
3-5-2022

Iranian EFL Teachers' Challenges and Coping Strategies During COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study

Nasim Ghanbari

Persian Gulf University, btghanbari@gmail.com

Sima Nowroozi

Persian Gulf University

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Recommended APA Citation

Ghanbari, N., & Nowroozi, S. (2022). Iranian EFL Teachers' Challenges and Coping Strategies During COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study. *The Qualitative Report*, 27(3), 605-625. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5066>

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Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has had unprecedented effects on education. The sudden shift to online classes along with strict physical distancing measures in the pedagogical settings require educators to reconsider all aspects involved in teaching and learning. Teachers as important stakeholders must grapple with the challenges caused by the abrupt transition to remote teaching and learning. Hence, using a qualitative case study, the present study set out to find how two Iranian experienced English language teachers at Persian Gulf University faced with the challenges after COVID-19 came into effect halfway through the university semester. To achieve this goal, the researchers conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with two teachers at different times during the course. Besides, the teachers were asked to provide a descriptive account of how they dealt with the pandemic in their teaching context. The findings showed that after the shift to online teaching, the two teachers initially encountered several pedagogical, technological, institutional and affective challenges; however, as the course proceeded, they could find solutions to cope with the new situation. The teachers recounted problems that remained and negatively affected their practice. Overall, the authors discuss that to continue the education in the new online mode several pedagogical and administrative measures should be taken. Further, the results of the present study provide directions for the teachers who need to adjust their practice in the current time of virtual education.

Keywords

COVID-19, challenges, English language teaching, coping strategies, online teaching and learning, teacher professional development, Persian Gulf University, qualitative case study

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to express their gratitude to two instructors at PGU Department of English Language and Literature for their participation in this study. The researchers further wish to thank PGU IT Department in especial Dr. Amin Keshavarz for their constant help provided to the university during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Iranian EFL Teachers' Challenges and Coping Strategies During COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study

Nasim Ghanbari and Sima Nowroozi
Persian Gulf University, Bushehr, Iran

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has had unprecedented effects on education. The sudden shift to online classes along with strict physical distancing measures in the pedagogical settings require educators to reconsider all aspects involved in teaching and learning. Teachers as important stakeholders must grapple with the challenges caused by the abrupt transition to remote teaching and learning. Hence, using a qualitative case study, the present study set out to find how two Iranian experienced English language teachers at Persian Gulf University faced with the challenges after COVID-19 came into effect halfway through the university semester. To achieve this goal, the researchers conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with two teachers at different times during the course. Besides, the teachers were asked to provide a descriptive account of how they dealt with the pandemic in their teaching context. The findings showed that after the shift to online teaching, the two teachers initially encountered several pedagogical, technological, institutional and affective challenges; however, as the course proceeded, they could find solutions to cope with the new situation. The teachers recounted problems that remained and negatively affected their practice. Overall, the authors discuss that to continue the education in the new online mode several pedagogical and administrative measures should be taken. Further, the results of the present study provide directions for the teachers who need to adjust their practice in the current time of virtual education.

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Introduction

Late in 2019, a new virus was observed in China. The virus which spread rapidly was labelled as COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO) on February 11, 2020. Later, on the eleventh of March, WHO declared the outbreak of a pandemic (Doctors without Borders, 2022). Besides widespread disruptions to many sectors like travel, business and economy, the pandemic has had unprecedented effects on education. As an example, at the end of January 2020, 30 million learners studying at 300 higher education institutions in China had to shift to online education without prior notice (Lau et al., 2020). This global transition from face-to-face education to online happened at a time when there was no prior guidance, insight, or specific models of good practice. The abrupt transition to remote teaching which used various internet-based resources created many challenges for the students and teachers. In addition, the idiosyncratic nature of the shift to online learning have cast doubt on the relevance of the previous research on online learning.

Several previous researchers analyzed the shift to online education via the innovation theory. According to this theory, the particular feature of an innovation determines the magnitude of its success. Therefore, some research (e.g., Caldwell, 2018, Herrando Rodrigo, 2017) studied students' reactions to educational opportunities created by online learning innovation. However, in these studies online education was a supplement to the traditional learning rather than a complete replacement for it. Additionally, the sudden shift to online learning has prevented experimenting different aspects of the innovative practice (Todd, 2020). Some other studies also reported several weaknesses with the online learning (Baralt et al., 2016; Tang, 2019).

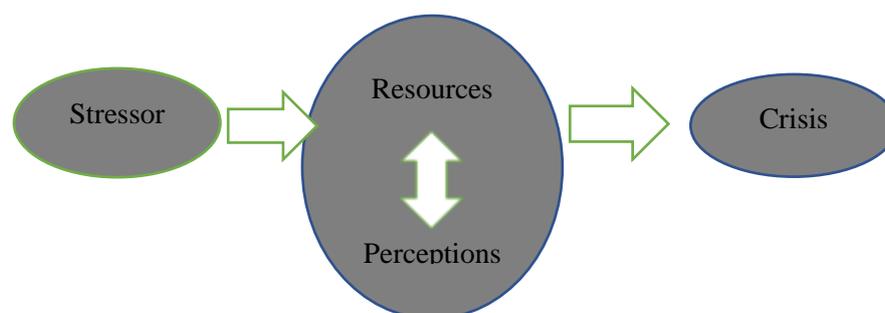
In the words of Chapelle (2007) technological innovations in education can be studied in two ways: examining its effect on the student performance and studying the teachers' evaluation of the innovative practice. Online teaching caused by COVID-19 presented an innovation to the educational system at all levels including pedagogical, technical, practical, administrative, etc. Among this, the current innovative "emergency remote teaching" (Bridges, 2020) has also led to numerous challenges for the students and the teachers which need to be studied.

As another model which provides a theoretical foundation for a crisis induced by the sudden shift to a new situation, the ABC-X model by Hill (1949, 1958) can be named. This model (Figure 1) which is used to explain if a stressor event can lead to a full-scale crisis has been used in many studies (Boateng, 2017; Conley et al., 2016; Dunn et al., 2019; Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020; Karikari & Boateng, 2019; McNeil Smith & Landor, 2017; Murry et al., 2018; Randall & Bodenmann, 2017; Van Schoors et al., 2019).

In this model (i.e., ABC-X), A stands for the stressor, B represents available resources to manage the crisis and C is the way the stressor event is perceived. Letter X also shows the degree the outcome (i.e., the interplay between the recourses and perceptions) is considered as a crisis.

Figure 1

Illustration of Hill's ABC-X model



At the time of writing this paper, several studies have been published that investigated how English language teachers reacted to the crisis brought by COVID-19 in different teaching contexts across the world. As an example, Davies et al. (2020) provided a reflective account of the way experienced EAP practitioners in four Sino-foreign universities in China dealt with the crisis. The teachers were asked to reflect on five major themes of interaction, learner autonomy, feedback, leadership, and institutional support. The findings showed that the teachers should design online courses with support mechanisms to boost the learners' autonomy. Also, increasing formative assessment and providing detailed feedback can enhance the quality of the students' assignments. At the administrative level, the study recommends that program administrators avoid the one-size-fits-all approach to the new educational delivery mode and

consider multiple factors in the success of the course. In another study, Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) investigated the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on a group of ESL learners and TESOL practitioners in a university context in the United States. The findings of their study showed that both teachers and students experienced higher levels of stress after the pandemic to the extent that teaching, and learning were not their main priority. Also, the students faced more challenges in the online mode and their speaking did not develop as their writing. Todd (2020) also surveyed a group of 52 English language teachers at a known Thai university to explore their perceptions of the shift from the classroom to online teaching. The findings showed that while the teachers initially faced with many serious problems, they gradually found solutions to deal with. Also, the teachers recounted some problems such as identifying suitable stimulating activities and assessing the students' tasks that remained.

In addition, Forrester (2020) studied the challenges and the possible solutions associated with moving a group speaking assessment task from face-to-face to online mode upon the outbreak of the pandemic at a university context in Hong Kong. The results showed that while teachers had a positive view on the new one-to-one discussion assessment, the students were ambivalent with some preferring the original group discussion format. The author recommends that a body of administrative, pedagogical and integrity concerns should be considered along with the teachers and the students' feedback on the new assessment task. Khatoony and Nezhadmehr (2020) also investigated the challenges Iranian teachers faced in the integration of the technology for online classes during COVID-19 pandemic in Iran. The findings of this study showed that the teachers despite using the online applications and the platforms efficiently, faced many challenges such as lack of appropriate materials, learners' lack of attention and demotivation towards online classes, lack of funding and support for language institutions. However, the teachers generally were positive to the adaptation of technology in the Iranian educational settings.

In the same line, Abid et al. (2021) investigated how transition to online teaching affected different aspects of a group of Pakistani teachers' career during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of interviews with the teachers showed that five areas including culture and gender-related issues, teaching effectiveness, challenges in online teaching, coping strategies, and faculty's post-COVID-19 perceptions were mostly considered by the teachers in the context. The findings implied that the teachers preferred to focus on the immediate pedagogical concerns in their context than considering the global experiences on online education.

In a review study, Turnbull et al. (2021) referred to five challenges of online education experienced by higher education institutions including synchronous/asynchronous learning tool integration, access to technology, faculty and student online competence, academic dishonesty, and privacy and confidentiality. Moreover, the authors recommended several strategies like providing e-learning training support for faculty and students, fostering online learning communities, and expanding traditional face-to-face course delivery to incorporate more elements of the blended learning.

Similarly, in another study Chung and Choi (2021) examined the satisfaction level of the instructors and the students with the new online mode. The results of the study showed that the teachers developed a professional learning community to develop new forms of assessment practices which were formative and process-oriented in nature. The study further showed that while the students were highly satisfied with the new forms of language assessment practices, the teachers were ambivalent with the new practice. Zhang et al. (2021) who investigated the online assessment practices of six EFL teachers in a Chinese university also found that the EFL teachers made assessment decisions and selected specific assessment methods based on policy, the local context, and their own teaching experience and reflections.

Yulianti and Mukminin (2021) further studied how the elementary school teachers in rural and urban areas in Indonesia experienced online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicated to six main aspects of online teaching in the context. These included pedagogical activities during the school closure, teachers' assessment of the students' learning, how the teachers maintained the students' motivation, the challenging subjects to teach online, support from the school and the parents and the barriers to online teaching and learning

As the above studies show, the ways teachers perform in the situated contexts of their practice including how they deal with the complex teaching scenarios and reflect on them would enhance their professional development (Ersin et al., 2020). According to Eisner (2002), teaching is like playing an instrument. In fact, through engaging in practical pedagogical tasks and receiving constant feedback teachers promote their professional identities. Therefore, the goal of phronesis (i.e., practical wisdom) would be obtained through dynamically reflecting on different teaching experiences (Lee et al., 2012).

It should be also added that long before Coronavirus pandemic caused the shift to online teaching, blended or mixed-mode delivery through the integration of the technology into the classroom teaching has been an option provided in many tertiary institutions (Alakrash & Razak, 2020; Alfallaj, 2020; Shariq, 2020; Webb Peterson, 2001). However, as mentioned above, the provision of blended learning was an additional provision and not the whole replacement of the course. As online mode of educational delivery has become the 'new normal' in many tertiary education contexts around the world and considering the power-coercive and unplanned nature of the change, a coherent research program is needed to investigate the change in different tertiary education contexts. In this way, the directions for the successful online courses in the future would be identified. Moreover, a greater understanding of the challenges the teachers face in the online teaching mode would help program administrators to implement policies for improving the quality of education. Additionally, the findings would have important implications for the teacher professional development programs. Building on the above discussion, the present study was conducted to answer the following two major research questions:

- What were the challenges faced by two Iranian English language teachers involved in online teaching at the time of COVID 19 pandemic?
- What were the solutions adopted by two Iranian English language teachers involved in online teaching at the time of COVID 19 pandemic?

Method

In this section, the particular methodology pursued in the study including design, characteristics of the participants, context of the study and data collection and analysis procedures will be elaborated on.

Study Design

The present study adopted a case study design which is used when the researcher aims to provide an in-depth understanding of particularity and complexity of a single case (Dörnyei, 2007). This study focused on the lived experiences of two teachers who shifted their teaching from face-to-face to online education during a global pandemic crisis. In fact, the study pursued to provide a thick description of the way the teachers functioned in their teaching context. In addition, the geographical setting of the study (i.e., Bushehr located in south-west of Iran) and

the selection of the university teachers among different educational level teachers who faced with the pandemic further bounded the case.

Moreover, among different types of case studies, an exploratory case study was selected. Based on Yin (2014), exploratory case studies seek to answer “what” questions. Therefore, due to nature of the research questions posed, the exploratory case study was adopted to reveal different aspects of the teachers’ practice affected by the pandemic.

Participants

There were a group of 10 female English instructors in the department of English language and literature in this study. Out of these, two female English language teachers agreed to participate in the present study. For reasons of anonymity, the two teachers are referred to as teacher A and teacher B henceforth. Teacher A obtained her M.A. in English literature. She taught at Persian Gulf University (PGU) for 21 years. She was 56 years old. The other participant in this study, Teacher B aged 39 and had a Ph.D. in English language teaching (ELT). She was also quite experienced with 15 years of teaching English at PGU and other language institutes. There was one major inclusion criterion in this study. In fact, the researchers sought for the teachers who were eager to participate in this study. The researchers found that uninterested teachers would not sit for hours of interview. In addition, they did not adopt a positive look to the research overall. Besides due to fear caused by the pandemic, some teachers were unwilling to participate in the research which needed some face-to-face sessions. Teachers with less than 10 years of experience were also excluded in this study. In fact, the researchers believed that the teachers’ expertise obtained through the years would help them take more professional measures at the time of crisis. Therefore, the two teachers who were willing to share their experiences of online teaching with the researchers participated in this study. As can be inferred, the study utilized a purposeful sampling strategy in which the researchers selected the individuals who can purposefully contribute to the understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The two teachers were asked to sign an informed consent to participate form. By doing so, the teachers agreed to contribute to the study. They were also assured that their data would be confidential and would be used only for research purposes. So, they actively participated in the whole study period which lasted for six months. Although this study was deemed to be exempted from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, the authors did several attempts to protect the participants’ safety, privacy, and confidentiality and hence ensure the ethical research practice.

Instruments

Interview Package

A semi-structured interview protocol was prepared to know the perceptions of the two teachers involved in online education. To develop the interview items, the researcher used the related research studies (Abid et al., 2021; Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020; Todd, 2020; Turnbull et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). The interview items were prepared in Persian (i.e., native language of the participants) to prevent any probable language hindrances. The duration of the interviews differed depending on the topic discussed. However, each interview session lasted almost two hours. Overall, six interviews totaling 750 minutes were conducted throughout the study. The interviews which were conducted and audio-recorded by the researchers were next transcribed.

Teachers' Descriptive Accounts

To elicit the teachers' descriptions and interpretations of different events involved in the transition from face-to-face to online teaching, they were asked to keep diaries (Dörnyei, 2007). The aim here was to get access to the feelings, thoughts, and interaction of the teachers to online teaching in an unobtrusive way. Therefore, the teachers as insiders in the context were required to provide a self-report each time a specific event occurred. The teachers could record their accounts during the whole study time. Due to the focus of the study on the challenges and the solutions the teachers adopted to cope with them, the teachers were supposed to note down how the transition to online teaching affected different aspects of their practice throughout the whole semester. Therefore, there was no strict rule for the number of accounts the teachers provided, rather the emphasis was on recording their interpretations when the pandemic affected any aspect of their teaching practice during the study time which was the whole semester.

Context of the Study

The study was conducted in the department of English language and literature at PGU in Bushehr located in southwest of Iran. The English department was established more than 25 years ago in the university. The Department offered B.A. and M.A. programs in both English literature and English language teaching to the students. In addition, it covered all the general English language courses requirements of the other departments in the university.

In Iran, the second semester of the academic year runs from February to June. At the time of the study, the number of COVID-19 cases were relatively few in the province; however, the fear and anxiety caused by the pandemic was clearly observed in the campus and among the teachers and the students. Three weeks after the beginning of the second semester, social distancing rules came into effect across the country which meant that all face-to-face classroom teaching had to stop. However, the shift to online classes appeared with a delay. In fact, although the university had developed its learning management system (LMS) long before the pandemic, such a widespread and abrupt shift to online learning was not expected. Additionally, although many teachers had used some online tools to supplement their teaching, few of them had taught the whole course online. After a brief delay which lasted for about one week, the university provided different departments including the English department with instructional videos and the needed technical support on how to use the LMS and its cell phone application, *moodle*. Therefore, following the university's decision to stop all face-to-face instruction, English department also decided to continue the remaining 12 weeks completely online.

Self-of-the Researchers

The two researchers who conducted the present study were experienced members of the department of English at PGU. The first researcher had more than 15 years of teaching English experience. Similarly, the second researcher has been involved in teaching English for more than 25 years. The researcher's vast teaching experience along with their familiarity with the context of the study helped them build rapport with the participants. In addition, their participation as insiders in the context could help them understand different aspects of the teaching environment affected by COVID-19 pandemic. Such a deep involvement in the context was a great asset for the researchers to frame the research questions. In other words, the researchers did not impose their experience on the study; rather, it helped them develop an

empathy with the participants which led to a deeper and more rigorous interpretation of the participants' experiences during the pandemic.

The researchers as members of the teaching context who faced with an unprecedented event (i.e., COVID-19) could identify the potential challenging grounds for the teachers. Therefore, the participants' lived experiences through the pandemic were analyzed in the light of the researchers' awareness, knowledge and sensitivity developed by their understanding of the context. It should be also mentioned that the researchers' long involvement in the context might bring certain biases in the data collection and the interpretation; however, the effort was made to ensure objectivity to the extent possible.

Data Collection

In this study, data were collected from February to June 2020. To collect data for the present study, the researchers developed a semi-structured interview protocol which addressed salient aspects of the teachers' practice. Overall, out of the six focused interview sessions, three were done collectively with both participants and the remaining three were conducted individually with each of the teachers. Critical points were recorded and discussed with the teachers in the interview sessions. The interviews were conducted at different times throughout the 12-week online sessions. Some of the interviews were conducted shortly after the shift to online sessions. Some others were conducted during the semester which were after the Iranian New Year holidays and finally the two teachers were interviewed after the final exams in June 2020. The participants were asked to provide thorough answers by giving specific examples and reflecting on them in a detailed way.

In addition to the interviews, the teachers were asked to write descriptive accounts of their teaching online experiences. Upon the end of the 12-week instruction, the teachers provided detailed accounts which showed their reflection on salient aspects of the course. The teachers' narratives collected in this way were considered to provide further evidence for the teachers' practices during the pandemic.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data as well as the teachers' descriptive accounts. Therefore, Terry et al. (2017) Thematic Analysis (TA) procedures were adopted to identify concepts, categories, and themes from the gathered data. The thematic analysis conducted in this study used the following steps:

Stage I: Familiarizing with the Data

This process which can begin during the data collection involves transcription of data and reading and re-reading through the data to obtain initial ideas. The collected data in this study were first transcribed in Persian (mother tongue of the participants) and then it was translated into English. The researchers were sensitive to different data elements which implied any meaning patterns.

Stage II: Generating Codes

In this step, the researcher systematically generates initial codes from the data which can act as building blocks of the analysis. Along with coding, the researcher also seeks for similarities and patterns across the data. In this study, the researchers developed codes and stayed focused on coding the whole dataset before constructing themes.

Stage III. Searching for Themes

The themes developed at this stage are not fixed and they are open to change. In fact, the codes developed in the previous stage construct the initial themes and the relevant data for each will be gathered. Therefore, the researchers examined the codes to develop themes in the data.

Stage IV. Reviewing Potential Themes

Here the themes developed in the previous stage are further refined. The researchers read the data extracts supporting each of the themes and reviewed and refined the individual themes and the initial thematic map.

Stage V. Defining, Naming and Analyzing Themes

In this stage, the researcher has clearly defined and named themes and the sub-themes.

Stage VI. Producing the Report

In this final stage, the researcher uses the narratives, data extracts and the arguments to further support the direct and indirect relation among the themes. Overall, the thematic analysis of the interviews and the teachers' diaries was used to identify the challenges the two teachers faced and the solutions they adopted during a 12-week of online teaching in the particular context of the present study.

The following illustrates a sample theme emerged from the teachers' interviews and accounts.

Table 1

Sample Emerged Theme from the Teachers' Interviews and Narrative Accounts

Prevalent Concepts	Earlier Themes	Final Emerged Theme
Lack of IT skills; negative attitudes to technology in education; limited online competence	Poor digital literacy	Technology-related problems
Security of online exams; privacy and protection; academic dishonesty	Online assessment concerns	
Lack of appropriate electronic devices; poor infrastructure for online teaching	Technological availability	

The researchers also took several measures to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. Qualitative validity, which is differently named as truthfulness, credibility, and authenticity (Creswell & Miller, 2000) is concerned with the accuracy of the findings whereas the qualitative reliability refers to the consistency of the researchers' approach across

researchers and different projects (Gibbs, 2007). Therefore, in this study, the attempt was made to provide a thick description of different components of the research such as setting, participants and results. The assumption was that a detailed description would add to the validity of the study. In addition, the authors used member checking by sharing some of the final themes with the two teacher participants to see if they confirm their accuracy. Meanwhile, the authors as members of the research context clarified the possible biases that they might bring to the study. The researchers emphasized that their interpretation could be affected by their interconnections to the research context and the participants of the study who were their colleagues for a long time.

Moreover, to check the reliability of the study and following Gibbs (2007), the researchers carefully checked the transcripts for the probable mistakes. In addition, the researchers as coders in the study continually shared their analysis to follow a constant approach for coding. In addition, the inter-coder agreement using the Cohen's Kappa estimate was found to be 0.87 which indicated a considerable degree of consistency among the coders in the study.

Results

The Challenges of Online Teaching for the Instructors

Technology-Related Problems

The following three major themes emerged about the technological challenges that the teachers experienced in this study. Each of these themes would be explained using the teachers' extracts as evidence.

Poor Digital Literacy. In the words of the two teachers in this study, the abrupt shift to online education happened at a time when the instructors did not have enough IT skills for adapting their courses into online ones. Despite the gradual integration of technology into the university educational programs, the faculty and the students had not developed the necessary online competence to cope with the technological challenges caused by the shift to online courses. As an example, both teachers mentioned that they did not know how to work with the university learning management system (LMS). Teacher A, for example, stated that early after the shift to online mode, she used social media apps such as WhatsApp to communicate with her students as well as sending them the educational files.

Teacher A: I did not know how to use LMS to teach the students. In the meantime, I wanted to continue my teaching. I found that WhatsApp can be a user-friendly option. Students knew how to work with it, and I also felt that it worked successfully at the time.

In addition to the lack of necessary IT skills, the teachers were ambivalent to the use of technology in maintaining their instruction. In fact, the teachers considered the technology to add to the efficiency of their teaching and not to replace their teaching. Teacher B described the days after the shift to pandemic as so,

Teacher B: I considered technology simply as a useful instrument that can improve my practice not the one that can replace the whole teaching. I could not trust in the educational outcomes of online teaching!

Online Assessment Concerns. One of the major technological concerns raised by teachers was the security of exams in the online environment. In traditional exams, there are different safeguards that control the security of the exams; however, in online assessment, cheating or academic dishonesty overall was a problem as teachers could not readily verify the identity of the exam candidates. The teachers also did not know how to use the technology to authenticate students and verify the originality and authenticity of their work. Therefore, the teachers focused on the test development and tried to design items in a way that the chance of cheating lowers to the extent possible. One item development strategy was to change multiple-choice items into essay-type ones. As teacher A put it, “essay-type items not only elicit the own language of the students but also it assesses more complicated psycholinguistic processes such as comprehension and production.”

Privacy and protection of teachers’ and students’ individual identity was another concern raised by the teachers in this study. In fact, as instructional channels suddenly shifted to the digitized mode, privacy and protection became one of the leading concerns. As a matter of fact, in the absence of guidelines on how to authenticate the users’ access and how to store and share data, the teachers treated the online education with care. As evidence, teacher B posed her concern in this regard as so, “teaching is a matter of personal expression. How can digital environment with lots of technical caveats protect it?”

Technological Availability. The shift to online teaching happened in a context which was not technologically equipped. Poor internet connection, no provision of sound digital devices (e.g., laptops, smart cellphones), along with limited online competence among the faculty and the students negatively influenced the teaching after the shift to online education in the context. According to the teachers, the university had not developed a firm infrastructure for online teaching. In fact, although the university had developed LMS platform some time before the pandemic, it was not designed as a complete replacement for the face-to-face classes.

The students were also adversely affected by the poor technological availability. According to the teachers, students who belonged to technologically challenged areas and came from low-income families experienced the most of what teacher A referred to as “digital divide.” In the words of teacher, A, “the quality of access to technology after the shift to online education divided the students to those who could proceed with the course and those who missed many sessions and were negatively affected.”

Pedagogical Challenges

The second major theme emerged from the data included the pedagogical challenges the teachers faced in the context. Two sub-themes including features of online education, and pedagogical demands of online education constitute this second theme. The following section describes the sub-themes obtained.

Features of Online Education. The shift to online education faced the instructors with an environment with special characteristics. Reduced interactions between teachers and students negatively affected the students’ rate of engagement in the class. In addition, the teachers believed that online education ignores the students’ particular learning styles. For example, kinesthetic-type learners who learn best through physical interactions could hardly adapt to the new mode. The teachers were also worried about the lack of prompt feedback to the students. As teacher A posed it, their corrective feedback was negatively influenced by the features of the digital environment:

Teacher A: Corrective feedback is beyond simply providing the students with the correct forms; rather, it is a learning practice which happens through a psychologically prepared environment between the instructor and the learners' Online environment as a reduced context complicates the learning expected from giving feedback to the students.

The other pedagogical challenge for the teachers was to shift to the transmission of knowledge approach instead of learner-centered, participatory teaching in their classes. In fact, in the absence of the instructor-student's interactions, the teachers had no way but to provide long lectures without the students' involvement. The instructors in this study were concerned with boring classes in which the students' participation was limited.

Pedagogical Demands of Online Education. The instructors in this study believed that online teaching presented new roles for both teachers and students. In the online class, teachers have additional multiple roles like a facilitator, mentor, and a co-learner. Frustration with technology, extensive workload in the new learning environment along with poor digital competence of the students necessitated the teachers to provide further protection for the students. As an evidence, teacher B stated how she used WhatsApp for further communications with the students. She mentioned that "many students especially those who were not technologically equipped for online learning had faced serious learning setbacks. Even those who had access to technology were overwhelmed with the requirements of the online course."

Moreover, online education demanded the teachers to redesign the course by adapting the content to the new online mode. The teachers also were expected not to compromise the quality of education. Teachers in this study described this as an 'intimidating experience' as they had not received any training for the new online education. Teacher B, for example, explained how she had to align the online tools with the requirements of the course in an integrative way:

Teacher B: Despite the advantages of online education such as its flexibility and the availability of a wide range of content for different audiences in different locations, and also opportunities to adopt innovative pedagogical approaches, the teacher's duty in managing different variables to maintain the quality of education is very demanding. Upon the shift to online education, the teachers had to moderate between learner-related factors, contextual factors, and the new demands of the technology. These all happened at a time where there was no explicit training for the teachers.

In addition to the teachers, online learning also demanded for the learners' self-regulation skills. In other words, online learning requires the students to take more responsibility for their learning through consistent reflection on their learning experiences in the new environment. Teacher A, for example, described how she helped the students to improve their IT skills. She continued that, "the students gradually learned how to develop self-study skills. They were asked to carefully study the recorded video files of the online and offline sessions put in the university LMS."

Affective Problems

As expected, the teachers in the context of the present study experienced several affective challenges. Overall, these can be divided into two sub-themes of teaching stress and mental health of the teachers. These two themes will be explained below.

Teaching Stress. Both teachers in this study described their stressful experiences in dealing with online teaching. Shortly after the university call to stop face-to-face education, the teachers were asked to adapt their teaching to online mode. This unprecedented shift happened at a time when there was no model of good online practice in the context. Therefore, teachers believed that redesigning their traditional course to online was a stressful experience for them. Challenges in managing content, records, and time; poor online competence and engaging students in the learning process created lots of stress for the teachers. Teacher A, for example, explained how she learned to make and record an online session by trial and error.

Mental Health of the Teachers. The findings of this study showed that the pandemic had affected the teacher's well-being and mental health. In fact, the self-isolation that happened following the nation-wide quarantine order challenged the two teachers' mental health. Teacher B also confirmed that the self-isolation and the sad news she heard every day about the Coronavirus made her scared and worried about the future.

Administrative Problems

As mentioned, after the shift to the pandemic the university's main priority was to continue the education. However, due to the unprecedented nature of the shift, the teachers encountered several administrative problems. The analysis of the teachers' interviews and their narratives revealed that the institutional problems could be summarized in three main sub-themes of lack of organization, no training for the staff and insufficient financial support. These three are further explained below.

Lack of Organization. Both the faculty and the students experienced vague days early after the shift to the online education in the university. In fact, the university announced the general details of online teaching after a delay. However, the announced guidelines were still vague and added to the confusion. As an example, teacher A stated how the announced guidelines about the synchronous and asynchronous online classes were controversial and they still added to the confusion. Specifically, teacher A questioned the time allotted to asynchronous courses:

Teacher A: In the asynchronous virtual instruction where there is no interaction between the teacher and the learners, a sixty-minute session exerts a heavy burden especially on the teachers.

Teacher B believed that the university administration had faced a drastic shift in education which was basically different from the traditional education. Therefore, she expected that the university officials be in constant contact with the instructors. She stated her concern as: "In this pandemic situation which no end can be imagined for it soon the university should avoid releasing multiple guidelines; rather teachers should be consulted. Also, the students' educational situation should be consistently monitored. As the change is a multi-faceted one, different stakeholders should be involved in decision-making process."

The other institutional problem which both teachers agreed on was that the university had provided strict controlling mechanisms for the teachers' online teaching performance, while the students were left alone and there were no rules to monitor their pedagogical behaviors. Teacher B, for example, stated:

Teacher B: I think both teachers and the students are involved in the instruction which means the pedagogical norms and disciplines should be observed by both sides. Unfortunately, the university did not control the students' participation in online classes or their improper academic behavior. But the teachers' performance was checked consistently per week by asking them to fill out detailed forms.

Apparently, the teachers working at self-isolation and dealing with many technical difficulties were underestimated by the unfair university rules.

No Training for the Staff. A related concern to the above challenge was the lack of training for the teachers. The teachers stated that they needed training on different aspects of online teaching. In fact, because of the instructors' little exposure to online teaching, several complexities had emerged about designing, structuring, and organizing the course, making sessions interactive, and identifying the relevant resources and tools. Therefore, the teachers needed immediate training to learn how to cope with the requirements of the online teaching.

Insufficient Financial Support. The other challenge the two teachers experienced was the lack of the university financial support provided to the teachers. As mentioned, the university had not developed the needed technological infrastructure to meet the pedagogical requirement of the shift to online courses. The teachers had not received any financial support from the university. Teacher A, for example, explained how she had to provide the needed digital devices for her online classes. The issue of financial support seriously affected the educational life of the students. Teacher B believed that several the students could not participate in the classes for not having the needed device or poor internet connection. There were also other students that experienced several problems during the classes.

The Teachers' Solutions to Cope with the Challenges of Online Teaching

As the course proceeded, the teachers could find solutions to address the problems they faced after the shift to online teaching. In the following, some of the initiatives that the teachers used are discussed. However, some challenging areas remained till the end of the course.

Technology-Related Solutions

Despite the many technological challenges, the teachers faced, they gradually learned how to cope with the problems. The solutions can be categorized into two groups of teacher-based and university based. These two themes are explained below.

Teacher Solutions. After the shift to online education, the teachers who now found themselves during a global crisis made many efforts to maintain the instruction flow. As the course proceeded, the teachers learned how to work with the technology in their online classes. Although both teachers referred to numerous instances of technical failures in their classes, their interactions with different aspects of the online courses helped them to have solutions for

many of their problems. For instance, the teachers learned how to use both synchronous and asynchronous devices to improve the quality of their teaching. Teacher B referred to numerous instances that due to poor internet connectivity, synchronous classes got cancelled and they instead continued with the popular WhatsApp platform. The use of WhatsApp was especially important in the exam sessions when because of some technical failures or blackout (which was common in the region), the students were guided to send their answer sheet to the WhatsApp.

This experiential knowledge gradually affected the negative attitudes the teachers had to technology-based education early after the shift to online education. The teachers mentioned that the integration of technology into pedagogy would be indispensable in the post-COVID era. Therefore, they should accept that the technology which relies on digital infrastructure can affect the quality of their teaching in case they do not improve their digital literacy. Teacher A, for example, believed that along with different changes in education, teacher professional development programs should also change. She continued as, 'teacher training programs should take advantage of both face-to-face and online environments. In fact, traditional teacher training body of knowledge should be translated in the new online environment. For example, we can have e-practicums in teacher training which can use online mentoring to professionally prepare the teacher trainees in the new environment.

University Solutions. Gradually the university could take a lead to provide clarity on the plans and decisions announced. In addition, it provided numerous technical supports for the teachers through several instructional videos published for the university LMS. Teacher A mentioned how she greatly benefited from the online workshops held by the university IT department. She also continued that the IT department had formed a WhatsApp group which was only focused to resolve any problems the teachers faced during their online teaching. The head of the university IT department actively helped the teachers and the students to resolve their technical problems. Teacher B who appreciated the efforts of the IT head, Dr. Keshavarz, stated, "He was accessible all the time throughout the day. He patiently answered my questions and guided me to the correct practice. I think he was so influential in reducing my anxiety when suddenly facing the online teaching."

Pedagogical Solutions

The instructors, who had experienced several pedagogical problems early in the course, could gradually cope with the new teaching environment. The teachers could improve their teaching by first knowing and getting adapted with the new online environment and second adopting and performing their new roles. These two coping strategies are further explained below.

Getting Familiar with the Online Environment. As the instructors' online competence improved, they could take advantage of the pedagogical strengths of the online education. Gradually, the teachers found that they deal with a flexible environment in which they can have access to lots of content for different learners. In addition, the teachers learned how to use the many characteristics of online environment to replace some aspects of face-to-face teaching which was missing in the online education. As an example, student engagement in class was one of the main concerns of the teachers in online classes. The teachers in this study were worried about a phenomenon they called as "ghost students" who referred to the students who seemed to be in the class but when the teacher called them, they did not respond. The teachers used some strategies to prevent this. As an example, Teacher A asked all the

students to attend the class with their microphones on. In addition, she occasionally sent some private messages to some students to see if they were really in the class.

Moreover, the teachers found that despite their concern with academic dishonesty in the students' assessment, they could use a variety of options to monitor the authenticity of the students' performance. Teacher B mentioned how she googled the students' texts in the advanced writing course. Sometimes she could find some instances of plagiarism, then she showed the student his/her misbehavior with evidence. As another example, the teachers learned to use the LMS polling option to receive the students' feedback on different aspects of the course. Also, the addition of new options such as raising the hands for the students and sharing the online board in the new updates of LMS enhanced the students' involvement in the class. As teacher B put it, the teachers could define many key concepts of the traditional teaching in the new online format.

Adopting New Roles. In line with more familiarity with the online teaching, the teachers learned that they have different roles such as a mentor, a facilitator, a co-learner, etc. The teachers also had found that they were during a general paradigm shift in education for which different stakeholders were not prepared. Therefore, different psycho-pedagogical along with technological factors should be considered to maintain the instructional integrity. As teachers in this study mentioned, the students experienced many psychological ups and downs. Therefore, the teachers devoted a considerable part of the class time to simply talk with the students. Teacher B, for example, stated how she spent about half an hour each session to talk to all the students one by one. She claimed that this initial friendly chat refreshed the students' mood and strengthened their connection to the teacher, their classmates, and the class.

The teachers also provided technical support for the students. Although the university IT department had put many tutorials for the students on the university LMS, the teachers also helped the students with their many technical questions.

Affective Solutions

Like the problems that affectively challenged the teachers, the solutions the teachers used to lessen the affective problems were multi-faceted in nature. The teachers gradually learned to use social medias to spend quality time with their families and friends. In addition, the teachers began to know about the experiences of teachers in different parts of the world. Teacher B, for example mentioned how learning about other teachers' practices during the pandemic helped them to recover emotionally. She proceeded as, "I found that there are many teachers who are experiencing the same challenges as me. I decided to read more research papers and reports to find out how others treated the problems."

At another level, some of the university initiatives also reduced the anxiety level of the teachers. As the university provided further technical resources, the teachers could more easily communicate their concerns. This in turn showed that the initial chaos which introduced considerable stress to the teaching context was gradually managed. Moreover, the university counselling center began to offer free counselling sessions for the teachers and the students. In addition to addressing different personal, familial, and occupational problems of the teachers caused by the pandemic, these workshops provided an opportunity for the teachers to virtually meet each other. The two teachers in this study confirmed how these meetings gave a sense of life and dynamism at the time of social distance and public quarantine.

Administrative Solutions

According to the teachers, the university leadership had an influential role in managing the crisis. The institutional support can be divided into two sub-themes of issuing clear and organized plans to manage the crisis and providing support sources for the faculty and the students. These two are further explained in below.

Clear and Organized Plans to Manage the Crisis. Owing to the unprecedented nature of the shift to online education, the university administration was unable to identify all the needs and concerns of different parties involved in the new education mode. However, despite the initial ambiguity reflected in the instructional guidelines announced after the shift, gradually the university administration could add further clarity to its decisions. The university consistently communicated with the faculty members to know about their problems with online education. At another level, the Iranian ministry of science and technology (MSRT) transferred its authority to local universities to make decisions about the pandemic. Therefore, different Iranian universities including PGU could perform according to the realities of the pandemic in their local context. According to the teachers, the assessment of the students was one example that showed the university agency in managing the problems. Teacher B explained that while the MSRT emphasized on administering the final exams in the traditional face-to-face form, PGU extensively surveyed the faculty's views on how to assess the students. The outcome of the survey was to have all the exams in the online mode and putting more emphasis on the during-the-course formative assessment. Overall, as the online education proceeded the institutional rules got more realistic and the concerns of the faculty were reflected in the announced plans of action.

Providing Support Sources for the Faculty and the Students. As mentioned before, insufficient financial support and lack of training the staff were two challenges levelled at the university administration. Despite the financial problems, the university could provide some free of charge internet for both the students and the instructors. In addition, the LMS platform was continuously updated to remove the technical problems in online classes. Moreover, the university provided some long-term loans for both the students and the teachers. Teacher A mentioned that although the amount of the loan was not much, it was a great help for the students who came from poor economic backgrounds.

In addition to the above, the university emphasized on the training of the faculty and the students. IT department which was in charge had an active role in providing lots of instructional videos and online workshops. In addition to the general training, the university also provided especial training for the instructors in different faculties. Both teachers in the study believed that the training sessions provided within a short time was effective in improving the quality of their teaching and reducing the burden of stress and anxiety the shift to online teaching had created.

Discussion

The findings of this study showed that several psychological, pedagogical, and institutional factors are involved in how to manage a full-scale crisis like COVID-19 pandemic. The unique data of this study which was solicited at a time when the teachers were experiencing the shift to online education revealed how two experienced EFL instructors interpreted the event and then used their experiential knowledge to adjust their instruction to the new mode. The way the teachers dealt with this global emergency can be discussed in terms of the ABC-X model (Hill, 1949, 1958). Following this model, the sudden shift to online education was

perceived as a stressor which threatened the teachers' professional identity. In other words, the teachers had to maintain the instructional continuity while adapting the course to the new online mode. According to Hill (1949, 1958) the interplay between the resources and the perceptions determines the magnitude of the crisis. The instructors in this study could draw on the multiple resources at their disposal to change this source of stress into a series of challenges to handle. It is noteworthy that the teachers' repertoire of knowledge gained over the long years of teaching considerably affected the way they treated the new situation. This new attitude helped the teachers to considerably manage their stress and then make a balance between their actions and emotions. Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) in their study also found that the pandemic increased the learners' and TESOL practitioners' stress to the extent that pedagogical priorities were replaced by a variety of new stressors in their lives. In another study, Abid et al. (2021) showed that the pandemic which influenced different aspects of the teaching caused the faculty to prioritize the immediate online instructional matters. As a solution, the faculty also prepared itself for a blended mode of learning in the future.

From another perspective, the findings of the study showed that online teaching effectiveness is related to the faculty member's characteristics. The teachers in this study were challenged by the content and technology management, poor IT skills, the absence of clear and systematic institutional rules for online education, low student engagement and different psychological and affective challenges. However, despite all these challenges, the teachers gradually learned how to adjust their teaching to the new online environment. This further emphasizes the role of the teachers in online teaching effectiveness. Many studies have also confirmed the dynamic role of the teachers at the time of pandemic (Abid et al., 2021; Turnbull et al., 2021). The teachers' coping strategies indicate that they know their role in online teaching effectiveness. In fact, despite the sudden shift to online education, the two teachers could evaluate their resources to cope with the new situation. This observation is in line with Zhang et al. (2021) who showed how teachers' online assessment practices can be explained by experiential factors such as teachers' motivation, attitudes to the adopting of technology in education, etc. In addition, Ni (2013) found the importance of the teachers in connecting, leading, and working in harmony with the students in online classes.

A deeper analysis of the teachers' coping strategies also underscores the instructors' skill in making a smooth change in the instruction flow. In fact, instead of developing a major cognitive shift in their teaching practices, the teachers just shifted the ongoing teaching methodology online. The attempt to establish cognitive connections between the traditional teaching and the online instruction shows how the experienced teachers in this study provided psychological support for the students in the middle of a crisis. Abid et al. (2021) found how a group of Pakistani instructors decided not to make drastic changes in their teaching methodologies just to protect the cognitive connections of the students with the previous traditional learning. In the same line, the teachers in this study used both asynchronous and synchronous online platforms to fully address different instructional and non-instructional needs of the students. These observations emphasize the centrality of the teacher's practical knowledge dealing with emergency teaching situations.

Moreover, a look at the ways the teachers performed after the shift to online classes and some months later confirms that they were aware of the importance of online teaching to maintain the instruction in the days of the pandemic. In addition, the way they treated the challenges and the coping strategies they adopted reveal that they were promoting their attitudes from simply the integration of technology to the adaptation/development of content in the context. As further evidence for this observation, the teachers emphasized on the blended learning for post-COVID-19 situation (Abid et al., 2021). Considering different educational, psychological, and contextual challenges the teachers faced along with the first-time experience of online classes in the context show a noticeable progress in the way the teachers

considered the future of the education at a larger socio-political level. This shift of attitude to the potential of technology would be promising for the general notion of the integration of the technology in the context. Although the integration of technology to ELT program is not new, few studies have investigated such a full-scale use of technology at the time of a global emergency.

Conclusions

The advent of COVID-19 pandemic transitioned the traditional face-to-face education into the online education. This change has had profound consequences for the instructors and the learners. The present study which was conducted in an Iranian EFL context during the first wave of the pandemic revealed several important concerns that should be incorporated in the shift to online education. As one of the influential concerns, the universities should constantly provide multi-faceted support for the instructors and the students. The focus of the support should be on providing the needed technological assistance for the online education. In addition, blended learning should be a necessary part of education in the post-COVID era. This requires that both the students and the faculty receive training in educational technologies and their use.

At a larger level, the results of the present study call for a more integrated view of education. From this perspective, educational institutes can draw on their resources and adapt them to the requirements of the external changes such the one experienced in the case of COVID-19 pandemic. In this view, education is no more divided into traditional, online, and blended; rather the focus would be on improving the capacity of shifting the professional repertoire of the educational systems into the new emergent situation. In this way, the institutional, pedagogical, and technological resources can be used in any learning approach or delivery model.

This view would have implications for the professional development of the teachers. As the present study showed the teachers have a significant role in dealing with many larger planned changes and classroom improvised changes. Hence, professional development of the teachers should emphasize on the teachers as independent and influential people in the fluid and dynamic context of the classroom.

According to Trilla et al. Daer (2008), the last medical crisis of this magnitude turned back to more than a century ago, (i.e., the H1N1 pandemic of 1918) and there is no research available showing how the pandemic affected the English language practitioners and the students. Therefore, the findings of the present study can contribute to the existing literature on how teachers experienced COVID-19 in the Iranian EFL context.

This study also suffers from several limitations. The present study was conducted in one university in Iran so further studies are needed to include more institutions. In addition, the study was conducted with only two teachers which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, to further validate the results of this study, a survey can be designed and administered with many the teachers. The results obtained in this way can show how the teachers view the problems on a large scale. Moreover, the students as another important stakeholders in this study can be surveyed for how they experienced online teaching.

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Author Note

Nasim Ghanbari holds a Ph.D. in English Language Teaching (ELT). Currently, she works as an assistant professor in the English language and literature department of Persian Gulf University in Bushehr, Iran. Her areas of interest are mainly academic writing assessment, language assessment, and sociolinguistics studies. Please direct correspondence to btghanbari@pgu.ac.ir.

Sima Nowroozi holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature. She has been an instructor in the English Language and Literature Department of Persian Gulf University of Bushehr, Iran for twenty years. Her areas of interest are poetry, drama, and sociolinguistic studies.

Acknowledgements: The authors wish to express their gratitude to two instructors at PGU Department of English Language and Literature for their participation in this study. In addition, the researchers wish to thank PGU IT Department in especial Dr. Amin Keshavarz as the head of IT Department for all his helps provided to the university during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Article Citation

Ghanbari, N., & Nowroozi, S. (2022). Iranian EFL teachers' challenges and coping strategies during COVID-19 pandemic: A case study. *The Qualitative Report*, 27(3), 605-625. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5066>
