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Back to normal? ESL Instructors' Post-Pandemic Perceptions of Virtual Learning

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Abstract: Our study aimed to explore language instructors' perceptions of virtual learning models as effective methods for English language instruction and acquisition in the U.S. K-12 context. Using the Teacher Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989; Chang, 2012) as a framework, we employed a mixed-methods survey to gauge K-12 ESL instructors' attitudes toward and acceptance of the use of distance teaching technology during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants in our study (N=117) all had experience in traditional classroom instruction prior to this emergency switch to online instruction. In addition to quantitative results that convey the K-12 ESL teachers' views on the adoption of online methodology, we also collected qualitative data which allowed these teachers an opportunity to discuss specific challenges and their thoughts on the future of the use of online tools in the ESL domain.

Keywords: virtual learning models, online instruction, traditional classroom instruction. COVID-19

1. Introduction

As a result of a global pandemic, many schools were asked to upend their traditional instructional methods and explore online practices in a matter of days (Hodges et al., 2020). While online learning in the language classroom is an established and frequently researched practice, there is not sufficient research regarding its effectiveness when implemented on a large scale and virtually overnight. This study explores K-12 ESL teachers' views of online teaching modalities in their ESL classrooms during and after the sudden remote switch necessitated by the emergence of COVID-19 and the changes it brought to the educational field.

2. Literature Review

2.1. History of Online Learning in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

The use of technology in the classroom has come a long way in the last two decades. Gurtner (2014), for example, summarized the potential benefits of virtual learning environments in conjunction with a blended learning model, the use of both face-to-face and online instruction (Murray & Christison, 2018; Dixon et al., 2021), as an equally effective yet cheaper instructional model. Many private programs and universities have pushed for more online courses as an alternative to face-to-face instruction in recent years (Sato et al., 2017). During this time, there were notable advancements in the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Kannan and Munday (2018) reported on the exciting possibilities and implications of artificial intelligence in the language

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classroom. Many companies and universities had time to develop and perfect their technologically enhanced curricula as research continued to guide their best practices (Sweetman, 2021; Moorhouse et al., 2022). Alobaid (2021) discovered that the use of ICT multimedia tools regarding affordances such as captions, can play a positive role in student writing accuracy. Isbell et al. (2022) outlined a wide array of exciting potential advancements of ICTs in the second language classroom. These advancements include improved audio-input and output as well as synchronous computer mediated communication. In a recent study, Alamin et al. (2023) explored ways in which developing educational technology policies can positively impact education on a national level. These benefits include supporting social and economic development as well as educational reform (Alamin et al., 2023).

2.2. U.S. K-12 System's Shortcomings with Regards to Technology Use in the Classroom

Despite these potential benefits, the newest and best technological practices were not adopted as widespread strategies in most K-12 schools in the United States. Lisenbee (2016) examined the lack of technological support for students in the digital age, resulting from a generational gap between themselves and their instructors. A year later, Tondeur et al. (2017) described K-12 teacher beliefs as a major barrier for current technology use in the classroom. Just two short years prior to the forced online switch during the COVID-19 pandemic, Collins and Halverson (2018) stated that "schools are stuck using 19th century technology, such as books, blackboards, chalk, paper, and pencils. Computers are not at the core of schools. (p.10)"

Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic forced traditional classroom instructors into the world of online learning at a moment's notice. Therefore, this switch to online instruction differs from intentionally planned online teaching as the foundation of a virtual system, which was not in place in most K-12 schools in the United States (Garcia-Mathewson, 2020). Hodges et al. (2020) coined the term *emergency remote learning*, i.e., a rapid and unprecedented shift in instruction, such as the one seen as the pandemic unfolded. Researchers have anticipated lingering online instruction use throughout the school systems, post-pandemic (Gacs et al., 2020). In fact, Moorhouse and Kohnke (2021) reported a continuous rise of online learning methods in ESL contexts even after the pandemic was declared over.

2.3. Online Language Learning Effectiveness

Various studies have presented the possible benefits of using an online learning model for language learning. These benefits may include the lowering of anxiety, increased participation, the promotion of student-centered learning, and may yield comparable student achievement to in person learning. Resnik et al. (2022) suggested that online learning may decrease foreign language classroom anxiety, as defined by Horwitz et al. (1986), in students who feel high levels of anxiety in a language classroom. It is also worth noting, however, that the rapid shift to emergency remote learning served to increase learner anxiety overall (Resnik et al., 2022). Some studies have indicated an increase in participation, engagement, and sense of belonging in the classroom at the university level during synchronous online learning (Yen, Hou, & Chang, 2015; Lai, Shum, & Tian, 2016; Berry, 2019). Chen (2023) "suggested that teachers adopt a blended approach with interactive assessment activities to promote a student-centered learning environment, monitor learning progress, and improve writing achievement. (p.86)" Additionally, properly planned online courses have demonstrated comparable student achievement results (Yen, Hou, & Chang, 2015; Peterson, 2021; Tabandeh & Rayeji, 2023) at a much lower cost to the institution and students (Hansen, 2021).

Despite the benefits of online learning for students, others have expressed concerns with the modality. These concerns include a lack of trust in the proficiency evaluation online, the absence of quality goal orientation, student learning preference variety, poor professional preparedness initiatives, and student motivation. Various studies regarding the effectiveness of evaluating student proficiency in a fully online setting (Blake, 2015; Alzubi et al., 2022; Algraini, 2023). Yantraprakorn (2018) noted explicit student criticisms of their online university language program. Study participants enrolled in this extracurricular university writing course documented a lack of appropriate goal orientation and sufficient feedback in the online setting as compared to a traditional classroom. It is also important to state explicitly that online learning may be more effective for some students than others. Administrators should be mindful that student comfortability and awareness of the technology may vary greatly (Ozawa, 2019). Moreover, many harbor reservations about the hurried pace in which public schools adopted these practices at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gacs et al. (2020) found that the training provided for teachers in these situations did not adequately prepare them for effective online language instruction. Ylina (2022) also argued that while online learning offers many of the same opportunities as in-person learning, the face-to-face component of traditional classrooms helps to develop and maintain student motivation.

2.4. Perceptions and Effects of Online Language Learning (Pandemic Era)

A small number of studies have explored perceptions of online language learning as a result of the pandemic. Research has found that students did not enjoy the experience of forced online learning in the university and private sector (Syahrin & Salih, 2020). Other studies have reported negative university instructor perceptions of online learning during the pandemic, often citing the importance of proper training and preparation (Cheung, 2021; Detwyler, 2022; Kianinezhad, 2023; Tafazoli & Farshadnia, 2023). Current research still lacks insights into teacher perceptions of online learning following the pandemic.

One study that found positive perceptions of online English language instruction was Manegre and Sabiri (2022). They investigated the perceptions of online language instructors towards online language learning. In their quantitative questionnaire study, 35 self-selected virtual English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers recommended the use of online learning platforms over traditional methods. These instructors indicated that student engagement was improved and that students could learn at the same rate or faster in an online classroom setting as compared to a traditional in-person classroom. While these findings are interesting, the sample did not account for language instructors with previous experience in the traditional classroom who were subsequently forced into an online mode of instruction during the emergency transition. In fact, out of the 35 participants, 43% had only ever taught virtually, and therefore had no reference for comparison.

2.5. TAM Framework and ESL

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) provides the ideal lens through which we sought to investigate ESL teachers' perceptions of online teaching. Originally posited by Davis (1989) and later extended by other scholars (e.g., Chang, 2012), the TAM has been used to identify users' willingness to accept or reject various technological additions to the learning (or teaching) experience. In its original conception the TAM includes indicators such as perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and attitude towards use of technology. In their review of decades of TAM-related studies, Granić and Marangunić (2019) noted critical shortcomings in research done on technology acceptance. For one, the vast majority of TAM research only sampled university students

(83%); the remaining 17% involved other participants, such as high school students or faculty and teachers. Furthermore, certain areas of the world, such as North America, are severely underrepresented among TAM-focused studies with a large majority of TAM studies being undertaken in an Asian context. For example, Teo (2014) found a generally positive level of technology acceptance among a sample of 673 South-East Asian school teachers. By contrast, we found no studies that considered any part of the TAM in a Western ESL context. The focus of our study is on the underrepresented group of North American K-12 instructors who, under unique circumstances (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic), were confronted with technological challenges. Thus, of particular interest is their attitude toward technology use during and also after the pandemic. Unlike in most studies investigating technology acceptance, our data set consists of participants who were given no choice but to rapidly use technology to teach. Using both quantitative and qualitative data can provide important insight into the immediate and long-term effects this rapid and forced switch had on teachers in this context.

3. Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine K-12 ESL instructors' views on the real-life use of online teaching methods, both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research questions were as follows:

1. How do K-12 ESL instructors view the changes to classroom instruction since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are K-12 ESL instructors' attitudes towards the use of online teaching methods in their language classroom?
3. What changes have K-12 ESL instructors noticed, if any, to student learning as a result of a switch to increased online instruction?

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Overview

This study surveyed teachers with experience in K-12 ESL instruction in the Mid-Atlantic United States. Due to its population density this area is home to a large number of both English learners (ELs) and ESL instructors, especially when compared to other regions of the country (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). The study employed a concurrent triangulation mixed-method design (Creswell, 2013). As such, both quantitative and qualitative were collected simultaneously, which allowed for each data type to validate the findings of the other. Additionally, this methodology granted the participants the opportunity to express their beliefs in more than one way.

4.2. Sample

For our study we collected data from one hundred and seventeen (N=117) K-12 ESL instructors. Importantly, these participants all had experience in a traditional (i.e., in-person) classroom setting before moving to online instruction due to the COVID-19 emergency. In other words, all participants, at the time of taking the survey, had had extensive experience using both traditional and online modalities.

4.2.1. Demographics

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Gender	Male n=2 Female n=115
Age (years)	Range: 24-65 Mean: 44
Teaching experience	2 years: 4.6% 2 – 5 years: 12.7% 5 – 10 years: 31.8% 10+ years: 50.9%
Education	Bachelor's degree: 1.8% Bachelor's degree w/ cert: 2.7% Master's degree: 82.7% PhD: 2.8%
Language experience	English L1: 94.4% Spanish L1, L2, or L3: 52.8% Multiple languages spoken: 61.1%
Experience *learning* online	Yes: 76.4% No: 23.6%
Current teaching context	Face to face (traditional): 98.2% Online/blended: 1.8%

4.3. Instrument and Data Collection

Participants received an electronic survey via Qualtrics, an online survey distribution platform. Our survey was a modified and expanded version of the instrument used in Manegre and Sabiri (2022); we added more focused Likert-scale and free-response items. Prior to data collection, the survey items were checked for bias by both authors and an additional researcher. Then the survey was piloted with a group of language teachers who judged the survey to be straightforward and clear. Next, the researchers recruited participants using regional teacher databases and social media. Once selected, potential participants received an individual link to the questionnaire via email. Upon clicking the secure link, participants reviewed the informed consent and participant criteria statement. They gave consent by clicking "begin survey". Participants then provided nominal demographic data. The second portion of the survey collected ordinal quantitative data using Likert-scale items, as well as multiple-choice questions. The third and final component of the survey gathered qualitative data in the form of (optional) participant responses to open-ended questions. Participants remained anonymous throughout. On average, the survey was completed within fifteen minutes. See Appendix for complete survey.

4.4. Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (i.e., measures of central tendency, variability, and frequency distribution. A thematic, qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the free-response items was used to identify and analyze patterns in the participants' online responses. This qualitative portion served to add depth to the results obtained from the quantitative data set. To ensure trustworthiness of the qualitative data, all answers were first coded separately by the two authors and then reassessed collaboratively until agreement was reached. The data was then quantitized to find the most common themes before choosing the most representative participant responses as excerpts. These responses also provided suggestions for improving teacher preparations and preparedness for online learning in the ESL classroom moving forward.

5. Findings

As we used a concurrent triangulation design (Creswell, 2013), both the relevant quantitative and qualitative data will be presented in support of our analysis for each research question (henceforth, RQ). Where appropriate, findings are organized by theme.

RQ1: How do K-12 ESL instructors view the changes to classroom instruction since the start of the pandemic?

5.1 Quantitative Data RQ1

While a majority of participants (80.4%) agreed to some extent that virtual teaching had made them a better teacher, they still did not recommend that it replace any subjects traditionally taught in person. In fact, 74.3% of respondents indicated that online instruction should only be considered as a supplementary material and 77.8% of participants expressed that they would not recommend virtual instruction to be exclusively used to teach any subjects in the K-12 system.

5.2 Qualitative Data RQ1 – Changes to instruction at the onset of the pandemic

Different thematic patterns with regards to our first research question emerged from the qualitative data. The first of these themes explored the changes to classroom instruction at the onset of the forced online transition. Eighty-five out of 90 responses reflecting on their districts' transition did so in a negative way. Twenty-one separate participants described the transition as *"chaotic"*. Other commonly used adjectives included *"terrible"*, *"horrible"*, and *"stressful"*. Many teachers placed the blame on a lack of curricular guidance from their districts. Here is one example:

"The transition, in my opinion, failed because we were not given an on-line curriculum to teach. We were simply expected to make our current curriculum "work" with virtual activities. Teachers did not have proper training. We were building the plane while we were flying it."

Others described the rushed effort and lack of support for teachers during this rapid instructional change. Many echoed the sentiments of one participant who wrote that *"[I]t was a reactive approach, instead of a proactive approach."* These critiques of the transition also created room for future suggestions, should this type of emergency remote learning be necessary again. Many participant responses (30) explicitly suggested the need for proper training and preparedness protocols. Most of these responses requested teacher-specific training, while others suggested a need for more student-centric training:

"In the future, if we were to teach virtually again, I think an 'online orientation' would help both teachers and students with virtual learning. This orientation could help students adjust to virtual learning by showing them how to navigate through the numerous platforms and websites before instruction begins."

Furthermore, several suggestions for future online transitions included an emphasis on IT support. One such teacher wrote, *"[T]eachers need to focus on TEACHING. They should not be the entire curriculum department and IT department all rolled into one"*.

Others suggested dedicated specialist roles for online teaching, as seen in this example:

"Online teaching should be a job for specialist online teachers who have qualifications and experience specifically in virtual instruction. In-person teaching should be a job for specialist in-person teachers who have qualifications and experience in in-person teaching. They are, in many ways, very different jobs."

5.3 Qualitative Data RQ1 – Changes to instruction following the pandemic

Aside from the changes at the onset of the pandemic, teachers also reported lasting changes to their instruction. Many participant responses (n=96) indicated that the teachers took at least something positive from the experience. Of these 96 responses, 82 identified technological advances as the major positive impact on their daily instruction. Some participants (13) cited the benefits of enhanced parent – teacher communication online. Of these 13, six stated that they still have regular Microsoft Teams meetings with parents as an alternative to in-person meetings. One teacher described the benefit of translation services in congruence with the parent communication benefit, stating that *"[P]arents are able to use Microsoft Teams for meetings instead of coming into school. Interpreters are also able to use this program"*. Others described the continued impact that the use of other technological tools has had on their daily lesson planning:

"Virtual teaching did allow me to differentiate instruction, and to become more creative in my teaching. I created a lot of web-based learning that I typically would not have used if I was teaching in person. I discovered new apps that I still use today."

Despite the technological advancements, participants reported many damaging long-term effects still present in their current day-to-day practices. Forty-two participants indicated that they felt as though their daily routines are still negatively impacted by the emergency online learning period, although many more have indicated its negative impact on student learning, which will be explored in RQ3. One teacher wrote, *"I find myself behind a computer more rather than directly next to kids"*, while another expanded on this idea by adding that, *"[S]tudents and teachers rely on translation too much"*. This new student and teacher overreliance on technology was mentioned by 17 other participants.

Other participants indicated a generally negative perception towards education amongst their peers as a result of the added workload following the pandemic:

"We are burning out at an incredible rate. Teachers are burning out because virtual instruction was not effective, and our students have large gaps in their learning. These gaps, when we returned to in person instruction, were not ever acknowledged."

This issue persists across various grade levels and contexts. One early education teacher wrote, *"[S]tudents without traditional preschool are qualifying for ESL instruction more now than before, so instructional groups are larger. Groups normally of 3-4 kids have doubled and tripled."*

In addition to the technology dependence and overwhelming new workload, some participants reported a continuous struggle to maintain academic rigor in their courses. One such teacher expressed, *"I believe I lowered my expectations for student success during virtual learning and during the pandemic"*, while another shared that they *"have less patience for students who make no effort"*. It is evident that the pandemic period has affected the expectations and practices of teachers following the return from online learning. Several teachers echoed the idea that their hope for a return to normalcy had negatively impacted their teaching.

RQ2: What are K-12 ESL instructors' attitudes towards the use of online teaching methods in their language classroom?

5.4 Quantitative Data RQ2

Overall, respondents indicated a generally negative perception of online learning. Traditional in-person teaching was preferred by 92.7% of the participants, while online instruction was preferred by only 2.8% of the participants. A sizeable majority of participants (68.2%) would not recommend

the use of virtual instruction to a friend in the K-12 setting, and 59.8% of participants indicated that they did not enjoy teaching virtually while 20.6% did. The remaining 19.6% indicated other. Many of the 'other' responses chose to mention the positives, whilst still maintaining an overall negative tone toward online learning. For example, one participant explained that while they enjoyed teaching from the comfort of their home and learning new skills, teaching a language virtually *"was painful and largely unsuccessful"*. This negative attitude toward the online language learning modality is further confirmed by the 79.4% of respondents who stated they would have an issue with returning to a fully online setting.

Participants shared some of their reasons for these negative perceptions through other forced-choice quantitative items in the questionnaire. Some of the questionnaire items asked participants to evaluate their classroom environment and rate of instruction. For example, 96.3% of respondents reported that face-to-face instruction better fostered their ability to become acquainted with their students. Instructors in the study also indicated that they were not able to teach as quickly online. When asked to describe their lesson pace, 72.2% of participants believed that they taught their ESL classes at a slower rate than in a traditional classroom.

Instructors furthermore reported on their perception of student learning in an online setting, which also contributed to their overall negative perception of fully virtual instruction in their ESL classrooms. When considering student preference, 86.9% of participants indicated perceiving that their students did not enjoy learning virtually. Aside from their enjoyment level, instructors also reported a slower rate of language skill development. Of the 117 participants, 83.3% contended that students learn at a slower rate online than in a traditional classroom, and 89.6% believed that students did not develop proficiency at a faster or similar rate compared to a traditional classroom. When considering specific language skills, 72.2% reported that students developed their receptive skills at a slower rate than in a traditional classroom, while 83.3% reported that students developed their productive skills at a slower rate.

5.5 Qualitative Data RQ2 – Negative perceptions of online learning: Rapport / Engagement

Qualitative results further provided support for the overwhelmingly negative attitudes found in the previously presented data. Every single participant stated that engagement in an online course was an issue during the pandemic. Among these observations, teachers cited a lack of attendance 23 times and web camera usage 35 times. One teacher echoed the thoughts of many when they wrote, *"[I]t was harder to keep kids engaged, have them participate, and keep them motivated online"* Another teacher mentioned that *"[E]ngagement in the virtual classroom was 95% one-sided."* One teacher spoke for many when they shared, *"[T]he glaring and pervasive and deeply troubling part of teaching language virtually was the fact that we had such low to nonexistent participation no matter what feats we attempted."*

Not only did participants find that students were not engaged, but that it was more difficult to create meaningful relationships and rapport. One teacher reflected, *"[B]uilding rapport, being able to communicate with clarity, and consistency were all negatively impacted by the virtual classroom."* Another participant expanded on the lack of rapport when they wrote, *"I felt like I couldn't have the informal student relationship conversations that I would have in person."*

5.6 Qualitative Data RQ2 – Negative perceptions of online learning: General opinions and other concerns

Teachers shared generally negative opinions about the online modality. Participants referred to the experience as a struggle on 18 separate responses. One participant mentioned that they felt as though *"[I]t was like double planning for teachers"*, while another wrote, *"I didn't feel as effective as a teacher when I taught virtually."* The preference for in-person learning was echoed repeatedly. On 36 separate occasions, participants used the term *face-to-face* as their preference in the free response items. One teacher plainly believed that *"[T]here is no substitute for in-person learning."* Another participant further expanded on this idea when they shared that *"[N]othing beats learning in a face-to-face environment. ESL students especially need to make connections using realia and other hands-on opportunities to build vocabulary."* Lastly, one participant echoed the sentiment of countless other responses when they wrote, *"I am glad it's over."*

Of the negative responses, 39 included mention of poor internet quality and/or limited access to the internet as an issue for their ELs. One teacher wrote, *"ESL students in particular really struggled with using the technology so there was a major barrier to entry for this population."* One participant continued by writing, *"[I]t was very detrimental to our English learners, especially our beginners."*

This theme of *technological inequity* amongst ELs was further noted by 34 separate responses which pointed out particular difficulties for young learners, beginners, and newcomer ESL students. One teacher simply stated that *"zooming with younger students was not easy."* Another teacher echoed the ideas of six other participants when they wrote, *"[I]t is a challenge to teach very young students how to read in a virtual setting. Especially when teaching letter formation and writing."* Not only was it difficult to teacher younger students' language skills, but one participant expressed the difficulty in finding technology at all when they wrote, *"I teach Kindergarten and First Grade ESL and it is very difficult to find appropriate technology to use."* Another participant reflected on the difficulties of classroom management and wrote,

"Management techniques that work in person do not work online. Communication techniques such as wait time, repetition and using props and TPR are more obviously necessary with online beginners. These are essential techniques for working with beginners in- person as well."

It was not only young learners, but newcomer students of all ages who reportedly struggled. One newcomer instructor wrote, *"if newcomers enrolled, I felt like a broken record trying to repeat and trying to help them understand the system, which put us back several days."* Additionally, one instructor shared that *"ESL newcomers have little to no experience with the technology they were provided by the district."* Finally, one participant expanded on the newcomer experience when they wrote,

"Newcomer students that are not familiar with using electronic devices were left to fend for themselves. Students that had no Wi-Fi were left behind during online learning. Many of my students did not have the self-discipline to overcome these monumental obstacles."

These findings provide ample evidence that our participants had generally negative attitudes toward online teaching methods in their classroom. It is also quite clear that they saw these shortcomings be amplified further in young, beginner, and newcomer courses.

RQ3: What changes have K-12 ESL instructors noticed, if any, to student learning as a result of a switch to increased online instruction?

5.7 Qualitative Data RQ3 – Effect on student learning: Behavior

Participant responses regarding changes to student learning since the switch to online instruction (and back) were mostly negative. Upon a return to face-to-face instruction, one major complaint

involved student behavior issues. Some teacher participants (n=8) cited behavioral issues as a major concern following online learning. One such teacher wrote, *"[T]hey needed lessons about how to behave and act in school."* Other participants mentioned specific behaviors. For example, one teacher wrote, *"[S]tudents rely more heavily on technology now than prior to virtual teaching"*, while another shared, *"[S]tudents expect to be able to hand things in late more often"*. Another teacher expanded on the behavioral effects of technological dependence by sharing, *"they are more interested in technology, want immediate answers, and their attention spans seem to have been affected negatively."* A commonly mentioned subcategory of behavior issues following a return to in person learning was the word *"engagement"*. This was referenced as having been negatively affected a total of 33 times. One participant noted *that "[I]t is harder to get students to pay attention. Students are more easily distracted."* Another teacher added to this idea by declaring that they would *"need to start from scratch (with regards to) engagement and other behavioral expectations."* The responses regarding behavior and engagement indicate a generally negative effect on students post-virtual learning. One such response summarized all of these ideas succinctly:

"Most of the students are completely dependent on technology, struggle to function without their phones and Chromebooks, and struggle to differentiate between when it's time to work and when it's time to socialize. Most students think they are great at multitasking and can't see the correlation between this and their work/low grades."

5.8 Qualitative Data RQ3 – Effect on student learning: Academic and social development

Another major concern mentioned by 46 participants indicated a negative effect on students' academic and social development resulting from the online learning period. Many of the social delays appear to be directly observable in student-student interaction. One participant wrote,

"Many just keep their heads in their phones as they were conditioned to do for the last 2 years. Others show anxiety about engaging with others in a school setting because they were no longer accustomed to the normal stressors and tension of academic and social school life."

This dependence on technology over traditional social interaction is further explored by another teacher who shared, *"[I]t was a very difficult time and the biggest behavior issue I had was cell phone usage. I noticed that students would rather spend time on their phones instead of socializing with their peers sitting next to them."* Eight separate responses included cell-phone usage as a major issue upon the return to in-person learning. Others commented on the general problem issue of social interaction by writing *"[W]e are still working on social emotional learning and how to communicate effectively with others, especially our feelings"* and *"The students are definitely struggling with basic social interactions"*.

Teacher-participants not only reported social delays, but academic delays as well. One teacher wrote explicitly, *"[T]here was a loss of overall language skills as a result of virtual learning, across the board."* Other participants shared the specifics of student deficits by sharing that they noticed, *"literacy retention deficits from day to day"*, *"a loss of foundational skills"*, and *"[that] reading levels stagnated and there was not a lot of growth in listening, speaking, and writing."* Additionally, participants expressed a concern for their general learning skills when they shared that, *"[T]heir attention spans are lower, their social skills are less developed, and they are less able to retain information/study effectively"* and that *"[S]tudent encoding and decoding application is sporadic"*.

Teachers in our study reported a general impression that students became overly dependent on technology, lost the more basic behavioral skills required to function in class, and are generally less engaged following the period of online learning. Additionally, the participants reported a general

decline in student academic and social development, as related to those in similar age groups prior to online learning. One final excerpt summarizes many of the ideas mentioned in our qualitative data. One teacher wrote very bluntly, *"I absolutely hated it! The kids fell behind socially, academically, and mentally. It was so stressful, and I would never want to teach virtually again. I would retire."*

6. Discussion

The results of our study present an overwhelmingly negative perception of online learning among in-service K-12 ESL instructors. In fact, our findings were diametrically opposed to the findings presented by Manegre and Sabiri (2022). That study, however, relied on a much smaller sample of online teachers, many of whom had never taught in person. Our surveyed sample in the K-12 ESL realm indicates a decline in student engagement online, a slower learning and teaching pace, and a decreased ability for teachers to create rapport with students in an online environment. The supporting qualitative data provides a multitude of criticisms, shared struggles, and future suggestions for teacher training and administrative accountability.

The most relevant element of the TAM framework for our study's context is the role that the initial attitude toward technology plays for the adoption of any technological elements by teachers. The U.S. K-12 context is unique in that it appeared *stuck in the past* (to paraphrase Collins and Halverson, 2018) even prior to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational system. Thus, teachers were not only poorly prepared for the sudden switch in modality, but their acceptance of technology immediately came in conflict with the force put upon them (and consequently, a lack of choice) in adopting technology. In other words, whatever their attitude toward technology use might have been was not taken into account under this set of circumstances. Based on our findings, it would be fair to hypothesize that the manner in which the teachers in our sample were obligated to use technology may have set the already lagging adoption (by international standards) of technological teaching interventions back even further in this context. At the same time, the overall negative perceptions expressed by teachers in our sample show a decidedly unfavorable attitude toward technology adoption due the overwhelmingly negative experience under the circumstances when they were first *made* to teach using technology. Other important elements of the TAM framework, namely the perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, have yet to be studied in a similar cohort since the teachers' perceptions of usefulness and ease of use were ignored and not part of any decision-making process with regards to what technology would be adopted or not.

Most of our participants declared that virtual instruction was not an effective method for teaching ESL in the K-12 setting and should only be considered as a supplementary tool, if at all. Through both qualitative and quantitative responses, these teachers reported a severe decrease in engagement in ELs when learning virtually. This reported decrease in engagement is supported by Salta et al. (2022) who reported a significant decrease in student engagement both academically and socially within their (university) community as a result of the shift into online learning. Considering our findings, this engagement crisis appears to be a general issue at all levels of U.S. education following the pandemic. As further evidence of the devastating effects of a subpar adjustment to online virtual teaching during the pandemic years, recent reports also showed "the largest average score decline in reading since 1990, and the first ever score decline in mathematics" in the U.S. between 2020 and 2022 (U.S. Department of Education). This is further supported by Relyea et al. (2023) in which the distance-learning reading growth of 52,525 students in grades 3-5 was analyzed and compared to in-person learning reading growth. The findings of that study not only showed that in-person learning

was more effective for sustaining reading growth, but that it may be even more important for vulnerable learning populations, specifically ELs, in order to prevent drastic learning loss.

7. Implications

Following our participants' suggestions, after having experienced both online and in person instruction as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are improvements to teacher education which may alleviate some of the negative aspects of teaching ESL virtually. Firstly, administrators should be cognizant of the shortcomings of virtual learning and manage their expectations of both their teachers and their students. School districts should also consider alternative methods for the more vulnerable ESL populations who may lack the resources needed to succeed in a virtual learning scenario.

In addition, teachers would greatly benefit from proactive virtual training. Among our participants, the very few who had a positive experience teaching virtually attributed their success to their school district's proactive approach during professional development assignments and faculty meetings. As mentioned frequently, an intentionally crafted online curriculum may benefit student and teacher performance more than an in-person curriculum adapted for online use.

Finally, administrators and school districts should recognize student deficiencies after an extended period of forced online learning, and give teachers clear directives for bridging these gaps, rather than placing an emphasis on a return to *normalcy*. The expectation of this immediate return to normalcy may be damaging to the emotional and academic development and recovery of students and teachers alike.

8. Limitations and directions for future research

While women do make up a larger proportion of teachers in K-12 schools, our sample showed a distinct bias toward female participation. As such, our study provides an additional data point to decades of research that has found that women are more likely to self-select as participants in survey research (for an overview on the issue, see Becker, 2022). Nevertheless, the findings were fairly one-sided, which makes it unlikely that gender played a decisive role in the clearly expressed preferences and criticisms present in the data. As noted earlier, this study took place two years after the forced online transition. Many of the participants had only returned to a fully traditional face-to-face setting for one year. It would be useful to reevaluate their impressions at a later time and to also see if any of their suggestions were heeded at an administrative level. Future researchers may want to study the lasting impacts on the profession, as well as the reported gaps in social and academic development of the students upon returning to the traditional setting.

Online instruction will undoubtedly continue to play a significant role in language teaching in the U.S., as it already does in many parts of the world. This paper provides a snapshot of the post-pandemic era in U.S. K-12 education with a particular focus on the vulnerable population of ELs. We hope that we or other researchers can continue to add to the big picture and in doing so help prepare the next generation of teachers for an ever-changing educational landscape. Technology is an increasingly important learning tool, but it must be implemented appropriately to ensure improved educational outcomes. There is work to be done at all levels and important lessons need to be learned from the historic shift in the realm of education brought on by the pandemic. Furthermore, seeing how under-utilized the TAM framework is in certain contexts, and particularly in North America, it is imperative that research gauges the acceptance of technology in this setting on a large scale. This

is even more important now that it appears that the emergency online transition during COVID may have negatively impacted teachers' attitude toward the adoption of technology rather than helped it.

This paper's accounts of teachers who experienced the shift (and its aftermath) hopefully provides an incentive to improve technological literacy among current and future teachers and students. Necessary improvements in this area are only possible with growing acceptance by teachers. Having assessed teachers' perceptions of a rapid implementation of online teaching, the field of TESOL would do well to critically examine ways of bringing more teachers in varying teaching contexts on board with the many technological innovations looming in the area of language education.

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Appendix

Survey
Questions 1-10: Ordinal Data
Question 11-25: Nominal Data
Questions 26-30: Free Response Data

Q1 What is your age? (Free response)
Q2 What is your gender? (Free response)
Q3 What is your highest level of education completed? (Forced choice)
Q4 In which state do you currently teach? (Forced choice)
Q5 Please list your spoken languages in order of most to least proficient. (Free response)
Q6 In which of the following settings do you currently teach? (Forced choice)
Q7 What subject(s) do you currently teach? (Check all that apply)
Q8 How long have you been teaching ESL? (Forced choice)
Q9 How long did you teach/have you been teaching online? (Forced choice)
Q10 Have you ever participated in online learning as a student (Check all that apply)
Q11 Which learning environment do you prefer for teaching English? (Forced choice)
Q12 Which learning environment better fosters your ability to get to know your students? (Forced choice)
Q13 Virtual instruction in an online classroom... (Forced choice regarding subject replacement)
Q14 Which other subjects would you like to see taught via virtual instruction? (Check all that apply)
Q15 In general, I can teach ESL classes in the virtual learning environment… (Forced choice regarding pace of instruction)
Q16 In general, when students take ESL classes in the virtual learning environment, they learn... (Forced choice regarding pace of learning)
Q17 Virtual ESL instruction allows students to develop their receptive (reading and listening) skills... (Forced choice regarding pace of development)
Q18 Virtual ESL instruction allows students to develop their productive (speaking and writing) skills... (Forced choice regarding pace of development)
Q19 Do you enjoy teaching virtually? (Forced choice)
Q20 Would you recommend teaching virtually to a colleague? (Forced choice)
Q21 Students who participate in virtual language learning develop proficiency at the same rate or faster than those learning in a traditional classroom. (Likert-Scale of agreeance)
Q22 The training provided by my school prepared me to teach online. (Likert-Scale of agreeance)
Q23 My students enjoyed learning online more than in a traditional classroom. (Likert-Scale of agreeance)
Q24 I would not mind returning to a virtual language instruction model. (Likert-Scale of agreeance)
Q25 My experience teaching virtually has made me a better teacher. (Likert-Scale of agreeance)
Q26 How would you describe the initial transition to virtual instruction in your school during the pandemic? Please provide any specific examples of what went well/what could be improved upon in the future.
Q27 Please describe/list any positive changes to your teaching as a result of virtual language instruction? Please include as many specific experiences as possible.
Q28 Please describe/list any negative changes to your teaching as a result of virtual language instruction? Please include as many specific experiences as possible.
Q29 Please describe/list any observable changes to student engagement as a result of virtual language instruction?
Q30 How did engagement in the virtual classroom differ from that of face to face instruction?