International Journal of Research in English Education (IJREE)

Original Article **Published online: 20 December 2022.**

Exploring Iranian EFL Students' Reflections of E-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Received: 7 June 2022
Revision: 15 July 2022
Accepted: 1 September 2022
Published online: 20 December 2022

Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has been a worldwide grave issue that unfavorably affected people's life, including education. This study aimed to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' learning in Iran EFL context. A mixed method research design was employed in carrying out the study. The quantitative data were gathered through an online survey questionnaire from 139 students in Islamic Azad university (IAU) selected on convenience sampling method and six semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. The quantitative data analyzed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) showed that the students were not involved in a continual online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also revealed that the pandemic unspeakably affected students' learning in Iran. In addition, the qualitative data coded and analyzed thematically showed that the students had problems with the Internet and technological facilities, and they suggested that the IAU design and introduce a resourceful online platform which will be free for and accessible to poor Internet connection users because some of the students live in areas where the Internet speed is very slow. The finding of the study may help educational managers and higher education leaders to review and adopt policies for teaching and learning in emergency cases. It will also help lecturers to design a proper plan and improve their instruction in these cases.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, students' reflections, E-learning, LMS

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[DOR: 20.1001.1.25384015.2022.7.4.2.7]

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 widespread has had an annihilating effect on social orders around the world, and it is irrefutable that the spread of COVID-19 displayed numerous challenges for educational systems in most nations (WHO, 2020). COVID-19 has had an extraordinary effect on education over the world and has brought about suspension of education and physical closure of schools and higher institutions influencing 1.5 billion learners around the globe causing phenomenal challenges such as how to alleviate learning misfortunes, how to employ distance learning, and how to securely revive schools and colleges (UNESCO, 2020).

This was the first time to force all educational institutions around the globe into distance and online learning (Williamson, Eynon, & Potter, 2020). All educational measures transformed to distance and online system of education during the pandemic that showed a collective practice in times of crisis or natural calamities (Swartz, Gachago, & Belford, 2018). However, such a rapid transformation influenced the quality of the online educational process and disorganized the entire educational institutions for several months (Al Shlowiy, Al-Hoorie, & Alharbi, 2021).

It was an unexpected and unprecedented shift for all stakeholders of educations. For example, students were hastily moved to online education without having well-prepared online learning experiences. They questioned their online tasks, learning measures, assessment policies, and attending procedures. Teachers and students had no measures to take except waiting for policymakers' decisions and instruction.

The instantaneous effect of COVID-19 on education in the 2019/2020 academic year has been massive since the pandemic resulted in closure and delays to the prevailing track of education, and the schools and universities endeavored to offer substitute provisions for emergency remote instruction. Therefore, many educational institutions continued to provide instruction and education compellingly by entirely remote education which led to new terminologies, such as emergency remote teaching (ERT) (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). Such terminology allows the scholars to differentiate between a crisis-instigated online learning and normal online learning.

To circumvent the spread of COVID-19 and to effectively come across the new educational challenge that undesirably influenced the easy access of students to education, the educational administrations and institutions took certain compulsory measures. The Islamic Azad University (IAU) was among the many educational institutions in Iran that faced this challenge from the beginning and offered its alternative system of online education via Vadana as the LMS for the IAU teachers and students.

The purpose of this study was to track the impact of this emergency move to distant education due to the spread of Coronavirus on the students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Iran. It intended to study their reflections in order to discover the changes in students' acceptance, progress, and recognition (goals, feelings, and achievement). It also discusses students' perceptions of teaching and learning in the remote educational alternatives. This study can assist in discovering their problems, challenges, faults, and requirements. The study aimed to investigate the students' capability and preparation to use the online platforms and resources during this pandemic. This study also tried to enrich the literature by substantiating valuable details about the emergency move by answering the following questions:

1. How did the move to online learning impact students' goals, feelings, and achievement during COVID-19?

2. How did the move to online learning impact students' perception of teaching and learning during COVID-19?

1.1 Theoretical Framework

As this study intended to track Iranian EFL learners' reflections of shift into ERT in response to COVID-19 pandemic, and as it investigated their perceptions of employing unexpected online learning, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) theory and Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) were used to scrutinize the reflections, perceptions, and acceptance of the shift to ERT. TAM was theorized by Davis (1989) to anticipate the perception, acceptance, and adoption of technology. As Shih and Chen (2013) note, TAM is empirically validated to function with considerably high quality. It includes two factors one of which is Perceived Usefulness (PU) that refers to "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance" (Davis 1989, p. 320). This factor can explicate the intention of users in accepting and using technology. The second is Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU), which refers to "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of efforts"

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(p. 320). This factor explains the users' acceptance and usage of technology in TAM. Besides, it is a flexible model that can involve numerous external variables and dependent variables, for instance, environment, culture, and various features within worldwide technologies (Chuttur, 2009).

TLT as the extension of conscience via self-adaption to a shifting situation was proposed by Mezirow (1997) to explain the learning situation in which the learners experience an uncomfortable position. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic created a conflict in the education systems around the globe, and caused a big shift and transformation in education. Mezirow believes that perplexing predicament causes alterations that result in mental shifts and dramatic alterations in the education. TLT states that when students experience a new learning situation, they create meanings which transform attitudes, behaviors, and concepts. In line with Mezirow that points out transformative learning takes place when learners interact with the environment and integrate with the learning process, Hashemi (2021) argues that TLT suggests learners to acknowledge challenging tasks during an unanticipated shift so that they would be stimulated to think critically and sensibly to rate their understanding of the learning process.

This study applied TAM and TLT to track the difficulties that influenced the acceptance, adaptation, and use of ERT in Iran EFL context during COVID-19 pandemic. TAM is one of the most leading and recurrently used models to study technology adoption and learners' evaluation of technology based on a task at hand (Shih & Chen, 2013), which refers to the distance learning in this study. On the other hand, TLT studies students' experience of challenging tasks of learning during a sudden transformation in Iran higher education. In this study, both models were combined to describe the acceptance of online learning technologies by attaining valuable intuitions into how learners experienced this emergency situation by identifying the challenges that they faced during COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Literature Review

Moving education from face-to-face learning into online learning situation as a response to any regional calamity is a normal task (Swartz et al., 2018). Nevertheless, COVID-19 was different in that it disturbed most educational systems around the globe (Johnson, Veletsianos, & Seaman, 2020). It was also different in length as it has been lasting for nearly three years at the time of writing this paper. The authors add that while many studies focus on the benefits and positive uses of distance learning during the crisis, literature has few publications about its worldwide negative effects on education, society, and economy. Notwithstanding, there are benefits of online learning systems, research shows that there are some problematic issues, such as technical problems (Al Shlowiy et al., 2021) availability of personal Pcs (Hakami, 2020), the Internet connection (Alshehri & Cumming, 2020), students' privacy issues (Sharma, 2019), and screen sharing issues (Oyaid & Alshaya, 2019). For example, Davari (2022) examined the effect of the online reformulation and collaborative feedback on Iranian learners' writing in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of One-way ANOVA and Post-hoc Tukey Test showed the significant effect of online reformulation and collaborative feedback on writing.

Likewise, students have dissimilar insights into using online learning depending on their teachers' utilization of LMS (Bousbahi & Alrazgan, 2015). Although they may enjoy the convenience of the online learning, they generally prefer the face-to-face learning environments (Al Shlowiy et al., 2021). This occurs when they are not able to discuss ideas, enhance their skills, and develop their knowledge. In some online learning situations, students only make the least requirement for passing the course (Kite, Schlub, Zhang, Choi, Craske, & Dickson, 2020).

Some studies (e.g., Alqahtani & Rajkhan, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Snoussi, 2019) that have inspected the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' learning argue that inadequate resources, inappropriate maintaining of academic integrity, educational policies, lack of students' self-discipline and confidence, and technical problems were the main challenges in executing online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Abbasi, Ayoob, Malik, and Memon (2020) state that the majority of students did not prefer receiving online instruction compared to the face-to-face one in Pakistan. They found that 86% of students felt that online instruction had little implication on students' learning. Their study also showed that because limitations created obstacles in practical aspects of instruction, the experience of online learning was not appealing enough to the students.

As found by Shenoy, Mahendra, and Vijay (2020) almost all educational organizations started online classes, and although they had positive experience, they experienced a lack of incorporation in online learning that unfavorably influenced students' learning in Indian higher education. In an another study, Byrnes, Civantos, Go, McWilliams, and Rajasekaran (2020) also found that COVID-19 pandemic created terrific changes in all aspects of society which

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adversely impacted students' learning revealing that their learning was postponed, and they did not have classes for several months.

Winters and Patel (2021) assert that COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected students' education worldwide and the educational systems need to adjust their teaching and learning policies. The results of the study done by Mokhtarzadeh (2021) indicated that students' achievement and engagement levels are adequate. The analysis of quantile regression revealed a strong link between top achievers' engagement and achievement. However, bivariate correlation revealed no statistically significant link between typical students' engagement and achievement. However, students' level of engagement perception was satisfactory. The concept of engagement applies to high achievers but not to ordinary or low performers, making measurement error possible.

Onyema, Eucharia, Gbenga, Roselyn, Daniel, and Kingsley (2020) believe that school closure badly affected students' learning motivation and engagement, which, in turn, influenced the quality of education. In their research, they reported that the school closure created many difficulties for students and teachers in countries with limited resources noting that teachers and students struggled with limited access to educational technological tools in developing countries. Similarly, in a quantitative study, Gonzalez, De La Rubia, Hincz, Comas-Lopez, Subirats, Fort, and Sacha (2020) compared students' test results in 2017, 2018, and 2020 and found that the students' achievement prior to and within the COVID-19 pandemic was highly different.

Ardan, Rahman, and Geroda (2020) conducted a study in Indonesia and found out that the students were spiritually and psychologically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. They reported that almost all of the respondents experienced high and moderate level of anxiety. The study carried out by Day, Chang, Chung, Doolittle, Housel, and McDaniel (2021) also showed that the students were stressed during the COVID-19 pandemic which adversely impacted their learning. They also stated many instructors decreased the amount of instruction and or the length of the online instruction was less than the face-to-face and scheduled one, all of which led to inadequate learning for the students. Wyse, Stickney, Butz, Beckler, and Close (2020) and Hamilton et al. (2020) reported that many students could not have easy access to the learning materials. In many cases, students did not even log in online learning, which shows a very low level of student engagement in online learning. They also pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic unspeakably influenced students' learning motivation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of the Study

The study employed a mixed methods design to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. According to Creswell (2015), an equal emphasis should be given to both quantitative and qualitative approaches in the mixed methods studies. The data were collected using an online survey questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The researcher interpreted and reported the results of the study accordingly.

3.2 Participants

The study targeted the EFL students in IAU in Rasht, Iran. The respondents of the quantitative part were 139 from 179 ((80%) undergraduate students from Rasht Azad University taking English Language Translation and English Language Literature courses for the academic year of 2021-2022. After obtaining the required approval, all participants were individually informed about the study requirements, their interest in joining was sought for, and their consent was gained. It needs to be mentioned that the missing data did not have any effect on the interpretation and finding of the data because the participants' response rate was high.

For administering the interview, the researcher asked ten students for their voluntary participation, and their oral consent were gained that indicated their agreement to participate in the interview section. However, six students agreed to participate in the qualitative part. They included sophomore, junior, and senior groups of students. Fresh students were not selected. The researcher purposefully selected the groups as the participants of the study because they had better experience of teaching and learning before and after the COVID-19. Two students were selected from each grade. There were four female and two male students.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

The research instrument was adapted from an online survey questionnaire developed by Noori (2021). A reliability test of Cronbach alpha was implemented to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. The results showed that each

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category of the items had an overall alpha value of over 0.76 which indicated a high reliability estimate of the instrument. The questionnaire comprised three main sections with 32 items. The first section sought the demographic background of the respondents. The second section included two parts that aimed to elicit students' experiences of instructors' teaching (eight items) and experiences of learning (ten items) during the COVID-19, and the third section sought after the impact of COVID-19 on students' achievement (five items), goals (four items), and feelings (five items). The respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statements on a 4-point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree). To check the questionnaire's validity, feedback was obtained from three lecturers in IAU. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 25 students who were not included in the study. The questionnaire was modified after receiving comments from the pilot study.

The interview questions were developed and adapted from the related previous literature (e.g., Hashemi, 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2020). The questions were shared with four colleagues for necessary revisions, which were revised based on their feedback and suggestions. The researcher asked the questions through WhatsApp and Telegram applications as they are frequently used by the students. They were asked to answer the questions orally by recording and sending their voices. They were asked to answer the questions within 20 minutes.

3.4 Data Analysis

Regarding the fact that the findings were based on answers given to the questions, descriptive data analyses (frequency table, average, percent…) were conducted to see the differences in the instructors' competences of attitudes, skills of teaching, assessment, and knowledge mastery by the use of SPSS as data analysis tools. Using NVivo software, version 12.0, the researcher transcribed, verified, coded, sorted, and finally analyzed thematically the qualitative data of the interview.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Results

4.1.1 Students' Teaching Experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The data gathered from 139 participants on their experiences of their instructor' teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic were displayed in Table 1 descriptively.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on students' experience of their teachers' teaching in the COVID-19

	Teaching experience	D	A	SA	SD	Mean
1	My lecturers were teaching normally during the COVID-19.	44%	27%	6%	23%	1.94
2	I had contact with my lecturers through online platforms.	50%	25%	4%	21%	2.05
3	I was aware of platform (Vadana) introduced by ISU.	46%	22%	8%	24%	1.98
4	I received constructive feedback from my lecturers.	59%	11%	2%	28%	2.04
5	I received support from my lecturers.	61%	12%	9%	18%	1.85
6	I received support from my faculty.	49%	25%	7%	19%	1.89
7	I was engaged in online classes.	58%	10%	5%	27%	58%
8	Overall, online teaching was very effective for me.	57%	11%	2%	29%	1.69

Table 1 shows that the majority of the respondents disagreed with the statements *of teaching experience* indicating that they did not experience a constant access to online teaching introduced by IAU during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1.2 Students' Learning Experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The descriptive statistics on the students' learning experiences during the COVID-19 are displayed in Table 2.

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Table 2. Descriptive statistics on students' learning experience during the COVID-19

	Learning experience	D	A	SA	SD	Mean
1	I had access to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.	48%	24%	7%	21%	1.96
2	I had Internet facility during the COVID-19pandemic.	46%	37%	7%	10%	1.97
3	I had electricity facility during the COVID-19 pandemic.	59%	24%	4%	13%	2.29
4	I had technology facility during the COVID-19pandemic.	69%	15%	4%	12%	2.06
5	I used different resources during the COVID-19 pandemic.	60%	25%	5%	10%	2.02
6	I had better knowledge of using technology.	47%	31%	10%	12%	1.79
7	I had contact with my classmates through online platforms.	58%	19%	7%	16%	2.34
8	I worked with my groupmates and classmates.	68%	14%	2%	16%	1.83
9	I was receiving feedback from my peers	50%	19%	6%	25%	1.81
10	My peers supported me during the COVID-19 pandemic.	52%	29%	5%	14%	1.71

Table 2 also shows that the majority of the students disagreed with the *learning experience* statements indicating that they did not enjoy a satisfactory level of learning experience in online instruction introduced by ISU during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following tables (3, 4, and 5) show the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic online-mediated instruction on the students' achievement, goals, and feelings. Table 3 shows descriptive statistics of students' perception about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their learning achievement.

Table 3. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' achievement

	Students' achievement	D	A	SA	SD	Mean
1	COVID-19 pandemic impacted my learning performance.	7%	60%	30%	3%	3.31
2	COVID-19 pandemic impacted my subject knowledge.	7%	57%	34%	2%	3.28
3	COVID-19 pandemic impacted my class projects.	4%	57%	36%	3%	3.24
4	COVID-19 pandemic impacted the quality of my learning.	7%	42%	47%	4%	3.26
5	COVID-19 impacted the load of my class assignments.	3%	44%	51%	2%	3.38

Totally, table 3 shows that 90% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statements indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced students' learning achievements. The descriptive statistics of students' perception about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their learning goals are sown in Table 4.

Table 4. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' goals

	Students' goals	D	A	SA	SD	Mean
1	COVID-19 impacted my future educational goals.	3%	52%	43%	2%	3.23
2	COVID-19 pandemic impacted my educational activities.	4%	44%	50%	2%	3.31
3	COVID-19 pandemic delayed my graduation.	1%	51%	45%	3%	3.52
4	COVID-19 impacted my out-of-university courses.	2%	46%	48%	4%	3.49

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It is also clear that almost 90% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statements indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic affected students' goals. Table 5 shows descriptive statistics of students' perception about the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on their learning feelings.

Table 5. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' feelings

	Students' feelings	D	A	SA	SD	Mean
1	Due to the COVID-19, I feel I did not study for years.	4%	54%	34%	8%	3.26
2	I feel I lost educational opportunities during the COVID-19.	6%	53%	40%	1%	3.14
3	COVID-19 pandemic impacted me psychologically.	6%	51%	40%	3%	3.33
4	COVID-19 pandemic impacted me spiritually.	5%	45%	49%	1%	3.31
5	COVID-19 pandemic impacted my motivation for learning.	4%	49%	45%	2%	3.41

Likewise, Table 5 indicates that almost over 90% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statements indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced students' feelings.

4.2 Qualitative Results

The qualitative data were gathered using a semi-structured interview from six students. Table 6 below reports the themes extracted from the interview recordings. The data indicate that nearly all the students were dissatisfied with online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they confronted different challenges such as lack of a stable Internet connection and electricity, lack of adequate technological facilities and financial problems, which adversely influenced their learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 6. Students' perceptions of the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on their learning and teaching experiences

Themes	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6
Teaching during COVID-19	Sharing materials via chat groups	No able to manage to follow lectures in remote areas	Ineffective online lectures; not having smart phones and computers	WhatsApp communication and presentation of lectures by professors	Unsatisfactory teaching; no lectures for months	Sharing learning materials through social media
Learning during COVID-19	Stopping over online lectures; lack of access to the Internet	Ineffective online learning; lack of Internet and technological problems	Contacting with friends via mobile and asking them for the assignments	No positive learning experience; not serious teaching by lecturers	learning style being damaged; Lost focus; no new learning; working with peers to prepare projects	Low learning outcome; Reviewing Notes only; no pressure from the lecturer to study
Challenges	Occasional blackout; no electricity; Internet problem	Internet and electricity problem	Financial problem; no smart phone	Very poor Internet; unable to download materials	Not proper classes for months	Internet, electricity, and computer problems
Suggestions/ Solutions	Designing an effective software for	Introducing a free software compatible	A helping policy for poor students;	Designing a practical and effective learning	Supporting the students and monitoring their	Designing and implementing a free online platform

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	learning by IAU	with slow Internet	developing good online platforms	application for teaching	learning progress	accessible to all students
The impact of COVID-19 on students' learning	Positive and negative impacts, but devastating negative ones	The worst learning experience; poor Internet	Stressful; feeling of lack of study for years	Achieving low grades; postponing graduation	Positive; experiencing online learning for the first time	Delayed graduation; losing job; feeling very stressful

Student one indicated that their professors used to prepare some questions from parts of their lessons and ask the students to look for their answers. Furthermore, the student also stated that the Internet services were highly expensive; hence, most students could not properly follow the courses. Student two noted that living in a remote district made most of the students like him not enjoy a good learning experience in the COVID-19 pandemic because there was no 4G coverage and the Internet connection was very poor. He also assumed that the Internet packages were very expensive, and most students could not afford to buy Internet services. He suggested a free online platform for students with improved 4G or 5G Internet coverage.

Furthermore, student three expressed that she had problems having access to technological facilities. She declared that she did not have a personal computer and could not afford to buy a smartphone; therefore, her learning achievement was negatively influenced. In addition, student four said that her instructors used to communicate through social media, not taking the teaching and learning seriously. She also pointed out that the COVID-19 influenced her psychologically. For example, she could not achieve good grades like she did in the previous years.

Furthermore, student five noted that teaching and learning were not adequately satisfactory because the COVID-19 impacted her concentration. The classes were not adequately held. She also contended that the COVID-19 had both positive and negative impacts on students' learning, but the negative impacts were twofold of the positive ones. Student six believed that teaching and learning was insufficient during the COVID-19, and he just used to review the lessons and do some self-studies at home. He also claimed that it is like a habit in our community that when there is no push from the instructors' side, the students do not study well. Consequently, it affects their learning. In conclusion, almost all the participants were dissatisfied with online instruction and learning, and they had problems with Internet and technological facilities, which adversely influenced their learning achievements.

5. Discussion

The effect of COVID-19 pandemic on students' learning varies from country to country. This study aimed to find out the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' learning in Iranian EFL context of higher education. It attempted this impact on the EFL students majoring BA at English Language Translation and English Language Literature in IAU. The finding of the study revealed that the majority of students did not experience continual and practical online learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic because they were encountering absence of acceptable and suitable resources and facilities. These limitations blocked students' learning engagement. The finding of this study is in line with UNESCO's (2020) report and studies conducted by Byrnes et al. (2020), Day et al. (2021), Onyema et al. (2020), Alqahtani and Rajkhan (2020), and Dhawan (2020) who reported that students experienced an unproductive learning, and they confronted different challenges in teaching and learning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic because of absence of sufficient resources. Nevertheless, it contradicts the findings of the studies by Kite et al. (2020) and Shenoy et al. (2020) who found out that students were pleased with online learning because it was effective for them during COVID-19 pandemic.

The results of data analysis revealed that approximately 90% of the students reported that the virus outbreak and education lockdown adversely affected their learning. The participants of this study acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced different aspects of students' learning including their projects, assignments, learning quality, learning motivation, goals, subject knowledge, educational opportunities, and the length of their studies. This result supports the finding of the earlier studies conducted by Abbasi et al. (2020), Alshehri and Cumming (2020), Gonzalez et al. (2020), and Byrnes et al. (2020), who concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted students'

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learning. Ardan et al. (2020) argued that because of COVID-19 pandemic, many students experienced anxiety which negatively impacted their learning and academic achievements. The researcher recommended that the educational institutions provide psychological and counseling services to support students' learning.

The literature notifies that students' perception of online teaching and learning about the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on their learning is significant. Winters and Patel (2021) believed that when students do not have access to sufficient facilities for online learning activities, they achieve low grades and experience undesirable effects with regards to their achievement. That is why educational institutions including IAU should try to provide enough resources for online teaching and learning.

The qualitative findings also revealed that the COVID-19 affected students' learning. The participants believed that the COVID-19 had both positive and negative effect on their learning. This finding is in harmony with the findings of the studies conducted by Hamilton et al. (2020) and Wyse et al. (2020) who found that the COVID-19 had both positive and negative impact on students' learning. In terms of positive impact, students' first experience with online learning provided an opportunity for them to learn the knowledge easily. The students also indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic badly affected their learning. For example, it suspended their graduation and resulted in their job loss and financial problems. The qualitative findings also showed that almost all the students were dissatisfied with online provision of teaching and learning. The finding supports the study by Ardan (2020) who found that due to lack of sufficient facilities, online teaching and learning is not satisfactory. The students stated that they had problems with the Internet and technological facilities. Therefore, they suggested that IAU officials review their policies, design, and launch an online platform which is applicable in the country. For instance, some participants suggested a free LMS for the students with fast Internet connection.

6. Conclusion

Understanding obstacles of online learning is valuable to assist students, especially when the perceived usefulness of online learning is connected with their perceptions of it (Snoussi, 2019). Students' acceptance of virtual learning and adjusting to its environment depends on how well they recognize their role as independent learners (Hashemi, 2021). It is difficult to improve their experience of online learning without addressing their perception that prefers face-to-face learning rather than online learning and without reducing the barriers of online learning. The learners spent at least one semester to understand the technical issues and, then, reduce their concern and frustration. That means their frustration relied on their understanding of online learning (Alshehri & Cumming, 2020). If they understand it, they can work by themselves. Therefore, they will likely have positive perceptions of perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness toward a system that supports them to achieve the learning objectives.

Teachers should consider how to recognize their students' emotions and modify their instructions consequently because teachers do not have clear access to verbal and nonverbal cues. This study shows that the official guidelines, quality expectations, academic integrity may be unclear and incomplete during this emergency shift as well as repeatedly unstable teaching environment (Williamson et al., 2020). Al Shlowiy et al. (2021) state that students benefited from the shift to online learning to cheat in their virtual assessments and assignments. For many of them, it was the first opportunity to experience the cheating practice without being educated about its unethical use. Future plans and instructions should deal with cheating issues seriously after COVID-19.

6.1 Pedagogical Implications

Teachers need to be fully aware of the problems students encounter during online learning. One of the obstacles is the technical support that may prevent learners from using and accepting online learning, particularly at the beginning. This study found that engaging students in virtual learning activities was driven by receiving expert support to enable them to overcome technical issues (Kite et al., 2020). It is sensible to prepare the students with an anticipatory plan to efficiently shift to an online learning environment in any case of education suspension or closure (Hashemi, 2021). The platforms and policies for online learning in higher education need critical evaluation and review because the students faced several challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational managers and higher education leaders should adapt and modify policies in emergency cases and consider all aspects of providing instruction and learning activities in higher education. On the other hand, teachers are required to assist students with online learning, respond to their questions, keep live teaching sessions, and establish proper interaction with their students. Moreover, teachers play the critical role to help students with the expression of their emotions and showing their anxieties during disasters (Swartz et al., 2018).

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