



Emergency Remote Teaching: A Temporary Solution to a Permanent Problem

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Considering the COVID-19 crisis and the sudden shift from face-to-face classes to online ones, universities had to initiate a new phase of educating learners using online platforms, known as ERT (Emergency Remote Teaching). This study aims to uncover the challenges EFL instructors, their learners, and university administrations encountered during ERT through conducting a qualitative case study. Accordingly, twenty-two learners, six instructors, and two administrative staff members who faced difficulties with online instruction during ERT at Alzahra University participated in this research by invitation. The participants were semi-structurally interviewed through social networking platforms (WhatsApp and Telegram) as well as telephone conversations. Subsequently, the collected data were manually coded and subjected to thematic analysis. The study's findings revealed that the inadequate infrastructure of the university, the lack of technical knowledge among learners and professors, unsuitable online materials, absence of training workshops, evaluation challenges, inadequacies of Adobe Connect (the chosen video conferencing platform for Alzahra University's online classes), lack of interaction among learners, overcrowded heterogeneous classes, suboptimal learning environments, and internet connectivity issues were the most significant challenges faced by language learners and instructors during ERT. Additionally, the study identified that the primary challenge for the online department authorities during ERT was addressing instructors' and learners' problems throughout the semester and conducting online exams at the conclusion of the course.

و تغییر ناگهانی از کلاس‌های حضوری به کلاس‌های بر خط دانشگاه‌ها مجبور شدند COVID-19 با توجه به بحران (تدریس از راه دور اضطراری) به ERT مرحله جدیدی از آموزش فراگیران را با استفاده از پلت‌فرم‌های بر خط به نام سرعت آغاز کنند. هدف این تحقیق کشف چالش‌هایی است که مدرسان زبان انگلیسی، فراگیران آنها و مدیریت دانشگاه در با آن‌ها مواجه شده‌اند، از طریق انجام یک مطالعه موردی کیفی می‌باشد. بر این اساس، بیست و دو نفر از ERT طول در دانشگاه الزهرا با مشکل آموزش بر خط مواجه ERT فراگیران، شش مدرس و دو نفر از کارکنان اداری که در دوره بودند، با دعوت در این پژوهش شرکت کردند.

شرکت کنندگان از طریق شبکه‌های اجتماعی (واتس‌آپ و تلگرام) و همچنین مکالمات تلفنی به صورت نیمه ساختاری مصاحبه شدند. سپس داده‌های جمع‌آوری شده به صورت دستی کدگذاری شده و مورد تجزیه و تحلیل موضوعی قرار گرفتند. یافته‌های این مطالعه نشان داد که زیرساخت‌های نامناسب دانشگاه، کمبود دانش فنی در بین فراگیران و اساتید، Adobe Connect مطالب بر خط نامناسب، عدم برگزاری کارگاه‌های آموزشی، چالش‌های ارزیابی، نارسایی‌های (پلتفرم ویدئو کنفرانس انتخابی برای کلاس‌های بر خط دانشگاه الزهرا)، فقدان تعامل بین زبان آموزان، کلاس‌های پرجمعیت ناهمگون، محیط‌های آموزشی نامناسب، و مسائل مربوط به اتصال به شبکه اینترنت مهم‌ترین چالش‌هایی بودند با آن مواجه بودند. ERT که زبان آموزان و مدرسان در طول رسیدگی به مشکلات مدرسان و ERT علاوه بر این، این مطالعه نشان داد که چالش اصلی مسوولین بخش بر خط در طول



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Introduction

December 2019 marked a period when the increasing number of COVID-19 infections led authorities to announce measures to slow down the virus's spread. These measures included lockdowns, social distancing, and the closure of establishments with large gatherings, including universities and educational institutes (Lippi et al., 2020). These measures had a detrimental impact on learning environments and learners' mental health, causing anxiety about their education (Sahu, 2020). At the peak of the pandemic, in April 2020, about 1.6 billion K-12 learners in over 190 countries were deprived of in-person schooling (UNESCO, 2020). Consequently, ministries of education in many countries recommended E-learning as a solution to sustain educational activities during the lockdown. Authorities require extensive planning and preparation to design an effective online educational environment for learners. However, the urgent nature of the COVID-19 pandemic did not permit sufficient time for such preparation. Therefore, E-learning was initiated without sufficient time to train educational staff, instruct teachers, and prepare learners for online classes (Shin & Hickey, 2020; Toquero, 2020). Hodges et al. (2020) termed this abrupt transition from physical classrooms to online classes as "Emergency Remote Teaching" (ERT), a novel form of distance learning that emerges during crises to enable learners to continue their education safely despite the crisis's circumstances (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

Based on research conducted by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), a British company specializing in analyzing higher education institutions worldwide, in 2020, half of the global academic classes transitioned to online teaching amid this challenging period. Some pioneer universities, mainly in Western countries, had previously experienced holding online classes for their learners; consequently, this sudden shift was easier for them than for some developing countries such as Iran. Like many countries impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Iran declared the closure of universities in February 2020 as a crisis management measure (Mousavi et al., 2021). Before the pandemic, owing to financial constraints and the increasing student population in higher education, only a handful of Iranian universities had embraced online learning (Rabiee et al., 2013).

Statement of the Problem

Considering the unexpected emergence of ERT, university officials encountered numerous challenges in conducting online classes during the pandemic. Dhawan (2020) stated that the primary factor contributing to these difficulties was insufficient time for preparation and training. While administrators of Iranian universities readily embraced the shift to ERT, they were taken by surprise by the challenges brought about by this sudden and rapid transformation.

First and foremost, teaching online is a novel practice for numerous Iranian instructors. Transitioning from traditional face-to-face classes to online formats can be challenging, mainly due to instructors' need for familiarity with the available technological tools and their potential positive impact on teaching and learning (Marandi, 2010).

Secondly, the absence of advanced technological facilities in many Iranian classrooms leaves learners unaware of the various technology options available and how these can enhance learning efficiency (Marandi, 2010). Computer and internet-related anxiety, heightened self-directed learning, and managing online materials represent some novel challenges learners encounter in online courses (Huang et al., 2020). Furthermore, the responsibility of universities to furnish instructors and learners with adequate equipment and financial support

for conducting successful online sessions is noteworthy. Another challenge arises as universities must procure licensed platforms for conducting online classes, workshops, and educational courses to educate faculty members on optimal utilization. This further complicates matters within the context of Iran.

It is worth acknowledging that each course in the ERT era faced its own obstacles when being delivered on a virtual platform. The central focus of our research, however, was on online General English (GE) courses offered by universities and their management during this challenging period. Hence, the overarching objective of this study was to identify the obstacles encountered by English instructors and learners during their online classes at Alzahra University, one of the esteemed institutions in Iran. Additionally, we sought to solicit recommendations to address these challenges and enhance the quality of higher education classes in the future.

Literature Review

Online Learning

We find ourselves in an era where technology has demonstrated the limitless boundaries of possibility. Online classes are a remarkable boon from technology to learners worldwide (Yen & Nhi, 2021). For those facing work or family commitments that render in-person attendance unfeasible, online classes offer a seamless opportunity to pursue education (McPartlan et al., 2021). Smith and Kurthen (2007) have delineated online learning into four distinctive categories, namely:

1. Web-enhanced: This educational approach deploys online tools to augment traditional classroom instruction.
2. Blended learning: A pedagogical strategy integrating online educational resources and virtual communication with conventional classroom methods.
3. Hybrid classes: Amalgamate face-to-face instruction with online learning activities.
4. Fully online instruction: Classes are conducted entirely in virtual environments, devoid of in-person or on-campus meetings, and conducted asynchronously or synchronously.

The proliferation of online classes in education has transformed the roles of learners and educators, distinct from the conventional face-to-face paradigm. The abrupt transition to online platforms necessitated a corresponding shift in learning and instructional methodologies. The concept of fully online instruction resonated particularly well with the tech-savvy generation of learners (referring to students proficient in technology use, especially computers, according to Xu & Jaggars, 2014). These tech-savvy students gravitate toward utilizing mobile phones or laptops for learning, granting them the flexibility to engage from virtually anywhere. This new generation of virtual learners and instructors, as identified by Bri et al. (2009), embodies several key characteristics, including:

Virtual learners: Successful virtual learners exhibit robust self-regulation, self-discipline, and self-directed learning abilities. They must cultivate metacognitive skills to independently manage their learning journey.

Virtual instructors: Online educators encompass roles as course designers, organizers, content developers, and adept technology users. Proficient virtual instruction fosters collaboration rather than mere lecturing and facilitates meaningful interactions among learners.

Enthusiasts of online classes laud their numerous advantages that motivate participation. For instance, online classes empower learners with enhanced and swifter access to instructors and course materials (Moore et al.,

2011). A study in the United States revealed that a prime outcome of online class attendance is profound learning, characterized by students applying their knowledge in real-world contexts (Xu & Jaggard, 2014). Additionally, online classes prove cost-effective for institutions and garner favor from learners' families (Adebo, 2018). However, Widayanti and Suarnajaya (2021) and Hart (2012) have outlined significant drawbacks associated with online class participation, such as limited peer and instructor interaction, the challenge of technology integration, and issues with internet connectivity.

According to Berry (2009), student evaluations emerge as a prominent aspect of online learning. While applications like Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle, and Desire2learn are instrumental for conducting online assessments, the absence of invigilation during online exams sometimes raises concerns about score validity for instructors.

The balance between these merits and demerits varies across global regions, making online learning appealing or daunting for learners. Palvia et al. (2018) suggest that countries like America, Australia, New Zealand, and China exhibit exceptional prowess in delivering online classes to their learners. In contrast, certain Middle Eastern nations still need to grapple with the readiness to develop comprehensive online courses within educational institutions, hindered by weak internet connectivity, public skepticism towards virtual education, and limited governmental attention to online learning within universities (Powell & Barbour, 2011).

Online classes in Iran

The advent of online classes in Iran occurred in 2001 (Hosseini Largani, 2010). Ostad et al. (2019) stated that Shiraz University, Iran University of Science and Technology, Amir-Kabir University of Technology, and Khaje-Nasir University of Technology were pioneers in holding online classes. Many other Iranian universities are now providing online classes for their learners. There are plenty of platforms universities use to start online courses, such as Skype, Big Blue Button, and Zoom; among them, Adobe Connect is the most popular among Iranian universities. Presidia first created this platform for educational purposes, and its surprising features made online instructors and learners feel like they were in a real classroom (Mehrabi & Homapour, 2018). Despite these beneficial features, online classes in Iran are not free from flaws. As Rabiee et al. (2013) claim, these barriers can be categorized as socio-cultural, structural, educational, economic, and legal, as described below:

1. Socio-cultural: Lack of public familiarity with virtual education, lack of socialization in online classes, learners' and instructors' inhibitions about online learning (Jahanian & Etebar, 2012).
2. Structural: Lack of preparation by universities and inappropriate telecommunication infrastructure in Iran.
3. Educational: Resistance of faculty members to online training, the difficulty of studying online materials, and the absence of up-to-date pieces of equipment in universities (Akbari Boorang et al., 2015; Dashtestani, 2014).
4. Economic: Lack of investment in virtual education, lack of adequate financial support for universities by the government.
5. Legal: Lack of adequate security and protection in the electronic system, infringement of copyright, unnecessary limitations on using the internet, and website filtering (Hedayati & Marandi, 2014).

These challenges have hindered the acceptance of online learning in Iran, leading to doubts about the credibility of online degrees. This reluctance has limited universities' investment in improving online courses (Hosseini Largani, 2010). However, the Ministry of Education now mandates online classes as essential, requiring students to develop technological proficiency. Instructors must update their expertise for these new environments (Dashtestani, 2014).

Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)

Mousavi et al. (2021) have pointed out that nearly all university classes worldwide transitioned into online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hodges et al. (2020) state that these online classes differ from the typical online classrooms that existed prior to the pandemic, and they should be termed ERT (Emergency Remote Teaching) because these classes emerged as temporary solutions within a short time frame with good quality in response to the crisis. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) noted that a fully online course's customary planning, preparation, and development time averages six to nine months before course delivery. Furthermore, instructors and learners engaged in these courses should be acquainted with the dynamics of this mode of instruction. Nevertheless, online classes are no longer optional; they have become an obligation that all learners and instructors must embrace (Marshall et al., 2020). This force majeure condition has compelled instructors, learners, and administrators to confront many unforeseen challenges. Dashtestani and Karami (2019) discovered that language faculty members and teachers in Iran need to be adequately prepared to conduct language classes online due to their lack of knowledge and hesitance regarding technology. However, universities are mandated to conduct all classes online, thrusting them into a transformative experience. This study aimed to assess the quality of General English (GE) classes, evaluate instructor performance, and gauge learners' attitudes toward this new mode of instruction. Additionally, the study sought solutions for these unprecedented problems to facilitate more successful online language classes after the pandemic.

Research Questions

Based on what was stated, the following research questions have been raised:

1. What challenges did learners and instructors face during remote General English classes at Alzahra University, and how can they address these issues for solutions to improve the quality of regular online classes at the university?
2. What challenges were encountered by the administrators of the IT software/hardware department of Alzahra University, and what solutions do they propose to overcome these problems to improve the quality of regular online classes at the university?
3. How can the experiences gained during ERT be used to improve the quality of regular university online classes?

Method

A particularly advantageous application of qualitative research is investigating novel subjects where the existing body of knowledge is still limited (Creswell, 2013). One such context is the employment of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) during the coronavirus pandemic. To comprehensively understand the difficulties encountered by three distinct cohorts, learners, instructors, and university administrators, amid the unconventional learning circumstances brought about by ERT, a qualitative study was undertaken utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Adopting a qualitative methodology, this research prioritizes participants' perspectives and interpretations of the situation (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). This approach is guided by a flexible interview protocol, enabling researchers to collect unrestrictive, open-ended data and delve into participants' thoughts, emotions, and convictions concerning the subject (Cohen et al., 2018; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013).

Participants

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Iranian universities had to switch from in-person to online classes quickly. This meant that General English (GE) instructors had to change how they taught. Alzahra University was ahead of the game in using online classes in Iran. Even before the pandemic, they were already offering various courses online. So, for this study, we have three groups of people taking part, each with their own characteristics:

1. **Instructors:** They were chosen through purposive sampling; six were selected from a pool of instructors teaching General English during the ERT period. Two of the participants were male, and four were female. Each had more than ten years of teaching experience as a faculty member at Alzahra University at the time of the study.
2. **Learners:** They were selected through voluntary sampling. All of them had attended General English classes at the onset of the pandemic. They were undergraduates from various fields of study. All the participants were female because the research was conducted in an all-female university setting.
3. **Administrators:** Administrators were selected through convenience sampling due to limited access to them, given the closure of universities during the pandemic. One of the university administrators who played a role in the decision-making process for the transition from in-person to online classes was interviewed. The second individual chosen for the interview was responsible for technical support to the Faculty of Literature at Alzahra University.

Instrument

We selected interviews as the primary method for data collection to delve into participants' perspectives, experiences, and recommendations. Each participant underwent a separate interview to uncover the challenges they faced in online classes during the pandemic and their potential solutions for enhancing the effectiveness of online courses. We opted for semi-structured interviews to offer flexibility in collecting information, allowing us to delve into and clarify issues. This approach allows interviewees to explore their thoughts and provide detailed responses. The researchers formulated the interview questions based on an extensive literature review of online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Collection Procedures

Before conducting the interviews, consent forms were distributed to each participant. The forms included details of the purpose of the research; the expected duration of the interview; and a statement that participation in research is voluntary. Upon receiving the signed forms, participants were enrolled in the study. To adhere to ongoing social distancing rules, interviews were conducted online. Various virtual methods were utilized to gather data as outlined below:

1. **Learners:** Interviews took place on messaging and social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram. These interviews were conducted using written text messages (chat) or voice messages. A total of twenty-two participants were interviewed, with each session lasting between 30 to 45 minutes. The amassed data amounted to 20 pages of transcribed content.

2. Instructors: Invitations to join the study and share experiences with online classes were emailed. Instructors could participate through telephone interviews or by sending voice messages on WhatsApp or Telegram. Each interview spanned 45 minutes to 1 hour, resulting in 25 pages of transcribed data.

3. Administrators: The researcher personally contacted each administrator to request their participation in the study. Interviews with administrators were conducted using written text messages and chat on social media platforms. Each interview lasted for 30 minutes, generating five pages of transcribed content.

The interview questions and transcripts can be made available upon request. However, the summarized outcomes of the interviews are presented in this paper and encapsulated in tables.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process undertaken for this study involved collecting interviews conducted through social media platforms, saved as screenshots, and recorded telephone interviews supplemented with interview notes. Additionally, participants' responses were captured using a Google Form document. A thematic analysis approach was chosen to make sense of the collected data, enabling the identification of patterns and insights by systematically categorizing codes and deriving themes from them (Lochmiller, 2021).

The process began with the categorization of codes based on their frequencies and occurrences, allowing for an initial structuring of the data. Manual coding was employed, involving the creation of themes through an inductive approach. This approach was chosen due to its ability to derive insights from the raw textual data. The data was systematically broken down into smaller units for examination, leading to the identification of new codes through repeated analysis (Basit, 2003).

Following the initial coding phase, coding and recoding iterations were conducted, refining the themes and enhancing their coherence. This iterative process, as outlined by Chandra and Shang (2019), was instrumental in the emergence of novel themes that encapsulated the underlying patterns within the data.

By employing this comprehensive data analysis methodology, the study aimed to uncover the prevalent themes and ensure the rigor and depth of the findings. The combination of manual coding, inductive reasoning, and iterative refinement allowed for a thorough exploration of the collected data, enhancing the credibility of the study's conclusions.

Results

Research Questions 1 and 3: Learners

This section presents the prevalent themes derived from the interview analysis. The organization follows a thematic structure, wherein learners' most significant challenges are discussed first, followed by their suggestions and predictions regarding online classes in the post-ERT era. The results are presented as follows.

TABLE 1
Learners' Challenges and Suggested Solutions in the ERT Era

Selected codes	Theme
- Frequent internet disconnection in Iran makes me angry. - The need for more high-speed internet in remote areas is problematic. - The microphone not working well during class because of a weak internet connection was a significant problem.	Slow internet connectivity
- Lack of eye contact has decreased concentration. - Instructors need help understanding which learner has learned the lesson thoroughly and which learner needs to understand it.	Absence of eye contact
- Due to the lack of eye contact, I learned less from my instructor. - Instructors mostly used PDFs, voice messages, and PowerPoints, but these can never replace paper books. - Online materials could be more useful, more efficient, and more organized. - Using online materials saves our environment but hurts our eyes and causes insufferable headaches and sleeping disorders.	Tiresome online materials
- I have a two-year-old son; I must care for him during my classes. - Our house is too noisy; I cannot concentrate at all. - My mobile phone, games on my laptop, and my young brother always distract me. - I often listen to music when I am in an online class.	Undesirable learning environment
- I prefer to type in Persian in the Chatbox. - Why don't we call it Adobe Disconnect? I can never connect to my meeting on time because of Adobe Connect's constant problems. - I always had problems with my microphone in Adobe Connect. - We only had training courses after attending our first online class. - Due to the time pressure, the university needed more time to hold workshops. - We learned everything ourselves in the first few weeks of ERT. - After one semester, the university started uploading educational videos for learners.	Adobe Connect's numerous annoyances
- I had never attended an online class before the pandemic. - I was not interested in online classes due to their unsatisfactory quality.	Limited online training workshops
- I had never attended an online class before the pandemic. - I was not interested in online classes due to their unsatisfactory quality. - Instructors do not trust us; they think we have turned on our laptops, logged in, are inattentive to class, and have fun. - We struggle with our slow internet connection when we do not answer our instructors' questions, but they do not believe us. - I want my instructors to understand us more and not double the pressure on us in this unbearable situation.	Learners' lack of experience in attending ordinary online courses Lack of mutual understanding among learners and instructors
- I prefer my in-person classes because of the interaction and collaboration with my friends that I missed in distance learning. - Face-to-face General English classes are more dynamic and active; online ones are boring. - In an online class, the learner needs to know how to work with a laptop at a beginner level, but some Iranian learners need help to do these simple activities. - Some Iranian learners need more technical knowledge, and some need to be more eager to learn them.	Lack of peer communication Learners' lack of technical knowledge
- LMS was helpful, but sometimes it loaded slowly. - We can use it even after the COVID-19 outbreak if its errors and bugs are solved. - The university had many unnecessary LMS updates, which we needed clarification on.	LMS trivial problems
Learners' suggested solutions	
- Universities must hold more training courses for instructors. - We need to have more offline classes to avoid technical problems. - Learners need training workshops. - Instructors in General English classes must pay attention to our level of English.	Suggested solutions to overcome barriers

Research Questions 1 and 3: Instructors

The second research question focuses on the challenges encountered by instructors during General English classes in the ERT era. Interviews were conducted with six instructors from the English Department of Alzahra

University, who had experience teaching online language courses during the ERT period. The findings are thematically organized as follows:

TABLE 2
Instructors' Challenges and Suggested Solutions in the ERT Era

Selected codes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learners only use the Chatbox to ask questions or comment on something; this makes online classes tedious and tiring. - English courses are different from other classes. Group work is a necessity for them. - Online classes have forced instructors to focus on teaching the language, and how to use the language is disappearing gradually. - I have announced that their class participation represents 80 % of the final score; therefore, they must be active in class to pass the course. - I have to see my learners to know them better; I easily understand how strong they are in English and how active they are in class. - After teaching a specific lesson, I need to see my learners' faces to realize whether they understood the lesson. - I am an English instructor; body language and acting are necessary to teach a lesson better. - Designing and scoring an online exam is tiring and time-consuming for instructors. - Learners are more nervous during online exams. - In GE face-to-face classes, we have too many learners of different ages, majors, and levels of language proficiency in one class. Conducting the class was very difficult. Luckily, controlling them is more manageable in online classes, but teaching will become more complex when we cannot see the students and their differences. - Due to a lack of time and a slow internet connection, learners need equal opportunities to talk in class. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of interaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Memorizing 40 names in each class takes much work. - When I ask questions from my learners, I hear them searching their books to find the answer. - In the final and mid-term exams, learners have their books and friends to help; therefore, I divided my final score into two parts: class participation and the final exam. Class participation is more important and represents a high percentage of their final score. - I wonder if learners have attended the classes themselves or asked their friends or family members to log in to the class. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of eye contact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Due to internet connection problems, I could not upload my videos, and learners could not watch them easily; as a result, I decided to change my material to paper books and PDFs. - Learners who live in remote areas struggle with numerous internet connection problems during online classes. - Based on that, I ask about their proficiency levels and give them homework. It is time-consuming, but it is worth it. - Teaching learners with different levels and then evaluating them is challenging both in face-to-face and online classes. - Learners could have understood the lesson more thoroughly due to repeated voice breakups. - Some learners could not turn on their microphones because of a slow internet connection or lack of technical knowledge. - Once the server did not work, I was forced to create the links and send them to the learners' group. - When the online class is finished, I have to check all the links, edit them, and send them to my learners to rewatch the recorded video. - I have a WhatsApp group with my students and answer their questions any time of the day. - Answering their questions is time-consuming; sometimes, they ask annoying questions, but I try to control myself and be as friendly as possible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners' evaluation difficulties Overcrowded online GE classes A rise in cheating Learners' weak internet connection Having students with different proficiency levels in one class Microphone problems Infrastructure problems Whole day instructors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instructors' suggested solutions - One critical reason prohibiting us from developing online teaching methods is the belief that this era will pass, and we will be back to face-to-face classes. - We have to introduce online classes not as an option but as a must for instructors in the modern world. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raise instructors' awareness about online classes.

- We can use videos from successful instructors' online classes worldwide to familiarize our instructors with online teaching.

Research Questions 2 and 3: Staff of the Online Department

The third research question addresses administrators' challenges in conducting online courses during the ERT period. Five primary categories were identified and ranked by their significance:

TABLE 3

Challenges and Suggested Solutions of the Online Department's Staff During ERT

Selected codes	Themes
- The presence of too many learners in the faculty of literature inhibits us from holding high-quality educational workshops. - The preparation workshops for learners before online classes were only five sessions; we primarily provided them with videos and PDFs to be more familiar with online courses.	Lack of educational workshops for learners
- Numerous training workshops were held for the instructors to prepare them for teaching on an online platform, even though the quality of some of them could have been better. - The need for more suitable infrastructure was challenging. - Lack of harmony among decision-making authorities. - Lack of updated technical instruments in the university. - Learners' recurring problems. - Instructors need more technical knowledge. - Slow internet connection.	Low-quality training workshops for instructors Recurring technical problems
- The assessment was done in LMS, but some instructors needed to learn how to design online exams. Therefore, we were supposed to help them.	The difficulty of learners' assessment
Suggested solutions by the staff of the online department	
- Preparing more appropriate infrastructure speedily - Holding advanced training courses for technicians - Holding online material development courses for instructors - Teaching instructors how to work with the chosen platforms - Teaching learners how to work with the chosen platforms - Improving technical instruments in the university	Solutions to solve problems

Discussion

The study's results unveiled distinct effects of the pandemic on three groups within the research, demonstrating varying degrees of disruptions, challenges, and inaccessibility encountered by the participants. Within the context of Alzahra University in Iran, an exploration of the "lived" experience highlighted that the most significant source of dissatisfaction among learners and instructors during ERT) was the instability of internet connectivity. These findings are consistent with previous works by Minabadi (2020), Mousavi et al. (2021), and Cooker et al. (2021).

Based on data from a speed test website that measures global internet connections, Iran is ranked 136th out of 175 countries worldwide. This ranking underscore Iran's status as a country facing challenges regarding internet accessibility. Consequently, online classes have yet to gain substantial favor among Iranian learners. Only a few students had experience with online classes before the ERT period. The slow internet connection issue has notably impacted the ongoing online classes, leading to frequent interruptions due to consistent disconnections and instructors' voices breaking up. These challenges are particularly amplified for learners in

remote areas, primarily due to technological barriers and disparities in internet reliability across different cities within Iran.

These findings closely mirror the conclusions drawn by Minabadi (2020), Shin and Hicky (2020), and Stewart (2021). These authors noted that numerous learners from low-income regions need access to the online infrastructure and cannot afford essential learning devices such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops.

Alzahra University opted for Adobe Connect as its online class platform. According to Pearl and Vasquez III (2016), this platform is among the most effective for conducting classes compared to its alternatives. However, its practical use hinges on a stable internet connection. This made attending Adobe Connect classes problematic for learners needing more reliable internet.

The second most significant challenge for language learners and instructors in online classes was the need for more interaction. Widdowson (2003) emphasized that learners in foreign language classes must communicate using the target language for real-life language use. Unfortunately, this opportunity has been hindered by online language classes, leading to challenges such as reduced social interaction and increased isolation during ERT.

This finding was supported by Golshan and Tafazoli (2014) and Kılıçkaya et al. (2022), who highlighted the dissatisfaction of online TEFL course instructors with the lack of human interaction. Data also revealed that learners attributed this passivity to the inadequacies of Adobe Connect, the platform used for instruction. Learners expressed difficulties chatting in Persian in the Chatbox and facing obstacles in simultaneous communication due to internet and technical issues. However, language instructors attributed the limited interaction in online courses to too many learners with varying language proficiency levels present in one class.

Another significant challenge during ERT was linked to online materials, a concern highlighted by multiple researchers, including Amin and Sundari (2020), Bucol and Ulla (2022), Estrella (2022), Jeffery and Bauer (2020), Oliveira et al. (2021), Rahiem (2020), and Schlesselman (2020). Learners expressed that online materials are tiring, disorganized, and distracting. They believed online books and PDFs could only partially replace traditional paper materials. Although learners acknowledged the eco-friendly aspect and accessibility of online resources, the disadvantages outweighed the benefits. This dissatisfaction stemmed from instructors' lack of experience crafting online educational content due to the abrupt transition to online teaching.

The rushed shift to ERT did not provide the time to develop high-quality online learning materials. Most language instructors were novices in designing and presenting online content during this period. Consequently, they required training to become familiar with creating effective online course materials. This finding aligns with Amin and Sundari (2020), Dashtestani (2020), Hamam and Hysaj (2022), Rahiem (2020), and Schlesselman (2020), who observed that online instructors lacked the proper guidance for utilizing online materials effectively. Furthermore, online content often needed to be more practical than in-person classes.

To address this issue, university administrators organized educational workshops for instructors. However, due to time constraints imposed by the pandemic's onset, these workshops could only cover the basics of using tools like Adobe Connect and LMS. Consequently, the quality of these workshops varied and needed to meet all language instructors' needs thoroughly.

Learners faced similar challenges during ERT. While Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) suggested that learners should undergo preparatory workshops to adapt to online classes, Alzahra University could not provide immediate preparatory workshops due to the swift transition to online learning – classes commenced just one week after the lockdown announcement. As a result, the university could only offer a few educational videos and PDFs within this short timeframe. This unpreparedness of both instructors and learners characterized the initial stages of ERT.

Another challenge learners encountered was the shift from physical classrooms to participating in language classes from their homes. Many felt uncomfortable attending classes remotely due to significant distractions and disturbances from family members. Jeffery and Bauer (2020), Rahiem (2020), Rafidiyah et al. (2022), as well as Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020) have all documented this issue in their recent studies. Moreover,

learning from home contributed to an increase in cheating during exams and assessments. While taking exams at home, learners had access to the internet, classmates, and family members, creating an environment conducive to cheating.

To combat this issue, instructors employed various strategies to reduce or prevent cheating. These included creating multiple versions of exams for each student in a class and implementing time limits. However, this approach significantly increased the workload for instructors, who had to invest substantial time designing and scoring these exams. Overall, remote learning heightened the demands on instructors across various fronts. They had to maintain constant availability for learners on social networking platforms, addressing queries to compensate for the absence of in-person interactions. This aligns with Estrella's (2022) and Klusmann et al. (2022) findings.

In hindsight, the era of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) proved challenging for both learners and instructors at Alzahra University. However, the university administration and IT technicians faced fewer difficulties than learners and instructors. Fortunately, before the outbreak, the university's online department had conducted numerous optional online courses for students, enabling the IT department staff to be well-versed in managing online classes. Consequently, the online education staff was better equipped than learners and instructors, providing valuable assistance in facilitating their online classes.

Within each department, one or two technicians were available around the clock (18 hours a day) to address potential technical issues during online classes and to aid instructors during online exams. Schlesselman (2020) and Weidlich and Kalz (2021) noted that educational technicians in Kenya and Norway experienced a smoother transition due to their prior exposure to distance learning. However, Valsaraj et al. (2021) presented a differing perspective; they contended that in the United Arab Emirates, Oman, India, and Malaysia, learners, instructors, and educational technicians encountered similar difficulties during ERT, as they were all unfamiliar with virtual learning.

The IT specialists at Alzahra University recommended enhancing the infrastructure and utilizing more advanced technical equipment. Additionally, instructors emphasized the necessity for Iranian universities to acknowledge online learning as either a substitute or a complement to traditional face-to-face education. Universities were advised to conduct extensive training workshops for both learners and instructors.

The proposed measures include implementing a preparatory phase for learners before they engage in online classes. On the other hand, instructors should undergo two types of training: one encompassing general technical knowledge for conducting online classes and another tailored to their specific disciplines, focusing on effective online teaching methodologies. Moreover, universities were encouraged to reduce class sizes for general language courses and establish a standardized placement test. This approach would facilitate the enrollment of learners with comparable proficiency levels in each class. The overarching goal of these recommendations is to foster dynamic language classes where learners gain practical language skills. This, in turn, requires the integration of actual language usage.

Conclusion

The study's findings underscore dissatisfaction among both instructors and learners regarding the limited collaboration in online classes. Challenges arise from overcrowded and heterogeneous General English classes, primarily due to enrolling all first-year students together. Due to class size, this approach hampers tasks such as attendance tracking, formative and summative assessments, and homework assignments. A significant hurdle lies in the technical knowledge gap between instructors and learners, highlighting the need for tailored educational workshops.

Another prominent issue is learner evaluation. Administrators and instructors express dissatisfaction with online exam quality, leading to the implementation of various strategies to enhance credibility. However, this inadvertently increases pressure on learners during exams.

Critical pedagogical implications emerge from this study to address online class limitations and enhance effectiveness. Universities can enhance infrastructure, providing up-to-date technical resources for IT staff and instructors. Pre-course training workshops can be organized for learners, while instructors can benefit from general and specialized workshops. Ensuring high-quality online course materials is essential, necessitating instructor training for developing effective materials suitable for diverse learners. To foster positive attitudes towards online education among Iranian learners, instructors should highlight the advantages of distance learning. Creating more homogenized General English classes through standardized placement tests can enhance the learning experience. Finally, post-ERT education could benefit from a blended learning approach.

Although this research provides valuable insights, it is in its early stages and exhibits inherent limitations. Further empirical investigations across various public and Private (Azad) universities are warranted to deepen our comprehension of online General English classes in Iran. Exploring online learning challenges in smaller cities and villages and investigating the psychological impact of ERT on learners and instructors during the COVID-19 outbreak are also promising avenues for future research.

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