges that teacher learning is a complex dynamic social activity which is contextually situated. It is reflected by theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as beliefs, agency, motivation and emotions, “all of which pertain to teacher identity as a complex dynamic system” (Jiang & Zhang, 2021, p. 272). We situate the present study in this context. With the global outbreak of COVID-19, we wanted to explore how student-teachers in a BA TESOL in central Mexico progressed from creating an initial professional identity as students in the program while simultaneously experiencing emergency remote teaching as teachers and students. Insights into these aspects will contribute to a better understanding of how and why teachers develop and re-shape their identities in pandemic and ERT contexts. It is our hope that this will offer essential implications for updating language teacher education and professional learning programs.

#### *COVID-19 and the need for emergency remote teaching*

In the midst of the pandemic, schools and universities worldwide made a rapid transition to a modality of instruction intended to allow classes to continue while at the same time protecting education communities from the risk of infection of the COVID-19 virus. The term often associated with this new modality was Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). In the United States, research by Hodges et al. (2020) defined ERT as “a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances” (p.6). They distinguish ERT from what is commonly known as ‘online teaching’ in that it is “...in contrast to experiences that are planned from the beginning and designed to be online” (p.6).

In a study carried out in Germany, König et al. (2020) investigated how early career teachers managed to adapt to online teaching during COVID-19 school closures. It was found that email was the primary media for providing students with learning content. They suggested that teachers who learned to use more sophisticated digital media in their pre-service training were more likely to succeed in these new circumstances. Likewise, they proposed that “those teachers who had already software resources at their disposal and were familiar with their use in teaching were clearly advantaged when school closures began” (2020, p. 617). In contrast to König et al. (2020), Bond (2020) provides an overview of research that was undertaken during the early months of the pandemic, to highlight the success, challenges, and recommendations for the future. The article includes a review of 89 studies from countries around the world, with many of them originating in Europe and Asia. Bond’s (2020) findings led to several recommendations. Some called for more funding for professional development and technology, and more funding for areas of disadvantage and equity to provide better access to remote learning opportunities for students who require additional support. For teachers, recommendations focussed on the design and inclusion of more activities involving interaction, as well as the use of appropriate technology and more asynchronous activities.

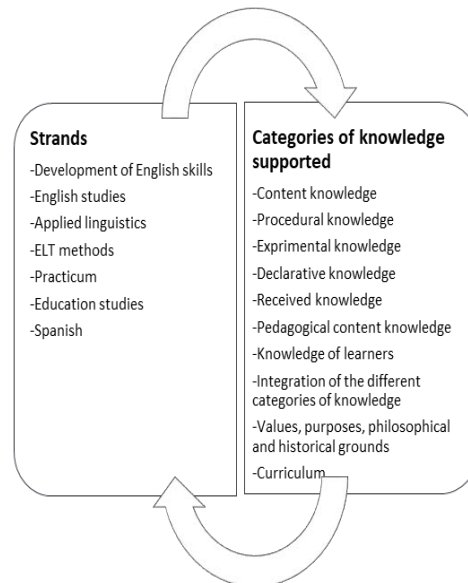
In the context of Mexico, the situation was similar. For example, the Metropolitan Autonomous University (MAU) launched a plan called the Emerging Remote Teaching Program (ERTP). The program objective was “to ensure the continuity of university education, as well as the submission of global and recovery assessments with the involvement of academics, to whom advice and technical support would be provided, without jeopardizing the university community’s health in the context of the health emergency imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic” (Morales Franco, 2020, p. 3). Also, Zapata-Garibay et al. (2021) provided a thorough description of the situation in the Mexican education system from the school closures in March 2020 and the implementation of ERT. Other studies (Padilla Rodríguez et al., 2021; Zamora-Antuñano et al., 2021) reported the challenges teachers faced in terms of interaction, collaboration, lack of access to specialized equipment, the inequality that existed among students in terms of the adequacy of the equipment they use, and the type of access to the internet. This in turn resulted in the potentially inadequate

learning opportunities and practice for the students, not only in urban but also in rural areas. The following section provides an overview of the situation for teacher education programs in Mexico and how they embraced the sudden change from face-to-face to ERT.

#### *Language teacher education programs in **Mexico** and the implementation of ERT*

Since the professionalization of language teaching in the 1990s in Mexico, English language teacher education has been approached from the applied science model. Currently, there are more than 50 teacher education programs in public and private institutions. They are related to areas such as English language teaching, modern languages, applied linguistics, and related disciplines. These programs aim to prepare future English language teachers who will teach at different levels, from kindergarten to university and private language centers. Therefore, it becomes important to provide opportunities of theory and practice in these programs. Sharkey (2009), inspired by her experience as a Fulbright Scholar in Central Mexico, posited the notion of taking the concept of ‘praxis’, converting it into a verb and ‘praxizing’ language teacher education programs. At the time of publication, her paper suggested that such programs might benefit from incorporating content that would encourage student-teachers enrolled in them to initiate and engage in critical discussion that results in a dialog between theory they are learning and their professional practice. This would in turn be more conducive to students internalizing the learned theory as they are able to make better sense of it as they attempt to apply it in their individual professional contexts.

Lemus Hidalgo (2017) advocated for the inclusion of more teaching practice in language teacher education programs. She proposed an approach for programs that “acknowledge the interconnectedness of teachers’ knowledge, beliefs and their teaching practices and the processes they involve” (p. 458). This would imply that programs, or at least the program being studied for her article, were lacking sufficient teaching practicum and the discussion of how it relates to the theory that student-teachers are learning. Lemus Hidalgo presented different elements when considering strands and categories of knowledge that support teacher education programs, as summarized in Figure 1.



Note: The arrows show the correlation between the strands and categories of knowledge.

Figure 1: Strands and categories of knowledge in teacher education programs in Mexico

Language teacher education programs throughout Mexico share these strands, or close variations of them. This commonality of core content can be linked to the influence on English language education and the development of language teacher education programs by the British Council, and later on, with the changes in the National English Program in Mexico. This program pushed teacher education programs to redesign their curricula and include more content classes related to teaching English to children in tertiary education. However, the lack of attention to educational technology in teacher education programs and social-emotional competencies is evident. Additionally, Mugford et al. (2015) present the case for the importance of teachers’

emotions in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. They cited Benesch (2013) as focusing on the “struggle between what teachers are feeling and what they believe they ought to be feeling while they’re teaching” (p. 118). Higher education institutions needed develop students’ social-emotional competencies in order to enhance their ability to cope with stress and challenging situations (Bamber & Schneider, 2016; Dvořáková et al. 2019). Mugford et al. (2015) explained that these types of feelings and emotions may be related “to their students, the classroom context, teaching conditions, school practices and educational policies and may range from joy and happiness to anger and frustration” (p. 4). These negative feelings can be strengthened by situations like the one we were experiencing worldwide.

In a study conducted in Puebla, Mexico, Juárez-Díaz and Perales (2021) described how faculty members of a teacher education program reported mainly negative feelings while delivering content sessions during the pandemic without proper face-to-face interaction and the problems faced by insufficient internet access. Their findings emphasized the importance of the university and State to provide more training and equipment to close the digital gap and ensure effective ERT in situations like this. Similarly, Hodges et al. (2020) presented some features of ERT. These are mainly related to challenges that faculty experience in terms of support, training and the difficulties of delivering content in a flexible manner to all students. In Mexico, students and teachers are accustomed to traditional, face-to-face instruction (Garcia-Ponce & Mora-Pablo, 2020) and they may lack the digital literacies and autonomous learning skills essential in the effective implementation of ERT. This strong inclination for face-to-face classes has become an intrinsic factor of who they are as teachers. Therefore, another component that becomes crucial in teacher education programs is the professional identity of teachers, and it will be discussed next.

#### *Developing professional identity: Challenges during the pandemic*

Mugford et al. (2015) discussed ‘teaching self and identity’ where they cited Ivanič to define the self as “people’s sense of who they are” according to their own perceptions (Ivanič, 1998, p. 10). They distinguish the “person” from the “self” as a person’s sense of her/his self as based on external views and social practices. When the “self” and the “person” are combined, the result is the “identity” (Mugford et al. 2015, p. 2). In their findings, Mugford et al. suggested that “in terms of identity, respondents often saw their identity in terms of gender, geographical location, community, and profession” (p. 6). In a different study, Ozturk and Yildrum (2013) described the often ‘unsettling’ experience that novice teachers have when transitioning from pre-service education to professional practice. When novice teachers begin their teaching careers, they often have the same expectations and requirements placed upon them as those of an experienced teacher.

Farrell (2012) noted that there is no clear, globally accepted definition of a novice teacher in the literature. A novice can be someone who is teaching something new for the first time or who has entered into a new cultural context for the first time. Karatas and Karaman (2013), in their research, defined a novice teacher as one with less than two years of teaching. Citing our context-specific considerations (that our participants are mostly in-service teachers), for our research we define novice teachers as those who have less than three years of instructing experience and, at the moment of the study, have undertaken their first job as English teachers while simultaneously being BA in TESOL students.

Xu (2012) described how the student-teachers’ professional identities underwent notable transformations in the novice stage of teaching. Specifically, the cue-based or exemplar-based imagined identities transformed into the more rule-based or schema-based practiced identities. “A strong driving force behind such transformation came from the institutional pressures of school rules and regulations, thus leading to rule-based identities” (p. 576).

In the case of the institutional pressure that our participant student-teachers face in their professional worlds, the reality is essentially a multiple-layered phenomenon. The student-teachers are not only impacted by the pressures on them from their employers, which definitely have an impact on their practiced identities, but also on their students and their learning experience. Likewise, student-teachers are influenced by the pressures on them from the institution where they study and their professors, which consequently affects their own learning experiences. They seemingly then carry results of these impacts back and forth from their teacher training context to their profession in-service context in a continual cycle until they complete their degrees or discontinue their studies.

The effects of the pandemic linger in Mexico, but the country has slowly returned to face-to-face instruction again. However, some institutions still maintain aspects of distance learning. For these teachers, elements

of distance learning have become a consistent part of their teaching practice. This begs the question of the student-teachers who participated in the research for this paper to know how their self-perception and the implementation of ERT have impacted the construction of their identity. Now, we turn our attention to the study.

## Materials and Methods

### *Research design*

This is a qualitative study that adopted a case study method. We opted for a qualitative research approach because, as Yin (2016) suggests, this allows for the study of “the meaning of peoples’ lives, under real-world conditions” (p. 185). As for case study, we followed Bryman’s (2008) definition, who noted that a “case study entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case” (p. 52). Therefore, a case study provides in-depth data and a whole or complete picture of real-life actions of human beings in a social activity in a particular natural setting (Punch, 2009). We aimed to look at how the implementation of ERT affected the teaching identity formation of ten students in the BA program of a public university. Our objective was to examine the transitions in identity development of the participants during the quarantine. It should be noted that in this research we had no interest in the pandemic per se, but rather in the internal struggle of the research participants’ professional identity as they struggled to implement ERT without any previous experience. As such, the pandemic created a space that amplified the opportunity to look at this specific group’s professional identity development in a unique context.

The purpose was to explore a social reality in natural situations that would help its further analysis. In this study, we wanted to understand how the pandemic influenced student-teachers’ identity and feelings regarding their teaching practices and their experiences as student-teachers in a BA TESOL. We focused on two major research questions:

*RQ1: How were the novice teachers’ identities challenged while adapting to ERT?*

*RQ2: What feelings and emotions were related to the student-teachers’ experiences with ERT both as students and teachers in their individual contexts?*

### *Context and participants*

This study was conducted in a public university in central Mexico. The first author is a teacher-trainer in the BA TESOL program in this university, the second author is a former teacher-trainer at the same institution who is often invited to supervise theses and give academic presentations. The BA TESOL has operated since 2000 and originally it was planned for in-service teachers. However, in recent years, this profile has changed, and more pre-service teachers have been admitted into the program. Since 2000 the program has gone through different modifications in its curricula. Currently, it has five main strands: English language teaching, applied linguistics, research, educational technology, and educational autonomy. The classes were face-to-face up to the moment we were advised to remain confined due to the COVID-19 outbreak in March, 2020. The participants of this study belonged to a cohort in semester six of the program and were taking a class called “Analysis of English Language Teaching Practice”, where the main objective is to analyze who they are as teachers and how they construct their professional identity as English teachers. All participants started teaching English while being enrolled at BA, therefore, they were novice teachers. Their average number of years teaching was between one and three years and their ages ranged from 21 to 28 years old. The group accepted to be part of this study and we provided the informed consent forms; ten out of 13 students responded. To respect their preferences, we use pseudonyms to refer to participants in this article.

### *Instruments*

We collected data for a period of eight months while they were taking the class and after they had finished the semester. This period of time encompassed reflective activities (including journals, the creation of a teaching map, a poster of their main qualities as teachers, forum discussions, and a description of themselves as teachers), and a semi-structured interview that was conducted via Zoom with each participant after they had finished the semester. The purpose of this interview was to expand on what they had revealed in the other instruments. It included questions about challenges during their teaching practices but also as student-teachers, as well as feelings, thoughts, and actions arising from the experiences reported. Some questions were: How did you feel with this sudden change in teaching modality? How did the classes you have taken at BA helped you to make this transition? How did the reflective activities help you with learning more about you and your current teaching practice? The interviews were conducted in English, but



sometimes, participants used their first language (L1), Spanish, to explain a particular aspect. Thus, the excerpts presented here are mainly verbatim as participants produced them during the interviews. All the other activities were originally in English. We have added a code after the name of the participant to signal where the information came from. Therefore, an 'I' stands for Interview and 'RA' for Reflective Activity.

### *Procedures*

Initially, we analyzed the reflective activities. We decided to call them reflective activities since they were part of a series of homework during the class, but they facilitated the reflection and creativity of the participants. After we collected all the activities, the first author read them to ensure that they were informative and substantial. At this point, reflexivity became an important element in the research. Reflexivity "can be understood as a process of self-examination through specific actions" (Probst, 2015, p. 38). In our research, we carried out self-examination through memos and journals by debriefing with each other, from our positions as internal (first author) and external (second author) from the research context. We considered this process as essential to maintain rigor in the research by being aware of our positioning in relation to the research and the research participants (Dodgson, 2019). From the moment we conceptualized this study, we made sure to keep a double perspective that Probst (2015) defines like "an eye that sees itself while simultaneously seeing the world" (p. 38). As Gemignani (2011) points out, reflexivity can function as a monitor between the positionality of the researcher and the researched, looking at the attachment and detachment of these two figures in the study. This, in turn, can increase the rigor between the study and its ethics.

The initial analysis of these activities was done using semi-directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The first author read the participants' insights in each of the activities without initially looking for any particular theoretical constructs. The initial categories showed similarities and differences. The next step was to reduce and label categories according to name and group constructs that emerged from the analysis. To ensure objectivity, rigor, and the aforementioned detachment, the resulting coding was then audited by the second author, who read the reflective activities and verified the applicability and consistency of the codes. The same procedure was followed when analyzing the transcripts of the individual interviews. Once the codes were finalized, both authors decided which ones would be more representative. We acknowledge the limits of this data and present them as a starting point for future exploration within the Mexican context and abroad. For the purposes of this article, we will discuss the following emerging themes: developing professional identity: the critical back and forth between the past and present "self", and the pandemic and ERT: self-reflections from the experience.

### Results

#### *Professional identity: The critical back and forth between the past and present "self"*

One of the main activities of the course was to create a teaching map. This consisted of first identifying key people, moments, places, or any other element that the student-teachers considered influential in the decision-making process of becoming English teachers. Second, they had to add a page where they explained this teaching map from a retrospective perspective and reflect on how these elements make them the teachers they are now. The purpose was to analyze their path, as a process of self-discovery and self-renewal. Participants claimed to have enjoyed this activity, as it was very free (they mainly created posters or videos) and allowed them to be creative. About her teaching map, Lynda explained:

*During the process, I recalled the key moments, for example that I already liked English since kindergarten. Then how my family encouraged me to keep studying English. But then some things happened during high school, I entered a very dark period in my life, and I was lost. And I decided to go take an English course in a Language Center in my hometown. So, in that moment, I realized that okay, maybe this is something that I can do. (Lynda-I)*

This activity allowed Lynda to detect specific moments in her life when she decided to become an English teacher and at the same time, to value her past life experiences, as she commented:

*I learned that no matter what happens in your life, maybe it's destiny, or I don't know how to call it. At the time, I was going through really difficult times in my life. But I learned that this is nothing to be ashamed of, because maybe I am older than my classmates, but I learned to identify the key moments that now I'm very proud of myself, and I'm very proud that I'm here in the [BA] program. (Lynda-I)*

The overall response to the teaching map was positive, as participants commented different stages in their lives and people that they considered influential in their decision to become teachers. Ruth, for example,

was able to make connections between her current teaching practices and how her mother was a pivotal influential figure in her development of professional identity:

*I discover the big influence that my mom had on me, on how I teach, on how I approach the kids. Because although my mom never taught me, I still went to her classroom, I was there observing her classes. So, this changed me a lot. And I didn't know that until I started analyzing it. Because I thought that it was like all my ideas. But then I started thinking, "No, where did you learn this?" And I was like, "Oh, my mommy did this in one class" or things like that. So [the teaching map] let me track some of my characteristics as a teacher, mostly in classroom management. (Ruth-I)*

This self-discovery process helped to identify the source of Ruth's current teaching style. This exercise also triggered participants' reflection and guided them to visualize the type of teacher they want to be, as with Danielle:

*I am the first English teacher for some of my students, mostly with the kids. So, for them, I want to be the teacher that I would have liked to have had when I was studying, or that I would have liked to have when I was about eight or nine. (Danielle-RA)*

Another activity was to record their class. During the pandemic all of these student-teachers were experiencing ERT, and they recorded their classes using different platforms such as Teams, Zoom or GoogleMeet. Lynda recorded about 15 classes before she decided which one she would share with the rest of the BA class. Initially, she did not like what she perceived:

*When I recorded myself, and when I watched the video, because we had to analyze it, it was a horrible experience, because I'm not used to watch myself. It is very uncomfortable for me. But when it was the moment to share it with my classmates and you [the teacher], it was amazing, because I didn't expect that [positive] feedback. I was thinking the worst. But with the feedback, I was really impressed and excited and happy. (Lynda-I)*

Self-doubt was another factor that participants discovered during the course. This was the first time they were teaching in ERT and they had lost confidence in their teaching abilities. Certainly, one cannot master technological abilities in a few months alone, but her self-confidence was reassured after receiving feedback from her peers and teacher.

Another factor that emerged as crucial when shaping professional identity was age, not only by the participants but also by their employers. For example, Alice, who was 21 years old, considered that her boss has a particular view of her because of age:

*My boss has this idea about me that I am very young, and I think she thinks that because I am young I don't feel pressure, or I don't feel stress or I don't punish kids. Maybe she sees me as lacking on character, but I was suffering, the same as the old teachers! (Alice-RA)*

Apparently, in the eyes of her boss, Alice's young age was synonymous with being more relaxed, with no problems adapting to new challenges. The image of being young became a concern to participants. They felt that age was a factor for which their pedagogical practices were questioned. Ruth, who was 23 years old, commented:

*I was in a school where my other colleague was older than me. And the difference of age was very noticeable. So, for the parents, it was like the "the English teacher is so young". They thought that I didn't have enough experience to teach their kids and even more during the pandemic. And that made me a little bit insecure. But with the kids, it was great, because I could relate more to them. It was difficult also because I had not a lot of support from my administrative (Ruth-I)*

In her case, it was not that students questioned her age, but rather the parents and administrators. She had a positive nature and this was evident in her reflection on what she learned from the situation:

*I think that every person that I meet has to add something to who I am. And in the case of teachers, I think that adds something to my teaching persona. (Ruth-RA)*

At the time of the study, participants were dealing with being student-teachers but also learning how to manage their classes in a new environment (ERT). Professional identity construction is closely related to situated learning. Through reflective activities, students were able to reflect on forces that contributed to

influence, facilitate or inhibit their current teaching practice. Professional identity construction therefore derives from past experiences, the environment in which they work and their perception of their own capability to overcome difficulties and embrace new challenges that will shape and re-shape their professional identity. In this venue, the pandemic tested teachers' flexibility and willingness to adapt to ERT. This brought new learning experiences to our participants, as is discussed next.

#### *COVID-19 and ERT: Self-reflections from the experience*

The learning pertaining to student-teachers' challenges when teaching with ERT was also linked closely to the learning while studying at the BA. Participants reflected on how this situation affected their teaching practice, but also, their life as student-teachers in the BA program. Participants were having their first teaching experience and they all went from being in face-to-face classes to ERT overnight. Lynda recalled the initial difficulties:

*During the pandemic, we had to go online from one day to the next one. That was very stressful. I had to look for some platforms for some apps or something that can work online. So, in that part, it was easy because my classmates and I started to share information on these apps. But this was my first class, my first-time teaching. So, it was very difficult because we're not used to turn on the camera. We were used to the face-to-face classes. (Lynda-I)*

Closer examination of participants' responses reveals notable losses during this complex time. A recurrent theme in the interviews was a sense amongst interviewees that the bond they had created with their students was lost during the months they worked with ERT. Alice reported:

*Before the pandemic, I was confident I could deal with any discipline problem, but with the pandemic, I lost that confidence in me, I didn't know how to react. Speaking to a screen and nobody responding. This was something I hadn't even experienced as a student in my whole life. (Alice-I)*

Changes in actions and confidence were recurring comments. Before the pandemic, they regarded themselves as novice teachers but with confidence in what they were doing. However, during ERT, confidence in their own expertise and competence lowered. Another incident revealed the heavy load participants were feeling during the pandemic after being with ERT for a few months:

*I had 13 students in one class. It was a one-hour class, and I was already 30 minutes in, and no one was answering, and everybody had their cameras off. They were not even answering when I was calling them directly and I remember it was a Friday and I had classes in the BA after that. I remember finishing like 15 minutes earlier and I was crying. I was like "what is happening?". I remember very well it was at the beginning of the scholar year. My reflection was that in my real life the things that were happening in online classes would emotionally affect me directly. Because I was like "what am I doing wrong? What can I improve? I haven't seen this in my classes in the BA". Face-to-face is easier. In online they are not paying attention to me? Or they are not listening to me? My reflections were deeper on myself like "what can I improve? What can I do?" (Nelly-I)*

They reported the connections they were making as teachers, but also as student-teachers in a BA program, as one participant reported during the interview:

*I am a teacher but also a student, and as a student I get distracted easily. I understood they [students] had a full house, with their cousins, grandmothers, they get distracted. I was not sure if they were just not listening to me or because they didn't want to, or because they were distracted. So, I had to assume that it's what it is, that it was something I could control, and I became a lot more flexible because of the pandemic. Like "okay, you don't have internet, you cannot hear me, I'm going to repeat it again". At some point even one of my students said "teacher you are very patient" because it was like the fifth time I explained something and I said thank you. And I remember how my teacher [trainer in the BA] was also suffering in class and nobody recognized how patient she was (Danielle-I)*

Though unpleasant, the negative emotional experiences were at times balanced by the confidence in the content they had learned in classes at the BA, as some of them considered prepared, somehow, to face the first months of the pandemic.

*We had the class of Education Technology, at beginning of the BA. And I am thankful that it was that way. Because we checked a lot of platforms, a lot of game platforms like Kahoot, Educaplay, and so on. So, I already had some*



*apps or websites that I could use with my students, and that I knew that were suitable because I already worked with them, because [at the time] we had to create activity for imaginary students. So, I already knew how to do that. And that helped me a lot into creating resources during the pandemic. (Ruth-I)*

Participants acknowledge the content knowledge that the BA has provided during their enrollment. However, this new situation also helped them to further analyze what they were doing as student-teachers in their BA classes, as Zara reports in the interview:

*Sometimes, in the BA classes we didn't turn on the camera and the teacher was trying to make the class interesting and make us participate, but nobody responded. And I felt really bad, but I was also tired from my own classes with my students. I felt exhausted, it was not personal against the teacher, it was just that I couldn't do it anymore. (Zara-I)*

What they were experiencing as teachers was impacting their performance as student-teachers. They reflected on how they were coping personally and professionally while being teachers and students. Participants acknowledged the effort some teacher-trainers were making to adjust to this sudden change, just as they were doing in their own context. However, there was also disappointment among some participants, as Danielle comments:

*I know some teachers had to pay for their Zoom licenses from their own pocket, that because the university didn't support them with this. And I understood that those teachers are more committed than others. Some others just gave us readings and never taught us a class. I could not understand how there were teachers who were teaching us to become English teachers who didn't even try to adapt to the situation. (Danielle-I).*

Despite the conflicting feelings, most of the participants reflected on the learning from this pandemic. The knowledge obtained from these experiences influenced the way these student-teachers perceived, interpreted, and understood the content knowledge taught at the BA and the way they constructed their professional identity. Nelly reflected on this in the following excerpt:

*I don't know how to explain it, but it has given me so much in understanding what I'm doing. It's more than the tools because I understand what I do because of the BA and because of how teachers help us to mirror our teaching practice. It is like a puzzle where everything matches, you find the pieces, sometimes the missing pieces. Sometimes you already have the pieces, but it is only a way of having like this matching. (Nelly-I)*

The connection these student-teachers made between their past and their present led them to analyze how they can embrace their future. The distance between their content knowledge and teaching and learning experiences may determine how they perceive teaching as a never-ending process, as verbalized by Ruth:

*With reflection and all the activities, I learned how big of an influence my mom was in my teaching style, but with the pandemic, I questioned everything again. So, this let me know that in order to be a teacher, I need to constantly be updating myself and to work. Teaching is not something static, you need to constantly change because your students are not going to be the same, their contexts are not going to be the same, this situation is not going to be the same, as we see with the pandemic. Because in my first six months of teaching, I thought that my whole career was going to be the same. But now I know that it may not. And maybe I can come back to face-to-face classes, but I also can teach online at the same time, or hybrid modalities. So, I think that in order to be a teacher, I need to keep reflecting and reflecting (Ruth-I)*

All these self-reflections will very likely work as tenets for them to construct and re-construct their professional identity. It is evident they have developed a high level of reflection and have acquired new perceptions of themselves and their teaching and learning processes.

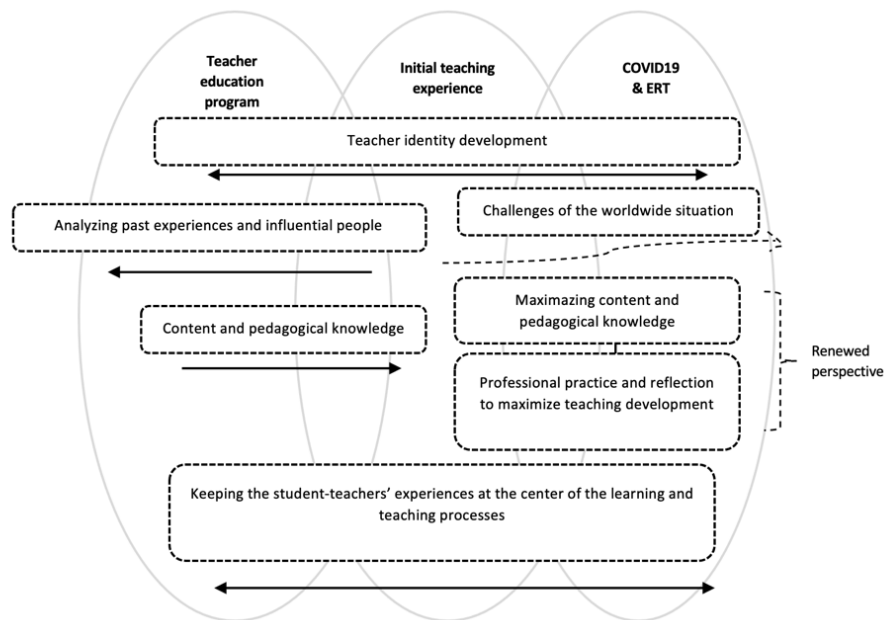
## Discussion

The worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 brought new challenges for everybody. For the participants in this study, this meant doing a critical self-analysis. This study aimed at examining how student-teachers of a BA TESOL program coped with ERT during the pandemic and how this influenced their professional identity. Our findings indicate that teacher learning is intertwined with and affected by identity construction. These participants were novice teachers who were facing their first teaching experience while simultaneously studying in a teacher education program. They were in the process of understanding who they are as teachers, but also learning how to teach. The complicated nexus between teacher learning and construction

of identity was put to test during the pandemic. Student-teachers reported elevated levels of feelings and emotions related to their experience with ERT. Their identity construction process was fed by three key moments: the teacher education program, their initial teaching experience during the pandemic, and the ERT context. These three elements were interacting in chorus. All of them have the potential to damage their professional identity construction and increase negative feelings and self-doubt, as reported by some participants. However, the identification of sources of influence as well as content knowledge, helped to overcome the challenges they were facing. It was pivotal to keep student-teachers' experiences at the center of the learning and teaching processes. Our findings reflect that by the time of this study, participants look at ERT retrospectively and they initially perceived themselves as "unqualified", "stressed" or "insecure", which led to emotional tensions. But later, participants took a proactive approach when facing ERT and they came to terms with how to manage self-perception and stress.

They also made a connection between their role as teachers and student-teachers. They revealed some empathy for their teacher-trainers. Participants seem to have had the initial idea that they would only transfer what they learned at the BA into effective practices during ERT once they were abruptly immersed from face-to-face into ERT. The classes they took related to Educational Technology helped them to cope with the new demands of the circumstances. However, at the beginning they seemed to lack confidence and the ability to think for themselves and to use their knowledge in new ways. They had to maximize the content knowledge and professional practice to overcome the challenges they were facing.

Taken together, a model of emerging conceptualizations of factors re-shaping student-teachers' identity is presented in Figure 2.



Note: The arrows indicate a relative direct relationship, whereas the dotted lines indicate the transit constructions happening in the specific moments: during the teacher education program, the participants' initial teaching experience and all of them during COVID19 and ERT.

Figure 2: Emerging conceptualizations of factors re-shaping student-teachers' identity; the critical back and forth between the past and present with a vision for the future

This showed a deconstruction of their own perceptions of "self" and teaching practices, which were originally constructed by past experiences and knowledge. As Kumaravadivelu (1994) suggests, teachers have first to discover who they are as language teachers, their identity, and then be prepared for the renewal. This implies the constant construction and deconstruction of teachers who are able to practice what they theorize and theorize what they practice (Gholami et al., 2021). In our study, participants were able to "mirror" their teaching practice with those of their teacher-trainers. They developed a sense of empathy, but at the same time questioned what and how they were being taught during ERT. This construction and deconstruction, as Da Silva (2005) recognizes, demands time and strong effort from both sides, student-teachers and those

who are involved in educating those student-teachers. Notwithstanding the merit to teacher-trainers for adapting to the situation, more needs to be done in teacher education programs to look not only at the pedagogical and subject matter teaching. In our study, a notable finding is the need for teacher education programs to look at student-teachers' social-emotional competencies which are necessary for coping with stressful circumstances as the ones caused by COVID-19. These competencies have been addressed in other studies (Birchinall, et al., 2019; Ergas & Hadar, 2019; Jennings et al., 2017) but with circumstances during the pandemic, it became necessary to equip student-teachers with them. Noting the substantial difficulties expressed by participants in this study, the role of social-emotional skills became even more important, as it demanded the ability to act on and to adjust to rapid changes as they happened.

### Conclusion

Few empirical studies have specifically examined student-teachers' insights the status quo of their experiences with ERT while taking a teacher education program and teaching simultaneously. Reflecting on the literature and our data, it is clear that teacher education programs need to be catalysts of "the making of" the critical reflective teacher who is able to look at the past but also to call for action in the present with a vision for the future. In our study, the emergent themes were related to how participants developed their professional identity, the critical back and forth between the past and present "self" and their self-reflections and experiences from COVID-19 and ERT. We acknowledge the limitations of our study. First, our results only report the experiences of one undergraduate teacher education program in Mexico. We cannot assume that the findings be generalized to other teacher education programs worldwide. Further research and studies are needed to compare experiences as a result of school closures due to the pandemic. Second, the experiences of the teacher-trainers were not considered in this study. More research addressing them is necessary to compare and contrast perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs.

The pandemic served as a way to expand on these student-teachers' processes of professional identity construction. ERT started as a response to the emergency situation but has been transforming into an increase in online instruction, and potentially a replacement to face-to-face teaching. The pandemic constituted a radical and unprecedented global situation. Teacher education programs had an opportunity to analyze, make substantial changes, and strengthen their teacher education curriculum with technological knowledge as well as social-emotional competencies. Also, training for student-teachers and universities in ERT is necessary, along with resources to deliver courses online in the near future, as these will likely become a permanent approach in education.

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