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EFL teachers' experiences of student engagement in synchronous online classes in Oman: Challenges and strategies

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of Omani school EFL teachers in engaging students during synchronous online classes. Although the data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings remain relevant to both current and future online teaching in Oman and similar educational settings. The aim of the study is to identify the key challenges faced by teachers and the strategies they employed to enhance student engagement. A qualitative case study approach was adopted. It involved six female EFL teachers from Cycle Two and Post Basic schools. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion. Through thematic analysis, the research identified several challenges, including technical difficulties, limited face-to-face interaction, low student motivation, cultural and environmental factors, and a misalignment between the curriculum and online learning environments. In response, teachers implemented various strategies, such as the integration of diverse digital tools, the use of motivational techniques, collaborative activities, the promotion of critical thinking, and consistent student monitoring. The findings provide valuable insights into the pedagogical realities of Omani EFL teachers and underscore the ongoing importance of student engagement in virtual learning. This study contributes to the growing body of research on digital education in Oman and calls for continued innovation in teaching practices and sustained professional support for educators working in digital environments.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of Study

According to UNESCO (2020) the COVID-19 pandemic affected over 1.5 billion students in 100 countries worldwide. To continue learning, many educational institutions, including those in Oman, shifted to online education. The Omani government schools responded in three stages: The first stage involved initial school closures from March to October 2020. Then, from November 2020 to March 2021, a blended learning model was introduced. In the final stage, from March to June 2021, schools moved to fully online learning, except for remote areas and small schools. To facilitate this transition to online education, the Ministry of Education implemented careful measures in government schools. Two platforms were introduced: *Mandarah* for Grades 1-4 and *Google Classroom* for Grades 5-12. In addition, teacher training programs were provided to enhance digital teaching competencies.

Online education during the pandemic incorporated both synchronous (Real-time interaction) and asynchronous (Self-paced learning) models. Synchronous teaching is particularly important for language learning as it enables live discussions and immediate feedback (Puliti, 2019). In Oman, English is considered a core subject taught as a foreign language. Prior to the pandemic, classes were in person with fixed schedules. During the pandemic, these classes shifted to an online format combining both synchronous and asynchronous lessons. This transition marked an essential turning point for many EFL teachers, who encountered online education for the first time. Therefore, teachers were required to adjust their teaching strategies in online classrooms. Student engagement is particularly important in language teaching. This is because interaction, feedback, and communication are essential for effective learning. However, in an online setting, students are more likely to feel isolated or distracted due to reduced social interaction which can negatively affect their engagement. Maintaining student engagement in online classrooms has consistently been identified as a significant challenge (McBrien, Cheng, & Jones, 2009).

Given the importance of student engagement in online language learning, it is important to understand how teachers adapt their instructional practices to sustain student engagement in online settings. Although digital platforms can provide opportunities for flexible education, they also demand new pedagogical approaches that may not align with the traditional methods. This study aims to explore the challenges EFL teachers in Omani government schools faced regarding student engagement in online classes. It also examines the teaching strategies they employed to promote participation in online English language classrooms.

1.2. Research Problem

Many EFL teachers in Oman faced difficulties adapting to unfamiliar online teaching environments, requiring them to step outside their "comfort zone". A study by Al Breiki and Yahaya (2022) reported that 70% of EFL teachers struggled to maintain student engagement while teaching via the "Google Classroom' platform. This issue was also observed during the researcher's supervisory online classroom observations conducted during the pandemic. Despite the teacher's repeated and direct questions, many students remained silent and provided minimal interaction during the online class discussion. This lack of responsiveness hindered teachers' abilities to gauge students' understanding and adjust their instruction accordingly. The problem was particularly pronounced among cycle two and post-basic students. Feldman, Smith, and Waxman (2017) explain that many teenagers during their transition from elementary to middle and high school become less engaged, and some drop out of school. These challenges highlight a pressing need to explore how teachers experienced and addressed engagement issues during this period.

While previous studies explored student engagement in an online education context, most of these studies tend to examine student engagement in general and primarily focus on exploring it based on students' points of views. In Oman, most research on student engagement in online education, especially during the pandemic has focused primarily on higher education students and faculty members (e.g., (Al-Balushi, Emam, & Al-Jahwari, 2022; Chavali & Sanyal, 2021; Naqvi & Zehra, 2020)). This study aims to explore Omani schools EFL teachers' experiences with synchronous online teaching during the pandemic. By identifying teachers' challenges and strategies, this research paves the way for more effective online teaching methods in the future. It can provide useful insights to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes in online education.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) which conceptualized online learning through three interrelated components: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. Social presence emphasizes establishing a supportive climate that enhances a sense of belonging. Teaching presence includes the design of curriculum, content and activities that steer students through their learning journey. Cognitive presence relates to the construction of meaning through intellectual engagement and reflection. Together, these three components provide a comprehensive framework to understand student engagement in an online setting. Clear instructions and facilitation help create the trusting environment necessary for students to engage openly. In turn, supportive atmosphere and effective guidance foster cognitive presence where students critically reflect and construct knowledge.

1.4. Research Objectives

1. Explore the challenges EFL teachers in Oman experienced regarding student engagement in synchronous online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Identify the strategies EFL teachers in Oman used to maintain student engagement in synchronous online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.5. Research Questions

1. What challenges did EFL teachers in Oman experience regarding student engagement in synchronous online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What strategies did EFL teachers in Oman use to maintain student engagement in synchronous online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.6. Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses a crucial aspect of modern education: student engagement in synchronous online classes. Although the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to online teaching, the challenges examined in this study go beyond the pandemic. The obstacles teachers faced and the strategies they employed remain relevant to the ongoing development of digital education. By providing clear insights into these factors, this study offers valuable guidance for educators, policymakers, and institutions aiming to improve the quality of online learning. Its findings support the creation of resilient and adaptable teaching models that meet current demands and anticipate future changes in educational delivery. As such, this research contributes to shaping sustainable and engaging online education in Oman and comparable contexts worldwide.

1.7. Research Limitations

1. This study was conducted in Omani government schools, and private schools were not included.
2. All participants were female EFL teachers working in cycle two and post-basic schools in Oman. No male teachers were included in the sample. This is because the researcher is a female supervisor assigned for female schools only and therefore had access exclusively to female participants.
3. A qualitative approach was adopted, using semi-structured one-to-one interviews and a focus group discussion as primary tools to gather data.
4. The specific educational aspect of this study is student engagement in synchronous online settings. It did not assess student academic performance or achievement.

1.8. Definition of Terms

- Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): An infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 viruses (World Health Organization, 2020).
- Student engagement: The active interaction and participation students show in the learning activities. (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).
- Synchronous online teaching: A form of real-time teaching where direct interactions occur between teachers and students through digital platforms (Rido, Prakoso, Perez-Amurao, Kuswoyo, & Mandasari, 2023).
- Asynchronous online teaching: Teachers share the learning material with students, and they can access learning resources at their convenience (Rido et al., 2023).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Student Engagement

Student engagement is widely known as an essential component of effective learning and academic success. It includes the degree of attention, interest and emotional investment that students exhibit during the learning process (Dixson, 2015; Kuh, 2009). Engagement influences how students interact with the content, their teachers, and their peers. It is considered an important predictor of achievement and overall satisfaction with learning (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Fredricks et al. (2004) proposed a multidimensional model of engagement which includes behavioral, emotional and cognitive domains. Behavioral engagement refers to participation in academic and social activities, such as attendance and contribution to discussion. Emotional engagement refers to students' feelings about their teachers, peers and learning environment. Cognitive engagement pertains to students' willingness to invest effort in understanding complex concepts and mastering skills.

Empirical studies (e.g., (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Sinval, Casanova, Marôco, & Almeida, 2021)) have consistently demonstrated that high levels of engagement are associated with improved academic outcomes. Conversely, disengagement is linked to absenteeism, low performance and increased dropouts from school (Klem & Connell, 2004). In online learning environments, synchronous setting engagement becomes even more essential and complex. It requires not only to be present but also to actively participate in digital interactions. Teachers have a vital role in maintaining engagement by promoting interactive and supporting

relationships and adapting their teaching strategies to meet students' needs (Mihai, Albert, Mihai, & Dumitras, 2022; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021).

2.2. Challenges of Student Engagement in Synchronous Online Classes

Although online synchronous teaching offers several advantages, it can present challenges regarding student engagement. According to the literature, these challenges arose from a variety of factors such as the readiness of teachers and students, the suitability of the curriculum, technological issues, and the shift to a completely new learning environment. During the pandemic, student engagement was a unique case where both teachers and students were unprepared for this form of teaching. For instance, in a study conducted by Aldossari and Altalhab (2022) teachers noticed reduced participation and interaction in online classes which led to decreased motivation for learning. In addition, it posed a challenge for teachers as they faced difficulties in implementing effective strategies to keep their students fully engaged.

In online education, connectivity problems and challenges in reaching course materials can make students feel physically and emotionally disconnected from the learning experience. Werang and Leba (2022) found that a lack of devices and internet connectivity significantly influenced student engagement in online classes in Indonesia. Similar problems can be found in developed countries as well. Ferri, Grifoni, and Guzzo (2020) conducted a qualitative study with fifteen participants from seven countries: the UK, Slovakia, Portugal, Lebanon, Estonia, Italy and Hungary. The study concluded that students in these countries struggled with technical issues and limited access to digital tools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, external factors can cause distractions, such as the presence of family members, pets, and digital tools (Kostaki & Karayianni, 2022). These distractions can affect students' ability to remain focused and engaged. As a result, students' performance can be affected, and students may feel isolated from their teachers and peers. Furthermore, Farrah and Jabari (2020) marked that studying online can lead to boredom, increasing the likelihood of students falling asleep during classes and reducing their engagement.

These challenges highlight the need for comprehensive understanding and support to address them. This can ensure that students can remain connected in their learning. Also, there is a need for effective teaching practices and strategies that can enhance successful engagement in an online setting.

2.3. Student Engagement and Community of Inquiry (CoI)

The (CoI) framework developed by Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) provides a useful guide for creating a supportive and engaging online environment. This model divides student engagement into three aspects: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. These elements play a vital role in creating a comfortable environment where students interact with each other, resulting in effective learning. When students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions, this fosters a sense of belonging and encourages active participation in discussions and group activities.
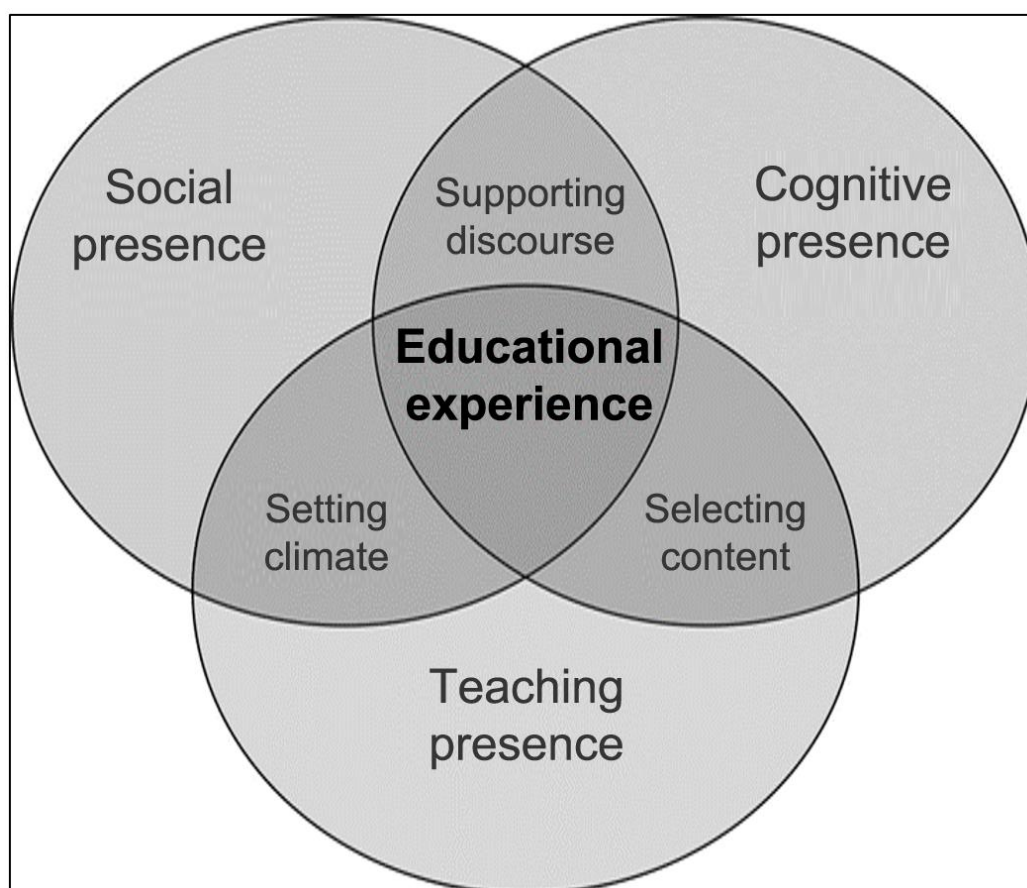
Figure 1. Community of inquiry.

In online education, social presence refers to students' ability to express themselves and form meaningful relationships within the online learning community. Insufficient interaction between students and their teachers or peers has been shown to negatively impact student engagement and academic achievement. (Sengsouliya, Soukhavong, Silavong, Sengsouliya, & Littlepage, 2020). Therefore, teachers can address this by encouraging open communication channels and facilitating opportunities for collaborative learning experiences. Teaching presence, on the other hand as highlighted by Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) shapes students' learning experiences through thoughtful and effective facilitation of activities. Burger, Nadirova, and Keefer (2012) emphasize that student disengagement often occurs when tasks lack relevance or fail to spark interest. Conversely, activities that capture student interest can positively impact engagement, as noted by Wood (2012). Finally, cognitive presence is linked to advanced thinking skills such as problem-solving and creativity, promoting cooperation and interaction and facilitating broader learning outcomes, as discussed by Chen, Lambert, and Guidry (2010). However, it is crucial to recognize that while interaction plays a pivotal role in engaging students, cognitive engagement extends beyond interaction. It involves higher-level critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as highlighted by Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005).

By fostering effective social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence, teachers can create an engaging online learning environment that promotes active participation and deep learning. The following section introduces strategies for implementing these elements in online education to maximize student engagement.

2.4. Student Engagement Strategies
2.4.1. Social Presence Strategies

In online education, educators use various strategies to increase student engagement and foster a sense of community among learners. These strategies, based on educational research, can improve student participation and social interaction in online learning environments. One strategy is to build personal connections, which play a crucial role in creating a deeper sense of community. Addressing students individually and sharing personal anecdotes helps build rapport and create a supportive learning environment (Baloran, Hernan, & Taoy, 2021).

Another important aspect is effective communication methods. These encompass diverse channels such as whole-class discussions, small-group breakout sessions, and one-on-one interactions. These modes of

communication facilitate meaningful exchanges and collaborative learning experiences by using virtual platform features like chat and breakout rooms (Berry, 2019).

Additionally, integrating problem-solving activities encourage community building by promoting active student participation and collaboration with peers. These tasks often involve group collaboration, allowing students to engage in substantive discussions and develop collective solutions (Richardson & Ice, 2010). Graded discussion assignments also provide external motivation for student involvement in class discussions, thereby reinforcing social presence within the online learning environment (Rovai, 2007).

2.4.2. Teaching Presence Strategies

Employing effective strategies is essential for enhancing teaching presence and fostering student engagement in online classes. Visual aids, such as webcams, offer a valuable tool for instructors to bridge the gap between online settings and traditional classrooms. Research by Nilsen, Almås, and Krumsvik (2013) indicates that utilizing webcams can foster a stronger connection between instructors and students. This visual interaction allows teachers to interpret nonverbal cues, thereby creating a more personalized and interactive learning environment.

Additionally, interpersonal skills and strategies are pivotal for establishing a positive atmosphere in online classes. For instance, greeting students and promptly addressing technical issues can contribute to a conducive learning environment (Bower, Dalgarno, Kennedy, Lee, & Kenney, 2015). Moreover, providing timely and constructive feedback empowers students to refine their learning strategies which can enhance their overall academic performance (King, 2015). Integrating technology into online classes further enriches the learning experience, offering various active participation and collaboration platforms. For example, using tools such as discussion boards and chat sessions facilitates student engagement and enhances student's belonging in the online classroom (Kelly & Westerman, 2020). In addition, incorporating gamification elements, such as points and levels, can increase students' motivation for learning, ultimately leading to improved learning outcomes (Jang, Park, & Yi, 2015).

2.4.3. Cognitive Presence Strategies

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999) developed a cognitive presence model including four phases: 'triggering event, exploration, integration and resolution'. This model offers a framework for implementing strategies that facilitate cognitive engagement in online learning. In the initial phase, triggering event, the problem is identified usually by the teacher to ensure alignment with the educational objectives. Then, in the exploration phase, students delve into personal reflection and group discussion to gather information and ideas related to the problem. Moving to the integration phase, students evaluate the relevance of gathered ideas to the issue, while teachers provide guidance through questioning and clarification. Finally, the resolution phase focuses on finding solutions to the identified dilemma. Teachers set clear expectations and create opportunities for students to apply what they have learned in different contexts. In some cases, unexpected problems may arise during this phase, necessitating further inquiry (Garrison et al., 1999).

2.5. Previous Related Studies

While some recent studies have contributed to providing some insights into student engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of these studies centered on understanding the perspectives and experiences of students (e.g., (Baloran et al., 2021; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; McBrien et al., 2009; Oraif & Elyas, 2021)). Some recent studies examine teachers' experiences with student engagement; however, they remain general and do not specifically address the target of the present study. The focus of these studies was on exploring teachers' general experiences of online language teaching during the pandemic and student engagement was partially examined. For example, Aldossari and Altalhab (2022) conducted a quantitative study to explore the general efficacy of online education. The study was conducted during the pandemic and involved 114 female teachers in Saudi government schools. On the other hand, Werang and Leba (2022) conducted a qualitative study to explore the views of ten Indonesian university lecturers on the factors that affect student engagement.

In Oman, some studies have examined online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, with most focusing on higher education institutions (e.g., (Naqvi & Zehra, 2020)). Although some studies have been conducted in the context of Omani government schools, their focus and scope differed from the current study. For instance, the study of Al Breiki and Yahaya (2022) was quantitative mainly examining the effectiveness of gamification in increasing student engagement in online classes. On the other hand, Al-Hinai (2022) explores the best strategies for engagement in online teaching.

However, the current qualitative study takes a different approach by exploring the experiences of EFL teachers in Omani government schools. The study delves into the specific challenges regarding student engagement in synchronous online classes from Omani school EFL teachers' experiences. Furthermore, the study explores the strategies teachers used to overcome challenges related to student engagement.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

For this study, a qualitative research design was used due to its strength in providing rich and detailed descriptions of individuals' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). To address the research questions of the study, a case study approach was employed. According to Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, and Morales (2007) the case study approach is a valuable research method that facilitates in-depth exploration of events, situations, or phenomena. In this study, the case study provided insights into EFL teachers' experiences in Oman regarding student engagement challenges and the strategies they adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic

3.2. Participants and Context

This study was conducted during the 2023/2024 academic year, and it focused on Cycle Two and Post Basic EFL teachers. Using purposive sampling, six female teachers from six governments in Oman were selected for their relevant experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Those teachers taught in cycle two and post-basic schools which implemented online education during the pandemic.

The participants were chosen from six governorates in Oman: Muscat, Ad Dakhiliyah, Al Batinah South, Al Batinah North, Ash Sharqiyah South, and Al Dhahirah (see Table 1). These governorates were in both urban and rural areas in Oman representing diverse geographical and economic backgrounds. Therefore, each participant could face unique challenges and employ distinct strategies in engaging students during online classes.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants.

Participant	Age	Governorate	Grades taught	Years of experience
Moza	45	Muscat	11, 12	24
Abeer	37	Al Batinah North	9	13
Aysha	37	Al Batinah South	11	13
Muna	40	Al Dhahirah	5, 6	16
Sumia	38	Ash Sharqiyah South	6, 8	14
Ibtisam	29	Ad Dakhiliyah	8	6

3.3. Researcher's Reflexivity

With twelve years of teaching experience and an additional ten years an English subject regional supervisor, I have developed a deep understanding of educational practices and student needs. Throughout my career, I have recognized the significant role that engagement plays in facilitating effective language learning. Consequently, I have continually pursued and implemented effective teaching strategies that maintain active student engagement, informed by classroom observations and extensive reading on educational resources.

Conducting interviews in this study with EFL teachers across various schools from different regions in Oman, allowed me to gain their insights into student engagement in online education. Throughout this process, I stayed attentive in controlling my emotions to prevent any subjective biases that could influence the research outcomes. As both a researcher and an English subject supervisor, transparency was crucial. I openly communicated my role to the participants to address any potential power dynamics or biases. Additionally, I explained the study's purpose and significance, highlighting the potential impact of their contributions on enhancing online EFL education and informing future teaching practices

3.4. Quality Assurance

Careful steps were implemented to maintain the integrity and reliability of the research findings. In this study, participants who had relevant experience of the research topic were selected to provide valuable insights. Semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion were used with protocol guides that allowed comprehensive and flexible responses. Triangulation was employed to enhance reliability by integrating data from one-to-one interviews and the focus group discussion. The individual interviews explored individual experiences, while the group discussion examined different opinions on certain areas. The researcher ensured ethical considerations in this study including securing informed consent and assuring participants of their anonymity and confidentiality. A detailed record of all research activities was maintained, including data collection and thematic analysis procedures.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Applying appropriate ethical principles to protect participants' rights is crucial in any research study. Before conducting the interview, the researcher sent a participation request letter to the participants. This letter explained the purpose of the study and its benefits. After agreeing to participate, the teachers were requested to sign a consent form. The participants were informed that their personal information would be excluded from the study to ensure confidentiality and privacy. Therefore, to protect their identities, pseudonyms were used instead of their real names and personal information.

The participants were informed that the meeting would be recorded, and there was no need to turn on the camera. Additionally, they were informed that their participation was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. I tried to establish a secure and respectful atmosphere with the teachers without showing any judgmental behaviors.

3.6. Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through semi-structured one-to-one interviews and a follow-up focus group. Interview questions were based on the study's research questions and were refined in response to participants' answers in the initial interviews. A total of eight core questions guided the interviews.

Four out of the six participants participated in the focus group discussion, while two teachers excused themselves for personal reasons. The group discussion included six questions derived from the interviews to encourage detailed and collaborative reflections.

3.7. Data Collection

First, official letters were sent by the Ministry of Education to Omani cycle two and post-basic schools who implemented online education during the pandemic via the Correspondence System. Then, the researcher reached out to the administrations of schools to obtain permission and collect data of EFL teachers in these schools. The six teachers who agreed to participate in this study exhibited genuine interest and willingness to engage in the research.

For the semi-structured interview and the focus group discussion, the researcher developed an interview protocol outlining the study's objectives and emphasizing the importance of maintaining participant confidentiality. This protocol included eight open-ended questions and was improved based on feedback received from an expert review. The interviews were scheduled at times convenient for everyone to ensure maximum participation levels.

Online interviews were conducted using Google Meet to reach the participants across the diverse six governorates in Oman. Google Meet was chosen as it is accessible and familiar to the teachers because it was used in teaching during the pandemic. Firstly, all the participants were instructed to install the app and ensure an excellent network connection to facilitate a smooth interview process. In addition, instructions were provided on how to use the platform using screenshots shared via WhatsApp. The interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes and throughout each session, the researcher established a warm environment to encourage open communication. All the interviews were recorded with the camera off to ensure participants' privacy.

The focus group discussion was arranged with the participants after the semi-structured interviews. This discussion lasted for 34 minutes, and prior permission was obtained to record the discussion. This discussion included six main prompts obtained from the semi-structured interviews' findings and was carefully designed to gain collaborative. Saturation in data collection was reached when no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews and a focus group discussion.

3.8 Limitations of Data Collection

For this study, the researcher was unable to use documents such as lesson plans and classroom observation records due to certain limitations. Since the study was conducted after the pandemic, lesson plans on the Google Classroom platform were no longer available. None of the participants took written notes; they explained that the planning was saved on the platform at that time. Additionally, the classroom observation records could not be accessed, as the data in the educational portal is yearly updated. These constraints meant the researcher had to rely solely on interviews and a focus group discussion to gather the necessary data for this study.

Furthermore, some participants had technical issues such as network connectivity and device problems which disrupted the flow of the interviews. One teacher faced difficulty in accessing the google meet links. Another teacher had problems with her device as it was not compatible with the app. Additionally, depending on online communication, made it difficult to observe non-verbal cues, which could provide clear context for the participant's responses.

3.9. Data Analysis

Data gained from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analyzed using the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first step, the researcher carefully read through the transcript multiple times to gain a better understanding of the data. In the second step, initial codes were created by identifying segments and patterns in the transcript that were related to the research focus. In the third step, the researcher grouped the codes based on a common theme related to the research questions. In the fourth step, these themes were reviewed and identified to ensure their accurate data representation. In the fifth step, the researcher identified and labelled the theme based on its content and meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the final step, the researcher compiled the data and wrote an analysis by providing illustrative examples from the data.

The results from the thematic analysis offered useful insights despite that the research relied mainly on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion. These tools are widely employed as primary data collection in qualitative studies. In addition, combining the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion provided a more detailed understanding of the subject of the study (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers in Engaging Students in Synchronous Online Classes

The six interviewed teachers identified five main challenges that hindered student engagement in synchronous online EFL classes during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 2).

1) Technical challenges
2) Environmental and cultural influences
3) Lack of in-person communication
4) Reduced student motivation and interest
5) Curriculum adaptation

Table 2. Challenges faced by EFL teachers in engaging students in synchronous online classes.

Main themes	Sub-themes
1. Technical challenges	- Network connectivity - Device malfunctions - Limited proficiency in using technology
2. Environmental and cultural influences	- Cultural norms and practices - Financial constraints
3. Lack of in-person communication	- Behavior management difficulties - Limited visual and nonverbal cues
4. Reduced motivation and interest	- Inconsistent participation - Lack of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation - Disinterest in technology
5. Curriculum adaptation	- Difficulty modifying content for online delivery

4.1.1. Technical Challenges

During the online synchronous EFL classes, almost all teachers in one-to-one interviews identified technical problems as the most significant challenge that negatively impacted student engagement and later reaffirmed it in the focus group discussion. They provided examples of these issues such as lack of internet access and malfunctioning devices. The following quotes exemplify these aspects:

"Poor WIFI connection made students hesitate and reluctant to participate in the class; it was a huge problem and a challenge for me." (Ibtisam)

"Some students experienced difficulty due to network and technical issues" (Moza)

Their experiences reflect how unreliable connectivity hindered students' willingness to engage, causing them to be passive in the online class. Similarly, Sumia noted that due to technical problems some classes even had to be cancelled:

"Sometimes, due to technical problems, the class might be cancelled" (Sumia)

4.1.2. Environmental and Cultural Influences

The impact of cultural and environmental factors on students' engagement in EFL classes was highlighted by some participants while others did not consider these factors to be relevant. For example, teachers reported that cultural practices and home environment made it difficult for students to remain focused:

"What most families did was spend the whole night awake, and in the morning, they slept, so we have a cultural problem." (Aysha)

Furthermore, most teachers attribute students' lack of engagement to their lack of access to technology and devices: "I know some families struggle with providing computers or laptops for children" (Moza)

"… they had three, four or five kids at school, and they could not afford a separate device for each one." (Aysha)

Some parents did not view online education as effective: *"Some parents thought that online education is not beneficial, and their children don't understand the material with this form of education"* (Sumia)

"They know that their children will pass during that time." (Abeer)

Rare but significant, cultural challenges were also noted: *"One parent talked to the teachers and said he did not want his daughters to talk and participate in the class, so men could not hear their voices."* (Sumia)

"One time the link was shared with other family members and started making comments in the chat and disturbed the flow of the lesson and interaction" (Abeer)

4.1.3. Lack of In-Person Communication

Another main challenge that teachers encountered during online education was the lack of face-to-face interaction. Teachers reported that it was challenging to observe and address student behaviors and establish personal connections in the online teaching environment:

"Most of the time, they are not with you at all…… you want to focus on certain elements or if it was a discussion or speaking task, we were struggling; they were not there." (Moza)

Teachers stressed the absence of visual cues and non-verbal communication and expressed concerns about reduced student engagement:

"Students could not look at the teacher's body language and they could not see if the teacher was happy or excited, and how the letters are pronounced, and sounds are articulated.' (Ibtisam)

"Some gestures can help them but when it comes to online teaching you have only the voice and the screen.' (Sumia)

The lack of teacher presence and visibility made it harder to assess attentiveness and encourage participation, especially as most students kept their camera off:

"In the real classroom, students feel more comfortable seeing their teachers moving around the class. When the teacher speaks and looks at them. it is essential." (Ibtisam)

*"The first challenge I faced was the camera. I could not see them concentrating on me. Also, they did not see the teacher. How do you think students would interact without seeing the teacher?" (*Muna)

4.1.4. Reduced Student Motivation and Interest

During online classes, motivating students to participate and remain actively engaged was another critical challenge for some teachers. They observed that although students were logged in, many of them seemed disinterested and not mentally focused on the lesson.:

"… but we struggled with a lot of the students. They just attended the class. You can see they are attending, but they are not with you." (Moza)

Furthermore, she added that some students lacked focus and exhibited signs of distraction during online classes.:

"They can be moving around the house doing whatever they want, sometimes sleeping, and you could not be sure 100% if they were following you in the class." (Moza)

Additionally, teachers emphasized the lack of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation leading to student disengagement among students:

"We used to give them gifts in online teaching. We cannot give them gifts. What we did, only engaging them orally" (Aysha)

"They have no motivation. They were just behind the screen. If they answered, it was okay. If not, it was okay." (Ibtisam)

4.1.5. Curriculum Adaptation

Two teachers shared their challenges in adapting the curriculum for online teaching and they reiterated the same concerns during the focus group discussion. They reflected the incompatibility of traditional curriculum with online teaching:

"Online teaching was difficult to give instructions and customize the curriculum from behind the screen." (Abeer)

"The curriculum was not designed for online teaching, and it was challenging not only for me but also for the students." (Ibtisam)

Recognizing these challenges is key to examining the strategies teachers implemented to address them and enhance student engagement in online classes. This naturally leads to research question two (RQ2), which examines the online teaching strategies teachers employed to boost student engagement.

4.2. Strategies EFL Teachers Used to Maintain Student Engagement in Synchronous Online Classes

Despite the challenges, the findings related to the second question showed that teachers adapted their teaching strategies to maintain student engagement. However, these strategies varied among teachers. Some teachers embraced creative and effective digital tools and interactive methods, while others opted for simpler approaches and tools. Overall, EFL teachers in Oman utilized a variety of strategies (see Table 3), including:

1) Integrating digital tools and applications.
2) Implementing motivational tactics.
3) Fostering critical thinking.
4) Incorporating collaborative tasks and discussion.
5) Employing monitoring strategies.

Table 3. Strategies EFL teachers used to maintain student engagement in synchronous online classes.

Major themes	Sub-themes
1. Integrating digital tools and applications	Using educational apps and platforms
	Integrating video content into lessons
2. Implementing motivational tactics	Utilising gamification and interactive warm-up activities
	Providing concrete incentives
3. Fostering students' critical thinking	Facilitating discussions and brainstorming tasks
	Using multimedia resources, Bloom's Taxonomy
4. Incorporating collaborative tasks	Organizing digital group activities
	Using multimedia to enhance collaboration
5. Employing monitoring strategies	Individualised interaction- multimedia resources: Prezi, Kahoot, ClassDojo, Google Meet, WhatsApp.

4.2.1. Integrating Digital Tools and Applications

Teachers reported that they used digital interactive tools and apps to facilitate their teaching and enhance student engagement. They also sought apps to address the lack of physical presence. Some teachers explored new platforms individually:

"Thanks to all teachers who researched this topic, Google helped me to find ways to assess student participation." (Ibtisam)

Others adapted familiar tools with adapted features:

"… the PowerPoint was not new, but it has lots of new features and themes to design and reinforce my students." (Abeer)

Others shared their approaches to students' attention by employing a variety of interactive warm-ups and strategies:

"I got their attention by using different and interactive warm-up activities and strategies …I used Wordwall and ClassDojo …. I used Live worksheets, quizzes, games … Padlet and Kahoot." (Muna)

"I downloaded useful applications like Wordwall, Kahoot, and Google Forms." (Abeer)

However, their use of technology varied based on their proficiency in using digital tools.

4.2.2. Implementing Motivational Tactics

To motivate students and foster engagement, some teachers highlighted that they employed interactive tools and apps. The below quotes are examples:

"I gave them reinforcement using live worksheets, quizzes, games, and competitions to make them active using Padlet and Kahoot." (Muna)

"I used educational programs like ClassDojo to motivate students and write in the chat box." (Aysha)

"The positive reinforcement was useful. I used different websites and apps." (Ibtisam)

Additionally, one teacher extended her efforts beyond digital praise by tangible gifts to her students:

" Since I am teaching my students in my village, I sent gifts to them. One-time reinforcement like clapping verbal reinforcement was not enough for teenagers." (Ibtisam)

4.2.3. Fostering Students' Critical Thinking

Teachers emphasized the significance of fostering critical thinking skills by asking comprehension and open-ended questions. The quotes below provide examples:

"Asking comprehension questions like how? or What do you think? encouraging them to justify and give reasons." (Aysha)

"I used open-ended questions to facilitate discussions in groups and brainstorming tasks to predict…. " (Muna)

Others utilized technology to facilitate deeper levels of analysis:

"I used videos and website strategies to reinforce critical thinking," (Ibtisam)

One teacher reflected that she used Bloom's Taxonomy to scaffold tasks by starting from simple and moving towards complex:

"I planned tasks and activities using Bloom's Taxonomy, starting with easier tasks" (Ibtisam)

4.2.4. Incorporating Collaborative Tasks and Discussions

Teachers reported that they adopted collaborative tasks like group work and interactive discussions to sustain student engagement:

"Discussion is important. We wanted to keep them busy and engage with us we cannot see them…" (Abeer)

She further elaborated on her strategy for engaging students in collaborative tasks:

"I attached photos, images, and videos and asked them to comment on them. In this way, I could engage them in discussions and group work." (Abeer)

Some teachers used Google Meet to create digital groups:

"I classified the class into digital groups to simplify teaching. I assigned group tasks to make it as close to an actual classroom experience as possible." (Muna)

Despite the challenges some teachers faced in creating digital groups, one teacher found alternative methods to facilitate collaboration. She said:

"… I sent each group a Google Meet link and let them open the link. I have different devices to monitor the groups and see how many students were working in each group." (Ibtisam)

4.2.5. Employing Monitoring Strategies

The participants in this study reported that they used different monitoring strategies to encourage student engagement. For example, they employed individualized interaction and personally guided students and their families.

"Calling their names to give answers to some short online quizzes and online tasks." (Moza)

"I checked their engagement by calling their names and sometimes, while they were participating in activities and tasks, I did some online activities with them to check who was with me and who was not." (Muna)

" I found different websites like Prezi, Kahoot, ClassDojo and a lot of them to monitor and encourage my students." (Ibtisam)

Some teachers communicated with parents through WhatsApp:

"Sometimes, I send messages to their parents in WhatsApp to check if they were with me." (Muna)

4.3. Discussion

The sudden shift to online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges for some EFL teachers in Oman. This study explored the experiences of EFL teachers in Oman regarding student engagement in synchronous online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through triangulation of semi-structured one-to-one interviews and a focus group discussion, the study provided an evidence-based analysis of the challenges and strategies of student engagement. This triangulation made it possible to compare the data of the tools and reduce potential biases.

All the participants identified technical issues as the most significant challenge that negatively influenced student engagement. Werang and Leba (2022) emphasize the importance of reliable technological infrastructure for sustaining education. Like this finding, global research indicated similar technological barriers in developing countries such as Malaysia and Ghana (Ferri et al., 2020). Students in Ghana encountered low internet access which hindered them from engaging in consistent online learning during the pandemic (Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson, & Hanson, 2020). In this study, all the participants from the six governorates reported network connectivity issues. Many Omani families lacked access to Wi-Fi at home and some students relied on costly mobile data. This made it difficult for them to engage consistently in synchronous classes, and as a result, some teachers cancelled the classes. The lack of strategies teachers reported to address the network problem showed limitations in their teaching presence as these issues were beyond their control. This underscores the need for systemic improvements in digital infrastructure in Oman.

Additionally, some teachers noted that the lack of adequate technical skills among both students and teachers posed a challenge to maintaining sustainable engagement. Teachers explained that some students lacked knowledge of using many programs in online teaching. Additionally, they mentioned they also lacked proficient skills in using digital tools. For example, some teachers faced difficulties in managing group work in Google Classroom. In addition, participants highlighted the need to solve issues such as fixing sounds and frequent technical glitches.

Moreover, the study underlined the influence of societal attitudes and cultural practices. Economic barriers affected many Omani families with multiple schoolchildren in the governorates. These challenges were evident in areas such as *Maabilah* in the capital as well as most areas in Batinah North, Batinah South and Ash Sharqiyah South governorates. These families often struggled to provide the necessary resources due to their low incomes which negatively impacted their children's engagement in synchronous classes. Comparing these environmental and social challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic globally reveals that even in developed countries, students faced similar issues. For example, in the UK students in rural areas encountered difficulties engaging in online classes due to limited parental education and financial status (Ferri et al., 2020). Similarly, the same study found that in Italy where 42% of families living in southern Italy lacked PCs. However, in Oman facing device shortages even in the capital city highlights that the issue was not confined to remote areas but affected urban regions. To solve this problem, communities and campaigns in different countries as well as in Oman contributed to donating digital devices to students, however, these initiatives were still limited.

Furthermore, some parents lacked acceptance of online education which led to limited monitoring and follow-up on their children's participation and engagement. Additionally, certain cultural conservatism in some cases restricted females from engagement such as appearing on camera as cameras were kept off throughout the synchronous class. In one instance the teacher from Ash Sharqiyah South mentioned that a parent even opposed his daughter speaking during the lesson to avoid being heard by men. Although these

cultural beliefs are difficult to change, raising awareness about the importance of engagement in online education is important.

Lack of face-to-face interaction was another challenge that influenced their ability to engage students effectively. For example, non-verb cues were absent in the online environment which made it difficult for teachers to monitor student focus. Moreover, external distractions within the home environment often prevent students from staying focused and engaged in online classes (Farrah & Jabari, 2020). Such findings mirrored those by Kostaki and Karayianni (2022) who remarked that external environmental factors influence the extent of student participation in online classrooms. Some teachers in this study noted that while students were online, they were often not following and disengaged. This was attributed to factors such as falling asleep or being distracted by other activities. Additionally, teachers reported that students showed low motivation and interest during online lessons. Many students tended to lack interest due to the nature of the online format.

To address this issue teachers adapted their teaching practices by integrating multimedia, collaborative tasks and fostering interaction through interactive discussions. This corresponds with Garrison et al. (1999) emphasize on the significance of establishing social, teaching and cognitive presence in online classrooms. Teachers responded with strategies like gamification, rewards and warm-up activities to increase students' interest and interaction. Rovai (2007) and Jang et al. (2015) highlighted similar findings and noted that motivational strategies can foster active student engagement in online education. Moreover, teachers used individualized and personal interaction with the students and their families which provided partial support in improving engagement.

While EFL teachers in Oman faced different challenges that sometimes hindered maintaining effective student engagement, the ability of some teachers to adopt suitable teaching strategies demonstrates the potential for overcoming these challenges. However, it was observed that some teachers depended on displaying the same syllabus without integrating creative online teaching methods. This underscores the importance of continuous professional development to equip teachers with the necessary teaching approaches for online teaching.

Since this study is grounded in (CoI) framework which explores student engagement in online classrooms, the challenges teachers encountered affected all three (CoI). Teaching presence was affected as some teachers struggled to facilitate online teaching and create a supportive climate. As a result, social involvement and engagement declined which could challenge students' development of critical thinking skills (Garrison et al., 2000). Despite its valuable insights into student engagement in online settings, (CoI) did not fully capture all the contextual and technological factors influencing engagement during the pandemic. Therefore, a broader framework is necessary to comprehensively understand the nature of student engagement in online classrooms.

5. Conclusion

During the COVID-19 pandemic educational institutions shifted to online education, posing challenges for some EFL teachers in Oman. The aim of this study was to explore teachers' experiences concerning student engagement in synchronous online classes in Oman during the pandemic. The study addressed two questions:

RQ1. What challenges did EFL teachers in Oman experience regarding student engagement in synchronous online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2. What strategies did EFL teachers in Oman use to maintain student engagement in synchronous online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic?

5.1. Summary of the Findings

The study's findings revealed six key challenges: technical difficulties, the lack of in-person communication, low student motivation, cultural and environmental influences, technological incompetence, and the need to adapt the curriculum for online teaching. Despite these obstacles, teachers demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience, employing a variety of strategies to engage their students.

The most significant challenge identified was the issue of connectivity and reliable access to technology. Without stable internet and functional devices, effective teaching and learning were severely hampered. Additionally, societal attitudes towards online education, like a lack of seriousness and conventional views that restrict girls' participation, can complicate the learning process.

The researcher observed that even though some teachers were not explicitly familiar with the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, their methods reflected the principles of this framework. They focused on teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence to establish dynamic virtual learning environments. They employed multimedia resources, motivational techniques, adaptable teaching approaches, and personalized interactions to address these challenges. This research offers valuable insights that could influence the future of online education in Oman by examining the practices of EFL teachers during the pandemic.

Unlike many studies conducted in Oman that focused on higher education or students' perspectives, this research examined the experiences of EFL teachers in governmental schools, providing a more holistic

understanding. The study focused on the potential challenges that may prevent the sustainable growth of online education and proposed targeted strategies to increase participation in online classrooms. It provided valuable insights that could have shaped the future of online education in Oman by examining the practices of EFL teachers during the pandemic. Additionally, it highlighted the crucial role of incorporating the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework into online EFL education, which could facilitate meaningful student engagement and improve the overall quality of teaching and learning.

5.2. Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in the education sector. Firstly, there is a critical need for substantial investment in digital infrastructure to ensure stable and reliable internet access and the availability of functional devices for all students. Addressing these technical issues is fundamental to the success of online education. Additionally, social donations and sponsorship programmes should be established to provide devices and improve network access for school students, particularly those from low-income families. Engaging the community and private sector in supporting these initiatives can significantly enhance the online learning experience for many students.

Fostering positive societal attitudes towards online learning is essential. Educators and policymakers should work together to raise awareness about the importance and validity of online education. Ensuring that parents and communities understand and support this mode of learning is crucial. This includes addressing cultural norms that may restrict participation and promoting the benefits of online education.

The study highlights the importance of professional development for teachers in the use of technology and online teaching methods. Training programmes should be implemented to enhance teachers' technological competence and equip them with effective strategies for maintaining student engagement in a virtual environment. These programmes should be continuous and include updates on the latest technological advancements and pedagogical strategies.

Improving the technical skills of teachers, students, and parents is crucial for the effective implementation of online education. Workshops and training sessions should be conducted to ensure all stakeholders are proficient in using digital tools and platforms. This includes practical sessions on troubleshooting common technical issues, using educational software, and advanced methods for creating interactive and engaging online lessons. Furthermore, the training sessions should focus on introducing innovative teaching strategies, and methods to foster student collaboration and critical thinking in a virtual environment.

Finally, raising societal awareness of the importance of online teaching and learning can help build a supportive community network. This involves organizing community meetings, and seminars to discuss the challenges and potentials of online education by sharing success stories and best practices.

5.3. Recommendations

1. Future studies could employ quantitative or mixed methods with larger and more diverse samples to increase generalizability. Additionally, action research involving teachers, students, and stakeholders in real-time classrooms could provide practical insights.
2. Broadening the participant pool to include male educators would allow researchers to explore gender differences in teaching strategies and student engagement.
3. Further research is needed to explore additional influencing factors in online education, such as curriculum design, assessment methods, teacher training, and technology infrastructure to develop comprehensive improvements.

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