



University of Hormozgan

Navigating Socialization in a Post-Pandemic Context: The EFL Learner Experience: A Phenomenological Study

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Article Info

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:

Received 02 Aug. 2025

Received in revised form 18 Dec. 2025

Accepted 28 Apr. 2026

Published online 01 Jun. 2026

Keywords:

COVID-19,
EFL learners,
Socialization,
Online education,
Challenges,
Strategies

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the factors affecting the socialization of Iranian high school English language learners in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the challenges they faced in returning to social activities and the strategies they used to cope with these difficulties.

Methods: Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 40 Iranian English language learners aged 14 to 19. The data were analyzed using phenomenological principles and grounded theory procedures with the help of MAXQDA software.

Results: The findings showed that the COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on learners' socialization. Participants reported reduced face-to-face interaction, difficulty re-engaging in social activities, negative effects on mental health, and decreased self-confidence. They also experienced problems related to online learning environments, including internet connectivity issues and limited engagement in virtual platforms. Major barriers to socialization included reluctance to participate in activities, feelings of social isolation, and communication difficulties. At the same time, several facilitating factors were identified, such as interaction with close friends, the use of social media, and participation in peer gatherings.

Conclusions: The study highlights the complex nature of post-pandemic socialization among Iranian high school EFL learners. The findings suggest that both technology-based communication and supportive interpersonal relationships play an important role in helping learners rebuild social engagement. These results may inform educators, schools, and policymakers seeking to support students' social and emotional adjustment in post-pandemic contexts.

Cite this article: Moghadam, M., Shamsi, H. & Alirezaee, F. (2026). Navigating socialization in a post-pandemic context: the EFL learner experience: a phenomenological study. *Iranian Evolutionary Educational Psychology Journal*, 8 (2), 1-26.

DOI: <https://doi.org/>



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DOI: [https:// doi.org/](https://doi.org/)

Publisher: University of Hormozgan.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared a global crisis by the World Health Organization in March 2020, was more than a public health emergency; it was a profound social disruptor. In an effort to curb the virus's spread, over 100 countries enacted widespread school closures, abruptly displacing more than half the world's student population from their classrooms (UNESCO, 2020). This move, while necessary for physical health, triggered a cascade of unintended consequences, replacing the bustling, interactive world of education with the isolated silence of online learning. The repercussions extended far beyond academic delays, seeding increased physical inactivity, anxiety, and stress (Ganesan et al., 2021) and fundamentally altering the mechanisms through which young people learn to become part of their society.

At its core, this disruption struck at the heart of socialization—the lifelong process through which individuals acquire the values, behaviors, and motivations necessary to become competent members of their culture (Gecas, 2001; Morawski, 2014). It is through socialization that we learn the "language" of our culture, internalize its norms, and prepare for our future social and professional roles (Terziev & Vasileva, 2022). Education systems are arguably the most formal and critical agents of this process after the family. Schools do not merely impart curriculum; they are micro-societies where, through daily interaction with peers and teachers, students learn cooperation, empathy, and the subtle rules of public life (Lawy, 2014). As Lamm (2000) argues, a primary objective of education is to equip young people with the tools to function within their society, a process that is inherently social. When the school gates closed, this vital channel for developmental and secondary socialization was severely constricted.

Socialization is not a singular event but a continuous developmental process through which individuals acquire the values, behaviors, and motivations necessary to integrate into their culture (Morawski, 2014). It is the process of social influence that shapes an individual's self and personality by imparting the culture or subculture of their group (Gecas, 2001). Scholars have further refined this concept, describing it as the transformation of an individual into a personality through the acquisition of language, social values, and experience (Georgieva, 2016), and as a complex interaction with the social environment that regulates behavior according to established norms (Desev, 2003a). This process is essential for the continuation of society itself, as it ensures the transfer of customs, norms, and values across generations (Terziev & Vasileva, 2022).

The process occurs through various typologies, including primary socialization (within the family) and the critically relevant secondary and developmental socialization that occur in broader social institutions like schools. It is within these contexts that adolescents learn to navigate smaller groups, prepare for future roles, and develop their social skills (Tumbaach, 2021). The forced isolation and reduction of face-to-face interaction during the pandemic directly impeded these secondary and developmental socialization processes, creating a deficit in the acquisition of crucial cultural competencies.

The education system is a paramount agent of socialization in the modern world. Its function extends far beyond knowledge transmission to actively preparing young people for their roles as citizens (Lawy, 2014). As Lamm (2000) contends, a fundamental objective of education is socialization—equipping students with the tools to function within their society's standards and guidelines. Schools provide a structured environment where students learn not only from an explicit curriculum but also from a "hidden" one: the daily routines, rules, and modeled behaviors of teachers that exemplify societal expectations (Schubert, 1986).

This function is closely allied with acculturation, whereby education transmits the cornerstone views, values, and beliefs of a culture, often through engagement with its canonical "cultural treasures" (Egan, 1999). For language learners, this is paramount; acquiring English is not merely a linguistic exercise but an acculturative process into new ways of thinking and being. The abrupt removal of the school environment, therefore, did not just pause instruction; it dismantled a primary ecosystem for social and cultural integration, particularly damaging for subjects like language that thrive on interaction.

A growing body of empirical research corroborates the detrimental effects of this dismantling. Nguyen (2020) found that university students transitioning to online learning felt isolated and reported a significant lack of classroom community, facing technological, social, and learning challenges that hampered engagement. While studies like Asghar et al. (2021) found that social media could mediate the loss of face-to-face socialization, it was a partial solution at best. The role of institutional support has emerged as a critical mitigating factor. Research by Al-Maskari et al. (2021) demonstrated that support from higher education institutions and faculty significantly affected students' academic and social concerns. Furthermore, effective communication from institutions is crucial for maintaining trust and reducing student stress (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020;

Active Minds, 2020), while technical support is essential for managing the technological burdens of online learning (Zeeshan et al., 2020).

Despite this global evidence, a specific investigation into the socialization of Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners during this period remains absent from the literature. Iranian high school students faced a confluence of unique challenges: enforced social distancing, heightened health-related anxiety, and potential inadequacies in educational support systems. For them, the lack of in-person interaction not only hindered general social skill development but also critically impeded the context-rich practice necessary for authentic language acquisition and cultural understanding.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring the impacts of social distancing, student anxiety, and school support—conceptualized as technical training, counseling support, and communication support—on the socialization processes of high school English learners in Iran. Understanding these interconnected factors is vital for developing effective, context-specific strategies to support students' holistic development in the post-pandemic era, ensuring their educational and social-emotional needs are met. Based on the mentioned objectives and the gaps in the literature, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are the specific socialization activities that learners engage in after COVID-19?
2. What are the challenges and barriers that learners face in engaging in socialization activities after COVID-19?
3. What are the coping strategies that learners use to overcome the challenges and barriers to socialization after COVID-19?
4. What are the main factors that hinder or foster learners' socialization?

Material and Methods

Research Design

The current study utilized a phenomenological approach within the qualitative research paradigm to investigate the naturalistic aspects of socialization. This interpretive approach aimed to understand and interpret the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences, as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2003). Phenomenology, rooted in the philosophies of Husserl and Heidegger, seeks to grasp the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of those directly involved

(Bonyadi, 2023). The researcher's goal was to present a comprehensive description of the phenomenon without imposing preconceived notions, aligning with the principles of transcendental phenomenology associated with Husserl.

According to Yüksel and Yıldırım (2015), the primary objectives of phenomenological research involve capturing the essence of individuals' experiences and emotions through their narratives, as well as providing detailed descriptions of the phenomenon. In educational contexts, phenomenological research typically focuses on the lived experiences, perceptions, and emotions of participants regarding a specific phenomenon. The fundamental goal remains to uncover the reality of individuals' experiences and emotions, and to offer comprehensive depictions of the phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association. The learners were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights as participants before providing their consent to participate. The data collected was kept confidential and anonymous, and the learners were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Participants

According to the phenomenological framework, it is essential to have a relatively homogeneous group of participants (Creswell, 2007). This implies that the participants should share experience with the same phenomenon, as noted by Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994), and have significant and meaningful experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. To this end, purposeful sampling strategy was chosen to select the participants. In this regard, 40 English language learners (including 15 male and 25 females) learning English at different language institutes in Fasa were chosen with age range between 14 to 19 years old. They were high school students and have experience online classes during Covid pandemic. Through a short interview the researchers made sure that the participants experienced online learning and were detached from face-to-face interaction with their friends and classmates and experience socialization problems after quarantine.

Data collection procedure

In this current phenomenological investigation, in-depth interviews were carried out with participants, following the approach suggested by Creswell (2007), as it is considered the primary method for gathering data when the goal is to elucidate the significance of a phenomenon shared by multiple individuals (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). To ensure the reliability of the participants' responses, as recommended by Seidman (1998), a series of three sequential in-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with each research participant. Following Seidman's framework, the initial interview focused on the individual's prior experiences with the phenomenon of interest, while the subsequent interview centered on their present experiences. The third interview integrated information from the preceding two interviews to capture the essential individual experience with the phenomenon.

The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured, focused interviews. The interview guide consisted of a series of open-ended and retrospective questions. All participants were asked the same questions. However, depending on the responses provided by the participants, other questions could be asked to clarify the issue and remove any possible ambiguity. The interviews were recorded and transcribed immediately after each session. Each interview lasted about 30 to 40 minutes. The interviews and data collected lasted from August 2023 to mid-November 2023 for about 2.5 months. After completing each interview, its content was immediately transcribed word by word and analyzed simultaneously.

Data analysis

As mentioned earlier, the phenomenon under investigation is English language learners' socialization problems, challenges and strategies. After gathering data through phenomenological interviews conducted by the co-researchers, the data was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) procedure for phenomenological data analysis. Moustakas' (1994) general procedures include preparing data for the analyses, reducing the data phenomenologically, engaging in imaginative variation, and uncovering the essence of the experience (See Figure 1 for the steps of data analysis).

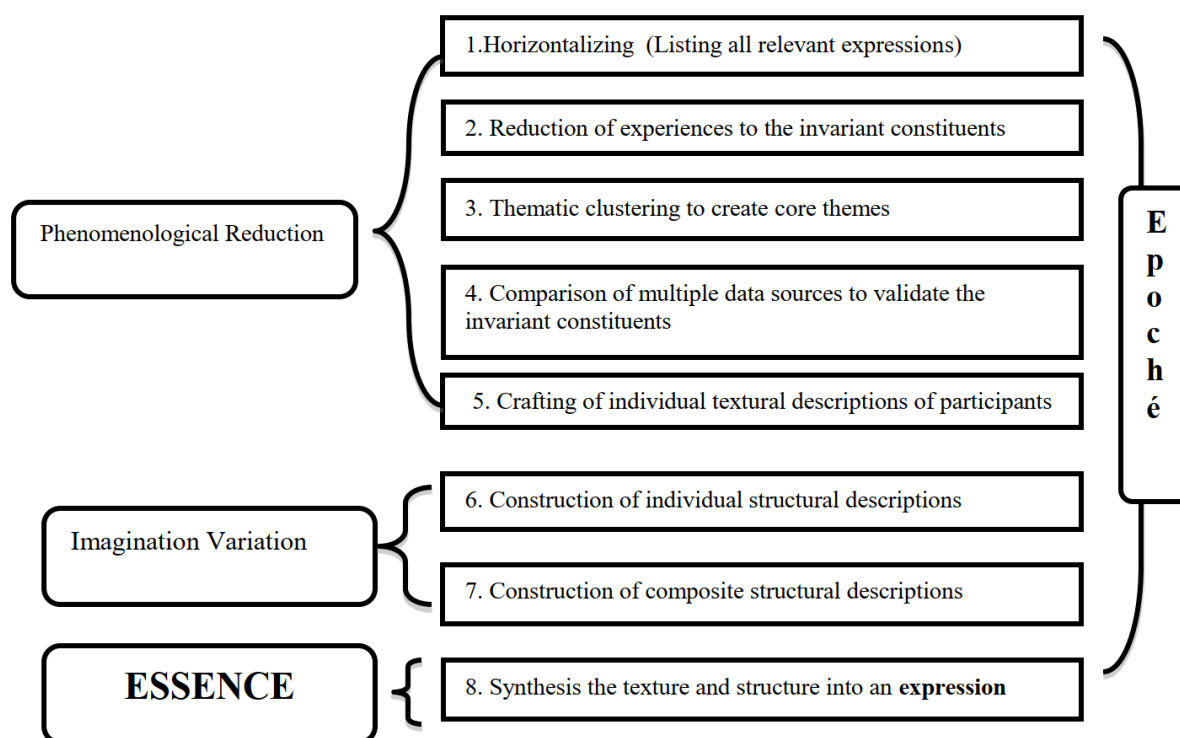


Figure 1. The steps of data analysis (Extracted from Yüksel and Yıldırım, 2015)

According to Moustakas (1994), the process of phenomenological analysis initiates with the suspension of the researcher's subjectivity, aimed at elucidating preconceptions throughout the study. This procedure, termed as Epoché, involves disregarding the researcher's biases and predispositions towards the phenomenon. It commences with the researchers drafting a thorough description of the phenomenon. Prior to the commencement of data analysis, researchers are advised to review their subjectivity statement, encompassing a portrayal of their personal encounters with the phenomenon.

1. Horizontalizing, or listing all relevant expressions: The gleaned data were analyzed equally, ignoring irrelevant or repetitive statements. A list from participants verbatim transcripts was created and irrelevant expressions were deleted. After cleaning, horizons, the textural meanings of the phenomenon, should be removed. Horizontalization is a never-ending process, as stated by Moustakas (1994).

2. Reduction of experiences to the invariant constituents: The horizons were clustered into themes and splits translated data into meaning units, describing phenomena in "textural language" through phenomenological reduction.

3. Thematic clustering to create core themes: The invariant constituents, referred to as "core themes of the experience," were clustered and thematized to understand the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).
4. Comparison of multiple data sources to validate the invariant constituents: Then, participants' experiences collected through interviews, field notes and focus group interviews were compared to ensure accuracy and clear representation across data sources.
5. Constructing of individual textural descriptions of participants: A narrative that clarifies participants' perceptions of a phenomenon is called a textural description. Using exact quotes from the interviews, the investigators employed a narrative approach to elucidate the significance of the experiences of the participants.
6. Construction of individual structural descriptions: Textural descriptions and imaginative variation were employed to imagine how experience occurred, then the structures were created based on this process.
7. Construction of composite structural descriptions: The researcher integrated textural descriptions of participants into a structured structure, adding structures at the end of each paragraph, to better understand their experiences with socialization.
8. Synthesizing the texture and structure into an expression: The researchers created two narratives for each participant, describing what and how the phenomenon occurred. The list meaning units and common meaning units were created for all participants.

The data collected from interviews were analyzed following the principles of the phenomenological approach using coding process with the assistance of MAXQDA software. The analysis of interviews and focus group notes was conducted through a coding process to reach the main themes in line with the above-mentioned steps. The coding process involves three steps: open coding, which categorizes data into major concepts, axial coding, which classifies similar concepts into categories, and selective coding, which integrates and refines the theory. The core phenomenon, identified through axial coding, is then built around the data. In the final stage, selective coding, the categories are categorized into general categories, causal conditions, and strategies, theoretically correlated in the form of a paradigm model proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The categories surrounding the core phenomenon are categorized as causal conditions, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions, and consequences.

After creating a MAXQDA project for the present study, the data was imported into the MAXQDA project as soon as the first data are available. The data included the interviews for which the audio recordings was transcribed and the focus group field notes gathered among the students. All data for a grounded theory study was imported into a single MAXQDA project so that they can be viewed, searched, and used at any time without any need to switch between different software programs.

Researcher's Role

Moustakas (1994) uses the term “co-researchers” for participants who are part of the essence of a phenomenon. According to him, the primary researcher should inform co-researchers about their roles and responsibilities, encourage open communication, and build amity with them. In this way, the researchers asked co-researchers about their experiences to seek answers to research questions. Based on qualitative research paradigm, researchers discussed their experiences during the investigation to make participants feel comfortable sharing details. Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2003) implied that the researcher “facilitates the flow of communication, identifies cues, and the participant sets respondents at ease” (p. 419) in qualitative research. Seidman (2006) suggested that it is necessary to build amity with the participant during the study. Therefore, researcher developed an appropriate amity with each participant.

Validity Considerations

In order to ensure the validity of the present qualitative research, the trustworthiness of the data interpretation was examined. According to the principles of phenomenological research, validity was examined by seeking to provide a detailed in-depth account of a particular group's experiences. The results can be expanded for a variety of reasons, including as offering comprehensive information, choosing appropriate sample technique, demonstrating the researcher's objectivity, and preventing researchers from making assumptions (Cilesiz, 2009).

With this regard, in the present study, bracketing process (epoché) was utilized to avoid making personal judgments throughout the study (Ashworth, 1999). Moreover, member checks were employed as another measure of validity (Merriam, 1995). To this end, researchers asked the participants about the transcription of their interviews during this procedure to confirm the researchers' understanding. Also, the participants received the verbatim files from the researchers so they can double-check their answers.

To ensure the validity of content and thematic analysis, the researchers worked collaboratively to triangulate the data with the help of a third researcher and using the MAXQDA software to eliminate any human prejudgment. Employing these steps, the four processes of trustworthiness, i.e., conformability, dependability, credibility, and transferability, can be achieved.

Results

As stated earlier in the previous chapters, the present study aimed to explore the specific socialization activities that Iranian EFL learners engage in after COVID-19 and also determine the challenges and barriers that learners face in engaging in socialization activities after COVID-19. It also sought to identify the coping strategies that learners use to overcome the challenges and barriers to socialization after COVID-19. Finally, the study aimed to examine the relationships between the factors that impede learners' socialization after COVID-19. To this end, this study adopted phenomenological research approach to collect data from EFL learners, and analyze data accordingly. This section re-states the research questions and provides answers to them as detailed below:

1. What are the specific socialization activities that learners engage in after COVID-19?

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of socialization experiences during COVID-19 from the perspective of professors and subject-matter experts. As can be seen, the most important impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was reduced face-to-face interactions among students (14.77%) followed by difficulty resuming interactions after COVID-19 (12.50%). The participants also reported that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected their mental state (11.36%) and reduced their self-confidence (10.23%) and interactions (9.09%). However, the participants also pointed to the positive effects of engaging in online interactions including the possibility of interacting with more people (4.55%), experiencing a new mode of interaction through online platforms (3.41%), and getting to know new resources and people (3.41%).

Table 1. Socialization Experiences During COVID-19

Row	Codes	Frequency	Percentage
1	Reduced face-to-face interactions	13	14.77
2	Difficulty resuming interactions after COVID-19	11	12.50
3	Negative impact on people's mental state	10	11.36
4	Reduced self-confidence	9	10.23
5	Reduced interactions	8	9.09
6	Getting used to no interacting with other	5	5.68
7	Restricted discussions and interactions	4	4.55
8	Interacting with more people	4	4.55
9	Experiencing new online interactions	3	3.41
10	Getting to know new resources and people	3	3.41
11	Feeling to be a stranger	3	3.41
12	Having no experience	3	3.41
13	Improved online interactions	2	2.27
14	Reduced quality of education	2	2.27
15	Difficulty in physical interactions	2	2.27
16	Getting to know teaching differences in other cities	2	2.27
17	Things getting worse	2	2.27
18	Socialization experiences during COVID-19	1	1.14
19	Saving on transportation costs	1	1.14

Table 2 shows the experience of using online platforms for socialization during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Table 2. The Experience of Using Online Platforms for Socialization

Row	Codes	Frequency	Percentage
1	Failure to use online platforms	13	22.8
2	Internet disconnection	10	17.5
3	Difficulty getting online	9	15.8
4	Using a webcam	9	15.8
5	Online courses being more convenient	7	12.3
6	Online courses being less effective	3	5.3
7	Less social interactions in online courses	3	5.3
8	Improved vocabulary	2	3.5
9	The experience of using online platforms for socialization	2	1.8

The data in the table indicate that the failure to use online platforms (22.8%), internet disconnection (17.5%), difficulty getting online (15.8%), using a webcam (15.8), and the greater convenience of online courses (12.3%) were the most frequent experiences of using online platforms for socialization.

The data in this study indicated that the participants highlighted the role of technology in facilitating social interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic. They believed that technology was effective in facilitating social interactions (23.3%) and it had positive effects on learners' interactions (18.3%), and communication (16.7%). Other positive effects of technology were its entertaining aspects (4.2%) and its role in improving the communication ecosystem (4.2%). However, the use of technology by learners for engaging in social interactions had some adverse effects such as less intimacy (10.8%), learner isolation (10%), and reduced social interactions (2.5%) as displayed in Table 3:

Table 3. The Role of Technology in Facilitating Social Interactions

Row	Codes	Frequency	Percentage
1	The role of technology in facilitating social interactions	28	23.3
2	The positive effect of technology	22	18.3
3	Facilitating social interactions	20	16.7
4	Less intimacy	13	10.8
5	Isolation	12	10
6	Facilitating communication	12	10
7	Entertaining	5	4.2
8	Improving communication ecosystem	5	4.2
9	Reduced social interactions	3	2.5

Table 4 displays the resources and support for improving learners' social experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. As can be seen, the participants in this study highlighted the importance of resources and support for improving social experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (20.9%). These resources/support include school support (20.9%), library facilities (9.6%), online platforms (8.7%) followed by effective planning (7.8%), reading books (7.8%), and peer interaction (7.8%). Other less frequently reported factors were resuming face-to-face interactions (7%), listening to English music and songs (6.1%), interacting with English native speakers (6.1%), attending group activities (3.5%), and listening to other people's experiences (1.7%).

Table 4. Resources and support for improving social experiences

Row	Codes	Frequency	Percentage
1	Resources and support for improving social experiences	24	20.9
2	School support	14	12.2
3	Library facilities	11	9.6
4	Online platforms	10	8.7
5	Effective planning	9	7.8
6	Reading books	9	7.8
7	Peer interaction	9	7.8
8	Resuming face-to-face education	8	7
9	Listening to English music and songs	7	6.1
10	Interacting with English native speakers	7	6.1
11	Attending group activities	4	3.5
12	Listening to other people's experiences	2	1.7
13	Learning programs	1	0.9

2. What are the challenges and barriers that learners face in engaging in socialization activities after COVID-19?

The second objective of the present study was to identify the challenges and barriers that learners face in engaging in socialization activities after COVID-19. As shown in Table 5, the most frequent challenges reported by the participants were Internet connection problems (20.7%), difficulty communicating with friends (13.8%), internet addiction (11.5%), restricted learning (11.5%), communication problems (11.5%), network congestion (9.2%), no correct perception of online communication (9.2%), and internet insecurity (8%).

Table 5. Learners' Challenges for Engaging in Socialization Activities After COVID-19

Row	Codes	Frequency	Percentage
1	Internet connection problems	18	20.7
2	Difficulty communicating with friends	12	13.8
3	Internet addiction	10	11.5
4	Restricted learning	10	11.5
5	Communication problems	10	11.5
6	Network congestion	8	9.2
7	No correct perception of online communication	8	9.2
8	Internet insecurity	7	8
9	Communication challenges during COVID-19	1	1.1
10	Learning problems	1	1.1
11	Difficulty having face-to-face communication	1	1.1
12	No interaction with other learners	1	1.1

This study also examined the impact of COVID-19 on EFL learners' interactions with each other. The findings indicated that the participants confirmed the impacts of COVID-19 on EFL learners' interactions. They believed that the COVID-19 pandemic can lead to reduced social interactions (13.7%), lower self-confidence in face-to-face interactions (11.1%), academic failure or poor academic performance due to the absence of face-to-face education (11.1%), feeling less stress during face-to-face interactions (11.1%), and social isolation (10.3%). However, some participants suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic has had some advantages such as increased online interactions (11.1%), improved online communication ecosystem (6.8%), facilitated online interactions (4.3%), and increased learning time (0.9%) as detailed in Table 6:

Table 6. The Impact of COVID-19 On EFL Learners' Interactions

Row	Codes	Frequency	Percentage
1	The impact of COVID-19 on learners' interactions	17	14.5
2	Reduced social interactions	16	13.7
3	Lower self-confidence in face-to-face interactions	13	11.1
4	Academic failure due to the absence of face-to-face education	13	11.1
5	Feeling less stress during face-to-face interactions	13	11.1
6	Increased online interactions	13	11.1
7	Social isolation	12	10.3
8	Improving the online communication ecosystem	8	6.8
9	Facilitating online interactions	5	4.3
10	Less impact of COVID-19 on learners' interactions	5	4.3
11	Increased learning time	1	0.9

The participants in the present study also pointed to the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their learning rate (25.2). They reported that they had a better learning rate in face-to-face education (22.4%). However, online education during the COVID-19 pandemic led to academic failure (15%), lack of experience (12.1%), communication problems (10.3%), wrong pronunciations (6.5%), low self-confidence in interactions (3.7%), and decreased motivation to study (1.9%) as displayed in Table 7:

Table 7 .The Negative Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Students' Learning Rate

Row	Codes	Frequency	Percentage
1	Negative impacts on the learning rate	27	25.2
2	A higher learning rate in face-to-face education	24	22.4
3	Academic failure	16	15
4	Lack of experience	13	12.1
5	Communication problems	11	10.3
6	Wrong pronunciation	7	6.5
7	Low self-confidence in interactions	4	3.7
8	Decreased motivation to study	2	1.9
9	The greater impact of face-to-face interactions	1	0.9
10	Familiarity with other dialects/accents	1	0.9
11	The impact of the absence of face-to-face interactions on the learning experience	1	0.9

3. What are the coping strategies that learners use to overcome the challenges and barriers to socialization after COVID-19?

The previous section addressed the challenges and barriers that learners faced in engaging in socialization activities after COVID-19. This section aims to examine the coping strategies that the EFL learners used to overcome the challenges and barriers to socialization after COVID-19. Table 8 reports the main strategies reported by the participants:

Table 8. The Coping Strategies Used by The Learners to Overcome Socialization Challenges

Row	Codes	Frequency	Percentage
1	Communicating with close friends	15	17.6
2	Using social platforms	14	16.5
3	Friendly gatherings	12	14.1
4	Video and voice calls	12	14.1
5	Communicating through social activities	10	11.8
6	Volunteering to answer questions	8	9.4
7	Communicating with family members	5	5.9
8	Hiring tutors	4	4.7
9	Joining social groups	4	4.7

The most frequent socialization strategies reported by the participants were communicating with close friends (17.6%), using social platforms (16.5%), attending friendly gatherings (14.1%), using video and voice calls (14.1%), and communicating through social activities (11.8). Other socialization strategies reported less frequently by the participants were volunteering to answer

questions asked by the teacher (9.4%), communicating with family members (5.9%), hiring tutors (4.7%), and joining social groups (4.7%).

4. What are the main factors that hinder or foster learners' socialization?

Finally, the last objective of the present study was to identify the main factors hindering or fostering EFL learners' socialization after the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 9 shows the barrier to socialization after the COVID-19 pandemic extracted from the interviews with the participants:

Table 9. The Barriers to Socialization After the COVID-19 Pandemic

Row	Barriers to socialization	Frequency	%
1	Less willingness to engage in social activities	20	19.6
2	Reduced social interactions	16	13.7
3	Lower self-confidence in face-to-face interactions	13	11.1
4	Less intimacy	13	10.8
5	Social isolation	12	10.3
6	Difficulty communicating with friends	12	10.3
7	Increased depression	12	10.3
8	Communication problems	10	9.7
9	Decreased self-confidence	5	4.9
10	Low self-confidence in interactions	4	3.7
11	Reduced social interactions	3	2.5
12	No interaction with other language learners	3	2.5
13	Communication challenges during COVID-19	1	1.1
14	Difficulty having face-to-face communication	1	1.1

As can be seen, the most frequent barriers to socialization after the COVID-19 pandemic reported by the participants were less willingness to engage in social activities (19.6%), reduced social interactions (13.7%), lower self-confidence in face-to-face interactions (11.1%), less intimacy in online interactions (10.8%), social isolation (10.3%), difficulty communicating with friends (10.3%), increased depression (10.3%), and communication problems (9.7%).

The other less frequent barriers to socialization after the COVID-19 pandemic reported by the participants were decreased self-confidence (4.9%), low self-confidence in interactions (3.7%), reduced social interactions (2.5%), no interaction with other language learners (2.5%), communication challenges during COVID-19 (1.1%), and difficulty having face-to-face communication (1.1%).

Table 10 displays the most frequent facilitators of socialization after the COVID-19 pandemic extracted from the interviews with the participants. As shown in the table, communicating with close friends (17.6%), using social platforms (16.5%), facilitating communication (14.1%), attending friendly gatherings (14.1%), video and voice calls (14.1%), communicating through social activities (11.8%), increased online interactions (11.1%), using online platforms (9.4%), and peer interaction (8.3%) were the most frequent facilitators of socialization after the COVID-19 pandemic reported by the participants:

Table 10. The Most Frequent Facilitators of Socialization After The COVID-19 Pandemic

Row	Facilitators of socialization	Frequency	%
1	Communicating with close friends	15	17.6
2	Using social platforms	14	16.5
3	Facilitating communication	12	14.1
4	Friendly gatherings	12	14.1
5	Video and voice calls	12	14.1
6	Communicating through social activities	10	11.8
7	Increased online interactions	13	11.1
8	Online platforms	10	9.4
9	Peer interaction	9	8.3
10	Volunteering to answer questions	8	7.8
11	Interacting with English native speakers	7	6.1
12	Communicating with family members	5	5.9
13	Joining social groups	4	4.7
14	Attending group activities	4	3.5
15	Listening to other people's experiences	2	1.7

Other less frequently reported facilitators of socialization after the COVID-19 pandemic were volunteering to answer questions in the classroom (7.8%), interacting with English native speakers (6.1%), communicating with family members (5.9%), joining social groups (4.7%), attending group activities (3.5%), and listening to other people's experiences (1.7%).

OVERVIEW

This study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socialization of Iranian high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. It explores the specific socialization activities learners engaged in after COVID-19, the challenges and barriers they encountered, the

coping strategies they employed, and the factors that hindered or fostered their socialization. To accomplish this, the researchers adopted a phenomenological research approach, gathering data through in-depth interviews with 40 EFL learners aged 14 to 19 years old from various language institutes in Fasa, Iran.

Socialization Activities After COVID-19:

The study found that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced face-to-face interactions among students, making it difficult for them to resume those interactions after the quarantine period ended. While some learners adapted to the changes by engaging in online interactions, a significant number experienced challenges in utilizing online platforms for socialization. Barriers to online socialization included internet connectivity issues and difficulties navigating online platforms, highlighting the importance of access to technology and digital literacy for effective online engagement. The study also acknowledges the mixed impact of technology on social interactions, recognizing its potential to facilitate communication while simultaneously contributing to a lack of intimacy and increased feelings of isolation. Learners expressed the need for school support, library facilities, and online platforms to facilitate social experiences, emphasizing the importance of both physical and virtual spaces in promoting socialization.

Challenges and Barriers to Socialization:

The study identifies several challenges and barriers that learners faced in engaging in socialization activities after COVID-19. Internet connection problems, difficulty communicating with friends, internet addiction, and restricted learning opportunities were among the most frequently cited challenges. These findings highlight the importance of addressing both technological and social barriers to socialization in the post-pandemic world. The researchers also observed that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted learners' interactions and learning rates, leading to reduced social interactions, lower self-confidence in face-to-face interactions, concerns about academic failure, and a decline in learning motivation.

Coping Strategies:

Despite these challenges, learners employed various coping strategies to overcome barriers to socialization. Communicating with close friends, using social platforms, attending friendly gatherings, engaging in video and voice calls, and participating in social activities were among the

most commonly reported strategies. These findings demonstrate the resilience of learners in finding ways to maintain social connections despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Factors Hindering or Fostering Socialization:

The study identifies factors that hindered or fostered EFL learners' socialization after the COVID-19 pandemic. Barriers included reduced willingness to engage in social activities, decreased social interactions, lower self-confidence in face-to-face interactions, increased feelings of depression, and communication problems. On the other hand, facilitators of socialization included communicating with close friends, using social platforms, attending friendly gatherings, and engaging in video and voice calls. Notably, many of the coping strategies employed by learners to overcome challenges were also identified as key facilitators of socialization in the post-pandemic environment.

Core themes

1. Disrupted Socialization Patterns

- The COVID-19 pandemic led to a marked decrease in face-to-face interactions among EFL learners, creating a social void that affected their ability to connect with others.
- Difficulties in resuming post-pandemic interaction indicate a pervasive impact on social norms and confidence levels.

2. Barriers to Effective Socialization

- **Technological Challenges:** Common issues such as internet disconnection, access problems, and internet addiction hinder learners' ability to utilize online platforms effectively for socialization.
- **Psychosocial Impacts:** The pandemic resulted in reduced self-confidence in face-to-face interactions, heightened anxiety, and increased depression, contributing to an unwillingness to engage in social activities.
- **Educational Disruptions:** Shifts to online learning environments have led to perceived academic failures and a decline in effective learning rates, further isolating learners socially.

3. Coping Mechanisms Employed by Learners

- **Engagement with Close Peers:** Sustaining relationships with familiar friends became a vital strategy for EFL learners to cope with social isolation.

- **Utilization of Technology:** A dual approach of leveraging social platforms for online interactions while also seeking out in-person gatherings was common, reflecting an adaptation to the constraints posed by the pandemic.
- **Active Participation in Social Activities:** Attending friendly gatherings and engaging in community activities were strategies identified as essential for rebuilding social connections.

4. Facilitators of Socialization

- **Support Systems:** Resources provided by educational institutions, including libraries and school support systems, emerged as critical facilitators for fostering social interactions in both physical

Discussion

This study sought to understand the complex effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socialization of Iranian high school EFL learners. The findings reveal a dual reality: while the pandemic severely disrupted traditional face-to-face interactions, leading to social isolation and diminished confidence, it also simultaneously fostered adaptation through digital tools, though not without significant challenges. This section moves beyond a descriptive summary to critically interpret these findings in dialogue with existing literature, exploring the underlying reasons for both convergence and divergence with prior research.

The core finding of reduced face-to-face interaction and increased social isolation strongly aligns with a global body of work, such as Nguyen (2020), who reported a profound lack of community in online classrooms. However, our data from the Iranian context suggest a critical nuance: this isolation was not merely a logistical consequence of school closures but was compounded by a developing anxiety towards in-person communication post-pandemic. This goes beyond many previous studies that documented the fact of isolation but less frequently its lingering psychological impact on the motivation to re-socialize. The participants' reports of "lower self-confidence in face-to-face interactions" indicate that the disruption may have stunted the development of crucial social competencies, a process central to developmental socialization theories (Gecas, 2001; Tumbaach, 2021). This suggests that for adolescents, the school's role as a

primary agent of secondary socialization (Lawy, 2014) cannot be suspended without potential long-term effects on social confidence.

The role of technology emerged as a central, yet paradoxical, theme. The learners' use of online platforms to interact with more people and access new resources confirms the potential of technology to act as a vital mediator, as seen in studies from Pakistan (Asghar et al., 2021). Yet, our findings critically contrast with overly optimistic views of digital substitution. The Iranian learners consistently highlighted the "less intimacy in online interaction," suggesting that digital communication, while functionally useful, failed to replicate the socio-emotional depth of face-to-face contact. This critical point explains why the increased online activity did not prevent feelings of isolation. It underscores that for socialization—particularly in a collectivist culture where nuanced, high-context communication is valued—the quality of interaction is as important as its quantity. This challenges the assumption that technological access alone is sufficient to maintain social bonds during crises.

Furthermore, the challenges identified, such as internet connectivity and a lack of institutional support, while consistent with global reports (Baticulon et al., 2020; Mahdy, 2020), must be interpreted through the specific socio-economic realities of the Iranian educational landscape. The finding that learners struggled with "difficulty getting online" and a perceived lack of support is not just a technical footnote but a critical indicator of systemic inequity. It provides a concrete explanation for the heightened anxiety and academic concerns reported by our participants. When compared to studies emphasizing the success of robust institutional support (Al-Maskari et al., 2021; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020), our data from Iran highlight the consequences of its absence. The "increased depression" and "communication problems" can be directly linked to this support gap, suggesting that the negative impacts of the pandemic were exacerbated by pre-existing institutional weaknesses.

Finally, the strategies learners employed—communicating with close friends and using social platforms—demonstrate agency and resilience. This aligns with the concept of re-socialization, where individuals actively discard old patterns and adopt new ones (Tumbaach, 2021). However, the heavy reliance on a small circle of "close friends" also suggests a contraction of social networks. This finding offers a critical counterpoint to the positive "facilitators" like increased online interaction; it implies that while digital tools helped maintain core relationships, they were

less effective in fostering the broader, weak-tie social networks that are also crucial for development and cultural integration, especially for language learners navigating a new cultural context (Egan, 1999).

In essence, this discussion critically positions the Iranian EFL learner's experience not as a simple replication of global trends, but as a unique interplay of universal pandemic disruptions and localized contextual factors. The erosion of social confidence, the emotionally deficient nature of digital substitutes, and the compounding effect of institutional challenges collectively paint a picture of a socialization process that was not just paused, but profoundly altered.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

This study explored how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the social lives of Iranian high school students learning English. The results show a difficult reality: while the pandemic severely limited in-person interaction—leading to feelings of isolation, lower confidence, and a hesitancy to socialize—it also pushed students to adapt.

In response, learners turned to digital tools and relied heavily on close friendships, social media, and small peer gatherings to stay connected, despite facing problems like poor internet access. This highlights an important tension: technology offered a lifeline, but it couldn't fully replace the value of face-to-face contact for these students.

These findings suggest that the pandemic has permanently changed how young language learners socialize. Moving forward, schools and teachers should acknowledge these lasting effects. Supporting students' emotional well-being, helping them rebuild social confidence, and ensuring fair access to reliable technology will be crucial in helping them reconnect and thrive, both inside and outside the classroom.

The findings of this study, several implications for educational contexts can be suggested. Firstly, to counteract social isolation and rebuild confidence, structured peer-mediated activities should be integrated into the curriculum. Structured peer-mentoring programs and collaborative project-based learning in small, stable groups can be implemented in English classrooms. Secondly, schools must provide targeted digital literacy and technical support to facilitate meaningful online socialization. Since learners faced barriers like internet connectivity issues and challenges with online engagement, support must go beyond merely providing devices. Establishing school helpline or dedicating IT support person for students, incorporating digital literacy workshops can

be some remedies. Proactive training interventions should equip learners with strategies to manage socio-emotional and communicative challenges. To empower students against challenges like social anxiety and communication difficulties, teacher-led interventions are crucial.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides in-depth insights into the socialization experiences of Iranian high school EFL learners, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the findings are based on a relatively small, homogeneous sample of 40 learners from the Iranian high school context. This limits the generalizability of the results to other age groups, educational levels, or cultural settings. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews, while rich, may be subject to recall bias or social desirability effects, where participants might have underreported or overreported certain experiences. Moreover, phenomenological approach inherently relies on the exploration of individual experiences; therefore, it cannot establish causal relationships, according to which interpretation of the results must be specified to the context the research was conducted.

Suggestions for Future Research

To address the above-mentioned limitations, other researchers can employ mixed-methods **designs** with large-scale and more diverse participants or conduct longitudinal studies to trace the trajectory of socialization skills over time. Moreover, the theme and topic of this study can be replicated in different cultural or educational contexts. to distinguish universal post-pandemic challenges from context-specific ones.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Fasa University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Funding

The authors did (not) receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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