

***Primary School English Teaching During COVID-19: Preliminary Results of  
Three Single Case Studies in Rural Schools in Costa Rica***

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**Abstract**

COVID-19 emerged as a pandemic that paralyzed the educational world in 2020. The Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education (MEP) took up two modalities, distance education (2020) and combined education (2021), with in-person education finally restored in 2022. This multiple case study consists of three single case studies in three different educational directorates in Costa Rica's Huetar Norte Region: San Carlos, Norte-Norte, and Sarapiquí. The three studies collected and triangulated data from 15 primary-school English teachers using semi-structured virtual interviews, document gathering, video recordings, photo-elicitation, and body mapping. Content analysis was performed using WebQDA and ATLAS.ti to categorize the data. This multiple case study aims to describe the perceptions of primary English teachers regarding distance, combined, and in-person education to increase understanding of the educational context during the health crisis. The first study is completed, the second study is in the final stages of data interpretation, while the data are currently being analyzed for the third study. Some preliminary results include identification of the tensions experienced by teachers as well as the emergence of self-efficacy skills required to comply with the modalities, the lack of coordination and communication between the Ministry of Public Education and the school districts, and the distinctive characteristics and challenges of each modality. This multiple case study seeks to expand on existing literature and to better apprehend the phenomenon of the pandemic and its educational implications in rural communities in Costa Rica.

Keywords: Costa Rica, COVID-19, Combined Education, Distance Education, English Teaching, In-Person Education, Rural Schools, Qualitative Research

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## **Introduction**

In 2020, the pandemic imposed a pause in the world in all socio-economic aspects and had a particularly strong impact on educational matters. In Costa Rica, the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) analyzed various scenarios to better provide for the students who were sent home at the beginning of March 2020. That year, distance education (or emergency remote teaching) became the official teaching modality. The following year, combined education took place as a new modality. Lastly in 2022, in-person education was restored, after practically two years of pandemic. This study focuses on three single descriptive case studies in three regional directorates of education: San Carlos, Norte-Norte, and Sarapiquí. The units of analysis were the educational modalities, and the focus was on 15 primary school English teachers from the different directorates. The 15 teachers were selected under the same criteria of teaching in rural areas, in low-population schools. Inductive qualitative research was employed with the aim of comprehending the teachers' perceptions and experiences to come to a better understanding of teaching and learning processes during and after the pandemic.

## **Research Context and Methodology**

The first study on distance education took place towards the end of 2020. This collected data on four English teachers (two males, two females) from the San Carlos Regional Directorate of Education via semi-structured virtual interviews, document gathering, and video recordings. The second study regarding combined education started in late 2021, in which data were collected on six teachers (two males, four females) from the Norte-Norte Regional Directorate of Education via interviews, document gathering, and photo-elicitation. Finally, at the beginning of 2023 the study on in-person education began collecting data on five teachers (three males, two females) from the Sarapiquí Regional Directorate of Education in the form of interviews, data gathering, and body mapping. All data collection techniques aimed at creative co-construction in the meaning-making process with respect to the distinctive educational modalities employed between 2020 and 2023. The selection criteria for the participants included these being English teachers with over five years' experience working for the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education (MEP), with tenured positions, who working in small schools in rural communities. Prior to the data collection processes, the participants signed letters of informed consent that guaranteed confidential use of the data. The interviews and other video and visual information were transcribed prior to coding. Analytical memoing, to reflect of the data sets, was utilized during the three studies. Member checking was also used to validate the preliminary results.

The data analysis of the three single case studies was based on content analysis using two software programs for qualitative data: WebQDA (Costa et al., 2019) was used for the first study, while ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2022) was used for both the second and third studies. Content analysis entailed full familiarization with the data sets, inductive descriptive coding, identification of semantic patterns within the codes, clustering categories, identifying, and naming domains, and description of salient themes (Hatch, 2002; Braun & Clarke, 2012). Once the last study is fully examined and the data interpreted, analysis will be made through a multiple-case study considering the evidence of the three studies to examine the educational phenomenon of teaching and learning via the distinctive modalities that took place in northern Costa Rican rural schools during COVID-19.

## **Results**

For the proceedings, some results will be presented from single case studies 1 and 2, while only preliminary results are provided for case study 3. With respect to the distance education case study, though there were several results found, only two will be fully addressed. Interviews were carried out in Spanish, although quotations were translated into English for ease of reading in this paper.

### **Distance Education in the San Carlos Regional Directorate of Education (2020)**

As a consequence of the abrupt interruption of the school year in March, 2020, and as a way of guaranteeing the continuation of the educational process in the country, the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) adopted the modality of distance education. This process was characterized by four scenarios created according to students' access to both internet connectivity and technological devices. Additionally, teachers were required to create self-study guides that included the contents to be studied along with brief explanations thereof, activities to promote the autonomous learning of students, and finally, a self-evaluation checklist that included the expected learning outcomes. In rural areas, these guides were collected from schools by parents on the days they picked up food packages, and students then had a month to complete and return them (MEP, 2020). Despite being called distance education due to the promotion of autonomy, self-regulation, and the physical distance between teachers and students, Hodges et al. (2020) point out that this modality in fact should be considered emergency remote teaching (ERT) since the model was unplanned, arising from the need to quickly respond to an unforeseen phenomenon affecting the educational system.

The teachers included in the study experienced a plethora of feelings at the beginning of the pandemic and during the 2020 school year. Though some of these had positive connotations, most can be seen as negative, including feelings of uncertainty, fear, nervousness, sadness, and stress. At the very beginning of the pandemic, the teachers felt doubt, concern, and confusion. They experienced a sense of helplessness, with no clear idea of how to go about the teaching process. Everything became more difficult as they had to plan and somehow continue to “teach” remotely. Numerous difficulties were encountered, including problems of lack of adequate internet connectivity, vagueness in the guidelines to be followed, and problems in communication processes with parents, among others. Every aspect of distance education was new to the teachers; thus, they rapidly began to feel tired, overwhelmed, and overworked. One teacher participant explained, “In order to teach, I had to immerse myself in virtual media, something I was not used to, at least for teaching. Also, designing the self-study guides for the first time, I did not know how to do them. It was very challenging, not impossible, but very difficult indeed. While designing the guides, it was very confusing, with so many changes and new guidelines happening all the time, some teachers understood things in one way while others understood something completely different. Nothing made sense, everything was confusing. We, the teachers, were scared since we did not know how to do anything, and all the responsibility was on us. It was very stressful and challenging.”

In the rural context in which the participants worked, they experienced discrimination with regards to some of the decisions made by MEP. Another teacher participant expressed:

At MEP, they make decisions “behind a desk” without fully understanding that some teachers live under very different circumstances, in poor areas, where children have

very limited or no access at all to many things. I felt limited too since I wish I could teach virtual classes but, in our case, it was remote teaching since the families did not have devices or connectivity, sadly.

Despite their negative feelings, the teachers developed a keen set of self-efficacy skills, which included personal, reflective, and technological skills. In terms of personal skills, the teachers developed the ability to proactively undertake various tasks as personal objectives with the main goal of continuing with the teaching process; for example, they paid for ink, printers, and paper to ensure that all students had access to the materials, they went to the schools to drop off and pick up students' work, and they drew on a wide range of mechanisms to communicate with the students' parents, such as calling them, sending notes, asking other parents to contact them, and taking the time to explain individually to each parent how to use the self-study guides. In terms of reflective skills, they developed empathy in analyzing the situation of students' families and their contexts to see what was required to meet the students' academic objectives, also modifying guidelines as necessary so that students could more easily continue with their learning paths. Generally speaking, they were very reflective on the issue of internet connectivity in areas where the families lived and when these had little money for telephone plans. Teachers engaged in professional development activities given that they were keenly aware of the importance of having new tools to enable students to continue to progress under such challenging conditions. With respect to technology skills, as part of their efforts to make the distance education process more accessible to students, teachers researched and learned how to better reach out to their students by creating videos to explain the self-study guides. They further collated lists of websites to use and recommend to students, and employed other technological platforms (such WhatsApp, the most used platform for education during the pandemic) so that students could access the materials and self-study guides.

### **Combined Education in the Norte-Norte Regional Directorate of Education (2021)**

After almost an entire year of distance education and careful analysis of the public health crisis, the MEP decided to gradually open schools and allow students to go back to on-site, face-to-face classes under certain restrictions. 2021 thus became the year of combined education; a model that shared some similarities to blended learning and included the continuation of autonomous work from home with self-study guides and periodical classes at school. Every group was split-up into two or three sub-groups to comply with the protocol of social distancing; schools created special schedules and assigned students specific days in the week in which they were to work from home or go in to school; nevertheless, parents were given the chance to decide whether their children adopted this model or continued their education under a full distance education model (Elizondo-Mejías et al., 2023; MEP, 2021a). During face-to-face English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, teachers were required to work on activities from the self-study guides to develop oral skills: listening, and oral production. These activities were part of the four main "moments" incorporated into the self-study guides: connection, clarification, collaboration, and application (MEP, 2021b).

During 2021, teachers characterized the management processes both at a macro and micro level as highly challenging. MEP-based management was defined by teachers as focusing mostly on safety protocols and issuing guidelines regarding pedagogical mediation and logistics. Teachers felt that guidelines were sent abruptly and changed constantly. One of the participants stated, "When they [the MEP] change new norms and guidelines, we have to execute them and try to find solutions; these constantly change." These changes were visible

in the decision making; another participant pointed out, “There are things that change overnight; in the end, you don’t know if instructions were privately sent to school principal or district supervisors which then need to be communicated to everyone else [teachers].” On the other hand, school management by the school principals was described as more flexible and supportive in terms of providing supplies for photocopies and schedule flexibility to those teachers working in more than one school.

One of the most revealing aspects during combined education was the fact that although the intention was to work under only two modalities (face-to-face and distance), many other sub-modalities arose, such as regular in-person education, irregular in-person education, synchronous distance education and asynchronous distance education. One of the participants stated, “There was a special schedule so that everyone was able to receive the same number of lessons; however, from five regular face-to-face lessons I had before the pandemic, only two were taught during combined education; the other lessons were used to work with students who were in the full distance modality, those who did not have to come to school on a given day, and those who were able to connect up virtually.” These modalities arose as the result of school infrastructure, classroom size to respect social distancing, and the parents’ decisions as to whether or not their children went back to school or kept studying from home.

### **In-person Education in the Sarapiquí Regional Directorate of Education (2022)**

The 2022 school year was characterized by the return to face-to-face classes, with all students required to attend school every weekday. The only public health safety measure was the use of face masks from February to May and constant hand washing. In terms of methodology and content, everything was supposed to go back to the way it had been before the pandemic hit two years previously; for EFL classes, activities needed to promote the development of the four language macro skills, and all contents from the 2017 curriculum were supposed to be covered. The only difference was that in 2019, the school year had been divided into three terms of three months each; in 2022, the MEP decided to change to two terms a year. Finally, due to the educational lag provoked by the pandemic, teachers needed to carry out a diagnostic process to determine which contents from previous years needed to be reviewed and incorporated to help students level up and recover from the marked learning gaps that occurred in both 2020 and 2021.

During 2022, with the official recommencement of face-to-face classes, teachers faced several new challenges. The re-adaptation process was challenging to all study participants. This process affected the daily routines of the teachers since it implied cognitive, emotional, and educational transitions from the way things had occurred both prior to and during the pandemic. At the beginning, certain public health protocols remained in place, with mask-wearing, the need to maintain social distance among students, and the avoidance of using fans leading to difficulties including health problems for the teachers. They had to speak louder which affected their throats. Additionally, in the rural areas where they worked, the weather is very hot, yet they were not allowed to use the classroom fans as they had previously done, which caused discomfort both for teachers and students. The teachers further alleged that it was difficult for them to articulate English sounds correctly, which also made it difficult for the children to learn to pronounce words properly since the masks blocked the view of the pronunciation process. A participant stated, “Wearing the mask all day is tiring, plus while I wore it, I had to speak to the children, trying to pronounce words that as you know, especially in English, it is all about articulation as one speaks, one pronounces specific words and phonemes so that they [the children] can understand better.”

Additionally, the re-adaptation process involved a reduction of class time because both teachers and students had to engage in more extracurricular activities than was customary prior to the pandemic. One teacher stated that “even when the students miss one day of class, everything gets behind significantly. Now there are the student games related to physical education, so the students get pulled out of school to attend different sport events. I know they [the students] are representing the school, but when they come back, they don’t know the topic, don’t bring homework, they just get behind; they are lost, and classwork is greatly reduced.” This class reduction aspect is linked to work overload since teachers were also expected to coordinate and work on extracurricular activities, such as art and English festivals. One teacher reported, “Yesterday, for example, it was 6:15 p.m. and we [some teachers] were just leaving the school since we had spent the day decorating for the school festivals. Today, we began work at 7:00 in the morning and worked until 3:00 in the afternoon putting everything back in order after the festivals. It is too much work, and we don’t get any acknowledgement for it. We do it for the children, we do it for them.” Due to public health protocols and the extra work of other school activities, the participants in the study experienced general exhaustion including physical, mental, and emotional weariness. One participant expressed how she was totally “exhausted and drained to the point that all I want is to be on vacation, to simply rest and load batteries to continue teaching.”

There were also challenges that impacted on the learners. Two specific ones stand out: lack of education competencies and educational lag. Lack of educational competencies refers to the lack of some competencies on behalf of the students such as socialization, a sense of accountability, collaborative skills, assertive communication, autonomy, and self-regulation, among others. One participant stated, “Social behavior was very affected. Some students were in second grade, yet their behavior felt more like they were first graders.” Another teacher stated how the “discipline in the students had no limits, students were aggressive and not willing to collaborate.” Students lacked motivation to come back to face-to-face classes; some students “did not click with the return to normal classes.” In addition, the teachers in the study emphasized how the students in general were behind where they should be academically. As part of the educational lag, the students did not have the knowledge they were expected to have. One teacher reflected on how she had a class that she had taught using combined education in 2021, and half her class did not know the topics covered that year. She recalled 2022, the year in which students and teachers returned to normality, as a year “where students’ minds were blank, as if they did not retain any information, as if all teaching was erased and all learning became nonexistent, as if they had not learned any English at all in two entire years. It was devastating, it happened in 2022, and I think it continues [in 2023, when the study data were collected].”

## **Conclusions**

From all three single case studies, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn. From the study carried out in San Carlos (case study 1), it can be concluded that during distance education in 2020, of all the significant number of feelings expressed by the teacher participants, most of these had negative connotations. However, the self-efficacy skills of the teachers were key to coping with the distance education modality to promote the academic success of the students. In Norte-Norte (case study 2), even when combined education was meant to consist only of regular face-to-face classes and work at home, the modality employed in the rural schools the participants worked at was fragmented into 5 sub-modalities for two specific reasons: logistics in the schools (infrastructure, school management, size of groups) and family decisions (convenience of families to keep students

at home). During 2021, MEP-based management was characterized by ambiguous and changing guidelines that were open to interpretation; however, school-based management provided the support that teachers felt was lacking in the educational management. In Sarapiquí (case study 3), the re-adaptation process became a challenge due to students' lack of educational competencies and educational lag as a result of having stayed at home for almost two years. In addition, the teachers felt overworked, both due to classwork and other extracurricular and administrative tasks which led to a sense of general exhaustion.

As mentioned before, two of the studies have concluded while the last one is still undergoing processes of data analyses and interpretation, with a view to arriving at a consolidated outlook on the Huetar Norte Region in Costa Rica. The researchers advocate in favor of qualitative research as a reflective endeavor that can capture the essence of the human dimension in educational settings. It was the qualitative research approach that facilitated engagement with the participants during the harsh times of the pandemic. Qualitative research should be celebrated as it places greater value on social phenomena as experienced by teachers within their educational contexts.

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