


Vol. 14, No. 5  
pp. 223-244  
November &  
December  
2023

## A Review of Emergency Remote Teaching during the Outbreak of COVID-19 in Vietnam: EFL Students' Problems and Suggestions for Sustainable Development of Online Teaching

Chau Thi Hoang Hoa<sup>\*1</sup> & Nguyen Trung Hieu<sup>2</sup> 

### Abstract

The breakout and intensification of the worldwide Coronavirus pandemic caused dramatic changes to education across the world. Both teachers and students were not prepared for the sudden change regarding the mode of teaching and learning: onsite to offsite and offline to online. The current study seeks to identify frequent problems that first-year English major students have during their online learning process and explore their suggestions for the improvement of the situation. Data were collected from an online survey of 89 first-year English-majored students. The students' obstacles were identified by the 30-item questionnaire, and their suggestions for positive changes were explored thanks to open-ended questions. The results show that learning environment is the students' biggest problem due to the distraction of attention during home study. The extent of problems in six areas: (1) self-regulation, (2) technological literacy, (3) student isolation, (4) technological sufficiency, (5) learning resources, and (6) learning environments are significantly different. Among the suggestions, the students expected improvements in (1) teachers' pedagogy, (2) students' health, and (3) assessment scheme. Acknowledging the problems and putting forward suggestions for emergency remote teaching could contribute to the development of sustainable online teaching as a complementary mode of instruction in the new normal.

**Keywords:** online learning, emergency remote teaching, COVID-19, online learning difficulties, new normal

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: lecturer, PhD, International Collaboration Office, Tra Vinh University, Tra Vinh City, Vietnam; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000000257389147>; Email: [cthhoa@tvu.edu.vn](mailto:cthhoa@tvu.edu.vn)

<sup>2</sup> EFL teacher, Bachelor, Tra Vinh University, Tra Vinh City, Vietnam;  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4667-2942>

## 1. Introduction

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has caused loads of great difficulties for people globally since its outbreak in late 2019. Thousands of deaths are reported on a daily basis in the light of the pandemic, which has created formidable barriers across the wide spectrum of economics, society, politics, culture, and education across the world. Students in many countries cannot attend in-person classes because of the risk of the pandemic spreading, so all teaching and learning activities must be postponed or switched over. Consequently, schools are obliged to transform into online environments to ensure the continuity of education. The teachers and students were forced to experience unexpected modes of teaching and learning, Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT).

However, the type of unprepared online teaching and learning as ERT is much likely to put the efficacy of teaching and learning in developing countries at risk (Pham & Nguyen, 2020). This situation attracts attentions of educational management and researchers. From management, many schemes were implemented to mitigate the adverse impact of the pandemic on education: revising the curriculum, delaying and changing assessment plans, shortening class time meeting, launching training workshop on online teaching. Also, educational research related to ETR receives abundant worldwide attention. In fact, plethora of studies have been conducted to explore issues related to ERT with different focuses: students' mental health (Copeland et al., 2021; Tran & Bui, 2022), students' engagement (Al-Obaydi et al., 2022; Shakki, 2022; Shakki, 2023), students' self-regulation (Carter et al., 2020; Resnik & Dewaele, 2021), students' IT competence (Al-Obaydi et al., 2023; Jayadi, 2020; Kang & Duong, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020; Ullah et al., 2021; Žižanović et al., 2021), students' learning conditions (Le et al., 2021; Žižanović et al., 2021), students' sense of community and social interaction (Jayadi, 2020; Kang & Duong, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020), and students overall learning experience (e.g., Adarkwah, 2021; Day et al., 2021). Despite the rising number of studies on online education in COVID-19, there is a paucity of research on foreign language education focusing on students' problems with and expectations for better online learning while they belong to the most vulnerable group to learning failure due to the scarcity of social interaction and communicative motivation (Nayman & Bavli, 2022). Besides, people's reactions to the pandemic are context-tied. The ways in which individuals and communities response to it much depend on their social and economic situations. Educational measures to maintain teaching and learning during

COVID-19 vary from time to time and place to place; hence students' perceptions of their challenges and expectations vary accordingly. In other words, the voice difference of EFL students in Vietnam in a specific time of the pandemic is the gap that this study aims to fill.

COVID-19 has been normalized since the beginning of the academic year of 2021 and 2022. However, its return or similar emergency are impending and threatening the normal life. Aside from that, remote teaching via an online platform deserves to be further studied and developed thanks to the development of online teaching applications during and after COVID-19 and students' familiarity with a new mode of education, online teaching and learning. Hence, it is necessary to locate students' problems with ERT and their suggestions for better kinds of online teaching which could be an effective complementary educational mode during and after the emergency like that of COVID-19. To specify, this research aims to answer the two research question as follows:

RQ 1. What are some of the problems first-year English majors often encounter when learning online with ERT during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ 2. What are some possible suggestions that have been put forward to better online learning and teaching?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Online education or online learning refers to the implementation of academic programs with the use of multimedia and Internet platforms and applications (Usher & Barak, 2020). This type of teaching and learning mode differs from the educational practice happening during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, known as ERT. According to Hodges et al. (2020), ERT is "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances", which integrates fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would normally be offered face-to-face, as blended or hybrid courses, and will revert to that format once the crisis or emergency has passed. ERT implies an unanticipated alternate technique of giving education from a distance since teachers are unable to be physically present in a classroom with their students (Shisley, 2020). Alternatively stated, ERT is meant to be a quick transformation from

traditional teaching mode into a remote (or distant) alternative, which happens without warning. This makes ERT markedly differ from well-planned online learning (University of the People, 2022). In this sense, the two terms "emergency remote teaching" and "online teaching" are distinctively used in this paper because the former refers to a type of unprepared remote teaching as a therapy for the urgent situation of the pandemic and the latter denotes a well-prepared teaching platform with well-designed teaching and learning activities involving internet connection. However, in some contexts, "teaching online", "learning online", and "online learning" are used with literal meanings when learning and teaching occur via the use of the internet physically.

## 2.2 The Problems with Online Education

With the abrupt change away from the traditional classroom setting, students in many regions of the world faced many problems with their learning. According to Hodges et al. (2020), the swift approach may result in the degradation of the courses. Similarly, Blackburn (2020) gave an apt description of students' common issues during online learning, which included their struggling with distractions while reading online, a lack of enjoyment and motivation, and having a poor relationship with peers and even teachers. In addition to distractions in the middle of virtual classroom sessions, which were also discussed by Maguire (2021), Colman (2020) added four more obstacles students were required to encounter amidst the online learning context, namely remote learning scheduling, poor online training content, technical issues, and a disadvantaged learning environment. Rasheed et al.'s (2020) proposed a framework for classifying students' problems: problems with learners themselves and with technology. As a combination of Colman's (2020) and Rasheed et al.'s (2020), Barrot et al. (2011) classified online learning problems into six clusters belonging to three areas: the learners themselves (self-regulation and isolation), learning conditions (learning environment and resources), and technology (insufficiency and incapacity). This research applied Barrot et al.'s (2011) framework because it is more comprehensive and the learning conditions of the participants (in the Philippines and Vietnam) are rather similar.

## 2.3 Previous Studies on the Problems with Learning Online during COVID-19

Within the past two years, many studies have been conducted in an attempt to

analyze students' difficulties while learning online remotely in the time of the COVID-19 crisis. In most of the studies, the results showed some relevance in students' online learning challenges amidst the pandemic, including technical issues (Jayadi, 2020; Kang & Duong, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020; Seyyedabadi et al. 2023; Skevi et al., 2023; Ullah et al., 2021; Žižanović et al., 2021) and decreased learning motivation and unqualified learning condition (Le et al., 2021; Žižanović et al., 2021), and poor communication or social interaction (Jayadi, 2020; Kang & Duong, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020).

Using qualitative methods, Jayadi (2020) conducted research to analyze the challenges of students studying English via WhatsApp in Indonesia amidst the COVID-19 and found that the four principal factors in virtual learning obstacles: increasing cost of data, internet data, misunderstanding between students and lecturers or peers, and discomfort during the learning process. They agreed that they had faced some difficulties with studying online for the first time. To improve the situation, the students suggested online learning in a comfortable environment and showed their preference to Zoom app.

In the study entitled "Challenges of e-Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced by EFL learners", Mahyoob (2020) identified the three main problems in learning online: technical spectrum, academic spectrum, and communication difficulties. Data collected from 184 students from Saudi Arabia showed that most students had problems with their learning issues. One-third of the participating students missed many tasks, duties, and communications with teachers in an online learning environment. Problems with internet speed caused students' troubles with online access and material downloading.

In the research "Educational challenges of emergency remote teaching and learning during the COVID-19 crisis", Žižanović et al. (2021) found the students in Croatia had problems with digital literacy and motivation in learning. The authors especially put emphasis on students' self-control over the learning process and mental wellbeing impairment. The fact that learning process largely depended on the student's emotional state highlighted the teacher's role in the student's overall development. To help students, it is important that teachers provide a positive and supportive atmosphere in the online environment.

In the Philippine context, Barrot et al. (2021) studied students' online learning challenges during the pandemic and how they coped with them. From data collected

from 200 students from a private higher education institution in the Philippines, Barrot et al. (2021) confirmed that students' greatest problem was linked to the domestic learning environment and their least challenge was technological literacy and competency. The findings further revealed that the pandemic had the greatest impact on the students' mental health, which called for the repair to students' mental condition.

In the local context of Vietnam higher education, Kang and Duong (2021) explored the students' perceptions of first-time online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam. Employing qualitative and quantitative instruments to collect data from 101 university students, Kang and Duong (2021) pinpointed that students had problems with internet access, technical problems, and difficulty paying attention, a lack of sense of community (or feelings of isolation), and less social interaction. Of them, the two biggest problems identified were internet access and technical problems. Students' expectations to improve the conditions were a better live platform and a combination of meeting in a classroom setting and completing coursework online.

### 3. Methods

The present study adopted a descriptive and mixed-methods approach to address the two research questions. This approach allowed the researchers to collect complex data about students' problems and suggestions for the improvement of their study conditions. The participants of the present study were 89 first-year students (63 females and 26 males) who were all English-majored freshmen at Tra Vinh University. They engaged in online learning via Google Meet and/or Microsoft Teams in the first two semesters of the school year 2021–2022.

This research used a survey-based questionnaire to collect quantitative and qualitative data on these two research issues. The quantitative data were collected from a 30-item 5-Likert-scale questionnaire, adapted from Barrot et al. (2021). Some of the items were eliminated or replaced as regards the contemporary context of EFL education in Vietnam. The main part of the questionnaire, focusing on students' problems with learning online during the pandemic, was divided into six clusters: (1) self-regulation (Sr), (2) technological literacy (Tl) and competency (Tc), (3) student isolation (Si), (4) technological sufficiency (Ts), (5) learning resources (Lr), (6) learning environment (Lr). Additionally, the questionnaire was

ended with an open-ended question to further explore students' problems and suggestions for the improvement of their learning conditions. All the quantitative data collected from the questionnaires were computed to calculate the internal reliability coefficient. The high value of Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha = .941$ ) for all 30 items together confirms its internal reliability coefficient. Quantitative data were analyzed, using the software IBM SPSS Statistics version 25 for frequency (F), mean scores (M), and standard deviations (SD) to evaluate the severity of hardship encountered by learners during the online learning process.

Qualitative data collected from open-ended answers were subject to thematic content analysis, deductively and inductively. First, relevant data were screened and put into categories which were supposed to be relevant to the six clusters of students' problems. Next, other out-of-category responses were gathered, classified, labeled to develop new categories. Finally, data were ordered according to the frequency of occurrence. To ensure research reliability and validity, both researchers were engaged in all data collection and analysis process. In fact, category development was the results of discussions of the two researchers while data categorization was conducted by the second author and checked by the first author.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

This study investigated students' problems with online learning in higher education within the context of the pandemic and what they suggested to make the learning better. The two research issues are answered and discussed in relation to the other studies in this section.

##### ***4.1. Students' Problems with ERT***

The overall mean scores of the six aspects of students' problems are reported in Table 1.



**Table 1***The Mean Scores of the Six Aspects of Students' Problems*

Problems	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Learning Environment	89	3.83	.86
Learning Resource	89	3.83	.79
Student Isolation	89	3.51	.87
Self-regulation	89	3.42	.81
Technological Sufficiency	89	3.29	.87
Technological Literacy	89	3.25	.94
Total Average		3.50	.88

Among the six factors, learning environment and learning resources are the two biggest obstacles for all online learners with the mean scores of 3.83. The two aspects related to students' internal emotion and regulations roughly similar, placed the third and fourth positions in the rank ( $M_{Si} = 3.51$ ) and ( $M_{Sr} = 3.42$ ). Problems regarding technologies are among the lowest ( $M_{Ts} = 3.29$ ;  $M_{Tl} = 3.25$ ). More details of students' difficulties regarding the six mentioned aspects are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2***Descriptive Statistics of Students Problems with Learning Online admits COVID-19*

Students' Problems		Mean	SD.
Learning environment			
Item 26	I experience online distractions such as social media during online classes.	4.10	.98
Item 27	I experience distractions at home as a learning environment.	3.98	1.10
Item 28	Home set-up limits the completion of certain requirements for my subject (e.g., group projects, field trip, ...).	3.83	1.07
Item 29	I lack motivation when studying at home.	3.72	1.17
Item 30	I have difficulties in selecting the best time and space for learning at home.	3.51	1.16
Learning Resource			
Item 21	I do not have enough storage capacity on my mobile phone/ laptop for downloading materials and learning apps.	3.98	1.20



Students' Problems		Mean	SD.
Item 22	I prefer using traditional materials (paper books) to online materials.	3.88	1.09
Item 23	I have insufficient access to library resources.	3.70	1.05
Item 24	I have limited access to textbooks, worksheets, and other instructional materials.	3.52	1.06
Item 25	I leave my textbooks, notebooks and learning materials at my boarding house.	3.37	1.24
Isolation			
Item 11	I feel emotionally disconnected or isolated during online classes.	3.66	1.14
Item 12	I feel uneasy and uncomfortable in using video projection, microphones, and speakers.	3.65	1.08
Item 13	I feel uncomfortable being the center of attention during online classes.	3.49	1.24
Item 14	I feel disinterested during online class.	3.43	1.10
Item 15	I feel shy when communicating with my teachers and peers via online platforms.	3.34	1.18
Self-regulation			
Item 1	I have poor time management skills during online classes.	3.55	1.11
Item 2	I have limited preparation before an online class.	3.50	1.18
Item 3	I fail to get appropriate help and / or properly use online peer learning strategies (i.e., peer tutoring, group discussion, and peer feedback) during online classes.	3.42	1.27
Item 4	I delay tasks related to my studies so that they are either not fully completed by their deadline or had to be rushed to be completed.	3.42	1.19
Item 5	I lack the ability to control my own thoughts, emotions, and actions during online classes.	3.21	1.20
Technological Sufficiency			
Item 16	I experience technical difficulties in completing my assignments and accessing online examinations.	3.64	1.06
Item 17	I have low bandwidth and slow processing speeds.	3.51	1.08
Item 18	I have outdated technology.	3.30	1.25
Item 19	I have insufficient access to learning technology.	3.12	1.10
Item 20	I cannot afford the availability of Internet connections.	2.85	1.08
Technological Literacy			
Item 6	I am distracted by overly complex technology.	3.42	1.19

Students' Problems		Mean	SD.
Item 7	I lack competence and proficiency in using various interfaces or systems that allow me to control a computer or another embedded system for studying.	3.40	1.17
Item 8	I resist and / or have difficulties in learning a new technology.	3.22	1.14
Item 9	I have poor understanding of directions and expectations during online learning.	3.21	1.15
Item 10	I lack knowledge and training in the use of technology.	2.98	1.14

#### 4.1.1. Learning Environment

With the highest mean score ( $M Le = 3.69$ ) for the whole cluster and mean score of each item higher than average value, domestic learning environment was the biggest obstacle to students. Of the items belonging to learning environment aspect, online distractions such as social media during online classes achieve high mean scores ( $M i26 = 4.10$ ). Without teachers' supervision and internet connection during lessons, students' attention is easily divided to social media or other types of online entertainment. That is why distraction happened while studying at home is reported with the second highest value of 3.98. In addition, many students believed learning at home limited their completion of the subjects ( $M i28 = 3.83$ ). Because of an abundance of unwanted distractions and limits, students' motivation was down ( $M i29 = 3.72$ ), and had difficulties finding a proper space and good time for learning ( $M i30 = 3.51$ ).

#### 4.1.2. Learning Resources

Learning resources place second as the factor causing difficulties for students amid the social distance due to the pandemic ( $M Lr = 3.69$ ). Though students preferred printed books to online materials ( $M i22 = 3.88$ ), using electronic materials especially during ERT was unavoidable. The two most common with online resources were storage capacity to store documents ( $M i21 = 3.98$ ) and insufficient access to library resources ( $M i23 = 3.70$ ). Students problems with accessing electronic learning materials and printed materials were not really confirmed with relatively low mean scores ( $M i24 = 3.52$  and  $M i25 = 3.37$ ).

#### 4.1.3. Isolation

Ranked in the third position, isolation due to social distance and lockdown challenged students with a relative mean score ( $M_{Si} = 3.52$ ). Being emotionally disconnected and uneasy to be virtually connected to other people were the most frequent feelings among students ( $M_{i11} = 3.66$  and  $M_{i12} = 3.65$ ). Specifically, a significant number of students felt uncomfortable being the center of attention when they presented themselves ( $M_{i13} = 3.49$ ) to the other on screen. In light of the disconnection with other learners and teachers as well as the discomfort of being the center of attention during classes, students were disinterested in the classes ( $M_{i14} = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) and hesitant to connect with teachers and classmates via online platforms ( $M_{i15} = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ).

#### 4.1.4. Self-regulation

The overall mean score of students' self-regulation is 3.42, which reveals that students found it rather hard to be self-regulated learners. Of the 5 items, Item 1, the mean score of difficulties in time management skills is significantly high ( $M_{i1} = 3.55$ ). Item 2, the lack of time management skills, accounts for their limited preparation before online classes ( $M_{i2} = 3.50$ ). In addition, regarding self-regulation factors amidst the online learning process, students also encountered barriers when seeking help from instructors and their peers ( $M_{i3} = 3.42$  were more likely to miss the deadline than study in face-to-face classes ( $M_{i4} = 3.42$ ). Finally, lacking the ability to control thoughts, emotions, and actions seemed not to be a problem to students ( $M_{i5} = 3.21$ ).

#### 4.1.5. Technological Sufficiency and Literacy

With lowest mean scores, technological sufficiency ( $M_{Ts} = 3.29$ ) and literacy ( $M_{Tl} = 3.25$ ) were not real problems to students. Of all the items belonging to the two clusters, only the two items dealing with technical problems when taking exams ( $M_{i16} = 3.64$ ) and slow processing speeds ( $M_{i17} = 3.51$ ) got rather high mean scores. Other issues relating to technology use in terms of accessibility and sufficiency and learners did get much attention from students. Noticeably, items 10 and 20, mentioning the lack of technology training and the unaffordability of Internet connections got the lowest score ( $M_{i10} = 2.98$  and  $M_{i20} = 2.85$ ). This low value of

mean score justify why technology literacy is not only a challenge to students in comparison to the others.

With reference to previous studies (Barrot et al., 2021; Kang & Duong, 2021; Le et al., 2021; Mahyoob, 2020; Ullah et al., 2021; Žižanović et al., 2021), the current study evaluated the extent of different difficulties of students' online learning concerning self-regulation, technical literacy and competency, student isolation, learning resources, technical sufficiency, and learning environment. Of all the six factors mentioned in this study, the biggest challenge of online learning in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic was poor learning environment. The unqualified domestic learning conditions, namely the lack of privacy, noise, housework, etc. caused a great deal of troubles for students. The relevance of this finding with those of Jayadi (2020) and Barrot et al. (2021) can be justified by the similarity of social and economic conditions of the Philippines and Indonesia.

In contrast to previous studies (Kang & Duong, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020; Ullah et al., 2021; and Žižanović et al., 2021), the participants in this study did not experience many difficulties related to technical sufficiency and technical literacy. The students had a fairly stable internet connection and they generally had satisfactory knowledge of working with new technology. These findings are consistent with those of Barrot et al. (2021), who reported that today's students are fairly good at learning and using technology to assist with their academic purposes. In addition, this study was conducted during the second semester when the students already were equipped with phones or computers and they already were used to educational apps for learning with ERT. The time of conducting this study and that of Kang and Duong (2021) could be the cause for the contradictory results of the two studies.

#### ***4.2. Students' Suggestions to Improve their Online Learning and Teaching***

The issues stated in the second research question are addressed based on the qualitative data collected from 67 (out of 89) students. The students' suggestions were based on the problems that they were facing. Their students' expectations were classified into three main themes: (1) teachers' pedagogy, (2) students' health, (3) assessment scheme. The other suggestions related to students' loan, waive of school tuitions, vaccination, reopening class during social distance periods were excluded for not closely related to the scope of the study.

#### *4.2.1. Teachers' Pedagogy*

Teachers' pedagogy was not included as a cluster in the questionnaire, which might be the reason why this issue attracted the most attention from the student participants. In fact, 12 students complained that they had problems with their study. They were not willing and not motivated to learn because the lectures were boring and delivered in a repetitive way with PowerPoint presentations and teacher's monotonous voices from hour to hour. Watching, listening, and doing homework are among the three common "academic tasks" the students kept doing regarding their online studying. To improve the situation, the students expected to have opportunities for active engagement in a variety of lesson activities, namely presentation, group discussion or interaction with the teacher and peers. The following are some examples of students' suggestions for their active role in class activities and interaction.

(1) "...lessons are not interesting enough to keep me engaged. I wish I could be arranged in group to talk to my friends." (ST 11)

(2) "... fed up with the PPT screen and teachers' unchanging voices. I thought that students should have a chance to talk and share my ideas during the lessons." (ST 26)

(3) "...I had to watch and listen to my teachers all day. I think that teacher could arrange some activities for us to do during the lessons." (ST 63)

(4) "... I did not understand why my teachers gave so many exercises and asked us to do it by ourselves. We could do it during the class time." (ST 25)

To cope with the challenges in seeking motivation and concentration, seven students recommend that teachers should include some activities like creative games or educational games, which could be conducted online in between the class time to foster students' creativity and allow students to take a break between sessions.

(5) "I think students need more activities to motivate their flexibility and creativity during class like games." (ST 04)

(6) "Many times, I fell asleep in front of the screen and no one knew. I wished that teachers would organize some activities to entertain us and refresh our minds." (ST 06)

Students further analyzed the causes leading to poor classroom interaction, which was (1) domination of teachers' talking time, (2) teachers' lack of technology to break the class into small groups to multiple interactions and (3) not observing "camera-must-be-on" policy. The problem with one-way interaction, teacher-to-

students, could be improved by the implementation of a variety of activities engaging students' participations as mentioned above.

(7) "Only the teacher, who taught Speaking, divided us into group discussion. We felt uneasy at first, but it was a nice practice. We are more confident to be with friends." (ST 27)

(8) "At the beginning of the course, we were asked to turn on our cameras but after some days, not many of us turned on cameras; even some teachers did not open their cameras." (ST 38)

Teachers' instruction was also the subject of students' problems and suggestions. Eight students stated that they usually missed or misunderstood teachers' instruction. For this reason, it was recommended that teachers should use simple and clear language when giving instruction and repeated it sometimes in the lessons.

(9) "I felt embarrassed because I did not get the instruction clearly. I had to ask my friends but many times, they did not understand either." (ST 24)

(10) "I failed to concentrate on what the teacher said. I wish they could speak slower and clearer." (ST 54)

In ERT, teachers were not well prepared and experienced enough to create opportunities to involve students' engagement and interaction but they could improve the situations as what students suggested.

#### 4.2.2. Students' Health

Twenty out of 67 students agreed that they had health problems with their physical and psychological health and they recommended some solutions. Red eyes, back pain, headache, and sleep disorders were four common reported "ailments" among the students. Hence, they expected the lessons to comprise some parts of practice they could do at home, which helped reduce time sitting in front of the screen and listening to the teachers passively. They recommended that the online lessons should be shorter and the breaks should be longer to give students time to do physical exercise and refresh their minds.

(11) "My eyes are blurred and tired after studying for hours. I have suffered from back pain also. I wish the lectures should be shorter and have more time to take rest." (ST 02)

(12) "I often feel sleepy when I sit in front of a camera for a while and I could not sleep at night. Students needed some activities to do at home as a part of the lessons." (ST 06)

Thirty students reported that they always felt restless and worried about their homework deadlines about other unidentified things. Students felt much more insecure, anxious, and afraid of making mistakes or even scolded when studying

online, which discouraged them to engage themselves in class activities. They agreed that the teachers were also tense and uneasy in ERT. They expected teachers to give them more practicing activities, less homework and be more approachable, patient, and sympathetic with them during ERT due to the pandemic.

(13) "I was always in a bad mood ... when I joined the class. I expect the teachers to be more friendly and willing to listen to me." (ST 12)

(14) "I was off the screen and microphone because I lived with my family and shared my room but my teachers asked me to turn on my cam and speak. The communication was not good and I felt guilty. I expect my teachers to understand my situation." (ST 17)

To the students' reports, teachers' pedagogy and ERT was one of the sources of students' health problems, but referring back to quantitative data, students were distracted by social media ( $M_{i26} = 4.10$ ) and they had poor time management skills ( $M_{i1} = 3.55$ ). Therefore, the students themselves contributed to their own problems with ERT for not balancing their life working and studying, lack of physical activities and being distracted by the online and offline factors.

#### 4.2.3. Assessment Scheme

Out of the researcher's expectations, 11 students suggested that the teachers and university should be flexible with the students' evaluation and assessment. First, five students agreed that teachers should have more varied ways to assess students, not restricted to the stated assessing and evaluating schemes. For example, teachers should take students' engagement and participation into account by giving them bonus marks as a kind of formative assessment. In other words, tasks given to students during the course should be counted as a part of formative assessment.

(15) ... "I was motivated to join the class activities when the teachers gave me extra marks." (ST 67)

(16) "I think that students would be more focused on the lessons if they were asked some questions and got some marks for it." (ST 32)

Improvement of testing methods was essential because the fairness in testing encouraged true studying. Students reported that most of the final tests in ERT were written and weighted more than 50%. However, the final exams were not well organized and not strictly supervised, so the students were more likely to cheat in the exams.



(17) ... "We used to search for references or even answer keys from many websites. Also, we used Google Translate to do translation or writing tasks. What we need is the fairness among the students taking the tests with different level of honesty." (ST 06)

(18) "... Students are more likely to get higher marks if they were willing to cheat on the exam. So, I think that teachers should not put much weight on the final tests and have effective strategies to prevent students from cheating" (ST 05)

Regarding testing and assessing, the students longed for a variety of in class engagements, which are counted as a part of marking scheme. More importantly, the prevention of students' cheating is important because it ensures the fairness and reliability of the tests or exams.

Of the three aspects (teachers' pedagogy, students' health, assessment scheme) that students proposed as their problems and solutions to improve their learning condition, teachers' pedagogy attracted students' greatest attention. Though categorized into two different sections, pedagogy and assessment schemes could be included into one. It is evitable that assessment, what and how to assess, is an integral part of or critically related to pedagogy. The division of the two aspects relies on the fact that teachers had more choice with their instruction than assessment scheme because assessment was prescribed in the course curriculum. Another reason for the bisection is that the amount of qualitative data collected from students was unpredictably big and divergent from researchers' expectations.

The excessive concentration on teachers' pedagogy could be explained as follows. First, teachers' pedagogy or the related issue like assessment was not included in the questionnaire. Therefore, students put more focus on what had not been discussed. Second, teachers' instruction was the very source of students' challenges and problems. This assumption was justified by the fact that students gave a great deal of examples and explanations on how teachers' instruction in ERT challenged them. Also, sharing the same context of higher education in Vietnam, Kang and Duong (2021) pinpointed that the students expected teachers' better instruction to induce more classroom interaction, students' engagement. For whatever the reason is teachers' instruction should get a better positionality in educational research and practices. The excess of students' focus on teachers' instruction as the sources of students' problems and subject of the change for online teaching improvement could be counted as the greatest contribution of this study to the literature of ERT or online teaching in general.

## 5. Implications

Based on students' reports on their problems and expectations, this research has some recommendations for parents, educational managers and teachers, and the students themselves.

It was questionable to involve the roles of parents in higher education research but they were the ones who could help to improve the quality of domestic learning environment. Due to the economic state of Vietnam, it is hard for each student to have a private soundproof room but they could help their children focus more on their learning by turning down electronic devices of their own voice in daily conversations. Hence, the school should have notified the students' families to raise their awareness of their children's education.

The management and teaching staff should admit that students had obstacles with their studying, as much as or even more than managers and teachers because they took a passive role in the ERT process. Flexible teaching time (shorter class meeting hours, the change of class meeting time, or a switch of theory and practice teaching load in per course) and flexible schemes of marking and assessing should be reconsidered. More importantly, teachers should be open to learning and practicing new teaching strategies to improve students' engagement and interaction. Finally, physical and mental health consultancy and human skills, self-regulating, dealing with stress, managing personal time, concentrating, and attaining objectives. should be integrated in each course or the whole teaching programs.

The last recommendation is for students themselves. They should build their own self-discipline or self-regulation; if so, most of their problems could be solved and the negative impacts of ERT could be mitigated. For example, they had the hardest time to avoid themselves from social media, which could worsen their physical, and psychological distresses namely red-eyes, headache, and anxiety disorder. Self-discipline drove students to more healthy practice behaviors and activities like maintaining contacts with teachers, friends and family in educational and safe social circles. Otherwise, they could engage in more physical activities to improve their health conditions.

## 6. Limitations and Conclusion

The research was conducted in 2021 during the COVID spreading in Vietnam but reported when normal life goes back. Locating problems and solutions to ERT seem to be outdated and unnecessary but the students' statements of problems and expectations are valuable to the education management and educators in general. After the pandemic, people's viewpoints changed dramatically, especially their openness and acceptance of virtual contacts via the internet and prepared online teaching via educational and professional settings. The other limitation of this study is the small number of participants that could affect the generalizations of the results. However, all of the expected participants, first year language majored students were engaged in this study. The data collected could be vulnerable but it was what the authors could do best to ensure the reliability of the study and the variety of opinions collected to address the two research questions.

The unpremeditated switch to online education due to COVID-19 brought tremendous changes to almost all aspects of our life. In education, billions of teachers and students were forced into online education without any proper preparation (Barrot et al., 2021). As a local voice to how ERT challenged EFL students' learning and what should be done to improve their condition, this study contributes to the literature of online education while and post COVID-19. Findings showed that students had more problems with their learning environment and self-regulation than technology literacy. In further open questions, students complained they had problems with teachers' pedagogy and mental health. They opined that teachers could help to improve the conditions by (1) engaging them into a diversity of interactive activities, (2) being patient and sympathetic to students, and (3) marking students' task performances or even participative engagement. Those suggestions have great educational values, not limited to ERT but also sustainable online education, which requires students' autonomy and teachers' efforts to improve their instruction to engage students in their lessons actively and effectively.

### Statement of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflict regarding the publication of this article. The article is the authors' original work, except where sources are properly referenced. It has not been submitted anywhere for publication.

## Acknowledgments

We owe thanks to the participants of this study, who devoted their time and gave us a lot of insightful information about their evaluations and perceptions. We acknowledge the School of Foreign Languages and International Collaboration Office, Tra Vinh University for giving us time and chance to conduct this graduation thesis. Finally, our deep gratitude is for the reviewers who gave us valuable comments to improve our paper.

## References

- Adarkwah, M. A. (2021). "I'm not against online teaching, but what about us?": ICT in Ghana post Covid-19. *Education and Information Technologies*, 26(2), 1665–1685. 10.1007/s10639-020-10331-z
- Al-Obaydi, L. H., Pikhart, M., & Shakki, F. (2022). Digital gaming as a panacea for incidental L2 acquisition in an EFL context. *Applied Research on English Language*, 12(1), 73–94. [https://doi: 10.22108/are.2022.135344.2001](https://doi.org/10.22108/are.2022.135344.2001)
- Al-Obaydi, L. H., Shakki, F., Tawafak, R. M., Pikhart, M., & Ugla, R. L. (2023). What I know, what I want to know, what I learned: Activating EFL college students' cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement through structured feedback in an online environment. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13(2022), 1–14. [https://doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1083673](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1083673)
- Barrot, J. S., Llenares, I. I., & del Rosario, L. S. (2021). Students' online learning challenges during the pandemic and how they cope with them: The case of the Philippines. *Educ Inf Technol*, 26, 7321–7338. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10589-x>
- Blackburn, B. R. (2020, August 9). *6 Issues Students May Face in Remote Learning*. MiddleWeb. <https://www.middleweb.com/43696/6-issues-students-may-face-in-remote-learning/>
- Carter, R. A., Jr., Rice, M., Yang, S., & Jackson, H. A. (2020). Self-regulated learning in online learning environments: Strategies for remote learning. *Information and Learning Sciences*, 121(5/6), 321–329. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ILS-04-2020-0114>
- Colman, H. (2020, May 22). *5 Remote learning challenges and how to overcome*

- them. Training Industry. <https://trainingindustry.com/articles/remote-learning/5-remote-learning-challenges-and-how-to-overcome-them/>
- Copeland, W. E., McGinnis, E., Bai, Y., Adams, Z., Nardone, H., Devadanam, V., & Hudziak, J. J. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on college student mental health and wellness. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 60(1), 134–141. 10.1016/j.jaac.2020.08.466
- Day, T., Chang, I. C. C., Chung, C. K. L., Doolittle, W. E., Housel, J., & McDaniel, P. N. (2021). The immediate impact of COVID-19 on postsecondary teaching and learning. *The Professional Geographer*, 73(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2020.1823864>
- Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020, March 27). *The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning*. Educause. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>
- Jayadi, A. (2021). *An analysis of students' difficulties in online learning process through Whatsapp media in English Department a Muhammadiyah University of Mataram 2019/2020* .[Unpublished thesis]. Universitas Muhammadiyah Mataram <http://repository.ummat.ac.id/1714/>
- Kang, M. & Duong, A. (2021). Student perceptions of first-time online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam. *i.e.: Inquiry in Education*, 13(1), 1–7. <https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol13/iss1/8>
- Le, D., Giang, T., & Ho, D. (2021). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on online learning in higher education: a Vietnamese case. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 10(4), 1683–1695. <https://doi.org/10.12973/eu-jer.10.4.1683>
- Maguire, T. (2021, June 9). *Overcoming remote learning's three greatest challenges*. The Educator Online. <https://www.theeducatoronline.com/k12/news/overcoming-remote-learning's-three-greatest-challenges/277276>
- Mahyoob, M. (2020). Challenges of e-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic Experienced by EFL Learners. *In Arab World English Journal*, 11(4), 351–362. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no4.23>
- Nayman, H., & Bavlı, B. (2022). Online teaching of productive language skills (PLS) during emergency remote teaching (ERT) in EFL classrooms: A

- phenomenological inquiry. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 10(1), 179-187. 10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.10n.1p.179
- Norman, S. (2016, March 10). *5 Advantages of online learning: Education without leaving home*. eLearning Industry. <https://elearningindustry.com/5-advantages-of-online-learning-education-without-leaving-home>
- Pham, T., & Nguyen, H. (2020). COVID-19: Challenges and opportunities for Vietnamese higher education. *Higher Education in Southeast Asia and Beyond*, (3)8, 22–24. <https://headfoundation.org/2020/06/02/hesb-issue-8/>
- Rasheed, R. A., Kamsin, A., & Abdullah, N. A. (2020). Challenges in the online component of blended learning: A systematic review. *Computers & Education*, 144, 103701. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.103701>
- Resnik, P., & Dewaele, J. M. (2021). Learner emotions, autonomy and trait emotional intelligence in “in-person” versus emergency remote English foreign language teaching in Europe. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 14(3), 473–501. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2020-0096>
- Seyyedabadi, S., Nafissi, Z., Rostami, R. & Sotoudehnama, E. (2022). Learners' perceptions of computerized cognitive training transfer to L learning: An adaptive case for COVID–19. *Language Related Research*, 13(5), 141–171. <https://dx.doi.org/10.52547/LRR.13.5.24>
- Shisley (2020). Emergency remote learning compared to online learning. *Learning Guild*. Emergency Remote Learning Compared to Online Learning Solutions Magazine.
- Shakki, F. (2022a). Iranian EFL students' L2 engagement: The effects of teacher-student rapport and teacher support. *Language Related Research*, 13(3), 175–198. <https://doi.org/10.52547/LRR.13.3.8>
- Shakki, F. (2023). Investigating the relationship between EFL learners' engagement and their achievement emotions. *Porta Linguarum An International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, 40(2), 275–294. <https://doi.org/10.30827/portalin.vi40.27338>
- Skevi, O., Ortega-Martín, J. L., & González-Gijón, G. (2023). Use of ICTs and the digital competences of foreign language teachers before and during the state of alarm Olympia. *Language Related Research*, 14(3), 145–166. <http://dx.doi.org/>

10.52547/LRR.14.1.6

- Tran, N. H., & Bui, H. P. (2022). Causes of and coping strategies for boredom in language classrooms: A case in Vietnam. *Language Related Research*. Advance Online Publication. 20.1001.1.23223081.1401.0.0.254.6
- Ullah, A., Ashraf, M., Ashraf, S., & Ahmed, S. (2021). Challenges of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic encountered by students in Pakistan. *Journal of Pedagogical Sociology and Psychology*, 3(1), 36–44. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPSP.2021167264>
- University of the People. (2022, March 02). *Emergency remote teaching Vs. online learning: A comparison*. University of the People. <https://www.uopeople.edu/blog/emergency-remote-teaching-vs-online-learning/>
- Usher, M., & Barak, M. (2020). Team diversity as a predictor of innovation in team projects of face-to-face and online learners. *Computers & Education*, 144, 103702. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.103702>
- Žižanović, S., Pranjić, S. S., & Radovanović, M. (2021). Educational challenges of emergency remote teaching and learning during Coronavirus crisis. *Proceedings of INTCESS 2021- 8th International Conference on Education and Education of Social Sciences*, 231–242. <https://doi.org/10.51508/intcess.2021168>

### About the Authors

**Chau Thi Hoang Hoa** is an EFL teacher at Tra Vinh University, Vietnam. Her research interests are teaching EFL in general education, teachers' education, online teaching, and integrating cultures into teaching EFF.

**Nguyen Trung Hieu** is a graduate English-majored student from Tra Vinh University, Vietnam. The areas of his research are often concerning the application of English learning strategies in practice and the integration of conventional and progressive learning approaches.