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## Investigating English Language Teaching Policies for Online Courses at an Iranian Language Institute

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### Article info    **Abstract**

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One of the first steps toward improving online English language courses should be exploring and understanding the educational policies that shape them. Accordingly, the present study examined 191 educational guidelines and plans which were issued during the COVID-19 pandemic at a well-known Iranian language institute in order to identify the main concerns of the institute policymakers, as well as the shortcomings of the online language classes. This was done through applying qualitative content analysis to these documents. The emerging themes revealed that the focus of the institute policymakers was mainly on supporting teachers' and learners' technological literacy. On the other hand, some of the guidelines which were issued in response to the teachers' questions and requests indirectly revealed their concerns, thereby highlighting the shortcomings. These revealed that online teacher training can be more efficient by supporting online teachers beyond mere technology literacy support, and with more emphasis on effective technological pedagogical knowledge. Moreover, online teachers could play an influential role in the decision-making, development, and teaching of online courses. Recognizing their key role and providing them with more support, freedom, dignity, and respect can lead to an improvement in teacher soft skills, such as patience and empathy with students in times of crisis. Furthermore, enhancing the motivation, job satisfaction, and overall well-being of teachers is expected to similarly promote student engagement and improve their performance.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Educational Policies, English as a Foreign Language, Online Teaching

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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 compelled a dramatic shift toward online learning as a quick response to lessen the virus spread. Many educational institutions, including many Iranian language schools, were not fully prepared for this abrupt transformation and lacked both the essential infrastructure and the *savoir-faire* of principled online education. The teaching experiences during this period, including Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), have been termed “emergency remote teaching” (ERT), referring to online courses due to a crisis or disaster (Hodges et al., 2020). These online courses have been continued in many instances, and similar emergencies may demand the continuation of online courses in the foreseeable future; therefore, ensuring effective online teaching and evaluating online programs are more important than ever.

Given the unprecedented conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and in order to understand the educational practices during and after this period, it is essential to review the policies that shaped them. This is important because policies, whether central or local, affect the pedagogical practices of educational environments (Bell & Stevenson, 2006). The ongoing evaluation of policies may help identify any potential gaps, or areas, for improvement, ultimately leading to the continuous enhancement of educational quality. Addressing the necessity of reviewing policies, Silva-Peña and Paz-Maldonado (2021) also contend that education management agencies, school administrators, and teachers should examine educational policies in pandemic contexts and provide new answers to address the new issues that have arisen. This involves understanding the goals and the intended outcomes, as well as considering the impact of these policies on the other stakeholders of the learning environment. Therefore, to do an in-depth situational analysis of the online instruction approach practiced during the COVID-19 pandemic, the educational policies that were issued needed to be explored.

According to Bell and Stevenson (2006), policies, including institutional policies, can be conceptualized as sets of guidelines, or regulations, addressing specific problems, or a particular area of concern. The creation of educational policies is closely related to decision-makers’ preferences and perspectives, as well as the limitations of the context (Howlett, 2004). The decision-makers’ outlook on designing language teaching courses shapes the implementation of the teaching program. By the same token, investigating existing guidelines is equally relevant, since they play an important role in ensuring consistency and standardization in implementing existing policies in the education system. They help administrators make effective and informed decisions. For these reasons, it is believed that investigating the educational plans and guidelines issued in the institute during the COVID-19 pandemic can help us learn more about the decisions made by

the authorities. These educational plans and guidelines include authorities' concerns and further identification of the areas in which changes need to be made. By addressing these concerns and implementing the necessary changes, the overall effectiveness of the courses may be improved for the benefit of all stakeholders involved.

In the current paper, therefore, and as part of a larger study, we investigated ERT at a language institute in Iran by exploring the online teaching guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic, as reflected in documents issued to English language teachers and officials. Thus, the first research question reads:

What were the key points in the general educational plans and guidelines for English teaching issued during the COVID-19 pandemic at an Iranian language institute?

Moreover, since these documents containing educational plans and guidelines often addressed teacher requests and complaints, they can also indirectly reveal some of the existing shortcomings. For this reason, these documents were further explored in an attempt to answer the following research question:

What were the shortcomings in designing online English courses during the COVID-19 pandemic at an Iranian language institute?

Thus, by analyzing the educational plans and guidelines issued during the COVID-19 pandemic at an Iranian language institute, this paper aims to identify the key points in these educational plans, explore the shortcomings in designing online English courses, and provide recommendations for improving online teaching. It is important to note that the analysis was limited to the information provided in the documents and may not capture all aspects of online teaching. The researchers applied content analysis to the aforementioned documents to identify the decision-makers' main areas of concern during the ERT period, as well as possible negative consequences. Hopefully, the findings of the study will assist decision-makers to provide more efficient online English-language courses by addressing the identified areas of concern and mitigating potential negative consequences. As explicated by Bell and Stevenson (2006), policy context impacts the institutional environment. Policies considerably affect daily events and experiences in schools and colleges, as well as the academic lives of students and staff. Bell and Stevenson (2006) further maintain that a variety of elements unique to each institution shape educational leadership, and the "macro-policy environment" (p. 7) is further influenced by institutional policy development and the local context impact. Thus, understanding the origins of policies, their objectives, and their influence on the educational process, as well as the outcomes of their implementations, are crucial components of educational leadership, and can contribute to creating a more effective educational environment. The

identification of the shortcomings of ERT can help decision-makers, program directors, and administrators of the institute with the revision of general educational policies related to online English teaching, and with the design of more effective online teaching courses.

## 2. Literature Review

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting remote teaching practices were labeled “emergency remote teaching” (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020), since they were considered too often lack the “careful instructional design and planning, using a systematic model for design and development” (p. 4) required for effective online teaching. The main purpose of ERT is the provision of temporary access to education in an emergency, using available, reliable media, or platforms (Cahyadi et al., 2021), and it should not be considered interchangeable with quality online distance education, as this can negatively affect distance education in the post-COVID world (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Online distance education goes beyond sharing simple tools, tips, and tricks. Furthermore, attention should be paid to the evolving learner needs, the learning environment, and the equipment availability. As Williamson et al. (2020) point out, emergency remote education is considerably different from effective online education, as the former is crisis-driven. They further maintain that although the information and guidance from existing research can assist educators in making the most of the new educational emergency, there is still a need for critical analysis of the global shift to “digitally mediated remote and distance education” (p. 107).

Reviewing the literature on emergency education, Kagawa (2005) concludes that emergency education is associated with uncertainty and challenge, and that a tension exists between the necessity for quick reactions and those that call for careful planning and preparation, such as being socio-culturally suitable. Kagawa warns that any emergency solution would have long-term effects; thus, consulting with local agents, urgent actions should be founded on plans for society's long-term, comprehensive development. At the same time, according to Sinclair (2002, as cited in Kagawa, 2005), educators worldwide should benefit from the lessons of emergency education, since its principles "are not very different from good practice in any education situation" (p. 30). These lessons could help educators, educational policymakers, and administrators prepare for possible future emergencies. Kagawa maintains that the lessons from emergencies raise stakeholders' awareness of their potential negative effects on education.

Other attempts have been made to evaluate ERT approaches in the past. Whittle et al. (2020), for instance, proposed a new conceptual emergency remote teaching environments (ERTE) framework to consider the

stakeholders' content learning and socio-emotional needs, to plan learning and teaching in crises, and to direct the ERT development and investigation. This framework is intended to deepen our understanding of learning and to enhance it in emergencies, and it includes three iterative steps: "inquiry, classifying ... resources into constants and variables, and designing educational experiences" (p. 313). Whittle et al. recommend that educators constantly reevaluate the learning design in ERTes in order to gauge the efficacy of the approach, adapt to unexpected changes in resources and goals in crises, and re-evaluate their current approach when necessary. In brief, evaluating the approaches taken during the pandemic is vital for designing more efficient online language courses.

Mohammed et al. (2020) evaluated how ERT was implemented in mechanical engineering courses in Oman using the CIPP evaluation model, a framework developed by Guba and expanded by Stufflebeam (1965, as cited in Stufflebeam & Zhang, 2017) that evaluates programs by examining four key components: Context, input, process, and product. In the evaluation of *context*, factors affecting ERT implementation were considered to be the short period available for redesigning courses for online platforms, students' problems accessing the materials due to bad connections, insufficient digital literacy, lack of concentration due to using digital devices, and home atmosphere. Conversely, the advantages of shifting to ERT were listed as frequent and permanent access to materials, enhancement of skills in using technological devices, and student-centered learning environment facilitation. Hardware, software, and learning resources made up the fundamental requirements for implementing ERT in the *input* evaluation phase. According to students' and teachers' opinions, the adopted tool (MS team) was excellent, and the tool for asynchronous learning (MS Kaizala) was efficient, especially in areas with a poor internet connection. Most teachers also considered the training course to be helpful in adopting a suitable methodology. In the *process* evaluation phase, based on students' responses, the ERT program was positively evaluated as flexible. Similarly, based on student satisfaction with the continuity of teaching and learning programs, the ERT model was regarded as successful and efficient in the *product* evaluation phase. By using this model, researchers can gain a holistic understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of emergency remote teaching. However, decision-makers' attitudes and approaches toward ERT courses were not investigated in this analysis.

Manca and Delfino (2021) emphasize analyzing the actual instances of how schools handled this crisis, as well as the arrangements they made to address the new problems in educational management and teaching practice. They call for recommendations based on "ethical and situated approaches," concrete examples supporting "policy and decision making," and sound procedures following standards of "responsible research and innovation" (p.

3). Bhatia and Joseph (2023) explain that after the focus on ERT during the pandemic, pedagogical research focused on “instructional design, student engagement, and teacher competencies” (p. 1). However, for e-learning to be effective, they argue, understanding the underlying decision-making processes is crucial, which means examining elements like “power and control, the rationale behind decision-making processes, and accountability in educational policies” (p. 1) in the e-learning context. The necessity of a complete online education evaluation was further stressed by Carrillo and Flores (2020), who emphasize the importance of moving away from content-driven methods that highlight social, cognitive, and teaching presence, in favor of a more thoughtful analysis of these methods with respect to authority, responsibility, and autonomy.

To improve educational policies in the e-learning context, it is important to involve a diverse group of stakeholders, including teachers, in the decision-making process, in order to ensure that multiple perspectives are considered in policies. Viennet and Pont (2017) recommend that policymakers examine the factors that impede, or facilitate, the policy implementation process, such as “inclusive stakeholder engagement,” whose effectiveness depends on whether and how relevant stakeholders are “recognized and included” (p. 6). For instance, teacher involvement in the early discussions of the policymaking process is believed to be beneficial. Similarly, for the teachers to become the desired empathetic role models, it is best for them to be involved in the planning and managing of online classes (Laughey et al., 2021). Teachers’ involvement in educational change leads to furthering their professional development (Voogt et al., 2013; Voogt et al., 2015), and can enhance their sense of dignity (Chall, 1975). According to Voogt et al. (2011), such involvement may improve, or transform, their teaching practice and develop a sense of ownership in them for the reforms. This is particularly effective when teachers share information, knowledge, and experiences through communities, support groups, and peer observation (Soodmand Afshar & Ghasemi, 2020). Together, teachers create new learning materials or modify the existing ones to match the goals in the curriculum and the context. This is of particular importance in studying the effects of the pandemic on teaching practices (Gruber et al., 2023).

Unfortunately, however, as Watkins (2022) states, “teachers are not often invited to the table of policymakers” and “have limited political voice in the policymaking process” (p. 1). On the other hand, Behin et al. (2019) found that tightly regulated educational policies limit teacher autonomy. They contend that assigning teachers to instrumental and technical tasks would make them support the system rather than acting as change agents who foster critical thinking and creativity in learners. This destroys their self-image, ultimately

leading to their becoming indifferent and unmotivated to “tackle inappropriate . . . policies” (p. 34).

On the other hand, Vai and Sosulski (2016) argue that for online teaching and learning to be efficient, institutes need to redesign on-site teaching practices, train educators in the fundamentals of using technology (a point also emphasized by McCabe & Gonzalez-Flores, 2017), and create materials while prioritizing simplicity, clarity, and organization, since good visual design enhances understanding. Vai and Sosulski further maintain that an open, clear, and attractive page design enhances communication as long as it does not interfere with comprehension, concentration, or learning. Gacs et al. (2020) further highlight the lowered quality standards in emergency remote teaching (ERT) due to the limited facilities and time during crises. This leads to striving for mere “continuity” (p. 3) and can be harmful. Gacs et al. stress the necessity of identifying syllabus tasks and components that are specifically appropriate for remote teaching, as well as immediately assessing students’ and teachers’ needs, and developing a plan for effective communication and engagement, creating a “compassionate learning environment” (p. 4). According to Gacs et al., an ERT syllabus should also be flexible and modifiable, and the institute’s support is required for quick, but effective teacher and student training, and the promotion of a collaborative atmosphere.

Despite the emphasis on studying the effects of the pandemic on teaching practices (Gruber et al., 2023), to our knowledge, the policies and guidelines for ERT courses in the context of Iranian language institutes have not yet been investigated. Therefore, the present study, as part of a larger project, examined the guidelines for conducting ERT courses at an Iranian language institute. We hope that this will not only shed light on this important issue, but also act as an invitation for further investigations of TEFL policies in Iran.

### 3. Method

This study is part of a larger project that explored ERT courses at a language institute in Iran. Given that the online teaching and learning practices studied were bound to a specific institute, the design adopted was that of a qualitative case study. Data were collected from a variety of sources, including classroom observations, interviews with English language teachers and students, and investigations of educational plans and guidelines, as observed in documents issued during the pandemic. In this paper, however, our focus is limited to the said documents and identifying any possible patterns, themes, and categories to be found in them through the employment of qualitative content analysis.

#### 3.1. Context of the Study

This study explored the online instruction program at an Iranian language institute that has a history of more than ninety years. It has branches

in almost every city across the country. It attracts different types of learners (i.e., kids, adolescents, and adults) at different levels of general English language proficiency (basic, elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced). Despite having so many branches and learners, this institute did an impressive job of being one of the very first to switch to online teaching in the early days of the quarantine period and has held virtual educational courses on a large scale ever since. In addition, according to the central office's records, in the second educational semester of the quarantine period, more than 170,000 language learners of a wide range of ages participated in the institute's language classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the size and influence of this language institute in Iran, it can provide a rich source for L2 online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **3.2. Data**

All the language courses of this institute across the country are taught in accordance with the educational plans and guidelines issued by the central office in Tehran. Since the practices during the pandemic were unprecedented, exploring the general policies of the institute would not address the objectives of this study. Instead, therefore, the researchers used the available data on the institute's ERT educational plans and guidelines during the pandemic, as evidenced by institute announcements, protocols, by-laws, and other communications, and examined the content of these educational plans and guidelines on online language education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This data also include various letters sent to inform the different branches of the institute of changes in teaching and management strategies. The researchers had access to educational plans and guideline documents through social media channels. About 200 documents were collected, and files irrelevant to the teaching process and teachers, such as those related to insurance (e.g., "Annual Supplementary Insurance Conditions") or teacher recruitment announcements, were excluded. Thus, the corpus comprised 191 documents. Moreover, since some of the documents were in response to teachers' questions, requests, or concerns, some challenges and issues regarding educational processes in the institute were identified as well.

At this point it deserves mention that before engaging in this research, the complete research proposal was sent to the then director of the institute, and he was thus made fully aware of the whole procedure. Thankfully, he was very encouraging and fully agreed with the necessity of such research. Nonetheless, we were limited to educational plans and guidelines that were publicly accessible via the institute's social media accounts.

### **3.3. Procedure**

To identify the institute's educational plans and guidelines during the pandemic, the researchers collected and investigated 191 documents conveying the authorities' decisions on language courses; these were issued



from April 2020 to January 2022 by the institute administrative board in the form of messages and letters, via social media to the teachers, learners, and office staff. These documents were explored to investigate the institute's priorities, teaching/learning processes, teacher professional development, teacher preparation, etc. when designing online courses in ERT. The initial coding was guided by relevant research findings on effective online learning. To explore the new context of online teaching during the pandemic, qualitative content analysis was employed on the collected documents, in order to identify the points of emphasis in the design of online courses, as well as the difficulties and shortcomings in designing online courses. The researchers conducted data collection and data analysis concurrently, which facilitated the development of concepts and data collection.

### **3.4. Directed Qualitative Content Data Analysis**

Among Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) three conventional, directed, and summative approaches to content analysis, the researchers of the current study employed directed qualitative content analysis method, in which initial coding was based on pertinent research findings on effective online teaching, and as the researchers spent more time with the data to explore the context deeply, themes started to emerge. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestions, the researchers analyzed the content of the documents, focusing on the identification, analysis, and interpretation of themes and patterns of meaning within the data. This allowed the researchers to produce insightful, comprehensive, and reliable research findings in six stages: familiarizing themselves with the data; creating open codes; looking for, evaluating, and defining themes; and lastly reporting the list of themes. Of course, each step was performed several times to maintain the quality and reliability of the analysis. The emerging themes representing the official policies perceived in these documents will be discussed subsequently.

While analyzing the data, the researchers needed to define the units and categories of analysis. Instead of using words, sentences, or paragraphs as the coding unit, following Zhang and Wildemuth's (2017) suggestions on qualitative content analysis, the researchers used individual themes which may be stated in a word, phrase, sentence, or even the whole document. Therefore, any excerpt from the text that expressed a theme or issue relevant to the research questions would be given a code, regardless of its size. In the coding method of the present study, for each sentence, phrase, or paragraph that represented a specific and related concept, an open code was identified. There were 527 extracted open codes, out of which 13 codes were found to be irrelevant to the subject of the study. Also, 12 codes referred to teachers' feelings in response to the educational plans, guidelines, and conditions. Therefore, 502 initial codes were found through the qualitative content analysis

of the documents, and while reading through the data, eight themes were identified, which were further divided into 20 sub-themes.

Following Lune and Berg (2017), the documents underwent both manifest and latent content analyses in which the researchers minimized the distance with the text, employed the words in the text to describe the unambiguous parts of the text, and advanced to the interpretation level to find the underlying and hidden meanings of the text, and what the text discussed.

### **3.5. Trustworthiness**

This study applied Tracy's (2019) criteria for trustworthiness. Moreover, the researchers ensured privacy and confidentiality of the participants, while accurately reporting the data and findings. Furthermore, the work was limited to educational plans and guidelines that were publicly accessible via the institute's social media, as explained above. To increase coherence, the researchers attempted to achieve the stated aim using techniques compatible with accepted theories and paradigms, and to link the research design, data collection, and data analysis to theoretical frameworks and situational objectives.

In order to ensure coding agreement, the following procedures were followed, in accordance with Creswell (2007). The first researcher examined and coded several document transcripts, and the initial codes were discussed with the other two researchers (researcher triangulation and peer debriefing; see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They examined the codes, code names, and the text segments that were coded, the result of which was that an initial qualitative codebook comprising the definitions of major codes and the text segments corresponding to each code was created. As the analysis continued, further codes were added, and once again the researchers examined and discussed until agreement was reached. The same procedure was applied after collapsing codes into more general themes. Following the completion of several transcripts, the codebook was revised, and the codes were re-evaluated to finalize the codes and themes. An agreement rate of 80% was obtained, as recommended by Mikes and Huberman (1994, as cited in Creswell, 2007).

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Results**

This study explored the educational plans and guidelines that were decided and issued regarding online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to uncover the main points considered by decision-makers in designing ERT courses in an Iranian language institute. Four main themes emerged from the data, representing the policymakers' concerns: *financial concerns*, *technology literacy support*, *materials provision*, and *evaluation of online courses*. Table 1 summarizes these points.

**Table 1**

*Main Points Taken into Consideration by Institute Policymakers, as Evidenced in Institute Documents on ERT*

Themes	Sub-themes	Initial codes
Financial concerns	Marketing strategies	Touting the institute's strengths Touting the institute's unique features Touting the institute's success stories
	Fighting to survive the pandemic	Cost-cutting measures Exploring alternative funding resources Introducing the e-learning environment
Technology literacy support	Educational measures	Teaching how to solve technical problems
	Fostering collaborative learning experiences	Using teachers to train colleagues Using teachers to train students Podcasts of sessions in students' panels for absentees
Materials provision	Provision of materials for students	Audio files of the 1 <sup>st</sup> three sessions in students' panels in case of absences PDF files of pre-intermediate level materials in students' panels
	Provision of materials for teachers	PDF files of the books on the teachers' panel Providing files to teach grammar Audio files in the teachers' panels
Evaluation of online courses	Assessment	Announcements about the placement test administration Announcements about online exams
	Research on educational problems	Finding and analyzing major educational problems Data collection and analysis of curriculum and content

In addition, the documents indirectly reflected teachers' preferences, views, and reactions to institutional educational plans and guidelines, as well as authorities' decisions addressing teacher requests and complaints, thereby revealing some existing shortcomings in ERT courses. Four main themes referred to the shortcomings in ERT classes emerged in the documents, including *teachers' economic grievances*, *technical issues*, *unsuitable attitudes towards the teacher*, and *pedagogical issues*. The shortcomings appear in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Shortcomings of ERT at a Language Institute, Inferred from Written Exchanges and Documents*

Themes	Sub-themes	Initial codes
Teachers' economic grievances	Teacher payment problems	Reply to teachers' complaints about low payment The reasons for the delay in teachers' payment Full insurance only for teachers with six classes
	Failure in providing job benefits	No discount for teachers Weak internet and system problems
Technical issues	Weak infrastructure	Long-term connection problems Problems with access to the site Problems due to crowded classes
	Connection-related issues	Limited number of microphones on Some sessions using only audio Problems with using pdf resources
	Numerous teacher roles	Mediator Facilitator Teacher

Themes	Sub-themes	Initial codes
Unsuitable attitudes towards the teacher	Limiting teacher freedom	Office worker
		Mentor
		Forbidden to teach on other platforms
		Forbidden to change the time /cancel the class
		Prescribed syllabus
		Teachers feeling unheard
		Authoritative and reprimanding tone used with teachers
		Violating teacher privacy
		Class size
		Using social media
Pedagogical issues	Increased workloads	Holding on-site classes
		Educational calendar
		Access to the site
		Multiple make-up sessions
		Overcrowded classrooms
		Fewer and longer sessions
		Dissatisfaction with online class quality
		Withdrawal from education
		Unhelpful changes in methodology and syllabus
		Imprudent changes in methodology.
Students' negative reactions to online classes	Substandard methodology	Insufficient education on how to teach communicative skills online
		Delayed teacher education
		Inefficient teacher education

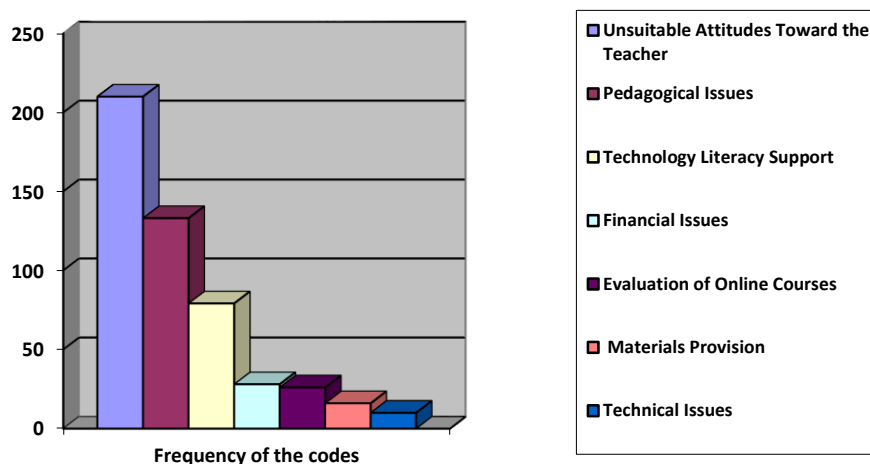
After sorting the data into themes, the researchers noticed that the number of entries in some themes had a big difference, and simply naming the themes did not reveal the existing patterns or the strength of the themes. Therefore, the researchers, using descriptive statistics, counted the number of entries in each theme, since according to Lune and Berg (2017), when many items say the same thing, a pattern is established, and describing the magnitude of the theme offers the strength of that pattern, and a large number of entries from many cases in a theme give the researcher the idea of “where to look for a pattern” (p. 197). Table 3 shows the main themes along with the frequencies of their codes (policymakers’ financial concerns in Table 1 and teachers’ economic grievances in Table 2 were combined as *financial issues*).

**Table 3**

*Frequency of Codes under Each Theme*

Themes that emerged from the documents	Frequency of the codes
Unsuitable attitudes towards the teacher	210
Pedagogical issues	133
Technology literacy support	79
Financial issues	28
Evaluation of online courses	26
Materials provision	16
Technical issues	10

Figure 1 illustrates the information in table 3, and is followed by explanations of these themes, with examples from the documents.

**Figure 1***Frequency of Codes Under Each Theme*

#### ***4.1.1. Unsuitable Attitudes towards the Teacher***

As indicated in the charts above, the main shortcomings were perceived to be related to *unsuitable attitudes towards the teacher*. Teachers were given roles in addition to teaching and managing courses while, at the same time, their autonomy and dignity were not always upheld. This was noticeable due to the authorities' offering explanations in response to the teachers' complaints about having to fulfil a large number of demands.

ERT teachers in the aforementioned institute were expected to perform administrative work, such as advising students on registration and exam dates: "Teachers should inform the learners of registration and final exam dates" (2/21/2021), or "Teachers should notify the learners of the start of the classes" (8/29/2021). Although institutional support for technology literacy, which included educating teachers and students on how to use the virtual environment and access classes, gained prominence, the teachers were expected to transmit this knowledge to the pupils, and in some situations, they were asked to educate the students or even try to fix their technical problems: "Teachers are to guide the students on how to use the system" (5/31/2020), and "Teachers are asked to assist the students with their technical problems" (8/12/2020). Additionally, teachers were given tasks like keeping track of attendance, uploading lists, advertising for the courses, and informing the students about administrative issues that could easily be completed using digital tools. One document, for instance, instructed teachers to "call the office to report absences within 15 minutes of the start of class" (8/11/2020). Some further examples are: "Class lists should be prepared by the teacher," and "Teachers should check the list

and report to the office” (1/6/2021). Along with reporting on students’ various problems, teachers were required to explain institute plans to the students and their families: “Teachers are required to give families reports on students’ academic progress” (12/2/2021), and “teachers are requested to notify the office of the student’s status, in advance of meetings with parents” (7/8/2021). This led to teachers serving as mediators between the institute, the students, and their parents.

Teachers were also limited in their autonomy, as they were not permitted to use other platforms to teach: “Running the classes in other platforms will result in an absence for your class” (10, 12, 2021). Similarly, they had no authority to change the class time, or cancel the class despite connection problems: “Do not cancel the class or change the time” (1, 10, 2021). Additionally, they were required to follow the prescribed methodology and syllabus, without making any changes: “Priority of teaching is based on the syllabus” (1, 30, 2021).

The teachers’ dignity was sometimes injured, as instructions seemed to prioritize learners: “Teachers must coordinate make-up sessions with *every* student and the office” (8/13/2020). Teachers’ privacy was violated when the students gained access to their phone numbers: “In case of interruptions with the class caused by server issues, teachers should carry on with the lesson via the groups on social media they have created” (8/12/2020). Furthermore, observers could enter the classes at any time and watch classes in progress. “Observers may visit the classes without prior notice” (8/28/2021). Teachers were also asked to hold some on-site classes despite resistance due to the coronavirus, with the warning that “online classes will be offered to teachers who select the on-site class option on the application form” (6/29/2020). Only a few teachers were permitted to participate in the webinar on the online class issues, with fewer speakers given time to speak: “Few teachers were permitted to discuss issues” (9/10/2021).

Despite a heavy workload, limited time, a demanding syllabus, a prescribed methodology, and infrastructure issues, teachers were expected to maintain a positive learning environment by being patient, approachable, encouraging, punctual, and empathetic. Some examples follow: “Teachers should give students confidence and peace” (3/8/2021). Or “Teachers must be approachable and effective in the classroom” (8/21/2020). “Teachers are asked to be patient with problems” (8/5/2020).

#### **4.1.2. Pedagogical Issues**

Inconsistencies were noticed in decisions regarding the class size, the use of social media, holding on-site classes, the educational calendar, and the access link, as seen in the following extracts from the documents, respectively: “Class sizes are adjusted so that twelve students is the minimum instead of six, and the maximum is twenty” (9/12/2021). “Teachers must create groups on

social media and report or solve language learners' problems" (5/28/2020). "Forming a group on social media is not mandatory" (5/14/2020). "Teachers can hold the on-site classes with students' agreement" (5/28/2020). "Plans are only for online classes, and we will not hold on-site courses" (11/15/2020). "The first session of the term changed from Saturday to Tuesday" (5/21/2020). "The link to access the classes changed" (28/5/2020).

Administrators also increased the demands placed on teachers by requiring them to hold many make-up sessions and finish the syllabus in fewer and longer sessions in overcrowded classes. The *substandard methodology* sub-theme emerged due to unhelpful changes in methodology: "Omitting vocabulary teaching" (1/2/2021) and "Prioritizing teaching based on the syllabus" (1/30/2021) despite the disconnections, as well as eliminating the use of video due to poor connections: "The interruptions in the classes appear to be due to poor internet. Therefore, it is advised to avoid using all the microphones at once, and avoid turning on the cameras" (2/1/2021).

Policymakers reported students' dissatisfaction with online classes and withdrawal from education, which were attributed to pedagogical failures. Therefore, after a year and a half of ERT practices, measures were taken to train teachers regarding pedagogy; however, this remained at a somewhat superficial level in a "webinar on class management, feedback, scoring, and proper teaching after two years of online teaching" (5/1/2021), and teachers had to pay for these courses. In other words, teacher preparation for online language teaching was deemed inadequate, inefficient, or delayed, and changes in methodology were deemed imprudent and unprofessional.

Some teachers were confused and angry, or even resigned as a result of these decisions. These feelings are depicted in the following document excerpts: "Most reports from yesterday's classes suggested that some learners and lecturers were unaware of the decisions, so this issue needs to be resolved" (5/28/2020); "some teachers complain about these circumstances in an angry and harsh tone of voice" (5/13/2021); "about 50 adult teachers at the provincial level have resigned" (9/10/2021).

#### **4.1.3. Technology Literacy Support**

Policymakers prioritized technology literacy support in ERT courses, discussing the technical problems and how to eradicate them in messages like "solution for audio and video problems" (8/19/2020). Additionally, by introducing an e-learning environment, the institute tried to offer teachers ongoing support and resources to enhance their technical proficiency, such as "instructions on how to use Adobe Connect on the phone" (5/21/2020), and "instructions on how to play listening in exams" (12/17/2021). The institute also used experienced teachers to train others to create a sustainable model of professional development where educators learn from their peers who have already mastered the use of technology in education: "Teachers are cordially

invited to participate in the Top Idea Challenge so that we may collect and apply your valuable suggestions and solutions to enhance the effectiveness of conducting online classes and address potential issues” (12/31/2020).

#### **4.1.4. Financial Issues**

Since both teachers' economic complaints and policymakers' financial concerns deal with financial matters, they are combined into the theme of *financial issues*. The data showed that the institute considered investing in marketing strategies to promote its offerings and attract more students to be a major concern. By touting the institute's strengths: “Quick launch of registration portal” (8/10/2020), unique features: “Holding a large scale of online classes in a short period” (5/28/2020), and success stories: “Although launching the online classes is a new experience in Iran, we made significant achievements” (8/21/2020), the institute tried to create a strong brand presence and establish itself as a reputable institute in the market. The institute also faced significant concerns about surviving during the pandemic: “Holding classes at any price to avoid a labor cut” (8/21/2020), and “we are fighting to survive” (8/21/2020) are instances showing this concern. In addition, the institute tried to take cost-cutting measures: “Given the transition to remote work arrangements, the institute plans to close some offices to reduce expenses related to maintaining physical office spaces” (8/22/2020), as well as exploring alternative funding resources: “A book presenting teachers' teaching experiences during the pandemic has been collected and is available for purchase at institute bookstores” (5/4/2021).

On the other hand, in the authorities' reference to teacher complaints, it was noticed that many teachers had faced payment problems, including low payment: “At the top of the discussed topics was the teachers' low pay” (1/26/2021), a delay in teachers' payment: “Please be informed that due to unforeseen holidays ... and the closure of offices and banks, payments will be paid on Monday” (6/7/2020), a delay in raises: “Due to the recent change in the Board of Directors, there is a delay in teachers' raises” (5/7/2021), incomplete insurance: “Teachers with fewer than 5 classes will be paid for the number of days they have classes” (8/22/2020), and discount elimination: “No discount is granted to teachers who wish to apply for courses at the institute” (9/14/2020). An instance of teachers' dissatisfaction was noted in their reaction to low payment: “While it is embarrassing to us that 75% of teachers earn low salaries, their inconsiderate behavior and harsh remarks in both the webinars and on social media may bring about a gradual end to logical conversation between the management board and teachers” (1/26/2022).

#### **4.1.5. Evaluation of Online Courses**

The institute evaluated online courses through student assessment and research on sources of educational problems, like asking teachers to complete online surveys to improve the quality of the classes. However, instructions on



student assessment were limited to some points on how to administer the placement test and online exams, such as the time, date, etc.: “The placement test will be conducted over the phone” (11/28/2020); “no listening component will be included in the online exam. Language learners will have two chances to take this exam” (3/8/2021). The policymakers also tried to gather feedback from teachers through surveys to make informed decisions regarding curriculum and content enhancement. “If teachers have helpful suggestions regarding the content to share with their peers, they should fill out the form and send it to the office (8/28/2021). Furthermore, they collected teachers’ lived experiences of online teaching. However, ultimately, these merely served as a means of funding for the institute: “A book presenting teachers’ teaching experiences during the pandemic has been collected” (5/4/2021). Moreover, the number of entries in this theme indicated that it was one of the least important concerns for the policymakers.

#### **4.1.6. Materials Provision**

The data showed that only the format of the materials provided had changed, while the resources, pedagogy, and syllabus remained the same—as described in detail under *pedagogical issues*. “The teacher panel provides access to the audio files and the books in pdf format” (5/9/2020). Furthermore, it was inferred from the documents that the teachers had complained about having trouble downloading these files: “We have been fixing the problem with downloading pdf resources since the first bug report by colleagues” (8/14/2020).

#### **4.1.7. Technical Issues**

This theme highlights technical challenges affecting online class quality, such as unreliable, or slow, internet and weak infrastructure. Examples of these problems are presented in the following statements: “The country’s technological infrastructure prevents full success” (5/30/2020), “we sincerely apologize for all the shortcomings related to resources and system inputs and processes” (1/4/2022), “it is recommended that not all microphones be turned on at the same time due to the data center’s low speed, causing sound to break up” (2/1/2021), or “according to the server performance report, some classes are held only in audio format” (10/19/2020). Technical issues were a source of teacher dissatisfaction: “In response to some teacher complaints about the less than desirable situation of online classes,” (7/27/2020). The institute, nevertheless, stated that technical problems were beyond its control: “Regarding the problem with the large number of students in this institute, all the current problems are due to the internet infrastructure” (7/27/2020).

## **4.2. Discussion**

This study explored the key points in the institutional policies and the shortcomings of online language classes through the documents issued for

online language courses at an Iranian language institute during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main institution concerns during the pandemic appeared to be *technology literacy support, financial issues, evaluation of online courses, and materials provision*. The findings demonstrated that the institute made an attempt to promote technology literacy, including educational measures and fostering collaborative learning experiences among teachers, to facilitate access to education, and to eradicate technical issues. They demonstrated the policymakers' concerns for technological education initiatives. This is of great value and is consistent with suggestions in the literature regarding the importance of educating online teachers on the use of technology. According to Vai and Sosulski (2016), "computer literacy is a must" (p. 17).

Financial concerns are a crucial aspect for any institute; therefore, it is important to carefully manage resources and explore avenues for generating revenue. However, by focusing on monetizing teachers' lived experiences, rather than using them to improve online teaching quality, the institute failed to acknowledge the value of these insights. The literature emphasizes the importance of studying the influence of the pandemic on teaching practices (e.g., Gruber et al., 2023). Teacher collaboration and communication are believed to foster the exchange of knowledge and viewpoints, inspire teachers' sharing of experiences, and ultimately improve the student's performance (De Varies et al., 2013, as cited in Soodmand Afshar & Ghasemi, 2020). Thus, the teachers' experiences with online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic could be used as collaborative learning, or peer instruction, to solve problems.

Based on the documents examined in this study, it appears that the evaluation of online courses and materials provision received the least attention. While this is perhaps understandable during an unforeseen calamity on the scale of the recent pandemic, it goes against Stufflebeam and Zhang's (2017) advice to evaluate program implementation, provide feedback on the extent to which it met expectations, and assess the outcomes. It also contradicts Vai and Sosulski's (2016) emphasis on the effective role of re-designing online materials to improve understanding and the quality of the courses.

The study also inferred four types of shortcomings in the institute's online courses from the institute documents: *Teachers' economic grievances, pedagogical issues, unsuitable attitudes towards teachers, and technical matters*. These shortcomings were further addressed by teachers and learners in interviews, which appear in another paper (Khosravi et al., 2024).

In the present study, it was noted that matters such as low/delayed payments and incomplete insurance were among the teachers' economic grievances. This is while low teacher payment can seriously undermine teacher motivation and act as a major barrier to their professional development (Soodmand Afshar & Ghasemi, 2020). Out of fairness to the policymakers,

however, it should be noted that the institute was also seriously struggling with financial difficulties and uncertainties—as were the rest of the world, due to this wholly unforeseen turn of events, and having to suddenly navigate hitherto uncharted dark waters.

The apprehensions raised with regard to pedagogical concerns in this study are consistent with Vai and Sosulski's (2016) call for institutes to invest more in pedagogical training of teachers for online teaching. Due to the sudden, unprecedented demand for inclusive online teaching practices, it was perhaps somewhat natural for the policymakers to focus on technological issues as well as attracting as many students as possible during the pandemic; however, teacher preparation for pedagogy through technology is undeniably vital and should not be neglected (McCabe & Gonzalez-Flores, 2017).

What was perceived to be *unsuitable attitudes towards the teachers* resulted in part from the managing board expecting teachers to take on numerous non-teaching roles and duties, similar to those of office staff? According to Yousaf et al. (2021), such additional tasks take up valuable time “that could be better spent with students” (p. 806). “Non-teaching school-related duties” are a reason for teachers' dissatisfaction with their jobs (Sturman, 2004, as cited in Yousaf et al., 2021).

Furthermore, it appeared that the teachers' dignity was not sufficiently upheld, due to their exclusion from discussions on course problems and course design. These observations are in stark contrast with studies that emphasize the importance of teacher participation in educational change and course design as a component of their agency or professional development (Chall, 1975; Viennet & Pont, 2017; Voogt et al., 2013).

The prescribed and rigid syllabus and methodology observed in this study overly limit teacher freedom (Behin et al., 2019), and are contrary to Gacs et al.'s (2020) recommendations for flexible syllabi in crisis-prompted online courses. Although Gacs et al. do not explicitly mention teacher freedom and dignity, the very premise of their article is that it is the teachers' responsibility to design the courses, and they, therefore, call upon the language instructor to make informed decisions for online language education. Teachers' limited freedom can hinder their creativity and innovation in the classroom, preventing them from tailoring their lessons to students' needs.

The findings also highlighted the importance of soft skills such as empathy and understanding required for an online teacher. These findings are consistent with Gacs et al.'s (2020) recommendation that when designing emergency courses, instructors' and students' emotional and physical comfort should be taken into account. On the contrary, when teacher authority in planning and managing online classes is neglected and the working conditions are stressful for teachers, teachers would not be the empathetic role models they are intended to be (Laughey et al., 2021).

Finally, *technical issues*, such as unreliable/slow internet and weak infrastructure, undeniably affected the quality of online teaching and contributed to teacher dissatisfaction, although it is only fair to note that these were largely beyond the institute's control. Indeed, an argument can be made that the decisions and difficulties noted in this study are no different from those of the majority of ERT classes observed worldwide throughout the pandemic. Notwithstanding this, such decisions and difficulties resulted in teachers' and learners' dissatisfaction and unfavorable reactions, as can be inferred from the authorities' lamenting the increase in resignations, addressing the teachers' confusion with the decisions, and conveying learners' complaints about the quality of the ERT classes to the teachers.

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

The institute documents that were disseminated throughout the pandemic indicated that some of the major concerns of the institute policymakers were *technology literacy support*, *financial issues*, and to a lesser extent *evaluation of online courses*, and *materials provision*. Also, some of the shortcomings of the online courses offered during the pandemic were identifiable through these same documents as *unsuitable attitudes towards the teacher*, *pedagogical issues*, *teachers' economic grievances*, and *technical issues*. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of ongoing evaluation and adaptation of the guidelines based on actively seeking feedback and input from stakeholders during the development and implementation of online courses. This will help to ensure their relevance and impact on education quality. In particular, hearing the views of the online teachers is paramount, since they are in direct contact with learners. The policies pertaining to emergency remote teaching need to be reviewed with the involvement and advice of the teachers, taking into account their needs, to create a more collaborative and supportive environment that fosters effective online course development and implementation. Online courses have grown in popularity in the post-COVID era, since they are accessible, affordable, and inclusive. In the "post-crisis" era, however, with teachers having gained a great deal of technological literacy, the efficiency of these courses is the primary concern, and additional steps can be taken toward improving the quality of online courses.

Although in an ERT situation, it is reasonable for technological literacy to be prioritized, the fact that the teachers appeared to feel the need for more consistent support, and had concerns about pedagogical issues, indicates that these issues need to be taken more seriously. It is unreasonable to expect teachers to be patient with students, or foster a stress-free environment in online classes, if they are already under a great deal of stress and pressure from inconsistent decisions and heavy workloads. Adding administrative work and piling on responsibilities irrelevant to the teaching field can distract teachers

from their guiding role in online courses. Furthermore, technologically and pedagogically trained teachers should be involved, and given more freedom, where feasible, to modify instructions to meet the demands of the context. By prioritizing these aspects in online course design and teacher training programs, courses can be redesigned in a way that promotes the teachers' motivation, job satisfaction, and overall well-being, leading also to improved student performance and engagement.

Nonetheless, we should not lose sight of how the abrupt shift to online classes was, in itself, a remarkable achievement. It is admirable that the institute made swift decisions to hold classes entirely online despite being caught off-guard with the occurrence of the pandemic. They performed an excellent job of educating teachers who, up until then, had little experience integrating technology into their work to this vast extent. Although the term "emergency remote teaching" was applied to education during the pandemic, highlighting the inadequacies of effective online instruction, it should be remembered that the decisions made during this period were focused on managing a major crisis, the like of which the world has rarely seen in recent times.

This study contributes to the literature on teachers' roles in online language education; however, it has some limitations. The findings of the study cannot be considered representative of all online education practices during the pandemic, since the sample size was small and a very specific context was studied. Also, the perspectives of the institute teachers and learners were investigated in a complementary study (Khosravi et al., 2024). However, exploring the policymakers' perspectives through in-depth interviews can further develop our understanding of the situation. Finally, by expanding the methods and contexts of inquiry, further research can contribute to a deeper understanding of effective online course development and implementation.

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