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An Exploration of Students' Lived Experience of Being Remote Learners: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

استكشاف تجربة الطلاب في كونهم متعلمين عن بُعد: تحليل ظاهري تفسيري

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Abstract

This study sought to explore a deeper understanding of the lived experience of students who underwent remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Following the qualitative phenomenology research paradigm, seven demographically diverse participants took part from different universities. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to explore how participants made sense of their experiences. A rigorous analysis of students' reflections and online interviews revealed three overarching themes: constructive experience, deconstructive experience, and futuristic sense-making of remote learning practice. This study proposes various solutions and evidence-based recommendations to enhance students' experiences of remote learning, as well as directions for future research.

***Keywords**:* Remote, Learners, Experiences, Phenomenology

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مستخلص البحث

سعت هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف فهم أعمق للتجربة الحية للطلاب الذين خضعوا لتجربة التعلم عن بعد خلال جائحة كوفيد-19 في المملكة العربية السعودية. باتباع نموذج البحث النوعي في علم الظواهر، شارك سبعة مشاركين متنوعين ديموغرافيًا من جامعات مختلفة. تم استخدام التحليل الظاهري التفسيري(IPA) لاستكشاف كيفية فهم المشاركين لتجاربهم. كشف التحليل الدقيق لأفكار الطلاب والمقابلات عبر الإنترنت عن ثلاثة مواضيع شاملة: التعلم عن بعد كتجربة بناءة، والتعلم عن بعد كتجربة محبطة، والإدراك المستقبلي لممارسة التعلم عن بعد. تقترح هذه الدراسة حلولاً مختلفة وتوصيات قائمة على الأدلة لتعزيز تجارب الطلاب في التعلم عن بعد، بالإضافة إلى توجيهات للبحث المستقبلي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عن بعد ، الخبرات، متعلمين، التحليل الظواهري

Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic has forced the world to shift its educational system to remote and distance education. This emergency has occurred in a very sudden and unstructured manner. Saudi higher education, like other countries, had to respond to this emergency, with remote learning taking place in all educational settings.

The educational process has been re-established virtually through online education platforms and communication systems. Al-Samiri (2021) clarifies: “In a brief timeframe, the whole country began the transition to remote learning environments, whether it was televised on select channels or communicated through various online platforms: Telegram, Zoom, Teams, WebEx, and Blackboard” (p. 148). As a result, a huge number of studies have taken place, researching the impact of such a switch and how the new virtual teaching-learning process is performed from different perspectives (Cranfield et al., 2021).

Despite such a substantial body of research across multiple fields, there is a lack of rich account of how students have experienced such a shift. Cranfield et al. (2021) states that, “The full impact of this sudden shift to digital platforms on all cohorts of students is still unclear” (p. 1). Therefore, to address this gap and widen the research on students’ experience of Emergency Remote Learning (ERL), this study aims to explore lived experiences of being remote learners, following phenomenological inquiry. This adds to our understanding of these effects through the collection and interpretation of students’ cognitive inner worlds, capitalizing on these new experiences. This study posed the following research question: how do students who underwent the emergency remote learning make sense of their experiences? Responding to crises like COVID-19 and adopting or adapting to online learning is not easy-going and may be challenging. This study's significance lies in uncovering the hidden stories of the online

teaching-learning process as experienced by students, through the examination of the personal and contextual influences of such experiences.

Related literature

Emergency Remote Learning, Distance Learning and Online Learning

Because "Emergency Remote Learning" ERL, "distance learning" and "online learning" are so closely intertwined, it is important to clarify the terms used through this study. The phrase "Emergency Remote Learning" has evolved in research because of the educational response to the COVID-19 crisis. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) argue that remote learning is not equivalent to the traditional distance education practiced before the COVID-19 crisis, but can best relate to "Emergency Remote Learning", despite remaining a part of distance education. ERL can be defined, therefore, as the use of a temporary shift to an alternate mode under crisis circumstances. This is a shift to fully remote pedagogical solutions of instructional delivery that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or in a blended manner. If the crisis or emergency subsides, the mode will return (Hodges et al., 2020). Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) state that "By definition, distance education is characterized by the distance in time and/or space between learners and learning resources. While remote education refers to spatial distance, distance education considers distance within the perspective of different angles and strives to explain it through transactional distance" (p. 2). The main difference is that traditional distance education existing before the pandemic is managed in a planned, designed, and guided way, unlike ERL, which is conducted in the form of emergency.

Compulsory Remote Learning Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Saudi Arabia

In the face of the global spread of COVID-19, Saudi Arabia, like other countries, must continue operating its education system remotely through

learning management systems such as Blackboard. Fortunately, prior to such a sudden shift to remote learning, advanced platforms and technological infrastructure were already in place for Saudi higher education institutions. "Saudi universities were naturally better prepared to transition to the online learning environment, as most Saudi universities had already implemented digital communication and learning tools" (Al-Samiri, 2021, p. 149). This was a fruitful outcome of the progressive steps that were taken by the Ministry of Education to establish online learning systems (Islam et al., 2021). The country has witnessed numerous online learning initiatives, the most important one being the establishment of The National E-learning Centre (NELC) in 2005. As part of this initiative, E-learning is being governed and regulated to improve equal lifelong access to E-learning that offers sustainable innovation to promote trusted online learning for all Saudi universities (Alammary et al., 2021).

Another significant initiative was the Saudi Electronic University in (2011), whose aim is to provide higher education opportunities using a blended eLearning method in which lifelong learning can be obtained. Consequently, the switch to remote learning has begun with equipment and support which ensure acceptable results, in a positive virtual learning environment for all involved.

Online learning is not new. Most Saudi higher educational institutions have integrated online learning systems as a stand-alone or complementary system (Alolaywi, 2021). Blackboard – an open-source learning system- was being widely used before and during the pandemic. Therefore, most of the students had experienced Blackboard's enhancement of face-to-face learning (Khasawneh, 2021).

However, the literature has yielded several studies aiming to explore the impact of remote learning from students' perspective, however, these studies took more descriptive qualitative or quantitative approaches. Yet,

more interpretive method exploring the lived experience of remote learning users is needed. Still, within the KSA this crucial issue is still unexplored. A study by Tanveer et al. (2020) describes Saudi students as worriers about independent learning. Hence, remote learning brought about a new meaning of learning experiences; understanding such experience helps in designing a suitable virtual learning experience that suits the learners.

Research gap and question

To understand the subjective reality, feelings, difficulties, and successes that students experience in this method of learning, this research study probes beneath the surface of remote education. This study acknowledges the necessity to comprehend the complex narratives playing out within this educational ecosystem. It focuses on the distinct viewpoints of the students, recognizing that their experiences are influenced not only by the learning platforms but also by their own backgrounds, feelings, and thought processes. To uncover the lived experiences of remote learners, the research methodology used, IPA, is a suitable strategy. The goal of IPA, which has its roots in phenomenology, is to investigate the meanings that people give to their experiences. As a result, it offers a methodical yet adaptable framework for identifying the underlying patterns and themes that underlie participants' impressions. The phrase "lived experience" perfectly captures the focus of this investigation.

This research acknowledges that each student's path is a unique story that is influenced by their social, cultural, and educational surroundings. In the end, this study adds to the larger conversation about education. The success of remote learning as well as opportunities for development can be determined by educators, policymakers, and educational institutions using the insights gathered from students' actual experiences. The goal of this study is to expose the narratives that distant learning conceals. This study sets out on a journey to illuminate the varied, profound, and frequently unexplored experiences of students who navigate

the digital landscape of education by embracing the interpretive phenomenological analysis technique.

RQ: how do students who underwent the emergency remote learning make sense of their experiences?

Methodology

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

This study has approached a qualitative phenomenological research paradigm. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis IPA form is the chosen research methodology. Phenomenology's purpose is to characterize the meaning of experience from the perspective of the experiencer, both in terms of "what" and "how"; a hermeneutic phenomenology, to be precise (Heidegger, 1962). IPA studies are not comparable to other phenomenological studies as they are more interpretative than descriptive (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). This systematic methodology seeks to gain a deep understanding of the participants' lived experience, where the center of concern is the individuals' experiences (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). As stated by Bynum and Varpio (2018), this aims "to understand the deeper layers of human experience that lay [sic] obscured beneath surface awareness and how the individual's lifeworld, or the world as he or she pre-reflectively experiences it, influences this experience." (p. 252).

This IPA research focused on how Saudi university students make sense of their experience of being remote learners. This methodological option supported the researchers to critically explain the core of the phenomenon and therefore build a rich, detailed, and contextualized understanding of how being a "remote learner" felt and how it was experienced. IPA is a 'participant-oriented' approach in which "human lived experience, and posits that experience can be understood via an examination of the meanings which people impress upon it" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 34).

IPA is taken as a foundation for analyzing the data. The focus of IPA is the understanding of how people are making sense of their lives and experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the researcher plays a double hermeneutic role when interpreting what participants are trying to do to make sense of their experiences. The mental and personal skills the researcher is adopting when analyzing data is like that of the participants employed to generate data, albeit more 'self-consciously' (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiographic are the three main theoretical foundations of IPA (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). On the phenomenological side, the focus of IPA is the understanding of how people are making sense of their lives and experiences (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). In terms of the idiographic side of IPA, each case of participants is analyzed in detail before moving to the next (Smith, 2004). MAXQDA is used throughout analyzing the data. MAXQDA is software for the analysis of qualitative data, which is considered reliable software to deal with qualitative data (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019).

Participants

IPA usually involves a small and homogenous sample to make in-depth interpretations of similarities and differences between participants (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Recruiting interviewees was not an easy task, thus, a purposive and snowball sample technique was employed. Seven students from different universities in Saudi Arabia who met the essential criteria to suit the requirements of the study participated, to ensure that the phenomenon was appropriately researched. All participants had experience being remote learners during the pandemic. The below table (1) describes the participants' demographic characteristics.

To ensure ethical issues, participants were recruited for the study in a friendly and polite manner, without making any offers or persuading them. A consent form was also prepared to indicate the agreement between the

researcher and the participants. In addition, pseudonyms are used to refer to the research participants in this study to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Participant's name	Participant's level of education	Field of study	Gender	Remote learning software	Employment	University
Ahmed	Masters	Education	Male	Blackboard	Employed	King Abdulaziz
Fatemeh	Masters	Business	Female	Blackboard	Employed	Umm Alqura
Norah	Masters	Education	Female	Blackboard	Employed	Taibah
Mariam	Bachelors	Linguists	Female	Blackboard	Unemployed	Taibah
Faisal	Bachelors	Engineering	Male	Blackboard	Unemployed	Umm Alqura
Sara	Bachelors	Computer Science	Female	Blackboard	Unemployed	Jeddah
Maha	Bachelors	Medicine	Female	Blackboard	Unemployed	King Saud

Methods of Data Collection

Students' Reflective Recordings.

The utilization of students' reflective recordings is an excellent way to collect raw in-the-moment experiences, and the reflection-in-action strategy is a gateway to the intuitive synthesis process (Miller, 2022). Participants were asked to provide reflective accounts about their experiences. The reflections were guided by a set of questions about their personal, emotional, psychological, academic, and contextual sense-making of being a remote learner. Through engagement in self-reflection, students were able to recall and communicate their feelings, which give rich account of the actual experience. In total, 32 reflections were received. Some of them were voice-recorded and others were in written format, depending on the student's preference. These reflections were sent to the researcher through WhatsApp and email. Following the submission of students' reflections, the researcher pre-analyzed them to formulate initial interview questions, after which semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Online Semi-structured Interview.

Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher and participant to converse in real time. They also provide enough room and flexibility for novel and unexpected topics to surface, which the researcher can pursue further with additional inquiries (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Constrained by physical distancing, with participants from different universities, online interview was the chosen method of data collection.

A total of 7 interviews were conducted, with students asked to reflect upon their experiences as remote learners. The purpose of IPA is individual sense-making, non-directive, semi-structured interviews. This data-collection method is recommended by (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Following the IPA strategy where the researcher "invites participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56), the interviewer was flexible, starting by asking students about their background. Following this, the employment of more probing questions, based on the responses from participants, enabled the interviewer to gain a more in-depth examination of participants' experiences and perceptions. Each Zoom interview took approximately 45-60 minutes. According to Archibald et al. (2019), Zoom is a videoconferencing platform with a number of unique and novel features that could make it appealing to qualitative and mixed-method researchers.

Table 2

Interview guide: An Exploration of Students' Lived Experience of Being Remote Learner

Main theme	Question	Probe
Warming up General	Tell me about yourself? How do you define your role as a student?	Interesting. can you tell me more about this?
General Experience of distance learning	How would you describe the experience of being remote learner? How did you adapt to remote learning process?	Tell me more about that? How would you compare this with your previous experience as on-campus student?
Life activities	How does remote learning effects your daily routine?	How did that make you feel

Main theme	Question	Probe
Learning strategies	What learning strategies do you practice during your remote learning experience? (Notes-search for information)	Can you think of another example of this?
Motivation	In your opinion, does remote learning experience contribute to motivating you towards learning?	How does that compare to the experience of traditional learning?
Blackboard	Has the blackboard provided an acceptable learning environment? How do you perceive the main differences between face-to-face and blackboard interactions in education?	How would you describe this?
Teaching strategies	Do you think teaching strategies approached by academics in remote learning are effective enough? Why?	What else can you remember about that situation?
Engagement	From your point of view, what are the factors that contribute to increasing the interaction of students in the remote learning experience?	What led you to think this way?
Significant challenges	What are the most significant challenges you have experienced as being a remote learner?	How would approach these challenges?
Added value	What are the most Added values you have experienced as being a remote learner?	How did this effects your learning?
Academic performance	In which ways do you believe that remote learning has affected your academic performance?	What are your feelings about this?
Future aspect	How can the distance education experience be developed from your point of view?	Looking back, what would you do differently now, if anything
Finish	Is there any comments or further points you would like to add?	What else can you remember about this situation

Process of data analysis

The collected data analyzed based on the principles of IPA: the four stages proposed by Smith et al. (2009) to analyze data using IPA will be followed. Lyons and Coyle (2007) indicate that, “IPA offers a series of steps that are designed to allow analysts to identify central concerns within the data” (p. 52). These steps are as follows:

Step one: close and interactive cycles of reading and re-reading of the data will be undertaken. The importance of several readings is that each

time there is more potential to gain insight into the participants' meanings, which will help future work, based on the participants' accounts. There will be a wide range of notes and comments in the results, therefore (Smith, 2003; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Smith and Shinebourne (2012) suggest three types of comments that the researcher could use at this stage, namely descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. The left-hand margin of the Word documents will be used, and important themes will be highlighted using different colors to show a clear connection between the data and the generated themes.

Step two: the identification and labelling of initial primary themes using the right-hand margin of Word, and the use of MindNode software. In this stage, themes will be generated to capture the nature, quality, and meaning of the experience under study (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012; Willig, 2013). Smith (2004) states that to obtain this, a researcher can "imagine a magnet with some of the themes pulling others in and helping to make sense of them" (p. 71). Lyons and Coyle (2007) indicate that researchers who want to explicitly use psychological theory in their analysis when analyzing qualitative data using IPA and, at the same time, make sure that participants' meaning making is not affected, have solved this dilemma in several methods: "The standard response has been to invoke theory when discussing the findings arising from an analysis of participants' meaning making undertaken as far as possible in their own terms" (p. 56).

Step three: the identification of thematic clusters by linking primary themes using MindNode to facilitate the identification process. This stage is "an attempt to introduce structure into analysis" (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012, p. 88), where the researcher is engaged in identifying connections between primary themes. Smith and Shinebourne (2012) categorize five different ways to locate connections between themes: abstraction,

subsumption, polarization, numeration, and functions. These are just suggestions to identify connections, however; the researcher must choose the one that could work with the data.

Step four: the production of summary tables to portray themes with quotations that illustrate these themes in the group level by the integration of individual cases. Willig (2013) indicates that integration of cases "should generate a list of master themes that capture the quality of the participants' shared experiences of the phenomenon under investigation, and which, therefore, also tell us something about the essence of the phenomenon itself" (p. 91).

Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate how do students who underwent the emergency remote learning make sense of their experiences? Table (2) explains the main themes and subthemes emerged from the analyzed accounts of the students' experiences when shifting from traditional learning to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3

Themes and Sub-Themes Emerging from the Study Data

Superordinate Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: remote learning as a constructive experience	1. Responsiveness to change through developing new learning strategies. 2. Mobile-social media networks build a socialized environment for social learning. 3. Constructing a new identity as online learner 4. Building pedagogical digital literacy
Theme 2: remote learning as a destructive experience	1. Instructors' synchronous/asynchronous teaching strategies impact on student experience 2. E-assessment methods in remote learning impact on students 3. ICT-related remote learning issues
Theme 3: futuristic sense-making of remote learning practice	1. The need for an engaging active online learning experience 2. Professional development on E-learning modalities

Superordinate Theme 1: Remote Learning as a Constructive Experience.

Students capture the sense of remote learning as being a constructive experience. Four main sub-themes have built up this superordinate theme; first, responsiveness to change through developing new learning strategies; second, managing the need of being connected in remote learning through social media; third, constructing a new identity as an online learner and fourth; building pedagogical digital literacy. These themes are discussed as follows:

Responsiveness to Change through Developing New Learning Strategies.

Students expressed personal adaptation to the new remote learning environment as a response to the sudden change that impacted their learning process. Mariam expressed how independent she became as result of being a remote learner, showing new positive changes in her learning strategies. For example, she describes finding meaningful resources online as a new learning method:

> Mariam: It requires high skills from the student…I must be in control of everything. Considering that I am studying from home the vibe is different, so I must be serious and put a line between studying and family time… it adds new skills, especially in the field of research … for example, in terms of finding more resources like a good video and so… As time passes, I found remote learning better and more flexible than traditional education.

Ahmed, a post-graduate student, also outlined how remote learning highlighted the need for new learning strategies, as well as to be organized and adaptable to change:

> Ahmed: You must be continuedly open to change to be able to navigate your way... It felt like I needed to have sort of new ways to learn. First, I

> realize the importance of time management, so I started by putting study plans… Also it is important when learning online to have like effective ways to organize your study, not only in terms of certain software or application but also in terms of learning space at home, [which] is important too because it is difficult to maintain focus with all the distractions around you.

Maha's reflection clearly portrays how remote learning improved her learning skills, emphasizing the advantage of "recorded lectures" that could not be obtained in traditional education, which helped her attaining better knowledge:

> Maha: Unlike in-person education, recorded lectures are one of the primary benefits in distance education. It helps me consolidate the information and refer to it if necessary, So the information made available for future reference up to a satisfactory level of understanding which aids in my achievement of higher grades.

Mobile Social Media Networks Build a Socialized Environment for Social Learning.

Mobile network-based learning creates new channels as a potential response to the inherent problem of isolation, both in a formal (e.g. submitting assignment) and informal (e.g. chatting with classmates) way.

Students voiced the significant role of mobile social media networks during their experience of being remote learners, although they also expressed the importance of Blackboard features such as the use of discussion forums.

However, other social media platforms were the most important tool in their discourses, especially applications like WhatsApp, Telegram and Snapchat, which are well known for socializing rather than education, like a traditional blog. Importantly, students prefer accessing the virtual classes through mobile devices. Norah highlights that during remote learning, social

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media helped her to feel connected not only with those whom she already known in-person, but also to expand her network.

> Norah: It is an enjoyable new experience, but I felt bored, I felt isolated because I really felt I couldn't connect with anybody and that really made me quite demotivated… especially since I was used to seeing people every day and changing the atmosphere of the house, I really miss the feeling of being at the university, being in person with others. Talking with others energizes me. Now, I feel like I have more connection with my class fellows through social media like Twitter and Snapchat which is amazing too… For me being connected to others though social media give me the chance to know others deeply in a way that we could not do otherwise. I [am] now in contact with almost all my classmates, not only on WhatsApp [but] even in Snapchat.

Faisal puts forward how the use of WhatsApp and Telegram groups assist him in meeting the intrinsic need of socializing and develop platforms of psychological support channels. He emphasizes the inner need to connect with instructors through social media, comparing this with other forms of learning.

> Faisal: Learning doesn't feel real… so bad, boring, no reaction, no human feelings. For me it is important to listen to other students who sound like me and feel like me. I don't prefer to study online because I can't gather with my classmates, there are no friends who can help lift my mood, so thank you to WhatsApp and Telegram groups that supported me to a great extent… That's why I really appreciate instructors who allow us to contact them through social media because it feels [like a] more engaging and deeper interaction comparing with contacting them with emails or Blackboard.

Sara states her feeling of loneliness when studying remotely and the way in which social media keeps her motivated about her learning:

Sara: We went through contradictory feelings… you just kind of feel a bit alone… I used to get in-depth support on-campus [where] you can talk with peers, interact with instructors... Now social media connects us with others because there was no way that we would approach others.... Receiving social support through these communities really helps me feel less pressure. Applications and groups on WhatsApp and Telegram programs increases my motivation of topics. I could sense the excitement of them before and keeps me in track with important things about my study.

***Constructing a New Identity as an Online Learner*.**

The global pandemic has fundamentally changed the way that students learn, offering a new online social community in which both the self and social identity are constructed. Students reconstruct their identity as remote learners and online tools (e.g. Blackboard forum) are used to aid the development of remote learner identity (Joyes, 2008). Identity is defined as "resources for constructing belonging, recognition of self and others, and context management (what I am, where, with whom and when)" (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999, p. 272). Thus, identity plays an important role in providing a rationale for understanding why and how members are committed to their communities. Interestingly most of the students in this research felt a sense of developing a new identity since being remote learners, and thus new roles are made for the learner and educators.

Such relatively new assigned roles might face some resistance, so students keep referring to the situation as a temporary one, hoping to reach the end of it. Norah, as a working student mum in the time of Coronavirus, voices how taking care of her work, study, and her kids' education places her in challenging multiple roles, driving her to feel uncomfortable:

Norah: Whenever I feel downhearted, I am trying my best to encourage my mind to be always positive… At the end it is a temporary situation, I

> always pray everything will be okay soonest. Remote learning weakens my enthusiasm towards learning [and] I wish we would go back to the lecture rooms. In the bright side, as a working mother… my children can be [looked after] at the same time without having to go out and leave them in the evening. Helping new mothers not to leave their children, I mean, I attend lectures, answer, share, and my child is next to me. Remote learning is a good means in times of crises, but it does not take the rudder of preference to it in stable conditions, because without a doubt face-to-face education is the most beneficial learning method.

Participants tend to define themselves in comparison with who they were in a face-to-face educational environment, and such recognition of their new identity as a self-learner creates a new educational experience. Mariam defines herself differently within the paradigm of being a remote learner in comparison with being a face-to-face learner. Within the world of remote learning, she transforms into a more confident student who can interact and take part in the learning process, compared to the shy self that she was in face-to-face education:

> Mariam: For me during my whole education 'til the shift to remote learning I felt embarrassment and shyness talking in front of my classmates… I have been always afraid of making mistakes, but now I am more able to discuss, enquire or even present maybe because they cannot see me so yes, the ability to interact without shyness and confusion [is good]. It suits my personality more.

Similarly, Faisal expresses that in face-to-face discussions, he did not get enough time to think before he could give a response. However, in remote learning, he has adequate time to read, think about and reply to the discussions. This opens the door to the importance of providing students with asynchronous learning activities, such as online discussion, and how these activities could help in fostering a positive learning identity:

Faisal: I must be a self-motivator… It was hard at first, but it became easy and beautiful… For me the important thing is I complete my education in any way… The experience in this semester is more enjoyable and beneficial than the last one, and I would say it was excellent. For example, my personality changed on Blackboard. Previously, I did not participate much, and if I had an idea in my mind, I would not participate, but with Blackboard, the dread decreased, and the level of my interaction increased. I have the time to think and type up my ideas in online discussions in a way that [was] impossible otherwise.

***Building New Digital Literacy*.**

The compulsory remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic unlocked the opportunity to develop digitally literate students. Participants in this study emphasized an improvement in their technological skills, building ability in finding information, in communication, and in data literacy competences. Fatemeh educated herself to adapt to the change whilst not getting lost in the process. She observes that remote learning gave her adequate time to develop her digital skills:

Fatemeh: Of course, I went through [a] number of challenges. but there are also advantages. I am learning lots of new applications and programs like video-making and infographics websites and I can expand my knowledge in this field. Yes, at the beginning I felt technologically lost, but, this motivates me to learn more… also being at home all the time gave me the time to improve my technological skills.

Ahmed, as a master's student, prioritized the development of his digital competency as a result of being a remote learner. This development includes basic computer skills; accessing his course resources; being able to find information that meets his needs and being able to look at the obtained information in a more critical way, particularly for research purposes.

Ahmed: I gain new information and new experience in term of different types of technologies that I could not gain otherwise so in this regards I see being [an] online learner as a good experience. From connecting at a predefined time to the remote learning platform to the ability of producing digital materials like mind-mapping and infographics especially as a master's student I get the chance to know a lot about research-related technologies such as RefWorks for references.

Sara expresses a level of understanding of the necessity of sufficient digital literacy skills and demonstrates an understanding of the associated risks. This includes multimedia images, sound and text.

Sara: Obtaining and benefiting from new technologies throughout the process, I got new information about programs I didn't know before. Not only about writing assignments using Microsoft Word, but also including multimedia to the text in a very neat writing format. So [I] gained technical knowledge and experience, [which] is amazing and being able to decide which information suits my need and what is trusted.

Superordinate Theme 2: Remote Learning as a Destructive Experience.

As well as being beneficial, students also experienced remote learning as a destructive experience. This theme is built up by a number of destructive experience triggers. Firstly, instructors' synchronous/ asynchronous teaching strategies impact on student experience. Secondly, E-assessment methods in remote learning can impact on students' progress. Thirdly, those students who are unregulated, and low in self-motivation, can learn passively during remote learning. Finally, ICT-related remote learning issues are raised. These themes are considered as follows:

Instructors' Synchronous/Asynchronous Teaching Strategies and their Impact on Student Experience.

Participants in this study experienced the massive negative impact of instructors' synchronous/ asynchronous teaching strategies in their

experiences. They articulate the way in which instructors' lack of designing effective online courses and delivery practice has negatively influenced their learning, appearing to take a backward step. Maha conceptualizes the matter as being completely linked to the teaching ability of the instructors and not to the method of education delivery, in which instructors need to be competent in dealing with different features of Blackboard. She reflects:

> Maha: Based on my experience. I felt that the problem is not with remote learning or face-to-face education. If the instructors are capable and can explain the content, then there is no difference. The point is that the ability to deliver information is determined not by the type of education, but by the competence of the instructors. Some instructors do not know how to use the technologies comprehensively. Instructors must be able to master the technologies or software used in remote learning, especially Blackboard. Like their ability to manage the discussion efficiently, giving a safe space for their students to present their opinions and directing students thinking without criticizing, and the cumulative review of the previous content of the course by effective quizzes and effective presentation.

Norah describes the experience negatively, and she attributes this to the teaching strategies of some instructors on her course. She believes that it is the instructor's responsibility to make the students comfortable through employing interactive technological tools, which most of the instructors' lack experience of, as she elaborates:

> Norah: Boredom and unwillingness to learn. [We] aren't getting appropriate education through Blackboard and some instructors don't try to explain subjects clearly. If I would consider it as a bad experience, it would be because of some instructors, not all of them. We need a lot of cooperation from the instructors; they should let students feel comfortable to ask, provide interactive explanation, discussions with students, and attention to their level of comprehension in the course.

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> Maybe the inability of the lecturer to master the technical means… of using the interactive programs causes [a] lack of effective interaction with the students. I believe if they practice this the situation would be brighter.

Faisal felt bad about his experience because he did not get adequate information as an engineering student, due to ineffective teaching strategies. He underlines the way in which instructors could improve their teaching through increasing the enthusiasm, interactivity, communication and providing feedback, as he explains:

> Faisal: The problem with lack of achievement does not fall on students alone, as it was found that teachers also had a regression in the process of delivering information in the required form. So yes, it is a bad experience for me as a student in the first year of the Faculty of Engineering, where I needed a lot of information while I gained little because the instructors in RL summarize a lot of information. They should increase their enthusiasm for teaching and add an interactive aspect during their presentation of the scientific material, by asking questions, providing… examples and stories from practical reality, or life in general. but also trying to involve students in the task of communicating the information, with an emphasis on providing feedback and assistance.

***E-assessment Formative and Summative Methods in Remote Learning*.**

Formative and summative methods of E-assessment in remote learning had a huge influence on students' experiences in a negative way. Ahmed's experience of E-assessment made him feel pressured, seeing the remotely designed exam as a "race against time", referring to the strategy of delivering the exam within a time constraint to prevent students from cheating.

Ahmed: The negative that I face is that the instructors pressured us because they were afraid of us cheating or because they believed that we did not study, so they made the exam difficult and they deactivated the back button for the question during the test, which prevents us from taking enough time while answering. Remote exams [feel like a] "race against time", as some put 20 questions in 15 minutes, [but because] it is impossible to think of solving 20 questions in 20 minutes that is unfair considering the issue of the network and the fact that it sometimes hangs or is slow.

Sara says that remote learning has left students mentally distressed, and compares the situation to feeling as if she is being killed by the amount of difficult and overlapping assignments which are hard to navigate and are easy to get lost in, with the addition of exams' difficulty on top of that:

Sara: Too many duties assignments, quizzes, and activities are not the solution. These just extinguish engagement from learning... Instructors gave us lots of assignments excessively. It kills me. I break down because I do not know which assignment to complete and submit first, so I just cry and cry. I spend some extra hours to be able to organize all my requirements on the arranged deadline. There must be a compromise. We are in front of the laptop all the time... This makes students emotionally stressed. also questions in the exams are complex and difficult.

Norah said that the assessment method was the only backwards aspect of ERL, especially the time-allocated exam. Norah is a postgraduate student, and she expressed that one of the most difficult tasks was summarizing "7 units or more in just 24 hours":

Norah: ERL is brilliant in all respects. Except for the exams – assessment methods of some instructors made remote learning the worst possible… Most instructors reduce the exam time very drastically to not allow

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students to cheat, and with this, all students are restricted, pressured, and affected, whether the student… wants to cheat or… does not... and this is one of the worst disadvantages of remote learning. The assignments have become very long, the tests have become more expressive and [involve] more articles to the extent that I swear to God that one of the tests was a summary of about 7 units or more in just 24 hours.

ICT-related Remote Learning Issues.

ICT-related remote learning issues can make remote learning a destructive experience for students, which is seen as a barrier to successful learning and practice. Maha explains the scenario she went through when she lost internet connectivity, and her teacher was angry as a result because of a disturbance to the audio:

Maha: Unfortunately, because of the technical problems either because of the Internet or difficulty logging to Blackboard, also the difficulty of faculty members to understand, I had to listen to the lecture again after recording it due to technical problems, most notably the professor's voice is not clear and if we told them like the voice is distorted because of technical problem or internet connection they get angry at us.

Likewise, Ahmed says that the lack of guidance given to him through Blackboard to get used to it as a mediation tool in his study was annoying. In addition to this, the interface was not attractive, and this hindered its use. However, he cites internet connectivity as the main disadvantage when being a remote learner, hindering his ability to understand the course and having a positive experience overall:

Ahmed: I do not like the amount of guidance I get through Blackboard. Also, I feel it lacks a good interface… The most important factor that improves or increases the interaction of students in the virtual classes is the strong internet, as many students have problems with the internet,

so they often do not have participation and interactions online and the reason is due to a lot of interruption due to the network. It is possible that the bad internet connectivity causes [me to lose] my patience and understanding.

Fatemeh agrees with her fellow participants that internet connection is a critical factor in the experience of being a remote learner. However, she adds that the quality of the device students use is also a factor.

Fatemeh: Maybe technology problems especially the internet connection is the most crucial issue because let's say if the voice [is] distorted during virtual classes, it extremely affected my understanding and concentration. The most important thing is the problem of the network and the device that you are using in distance education. [I was] tired at first because I did not like to sit on the phone for a long time, but now the situation has changed, and I loved the experience and got used to it. I borrow a computer just to finish tasks when my smartphone is not enough to complete the task.

Superordinate Theme 3: Futuristic Sense-Making of Remote Learning.

The Need for Engaging Active Online Learning and the Learning Experience.

As students underwent the experience of being remote learners, they developed a new vision about its future practices. The futuristic sense-making they developed centered around two main themes: The need for active E-learning experience through remote learning and professional development on the use of E-learning modalities.

Ahmed senses the need for active learning activities such as gamification, believing this to be an effective way to engage learners remotely. In addition, such active activities, in his view, can transform the lectures from being boring to engaging:

> Ahmed: To be interactive and stay away from boring lectures… use games and interactive programs during the lesson. Adopting more fun methods and more enjoyable applications [will improve] the effectiveness and preparation of the scientific material in an attractive manner and activate the role of students. The problem now is that some instructors are teaching with the same method of classrooms, just reading the lecture from the slides…

Similarly, Faisal views turning on the camera during virtual classes as a serious need in order to feel connected with his learning:

> Faisal: Opening the camera during lessons makes the students more alert, we're paying more attention to the lecture if the cameras are turned on. Being on camera [is] just like being in person and feeling a higher sense of connection with individuals.

Mariam, in her reflection, places weight on the importance of being engaged through discussion and opportunities to ask questions. For her, even the tone of instructors in remote learning can boost her enthusiasm, and calling students by their names can make a difference:

> Mariam: Undoubtedly, [the best teaching is from] the flexible lecturer, who gives students an opportunity, whether with discussions or questions, and does not focus only on reading the lecture. First, the instructor demonstrates a tone of enthusiasm and true passion in teaching. Second, [they] motivate, encourage, and give us actionable skills tools. Moreover, [they] provide the opportunity for students to participate and interact. Additionally, [they] use a variety of audio-visual aids during the course explanation. [Lastly, it's important] they talk individually and intimately with students (calling their names, praising them, etc.).

***Professional Development on E-learning Modalities*.**

Students identified the need for professional development in E-learning modalities as a means for fruitful future practice. In her reflection, Fatemeh listed the areas in which instructors needed professional

development. This list included: developing their knowledge of applications and programs; employing different E-assessment methods; using techniques that motivate students, and more ways to employ mobile learning. She said:

> Fatemeh: [Universities should] educate instructors about the mechanism of dealing with digital educational systems [and] develop modern programs and applications that facilitate the distance education process, diversify the assessment process… [and] contribute to the development of students' level of motivation and benefit from… using smartphones or mobile devices as much as possible.

Sara identified the need to continue using virtual learning post-COVID-19 in a form of blended learning. She justifies this by explaining that this method could not only open the door for students with more diverse personal situations, but also open the door for new learning for all. Importantly, she proposes the need for training to master such desirable practice:

> Sara: [Universities should] make Blackboard a part of the regular lectures in universities after the end of the pandemic, integrating technology with learning [so] you learn a new method and new ways of learning, as it enables all students with difficult circumstances to acquire education with ease. However, great effort must be given to training all Blackboard users to master such a method of learning appropriately.

Faisal calls for the need to boost instructors' capabilities in teaching remotely, not only by using technologies, but also by being able to make sense of students' problems and overcome them by building communication channels:

> Faisal: It takes time to get used to… Blackboard. [The] important fact is the doctor must be an expert on how to teach remotely... [by] identifying the problems faced by students and working to solve them, facilitating ways of communicating with them, and recording the negatives and positives weekly, analyzing the problems contained therein...

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Discussion of Key Findings and Suggestions for Further Research

The main aim of this study is to answer the question: how do students who have gone through compulsory remote learning make sense of their experiences? Learning remotely in emergency-mode is recognized by participants in three ways; as being constructive, destructive, and informing futuristic vision. Each one is being fabricated by other effects.

Several motives made participants view ERL as a constructive experience. The obvious one throughout the data is that ERL opens the door for developing new learning strategies as a responsive action to the change. This finding is in line with the Al Zahrani et al. (2021) study, which found that improving new self-learning skills was the main advantage of remote learning, as reported by Saudi student participants. Moreover, the studies of Cranfield et al. (2021) and Rotas and Cahapay (2021) concluded that ERL improved students' independent learning skills. It is evident that the transition to ERL has created a positive space to change students' learning skills; thus, to address this learning change, various online learning strategies have been developed. Students become more independent and responsible for their learning. To improve their time management abilities, students should establish a timetable of the tasks that they need to do, which should include completing lesson activities ahead of time. The time set aside for learning tasks should also be extended. This might be attributed to their change in learning strategies after Covid-19 when they return to F2F learning.

The second element that made ERL a constructive experience is the application of mobile social media networks, which fulfils the psychological need of being connected in remote learning. This finding coincided with previous research Dragseth (2020), and Ragusa and Crampton (2018) which articulated that students cited "impersonal" communication interactions as the most important factor affecting their sense of connection when discussing online learning. Similarly, research by Alenezi and Brinthaupt

(2022) showed that most students perceived that social media facilitated interaction with peers and faculty, leading to engagement and collaborative learning. Thus, it is evident that social media and online class participation played a mediating role between social support and psychological resilience.

Moreover, Participants used only a narrow range of social networking sites, predominantly Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat, comparing with other applications that are known to be useful in higher education include wikis, blogs, forums, and social bookmarking. This is congruent to the research of Tyrovolas et al. (2020), due to its ease of use and simplicity, students in Saudi Arabia view social media as a more appropriate instrument for communication. Alenezi and Brinthaupt (2022) stated that most of the students were familiar and experienced with the informal use of social media for socialization and entertainment, but not necessarily as a formal educational tool. Students actively socialized themselves in social media environments with their friends who they knew face-to-face before the COVID-19 pandemic (Asghar et al., 2021). Most students utilized their cell phones to attend online classes and complete their tests and homework (Maqableh & Alia, 2021). Consequently, increased engagement can be achieved through the usage of the mobile social media network, which fosters a stronger bond between students and educators, as well as aiding the ability to access and discuss course content. It aids in overcoming their feelings of loneliness.

The third motive trigger which makes ERL a constructive experience is the formulation of a new identity as an online learner. Digital identity has been defined as representing some features of an individual's identity "in some processes of interaction with others in distributed networks for recognition of the individual" (Lizenberg, 2013, p. 1). Digital identity can be defined as "a collection of electronically captured and stored identity attributes that uniquely describe a person within a given context and are used for electronic transactions" (World Bank Group, 2016, p. 11). Learner

identity is seen to be a transient identity formed in the social category because of social interactions and attitudes about its current social group (MacFarlane, 2018). Individuals must use identity management to adapt, reinterpret, or reconfigure themselves in response to their current circumstances or surroundings (Brekhus, 2003). This study found that students who begin remote learning are more likely to be concerned about increasing teacher expectations. However, they can cope with the pressure by self-regulating. They seek settings in which they can enact and express their social positions and identities to validate and preserve them. Understanding aspects of identities in online learning could assist stakeholders in designing successful online communities (Khalid, 2019). These students must have developed an identity management culture. Therefore, the way in which remote learning is practiced has a huge influence on students' positive or negative learner identity.

Digital identity is a crucial part of online learning communities. Students need to be assisted in constructing their digital identities because they might not be conscious about how online activities are shaping their digital identities (Babić et al., 2014). The expansion of online learning adds a new dimension to learner identity, which is, as yet, under-researched within the paradigm of online learning (Al Siyabi & Al Shekaili, 2021; Ragusa & Crampton, 2018). Coll Salvador and Falsafi (2010) declared that learner identity as a concept should be given more attention in the educational context. Lack of effective learning communities, due to the lack of effective remote learning design, could hinder the positive development of digital identity, thus the university should broaden their student support services as far as psychological services are concerned.

The fourth cause of ERL being seen as a constructive experience is that ERL allows the building of pedagogical digital literacy. Digital literacy is "the ability to use and integrate digital apparatus to make communication interesting while delivering new knowledge to the society or community"

(Butarbutar et al., 2021, p. 162). Beyond educational institutions, being digitally literate is an important skill needed in the 21st century workplace as well as in social life. Undoubtedly, remote learning is a tool for enhancing students' digital skills. Participants in this study supported the statement that being a remote learner helps them to be digitally literate. This is in line with Al Zahrani et al. (2021) study, which states that the COVID-19 pandemic opened the door for improving students' digital skills. Similarly Iffat (2021) study supported the notion that remote learning platforms have been immensely valued by remote learners since they provide the most convenient way of learning in every field.

The findings demonstrate that ERL is viewed as a destructive experience by the research participants. This theme has escalated from several destructive experience triggers. First: the impact of instructors' teaching synchronous/asynchronous strategies on the student experience. Under the active leadership of the Ministry of Education, institutions in KSA and faculty members made multiple attempts to teach online and deliver the greatest experience for students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Without the requisite training or assistance, academic staff were forced to modify their instructional materials for online delivery (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021). Such sudden movement to remote learning left Saudi instructors with limited space to prepare for the new teaching model. To deliver the rest of their required instruction, instructors were given limited online choices, including live lectures, recorded video lectures, voice-over demonstrations, and picture-in-picture presentations. For students, this creates an absence of direct communication and active dialogue, as well as a lack of body language and eye contact. Bahanshal and Khan (2021) concluded that virtual classes are an effective teaching and learning approach; however, they cannot substitute physical ones.

It should be noted that comparing synchronous and asynchronous aspects of Blackboard in the Saudi context was beyond the scope of the previous studies. Thus, the need for high-quality teaching in higher education institutions, fueled by effective teaching methods, is today more critical than ever, especially within ERL (Alkhudiry & Alahdal, 2021). This is in line with Al Zahrani et al. (2021), during remote learning there were distractions, a lack of desire, worry, and the ineffectiveness of online practical applications to contend with. With sufficient technological assistance, improved strategic planning, and timely supervision, academicians and students may be able to achieve higher success with the use of many Blackboard tools (Alenezi, 2020; Iffat, 2021). Therefore, the more E-learning materials and tools are used in an educational setting, the better the students' performance and the efficiency of teaching methods will be.

The second destructive experience recognized by the participants was E-assessment methods and their negative impact on them, as they caused ever-increasing stress and pressure on students. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with the coursework, which they described as difficult and inaccessible for self-study. Due to the rarity of study materials, many assignments are still pending. This agrees with Tanveer et al. (2020) work which states that students are concerned that they will not be able to complete their homework on time. Hence, higher education institutions should consider more robust e-assessment methods for remote learning method.

Due to the unexpected complexities of how IT is applied as a learning tool, there are no strict regulations surrounding the exact learning duration and level of commitment, and many students are not well prepared to carry out their studying and teaching practices using E-learning strategies as a result. Students found the strategies their instructors followed to ensure fair exams conversely felt unfair and caused pressure. The Al Zahrani et al. (2021)

study agrees with this finding and suggests that more time for exams with many attempts at the exam are needed to combat a destructive experience. Furthermore, students would benefit from the availability of an examination policy with guidance surrounding protocol in the case of internet disconnection (Alenezi, 2020). Additionally, the employment of an effective system that detects and prevents cheating, and amendments to unfair assessment techniques which facilitate cheating, are also tools to overcome such a destructive experience (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020). Therefore, it is important to stress that supporting creative instructional strategies and alternate assessment plans as a major success factor.

Fraud, technology, integration of learning goals, and student compliance with assessments have all been identified as key concerns for online exams. Similarly, Alenezi (2020), Jarrah et al. (2022), and Khalil et al. (2020) studies all concludes that universities and instructors must reconsider exam assessment methods and weights to decide how carefully students' learning is measured. However, it can also be said that individual personality traits determine barriers to online learning adoption. Consequently, exams methods must be redesigned in remote learning to fit the individual preferences and ensure achieving quality and equality in assessing students' performance.

In both face-to-face and online learning programs, self-regulation has been demonstrated to be one of the best indicators of academic achievement. For instance, research showed that self-regulation and focus and control were revealed to be important distinguishing variables between students who completed online courses and dropouts (Mishra et al., 2021). Self-regulation is the "self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 14). Highly self-regulated students, manage their learning in a metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active approach. To avoid inconsistencies or discrepancies among institutions, a

uniform E-assessment policy should be developed (Islam et al., 2021). Thus, students' negative views toward E-assessment methods could be understood not only due to instructors' unfair practice but also because of students' lack of self-regulation during ERL, which calls for more research to uncover the causes of such practice.

The fourth cause of viewing ERL as a destructive experience is ICT-mediated remote learning issues. The first considerable factor is internet connectivity. Students are unable to attend courses online due to internet connectivity issues. This correlates with the results of a study by Khashaba et al. (2022) where internet connectivity issues are one of the major challenges of online learning. Therefore, students who do not have an internet connection look for every possible alternative to meet their requirements (Rotas & Cahapay, 2021). Monitoring E-learning practices, developing robust internet infrastructures and providing free internet and technology access to students, are considered a priority for Saudi Arabia, which is technologically advanced (Islam et al., 2021). The second ICT-mediated remote learning issue is related to Blackboard. This reveals that Blackboard's usage at Saudi universities calls for more in-depth research (Al-Nofaie, 2020). Obaid (2020), and Aboagye et al. (2021) studies concluded that most university students are frequently concerned about poor connectivity in specific areas, difficulties logging in to the network and completing courses, as well as a lack of resources to read reports or even difficulty in understanding mentors. As a result, well-built ICT, telecommunications, and a well-organized faculty support system are essential for successful remote learning programs.

Futuristic sense-making is naturally formed when constructing an experience. Koh and Kan (2021) stated that students' current experiences shape how they desire to use E-learning systems in the future. Students cite two remote learning futuristic practices. The first one is the need for a more engaging online learning experience, in which online learning is not

practiced as being just another phase of traditional teaching. Martin et al. (2022) suggests that to engage students, instructors must use a variety of pedagogies and resources, such as play materials and physical tools. Thus, during remote learning, they should use a mix of synchronous and asynchronous forms, as well as informal places for community formation.

In addition, they should allow students to reflect on and develop their learning strategies, thereby improving their performance (Alammary et al., 2021). Mohtar and Yunus (2022) assert that asynchronous approaches, such as gamification-based modules and E-portfolios, can boost student motivation by instilling a sense of ownership in the task at hand. In addition, Al-Maskari et al. (2021), and Alammary et al. (2021) stated that teachers had a significant impact on students' online education experiences, primarily by being accessible during the course and providing needed support to their students. Hence, improving students' technological competence is instructors’ responsibility in which they should their and relations to the learning process, to be more motivated to learn.

Surprisingly, technical skill inadequacies were not the source of students' dissatisfaction with online learning; on the contrary, students reported that the current situation had helped them improve their technical skills. Rather, negativity stemmed from a lack of relational connectedness with the new context, which students continued to refer to as a temporary situation, as well as a lack of teacher support (Al Siyabi & Al Shekaili, 2021). Students in synchronous classes that used active E-learning techniques (which are more social by definition) reported significantly higher levels of engagement, motivation, enjoyment, and satisfaction with the instruction (Nguyen et al., 2021). Therefore, active E-learning methods, which have been shown to improve motivation, engagement, and learning in traditional classrooms, have a positive impact in the remote E-learning environment. By incorporating these elements into online courses, students will have a better learning experience. This also necessitates that higher education

institutions and faculty interact with students regularly and address their concerns for them to feel supported.

The second key futuristic-needed practice conceptualized by students is the need for professional development and training in E-learning modalities for instructors. Consistent with the research conducted so far on remote learning, Almusharraf and Khahro (2020) assert that it is critical to investigate what contributes to students' satisfaction with online learning settings and to provide technical training and proper instruction. Islam et al. (2021) concluded that institutional training should be organized to prepare teachers' capabilities to conduct E-learning more effectively. Almusharraf and Khahro (2020) work supports the idea that professional development workshops and practical training for online learning and education are needed to support innovative teaching techniques and alternative assessment plans for educators, learners, managers, and policymakers. There is a much-needed call for further meaningful research on integrating training courses is needed.

Conclusion

During the COVID-19 crisis, ERL presents challenges to students, but it also motivates them to persevere despite the numerous difficult tasks that they must complete every day. Such experiences put forward the question: how do students who have undergone compulsory remote learning make sense of their experiences, especially within the KSA higher education context?

Approaching IPA methodological design helps uncover the hidden challenges and opportunities of ERL through understanding students' experiences of such phenomenon. Examining such unique and complex experiences, three themes emerged. Firstly, that ERL is a constructive experience, in which students develop new learning strategies, adopt more mobile social media networks to build a socialized environment, construct a new identity as an online learner, and build pedagogical digital literacy. Secondly, that ERL is a destructive experience in which instructors' synchronous/asynchronous teaching strategies, E-assessment methods in

remote learning, and ICT-mediated remote learning issues impact students' experience negatively. Thirdly, that due to futuristic sense-making of remote learning practice, students sense the need of engaging in active online learning strategies, and the need for professional development in E-learning modalities. For remote learning to thrive, three main critical considerations must be attained; first, the support of students emotionally, socially, financially and intellectually. Second, understand students' needs and go from there, developing strategies based on their needs. Third, a crucial need for practical training for instructors and development guidelines for online learning users. Several other aspects remained unexplored; recommendations for further research include exploring the experiences of instructors teaching in ERL.

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The author has no potential declarations or conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author [Sahar Alghanmi], upon reasonable request.

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