Emergency remote teaching of foreign languages at Saudi universities: Teachers' reported challenges, coping strategies and training needs

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Abstract

Though considerable research has been reported on COVID-19-related distance education, some dimensions of remote foreign language teaching experiences during the pandemic crisis remain to be explored. The study reported in this paper investigated Saudi university foreign language teachers' accumulated experiences and reflective beliefs of emergency remote instruction. The study focused specifically on: a) the general educational challenges the teachers encountered and their attempts to overcome them; b) the teachers' perceived difficulties in remotely teaching and assessing foreign language areas and their strategies for coping with them; and c) their reflective evaluation of remote foreign language teaching after doing it for three academic terms. Questionnaire data was collected from 112 teachers of Arabic and English as foreign languages, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 teachers. The analysis of both data types showed that the participants had a number of general educational and language-teaching-specific challenges in their COVID-19-related remote teaching. The teachers generally viewed the remote assessment of language areas is a more challenging task than teaching them. Reading was rated as the least difficult language area to teach and assess remotely, whereas writing was the most difficult one. The teachers reported using various coping strategies to overcome the educational and language teaching-specific challenges. They perceived their remote teaching experiences positively, but reported their needs for further training in developing better online assessment methods, using different teaching platforms and technological tools, and managing classroom interactions. The paper ends by discussing the results of the study and their implications.

Keywords Remote language teaching · Online language teaching · Online classroom interaction · Online assessment · COVID-19 · Mixed-method research · Saudi universities

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1 Introduction

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, educational systems worldwide have undergone major changes. There has been a sudden shift from face-to-face instruction to remote teaching in most countries. Unlike planned online instruction, emergency remote teaching is mainly used during crises such as pandemics and weather conditions (Hodges et al., 2020).

Due to varied contextual circumstances, the emergency remote teaching caused by the pandemic has been implemented in different forms worldwide (Moser et al., 2021). According to Hodges et al. (2020), "the primary objective in these circumstances is not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis" (p. 6). Thus, this sudden shift from traditional education to emergency remote teaching has brought about a number of challenges and opportunities.

Teachers' readiness to COVID-19-related remote instruction and their ability to cope with its potential challenges have considerably varied. In most countries, many teachers have struggled in coping with such challenges, and have learned how to use online instructional tools and approaches while teaching remotely (Hodges et al., 2020). Given that educational communities could depend on emergency remote teaching in the future, it is essential to explore and understand teachers' online instruction experiences in order to help them be better prepared for it in future similar circumstances (Hodges et al., 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020).

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis and the enforced transition to remote teaching, growing research has investigated how educational communities have dealt with remote teaching during the pandemic crisis. Some studies have particularly focused on language learners and teachers' experiences with COVID-19-related emergency remote education (e.g., Al Shlowiy et al., 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2020; Wong & Moorhouse, 2021; Wong et al., 2022; Yi & Jang, 2020). Though such studies have revealed important findings about the challenges and opportunities of COVID-19-related remote education, some other issues are yet to be explored.

We still need to examine some issues pertinent particularly to emergency remote language education during the pandemic period. For example, there is a need for researching how language teachers have experienced the remote teaching and assessment of language areas, and how they have coped with the challenges related to each. Investigating teachers' reflections upon their long-term experiences with COVID-19-related remote language education remains another underexplored issue. Since long-term emergency remote language teaching experiences potentially vary from one context to another, we also need to explore them in different international educational settings. In an attempt to address these research gaps, this study investigated Saudi university foreign language teachers' experiences and perceptions of emergency remote teaching imposed by the pandemic.

2 Previous studies

An increasing number of studies have investigated how teachers and students worldwide reacted to the new educational circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 crisis. Not many studies, however, have addressed teachers' reactions to the crisis in language education environments. The relevant language education research reported so far has adopted different approaches to exploring this area. Some studies have explored remote teaching challenges, whereas others have dealt with both teaching challenges and coping strategies. Most of the studies have probed these issues in one country, but a few others have investigated them from a cross-cultural angle. Methodologically speaking, the majority of studies have combined quantitative and qualitative data through using either a questionnaire and interviews or a survey with Likert-scale statements and open-ended questions.

The cross-cultural approach to probing COVID-19-related online English teaching experiences is particularly noted in the research published during the early stage of the pandemic crisis. For example, the large-scale studies published by the British Council (2020a, b) revealed that language teachers in a number of countries had some remote teaching difficulties such as assessing students' performance, accessing Internet and digital devices, overcoming technology illliteracy, dealing with students' demotivation, and communicating with families. In another early cross-cultural research report, MacIntyre et al. (2020) found that the main emergency remote teaching difficulties are: workload, family and personal health, and distraction between home and work affairs.

The country-specific studies have also revealed a number of COVID-19-related remote teaching challenges. Collectively, these include: limited prior experiences with remote teaching (Lie et al., 2020; Moser et al., 2021; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020), poor classroom interaction (Al-Jarf, 2020; Al-Nofaie, 2020; Wong & Moorhouse, 2021), distractions and limitations resulting from working from home (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020), students' performance assessment (Evans et al., 2020), boredom, demotivation and carelessness (Al Shlowiy et al., 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2020), their unaffordability of technological devices and limited access to Internet (Lie et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2022).

Compared to research on such emergency remote teaching challenges, a few studies have explored teachers' strategies for coping with them. Examples of the coping strategies these few studies revealed include: using various teaching platforms for dividing students into smaller groups (Gao & Zhang, 2020), adopting a three-stage lesson sequence (a pre–live-lesson task, a live lesson, and a post–live-lesson task) to maximize learners' engagement (Moorhouse & Beaumont, 2020), and depending more on process-oriented and formative language assessment types (Chung & Choi, 2021). Some other reported coping strategies relate to: accepting the pandemic realities and reframing them positively (MacIntyre et al., 2020), planning for more effective remote teaching and assessment procedures (Wong & Moorhouse, 2021), using collaborative teaching (Yi & Jang, 2020), and building professional learning communities to share ideas for assessment practices (Chung & Choi, 2021).

Despite the insights gained from these previous studies, some research gaps are yet to be addressed. As noted above, the teaching challenges and coping strategies investigated by such studies are of general educational and psychological nature. In other words, they have not addressed the COVID-19-related language teaching-specific issues. Thus, there is room for researching teachers' experiences in teaching and assessing language areas (i.e., grammar, listening, reading, speaking, vocabulary, and writing) under such exceptional circumstances, and their attempts for coping with them. It is also important to investigate teachers' reflection upon their COVID-19-related emergency remote instruction after spending longer time doing it. Given that most previous relevant studies have looked at teachers' emergency remote education experiences during the early waves of the pandemic, deeper insights into these experiences could be gained through investigating the accumulated pedagogical practices and beliefs teachers have had over longer periods. Researching emergency remote teaching beliefs and practices from this angle could provide more insightful practical implications for language teacher support and training in future similar circumstances.

3 Remote teaching at Saudi universities during the COVID-19 crisis

In March 2020, all the educational institutions in Saudi Arabia had to move to remote teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Like other countries in the world, the transition to remote teaching was a sudden change to all stakeholders in Saudi Arabia. Luckily enough, many Saudi universities under the guidance of the Ministry of Education began to provide their faculty members with some training in online teaching in 2018 and 2019. During the first 2–3 weeks in the transition, faculty members at Saudi universities received intensive training in remote teaching using Blackboard. This initial intensive training was followed by regular online workshops covering a range of related areas such as using the platform tools and building online tests. In addition to Blackboard, university teachers were allowed to use other applications and platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Forms to avoid any technical difficulties hindering the educational process. Remote teaching was the only mode of instruction used at Saudi universities from March 2020 to the end of the academic year. In the 2020–2021 academic year, the universities continued to use remote teaching in all social sciences and humanities majors. Meanwhile, a blended mode was used in applied and medical sciences, where a face-to-face instruction mode was used in laboratory courses and a remote teaching mode was followed in theoretical courses. Most of the exams were conducted remotely as well. With the beginning of the 2021–2022 academic year, Saudi universities have started to depend on regular face-face instruction in all majors, though the blended mode is still used in teaching some few courses within particular study programmes. Some measures were taken to enable a safe return to face-face teaching. First, receiving two COVID-19 vaccine doses has become a pre-requisite for both teachers and students to access university buildings. Second, class sizes have been minimized for protective purposes.

Though some research has addressed remote language education experiences in the Saudi context, it is noted that the studies concerned with learners (e.g., Mahyoob, 2020; Oraif & Elyas, 2021) outnumbered those of teachers. These few teacher studies imply that remote language teaching at Saudi universities was hindered by lack of access to up-to-date technologies (Al-Nofaie, 2020), students' demotivation and poor interaction in online activities (Al Shlowiy et al., 2021; Al-Jarf, 2020; Al-Nofaie, 2020), and their distraction and indiscipline behaviours (Al Shlowiy et al., 2021; Hakim, 2020). While these Saudi environment-specific challenges appear to resemble those found by the studies addressing other international educational communities, using different approaches to researching COVID-19-related remote language teaching could reveal valuable information about other important dimensions.

Like the research reviewed in the previous section, these Saudi context-specific studies have also investigated challenges related to general educational and psychological issues rather than to teaching and assessing language areas. It is worth noting that these studies have not reported detailed information about language teachers' coping strategies with such challenges in the Saudi educational context. As the publication dates of these works also indicate, they assessed language teachers' experiences in the early waves of the pandemic; no studies seem to have explored Saudi university teachers' accumulated or long-term COVID-19-related remote teaching beliefs and practices. Therefore, there is a need for an in-depth investigation of these research voids in the Saudi context. Therefore, the present study investigated the accumulated beliefs and practices Saudi university foreign language teachers have experienced with COVID-19-related remote education and how they have taught and assessed language areas remotely. The study could provide important implications to those interested in developing remote language teaching practices and meeting language learners' needs in online instructional environments in Saudi Arabia.

4 The present study

In light of the above, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the general educational challenges Saudi university foreign language teachers encountered in COVID-19-related remote teaching? And how did they try to overcome them?
2. What are the challenges they perceived in teaching and assessing language areas remotely? And how did they cope with such difficulties?
3. What are the teachers' reflective evaluation of foreign language remote teaching after doing it for three academic terms?

The study answered these research questions using a mixed-method approach by drawing on questionnaire and interview data. It focused on the teachers of Arabic and English; the two main foreign languages taught in the Kingdom. English is the main foreign language taught at Saudi universities. Arabic is the native language of Saudis, but it is also taught as a foreign language to a considerable population of

overseas students studying at Saudi universities. Some other foreign languages such as Chinese and French are taught in this higher education context but in a limited number of programmes.

4.1 Participants

The sample of the study consisted of 112 questionnaire respondents, and 14 interviewees. They were all faculty members teaching either Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) at the Saudi universities. The participants were of varied ages and teaching experience periods. Of the 112 questionnaire respondents, 73 were teachers of English as a foreign language and 39 were teachers of Arabic as a foreign language; 59 were females whereas 53 were males. Table 1 provides a summary of these demographic characteristics. The 112 respondents were teaching at the following 12 Saudi universities at the time of collecting the questionnaire data: Al-Baha University (n=6), Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (n=17), King Abdulaziz University (n=11), King Khalid University (n=8), King Saud University (n=16), Majmaah University (n=6), Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University (n=7), Princess Nora University (n=14), Qassim University (n=9), Shaqra University (n=6), Umm Al-Qura University (n=7), and University of Bisha (n=5).

In this university context, foreign language teachers normally teach a variety of language areas; and some of them may teach general courses covering all language areas. The questionnaire respondents represent the cultural backgrounds of the faculty members who are currently teaching the two language majors at Saudi universities. The larger number of these the faculty members are Saudis, but there are also other teachers who are Egyptians, Jordanians, Sudanese, Tunisians and Yemenis.

As for the 14 interviewees, eight of them were teachers of English, and six were teachers of Arabic. These 14 teachers also completed the questionnaire, and they were interviewed to expand upon the questionnaire responses. Regarding the nationalities of the interviewees, they were of Egyptian, Jordanian, Saudi and Tunisian nationalities (n=5, 2, 4, 3, respectively). Of the 14 interviewees, 11 were males and 3 were females. The interviewed teachers were affiliated with two of the above-mentioned Saudi universities. They were teaching various language areas, but their major teaching areas varied as follows: general language courses (n=6), writing (n=3), literature and

Table 1 A summary of the questionnaire respondents' demographics	Demographic variable	Number of respondents
	AFL teachers	39
	EFL teachers	73
	Female teachers	59
	Male teachers	53

reading (n=2), speaking and listening (n=2), and translation (n=1). All the questionnaire respondents and interviewees took part in the study on a voluntarily basis.

4.2 Data sources

As indicated above, the study drew its data from a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The authors worked collaboratively in developing the questions of the two data sources. The initial draft of the questionnaire and interviews were evaluated by an expert language education researcher, and were modified in light of his feedback. The questionnaire was developed in light of the research questions and also based on a relevant framework developed by the first author (Abdel Latif, 2022). It was written in Arabic to facilitate item understanding and answer. The questionnaire starts with three demographic questions about the participants' gender and teaching major (i.e., Arabic and English), and the university they work for. It has 35 Likert-scale statements distributed in four main parts, along with three open-ended questions given after the first, third and fourth parts. Its first part includes 15 statements about the general educational challenges of emergency remote teaching. This part is followed by an open-ended question which asks the respondents to explain how they coped with any difficulties they indicated. The second and third parts include items about the challenges the teachers experienced or perceived in teaching and assessing seven language areas (grammar, listening, reading, speaking, translation, writing, and vocabulary). Each of these two parts includes seven items, and they are followed by an open-ended question which asks the respondents to explain how they coped with any indicated difficulties in teaching or assessing language areas. As for the fourth questionnaire part, it has six statements tapping the respondents' reflective evaluation of their online teaching experiences. This part is also followed by an open-ended question. For parts one and four, a 5-point Likert response set (strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, and strongly disagree) was used, and another five-point Likert response set (completely difficult, difficult, not sure, non-difficult, and completely non-difficult) was used for parts two and three. The statistical analyses revealed that the 35 Likert-scale items in the questionnaire had high Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients which ranged from 0.73 to 0.88. The English version of the questionnaire is given in appendix 1.

On the other hand, eight guiding questions were developed for the semi-structured interviews. These questions aimed at obtaining narrative data from the teachers about the key issues covered by each part in the questionnaire. Specifically, the questions focused on the potential changes in the teachers' remote instruction experiences since the beginning of the pandemic, the general difficulties they encountered in online teaching during this period, the difficulties they found in remotely teaching and testing their main language major, and their reflective evaluation of online teaching. See the guiding questions of the semi-structured interviews in appendix 2.

4.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

The data collection procedures were carried out in two stages. In the first stage, the questionnaire was created using Google Forms, and then its URL was circulated to

different groups of teachers of Arabic and English as foreign languages some Saudi universities. The teacher groups were invited to complete the questionnaire through email or WhatsApp messages in summer, 2021. The second stage of the data collection involved conducting the phone or voice application interviews 14 teachers. A number of teachers were invited to the interviews via phone calls and WhatsApp messages. Those who responded positively to the invitations were interviewed based on an agreed-upon schedule. The 14 interviews lasted from 30 to 40 min. The first author interviewed the teachers of English, while the second author conducted interviews with the teachers of Arabic. The interviews were conducted in Arabic to facilitate communication.

The two authors co-analyzed the data collected. First, the percentages of the participants' responses to the questionnaire Likert-scale items were calculated and tabulated. Second, the participants' responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire were analyzed and categorized according to their frequencies (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). As for the interview data, it was analyzed in light of the following guidelines proposed by Lodico et al. (2006): preparing and sorting out the data, exploring the data and classifying it, locating the relevant descriptions of the interviewees' perspectives and experiences, and finding further evidence emerging from the data. The interviews were transcribed in English. Following this, the authors read and analyzed the interview data independently and then collaboratively to identify the emerging themes related to the research questions. Finally, the questionnaire and interview data analyzed was combined to provide answers to the research questions.

5 Results of the study

In what follows, the results of analyzing the questionnaire and interview data are given. These results will be presented and discussed in light of the three research questions and the relevant parts in both types of data.

5.1 The general educational challenges encountered in remote language teaching

The first part of the questionnaire concerns the teachers' perceptions of the general educational challenges encountered their remote teaching. Table 2 shows the teachers' responses to the 15 Likert-scale statements in this part. The first seven statements in the table relate to the teachers' preparedness to remote instruction, coping with its tasks and accessibility of its tools.

As noted, the teachers generally agreed with the statements indicating they found remote teaching challenging due to: their unpreparedness to it at the early stage of the pandemic crisis, work overload involved in preparing for online teaching, doing multiple tasks while teaching online, and the technical difficulties (M = 3.73, 3.58, 3.75 and 3.45, respectively; *Agree* mean ranges from 3.41 to 4.20). Meanwhile, they reported neutral opinions about viewing remote instruction a challenging task due

Table 2 The teachers' views on the general remote teaching challenges

I found remote teaching challenging due to:	Mean	SD
My unpreparedness to it at the early stage of the pandemic crisis	3.73	3.39
My inability to psychologically cope with online teaching	2.93	2.68
The work overload involved in preparing for online teaching	3.58	3.29
Doing multiple tasks while teaching online	3.75	4.47
Technical difficulties in using the platform tools	3.45	3.12
My inability to access to access online teaching devices and tools	2.73	2.49
Unavailability of electronic teaching materials	3.19	2.92
The difficulty of implementing learning activities in online classes	3.47	3.18
The difficulty of managing teacher-student interaction in online classes	3.37	3.02
The difficulty of managing student–student interaction in online classes	3.69	3.36
My students' inability to effectively use the platform tools	3.66	3.15
My students' inability to access online teaching devices and tools	4	3.61
My students' boredom and demotivation during online classes	3.45	3.14
My students' non-responsiveness and distraction during online classes	3.46	3.17
My students' negligence of doing course assignments	2.83	2.59

(*strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, not sure = 3, disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1*)

to their inability to psychologically cope with remote teaching and to access some basic elements of online teaching, or the unavailability of electronic teaching materials (M = 2.93, 2.73, and 3.19, respectively; *Not Sure* mean ranges from 2.61 to 3.40). Besides, the teachers' responses to the three statements about online instruction implementation challenges generally show that they had difficulties in implementing learning activities, and managing teacher-student and student–student interaction. The responses to the four statements indicate that the teachers found managing student–student interaction (M = 3.69) more challenging than the other two difficulties.

As for the statements about learner-related factors (i.e., the last five items in this part), the teachers agreed that four of them are challenging, and rated students' technology unaffordability and inability to effectively use the platform tools as relatively more problematic than their boredom and demotivation, and non-responsiveness and distraction in online classes (M = 3.66, 4, 3.46, and 3.45, respectively). Contrarily, the responses to the statement about students' negligence of doing course assignments indicate it was not problematic for some teachers rather than others (M = 2.83).

The open-ended question given at the end of first part asks the participants to explain how they coped with any main remote teaching difficulties indicated in their responses. The responses to this open-ended question, and the answers of one interview question revealed important details about the above quantitative data. The teachers provided 63 positive questionnaire responses related to the following three main dimensions: their unpreparedness to remote teaching at the beginning of the crisis (n = 33 responses), students' inability to use the platform (n = 6 responses), and poor classroom interaction (n = 24 responses). The 14 interviewees also reported having these three main problems. For example, in the

following excerpt an interviewee is describing his own remote teaching experiences and those of his colleagues at the beginning of the crisis:

> Interviewed Teacher 8: We already had some kind of e-learning training before doing remote teaching, but what happened wasn't expected at all. I had to cope with this emergent situation at the beginning because there was no other alternative, and week after a week I managed to develop my remote teaching skills. I used Blackboard and also learned how to use Zoom. … The case was different with some colleagues. The younger generation got adapted to remote teaching during the early two or three weeks, but it took older colleagues a longer time until they managed to overcome some problems.

Other interviewees also narrated similar stories about moving from the early stage in which they had difficulties in coping with remote teaching to a later stage in which it became the new normal they dealt with it more easily. The questionnaire respondents and interviewees reported that they overcame the problem of their unpreparedness to remote teaching through a number of ways. Collectively, these include: attending online teaching courses and workshops organized by their universities, self-learning how to use different teaching platforms, consulting colleagues, preparing well for how to deal with technological difficulties in online classes, and upgrading their technological devices and Internet packages. Additionally, some questionnaire respondents and interviewees mentioned that at the early stage of remote teaching, some of their students were unable to join the online classes, use the platform tools, or even submit their coursework or test answers through the platform. An interviewee explains how he tried to support his students' learning and ability to use the teaching platform as follows:

> Interviewed Teacher 5: It took some of my students two weeks to attend online classes at this early stage. To help these students during the early weeks of remote teaching, I allowed them to submit their assignments and test papers through emails instead of the platform… I also communicated with my university technical support team to help in fixing their technical problems….Instead of Blackboard, I used Zoom which is more compatible with students' devices.

The 24 questionnaire respondents' answers concerned with poor classroom interaction suggest many teachers could only partially overcome this problem. One questionnaire respondent comments on her attempts to overcome poor classroom interaction by saying, "I didn't find a solution for this problem". Below an interviewee also diagnoses some causes of poor interaction in his remote Arabic classes:

> Interviewed Teacher 1: Teaching Arabic as a foreign language requires creating a classroom atmosphere in which I interact with my students and they interact with each other without any communication barriers. Informal classroom chats also reflect cultural and linguistic dimensions for language learners. ... But in online classes this interaction is interrupted in many cases by the noise coming from microphones, Internet disconnectivity, or camera problems.

Some respondents' answers about poor classroom interaction concern students' boredom and non-responsiveness in online classes (n= 13), whereas others relate to managing student–student interactions (n=11). The relevant questionnaire and interview answers imply that it was difficult to deal with students' boredom and non-responsiveness. For example, the following interviewee is talking about this problem:

> Interviewed Teacher 2: In most online classes, I found many students saying they were unable to participate in the activities due to technical difficulties such as camera or microphone problems….So, I made the students' course-work mark associated with their class participation… I'd like also to say that in traditional classes I regularly use humour and laughter to create a friendly learning atmosphere, but I don't do this in online classes. I have to be more serious with students to give them the impression that their participation in classroom activities is obligatory.

The 11 questionnaire respondents who mentioned having difficulties in managing student–student interactions described some strategies they used to overcome this problem such as dividing the online class into small groups, and using more interactive activities. Likewise, the strategies some interviewees reported for managing student–student interactions include using other platforms for organizing students in breakout rooms, motivating students to participate in peer activities, and using various communication activities. For example:

> Interviewed Teacher 13: My main concern in online classes was students' non-responsiveness. I tried to overcome this problem by talking to the students about the importance and benefits of their participation, fostering my relationship with them by addressing them by their names, asking students to turn off their microphones in their non-participation time, and grouping them in classroom activities and monitoring their interactions.

5.2 Remote teaching and assessment of language areas

The second and third questionnaire parts asked the respondents to rate the perceived difficulties in remotely teaching and assessing language areas, respectively. As noted in Table 3, the seven language areas were rated from less difficult to more difficult to teach as follows: reading (M=2.42), vocabulary (M=2.42), speaking (M=2.59), listening (M=2.66), grammar (M=2.71), translation (M=2.77), and writing (M=3.17). Overall, the remote teaching of reading, vocabulary and speaking is viewed as non-difficult (mean ranges from 1.81 to 2.60), whereas listening, grammar, translation and writing are rated in the *Not sure* category (mean ranges from 2.61 to 3.40).

Table 4 shows that the respondents rated the remote assessment of language areas as relatively more difficult than their teaching (grand mean of remote assessment=2.87; grand mean of remote teaching=2.67). The seven areas were rated from less difficult to more difficult to assess as follows: reading (M=2.58),

Table 3 Teachers' rating of the difficulty of teaching language areas remotely	To what extent have you found it difficult to teach the following language areas remotely?	Mean	SD
	Teaching grammar remotely	2.71	2.47
	Teaching listening remotely	2.66	2.40
	Teaching reading remotely	2.42	2.11
	Teaching speaking remotely	2.59	2.32
	Teaching translation remotely	2.77	2.47
	Teaching vocabulary remotely	2.42	2.11
	Teaching writing remotely	3.17	2.89

(completely difficult=5, difficult=4, not sure=3, non-difficult=2, completely non-difficult=1)

Table 4 Teachers' rating of the difficulty of assessing language areas remotely	To what extent have you found it difficult to assess the following language areas remotely?	Mean	SD
	Assessing grammar remotely	2.71	2.42
	Assessing listening remotely	2.92	2.68
	Assessing reading remotely	2.58	2.32
	Assessing speaking remotely	2.81	2.55
	Assessing translation remotely	3.13	2.78
	Assessing vocabulary remotely	2.62	2.34
	Assessing writing remotely	3.33	3.02

(completely difficult=5, difficult=4, not sure=3, non-difficult=2, completely non-difficult=1)

vocabulary (M=2.62), grammar (M=2.71), speaking (M=2.81), listening (M=2.92), translation (M=3.13) and writing (M=3.17). Thus, all these ratings fall in the *Not sure* category (mean ranges from 2.61 to 3.40) with the exception of reading whose assessment was rated as non-difficult.

The ratings given in Tables 3 and 4 generally indicate that the teachers viewed reading as the least difficult language area to teach and assess remotely, and writing as the most difficult one. The difference between the rated difficulty of teaching and assessing translation (M=2.77 versus 3.13, respectively) is noteworthy; this issue is explained later when discussing pertinent qualitative data.

The teachers' answers to the open-ended question following these two questionnaire parts and to the interviews revealed insightful dimensions about their understanding of the difficulties encountered in teaching and/or assessing the seven language areas, and how they coped with them. The 87 positive answers to the open-ended question relate to language teaching areas as follows: writing (n=21), reading (n=16), speaking (n=15), listening (n=12), grammar (n=10), vocabulary (n=9), and translation (n=5). The respondents referred to teaching language issues in 57 of these answers, and to assessment issues in 30.

The teachers discussing the remote teaching of writing mentioned they had two main obstacles: the more time needed for commenting on students' writing, and the difficulty of implementing corroborative writing and peer assessment activities. With regard to the first obstacle, five respondents congruently referred to the difficulty of getting students to perform writing tasks in online classes as compared to the face-to-face instruction in which they easily monitor students and organize them into groups. Since this obstacle has resulted in asking students to do these tasks as home assignments, the teachers had to spend much more time reading students' texts and commenting on them. Four respondents also indicated it is difficult to implement interaction activities (i.e., corroborative writing and peer assessment) in online classes. The three interviewed writing teachers also reported similar instructional experiences in online writing classes. According to them, remote writing teaching is challenging mainly due to the nature of writing instructional materials and activities. One of these teachers elaborates on this issue:

> Interviewed Teacher 4: Teaching writing remotely is so demanding. I'm teaching textbooks mainly suited for collaborative learning and critical thinking activities. … Because it's difficult to teach these activities in the same way I do in face-to-face classes, I found myself talking for a longer time in online classes…. When it comes to commenting on students' texts in online classes, this is another challenge…In traditional classes, I used to give more oral comments on students' texts…but in online classes I give more written comments because students write the assigned essays at home.

Regarding translation which is another written language area, only one questionnaire respondent commented on the nature of teaching it remotely. Concurring with the respondents' above-noted lower rating of the difficulty of teaching translation– as compared to its assessment, she referred to the easier accessibility of online dictionaries and machine translation tools, and this offers an advantage in remote translation teaching. The interviewed translation teacher also supported this view, and added that it requires adapting online teaching scenarios of translation. Meanwhile, he also reported depending on teaching translation as individual learning activity in online classes due to the difficulty of implementing collaborative activities.

Meanwhile, the questionnaire respondents and interviewees expressed more concerns about the difficulties of assessing writing and translation remotely. In the following questionnaire answers, online assessment of writing is regarded problematic due to the potential assistance students may get from others and the accessibility of written text evaluation software:

– In many cases when evaluating an essay submitted through the platforms, I'm not sure whether the student wrote this essay himself, or someone else helped him.
– In online tests, many students use written error correction programmes. This makes it difficult for me to have objective scores of their writing performance.

The questionnaire respondent and interviewed writing teachers mentioned using the following solutions to deal with such problems: raising students'

awareness of plagiarism, using plagiarism checkers when evaluating texts, asking students to submit handwritten texts and to turn their cameras in assessment sessions, relying more on formative assessment, and shortening the time of writing tests/exams to minimize cheating attempts. On the other hand, the interviewed translation teacher mentioned using similar strategies for assessing students' translation abilities:

> Interviewed Teacher 14: Online assessment doesn't accurately reflect students' translation abilities. If it's my own decision, I wouldn't choose it … It is the main problem I faced because many students depend on Google Translate…There're many accessible online translation tools as well…So, I had to use more multiple-choice and true-false questions and minimize direct translation questions. In my exams, I include some sentences which can't be translated correctly through machine translation. ... I also translate exam texts using more than a machine translation application to characterize copied answers from original ones.

Unlike writing and translation, the questionnaire respondents and interviewees did not report major concerns regarding teaching or assessing reading remotely. Their answers explain some adaptations or compensatory strategies in remote reading teaching such as: using the flipped classroom technique which involves students in reading the texts at home and discussing them in online classes, evaluating students' recorded oral reading audios submitted through WhatsApp, sharing reading texts via the visual tools in platform, varying reading activities, and engaging students in more extensive reading. Three questionnaire respondents and the two interviewees majored in reading and literature also mentioned altering their reading assessment strategies. They particularly reported depending on formative assessment forms and objective tests. The two interviewed teachers, however, did not regard objective tests suitable for assessing students' understanding and knowledge of literature. One of them explains this issue as follows:

> Interviewed Teacher 10: In face-to-face literature courses, I assess students' performance using essay questions asking them to provide a critique of a literary work or a particular issue in it. I also ask students to do one coursework task along with the mid-term test and final-term exam.… While teaching online, I had to depend more on objective tests, and assign students three coursework tasks. In mid-term and final-term assessments, students write short notes on some literary issues, and answer a set of multiple-choice and true-false questions.… I know this isn't the optimal way for assessing students' literature understanding, but there is no other solution!

On the other hand, no major obstacles were mentioned in the 15 questionnaire respondents' comments about teaching and assessing speaking remotely. Five teachers talked about the technical difficulties occurring during online speaking lessons such as microphone problems and the unavailability of the speaking assignment recording feature in the platform. One teacher reported noting her students' shyness in online speaking activities especially when participating with

their cameras on. Six teachers referred to grouping students in online speaking classes, motivating their lesson engagement by making their participation conditional to improving coursework marks, and getting each student to take part in the online speaking activities. The questionnaire respondents did not refer to specific problems encountered in assessing students' oral skills remotely, but three of them mentioned trying to foster students' speaking ability by asking them to share their audio-recorded monologues or dialogues through WhatsApp for peers and/or teacher evaluation. Like speaking, no majors concerns were reported in the 13 questionnaire responses about listening. Five questionnaire respondents had some students who found it difficult to clearly hear the listening audios played remotely. As result, they had to send students these audios prior to the activities to play them on their own devices. Six other teachers commenting on remote listening instruction talked about scaffolding their students' aural skills by sending them further listening activities for practice and drawing their attention to reliable listening comprehension learning websites.

With regard to assessment difficulties, two teachers reported some students may receive assistance during listening tests/exams. Therefore, they overcame any potential attempt of this kind by asking the students to keep their cameras on while completing their tests/exams. The two interviewed speaking and listening teachers also agreed that it is easy to teach the two skills remotely and mentioned using similar coping strategies, but one of them talked about the absence of complete language interaction in her online speaking classes:

> Teacher 12: Speaking was one of the easiest skills to teach remotely…. I overcame many problems in my online classes by engaging the students in more practice and also asking them to submit their recorded speaking audios to evaluate them either orally in the classes or in written comments… The problem I couldn't solve is the absence of students' real group interactions and body language communication in these activities. The camera can't completely show me the full body language the students use when performing speaking tasks.

The questionnaire respondents talking about their remote teaching of grammar mentioned one main issue which is making use of visual materials and platform tools (such as the board) to summarize grammatical rules or help students characterize their details. Commenting on their vocabulary instruction, three respondents also mentioned making use of visual aids and tools to explain word lexical features. Six other teachers talked about guiding students to using some lexical tools useful in word lookups (such as Quizlet and online dictionaries). Overall, these respondents reported no noted difficulties in teaching or assessing both grammar and vocabulary remotely.

5.3 Teachers' reflective evaluation of their remote language teaching experiences

The fourth part of the questionnaire includes six Likert-scale statements assessing the respondents' reflective evaluation of their online teaching experiences and

the lessons learned from them. As noted in the respondents' answers given in Table 5, they strongly agreed with the statement about viewing teaching remotely as a useful and good experience for them (M=4.65). They also agreed with the three statements about their willingness to make online teaching a part of future instruction tasks (M=4.12), and their current need to master some skills in using teaching platform (M=3.65), and others in designing the tests appropriate to online environments (M=3.47). Meanwhile, they had neutral views towards evaluating online teaching as an imperfect educational process (M=3.28), and on the need to master some online language teaching skills (M=3.30). Overall, these responses indicate that the teachers positively perceived their remote teaching experiences, and that they still need to develop some skills.

Similar results were also found in the answers to the first interview question. All the 14 interviewees positively perceived their remote teaching experiences, and said that such experiences have reshaped their pedagogical perspectives. As one interviewee summarizes it:

> Interviewed Teacher 6: I didn't use to believe in online teaching before COVID-19 developments, and I used to say it is a useless mode of education. But after this experience, I have changed my beliefs. So, never say never!

In their answers to the final interview questions, the 14 teachers also confirmed their positive attitudes towards online education and mentioned the benefits gained from their remote teaching experiences. According to the interviewees, the lessons they learned from teaching their foreign language courses remotely are: a) learning how to use online teaching tools in a short time; b) getting ready for future similar situations; c) realizing the increasing importance of educational technology; d) discovering new teaching and learning tools; e) recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of online language teaching; f) developing a self-learning approach in learning how to teach with technology; and g) getting connected with students more regularly to support their learning. Meanwhile, four interviewees said that while online teaching is a useful pedagogical alternative to traditional teaching, it cannot replace it completely. As one teacher explains:

Table 5 Teachers' reflective evaluation of their remote language teaching experiences

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	Mean	SD
Teaching remotely has generally been a useful and good experience for me	4.65	4.18
Online teaching is generally an imperfect educational process	3.28	3.07
I want to make online teaching a part of my future instructional tasks	4.12	3.86
I still need to master some skills in using teaching platforms	3.65	3.34
I still need to master some skills in online language teaching	3.30	3.01
I still need to master some skills in designing the tests appropriate to online environments	3.47	3.17

(*strongly agree=5, agree=4, not sure=3, disagree=2, strongly disagree=1*)

Interviewed Teacher 3: Online teaching is so useful and we've found it a solution for teaching in these difficult circumstances…. In the future, it must be blended with traditional classes, but it can't replace them.

This questionnaire part was followed by an open-ended question that asks the respondent teachers about the potential further online teaching training areas they may need. The teachers provided 53 answers which are related to three training areas. Twenty-four of these answers reflected the teachers' technological training needs such as knowing how to use multiple teaching platforms, using some tools in particular platforms (e.g., the board), and designing electronic learning and teaching materials. In 21 answers, the teachers talked about their training needs in designing and managing more reliable online language assessment types, and in eight responses they referred to training in managing online classroom interactions efficiently. The interviewed teachers also confirmed these questionnaire responses in their answers to the questions about their potential training needs. They focused mainly on their training needs in the three areas. An interviewed teacher explains her training needs below:

Interviewed teacher 7: I still need develop some skills in online teaching. First, I want to have good skills in building effective electronic tests, and also to know new tools for preventing plagiarism…There're also more interactive teaching platforms such as Nearpod… I'm not familiar with using it yet… Training us in using different platforms will lead to finding better ways in online teaching….There's no problem in managing the interactions between me as a teacher and students, but the problem is managing the interactions among the students. So, we still need training in setting up breakout rooms and monitoring students in them.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the reported training needs of the interviewed teachers differed slightly from those of the questionnaire respondents in their frequencies as follows: developing more robust electronic assessment formats and systems (14), technological training (n=13), and managing classroom interactions (n=6).

6 Discussion of the results

The questionnaire and interview data given above show important issues about the general educational and language-teaching-specific challenges Saudi university foreign language teachers encountered in their remote instructional practices. Some of these challenges are associated with teachers, particularly their unpreparedness to remote teaching at the early stage of the crisis, and work overload. These results align with those reported by other studies (e.g., Lie et al., 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2020; Moser et al., 2021; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020).

The questionnaire respondents rated some challenges pertinent to online lesson delivery and to students as higher than others. The highest rated challenges relate to students' inability to access some online teaching tools and devices, managing

student–student interaction in online classes, and students' unfamiliarity with the platform tools, respectively. The questionnaire responses also indicate that the teachers encountered other challenges associated specifically with students' boredom, demotivation, non-responsiveness and distraction, and with managing teacher-student interaction in online classes. The qualitative data supports the teachers' questionnaire ratings. It is worth mentioning that such online lesson delivery and student-related challenges were reported in some previous studies which revealed that COVID-19-related remote language teaching is negatively influenced by poor classroom interaction (e.g., Al Shlowiy et al., 2021; Al-Jarf, 2020; Al-Nofaie, 2020; Wong & Moorhouse, 2021), students' boredom, demotivation and carelessness (e.g., Al Shlowiy et al., 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2020; Hakim, 2020), and their unaffordability of online technological devices and tools (e.g., Lie et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2022). However, compared to the results of previous studies, the present study profiled detailed data about the challenges specifically found in the Saudi university context.

Meanwhile, the qualitative data helped also in profiling the coping strategies the teachers used to overcome these challenges. Compared to the coping strategies revealed by previous studies (e.g., Chung & Choi, 202; Gao & Zhang, 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2020; Moorhouse & Beaumont, 2020; Yi & Jang, 2020), a wider range of such strategies was reported by the present study participants. For example, the participant teachers reported that they were able to overcome remote teaching technological difficulties through attending online training courses, self-learning how to use different teaching platforms, consulting colleagues, and upgrading their technological tools. Likewise, they mentioned using some coping strategies to overcome the student–student interaction problem, including: dividing the online class into small groups, implementing more interactive activities, and using other platforms for organizing students in breakout rooms. While the results indicate that the teachers managed to overcome some of these challenges with time and experiences (for example, those resulting from their own and their students' unpreparedness to remote education), they could only partially overcome other ones (for example, students' boredom and non-responsiveness, and poor classroom interaction).

An original contribution of the present study relates to investigating the language-teaching-specific challenges in remote education environments. As indicated above, this issue has hardly been addressed in previous research. Some previous studies (e.g., British Council, 2020a, 2020b; Evans et al., 2020; Wong & Moorhouse, 2021) generally indicate that assessing students' performance has been a main challenge for language teachers in COVID-19-related remote teaching, but these studies have not provided further related details. The present study revealed the rated difficulties and complexities of remotely teaching and assessing each foreign language area. It was found that the teachers generally viewed the remote assessment of the seven language areas a more challenging task than their teaching. Additionally, they viewed reading as the least difficult language area to teach and assess remotely, and writing as the most difficult area. The qualitative data also indicates variance in the complexity of teaching and assessing each language area remotely. For example, while the remote teaching of writing is regarded as more challenging due to the extra time needed for commenting on students' texts and the nature of writing activities, the

difficulties mentioned in teaching listening and speaking are mainly technical ones. Regarding assessment, the more difficulties involved in remotely evaluating writing and translation are associated with the potential assistance students may get from others and the accessibility of written text evaluation software and machine translation tools. Likewise, the use of online objective tests is viewed as a necessity to minimize plagiarism, but some teachers regard these tests as unsuitable for assessing students' literature understanding and knowledge.

The teachers' reported coping strategies for overcoming the complexities of the remote teaching and assessment of language areas varied also remarkably from one area to another. The teachers made some adaptations or use specific compensatory strategies in their remote instruction and/or assessment of listening, reading and speaking. For instance, the reading teachers reported using the flipped classroom technique, evaluating students' recorded oral reading audios, sharing reading texts via platform visual tools, and varying reading activities. Some speaking teachers also reported asking their students to electronically share their audio-recorded monologues or dialogues for peers and/or teacher assessment. A common practice many teachers reported drawing upon in remotely evaluating their students' language performance is using formative assessment types. This practice is congruent with language teacher educators' suggestion for coping with COVID-19-related assessment difficulties (AUTHORS, XXXX) and also with the assessment approaches used by language teachers in South Korea (Chung & Choi, 2021).

The results also indicate that the teachers positively perceived their remote teaching experiences, and learned some lessons from them. At present, they are generally ready for future online teaching situations. Unlike some studies indicating Saudi language teachers' need for training in using particular online instruction applications only (e.g., Al Shlowiy et al., 2021; Hakim, 2020), the qualitative data in this study showed that Saudi university foreign language teachers have training needs in: developing better online assessment methods, using multiple teaching platforms and technological tools, and managing classroom interactions. On the one hand, future remote teaching training in the Saudi university context, and perhaps worldwide, should target meeting these needs. On the other hand, technological developments may bring to us better teaching platforms that help teachers have more interactive online classes.

7 Conclusion

This study explored Saudi university foreign language teachers' accumulated experiences of emergency remote instruction, the general and language-teaching-specific challenges they have encountered and their strategies for overcoming them, and their reflective evaluation of remote foreign language teaching after doing it for three academic terms. Some main conclusions can be drawn from the results given above. Compared to the other types of challenges, the Saudi university foreign language teachers encountered more difficulties in delivering online lessons and in helping their students cope with remote instruction. While these teachers' accumulated remote instruction experiences have helped them overcome the challenges related to

their own and their students' unpreparedness to remote teaching, they could partially cope with the ones pertaining to poor classroom interaction, and students' boredom, demotivation, and distraction. Additionally, the teachers have found more challenges in the remote assessment of the seven language areas as compared to teaching them.

The study generally suggests that as a result of their online education experiences during the pandemic crisis, foreign language teachers at Saudi universities have now accepted remote teaching as a tool they may occasionally depend on for curriculum delivery. These teachers, however, still find some challenges in teaching and assessing language areas remotely, and such challenges vary from one language area to another. Therefore, they need training in some online teaching areas, particularly in developing better online assessment methods and managing classroom interaction.

This study is limited by its focus on Saudi university foreign language teachers. This limitation should be considered when generalizing its results. Since educational institutions may resort to remote teaching in emergency situations such as health crises and weather conditions, exploring educators' experiences in such circumstances could have important implications for future relevant practices. Given this, there is a need for investigating teachers' long-term experiences with emergency remote language teaching in other international contexts. Future studies could also address the long-term COVID-19-related remote education beliefs and experiences of the faculty members teaching other university majors, and those of pre-university teachers working in different international settings. With these research endeavors, we could understand how the educational communities have experienced and reacted to remote teaching during the COVID-19 crisis, and to what extent they are ready to use it in the future.

Appendix 1: A questionnaire about online language teaching during the COVID-19 crisis

Dear faculty member,

This questionnaire aims at exploring your online teaching experiences and perceptions since the beginning of the Corona pandemic crisis. While completing the questionnaire, please try to provide the answers that realistically reflect your own teaching experiences and related views. Kindly note that your responses to this questionnaire will be only used for research purposes, and that they will be dealt with confidentially so that no one can identify who you are or where you work. Thank you for your cooperation.

Gender

Female		Male	

Teaching Major

Arabic		English	

University:

Part one: The challenges you have encountered since the sudden transition to remote teaching in March 2020.

I found remote teaching challenging due to:	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My unpreparedness to it at the early stage of the pandemic crisis.					
My inability to psychologically cope with online teaching.					
The work overload involved in preparing for online teaching.					
Doing multiple tasks while teaching online.					
Technical difficulties in using the platform tools.					
My inability to access to access online teaching devices and tools.					
Unavailability of electronic teaching materials.					
The difficulty of implementing learning activities in online					

classes.					
The difficulty of managing teacher-student interaction in online classes.					
The difficulty of managing student-student interaction in online classes.					
The difficulty of assessing students' language performance.					
My students' inability to effectively use the platform tools.					
My students' inability to access online teaching devices and tools.					
My students' boredom and demotivation during online classes.					
My students' non-responsiveness and distraction during online classes.					
My students' negligence of doing course assignments.					

Please indicate how you have coped with the main difficulties (if any) you ticked above.

Part two: Teaching language areas remotely

To what extent have you found it difficult to TEACH the following language areas remotely?	Completely difficult	Difficult	Not sure	non-difficult	Completely non-difficult
Teaching grammar remotely					
Teaching listening remotely					
Teaching reading remotely					
Teaching speaking remotely					
Teaching translation remotely					
Teaching vocabulary remotely					
Teaching writing remotely					

Part three: Assessing language areas remotely

To what extent have you found it difficult to ASSESS the following language areas remotely?	Completely difficult	Difficult	Not sure	non-difficult	Completely non-difficult
Assessing grammar remotely					
Assessing listening remotely					
Assessing reading remotely					
Assessing speaking remotely					
Assessing translation remotely					
Assessing vocabulary remotely					
Assessing writing remotely					

If you have any difficulties in teaching or assessing the above language areas, please mention them below and explain how you have coped with them:

- Teaching and assessing grammar remotely:

- Teaching and assessing listening remotely:

- Teaching and assessing reading remotely:

- Teaching and assessing speaking remotely:

- Teaching and assessing translation remotely:

- Teaching and assessing vocabulary remotely:

- Teaching and assessing writing remotely:

Part four: Experiences and needed training

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Teaching remotely has generally been a useful and good experience for me.					
2. Online teaching is generally an imperfect educational process.					
3. I want to make online teaching a part of my future instructional tasks.					
4. I still need to master some skills in using teaching platforms.					
5. I still need to master some skills in online language teaching.					
6. I still need to master some skills in designing the tests appropriate to online environments.					

If you still need to training in any dimensions of the online teaching process, please explain these.

Appendix 2: Guiding questions of the semi-structured interviews

1. In this interview, I would like to know about your experience in teaching remotely since the beginning of the Corona pandemic. So, how have you experienced online teaching during this period? Was it a positive or negative experience? Please explain in detail.
2. To what extent has your remote teaching of (Arabic/English) differed or changed at the beginning of the crisis as compared to the later stages?
3. Have you encountered any general online teaching difficulties after the sudden transition to remote instruction in March 2020? If so, how have you coped with these difficulties?
4. Have you encountered any difficulties in remotely teaching your main instruction major? If so, how have you coped with these difficulties?
5. Have you encountered any difficulties in remotely assessing your main instruction major? If so, how have you coped with these difficulties?
6. Do you think you still need to master a number of skills in using online teaching platforms? If so, please explain.
7. Do you think you still need to receive training in online teaching or testing skills? If so, please explain.
8. In your opinion, what are the lessons learned from teaching (Arabic/English) courses remotely since the beginning of the Corona pandemic crisis?

Declarations

Conflict of Interest None.

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