The Impact of COVID-19 on EFL/ESL Education: A Developing Country Experience in Motivating Teachers to Return to In-Person Teaching

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly altered lifestyles worldwide. As a response, most countries have imposed quarantine measures, banned large gatherings, and transitioned from in-person to online education. Online education emerged as an essential alternative following the World Health Organization's projection that widespread availability of a COVID-19 vaccine would not occur until 2021. Especially after experiencing the upheavals caused by the virus, there's a pressing need for a collaborative effort, both locally and nationally, to emphasize the importance of reigning motivation to return to university settings. Interestingly, despite the evident benefits of modem e-learning technology, EFL/ESL teachers have shown a marked preference for online instruction over traditional classroom teaching. This study not only probes into the impacts of the pandemic on the lives of EFL/ESL students but also explores the incentives that might prompt EFL/ESL educators in Iranian universities to revert to in-person teaching. As motivation and enthusiasm play pivotal roles in successful education, it's imperative to ensure that both EFL/ESL instructors and students are provided with a secure and well-equipped environment for teaching and learning.

Keywords: Remote Teaching · Academic activity during the pandemic era · Practical Skills

1 Introduction

Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that spread very quickly among people because They are contagious diseases. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous countries globally took the step of shutting down schools, colleges, and universities in an effort to mitigate the virus's transmission. This crisis has led to a heightened demand for online education, particularly in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, across universities worldwide. From elementary schools to colleges, the whole educational system was forced to abandon in-person instruction in favor of online learning. Investigating the potential consequences of online learning and teaching on the quality of education appears necessary in light of this significant transformation in the educational system. Technology has given EFL teachers a lot of opportunities to use inline tools and platforms to improve their students' skills in challenging situations like the COVID-19 issue. Carol Chapelle's book, titled "English Language Learning and Technology," highlights the pivotal role played by the internet and various electronic resources in providing abundant English content to learners. It not only grants access to substantial English materials but also connects learners to a broad spectrum of discussions and information [1]. The emergence of internet speech communities has notably altered the constraints learners often experience in face-to-face interactions. Additionally, learners can access copious amounts of input, engage in interactions while maintaining anonymity, and create web pages that can be viewed by unknown individuals. This enables learners to exchange thoughts and information on specific topics, as well as stay updated on news and events.

Tony Erben underscores the use of Information Technology (IT) as a tool to facilitate learning. This includes the establishment of virtual learning environments for posting homework assignments, announcements, and other classroom-related information. Students, as a result, transition from passive recipients or viewers of IT to becoming active users who actively engage with the technology [2]. In that case, the teachers themselves will be good at using these technologies in order to help students learn effectively. Yet, it should be highlighted that for EFL teachers who have been conducting classroom instruction for many years, teaching online presents its own unique set of difficulties. Transitioning from traditional to online teaching posed a significant challenge for educators. The abrupt shift left them with minimal preparation for this new teaching mode. In the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, these dedicated EFL teachers demonstrated remarkable commitment and adaptability in addressing the situation.
Given the potential need for future lockdowns in response to new waves of infections, it becomes crucial for governments to discern which policies can influence the efficacy of online learning and teaching.

As education moved to the online realm and traditional classroom structures were disrupted, teachers found themselves facing unique challenges in delivering effective instruction. To meet these challenges, teachers may require additional training and education, which can help them to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to adapt to the new teaching environment. Several studies have investigated the factors that influence the motivation of EFL/ESL teachers to pursue further education. In a study conducted by Kuo and Lee in 2019, it was discovered that teacher self-efficacy, which represents an individual's confidence in their capability to succeed in a particular task or situation, exhibited a positive correlation with teachers' motivation to seek further education [3]. Another study by Niu and Wang (2018) found that teacher autonomy, or the degree of control a teacher has over their own teaching practices, was positively associated with teacher motivation to pursue further education [4].

Apart from individual aspects, organizational factors also hold considerable influence in shaping teachers' motivation to engage in further education. A study by Zhang et al. (2020) found that organizational support, such as financial assistance, release time, and recognition and rewards, positively influenced teacher motivation to pursue further education [5].

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about new challenges and opportunities for EFL/ESL teachers to pursue further education. A study by Liu and Liu (2020) suggests that the pandemic has accelerated the trend to aid online learning and has created a greater need for teachers to develop new skills and knowledge in digital teaching [6J. Another study by Hwang and Park (2021) found that the pandemic has increased the importance of teacher self-efficacy and motivation in adapting to new teaching contexts.

In terms of strategies to increase teacher motivation to pursue further education, a study by Cheng and Lo (2019) found that providing clear and achievable goals, supportive learning environments, and relevant course content was effective in increasing teacher motivation to learn [7]. Another study by Tsui and Law (2019) suggests that providing opportunities for collaboration and peer support can also increase teacher motivation to pursue further education [8].

2   Challenges Faced by Educators and Students Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

In this section, we'll discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic affected both teachers and students and how it influenced their willingness to return to in-person learning.

The global impact of COVID-19 on students and teachers has been largely unfavorable. When the pandemic hit, schools and universities closed abruptly, disrupting the normal learning process for both groups. In response, students and teachers in Iran followed the guidance of the Ministry of Science Research and Technology and the Ministry of Health by switching to online learning from their homes.

According to Elhadary et al. (2020), Covid-19 had significant unwanted effects on students. For instance, it reduced their motivation for traditional face-to-face education, with many preferring online learning [9]. The switch to online education posed challenges for students, particularly those without reliable internet access and a good learning environment. Online learning was also found to be less effective than in-person instruction, leading to learning setbacks, disengagement, and lower academic performance. Students missed the in-person classroom experience, struggled with focus, and missed nonverbal cues from their teachers. The pandemic also took a toll on students' mental well-being, causing feelings of isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future.

On the flip side, teachers had to adapt quickly to new technologies and teaching methods, which increased their workload and stress levels. The absence of in-person contact with students made them feel isolated and contributed to burnout and decreased job satisfaction. Importantly, students' challenges, like lower participation, attendance, and limited interaction with instructors, affected teacher motivation. Additionally, the pandemic disrupted opportunities for professional development, which is crucial for teachers' ongoing growth.

The unwanted effects of COVID-19 on students and teachers are significant, highlighting global disruptions in education and underscoring existing inequalities. Governments and educational institutions must collaborate to alleviate these issues by supporting students and teachers during these challenging times.

3 Students Participation

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous educational and higher educational institutions in Iran transitioned to online learning in order to provide education to their students while adhering to social distancing measures. Online learning has become the primary mode of education in Iran since the outbreak of COVID-19.

However, online learning has not been without its challenges. Internet access is not widespread in Iran, and many students don't have access to devices such as laptops or tablets. In addition, some EFL/ESL students may face difficulties in adjusting to the new format of learning and may struggle to stay motivated without the structure of in-person English classes. Due to the aforementioned problems, many students could not participate in online classes during the crisis. Studies have shown that when students actively participate, it helps teachers choose the right teaching styles to keep students engaged and reinforce learning (Pelletier & Rocchi, 2016) [10]. Missing out on these benefits would negatively affect both the teacher and the student.

Despite these challenges, there have been efforts to improve online learning in Iran. The government has launched initiatives to provide students with the necessary equipment for online learning. Schools and universities have implemented measures to support students' participation, such as providing, additional online resources and offering online tutoring to improve their English proficiency. While there have been challenges with online learning in Iran during the post-COVID- Era, efforts are being made to improve access and support students' participation in online education.

4 Practical Skills

Another challenge can be helping students to learn practical skills. It is crucial to establish specific learning objectives for the practical skill you are going to do and to be aware of your contribution to the student's achievement of the goals. In fact, having practical skills can facilitate learning in the classroom. Using practical skills can help structure a lesson and students' attention and knowledge retention. Practical skills are of great importance for the student's future career because these skills affect the student's chance of being accepted into the labor market and his chances of joining graduate studies (Gamage et al., 2020; Heiskanen. Thidell & Rodhe. 2016) [11,12]

The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled educational institutions worldwide to turn to online learning as an alternative to traditional in-person teaching. This transition has affected English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Iran, as well. While online learning has some benefits, it also has some drawbacks that may affect students' practical skills.

The possible effect of online learning on EFL/ESL students' practical skills is that they may not get enough opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills in a real-life context. In traditional classrooms, students can interact with their classmates and teachers face-to-face, and engage in various activities such as role-plays, discussions, debates, and presentations. These activities provide students with ample opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills in a supportive mid mid-authentic environment. However, in an online learning environment, students may feel less motivated to speak mid listen, as they may not feel as engaged or connected to their peers and teachers.

Another potential effect of online learning on EFL students' practical skills is that they may not get enough feedback on their language use. In a traditional classroom, teachers can provide immediate feedback to students on their pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse. However, in an online learning environment, it may be more challenging for teachers to provide timely and meaningful feedback, especially if they have a large number of students or if they rely on asynchronous communication.

Moreover, online learning may affect EFL students' ability to collaborate and work in teams. In traditional classrooms, students can work together on group projects, assignments, and presentations, which not only enhances their language skills but also their interpersonal and intercultural competence. However, online learning environment, students may find it difficult to collaborate effectively, as they may not have the same level of communication and coordination as they would have in a face-to-face context.

Ultimately, online learning has both advantages and disadvantages for EFL students' practical skills. While it provides flexibility, convenience, and access to resources, it also poses challenges for speaking and listening practice, feedback, and collaboration. Therefore, it is important for EFL teachers in Iran to design and implement online learning activities that address these challenges and support students' language development in a meaningful and engaging way. However, the problems of high-speed Internet access and the technical problems of educational sites in Iran cause a delay in covering the topics on the curriculum. Teachers could experience more pressure and stress as a result, which could negatively impact their social lives and other pursuits like research.

5 The Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Social Lives and Academic Pursuits of EFL/ESL Educators in Iran

The COVID-19 outbreak has had detrimental ramifications on the social lives and academic engagements of EFL/ESL (English as a Foreign Language) educators in Iran. Here are some of the ways in which the pandemic has affected EFL/ESL teachers in Iran:

- Social Interaction: The pandemic has necessitated the adoption of measures such as social distancing and mask-wearing, resulting in the curtailment of social gatherings. EFL/ESL educators in Iran have been compelled to limit their interpersonal interactions to mitigate the virus's spread, thereby inducing sentiments of isolation and solitude, which could potentially undermine their mental well-being.
- Academic Endeavour: The pandemic has also wrought changes in the academic undertakings of EFL/ESL educators. Educational institutions have temporarily closed, necessitating the transition to online teaching platforms. This transition has posed a formidable challenge to educators who may lack the requisite technological proficiency or equipment to conduct online classes effectively. Furthermore, access to computers and the internet has been a stumbling block for some students, thereby further complicating the teaching and learning process.
- Workload: EFL/ESL educators have had to grapple with an increased workload resulting from the pandemic. The shift to online teaching has mandated additional preparation time, compelling educators to familiarize themselves with novel technologies and too Is for effective instruction. Additionally, certain educators have shouldered extra responsibilities, including providing emotional support to students grappling with the pandemic's repercussions.
- Uncertainty: The pandemic has engendered a pervasive sense of uncertainty among EFL/ESL educators. The situation is constantly evolving, and it is challenging to anticipate a return to normalcy. Such uncertainty can generate anxiety and stress, particularly regarding job security and financial stability.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has cast a shadow over the social lives and academic pursuits of EFL/ESL educators in Iran. These teachers have had to adjust to a new mode of instruction, contend with an elevated workload, and confront the persistent ambiguity surrounding the situation. In light of these challenges, it is imperative for educational institutions and relevant authorities to extend support to EFL/ESL educators during these trying times and provide the requisite resources to help them cope with the pandemic's ramifications.

6 Enhancing Motivation and Resilience: How EFL/ESL Educators Overcome COVID-19's Impact to Re-engage in Post-Pandemic University Activities

To tackle the challenges posed by COVID-19 and encourage EFL teachers to return to Iranian universities, there are practical strategies to consider. Here are some ways EFL teachers can combat the negative effects of Covid-19:

Enhancing Technological Skills: Teachers can enhance their technological skills to become proficient in using digital tools and platforms for teaching. This can include learning new software, familiarizing themselves with online learning management systems, and exploring different online teaching methods.

Collaboration and Peer Support: Teachers can collaborate with their peers to share resources, ideas, and best practices for teaching online. This can create a sense of community and reduce the feeling of isolation that some teachers may be experiencing.

Mindfulness and Self-Care: Teachers can practice mindfulness and self-care to reduce stress and anxiety related to the pandemic. This can include engaging in physical exercise, meditation, and seeking counseling or support from mental health professionals.

Professional Development: Teachers can attend virtual conferences, webinars, and workshops to stay up-to-date with the latest teaching trends and technologies. This can help teachers to improve their skills and stay motivated to continue teaching in the current context.

To motivate EFL/ESL educators to rejoin Iranian universities, institutions and authorities can adopt the following strategies.

Flexible Work Arrangements: Universities can provide flexible work arrangements to address the needs of teachers during the pandemic. This can include a combination of online and in-person teaching or alternative work

arrangements to reduce workload and strain. A lot of EFL/ESL teachers suggest that a hybrid teaching approach, whether it's in the university or from home, could be the most effective in a post-Covid world. Combining these two methods might boost productivity.

Financial Support: Universities can offer financial support to educators who may be challenging as a result of the pandemic. This can include financial assistance for online teaching equipment or professional development opportunities.

Emotional Support: Institutions can provide emotional support to teachers who may be experiencing anxiety, stress, or burnout related to the pandemic. This can include counseling services or peer support groups.

Recognition and Appreciation: Institutions can recognize and appreciate the efforts of EFL teachers who have continued to teach during the pandemic. This can include awards recognition programs to acknowledge the efforts and dedication of teachers during this challenging time.

In summary, EFL/ESL teachers can reduce the harmful effects of COVID-19 by improving their tech skills, working with colleagues, taking care of themselves, and advancing their professional growth. Returning to university can be a daunting prospect for many teachers, particularly those who are already overwhelmed by their teaching workload. Therefore, it is important to explore strategies that can increase the motivation of EFL/ESL teachers to return to university in the post-COVID-19 era. Institutions and authorities can motivate teachers to return to universities by offering flexible work arrangements, combining work from home or office, financial support, emotional support, and recognition and appreciation for their efforts.

7 Conclusion

Iran's minister of education declared that colleges and institutions would reopen after COVID-19. The reopening of schools and universities in the post-COVID era alarmed all families, students, and teachers because Iran is still dealing with new Corona waves. Moreover, many educators were accustomed to online teaching, which made the shift to in-person classrooms in the post-COVID era challenging for them.

According to this research, virtual teaching presents a number of difficulties for EFL/ESL instructors in developing nations, including technical issues, restricted resource access, and lower pupil engagement. These difficulties can cause instructors to lose motivation, become burned out, and feel lonely. It may be possible for teachers to overcome these difficulties during the post-COVID-19 pandemic in Iran by utilizing some efficient strategies, such as adopting virtual or hybrid learning, using technology to improve learning, and adapting teaching strategies to various learning styles.

As a result, this research also identified a number of methods that can aid EFL/ESL teachers in raising their motivation and engagement levels, including creating networks of support among peers, concentrating on student-centered teaching strategies, and taking part in professional development activities. These methods can help EFL/ESL teachers in developing nations adapt to the shifting educational landscape and b<x>st their desire to return to face-to-face instruction, but they shouldn't be forced to. Additionally, certain measures should be put in place to ensure teacher safety, improve student performance, and do so without placing additional demands on teachers.

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