Article

The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on ESL Learners and TESOL Practitioners in the United States

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Abstract
This study seeks to understand the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on a group of university ESL learners and their teachers in the U.S. While some schools quickly closed to protect students and teachers, others transitioned to remote teaching and learning. In addition to challenges associated with moving instruction to an online format, many teachers and students have had to grapple with a variety of additional issues regarding health, employment, finances, and other concerns. With the aim of better understanding the effects of the pandemic on students and teachers, researchers prepared a survey that addressed stress levels, learning and teaching English, and remote instruction. Participants indicated how important learning English was before and after the pandemic and responded to an open-ended question soliciting their perspectives on what was most difficult during the pandemic. The researchers looked at their responses, demographic information, and proficiency gains to learn more about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and teachers. The results of this study show that the effects of the pandemic increased stress for both students and teachers across an array of contexts. Although still relatively important, the priority for teaching and learning decreased for both the practitioners and their students during the pandemic due to a variety of new stressors in their lives. The transition to online instruction was more challenging for the students than the teachers. Results also show that during the pandemic students experienced less language development for speaking than for writing.

1 Introduction and Literature Review

The United States hosts over one million international students annually who are learning English as a second language (ESL). This is more than any other nation. These international students make up nearly

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6% of the total higher education population in the U.S. and add nearly $45 billion to the U.S. economy annually (IIE, 2019). Like many others around the world, these students have been dramatically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study seeks to understand the effect of this pandemic on ESL students in an intensive English program at Brigham Young University's English Language Center and their teachers in the western United States. In order to properly frame this study, we begin with basic information about the COVID-19 pandemic.

A new virus was first observed at the end of 2019 and began to spread rapidly during the early months of 2020. On February 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) labeled the newly identified virus COVID-19, and by March 11, they had declared the outbreak a pandemic (Doctors without Borders, n.d.). In addition to widespread illness and loss of life, efforts to combat the spread of the virus dramatically impacted numerous sectors worldwide such as travel, business, and education. In order to protect individuals, many governments and institutions implemented physical distancing measures. While such measures safeguarded physical health, for some, they created feelings of separation, isolation, and loneliness that impacted mental and emotional health. Though stress, or emotional strain, is a universal part of the human experience, when it becomes persistent, stress can impact essential body functions such as sleep, digestion, and immune responses, and may undermine overall health and wellbeing (e.g., Tovian, et al., 2017).

Wang, et al. (2020) described early impacts of the virus including its effect on anxiety and stress, challenges associated with home confinement, and health worries for family and extended family. Among other results, they found that students experienced more stress, anxiety, and depression than nonstudents. Such findings suggest that vulnerable populations such as students may need additional support when facing traumatic challenges such as those brought on by the pandemic. Researchers anticipate that physical distancing and pervasive feelings of anxiety over the COVID-19 pandemic have initiated a wide array of challenges in education including poor academic performance (Sintema, 2020), concerns over the physical health and well-being of students (Rundle, et al., 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020), and negative disruptions to internal and public assessments (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020).

While some universities quickly closed to protect students and teachers once the virus began to spread widely, others transitioned to remote teaching and learning using various internet-based resources. In addition to challenges associated with moving instruction to an online format, many teachers and students have had to grapple with a variety of additional issues such as how to stay healthy, how to manage lost or reduced employment, how to deal with shortages of food or basic supplies, and how to manage mental and emotional health with faltering financial markets and growing feelings of fear or panic within society.

Though such difficulties seem to pervade most educational contexts for domestic students, Andrade and Hartshorn (2019) indicated that difficulties for international students may be exacerbated as they face unique physical, mental, sociocultural, linguistic, and academic challenges. This was likely the case for the more than one million ESL students in the U.S. at the onset of COVID-19. As of March 26, 2020, the U.S. began to lead the world in the number of COVID-19 cases (McNiel, 2020), adding to students fears and concerns. Moreover, many students with lower English proficiency may have had difficulty fully understanding what was happening and may have struggled to communicate their needs or concerns.

In order to help frame this study, we examine the associated phenomena through the lens of a model posited by Hill (1949, 1958) designed to account for whether a stressor event leads toward a full-scale crisis. The model is often referred to by the letters ABC-X, where the letter "A" represents the stressor event, the letter "B" signifies available resources used to manage stress, the letter "C" characterizes perceptions of the event, and the letter "X" symbolizes the extent to which the outcome is considered a crisis. Hill (1949, 1958) found that the interplay between resources and perceptions often determined the extent to which the result of the stressor was experienced as a full-scale crisis. This model is illustrated in Figure 1.
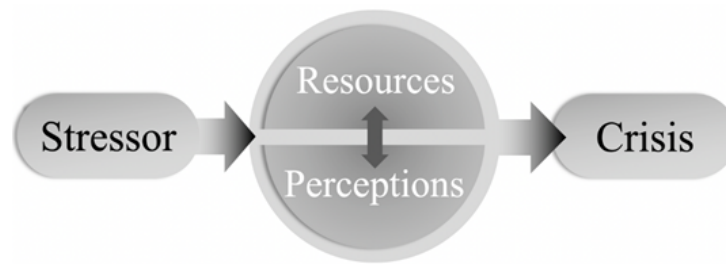
Figure 1. Illustration of Hill's ABC-X Model

This model has been used to produce important insights about stressors and crises in a wide variety of research for more than a half century. Recent study has included areas such as employee resilience (Conley, et al., 2016), sociocultural issues (McNeil Smith & Landor, 2018; Murry, et al., 2018), romantic relationships (Simpson, 2017), domestic violence (Boateng, 2017), the effects of cancer (Karikari & Boateng, 2019; Van Schoors, et al., 2019), mental disability and illness (Dunn, et al. 2019; Rizki, et al., 2018), and stresses associated with military service (Quichocho & Lucier-Greer, 2019; Ross, et al., 2020; Vagharseyyedin, et al, 2017).

With this backdrop of the precipitous spread of COVID-19, this study sought to understand the effects of this pandemic on ESL students and TESOL practitioners as they continued to engage in the teaching and learning of English in the U.S. during the COVID-19 ordeal. Although numerous studies have examined various aspects of stress and anxiety in a variety of ESL teaching and learning contexts, many of these studies have focused on the experience of individual learners (Halimi, et al., 2019; Jayanth & Soundiraraj, 2016; Lin, et al., 2019; Lumley, et al., 2018; Shi, 2017). The last medical crisis of this magnitude was more than a century ago, the H1N1 pandemic of 1918 (Trilla, et al., 2008), nearly a half century before TESOL emerged as an independent field. We are unaware of any research from that era or the ensuing century that examines the effects of a pandemic experienced so universally by ESL students and their TESOL practitioners. A greater understanding of stresses that students and teachers face in times of crisis and their associated effects could help TESOL practitioners and program administrators implement policies and support mechanisms to aid learning despite unusual challenges that students and teachers may experience.

Building on the preceding discussion, this study sought to answer the following research questions by analyzing survey responses from ESL learners and TESOL practitioners at an intensive English program, the English Language Center (ELC), at Brigham Young University in the western United States.

1. What are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on stress levels, the learning and teaching of English, and remote instruction, and do these effects differ for students and teachers?
2. Have the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the relative importance of English language teaching and learning compared to before the pandemic, and does this impact differ for students and teachers?
3. Which demographic variables, if any, contribute to student stress levels?
4. What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on actual English language development?
5. What can student and teacher commentary tell us about the kinds of challenges they face during the COVID-19 pandemic?
6. What insights can be gleaned through examining the findings of this study through the ABC-X model lens?

2 Methodology

The following paragraphs address the instrument used to collect data, the context in which it was collected, the participants, and a brief overview of the analyses used to examine the results.

2.1 Instrument

In an effort to answer the preceding research questions, a survey was developed, one version formatted for students and the other formatted for teachers (see survey in Appendix). The survey was sent to students and teachers via a Qualtrics link sent to their email addresses. The survey was completed by 153 students and 41 teachers, with response rates of 68% and 72% respectively. Five-point Likert scales were used for the first and second research questions (see Appendix). In addition to the information gathered in the survey, the institution provided researchers with anonymized demographic information such as student age, sex, marital status, and English language proficiency. The survey also included an open-ended item for students and teachers to share what they perceived to be their most difficult challenges during the pandemic. Likert-scale data was examined using analysis of variance and linear regression while responses to open-ended comments were analyzed with qualitative research methods.

2.2 Context

As mentioned earlier, this study looked at ESL students in an intensive English program at Brigham Young University's English Language Center and their teachers. The university is located in Utah and at the time of the study, the number of COVID-19 cases and related deaths in the state were relatively small. These students are enrolled in a 15-week intensive English program that consists of 18 hours each week in grammar, listening and speaking, reading, and writing courses, collectively. Students are learning English to prepare for matriculation in an English-speaking college or university. Generally, students increase in proficiency measures by one ACTFL sub-level each semester (i.e. intermediate high to advanced low).

   Prior to the university's decision to move all courses online, students in the program had completed seven weeks of instruction face-to-face in a traditional classroom. They were in class for 18 hours each week with typical homework expectations. When the university closed its doors to face-to-face instruction, English Language Center administrators and faculty decided to continue instruction online completely synchronously. Students were now using technology in real-time for class instruction for 18 hours each week.

2.3 Participants

Of the 153 students who completed the survey, there were 89 females and 64 males with an average age of 26 and a range of 17 to 58. The ten native languages of students represented in this study are presented in Table 1. Table 2 shows student English language proficiency ranging from novice high (CEFR A1) to advanced low (CEFR B2.1) at the beginning of the semester of the pandemic (based on guidelines from the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages, Swender, et al., 2012). Most of the students were single (85%, 130) though some were married (15%, 23). Percentages for each level are broken down in Table 1. Of the 41 teachers who completed the survey, there were 6 males and 35 females with experience levels ranging from novice teachers to those with decades of experience. Most of the teachers were from the United States, but there was one teacher from each of the following countries/regions: Brazil, Hong Kong, Italy, New Zealand, Romania, Russia, and Tahiti.

Table 1

Student Native Languages

L1	Percentage
Spanish	49.67% (76)
Japanese	16.34% (25)
Portuguese	11.11% (17)
Chinese	10.46% (16)
Korean	5.23% (8)
French	3.27% (5)
Mongolian	1.31% (2)
Russian	1.31% (2)
Bambara	0.65% (1)
Thai	0.65% (1)
Total	100.00% (153)

Table 2

Student English Language Proficiency Levels

ACTFL	CEFR	Percentage
Advanced Low	B2.1	14.38% (22)
Intermediate High	B1.2	24.18% (37)
Intermediate Mid	B1.1	45.10% (69)
Intermediate Low	A2	12.42% (19)
Novice High	A1	3.92% (6)
Total		100.00% (153)

2.4 Analyses

This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods were used for scaled items from the survey and included analysis of variance and linear regression. For the qualitative data, we employed a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is concerned with looking at the whole and describing the phenomenon. It involves delineating units of meaning, and clustering of units of meaning into themes (Hycner, 1999). Lauer (1958) described the need to set aside bias in order to understand the phenomenon being observed. In short, researchers attempt to minimize their personal views, preconceptions, opinions, and preferences in order to better understand the participant perspectives.

Delineating units of meaning involves extracting, marking, or isolating key statements or phrases that illuminate the phenomenon. The data was placed in a spreadsheet. We carefully looked at the responses and identified key phrases which we placed in adjacent cells in the same row. Finally, we clustered the units of meaning from the delineation phase into themes. For example, if one unit was "there were many factors that generate distractions" and other unit was "it is difficult to take online classes from home without distraction," the theme might be called "distraction." Clustering involves creative insight and careful interpretation of the delineated units of meaning while continuing to limit one's own preconceptions. We clustered the previously delineated units in two phases. First, we came up with 17 clustered themes for students and 15 for teachers. After further scrutiny of these clusters, some were combined, resulting in six salient themes for students and five salient themes for teachers.

3 Results

Using the aforementioned data analysis methods, we present the quantitative and qualitative results as follows and briefly discuss insights as they pertain to the ABC-X model.

3.1 Quantitative analysis

The first question sought to understand the effect of the pandemic on a number of areas while studying or teaching at the ELC and whether the effects were similar or different between students and teachers. Figure 2 presents these findings for the perceived effect of the pandemic on stress levels, the learning and teaching of English, and learning and teaching remotely while at the ELC. It shows the mean scores and standard deviations based on the Likert scale responses, where "extremely negative" was given a score of one and "extremely positive" a score of five. The first of these was the perceived level of stress. On average, students and teachers likewise acknowledged the effect on their stress could be described as approaching "somewhat negative," with no significant difference between students and teachers, $F(1,191)=.095$, $p=.759$. Students and teachers also perceived a similar "somewhat negative" effect on their learning and teaching of English, again, with no significant difference between students and teachers, $F(1,191)=.056$, $p=.813$. However, students and teachers felt differently about the transition to remote teaching and learning due to the pandemic. While both still viewed the crisis to have a generally negative effect, students perceived the effect on their English learning somewhat more negatively than the teachers perception of the pandemic's effect on their teaching, $F(1,191)=4.892$, $p=.028$, $d=.394$.
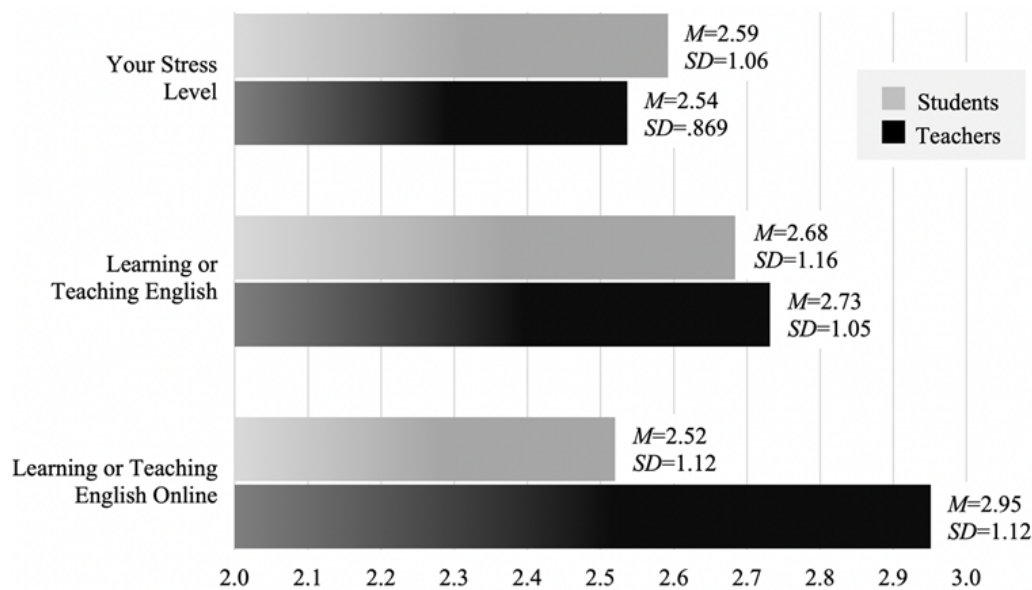
Note: Extremely negative = 1, somewhat negative = 2, neither positive nor negative = 3, somewhat positive = 4, extremely positive = 5

Figure 2. Pandemic effects on student and teacher perceptions.

The second question addressed the degree to which the COVID-19 impacted the importance or priority students and teachers placed on their learning or teaching of English compared to before the pandemic. Results of the mixed method repeated measures test showed there was no significant difference for the group by time test, $F(1,191)=1.797$, $p=.182$, suggesting that students and teachers were similarly affected over time in terms of the change in their priorities for teaching and learning. Before the pandemic, teachers and students viewed the importance of the English teaching and learning between "very important" and "extremely important," ($M=4.347$, $SD=.796$). However, after teaching and learning went

online due to the pandemic, the priority level moved further from "extremely important" toward "very important," (M=4.104, SD=.973), F(1,191)=14.257, p<.001, d=.377.

Additional insights can be seen in Table 3. Though the largest majority of practitioners and students reported no change in terms of the importance of their teaching and learning, interesting differences between teachers and students are observed for the increases and decreases in importance of teaching and learning English due to the pandemic. Although one teacher expressed an increase in the importance of teaching of English after the pandemic, 17 students felt their learning of English was even more important after the onset of the pandemic. This seems to be based on regrets students felt about not studying harder while their learning opportunities were more ideal. We also note that a greater proportion of practitioners felt their teaching was less of a priority after the onset of the pandemic as they managed other competing priorities such as the needs of their immediate families and concerns about future employment.

Table 3

Importance Levels for the Learning and Teaching of English

Priority Level	Students	Teachers
Increased Importance	11% (17)	2% (1)
No Change	65% (98)	66% (27)
Reduced Importance	24% (37)	32% (13)

The third research question addressed which of the variables under investigation contributed to student stress levels. In order to answer this question, a stepwise linear regression analysis was used to determine which variables account for student stress. Examined variables included student age, sex, marital status, English language proficiency, perceptions of the effect of the pandemic on English teaching and learning, the effect of having to learn English online, and feelings of the importance of learning English before and during the pandemic. Of these variables, the only one meaningful enough to be included in the model was the effect of having to learn English online. This single variable produced an adjusted R of .151 (t=5.271, p<.001), suggesting that more than 15% of the stress perceived by students was associated with the need to study English online. Perhaps equally important is the observation that none of the other variables seemed to have a meaningful impact on student stress levels including age, sex, marital status, proficiency, perceptions of the effect of the pandemic on learning, and the relative importance of English learning before and during the pandemic.

The fourth question had to do with the impact of the pandemic on the actual English language development of the students. We analyzed gain scores or the difference between student scores at the beginning of the semester and the end of the semester. These scores were based on institutional proficiency tests tied to ACTFL proficiency levels, and were identified for the productive skills (speaking and writing) for the semester preceding the pandemic, running from September to December, 2019, as well as the scores obtained during the semester the outbreak was declared a pandemic, running from January to April, 2020. The institutional speaking assessment consisted of several prompts targeting novice to superior functions on the ACTFL scale. The speaking samples were then evaluated by trained raters. Two timed-writing samples were also evaluated by trained raters. The only difference between the two institutional test sessions were that the students completed the exam in a computer lab, but did the test at various locations due to pandemic restrictions. Results show that students improved in both speaking and writing overall during this period. However, while no statistically significant difference was observed for gain scores in writing, t(277) = .676, p = .500, when comparing the preceding semester (M = .35, SD =1.02) and the semester of the pandemic (M = .44, SD =1.09), the decrease in gain scores for speaking from the preceding semester (M = .58, SD =.97) and the semester of the pandemic (M = .28, SD =.93) was statistically significant, t(227) = 2.41, p=.017, d=.319. In other words, students improved in both their speaking and writing skills, but the improvement was much smaller for speaking compared to writing.

3.2 Qualitative data

We begin with a summary of the most salient themes for students and teachers. The most salient theme for students was schoolwork making up nearly half of all the delineated units. However, the most frequent theme for teachers, student well-being, consisted of only a quarter of the delineated units. Another interesting insight is the number of total clustered units. From the 153 student responses, we identified 267 units, but from the 41 teacher responses, we only delineated 63 units. This suggests that on average, individual students provided more challenges they experienced than individual teachers as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4
Theme Frequencies for Students and Teachers

Student Themes	Percentage
Schoolwork	47.46% (131)
Finances	24.64% (68)
Family	10.87% (30)
Social and Mental Health	8.33% (23)
Physical Health	5.43% (15)
Travel Restrictions	3.26% (9)
Total	100.00% (276)

Teacher Themes	Percentage
Student Wellbeing	25.40% (16)
Family	20.63% (13)
Social and Mental Health	19.05% (12)
Transition to Online Classes	14.29% (9)
Employment & Finances	11.11% (7)
Physical Health	6.35% (4)
School Work	3.17% (2)
Total	100.00% (63)

3.2.1 Student themes

Schoolwork. Overwhelmingly, the students expressed that schoolwork was the most difficult challenge during the pandemic. Fortunately, many of the students elaborated on the various aspects of schoolwork that were difficult for them. Many had problems using and adapting to technology-driven courses. One student reported, "I had to be out of classes due to the problem of WIFI of my apartment." Learning how to use video conferencing and how to interact online was difficult. Students reported that, "it was hard to [be] in front of a computer for many hours" and that "not being in class was difficult because you can't speak to your teachers correctly." Regardless of whether "correctly" refers to language accuracy or normal communication, the student is expressing a perceived communication issue. In specific regard to video conferencing, another student said that "Zoom [a video conferencing platform] isn't easy [to use] because of some noises during the lessons… In Zoom classes, we can't participate correctly." As mentioned previously, it may be difficult to ascertain the meaning of "correctly," but it does, however, indicate that participation was affected by the move to technology mediated communication.

For others, the act of practicing English became very difficult. One comment made by one student describes the sentiments of many others: "The opportunity to speak in English, which is very important, was reduced a lot. When I took the class at the ELC, there were a lot of chances to communicate with other friends. However, after the class was changed online, it was impossible to talk to each other a

lot." They found limited opportunities to practice their language outside of the classroom. One student indicated, "I thought COVID-19 would influence interaction between native speakers and me. Now, it's kind of influencing my speaking activity with other [students]." These students realized that their schoolwork was difficult because of a lack of speaking and listening opportunities outside of class. Some were concerned about the efficacy of learning a language online regardless of their ability to use technology. One student concluded, "I feel like I was not improving my English in the way that I was in class." There were also a few students who remarked that the quality of teaching they received was of great concern. They felt that the teachers were not fully prepared or ready to teach online. One commented that "teachers need more wisdom to [get] students' attention [during class]" and that "teachers were not properly trained."

Finances and employment. The second most salient theme revolved around finance and job opportunities. Some students were worried about finances because their families at home might become unable to support their study abroad in the U.S. presumably due to family members who support them losing jobs or experiencing a decrease in income. For example, one student said "My parents are not working, and I do not have help [from] them now. The problem for me is finances." Others were worried about earning money. One student observed "Many of us lost our jobs, so we were worried about money." Visas issued to foreign students are restricted to employment on campus. When the campus closed many had reduced hours or lost their jobs. Understandably, these students were worried about paying for tuition and living expenses. Fortunately, the university had several job openings due to the exodus of domestic students at the outset of the pandemic, allowing some international students to find new employment. Nevertheless, many students still felt insecure. One student confessed "Though I was able to maintain my job, the uncertainty of not knowing when [I] would lose that job, makes [me] try to find efficiency as much as [I] can, financially speaking."

Family. Students who identified family as being of concern during the pandemic often mentioned a number of the other themes as it applied to their families. Students worried about the finances, social and mental stability, physical health, and travel restrictions confronting their distant families. One student acknowledged "I also was worried about my family all the time." Another reported that the quarantine in his home country "caused [his] father and [his] brother to lose their jobs." Sadly, other students explained concern for the health of their family members. One divulged "I am worried about my mom because she took her last chemotherapy [treatment] just a few months ago, and I am afraid that her immune system might be too weak to face a COVID-19 infection." Another revealed "I have been worried about my family's health because I am far from them and [my] grandparents live in a city where they are very exposed to COVID19." Additionally, some expressed concern for their immediate families that currently reside with them. Childcare and helping children with online school was an additional source of stress. Often it became a conflict with their own schooling, whether it be limited shared resources (i.e. one computer for the family) or concurrent class times. One student observed, "My two sons, my wife, and I had class at the same time." Another noted "For me [it] was [very] difficult because my children had class on the same schedule."

Social and mental health. While the lack of social interaction and mental health may not always be correlated, including these two considerations as one theme helps describe the nature of the concern that students expressed. Students were worried about their mental health largely because of the limited or non-existent face-to-face interaction with other students, teachers, and friends. One student noted, "I am feeling that staying home is really hard…Because we could not gather in a classroom, we kind of lost our motivation." Another student observed, "Because it's only safe to stay at home, I think my emotional [state is] lower…[There] is less opportunity that I have to meet with friends, classmates, and teachers." Some were simply tired of being "stuck inside." One admitted "About friends, the hardest part is to follow the social distance precautions [because I] wanted to see them at the same time."

Physical health. A smaller number of students expressed physical health as a concern or difficulty during the pandemic. Some students were simply afraid of getting sick. One student disclosed "[I'm] worried about getting sick and not being able to work." Others were sick or had pre-existing conditions that heightened their risk of contracting COVID-19. For example, one student revealed "Because I have had lung surgery, I [am] really afraid." Fortunately, none of the students reported actually having COVID-19 during the semester they responded to the survey.

Travel Restrictions. Finally, a group of students were concerned about not being able to leave the United States or return to their home country. One student noted "I can't go back [to be] with my family due to the…government limiting the flights." Others reported "[I] cannot find flights to return" or "I wasn't able to return to my home country." Additionally, two students mentioned that local public transportation was difficult due to reduced numbers of routes and strict social distancing guidelines. One observed "[It has] been hard [to use] public transportation, [because] there are not so many buses." Another lamented "I have to commute…with difficult and complex schedules of public transportation sometimes causing absences in my job, which is bad for me because I don't make enough money to survive."

3.2.2 Teacher themes

Teachers responded to the following prompt: *Please share what things have been the most difficult for you during the COVID-19 pandemic and why it has been difficult.* With a few differences, the five themes identified from the data analysis proved to be similar to those of the students including student well-being, family, social and mental health, transition to online teaching, and finances and employment. However, physical health and schoolwork were not prevalent in the responses though there was a subset of teachers who were concerned with physical health and a small number of student teachers were concerned with schoolwork.

Student well-being. Teachers reported that concerns for their students were among the most difficult things they dealt with. Teachers were concerned about the educational well-being of their students. While trying their best to make the switch to online classes a positive learning experience, teachers were still very concerned about how well students were progressing in their English proficiency. For example, one teacher observed "A lot is lost with online classes. They may be successful. They may function. They may serve a purpose, but, they do not replace live interaction, immersion in the language, social interaction...which are all absolutely necessary for language acquisition." Teachers were also concerned about the emotional or mental well-being of their students. They were worried about how self-isolation might affect them and how the lack of interaction with their classmates in face-to-face scenarios might negatively impact their social and emotional health. One teacher noted,

> I was also concerned that students were feeling isolated and afraid about COVID19, because they only have each other at the ELC, since they are so far from family and friends in their own country. I am sure they were getting depressed, and that mental state must have affected their performance also.

As indicated in the previous response, teachers were also concerned about the physical health of their students. They were worried that students might not have food or that they might get sick. One teacher observed "Mental, physical, and emotional health definitely all have [taken] a toll on the students."

Family. Teachers expressed concern for their own families as well. Some were worried about elderly parents and family members that don't live locally. One confessed "I am also concerned about my family's health, especially that of my mother who needs surgery and my grandparents." Additionally, one teacher reported "concern with family members losing their jobs." Another teacher, speaking of family members, said, "My biggest concern has been to make sure everyone was on board with not seeing each other." Others found it extremely difficult to teach from home and care for their children who would normally be at school. One noted "I think the hardest thing has been helping my children get through

this." Another indicated, "For me, the most challenging thing has been balancing time for my students and my entire family's online learning and work needs" while worrying about "emotional health for everyone."

Social and mental health. Similar to students, the teachers found self-isolation difficult and felt like keeping themselves mentally and socially healthy was of high concern. One teacher acknowledged "I miss people and actually being with my students! It's hard to just sit in front of a computer all day, preparing for and teaching classes." Another admitted "I'm also starting to really miss socializing with friends and even family. I don't see much of anyone anymore." Another teacher concluded "In person socialization is important. Not being able to go out and about with friends and family is hard."

Transition to online classes. Although most of the TESOL practitioners did not express that teaching online was difficult, several mentioned that the initial transition was challenging. One noted "As a teacher, by far the most difficult thing was the initial transition from classroom-based instruction to online-only, synchronous instruction." Many practitioners were worried about the students' transition. One teacher said that the most difficult challenge during the pandemic was "switching over to everything online and relying on technology fully despite the many disruptions it caused for me or my students." Another teacher reported, "Being able to make the transition to online teaching has been difficult. Online teaching brings a whole new set of hurdles (monitoring student participation, dealing with technological issues, facilitating interactive activities)." Many teachers felt uncertainty regarding their ability to teach online when classes changed from a face-to-face to online format, but none mentioned that teaching online was very difficult when they responded to this survey six weeks after the transition. One teacher observed "My concern was that I would not be able to teach online. I really didn't believe I could do it. Thanks to [supporting faculty], I did it! Learning to teach online, overnight, was by far one of my biggest accomplishments of my…career, thus far."

Employment and Finances. With enrollment numbers dropping in intensive English programs in the U.S. part-time teachers felt concerned about future employment prospects. One teacher expressed the concern "I am not going to have a job in the next few upcoming months because there are not enough students. This kind of stresses me out because I really need money." At the time of the survey—after the semester in question, some of the teachers had already personally seen the results of this decline in enrollment. They had been assigned fewer classes to teach in the upcoming semester both at our institution and others where they worked. When referring to limited future employment, one teacher commented, "I'm not sure if that'll be enough, and it'll be a struggle financially."

3.3 ABC-X model insights

The final research question addressed possible insights to be gleaned by using the lens of the ABC-X model to filter the findings of this study. Results suggests that the extent to which a stressor creates a full-scale crisis depends on the resources and perceptions of those affected by the stressor. The data gathered for this study indicates that participants perceived clear detriments associated with the pandemic that added to their stress. For example, many teachers described frustrations specifically associated with instruction such as "the additional hours of work" required for online teaching, and that it took students "more time to respond" and "to navigate the lessons." They also described their difficulties with fostering "student engagement," maintaining "good rapport," and their inability to read student "body language" or provide feedback effectively.

This was coupled with teacher struggles to process the uncertainty in their own lives outside of the classroom. For example, one teacher depicted the "stress of decision making, anticipating constant adjustments, and adapting to the unknown as it comes." One described the "uncertainty about the viability of our program in the future," and another simply acknowledged "COVID has made me more uncertain of everything." Of course, most concerns mentioned by teachers could be match by similar expressions from students regarding their uncertainty and the many disadvantages to using technology

to learn English. For example, one student observed that "a lot of hours on the computer" made her "feel sick" and gave her a "headache."

In contrast to the effects of these stressors, however, the data also suggests that this same pandemic created circumstances perceived by others to help alleviate some stress that was already part of the respondent's normal life before the onset of COVID-19. For example, one teacher, without elaboration, stated that "Teaching online synchronously has its advantages." Another teacher stretched in terms of time and energy determined "The social distancing has felt like a giant blessing." Some teachers seemed to be relieved by the circumstances that relaxed expectations to "be places" or "have appointments." Others described the pandemic as providing them with greater opportunity to "enjoy time with less stress" or to "enjoy family time and a chance to focus on hobbies and projects."

The effect of family, as described previously, was another case that seemed to generate stress for some and helped relieve stress for others. The data shows that both students and teachers were stressed by their families. This included worry about issues such as health, employment, finances, and attempts to share limited resources such as time, space, internet bandwidth, and even food. However, some students and teachers found comfort, solace, and renewal in being able to spend more time with family during the pandemic than was possible before.

These data show that while the pandemic in general produced stress for most respondents, the ultimate level of stress experienced by students and teachers may have depended on how individuals viewed their resources and circumstances. For example, though most students and teachers recognized that the need to replace face-to-face teaching and learning with technology was not ideal, some perceived technological tools as useful for facilitating language development while others saw them as stressors in and of themselves. A similar observation could be made for the impact of families. Some students and teachers seemed to benefit from greater access to and a greater supportive influence from their family as a valuable resource, while for others, the interactions and impact of their families created greater difficulty which added to their stress and may have worsened their personal perceptions of the larger crisis.

4 Discussion

The results of this study show that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic increased stress for both students and teachers across an array of contexts. Though still relatively important, the level of priority for teaching and learning decreased for both the practitioners and their students during the pandemic compared to before its onset. However, one teacher who felt a keen responsibility to students reported a greater sense of priority precisely because of the effects of the pandemic on his students though most teachers expressed a small reduced sense of importance due to the many other challenges they were facing in their lives. On the other hand, 17 (11%) of the students reported that learning English had taken on a greater priority since the outset of the pandemic. Responses suggest that some students felt that they had taken their opportunity to learn English in the U.S. for granted and that they were now attempting to be more diligent since the future was uncertain and they might not be able to continue to study English in the U.S.

Although many of the findings were similar for both the practitioners and the students, this was not true for the transition to online teaching and learning. On average, the negative effect of transitioning to online teaching and learning was nearly negligible for teachers, but it was perceived much more severely by students. Despite frustrations, some teachers perceived the technological resources allowing them to teach online as a benefit that helped them continue instruction. However, many students and some teachers saw the online approach to teaching and learning as a hindrance that actually undermined student language development and created additional stress.

In this regard, they may have been at least partially right. Students made measurable progress in both speaking and writing during the semester of the pandemic. However, gains were not equal. While

students made typical gains in writing, they made markedly less progress with their speaking compared to the previous semester. One student lamented "online classes didn't maintain quality for listening and speaking" and another concluded, "online classes are not fully helping students' English ability, especially in grammar, speaking, and listening class." This disparity across skills might be explained by the observation that writing instruction and practice tends to be less interactive than speaking needs to be. These findings suggest that the complications of using technology and the constraints on speaking in and out of the classroom during this period may have undermined student language development in terms of their speaking skills.

This study also suggests that what some participants perceived as stressors triggering a crisis, others viewed as beneficial. This observation seems applicable for the pandemic in general as well as for some specific issues that became concerns due to the pandemic. While many students and teachers where scared, frustrated, and challenged by the pandemic and all its repercussions, others felt less stress as they enjoyed a more relaxed and less-structured approach to study, work, and family life.

Implications and applications of these findings may vary widely depending on context. Nevertheless, we provide a few of the most salient observations for teachers and program administrators that could be helpful in circumstances similar to those experienced by the students and teachers examined in this study during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. With the extensive variation across individuals, TESOL practitioners and program administrators should not make uninformed assumptions about the needs or preferences of students and teachers. Gathering data about the needs and preferences of students and teachers in an institution could provide useful information for the institution as well as important insights associated with specific individuals.

2. Where possible, institutions need to be ready to provide general training for both students and teachers on how to use specific technologies as well as ongoing support for those who may be struggling. In addition to the technical side of simply being able to use these resources, teachers and students may need carefully planned approaches to effective use of technology that ensure exercises, activities, and homework are specifically designed to facilitate language development, particularly terms of listening and speaking skills that may be underutilized in a time of physical distancing.

3. Identify students with unique technology needs and work toward providing appropriate solutions. For example, lower-proficiency learners may not have the language skills needed to function successfully in a technology-based learning environment. Depending on a wide variety of safety and logistical factors, it may be appropriate to have high-proficiency students stay off campus while the lowest-level students participate in a carefully regulated face-to-face environment where additional support could be provided.

4. Identify students with challenging family circumstances that could undermine student participation and learning. In some cases, it might be possible to grant institutional access to a limited number of students who might be stationed in different locations throughout the building while they participate in online classes with other classmates who join from their homes.

5. Be sensitive, understanding, compassionate, and patient toward students and teachers who may be struggling or whose priorities may have shifted due to the immediate physical, financial, familial, or personal challenges they may face. Balance the expectation of excellence in student and teacher performance with flexibility to optimize success.

6. Where possible, provide comfortable and nonthreatening mechanisms for students and teachers to report how they are doing physically and mentally. Then provide support or resources for these individuals. Helping address these needs explicitly may facilitate better teaching and learning outcomes.

4.1 Limitations and future research

Although this study provides a number of useful insights regarding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on ESL learning in the U.S., there are a number of limitations that should be considered when examining these findings. First, this study was conducted at a single institution. Similar studies in the future could benefit from including multiple institutions across a number of regions. On a related note, the number of COVID-19 cases and related deaths were relatively small in the state where this study was conducted. Though national and international media presented the threat and devastation of the pandemic in alarming detail, little of that was actually observed locally. This lack of severe effects of the pandemic in this region may have tempered responses compared to what might have been obtained from other harder hit areas of the U.S.

5 Conclusion

This study sought important answers to a number of questions associated with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on ESL learners and TESOL practitioners in the U.S. Evidence suggests that although the ordeal added stress for all participants, the amount of stress varied from one individual to another depending on context and circumstances. Some issues generated similar levels of stress for students and teachers while others created more stress for students such as the transition to using technology in place of in-person teaching and learning. Although students continued to make progress in their language development during the pandemic, their speaking skills lagged behind their writing skills during the pandemic. TESOL practitioners and program administrators should consider the findings of this study to help optimize teaching and learning in similar contexts in the future.

Appendix

Survey for Students and Teachers

Please click on the description that best matches your feelings about the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on each of the following while studying at the ELC:

	Extremely negative	Somewhat negative	Neither positive nor negative	Somewhat positive	Extremely positive
Learning English	O	O	O	O	O
Your stress level	O	O	O	O	O
Learning online	O	O	O	O	O

Your priority level or importance for learning English...

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Before the pandemic	O	O	O	O	O
Now	O	O	O	O	O

Please share what things have been the most difficult for you during the Covid-19
pandemic and why it has been difficult (worry about family, school, work, health, finances,
friends, etc.)

Note. The teacher survey was identical to the student survey except the words "studying" and "learning" were replaced with the word "teaching."

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