EFL Educators' Insights into Online Education and its Impact on Teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: After months of 100% online teaching due to the pandemic produced by COVID-19, the return to face-to-face classes is being experienced. This study focused on finding the English as a foreign language (EFL) University professors' perspectives of online education during that time. The information was collected from three Ecuadorian universities: The Technical University of Ambato, The Higher Polytechnic School of Chimborazo, and The University of Cuenca. The survey was designed with 26 questions about professors' perceptions of online teaching and its impact on their pedagogical practices, affective factors, and student achievement. Software R, and the Cronbach's alpha tests were used as statistical tools, along with Kendall's Tau_b, and the Kruskal-Wallis test. The results showed that teaching online not only represents a solution in cases where face-to-face education is not possible, but also offers teachers the opportunity to experience the benefits of using technological tools and innovative strategies. Although some drawbacks, such as lack of time and real interaction were encountered, online teaching resulted in an alternative methodology that engaged learners.

Keywords: *Affective factors, EFL, online education, pedagogical practices, student achievement.*

Introduction

Although EFL teaching underwent a significant change in the 21st century involving the use of technology in the classrooms, teachers and students suddenly became part of a process that was challenging for both parties. Teachers realized that 100% online teaching implied many requirements and difficulties that only then, they were aware of. Regardless, educators understood that teaching online was the best way to continue educating children, teenagers, and adults in the world.

Least developed countries, like Ecuador, faced more challenges, such as the gap between students who had internet access, and those who did not. There were also many teachers who needed training in the area of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), which, until then, had yet to be enough. However, we are currently back to face-to-face classes, learning that online education will always be an option to continue with teaching, and also learning about other potential benefits, including the possibility of using it to overcome the temporal and spatial constraints of traditional educational environments (Bates, 2018).

It is important to remember that even before the pandemic, the use of technologies and online learning were strongly recommended in language teaching, not as a way to replace teachers, but as a way to reinforce the knowledge by making use of online presentations and various apps and materials (Adnan et al., 2019). Yet, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic forced teachers to perform in a new territory of classes 100% online without a suitable and smooth transition. One example of this is mentioned by Selvaraj et al. (2021), who reported that teachers suffered from psychological and physical stress.

According to An et al. (2021), the 107 university professors surveyed in their study suggested that training for teachers and students, action and communication plans and continuous professional development offers are needed. These suggestions are to be taken into account to be prepared in case of future emergencies like the one the world faced

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during the COVID-19 pandemic. Maphosa (2021) agrees and adds that educational institutions should provide continuous professional development for teachers.

Therefore, it is crucial to explore the genuine insights of educators now that new realities have been experienced and new issues regarding the teaching approaches, methods, tools, assessment strategies, emotions, feelings, and learning outcomes have been found in this teaching modality. This is why, the information obtained from the three universities: The University of Cuenca, The Technical University of Ambato, and The Higher Polytechnic School of Chimborazo has been analyzed separately to determine the existing realities of each one, since there are proposals and projects for the implementation of hybrid or online courses to teach English as a foreign language in all of them. Professors' perspectives on their practice, as well as the results of such work, are a necessity for conducting this investigation. Thus, the present work addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How did university professors feel regarding online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How did university professors feel regarding their pedagogical practices while teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: How did university professors feel regarding the impact of online teaching on their affective factors during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ4: How did university professors feel regarding student achievement while teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Literature Review

Online Teaching

Undoubtedly, the transition from face-to-face classes to online teaching, and back to face-to-face classes again, has brought significant implications. Several EFL teachers have expressed different insights towards this radical change in education. For example, according to Li and Yu (2022), teachers noticed that they needed to develop and demonstrate digital literacy in order to be able to teach online effectively. In other words, they needed to know how to manipulate multiple technological tools in their lessons.

Alolaywi (2021) explains that professors' perceptions of online teaching during the pandemic were both: positive and negative. Apart from feeling protected from the virus while working from home, some of the advantages are that the professors were given the opportunity to experiment by applying new teaching methods and assessment tools. Alolaywi's study demonstrated that the participants did not experience difficulties when using technology and seemed to have enough skills to utilize educational platforms. Nonetheless, communication among teacher and students was not fluent, and online teaching did not allow teachers to clearly see how much students understood the lessons. Even if educational platforms offer various assessment strategies, they cannot be seen as a replacement for face-to-face communication because direct interaction is unquestionably more effective and shows real student assessments.

Joshi et al. (2021), on the other hand, state that the findings of their study revealed that professors experienced several issues in home environment settings. For example, they experienced external distractions and family interruption while teaching, and serious problems were reported when conducting assessments. In addition, there were institutional support obstacles, such as the budget needed to buy advanced technological equipment and not enough training and technical support. Professors also reported needing more clarity and direction towards working online and complained about the lack of technical infrastructure, and limited knowledge about online teaching platforms. For instance, navigating the internet or downloading free software was a big concern because of the danger of getting viruses on their computer. All these factors influenced how they saw online teaching and discouraged them from confidently adopting this working modality. Evidently, although quite a few EFL professors support online teaching because of its benefits, others argue that remote teaching has some drawbacks, such as low student interaction, which weakens the essence of teaching.

Pedagogical Practices in Online Teaching

Educators had to adopt different pedagogical practices in response to the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic. The implementation of remote teaching or online teaching tested the abilities and confidence of teachers worldwide. For most professors, the transition to online teaching was hard because they had to use new instructional strategies. A response to this situation was training. The training enabled teachers to transact teaching and start using valuable materials and online platforms to broaden their academic experience and understanding (Mishra et al., 2020). Likewise, Hidalgo-Camacho et al. (2021) point out that the new teaching modality positively impacted pedagogical practices since teachers used various resources that made students learn meaningfully. These authors concordantly indicate that at the onset of the pandemic, teachers experienced high anxiety levels, which were lowered when they had more confidence teaching remotely.

In this respect, Tsegay et al. (2022) note that the pandemic compelled academic institutions in China and educators without an opportunity to offer pedagogical training. In the beginning, online teaching was difficult for teachers with little knowledge of creating digital materials to teach. Only some of them were lucky to have external support to fulfill their online teaching goals. In fact, professors initially had negative insights towards this teaching modality; however, they later found out that online teaching could positively impact professors and learners' confidence and motivation. Hashemi (2021), in his study conducted in higher education institutions of Afghanistan, concluded that professors with more teaching experience and training had better participation in online teaching during the pandemic. In contrast, professors whose teaching experience was less had a hard time facing the challenges implied. During the pandemic, professors had to devise suitable activities, methods, and strategies, which probably caused educators to express a preference for face-to-face instruction. After all, that way of instruction was something which they were familiar with.

Online Education and Affective Factors

Motivation plays a crucial role in education and was affected due to the transition from face-to-face classes to online lessons. Vaillant et al. (2022) noted that the changes in the teaching processes caused tensions and challenges at different levels, such as work, pedagogy, and technology. Occupational health was negatively impacted, and teacher stress was evident. Nambiar (2020) took a sample of 70 teachers and 407 students from colleges and universities in Bangalore city in India, who participated in an online survey whose answers showed that frustration with class structure and design may have led to students' poor learning outcomes. Similarly, another study conducted at Van Lang University explored the professors' emotions during online teaching and how they managed the negative emotions to adapt, which is linked to good professional performance. The professors reported feeling anxious, confused, frustrated, stressed, and exhausted (Ngo, 2021).

Undoubtedly, the fact that there was no chance to smoothly experience the transition from face-to-face to online teaching affected everyone involved. As time passed, the main protagonists of the learning process got familiar with the modality and did their best to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning.

Student Achievement During Online Teaching

Professors' perceptions of online teaching influence their self-evaluation of teaching quality. For this reason, it is vital to find their insights after having experienced teaching during the COVID-19 sanitary crisis. Zou et al. (2021) conducted a study on the topic, reporting that Chinese professors and students were satisfied with such an experience since training, digital skills, and confidence made their teaching delivery more efficient.

Similarly, studies have highlighted the effectiveness of using online learning, blended and hybrid courses to teach and learn languages, for example, Ahmadi (2018) states that it is basically because online learning accommodates students' needs. In this regard, Sevy-Biloon (2021) completed a research project involving eighteen Ecuadorian students from a public university who expressed that online education allowed them to have more time to spend with their family, complete tasks, and meet their home and work obligations, which positively affected their learning experience and achievements during the pandemic.

Hidalgo-Camacho et al. (2021), whose research was previously mentioned, reported positive perceptions of students who said they learned as much English studying online as they would have learned in face-to-face classes. Nevertheless, they acknowledged they needed extra effort; therefore, they would rather attend on-campus meetings.

Although there is evidence that teachers have tackled teaching online and have learned to digitize their learning efficiently in most cases, and many others affirming that students can see the effectiveness of learning online, there are also facts that need to be analyzed. For example, what happens in Ecuador, a developing country where only half of the population has access to the internet. Undoubtedly, that has to be considered before taking online learning as a long-term solution (Andrade-Vargas et al., 2021).

Some researchers have focused on the reaction of students to the new modality during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was mostly positive. Yet, it is also necessary to emphasize the professors' beliefs regarding their experiences and perceptions of student achievement. Huang et al. (2020) found that teachers in their research work expressed a need for innovation and training in technology as a step to include hybrid and remote courses regularly. Lassoued et al. (2020) confirmed that there were issues with the security and confidentiality of data and information and its protection, affecting results in tests and exams. Besides all these downsides found in online teaching, the challenge of developing English language skills increased for teachers and students.

Even though there are efficient methods and strategies to develop each language skill, the problem of using a different scenario makes fostering a favorable environment challenging (Abou Shaabani, 2020). For example, Shah and Alam (2020) affirmed that learners' anxiety, low motivation, and low English proficiency level became an obstacle for students' language skills development. They also mentioned that the teacher's guidance and students' self-efficacy play an important role when pursuing the mastery of a new language.

Numerous authors have examined online education during the pandemic, and other relevant aspects, such as pedagogical practices, affective factors, and student achievement during online teaching. However, they seem to fail to indicate deeper and more concrete professors' perceptions of these aspects. For example, some of the studies mentioned above present the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching, stating that professors needed to be more open towards their view regarding this topic. Generally speaking, the authors explained that the participants found online education beneficial, but also challenging, due to various factors they encountered during the process.

For some professors, online teaching represented an opportunity to explore new teaching platforms, and strategies and spend more time with their families. However, for others, working online was hard, considering the changes that had to be made in their teaching.

Even if previous researchers analyzed various constructs regarding online teaching, they could have provided more conclusions. It was unclear whether participants supported online teaching more than face-to-face education. Therefore, this is one of the main areas for improvement in previous studies exploring the EFL faculty views of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to obtain more reliable, comprehensible, and complete results, this study focused on professors from three different public universities. The information is desegregated considering The University of Cuenca, The Technical University of Ambato, and The Higher Polytechnic School of Chimborazo. The realities provided by these three universities will undoubtedly show more precise results with regard to professors' perceptions of online teaching and its impact on the core four constructs of this study.

Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was used to carry out this study, which aimed to determine university professors' perceptions of online education and their students' performance in the online EFL teaching-learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic. The nature of this study interweaves qualitative and quantitative data in order to provide answers to the research questions. This approach also offers a logical ground, methodological flexibility, and a deep understanding of cases (Maxwell, 2016, as cited in Dawadi et al., 2021). The present work aimed to prove the hypotheses, involving online education during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on teaching, pedagogical practices, affective factors, and student achievement in three Ecuadorian universities.

The Alternative Hypotheses: Ha

- Online education influenced teaching in the three universities during the COVID-19 pandemic;

- Online education had an impact on pedagogical practices in the three universities during the COVID-19 pandemic;

- Online education influenced affective factors in three universities during the COVID-19 pandemic; and

- Online education impacted student achievement in the three universities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Note: the null hypothesis correlates with no influence between the variables under study.

Sample

Sixty-five university professors from three public universities in Ecuador voluntarily participated in this research: 27 professors were from the University of Cuenca, 24 were from the Technical University of Ambato, and 14 were from the Higher Polytechnic School of Chimborazo.

Table 1. Professors´ Information

University	Frequency	Percentage
The University of Cuenca	27	41,6%
The Technical University of Ambato	24	36,9%
The Higher Polytechnic School of Chimborazo	14	21,5%
Total	65	100%

The number of university professors who participated in this study is quite similar as seen in Table 1. Additionally, all the professors teach different levels of English: A1, A2, B1, B1+ and, B2 and, they instruct the English language to students who study English as a requirement prior to graduation.

Data Collection Instruments

The information was collected through a survey elaborated using Google Forms and distributed via e-mail to the university professors randomly selected in the sample. Interviewees were utterly anonymous to ensure avoiding bias and the reliability of the data. In addition, the pre-processing of the information and the exploratory and inferential analysis of the data of this study were developed in the statistical programming software R, version 4.1.0. In particular, the integrated development environment RStudio version 1.4.1717, was used.

The survey had 26 questions to collect information related to four constructs: professors' insights on pedagogical practices, affective factors, student achievement, and online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The last one was an open question for professors to express their opinions freely. In order to test the extent to which the survey measured what it was supposed to measure, two tests were carried out. The first one tested face validity, and it consisted of a pilot survey that was carried out with the researchers in their roles as professors and some field-related colleagues. The second one was to test the content validity, and for this, the survey was validated by experts in the EFL field who were external to the universities participating in this research. After some modifications, it was concluded that the survey contained questions that covered all aspects of the construct being measured.

For the analysis, a discretization of the variables was applied to perform the statistical analysis as follows:

- Strongly agree = 5

- Agree = 4

- Neutral = 3

- Disagree = 2

- Strongly disagree = 1

Also, an internal validation of the survey was carried out, and Cronbach's alpha value accounted for 0.89, as shown in Table 2. It was determined that the survey as a whole indicated an optimal reliability coefficient for the entire measurement instrument. As for the average correlation coefficient, a low value was obtained, indicating that the questions are linearly independent of each other. In addition, a validation of the four constructs defined in the survey was developed, determining that the values of reliability are in an interval between 0.79 and 0.65, where the sections of affective factors, student achievement, and pedagogical practices exceeded 0.70, which defined the high reliability of these sections.

However, the online teaching section has a lower reliability (0.65), which is a relatively acceptable coefficient, but indicates that this section is susceptible to improvement. Meanwhile, the average correlation coefficients for each section ranged from 0.31 to 0.51. This defined that the internal items belonging to each section of the survey did not have internal linear relationships; therefore, adequate reliability of each section was determined.

Table 2. Internal Validation of the Measurement

Section	Number of Questions	Cronbach Alpha	Average Coefficient of Correlation
General	18	0.89	0.31
Online teaching	4	0.65	0.32
Pedagogical practices	5	0.79	0.46
Affective factors	6	0.77	0.36
Student achievement	3	0.76	0.51

Data Analysis

The variables were summarized according to the measurement of each of the four constructs under analysis in order to obtain a record of the perception of each professor for every construct. Based on these values, a descriptive analysis of the data was carried out. As for the inferential analysis, the correlation between the sections studied was analyzed by means of Kendall's correlation coefficient. In addition, the influence of the university to which the professors belong was compared and analyzed through the Kruskal-Wallis test, where the degree of association between the variables was corroborated with the squared epsilon coefficient of effect size.

Regarding the reliability of the open question, a code called *Text Analysis Procedures* was used to determine the most relevant categories. This code consisted in doing a deep analysis of all the respondents' points of view, which enabled the researchers to establish their representational perspectives.

Findings / Results

Table 3 summarizes the descriptive statistics for each dimension considered for the study.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

	Online Teaching	Pedagogical Practices	Affective Factors	Students Achievement
Mean	3.62	4.35	2.69	3.09
Median	4	4	3	3
Standard deviation	1.09	0.72	1.04	1.09
Median absolute Deviation	1.48	0	1.48	1.48
Standard error	0.13	0.09	0.13	0.13

According to the descriptive statistics (table 3), the university professors surveyed mentioned that online teaching tends to define a value of 4, which shows that professors agree with the suitable implementation of it. According to the descriptive statistics of this section, the surveyed university professors mentioned that the topic of pedagogical practices tends to define a value of 4, which indicates that they agree that there is an adequate implementation of pedagogical practices. As a result of the analysis of the affective factors, the tendency of the data is in value 3, which can be a sign of indecision regarding the perception of the university professors about this aspect. According to the results of the student achievement, it was possible to determine that the trend of the data is at value 3. Hence, the perception of indecision is evident regarding this section.

Table 4. Kruskal-Wallis Test of Sample Comparison Test

	Online Teaching	Pedagogical Practices	Affective Factors	Student Achievement
Median	4.00	4.00	3.00	3.00
χ^2 Statistic	2.32	8.34	4.09	11.51
Degrees of freedom	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
P value	0.312	.015	0.13	.003
ε^2	.04	0.13	.06	0.18

Table 4 summarizes the statistical comparisons of the four constructs. The results obtained from the professors' perceptions of online teaching are compared in each university, and the Kruskal-Wallis test has defined a p-value of 0.312. Due to this, there is not enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis, but there are similarities between the results of the three universities. In addition, the squared epsilon coefficient obtained a value of .04, which was used to calculate a coefficient that defines weak effects regarding online teaching in the three universities.

The construct of Pedagogical practices has a p-value of .015 for the Kruskal-Wallis comparison test, which indicates a rejection of the null hypothesis, accepting that online education had an impact on pedagogical practices in the three universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the values of the three universities, there are significant differences in the survey results in this section. The squared epsilon coefficient (0.13) displays a moderate effect between the results of the pedagogical practices compared to the universities under study. When the indicators of affective factors are compared for each university, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test has defined a p-value of 0.13. For this reason, there is insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis, which states that online education did not influence affective factors in the three universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it can be affirmed that professors similarly perceive the affective factors in the three universities. In addition, a value of .06 was obtained with the squared epsilon coefficient, which corroborates the test results previously performed. This weak coefficient indicates slight differences in the perception of professors of the universities regarding affective factors.

Finally, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test has defined a p-value of .003 for the professors' perception of achievement in their universities. Due to this, there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis, with which it can be affirmed that online education impacted student achievement in the three universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the squared epsilon coefficient obtained a value of 0.18, confirming the previously performed test results. This relatively strong coefficient indicates that there are active effects on the student achievement of the three universities.

Given these results, it is necessary to establish differences in the sample comparison made above. For that reason, the post hoc Kruskal-Wallis tests were calculated for each research dimension.

Table 5. Kruskal-Wallis Post Hoc Test of Online Teaching per University

University	Mid ranges	Groups
The Higher Polytechnic School of Chimborazo	36.11	A
The University of Cuenca	35.28	A
The Technical University of Ambato	28.63	A

The results individually indicate the professors' perceptions of online teaching, where similar data distributions have been determined between ESPOCH and the University of Cuenca. UTA presents values more focused on its median, which in all cases has a value of 4. This value points out an adequate perception of online education. The post-hoc test of the Kruskal-Wallis test (table 5) shows that the results of the three universities can be put into a single statistically significant group.

Table 6. Kruskal Wallis Post Hoc of Pedagogical Practices per University

University	Average-range	Group
The Higher Polytechnic School of Chimborazo	39.92	A
The Technical University of Ambato	36.79	Ab
The University of Cuenca	26.03	B

According to Table 6, the results at ESPOCH and UTA are practically the same in terms of distribution and trend (median value of 5), while, according to the professors at the University of Cuenca, they show to have lower perceptions of Pedagogical Practices (median value of 4). However, the post hoc test of the Kruskal-Wallis test indicates the formation of three groups, where it can be indicated that the perception between ESPOCH and UTA is statistically equal. At the same time, the survey results between UTA and the University of Cuenca are different. There are also statistical differences between the results of ESPOCH and the University of Cuenca.

Table 7. Kruskal Wallis Post Hoc of Affective Factors per University

University	Average ranks	Group
The Technical University of Ambato	39.93	A
The Higher Polytechnic School of Chimborazo	36.79	A
The University of Cuenca	26.03	A

The results of Table 7 indicate the university professors' perceptions of affective factors, where similar data distributions have been determined between ESPOCH and UTA. At the same time, the University of Cuenca defines a slightly lower dispersion in this aspect. The post-hoc test of the Kruskal-Wallis test confirms the dispersion, which indicates that the results obtained from the three universities can be put into a single group.

Table 8. Kruskal Wallis Post Hoc of Student Achievement per University

University	Mid-range	Group
The Higher Polytechnic School of Chimborazo	39.92	A
The Technical University of Ambato	38.35	A
The University of Cuenca	24.09	B

The results shown in Table 8 individually indicate the perception of the university professors regarding student achievement, where different distributions of data have been determined among all universities. However, the trend between ESPOCH and UTA is similar (median value of 5), while the University of Cuenca has a lower trend range (median value of 2). These results were reaffirmed by doing the post-hoc test of the Kruskal-Wallis test, which indicates that the results of ESPOCH and UTA are significantly similar. Nevertheless, the results differ greatly from the ones of the University of Cuenca, which have lower weighting.

The survey also included a section for general opinions, which contained three multiple-choice questions to get information about the university professors' perceptions towards online education and the students' development of language skills. There was also an open question about the advantages of online education.

The results show that professors consider that the main benefit of online education for students is that they achieve autonomous learning (43.08%). Second, professors have perceived that online education is an alternative to managing the crisis of health emergencies due to the COVID-19 pandemic (24.62%). In a smaller proportion, some professors think that some students passed their English levels more easily learning online (21.54%), others believe students

improved their skills to use technology (7.69%), and a small group expressed that students improved their academic performance (3.08%).

It could also be added that half of the professors surveyed considered speaking the least developed skill during online education (50.77%). In comparison, 16.92% thought reading was underdeveloped, and 15.38% indicated listening was. Concerning writing, 4.62% agreed that it was not developed enough, and 4.62% perceived that grammar and vocabulary were the areas that were more difficult to progress during online teaching.

The last open question was included in the survey to enable the researchers to deepen the university professors' perceptions of online education. The most remarkable one is the possibility to use a variety of updated technological tools, teaching strategies, activities, devices, and sources, which make the learning process more appealing to the students, and more dynamic. Similarly, professors think that online education positively impacted learners' autonomous learning because they could access materials asynchronously, which allowed them to reinforce their learning and practice more by doing the exercises provided by their instructors at any time they needed. Another important upside is the comfort and safety that professors and learners felt while working and studying from home. They felt less anxious about being infected by the COVID-19 virus. Finally, these university professors highlighted that the time they usually spent on grading tests, homework, and activities was reduced in online education when the use of platforms and tools were appropriately used.

Discussion

The first research question analyzed online education. Professors do perceive this teaching modality as an alternative to managing the health emergency crisis because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also allowed educators to use various updated technological tools, teaching strategies, and techniques, which made the learning process more attractive and enjoyable for students. Meirovitz et al. (2022) also found that COVID-19 crisis provided teachers with an opportunity to experiment working with new teaching technologies, which transformed traditional teaching methodologies into innovative approaches. This digital transformation made classes more appealing to pupils.

The second research question explored pedagogical practices during online teaching. Most EFL professors stated that one of the main advantages of online education was the opportunity to explore modern language teaching approaches that enriched their educational practice. Also, they stated that the teaching environment was generally participative and collaborative. The activities designed for teaching were relevant and chosen according to the class objective and contents being covered. Therefore, there was an adequate implementation of pedagogical practices. Contrastively, the study by Naqvi and Zehra (2020) demonstrated that pedagogical practices were challenging for EFL teachers because they had to deal with internet connection issues, lack of interaction and motivation among students, elaboration of engaging material or activities that involved technology, and time management.

Regarding the third research question, which analyzed the impact of online teaching on professors' affective factors, it was demonstrated that the three universities under study showed slightly different perceptions. Concerning which working modality the university professors in this study would choose to continue teaching English during the pandemic, most expressed they preferred to teach in a face-to-face setting rather than online as they do not feel confident enough when teaching digitally. On the other hand, when they were asked whether teaching English should be done online after the pandemic, most of them demonstrated to be indecisive.

These results differ from the educators' perceptions found by Saha et al. (2022), whose study demonstrated that more than three-fourths of the professors under study preferred online teaching during the pandemic, while only a few preferred online teaching after the pandemic. This study also showed that almost half of the participants preferred a combination of online and physical teaching during and after the pandemic. As a matter of fact, young university teachers prefer to teach online since they are more familiar with contemporary technological tools.

Concerning the fourth research question, which focused on university professors' perceptions about student achievement, the findings showed indecision when they answered the questions related to students' learning, and grades contrasted with knowledge and English language skills development. In the same line, Andrade-Vargas et al. (2021), in their study Teachers' Perceptions, Institutional Challenges, and Educational Sustainability During COVID-19 in Ecuador, mentioned that a considerable amount of teachers (24.64%) felt afraid or were cautious of the results of the students and 27.5% perceived a lag and delay in the acquisition of skills by students. In like manner, the study performed by Kerr-Sims and Baker (2021) at the University of Central Missouri and Tennessee State University, respectively, showed the same findings, i.e., students' engagement and performance declined during the pandemic with the transition from face-to-face to online instruction. With all these hesitant perceptions, it is clear to say that achievement, grades, knowledge, skills, and results credibility are further into question, both in developing and developed countries where conditions differed notably. In fact, even though countries took a big step digitizing education, in-depth changes in how students perceive online education are needed before it can be implemented as the only alternative to supplement the conventional education system.

Regarding general opinions about teaching English online, there were two significant findings: university professors expressed that online education improved students' autonomous learning, and secondly, they reported that the skill better developed by students was speaking. In this regard, the first finding matches the Iranian professors' perceptions. They said students' self-directiveness was evident since online teaching provided opportunities to learn at their own pace, making students and teachers more self-regulated and independent. About the second finding, they were unforeseen from the researchers' own point of view since online education seemed to hinder speaking skills due to the lack of interaction and the large class size that fostered only a few opportunities to participate orally. However, chat rooms, synchronous pair or group work meetings, and video recordings available in English lessons alleviated this isolation and deprivation that prevented students from having their peers' help and cooperation and timely feedback and scaffolding from teachers (Azizi, 2022).

Finally, professors wrote about the advantages of online learning. They referred to various strategies, tools, and materials that enriched every class session and strengthened the skills development process.

Conclusions

Although studies have been carried out to discover students' insights about online learning during the pandemic, not many focused on professors' perceptions. This study is relevant because it made it visible to the researchers that professors thought of online teaching as a reasonable alternative to deal with the health crisis caused by the pandemic and not necessarily as a method to replace face-to-face classes. Although this working modality allowed them to explore and employ several technological tools, innovative teaching strategies also involved more effort. It should be noted that professors agreed that student achievement in online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was questionable. This occurred due to subpar control in the assignments due to lack of time, poor interaction during online sessions, and students' ethical misconduct, despite the proper implementation of pedagogical practices.

It can be affirmed that professors similarly perceived the affective factors in the three universities. Abruptly being forced to teach online was overwhelming and this led to high levels of anxiety, lack of confidence and motivation, and stress. During the process, professors gained experience and training, gradually changing their perception of teaching online. As an example, professors expressed that they considered students' achieving autonomous learning the main benefit of online education. Also, they highlighted that the time they usually spent on grading tests, homework, and activities was reduced when using online platforms.

As can be seen, there are upsides and downsides when analyzing online teaching from the professors' perceptions. The results obtained are useful as a source of information to be taken into account before implementing this type of teaching.

Recommendations

It is necessary to deepen the research to know the internal voice of the professors about other important aspects of their day to day work, as well as their outlook of the different stakeholders in education during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, it would be advisable to make an account of the transition that was experienced, and what is now happening in their return to the classrooms in order to evaluate students achievement and their impact on the professors' professional field.

Limitations

The results show that university professors expressed hesitancy when referring to the impact of online education on affective factors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions in this section could have had more clarity if they had been designed in such a way that they would have broadened the topic. In addition, it should be noted that the data were collected when the professors and students were still in lockdown; therefore, it was not feasible to conduct an interview or use any other type of instrument to support the qualitative data.

Authorship Contribution Statement

All the authors contributed to concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis / interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript, statistical analysis. Additionally, the corresponding author oversaw the process of research, article writing and the selection of the journal.

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