

## Teachers' Perspectives: Teaching Strategies during COVID-19 Pandemic in a Primary School in the United Arab Emirates

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### Abstract

*This qualitative case study was conducted in a private school, Abu Dhabi/United Arab Emirates to explore the effect of online-home learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' teaching strategies, in particular collaborative learning. The researcher used semi-structured interviews with ten teachers as well as observation. Vygotsky's Social Constructive theory was used as a framework to understand the impact of online learning on teachers' teaching strategies. Using thematic analysis, four themes emerged for the research question: What is the effect of online-home learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' teaching strategies? (Teachers' low skills in technology, lack of guidance to students, students' lack of interest, and struggle in identifying students' learning styles and needs). Limitations and implications for future research were presented.*

**Keywords:** *online learning, teaching strategies, Covid-19, pandemic, teaching and learning process.*

### 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted every industry, including school closures, leading to a shift towards distance or online learning. Countries around the world have adopted both online and offline learning systems while following health protocols. Given the current situation, the traditional way of learning must be altered to meet learning goals (Guo & Li, 2020). The alteration of the learning process has had an impact on the quality and effectiveness of teaching, including in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Its impact is widespread, including in education, leading to the temporary closure of educational institutions by many governments to curb the spread of the virus (Abidah et al., 2020; Alarabi et al., 2022). According to UNESCO, 107 countries have shut down their educational systems in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting over 90% of the world's student population (Viner et al., 2020). To combat the spread of Covid-19, countries have adopted distance education as an alternative to in-person instruction. The temporary closure of schools resulted in a shift towards online learning, with teachers conducting lessons remotely.

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To control the spread of COVID-19, the UAE government declared the closure of schools across the Emirates at the end of March 2020 and again in January 2021 as a response to the emergence of the new coronavirus variant (Heba & Sultan, 2020; Alarabi et al., 2022; Tairab et al., 2023). Online learning was instructed by the UAE government to ensure the continuity of learning. To guarantee the success of online learning, the Ministry of Education directed schools with clear and actionable guidance as well as equipped schools with appropriate learning resources and platforms in the UAE educational context (ADEK, 2020). Most of the educational institutions were not ready for this rapid shift from face-to-face to online learning (Tairab et al., 2023). Such a situation posed real challenges to school communities; teachers had difficulties in adapting online learning effectively in a short period of time and most of them were not proficient in using various online teaching strategies and technology (Lestyanawati, 2020). Moreover, the majority of students were not accustomed to online learning. In order to overcome the barriers faced by both teachers and students, educators have to adapt their teaching strategies to run online learning successfully (Putri et al., 2020).

Preparations for distance learning must include proper school infrastructure (Beneke, 2020), such as addressing uneven internet access and other related issues. Despite high internet usage in Indonesia at 60% (Kurniawan & Rofiah, 2020), online learning still requires improvement and must address factors like teacher and parent abilities, economic factors, facility limitations, and pedagogical limitations, as highlighted in a study by Muhdi et al. (2020) on online learning in early childhood education. Most of the educational institutions were not fully prepared to shift from face-to-face to online learning. This phenomenon made educators and students confused about acknowledging the existing reality and posed many problems in the education field. Educators were responsible for managing the learning environment by preparing and designing innovative online materials and teaching strategies that can be used at all times and could positively impact students' academic achievement (Fahmi et al., 2020). In addition, the lack of clear institutional expectations and guidelines for educators posed a problem. Educators were not able to evaluate the effectiveness of their online classes (Anderson et al., 2011). Experts and educators recognized the need for contemplating approachable teaching strategies as well as the role of technology in implementing the curriculum effectively during online home learning. Many challenges and obstacles have arisen in developing teaching strategies during online learning (Cleveland et al., 2017).

This qualitative case study was conducted to explore the effect of online learning on teachers' teaching strategies during the COVID-19 outbreak among primary learners in a private school in Abu Dhabi/UAE to acquaint educators as well as stakeholders with the tactics to improve and modify their online teaching strategies which will enhance students' engagement as well as students' learning outcomes.

## **2. Teaching Strategies**

A curriculum is a set of plans that comprises different teaching materials and learning experiences delivered by educational institutions which is designed systematically in the learning process for educators and students to achieve target goals (Fahmi et al., 2020; Al Mansoor, 2023). Educators seek innovative ways to facilitate the delivery of knowledge to learners through authentic communication strategies to achieve their target academic objectives. It is crucial that educators implement various teaching strategies to help learners improve and apply their critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills which contribute effectively to students' academic performance as well as prepare them to face the complex problems they might face in the future (Sharma, 2017). Developing and implementing creative teaching strategies by educators is necessary as they are considered key figures in formulating innovative environments and this should be supported by institutions and policymakers. A creative environment allows teachers to

meet their students' needs and interests as well as helps students to recognize their weaknesses and strengths which could improve the learning process (Burke, 2007).

### 3. Related Literature

Previous research has identified various issues and challenges in online learning environments, as found in studies conducted across different countries and levels (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007; Alarabi et al., 2022). A recent study of early childhood education instructors revealed a range of challenges, including network and connectivity problems experienced by the instructors themselves (Alarabi & Alwardat, 2021). According to Diningrat et al. (2020), there are difficulties with student engagement including a lack of feedback from students and the quality of course content impacting the accuracy of teacher assessments. The basic view of online learning from the student's perspective is seen as a way to enhance and support collaborative learning, leading to the development of presentation skills (Verdonck et al., 2019). Students' positive attitudes can increase feedback, thereby improving student competency.

Changing from face-to-face learning to online learning, researchers moved beyond comparing the effectiveness of both approaches and are now probing into the domain of examining the most effective strategies to be employed in an online learning context (Johnson et al., 2000; Hiltz et al., 2002; McLaren, 2004). Several researchers have conducted studies related to the efficiency and suitability of the implementation of online technologies (Cooner, 2010; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Kerres & Witt, 2003). However, there are only a few studies that examined the impact of online learning on learning and teaching strategies (Collis & Van Der Wende, 2002; Driscoll, 2002; Hofmann, 2006). There is an agreement that the strategies used in online learning replicate the traditional approaches and fail to achieve the target goals (Ge, 2011). The used pedagogies in the online environment fall behind the current technology innovation. According to Sonwalker (2007, p. 45), "computer as a learning platform is proving to be an ineffective and boring medium".

According to Swan (2001), the use of innovative design and teaching strategies that allowed active discussion and interactions with teachers considerably positively affected learners' satisfaction and learning. Swans' findings were supported by Kuh and Hu (2001) who alluded to the importance of implementing teaching strategies that comprised students' engagement as it improved students' social skills as well as learning outcomes. In addition, Thurmond and Wambach (2004) pointed out the role of collaborative learning as it motivated students, encouraged them to be active participants in online settings, and allowed transformative learning to exist. Doering (2006) argued that his data supported Thurmond and Wambach's (2004) view that teachers were able to design online teaching strategies that increased the engagement of students through the use of collaborative learning. Moorhouse (2020) conducted a study discussing the challenges and strategies for facilitating the online learning process in both synchronous and asynchronous learning during the pandemic. The findings showed that students had the tendency to be passive participants, and this was exemplified by low students' participation accompanied by long silence and students' brief answers. Moorhouse's (2020) work was complemented by Yang's (2020) study which investigated teachers' willingness to online learning. The results revealed that teachers had difficulties employing certain teaching strategies that promote student engagement, yet they were highly willing to carry out online teaching.

### 4. Methodology

According to the social constructivism view, reality is constructed through social interactions (Mertens 2005). The researcher utilized interpretivism/constructivist approaches to create profound reality and knowledge. This was achieved through

interacting with participants to recognize their perspectives. In addition, the study carried out an inductive approach that allowed themes to develop through the research process as an alternative to examining a proposed hypothesis (Creswell, 2012).

#### 4.1 Research Design

To understand the effect of online learning on teachers' teaching strategies in Abu Dhabi/ UAE, this study used a qualitative case study approach. The use of qualitative research designs allows researchers to gather, explore, and comprehend data in research studies (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative researchers usually are concerned with the way outcomes arise, similar to cause and effect (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Moreover, qualitative researchers pay attention to opinions, beliefs, and the responses provided based on particular phrases, discussions, and questions. Qualitative researchers tend to concentrate on individual perceptions as they aim to be acquainted with the participant's way of thinking as well as the motives behind their thinking procedures (Fraenkel et al., 2015).

A case study was defined by Creswell (2012, p. 15) as when the "researcher explores in depth a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals". Because a qualitative research study approach enabled the researcher to gather authentic data from different perspectives in the participants' familiar settings (work or school), the researcher chose to employ a qualitative case study approach. In accordance with Yin's (2014) recommendations, it is useful to employ a case study when the researcher is interested in answering "how", "why", and "what" questions as well as when the context has a critical impact on the outcomes of the study. Moreover, the researcher found choosing a case study would be helpful in gaining a holistic view of teachers' teaching strategies in the context of online learning.

#### 4.2 Participants

For this study, the researcher chose ten online teachers as a purposive sample. All participants came from different countries and ranged in age from twenty-nine to forty-seven. All of them earned a higher diploma in teaching with a minimum of six years of experience. The rationale behind the researcher's choice of this purposive sample was to ensure that they would represent the larger population of the selected school and allowed the researcher to collect the needed data within the allotted period of time to achieve the purpose of this study (Yin, 2016). Table 1 illustrates the participants' codes, nationality, and years of experience.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Codes	Nationality	Years of Experience
01	Syrian	7 years
02	Lebanese	16 years
03	Lebanese	8 years
04	Jordanian	6 years
05	Algerian	6 years
06	Egyptian	10 years
07	Syrian	8 years
08	Lebanese	7 years
09	Egyptian	9 years
10	Egyptian	14 years

### 4.3 Data Collection

As stated above, the purpose of this study was to explore the effect of online learning on online teachers' teaching strategies in a private school in Abu Dhabi/UAE. The researcher chose to gather data using interviews and observation. The researcher was consistent with all the research methods and practices to sustain validity (Creswell, 2012).

### 4.4 Data Analysis

During the analysis, careful consideration was given to the aim and the design of the study (Patton, 2015). The recordings were transcribed by the researcher after the completion of the data collection, the transcription process took five days. Before sending the transcripts to the participants to be checked for accuracy, all the transcripts were revised and confirmed by comparing them to the recordings. The researcher used the transcripts through all the research phases for coding purposes.

Qualitative data analysis is a process that comprises immersing in the collected data, organizing, and reporting the data (Fraenkel et al., 2015). The researcher reviewed all ten transcripts twice concurrently with the data collected from observations to acquire sense and be aware of the participant's perceptions. Using thematic analysis, the researcher was able to recognize, describe, and analyze patterns. Vygotsky's (1986) theoretical stance on social constructivism directed this qualitative case study. The researcher used the data gathered from the interviews and observations to synthesize it into themes. Well-mapped themes emerged from the two data sources. Themes were reviewed, named, and defined through a thorough process (Braun & Clark, 2006).

### 4.5 Interviews

In this study, the researcher chose to interview ten online teachers as it is considered a common method to collect qualitative data in case study research (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Interviews enabled the researcher to exchange views between the participants and the researcher which in turn supplied the researcher with the needed information to gain an accurate and truthful understanding of participants' thoughts, experiences, beliefs, and values (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, open-ended question interviews allowed the researcher to conceptualize participants' events in their context as the researcher had the opportunity to interact directly with the participants in their familiar environment (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Because it is important to understand online teachers' views accurately regarding the used online teaching strategies during the COVID-19 Pandemic, interviewing participants was the most appropriate method to get an extensive understanding of the participants' opinions and their suggestions for online teaching strategies.

In February of 2021, the researcher got approval from the school to conduct face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with ten online teachers for 20 to 30 minutes in length. Verbal consent forms were provided to the participants, and they were introduced to the nature of the study. Moreover, the participants were informed that they could choose not to answer any question they felt it was inappropriate. To keep the participants' identities confidential, each participant was given a code number; names were not included either in the transcripts or the recordings. The researcher recorded all the interviews, audio recordings were reviewed by the researcher after each session. Using interviews was beneficial to reaching a broader comprehension and accurate data as it allowed to diminish the constraints between the participants and the researcher (Fraenkel et al., 2015).

### 4.6 Observation

Interviews are usually accompanied by observation in qualitative studies as they complement each other and provide the researcher with more accurate data. In this study, observation was used as a second instrument for data collection. Through observations,

the researcher clarified unseen attitudes and elaborated, and validated the data (Creswell, 2012). According to Johnson and Christensen (2014) and Patton (2015), the use of observations allows the researcher to get involved in the participants' real context which provides the researcher with unnoticed and meaningful data. Observations took place in February, two times a week for 45 minutes. Observations were arranged according to the teachers' schedule.

#### 4.7 Trustworthiness

The researcher applied different strategies during the data analysis to stress the validity and credibility of the data. Triangulation has been confirmed through the collection of data from different sources including interviews and observations. In addition, the researcher used member checking as a tool to ensure trustworthiness; the ten participants reviewed their transcripts to ensure that the transcripts validly reflected what was stated in the recordings (Patton, 2015; Creswell, 2012). Moreover, the research participants were selected purposively from a private school in Abu Dhabi/UAE to be able to generalize authentic findings.

## 5. Results

The data were collected from the two sources described above to get a clear view. In this study, As the researcher analyzed the interviews and the observations, trustworthy themes emerged and were identified as a precise synthesis of the data taken by the researcher. For data analysis, different strategies were used to enhance credibility—in particular, triangulation of data sources and member checking (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015).

### 5.1 Research Question

Two themes were identified in the analysis of research question one: What is the effect of online-home learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' strategies (collaborative learning)?

1. *Lack of guidance to students: inadequacy of support, direction, or instruction provided to students by their teachers or educational institutions.*

*“During my class, I really find it hard to know how students perceive the designed activities and there is not enough time to provide them with continuous assistance”.*

*“In my classes, I keep asking students if they need any help or guidance. However, many students feel shy to ask for help and this presents a problem, as they sometimes do not know how to complete the tasks.”*

2- *Lack of clarity in giving online instructions— lack of aspects of directions and formats which is vital to achieve the learning outcomes.*

*“Not meeting students in class, the only way to communicate with them is through a screen is a challenge to teachers to know students' learning styles. No matter which strategy I use it is still difficult to get to know the best way to deliver the lesson to them”.*

*“Many students are shy to ask if they do not understand. I constantly ask them to tell me to repeat anything they feel they do not understand, however, they really hesitate to unmute their microphone and ask. I noticed that after posing questions, some students are really struggling in comprehending the lesson”.*

Three themes were identified in the analysis of the research question two: What challenges do teachers encounter in delivering lessons effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic?

1- *Teachers' low skills in technology— lack of basic technical skills as it is considered the key building block in facilitating collaborative learning.*

*“I faced problems using technology in my online classes, as not I was not adept at using internet technology or social media as a learning tool. I do not know how to do this and that. I need help with technology, and I have to learn fast”.*

2- *Students’ lack of interest*—students have little value regardless of the importance of the topic or the activity, which negatively affects their motivation to put more effort.

*“It is really hard for primary students to keep their concentration on the same screen in the same place for more than fifteen minutes. In online learning, my students get bored and lose their interest quickly although I tried my best to make my lesson interactive as much as possible. If students are not interested in the lesson, it will be hard to engage them in meaningful discussions”.*

*“During online learning, few students interact with teachers and the majority are only listening and barely participating. Even when I pose questions to students who are not participating, some of them keep silent and others log out and claim that they have internet problems”.*

3- *Struggling in identifying students’ learning styles and needs*— not able to recognize students’ preferred learning modes as well as their strengths and weaknesses.

*“Not meeting students in class, the only way to communicate with them is through a screen is a challenge to teachers to know students’ learning styles. No matter which strategy I use it is still difficult to get to know the best way to deliver the lesson to them”.*

*“Many students are shy to ask if they do not understand. I constantly ask them to tell me to repeat anything they feel they do not understand, however, they really hesitate to unmute their microphone and ask. I noticed that after posing questions, some students are really struggling in comprehending the lesson”.*

## 6. Discussion

The findings showed that online learning during the COVID-19 outbreak has affected teachers’ teaching strategies—in particular collaborative learning. The data analysis identified three themes: lack of clarity in giving online instructions; students’ lack of interest; and struggle in identifying students’ learning styles and needs.

Students were accustomed to being at school and this enabled them to interact socially and physically with their peers and teachers. Although students can interact virtually with their peers and teachers during online sessions, the interviewees indicated that the interaction during online sessions cannot be compared to face-to-face interaction, and they described it as awkward. In addition, many teachers stated that students tended not to respond as they used to be in the classroom. Students’ lack of interest became a concern during online learning. As claimed by Vygotsky (1980), students acquire skills and knowledge through social interaction. Teachers reported that spending five to six hours in front of a screen would definitely decrease students’ interest and focus and increase their feelings of boredom no matter how engaging the lesson is. This finding was supported by Kuh and Hu (2001) who highlighted the importance of implementing engaging activities to enhance students’ social skills as well as their interests. For online learners, organizing their own study and the amount of time needed could sometimes decrease students’ motivation (Coman et al., 2020). Moreover, teachers asserted that many students had difficulties socializing through the used platform (Google Classroom) which negatively affected their progress as well as the productivity of the lesson.

In addition, teachers indicated that they needed to put more effort and time into online learning as they implemented different teaching strategies to deliver the content effectively. This was consistent with Putri et al. (2020) who stated in their study that online teachers needed more time and effort to create content and teaching strategies for

online learning. Online learning forced teachers to employ technology in their classes. Many teachers reported that they are not competent enough to use technology effectively. Teachers struggled to implement the appropriate teaching strategies as they lacked the needed skills in technology. Although the school offered training to teachers, participants identified that older teachers faced more difficulties in using and adapting technology compared to younger teachers. This caused an adverse impact on both the quality and the progress of the teaching and learning process.

Students' learning styles and needs must be taken into consideration in online learning as they play a vital role which helping teachers choose the best teaching strategy to deliver the content successfully (Zapalaska, 2006). The present findings seemed to be consistent with Zapalaska's (2006) as a common view amongst interviewees was that they had difficulties in choosing the appropriate teaching strategy as they were not able to recognize their students' learning styles and needs. A possible explanation for this might be that the lack of face-to-face interaction between teachers and students was a barrier to teachers getting to know their students. Moreover, meeting students through a screen does not compare to face-to-face class as it does not reflect the actual differences among learners in the way of their learning which could negatively affect the academic achievement of students. Therefore, teachers need to adjust the curriculum as well as the teaching strategies to be able to address their students' different learning styles and needs (Lewis et al., 2015; Al Mansoori et al., 2022).

One way to keep learners on task during online learning is to provide them with continuous and meaningful guidance (Lynch, 2002). Due to the lack and delay of guidance in online classes, students tend to disconnect more than face-to-face students (Ko and Rossen, 2001). Interviewees expressed that they did not offer the appropriate amount of guidance to online learners due to the lack of time and physical interaction between teachers and learners as well as the lack of teachers' technological skills. Teachers affirmed the importance of providing students with continuous guidance as it promotes collaboration among online learners.

From a social constructivist perspective, knowledge is constructed through active engagement in meaningful activities, continuous guidance and feedback, and energetic interaction in social contexts (Vygotsky, 1986). An expected tradeoff of online learning is that many students would anticipate a lack of interaction with their peers as well as their instructors (Liu et al., 2007). However, teachers should design their online classes using various strategies to create an active learning environment and not sacrifice interaction. In an online learning context, students should be involved in doing things through collaboration, active discussions, and simulation (Schunk, 2012). The findings of this study stated above may be explained by Vygotsky's social constructivism theory (1986). In short, this theory suggests that knowledge and skills are constructed through collaborative learning in which the learning process should be shifted from an individual effort to a group interaction among learners as knowledge could be significantly constructed through cooperation with society. In an online learning context, teachers should offer effective guidance and plan various interactive teaching strategies between students and their peers, instructors, and content in order to increase students' interest, motivation, satisfaction, and overall academic achievement.

## **7. Limitations**

The study provided, from the teachers' perspective, a holistic picture regarding the way the teaching and learning process took place in Abu Dhabi/UAE during the pandemic, and significant information that helped to improve the online teaching-learning process. However, the current study has its limitations that need to be acknowledged. One limitation was represented by the fact that the study was conducted in only one school in Abu Dhabi/UAE. Another limitation was the small sample size which limited the



generalizability of this study to the entire UAE education system. Finally, this study would provide more authentic findings if the researcher employed a mixed-method approach.

## 8. Recommendations and Future Research

To ensure reliability and validity, it is recommended to broaden the study by including students' perspectives. In order to get a comprehensive picture and be able to generalize the findings of the study, it would be useful to conduct a longitudinal study including a larger sample. In addition, it would be interesting to examine the impact of other variables such as parents' educational level and economic status.

## 9. Conclusion

A drastic change has been brought in how the learning and teaching process is conducted in the education field in Abu Dhabi/UAE during the COVID-19 breakout. The problem was that online learning had not been implemented in most UAE schools and educational institutions as they were relying on face-to-face learning. The rapid shift to online learning heavily impacted students and teachers and was hard to implement with primary-age students as they require more guidance in their learning process. With this sudden change, teachers were struggling to choose the most effective online strategies to maintain a high teaching and learning quality.

The objective of this study was to explore the effect of online home learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' strategies—in particular collaborative learning in a private school in Abu Dhabi/UAE. The findings of this study highlighted that there were barriers to employing collaborative learning in an online learning context. The fact that most teachers and learners have not been introduced before to skills of online learning caused a major tension. Both teachers and students should be provided with essential technical skills to adapt to online learning. In addition, teachers must ensure that they give meaningful and continuous guidance during synchronous and asynchronous online learning. Moreover, Online teaching strategies need to meet the different needs of learners as well as to identify students' learning styles to achieve a meaningful learning environment. Lastly, teachers spotted the light on students' lack of interest and getting bored during online classes as this situation is getting longer than expected. Interaction between students and teachers is vital to nurture students' interest as well as stimulate their motivation. Stating the obstacles and the barriers in online learning could help teachers and researchers by providing them with a holistic perspective to select the most effective and efficient techniques that could improve their learning strategies, specifically collaborative learning to run the learning process to the fullest.

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, social constraints and physical distancing should be supported by all sections of society, particularly education. However, all agreed that education should not be put to a halt as it is essential to build a well-educated generation (Putri et al. 2020). Teachers as well as stakeholders should support the online learning process as it becomes a sensible alternative for face-to-face learning.

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