



## Digital Resilience in TESOL Courses: Teaching in the New Normal

**Doaa Hamam**

*Higher Colleges of Technology*

### Introduction

Digital resilience is defined differently within different contexts. It usually refers to issues and challenges of being safe online and avoiding cyberbullying or other risks. However, in this paper, I base the definition of digital resilience on the interpretation of Eri et al. (2021), who mentioned that digital resilience means being able to face and deal with the challenges associated with technology and be successful in online teaching and learning, especially as most higher education institutions shifted to online learning as a result of the pandemic. Resilience refers to the ability to survive certain situations. Masten et al. (1990) define resilience as the “process of, capacity for or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (p.425).” This refers to the ability of people to adapt to certain situations and continue to be successful after dealing with the challenges they face. In other definitions, resilience could mean surviving a shock or a certain type of trauma; therefore, resilience is also associated with well-being (Harms et al., 2018). In another distinction by Pan and Chan (2007), resilience is considered a personal trait or a process. When considered a personal trait, it refers to the human ability to survive or bounce back after a challenging situation. However, when it is considered a process, it refers to a series of steps taken to overcome a challenging situation. Resilience can be developed starting from childhood, and people can also practice resilience later and improve their skills (Yost, 2018). The concept of resilience is also rooted in positive psychology and reflects positive adaptations (Luthar et al., 2014). Being resilient is one of the critical success factors, especially in the education field.

### Literature Review

#### Digital Resilience and a Fast-Changing World

Moving from the various definitions of the concept of resilience, this paper focuses on digital resilience, especially in the higher education context. Higher education teachers faced many challenges during the sudden shift to online teaching during the pandemic. Therefore, there was a need to understand their coping strategies at that time. Although we live in a fast-changing world, nobody expected this sudden change in the teaching methodology, and since the advancements of technology, there has been a need to be digitally resilient to cope with the rapid changes. According to the existing literature, higher education teachers faced several challenges when they shifted to online teaching. Examples of these challenges can be “learning



style and cultural challenges, pedagogical e-learning challenges, technological challenges, technical training challenges, and time management challenges (Islam, et al. 2014, p.109)” which were even described before the pandemic by several studies such as the cited study by Islam et al. (2015). After the pandemic hit, there was no other alternative for online teaching, and teachers were obliged to find solutions; however, challenges were also expected. Mishra et al. (2020) described issues with the availability of multi-modal material and reliable communication tools. They suggested that these should be available to enhance the online learning experience, while Guangul et al. (2020) described challenges faced when conducting assessments online, things like the students’ commitment to hand in the assessments on time, academic dishonesty, and plagiarism were also issues to consider. Hysaj and Hamam (2022) described the importance of giving feedback on the online platform. On the other hand, Mouchantaf (2020) described issues like absent students, technical problems, and the need for training and support. Furthermore, Zarei and Mohammadi (2021) described problems such as the lack of technological and financial infrastructures. Finally, according to Aldulaimi et al. (2021), the challenges faced during the mandatory shift to online learning were mainly technical and software-related, especially for the Arabic language.

## **Online Teaching in the New Normal**

Way before the pandemic, many higher education institutions were interested in digital teaching and learning (Hamam & Hysaj, 2021). For many years, there have been many digital teaching platforms and online teaching and learning tools available for free or for a fee on the internet. Teaching with technology has become the new normal, and using chatbots in education or as teachers’ assistants is already part of the discussion (Hamam, 2021). Therefore, most higher education institutions were targeting the shift to online teaching and learning, but the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 accelerated that shift. To be ready to deliver courses online, higher education teachers should be well-trained, and the students should be ready and motivated. In addition, the infrastructure should be strong, and support should be available for both teachers and students. The online teaching and learning process can sometimes be challenging, but it can also be very rewarding and successful. Without needing a pandemic or exceptional circumstances, online learning is currently a trend and it is considered essential, and no one can deny its existence. Therefore, it seems that in the future, online courses will be an integral part of many academic programs.

The conceptual framework chosen for the current study is based on the resilience models described by Fergus and Zimmerman (2005). In particular, the focus is on the challenge model and its application which is described by Richardson (2002 as cited in Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). In the challenge model, there is a link between a risk factor and its outcome. If individuals are exposed to moderate risk factors, they might learn how to overcome them. Based on the challenge model, Richardson (2002) described the concept of Resilience reintegration, which “occurs when one experiences some insight or growth as a result of the disruption. It results in the identification or strengthening of resilient qualities (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008, p.7).” Therefore, this study explores the challenges higher education teachers faced when they shifted to online teaching and how they coped with them. So, the research questions proposed for this study are 1- What is the biggest digital challenge encountered by higher education teachers during the mandatory shift to online classes? 2-How did higher education teachers cope with this challenge? 3-What are the digital resilience strategies used by higher education teachers to cope with digital challenges?

## **Methods**

The study utilized the qualitative method to get in-depth insights into the challenges faced and the teachers’ resilience strategies endorsed during the pandemic. The rationale for choosing a qualitative method for this study was based on the fact that this approach could lead to more specific information about the culture and the values of certain groups. A questionnaire with two open-ended questions was designed based on the suggested framework for this study to collect the required data. The questionnaire was sent to

a purposive sample of higher education teachers in the Gulf region. The criteria used to choose the higher education teachers were (1) they work in a higher education institution, (2) they have more than three years of teaching experience, and (3) they taught 100% online during the pandemic. The rationale behind the criteria used is to ensure that the teachers have enough teaching experience, so the challenges they face are not due to their lack of experience, that they taught online to serve the purpose of the study, and that they work in the targeted sector. The teachers were asked to answer the following two questions (1) What is the biggest digital challenge you faced during online teaching? (2) How did you overcome this challenge? Describe your digital resilience strategies, if any. A sample of 14 TESOL teachers responded to the two questions proposed, the data was collected, and the results were thematically divided to find out the challenges faced by higher education teachers during the mandatory shift to online teaching as a result of the pandemic. The participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity and were told about their right to withdraw from the study at any point without justification.

## Findings

The data extracted from the questionnaire described four main challenges: technical issues, communication issues, students' engagement and response, and the format of the online class and assessment. Other challenges were described by the teachers, such as the availability and accessibility of professional development programs, work-life balance, screen time and mental fatigue, teachers' well-being, and social isolation.

### Technical Issues

A common theme that was identified among the participants of the study was the existence of technical issues. Participants revealed that sometimes they had issues with the LMS or the platforms they used for live lessons with their students. They also mentioned that it was time-consuming to contact IT support and try to fix the issue on the spot, as this wasted precious class time. One teacher said, "at times, it was very frustrating when something breaks down in the middle of the class and stops functioning." Another teacher stated: "we were lucky to have a very robust infrastructure at our university, but IT support staff were overwhelmed by the requests of teachers and students most of the time." Several teachers indicated that they tried to help themselves by using trial and error first; if the problem persisted, they would approach their IT staff at their campus.

### Communication Issues

According to higher education teachers, one of the biggest challenges faced was the idea of communication. Since everybody was working from home, teachers reported some communication challenges. One teacher mentioned, "It was a big problem for me not to get the answer to my questions or the information I needed on time, especially from IT staff." Teachers mentioned that some institutions relied on online meetings or phone calls, while others relied heavily on emails. Some teachers reported that it was challenging to communicate with colleagues and administrative staff during teaching hours. However, they also reported that email communication was the best approach to managing various tasks.

### Students' Engagement and Response

Teachers reported that, in general, students were responsible and cooperative, except for a few cases where students did not join the session on time, refused to turn on their cameras, or did not engage or pay much attention in class. One teacher mentioned, "It was not a big deal for me to insist on seeing students in the online class, but it was a big deal to ensure that they were engaged in the class activities." Another

teacher stressed the importance of Teacher-student contracts where all the responsibilities of the stakeholders were described and agreed upon, for example, joining the class 5 minutes earlier than the class's actual start time.

### **The Format of the Online Class and Assessment**

Most classes were paperless and depended heavily on online platforms. Teachers reported that this led to a fundamental change in planning and structuring their lesson plans. One teacher mentioned, "I used digital tools before, but most of my group activities were on paper, and it took me a lot of time to transfer them into digital so I could use them in my online teaching." Many teachers reported that they had to restructure their courses and add more tools that worked better in the online environment. Another teacher mentioned: "I had to attend quick courses on how to use the online tools, especially for assessment." Two teachers also mentioned that they faced issues with online assessments and academic integrity.

### **Professional Development**

Most teachers revealed that their institution developed courses, workshops, and webinars to support teachers in their online teaching. Teachers reported that it represented a big asset in improving their online practice. One teacher said, "At the beginning, I was terrified of going 100% online, but to be honest, our IT support staff were available and accessible all the time, and that was a great help!" Another teacher mentioned: "I used to attend PDs all the time, but now I am focused more on teaching with technology to help me in online teaching."

### **Work-Life Balance**

Teachers had several responsibilities at home, including kids studying online and house chores, as well as other responsibilities. They had to use the time effectively to teach online and perform all their duties at home and at work. Some teachers identified some digital tools that helped deal with life-work balance, one of the teachers mentioned that she did online yoga classes and mindfulness activities. Another teacher said that having a designated space for using the computer/tablet in each room helped the different members of the family to finish their work or school lessons on time.

### **Screen Time and Mental Fatigue**

One of the challenges that higher education teachers faced was the amount of time spent on screens during the pandemic and mental fatigue. Several teachers reported that the extensive use of computers caused health issues such as back pain, eyesight issues, and headaches. Most teachers mentioned that they overcame these challenges by trying to minimise their screen time. One of the teachers stated that he downloaded an application to show him screen time. The application reminded him of the number of hours spent on the screen, which helped him to manage his screen time. Other teachers talked about following a strict schedule to finish their work. Then they said we stopped using the computer or any digital device for the rest of the day.

### **Teachers' Well-Being**

As this was an emergency, the need for mindfulness activities and strategies was more evident. One teacher mentioned, "I suffered from a lot of stress because of the idea of shifting to online teaching. At the same time, I was also worried about my loved ones." Teachers revealed that their institutions contributed

to their well-being by providing flexibility in working hours, mindful online activities, and launching digital support campaigns to support mental health.

## **Social Isolation**

One of the challenges described by some teachers was the social isolation resulting from working and teaching from home. One teacher mentioned, “The computer screen was for me a window to participate in social life, I suffered from the idea of staying alone, especially I didn’t have any family members living with me.” However, most teachers reported that they overcame this feeling of isolation by organising events online so they could socialise with their colleagues and attend virtual educational events.

## **Discussion**

The current study's findings show that higher education teachers faced several challenges during the mandatory shift to online teaching. Moreover, they also found several strategies to help them be more resilient during the pandemic. Although there was a sudden change and switch to online teaching, the teachers and their educational institutions could cope with the rapid change. Four main challenges were described in this study: technical problems, communication, students’ responses, and the format of the online class and assessment. Previous studies described and cited these challenges as well (Islam et al., 2015; Mishra et al., 2020; Guangul et al., 2020; Zarei & Mohammadi, 2021). Higher education teachers also reported issues with screen time, mental fatigue, work-life balance, well-being, and feelings of isolation. These findings also agree with the conclusions from Coombe and Hamam (2022), who emphasised the importance of teachers’ well-being and how it feeds into the teachers’ professional practice and confirm the conclusions of Ang et al. (2022), who stated that developing resilience is essential for people’s well-being. The findings also show several strategies for digital resilience, like teachers utilising their institutions' services for help and support and joining professional development programs when available to enhance their teaching practice, especially when it comes to teaching with technology (Hamam & Hysaj, 2022). The teachers also utilised their IT departments and their psychological support programs. Teachers revealed that a good part of their support was received through various online platforms and applications. Therefore, the study reveals that professional development programs should include strategies of digital resilience due to their importance, and this finding concurs with the findings of Eri et al. (2021), who stressed the importance of integrating resilience into professional development programs.

## **Conclusion**

The study concludes that teachers were resilient at the time of the pandemic and that they used several strategies to cope with the rapid change imposed by the mandatory shift to online teaching in 2020. Higher education teachers positively viewed the overall online teaching and learning experience, which was described as a big success, although some challenges were faced. Higher education teachers revealed that they faced several challenges and had high levels of stress at the time; dealing with technology was the biggest challenge for some. Other main challenges were communication issues, students’ responses and engagement level, the online classes' format, and others. However, the teachers in this study used several digital resilience strategies to deal with these challenges. The strategies employed by teachers were described in this study; some of these strategies were developed as a result of the support provided by their educational institutions, and some were developed based on the teachers’ preferences and research. Based on these strategies, it is clear that more professional development programs can be created to focus on defining digital resilience and supporting higher education teachers to enhance their digital resilience strategies.

## The Author

Doaa Hamam holds a PhD in Education-TESOL from the British University in Dubai. She is currently a lecturer at the Higher Colleges of Technology, UAE. Dr Doaa Hamam's main research interests are teaching and learning in higher education, teaching with technology, academic writing, linguistics, and teacher education.

General Studies Department  
Higher Colleges of Technology  
Dubai, UAE  
Tel: +97122064546  
Email: dhamam@hct.ac.ae

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