LEARNING LOSS FROM COVID-19 EDUCATION POLICIES: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF TEACHERS IN THE UAE

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الحلول المقترحة لسد فجوة الفاقد التعليمي الذي واجه معلمو اللغة العربية خلال جائحة Covid-19

الملخص باللغة العربية:

تسبب جائحة COVID-19 في تعطيل الكثير من القطاعات على المستوى العالمي، وقد أثر هذا الاضطراب على قطاع التعليم ، وقد انعكس ذلك في إغلاق المدارس والتحول الكامل من التدريس المباشر في غرفة الصف إلى تجربة جديدة كليا وهي التدريس الافتراضي عبر الإنترنت. وقد أحدثت النقلة المفاجئة تحديات للمعلمين ، الذين اضطروا للتعامل مع مستويات مختلفة من الفاقد التعليمي بين طلابهم عن بعد. تقف هذه الدراسة على التحديات التي واجهها معلمو اللغة العربية في مدارس في الإمارات العربية المتحدة أثناء التدريس الافتراضي خلال الجائحة من خلال البحث النوعي القائم على الاستبانات. بينت الدراسة أن التحديات الرئيسة التي يواجهها المعلمون تنطوي على تحديات مثل عدم الاستعداد ، والتأخر في الاشتراك في بعض منصات التعليم الافتراضية ، وقلة التدريب المسبق للطلاب والمعلمين لتوظيف موارد التعلم عبر الإنترنت، قلة التدريب على التعامل مع الفاقد التعليمي، عدم وجود تدريب مسبق على التعليم وقت الأزمات و التعليم الافتراضي، غياب السياسات التعليمية للتعليم وقت الأزمات. أدت هذه التحديات إلى اقتراح العديد من الحلول للتحديات التي تمت مواجهتها أثناء التعلم الافتراضي ، مثل تعزيز الدعم من المعلمين وأولياء الأمور وضمان الوصول الكافي إلى الموارد عبر الإنترنت، التركيز على عمق المنهاج عوضا عن الاتساع، ودهوة المعلمين المتقاعدين والخبراء في مجالات محتوى معينة ، وتخصيص الوقت للدعم ، وإعادة التفكير في الجدولة وبناء المجموعات الطلابية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مدرسو اللغة العربية ، كوفيد -19 ، الفاقد التعليمي ، التعلم الافتراضي ، الجائحة

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupted the way people live. The education sector was particularly impacted, with school closures and a shift to online teaching having a detrimental impact on learning for many students. This learning loss will continue to pose difficulties for students and teachers in the coming years, and traditional intervention methods may have limited effectiveness. This study explored the challenges of online teaching among 26 school teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Findings from quantitative data gathered through questionnaires showed that the main challenges faced by teachers included lack of readiness, lack of subscription to relevant or necessary platforms, and lack of resources for online learning among teachers and students. Several solutions to such challenges are proposed, such as rethinking the issue of depth versus breadth within the curriculum, utilizing retired and expert teachers in certain content areas, allocating time for interventions, rethinking scheduling and student grouping, and enhancing support from teachers and parents to ensure adequate access to online resources.

Keywords: *Arabic language teachers, COVID-19, learning loss, online learning, pandemic.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid spread of COVID-19 resulted in the adoption of safety measures such as lockdowns, quarantines, and social distancing (Alvi et al., 2021), as governments around the world aimed to minimize face-to-face contact and group gatherings (Khlaif et al., 2020). Policymakers in many countries took immediate action to temporarily close schools and other educational institutions, creating a massive shift from in-person to online learning. Zhadanov et al. (2022) suggest that the pandemic affected 1.6 million learners in more than 190 countries, with school closures impacting 94% of the world's student population. Teachers were on the whole unprepared for the sudden transition to a digital learning environment and were forced to adapt rapidly. A new format of learning and teaching from home emerged to assure continuity of education amidst closed schools. This was a significant challenge for educators worldwide, who had to establish alternatives to learning and teaching to maintain flexibility and efficiency (Haron & Rakami, 2021; Riwanda, 2021).

Arab language teachers experienced substantial transformations in their learning models as a consequence of these pandemic-related changes. Rahmawati and Febrian (2021) explain that the Arabic language learning processes typically takes place in classrooms, where students benefit from educational materials, facilities, and infrastructure. However, Kerras and Essayahi (2022) note that even in an ideal learning environment, studying Arabic can be an immense challenge. Learning Arabic requires grasping Semitic language with entirely different characters, an alphabet, and complex grammatical structures (Kerras & Essayahi, 2022). School closures therefore imposed particular difficulties on Arabic language teachers who had to make the transition toward comprehensive e-learning platforms (Mohammed & Mudhsh, 2021).

The primary aims of this study were to investigate learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic among primary grades students, and to identify strategies that language teachers can take to mitigate the detrimental impact of the shift to online learning. To address these aims, the research investigated the extent of learning loss among students of primary grade language teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) during the pandemic, examined the main challenges these teachers faced, and determined lessons learned regarding learning loss.

Literature review

Social learning theory was selected as the driving theoretical framework for this study. The theory outlines several key concepts that are relevant and important for the present research. First advanced by Bandura, social learning theory addresses observed behavior and modeling (Bandura, 1977). The theory's key components are attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. According to Bandura and Schunk (1981), social learning theory holds that learning occurs through continuous interplay between behavior, the environment, and personal factors. Within this context, learning a language is more effective in-person than online because in-person learning fosters this interplay. For example, there is increased interaction between teachers and students in language learning than in other subjects. Rahmawati and Febriani (2021) assert that face-to-face interaction between teachers and students makes learning more successful.

Applying social learning theory to education, Timar and Moraru (2011) found that learning typically occurs via observation. This supports the notion that in-person teaching is preferable for learning a language, as students can observe non-verbal cues related to expressing a language much better than through online learning (Al-Assaf 2021). Another emphasis of the social learning theory is attention. Online learning has been shown to be less effective at holding students' attention, especially when lessons run for long periods of time (Kerras & Essayahi 2022).

Method

Design

The study utilized quantitative data, which has been argued to improve objectivity of research findings (Fischer et al., 2014). A descriptive research design was employed. Williams (2007) explains that a descriptive research design facilitates description of critical issues raised through data collection. One of the main reasons for using a descriptive research design is that it can help to foster accurate profiles of people, situations, and events (Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019). In this case, this design was instrumental in illuminating the profile of Arabic language teachers, the events caused by COVID-19 in the education system, and the challenges experienced by teachers when teaching online.

Research participants

Research participants were selected and recruited into the study using probabilistic methods and simple random sampling. Devi (2017) explains that simple random sampling is a suitable method of selecting research participants because of its minimal bias. Opuku et al. (2016) illustrate that simple random sampling gives members of the population an equal chance of selection. In total, 26 Arabic language teachers were selected to participate in this research.

Data collection and research instrument

This study utilized self-administered questionnaires to facilitate data collection. Fischer et al. (2014) assert that questionnaires can capture essential demographic elements of research participants and target the key aspects of the research questions. Participants received the questionnaire via email. Questions were designed to assess changes in students' learning processes during the pandemic, including the shift to online learning. Another section of the questionnaire collected demographic data.

Data analysis

The strategy for analyzing data in this research is focused on descriptive analytics, which allow for a thorough description of survey data. According to Aggarwal and Ranganathan (2019), descriptive statistics encompass the application of tables and graphs to summarize collected information.

Ethical approval and considerations

Informed consent was obtained following a thorough explanation of the study to participants. Participants accepted to be part of this research after selecting an option on the consent form stating, "I am on my own accord willing to participate in this study." The identity of research participants was anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Results

Demographic results

Table 1 illustrates the demographic information of the participants. Participants were mainly female (73.08%), had a bachelor's degree (61.54%), and taught Arabic (80.77%). All were aged 31 years or older. Most had been teaching for over ten years, and had taught online classes during the pandemic for five to 12 months.

Table 1. Demographic information.

Traits	No. Participants N=26	Percentage 100%
Gender:		
Male	7	26.92
Female	19	73. 08
Age:		
21-30 years	**0**	**0**
31-40 years	10	38.46
41-50 years 3	10	38.46
Above 50 years	6	23.08
Education level:		
Diploma level	**0**	**0**
Bachelor's undergraduate level	16	61.54
Graduate Studies	10	38.46
Teaching Subject:		
Language teacher (Arabic)	21	80.77
Language teacher (English)	4	15.38
	1	3.85
School Type:		
Public	21	80.77
Private	5	19.23
Other		
Length of career as a language teacher:		
6-10 years	5	19.23
More than ten years	21	80.77
Duration of online learning/School closure:		
1-4 months	2	7.69
5-12 months 1	13	50
More than 12 months	11	42.31

Challenges experienced by Arabic teachers during COVID-19 in the UAE

Reasons for low resumption of in-person learning

The results depicted in Table 2 show reasons for the low resumption of in-person learning. According to teachers, the leading cause was that most parents did not think it was safe for their children to resume classroom learning. The next most mentioned reason was that most students were unwell following the resumption of in-person education.

Table 2. Reasons for the low resumptions of in-person learning.

Reasons for low Resumption	No. of Respondents
Parents do not think it safe	19
Lack of teachers	1
Refusal of students to attend	11
Students unwell	18
Teachers unwell	8
Teachers' laziness	2
Neglectful parents	1
Normalizing distance learning	1

Extent of learning loss of the students

The results depicted in Table 3 show that learning loss experienced due to online learning during COVID-19 was a pervasive issue . Most students were now six months to over a year behind in progress along the curriculum due to learning loss.

Table 3. Extent of learning loss measured by the length of time students were behind.

Responses	No. of Participants (N=26)	Percentage 100%
1-3 Months	3	11.54
3-6 months	4	15.38
6-12 months	7	26.92
More than a year behind	12	46.15

Teachers' priorities after school resumption

Table 4 shows the activities prioritized by teachers following the resumption of in-person learning. The most prominent was identifying how far behind students were in the curriculum. The next was catching up on academic learning, and then resuming regular curriculum teaching.

Table 4. Priority of teachers following school resumption.

Priorities of teachers following school resumption	No. of Respondents
Academic learning catch-up	6
Normal curriculum teaching	5
Identification of how far the students have fallen behind	14
Distance learning for students with chronic conditions	1

Resource challenges experienced by Arabic teachers during the COVID-19 in the UAE

Table 5 highlights the challenges in terms of resources faced by language teachers. Based on collected data, teachers' main challenge during online learning was a lack of readiness. There were also resource availability issues for online learning experienced by teachers and students. Teachers' lack of knowledge regarding subscription to necessary education platforms for online learning was yet another challenge.

Table 5. Resource challenges faced by teachers during online learning.

Responses	No. of Participants (N=26)	Percentage 100%
Lack of readiness		
Agree	10	38.46
Neutral	10	38.46
Disagree	6	23.08
*Lack of education regarding educational and subscription platform**s***		
Agree	18	69.23
Neutral	6	23.08
Disagree	2	7.69
Students' lack of resources for distance education		
Agree	12	46.16
Neutral	4	15.38
Disagree	10	38.46
Teachers' lack of resources for distance education		
Agree	6	53.85
Neutral	6	23.08
Disagree	14	23.08

The results depicted in Table 6 demonstrate the prominent practical challenges experienced during online learning. The most severe challenge experienced was poor student interaction during online learning. The next most severe problem was conducting remote exams.

Table 6. Practical challenges of online learning during COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges	No. of Respondents
Internet speed	15
Remote exams	20
Few training models	10
Availability of suitable place	9
Student interaction	22
Student participation	3
School support	4
Parents' intervention	15
Parents' awareness	1
Parents neglect to track the students' level	1
Inadequate distance learning tools	3

Teachers' approaches to addressing learning loss

Several approaches that teachers intended to use to address learning loss are outlined in Table 7. The first approach identified was conducting a data-driven intervention. The next most important approach was setting aside some time during the school day to fill the gaps experienced because of learning loss.

Table 7. Teacher's intended approaches to address learning loss.

Approaches	No. of Respondents
Data-driven intervention	14
Set time during the school day to fill the gap	8
Implementing strategies suggested by colleagues	2
Extending the school day for some students	1
Not sure	1

Challenges to addressing learning loss

Table 8 displays the key challenges that arose as teachers attempted to address learning loss. Lack of time was the most noted challenge. Also mentioned were the quality of tutors and the lack of school support.

Table 8. Challenges to addressing learning loss.

Challenges faced in addressing learning loss	No. of Respondents
Quality of tutors	8
Insufficient budget	2
Insufficient time	19
Lack of alignment of tutoring with school	1
Lack of school support	7
Lack of parents' support	2
Length of the school day is exhausting for teachers and student	1
Incoming administrators do not care about students' education	1
Students' lack of interaction and desire to make up for losses	1

Educational activities to address learning loss

Table 9 shows the educational activities that teachers have used to help address learning loss. The first activity incorporates skills that were weakened or lost during online learning into the current curriculum. Training students to manage their learning was also noted as an important strategy, as was the provision of extra teaching materials.

Table 9. Educational activities to overcome learning loss.

Educational Activities	No. of Respondents
Additional teaching materials	11
Incorporating skills lost during online teaching in current curriculum	17
Training students to manage their learning	14
Continuous review of enhancing and enriching skills and adding to constructive ones	1
Basic skills (reading, writing)	1
Consolidating previous learning with current	1
Teaching the students categories concerning managing their learning	2
Supplementing classroom learning with online activities	1

Future resources

Table 10 shows the resources that teachers believed would be needed in future to prevent learning loss during school closures. One vital resource mentioned was ensuring sufficient access to online learning platforms. Additionally, it was commonly stated as necessary that personal computers and relevant audio-visual equipment be made available to students and teachers.

Table 10. Additional resources needed in the future.

Additional resources	No. of Respondents
Personal computer/laptop	10
Access to online learning platforms	18
Reliable internet connectivity	13
Audio-visual equipment	10
Facilitate communication with educational institutions	1
Enhancing teachers' motivation	1
Training in preparing tests of graded difficulty in Arabic language skills for student groups	1

Lessons learned

The results depicted in Table 11 illustrate the lessons that were learned from the online learning experience. These include the need for additional training and new skills for teachers regarding online learning. Additionally, teachers reported

needing more training in assisting students with online learning. Finally, all but one teacher stated it was essential for parents to receive training to guide their children.

Table 11. Lessons learned from the online learning experience during COVID-19.

Responses	No. of Participants (N=26)	Percentage 100%
Additional training for teachers		
Agree	15	57.69
Neutral	7	26.92
Disagree	4	15.38
Additional skills for online learning		
Agree	16	61.54
Neutral	6	23.08
Disagree	4	15.38
More training for teachers to assist students with online learning		
Agree	17	65.38
Neutral	6	23.08
Disagree	3	11.54
Parents need training in online learning		
Agree	25	96.15
Neutral	1	3.85

Discussion

This study explored issues related to learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, as reported by a sample of language teachers from the UAE. Due to school closures and consequent learning loss, teachers implemented several strategies to promote educational outcomes. However, teachers reported having to deal with a series of difficulties, such as lack of readiness, lack of experience with digital platforms for online teaching, and lack of resources for distance education. These findings support those of Haron and Rakam (2021), Al-Assaf (2021), and Rahmawati and Febriani (2021), who all indicated that conducting online learning was a challenge to teachers, and that teachers found it difficult to provide suitable feedback to students. That said, the current findings demonstrate that, contrary to social learning theory, online teaching can be an alternative to traditional educational dynamics amid restrictions on human movement such as during the pandemic.

Results confirm that learning loss was a significant issue that emerged after the switch to online learning after pandemic-related school closures. Teachers reported that most of their students were now at least six months behind the expected position in the curriculum, with many teachers discovering this issue following the resumption of in-person learning. Some particular areas of concern regarding learning loss included a decline in students' knowledge and skills, a gap in the level of curriculum requirement, more learning loss among students from lower economic backgrounds, and many students requiring additional help because of learning loss. These findings are in line with those of Wahyudi (2021), who showed that learning loss caused by reduced interaction between students and teachers was a significant negative outcome of the pandemic, and with the work of Zhdanov et al. (2022), who identified that learning loss resulted from inadequate online learning mechanisms which caused many students to fall behind in the curriculum. Rahmawati and Febriani (2021) produced similar findings, linking learning loss to the interruption in communication between teachers and students during the pandemic. Overall, the information gathered here indicates that in-person education prevails. Successful transitioning to virtual learning environments requires changes in infrastructure that make high quality online learning resources more widely available.

Results of this study also provided insight into how teachers implemented strategies for overcoming the challenges caused by online learning during the pandemic. For example, teachers created interventions based on data, learned tactics from other colleagues, and extended school days. These findings support those of Al-Assaf (2021), who identified several strategies for dealing with learning loss, including goal planning, using diverse teaching methods, enhancing motivation, and helping students to use online learning (Al-Assaf, 2021). Moreover, Kasradze and Zarnadze (2021) also highlighted the importance of teachers needing technical and digital competencies to carry out effective online teaching, showing that teachers must adapt to new circumstances and transition to new teaching models. In other words, teachers had to implement online teaching to continue their work, forcing an education paradigm shift.

Some notable challenges reported by the sample of teachers in this study were low student interaction, conducting remote exams, poor parental intervention, and slow internet speed. Undoubtedly, the lack of suitable places for online learning and limited opportunities for student interaction, combined with a lack of school support, caused educational processes to deteriorate. Furthermore, insufficient parental awareness of online learning and parents neglecting to track their children's progress emerged as other challenges. Kerras and Essayahi (2022) and Al-Assaf (2021) previously detailed a series of challenges experienced during online learning. Together, the current findings fit with existing literature to emphasise that the transition to online learning from conventional in-person learning was an unprecedented event that caused substantial difficulties. Additionally, our findings illustrate that much effort is still needed to implement online education in UAE

schools. There is a need for changes in infrastructure, perspectives within schools about how education should be implemented, and parent perspectives about how learning should take place.

According to our findings, teachers used several approaches to help address learning loss. The most common approach was the use of data-driven interventions. Other commonly reported approaches entailed setting aside time to fill the curriculum gap and extending school days. Al-Assaf (2021) has postulated that learning loss must be mitigated through implementation of effective strategies, though notes that addressing learning loss is far from easy. Potential challenges include limited time and poor quality of tutors. Lack of appropriate support from schools and parents as well as insufficient education budget compound the problem.

Preventive solutions that can be put in place to address future risk of learning loss include ensuring access to online learning platforms and reliable internet connectivity. Other solutions include provision of personal computers and audio-visual equipment. Findings also indicated lessons learned by teachers regarding best practices for online learning. Teachers mostly agreed that there should be additional training for teachers to improve online teaching skills, training so that teachers can better assist students with online learning, and training for parents to facilitate online learning for their children. These solutions would help to smooth any transition towards fully-online or hybrid education models, if needed.

Conclusion
The potential long-term effects of learning loss experienced by school-age children is a concerning impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research aimed to explore the topic of learning loss and low resumption of in-person teaching during the pandemic from the perspective of primary grade teachers. It also sought to identify what strategies teachers are implementing to lessen the impact of transitioning to online learning. Quantitative surveys completed by 26 teachers of schools in the UAE revealed that despite the merits of online education, structural changes to educational paradigms and approaches are needed if online learning is to be successful.

Based on research results, to ensure that students achieve learning outcomes and master basic knowledge, it is encouraged for school teachers to work collaboratively to develop targeted, focused catch-up courses. Teachers could divide students based on their learning gaps to more closely attend to their specific needs. Additional instructional time could be allocated in person or virtually. Principals may need to hire expert teachers to make up for lost learning, and may consider utilizing retired teachers to increase capacity to conduct "extra-time" interventions. Greater flexibility in curriculum and assessment delivery is needed, with teachers focusing on the most significant themes in the curriculum and essential learning outcomes, perhaps altering the balance of depth versus breadth of the curriculum. A modified curriculum plan with lengthier blocks for addressing missed learning requirements and topics may be required. Finally, teachers should monitor student progress through technological solutions, and maintain student interest through the use of online learning and reading platforms. Online student collaboration and personalized support could also be more widely employed.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declares no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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