Overview of Online Language Education as a Panacea in the Time of Crisis

Sahar Dabir [*]

Corresponding Author, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Isfahan, Iran.

sahar_dabir@fgn.ui.ac.ir

Abstract:

The global pandemic of COVID-19 has driven us apart, disrupted the continuity of education worldwide, and awakened the need for developing an educational environment based on kindness, compassion, and understanding more than ever before. Also, this crisis has forced the authorities to change the format of education from face-to-face to online delivery mode on very short notice. Due to this rapid transition, lack of appropriate infrastructures, and absence of proper preparation in Iran and most countries around the world, face-to-face education has switched into a kind of low-quality, temporary, and unplanned online practice, which should be referred to as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). This study aims to provide a discussion on the practice of this low-quality and temporary online education or ERT in the current situation of Iran and other countries around the globe during the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, this paper summarizes the literature on the history, definitions, merits, barriers, and effectiveness of online education for students and teachers from different disciplines, especially language education. The present literature review can help students and teachers grasp the current status of this low-quality and unplanned online education or ERT in Iran and other countries worldwide. Furthermore, instructors and authorities can reconsider their online teaching practices, move beyond ERT, and develop a high-quality and well-planned online education for their students based on the information obtained from this literature review and the lessons learned from the pandemic.

1. Introduction

In the time of crisis, above all, it is necessary to have compassion, empathy, and kindness in order to deeply understand other people's unique conditions and feeling, imagine what it is like to be in someone else's situation, provide them with heart-based support, and relieve their suffering and pain. With this idea in mind, universities need to develop a humanized environment and healthy working culture during challenging times more than ever before (Devis-Rozental & Clarke, 2020). Then, it is essential to study and review the previous literature in order to comprehend the significance of online education as a panacea and smart way to guarantee the continuity of education during the emergency situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, governments worldwide announced the closure of face-to-face classes and quickly moved to online delivery mode to diminish the spread of the virus. Due to this rapid transition, the authorities in Iran and most countries around the world failed to provide students and teachers with proper infrastructure and facilities. Also, they did not have enough time to develop long-term plans for online education. However, Branch and Dousay (2015, as cited in Hodges et al., 2020) mentioned that "effective online learning results from careful instructional design and planning, using a systematic model for design and development" (p. 5). Therefore, the students and teachers in Iran and other countries across the world were incapable of experiencing effective and high-quality online education during the pandemic. As an attempt to fill this gap, this study presents a summary of the literature on the history, definitions, merits, barriers, and effectiveness of online education for students and teachers to get a grasp on the present status of online education across the world and learn how to integrate online education in an effective way. In this regard, first, it is crucial to provide a brief history of online education for the students and teachers to gain a better understanding of the ever-evolving nature of technology and the need to constantly update their digital literacy and competence to survive in this digital age.

Online education is the latest form of distance education (Al-Abdullatif, 2012). The origin of online education traces back to the late 1800s when distance education was common in forms of paper-based instruction and correspondence courses (Simon, 2012). At that point in time, the teachers sent the course contents in paper-based format to the students by mail, and then the students responded with the assignments (Aaron, 2016). One might think of a student in the late 1800s who lived miles away from her teacher and only had access to paper-based

instruction and mail. In such a situation, it was immensely difficult and torturing for that student to learn from her teacher due to the lack of face-to-face interaction (Al-Abdullatif, 2012), the slow delivery of instruction (Aaron, 2016), and the lack of immediate feedback (Montiel-Chamorro, 2018).

With the emergence of the radio and television in the 1920s and 1930s, students were allowed to hear and watch the course contents (Montiel-Chamorro, 2018). However, they still had to mail their assignments to the teacher (Al-Abdullatif, 2012). Although the broadcast systems facilitated distance education by providing audio and video-based instruction, they could not completely solve these limitations. In the early 1980s, personal computers (PCs) became widely popular (Pham, 2015), and in the mid-1990s, when the internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) became accessible, distance education developed into online education (Al-Abdullatif, 2012; Montiel-Chamorro, 2018). With the emergence of modern technologies during the 2000s, the limitations of distance education, such as the slow delivery of instruction, the lack of immediate feedback, and the lack of face-to-face interaction were solved (Montiel-Chamorro, 2018). In recent years, with the remarkable growth of the internet, instructors and students have been presented with many different types of online education tools, such as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) tools, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and Learning Management Systems (LMSs) such as Moodle and BigBlueButton (Al-Abdullatif, 2012; Pham, 2015; Rekola & Siltanen, 2021).

2. Definitions, Merits, Barriers, and Effectiveness of Online Education

Online education goes by many names in the literature, such as electronic learning (e-learning), online learning, web-based instruction (WBI), distance education, and so on. For example, Mpungose (2020) described that "e-learning is education that takes place over the internet is alternatively called online learning, and it is an umbrella term for any learning that takes place across distance and not in a face-to-face platform" (p. 2). In addition, Castro and Tumibay (2019) explained that "online learning refers to the delivery of educational material via any electronic media such as the internet, intranet, extranets, satellite broadcast, audio/videotape, CDs, video conferencing and computer-based training" (p. 2). Also, Northcote and Gosselin (2016) defined online education as "teaching a class totally or partially through internet and online course management tools" (p. 209). Moreover, Zhu and McKnight (2006, as cited in Al-Abdullatif, 2012) described that online learning is "any formal

education process in which the instruction occurs when the learner and the instructor are not in the same place and internet technology is used to provide a communication link between the instructor and students" (p. 1).

Despite the abundance of research on the definition of online learning, there seems to be no standard and clear definition of online education in the literature. Similarly, Singh and Thurman (2019) mentioned that online education includes online learning and online teaching. However, so many researchers used the term online learning to talk about online education. In order to reduce the confusion and develop a deeper understanding, Singh and Thurman (2019) conducted a systematic literature review on the definitions of online learning from 1988 to 2018. They pointed to five critical elements for defining online learning in terms of "clear domain delineation of the concept", "use of technology", "time element" (synchronous or asynchronous), "interactivity or learning examples", and "the role of physical distance" (p. 302). Based on these elements, they defined online education as "education being delivered in an online environment through the use of the internet for teaching and learning. This includes online learning on the part of the students that is not dependent on their physical or virtual co-location. The teaching content is delivered online and the instructors develop teaching modules that enhance learning and interactivity in the synchronous or asynchronous environment" (p. 302). Today, the internet and online education tools have made teaching and learning easier. In fact, online education provides many benefits for teachers and students from all disciplines, including languages, such as affordability and convenience (Castro & Tumibay, 2019; Stone & Springer, 2019), flexibility and accessibility (Al-Abdullatif, 2012; Lalitha & Sreeja, 2020; Simon, 2012).

In this respect, Stone and Springer (2019) suggested that online learning eliminates the financial and time challenges for students with low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, who have to work and study simultaneously. Also, they pointed out that online learning is more effortless and more convenient for students with disability. Moreover, Castro and Tumibay (2019) reported that online learning is cost-effective and it can eliminate the time and expenses of traveling. In addition, online learning is more convenient and accessible for those students who may not be able to attend face-to-face classes due to work or personal reasons. Furthermore, they pointed out that the privacy of online learning can provide a safe and convenient environment for introverted students to participate in online learning activities more easily.

In addition, Al-Abdullatif (2012) pointed out that online education eliminates the limitations of place and time. For example, the students can have access to the learning materials, and the instructors can access their students' tasks anywhere and anytime. Also, learning is not limited to fixed classroom time anymore, and the students can communicate and learn from their teachers in a convenient location or time. In the same line, Simon (2012) stated that online education provides students and teachers with more time and opportunities to learn new skills and work on their professional development at any location or time. Moreover, Lalitha and Sreeja (2020) suggested that when you have access to the internet and online learning resources, you can continuously learn and update your knowledge and skills.

Despite all its merits, many researchers pointed to some of the barriers to the integration of online education for students and teachers in all fields, including language education, in terms of lack of teacher presence and responsiveness (Alshamrani, 2019; Arghode et al., 2018; Stone & Springer, 2019), lack of an interactive and appropriate online course design (Al-Abdullatif, 2012; Stone & Springer, 2019), lack of effective online training and technical support for online teachers (Al-Abdullatif, 2012; Arghode et al., 2018; Bailey & Lee, 2020; Stone & Springer, 2019), and students' lack of discipline and self-directed skills (Al-Abdullatif, 2012; Gilbert, 2015).

Among them, Stone and Springer (2019) described that a lack of teacher presence and responsiveness could result in the students' isolation and higher attrition rates, that is, "when students experience little or no feedback, no discussion and 'don't bother me tutors," they will feel isolated and cannot be engaged in the online learning (p. 153). Also, Arghode et al. (2018) stated that "quality learner-instructor interaction can be more important to learning than learner-learner or other instructional models" (p. 7). In other words, when the teacher could not provide the students with effective and instant feedback, the students' motivation and engagement in online learning will decrease. Moreover, Alshamrani (2019) suggested that there are higher chances of cheating and plagiarism in online learning due to the lack of teacher presence and appropriate monitoring.

In addition, Stone and Springer (2019) expressed that some factors like "large class sizes" and "insufficient time" can make it difficult for instructors to create an interactive online atmosphere and to develop "appropriate standards" for online education (p. 159). Also, they addressed that replicating the same face-to-face teaching methods and materials will not work in online classes. Therefore,

the universities should develop "a quality agenda" for online education, that is developing a course design which is appropriate for online delivery (p. 156). Moreover, Al-Abdullatif (2012) stated that when teachers do not know how to develop an effective online course and cannot explain the course objectives clearly, the students will be confused and cannot be engaged in online learning.

Furthermore, Arghode et al. (2018) explained that online instructors need professional training to engage students in online learning and develop a sense of connection and caring in online environments. Also, Al-Abdullatif (2012) noted that the instructors need technical support and assistance during online teaching and it is the universities' responsibility to provide appropriate online training and technical support for the teachers. In the same vein, Bailey and Lee (2020) highlighted that when instructors do not have enough knowledge and skills in online teaching, they cannot develop appropriate online courses for the students. In addition, Stone and Springer (2019) suggested that universities should provide instructors with consistent support and training so that they can create an interactive and supportive online atmosphere for the students.

Finally, Al-Abdullatif (2012) reported that the lack of student discipline is one of the main disadvantages of online education. Because if the students could not discipline themselves and manage their time to meet the online course deadlines, they will fail the course. As Aguilera-Hermida (2020) described, "research has shown that lack of motivation and self-regulation skills in online learning may result in individuals spending extra time completing assignments, turning in late assignments, or overall poor-quality work" (p. 2). Along the same line, Gilbert (2015) pointed out that students who are not self-directed have a hard time balancing their life priorities and staying motivated to complete their assignments on time. Therefore, online instructors should support their students in developing their self-directed learning skills.

In order to overcome these limitations, some researchers highlighted the factors that can have a noticeable effect on the effectiveness and quality of students' online learning, including language learning, in terms of a strong teacher presence and online student engagement (Arghode et al., 2018; Stone & Springer, 2019), the institutional responsibility to develop a quality online education (Castro & Tumibay, 2019; Stone & O'Shea, 2019; Stone & Springer, 2019), the consistent and prompt feedback (Aaron, 2016; Arghode et al., 2018; Stone & Springer, 2019; Tanis, 2020), and the instructor familiarity with the students' needs, characteristics, and learning styles (Al-Abdullatif, 2012; Arghode et al., 2018; Yu, 2021).

As mentioned above, the previous studies addressed several barriers to the application of online education; here it is essential to present some solutions for these limitations. In order to solve the first barrier which is the lack of teacher presence and responsiveness, Stone and Springer (2019) suggested that instructors should make every effort to create a welcoming atmosphere and help the students to develop a sense of belongingness to the online learning community, and encourage them to participate in the online learning activities. In this way, the students can be sure about the presence of their teacher on the online system who is caring and listening to them. In the same line, Arghode et al. (2018) conducted a study on the significance of the instructor's role in online student engagement and mentioned that "learners are motivated to involve in learning by instructors fueling their passion and inclination to study" (p. 2). In other words, when the instructor is supportive and interested in the students' progress and development, the students will develop a strong academic passion to take part in online learning activities. Therefore, effective online learning is often based on a strong teacher presence and online student engagement.

Moreover, in an effort to solve the second barrier that is the absence of an interactive and appropriate online course design, some researchers recommended that the universities need to develop a course design that is appropriately and specifically designed for online delivery (Castro & Tumibay, 2019; Stone & O'Shea, 2019; Stone & Springer, 2019). Among them, Castro and Tumibay (2019) noted that it is essential to develop an effective online instructional design that is specific to online education and can make the delivery of online learning easier. Also, Stone and Springer (2019) mentioned that it is the institutions and universities' responsibility to develop a quality schedule and course design for online education. That is, the universities should implement clear and standard strategies for online education, develop an appropriate and engaging online course design, provide high-quality and ongoing professional development for teachers, consider the students' employment challenges and provide flexibility with online exam dates, and make sure teachers and students are supported and equipped to teach and learn online. Along the same line, Stone and O'Shea (2019) addressed that it is necessary to provide appropriate support to online students who may "lack the time, the confidence and the sense of entitlement to ask for support" (p. 63). Also, they noted that this support should be "embedded within the curriculum as much as possible, hence delivering it where and when it is most needed" (p. 63).

In addition, other scholars (Aaron, 2016; Al-Abdullatif, 2012; Arghode et al., 2018; Stone & Springer, 2019; Tanis, 2020; Yu, 2021) pointed out that the instructors' consistent feedback and familiarity with the students' needs can also have a considerable impact on the effectiveness and quality of students' online learning. For instance, Aaron (2016) described that the feedback and perception of the students about online instruction are essential for effective online learning and teachers should care about their students' feedback and ask their opinions about the quality of online teaching. Also, Stone and Springer (2019) reported that when the instructor provides students with immediate feedback, the students feel cared for and they can make sure that their teacher is present and monitoring their progress. In addition, Arghode et al. (2018) stated that instructors can show their presence and develop a sense of connection with online learners by providing frequent and immediate feedback on their performance. For example, the instructors can provide the students with weekly online meetings to check their progress and answer their questions. Moreover, Tanis (2020) addressed that providing consistent, immediate, constructive, and timely feedback can increase the students' motivation, engagement, and satisfaction with the online course.

Furthermore, Skelton (2007, as cited in Abdullatif, 2012) stated that for effective online education, the instructors should adjust their teaching methodologies to the students' needs and be familiar with the students' characteristics. Also, Arghode et al. (2018) expressed that when developing an online instructional design, the instructors should pay attention to the students' learning styles to increase their motivation and engagement in online learning. In addition, Yu (2021) believed that when teachers are familiar with their students' characteristics and learning preferences, they can implement more appropriate online teaching strategies and design careful pedagogical approaches. Therefore, paying attention to the students' personalities and needs can have a positive effect on the quality and effectiveness of online education.

3. Online Education in Critical Situations: Focus on Iran

In the 20th and 21st centuries, many crises such as war and conflicts (e.g., the first world war in 1914 and the second world war in 1939), natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes and earthquakes), and epidemics (e.g., the influenza pandemic of 1918, the outbreak of SARS coronavirus in 2002, and the H1N1 pandemic in 2009) caused major academic disruption and transition to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Gelles et al., 2020; Ronkowitz & Ronkowitz, 2021; Tafazoli,

2021a). However, the global pandemic of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 interrupted the continuity of education and affected the lives of people to such an extent that it was mentioned as "the most crucial global health calamity of the century and the greatest challenge that humankind faced since the 2nd World War" (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020, p. 1). As a result, most educational sectors worldwide announced the closure of face-to-face classes and switched to ERT to maintain the continuity of education (Hodges et al., 2020).

The term ERT was first introduced by Hodges et al. (2020) and can be referred to as "pandemic pedagogy" (Tafazoli, 2021a, p. 5), "education in emergencies" (EiE) (Oliveira et al., 2021, p. 1359), "emergency remote education" (ERE) (Oliveira et al., 2021, p. 1359), and "emergency distance education" (EDE) (Tarchi et al., 2022, p. 2). Although some countries across the world performed well in developing pandemic/emergency response plans and teams, scenario planning, and discovering the available options before the COVID-19 pandemic (Dhawan, 2020; Rice & Zancanella, 2021; Ronkowitz & Ronkowitz, 2021), the Iranian government failed to have long-term plans and could not take the appropriate decisions on time. As a result, the transition from traditional face-to-face classes to online delivery mode occurred with a delay (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Tafazoli & Atefi Boroujeni, 2022).

Due to this "temporary disruption of education" (Tarchi et al., 2022, p. 4), "the lack of technological infrastructure" (Tarchi et al., 2022, p. 4), and "the absence of clear and systematic institutional rules for online education" (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022, p. 621), the Iranian students and teachers from different disciplines, including language education, experienced so much confusion, frustration, and stress. As Tarchi et al. (2022) mentioned, "the reason for this lack of attention might be that the Iranian government is in its primary stage of offering its administrative and management services online¬¬—the Iran e-government services project, which officially started to operate under the name Mobile Government in early 2018" (p. 4). Also, Dashtestani and Hojatpanah (2020) highlighted that since 2010, the Iranian government has started to integrate technologies into education with the purpose of changing the traditional education system into a smart and technology-based one. That is, the integration of technology in education does not have a long history in Iran, and it has attracted the Iranian authorities' attention in recent years. Therefore, Iranian students and teachers do not have adequate knowledge and skills to integrate technology effectively into online education during the COVID-19 crisis.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Iranian instructors worked with some online education tools, such as LMS, to a limited extent in order to complement their teaching and provide an opportunity for the students to access and download the traditional classes' course contents. However, these teachers did not know how to use the online education tools "in a systematic and professional way" (Tafazoli, 2021b, p. 399), because they had no prior experience with fully online teaching and did not receive any professional development courses in order to learn the appropriate knowledge and skills for teaching online (Derakhshan et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022). As a result, when the Iranian authorities announced the closure of universities on very short notice, face-to-face education shifted to a kind of low-quality, temporary, and unplanned online practice (Tafazoli, 2021b). Although, in the Iranian educational context, it is called 'online education,' Tafazoli (2021a) believes that this type of education in Iran should be referred to as ERT.

Due to poor planning, lack of preparation, and the sudden transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to ERT, Iranian students and teachers from various disciplines, including language education, faced many challenges, such as situational and environmental issues (e.g., Tarchi et al., 2022), psychological and emotional challenges (Derakhshan et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Tafazoli, 2021b), and technological barriers (Badrkhani, 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Tafazoli, 2021a, 2021b; Tarchi et al., 2022).

For example, regarding situational and environmental challenges, Tarchi et al. (2022) pointed to the lack of concentration at home by stating that "online classes allow you to study in a more comfortable environment, which is also a weakness as it is easier to get distracted at home" and "you lose focus and motivation when staying at home by yourself" (p. 7). Furthermore, Derakhshan et al. (2021) reported that Iranian students felt less motivated and bored due to the stay-at-home order during the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, when the students were forced to stay at home and work with their laptops and cellphones for a long time, they felt extremely bored and tired. Other reasons for the students' boredom and mental fatigue can be teachers' monotonous lectures, lack of teacher presence and support, and lack of face-to-face interaction. Moreover, Tafazoli (2021b) pointed out that the Iranian EFL teachers experienced "panic" and "stress" during the online classes due to having no prior experience with online teaching and receiving no training for teaching online in an effective and systematic way (p. 7). Along the same line, Ghanbari and Nowroozi (2022) highlighted that the Iranian EFL teachers experienced so much

stress and anxiety because they did not have an appropriate model for the standard online practice; therefore, they had to learn how to teach online by trial and error.

In addition, the previous literature shows that Iranian students and teachers in all fields, including language education, confronted several technological barriers (Badrkhani, 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Tafazoli, 2021a, 2021b; Tarchi et al., 2022). In this regard, Tarchi et al. (2022) noted that due to the lack of technological readiness in Iran, the educational system and learning atmosphere have completely changed from a mostly traditional face-to-face mode to a completely online delivery mode. However, some countries like Italy and Sweden, with a high level of technological readiness, experienced blended learning before the pandemic, and it was easier for them to move to a high-quality planned online education. Also, Derakhshan et al. (2021) highlighted that during the COVID-19 crisis, Iranian students experienced boredom due to some technological challenges in online classes, such as "poor audio quality and microphones," "poor internet connection," and "poor online platform" (p. 8). In addition, Ghanbari and Nowroozi (2022) explained that the Iranian EFL teachers reported that the university and authorities did not develop the appropriate infrastructures and online education tools for fully online teaching. Also, some students could not attend the online courses due to "poor technological availability" (p. 614) and "insufficient financial support" (p. 617). In the same way, Badrkhani (2021) pointed to the absence of "a strong background in online education" and the "lack of sufficient infrastructure" for online education during the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 2). Along the same line, Tafazoli (2021b) described that the Iranian EFL teachers faced many technological barriers, such as a "lack of infrastructures" and "widespread power outages" that were out of their control (p. 400).

4. Conclusion and Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic has driven us apart, disrupted the continuity of education worldwide, and awakened the need for developing an educational environment based on kindness, compassion, and understanding more than ever before. In other words, in order to provide students and teachers with the appropriate support that they need, it is essential to care for their unique personal journeys and barriers during challenging times.

This study reviewed the literature related to the practice of low-quality and temporary online education or ERT in the current situation of Iran and other

countries around the world during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, this paper presented a summary of the literature on the history, definitions, merits, barriers, and effectiveness of online education for students and teachers in all fields, including language education. The present literature review can help students and teachers to gain a better understanding of the present status of this low-quality and unplanned online education or ERT in Iran and other countries worldwide. As a result, they can use the information obtained from this literature review to reconsider their online learning and teaching practices, move beyond ERT, and develop a high-quality online education.

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مروری بر آموزش برخط زبان به عنوان راه حلی در زمان بحران (پژوهشی)

سحر دبیر*

نویسندۀ مسئول، دانش آموختۀ کارشناس ارشد آموزش زبان انگلیسی، دانشگاه اصفهان

sahar_dabir@fgn.ui.ac.ir

چکیده

همه‌گیری جهانی ویروس کرونا، روند آموزش را در سراسر جهان، مختل کرده است و روش آموزش را در مدت‌زمان کوتاهی، از حالت حضوری به حالت برخط تغییر داده است. این تغییر سریع و عدم آمادگی مناسب ایران و بیشتر کشورهای جهان در زمینه‌های مختلف، باعث شده که آموزش حضوری، به نوعی آموزش برخط غیراستاندارد، بی‌کیفیت، موقت، و برنامه‌ریزی نشده تبدیل شود که باید از آن به‌عنوان آموزش از راه دور، در شرایط اضطراری یاد کرد؛ زیرا این آموزش بی‌کیفیت، با آموزش برخط استاندارد و برنامه‌ریزی شده، بسیار متفاوت است و مشکلات زیادی برای دانشجویان و معلّمان در تمام مقاطع تحصیلی ایجاد کرده است. هدف این مطالعه، ارائه گزارش و اطلاعاتی دربارۀ وضعیت کنونی آموزش از راه دور، در شرایط اضطراری ایران و سایر کشورهای جهان، در طول بحران کرونا است؛ درضمن، این مقاله خلاصه‌ای از ادبیات مربوط به تاریخچه، تعاریف، فواید، موانع و اثربخشی آموزش برخط را برای دانشجویان و استادان رشته‌های مختلف، به‌ویژه رشتۀ آموزش زبان ارائه می‌کند. علاوه بر این، مرور ادبیات حاضر، می‌تواند به دانشجویان و استادان کمک کند تا درک بهتری از وضعیت فعلی آموزش از راه دور، در شرایط اضطراری در ایران و سایر کشورهای جهان داشته باشند. همچنین، استادان و مسئولین می‌توانند با مرور ادبیات حاضر، در آموزش برخط خود تجدید نظر کنند و به سمت آموزشی فراتر از این آموزش برخط موقت، حرکت کنند و آموزش برخط باکیفیت و برنامه‌ریزی شده‌ای را برای دانشجویان خود فراهم کنند.

کلیدواژه‌ها:

آموزش برخط، آموزش از راه دور در شرایط اضطراری، آموزش زبان، همه‌گیری ویروس کرونا