

Practical, Technical, and Affective Aspects of Teaching English Online during the Pandemic: Instructors' Voices

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors' apperceptions about practical, technical, and affective aspects of online teaching as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our study involved qualitative data collection using an open-ended interview form, including three sections developed by the researchers. EFL instructors (N =18) from randomly selected three state and three private universities of Turkey participated in the study. The results of the content analysis indicated that instructors perceived the distance teaching environment less favorably than the face-to-face environment, although they generally feel competent using the technology. However, the instructors were also found to have negative attitudes towards the psychology of distance teaching by reporting it as boring and an awkward way of teaching. The study concluded that EFL instructors regard distance teaching as inconvenient since teaching and learning foreign languages involve face-to-face interaction and higher learner engagement and motivation.

Keywords: EFL Instructors, Distance Teaching, Online Teaching Foreign Language Teaching

Introduction

With its dynamic nature, education has been affected by every sociological, economic and technological development in the world. As one of the latest and worst factors that have caused many changes in the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has taken hold of education around the globe. In other words, education is the field that has been shaken overwhelmingly by the Covid-19 pandemic (Erkut, 2020). Afterwards, to minimize the adverse effects of this situation, a shift to distance learning has been inevitable (Sahu, 2020; Erkut, 2020). However, being involved in such an education system without detailed planning and designing processes has virtually turned out to be crisis management.

Even though Turkey met the challenges of Covid-19, at a comparatively later stage than other European countries, World Health Organization's declaration about the pandemic's rapid spread, Turkey gave a break to education on 11th March 2020. Right after this application, distance education started as a novice system in all levels of the education system (Ministry of National Education [MEB], 2020). Unfortunately, having no prior experience in this type of education, all stakeholders were faced challenges and problems (Laplante, 2020).

As Sahu (2020) indicated, although this compulsory transition offers a variety of positive outcomes such as “ensuring the sustainability of education, and preventing disruptions in students’ graduation times and falling behind a term”, it also resulted in some hot debates concerning its feasibility and efficiency. Being one of the significant parties in the teaching-learning process, teachers can be accepted as the ones who have been affected most negatively when the use of materials, testing and assessment, instruction and other pedagogical issues are concerned.

The factors that contribute to challenges that instructors suffer from have not been widely investigated. However, it is believed that being over-dependent on digital platforms throughout the instruction process or internet-related hardships, the necessity of using social-media channels to communicate can be accepted as a burden or challenge by some teachers (Quezada, Talbot & Quezada-Parker, 2020). On the other hand, depending on the technological literacy level of the teachers, these situations may be perceived as positive. If the former is the case, it can be a potential source of stress and might, in turn, result in diminished well-being (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018).

Moreover, in the field, some factors that negatively affect teachers’ technology use are listed as lack of resources, time, and support (e.g., Pittman & Gaines, 2015). A number of research studies have concluded that teachers are disposed to experience stress if they think they are not supported, and lack adequate time when teaching students (e.g. Kyriacou, 2010; Pithers & Soden, 1998; Travers & Cooper, 1996). Additionally, teachers feel under stress if they do not feel competent enough to use technology for their instruction (e.g., Al-Fudail & Mellar, 2008).

A recent study by Priyadarshani (2021) investigated problems of school teachers related to online teaching. The study concluded that because of lack of the experience in online teaching, teachers face difficulties in conducting online classes, and the greatest challenge for online classes was reported as technological and network challenges. Although this study presents findings of the technical and practical aspects of teaching online, it has not focused on the affective factors and fails in reflecting

the psychological states of the participants teaching online during a pandemic.

Another study by Kulal and Nayak (2020) investigated the perceptions of both teachers and students toward online classes in Indian context during the pandemic. They found that teachers were facing difficulties in conducting online classes because of a lack of proper training and technical information for holding online classes by concluding technical issues as the major problem impeding the effectiveness of the online classes.

It is important to note that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, while a great body of research has focused on students’ perspectives about the implementation of distance education in various educational settings, research on teachers’ perspectives has remained generally unvisited. More specifically, a number of above-discussed studies exist in the field of language teacher research, so, there is still a dearth of research studies that have investigated the perceptions of language instructors about distance teaching. Hence, this study will make a great contribution to the existing literature by presenting findings about tertiary level language teachers’ ideas about practical, technical, and affective aspects of teaching English online as a foreign language during the pandemic.

In a nutshell, this study is significant since it attempts to ascertain possible challenges of online teaching for university instructors, including technical, practical and affective aspects. With this objective in mind, the present study aims to investigate the language teachers’ ideas about these concerns by addressing the following research questions:

- What do the instructors think about the practical aspects of distance teaching?
- How do the instructors cope with the technical aspect of distance teaching?
- How do the instructors feel about distance teaching?

Methodology

Research Design

This study was designed as qualitative research to explore English language instructors’ opinions and perceptions concerning practical, technical, and affective aspects of teaching English online as a foreign language during the pandemic.

Participants

The participants of the study were 18 Turkish native speakers of English language instructors (12 female and 6 male) teaching English as a foreign language at the school of foreign languages at both state (N=12) and private (N=6) universities in Turkey. The participants were randomly selected among preparation class instructors from three state and three private universities.

Procedures for Data Collection

A questionnaire including questions about the practical, technical, and affective aspects of distance teaching was used as the data collection tool. The open-ended questions were designed by the researchers with reference to the existing literature. An item pool was prepared, and the form was sent for scrutiny to three different academics with PhDs in ELT for construct validity. According to the suggestions, and feedback received, the questions were revised and the form was finalized.

The form consists of five different sections. The first section included some demographic information to specify the participants' age, gender, years of language teaching experience, university, and whether or not they had any prior distance teaching experience before the pandemic. In the second section, participants' ideas about practical aspects of online teaching were elicited with seven open-ended questions. In the latter part, views regarding technical concerns were examined via four questions. The fourth section was concerned with investigating the opinions of affective aspects of online teaching. In the final section of the form, the ideas of language teachers regarding the appropriateness of various stages of teaching in online and face-to-face environments were elicited.

Section 3	Technical aspects	Have you received any technical training about distance teaching? Did you need any?
Section 4	Affective aspects	How did you feel at home as a teaching environment?
Section 5	Appropriateness of teaching in online and face-to-face environments	Testing of language skills.

The form was sent to 18 instructors from three public and three state universities and we received 18 responses via email. To ensure that the number of returns is representative of our target population, we divided the number of completed surveys by the number of instructors we shared the form with. We calculated the response rate as 60 % as an acceptable response with reference to Sheehan (2001), who reported 60 as very good to be able to draw reliable and accurate results.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data gathered through open-ended questions was carried out by content analysis. As one of the several methods for analyzing qualitative data and interpreting its meaning, content analysis enables the researchers to go beyond merely counting words to examining language intensely to classify large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings (Weber, 1990). Since content analysis is open to various interpretations depending on researchers' perspectives, both researchers were involved in blind analysis of the same data set in order to minimize subjectivity and ensure the utmost accuracy of findings and interpretations suggested by Miles, Huberman, & Saldana (2014). Based on Miles and Huberman (1994) inter-coding reliability was calculated based on the following formula: "reliability = number of agreements / total number of agreements + disagreements". According to the formula, the inter-rater reliability was found as .89 which can be considered as a high level of agreement between the coders. By using a systematic classification process of coding, themes and codes were identified and presented in the results section.

Table 1: Item Descriptions and Sample Items for the Interview Form

	Section name	Sample item
Section 1	Demographic information	Are you teaching at a state or a private university?
Section 2	Practical aspects	What was the most challenging thing for you about distance teaching?

Results

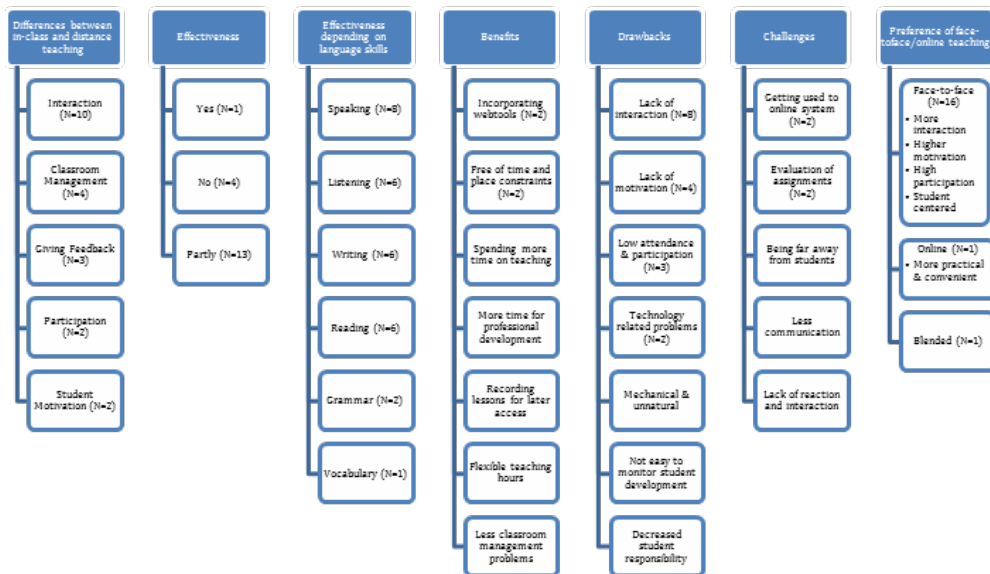
Data gathered through demographic information demonstrated that 10 participants were female and 8 were male. Moreover, 11 of them indicated that they work in a state university, whereas seven indicated they work in a private university as English language instructors. Findings about the years of experience revealed that 8 participants have been working as language teachers for more than 16 years, five have been language teachers with 11-15 years of experience, three with 6-10 years of experience, and two of them stated they have been working with 1-5 years of experience. As the final question in the first

section, the participants were asked to state whether they have had any prior online teaching experience. Fourteen of them reported having no online teaching experience prior to the pandemic.

Language Instructors' Ideas about Practical Aspects of Distance Teaching

Participants' voices regarding the practical aspects of distance education were explained under seven categories. The categories and codes under each one are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Categories and Codes about Practical Aspects of Distance Teaching



As shown by Figure 1, and explained in the following quotes, language instructors stated a variety of distinctions between in-class and distance teaching. Most of them mentioned interaction (N=10) as the main difference. Classroom management, motivation, participation and giving feedback were listed among other differences.

"In in-class teaching, there is more student-teacher interaction, and I think this is an effective element in the learning process." (Participant 7)

"In-class teaching requires more classroom management strategies."(Participant 11)

"It is really difficult to motivate students and increase their participation without active interaction." (Participant 17)

Additionally, out of eighteen participants, only one believed in the effectiveness of distance teaching while most of them (N=13) thought that it is partially effective. When the codes under the category of effectiveness of online foreign language teaching depending on specific language skills, some teachers (N=8) appear to believe that it is mostly effective for speaking. Moreover, the participants' voices about the benefits and drawbacks of distance teaching illustrated that teachers experienced many benefits such as incorporating web tools, having no time and place constraints, spending more time on professional development and the opportunity to revise lessons thanks to recording.

"I tried to turn this period into an advantage

to learn how to incorporate web tools into my instruction.” (Participant 2)

“Being free in terms of time and place is really good. You do not need to be within the borders of the classroom.” (Participant 5)

“This period gained me more time to be involved in professional development.” (Participant 10)

On the other hand, they complained about lack of interaction, low motivation, technology- related problems, low participation and attendance rates.

“The most demotivating issue about online instruction is lack of interaction. Without interacting, it is really hard to make students participate and attend actively.” (Participant 13)

“Since I did not have to deal with technology that much, I was not that good to solve technology related

problems.” (Participant 18)

Finally, 16 of the participants stated that they had a preference for face-to-face teaching because of its being more interactive, motivating, and student-centered.

“I definitely prefer face-to-face instruction. Being active, interaction in the class, students’ active participation can only be managed in this way.” (Participant 14)

Language Instructors’ Ideas about Technical Aspects of Distance Teaching

The analysis of participating language instructors’ ideas about technical aspects of distance education revealed five main categories. The codes related to the categories are provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Categories and Codes about Technical Aspects of Distance Teaching

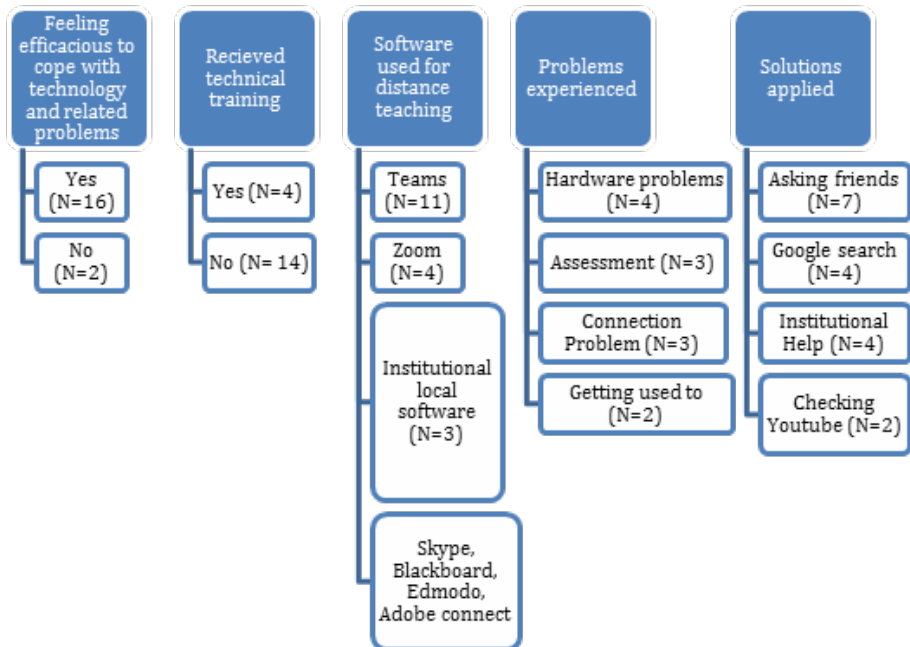


Figure 2 depicts the participating language teachers’ ideas regarding the technical aspects of distance teaching during the covid-19 pandemic. Sixteen of them asserted that they felt efficacious about technology and related problems. Only four of the instructors declared having received in-service training about distance teaching.

“I haven’t experienced any difficulty in coping with technology and related problems mostly because I have always been integrating technology in my instruction.” (Participant 1)

Additionally, Teams, Zoom, and local institutional software were the most commonly stated software for distance teaching. On the other hand, they stated that they faced problems with connection, hardware, assessment methods, and getting used to the online system. When they were asked to explain the solutions they applied, they generally stated that they asked a friend, did Google searches, and/or watched YouTube videos.

“Our institution provided us with local software to use during our online instruction. However, when

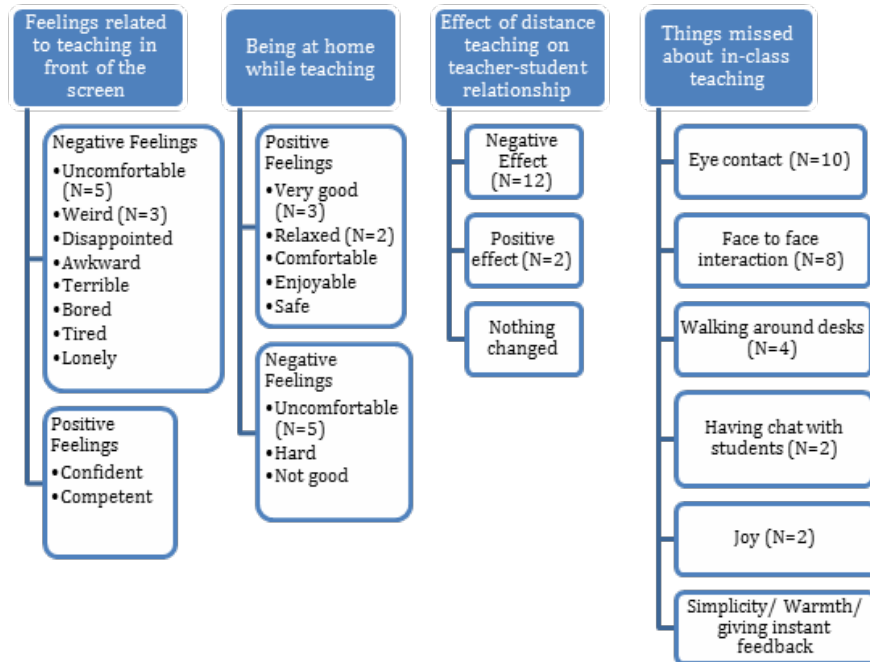
we face problems, we use other systems like zoom.” (Participant 2)

“I sometimes experience some difficulties and I prefer to ask Google or my colleagues for fast and accurate solutions.” (Participant 7)

Language Instructors’ Ideas about Affective Aspects of Distance Teaching

Participants’ voices regarding the affective aspects of distance teaching were examined with four open-ended questions. The responses given to these questions resulted in four main categories and some codes under each category. The results are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Categories and Codes about Affective Aspects of Distance Teaching



In the last aspect related to distance teaching, instructors’ feelings were elicited. When they were asked how they felt while teaching in front of the screen, they generally stated negative feelings such as feeling uncomfortable, weird, disappointed, bored, or terrible. However, their feelings about being at home while teaching mostly appeared to be positive such as relaxed, comfortable, and enjoyable. In addition, they (N=12) mostly responded that their relationship with students was negatively affected.

“As a social being, instructing in front of a screen is really weird and uncomfortable.” (Participant 11)

“Even though it is not really comfortable to be online because of the kids and pets I have, I cannot ignore the relaxed atmosphere at home. Not having

to get dressed officially and the chance of sitting all the time is really comfortable.” (Participant 15)

As a final issue, they were asked to explain what they missed about in-class teaching. Eye contact is stated most commonly (N=10), face to face interaction (N=8) is another thing that was missed considerably. Additionally, instructors affirmed that walking around the desks, chatting, and enjoying time spent with students, warmth and simplicity as other missed components of in-class teaching. In the third section of the interview form, participants were asked to indicate the appropriateness of in-class and distance teaching with specific relation to some educational concerns. Table 1 illustrates these results.

Table 2: Appropriateness of In-Class and Distance Teaching Regarding some Educational Concerns

	In-class teaching		Distance teaching	
	F (%)	N	F (%)	N
Delivery of content	88.8	16	11.1	2
Teacher-student collaboration	88.8	16	11.1	2
Teacher-student interaction	100	18	0	0
Feedback from students	83	15	17	3
Testing of language skills	88.8	16	11.1	2
Assigning-evaluation of homework	77.7	14	13.3	4
Teacher autonomy	77.7	14	13.3	4

As can be seen from Table 1, in all aspects related to teaching, the majority of the participants reported their opinions in favor of face-to-face teaching.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed at understanding EFL university instructors’ opinions and experiences about distance teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. After the countrywide break out of pandemic, the universities in Turkey shifted rapidly to emergency remote education beginning on March 30th, 2020, both in synchronous and asynchronous formats. Under those circumstances, the instructors were unprepared for distance teaching. However, during the summer of 2020, the universities put considerable efforts into training their teaching staff and offering coursework to ensure effective online teaching experience for the 2021 academic year. Therefore, this study tried to investigate EFL instructors’ opinions after two terms of organized distance teaching experience rather than eliciting their ideas about emergency remote teaching condition.

The overall findings of the analysis of the qualitative data revealed that the instructors were

generally not happy about distance teaching conditions and felt that distance teaching is not a proper way for teaching languages and it is not effective for teaching a foreign language (Al-Fudail & Mellar, 2008). More specifically, for our first research question concerning instructors’ ideas about the practical aspects of distance teaching, the findings suggested that the participants perceive the teacher-student interaction in distance teaching as the most problematic issue (Quezada, Talbot & Quezada-Parker, 2020). This finding might be explained due to the interactive nature of language teaching. Typically, in EFL classes, there is an ongoing physical interaction in the form of student-student and teacher-student with eye contact, body language, and information exchange. However, when students are online, the instructors do not have such opportunities to fulfill the requisites of basic human communication because although they can actually see each other on the screen and cannot interact in person. As a result of this, classroom management becomes a critical issue since it makes giving feedback difficult for the instructors, which in turn leads to low levels of student participation and motivation at the same time (Sahu, 2020). Additionally, the instructors also believed that distance teaching is not a good way to monitor students’ academic development since the students feel physically far away from the teachers and tend to display less responsibility for their own learning. To be brief, less communication opportunities bring about less interaction between the parties.

On the other hand, when asked about any possible benefits of distance teaching, the instructors reported a shift in their time management. According to the participants, they had more time not only for teaching online but also for their professional development. Due to flexible teaching hours, the instructors reported feeling free of time and place constraints. However, the majority of the participants reported their preference for face-to-face teaching since it offers more interaction, higher teaching motivation, and higher student participation as essential requirements for teaching foreign languages.

The second research question involved ascertaining how instructors deal with the technical aspect of distance teaching. After a semester long

emergency remote education scenario in the 2020 spring term, the participants happened to feel efficacious to cope with technology and related problems, although the majority of them (N= 14) reported that they had not received any technical training from their institutions. The participants stated that they solved technical problems by asking help from colleagues, by doing Google research, or by watching YouTube videos providing solutions. The most common type of problems was to do with the hardware, including the use of cameras and microphones (Priyadarshani, 2021). In addition, some of the instructors experienced connection problems due to weak internet infrastructure. Also, when asked about the online teaching platforms that they used, the majority of them reported to have used MS Teams, whereas the others responded that they used Zoom and institutional local software. The overall findings related to the technical aspects of distance teaching suggest that, after the sudden shift to distance teaching, the instructors took the initiative to improve their technological skills and tried to get ready for the next semester with their own efforts. In other words, teachers became learners in order to upgrade their skills make their teaching more effective under complicated conditions (Pittman & Gaines, 2015, Kulal & Nayak, 2020).

The third research question was concerned with the subject of language instructors' opinions about the affective aspects of distance education. When asked about their relationship with their students in distance learning classes, the majority of the instructors (N=12) reported that they were negatively affected by distance teaching environments (Kyriacou, 2010; Pithers & Soden, 1998; Travers & Cooper, 1996). They stated that they felt uncomfortable, weird, awkward and even disappointed while teaching in front of the screen. The instructors were also asked to express their feelings about being at home while teaching. In this case, most of the participants (N=13) appeared to be happy and reported positive feelings about home-teaching. They described teaching from home as relaxed, comfortable, and enjoyable, while a few of them found it hard and unpleasant (N=5). This finding might sound quite contradictory with the greater desire of the instructors to be back in classes. However, we believe that this finding once again

exemplifies the unique nature of language teaching involving face-to-face interaction. Despite all its comfort and flexibility, distance teaching is not still preferred over in-class teaching, and does not seem to be an efficient alternative for language instructors. Other evidence for this finding came from another discussion when the language instructors were asked about what they had missed about in-class teaching. Most of their responses were about being able to have and maintain eye contact, to have face-to-face interaction, and walking around the classroom. They also reported that they missed chatting with their students, experiencing the joy of teaching profession, and feeling the warmth of the classroom (Quezada, Talbot & Quezada-Parker, 2020).

As a result of the unprecedented pandemic, higher education institutions shifted rapidly to synchronous and asynchronous digital platforms to continue offering courses. However, as concluded by this study, in spite of a number of its benefits, such as flexible teaching hours and feeling free of time and place constraints, the EFL instructors who participated in this study underlined their high level of desire for going back to face-to-face teaching (Laplante, 2020). This is not only due to practical or technical difficulties that are more likely to occur, but also because of the psychological aspect of the teaching profession. After three semesters of online teaching, the language instructors were still not accustomed to teaching on digital platforms since they prefer to interact with their learners in the classroom. They want to be in class with their students keeping eye contact and to having face-to-face interaction in order to meet their students' needs for language learning provided that student engagement is a central requisite for learning a foreign language.

Suggestions and Limitations

This study provided evidence for the fact that even though online teaching will continue to have a significant place for tertiary education in the future; it is not likely to replace in-class teaching for language teachers. Despite many opportunities it offers, online language teaching still seems unrealistic for foreign language teaching, which requires extensive interaction between the language learners and their teachers.

Becoming an alternative to traditional classrooms during the pandemic, distance teaching was proved to be an inevitable part of future teaching practices. We believe that even under normal circumstances, hybrid teaching (partially online and partially in-class) will be the choice of educational institutions rather than turning entirely back to face-to-face education. Hence, we suggest that universities revise their infrastructures and train their teaching staff for future hybrid education as soon as possible.

This study presents findings from a limited number of participants and from one specific context. However, to draw more reliable and valid results, researchers should carry out both qualitative and quantitative research concerning how EFL instructors perceive distance teaching practices.

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