Being a public school English language teacher in pandemic times in Sergipe, Brazil

Ser professor de língua inglesa em escola pública em tempos de pandemia em Sergipe, Brasil

Ana Karina de Oliveira Nascimento*
Laudo Natel do Nascimento**

Abstract: Learning how to face the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge to the Brazilian population, especially in public educational contexts. Due to the difficulties imposed by such a hard moment, while conducting a research on new literacies in English teachers' practices, new data emerged and helped researchers to understand what it meant to be public school English teachers in pandemic times in Sergipe, Brazil. This article is a result of a qualitative interpretive research that draws on data generated through interviews and a focal group. The main results suggest that being a public school English teacher this time meant recognizing the differences between on-site and remote teaching, having a burden to carry, getting prepared for the unexpected, reinventing themselves as teachers, and that understanding education as opposed to training is necessary.

Keywords: COVID-19. English. Teachers. Public schools. Brazil.

Resumo: Aprender a enfrentar a pandemia de COVID-19 foi um desafio para a população brasileira, especialmente nos contextos de educação pública. Em virtude das dificuldades impostas por um momento tão difícil, enquanto conduzíamos uma pesquisa sobre novos letramentos nas práticas de professores de inglês, novos dados emergiram e ajudaram os pesquisadores a entender o que significava ser um professor de inglês da rede pública durante a pandemia em Sergipe, Brasil. Este artigo é resultado de uma pesquisa qualitativa interpretativista que contou com dados gerados por meio de entrevistas e grupo focal. Os resultados principais sugerem que ser professor de inglês da rede pública durante esse tempo significou reconhecer as diferenças entre ensino presencial e remoto, ter um fardo a carregar, preparar-se para o inesperado, reinventar-se enquanto docente e que compreender a diferença entre formação e treinamento de professores é necessário.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19. Inglês. Professores. Escolas Públicas. Brasil.

*   Universidade Federal de Sergipe (UFS).
**   Universidade de São Paulo (USP/CNPq).

Introduction

Being both born and raised in Sergipe, the smallest state in Brazil, the authors speak from the perspective of two researchers who reside in the same city but whose experiences are different. One is a PhD candidate and professor at a federal university and the other one has a PhD and works in a different federal university. At the same time, the two researchers are very much connected, since both are part of the same research group called Linc (Literacies in English: language, literature and culture), which is associated to a National Literacy project conducted by the University of São Paulo. It is due to these research connections that both decided to write this article on a current research with English language teachers during the pandemic.

As for the pandemic in Brazil, in March 2020 no more on-site classes were allowed in Sergipe. It was only by the end of 2020 that hybrid classes were permitted, but only to Senior High School students. The beginning of the following school year (2021), however, faced some changes since on-site classes for all levels were allowed and private local schools started their classes. As the number of people infected by SARS-COV-19 and the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 started to rise again, a new change was made and after March 2021, only remote classes for all levels and schools were permitted. This means that public schools did not even start on-site classes in the beginning of the school year of 2021 due to their school calendar, which predicted the beginning of classes to take place in March. It was only on the second semester of 2021 that public schools were allowed to start on-site classes again, but taking into consideration the number of students, the classroom capacity and so on. In this article, our focus is on the time while only remote classes were taking place, from March 2020 to the first semester of 2021.

While this new and terrible situation became a reality, a research

was being conducted aiming at understanding how public school English language teachers had been dealing with new literacies in their pedagogical practices, following a qualitative interpretive approach (MOITA LOPES, 1994; SALDAÑA, 2009). It focused on public school English teachers who reside and work in Sergipe and the data collection techniques involved questionnaires (applied to 18 respondents), interviews (08 participants), and a focal group (06 participants) taking place from 2019 to 2021. All participants were English teachers, mostly in-service but it also involved some pre-service teachers. Due to the pandemic, the interviews and focal groups were conducted online.

Since the research was being conducted while the pandemic was taking place, new data started to emerge and this article is about them. It relates to what it means to be a public school English language teacher in pandemic times in Sergipe. Therefore, we aim at discussing English teachers' points of view concerning their ideas as to what it means to be an English teacher during this time, taking into account in-service public school English language teachers and their interactions during the interviews and focal group sessions. The first ones took place from March to May 2020 while the second ones in February and March 2021.

In order to analyze the data, the concepts of new literacies (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2007; 2012; LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL; CURRAN, 2013) and digital literacies (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2008; NASCIMENTO; KNOBEL, 2017) were revisited, together with the exploitation of studies connected to pandemic times (ALVIM; VIEIRA, 2020; RONDINI *et al*, 2020). They are explored throughout the article, while the data is analyzed.

Analyzing the data, five different categories emerged and they are discussed throughout this paper. According to the participant teachers, being a public school English teacher in Sergipe during pandemic

times means: a) recognizing the differences between on-site and remote learning; b) having a burden to carry due to the various digital technologies they have to deal with; c) having to learn to understand the difference between training and educating teachers; d) getting prepared for the unexpected; e) reinventing themselves as teachers.

In order to discuss the categories we got to as a result of the data generation process, this article is divided in two more sections besides this introduction. The first one is called *Methodological Path* in which it is explained how the data collection process and analysis took place. The following section is called *Analyzing teachers' voices*. There, the categories are explored together with the theoretical basis of our analysis. After that, we present our *Final Words*.

Methodological Path

The research this article results from was conducted at a public university from August 2019 to July 2021. It originally aimed at understanding how public school English language teachers had been dealing with new literacies in their pedagogical practices and the connections they established with teacher education programs, focusing on digital literacies and multimodality. It is a research that follows a qualitative interpretive approach (MOITA LOPES, 1994; SALDAÑA, 2009).

The research participants were public school English teachers from Sergipe. The data was collected throughout two years. In the first year, eighteen (18) questionnaires were applied and the data analyzed. Due to the data that emerged, the research group decided to continue the data collection process but this time deepening the information collected through the questionnaires by conducting individual interviews with eight (08) of those English teachers who had participated in the previous stage of the investigation, the questionnaires. The interviews

were conducted from March to May 2020, when the social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic was already a reality. Therefore, they were conducted through Google Meet, during a recorded session.

The data generated through the interviews were transcribed and later analyzed by the group of researchers and revealed very interesting understandings as to how public school English language teachers had been dealing with new literacies and connecting that to their in-service teacher education programs, especially because of the beginning of the pandemic.

Due to that, we selected as one more data collection technique, the creation of a focal group (KRUEGER; CASEY, 2000). Because this moment of data collection was also during the pandemic, the focal group took place through Google Meet on Saturdays from ten to midday. Each session lasted around two hours. At first, five meetings were planned but considering teachers' exhaustion, at large due to the pandemic, we decided to reduce that to three (03) meetings, which took place in February and March 2021. Six (06) English language teachers who work on public schools participated and even though that was not our initial objective, during the interviews and later, on the focal group sessions, participants revealed very interesting understandings as to the meaning of being a public school English language teacher in Sergipe during pandemic times. It is focusing on their main ideas that we came up with five categories that, according to their voices, have a say as to what it means to be an English teacher in Sergipe during the pandemic.

In order to analyze the data, we followed what Saldaña (2009) calls a first cycle coding method, particularly, in vivo coding. That means, during this stage, we read the transcriptions of both interviews and focal group sessions, trying to identify words or short phrases actually said by the participants that seemed to "call for bolding, underlining,

italicizing, highlighting, or vocal emphasis" (SALDAÑA, 2009, p. 75). After this initial stage, we read our notes as to identify what we had highlighted and started theming the data as to what was recurrent to categorize teachers' voices. Many themes emerged. After that, we followed Saldaña's (2009) second cycle coding method and worked on pattern coding, for categorization of our coding data. As the same author puts it, it refers to "the category label that identifies similarly coded data. Pattern codes not only organize corpus but attempt to attribute meaning to that organization" (SALDAÑA, 2009, p. 150). This article is about these findings and we decided to publish the results we encountered, understanding that it is relevant to know language teachers' views on their work during pandemic times. In order to do that we present the five categories we came up to together with one or two examples of teachers' voices to exemplify what we mean, together with the theoretical basis we follow. Throughout the analysis, we identify participant teachers by a pseudonym so that their real identities are preserved.

Analyzing teachers' voices

Considering all the data that was generated, we decided to focus here in this article on five categories we came up to after analyzing the data generated through the focal group sessions and interviews, since both took place during pandemic times. According to the participant public school English language teachers, being a public school English teacher in pandemic times in Sergipe means: a) Being able to comprehend that on-site is completely different from remote lessons; b) Dealing with different technologies, which can be a burden to their professional activity; c) Having to learn to understand the difference between training and educating teachers; d) Getting prepared for the unexpected; e) Reinventing themselves as teachers.

a) Being able to comprehend that on-site is completely different from remote lessons

While conducting the interviews and focal group sessions in order to understand how English teachers dealt with new literacies in their pedagogical practices, it was inevitable to listen to accounts of their new realities as teachers: the introduction of remote classes. A number of issues arose from their experiences, especially the ones connected to the difficulties faced by public school students. As pointed out by one of the teachers:

> When I started [...] this idea of *remote education, I did not think that I would replace face-to-face teaching. I was thinking that I would reduce the losses*..., it was just to mitigate the losses because I knew that remote education [...] was not in a position to replace face-to-face education, both for *space reasons*, because not all students have adequate space, so the school is a space for teaching, for study; also *food issues*, problems that go far beyond *technological access,* because *this pandemic, it deepened, opened up problems that already existed: social, economic and political.* (Focal group, Flávio, March 2021, our emphasis).

The ideas shared by Flávio are aligned to what Sousa Santos (2020, p. 8, our translation) predicted in terms of what could happen to some people around the globe due to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially to the underprivileged populations. According to the author: "[...] the invisibility zones could multiply in many other regions of the world, and maybe even here, very close to each one of us [...]"[3]. As the same author reinforces, this crisis would take place someday as a result of the fact that "[...] since the 1980s – as neoliberalism has been imposing itself as the dominant version of capitalism and it has been subjecting itself more and more to the logic of the financial sector – the world has lived in a permanent state of crisis [...]"[4] (SOUSA SANTOS,

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[3]   "[...] E as zonas de invisibilidade poderão multiplicar-se em muitas outras regiões do mundo, e talvez mesmo aqui, bem perto de cada um de nós [...]."

[4]   "[...] desde a década de 1980– à medida que o neoliberalismo se foi impondo como a versão dominante do capitalismo e este se foi sujeitando mais e mais à lógica do sector financeiro–, o mundo tem vivido em permanente estado de crise. [...]"

2020, p. 5, our translation).

Therefore, being an English teacher for the group of participants in the research meant the necessary understanding that remote classes could never be the same as on-site ones, since so many contextual problems are at play. This situation, therefore, would require teachers not only to become aware of remote tools they could make use of, but also to consider alternative practices to the students who could not have enough space to study, food to eat, a technological tool at his/her disposal and so on.

This finding gives us a chance to problematize the idea of new literacies adopted in our research. We follow Lankshear and Knobel's (2007; 2012) and Nascimento and Knobel's (2017) understanding that what we account for new literacies are not only in chronological terms, as if literacy practices could be historically studied just like the evolution of cars, for example. Quite the contrary. Drawing from the authors' accounts of paramount cases of new literacies, these are characterized by both new technical and new ethos stuff. By new technical stuff it is meant the digitality as one main characteristic of new literacies, though we understand there are many practices that can become digital and not be considered as new literacies. In order to be understood as new literacy practices, a new ethos should also be at place. This new ethos refers to how participatory, dispersed and collaborative the new literacy practices are. Therefore, new literacies connect to what authors have called Web 2.0 or 3.0 as opposed to Web 1.0 (KNOBEL; LANKSHEAR, 2012; XAVIER; FONSÊCA, 2016; SANTAELLA, 2013). According to the authors, Web 1.0 is also known as the microcomputer era when users would only receive static, predetermined information while 2.0 is characterized by users' possibility of interaction. As to Web 3.0, also known as semantic web, it is characterized as part of an era of big data and cloud storage, in which participation, interaction and dispersion

are deepened.

Despite seeming to be aware of some new literacy practices associated to the Web 2.0, teachers insisted on the fact that for them, being English language teachers during pandemic times in Sergipe meant understanding remote lessons were completely different from on-site classes. This can be seen in one more account of a participant teacher who reinforces the issues mentioned earlier. Therefore, even though he could easily navigate through different and new technological stuff, part of a new ethos and technical paradigm, his knowledge of that was not enough:

> I feel like *I didn't start from scratch when the pandemic started*, for me it wasn't a break or a start… I feel like I started half way through, *because I already knew part of the tools that are popular today*. I knew Google Meet, Zoom, the Web Conference, because I was already participating in courses due to BNCC, that used these tools. *So my biggest difficulty was not to learn to use these resources or to adapt them to the class, but the contextual issues of the schools where I work*. [...] (Focal group, Ailton, Feb. 2021, our emphasis).

This initial category found in the research provides us with a chance to understand a bit about the teachers' job in Sergipe during pandemic times, since the teaching process is not only composed by what teachers are able to do but also needs to account for what students are able to accomplish, which depends on their specific contexts.

b) Dealing with different technologies, which can be a burden to their professional activity

As pointed out by Knobel and Kalman (2016, p. 3), "ongoing learning and professional growth for teachers has been a hot-button topic within—and outside—education, especially over the past 10 years". We would add that the COVID-19 pandemic made teacher education a top trend in many parts of the world, as new practices were required in order to keep classes going while social distancing was still

a necessity in order to save lives. The teaching practices needed to rely on digital technologies as to keep education going.

One of the main issues when we consider having teachers adding digital technologies to their classes relates to the understanding that this requires knowing many tools. Besides, it also connects to big enterprises, hired by schools or governments, aiming at preparing teachers to deal with digital technologies. As claimed by Knobel and Kalman (2016, p. 3), the courses offered usually "comprise an 'outside expert' coming to the school and delivering an intensive, short-term presentation on some topic or program […]. This especially appears to be the case where digital technologies are concerned." Because of such practices, when reflecting on having to deal with digital technologies due to remote lessons, most English language teachers from Sergipe who participated in the research highlighted having to deal with different technological tools that represented a burden to their already tiresome professional life. As one of the teachers reports below, they are often worried about being able to work with a range of digital tools and that means being a teacher during pandemic times was a burden to them.

> […] I have to say that I always tell this story that when we were learning MSN, Orkut entered, when we were learning Orkut, Facebook entered, when we started to get used to Facebook, Instagram entered... and then when we started to get used to Instagram, Telegram entered. *So in a way, when we learn a technology and feel at ease with it, there is another new one*, just to talk about tools […]. (Focal group, Ailton, Feb. 2021, our emphasis).

We would risk saying that this feeling of having to be up-to-date in terms of apps, softwares or digital tools might also be connected to a traditional way of understanding digital literacies. As discussed by Nascimento and Knobel (2017, p. 68), the studies on digital literacies challenge the view that understood being digitally literate as being able to accomplish:

> a specific set of skills and competencies that would qualify the individual to be considered 'literate' […]. Subsequently, however, digital literacy has been taken up within fields informed by social and cultural theories to focus on digital literacies (in the plural) as a set of sociocultural practices, and not a checklist of proficiencies or competencies […].

This turn on the understanding of digital literacies is not something everybody agrees on. For some, especially those who do not follow the understanding of literacies as sociocultural practices, a number of skills and competencies, mostly predetermined, is still a valid comprehension. This, however, hugely complicated the decisions made by governments and schools, which mostly bought one-size-fits-all teacher education programs in which lots of tools were part of the program as being essential for teachers' practice, which highly contributed to the feeling of burden, as stated by this teacher:

> […] when you… think, for example, about tools that are not for education, but they ended up being used for class [...] when we are learning these tools and consolidating them with the students, another one comes up that will rock and then you have to skip to this one […] so, in a certain way so, *if we don't have a [...] reference point to value the teacher in what he already knows, it is very complicated.* (Focal group, Ailton, Feb. 2021, our emphasis).

As a result of the disrespect to teachers' and students' contexts and knowledge, lots of technological tools ended up having to be learned by the participant teachers and this had a negative outcome. After all, "the myriad of options […] can sometimes generate the opposite effect, becoming a source of anxiety about which tools to select, and the necessary support." (ALVIM; VIEIRA, 2020, p. 45).

c) Having to learn to understand the difference between training and educating teachers

Directly connected to the previous category, this one relates to teachers' ability to understand that teacher training is different from teacher education. In this sense, it was interesting how the focal group

generated opportunities for reflection and collaborative discussion and learning. When the discussion centered on the courses offered by the local government, one of the main points addressed was on how they focused more on "how to do things" than on critically reflecting upon choices, decisions and reasons for taking one decision or another.

> About what Ailton said, I find it very interesting, it was something that I *was really bothered about... in relation to the course offers that we receive*, even before the remote period. I have always been a little frustrated when I didn't have this pedagogical, critical [...] discussion. So, *the proportion of courses more focused on knowing how to do it than reflecting on what you do was much higher*... [...] For example [...] in the same course I took, there was a lot about knowing how to do things... and little support to [...] reflect on the impact of this remote time on the educational reality. So, *it was [more like] the teacher himself wanting to problematize these situations.* (Focal group, Flávio, Feb. 2021, our emphasis).

This conversation gave us researchers a chance to connect participant teachers' thoughts to the previous teacher education programs they had been part of, since besides criticizing the predetermined offer of courses and their focus on how to do things, participant teachers also highlighted the importance of collaborative work among schoolteachers. As stated by Knobel and Kalman (2016, p. 3):

> [...] A long history of research into teachers' professional development suggests teachers gain most from professional development experiences that are not delivered by expert-outsiders and that are not one-size-fits-all, one-shot sessions on how to do something better [...]. Instead, research suggests what works includes things like sustained and supported opportunities to learn something new or to learn about something familiar more deeply, learning opportunities that are grounded in immediate teaching contexts, encouragement to change classroom and school practices in innovative ways, enacting social theories of learning to shape collaboration among fellow teachers, fluid leadership and expert roles within a professional learning group or space, and a conviction that what's being learned is going to be useful or beneficial to students [...].

Following the perspective outlined by Knobel and Kalman (2016),

teachers stated that even though they understood the importance of the courses offered, working and sharing knowledge with their colleagues who knew their school context was a lot more beneficial to them and helped them go through the hard beginning of remote lessons. We can visualize that by reading this account:

> *We had to go after it and seek knowledge, we had to expand this knowledge.* And then, *the courses… and projects that I participated in certainly… helped me in this process,* they are helping me in this process. *But, I think it helped me a lot to work collaboratively too*, you know? *So I have coworkers who have more... knowledge than I do, so I went after these colleagues, we worked a lot with interdisciplinary activities there at school*... and we changed, you know? [...] Me and other colleagues also started to do research, we did a project like this for us to find out how we worked, how could we work this [...] *and we ended up learning a lot in this... process,* doing research [...] so this project also helped us... Me and the other colleagues who were involved when it was time to launch the school's official proposal. So, we already had a more or less notion […]. (Focal group, Marilene, Feb. 2021, our emphasis).

Teachers' voices and ideas connect to one of the characteristics of what Cope and Kalantzis (2016) call collaborative intelligence, understood by the authors as one of the e-learning affordances that can be developed when working online. According to them, the online environment makes room for a reflexive pedagogy as opposed to the traditional didactic pedagogy. This reflexive pedagogy would provide students with opportunities to build knowledge collaboratively as described by the participant teacher. That means a change in paradigm, from "the isolated learner, with a focus on individual cognition and memory" to "peer-to-peer learning, sourcing social memory and using available knowledge tools appropriately" (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2016, p. 16). This definition aligns with the concept of new literacies as sociocultural practices, as previously discussed, according to which expanded social participation and a more participatory behavior are part of a new ethos.

d) Getting prepared for the unexpected

During the interviews and focal group sessions, teachers expressed their concern as to the uncertainties brought up by pandemic times. They confessed being exhausted due to the so many challenges they had to face and new things they had to learn in a short and hard period. The whole situation made them talk about the necessity of being ready to face the unexpected. According to them, this was not something they were prepared for during their pre-service or even in-service teacher education. This teacher expresses his concern as to the new challenges to be faced for which they were not prepared:

> About the new challenges for the teacher, [...] *today we live a reality of hybrid education* and [...] we ended up being pressured to use technologies [...] *it is as if... last year […] I really died, that old [Flávio] from the previous year* [...] *last year was a very challenging one,* as if I had been dying and... *and I had to be reborn* through searches in the [...] impulse really […]. (Focal group, Flávio, Feb. 2021, our emphasis).

During this focal group session, teachers made connection to what happened or was happening to them – considering both their personal and professional lives – to a song by Belchior, the famous Brazilian singer, in which the singer states that "last year he had died but this year he won't"[5]. So despite knowing more challenges were still to come due to hybrid education, it seems they are now facing the unexpected in a more natural way:

> […] so this year will also be *in impulse*, because we will have to work on other skills... *both in the classroom and accompanying students remotely*. So for me it will be another challenge, right? It seems that we are evolving, as things move, the pandemic creates new directions, we also create new directions for education. So for me it will be a new challenge. [...] so I am apprehensive and very... instigated to try to adapt again to this new reality. (Focal group, Flávio, Feb. 2021, our emphasis).

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[5]   We are referring to the song "Sujeito de sorte" by Belchior. The lyrics can be accessed here: https://www.letras.mus.br/belchior/344922/. Access: March 14th, 2021.

When discussing that teacher education should also work on preparing undergraduate students for the unexpected, Zacchi and Nascimento (2019), based on a research project they developed, state how data showed that pre-service teacher education does not accomplish that. On the contrary, the results of the investigation showed how undergraduate teacher education courses focus on so many certainties, while this historical moment demands more than that. As stated by the authors:

> Thus it is essential to prepare teachers for the uncertain, the unpredictable, the unexpected [...], since [...] humanity follows its course towards not the guaranteed path of progress, but that of "uncertainty" [...], making it necessary to prepare "for our uncertain world and await the unexpected" [...]. More than competence, it is performativity […] that takes the central role, which depends on the different and peculiar contexts that will be encountered. […]" (ZACCHI; NASCIMENTO, 2019, p. 48, our translation).[6]

The data collected through the focal group sessions led us to believe that due to the pandemic, teachers had to learn to do things and redirect their pedagogical practices based on performativity – learning by doing things, experimenting and verifying what works best. In our view, this means that being an English teacher in Sergipe during pandemic times meant to them getting prepared for the unexpected since their certainties were no longer valid.

e) Reinventing themselves as teachers

One last category we identified through the data collected related to teachers' understanding that being an English language teacher during pandemic times meant reinventing themselves as teachers. The whole situation required them to reassess their own practices in order to

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6 "[...] É fundamental, portanto, uma formação de professores que os prepare para o incerto, o imprevisível, o inesperado [...], já que [...] a humanidade segue seu curso não em direção à via garantida do progresso, mas a "uma incerteza insondável" [...], tornando necessário preparar-se "para o mundo incerto e aguardar o inesperado" [...]. Mais do que a competência, é a performatividade [...] que assume o papel central, pois sua atuação se dará muito em função dos diferentes e peculiares contextos que vão encontrar. [...]"

evaluate if their teaching objective was being accomplished. Teachers also identified that they were going through a process and did not have prompt answers to the questions they were asking themselves. As an example, in the beginning of the pandemic, during the interviews, teachers shared testimonies such as:

> [...] *technology* has been a*… a very important tool* for us to continue our work. [... *But] I have to reinvent myself*, I have to reinvent the *teaching process [...] the methodologies that I used in the classroom are different now*. You see a classroom icon, you see *three participants... "Am I reaching my [goal]*?" I have to create *new strategies to reinvent my classroom*, [...], it won't happen in 60 days of a pandemic, *and it won't happen in a month, two, three, a semester*. (Interview, Marcos, May 2020, our emphasis).

Despite all the difficulties faced, teachers saw the pandemic as an opportunity to question themselves and their own work, having in mind that the necessary changes would not take place quickly. On the contrary, that would impose a trial and error kind of practice, which is part of the reinvention process. Rondini *et al* (2020, p. 54, our translation) also identified in the study they conducted that "[…] despite the difficulties in transposing face-to-face teaching to the remote modality and in the use of […digital technologies], teachers point out how challenging and enriching the pandemic moment is for their practice, making the process of teacher 'reinvention'."[7]

This reinvention process also involved learning that students would change their behavior when their school practices migrated to the online environment only. As posed by the participant teachers and is illustrated through one of the teachers' talk, digital practices which were required by students during on-site lessons turned out to be avoided by students as they missed the face-to-face encounters.

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[7]   "[...] apesar das dificuldades em transpor o ensino presencial para a modalidade remota e na utilização das [...tecnologias digitais], os docentes apontam o quanto o momento pandêmico é desafiador e enriquecedor, para a sua prática, fazendo aflorar o processo de "reinvenção" docente."

This is one practical example of teachers' pedagogical practice that required reinvention. According to one of the teachers:

> An interesting fact happened in this period of isolation, of social distancing. [...] I am [...] communicating with my students [...] sending activities to them, using digital media. *I created an activity for my high school students*. It showed posts from people and then *I asked some questions and asked them to write a sentence saying how they were feeling during that period and a student replied that she is missing the face-to-face contact*. So like,[...] when they have access, when they have access to both media [face-to-face and virtual], they seem to want to enjoy to be much more in the digital, but now, that is the moment that they are forcibly there in the digital world and are not, for example, being able to go to school [...]. *At this moment, when these interactions are necessarily taking place only through digital platforms, they are missing the face-to-face.* (Interview, Marilene, May 2020, our emphasis).

For Alvim and Vieira (2020), whose study focuses on the challenges, promises and progress of teaching during COVID-19 times, the abrupt shift into remote instruction caused a loss to the benefits of daily exchanges, as the limitations of interactivity by video-camera conferences impose a much smaller amount of time of social contact and performance. That reinforces what the participant teachers noticed, which strengthened the necessity for teachers' reinvention. However, it is imperative to highlight that this reinvention did not mean teachers were completely unprepared. As the participants called our attention to during the focal group sessions, they already knew some things, but not enough for the requirements of the pandemic times. Therefore, pedagogical reinvention became a reality, as one of the teachers highlighted:

> I didn't feel totally unprepared for online teaching [...]. We all had to reinvent ourselves, didn't we? We had to adapt to this new situation, but then, I already used some digital tools. But we had to adapt to this new... need, to this new requirement. […]. (Focal group, Marilene, Feb. 2021).

Facing the new challenges of this new time, English teachers in

Sergipe lived a moment of new definitions and paths in their teaching practices, and reinventing themselves as teachers was an important though challenging part of this process.

Final words

Understanding language teachers' job during pandemic times is a relevant topic considering all the obstacles imposed by this hard moment. Therefore, not only generating but also analyzing data related to that has its importance as register for current times and as a historical record of the unexpected times we have been facing worldwide and since March 2020 to the date this article was submitted (Dec. 2021) in Brazil.

The data analyzed throughout this article showed that, for public school English language teachers in Sergipe, doing their job during the COVID-19 pandemic meant being able to comprehend that: on-site is completely different from remote lessons; dealing with different technologies can be a burden to their professional activity; it required to understand the difference between training and educating teachers; that it is crucial do get prepared for the unexpected and finally that reinventing themselves as teachers was an unavoidable step.

We reinforce that these meanings are contextual and reflect one specific population: public school English language teachers located in the northeast of Brazil, more specifically on a capital city. This means that even though those might be the same as other parts of the country, it was not our idea to generalize our findings. On the contrary, we believe more research is necessary in order to map out the changes in teachers' professional activities due to the unexpected pandemic, which proved to be a very difficult time to the whole population, but especially to teachers.

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