



# University students' challenges and coping strategies in emergency remote teaching: Fostering a humanized culture

 Sahar Dabir

*Department of English Language and Literature, University of Isfahan, Iran*  
*sahar\_dabir@fgn.ui.ac.ir*

 Dara Tafazoli

*The University of Newcastle, Australia*  
*dara.tafazoli@newcastle.edu.au*

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This qualitative study aimed to uncover the challenges Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students face and their coping strategies amidst the transition to online education. Employing a phenomenological approach, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve EFL MA students at an Iranian university. Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological data analysis procedure. This study's findings revealed a multitude of challenges experienced by the students, categorized into individual, teaching-led, and contextual challenges. In response to these challenges, students employed adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. The study's findings offer valuable insights for educational authorities and teachers, encouraging them to empathize with students' perspectives and understand their unique challenges and circumstances. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, universities can foster a humanizing culture that supports students during difficult times.

**Keywords:** Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), university students' challenges, university students' coping strategies, humanization framework, phenomenological inquiry

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## Introduction

Online education, defined as the provision of education through the Internet, enables students to learn without the constraints of physical or virtual co-location (Singh & Thurman, 2019). It offers numerous benefits, including affordability, convenience, flexibility, and accessibility (see Stone & Springer, 2019).

However, it also presents several drawbacks. These include the absence of physical presence and limited responsiveness of teachers (Arghode et al., 2018; Stone & Springer, 2019), inadequate interactive and well-designed online courses (Stone & Springer, 2019), insufficient training and technical support for online teachers (Arghode et al., 2018; Stone & Springer, 2019), and students' challenges with discipline and self-directed learning skills (Gilbert, 2015). The history of online education in Iran, the context under investigation, is relatively short. The Iranian government initiated the limited integration of technology into education in 2010, aiming to transition the traditional education system into a technology-based one. Technology integration into the education context of Iran has been considered as an 'option' (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022), and the Iranian government failed to have long-term plans for expanding online education. Consequently, the transition from face-to-face classes to online delivery mode during the pandemic occurred with a delay (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Tafazoli & Atefi Boroujeni, 2022). Moreover, the abrupt shift from traditional classrooms to online education was poorly planned and ill-prepared, leading to numerous challenges for Iranian students and teachers.

Technology integration in language education, whether online or offline, is known as Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) (Levy, 1997). In the realm of CALL, various studies have identified inadequate infrastructures, insufficient technological tools, and a lack of financial support as the primary contextual challenges faced by Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students and teachers during online education, resulting in boredom and difficulties in attending online classes (Badrkhani, 2023; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Tafazoli, 2021). Furthermore, research indicates that Iranian EFL students and teachers experienced various negative emotions and psychological difficulties during the sudden transition to online language education (Derakhshan et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Tafazoli, 2021). Students and teachers may adopt several coping strategies, responses, or behaviors in such challenging circumstances based on their individual characteristics, cultural backgrounds, and unique circumstances (Schmiedeler et al., 2023).

Coping strategies encompass the cognitive and behavioral approaches employed to manage internal or external stressors (Schmiedeler et al., 2023), which can be classified into adaptive/functional and maladaptive/dysfunctional categories (Kamaludin et al., 2020; Schmiedeler et al., 2023). Schmiedeler et al. (2023) explain that adaptive coping aims to enhance performance and mitigate stress, whereas maladaptive coping emphasizes avoidance as a means of stress reduction. They provide examples of functional coping strategies, such as taking proactive steps to address the issue, reframing stressors in a positive light, and seeking guidance from others while mentioning withdrawal as an instance of dysfunctional coping. In the same line, Kamaludin et al. (2020) state that adaptive coping involves active problem-solving and seeking social support, including emotional assistance, while maladaptive coping encompasses avoidance, self-blame, and substance use. Their research findings suggest that during the COVID-19 pandemic, students tend to rely more on maladaptive coping

mechanisms like acceptance and mental disengagement rather than adaptive coping strategies such as seeking social support and engaging in humanitarian activities. Moreover, Kamaludin et al. (2020) note that individuals commonly resort to maladaptive coping strategies during crises, indicating that amidst health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, students are likely to lean towards maladaptive coping mechanisms.

The landscape of scholarly inquiry in the domain of online education has predominantly focused on elucidating the myriad challenges encountered by educators, often sidelining the equally pertinent experiences and perspectives of students navigating this digital learning terrain. While the literature has extensively examined the coping strategies and pedagogical adaptations employed by teachers (Hajar & Manan, 2022), there remains a conspicuous gap in understanding how students perceive and respond to the exigencies of online learning. For instance, Hajar and Manan (2022) aptly highlight the scarcity of research delving into university students' viewpoints on Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), indicative of a lacuna in scholarly discourse. Similarly, Lee et al. (2021) have drawn attention to this gap, underscoring the disproportionate focus on the challenges faced by educators and educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, with limited attention afforded to the nuanced experiences of students grappling with the abrupt transition to online modalities. This oversight underscores a critical research gap, indicative of an incomplete understanding of the intricate dynamics inherent in students' adaptation to remote learning environments.

## Literature review

The concept of 'humanization' or 'humanizing' utilized in this study denotes a specific perspective or value regarding humanity and taking action to uphold this belief (Galvin & Todres, 2012). While some scholars have proposed 'humanizing pedagogy' and 'pedagogy of care' as approaches to humanizing education during the COVID-19 pandemic (Karakaya, 2021), the term 'pedagogy' typically focuses more on teaching methods rather than on students' learning experiences. Therefore, this adopts the 'humanization framework' developed by Devis-Rozental and Clarke (2020) to investigate the challenges and coping strategies of Iranian EFL students in online learning during the pandemic within a higher education context. Initially discussed by Todres et al. (2009) in the context of healthcare and social care practitioners, the 'humanization framework' concept was later adapted by Devis-Rozental (2018) for use in higher education, serving as a tool for humanizing the learning experience. For instance, when students are perceived as a homogeneous group, their individual challenges and needs may be overlooked. Emphasizing the concept of uniqueness underscores the celebration of individual differences, thereby positively influencing the learning experience (Devis-Rozental & Clarke, 2020).

Reeve's (2016) exploration of autonomy-supportive pedagogy resonates deeply with this sentiment, underlining the imperative of integrating student viewpoints. By recognizing and valuing students' perspectives, teachers can

tailor their instructional approaches to align with learners' diverse needs and preferences, thereby fostering a more inclusive and engaging learning environment. Reeve's (2016) study serves as a valuable resource for educators seeking to imbue their instructional practices with humanizing elements. By delving into the principles of autonomy-supportive pedagogy, educators gain insights into how to empower students, enhance their intrinsic motivation, and cultivate a sense of ownership over their learning journey. Focusing on the online aspect of CALL, several scholars (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2022; Gleason & Mehta, 2022; Le et al., 2022; Shin, 2022) have proposed various methods to assist teachers in adopting more compassionate and considerate teaching approaches, particularly in challenging circumstances. For instance, Shin (2022) suggests that educators should go beyond the curriculum and cultivate an awareness of sociocultural issues, validate the experiences of their students, and embrace their complexities and diversities. Additionally, Gleason and Mehta (2022) observed that encouraging students to prioritize their well-being during difficult times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can strengthen the teacher-student relationship and facilitate learning.

The existing literature hints at a fundamental lack of insight into the coping strategies employed by students to navigate the challenges posed by online education. While scholars have meticulously documented the hurdles faced by students and educators alike (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Hajar & Manan, 2022), there remains a dearth of empirical investigations into the coping mechanisms and resilience exhibited by students amidst the exigencies of remote learning. This paucity of research not only limits our understanding of the holistic experiences of students but also impedes the development of targeted interventions and support mechanisms tailored to their unique needs.

Given the evolving landscape of education in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing reliance on online learning modalities, it is imperative to address this research gap. Scholars such as Ghanbari and Nowroozi (2022) and Hajar and Manan (2022) have underscored the importance of exploring students' perspectives and experiences to inform effective pedagogical practices and support initiatives. In an effort to address this gap, this study aims to explore the challenges faced by Iranian EFL students and their coping strategies amidst the transition to ERT during the pandemic. Accordingly, the following two research questions have been formulated:

RQ1: What are the Iranian EFL students' challenges in emergency remote teaching?

RQ2: What coping strategies do Iranian EFL students employ to address challenges in emergency remote teaching?

## **Methodology**

### *Research design*

To delve into EFL students' experiences with ERT, a qualitative design was selected for this study to profoundly and comprehensively investigate their

perceptions and experiences. While it could be feasible to examine these issues quantitatively, students' experiences and perceptions are not easily quantifiable. Therefore, we chose a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013) to gain insight into how students experienced online learning during the pandemic.

### *Participants*

In order to employ a phenomenological framework effectively, it is essential to have a relatively homogeneous group of participants (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, 29 participants were purposefully selected from a population of EFL MA students at a specific university in Iran who had experienced ERT during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 29 students contacted, only 12 responded and agreed to participate in the interviews. The ages of the students ranged from 24 to 28 years old at the time of data collection. Table 1 presents the participants' demographic information.

**Table 1.** Participants' demographic information

No.	Name (pseud)	Gender	Age	Semester	Previous online learning experience
1	Negar	Female	27	5	Yes
2	Ashkan	Male	27	5	No
3	Pari	Female	25	5	No
4	Amir	Male	26	5	No
5	Leila	Female	28	Graduated	No
6	Nazanin	Female	24	5	No
7	Shirin	Female	25	5	No
8	Setareh	Female	25	5	No
9	Ehsan	Male	25	5	No
10	Roya	Female	26	5	No
11	Soror	Female	26	5	No
12	Nika	Female	28	5	No

### *Instrument and data collection*

In this phenomenological investigation, the primary data collection method involves conducting in-depth interviews with participants (Creswell, 2013). Open and semi-structured interviews are widely recommended as data collection techniques for phenomenological studies (Roulston, 2010). Given that our research aims to explore detailed and comprehensive descriptions of EFL students' experiences with the phenomenon, it is essential to employ open-ended questions to assess their perceptions and emotions. This approach facilitates the expression of participants' voices. The role of the interviewer (first author) evolved from that of an interviewer to that of a student, aiming to learn as

much as possible from the interviewees while maintaining a “neutral but interested stance” (Roulston, 2010, p. 17).

The validity and reliability of semi-structured interview questions were carefully assessed and improved through an iterative process, resulting in a robust data collection instrument that provided valuable insights. To develop the interview questions, the researchers consulted established theory and prior research (Abid et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Hajar & Manan, 2022). Two experts in the field of language education and CALL then provided feedback on the clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the questions. The experts evaluated the content validity of the questions, ensuring they covered all relevant aspects of the research topic and aligned with the research objectives while accurately measuring what was intended to be studied. Next, a pilot interview was conducted with a student from the same context to identify and address any ambiguities or misunderstandings in the questions. Based on expert reviews and pilot testing, the researchers revised and refined the instrument as needed, clarifying language, removing redundancies, and ensuring logical flow.

Consequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant via Skype, utilizing either video or audio calls. The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant, lasting 10 to 42 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Persian, and the selected verbatims were later translated into English to be reported in the Findings section. These interviews were arranged online and scheduled according to the participants’ availability over a six-week period. Throughout the interviews, the first author adopted a careful listening approach, allowing participants to freely express themselves without unnecessary interruption. The primary focus was on exploring the factors influencing participants’ perceptions and experiences with ERT. To ensure clarity, the first author refrained from making assumptions about the intended meanings of participants’ responses. Instead, she employed follow-up prompts such as “Tell me more about that” and “...can you tell me what it means to you?” to elucidate responses, as suggested by Vagle (2013, p. 139). Additionally, multiple questions were posed when necessary to gain a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences. This approach, aligned with phenomenological qualitative methods, sought to uncover participants’ perspectives authentically (Creswell, 2013). Establishing credibility involved fostering a relaxed atmosphere through informal conversations before and after interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Participants were reassured of their role as collaborators in the study, fostering honesty and trust (Kassaimih, 2006). Empathy played a crucial role, allowing for a deep understanding of participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Husserl, 1977). All interviews were recorded with the participants’ oral and written consent. Transcripts were also shared with participants for review and feedback.



## *Data analysis and the rigor of the study*

In this research stage, the data collected from the interviews was analyzed to identify commonalities among all participants and eliminate themes that did not align with the research questions. Following Moustakas' (1994) approach, the research process began by identifying the phenomenon under investigation, which in this study was the challenges and coping strategies experienced by students. The collected data were then analyzed using Moustakas' phenomenological data analysis procedure, which consists of four steps: epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meaning and essences. We believe that Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological data analysis procedure is a suitable approach for data analysis in this qualitative research, as we aimed to understand human experiences profoundly and holistically.

Moustakas' (1994) approach emphasizes a thorough exploration of participants' lived experiences. By employing steps such as phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation, researchers delve deeply into the richness of participants' narratives, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. Additionally, Moustakas (1994) outlines a systematic data analysis process, providing us with clear guidelines to follow. From bracketing to synthesis of meanings and essences, each step is structured and methodical, facilitating a rigorous and disciplined approach to analysis. While Moustakas provides a structured framework for analysis, his approach also allows for flexibility and adaptation to fit the specific context and goals of the research study. We can tailor the procedure to accommodate variations in data collection methods, research questions, and participant characteristics. Finally, one of the critical strengths of Moustakas' (1994) approach is its focus on identifying the essence of the phenomenon under study. By synthesizing textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essence, we can uncover the fundamental qualities or conditions that define the experience for participants.

The analysis commenced with bracketing the researcher's subjectivity, known as epoché, to set aside personal biases and preconceptions (Ellis, 2016). This involved writing a detailed description of the phenomenon and reading a subjectivity statement to separate the researcher's experiences from those of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The first author employed reflective journaling to ensure objectivity by 'bracketing' personal experiences and prior knowledge. Also, she transcribed each interview verbatim without incorporating her personal experiences or participants' knowledge. Phenomenological reduction involves several sub-steps, starting with bracketing to focus solely on the topic and research question (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalizing was conducted by treating each statement equally and deleting irrelevant or repetitive statements, leaving only relevant 'horizons' or textural meanings (Moustakas, 1994). Clustering similar horizons into themes and organizing them into a coherent description of the phenomenon followed. Individual textural descriptions were created for each participant to describe their experiences using verbatim interview excerpts. The first author employed color coding (Thamrin & Pamungkas, 2017) to highlight pertinent information based on



thematic categories. Subsequently, the horizons and themes were organized to create a coherent textural description of the phenomenon, with each research participant having an individual textural description. Imaginative variation involves systematically varying possible structural meanings underlying the textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). This process allowed for exploring diverse perspectives and deriving structural themes from textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Individual and composite structural descriptions were constructed based on participants' experiences, incorporating elements such as time, space, causality, and relationships. Guidelines were followed to construct structural descriptions based on participants' narratives. Therefore, we integrated the textural descriptions into a framework that explained how the experience occurred by adding context and describing each participant's textural description. Regarding the final step, the synthesis of meanings and essences involves the intuitive integration of textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Essence refers to universal qualities or conditions without which the phenomenon would not exist (Husserl, 1931). Meaning units common to all participants were identified, and composite narratives were created to represent the group as a whole. Composite textural and structural descriptions were synthesized to create a universal description of the investigated phenomenon. To achieve this, we merged the structural and textural descriptions to comprehensively understand the phenomenon under investigation.

Regarding the rigor of the qualitative study, Denzin and Lincoln (2012) suggest terms like credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity to replace traditional criteria in assessing qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose operational techniques to enhance these criteria. For credibility, techniques include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checking. Similarly, purposeful sampling, thick description, auditing, and keeping an audit trail are suggested to facilitate transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The use of reflexive journals and prolonged engagement is recommended to ensure authenticity.

To enhance the credibility of the study, the first author utilized prolonged engagement to establish trust and confidentiality with participants, assigning pseudonyms instead of real names. Additionally, member checks were employed, allowing participants to review and edit their transcripts. Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure transferability, providing detailed experiences for other researchers to understand and apply the findings to different contexts. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis, efforts were made to describe the research context and participants' specific conditions meticulously. To ensure the reliability and validity of our research, we kept a reflexive journal to document our research process. We conducted continuous literature reviews and data audits throughout the study to ensure the accuracy and dependability of our findings. Additionally, we enlisted the assistance of another coder to independently code 20% of the data. This approach allowed us to evaluate inter-coder agreement using Cohen's Kappa statistic (Cohen, 1960),



which resulted in an 88% agreement level between coders (Landis & Koch, 1977), indicating a high level of credibility for our research.

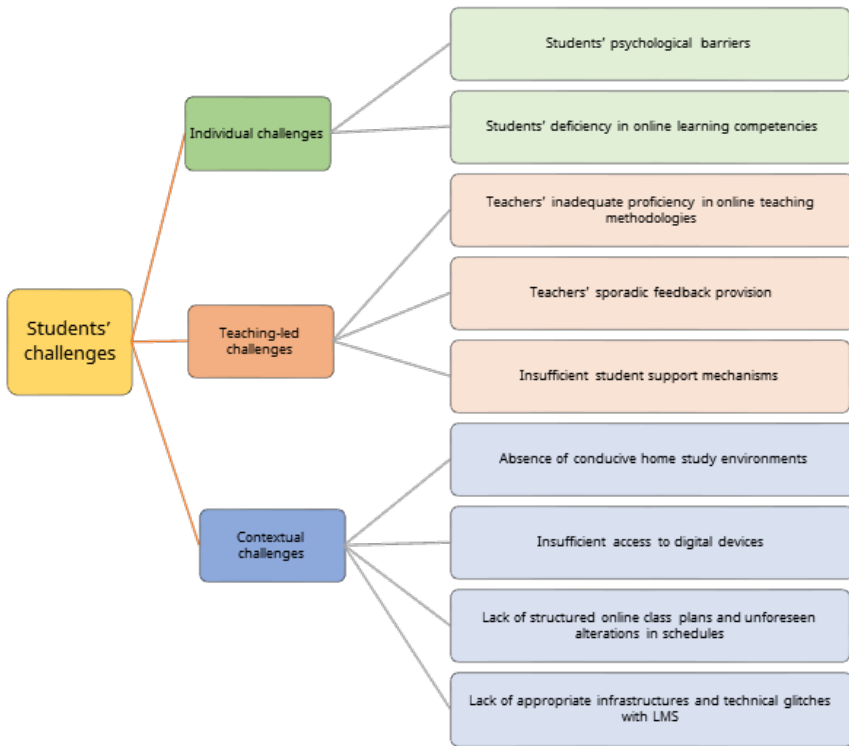


## Findings and discussion

This qualitative research aimed to give the audience a deeper understanding of how students are feeling and experiencing the ERT. This understanding can help universities create a more compassionate and empathetic culture. We did not rely on statistical analysis but instead focused on understanding human behavior and experiences. To ensure the accuracy of the findings, we utilized “verbal counting” (Sandelowski, 2001), which involves using words like “few,” “some,” “many,” “majority,” and “most” to refer to the percentage of participants without providing exact numbers. Specifically, in this study, ‘few’ referred to less than 20%, ‘some’ referred to 21% to 50%, ‘many’ referred to 51% to 70%, ‘majority’ referred to 71% to 90%, and ‘most’ referred to 91% to 100% of the participants.

### *Students’ challenges with online education*

The first research question of this study aims to investigate the challenges encountered by Iranian EFL students in ERT. Data analysis unveiled three primary categories of challenges: individual, teaching-led, and contextual. Individual challenges encompass the psychological barriers and deficiencies in online learning competencies experienced by the students. Teaching-led challenges pertain to teachers’ inadequate proficiency in online teaching methodologies, sporadic feedback provision, and insufficient student support mechanisms. Contextual challenges revolve around the absence of conducive home study environments, insufficient access to digital devices, lack of structured online class plans and, unforeseen alterations in schedules, and technical glitches with the Learning Management System (LMS). A graphical representation of the students’ challenges is depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Students' challenges in online education

**Individual challenges.** Many students grappled with two primary internal factors or individual challenges, including psychological barriers and deficiency in online learning competencies.

*Students' psychological barriers.* The majority of students reported experiencing poor mental health and facing challenges in online learning due to various psychological factors, such as low motivation, heightened anxiety, and increased social isolation. For instance, Negar articulated, "I lacked interaction with my classmates during online classes, leading to quick boredom. I struggled to maintain my motivation to endure lengthy teacher lectures. It becomes tedious when someone speaks in a monotonous manner." Similarly, Soror expressed, "Apart from exam stress, I found myself anxious about Internet connectivity, laptop battery life, and other seemingly trivial concerns." Additionally, Leila remarked, "Without face-to-face interaction [during online classes], I felt depressed, isolated, and disconnected from others."

*Students' deficiency in online learning competencies.* Some students mentioned their unfamiliarity with online platforms, their inability to navigate various applications for recording online classes or completing assignments, and their lack of self-directed skills required for online learning. For instance, Pari commented, "I wasn't acquainted with platforms like BigBlueButton or Skype. Our inability to utilize these applications can be attributed to our lack of skills." Similarly, Nazanin highlighted, "the process of recording and preparing presentations was really time-consuming. It would have been less time-consuming had we possessed the skills for online presentation creation."

Numerous studies have underscored that the COVID-19 pandemic has induced negative emotional responses and psychological challenges among students worldwide, including fear, depression, stress, anxiety, lack of motivation, boredom, and mental fatigue (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Hajar & Manan, 2022; Tafazoli, 2021). To mitigate these challenges, it is imperative for authorities and teachers to offer consistent support to students, particularly during times of crisis. These findings align with prior research (e.g., Gilbert, 2015) advocating for online instructors to aid students in cultivating self-directed learning skills. Additionally, several studies have underscored the significance of implementing online training programs for both students and teachers (Dashtestani & Hojatpanah, 2022; Hajar & Manan, 2022; Tafazoli, 2021). Authorities should provide training sessions for students to familiarize them with online platform functionalities, while teachers can design appropriate in-class activities to facilitate students' self-directed and independent learning.

**Teaching-led challenges.** The majority of students reported encountering various teaching-led challenges, such as teachers' inadequate proficiency in online teaching methodologies, sporadic feedback provision, and insufficient student support mechanisms.

*Teachers' inadequate proficiency in online teaching methodologies.* The majority of students emphasized that most teachers lacked proficiency in online teaching methodologies, exam development, and utilization of platform tools, leading to simply replicating traditional face-to-face methods in online classes. For example, Leila remarked, "Teachers were unfamiliar with online teaching because they had not received adequate training to effectively teach in an online environment. This lack of preparation poses a significant challenge in online education." Similarly, Ashkan observed, "Teachers relied on traditional methods for developing online exams, unaware that the online environment requires different approaches compared to face-to-face classes." Furthermore, Pari highlighted, "Online classes often proved ineffective, as teachers struggled to leverage the features of online platforms."

*Teachers' sporadic feedback provision and insufficient student support mechanisms.* Some students highlighted their inability to effectively learn due to teachers' infrequent and inadequate feedback, as well as their failure to consider individual student personalities and circumstances for providing appropriate support during the ERT. Consequently, students became disengaged and failed to take online education seriously. For instance, Ehsan noted, "In face-to-face classes, we could interact directly with teachers, but this was not the case with online classes. The lack of face-to-face interaction made it challenging for both students and teachers to ask or answer questions, hindering student participation." In addition, Pari shared, "As I had to simultaneously use BigBlueButton as both a teacher and a student, I couldn't attend university online classes. Despite emailing the teachers to explain my situation, I received no response."

According to some students, many teachers lacked the skills to teach, develop exams, and utilize online platforms professionally, primarily due to

the absence of effective online training courses. Consequently, they resorted to employing teacher-centered methods in the online environment, resulting in students feeling bored, demotivated, and disappointed with online learning during the pandemic. These findings corroborate previous studies (e.g., Akçayır & Akçayır, 2018; Fathi & Rahimi, 2022), which emphasized the critical need for developing robust online training programs for teachers (Arghode et al., 2018; Stone & Springer, 2019). Scholars have also noted the dearth of prior experience and professional development courses for online teaching in Iran (Derakhshan et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Tafazoli, 2021). Stone and Springer (2019) recommended that replicating face-to-face teaching methods and materials in online classes is ineffective, urging authorities to design courses suitable for online delivery and provide comprehensive online training courses for teachers.

According to the findings, some students expressed dissatisfaction with their teachers' inadequate support and responsiveness during the pandemic. They felt that some teachers failed to address their specific challenges and were unresponsive to their emails, resulting in feelings of isolation and disengagement from online classes. This deficiency in support and responsiveness has also been highlighted by other researchers (e.g., Arghode et al., 2018; Stone & Springer, 2019). Stone and Springer (2019) noted that a lack of teacher presence and feedback can contribute to higher attrition rates and student isolation. To address this issue, Arghode et al. (2018) recommended that teachers establish a sense of connection with their online learners by conducting weekly online meetings to monitor their progress and address their queries.

*Contextual challenges.* Most of the students emphasized encountering numerous external challenges beyond their control. These challenges encompassed the absence of a conducive study environment at home, insufficient access to suitable digital devices, lack of structured online class plans and unforeseen alterations in schedules, and issues related to a lack of appropriate infrastructures and technical glitches with the LMS.

*Absence of conducive home study environments.* Some students admitted to lacking a suitable study environment at home during the pandemic and hindering their ability to concentrate and participate fully in online classes by enabling their microphones. For instance, Soror remarked, "The home environment is prone to distractions. For instance, someone might call us, or the television volume might be too loud." Additionally, Shirin highlighted, "At home, there are often background noises. When the teacher asks us to enable our microphones and speak, some students, including myself, are unable to do so due to these distractions."

*Insufficient access to digital devices.* Some students cited the lack of access to appropriate digital devices for participating in online classes, attributing it to economic challenges and the high cost of Internet and digital devices in Iran. For instance, Ehsan emphasized, "The primary challenge of online education lies in the lack of accessibility to suitable technology and digital devices such as laptops or mobile phones for participating in online classes." Also, Nazanin pointed out, "Participating in online classes necessitates suitable digital devices.

For example, having an appropriate laptop is crucial; using an outdated laptop can lead to numerous problems during online learning. Personally, I faced difficulties completing assignments with my mobile phone due to not having access to a suitable laptop.”

*Lack of structured online class plans and unforeseen alterations in schedules.* Some students noted that authorities failed to establish a predetermined plan for online classes and abruptly changed class schedules without considering the specific challenges posed by ERT. Consequently, students encountered difficulties attending and participating in university online classes. For instance, Leila stated, “Many students voiced complaints about sudden schedule changes. These unexpected alterations caused confusion among students, leading to distraction and ineffective learning.” Similarly, Pari mentioned, “As I had to use BigBlueButton as a teacher and tried to record university online classes with another laptop, I found it impossible to be present and participate in the classes simultaneously.”

*Lack of appropriate infrastructure and technical glitches with LMS.* The majority of students attributed most of the LMS’s technical issues, such as choppy audio and difficulties in enabling webcams, to the inadequate facilities and infrastructure in Iran, particularly unstable Internet connection. For example, Leila noted, “The slow Internet speed significantly hindered online learning. At times, words were repeated with a sharp sound, causing us to miss parts of the class due to disruptions in the LMS.” Moreover, Pari emphasized, “face-to-face interaction is crucial for effective online learning, but we were unable to enable our webcams and see each other during online classes.” Additionally, Shirin pointed out that “Seeing the teacher’s face, their mannerisms, facial expressions, and body language is more effective than solely hearing their voice. Visual learners particularly struggle when only exposed to auditory instruction.”

The study findings revealed that students encountered contextual challenges stemming from the abrupt transition from in-person to online instruction, such as the lack of dedicated study space at home. Some students struggled to concentrate during online classes due to background noise and the presence of family members. This aligns with the findings of other researchers (e.g., Gelles et al., 2020). Devis-Rozental and Clarke (2020) suggested that institutions prioritize student well-being and consider individual student circumstances. To mitigate these challenges, universities can expand spaces for online meetings and facilitate in-person group discussions.

The study findings indicate that economic challenges and the high cost of digital devices in Iran have resulted in some students having limited access to essential technology, such as laptops. Consequently, they faced difficulties participating effectively in online classes and meeting assignment deadlines during the pandemic. Previous research has also underscored students’ lack of access to digital devices (e.g., Gelles et al., 2020). Therefore, it is imperative for teachers and students to receive financial and technical assistance to facilitate

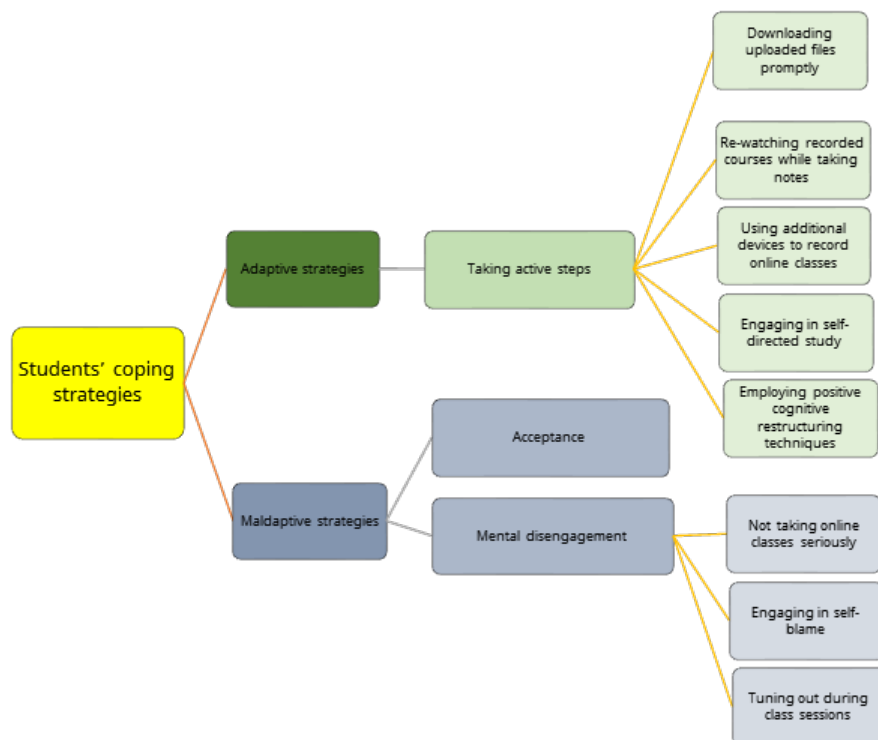
effective online teaching and learning. Both the government and universities should assume responsibility for providing such support.

During the ERT period, some students encountered confusion, frustration, and stress due to the absence of a predetermined plan for online courses and frequent schedule changes. This study revealed that some students felt demotivated and disappointed with online learning during the pandemic as authorities did not adequately consider their individual challenges, such as employment constraints when establishing schedules. Ghanbari and Nowroozi (2022) also noted a delay in transitioning from face-to-face classes to online delivery mode in Iran due to insufficient planning and preparation for emergencies. Stone and Springer (2019) suggested the necessity of developing an effective online instructional design tailored to online education, taking into account students' specific challenges. The findings indicated that technical issues with the university's LMS, such as difficulty enabling webcams, stemmed from inadequate infrastructure in Iran, particularly unstable Internet connection. This hindered students' participation in group discussions and class activities, leading to feelings of isolation, demotivation, and detachment from peers. Similar findings have been reported by scholars worldwide (e.g., Alavi et al., 2022).

### **Students' coping strategies**

The second research question of this study inquires, "What coping strategies do Iranian EFL students employ to address challenges in ERT?" Students' coping strategies can be classified into two categories: adaptive and maladaptive. Adaptive strategies entail proactive measures taken by students to cope effectively. These include promptly downloading uploaded files, re-watching recorded courses while taking notes, using additional devices to record online classes, engaging in self-directed study, and employing positive cognitive restructuring techniques. Conversely, maladaptive strategies involve acceptance and mental disengagement, which manifest as not taking online classes seriously, tuning out during class sessions, and engaging in self-blame. Figure 2 illustrates the breakdown of the students' coping strategies.





**Figure 2.** Students' coping strategies

**Adaptive strategies.** To address the challenges of online learning during the pandemic, many students resorted to adaptive or functional coping strategies, which involved taking active steps. These students utilized problem-solving approaches to overcome the challenges they encountered.

*Taking active steps.* Many students mentioned that they took several active steps to cope with the challenges of online learning during the pandemic. These steps included downloading files as soon as they were uploaded on the LMS, re-watching recorded courses and taking notes, recording online classes with another laptop, engaging in self-study, and practicing positive cognitive restructuring. For example, Leila explained, “Due to the LMS’s technical problems, some recorded course contents were deleted, and we couldn’t access them anymore. Therefore, we had to download them as soon as they were uploaded on the LMS to ensure offline access later.” Similarly, Negar stated, “I watched the PowerPoint presentations repeatedly and took notes to compensate for the teachers’ lack of online teaching skills.” Additionally, Pari noted, “I had to use BigBlueButton as a teacher while attending university online classes. I attempted to record the university online classes with another laptop, but I couldn’t participate fully in the classes. I resorted to self-study to compensate for the teachers’ shortcomings in online teaching.”

Furthermore, few students who initially harbored negative attitudes toward online education experienced a change in perspective over time and began to recognize the benefits of online learning. That is, they developed a more positive outlook on online learning. For example, Setareh pointed out, “Online

learning is preferable for students who juggle study and work simultaneously or for those who experience significant stress during face-to-face classes.” Moreover, Amir reflected, “Initially, I had reservations about online learning, but as time passed, I realized I could adapt to it, and it offers specific benefits.”

**Maladaptive strategies.** Most students reported resorting to maladaptive coping strategies, such as acceptance and mental disengagement, to cope with the challenges of online learning during the pandemic. In essence, the students predominantly opted to accept or ignore those challenges and stressors that were beyond their control.

*Acceptance.* Many students believed the pandemic was beyond their control, and they felt powerless to change the situation. Consequently, they felt compelled to accept and cope with the ERT. For instance, Leila expressed, “I coped with it personally because when there’s no solution, you can’t change anything; you can’t eliminate the COVID-19 pandemic, so you have to accept it.” Also, Ashkan remarked, “I felt I had to accept it and continue studying. I couldn’t change anything about it; I needed to take learning more seriously.”

*Mental disengagement.* Some students attempted to employ mental disengagement strategies, such as tuning out of class, not taking online classes seriously, and engaging in self-blame. For example, Pari mentioned, “when I find out that the instructor does not care and refuses to answer my questions and emails, I did not study next session and turned out of class.” She added, “I kept telling myself that this is my fault, I could not make a balance between working and studying.” Also, Negar reported, “we were present only for a few minutes at the beginning of the online class, then we disabled the audio and turned out of class.” Moreover, Ashkan admitted, “I did not take online classes seriously. I turned out of class and watched a soccer game on TV.” Additionally, Nazanin noted, “we did not take online classes seriously. For example, as the instructor was lecturing, I ate food and did not participate in the online discussions.”

The current study’s findings align with those of Kamaludin et al. (2020), who observed that students may resort to maladaptive coping strategies like acceptance and mental disengagement during health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversely, Soon et al. (2022) found that Singaporean students utilized positive cognitive restructuring and proactive measures to address online learning challenges during the pandemic. Schmiedeler et al. (2023) also identified positive reframing or ‘reframing the stressor in positive terms’ as an effective and adaptive coping strategy that can reduce anxiety and enhance well-being during the pandemic. Meanwhile, Pawlak et al. (2022) noted that ‘tuning out of class’ can be a maladaptive coping strategy, but in rare cases, it can lead to productive outcomes. Finally, Kamaludin et al. (2020) observed that ‘self-blaming’ can be a maladaptive coping strategy that worsens anxiety in young adults. It is crucial to recognize that students may not be aware of the most effective coping strategies during crises; therefore, universities and teachers should offer emotional support and pertinent information to assist





students in discovering their own coping mechanisms during emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Conclusion

The global COVID-19 pandemic has physically distanced us and significantly disrupted education worldwide, highlighting the urgent need for nurturing educational environments rooted in kindness, compassion, and understanding. Moreover, this crisis has compelled educational authorities to transition swiftly from traditional face-to-face instruction to online delivery modes. However, in countries like Iran and many others, this abrupt shift has resulted in a form of ERT characterized by inadequate infrastructure and hasty implementation.

The objective of this study was to explore the challenges and strategies encountered by Iranian EFL students during the ERT, with a specific focus on higher education. Employing qualitative research methodology, the findings revealed that students grappled with various internal and external challenges, including psychological barriers, deficiency in online learning competencies, teachers' inadequate proficiency in online teaching methodologies, teachers' sporadic feedback provision, insufficient student support mechanisms, absence of conducive home study environments, insufficient access to digital devices, lack of structured online class plans and unforeseen alterations in schedules, and lack of appropriate infrastructures and technical glitches with LMS. Additionally, some students devised adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms or strategies to navigate these challenges and adapt to the circumstances during this crisis.

While the study sheds light on the experiences of Iranian EFL students during the ERT, several limitations may have affected its outcomes. Despite attempts to ensure anonymity in data collection, many students were hesitant to participate due to concerns about potential repercussions. Consequently, the level of engagement among participants may have varied. Although the study aimed to identify students' challenges and strategies, it overlooked teachers' experiences at the same university, which could have provided valuable insights into the broader educational landscape. The study's small sample size was a result of logistical challenges posed by the pandemic, which hindered the researchers' ability to recruit more participants. It is also important to acknowledge a limitation regarding the gender distribution among participants. The majority of participants were females, and the gender imbalance in our sample could have impacted the comprehensiveness of our findings.

Despite the acknowledged limitations, the study contributes significantly to both theoretical understanding and practical applications within the realm of CALL and higher education. By delving into the challenges and strategies experienced by Iranian EFL students during the era of ERT, this research offers a nuanced examination of the educational landscape not only in Iran but also on a broader global scale. The findings gleaned from this study serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, educators, and students alike, providing them with crucial insights into the prevailing state of ERT and its implications. Moreover,



this study serves as a clarion call for future educational endeavors to transcend the constraints imposed by ERT and strive toward the delivery of effective online education. Recognizing the diverse array of challenges faced by students and teachers, subsequent initiatives must adopt a holistic approach that considers the multifaceted nature of these experiences. By incorporating the voices and perspectives of all stakeholders, including students, teachers, administrators, and policymakers, future educational strategies can be tailored to address the specific needs and concerns of the entire CALL community. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of fostering empathy and understanding among all stakeholders in the educational ecosystem. By cultivating a culture of empathy and mutual support, educators and policymakers can create more inclusive and supportive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of students and teachers. Particularly in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, cultivating a sense of solidarity and understanding can play a pivotal role in mitigating the challenges posed by emergency remote teaching and ensuring the continuity of quality education for all.

Recommendations for future research include conducting comprehensive studies with larger sample sizes across multiple universities to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and strategies associated with ERT. Expanding the scope of research beyond higher education to explore ERT experiences across different educational levels. Giving due attention to the experiences and perspectives of teachers as key stakeholders in education. Exploring alternative research methodologies, such as mixed-method approaches combining qualitative interviews with quantitative questionnaires, to gain a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

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