

## Impacts of online education during COVID-19 on teaching English in rural state schools in Türkiye

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### Highlights

- This study investigated the actual challenges that teachers of English faced at rural state schools before and during COVID-19.
- This study draws attention to the realities about the difficulties in teaching English in rural state schools emerging from three factors: teachers, students and school facilities.
- This research emphasizes the positive effects of the online teaching during COVID-19 in decreasing the urban-rural divide in terms of technological challenges.
- This study focuses on the effectiveness of the group discussions for exchanging the experiences in terms of professional development.

### Abstract

It is a commonly experienced fact that teaching English as a foreign language in rural areas is challenging for language teachers around the world. This study explored the actual challenges that teachers of English faced at rural state schools before and during COVID-19. To find out the regarding problems, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to 46 participants working at public schools as teachers of English in different regions of Türkiye. Additionally, to have a deeper understanding of the challenges that teachers of English faced during COVID-19 period, the reports from the focused group discussions were analyzed using content analysis. The discussions were held by 29 teachers of English working in the same rural district. The results revealed that teachers had some common difficulties deriving from school facilities, poor infrastructure, inadequate technology, instructional materials, students' language levels, attitudes towards language learning and teacher competencies. The study also shed light on the positive impacts of the online education on teaching English as a foreign language in rural areas during COVID-19 pandemic in relation with the technological challenges and its effect on decreasing the urban-rural divide.

**Article Info:** Research Article

**Keywords:** *Challenges, COVID-19, positive effects, rural areas, teaching English*

## 1. Introduction

The boundaries between the urban and rural areas have become blurry because of the different financial, cultural and social circumstances. Therefore, it is difficult to make a clear distinction about the development level of urban and rural areas. According to Ögdül (2010), Türkiye is categorized as dominantly rural, dominantly urban and transitional. Education is inevitably influenced by these disadvantageous financial, cultural and social circumstances at all levels. For that reason, it is possible to witness that schools and teachers have common problems in these areas. Therefore, this study focused on the challenges of educational system at rural areas in the eyes of the teachers of English.

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It is a general fact that teachers of English face several challenges when they teach it as a foreign language regardless of the locations of the schools. That is to say, teaching English as a foreign language becomes a more challenging task when it comes to the places where there is inefficiency in many respects from physical conditions to learning atmosphere (Khan, 2011; Kızılaslan, 2012). Türkiye as a country where English is taught as a foreign language can be regarded as a country possessing this problem intensively. According to Kızılaslan (2012), major challenges that teachers of English face at rural schools in Türkiye can be categorized into three factors: students, teachers, and school facilities, which were also influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is safe to say that the COVID-19 pandemic affected every part of our life as well as the schools, which have been one of the mostly influenced institutions in the world. This unexpected and unavoidable fact, as in the whole world, has brought additional challenges for schools, parents and teachers not only in urban areas but also in rural areas. Research in the field, which have been conducted both in Türkiye and all around the world (e.g. Bayzan, 2023; Erarslan, 2021; Kaygısız & Balçıkanlı, 2021; Sönmez et al., 2020; Yamamoto & Altun, 2020), prove that during COVID-19 pandemic English teachers have faced problems in relation with socio-economic conditions of their students, their readiness from the aspects of Technological, Pedagogical, and Content Knowledge (TPACK) to teach online, and effective implementation of the curriculum. It is not fair to state that this unexpected case has led to negative developments only in terms of online education. However, compulsory transition to distance education period has brought some positive effects on language education in rural areas ranging from the access to effective technological devices to online learning platforms (Kılınç & Medeni, 2023; Tosun, 2021)

This study intends to explore challenges that teachers of English confront in rural areas and the importance of online education in decreasing the divide between rural-urban and offering equality in education in the disadvantageous areas. It is obvious that more research is needed to investigate the challenges faced in different teaching environments, especially in rural schools, and reinforce the positive impact of required developments related to COVID-19 pandemic and online education over teaching English in the disadvantageous areas such as rural state elementary and secondary schools. Therefore, the detailed exploration of the challenges faced by teachers of English currently working in rural state schools before and during the pandemic and the positive impact of the online education in rural state schools in Türkiye is still a gap waiting to be filled in the literature.

## 2. Literature

From a general perspective, it is quite common that students and teachers cannot reach the proper teaching facilities in rural areas because of some specific factors peculiar to each society (Mishra, 2015; Muilenburg & Berge, 2000; Pande, 2013). They usually come across various problems regardless of topic taught. One of the widely taught subjects in schools all around the world is English. In teaching English as a foreign language, teachers of English face some possible challenges such as lack of adequate exposure to the target language, motivation to learn, parents' attitudes, anxiety, lack of teaching sources, physical environment etc. (Kızılaslan, 2012; Kızıltan & Atlı, 2018; Mishra, 2015). One of the biggest challenges that can be listed is motivation of the students towards learning and using the new materials or methods in distance education (Muilenburg & Berge (2005). Arshad (2012) agrees that a child's own characteristics across developmental domains with respect to their biological, physical, psycho-cognitive, social, and emotional developmental areas have a great role towards learning as well as the schools they study at and the family environments they live in. Moreover, financial difficulties and improper guidance from parents has a great influence on the child's language learning (Arshad, 2012; Kılınç & Medeni, 2023). Similarly, in addition to the socio-economic conditions of learning English, this current research also aimed to investigate different intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence learning English as a foreign language in rural areas before and during COVID-19 pandemic period.

Some of the teachers working under such circumstances believe that they sometimes need professional guidance and support to handle the challenges (Kılınç & Medeni, 2023). To this end, it can be asserted that

professional competency of teachers is another crucial problem. When they are not trained how to solve possible problems during their education, it might become challenging for them (Bailey & Lee, 2020). In this sense, Kızılaslan (2012) points out that teachers of English in Türkiye are not trained enough to teach in rural schools and all practical and theoretical aspects of language teaching do not usually fit to the classes in such circumstances. Similarly, Emery (2012) states that teachers find it difficult to tackle with the problems that take place in teaching context for different reasons ranging from inabilities in teaching the subject itself to the learners' profile. Apart from the lack of teaching competency of teachers, Mishra (2015) contends that mostly rural areas lack the required educational materials and tools. Therefore, it can be concluded that learners' chance to be exposed to the target language and effective learning and teaching applications might be affected to a great extent by the facilities that their schools provide.

Khulel (2021) emphasizes the urban-rural divide by pointing to the inequality of access to English at primary level, especially the division between urban and rural areas and amongst urban schools. In this context, Khan (2011) argues that lack of English exposure demotivates students to practice and understand English due to students' insufficient background knowledge of English; and thus, it becomes difficult for teachers to encourage them to be enthusiastic to use target language. More specifically, in rural areas students are likely to lack adequate exposure to the authentic usage of the target language.

Incorrect use of pronunciation of some basic vocabulary and inability to use the functional and structural language are the other prominent problems that teachers commonly face in the rural areas. As Khan (2011) contends, "specific problem connected to pronunciation, stress, and intonation become problem for students" (p. 57). Kızıltan and Atlı (2018) further assert that "in second language use, learners' or acquirers' current linguistic competence may affect their language use and, in their production, implicit linguistic knowledge may be displayed by their current linguistic competence" (p. 254). Furthermore, learners tend to use mother tongue (L1) in the class rather than target language. Fatiloro (2015) confirms the problem of L1 interference by emphasizing that English language learners experience mother tongue interference to the second language due to the syntactic (grammatical), phonological (mispronunciation), semantic or morphological factors. As the research proves (e.g. Fatiloro; 2015; Khan, 2011; Kızıltan & Atlı, 2018; Tekin & Garton, 2020) linguistic problems need to be eradicated carefully in the classroom. However, challenges stemming from school facilities which lack adequate learning tools and materials and learners' educational conditions make it difficult for the teachers to handle the problems properly.

In relation to English education, it is generally observed that rural areas do not have enough funds to hold such education in their districts adequately (Alipio, 2020; Church et al., 2001). With regards to the instructional materials accessibility, Hansen-Thomas et al. (2014) affirm that rural areas have limited funds to cover the costs of teaching materials. Therefore, as stated in Febriana et al. (2018), teaching in rural areas is renowned for its inefficiency from the aspect of quality. The study conducted by Church et al. (2001) confirms the findings of this study in that academic success ratios are all lower for children from low-income families than for children from high-income families.

During COVID-19 pandemic, a great amount of teachers in different fields and levels have certainly faced a lot of additional challenges along with the existing ones. Kuehl (2021) categorized these challenges into three groups: (1). Students' socio-economic conditions, (2). the status of English in the school, and (3). COVID-19. Of these categories teachers' case seems to be the most significant one as they had to get into online teaching immediately in the compulsory distance education period. In the same vein, Kusuma (2022) identifies the related challenges as follows: (1). Teachers' readiness for online teaching, (2). its implementation and, (3). the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Educationally speaking, COVID-19 pandemic made the Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) compulsory, and this term is defined as "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances" (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 6). In Turkish context, Kaygısız and Balçıkınlı (2021) point out that language teachers having little or no experience in online teaching beforehand might have to deal with different

challenges during this sudden transition as the pandemic was an unexpected phenomenon. This unavoidable compulsory transition turned out to be much more difficult for those teaching in rural areas.

To investigate the challenges related to education during COVID-19 pandemic, several studies have been conducted. For example, Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) analyzed sixteen Indonesian English language teachers' experiences during the pandemic, and they indicated challenges ranging from teacher inefficiencies to the scarcity of the technological devices (p. 66) as well as their "lack of preparation and readiness" (p. 67) in online learning. In another study, Bailey and Lee (2020) explored English language instructors' perceived challenges and benefits of ERT. The findings highlighted the importance of developing teachers' online teaching competencies. Similarly, Erarslan (2021) reviewed sixty-nine studies, globally, examining English language teaching during the ERT process and the results of his study show that this process brought several challenges in relation with the insufficient technology and teachers' lack of preparation and insufficient "technological and pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK)" (p. 359) although it improved the teachers' digital literacy skills.

There are some other studies in literature focusing on the positive aspects of compulsory distance education. For example, Telli and Altun (2021) confirmed that in about a year after the COVID-19 pandemic, online education practices have evolved from emergency solutions to feasible solutions based on their evaluation of findings of academic research conducted in this period. Yamamoto and Altun (2020) highlighted that Coronavirus pandemic and online education might become an alternative in the future and become the basic ground for education.

This present research acknowledges the similar challenges occurring at rural state schools, and it intends to shed some lights over the possible benefits of the compulsory online education on decreasing the previously faced challenges and positive developments in rural areas during and after COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study attempts to fill the gap in literature by seeking the answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the types and reasons of the challenges teachers of English face in teaching in state schools in the rural areas of Türkiye before COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What challenges did teachers of English face during ERT due to the COVID-19 pandemic in rural areas?
3. What are the contributions of online education during COVID-19 Pandemic in decreasing the urban-rural divide in teaching English?

### **3. Methodology**

In this study, mixed method was adopted as a guidance to collect data, as the researchers acknowledge that multiple realities lie under a phenomenon under study. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to triangulate the data. It was important to have data from focused group discussions because during these meetings participants shared their perceptions about their teaching experiences with each other and they kept on discussing the actual challenges, problems, and applicable solutions until reaching topic saturation. They were requested to share their actual experience of teaching English in the same neighborhood and offer suggestions to the other members (their colleagues) to use effective teaching methods and best practices. The decisions were made together by group members and recorded in reports by two reporters.

#### *3.1. Data Collection Process and Research Instrument*

Data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire and reports of the focus group discussions. The data obtained from the questionnaire constituted the quantitative part and focused group discussions part was qualitative aspect of this study. The data was collected with a questionnaire using a Google Forms which intended to figure out the challenges that English Teachers faced while teaching in rural state schools in Türkiye before COVID-19 pandemic. Mostly faced challenges gathered around three main categories: challenges partly from school facilities (n=5), teachers (n=3), and students (n=7). Items in the open-ended

questionnaire were adapted after elaborating the related literature (e.g. Bulter, 2005; Emery, 2012; Endriyati, et.al., 2019; Fatiloro, 2015; Hossain, 2016; Mishra, 2015; Kızılaslan, 2012; Littlewood, 2007; Pande, 2013; Songbatumis, 2017). Before implementing the questionnaire two experts were required to check it and offer their opinions about the items for the validity of the instrument (Dörnyei, 2007). Based on the feedbacks received from the experts the questionnaire was redesigned. Data collection related to the open-ended questionnaire started in May 2020 and took approximately one month.

The second part of data was obtained from the reports of the focused group discussions. The reports were received from the District Directorate of Ministry of National Education after getting permission from the director in charge in order to use the regarding data for this research. Merton et al. (1990) defines the focused group interview term as a qualitative method in which researchers interactively question a group of participants about a theoretical hypothesis. These reports consisted of the problems and some practical applications shared by the participants, teachers of English working in the same neighborhood. The meetings were recorded by two reporters. The average of participation of the teachers in the focused group discussions was 14, and each session lasted for about 90 minutes.

**Table 1.**

Order, date, number of participants, duration, and type of the focused group discussions.

<i>Order</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Number of Participants</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Type</i>
First	06.02.2020	14	1.5 hours	Face to face
Second	27.08.2020	15	1.5 hours	Face to face
Third	18.02.2021	13	1 hour	Online
Fourth	23.06.2021	12	1.5 hours	Face to face
Fifth	10.02.2022	16	1.5 hours	Face to face

### 3.2. Participants

This study was conducted with two sample groups consisting of EFL teachers working in rural state schools using a survey and a focus group discussion technique. The survey was administered to the first sample group composed of 46 EFL teachers working at state public schools in different parts of Türkiye. The second group included 29 participants who attended to the focused group discussions. All of the participants were informed about the research and they accepted to take part in the research voluntarily. Convenience sampling technique was used during data collection period because of the practicality concerns and challenging conditions caused by Coronavirus and precautions related to health. The reason for choosing this technique to collect data is that it is used in many studies with the available participants when reaching all members of the entire population is not practical, easy or impossible (Fred & Perry, 2005).

Out of 46 participants, 11 participants are male and 30 of them are female and the remaining 5 participants did not answer the gender question. The ages ranged from 25 to 60, and 26 of the participants have working experience between 1 and 5 years while 10 of them have 6-10 years. 70 % of the participants teach English at secondary schools and the rest of them work at primary schools. The second sample group (n=29) work in the rural state schools of the same neighborhood. They met five times to talk about the problems, challenges, experiences and suggested possible solutions. The responses taken from the focused group discussions provided data for the second and third research questions of this study.

### 3.3. Data Analysis



The data was subjected to both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques. The findings related to quantitative data were presented in detail using tables, charts, graphs, frequencies, and ratios. For the analysis of the qualitative data both conventional and directed content analysis was applied and the common themes and categories were formed and presented in tables and quotes. Krippendorff (1989) defines content analysis as one of the most important research techniques in social sciences, and it seeks to analyze data within a specific context in view of the meanings someone, a group or a culture attributes to them. The categorization of the results was checked by two experts in the field as an external auditor (Creswell, 2002) to ensure the validity of data. It is generally advocated that categorizing the themes for content analysis serves a great help for the researcher to make valid inferences from text (Weber, 1990). While identifying the categories and themes, other relevant previous studies were consulted. Therefore, it can be said that both Conventional and Directed Content Analysis (DCA) approaches were used to analyze the qualitative data. According to Potter and Levine-Donnerstein (1999) DCA is generally more structured than inductive methods in that you begin your research by identifying key concepts, categories, or themes as initial coding categories based on previous research on the topic. Similarly, the previous studies in the literature review part of this research guided the categories and themes formed during the analysis of the qualitative data in this research and they were presented in tables. Therefore, this approach helped the researchers to make valid inferences from the written documents (the reports) and this made the data analysis more practical for the researchers and gave them the chance to compare the present results with the already existing literature.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

Results of the study gathered around three main categories and subcategories.

##### 4.1. Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers at Rural State Schools before Covid-19 Pandemic

###### 4.1.1. Challenges Related to School Facilities

Provision of the physical facilities by the schools is sometimes unsatisfactory as stated by the participants with varying numbers. Table 2 below depicts this situation clearly.

**Table 2.**

Problems related to schools' physical facilities.

Type of the problem	Number of participants
School canteens	20
School buildings	20
Heating system	19
Meals	17
Transportation	17
Playgrounds for students	15

As is seen in the table above, most of the participants (n=20) stated that school canteens and the school buildings were not satisfactory. Heating system (n=19) was the other problem which was mentioned along with challenges regarding the meals (n=17) and transportation (n=17) facilities. The results (n=15) also indicate that some schools cannot provide students with playgrounds.

### 4.1.2. Challenges Related to the Learners

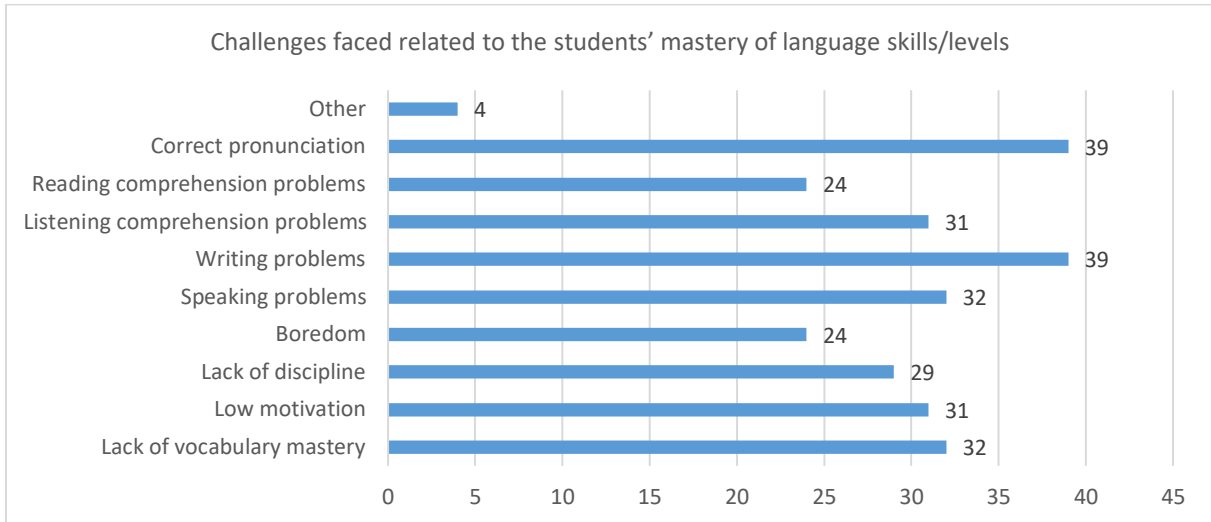


Fig. 1. Challenges in relation with the students' mastery of language skills/levels.

In relation with the language levels of the learners, having difficulty to produce the correct pronunciation (n=39), problems in writing (n=39) and speaking problems (n=32) and lack of vocabulary mastery (n=32) were found to be the main challenges faced by most of the participants.

### 4.1.3. Challenges Related to the Classroom Management

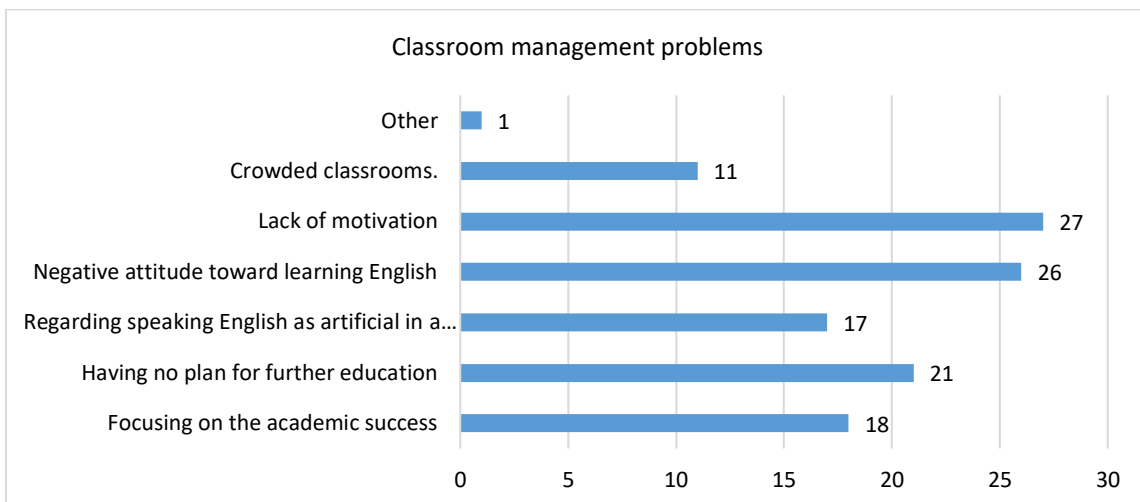


Fig. 2. Challenges in relation with classroom management problems.

Participants agreed that they faced different challenges with respect to classroom management problems at high numbers. Among these challenges, lack of motivation to learn English (n=27) and negative attitudes towards learning English (n=26) were significant ones. Having no plan for further education (n=21) also had high frequency. Another interesting finding was that they thought speaking in target language in a nonnative setting was artificial (n=17), which also demotivated them to learn it. As a follow-up question, participants were asked about the reasons behind the classroom management specified above. One of the teachers agreed as follows:

*“Students don’t really believe they will need English in their life as they mostly don’t know about the real world because of the level of the family consciousness on education. They are also not good*

*enough at Turkish lesson. So it affects their understanding and achievement in a foreign language.” (Informant 12)*

Using different teaching techniques and target language during the classes form another important challenge in terms of classroom management for these teachers working at rural state schools. In response to the questions about the difficulty in using the effective techniques and materials to practice the target language, the results showed that 65% of the participants had trouble with using the target language, English. They stated that their students mostly tended to use Turkish during English classes. They stressed that students did not understand the content of the lesson when L2 was used during instruction. This was followed by the scarcity of the educational resources with the ratio of 40%, teaching aids with the ratio of 24% and teaching space with the ratio of 20%.

#### 4.1.4. Challenges Related to the Use of Technology

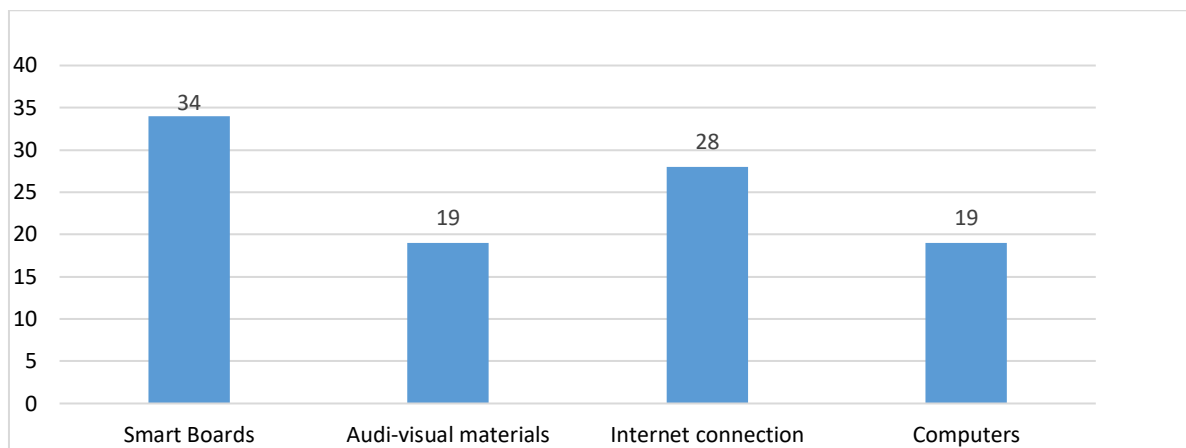


Fig. 3. The provision ratio of the technological devices and access to internet.

The results showed that before the pandemic, only 34% of the participants were provided with the smart boards in their schools and 66% of the participants did not. The case seemed to be even worse with the provision ratio of the internet connection (28%), audio visual materials (19%), and computers (19%).

In relation with the technological problems, the internet connection (n=18) had the highest ratio. The other challenge that was commonly faced was lack of course materials (n=14). Four of the participants stated that they did not have even a projection device in their classes. Lack of technological equipment (n=3) and outdated technological devices (n=9) were the other challenges faced before the pandemic. The participants who faced challenges related to the technological equipment were requested to express the problems they faced while using them. Out of 36 responses, 50% (n=18) of them had problems with the speed and access to the Internet. When the number of the respondents who expressed that they did not have any internet connection in their schools (n=5) was added to this problem, the total number of the participants facing similar problems went up to 23 (64%).

Another high ratio is related to the inadequacy of the technological equipment such as not having enough number of computers, speakers, projectors, smart boards, etc. The number of the respondents who faced such problems was 14 which means that 40% of the respondents did not have the adequate technological devices to assist teaching. When the number of the answers for not having computers, smart boards, projectors, etc. in their schools was added to this number, the total number of the teachers suffering from the inadequate technological devices in their schools went up to 23, which means that 64% of the participants did not have the necessary technological devices. In this context, one of the participants expressed his view as follows:



*“We don’t have a technological assistant at school. Students mostly don't have an internet connection at home or they have but they can't use it properly. So reaching the sources by using internet is hard for them. Making them use some helping technological applications is nearly impossible. We always have problem even with photocopy machine.” (Informant 14)*

When it comes to the responses to the question regarding the availability of the computer laboratories at schools, 16 of them expressed that the schools had computer laboratories, 12 of them said that they faced different challenges regarding laboratories such as insufficient number of the computers for the students to be able to work on, outdated computers, no internet connection to search for information. The results proved that most of the teachers were not able to practice online education and some of them had difficulties in using them effectively due to some problems. They were also asked how they solved the technology-based problems they encountered. The responses to this question revealed that technological problems were mostly solved by the administrative staff or IT teachers in schools. Some of the participants (n=9) were able to carry out their teaching profession using their personal software and hardware equipment so as to maintain the online education.

#### *4.1.5. Challenges Related to Parents’ Socio-economic Conditions and Learners’ Educational Backgrounds*

The responses proved that five teachers (31%) did not have any problems with parents. Two of the participants stated that they did but they did not want to explain what the problems were. 25% of them agreed that parents had low education level and negative attitude towards education considering that teachers were responsible for the whole education process. In relation with this situation one of the participants expressed the following quote:

*“Some of the parents simply don’t care about their children’s educational progress. This attitude makes it hard for us to cope with the problems because students feel that they are not forced or encouraged by their parents to fulfill their responsibilities both at school and at home.” (Informant 23)*

Out of 11 responses to the question related to the challenges stemming from the social and economic conditions of the students, two of the most attention gathering facts were the low economic conditions of the students. This result proves that it is difficult for some parents to afford some supplementary materials required to enhance effective learning. Consequently, low economic conditions might lead the students and their parents to think that English is an unnecessary subject for them to focus on. Furthermore, some topics such as travel, some of the sport activities and the Internet related terminology in the content of the teaching program of English seemed to be unfamiliar and irrelevant for them. Indifference to such topics in the course content can be linked to economic and social conditions of the parents. When the teachers were asked to what extent they were able to teach these topics, only three respondents stated that they had no problems in teaching certain topics in relation with the social and the economic conditions of their students. The following response to the question about the topics in the course book clearly reveals the attitude of the learners.

*“For example, the units about travel and holiday are mostly disappointing for the students. The places in the units such as Paris/ New York are unreachable for them. They think they will not even get a chance to visit Istanbul. These topics can be discouraging for them.” (Informant 5)*

Some of the basic difficulties deriving from the course content and learners’ readiness to learn English that teachers confront while teaching English are listed in Table 3.

**Table 3.**

Difficulties in teaching topics related to learners' educational and cultural backgrounds.

Type of the difficulty	Number of participants
Creating a positive atmosphere	24
Teaching tenses in English	8
Negative attitudes towards learning English	4
Resistance to learn a foreign language and culture	6
Incorrect pronunciation	3
Different language levels in the same class	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>

As is seen in Table 3, responses given to the question about the challenges that teachers commonly face prove that most of the teachers (n=24) were not able to create a positive atmosphere in teaching English. Furthermore, the other responses for the same question were categorized as teaching tenses in English (n=8), negative attitudes towards learning English (n=4), resistance to learn a foreign language and culture (n=6), incorrect pronunciation (n=3), mixed language levels (n=6). Based on the results, it can be concluded that the reasons behind these challenges are mostly related to students' insufficient educational and cultural background, which automatically leads them to grow negative attitudes towards learning English. Additionally, unfamiliarity with the target culture, lack of target vocabulary, boring or unfamiliar teaching topics in the course books seem to be the other factors that hinder students in learning English.

#### 4.1.6. Challenges Related to Received Education and Current Teaching Context

The responses (n=42) given to the question related to the gap between the training received during training programmes and the current educational context showed that the participants were not satisfied with the education they received before becoming language teachers. The results of the data analysis related to this discrepancy gathered around three subcategories: Gaps between the theory and practice (n=9), scarcity of the teaching equipment (n=8), profile of the students in relation with their low level of motivation and language (n=7).

One of the mostly stated gaps among the responses was related to teaching and learning approaches and the challenge of their applications in real educational context (n=3) due to the lack of practical applications related to methodologies and the technological equipment to be used effectively in actual classrooms during their pre-service training and internship period. These participants mostly stated that they should have received more practice-based education at university, and during school-practice period as well. In other words, the first most important gap expressed by the respondents was between the theory-based education and their actual applications in their current educational context. Moreover, their insufficient background education can also be added to the problems related to classroom management challenges such as teachers facing difficulty in using the target language or applying different types of teaching methods and activities. In this context, this fact was expressed by a respondent as follows:

*"The training I received doesn't work for class management in my classes. I try to behave friendly, and sincerely and we all have fun during games or talking about anything but this makes me too tired while I teach my class because the students go on talking and don't listen to me. I still couldn't get the right balance even if I read many books about "how to behave during the class". (Informant 29)*

Findings of this study are parallel with Yarrow et al. (1999), who examined the preparation and support of teachers working in rural areas and remote schools with challenges in teaching applications. The findings of the study showed that despite the large body of research that emphasized the need for specialized pre-service teacher education which accommodates the social and professional challenges associated with working in rural and remote areas, the implementation of such programs by teacher training institutions was sparse or non-existent in some cases.

The second most important challenge about theory-practice discrepancy was related to the scarcity of the teaching equipment. Most of the respondents stated that they were trained with technologically equipped classrooms and their internship trainings also included technology-based practices. However, they suffered from the lack or insufficiency of technical and technological equipment and other educational materials in their actual teaching contexts.

The third most important challenge was related to the profile of the students in relation with their low level of motivation and language. All through the data, one of the mostly expressed challenges was unmotivated students (n=6). The reasons behind this might depend on different variables such as social and economic conditions of their families, physical facilities of the school, not having future plans to attend a higher school or a university. The results are consistent with the findings of the study carried out by Yarrow et al. (1999).

#### *4.2. Challenges Related to Online Education during COVID-19 Pandemic*

The second part of the research is based on the analysis of the conversations recorded during the discussion meetings carried out by the teachers during COVID-19 period. Analysis of the reports includes the answers to the second research question based on investigation of the challenges of teaching English during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural areas. The analysis of the qualitative data taken from the written reports was conducted with the help of the Directed Content Analysis. Findings were depicted in the Table 4 below.

In all of the meetings, participants mentioned about the difficulties in using the target language such as low language level of the students and lack of speaking and communicative abilities. The findings were generally align with findings of Mukattash's (1983) study, which also indicated that the majority of the learners had difficulties in expressing themselves in English, although nearly four decades passed. Teachers' views about the use of target language in these focused group discussions are also consistent with the findings of the survey we administered to the teachers in rural areas in this study prior to the focused group discussions.

The first reports of this study are in accordance with the results of the previous studies in the literature. For example, Mishra (2015) emphasizes that the majority of the rural areas experience deficiency in adequate teaching and learning tools. Therefore, it can be said that learners' exposure to the target language and effective learning and teaching applications might be affected negatively to a great extent by the facilities that their schools provide. Similarly, the results of Directed Content Analysis can be interpreted as the challenges related to the lack of technological devices, inadequate printed and digital materials, maintaining active participation and motivation of the students still exist in some of the reports analyzed for this study. Kılınç and Medeni (2023) also found similar findings in their study which was carried out by the teachers from various branches including teachers of English.

**Table 4.**

## Problems and challenges faced during online education during COVID-19 Pandemic.

Themes	1stReport (Before COVID-19)	2 <sup>nd</sup> Report (During COVID-19)	3 <sup>rd</sup> Report (During COVID-19)	4 <sup>th</sup> Report (During COVID-19)	5 <sup>th</sup> Report (After COVID-19)
Internet Connection	✓	✓			
Non-attendance		✓	✓		
Active participation of the students	✓	✓	✓		
Inadequate technological devices	✓	✓			
Lack of course materials (Books)	✓	✓			
Lack of additional materials to prepare for The Test for High School Entrance)	✓	✓	✓		
Lack of the desired dictionary usage ratio by learners	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Difficulties in using the target language (Low language level of the students)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Challenges related to testing and assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

One of the striking results reflected in these reports was that the frequency of the challenges related to the internet connection, and lack of technological devices. The problem regarding the availability of the instructional materials seemed to lessen in the last two or three meetings. This decrease in the number of the challenges stated can be attributed to the different developments which were reflected both by the participants in the reports of the focused group discussions. Furthermore, the researchers' observations proved that there was positive improvements in the challenging topics in rural areas during pandemic era comparing the practice before pandemic. First of them was that parents themselves and charity organizations bought computers or tablets for their children to get them reach online education and complete related homework and they also started to get internet access at their homes. The other improvement was the provision and fixing services of the technological devices by the related units of Ministry of National Education in the state schools in rural areas to make online educational possible and more effective.

Another remarkable finding related to the challenges was about testing and evaluation. According to the reports of five meetings, evaluating learners' academic success during the pandemic was the only challenge which could not be overcome. This result seemed to be aligned with the data of Alex's (2019) study which emphasized the need for a well-defined continuous assessment component in distance learning. The study also highlighted that monitoring and evaluation were essential components in distance education and it was also recommended in his study that teaching, learning, and assessment procedures are effectively monitored for improved outcomes and best practices.

### 4.3. Positive Effects of Online Education after COVID-19 Pandemic on Teachers

This part of the study includes the answers for the third research question about the positive impacts of Online Education during the pandemic in lessening the number of the challenges faced by EFL teachers especially before and partly during compulsory online education and its effect on decreasing the divide between urban and rural schools. Results of the Directed Content Analysis based on the written reports of the focused group discussions were presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.**

Positive effects of Online Education on teaching English in rural areas.

Themes	2 <sup>nd</sup> Meeting	3 <sup>rd</sup> Meeting	4 <sup>th</sup> Meeting	5 <sup>th</sup> Meeting
Continuing to use EBA Platform and other online learning tools during the normalization period after the COVID-19 pandemic	✓	✓	✓	✓
Directing students into the effective use of digital dictionaries and engaging them in speaking tasks to develop communicative abilities	✓	✓		✓
Continuing to use effective online education tools in the face-to-face education	✓	✓	✓	✓
Accessing to visuals and videos related to course content and digital testing tools to improve language level	✓	✓	✓	✓
Searching information online for their classes and assignments	✓		✓	✓

As seen in the Table 5, participants had some crucial benefits from the online education and the use of technology intensively during COVID-19 pandemic. In the four of the meetings, they agreed that they would continue using EBA Platform and other online learning tools to assist language teaching and they were able to access to visuals and videos related to course content and digital testing tools to improve language level of learners. The results proved that teachers seemed dedicated to use online education tools in the face-to-face education, which was also supported with the fifth item in that teachers became more skillful and aware of utilizing digital tools for instructional purposes thanks to online education during the pandemic.

It can be asserted that this study yielded some significant and interesting results when compared to the previous studies. Knowledge of teaching content using technology is necessary for all teachers including those teaching in rural areas (Koehler & Mishra, 2005). In this respect, findings of this study align with the study conducted by Koehler and Mishra (2005) who presented the experiences of teachers related to gaining TPACK. As teachers working all around Türkiye directly started to teach online, some of the participants in this study expressed that they took the advantage of their previous trainings during their faculty education before the pandemic. Others expressed that they benefited from compulsory online education, emergency remote teaching, during which they found chances to improve themselves in the effective use of technology and digital learning tools.

Another interesting finding is that only one of the 29 participants in the discussion groups mentioned about experiencing difficulties in relation with the application of technology in their online classes. In other words, the analysis of the reports proved that participants did not have any difficulties regarding TPACK. On the contrary, in the reports they all expressed that some of the online learning platforms were enjoyable and motivating for their students with the efficient activity-based visuals, audios, videos, and games. Moreover, the reports showed that they are willing to continue to make use of the online education tools



and applications in their face-to-face classes and out of classroom activities such as homework and self-study tasks at home in the upcoming education years to improve their teaching and students' learning.

The results of this study showed some similarities with the other studies in literature before and during COVID-19 such as the lack of technological devices, internet connection and students' willingness for learning. For example, Adnan and Anwar (2020) highlighted that online learning could not produce desired results in underdeveloped countries like Pakistan, where access to technology is problematic. Additionally, their study also revealed that lack of face-to-face interaction with the instructor, response time and absence of socialization were among some other problems expressed by higher education students. Therefore, the results of this study seem to support their findings.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be said that there are also some differences between the results of this study and other studies. For example, Erarslan (2021) reviewed sixty-nine studies conducted globally examining English language teaching during the ERT process and the results of his study showed that this process brought several challenges such as technological problems and "insufficient technological and pedagogical content knowledge" of the teachers required for the digital literacy skills. However, in our research, the investigation of the qualitative data revealed that none of the teachers in the written documents expressed to have difficulty in using digital teaching tools. Contrary to the results of Erarslan (2021), in the documents of the focused group discussions, teachers expressed that they started to take the advantage of some digital tools, which are both effective and enjoyable for learning and teaching, inside and outside the classrooms.

To conclude, the results of this study related to challenges of teaching English in rural areas before COVID-19 Pandemic showed some similarities with the recent research in terms of negative effects of online education. However, this study pointed out the positive effects of online education on teaching English in rural areas towards the end of the compulsory online education and the period right after this compulsory education as well. Although the participants were teachers of different subject matters and they were not the teachers of English working at rural areas, the results of the study by Kılınç & Medeni (2023) highlighted the positive improvements that has been brought by online education. However, while our study also emphasized the impact of online education on decreasing the number of the challenges expressed to be faced by EFL teachers, our study drew attention to the positive developments that were brought by online education specifically for the teachers of English working actually in rural areas and its contribution to the reaching the educational objectives related to the urban-rural education equality.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study intended to investigate the problems and challenges faced by English teachers currently (right before, during and right after COVID-19) working at state primary and secondary schools in rural areas of Türkiye. Results related to the period right before COVID-19 revealed that one of the mostly stated challenges is the unfavorable physical facilities of the schools which lack technological devices, technical equipment, educational materials, and internet connection. The students' low level of language proficiency, which was stated to be caused by the lack of exposure to the authentic language and use of the target language. This might also be leading them to grow negative attitudes towards learning English or regarding learning English as useless. The other mostly stated challenge was related to the gap between theory-based university education and practice-based teaching. Furthermore, during the period right before COVID-19, the participants experienced many classroom management problems such as lack of motivation, negative attitude towards learning English and having no plan for further education have the highest frequencies.

When it comes to the impacts and objectives of distance education, Cavanaugh (2001) emphasizes that distance learning has objectives such as creating new educational opportunities, providing equal opportunities in education (rural and urban education divide might also be referred here), and integrating information technologies into learning and training process. This study also supports this notion, and it

seems that the findings of our study provided some proof that distance education has reached some of its aims to some extent in relation with creating new (online) learning opportunities for the students at rural state schools. Findings of this study also revealed that online education provided equal opportunities in education by eradicating the limitations of place, time and poor technological infrastructure, and integrating efficient technologies into learning and teaching process with the help of the collaborative working with stakeholders.

To sum up, this study pointed out the positive effects of online education on the challenges faced before and during Coronavirus Pandemic. Findings clearly showed that although some challenges continued to exist, online education had a lot of positive impacts over English teaching in rural areas. Teachers of English expressed different positive impacts of ERT during the pandemic in the reports of the focused group discussions. These advantages ranged from taking the advantage of the educationally effective and enjoyable digital learning tools experienced during online education to continuing using online learning platforms such as EBA, and/or taking English learning outside the classroom with the help of the fairly adequate technology. Difficulties in relation with the physical facilities of schools, transportation, and lack of educational materials were not mentioned as a challenge in the reports and this can be taken into account among the benefits of distance education to lessen the disparity and the divide between urban-rural educations.

## 6. Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

This study aimed to investigate the types and reasons of the problems faced in teaching English by the teachers of English working at state schools in rural areas in Türkiye. It also aimed to inform the authorities and the program planners about the actual challenges stated by the teachers themselves and considering these challenges while designing the instruction at nation-wide level for effective teaching and learning.

The data collection processes did not aim only to gather data about the practical solutions related to the challenges teachers of English face in rural areas in detail. It also aimed to find out the current problems faced by these teachers in rural state schools. Therefore, action research that combine the English teachers currently working in rural areas with the teacher candidates that might work in rural areas can be conducted to give them chance to see and experience the real teaching environment in different rural areas. Thereby, some of the possible problems or the already existing problems or challenges in relation with the implementation of the English teaching curriculum might be solved or lessened to some extent.

Last but not the least, new studies started to emerge in literature in relation with the impacts of ERT and the positive impact of the online education in education in general. However, the impact of ERT and online education in rural areas is still a gap in literature that needs to be filled and examined thoroughly. Therefore, further studies might focus on the benefits of the Online Education and application of the digital education tools and platforms in relation with their effectiveness in teaching, learning, motivation, and job satisfaction among teachers of English working in rural areas. More research related to the challenging conditions of the rural schools can enlighten not only the pre-service teachers but also in-service teachers who might also have to teach at these areas. It might also lead the future researchers and the practitioners of language teaching in these areas into searching for alternative and effective solutions such as online education applications and effective use of different technological devices and thereby the rural-urban education disparity and imbalanced development in education can be eradicated.

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