First year experiences of emergence remote learning at a university

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Esperienze del primo anno di formazione emergenziale a distanza in un'università

COVID-19 forced many institutions of higher learning to make a sudden switch from face-to-face classes to emergency remote learning. This move was welcomed with mixed reactions by first year students. The purpose of this study was to investigate first year students' experiences of emergency remote learning amidst the time of the global pandemic of COVID-19 in the United Arab Emirates. The study adopted a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm and it was conducted as an exploratory case study in a federal university. Three hundred and ninety two open-ended questionnaires were completed by first year students about their experiences of emergency remote learning. Data was analysed using content analysis. It was concluded that the best way to judge the validity of emergency remote learning is by taking context into consideration. The use of different online teaching strategies help cater for diverse needs of first year students and reduce dropout rates.

Il COVID-19 ha costretto molte istituzioni di formazione superiore a passare repentinamente da lezioni in presenza ad apprendimento a distanza. Questo cambiamento è stato accolto con reazioni contrastanti dagli studenti del primo anno. Lo scopo del presente studio è stato indagare come gli studenti del primo anno di università abbiano vissuto l'apprendimento a distanza nel periodo della pandemia globale di COVID-19 negli Emirati Arabi Uniti. La ricerca ha adottato un approccio qualitativo all'interno di un paradigma ermeneutico ed è stata condotta come caso di studio pilota in un'università federale. Trecentonovantadue questionari aperti sono stati compilati dagli studenti del primo anno sulle loro esperienze di apprendimento a distanza in emergenza. I dati sono stati analizzati utilizzando l'analisi del contenuto. Si è concluso che il modo migliore per giudicare la validità dell'apprendimento a distanza in emergenza è prendere in considerazione il contesto. L'uso di diverse strategie di insegnamento online aiuta a soddisfare le diverse esigenze degli studenti del primo anno e a ridurre i tassi di abbandono.

Keywords: First year experiences; Remote learning; Face-to-face; Synchronous; Asynchronous.

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1.   Introduction and background

The number of students dropping out of university education is increasing across the globe (Sosu & Pheunpha, 2019; Lackman, Smith & McNeill, 2015). Research shows that the majority of students who drop out of university education do so in their first year (Pather, Norodien-Fataar, Cupido & Mkonto, 2017; Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard & Smith, 2015). Consequently, the first year is the most critical stage in students' university education. This is because "students are at their most vulnerable in the first year in terms of their likelihood of academic failure and they are most at risk with respect to a range of potential social, emotional, health and financial problems" (McInnis, 2001, p. 106). James, Krause and Jennings (2009) argue that at some point in Australia there was a higher number of first year student dropouts compared to those returning. This requires universities to provide more support to first year university students as they "experience serious academic and adjustment challenges, which remain undetected until it is too late to provide meaningful intervention" (Mkonto, 2018, p. 65). First year students are more vulnerable to dropping out of their university education compared to students in second, third and final year groups. This is because in their first year, students are faced with unprecedented challenges which include financial problems, pressure of work, family and social issues, course selection, familiarisation and adjustment-related concerns (Tinto, 1993, 1987; Arnekrans, 2014; Schreiber, Luescher & Moja, 2016).

Although there are several studies which were conducted about first year experiences (FYE) in different contexts and focusing on different aspects, there is a dearth of scholarship about FYE of learning online, particularly emergency remote learning (ERL). Brown *et al.* (2015, p. 1) contend that "little is known about what actually happens to first year distance students once they have enrolled in tertiary institutions; what motivates them and how they actually experience the transition to formal study by distance." Similarly, Henry (2018) postulates that understanding the first year experience across the globe is mainly limited to extrapolations from on-campus experiences rather than online. There is "absence of a deep, student-centred understanding of first-year online students' expectations and experiences" (Henry, 2018, p. iii). A lack of knowledge in FYE of learning online and ERL is what this study seeks to address.

The purpose of this study is to investigate first year students' experiences of ERL during the time of COVID-19 at a Federal University in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The study has one critical research question: What are first year students' experiences of ERL during the time of COVID-19 at a Federal University in the UAE? The article begins by presenting literature review where ERL and online learning are conceptualised. This is followed by literature which focuses on students' experiences of ERL in different contexts. A theoretical framework, context of the study and research design and methodology are presented soon thereafter. Results and discussion follow and the paper ends with a succinct conclusion.

2.   Literature Review

2.1.   Conceptualising Online Learning and Emergency Remote Learning

Although many academics and students are referring to the current learning happening (in universities which used to provide face-to-face classes) as online learning, scholarship says it is in fact ERL (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020). This necessitates a review of literature that conceptualises online learning and ERL. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) argue that online learning is one thing and ERL is another thing, and the two terms should not be used interchangeably. Although the two terms online learning and ERL refer to learning that takes place online, a significant difference is in the fact that the former (online learning) is carefully planned in terms of course design, plan for implementation and assessment strategies (Anderson, 2011), whereas the latter (ERL) is usually unplanned and is often a temporary solution until the crisis is over (Zhang, Wang, Yang & Wang, 2020).

In online learning, planning for student interaction and engagement is one of the most important aspects. Gillett-Swan (2017) argues that supporting and engaging isolated students is one of the greatest challenges in online learning. Skordis-Worrall, Haghparast-Bidgoli, Batura and Hughes (2015) concur

that if students are not supported and engaged, their online learning experiences will not be interesting. There is a need to present first year students with opportunities to interact with their instructors and fellow peers in online learning (Brown *et al.*, 2015). Muhammad and Ademola (2018) argue that first year students in Kampala learned using online means for the first time in their first semester at university. Students did not find the e-learning platform easy to use for the first time, however they got used to it and ended up enjoying engaging with tutors and collaborating with other students. Afolabi (2017) argues that when first year students have negative online learning experiences, they are likely to drop out of university education.

Some first year students have a wrong perception of online learning; they think it is easy as they will be studying from home (Skordis-Worrall *et al.*, 2015). Such a misconception of online learning results in students taking their studies lightly and eventually having a lot of work to do towards the end of a course. It is important to orient students, give them comprehensive information about online learning and support them in their learning every now and then.

ERL occurs when there is a crisis or pandemic, for example the current global pandemic of COVID-19 which has resulted in the temporary closure of learning institutions and forced students' learning to switch from face-to-face classes to online. Rahiem (2020, p. 4) postulates that "well-planned online learning experiences are substantially different from those that are delivered online in response to a crisis or catastrophe." When the crisis or pandemic is over, it is expected that face-to-face or hybrid classes will resume (Rahiem, 2020). This is unlike online learning where teaching and learning will be designed for online strategies and the pedagogical approach will not change whether the pandemic is over or not. What many schools and universities are currently using is a temporary shift of instructional delivery from the regular face-to-face classes to distance learning because of COVID-19, and that is best described as ERL (Hodges *et al.*, 2020). Affouneh, Salha and Khlaif (2020, p. 1) summarised ERT comprehensively as

> Not usually planned in advance and involves a sudden shift from traditional teaching into a remote one in view of emergency situations like the outbreak of Coronavirus in different countries. This is a totally different situation compared to e-Learning in normal circumstances. After an emergency state, everything is supposed to go back to normalcy. Moreover, educators have to work in a highly stressful situation while having no knowledge of the end of the crisis.

In this study, students participated in ERL as their university closed all face-to-face classes and switched to remote learning modalities which involved the use of synchronous and asynchronous teaching strategies. Many universities across the globe implemented ERL and students had different experiences of it.

2.2.   Students' Experiences of Emergency Remote Learning During the Time of COVID-19

UNESCO (2020) states that the current global pandemic has negatively impacted students in higher education institutions, particularly undergraduates as they were left in a completely new situation where they had to delve into ERL which they were not used to. Students grappled with the demands of adapting to ERL in the United States where some were overwhelmed with studies, lost opportunities they had to do internships and others had delayed graduation (Aucejo, French, Araya & Zafar, 2020).

Edge Foundation (2020) states that the situation caused by the global pandemic negatively affected students in the United Kingdom as they were not used to such a pedagogical approach. Similarly, Crawford *et al.* (2020) argue that students in Europe and many countries around the globe did not have a smooth transition from face-to-face classes to ERL. Some students liked the contingency plan of learning remotely because of the global pandemic, but preferred face-to-face classes post COVID-19 era.

The situation caused by COVID-19 has disrupted the regular functions of universities and made first year students more vulnerable to dropping out of their studies. UNESCO (2020) postulates that the situation caused by COVID-19 is "worrying for those higher education students who are more vulnerable on account of their more fragile condition." First year students fit in the group of vulnerable

people as research shows that they are at the greatest risk of dropping out of their studies compared to students in second, third and final year groups (McInnis, 2001; Mkonto, 2018; Pather *et al.*, 2017; Arnekrans, 2016). COVID-19 has the potential of worsening the numbers of university dropouts (UNESCO, 2020). The current situation caused by the global pandemic has cast fear among university students, especially those in the first year of their studies. Karanicolas and Kontoleon (2020) contend that at one university in Australia, first year students were worried about their studies and wondering how they would get through to their second year of study. One of the participants who was teaching first year students said:

> Currently, I am teaching a class of 150 first-year students. In our first Zoom meeting, fear amongst the student cohort was obvious. Most already lacked confidence in their abilities to get through their first year of university; the impact of COVID-19 meant a further blow to their confidence (Karanicolas & Kontoleon, 2020, p. 30).

In the UAE context, the Ministry of Education responded to the COVID-19 global pandemic by requiring all public and private schools and institutions of higher learning to temporarily suspend face-to-face classes and switch to ERL (UAE Ministry of Education, 2020). The decision to temporarily suspend face-to-face classes was done to reduce large gatherings of people as that constituted a risk of spreading the virus (UNESCO, 2020). All universities in the UAE commenced ERL from 22 March 2020 until the completion of the academic year 2019–2020 (UAE Ministry of Education, 2020).

The move from traditional face-to-face classes to ERL has been quite a difficult task in the UAE (Mustafa, 2020) and universities across the globe as they lacked experience with a similar situation in the past (UNESCO, 2020). Despite the challenges posed by ERL, the UAE made great strides to ensure that university students' learning continued virtually. The majority of university students in the UAE already had access to technological gadgets and internet (Almuraqab, 2020). The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority in the country coordinated with local network providers to facilitate e-learning systems and to provide internet connection to families that did not have proper coverage (Mustafa, 2020, p. 28). The UAE government was very instrumental in preparing students for ERL through providing the needed infrastructure. Almuraqab (2020, p. 230) states that "the excellent infrastructure of the country [UAE] played an active role to facilitate the online/distance learning process." This made ERL possible for university students in the UAE as they had technological resources and internet access at home (Almuraqab, 2020).

Despite having all the technological devices and internet connection in the UAE, not all students liked ERL. A study conducted by Almuraqab (2020) indicates that only 55% of students at a university in the UAE would prefer continuing with distance learning after COVID-19. That means 45% of students who participated in the study would prefer going back to either face-to-face classes or hybrid learning post the COVID-19 era. Students prefer face-to-face classes as they engage more with content, their instructor, and other students without worrying about disruptions caused by technology (Gillett-Swan, 2017; Skordis-Worrall *et al.*, 2015; Brown *et al.*, 2015).

2.3. Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by Wang and Kang's cybegogy model for engaged learning. The model has three interdependent components, namely cognitive presence, social presence and emotive presence, which overlap to give students engaged online learning experiences (Wang & Kang, 2006). The model is illustrated on figure 1.

Cognitive presence involves students' exploration of content where they take ownership of their learning, experience self-regulated learning and actively construct their knowledge (Wang & Kang, 2006). Social presence involves collaborative learning among students where they will be sharing information and co-constructing knowledge in an interactive environment (Wang & Kang, 2006). This is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of constructivism which postulates that students learn when they are interacting with one another and with the teacher. Emotive presence involves students' feelings of confidence, curiosity, comfortability and security (Wang & Kang, 2006). Emotions are integral to adults' online learning experiences (Dirkx, 2001). The cybegogy model has been selected
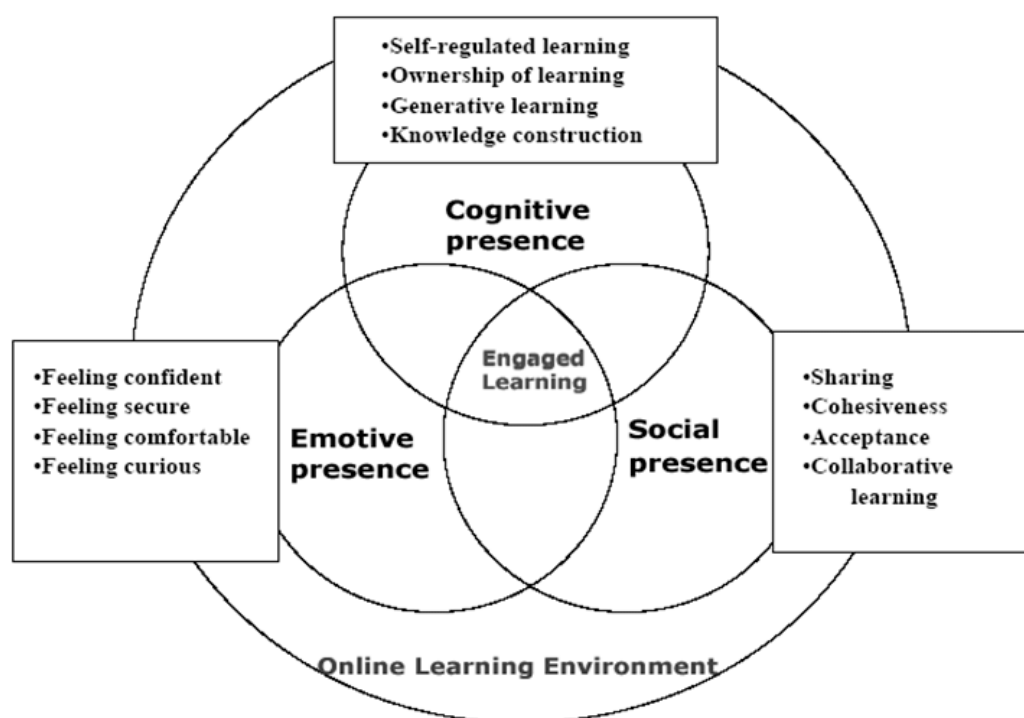
Figure 1. Cybergogy model (Wang & Kang's, 2006)

for this study as it relates to students' ERL experiences which this study focuses on. The model is consistent with a qualitative and phenomenological approaches which enabled participants to share rich textual data about their experiences of ERL during the time of COVID-19. It was also chosen as it provides a comprehensive framework for creating learner engagement through information and communication technology (Wang & Kang, 2006).

2.4.   Context of the Study

The study was conducted at a university in the UAE. The university has male and female students on separate campuses. The majority of students completed high school in 2019 and a few in 2018 and 2017. Students joined the university for the first time (as first years) at the start of the 2019–2020 academic year in August 2019. They attended face-to-face classes on the university's campuses until it was closed in March 2020 because of COVID-19. Students had to complete the remaining months (April and May) of the academic year using ERL. It was a sudden switch from face-to-face classes to ERL and there was limited time for students and instructors to prepare. All syllabuses which were designed primarily for face-to-face classes had to be changed to fit ERL. The university subscribed to Adobe Connect in order to allow synchronous online classes to happen. Students who participated in this study reflected on their experiences of ERL during the second half of the semester. The majority of instructors used synchronous teaching strategies as was evidenced by students' reflections.

3.   Research method

3.1.   Theoretical Underpinning

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm. A qualitative approach was chosen as it enabled participants to provide rich textual data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin,

2018). Leedy and Ormrod (2015) concur that a qualitative approach is suitable for a study that seeks to obtain textual data from the participants. An interpretivist paradigm was selected as it is compatible with a qualitative approach. Lapan, Quartaroli and Riemer (2012) argue that all qualitative research has an interpretive perspective which focuses on uncovering participants' views about a particular phenomenon. The phenomenon in this case was first year students' experiences of ERL. The study was undertaken using a phenomenological design which Creswell (2012) describes as one of the common qualitative designs which enables researchers to explore the lived experiences of people in a particular group. In this case, the researcher focused on the experiences of first year students who had to learn remotely during the time of COVID-19.

3.2. Sample and Sampling Procedures

Purposive sampling, which is characterised by deliberate targeting of information-rich participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017), was used to select first year students at the university. All 1,987 first year students enrolled for the 2019–2020 academic year across the faculties and campuses of the university were invited to take part in the study. Only 392 students agreed to participate. The study was focused on first year students only because they are more vulnerable to dropping out of university education compared to students in second, third and fourth year groups. Research shows that the majority of students who drop out of university education do so in their first year (Mkonto, 2018; Pather *et al*., 2017; Tinto, 1993, 1987; Arnekrans, 2014).

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using an open-ended questionnaire about students' experiences of ERL during the time when the university was forced to switch from face-to-face classes to online learning because of COVID-19. Creswell (2012) states that open-ended questionnaires are suitable for a qualitative study as participants will have an opportunity to freely express their views in response to guided questions asked. An open-ended questionnaire was suitable for this study since it used a phenomenological approach which allowed participants to have the freedom to express their views about their experiences of ERL. Data was analysed using content analysis where the researcher first and foremost organised information obtained from the questionnaire. He then read through data and created some codes. Each code was assigned a colour (colour coding). There were many codes which were collapsed to two main themes positive experiences (comfort, flexibility and convenience of online learning) and negative experiences (Technical problems, pressure of work and limited engagement). Each of the themes is presented in detail in the results section.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were observed by obtaining ethical clearance from the university's ethics committee. Ethics approval number is ZU20_012_F. The purpose of the study was explained to all participants, and they were informed that their participation was purely voluntary. Participants signed a consent form prior to completing the questionnaire and they had freedom to withdraw from the study at any point. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. No real names were used.

4. Results

Findings of this study are grouped into two main themes, positive experiences (comfort, flexibility and convenience of online learning) and negative experiences (technical problems, pressure of work and limited engagement). It is important to note that students in this study referred to ERL (which they experienced) as online learning. Students who participated in this study had mixed feelings about their experiences of ERL when the university suddenly switched from face-to-face classes to online learning. Some students had positive experiences while others had negative experiences.

4.1. Positive Experiences – Comfort, Flexibility and Convenience of ERL

Generally, students applauded ERL for its convenience as they could attend classes in the comfort of their homes, save time and money for travelling to campus for classes and it enabled shy students to have an opportunity to let their voices be heard freely. A student said: "learning from home is so comfortable and I do not need to go to university using a car." Another student echoed the same sentiments saying ERL is better (than face-to-face learning) as "there are less hassles to travel back and forth to university as I do not have transportation. So, it is better to study in the comfort of my home." Some students applauded ERL as it enabled them to attend classes on time without experiencing travelling challenges. A student said: "online learning is easier and more comfortable. Moreover, I used to be late to some classes due to transportation problems. Now I am never late because the classes are online."

A good number of students reported on the flexibility of ERL. One student said: "I am comfortable and I am receiving information better than before because if I miss any information it is recorded so I can review it." In other words, students can learn at their own pace, anywhere and anytime, which they liked. One participant supported this view saying: "everything about online learning is positive. I am learning at my own pace, I get to see my family more, work is getting done and I am arriving to class on time. I love this time of my life." Participants in this study applauded ERL as it opened opportunities for students who were shy to speak in face-to-face classes. One participant said: "distance learning is really fun and I get to participate more because I sometimes get really shy when participating in face-to-face classes, so this helps overcome my shyness." Similarly, another participant said: "Online learning is good. I do not feel pressured when answering or asking a question, I do not like talking in real classes and prefer to stay quiet." One student liked ERL and wished it would continue after COVID-19 as some instructors taught online better than on campus: "we got to continue our online classes, surprisingly some professors do better teaching online than in real life [face-to-face]." Students learnt a great deal in ERL. This is supported by a participant who said:

> Online learning is a new experience which I have always wanted to try and it was really good. I understand the lessons pretty well and I focused and the program was really easy to use including a microphone, chat box and document files with a really good quality sound.

Similarly, another student who liked online learning said: "I prefer it in all its aspects and I do not see any negativity in it except technical problems." Technical problems, pressure of work and limited engagement formed students' negative experiences with online learning.

4.2. Negative Experiences – Technical Issues, Pressure of Work and Limited Engagement

Since most of the classes conducted were done synchronously, many students reported technical issues as one of the hindrances to their successful online learning experiences. One participant said: "It was easy to access online classes and everything would run smoothly until a technical issue arises or sometimes there would be an issue with communication with instructors via email." Another participant said she liked ERL except "when there are technical issues which happen and students are blamed for that."

Some participants felt that technical issues they experienced were so bad that they compromised their learning experiences. One student said: "it was easy to attend a class online, but technical difficulties made it hard to stay focused. I felt like my learning was compromised." Similarly, another participant who felt that students' learning was compromised said:

> It was a new and nice experience, although there were some issues with the internet and it was a little hard because sometimes I could not hear what the professor was saying and some professors make noises while talking or if some students talk. Most of the professors do not record the class.

Another participant echoed the same sentiments about technical issues which resulted in cancellation of some classes. The student said the experiences were "mostly satisfactory aside from the occasional technical issue. Those usually get solved within 24 hours at the most, though a fair number of lessons

had to be cancelled because of them." Technical issues were mainly happening because of poor internet connectivity during class and the Adobe Connect application which the university subscribed to in order for synchronous ERL to occur.

One student who reported on her experiences said:

> At the beginning, it was kind of hard adapting to the new changes but teachers were kind enough to make the process for us much easier. Also, the application [Adobe Connect] sometimes keeps lagging although my Wi-Fi connection was working well. Overall, my experience was pretty great.

The issue of Adobe Connect lagging was raised by all the students who reported on technical issues as a barrier to their online learning. A participant said: "I do not fully grasp what the teacher is talking about, Adobe lags too much, sometimes the professor asks us repeatedly to talk using the microphone even when it is very inconvenient and we say we cannot." Some students expressed emotional feelings about technical issues they experienced as a result of Adobe Connect. One student said: "I hate it [online learning]. Adobe lags, it is hard to focus, it is really annoying to manage, and very hard to understand when you are not there talking to the teacher face to face." Another student said: "what annoys me the most is the lagging that happens and I always make sure that my internet connection is excellent." As a result of lagging which students were experiencing, one came to a conclusion that: "we should use a different application than Adobe." The reason for that is supported by a student who said: "sometimes the Adobe Connect is not working well, and I do not hear the instructor sound very well."

Some students disliked ERL because there was a lot of work which needed to be done in a short space of time. The switch from face-to-face classes to online was not smooth. It was sudden and lecturers wanted assessments to be completed before the end of the semester. This put a lot of pressure on students. One student said: "there was a lot of work. I had due dates in the same week and the work needed a week to be done in three or one day." Another student said they were "under pressure as there were too many assessments to be submitted on the same day." Similarly, another student said: "due to the cancellation of quizzes and tests, many assignments were given to us which was hard to manage." As a result of too much pressure caused by the many assessments that were assigned at the same time, some students got stressed with ERL. One student said:

> Assignments were all due at the same time which was very stressful. I am grateful about the fact that in some classes exams were replaced with assignments. Instructors were as understanding and helpful as possible, which gave a sense of relief. I realised I learn better in person versus online.

Another student who felt stressed by having too much work during ERL said:

> It is too stressful due to having lots of projects to do in a short period of time and not being able to ask about what is not clear easily like we used to do. Mainly, there are loads of projects and homeworks to do that caused me to give up on some and focus on some. So I ended up getting an A in a course and F in another course. Horrible, just horrible.

Students were overwhelmed with work as instructors had to finish the second half of the semester. This added to the worries of COVID-19 which students already had. A student confirmed this saying:

> I cannot understand through online classes. After I finish each class and I have plenty of time, I have to repeat the classes three times to understand. During this difficult time, we feel more stressed about COVID-19, and the university increases this stress more, why? Every day we have more than 5 assignments in a day. How will I not feel stress? Of course we feel more stress, anxiety and depression if we cannot finish the work within the deadline.

Too much work and assessments to be submitted in a short space of time made students develop negative feelings about ERL. This resulted in some students not being able to finish some tasks in other courses. This was confirmed by a student who said:

> All lecturers gave us a lot of work and tasks that we must accomplish and finish in a short time and with all these things overlapping I cannot finish what is required so they must remember there are other materials that we should work on and not only their subject and they must take care of our feelings and hear us when something happens.

Too many assessments in a short space of time made students dislike online classes and prefer face-to-face, as was articulated by one student: "online classes make me get bored during the class and now most of my time I am working at the assignments and studying. While on campus, I did work, but not as much."

Some students reported experiencing limited engagement in their online learning. Some of the comments written about students' limited engagement include:

- "It is hard to engage with the instructor"

- "Not enough engagement in the class"

- "Unable to interact with professors in class as there were too many assignments"

- "I am not that engaged in online teaching"

- "The positive thing is that there is no trouble in dealing with transportation and the negative side is that sometimes you need to sit down and talk with others like your group members and professors"

One participant reported poor engagement among students who were assigned to a group project:

> Another challenge was working on our group project. It was difficult to get the group together to discuss the project and it took a lot of time and some of the students were not doing their part in the project, so it was hard to complete the project on time. Also, sometimes we could not reach our instructors and could not use the library source whenever we needed.

As a result of limited engagement in ERL, experiencing technical problems and having too much work to do, some students disliked online learning. Some did not consider it as real learning, as one student said: "I did not get the full experience of learning, it was so hard to focus (despite the hard work the professors were making to make us grasp the whole concept), it was so different." This is why another student said: "I do not like anything about the online classes as it has given me more anxiety."

The divergent views given show that to some students, ERL was very welcomed and a big relief as they did not have to worry about transport to and from campus as they attended classes in the comfort of their homes. To other students, their ERL experiences were not positive as pressure of work added to worries they already had which were caused by the global pandemic of COVID-19.

5.   Discussion

Findings in this study are categorised into positive experiences (comfort, flexibility and convenience of online learning) and negative experiences (technical problems, pressure of work and limited engagement).

In most cases, first year students were overwhelmed by online learning which challenged them to practice self-regulated learning. Henry (2018) postulates that the first year students' online learning abilities and experiences were influenced by their self-regulation. If first year students get more differentiated support in online learning they will learn to regulate their learning and subsequently reduce pressure of work which overwhelms them (Gillett-Swan, 2017; Brown *et al.*, 2015). First year students in this study had a lot of work to do at the beginning of ERL classes, but when they gathered momentum, they were able to manage their time and regulate their learning. This is consistent with self-regulated learning which falls under cognitive presence in Wang and Kang's (2006) cybegogy model of engaged

learning in an online environment. Students have to take ownership of their learning, manage their time and use their cognitive skills to explore and construct knowledge (Wang & Kang, 2006). Students can do that effectively if they are supported by their instructors. Instructors can support students by promoting interactive learning and continual engagement.

Henry (2018) postulates that there is a need for first year students to interact among themselves, with the instructor and with course content. Antonis, Daradoumis, Papadakis and Simos (2011) concur that in addition to ensuring that students interact with course instructors and course materials, there is a need to make sure that they also interact among themselves as that helps them connect and help each other in social and academic-related matters. Student interaction in the course forms part of social presence in the cybegogy model. Social presence was limited in this study as students reported on lack of communication with instructors and some students not actively taking part in group projects assigned to them. This is consistent with a statement by Gillett-Swan (2017) that one of the barriers to online engagement is evident in group activities. This explains why students in this study had negative experiences of ERL as they felt less engaged and overwhelmed by work. That is why some students disliked online classes as they felt their learning was compromised. Findings of this study concur with Almuraqab's (2020) research which revealed that 45% of students at a university in Dubai preferred either face-to-face classes or hybrid learning as opposed to ERL. Students enjoy ERL if their learning experiences are enhanced and the social presence in the cybegogy model is attained through various engagement with content, instructor and fellow peers (Karanicolas & Kontoleon, 2020; Aucejo *et al*., 2020). Brown *et al*. (2015) argue that there is a need to boost students' ERL experiences by engaging them in the course and making sure that they all take part in planned activities. When students are engaged in online learning, they are likely to understand difficult concepts as they can learn from each other. Skordis-Worrall et al. (2015, p. 417) concur that "understanding new concepts in an online course takes longer without the immediate support of peers and teachers to proffer alternative explanations." Engagement in online learning does not only enhance first year students' learning experiences, but also reduces dropouts. When Wang and Kang's (2006) emotive presence is supported, where students feel engaged, confident and comfortable with their learning, they are not likely to drop out (Afolabi, 2017).

The element of emotive presence in the cybegogy model was evident in this study as students stated some emotional words like *stressful*, *distressing*, *anxiety* and *hating* to describe their ERL experiences. This is consistent with findings of a study conducted at a university in the United States where students expressed dissatisfaction and emotional feelings related to ERL where they were overwhelmed by work and lost some opportunities (Aucejo *et al*., 2020). The sudden switch of classes from face-to-face to online caused by COVID-19 was a rough transition which distressed students in higher education across the globe and made first year students more vulnerable to dropping out of university education (UNESCO, 2020).

There is a need for more support for first year students in ERL than on campus (Brown *et al*., 2015). This is because online is an unfamiliar territory to most students and they need more orientation and support to understand what is expected of them in distance learning and how to study online. Some of the first year students will be studying online for the first time and they require more support to cope with their studies. Ugandan students used online learning in their first year and first semester at the university. Although they found the e-learning platform difficult to use, they were supported so much that there was "high turnout and enthusiasm amongst the first year students who participated in online courses" (Muhammad & Ademola, 2018, p. 97). Similarly, Karanicolas and Kontoleon (2020) contend that first year students at a university in Australia received a lot of support to overcome fear and lack of confidence which they had when they were having live classes during the time of COVID-19 (Karanicolas & Kontoleon, 2020).

6.   Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate first year students' experiences of ERL at a university in the UAE. It is concluded that context in which ERL has taken place is very important when judging students' learning experiences. In this case, students reflected on ERL experiences as they relate mainly to synchronous learning, which was influenced by an abrupt shift from face-to-face classes to online

classes. This is why students reflected mainly on experiencing technical issues as they are dominant in synchronous online learning. It is rather primitive to conclude that first year students at the university under investigation did not like ERL at all. They did not like the experiences they had which include technical errors in live classes which were conducted through Adobe Connect; they did not like the amount of pressure they had and limited engagement in asynchronous classes. In order to enhance students' learning experiences in ERL, this study advocates for the application of inclusive online pedagogical approaches, and the use of both synchronous and asynchronous teaching strategies in order to meet the diverse needs of all first-year students. The use of different online teaching strategies help cater for diverse needs of students in ERL and subsequently help reduce the rate of first year students' dropouts. A reasonable judgement of ERL can be made after students had adequate exposure to both synchronous and asynchronous online teaching strategies. If students had more asynchronous experiences to reflect on, they probably would not have raised concerns they had about technical issues and engagement. It is understandable that instructors mainly used synchronous classes because it was a sudden switch from face-to-face to online teaching with limited time to prepare and they had syllabuses already prepared for face-to-face teaching. That is why it is not advisable to make generalisations about online learning. For example, generalising that online learning is good for all students. That statement is inaccurate as different students in different contexts prefer different learning styles.

7. Implications

There is a need for instructors to use both synchronous and asynchronous ways of teaching to enhance students' learning experiences in ERL. Instructors should exercise continual engagement in asynchronous online teaching strategies. This will enhance the learning experiences of all students, including those who will be inactive. Policy makers in institutions of higher learning have to design inclusive ERL pedagogical approaches which allow all students to engage in active learning. Students need to be consulted when design inclusive policies as that helps in the designing and implementation of the curriculum in a way that is responsive to their needs. This can help reduce attrition which often happen among first year students in universities.

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