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Teaching by distance

A qualitative investigation into upper secondary EFL teachers'
perspectives on distance education in the Swedish context

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate EFL teachers' perspectives on distance education in the Swedish context. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has fuelled the need to investigate teachers' experiences in the transition from face-to-face to online teaching. Five EFL teachers were interviewed to collect qualitative data, which was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that the participants had both positive and negative experiences of distance education. Their overall experience has shown that there have been affordances and limitations of distance education. The affordances of distance education, according to the participants, are that: (1) it enabled the teachers to focus more on students as individuals, (2) it made recording the lessons easier, which has made the participants' work more manageable, and (3) it increased the quality of private conversations with individual students. The results also showed that according to the participating teachers, social interaction with the students and assessment practices were negatively affected by distance education. Overall, the participants' experience of teaching through distance education has been challenging. However, integrating technology in their lessons has enabled creative planning.

Keywords: COVID-19, CMC, distance education, digital tools, EFL teachers, English subject, pandemic, Sweden, online teaching, upper-secondary school

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1 Introduction

School education has a significant role in an evolving society. We teach students that will be future lawyers, doctors, engineers, nurses, and even future teachers, that is to say, professions that are important for society to function and evolve. The year 2020 has had a significant impact on using technology to communicate, especially in school-based education. By the spring of 2020, COVID-19¹ had reached different countries and continents globally and was declared a pandemic by the Public Health Agency of Sweden (2020-03-11). The virus had spread rapidly, and the Swedish health care system risked being congested. To avoid this issue, Folkhälsomyndigheten (Public health agency of Sweden) announced plenty of advice that all citizens of Sweden have a personal responsibility to keep social and physical distance in order to decrease the spread of the virus. Folkhälsomyndigheten recommended many people to work from home, and this impacted the teaching profession. Due to the rapid spread of COVID-19, Sweden's government considered the recommendations from Folkhälsomyndigheten, and as a result, Swedish upper-secondary schools had to operate mainly through distance-based education from March 2020 until 1 April 2021.

Distance education has existed in Sweden for 120 years. However, it is only in the last 10 years distance education has gained attention in upper-secondary schools (Hillborn & Wieslander, 2008, p. 14). A study made by Bergdahl and Nouri, (2020) investigated the transition from traditional teaching into distance teaching in Swedish schools due to COVID-19. The results of their study showed that school preparedness required for distance education focused on the technical aspects and the teachers lacked pedagogical strategies needed to conduct distance education (p.1). Previous research regarding teaching language skills through distance education has shown that many teachers experienced difficulties in incorporating digital tools in the

¹ COVID-19, or Coronavirus disease is an infection disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus (World health organization)

beginning of the transition enforced by COVID-19 (Tseng & Yeh, 2020). Distance education involves incorporating technology in teaching, and the Swedish curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education [NAE], 2011) states that schools are responsible for providing students with the knowledge of using technology required in our society. This means that the students are expected to manage technological devices; hence, schools are responsible for teaching students how to use digital resources and platforms. To clarify, this is relevant to point out because distance education requires that both teachers and students have high ICT² competence in order to conduct distance education properly.

The decision to switch to distance education has been a major adjustment for school education. I had the opportunity to see these adjustments through my internship in an upper-secondary school in Sweden. The announcement came as a shock for everyone because it happened abruptly, and the teachers panicked because they did not have any guidelines on how distance education should be handled properly at the beginning.

With the pandemic affecting a change in school education, the teachers' perspectives on distance education should be investigated to gain insight into their experience with the transition from a traditional way of teaching to distance teaching. Furthermore, it is important to carry out research into teachers' perspectives on distance education for pedagogical purposes. By investigating teachers' experiences of attitudes towards distance education, this study can help teachers by providing insights into the affordances and limitations of distance education. Thus, the aim of this study is to research upper-secondary school English teachers' perspectives on distance education in the English subject. In order to address the aims of the study, the following research questions have been posed:

1. What are the participating teachers' experiences of the transition to distance education?
2. How have the teachers adjusted to the new situation regarding teaching the English subject through distance education?

² Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) refers to all types of communication technologies such as internet, computers, videoconferencing, cellphones and social networking and other media applications.

3. What are the affordances and limitations of distance education according to the participants?

2 Literature review

Many studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Ferraro et al., 2020 & Tomasik et al., 2020) have recently been carried out on students' attitudes towards distance learning. However, few studies have been conducted from teachers' perspectives. A review of studies has shown that research on teachers' attitudes towards distance education is scarce and further investigations into the use of different technologies for teaching English are required. White (2006) argues that more research is needed into, for instance, how virtual classrooms are incorporated in teachers' training, as well as how teachers introduce technology in a classroom (pp.253-256). In the following sections, previous studies into distance education will be presented.

2.1 Distance education

Education during the pandemic is very different from the traditional classroom-based teaching where the teachers and students are in a physical classroom. Because of the circumstances that the pandemic has caused, teachers have to develop new ways of teaching to their students, which is done through distance, but what is the meaning of distance education? According to Macteer (2010),

Distance education or distance learning is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology, and instructional system designs that aim to deliver education to students who are not physically on-site in a traditional classroom or campus. (p.1)

In other words, the learning process between a teacher and students does not happen inside the walls of a classroom. Instead, the students receive information and co-construct knowledge through online teaching tools. Distance learning requires communication between the student and the teacher through various media. Internet access enables students and teachers' flexibility to work, and the students can learn and interact with the teachers wherever they are. In addition, it enables teachers to share their teaching materials with their colleagues (Lassoued et al. 2020).

Neidorf (2012) argues that distance education is more common than before because of the wide range of digital tools that the internet provides for people with assisting in both academic work and everyday use such as writing, networking, and sharing information (p.6). The author further states that in the category of “web-based classrooms”, (p.6) a teacher can find a variety of learning platforms and instructional approaches that are useful when conducting distance education, for example, the term webinar which refers to a “real time-web-based presentation”, and “web-based classrooms” (Neidorf, 2012, p.6). A web-based classroom can be divided into two categories and the first category is called synchronous, meaning that teaching occurs in the same space and time (online); however, it occurs through distance (Amhag, 2013, p.129). To clarify, teachers can have their lessons through web-based teaching media, for example, Zoom, in real-time, which takes place by distance. The second category is called asynchronous, which is the opposite of synchronous. Communication that occurs synchronously between the teacher and the student does not occur in the same space and time. Instead, asynchronous communication may occur via e-mail, discussion forums or other forms of written interaction. Amhag (2013) states:

What distinguishes them is that the synchronous communication exists for the moment and is usually oral, while the asynchronous communication is delayed and usually written, which makes everyone's participation visible. (Amhag, 2013, p. 129)

The concepts of asynchronous and synchronous communication are relevant terms to point out to understand how education may be provided at a distance. Hillborn & Wieslander (2008) argue that the original intention of distance education was to conduct education that does not require meeting people physically (Hilborn & Wieslander, 2008, p. 14). According to the authors, what characterizes distance education are:

- Teachers and students during teaching are often separated from one another.
- An educational coordinator, in other words, a teacher, has the responsibility of planning the education for the students, also developing study material, and to give support to the students.

- Different types of technological devices are often used to minimize the gap between the students and the teachers. The purpose of the technological devices for instance, is to make it easier for the teachers and students to communicate and inform the students about the course content (Hillborn & Wieslander, 2008, p.20).

The above-mentioned criteria of Hillborn and Wieslander show similarities to today's education where students and teachers are in a similar situation in their interaction with one another, and the students and the teachers communicates via different web-conferencing tools such as Zoom or Microsoft teams. Working from distance has its benefits; however, there are also some limitations. The next section will present the advantages and disadvantages of distance education.

2.2 Advantages of distance education

According to Zhou (2020), there are several advantages to distance education, and one of them is that "it promotes the reform of teachers' teaching mode" (Zhou, 2020, p.1). In other words, with distance education, the teaching process may potentially improve. Zhou (2020) claims that one advantage with distance education is that it allows teachers to create a learning situation in which all students have access to the same resources. This can be done by sharing and having the materials the students need online, thus enabling the students to access the materials any time. In addition, Zhou (2020) argues that by uploading the educational resources online, the students "can study anytime, anywhere, with strong flexibility" (p.2). Similarly, Demouy et al. (2016) claim that teaching and learning with the help of technological devices have eliminated "time and space limitation," making it "more fun and interactive" (Demouy et al., 2016, p.19). Furthermore, due to the lessons taking place online, Zhou (2020) points out that the teacher can treat each student equally because the classroom setting is different from a physical classroom, where the students can feel that they are not being seen depending on where they are seated (p.2).

Al-Arimi (2014) also brings up advantages of distance education, specifically (1) flexibility for the learner, (2) communication between the learner and teacher is more accessible, (3), more variety and adaptability in terms of learners' needs, and (4) more variation to include multimedia in teaching (p.1). The author's point is that

there are numerous advantages with distance education, and it equips both the teacher and the learners with more flexibility in their work. It may also improve communication with the learner and make it is easier to focus more on a learner's needs. Distance education provides more creativity for both the learners and the teachers due to the use of different technologies that are available. Al-Arimi (2014) also states that distance education can empower learners in managing their way of learning, which can be beneficial for some students. Thus, distance education allows the students the opportunity to be more flexible in their learning (Al-Arimi, 2014, p.3). Similarly, to Al- Arimi, Andersson (2006) points out, an advantage of having the lessons online is that the learners can manage their own learning. Instead of a controlled environment that is typical in a classroom-based teaching, the beneficial part of distance education is that it provides the students with the opportunity to decide the setting of their workspace.

Another advantage of distance education is that any type of communication is easier. Veletsianos (2010) states that communication can be carried out in various ways, for instance, through text, video, or voice. Veletsianos also points out that communication through the internet can be done by "one to one, one to many or many to many" (p.30). According to Veletsianos, by communicating through the internet, educators are not as restricted as they would be in a physical classroom. For example, if a student had been absent from a class, s/he would have missed information provided by the teacher. Anyone can participate because they are not required to attend in a physical classroom. Nevertheless, distance education does not guarantee full attendance, although students that are less motivated to attend lessons in a physical classroom, and experiences social anxiety, will benefit from having lessons online.

Distance education has many beneficial factors, as mentioned above. Even so, there are some disadvantages the teachers are faced with and these will be presented in the forthcoming section.

2.3 Disadvantages of distance education

Yandell (2020) claims that online teaching is not as effective as teaching in a physical classroom. Furthermore, Yandell (2020) argues that teaching and learning occur

through social activities, and with online teaching, the pedagogical aspect of teaching is affected because the teacher and students are separated. The author also argues that interactions that take place online are different than in a physical classroom in the sense that interaction tends to be “less intricate, nuanced, and multidimensional” (Yandell, 2020, p.263). Furthermore, Yandell claims that teaching online is more clinical because interactions with the students occur through writing. Furthermore, Yandell states that the pedagogical dialogue with the students gets affected. A teachers’ pedagogical skills are affected by having the lessons through distance because a teacher cannot interact with the students as in a traditional classroom. Yandell (2020) also argues that because teachers have different students, they will have different technological devices available to them, which can cause problems. Many students may have a fast internet connection; however, the issue is that many students may not. Furthermore, even though some students may have access to a quiet place to study, there are still students that do not. According to Yandell the problems the students may encounter during distance education arise because of the fact that the students’ living conditions are different and this has to do with, as Yandell argues, “structural inequalities, of class, gender, and ethnicity” (Yandell, 2020, p.263). Although some students may have easy access to resources available, some students might have an issue since the students come from different socio-economic backgrounds. Because of the fact of their different socio-economic background, some students learning at online teaching might get affected negatively.

Williamson, Eynon and Potter (2020) list possible limitations of distance education. They claim that moving to teach online is different than moving the lessons to a different location in a physical classroom, meaning, a new set of challenges involves working with technology, especially from a pedagogical perspective. The pedagogical challenges that come with distance education are how to hold tutorials and presentations, for example through Zoom or Teams, how to make resources and materials available online to their students, and how to conduct lessons that are beneficial for collaborative learning and useful for students (Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020, p.262).

Another limitation with distance education, as Al-Arimi (2014) argues, is that teachers can feel resentful, since they can feel forced to take responsibility on their

own to learn how technology works without getting enough guidelines. Al-Arimi (2014) also claims that student and teacher relationships in distance education are an issue. Teachers can experience difficulty in making the students committed, have difficulty assisting students, and have difficulty motivating them to complete the assignments (Al-Arimi, 2014, p.4).

Downing & Dymont (2013) investigated teacher educators' and teachers' perceptions of online teaching. The authors' findings regarding the teacher educators' opinions suggested that they lack confidence and competence regarding the technical skills required in online teaching. Similarly, Paulus et al.'s (2010) study showed that the teachers were concerned about whether the learners have the required skills and ICT knowledge for distance education. Moreover, regarding blended³ or online courses, teachers tend to feel that the connection with the learners is affected, and they feel that there is less interaction online than in a physical classroom with their students. The teachers feel overwhelmed with having to rely on digital tools to communicate with their students and showed some doubts about whether they reached the purpose of the lesson (Dymont and Downing, 2018).

To summarize, some advantages of distance education are more flexibility for both teachers' and students' work, communication is easier due to different types of communication that exist, and it empowers learners' in managing their own studies. Some disadvantages of distance education from a teachers' perspective are that their pedagogical skills are challenged because the students are separated from them, and the second is, how to properly use technology in their teaching without any proper guidelines. In the forthcoming section, an overview of previous studies on distance education in the English subject will be presented.

2.4 Distance education in the English subject

Studies have shown that different digital tools have been incorporated into language teaching in order to enhance EFL⁴ students' language learning. Golonka et al. (2014)

³ Blended course refers to education that combines activities in class and in an online learning environment.

⁴ EFL is an abbreviation for English as a foreign language.

investigated the effectiveness of technologies for foreign language learning. In their study, Myspace and Facebook, which are web-based social media platforms where one can communicate with one another, were used in order to investigate student's language learning. Using these two social-media platforms in language teaching helped improved the students' language learning because the students got the opportunity to communicate with native speakers. Such increase exposure offers a way for students in improving their pronunciation and speaking skills.

When it comes to creating a collaborative learning environment for reading and writing, web-based tools such as Wiki, Google Docs, and Blogs have also been used. However, to effectively integrate these tools into language teaching, teachers need to have Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) competencies, which means that they need to combine instructional and content knowledge with technological knowledge (Golonka et. al. 2014). According to Tseng and Yeh (2020), many language teachers have difficulty adopting technology in their teaching. Previous study has reported that teacher education programs often focus on delivering content and employing instructional strategies; however, teacher education programs do not provide opportunities for working with various technologies. Therefore, an issue that can occur when conducting distance education is that the teacher does not possess adequate CALL competencies (Tseng & Yeh, 2010).

Olsen, Goodman, and Ramsay (2011) conducted a study where they introduced two tools that can be used in writing, speaking, and listening exercises, which are the comment feature in Microsoft Word and Skype. According to Olsen et al., Microsoft Word's comment feature is often underused even though it is available for many language teachers. This tool is handy for teachers when giving feedback on student writing. Skype is useful in listening and speaking exercises because it allows users to call online for free (Olsen, Goodman & Rayman, 2011, p.2). Their study showed that the comment feature helped the majority of the students develop their grammar skills, fluency, and vocabulary. With Skype, the students got 30 minutes tutoring appointments once a week where they got the opportunity to practice listening and speaking skills. This was done by the students listening to the teachers' speech, and the teachers then had the opportunity to give feedback on pronunciation and vocabulary. The participants' overall experiences indicated that their listening and

speaking skills improved due to the personalized one-on-one session with the teacher and the fact that the instruction was individualized (Olsen et al., 2011, pp.7-8).

Another study conducted by Amiti (2020) investigated the effectiveness of teaching English online for developing EFL students' oral proficiency in Gostivar schools, using Google Classroom as their platform (Amiti, 2020, p.1). Amiti argues that in a classroom setting, a student would usually depend on the teacher; however, with online teaching, students are encouraged to work individually, relying on themselves most of the time. Moreover, even though the students are forced to be more independent, the teachers have to encourage them to speak. According to Vilar (2000), a teacher has two significant roles in the classroom: (1) creating an environment where learning can take place, and (2) supporting the students in their learning. The teacher's role is to encourage students to become independent learners while simultaneously guiding the students throughout the process of learning (Vilar, 2000, p.7). With online teaching, there is no teacher presence to explain the instructions or read a text that they have to work with, implying that students have to find out themselves how certain words are read and find the proper pronunciation (Amiti, 2020, p.3). The findings of Amiti's study showed that the students improved in oral proficiency; however, some students had difficulties learning autonomously if they did not get help from a teacher. The findings of the study also showed that detailed lesson plans with a combination of activities, helped the students to speak more in online teaching classes.

The research reviewed in this section shows that students' effectiveness in learning English depends on how the teachers adjust their lesson plan to the individual student. Overall, the students' success rate in learning reading, writing, and speaking English at a distance has to do with the teachers individualizing the instructions and allowing students to have one-on-one time with the teacher. The forthcoming section will introduce the method of choice for this study.

3 Method

This study aims to investigate upper secondary EFL teachers' experiences with distance education and how they have adjusted their teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative approach was chosen to answer the research questions. Five

EFL teachers in upper-secondary schools were interviewed, and the purpose of the interviews was to investigate their experiences of teaching English through distance education. The initial plan for this study was to conduct face-to-face semi-structured interviews; however, due to the restrictions issued by Folkhälsomyndigheten, the interviews had to be conducted through electronic media such as Zoom and mobile devices. By contacting the participants via Zoom and speaking to them over the telephone, semi-structured interviews were still possible because the participants could still be interviewed in the same way. The difference is that the interviews were not carried out in the same location. The data collection had to adapt to the situation of the pandemic where the possibility of organizing face-to-face interaction with the participants is very limited.

3.1 Data collection and participants

The participants of this study were five upper- secondary EFL teachers from 5 different upper secondary schools in Sweden. Many of the schools where the teachers worked did not allow visitors to come into the school building and the participants preferred doing the interviews through distance. The participants were asked 10 questions in total (see appendix) and the interviews were carried out in English. The interview questions that the participants had to answer were chosen specifically to answer the research questions. Some of the questions were asked for the reason of giving the participants space to think freely and might lead to open ideas for the next question. Moreover, some minor grammatical errors from the participants were corrected without affecting the content of the answers. The participants' background information is presented below.

Table 1 Background information of the participants

Participants	Age	Teaching experience	Experience with distance education
Teacher 1	24	1-2 years	No
Teacher 2	45	12 years	No
Teacher 3	36	5 years	Yes
Teacher 4	65	36 years	Yes
Teacher 5	42	15 years	No

3.2 Data analysis

This research draws on thematic analysis. According to Clarke and Braun (2017), thematic analysis is a method for “identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data” (p.297). The interviews in this study were audio-recorded and transcribed, which enabled me to identify common themes and patterns from the participants’ answers. The themes were created by color-coding similar words and phrases that emerged from the interview questions’ answers. The common themes that emerged from the interview questions were experiences of teaching English through distance education, adjustments of teaching, and limitations and affordances of teaching English through distance education. The themes were also divided into subthemes that correlate with the main themes and highlight the participants’ thoughts and opinions on distance education. Clarke and Braun (2017) argue that thematic analysis provides a wide range of flexibility when conducting research and it can be used for both inductive and deductive analyses (p.298). This study has chosen to use an inductive approach, which means that the data has determined the chosen themes. To summarize, the themes chosen for this study have highlighted the same recurring answers from the content of the collected data.

3.3 Ethical considerations

The participants were informed about the guidelines issued by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017) on ethical considerations such as integrity and confidentiality, the purpose of this study, that the participation was voluntary, and the intended method that was supposed to be used. I also informed the participants that they could end their participation any time without an explanation. To protect the participants' identities, their names have not been mentioned. The participants were also asked for permission to be recorded, and they were informed that the recordings were only going to be used for this study.

4 Results and analysis

The teachers in this study will be referred to as T1, T2 and so on (see Table 1 for the participants' background information), and the participants' answers have been divided into three main themes: (1) experiences of teaching English through distance education, and (2) adjustments of teaching, and (3) affordances and limitations of teaching English through distance education. The structure of the results section is based on the research questions. Each theme has also been divided into subthemes that correlate to the themes in question. The results of the study are presented below.

4.1 Experiences of teaching English through distance education

4.1.1 Previous experiences with distance education

When asked if the participants had any previous experience with distance education before the pandemic, their responses varied. Three of the five participants expressed that they did not have any prior experience working through distance, and two of them shared that they had previous experiences.

T1, T5, and T2 expressed that they had no experience teaching English through distance education before the pandemic. The only experience T2 mentioned was that s/he usually used the school platform to hand out assignments and contact the students. T3 and T4 had previous experience with distance education before the pandemic, and they did not have any problem working through distance. T3 claimed that s/he mostly worked through distance before the pandemic and preferred having

the lessons online. Overall, the three participants who did not have prior experience with working through distance expressed hardships in the beginning. They had some questions on what approach they would choose in order to conduct online teaching smoothly. The two of the participants who had prior experience claimed that they did not encounter any obstacle because they were used to this type of working method.

The purpose of the question about prior experience of working with distance education was to get an overview of what they consider as distance education. As mentioned earlier, there are two different types of categories associated with distance education (asynchronous and synchronous). The teachers in this study who claimed that they had no previous experience of working online, may have not considered that asynchronous teaching (for example communication and interaction via e-mail or phone) is a kind of distance education. All of the participants have a school platform where they communicate with their students and upload materials daily, and therefore all of the participants have some kind of experience with working online. The reported lack for experience, may have been influenced by how distance education in Sweden is conducted at the moment, that is to say: synchronous teaching, which is the most common teaching style in Sweden when conducting online teaching today during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1.2 Experiences of transitioning to distance education

The process of transferring lessons from a physical classroom to online was quick and the transition happened quite abruptly. In response, the teachers were expected to move their lessons online as soon as possible. The lack of teaching experience made T1 feel stressed and anxious about how to conduct distance education properly.

I wasn't familiar with it. I'm comfortable with technology and doing all these PowerPoints and editing on the computer. But, having to actually engage with the camerawork, how you are going to take care of all these students in a class which could be up to 32 students, I got scared. (T1)

What can be drawn from T1's response is that the lack of teaching experience has impacted T1 on how to conduct the lessons and manage the classes in the best way. Even though T1 is comfortable with technology, s/he felt scared because s/he was uncertain of which approach was the best way to transition to online teaching as

smoothly as possible. When T1 got more comfortable working through distance, s/he felt "excitement because it was something new" (T1). T5 showed a similar reaction where s/he felt that the scariest part for them was "to try to learn how to work with it in the best way and adapting our lesson plan". (T5)

Unlike T1, the teachers who have more teaching experience argued that they were not as stressed that the lessons were to move online. T2, who is an experienced teacher, shared that s/he expected that there was going to be a change in the education system. However, s/he did not have any prior experience with distance education (see Table 1) but tried to be "optimistic" about the transition. Similarly, T5 did not have any prior experience working through distance. However, the school s/he is working at had a plan on how to conduct distance education, and T5 and her colleagues work with the internet daily; therefore, s/he felt prepared. T4 was not scared; instead, s/he felt "excited because it was new." T3 was familiar with technology which meant that s/he did not change his/her way of teaching. T3 was used to working at a distance since this is how s/he usually worked prior to the pandemic.

I always uploaded on their school platform so that the students have it available. My students are used to working in a teaching method of a flipped classroom, which means that the instructions are handed out online for them.

T3's response indicates that working through distance has not drastically changed her/his lessons. T3's experience with the work method of a flipped classroom shares similarities with distance education, and therefore T3's experience with a flipped classroom has been an advantage during the transition process.

The majority of the participants' experience with transitioning to distance education is affected by their lack of experience in this field rather than their age or teaching experience. The teachers who expressed concern were those who were not familiar with working through distance prior the pandemic, and those who were experienced did not see a drastic change in their teaching. Some of the teachers felt excited, and they did not mind working through distance permanently.

4.1.3 Similarities between distance education and traditional teaching

When asked if the participants saw similarities in teaching through distance education compared to the physical classroom, T1 expressed that s/he had difficulties in engaging students in discussions. Also, starting a lesson and roll calls are done in the same way as in the physical classroom. Similarly, to T1's statement that rolls calls can be done in the same way, T5 agreed that starting a lesson in an online class is done in a similar manner as in a classroom environment. T5 claimed that s/he usually starts the lessons with a PowerPoint on the lesson content. As in a physical classroom, the students work on their assignment, and T5 would monitor and be available for them if they had any questions. T5 claimed:

It was not that different; the similarities were a majority rather than differences. Discussions and handing out assignments have not changed; they can still be done similarly. Also, the lessons are still the same with a few exceptions, such as listening exercises.

T2 mentioned that the similarities between classroom-based teaching and distance education is that the students have difficulties in concentration. T3 argued that the similarity of teaching online is s/he still used the whiteboard and the flipped classroom approach. According to T3, the difference with online teaching was that the students are not physically present.

All the participants' answers have shown that conducting lessons through distance education has not been that difficult because all the lessons can be done in the same way as in a physical classroom. Some of the problems the participants have encountered are getting the students to work and to concentrate. However, these problems also occur in classroom-based teaching. Thus, the way the teachers in this study teaching English through distance has not drastically changed. Interestingly, all the teachers claim that teaching English at distance has not affected their teaching as much, which indicates that the transition from a physical classroom to distance has gone smoothly.

4.2 Adjustments of teaching English during distance education

4.2.1 EFL teachers' adjustments in teaching the English subject

When asked if the participants had taught differently regarding the four language skills, they answered that they had to adjust many of their reading and writing assignment to the students. One aspect where they had to adjust the most was assessment. The participants pointed out that they encountered many issues when it came to assessing the students. T2 claimed that the students had to come back to school just for assessment purposes and T1 argued that s/he had to be more "lenient" regarding the assessment. T1 described an incident that occurred during a class online regarding a speaking assessment. T1 claimed that s/he had to make an adjustment in assessing the students in speaking in order to suit an online environment:

They were initially going to speak for half of the class, but because of the fact that we had to do it at a distance, it became like one person speaking and me and three more students listening, which was a different approach than I would have liked.

It can be understood by T1's response that speaking assessments online has made it more difficult for the teacher. The students get affected negatively because the fundamental aspect of speaking is speaking in front of a bigger audience. However, due to the lessons being done over the internet, the teacher must solve the limitations in the best way, and by dividing the students into smaller groups, the teacher adjusted to the situation as best as s/he could. On the other hand, T4 felt that assessment was not a problem because s/he felt confident that it is difficult for the students to cheat because of plagiarism control, and s/he claimed that many digital tools can help avoid cheating issues.

All the participants stated that reading was not a problem because they trusted their students to take responsibility in reading independently. In terms of writing, all the participants claimed that writing exercises was not a problem in online teaching. T1, T5, and T4 had different tools they used, such as DUGGA (digital assessment), which T1 used as an aid when assessing the students in writing. T1 claimed that using DUGGA "was a creative approach regarding the writing part". T5 stated that she used

Word and Google docs when assigning writing exercises which she claimed were “convenient and easy”, because T5 could follow the students’ writing simultaneously. T4 used different digital tools that were available in their school platform, Itslearning, when creating writing assessment and it worked very well. T2 had some difficulties with the writing exercises, and s/he avoided them. T2 claimed: “I avoided having many writing assignments, and I didn't have any writing test. It feels in a way limited to have them on Teams”(T2). T2 adjusted his/her teaching and relied more on reading and speaking exercises.

I mostly had speaking and reading, it depends on the class. Some class did presentations, some class did seminars, some class read novels, and do different speaking assignments around the novels. (T2)

T1 and T5 shared the same opinion that they were glad that they had already done listening exercises because they felt that listening exercises and assessment were the most difficult to manage through distance, and T5 stated: “I don’t really know how to do that in a way that is structured so that they can’t cheat.” The only participant who did not have to adjust her/his teaching drastically was T2 and s/he expressed:

I've done the same thing. I have shared my screen with my students on Zoom. I have shown videoclips for them and divided them into groups. I have made them discuss the clips, for example, the difference between Australian, British, and American English. But I did not have to adjust so much. My teaching is practically the same, except that it is done online.

Most of the participants indicated that their main concern of teaching the English subject online was how to assess the students in the best way. They had to make major adjustments in this aspect, such as dividing the students into smaller groups or completely avoiding assessing writing skills for example.

Overall, the participants’ experiences of teaching English shows that they have encountered some limitations in assessing some of the four language skills, mainly the students’ listening skills. However, they all tried to solve these limitations in the best way by staying positive and tried creative solutions to solve the problems they encountered.

4.2.2 Issues with online teaching due to technical problems

The biggest problem all the participants encountered regarding technical difficulties is the problem with the internet connection. Another problem they encountered was that they did not get proper education on the computer software they were using. T1 explained that the teachers in his/her school only got "one day of training on how to work with Microsoft Teams" (T1). T1, T2, and T4 had to learn on their own how to best conduct lessons through distance education at the beginning, meaning that they did not know how to solve technical problems and were not given sufficient guidelines. Unlike the other participants who felt that they had to learn on their own, T3 claimed that everything went very smoothly, and since T3 had prior experience with distance education, s/he did not encounter such problems. However, one major problem all participants encountered was the internet connection, which interrupted their lessons. T1 experienced some difficulties with the Teams application itself, which disrupted the lessons:

The volume could be really loud, and the microphones would mess up. The students also figured out that they can kick out one another from the lessons, and some students would use it to kick out their classmates.

Distance education is dependent on technology, and if the technology fails, the lessons will be interrupted, which corresponded to T1's experience with Microsoft Teams. Also, another technical problem T5 encountered was when all the students had their camera on. The application got overloaded when all the students were logged in at the same time, which caused trouble with lagging:

The students had a lot of trouble with internet connection when there were a lot of students present and when all the cameras were on. The students then missed a lot of the information, and I repeated myself more.

Drawing on T5's experience, it can be suggested that when the majority of the students are connected at the same time, the internet connection becomes an issue. T1 and T5's responses indicate that if the internet connection is poor, the lesson will be affected, meaning that the lesson will be interrupted, and the students may lose their concentration and motivation to keep up.

When it comes to technical problems, the participants' experience has shown that the most significant issue was the internet connection, which is essential when conducting distance education. The participants' answers show that this was a major issue because it interrupted their lessons and made it harder to follow. The lack of training was also a problem because most participants did not have any guidelines on what they were supposed to do if they encountered some difficulties. The participants' experience with digital tools was reflected in how they adjusted their teaching in the English subject.

4.3 Affordances and limitations of teaching English through distance education

4.3.1 Affordances of teaching English through distance education

The participants also pointed out some affordances of distance education. All the participants felt that having lessons online has made it possible to record the lessons and have them as a backup for both the students and the teachers. When asked if the participants felt that teaching English through distance is different, T2 answered:

It's different for sure, there's a lot of limitations, but there are some certain advantages to when you are online. Recording things is easy, which is something I have done, and that is something I wanted to do when you are not on distance. We use Teams, and you can just push the record button. I always get consent from the students if I record a presentation. It's nice to have it for the students and me to look back if needed.

Thus, an advantage of having lessons online is the opportunity to save the recording for future use. The students have the opportunity to watch the lessons again, and in their own uninterrupted time, repeat the lesson to see if they have missed something important.

T1 and T2 felt that the advantage of online teaching is one-on-one communication with the students. They feel that this has been a positive experience because they could focus more on the individual student. T2 stated that it is very "easy to call somebody, and that is convenient because nobody else hears you" (T2). Furthermore, T2 claimed: "English is not affected so much like, for example, math, because they

need more hands-on contact with the students." When T2's students came to school for examination, T2 was very careful not to touch the students and kept a two-meter distance, which is very different from what a teacher would have done. T3 shared similar opinions and claimed that, in a way, distance has "improved the ability to be private in class." In addition, T3 claimed that having lessons online resulted in more time to focus on individual students.

One aspect that has improved with online teaching is the one-on-one time with the students. With the help of Google Meet, one can create breakout rooms and the students have the opportunity to get help from the teacher privately. Even though their teaching has somehow changed, an improvement that has been beneficial in the participants teaching, is the opportunity to focus more on an individual student.

Another affordance with distance education, according to the participants, is the opportunity to be more creative with their work. Having to incorporate technology in their lessons forced the teachers to change their lesson style. For instance, T1 claims that s/he had to take a different approach to the lessons to make them more appropriate to online teaching.

I had to be more creative when it comes to having lessons online. I would typically have the students write on the whiteboard during exercises, but because the lessons are online, instead of using the whiteboard, I let them use their notebooks or make them write in Word and share their screens to create discussions.

In other words, distance education has enhanced creative aspects of teaching, which is beneficial from a teacher's point of view. T4 shared the same opinion, and s/he thinks that working with technology, one must think of creative solutions in order to give the students the best quality of the lessons.

4.3.2 Limitations with teaching English through distance education

When it comes to EFL teachers' experience of teaching English virtually compared to in the physical classroom, the majority felt that their teaching had not changed much. However, the limitations have impacted the participants teaching. T1 felt

disconnected to the students because they would not interact as much. Like T1, T2 stated that communication with the students online was different. Moreover, T2, explained that communication with the students is not the same and claimed that an obstacle with having the students at distance has limited the teacher's ability to create bonds with the students.

Definitely, the best part of being a teacher is engaging with the students. In the classroom, I move a lot. I always go to each student or student group and ask them if they have understood everything. We have this kind of a light, humorous classroom, we joke a lot, and we are quite friendly. But it changed when working through distance because the students never put on their camera, meaning that it was just me speaking to myself, so there was a huge difference in the social aspect. (T2)

In other words, distance education has impacted the teacher's interaction with the students. T5 claimed that s/he did not have any lectures, and therefore her/his teaching has not changed. However, T5 felt that s/he had to make "more time for students outside of class" because the students did not have the confidence to ask questions online. This possibly indicates that the online exchanges with the students did not lead to engaging and meaningful discussions. T3 stated that distance education had not affected her/his teaching style. However, as T5 stated, s/he also needed to make more time with the students outside of class. T4 claimed that her/his teaching style varied, and the difference with her/his teaching online compared to classroom teaching is that you have to be extremely structured. In addition, when asked if T4 saw a difference in her/his teaching, T4 stated:

Yes and no. There is this physical aspect because we are not in the same room, and then there is a distance. There is a distance between me and the screen. A lot of non-verbal communication takes place in the classroom that you can't see on screen because you don't see their entire bodies. They are not moving around, so the nonverbal communication is gone. And a lot of time, the communication is through email. (T4)

What can be drawn from T4's response is that the students displayed different participation practices in an online lesson environment. The students tended to be

not as active as they would have been in a physical classroom. T4 argued that usually, the students would engage and be more talkative with their classmates in a classroom setting. However, online lessons have changed this aspect. Moreover, the communication between the teacher and the students that occurs virtually has also been different because the students are silent for the most part, which indicated that the students are not actively engaged in the lessons. T4, however, did not see any problems with communicating with the students through distance and s/he claimed:

No problem, as long as I can see their faces, which is compulsory, they have to be on camera. I have to find creative solutions. I have to find ways to communicate with them, one by one, or groups, or in a large class—Whatsapp, Itslearning, email.

It can be understood by T4's response that, communication has not been a problem because s/he solved the problems that occur with different social media applications. T4 argued that there is a distance between a teacher and the students, and s/he claimed: "there is a wall between us, and that is the internet". That is to say, one must find the best solution to communicate with the students. The response from T4 also demonstrated that technology has made communication with the students simpler because there are more options to choose from, thus indicating that unlike the other participants, T4 did not see communication as a limitation.

Overall, communicating with the students through distance has been more difficult due to a lack of physical and social interaction. The participants also pointed out that they saw a change in how the students would interact with one another. Many of their students tended to be shy when they were online, which resulted in the students not being willing to communicate with one another. T5 mentioned that her/his students usually have many questions when they have lessons in the physical classroom, but this changed with distance education. Thus, the participants' social interaction with the students, and students' interaction with other students, have been affected by having distance education.

To summarise, the participants' responses indicate that their teaching has not changed drastically. However, the teachers felt that they had to offer more time and effort with distance education. The participants also think that even though some

aspects of teaching have been different, they see some affordances such as recording and having more time with each student. Another beneficial aspect of distance education is that it has allowed some of the participants to be more creative with their work, which is a positive aspect of a teacher's profession.

5 Discussion

The participants' answers regarding their past experiences of distance education before the pandemic, showed that the majority did not have any experience. Furthermore, their lack of experience in conducting distance education at the beginning of the transition affected their teaching in the English subject. A contributing factor was the lack of training provided by their school. According to Tseng and Yeh (2020), teacher education does not often focus on integrating technology in teaching, making it difficult for teachers to determine which technology is deemed fit. The training some of the participants received was inadequate, and most of the participants in this study had to manage on their own. Even though some participants have many years of experience as teachers, they still felt uncertain because they had never worked where one is dependent on different digital tools. The teachers' opinions in this study correspond to Downing & Dymment's study, where the participants shared the same uncertainty and the lack of confidence in their technical skills (Downing & Dymment, 2018). T1 expressed that s/he was "scared" initially because s/he had recently graduated from the teacher program, which affected his/her lesson plan of how to manage to transfer her/his lessons online. Similar to what William, Eynon & Potter (2020) and Downing & Dymment (2013) argue, the challenges that come with distance education regarding the pedagogic aspect are managing presentations and making resources available for their students properly.

Regarding the participants' adjustments in teaching in the English subject, they had to adjust when assessing the students. Previous research by Golonka et. al (2014) investigated EFL students' language learning by incorporating different digital tools in their language teaching. Their study showed that by using different social media platforms, the student's language learning enhanced. In this study, the participants used different digital tools in their teaching. Even though the participants did not use social media platforms to enhance the student's language teaching, T4 used a similar

social-media app, Whatsapp to stay in touch with T4's students. Assessing the students through distance education had its challenges, and some aspects of the language skills were hard to assess, for instance, listening. Some participants claimed that listening exercises were difficult to do at a distance, and therefore they were relieved that they had already completed the listening part of the four language skills. Instead, they focused more on writing and speaking exercises because they felt that it was easy to monitor them through Teams and Zoom. However, T2, for example, avoided having writing assessments because s/he felt that it was very limited to have them on Teams. Reading was no problem because the teachers felt that they trusted their students to read independently. Compared to Olsen, Goodman, and Ramsay's (2011) study where they integrated the word comment feature in enhancing the students' writing, T5 used that same tool when assigning writing exercises, and T1 used a similar tool, DUGGA to help the students' writing.

Some of the participants had technical problems during distance education. For example, the application Microsoft Teams did not work at times. Another problem they mentioned was internet connectivity, and some of the students did not have a good internet connection, which made it harder for them to participate in the lessons. The participants expressed that their workload had increased. They would often have to repeat themselves and send private messages to the students in order for them not to miss anything important. Furthermore, as stated earlier, Williamson, Eynon & Potter (2020) claimed that working with technology comes with a new set of challenges, such as integrating teaching and technology appropriately. Of this statement, as teaching English through distance was perceived as difficult when technology and internet connectivity did not work.

The findings suggests that distance education has come with affordances regarding the students' one-to-one time with the teacher. Some of the participants felt that their focus on one individual student has improved. Moreover, it was more convenient to have privacy by creating breakout rooms and to talk on the phone. Some of the participants had to trust their students more to complete the assignments due to online teaching. In other words, the students had to manage their studies. The participants experiences correlates to Al-Arimis (2014) statement that e-learning could benefit students' way of managing their way of studying and learning (p.3). A

similar study like Al-Arimi, Zhou (2020) stated that having lessons online had made it possible for the students to study anytime and anywhere, and that they could be more flexible when it comes to managing their own study time. Another affordance with distance education, according to the participants, is that distance education has enabled them to be more creative with their lessons. Since the participants were forced to incorporate technology in their lessons, they had to come up with creative solutions that they would not typically have done.

The main limitation of distance education that most participants agreed on is the social interaction with their students. As previously mentioned, online teaching is not similar as to teaching in a physical classroom, (Williamson, Eynon and Potter, 2020, p. 262) the participants in this study claimed that this was problematic. The pedagogical aspect of teaching was affected, and the social interaction between the students and the teacher had changed. Some of the teacher's interaction with the students online described by the participants in this study, has been a one-way communication, thus supporting Yandell's statement that interactions online "are much less intricate, nuanced and multidimensional" (Yandell, 2020, p.263). Similarly to Downing & Dyments (2013) study, where the teachers' connection with the students online is not like in a physical classroom, the participants in this study shared similar experiences. The results in this study showed that the participants' interaction with the students online was more clinical and awkward, meaning they felt a distance from their students because they were not as active in participating in the lessons and communicating with both the teacher and the students.

The lack of body language and non-verbal communication that comes with distance education affected all the participants. The participants felt that being separated from the students caused a limitation. Some of the participants did not require the students to turn on their camera, which resulted in most of their students not doing so. According to the participants, the students also behaved differently because they did not interact with their classmates and the teachers as they would have done in a physical classroom. Everyone was more reserved and quieter, which affected the quality of the lessons. The lack of non-verbal communication also limited the teacher because often, they had to make sure that the students were present by calling out their name. This is in line with Yandell's claim that teaching through distance is more

like "teaching by semaphore rather than pedagogical dialogue" Yandell, 2020. p.263). In other words, communication with the students online is not the same as in a physical classroom. The dialogue between the teacher and a student and student to student is non-existent most of the lesson. Social and physical interaction with both students and colleagues has been an issue as well with distance education. Some participants' opinions indicated that they did not enjoy communicating with the students through technology because they missed interacting with the students. For instance, T2 claimed that distance education has limited the ability to build relationship with their students because you could not see them physically, and most of the time, the students were quiet in the lessons, which made it difficult for the teacher. Yandell (2020) argues that teaching and learning occur through social activities, and the participants in this study had to face the difficulties that come with distance education. That is to say, the social and physical interaction has affected the pedagogical part of teaching. Some of the teachers did not force their students to turn on the camera, and most often, the students did not, and therefore some of the teachers felt that it was one-way communication.

At the moment, Folkhälsomyndigheten (2021-01-30) has decided that distance education should be conducted 50 % online and 50 % on campus, and this has been issued until June 2021. In other words, distance education is still ongoing which indicates, for the teachers and students, a new set of challenges in education.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate upper secondary school teachers' perspective on distance education in the English Subject. The participants in this study have shown that they had different experiences regarding teaching English through distance education. Their overall experience with distance education has varied in different aspects. An aspect that has improved from distance education, is the one-on-one time and privacy with the students. However, one of the biggest hindrances they all claim was the lack of social interaction and non-verbal communication with their students and colleagues. The pedagogical aspect of teaching, such as using a whiteboard and interacting with the students, has also been affected because the participants felt limited. The lack of training to properly handle web-based programs

in the beginning of the transition was initially an issue, but they navigated around it in the end. Overall, the participants managed to stay positive through the transition that occurred in March 2021, until April 2021, making it possible to conduct distance education.

For future research, including students' perception of distance learning would enhance this study to make it broader. Another idea for future research is to compare how other countries have handled distance education, especially in countries where internet connectivity is a significant issue. Sweden overall has good internet connectivity, meaning that conducting distance education has not been a problem. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused many changes in society and people's everyday lives. Even though distance education has existed in many years in Sweden, there has been little research that has been conducted in upper secondary schools regarding distance education. Thus, this study can hopefully provide more insight for future research.

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Appendix

Interview guide

1. Did you have any experiences of teaching English through distance education before the pandemic?
2. What was your reaction when you found out all teaching is going to be through distance learning?
3. Can you see a difference in your teaching when teaching through distance and when teaching in a physical classroom?
4. What are your thoughts on teaching English through distance education? Is it easier or difficult compared to a classroom-based teaching?
5. Are there any similarities in your teaching when teaching through distance compared to teaching in classroom-based teaching?
6. In terms of the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). How did you conduct the lessons through distance? Did you see any difference in your teaching regarding the four language skills?
7. What are your thoughts about communicating with your student's through online teaching?
8. Have the social aspects (interaction with the students) been affected in any way? How?
9. Have there been any difficulties with technology in your online lessons?

