

Technology Integrated Online Classrooms and the Challenges Faced by the EFL Teachers in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

It is a widespread and strongly supported assumption in the educational arena that the integration of technology into language classrooms can lead to improved teaching and learning with a positive impact on language learners' proficiency level. The current situation with the COVID-19 pandemic has provided language teachers with great many potential opportunities to implement online applications and instruments to develop learners' language proficiency. In contrast to the previous norms of EFL classrooms, where technology integration used to be an important albeit a subsidiary component, the current COVID-19 state has put online teaching on the foreground as it is purely a techno-led teaching scenario. However, with the integration of technology-based learning strategies, challenges faced by EFL teachers have also increased. The current study aims to study technology-integrated classrooms and address the challenges before EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 pandemic. To have a clear instrument development of data and research findings, the Exploratory Sequential Mixed Method Design was selected by the researcher after using a blend of questionnaires and online interview techniques. For data collection, 50 language instructors at the English Language Institute (King Abdulaziz University) participated in the research. Due to the pandemic control lockdown state, these teachers were teaching an online Module from March-May 2020. The research design was focused on obtaining data based on two aspects: 1. Investigating the positive impact of technology integration in online EFL classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic. 2. Addressing the challenges faced by the teachers in techno-led online classes during the COVID-19 era. The research findings indicated that despite having access to various techno-led applications and techniques including the blackboard ultra, podcasting, vodcasting etc., still there were many challenges faced by Saudi language instructors. The most common challenges included, but were not limited to, the inability to have access to the modern equipment, interrupted or weak internet connection, learners' low motivation level and attention deficit. Despite these issues, however, many language instructors reported a positive inclination towards the use of technology in EFL online classes. The findings of the study shed light on the productive use of techno-led online EFL classrooms, focusing on strategic skill-based learning taking place and establishing a strong virtual link between the instructors and learners. Furthermore, the results of this study would help policymakers, trainers, EFL teachers and professional development experts with the current aspects of COVID-19 and the pending issues determining technology integration in EFL online classrooms, thus enabling them to make better-informed decisions.

Key words: COVID-19, Techno-led, Podcasting, Vodcasting, Technology Integration.

INTRODUCTION

With the aim of introducing improved learning strategies for language learners, technology integration and incorporation of related digital combos to the language pedagogy has become a globally established demand (Hutchinson and Reinking 2011). According to Tondeuretal (2009), the last decade of the (21st) century saw an extensive and significant amount of research and findings in the field of technology integration to learning schemata as a strong learning tool. Also, in the current scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic,

technology integration to online language teaching has gained (inevitably) increasing attention. Regardless of the existing barriers to technology integration in language teaching and learning, the COVID-19 pandemic has expedited the process of technology integration. It is, therefore, important to be prepared and well-equipped for the new status quo in terms of knowledge, skills and resources needed for technology integration. According to Jiang, Zhang, May and Qin (2018), English teaching and learning has encountered many challenges and problems over the last few decades but the

resourceful role of EFL teachers has consistently been an established element in the development of related effective pedagogies to overcome obstacles. Due to the pandemic, English language programs are being modified rapidly, with the effective and distinctive implementation of technology for the improvement of the learning and teaching process and dealing with the expected challenges. In a recent study by Adnan et al. (2019), integration of vodcasting and podcasting into online classrooms was reported as successful. However, regardless of all the constructive steps taken and positive developments in language learning and teaching, there are certain issues that still need to be addressed. Li (2014) and Tondeur et al (2008) hold that the factors promoting techno-led language learning should be given due importance and addressed in a timely manner, both collectively and on an individual and contextual level. Another important issue is to raise awareness about technology integration to the learning process among learners and parents (Au-Yong-Oliveira et al., 2018). Access to internet connection without disruption and bandwidth limitations is another technical aspect to be dealt with and resolved as it potentially discourages EFL teachers from implementing new technologies to online classrooms (Yadov, Gupta, & Khetrapal, 2018). Also, as discussed by Mahmoudzadeh (2014), teachers' level of satisfaction with the designed curriculum and available materials for online teaching is another prime factor that greatly influences the success rate of the techno-led EFL teaching process. Teachers tend to find this process of material designing and its online availability and grading a complicated and time-consuming process that has a negative impact on their motivation. These are only some of the challenges to integrating technology to online classrooms especially during today's COVID-19 pandemic state that have not been investigated earlier in the literature of EFL/ESL teaching and learning. Needless to say, an extended lockdown state has caused the closure of schools and institutions, leading in turn to largescale changes in the educational setup globally. Also, authorities seem to have no option other than technology integration in order to be able to maintain the flow of the teaching and learning process. Although maintaining the teaching process through online classes helps the educational institutions, however, there are multiple challenges that have emerged while implementing this, i.e. integrating technology into online classes. The main objective of the current study is to highlight the challenges faced by EFL teachers in online classes during the pandemic state in Saudi Arabia and address them by trying to find solutions through technology integration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research on technology integration in EFL classrooms has highlighted certain factors that have a positive impact on the learning/teaching process. The studies of Al-Awidi and Aldhafeeri (2017) and Li and Walsh (2010) indicate the positive impact of techno-led classes, which are increasingly gaining popularity with EFL teachers who seem to be open to change their conventional teaching methods and ways towards a new style that would benefit learners.

According to Patil (2020), coping with new theories of language teaching methodology is always a challenge before teachers and learners. Over the past decades, many theories have been presented and, based on these theories and learners' needs, immense changes have been made in the field of teaching and learning methodologies of the English language. Huang, Wu and Chen (2012), highlighted the importance of learning materials to be used in EFL classrooms besides the changes in language learning strategies and methodologies. The study of Kuhl, Scheiter, Gerjets, and Gemballa (2011) showed that most teachers preferred to use digital materials (e.g. videos, audios, presentations, online documentaries or motion pictures, etc.) instead of traditional worksheets and test papers. Their study further showed that, if technology integration to curriculum, teaching and learning process is well-planned and effectively infused, it would lead to manifold enhancement of learners' language acquiring capacity. Effectively used technological interaction tools would help both learners and teachers by, for instance, making available the latest primary source materials and helping with the process of speaking/writing data. It also helps find ways to collaborate with students, teachers, and experts around the world, opening a window of opportunity to understand the language via multimedia with an international audience. Techno-led classes also ensure that the learning process is relevant and the assessment methodology is authentic.

The advent of the digital era, and the concomitant notion of technology integration, have occasioned a significant transition in teaching and learning trends in the language learning process. It is a demanding endeavor to be able to fully explain every aspect of how technology impacts the learning process because the process of "technology integration" is a comprehensive parasol introducing varied tools and practices that turn technology into an integral part of the learning process. The introduction of many new technological tools (online and blended classes, use of tools such as mobile or project-based technology integration) have a great social impact as certain issues are intrinsic and a widespread implementation following their discovery brings about considerable transformation in the society (Martins, Goncalves, Oliveira, Cota, and Branco, 2016). Egbert et al. (2002) and Spiteri and Rundgren (2018) hold that the process of informal learning (e.g. peer learning among teachers by sharing ideas and experiences in using technology) motivates teachers to use technology. Likewise, Zhao and Frank (2003) reported that peer informal learning among teachers brings about a constructive and positive influence on the process of technology integration. Also, the process of learning new techniques, to be implemented in the teaching process specifically learned in social settings, has a great impact because colleagues influence one another's beliefs and attitudes towards using technology. Technology integration has had such a powerful impact that the conventional methods of teaching and learning are now largely demotivating to learners and teachers. Since today's generation of learners is brought up primarily, if not exclusively, in the digital era, the use of new technology in EFL classrooms brings about quality and maintains their interest, which is the best, or should we say the only, way to maintain the language

learning process during the current critical situation with the COVID-19 pandemic (Pital, 2020). In addition to the relatively older technological tools such as text, video, and voice tools, which are relatively cheaper and easier to use but largely boring for today’s learners, there are novel tools and techniques that can be used to maintain interest and enhance language learning. Some, such as learning with the aid of mobile and handheld devices, game-based learning, instructional tools like smart interactive whiteboards and student response centers, are being effectively used and rated high by both language teachers and learners. The study of Bruff, Fisher, McEven, and Smith (2013) demonstrated that a combination of face-to-face interaction (offline or in-class) with the use of paper-based materials and online materials and activities yielded positive outcomes for learners as they were shown to be motivated and learned more effectively. Bonner and Reinders (2018) also observed that the use of new technologies in language learning process encouraged the learners to actively participate in the online learning process and added a positive element to the online teaching and learning environment. In general, previous research indicates that the integration of new technologies into EFL classrooms under teachers’ direct physical supervision is challenging but feasible, though in the current sudden COVID-19 pandemic state it is found to be much more challenging, for learners and teachers alike, especially in Saudi Arabia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology section includes the research design, research theme statements, the number and type of participants, types of data collection instruments and the data analysis design.

Research Design with Data Collection Instruments

Exploratory Sequential Mixed Method Design was selected by the researcher by using a blend of the questionnaire and online interview techniques.

Research Theme Points

The research design was focused on obtaining the data by relying on two points:

1. Investigating the positive impact of technology integration in online EFL classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Addressing the challenges faced by the teachers in technology-led online classes during the COVID-19 era.

Participants

A total of 50 language instructors from seven different nationalities, with varied teaching experiences and from different age groups working at the English Language Institute of King Abdulaziz University KAU participated in this study (see Table 1). The participants are all Master’s degree holders in the field of English language teaching and are currently involved in teaching English to students from four different levels (beginners

to advanced levels). Their professional teaching experience spanned from 5 to 10 years, ranging in students’ age from 28-40. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all participants received essential training for online teaching through Blackboard Ultra on the KAU website banner. Also, it was made sure that they were competent in using different technological apps such as vodcasting, podcasting, etc. Confidentiality was promised and the teachers participated voluntarily in the study.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

For data collection, the researcher used a blend of questionnaires and online interview techniques.

DATA COLLECTION

Quantitative Stage 1 (The Questionnaire as Survey)

A google survey form-based questionnaire, based on a Likert four-point bipolar scale, was employed to investigate the participants’ opinions and experiences on the impact of technology integration into online EFL classes on blackboard ultra. The Likert scale, according to Armstrong (1987), is an effective tool to examine teachers’ perceptions of various education-related issues because the scales reflect the complexity, and at the same time flexibility, of human behavior and responses to different phenomena.

Findings

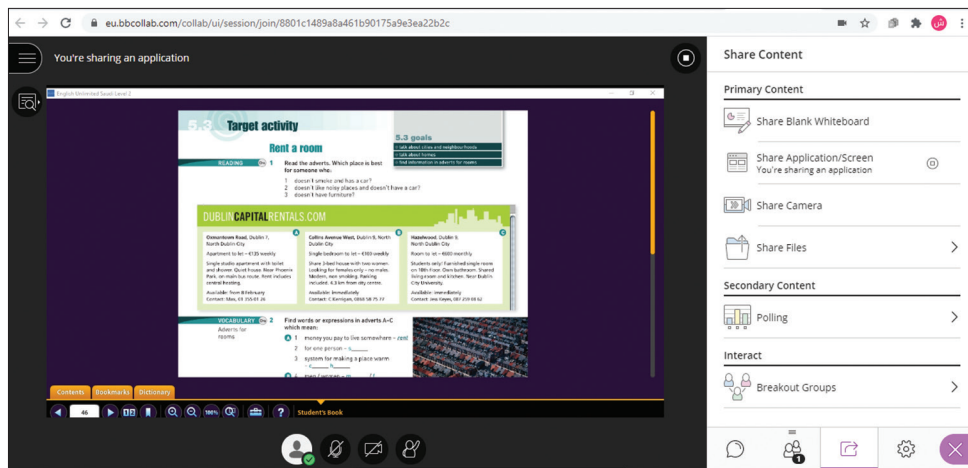
Analysis of the participants’ responses to the administered online questionnaire indicated that they held different opinions and viewpoints on technology integration in online classes in the current COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia. The results also revealed a variety of perceptions on the relation of student success and/or failure as key indicators of the success of the technology integration regarding the objectivity of the teaching process.

Discussion on the quantitative data

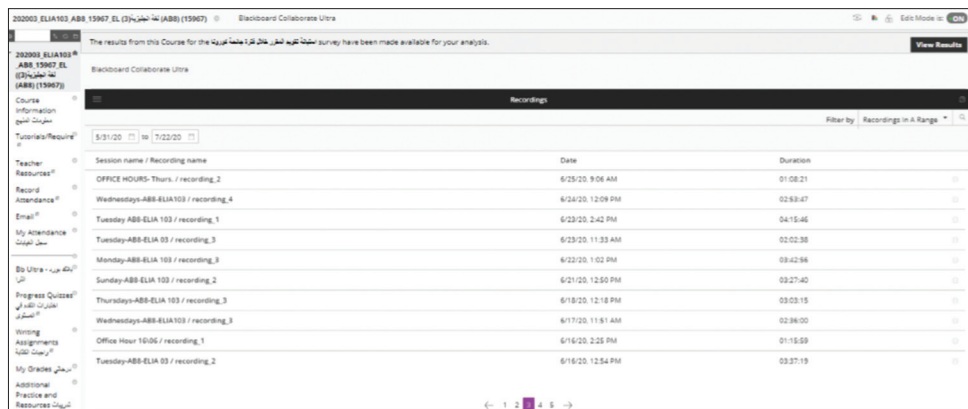
Regarding teachers’ opinions on promoting the development of communication skills (writing and presentation skills), the results illustrated in Table 2 show that 76% of the respondents agreed that communication skills could be improved by using various technology-based tasks. In the same vein, 78% of the teachers were shown to consider

Table 1. Participants of the study by age and nationality

Nationality	Age range	Number of teachers
Saudi	30-42	25
Egyptians	33-45	5
Americans	35-40	4
Tunisian	36-45	5
Pakistanis	35-42	5
British	38-44	2
Jordanian	35-38	4



Shows an example of an online class during the Coronavirus pandemic



Shows a view of available recorded lecture for the learners

Table 2. Teachers’ opinions on promoting the development of communication skills (writing and presentation skills)

Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly agree	20	40%
Agree	18	36%
Disagree	8	16%
Strongly disagree	3	6%

Table 3. Teachers’ opinions on considering the current circumstances as an opportunity to act as learning facilitators instead of information providers

Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly Agree	14	28%
Agree	25	50%
Disagree	10	20%
Strongly disagree	1	2%

the current circumstances, and the subsequent technology integration, as an opportunity to act as learning facilitators instead of information providers. Also, as shown in Table 3, only 22% of the respondents were not satisfied with the current system of online teaching with technology integration at ELI. Table 4 shows that the majority of teachers (90%) believed that technology integration had a positive impact on learners’ success rate; only 5% of the teachers disagreed with the idea, which is negligible and insignificant. Around 88% of the teachers believed that techno-led online teaching accommodates students’ personal learning styles (Table 5); only 12% of the teachers disagreed with this idea. Similarly, as shown in Table 6, around 84% of teachers held that the techno-led online teaching method motivated students to get more involved in learning activities; only 8% disagreed with this viewpoint. Also, as illustrated in Table 7, the majority of

Table 4. Teachers’ opinions on the impact of technology integration on improved academic achievement (i.e. The grades)

Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly agree	15	30%
Agree	30	60%
Disagree	3	6%
Strongly disagree	2	4%

the teachers (80%) believed that techno-led online teaching required no extra time to plan learning activities; only 20% believed otherwise. Again, the majority of the teachers (88%) held that techno-led online teaching required software skills training that was not too time-consuming, as indicated in Table 8; only 12% disagreed with the statement. The

Table 5. Teachers’ opinions on whether techno-led online teaching accommodates students’ personal learning styles

Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly agree	16	32%
Agree	28	56%
Disagree	4	8%
Strongly disagree	2	4%

Table 6. Teachers’ opinions on whether techno-led online teaching method motivates students to get more involved in learning activities

Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly agree	12	24%
Agree	30	60%
Disagree	6	12%
Strongly disagree	2	4%

Table 7. Teachers’ opinions on whether techno-led online teaching requires no extra time to plan learning activities

Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly agree	10	20%
Agree	30	60%
Disagree	6	12%
Strongly disagree	4	8%

Table 8. Teachers’ opinions on whether techno-led online teaching requires software skills training that is not too time-consuming

Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly agree	15	30%
Agree	29	58%
Disagree	5	10%
Strongly disagree	1	2%

majority of the teachers, around 90%, believed that teachers’ involvement in the selection of computer technologies could have a positive impact on the learning process; only 10% did not agree with the statement, as indicated in Table 9. All teachers (100%) agreed that adequate teacher training in the use of technology for learning involvement in the selection of computer technologies to be integrated was an essential factor. No teacher disagreed with this statement, as indicated in Table 10. Finally, the majority of the teachers (86%) believed that the success of technology integrated online classes was possible only if there was the support of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic; 14% of the teachers disagreed with this statement, as shown in Table 11.

In general, the quantitative data reflects the positive stance of the teachers that technology integration during the Covid-19 pandemic can be used as an important instructional device.

Based on the results obtained from the quantitative findings, it can be inferred that technology integration can be optimally used for drills, exercises and remediation. Besides,

Table 9. Teachers’ opinions on whether teachers’ involvement in the selection of computer technologies should be integrated

Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly agree	18	36%
Agree	27	54%
Disagree	3	6%
Strongly disagree	2	4%

Table 10. Teachers’ opinions on adequate teacher training in the use of technology for learning involvement in the selection of computer technologies to be integrated

Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly agree	28	56%
Agree	22	44%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%

Table 11. Teachers’ opinions on the success of technology integrated online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic being largely contingent on the support of parents

Response rating	Number of Participants	Percentage
Strongly Agree	25	50%
Agree	18	36%
Disagree	6	12%
Strongly disagree	1	2%

technology integration into online EFL classes at ELI (via blackboard ultra) offers a communicative tool by means of which teachers and learners can interact.

Qualitative Stage 2 (Interview method)

Qualitative Results

In order to collect data, with the aim of addressing the challenges faced by teachers in techno-led online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interview method was selected. All 50 EFL language instructors at the Eli-KAU were interviewed through Zoom meeting interview schedule. This arrangement was practiced in order to follow the social distancing SOPs during the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued lockdown in the city. Some of the interview transcripts have been quoted below and show various types of reactions from the teachers in response to the interview questions. Their responses show that some teachers even tend to prefer online classrooms to face to face classrooms during the Coronavirus pandemic.

Interview Questions

One of the questions was: “How was your experience with the techno-led online teaching? Please mention if you faced any challenges while teaching in such an arrangement during the COVID-19 pandemic situation.”

Some of the responses from the participants (as confidentiality was promised) are listed below:

“Though at first, I had some difficulties with the internet connectivity and the use of microphone with the linked LMS attendance system, having a pre-planned curriculum with a fully equipped support team during my classes was a relief.”

“Internet speed and connectivity problems were always a nuisance but since we had full cooperation and support from the quick response team of the mentors and the management, the problems were solved in a timely manner; though it sometimes caused a delay in the teaching process.”

“Teaching through the blackboard ultra as a fulltime online EFL teacher while using new technologies and various applications on one platform with fully involved students who are motivated and interested even during this difficult phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, is a new but exceedingly amazing experience.”

“Online teaching during the pandemic situation is rather advantageous to shy students, who normally feel anxious or scared to speak out in the classroom. These introverted students got an opportunity to build more language confidence and be able to interact with their teacher and peers from the privacy of their computer screens and the comfort of their own home.”

“My main aim while teaching online classes was to integrate the technology with the vision and the mission of the institution and I was largely successful. My learners were fully motivated and encouraged to become problem-solvers and help their peers.”

“The biggest problem that I faced was keeping track of my students’ writing records and grading the data in the system. Keeping LMS attendance records on a daily basis was also time-consuming and took away a lot of teaching time.”

“Assessment components should be regularly revisited by the institution especially considering the current COVID-19 pandemic situation.”

“Teachers are not equally competent in the use of new technologies in online classrooms, which constitutes a skills gap. Shifting to online teaching needs to be rewarding and fulfilling, otherwise less tech-savvy educators will be put off by intense professional development sessions and constant updates or how-to guides.”

Discussion of the qualitative data

The findings of the qualitative data should be interpreted in light of the limitations that were due to the pandemic situation. The study aimed to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the potentially positive impact of technology integration in online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and to understand the challenges faced by teachers in these online sessions, in Saudi Arabia. The qualitative data reflects that the EFL teachers at ELI-KAU Saudi Arabia were, overall, comfortable with teaching online classes though they faced some technical problems. This result aligns with the results of the previous studies carried out by Che Musa, Azman and Koo (2012), Yadov, Gupta and Khetrupal (2018), Adnan et al (2019) and Pital (2020). In alignment with the conclusions drawn in the aforementioned

studies, the qualitative data in this study show that EFL online techno-led classes are probably the only viable alternative to replace physical classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. By the same token, technology integration may be considered the most efficient and practical method to enhance learning for EFL students in these special times. Using technology facilitates teaching and helps teachers maintain a positive attitude towards their profession but, at the same time, problems such as reduced teaching time due to more management tasks, lack of effective assessment tools, technical issues with learners, and the challenge of material development are among the hurdles that need to be overcome. The findings of the qualitative data shed light on the fact that online techno-led EFL classes, though effective, still have issues that should be addressed by the teachers, learners and, mainly, by the institutional management.

CONCLUSION

The current research investigated the impact of technology on online EFL classrooms and the challenges faced by EFL teachers teaching techno-led online classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia. The findings of the study show that majority of the participant teachers have a positive attitude towards this new scheme to teach the English language in these emergent circumstances. They also point to the fact that having online techno-led classes is advantageous and, overall, better than totally cutting down the learning process, due to the pandemic. Techno-led online EFL classes proved to be able to offer learners an opportunity to engage in learning from distance, in their comfort zone and under secure conditions and keep up with their lessons. The findings of qualitative data also highlight the challenges that teachers face in integrating technology in their EFL online classes including, but not limited to, internet waveband, connectivity, LMS attendance linking issue and suitable assessment tools. Findings also revealed that the teachers were willing to receive further training and professional development courses on the effective use of technology integration with the use of special applications in their online teaching. The implications of the current research were shown to be relevant and effective in solving the reported issues. An effective measure is to arrange more training sessions for the EFL teachers to equip them with the needed applications for online classrooms. As stated by Ogilvie and Dunn (2010), in critical teaching scenarios, teachers are the most neglected people in the educational reform system and their role is often not acknowledged. In this regard, educational researchers and policymakers and practicing teachers hold that extensive professional development training would have a strong and positive impact on learners’ success rate. The results of the research also indicate that most teachers consider teaching online not only as an inevitable outcome of these special circumstances but also as an opportunity to improve actual English language learning through more sophisticated technology. However, it entails an in-depth investigation of the departure point of teachers’ technology use, availability of tools and support, related beliefs, and perceptions of challenges. Developments motivated by a clear definition

of policies and practices may, henceforth, become more perceptible. In this regard, findings of the current research could have very effective and concrete pedagogical implications for EFL teachers, learners and curriculum developers.

The main aim of the current research was to enable EFL teachers to use the platform of the techno-led online classroom to bring about the best of their teaching skills and enhance learners' performance by using multiple applications and techniques during the pandemic. Other stated aims were to raise awareness of the institutional management and curriculum designers to take necessary measures to develop a suitable cooperative atmosphere for teachers and learners and try to reshape the curriculum and assessment tools suitable for the current teaching pattern in the context of the pandemic. Also, more comforting and technical error free learning environments can be created for language learners by addressing their issues and solving them on priority, which would further help them to adapt swiftly to the new technological demands of the online teaching process and latent pressures in language settings. The research implications also encourage curriculum and teaching material designers to plan more motivational materials that are easy to handle with the online teaching system in the context of the current COVID-19 situation.

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