Ready or Not: Gulf Country Teachers' Challenges toward Teaching Online Courses in Emergency Cases in Higher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the challenges faced by teachers from the Arabian Gulf countries of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait while teaching virtual online courses. Because online learning in higher education in these countries had not occurred before the current pandemic, the teachers and students faced new challenges for the first time, including online communication, inadequate training, insufficient practice, and incompetence in online assessment. Seventy-six teachers of higher education in Kuwait or Saudi Arabia participated in this study, which was a survey created by the first author to determine the effectiveness of communication, training, practicing and assessing students' performance during the pandemic. Results indicated that no differences were found between the two countries; while participants felt that training was adequate for the task of converting to remote teaching, they were concerned about nonverbal aspects of communication and assessing online work. Suggestions included obtaining participants from other Gulf countries, refining the survey, and involving different types of institutions such as private colleges. The results of this study imply that for many teachers, improvements in communication and assessment are necessary to improve online teaching, which is likely to continue in these countries after the pandemic is over.

Keywords: pandemic, online teaching, higher education, communication, training, assessment

1. Introduction

After the emergency of COVID-19, minimizing social contact in school was a worldwide accepted approach towards minimizing the spread of the virus. In this context, online classes were adopted by different schools all over the world. However, for the Gulf countries of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (hereafter referred to as Gulf countries collectively), undertaking online classes using a virtual environment posed an excess of challenges, especially to the teachers. The purpose of this study was to determine the challenges faced by teachers from Gulf countries while teaching virtual online courses. Before COVID-19 occurred, gulf countries did not use online learning in higher education. This was the first time the countries have agreed to converting to a full academic year of online learning. Therefore, very little information exists as to the effect of online learning in the Gulf countries.

Teaching online course in the Gulf countries were affected by different challenges. Some of these challenges included inconvenience of online communication, inadequate training, insufficient practice, and incompetence in online assessment. Online courses posed a series of challenges that hindered the flow of instructions, skills, and knowledge from teachers to their students. Insufficient communication also created misunderstanding and inattentive follow-up of the students by the teachers. The assessment of the students was also affected by the existence of mistrust between teachers and students, who felt that teachers were not capable of judging their work remotely. In the other areas, online training courses were challenged by issues such as internet failure, infrastructural failure (laptops and cameras), and lack of monitoring of the psychological welfare of the learners. Another major challenge in teaching online courses was the high cost of infrastructure such as the internet.

Nevertheless, online courses achieved their main purpose of minimizing social contacts in the classes. Therefore,

online courses were seen as the major contributor to the fight against the spread of COVID-19 in schools. Online courses also brought opportunities to reduce the time and costs needed in traveling and conducting physical classes. In this research, we wanted to understand the perspectives of higher education teachers toward the challenges of online learning. The first author is a teacher who is teaching online in a Gulf country for the first time, so this was an important study for her personally.

The results from this study are important for different stakeholders such as teachers, software developers, policymakers, and social workers who engage in online classes, especially in the Gulf countries. The study will be vital in identifying the challenges, weaknesses, strengths, and opportunities in online teaching and hence can assist in forming stable online teaching systems for the foreseeable future.

1.1 Definition of Terms

1.1.1 Online Learning

Online learning involves a variety of complex processes. For instance, for this activity to take place, various senses (visual, auditory, and tactile) must be factored in (Coman et al., 2020, p. 3). The process also involves a range of technologies like the worldwide web, text, email, chat, audio, and visual conferencing.

Online learning usually differs from the traditional methods of teaching in terms of the principal source of information, quality, and assessment of the education (Coman et al., 2020, p. 3). In traditional formats, students heavily depend on their instructors for information and assessment while online students can look to other equally online systems using the internet.

1.1.2 Blended Learning

Blended learning can be defined as "the effective combination of various modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning" (Bryan & Volchenkova, 2016, p. 24). The term can also be defined as "involving the combination of two fields that are of concern: education and educational technology" (Bryan & Volchenkova, 2016, p 24). Blended learning can involve a variety of models that play a pivotal role in imparting knowledge to students. One essential factor that should be noted is that this type of learning must have two effective models that can work hand in hand in ensuring students get the knowledge they need.

1.1.3 Emergency Learning

Emergency learning can be defined as an unplanned and alternative method for instructors to deliver instructions to their students from a distance since they cannot be physically located in classrooms (Burde et al., 2016, p. 620). This type of learning can also be defined as a type of online learning where learners are given instructions via digital devices which will help support their learning from remote locations (Ferri et al., 2020, p. 2). Emergency learning is usually put in effect when there has been a crisis and learning must take place. For instance, when there is a war or a pandemic and students have to learn, emergency learning is initiated.

1.1.4 Distance Learning

Distance learning involves imparting knowledge to students who may not always be physically present in the classroom (Traxler, 2018, p. 1). This method of learning embraces the use of digital technology to connect an instructor with their students. Through distance learning, students and instructors from different countries and continents worldwide can easily connect without ever physically meeting each other. This approach allows educational institutions to tap into a wide market where they can attract more learners.

1.1.5 Learning Online

Learning is a great way to pass knowledge from one generation to another. In certain instances, learning may be impeded by certain factors in society that may need institutions and instructors to find new ways to reach their students. Due to the technological advancement that the world is experiencing, learning has been made possible through digital devices. Thus, there has been an emergence of various types of online learning that have allowed instructors and students to overcome these obstacles and proceed with their educational activities. In the past few decades, the academic realm has undergone tremendous evolution. This evolution has been brought about due to the technological advancements that are experienced worldwide. As such, technology has become a major part of people's lives because it is challenging to live without it. Due to this, online learning has become an imminent trend in the education sector globally. Students and instructors presently can meet online and conduct their business without having to meet physically. Various types of online learning have been discovered and thus it is important to reflect on them to get a better perspective on what they entail.

1.1.6 Types of Online Learning

Types of online learning include asynchronous and synchronous online courses. In asynchronous online learning, students are provided with content and assignments by their instructors to complete in a specific time frame (Zachary, n.d., p. 1). In synchronous online learning, instructors and their students interact simultaneously online. There are also hybrid courses, where learners can learn both in online and physical locations (Zachary, n.d., p. 1). The learners and the instructors can meet several times physically throughout the semester and also use technology to meet electronically (synchronously) and to communicate with one another when not meeting together (asynchronously).

1.1.7 Previously Described Benefits of Online Learning

Online or electronic learning has increasingly become a critical aspect of the modern-day learning environment in the recent past, driven by various factors within and outside the education sector including technological advancement. According to Singh and Thurman (2019, p. 292), online learning is often used to refer to education that takes place over the internet facilitated by electronic devices such as computers and tablets. The increasing adoption of online learning has generated debates in different quarters concerning its costs and benefits to learning for learners and teachers. This paper discusses the various benefits that online learning presents to multiple stakeholders in the education sector.

One of the most critical benefits of online learning is the flexibility it affords learners to study from anywhere and anytime (Goodman et al., 2018, p. 67). Before the emergence of online learning, learning could only occur in a classroom environment within a specific scheduled period. This learning environment landscape meant that learners had to travel and avail themselves of the learning institutions to which they were registered. According to Sadeghi (2019, p. 83), the flexibility afforded by online learning enables people to overcome these time and distance limitations, meaning that learning can occur from anywhere and at any time. This new landscape improves the accessibility of education to learners with different needs and from diverse backgrounds.

Another vital benefit of online learning is better time management for both learners and teachers. The contemporary education system where learning takes place in classroom environments is characterized by time wastage by both learners and teachers traveling to and from schools (Coomey & Stephenson, 2018, p. 43). Online learning eliminates this time wastage because learners can access education right from the comforts of their homes. Better time management enables learners and teachers to invest their time in more productive ways such as revising materials and assisting more learners. The net impact of this is improved academic performance and productivity for learners and teachers, respectively (Panigrahi et al., 2018, p. 6).

Access to quality education is another significant benefit determined to be associated with online learning. Since the emergence of online learning, students from various corners of the world have an avenue to access education offered by some of the world's most prestigious institutions (Goodman et al., 2018, p. 70). This is particularly true for people in developing countries with few institutions offering emerging or world-class courses in various fields. Online learning enables people from such countries to access high-quality education from distance institutions without the need to incur various financial and non-financial expenses of traveling far from their home countries (Gilbert, 2015, p. 8).

Another important benefit of online learning is its capacity to address the individual needs of different learners. Learners at different levels of education have diverse needs based on their learning abilities and other factors. According to (Coomey & Stephenson, 2018, p. 41), stakeholders should adequately consider these diverse needs when creating the best approach to students' learning environments and processes. The flexibility offered by e-learning always considers the individual learning differences for learners with diverse needs and capabilities. This is beneficial because it ensures that all students are provided equal opportunities to achieve their potential (Nguyen, 2015, p. 313).

Finally, online learning is beneficial because it eases the cost and process of updating learning materials (Guragain, 2016, p. 6). Study materials in e-learning systems can easily be updated more frequently compared to a classroom-based education system. Once learning materials have been digitized, updates can smoothly be undertaken without changing the whole material, and materials can be available and reused for longer amounts of time. This aspect of online learning is critical because it enhances cost savings for learning institutions and the educational sector (Guragain, 2016, p. 7).

The evidence presented in this paper indicates that online learning offers numerous benefits to the education sector for learners, teachers, and institutions. With this evidence, it is crucial that all concerned stakeholders fast-track the adoption of online learning at all levels of the education landscape. This would help achieve the overall goal and

objective of universal, accessible, and high-quality education.

1.1.8 Teachers' Perspectives on Online Learning in the Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented drastic changes to the education system. Students have been forced to shift to online classes, affecting the previous in-person teaching. Though students express positive perspectives about the shift, such as attendance convenience and reliable costs, teachers express mixed opinions and perspectives about online teaching and learning (Kulal, 2020, p. 3). Therefore, the following questions aim to highlight teachers' concerns regarding online learning.

1.1.9 Is Online Learning Effective?

Some teachers argue about the effectiveness of online learning. Notably, the main objective of teaching is to pass down knowledge most effectively and efficiently. Whereas online teaching might be effective in some cases, some courses require in-person teaching for effective teaching and understanding. As Kulal (2020, p. 3) argues, some students, especially those who register lower marks, register lower results in online classes than others. Therefore, some teachers are skeptical of online classes, arguing that they hinder effective teaching and promote inequality in the education system.

However, some teachers welcome online teaching, arguing that it presents significant advantages to society. Accordingly, online learning attracts numerous individuals as one can engage in learning anywhere, anytime. Such flexibility ensures a significant population is educated, contributing to society's development. Furthermore, online learning presents teachers with a unique opportunity to develop their metacognition knowledge, understand the importance of a supportive learning community and learn the constructive use of some online tools (Kebritchi et al., 2017, p. 1).

1.1.10 Is Online Assessment Effective?

Apart from general skepticism, teachers express concern about online teaching and assessment. As teaching and learning have shifted during this COVID-19 period, so has the way teachers assess students. The standard pass/fail mark is simply not adequate, considering the prevailing inequalities in access to online classes. Even in a country as rich in technology as the United States, according to McNamee et al. (2020, p. 12), approximately 14 million Americans lack broadband connectivity. If this statistic were translated to assessment, a considerable number of students would fail. To prevent this occurrence, teachers have been faced to come up with new assessment strategies that encompass such disparities. Notably, this shift is not easy as it requires ample time to develop effective strategies that will ensure a balanced assessment, especially in countries where technology and technological infrastructure is not as available or as reliable as in more technology-rich countries.

1.1.11 How Does Online Teaching Affect Communication?

Teachers also express concern about how online learning will affect communication. According to Rapanta et al. (2020, p. 1), online learning and teaching require specific pedagogical knowledge in designing and organizing learning experiences to ensure effective communication occurs during the learning process. However, the pandemic has called for an abrupt change in learning techniques without adequately equipping teachers with pedagogical knowledge. Accordingly, this change has affected communication from some teachers' perspectives, undermining their ability to provide quality education. Moreover, there is considerable concern on how online teaching affects training and practicing. As aforementioned, online teaching calls for a level of knowledge that will ensure a conducive and collaborative online environment for students. However, a lack of knowledge of the various online tools impedes teachers' ability to achieve this goal. Furthermore, it affects their chances of acquiring ample training, as the pandemic limits face-to-face teaching and learning (Rapanta et al., 2020, p. 1). Besides, as Correia (2020, p.1) notes, some teachers have been forced to provide Wi-Fi devices and turn up at student's homes to offer private classes. Such has stretched their resources affecting their ability to practice the profession effectively. Furthermore, inadequate education regarding the use of various online tools also impedes teaching, consequently affecting education's quality.

In the authors' opinion, many educational systems in Gulf countries have viewed online learning as unnecessary in the past, but after this pandemic and the gap the education ministry observed in this situation, these countries are beginning to realize that shifting to online learning is necessary. As a result, the view is shifting to a point where online learning should not be used simply for teaching in emergency cases any more; it should be an option for teaching from now on. This study examines the barriers to this type of learning to work on improving and making online teaching options more efficient and available to Gulf countries.

1.2 Research Questions

• Is there a difference among gulf countries, gender and/or academic subjects in terms of attitudes toward online learning?

• How do higher education teachers in Gulf countries describe their online learning experience in terms of communication, training and assessment?

2. Method

2.1 Participant Characteristics

Seventy-six participants in this study represented teachers of higher education (colleges and universities) in Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. The teachers ranged in experience between 1-20 years. This study used purposeful convenience sampling with the inclusion criteria that participants must have taught an online learning class at the post-secondary (college/university) level.

Responses were limited to educators teaching online in either Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. No other inclusion or exclusion criteria were used. The final sample consisted of 76 individuals. The participants had experience teaching online prior to the preceding year (61.84%), came from public educational settings (76.32%), had been teaching for 10 or fewer years (61.84%), were primarily female (59.21%), from Kuwait (59.21%), and taught in either Education (30.26%) or Education Technology (22.37%). A full recounting of demographics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of Final Sample

Taught Online Before	n	%
No	29	38.16%
Yes	47	61.84%
Private or Public Educator		
Both	11	14.47%
Private	7	9.21%
Public	58	76.32%
Experience in Higher Education		
1 – 5 Years	30	39.47%
5 – 10 Years	17	22.37%
10 – 15 Years	10	13.16%
15 – 20 Years	7	9.21%
20 + Years	12	15.79%
Country		
Kuwait	45	59.21%
Saudi Arabia	31	40.79%
Gender		
Female	45	59.21%
Male	31	40.79%
Discipline		
Arts & Humanities	5	6.58%
Business & Economics	5	6.58%
Computer Sciences	2	2.63%
Education	23	30.26%
Education Technology	17	22.37%
Engineering & Technology	7	9.21%
Life Sciences	4	5.26%
Medical& Health	6	7.89%
Other	7	9.21%

Note. n = 76.

2.2 Instrumentation

A survey was created by the first author to discover the level of the challenges encountered in teaching online courses in the Gulf Countries of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. This survey was developed through the author's extensive experience both as a teacher and a Ph.D. of Educational Technology.

Survey responses measured the following variables:

• How do teachers feel regarding *communication* with their students using an online platform?

• After they started working on the online learning, did they think the *training and practicing* they obtained was sufficient or not?

• Are they satisfied with the *assessments* that are provided to assess the students?

3. Results

3.1 Differences by Country, Gender, and Discipline

To gain an understanding of how various demographic groups may differ in their attitudes toward virtual teaching, an investigation using a MANOVA was conducted looking at country, gender, and discipline variables:

• Analyses testing whether differences existed between attitudes in teachers from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia failed to show statistically significant differences for attitudes on between the two countries ($F(3, 55) = 2.496$, $p = .069$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.880$, partial $\eta 2 = .120$).

• There was not a statistically significant difference in attitudes based on gender, $F(3, 55) = 1.380$, $p = .259$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.930$, partial $\eta 2 = .070$ in terms of Assessment and Training. However, in a separate t-test, men ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.58$) showed a statistically significantly higher mean rating of Communication ($t(57) = -2.02$, p-value $< .05$) than women ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.73$).

• Finally, the MANOVA evaluated whether or not there were attitudinal differences among education disciplines. This analysis also failed to show a statistically significant difference in attitudes based on discipline, $F(24, 139.916) = 1.179$, $p = .271$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.586$, partial $\eta 2 = .163$.

3.2 Overall Attitudes and Specific Items

• Combined scores were created for Training, Assessment, and Communication by first reverse-scoring negatively phrased items (e.g., "I had difficulty accessing e-learning training courses.") and then creating mean scores for each category to preserve the 1-5 rating scale for ease of interpretation. Reliability of each scale was also calculated and scales neared acceptable levels of reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > .80$). Reliability and descriptive statistics for overall category scores can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Outcome Scales

Outcome	Mean	SD	*n*	Items	*α*
Training	3.64	0.70	67	8	.76
Assessment	3.19	0.78	60	8	.85
Communication	3.16	0.69	59	8	.78

Note. SD = Standard Deviation.

• Paired sample t-tests were performed to look for differences between overall satisfaction with the three domains of interest. Satisfaction with Training was rated as being statistically significantly higher than Assessment ($t(59) = 5.18$, p-value $< .001$) and Communication ($t(58) = 5.57$, p-value $< .001$), but Assessment was not statistically significantly higher than Communication ($t(58) = 0.37$, p-value $= .71$). These results suggest satisfaction with training is marginally higher than satisfaction with its outcomes (i.e., virtual assessments and communication).

• To investigate satisfaction with more specific topics, individual items were examined. Rate of agreement (i.e., "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" responses) with positively-scaled items (e.g., "I felt that the online class assessments worked well.") and rate of disagreement (i.e., "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree" responses) with negatively-scaled items (e.g., "I felt that there was a shortage of supportive programs for e-learning.") were tabulated, and can be found in Tables 3, 4 and 5 for communication, training and assessment.

3.3 Communication

Table 3. Rates of Agreement and Disagreement for Individual Items - Assessment

Scale and Item	Disagree (SD/D)		Neutral		Agree (A/SA)	
Assessment	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
I felt that I could easily deliver assessments through an online platform.	11	17.74	11	17.74	***40***	***64.51***
I felt free to experiment with different formats of online teaching assessments.	13	20.97	12	19.35	***37***	***59.68***
I felt that It was difficult to assess student learning through an online platform.*	***30***	***48.39***	13	20.97	19	30.64
I felt that the online class assessments worked well.	19	30.65	14	22.58	***29***	***46.77***
I felt the assessments used in my online course accurately portrayed student learning.	18	29.03	18	29.03	***26***	***41.94***
I felt that it was difficult to develop group assessments online.*	25	40.32	11	17.74	***26***	***41.93***
I felt that it was challenging to provide quality feedback to students in an online class.*	24	38.71	13	20.97	***25***	***40.32***
I felt that students may not take online assessment questions seriously.*	***23***	***37.1***	18	29.03	21	33.87

* This item was reverse coded

Note: The highest category in each item is italicized and bolded; all items ranked in terms of positive support. Missing values were not included; all percentages reflect valid percentages.

• For the most part, teachers felt they were capable of using technology to communicate effectively online, but were concerned about non-verbal cues such as eye contact, etc.; keeping students engaged; and supporting students with special needs or disabilities. In addition, teachers as a group were divided as to feelings of isolation in an online learning environment.

3.4 Training

Table 4. Rates of Agreement and Disagreement for Individual Items - Communication

Scale and Item	Disagree (SD/D)		Neutral		Agree (A/SA)	
Communication	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
I felt that I was able to communicate effectively with the students using online technologies (e.g. email, chat, discussion board, video conferencing, etc.).	10	16.39	6	9.84	***45***	***73.77***
I felt comfortable using web technologies to exchange information with others.	4	6.56	12	19.67	***45***	***73.77***
I felt that I could collaborate well with a virtual team.	7	11.48	14	22.95	***40***	***65.57***
I felt that it was difficult to maintain effective communication strategies with my students on an online platform (e.g. eye contact, non-verbal communication, etc.).*	18	29.51	11	18.03	***32***	***52.46***
I felt that it was difficult to support students with special needs or disabilities in an online learning environment.*	9	14.76	20	32.79	***32***	***52.46***
I felt that it was difficult to keep my students engaged in an online class.*	20	32.79	11	18.03	***30***	***49.18***
I felt that I could express myself clearly online through my writing (mood, emotion, humour).	16	26.23	16	26.23	***29***	***47.54***
I felt isolated in an online learning environment.*	***22***	***36.06***	17	27.87	***22***	***36.06***

* This item was reverse coded

Note: The highest score in each item is italicized and bolded; all items ranked in terms of positive support. Missing values were not included; all percentages reflect valid percentages.

• For almost all items, over fifty percent of all participants agreed that training was sufficient to allow them to switch to online teaching. The most highly-rated items referred to access to training, and the lowest rating items referred to variety and effectiveness of training materials and opportunities.

3.5 Assessment

Table 5. Rates of Agreement and Disagreement for Individual Items-Training

Scale and Item	Disagree (SD/D)		Neutral		Agree (A/SA)	
Training	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
I had difficulty accessing e-learning training courses.*	***53***	***76.81***	10	14.49	6	8.7
I felt that I was lacking experience using computers and the internet before starting to teach the online course.*	***51***	***73.92***	7	10.14	11	15.94
I received the technical support I needed for online learning.	7	10.45	11	16.42	***49***	***73.14***
I felt prepared to teach an online course.	14	20.29	11	15.94	***44***	***63.77***
I felt that I had enough time to prepare my course in the online learning environment	18	26.09	8	11.59	***43***	***62.32***
I had difficulty switching from traditional in-person teaching to e-learning.*	***39***	***56.53***	17	24.64	13	18.84
I received the online learning pedagogical support I needed before starting to teach the online course.	19	27.53	15	21.74	***35***	***50.72***
I felt that there was a shortage of supportive programs for e-learning.*	***30***	***43.48***	17	24.64	22	31.89

* This item was reverse coded

Note: The highest category in each item is italicized and bolded; items ranked in terms of positive support. Missing values were not included; all percentages reflect valid percentages.

• The items making up the area of assessments had lower agreement among participants than communication or training, with six of eight items scoring less than 50% agreement. The highest-rated statements included agreement about the ease of deploying assessments of varying types. However, fewer than half the participants felt that the assessments accurately represented student learning, and many participants felt concern about group assessments, quality feedback and students viewing online assessments seriously.

4. Discussion

Before specific survey items were analyzed, we wanted to find out whether or not the two countries of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in the Gulf region felt differently about their online experiences and whether gender or academic subjects made a difference in attitudes about online teaching. We found no significant differences in either country or academic discipline, and only slight differences between men and women concerning communication. Therefore, we turned to specific items within the survey to see how participants felt about training, assessment and communication within the online environment.

4.1 Training

Overall, training attitudes were more positive than feelings about assessment and communication. Over 50% of teachers in both countries felt that the training they received was adequate. While there is some discussion that online teaching may or may not be effective for certain types of students and may provide new opportunities for teaching practices (Kulal, 2020), there is little argument that teachers must receive training to be effective online. This training must include the use of online tools such as hardware and software, but to be truly effective, the training should include the constructive use of those tools to provide a rich learning environment that caters to most, if not all students (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Because of the pandemic, teachers had to be quickly responsive, learning to teach to all types of students without a great deal of warning. In this study, most participants agreed that their training was sufficient to provide them the ability to teach online. This finding simply acknowledges that teachers were able to offer their services online. However, while training was easily accessible, the materials need to teach effectively and

opportunities needed to use the information to the best of the participants' abilities was not as readily available. Teaching online is more than learning new tools such as remote classrooms via video technology; it is about engaging students - to use the tools in a constructive way such that students are engaged in learning in ways that can be new and exciting to the student as well as the teacher. Therefore, while over 50% of the participants felt that their training was sufficient to allow them to teach online, "sufficiency" is merely the baseline for teaching online; constructive teaching and innovation are even more important for students and teachers to feel pleased with teaching and learning online. Future studies should examine training materials to assess whether or not they address the unique opportunities offered to make online teaching a true enhancement of teaching (Kebritchi et al., 2017) rather than a necessary substitute to be discarded when the pandemic is over.

4.2 Assessment

Participants' attitudes regarding Assessment were positive around the ease of deploying assessments and the ability to use different formats. However, participants' attitudes were more negative when concerning how useful these materials were or if they were taken as seriously as in-class assessments. As with teaching, online assessments are more than simply putting a document in an electronic format; there are nuances that must be understood by teachers for online assessments to be effective. In this study, fewer than half the participants felt that the assessments accurately represented student learning, and many participants felt concern about group assessments, the quality of feedback and students considering online assessments seriously. It is not enough that traditional assessment materials are converted to electronic equivalencies; they must be viewed in terms of assessing students who are in a non-traditional school environment, who may not feel as compelled as in-school students to perform at their best. Moreover, this assessment takes place over technology which is not always adequate to the task; if McNamee et al. (2020) find evidence that a technology-rich environment such as the U.S. struggles with providing the equipment necessary to adequately assess student learning, how much more is this true in countries without the technological prowess necessary to assess learning in the proper way? It is our belief that assessment in this context should be viewed with new eyes to learn better ways to demonstrate learning; conversion of old techniques and materials is not enough.

4.3 Communication

Rapanta et al. (2020) have described the pedagogical knowledge required to ensure effective communication. Communication is more than verbal language spoken from one person to another; it includes non-verbal cues that may not be seen online (particularly if a video camera is not available or turned off). Good online communication involves being able to involve students of all types of abilities in activities and discussions. In addition, good communication provides a sense of community to those who are isolated from others. Rapanta et al. (2020) discussed equipping teachers with the knowledge needed to create and sustain effective communication, but in the midst of a pandemic, this type of knowledge was not quickly gained by teachers, who were more concerned with the basics of teaching such as the equipment working. As a result, teachers' concerns in retrospect were about areas of communication that went beyond the hardware or even software used in online communication; instead, they focused concerns dealing with non-verbal cues, diverse learners, student engagement and isolation.

4.4 Summary

In all of these findings, a common thread exists: while technology and basic training was found to allow these countries to switch to online learning as a result of the pandemic, the nuances of teaching effectively online was not provided to give teachers the skills they needed to make online learning a great opportunity for students and teachers alike (Kebritchi et al., 2017). It is very possible that these findings are not unique to the Gulf States region; future research could explore other countries and their experiences during the rapid switch to online teaching. However, the results of this study are alarming to those of us who want to promote online learning throughout the world for the valuable asset it can be to many students unable to fit in a traditional school environment. We found many teachers who did not feel adequately prepared to teach online, did not feel that assessments were accurate, and who were unable to communicate as effectively as they wished. These findings do not bode well for a future world in which technology will play an even bigger role in education than it already has. If we are to bring education to students in an innovative, creative way that will enhance learning opportunities, we must take the time to discuss concerns and strive for needed enhancements, particularly in assessment and communication.

4.5 Limitations and Opportunities

This study was intended to highlight the attitudes of teachers who taught during the pandemic in the Gulf region countries of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. This was important because many of these teachers had never taught online

before. While this study only represents two countries within the Gulf region, a larger study might be able to incorporate other countries within the region to see if their teachers have had the same experience.

Another limitation concerns the survey itself. Though this survey was newly constructed, reliability evidence for this instrument was acceptable; however, more evidence is needed before the survey can be said to be completely acceptable. Again, if a larger study was conducted in all countries in the Gulf region, more evidence as to the instrument's validity and reliability could be gathered.

Finally, this study used only teachers from public institutions in both countries. Other private institutions of learning may have results that are different from this study due to financial and training differences between private and public institutions. A further study may expand the study to other types of institutions to determine whether or not the findings would still be applicable.

5. Conclusion

The implications of this study are extremely important. As this paper is being written, the pandemic still rages on, and modes of online learning are still essential in most parts of the world. Even after the pandemic is over, teaching online is a mode of teaching that will not fade away now that the technology is available to teach students who are in remote areas or for other reasons cannot attend a regular in-person school. Therefore, online educational opportunities for students must be at a level of standard that meets or even exceeds traditional teaching in local schools.

For the Gulf countries in this study, technology and training of that technology seems to be adequate to the task of switching to online teaching for a majority of teachers. However, while technology is essential to teaching online, the more critical elements of teaching – communication and assessment – are vaguer when it comes to teacher satisfaction. To be successful at online teaching, teachers must know how to truly engage their students, to offer nonverbal support and feedback, and how to be sure that assessments are adequate and fair, whether the teaching is face-to-face or online. The results of this study imply that for many teachers, those areas of non-technical teaching need more support. In addition, online teachers must be comfortable and knowledgeable in supporting students with disabilities of all types. If teachers are not given adequate support and training in the non-technical aspects of teaching online, their students may not receive the type of education they need. We encourage administrators to view this study as a beginning point with which to continue their work of helping teachers learn how to use online teaching to the best of their abilities. Ready or not, online learning is here to stay; we must make it the best that we can for our students.

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