



EFL learners' emotional challenges and the associated coping mechanisms in online and hybrid learning contexts: A narrative inquiry

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an abrupt transition from traditional classroom environments to online learning, which left a profound impact on learners' emotional experiences. This study explored the emotional challenges, particularly anxiety and frustration, faced by university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners during this period and their subsequent transition back to hybrid or traditional pedagogical settings. The study employed narrative inquiry with 33 undergraduate EFL learners, followed by semi-structured interviews with four participants in a university context in Iran. The results revealed five key themes, including emotional responses to technology challenges, development of coping strategies, impact of external factors, instructor influence on students, growth in confidence, and adaptation. The findings showed how students gradually build upon initial negative emotions to enhance their resilience and confidence through coping strategies. The results further revealed the critical role of supportive instructor behavior and well-designed hybrid learning environments in reducing emotional challenges and fostering adaptability. The findings also emphasized the need for institutional support to address learners' emotional and technological needs, which ensures effective transitions in evolving educational contexts.

Keywords: anxiety, COVID-19 pandemic; EFL learners; frustration; narrative inquiry

Introduction

Emotions have been reported to play significant roles in shaping learners' engagement and performance in various contexts (Zhoc et al., 2020). Transitions in learning environments, such as the shift from face-to-face to online instruction, often intensify learners' emotional

experiences due to increased uncertainty and the need for adaptation. One such shift concerns the sudden turn from traditional face-to-face instruction to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and back to more traditional or hybrid settings. This shift has profoundly impacted the emotional experiences of learners, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, where communication is inherently challenging (Córdova et al., 2023; Maurya & Yadav, 2024). Such emotional experiences may include what are conventionally labeled “negative” emotions, such as anxiety and frustration, which are the focus of the present study.

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a well-established barrier to language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986). Learners experiencing heightened FLA may struggle to effectively process linguistic input (Krashen, 1982). Such anxiety influences students' achievement and affects their willingness to participate in learning activities (Zhou, 2016). In the context of online learning, different factors, such as unstable internet connections, lack of real-time interaction, limited access to immediate feedback, and the pressure associated with the lack of technological know-how are likely to exacerbate students' emotional strain and lead to higher levels of anxiety (Hasibuan et al., 2022).

Besides anxiety, frustration is a prevalent emotional response during online learning, particularly when learners face technical difficulties such as software management issues and system crashes (Novak et al., 2023). Frustration is defined as an emotional response to unexpected obstacles that impede goal achievement, which, in educational contexts, can disrupt the learning process and contribute to a sense of helplessness and disconnection (Bessière et al., 2006; Peng et al., 2024). Frustration, if not properly managed, can act as a barrier to learning and exacerbate inequalities in educational outcomes (Spann et al., 2019); moreover, it can trigger a sense of disconnection from peers and instructors, which further exacerbates negative emotional reactions during remote learning (Sahraie et al., 2024).

As we transition into the post-pandemic era, the emotional impact of prolonged online learning continues to affect students' reintegration into traditional classroom settings. Studies have found that learners struggle to re-engage in face-to-face education after adopting passive learning habits during remote instruction (Afidawati et al., 2024). These habits include reduced participation and motivation, compounded by the residual anxiety linked to technological challenges faced during the pandemic (Cerelia et al., 2021). Furthermore, research emphasizes the importance of understanding these emotional impacts and developing coping strategies to support learners (Mozid, 2022). Addressing these emotional challenges that learners face is essential to foster resilience and help students regain control over their emotional responses in educational settings (Peng et al., 2024).

Given the central role of emotions in learners' interaction with technology, particularly in post-pandemic EFL contexts, it is essential to explore the strategies that they employ to manage these emotions. In this context, through narrative inquiries and semi-structured interviews, the current study aimed to investigate how university EFL learners develop and employ coping mechanisms to manage emotional difficulties during the post-pandemic period as they transition back to traditional and hybrid classroom settings.

More specifically, based on the objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What emotional challenges (particularly anxiety and frustration) did university EFL learners experience during the abrupt transition to online learning prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did learners' emotional responses evolve as they transitioned back to hybrid or traditional classroom settings after the initial period of online learning?

3. What coping strategies did EFL learners develop to manage the emotional challenges they faced during the online learning period?
4. How did external factors influence the emotional experiences of EFL learners during the pandemic?
5. How did the development of coping strategies and emotional adaptation feed into their performance and engagement when returning to hybrid or traditional learning environments?

Review of Literature

Emotions and Learning

Emotions are intricately linked to cognitive and physiological processes and, when managed effectively, can enhance learning outcomes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Véliz-Campos, 2023). Learners' emotions play a critical role in shaping their educational experiences, as they directly impact cognitive processes, motivation, and overall performance in academic settings (Pekrun, 2006). In education, emotions are not merely byproducts of learning; they are fundamental to how students process information, set goals, and engage with the learning environment (Schutz & DeCuir, 2002). The relationship between emotions and learning becomes particularly relevant in second language (L2) acquisition, where emotions are assumed to profoundly affect learners' ability to communicate effectively and participate in classroom activities (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) brought the emotional and psychological challenges of online learning into sharp focus, particularly for L2 learners grappling with the complexities of language acquisition (Hodges et al., 2020). The abrupt transition to online learning environments heightened pre-existing anxieties, as the technological demands of ERT introduced new sources of stress and frustration (MacIntyre et al., 2020). These challenges were further exacerbated by the loss of in-person interaction with peers and instructors, which required learners to adapt to self-directed education while managing motivation and emotional engagement (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022). The lack of physical and social cues in online settings shifted the burden of emotional regulation onto learners, which made negative emotions, especially when intensified by insufficient institutional support and technical difficulties (Derakhshan et al., 2021). In Iran, as in many other countries, insufficient technological infrastructure and lack of preparation during the shift to online education further magnified feelings of anxiety and frustration among learners as they struggled to navigate these digital and emotional challenges effectively (Hartshorn & McMurphy, 2020; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022).

Anxiety and frustration were prevalent emotions reported by L2 learners during the pandemic, primarily due to the technological challenges and disruptions experienced in online learning environments (Derakhshan et al., 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2020). Foreign Language Anxiety, typically linked to fears of negative evaluation, was heightened by the uncertainty of digital tools and connectivity issues (MacIntyre et al., 2020). Additionally, frustration often arose from learners' inability to manage technical problems independently, exacerbated by the psychological distance and isolation from peers and instructors in online environments (Hartshorn & McMurphy, 2020). These emotions significantly impacted learners' experiences and will be explored further in subsequent sections.

Anxiety in Learning and Learners

Anxiety is a significant psychological factor that can influence learning outcomes across various educational contexts. Defined as negative feelings of apprehension, it affects students' ability

to concentrate and perform academic tasks (Horwitz, 1986). In language learning, anxiety has been recognized as a major obstacle, particularly in L2 acquisition, and it manifests through specific responses such as communication apprehension, fear of peer evaluations, and test anxiety (Horwitz, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994b). This phenomenon, referred to as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), includes a range of self-perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors that hinder learners' engagement with the language learning process (Horwitz et al., 1986). FLA has been shown to negatively impact learners' cognitive processes and overall academic performance, which creates a circular relationship where increased anxiety leads to decreased language acquisition, which, in turn, increases anxiety further (Horwitz, 2001; Papi, 2010). Research indicates that anxiety affects all language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Bárkányi, 2021).

The shift to online learning, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has exacerbated anxiety among learners. Moreover, learners' interactions with teachers and peers in an online setting have been identified as significant factors influencing anxiety (Yuan, 2023). Anxiety in online learning also stems from the fear of the unknown, lack of technical skills, lack of social interaction, unfamiliarity with online platforms, and concerns about balancing multiple responsibilities, such as professional and family obligations (Hong et al., 2021; Resnik et al., 2023). Online foreign language courses, in particular, have been reported to cause anxiety, with students expressing fear and apprehension about the differences between multimedia learning environments and traditional classroom settings (Li & Du, 2023). The sense of alienation and the inability to connect with classmates or instructors further heighten anxiety levels in online contexts (Resnik et al., 2023). Despite some findings suggesting a decrease in anxiety in online settings compared to in-person learning, anxiety remains a significant issue in online education, which affects students' motivation, engagement, and overall performance (Abdelwahed et al., 2021).

Frustration

Frustration is broadly defined as a negative emotional response triggered when progress toward achieving a goal is blocked by obstacles or challenges (Kuppens & Van Mechelen, 2007). In educational contexts, this emotion emerges when students encounter difficulties that hinder their learning objectives. Frustration intensity depends on the importance and complexity of the goal, as well as the learner's commitment (Holzinger et al., 2008). For instance, technological difficulties during high-stakes learning tasks, such as accessing critical materials for an exam, can significantly intensify frustration (Bessière et al., 2006). Emotion research identifies frustration as an achievement emotion that affects activities like test preparation and interactions with technology, as it diverts cognitive resources from learning to troubleshooting (Pekrun, 2016).

In online learning environments, technological barriers, such as slow internet, login failures, and inaccessible content, intensify frustration by shifting attention away from learning to peripheral tasks. This diversion of cognitive resources undermines engagement and focus, particularly when learners unconsciously perceive these obstacles as insurmountable (Boehner et al., 2007). When unresolved, frustration leads to disengagement, reduced motivation, and poorer performance, which presents long-term risks for learning outcomes (Holzinger et al., 2008; Novak et al., 2022).

In the context of L2 learning, frustration becomes especially relevant as learners face dual challenges: acquiring a new language while managing online platforms. Technological issues like unstable systems or poorly designed interfaces exacerbate this frustration by diverting attention from essential cognitive processes needed for language acquisition (Bessière et al.,

2006; Pekrun, 2006). This dual-layered frustration is problematic because language learning requires sustained focus and cognitive engagement, which are disrupted when learners spend valuable time troubleshooting instead of practicing language skills (Holzinger et al., 2008). If not addressed, these disruptions hinder learners' progress and may result in emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Abrahamson, 1998).

Collaborative online learning introduces additional challenges, such as communication breakdowns, unequal participation, time zone differences, and reduced social interaction. These factors heighten frustration, particularly for L2 learners who must manage language barriers alongside technological and group dynamics (Pietarinen et al., 2019). Frustration in collaborative tasks often reduces motivation and academic outcomes, with high school students frequently reporting frustration and fatigue during inquiry-based activities with web-based tools (Rahm & Reed, 1998).

Addressing frustration is crucial in online learning, particularly for L2 learners, where persistent barriers can lead to disengagement and emotional exhaustion. Strategies such as providing timely technical support, improving digital interfaces, and equipping students with emotional regulation tools are essential for reducing frustration and fostering successful learning outcomes (Novak et al., 2022).

Coping Strategies

The emotional challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in EFL learning contexts, have highlighted the importance of adopting various coping strategies to mitigate stress and anxiety. Coping, as defined by MacIntyre et al. (2020), is the process through which individuals use one or more strategies to adaptively respond to stressors. Effective coping mechanisms are pivotal in maintaining academic performance, especially during transitions between online, hybrid, and face-to-face settings (Khorasani & Ghanizadeh, 2017).

Coping strategies are generally classified into problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, as cited in MacIntyre et al., 2020). Problem-focused strategies aim to resolve identifiable stressors, such as technical challenges or language difficulties. For example, EFL learners during the pandemic used digital tools and resources to address gaps in their learning caused by limited real-time interaction (Tao & Gao, 2022). In contrast, emotion-focused strategies seek to regulate emotional responses and include techniques such as mindfulness, relaxation, and seeking social support, which were particularly effective for addressing feelings of isolation and frustration in online learning (Resnik & Dewaele, 2021).

MacIntyre et al. (2020) noted that successful coping strategies yield positive outcomes by minimizing negative effects and fostering emotional resilience. On the other hand, the failure of coping mechanisms can exacerbate anxiety and stress, which hinders learners' academic performance. Therefore, equipping learners with effective tools and practices to manage the emotional demands of evolving educational contexts is important.

While existing literature has extensively examined the impact of emotions on learning, particularly in online and traditional classroom settings, fewer studies have focused on the complex emotional dynamics involved in transitioning between these modalities. In the Iranian EFL context, these challenges are further compounded by infrastructural limitations, differences in digital literacy, and institutional preparedness for hybrid learning. Moreover, there has been limited research on how coping strategies evolve across different learning environments and how learners adapt their emotional regulation techniques accordingly. This study aimed to address these gaps by investigating the emotional experiences of EFL learners in Iran and exploring the effectiveness of different coping mechanisms in maintaining engagement and performance.

Method

Participants

This study was conducted in a state university ELT context in Iran. The participants included undergraduates who attended both in-person and online EFL classes, which provided valuable insights into their learning experiences, particularly regarding the shift to online learning during the pandemic. A total of 33 students, consisting of 10 females and 23 males, were recruited for the study using convenience sampling based on their willingness and availability to participate (Creswell, 2012). To begin, all 33 EFL learners provided written narratives, and one and two weeks later, they submitted their responses to a list of prompts. From these narratives, four participants (two males and two females) were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews based on the depth and relevance of their experiences. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed; consent was obtained from participants before the study, and their anonymity was protected by assigning pseudonyms during the interview and data reporting processes. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time to ensure their comfort and voluntary participation.

Data Collection

This study employed narrative inquiry along with semi-structured interviews to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences during and after online learning in the COVID-19 pandemic and back to more traditional or hybrid settings. Since the seminal work of Connelly and Clandinin (1990), narrative inquiry has gained significant recognition as a qualitative data collection method in educational studies. It is widely used to explore how individuals make sense of events in their lives. The interview questions were reviewed by an expert in EFL, ensuring content validity (Oppenheim, 1992). These interviews, conducted individually via Telegram voice notes and lasting approximately 30 to 40 minutes, focused on participants' challenges with online learning through technologies, their emotions, and the strategies they employed to cope with these issues. The interview questions covered the main areas, such as (1) challenges in online learning (e.g., "What were the biggest difficulties you faced while learning online?"), (2) coping strategies (e.g., "What specific actions did you take to manage these challenges?"), and (3) the transition back to hybrid/traditional settings (e.g., "Did any habits from online learning persist?"). The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility, with additional questions asked to explore their responses and connect them to broader issues of learning with digital technologies. To minimize bias, the researchers refrained from giving verbal feedback during interviews, which allowed participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely (Harding, 2018).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using both thematic analysis and microgenetic analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Thematic content analysis yields rich, detailed, and complex data reports (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It involved identifying common threads across the interviews (deSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). It focused on the participants' experiences and perspectives on online learning through digital technologies during and after the pandemic and back to more traditional or hybrid settings. The goal was to understand the core themes emerging from the interviews and reveal insights related to the participants' challenges, strategies, and emotions.

The data analysis followed a systematic procedure drawing upon Braun and Clarke (2006). It began with getting familiar with the data, coding, identifying, and reviewing themes, followed by

producing a final report. In this regard, the semi-structured interviews were coded and analyzed thematically to explore EFL learners' emotions and strategies while using digital technologies during and after the pandemic and returning to more traditional or hybrid settings. Two researchers conducted the final data coding independently, followed by discussions to reach a consensus.

After identifying the main themes through thematic analysis, microgenetic analysis was employed to further explore the temporal dynamics of these themes in greater depth. While thematic analysis provided a broad overview of learners' experiences, microgenetic analysis added depth by tracking specific, moment-by-moment changes in the participants' emotions and behaviors. This approach captured how learners developed and refined coping strategies to manage their emotions, such as anxiety and frustration, in online learning contexts during and after the pandemic and back to more traditional or hybrid settings. By examining these gradual, adaptive processes, the analysis revealed critical insights into how participants naturally adopted strategies and allowed them to evolve to overcome challenges. The interview session was treated as a unit of analysis, which allowed a detailed examination of these shifts over time (Ohta, 2012). The combination of thematic and microgenetic methods facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the development of participants' coping mechanisms and emotional resilience. This shed light on the processes of change in the context of online learning.

The Researchers' Positionality

Acknowledging the researchers' positionality, particularly the relationship between the participants and the interviewer is important. The interviewer, the second author, was not teaching them during the pandemic when the emotional experiences took place. The data collection occurred in a friendly, open environment, which allowed participants to feel comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives on the topics under investigation. This familiarity facilitated trust, fostering more open and candid discussions.

Findings

Five overarching themes emerged from the analyses: (1) emotional responses to technology challenges, (2) development of coping strategies, (3) impact of external factors, (4) instructor influence on students, and (5) growth in confidence and adaptation.

The findings illustrate a progressive shift in participants' emotional responses and coping mechanisms over time. This underscores the importance of preparation, support systems, and instructor behavior in facilitating adaptation to the online learning environment.

Theme 1: Emotional Responses to Technology Challenges

Participants reported that the initial stages of online learning were marked by high levels of anxiety and frustration due to unfamiliar technology, frequent internet disruptions, and poor system usability. These stressors elicited immediate, intense emotional reactions, such as panic and helplessness, particularly during high-stakes moments like exam times.

Episode 1: Anxiety and Technological Failures

Participant 1 shared a particularly distressing episode where her internet connection failed during a crucial exam: *During an important exam, my internet cut out, and I couldn't submit my answers on time. I was panicking because I thought I was going to fail. Even after I finally submitted the exam sheet, the stress stayed with me the entire day.*

This episode captures the intense anxiety experienced by the participant when faced with unpredictable technological failures. This type of emotional challenge was common across

interviews, particularly in high-stakes academic moments. The participant noted that her anxiety persisted beyond the immediate incident, and it affected her concentration and ability to engage in subsequent classes. Over time, she learned to anticipate these issues, but the emotional burden of early experiences remained evident.

Episode 2: Emotional Withdrawal from Online Participation

Participant 3 reflected on how his anxiety about potential technical issues influenced his participation in online learning: *In face-to-face classes, I'm usually more engaged, asking questions and participating in discussions. But in online classes, I was more withdrawn because I was worried about technical issues or the fear of being called on when something wasn't working properly.*

This episode illustrates how emotional withdrawal was a common response to the anxiety associated with online learning. The participant who would normally engage in classroom discussions held back due to fears of technological failures or embarrassment. This emotional shift led to reduced interaction and engagement in online classes, which demonstrates the detrimental impact of anxiety on academic performance and social interaction in a virtual learning environment.

Theme 2: Development of Coping Strategies

Participants' coping strategies gradually evolved from emotion-focused responses (e.g., panic and avoidance) to problem-focused strategies (e.g., preparation and adaptation). As participants became more familiar with the challenges of online learning, they developed strategies to cope with potential disruptions.

Episode 3: Preparedness and Backup Plans

Participant 2 described her approach to preparing for technical issues: *I started recording my presentations beforehand. That way, if something went wrong during the live class, I had a backup that I could send to the professor. This took a lot of the pressure off.*

This episode points out the gradual development of coping strategies progressively, as she learned to prepare backup plans to mitigate anxiety. By anticipating potential disruptions and taking proactive steps, such as recording presentations in advance, the participant could reduce the stress associated with online learning and regain control over their academic performance.

Episode 4: Logging in Early as a Coping Mechanism

Participant 1 described how she adapted her routines to manage anxiety: *I started logging into Adobe Connect early to check my connection and I kept my phone nearby as a backup in case my laptop crashed. This practice helped me feel more in control and less panicked.*

This episode demonstrates how consistent practices and preparedness became key strategies for managing the unpredictability of online learning. By logging in early and ensuring that backup options were available, the participant was able to alleviate some of the stress associated with technological uncertainties. This strategy, developed as time passed, allowed the participant to engage more confidently in online classes.

Episode 5: Integrating Pandemic Strategies in Traditional Learning

One participant shared how the skills she developed during online learning helped her actively engage in face-to-face classes after the pandemic: *During the pandemic, I got used to using digital tools like note-taking apps and recording lectures for review. When we returned to in-person classes, I realized I could still use these tools to stay organized and improve my*

focus. Now, I ask for permission from my instructors and use my phone with a note-taking app during class to record important points.

This episode shows how the participant innovatively integrated digital tools and practices from the pandemic to enhance her classroom experience. The episode underscores how acquired skills can enrich face-to-face learning. It demonstrates that the transition back to traditional education is about resuming old habits and leveraging new, effective practices to improve learning outcomes.

Theme 3: Impact of External Factors

External pressures, such as family expectations, socio-economic constraints, and the quality of technological infrastructure, profoundly influenced participants' emotions. These factors often created additional stressors that compounded the challenges of online learning.

Episode 6: Family Expectations and Academic Pressure

Participant 4 reported how his expectation to contribute more to household responsibilities influenced his ability to focus on his studies. He shared, *since I was studying from home, my family expected me to help more, which cut my study time. This created much stress because I couldn't focus on my studies properly.*

This episode underscores the tension between family responsibilities and academic performance. He noted that studying from home created an expectation that he would contribute more to household chores, which often conflicted with his academic obligations. This external pressure exacerbated feelings of frustration and anxiety, mainly when he was unable to fully focus on his studies due to competing demands.

Episode 7: Socio-economic Constraints and Technology Access

Participant 3, from a lower socio-economic background, faced additional challenges related to technology access. He noted, *we didn't have a great internet connection, and I didn't have the latest devices either. This made me anxious because I was always worried about something failing during an important class or exam.*

This episode illustrates how socio-economic factors contributed to the emotional challenges of online learning. Limited access to reliable technology added another layer to the anxiety experienced, as the participant worried that factors beyond his control could compromise his academic success. These external constraints amplified the emotional burden of online learning, particularly for students with fewer resources.

Episode 8: Digital Solutions to Address External Educational Challenges

One participant described how external circumstances, such as communication gaps and potential class cancellations, prompted her to seek innovative solutions: *I asked my instructor to create a group on a social media platform to access information more effectively. We also suggested that if a class couldn't be held for any reason, we could have makeup sessions online.*

This episode shows how external pressures, like class disruptions, prompt learners to adopt creative strategies. By integrating pandemic-era practices, the participant ensured better access to resources and maintained academic continuity, which demonstrates how external factors shape learning environments and drive proactive approaches.

Theme 4: Instructor Influence on Students

Instructors play a crucial role in shaping students' emotional experiences during online learning. Their influence extends beyond academic guidance and directly affects students' emotional

well-being and comfort. Empathy and flexibility from instructors can boost confidence and engagement, while a lack of trust or understanding may increase stress, which underscores the dual impact instructors have in online learning environments.

Episode 9: Instructor's Role in Reducing Anxiety

Participant 1 emphasized the impact of her professor's understanding: *The instructor's behavior made a big difference. When my professor was patient and understanding about my tech issues, it helped reduce my anxiety. Knowing they wouldn't get upset made me feel more comfortable.*

This episode reveals how instructor support played a crucial role in lessening student anxiety. The participant who felt that her instructors were empathetic and flexible when dealing with technological issues reported feeling more comfortable and confident in her online learning experience. This emotional relief allowed her to engage more fully in her academic work.

Episode 10: Distrust and Increased Anxiety Due to Instructor's Skepticism

Participant 3 shared an experience that contrasted with the supportive behaviors discussed by the other: *There were times when I genuinely couldn't answer because of my internet connection, but my instructor thought I was just evading the question. The professor commented having these issues was convenient only during difficult questions. It made me feel bad because I felt like I wasn't believed.*

This episode underscores the negative impact of an instructor's distrust on student's emotions. When he felt that his connectivity issues were met with skepticism, it led to heightened anxiety and a sense of isolation. Rather than feeling supported, this student reported feeling hesitant to participate as he feared further negative reactions from the instructor. This lack of understanding and empathy not only discouraged the student from engaging but also exacerbated the emotional strain associated with online learning challenges.

Theme 5: Growth in Confidence and Adaptation

Over time, participants adapted to the challenges of online learning, as initial anxiety and frustration were transformed into confidence. By developing effective strategies and gaining experience, they felt empowered to manage disruptions, which enhanced their engagement in academic work.

Episode 11: Finding Strength Through Persistence

Participant 2 reflected on how she managed to adapt to the challenges of online learning: *Even when things got frustrating, I just kept going. I didn't let myself give up, even when it felt overwhelming. I realized that I felt more capable each time I pushed through.*

This episode points out how her steady approach helped build confidence. By consistently facing each challenge instead of avoiding it, she experienced a gradual growth in self-assurance. This sense of capability allowed her to engage more comfortably and trust her ability to handle any obstacles she encountered in the online environment.

Episode 12: Gaining Confidence Through Positive Reinforcement

Participant 4 shared how opening up to classmates made a difference: *I'm not usually one to talk about what I'm struggling with, but I decided to share a bit about my challenges. When my classmates told me they were going through the same things and even said I was handling it well, it increased my sense of confidence. It made me feel like I was capable of getting through this.*

This episode illustrates how encouragement from peers helped him find a sense of reassurance and connection. Hearing those other students share similar challenges and value his efforts, he felt a subtle increase in confidence that reduced his initial reluctance to engage. The positive reinforcement allowed him to overcome his usual reticence and approach the online learning environment with greater ease and self-assurance.

Episode 13: Post-pandemic Adaptation: Choosing Online Learning for Flexibility

One participant shared how their familiarity with online learning during the pandemic influenced their decision-making when registering for courses at an English language institute:

After experiencing online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, when I registered for courses at the language institute, I chose the online option over the in-person classes. The main reason was that I could attend classes from anywhere, which was a significant advantage for me as a university student living in a city where this institute didn't have a branch. Additionally, since I was already familiar with the challenges of online learning, it wasn't very difficult for me to adapt.

This episode illustrates how the participant's adaptation to online learning during the pandemic not only helped him overcome initial challenges but also shaped his post-pandemic educational preferences. The participant demonstrated confidence in his ability to manage the online learning environment and regarded it as a flexible and practical option. This reflects the long-term impact of the pandemic; wherein previous challenges were transformed into opportunities that enabled the learner to make informed decisions and take advantage of the benefits of online education.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the significant emotional impact of online learning on EFL students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and back to more traditional or hybrid settings. They also emphasize how emotions such as anxiety and frustration influenced learners' experiences and the strategies they recruited. The results align with prior research, which underscores the importance of emotions in learning and their amplified role in online settings, particularly where language acquisition is concerned (e.g., Meyer & Turner, 2002). Studies such as those by Peng et al. (2024) and Véliz-Campos et al. (2023) have similarly reported increased anxiety among EFL learners in online learning environments and have found that this anxiety is linked to poorer language performance and engagement.

One of the primary emotional responses identified was **anxiety**, which emerged prominently due to technological disruptions and the unfamiliar online environment. This finding is consistent with the established concept of FLA, wherein learners feel heightened anxiety in challenging environments (Hasibuan et al., 2022), further complicated by technological demands. The participant interviews illustrated the pervasive sense of anxiety that arose from internet instability and platform unfamiliarity. This echoes the findings by Maurya and Yadav (2024), who noted that technological challenges compound existing anxiety in language learning.

Over time, however, the participants developed anticipatory coping strategies, such as preparing backup plans, which contributed to reduced anxiety levels. This adaptive behavior demonstrates resilience and indicates a gradual emotional shift towards self-regulation and preparedness (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This aligns with findings by Badiozaman et al. (2023),

who showed that hybrid learning fosters self-regulation and active management of learning processes. Participants' use of digital tools, such as note-taking applications, to enhance focus and organization reflects these adaptive behaviors. Similarly, Musfiraha and Nurb (2024) emphasized the importance of academic engagement, where intellectual tools help learners manage challenges effectively, resonating with participants' integration of these strategies into traditional classrooms.

In addition to anxiety, frustration was found to be another prevalent emotion, often triggered by technical failures and a lack of real-time support, which left students feeling isolated and helpless. Participants described feeling frustrated by interruptions in learning and disconnection from instructors and peers, feelings that align with those of Novak et al. (2023). This frustration underscores the challenges faced in online language learning, where technical issues disrupt cognitive focus and hinder engagement. The reported lack of control over these disruptions further fueled frustration, corroborating Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory, which suggested that perceived control over one's environment significantly influences emotional responses. Similarly, Ironsi's (2022) study has shown that inadequate support structures and ambiguous instructions exacerbate student frustration, which leads to disengagement and stress. Sulaiman et al. (2023) further highlighted how hybrid learning environments, when designed well, mitigate such frustrations by promoting collaboration, peer support, and resource sharing, as evidenced by participants who proposed social media groups to enhance communication and continuity.

Despite these challenges, participants exhibited gradual development in their coping strategies, progressively adopting mechanisms to manage anxiety and frustration. These strategies included logging in early to test technology and creating backup materials for presentations, which illustrated an increase in students' emotional resilience. This gradual development outlines a crucial adaptive process where learners adjust their behaviors to manage emotional responses effectively. Peng et al. (2024) correspondingly pointed out the importance of emotional regulation and the gradual development of coping mechanisms in online learning environments. These findings align with Wang et al. (2024), who underscored that students' preference for recorded lectures and asynchronous options reflects a broader trend of adapting to hybrid teaching modalities to manage learning demands effectively. Such findings support the assumption that emotions, though challenging, can be harnessed to foster coping mechanisms, which ultimately strengthen emotional regulation and self-efficacy. This development aligns with broader research on self-regulated learning, which emphasizes the transition from reactive to proactive mechanisms as key to managing stress in educational settings (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011).

The role of external factors, such as socio-economic status and family responsibilities, was also evident, as these factors exacerbated students' stress and frustration. Participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds, for instance, reported higher anxiety due to limited access to reliable technology, which mirrors previous studies that associate resource limitations with increased stress in online learning environments (Hong et al., 2021). Family expectations also added pressure, particularly as studying from home often blurred the boundaries between academic and household responsibilities, which heightened stress levels. Hurd (2007), in a similar vein, found that separation from peers and instructors significantly contributed to anxiety and isolation among learners. This is supported by Musfiraha and Nurb (2024), who pointed out the importance of social engagement in reducing isolation and fostering connections, in online and hybrid learning environments. These findings reveal the need for educational institutions to consider these external factors when designing online learning environments, especially in times of crisis.

Instructor support emerged as a critical factor in alleviating emotional stress. Students reported feeling reassured and more comfortable participating in online classes when instructors displayed empathy and flexibility regarding technical challenges. This emotional relief enabled students to focus on learning rather than worrying about potential disruptions, which highlights the instructors' role in fostering a supportive learning atmosphere. Barrot et al. (2021) confirmed this point, noting that instructor feedback and support are pivotal in reducing learner anxiety and promoting a positive learning environment. Sulaiman et al. (2023) further elaborated that personalized teaching and one-on-one support in hybrid settings enhance learners' sense of security and motivation, contributing to a more engaging and positive experience.

The gradual growth in confidence and adaptation observed among participants suggests that, despite initial challenges, students can adjust to online learning environments through the repeated application of coping strategies. As participants became more familiar with the demands of online learning, they demonstrated an increased ability to anticipate challenges and implement effective coping strategies, such as logging in early or using alternative devices. This confidence boost underscores the importance of resilience-building in educational practices, which enables students to overcome initial emotional barriers and actively engage with the learning process. This echoes the findings by Badiozaman et al. (2023), who revealed the role of self-efficacy in driving engagement, motivation, and satisfaction in hybrid learning. Additionally, Sulaiman et al. (2023) acknowledged the role of flexibility in hybrid learning, which allows learners to adapt to their unique circumstances, as seen in participants who preferred online learning post-pandemic for its accessibility and convenience.

Conclusion

The findings of the study reported in this paper illuminated the complex emotional experiences of EFL learners during the abrupt shift to online learning required by the COVID-19 pandemic. Anxiety and frustration emerged as central emotional responses, mainly driven by technological challenges and isolation from traditional support systems. These emotions not only affected learners' engagement but also disrupted cognitive processes crucial for language acquisition.

Importantly, this research shows the adaptive capacity of EFL learners as participants gradually developed coping strategies to manage their emotional responses to technological stressors. By employing anticipatory tactics, such as logging in early or preparing backup materials, students demonstrated resilience, which indicates that while online learning environments can amplify emotional challenges, they also provide opportunities for growth in emotional regulation. These insights reveal the need for institutions to foster supportive online learning environments that proactively address technical and emotional challenges and provide students with tools for self-regulation and resilience. The findings further highlight the potential of hybrid learning to enhance emotional resilience and adaptability by integrating the best features of online and face-to-face modalities.

This study also emphasizes the role of social and academic engagement in mitigating stress and fostering collaboration among learners. The use of digital tools, such as social media groups and asynchronous resources, to maintain continuity and communication identified the need for well-designed hybrid learning environments (Musfiraha & Nurb, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Such tools not only address logistical barriers but also promote long-term adaptability and self-regulation among learners, even in post-pandemic educational settings.

However, there are limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. First, the study's sample size was relatively small and limited to a specific cultural and linguistic context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, this research relied primarily on

self-reported data, which could introduce biases related to participants' perceptions and retrospective accounts of their emotional experiences. The rapid transition to online learning during the pandemic also created unique circumstances that may not fully reflect more stabilized online learning environments.

Future directions for research include exploring the long-term effects of hybrid learning on emotional resilience and academic engagement across diverse educational contexts. Additionally, studies could examine the mechanisms through which hybrid learning fosters creativity, collaboration, and emotional growth. Institutions could also benefit from identifying and implementing scalable strategies to enhance instructor presence and student engagement in hybrid models.

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