(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

# A phenomenological study on the problems, challenges and coping mechanisms of students in learning Filipino through e-learning during the pandemic

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## Abstract

This research aimed to uncover the difficulties, issues, and survival strategies of e-learning students in the field of Filipino language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study identified and investigated the challenges, problems, and coping strategies of students involved in their learning experiences. The researcher employed a qualitative-descriptive research design supported by a phenomenological approach. For participant selection, purposive and criterion sampling methods were applied at one university in General Santos City, Philippines. To collect the data and answer the research questions, the researcher conducted a focus group discussion (FGD). The themes that arose from the data obtained were as follows: problems with Wi-Fi or data connections; the challenge of managing household duties and e-learning; no rightful e-learning space; self-learning; research and inquiry; difficulties in obtaining a reliable and strong Wi-Fi connection; lack of knowledge in using the software/LMS; and interruptions due to noise and nearby activities. It was also revealed that students' coping strategies in response to these challenges and problems include persistent learning about software/LMS, self-belief, and effective time management. The findings of this study show that a variety of first-order issues encountered by students in e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic were eventually overcome through the use of different coping strategies. In brief, even though the pandemic brought about changes to the educational system, students managed to develop preliminary solutions.

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused substantial shifts in the global educational system, and the Philippines has been no exception. The unexpected transition from everyday face-to-face teaching to remote learning made e-learning the new face of education. Although this change ensured educational continuity, it also created new problems for learners. The majority of students who were at home due to the pandemic felt that they had learned little or nothing, with the absence of knowing more pronounced information among those who were economically disadvantaged (Engzell, Frey, and Verhagen, 2021).

E-learning became the principal means of education during the pandemic. The institutions that were technologically integrated into education, however, found it easier to cope with this change. In contrast, others were left with students who had no prior experience with the e-learning platform. E-learning is viewed as a potent technology that provides direct access to knowledge and information and promotes self-directed learning (Alenezi, 2018). On the other hand, the rapid and widespread adoption of this technology has highlighted the accessibility and readiness issues that lie beneath both students and institutions.

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One of the most urgent issues in e-learning implementation is the lack of reliable internet connectivity. Many students were very upset with slow or unreliable internet service, especially since many classes required everyone to be online at the same time. Some students have no access to the internet at home or face other problems, such as a lack of high-quality learning devices and poor network infrastructure (Mahyoob, 2020). The barriers included inadequate computer laboratories, the absence of personal computers or laptops, and various technical issues. These hardships also involve the same stakeholders' concerns regarding infrastructure, technology, management, institutional support, implementation, and pedagogy (Nuhu, Ibrahim, and Oladipo, 2023).

In this context, it becomes necessary to scrutinize, evaluate, and situate the day-to-day realities of Filipino students within the broader picture above and beyond the pandemic lockdown and e-learning modes of instruction. There have been various e-learning studies across the globe; however, it is more important to present findings from the Philippines to highlight the peculiarities of Filipino learners, such as their skills, capacities, experiences, and socioeconomic difficulties. Acknowledging these realities can foster an understanding that may make decision-makers and educational leaders more effective at developing locally needs-based solutions rather than relying on imported solutions that may not fit well with the Philippine educational system and resources.

The research at hand is highly relevant and valuable in the contemporary context. It addresses the problems in education that the pandemic has created, elucidates the challenges and supports students through e-learning. The findings, when placed in the context of Filipino learners' experiences, contribute not only to the body of knowledge on digital education but also to a source of recommendations for improving accessibility, digital infrastructure, and pedagogical support in the Philippines. In the end, the study highlights that the pandemic, which disrupted traditional learning systems, also facilitated the review and strengthening of teaching and learning practices that are now more resilient to future crises.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Related Laws on the Implementation of Learning Modality

The transition and transformation of the education system during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines required the immediate implementation of policies at various levels of the community nationwide. With the enactment of Republic Act 11469 (2020), also known as the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act, the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) implemented community quarantine guidelines to control the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country (IATF, 2020). These standards and policies included the strict enforcement of safety and health protocols such as physical and social distancing, the closure of nonessential businesses and establishments, and the suspension of classes in schools.

The restrictions imposed by community quarantine and the continuous threat of the pandemic to the health and safety of Filipinos resulted in the postponement of school openings across all public basic education institutions, while several private and public higher education institutions (HEIs) also experienced delays of several months. In both basic and higher education institutions, traditional teaching and learning have shifted toward flexible learning, as mandated by the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

This shift in the learning modality stemmed from CHED's directive requiring HEIs to open classes in August while prohibiting regular face-to-face instruction (Rocamora, 2020). Moreover, the agency promoted flexible learning that focused on the design and delivery of programs, courses, and learning interventions according to time, place, process, and learning outcomes (Cervantes, 2020).

This change in the educational system necessitated new learning management systems (LMSs), capacity building and training for teachers, and repositories of flexible learning resources. The shift to flexible learning delivery has become essential despite various challenges in remote or online learning, such as unequal access to the new learning modality caused by the socioeconomic status of students (Simbulan, 2020).

One institution affected by this educational transition was Mindanao State University–General Santos City, pursuant to Presidential Proclamation No. 922 and Executive Order No. 11, s. 2020, issued by the Mayor of General Santos City regarding the suspension of classes in both public and private schools. Correspondingly, the Office of the MSU System President released a memorandum that became the basis for Memorandum Order No. 014--20C, declaring the suspension of all classes in MSU–General Santos in March 2020.

In response, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued Memorandum Order No. 04, series 2020, titled Guidelines on the Implementation of Flexible Learning, on September 25, 2020. This memorandum order outlined the fundamental principles and guidelines for implementing flexible learning. CHED also conducted a Public Orientation on CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 4, series of 2020, to further explain the Guidelines on the Implementation of Flexible Learning.

## 2.2. Challenges and Issues Faced by Students in the Use of E-Learning

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of e-learning was gradually introduced in schools. Students became more familiar with technology following the social media revolution over the past decade. The term "e-learning" is more appropriate and applicable to universities and educational institutions (Dutta, 2020).

With the arrival of the "new normal," educational processes rapidly transformed and had to start from the most basic level. E-learning can enhance the educational process; however, to maximize its benefits and performance, both teachers and students must possess the knowledge and capacity to link technology to teaching and learning. The effectiveness of e-learning can be determined through three key elements: (1) institution, which refers to teachers who are knowledgeable in using digital tools to enhance learning; (2) their ability to interact with students and create a conducive learning environment; and (3) their creativity in capturing student attention (Tham and Werner, 2005).

Teachers and administrators were tasked with revising course syllabi and requirements toward alternative or remote teaching modalities—both synchronous and asynchronous—where teachers and students were expected to have access to electronic devices; reliable internet connections; learning management systems such as Canvas and Blackboard; and communication tools such as Google Hangouts, Zoom, and Skype. For students with limited access to computers or the internet, teachers and students use smartphones to exchange messages through text messaging, email, Facebook Messenger, and Twitter (Simbulan, 2020).

The 21st century is known as the age of technology, which plays a significant role in people's lives and serves as a key driver of economic growth. A nation with limited technological advancement cannot keep up with the times, as technology makes everything easier and faster. Its impact is evident across different disciplines, particularly in education (Nagasubramani and Raja, 2018).

There is no single reason why technology is essential in the learning process, but it is clear that it surrounds every learner in postsecondary education who must be aware of new software technologies and trends. In essence, technology has become an integral part of the educational system. However, despite the recognition of its benefits, students face several challenges, such as the limited technical capabilities and functionality of certain software (Swan, 2017). These technological needs require skills to be overcome, in addition to financial considerations for accessibility. Given the diversity of e-learning platforms, students must develop proficiency in using them effectively.

E-learning is a form of technology that supports teaching and learning through computers and web-based platforms, connecting teachers and students from different geographical locations. The rise of the internet and multimedia technologies has enabled the implementation of e-learning (Wani, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of various online platforms and educational tools. However, the most significant issues in implementing e-learning include accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, lifelong learning, and educational policy (Chhetri and Pokhrel, 2019).

Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015) explored the implementation of e-learning, emphasizing that it relies heavily on access to technology—specifically, computers and the internet. Without these tools, students cannot participate in e-learning. Interruptions in connectivity and other barriers may hinder learning (Sadeghi, 2019). One of the primary concerns is security, particularly when e-learning is not aligned with active learning processes. Many countries continue to face unreliable internet connections and lack digital access. Even in developed nations, some students cannot afford online learning devices and are at risk of excessive exposure to digital tools.

Another significant challenge is the lack of skills in using e-learning tools. A study involving 424 universities worldwide revealed that institutions affected by the pandemic—particularly in research, conferences, and international education—had to adopt online learning and address issues of access to technology and teacher preparedness in delivering online courses (Gayathri et al., 2018). Other common issues include the limited functions and space of certain LMS software, which can reduce student interaction, increase time constraints, and cause frustration (Swan, 2017).

In the study conducted by Sarvestani et al. (2019), several challenges encountered by students in the implementation of e-learning were identified. These include educational problems, which refer to students' difficulties in analyzing content, objectives, and learning materials, resulting in a decline in learning quality. Organizational issues were also observed, particularly the lack of attention to institutional or organizational factors that affect the overall effectiveness of e-learning. Ethical issues emerged as another concern, highlighting the failure to meet learners' ethical and field-specific needs. In terms of technological infrastructure, the study highlighted the absence of advanced software and hardware necessary to support e-learning systems. Additionally, support issues, particularly the inadequacy of institutional support services available to assist students in navigating online learning, were noted. Evaluation problems were also identified, including inconsistencies in electronic assessments and the limited practical application of evaluation skills among professors. Finally, the study emphasized management issues, such as the lack of managerial competence and insufficient allocation of funds for the effective implementation and maintenance of e-learning systems.

## 2.3. Opportunities Brought by E-Learning

The application of e-learning has a significant effect on higher education. Today, students have the freedom to choose the most suitable learning mode that aligns with their preferences. Prior studies have shown that the effective implementation of e-learning can address authentic learning and achievement issues (Al-Azawei, Parslow, and Lundqvist, 2016).

Education plays a crucial role in learning across all levels. It is a shared responsibility—not only of students, teachers, and parents but also of the entire community that supports a child's dream to study. For many years, the Philippine education system has been entangled with various problems. However, through unity and collaboration, the vision of a brighter future for Filipino learners and the nation remains attainable—even amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Pacleta, 2020).

Private and public higher education institutions (HEIs) were compelled to adjust to social and educational needs, particularly as face-to-face interactions and mass gatherings were prohibited. As a response, leading universities and colleges in the Philippines—such as the University of the Philippines, De La Salle University, and Ateneo de Manila University—members of the ASEAN University Network—transitioned to innovative modes of teaching, research, and service delivery. Faculty members and administrators shifted to work-from-home arrangements (Simbulan, 2020).

In this new educational landscape, teaching and learning modes, methods, strategies, and pedagogies have evolved—primarily occurring within the home setting. This is referred to as the new normal in education, marked by the increased use of online and e-learning tools. COVID-19 has transformed the way people learn worldwide, as educational institutions rely on e-learning platforms to continue instruction (Gautam, 2020).

E-learning has become the core of student learning and the foundation for educational continuity. Digital learning is now essential as a reference point for students globally, signifying a complete shift in educational delivery (Gautam, 2020). It also enhances teaching methodologies, helps reduce the costs and time spent by students, and fosters digital competence and lifelong learning skills (Thuy, Hoang, and Phong, 2022).

During the pandemic, e-learning has played a vital role in distance education, supported by communication technologies such as television, videotapes, computers, email, and the internet. E-learning involves any learning experience anchored on the internet or the Worldwide Web (WWW) as the main medium of communication and content delivery. The potential benefits of online learning include increased access, improved learning quality, better preparation for a knowledge-based society, lifelong learning opportunities, and many others (Appana, 2008).

The migration of teaching methods by universities, faculty, and students highlighted both challenges and opportunities during the crisis. Moreover, online learning differs from emergency remote teaching, as the latter focuses on continuity rather than long-term instructional design (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020).

The rapid shift in the education system also demanded equally rapid adaptation of e-learning pedagogies, requiring skills and expertise in technology aligned with the platforms being used. The most appropriate pedagogy for e-learning depends on the proficiency and exposure of teachers and students to information and communication technology (ICT).

Common online platforms—such as Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Canvas, and Blackboard—facilitate unified communication, collaboration, and course creation. These tools include workplace chats, video meetings, and file storage, enabling organized classes and efficient workflows. They also support the sharing of files (words, PDFs, Excel

files, audio files, videos, etc.) and allow teachers to assess learning through online quizzes and rubric-based assessments (Petrie, 2020).

The redefined classroom model involves providing learning resources—articles, prerecorded videos, or YouTube links—before class sessions. Online class time is then used for deeper discussions between teachers and students. However, this setup is not always stable, as some schools have been forced to cancel online classes due to students' unequal socioeconomic conditions, which limits access to such modalities.

Despite these difficulties, e-learning presents valuable opportunities for both students and teachers to engage with digital educational tools, such as mobile-based, computer-based, and web-based learning (Judd et al., 2020). Today's students differ from those of previous generations—they are digital natives, highly immersed in the virtual and digital world, and active participants in e-learning through various technologies that serve different purposes (Mahyoob, 2020).

From the related studies and literature reviewed, it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted the global education system, leading to the immediate transformation of learning modalities across all levels. This transformation—known as the new normal—introduced e-learning as a new form of learning delivery via various platforms. Despite its advantages, e-learning also has disadvantages for students, as it is influenced by factors such as institutional readiness, socioeconomic status, and geographical location.

Two years into its implementation in Philippine universities and colleges, e-learning continues to evolve. There are signs of flexible adaptation to the new normal, and it is possible that the advantages of e-learning are now beginning to outweigh its earlier challenges.

## 3. Methodology

The researcher chose a qualitative research design for his study. Qualitative research involves the gathering and interpretation of nonnumeric data for the purpose of understanding ideas, beliefs, or experiences. It can serve as a means to better understand the issue or to develop a whole new set of research ideas. This method is widely used in the humanities and social sciences, especially in anthropology, sociology, education, health, and history (Bhandari, 2020). Moreover, qualitative research is considered a primary design that aims to reveal and investigate meaningful information. Its objective is to acquire knowledge of hidden reasons, opinions, and desires. It clarifies the issues or supports the development of ideas or theories for future research. This design was applied to deepen understanding and provide a thorough analysis of participants' experiences, coping strategies, and perspectives (Chali, Eshete, and Debela, 2021).

The phenomenological approach in qualitative research can be traced back to the Latin and Greek roots of the word phainomenon, which together imply "to appear" and "to show"; thus, the philosophy of phenomena. 1) The movement, founded by Husserl, as Harris (1987) and cited by Bayer (1991), focuses on elaborating experiences in detail, not through repeating definitions, metaphysical presuppositions, or philosophical questions at all. 2) It is "the science of phenomena as opposed to the science of being" (Collins English Dictionary, 1991). Therefore, phenomenology involves sorting out experiences without arguing about their existence. This approach highlights the real and lived experiences of every individual. The focus is on the everyday experiences shared by the participants that the researcher seeks to understand (Chali et al., 2021).

Mambrol argues (2019) that a phenomenological design is the study of an individual's experience and reaction to various situations. Moreover, how a person governs himself or herself is a vital aspect of this analysis. In this research method, the researcher can determine the real-life situation, main concerns, and feelings of the participants. In addition, this approach helps researchers develop a significant connection with participants, which is essential for this technique (Chali et al., 2021). Jill (2016) asserts that the phenomenological qualitative research design is a data interpretation procedure consisting of interviews, observations, documentation, and other sources, together with a responsible presentation of the information gathered from the study's key informants.

This approach is commonly applied to problems affecting individuals and is intended to portray and comprehend every statement or viewpoint related to the issue. Descriptive data are often needed, and compared with quantitative research, it is harder to analyze results, as she noted. She also explained that qualitative research is advantageous when dealing with individuals because it offers more profound ways of thinking and feeling about people. This study adopted a phenomenological design because it is a theoretical tool for education. The design enables the researcher to participate

in various activities that depict and elucidate complex phenomena, such as the different features of human social experience (Alhazmi and Kaufmann, 2022).

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## 4. Results

This investigation used a qualitative research design to analyze students' learning experiences—problems, challenges, opportunities, and outcomes—through e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five subjects participated in the study and answered each question individually via a questionnaire. The researcher allowed the subjects to express their responses in terms of their choice of medium and language. They were then able to elaborate on their answers during in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. The data and information obtained from the participant's recorded responses were immediately transcribed by the researcher for data analysis. The transcription was made from video recordings of Google Meet conference sessions. Every single word of the participants was listened to and interpreted, ensuring the accuracy of the data and information. The finished transcripts of the interviews then became the basis for analysis, from which the main themes and core ideas emerged.

### 4.1. Situations that influence students' experiences of challenges and problems in using e-learning

The interviews with the participants revealed three main themes related to the situations that affected the students' experiences with challenges and problems in e-learning. These problems include (1) problems with Wi-Fi or data connections and (2) difficulty managing household duties alongside e-learning.

In the opinion of the participants, all used laptops and mobile phones for their e-learning, as these were the main tools for submitting activities and participating in online discussions. The experiences they shared were quite diverse with respect to the situations that made it difficult for them to access and create issues with e-learning use.

Moreover, the three themes were derived from interviews with the selected participants on the basis of their specific challenges and problems with e-learning. These themes include (1) problems concerning the availability of a strong and stable wi-fi connection (connectivity issues); (2) lack of knowledge in using software or learning management systems (poor knowledge about the software/LMS); and (3) disturbances caused by noise and events in the surrounding environment (distractions from surroundings).

The situation was similar for the main tools of e-learning used in the interviews: the Learning Management System (LMS). Cutting off internet access directly impacts learner engagement, so weak or unstable connections via either Wi-Fi or mobile data are problematic.

Table 1 shows the main themes and ideas derived from the analysis of the participants' responses. The participants' specific responses are also evident in Table 1, which organizes the primary themes and key ideas that emerged from the analysis.

**Table 1** Students' experiences in learning Filipino through e-learning

| Main Themes | Key Ideas |
|---|---|
| Difficulty with Wi-Fi or Data Connection | It is difficult when the internet cannot be maintained or is unstable |
| | Slow internet causes unexpected disconnection from online class |
| | Difficult to communicate with those without internet or Wi-Fi |
| | No reliable internet connection |
| | Mobile data is unreliable |
| Difficulty Balancing Household Responsibilities and E-Learning | Sudden tasks are given while in class |
| | There are disturbances or interruptions in the learning process |
| | Lack of focus in class due to household chores |
| | Family-related problems |
| Lack of a Space Conducive to E-Learning | The environment is not suitable for learning |
| | The home is not conducive for e-learning |
| | The number of people at home causes distractions to learning |
| | The presence of people and noise reduces focus in class |
| Problems with the Strength and Stability of Wi-Fi or Data Connection | Unstable signal and internet connection |
| | Absence of signal and internet connection |
| | Sudden or unannounced internet interruptions |
| Lack of Knowledge in Software/LMS | Problems using different e-learning platforms |
| | Lack of knowledge in using software and applications |
| | Unfamiliarity with online tools for e-learning |
| Barriers Caused by Noise and Surrounding Events | Noisy environment |
| | Unable to hear when speaking |
| | Lack of focus due to other activities |

*4.1.1. Difficulty with Wi-Fi or Data Connection*

As the first theme, participants openly shared their e-learning experiences, highlighting that their primary tools were laptops and cellphones. These technological devices serve as key instruments for accessing and participating in synchronous classes, which require strong Wi-Fi or data connections. However, like many others, internet connections are unstable, and even mobile data are sometimes unreliable. The main issue affecting participants' e-learning experience under the theme "Difficulty with Wi-Fi or Data Connection" was poor connectivity, whether through Wi-Fi or mobile data, which hindered access to and participation in e-learning platforms.

*4.1.2. Difficulty in Balancing Household Responsibilities and E-Learning*

Given that the second theme emerged, since e-learning is not a traditional classroom-based learning system, the participants were confined to their homes. However, this stay-at-home order affects their learning, as has been the case for many students. Those who completed their e-learning at home experienced interruptions and disruptions in their learning because they had to manage both household responsibilities and e-learning simultaneously. The central theme, "Difficulty in Balancing Household Responsibilities and E-Learning," led the researcher to discover the problem of using the home as a place of learning, as participants noted that loss of concentration or focus was a common issue. The loss of concentration or focus was caused by household tasks, which disrupted the learning process.

### 4.1.3. Lack of a Space Conducive to e-Learning

On the basis of the theme "Difficulty in Balancing Household Responsibilities and E-Learning", it was also revealed that staying at home while engaging in e-learning posed additional challenges due to household environmental factors. This led to the emergence of another theme: the lack of space conducive to e-learning. The unsuitability of the home learning environment was perceived as not conducive to participants' learning, as they affirmed.

### 4.1.4. Problems with the Strength and Stability of Wi-Fi or Data Connection

As previously mentioned in the participants' statements, their primary problem was the signal and internet connection, whether they used Wi-Fi or mobile data. This challenge was further aggravated by the participants' geographical location, which also contributed to instability in the signals and internetInternet-Internet connections. In the Philippines, there are two major companies providing internet services, namely, Globe Telecommunications and SMART Telecommunications. However, these providers are not fully capable of delivering consistent services to consumers, such as participants, resulting in difficulties in maintaining strong and stable connections. In the interviews, the participants expressed that one of the difficulties encountered was the signal and internet connection strength and stability. Moreover, the situation worsened due to the lack of prior notification of internet downtime, leaving the participants unprepared for abrupt disconnection. Therefore, this approach remains a significant challenge for participants in e-learning.

### 4.1.5. Lack of Knowledge in Software/LMS

One of the areas for which the educational system was unprepared during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—which brought about the immediate implementation of e-learning across all levels—was the ability and competence of various e-learning platforms, such as the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Google Classroom, Google Meet, Zoom, and other software and online applications. The participants identified a lack of skills in using these learning management systems (LMSs) as a challenge and a barrier to accessing e-learning effectively, which served as their primary source of learning. The absence of competence and skills in using different online e-learning tools, LMSs, and other platforms became a difficulty and issue that participants faced during their e-learning process.

### 4.1.6. Barriers Caused by Noise and Surrounding Events

Environmental distractions are what this is all about. One environmental factor that affected participants' learning was noise and events in the environment that were beyond their control and occurred while they were learning online. In addition to these factors, the participants mentioned, as one of their challenges, the household tasks already referred to in Table 1, which they said caused problems that interfered with their learning.

The comments of the participants in the study suggest that environmental factors are highly influential in e-learning. The participants' answers to the question of what challenges and problems students encounter in using e-learning clearly indicate that the issues of poor internet connection; lack of skills in using software, applications, LMS, and other e-learning platforms; and barriers due to environmental factors are the main challenges and problems in e-learning.

## 4.2. Students' Coping and Success in Overcoming the Challenges and Problems of E-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The interviews with participants revealed four main themes regarding how students managed to cope with the difficulties and challenges of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher noted the following themes: (1) learning independence; (2) research and conversations; (3) learning diligence in using software/LMS and exploring applications; and (4) time management. In addition to the challenges and problems mentioned above, the researcher concluded that e-learning during the pandemic improved the students' personalities. Some participants managed to obtain online jobs as a source of income. Nevertheless, the researcher noted that the most significant opportunity for the participants was to enhance their e-learning skills and competencies across different settings, thereby enabling them to better meet their learning needs.

Each participant had different experiences sharing and elaborating on how they approached the e-learning challenges. Later, during the discussion of how e-learning helped meet students' learning needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher identified three main themes and their corresponding ideas. These three themes revealed that, through these opportunities, the participants were able to maintain their academic performance. This shows that despite e-learning challenges, the participants maintained high grades owing to their commitment and effort.

Table 2 presents the primary topics and concepts derived from the study of participants' interview responses. The individual participant responses are also reflected in Table 2, together with the main themes and ideas linked to the analysis.

**Table 2** Students' coping and success in overcoming the challenges and problems of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

| Main Themes | Key Ideas |
|---|---|
| Independent Learning | Does not rely solely on teacher discussions<br>Guided by independent learning<br>Shows personal initiative to learn<br>Establishes self-directed learning through habits |
| Research and Consultations | Importance of research<br>Asking questions to teachers and classmates<br>Consulting search engines and e-learning platforms to broaden learning |
| Diligence in Learning to Use Software/LMS | Use of different search engines<br>Knowledge in using various platforms<br>Manipulation of learning applications |
| Proper Time Management | Organized time management<br>Importance of proper time management in online classes<br>Self-discipline |

*4.2.1. Independent Learning*

This clearly shows that the learners were capable of becoming independent learners. This was the first central idea that emerged when the inquiry considered how students managed to overcome the hurdles and difficulties posed by the pandemic to their online education. Considering that online learning has two modes—synchronous and asynchronous—this means that students who depend solely on teachers' instruction have very little chance of accessing knowledge on specific topics. This restriction becomes more noticeable in asynchronous learning, where the teacher's presence is not felt. In such instances, the interviews have shown the participants that they were the ones who pushed their learning, thus leading to the idea of independent learning.

In online education, instructors sometimes lack the necessary teaching materials across different support platforms, which prevents them from giving a complete overview of a topic. Consequently, the learners developed their own learning habits to sustain their academic involvement. During the online lectures, whenever their requirements were not fully met, they turned to self-study as a primary technique, which further facilitated their understanding of the topics discussed in their classes.

With respect to the theme of independent learning recognized by the researcher, even though there were restrictions on learning during the noninteractive session, the participants were unable to meet their learning needs through self-directed learning, the application of personal strategies, or the development of individual study habits.

*4.2.2. Research and Consultation*

The second theme, which was extracted from the researcher's interviews with the participants, was this time. This connects to the previous theme of learning autonomy. This section highlights the participants' inventiveness and resourcefulness in making the most of e-learning. The participants were able to cover aspects that had only been introduced by their teachers during asynchronous sessions via different search engines and other learning sites, such as Google Search and YouTube. This approach also allowed them to investigate related topics. The participants' efforts and personal initiative are strong indications of their commitment to supplementing and meeting their learning needs during periods when e-learning alone did not provide them with complete instruction.

*4.2.3. Diligence in Learning to Use Software/LMS*

The proliferation of e-learning platforms has also become a barrier to participants' overall learning experience. The interviewees' remarks revealed that the low level of competence, skills, and knowledge of LMSs made it difficult for the people concerned. There were also some candidates with basic computer skills for using and accessing LMSs, but these skills were still insufficient for complete e-learning. In addition, different software, apps, LMSs, and other e-learning platforms have various functionalities that are not known to participants and are difficult for them to use.

Despite these hurdles, the participants demonstrated personal motivation to investigate and become proficient in using these tools for practical learning in online education. These activities motivated them to search various sources, such as Google search, to meet their learning needs. Knowledge and thoroughness in the use of learning tools, software, applications, LMSs, and other e-learning platforms were recognized as key factors in participants' successful coping with e-learning during the COVID-19 epidemic.

*4.2.4. Proper Time Management*

The last theme was that the researcher connected with the interview respondents. Moreover, the researcher could gain several insights and related ideas from the participants' answers. Time management, in particular, was highlighted by many e-learning activities because students had more flexible, open schedules for academic work. Self-discipline through time management contributed to participants' learning success in e-learning. The interviewees' remarks underscore the importance of time management for effective learning, particularly given the flexibility of their timetables, which could be easily disrupted by a range of factors. The participants acknowledged the positive trait of time management behavior, which enabled them to reap the benefits and success of their learning through e-learning.

The researcher, on the basis of the second research question—how students were able to overcome the difficulties and problems of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic—identified the themes. It was inferred from the interviews that the participants were able to develop their own approaches, strategies, and learning styles in response to the limitations and constraints of e-learning, shaped by its system and mode of delivery. This opportunity to develop was given to students to address gaps in e-learning caused by various factors.

## 4.3. Insights and Lessons Shared by Students on the Results of the Study

Finally, the third research question focused on the insights and lessons that students could share regarding the results of this study. The following major themes were identified from the researcher's analysis of the data collected during the interviews with the participants: (1) hard work and determination and (2) self-confidence or self-reliance.

Table 3 presents and illustrates the important insights and lessons drawn from students' experiences with e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the significant strategies they employed as coping mechanisms for learning.

**Table 3** Insights and lessons shared by students on the results of the study

| Main Themes | Key Ideas |
|---|---|
| Hard Work and Determination | The need for diligence in reading |
| | Formulating and answering questionnaires |
| | Writing learned lessons and creating a schedule of tasks |
| | Use of various search engines |
| | Knowledge in using different platforms |
| | Manipulation of learning applications |
| Self-Confidence (Self-Reliance) | Initiative to find solutions in order to learn |
| | Personal strategies on how to learn in courses |
| | Being independent in learning |

*4.3.1. Hard Work and Determination*

The last theme created by the researcher was based on the second interview question, titled "How did the students manage to overcome e-learning hurdles and issues during the COVID-19 pandemic?" In this section, the researcher

noted, on the basis of the participants' interviews, that since e-learning was not entirely adequate, their positive attitude played a significant role in how they addressed various challenges and problems. Through this theme, the participants' positive characteristics, such as hard work and persistence despite e-learning difficulties, became evident. These traits have also led participants to develop new and practical ways to support their e-learning through creativity and tact.

### 4.3.2. Self-confidence (self-reliance)

E-learning, like distance learning, is characterized by the absence of a physical teacher and by the absence of direct personal interaction between students and the teacher. Even if such interactions do occur during class time, they are still very limited in synchronous sessions. In these situations, the lack of time to guide students properly through the concepts and theories in their courses also opens an opportunity for students to become independent learners.

In contrast, through interviews with participants and data analysis, it became clear that valuable insights and lessons were gained from their experiences. E-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic evolved into an independent, self-directed form of learning. The identified themes highlighted the participants' positive traits, enabling them to meet their learning needs during the pandemic. These are the positive behaviors that students should acquire to cope with the new educational system.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Situations that influence students' experiences of challenges and problems in using e-learning

On the basis of interviews with participants, six major themes emerged regarding the factors that influenced students' experiences with challenges and problems in e-learning. These barriers include (1) difficulty with Wi-Fi or data connections; (2) difficulty in balancing household responsibilities and e-learning; (3) lack of space conducive to e-learning; (4) problems with the strength and stability of Wi-Fi or data connections; (5) lack of knowledge about using software or LMSs; and (6) barriers caused by noise and surrounding events.

### 5.1.1. Difficulty with Wi-Fi or Data Connection

An internet connection involving either Wi-Fi or mobile data is one of the key prerequisites for using e-learning. However, the participants still had a hard time, as access to such a kind was not only technologically but also financially supported. The internet's instability, slowness, and sudden disconnections or interruptions during online classes were the main inconveniences that e-learning participants faced; thus, the lack of communication made them even more frustrated.

This topic aligns with the findings of Cullinan et al. (2021) and Raes et al. (2019), who suggested that online delivery is the first issue to be considered in relation to the possible differences in students' access to digital learning. Culinan et al. (2021), noted that this difference results in a lack of access to the right tools, such as laptops or desktop personal computers (PCs), which are suitable for home-based learning and are crucial for the acquisition of digital literacy skills that are needed for online learning participation.

A study conducted by Fabito et al. (2020) revealed that in the Philippine local context, a reliable internet connection was one of the three major obstacles that students experienced during online learning. In the same vein, Cleofas and Rocha (2021), citing Asio (2020), noted that a significant number of low-income students had no personal laptops or desktop computers and had minimal internet access. Cahapay and Roca (2020) further confirmed this issue, noting that poor internet connectivity was the most commonly reported problem during the rollout of online education.

### 5.1.2. Difficulty Balancing Household Responsibilities and E-Learning

In most cases, e-learning was conducted at the participants' residences. In this environment, learning via digital tools took place. However, living at home also led the participants to various interruptions that hindered their learning. Among these interruptions were sudden household commands that disrupted their concentration, loss of focus due to housework, and even personal issues that obstructed learning.

This second theme parallels the observations of Cahapay and Rotas (2020), namely, that one of the drawbacks of online learning is scheduling around household chores. They noted that disruptions occur in online classes because students need to complete homework. This problem can affect students' academic success, as evidenced by past research showing that involvement in domestic work is associated with lower academic performance.

### 5.1.3. Lack of a space conducive to e-Learning

Home was the central place for e-learning, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this place was not suitable for the participants in e-learning to learn in the way they did. The environment was unsuitable; for example, the presence of many family members and the noise they had interfered with their online learning. This idea is supported by Cahapay and Rotas (2020), who noted that the lack of a well-organized learning environment was the reason for poor students' limited participation in remote learning. In addition, Cahapay and Rotas (2020), citing Baticulon et al., further stated that creating a positive and conducive learning space has always been a challenge in distance education, particularly in developing nations.

### 5.1.4. Problems with the Strength and Stability of Wi-Fi or Data Connection

This theme emphasizes the importance of the internet as a fundamental requirement for effective, productive e-learning. However, according to the participants' narratives, their main issues were unreliable internet signals and connections, total signal and internet access loss, and sudden internet disturbances, often due to power outages.

Cullinan et al. (2021) confirmed this conclusion by noting that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions (HEIs) to engage in fully online and blended learning. This transition led to differences in students' access to digital learning from home, with fast broadband services being a significant factor. The students' geographic location was also a determining factor, as many were economically disadvantaged and thus faced significant hurdles in obtaining broadband services.

This was also the case for Cahapay and Rotas (2020), who reported that participants identified unstable internet connectivity as one of the most important problems in remote learning. Barot et al. (2021) enriched the discussion by highlighting that the abrupt transition from traditional, face-to-face teaching to online learning created an entirely new educational experience for students. Many students did not have access to fast, reliable internet. Therefore, online learning has become a challenge for them.

### 5.1.5. Lack of Knowledge in Software/LMS

The lack of knowledge about using software or an LMS among the participants was one of the points that emerged in the discussions. The fact that the different platforms, software, applications, and other online tools used in e-learning were generally unknown to the participants also negatively influenced their access to online learning.

Alenezi (2018) reached this conclusion by citing Ioannou and Hannafin (2008), who reported that students argued that LMS platforms were confusing, slow, and focused more on administration than on learners. Moreover, the LMS was rated inferior to other social environments, such as Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace, which were seen as more engaging and fun. Additionally, Alenezi, citing Smith and Abouammoh (2013), stated that significant obstacles in the LMS included inadequate training and support, software problems that obstructed teaching, inaccessible websites, and poor university infrastructure.

### 5.1.6. Barriers Caused by Noise and Surrounding Events

One of the difficulties encountered by e-learning participants was the external factors affecting their learning process, such as a noisy environment, difficulty hearing during discussions, and an inability to focus due to other classroom events.

This was supported by Barrot et al. (2021), who noted that students' difficulties in online learning vary in form and extent, with the most significant problems occurring in the teaching environment and at home, whereas the least common problems are related to technological literacy and competency. Cahapay and Rotas (2020) noted that students faced oceanic problems in remote learning, particularly in the learning environment. They had to visit internet shops where the noise was distracting them. The participants also did not consider their homes suitable learning environments because of limited space and difficulty in focusing and concentrating.

## 5.2. Students' Coping and Success in Overcoming the Challenges and Problems of E-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite the challenges students faced in using e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were able to overcome these difficulties. From the interviews conducted with the participants, four major themes emerged. The themes identified by the researcher were as follows: (1) independent learning, (2) research and consultations, (3) diligence in learning to use software/LMS, and (4) proper time management.

*5.2.1. Independent Learning*

It was discovered through participant interviews that they did not rely solely on learning because of the lack of personal interaction; instead, they created their own guides for independent learning. Furthermore, they aimed to learn through personal initiative and to create self-directed learning that fit their own routines. This was in line with Dayagbil et al. (2021), asserted that flexible learning would offer various methods that could cater to learners' different needs. These are among the advantages of flexible learning: the time and place of learning, varied levels of choice in the curriculum (content, learning strategies, and assessment), and the use of modern communication technologies that support learning.

Basuki et al. (2020) noted that students develop strong independent learning capabilities through habits that develop during face-to-face learning activities. The ability to learn independently and self-confidence helped the students overcome the challenges associated with online tasks. Moreover, the factors affecting students' independent learning can be classified into two groups: internal factors, such as discipline, motivation, and responsibility, and external factors, such as family and school environments.

*5.2.2. Research and Consultations*

The participants in the interviews indicated that the themes of research and consultation were among the independent learning activities they considered most important. They noted the necessity of conducting research, asking teachers and classmates questions, and consulting different search engines to take advantage of e-learning and broaden learning were their primary points about the topic.

This theme is supported by Roper (2007), who indicated that successful online learners devote time to studying and formulating questions to achieve a more precise, more profound understanding. He emphasized that students agreed that asking and asking questions was one of the tactics used to involve both learners and teachers. Du et al. (2018) also acknowledged this, asserting that the majority of students considered search engines the primary basis for inquiry and used them primarily for educational purposes.

*5.2.3. Diligence in Learning to Use Software/LMS*

In the second research question, the importance of diligence in reading, formulating, and answering questionnaires, writing learned lessons, and creating task schedules was identified as a significant factor for the participants.

From this perspective, Du et al. (2018) confirmed that students' learning motivation develops and affects what they learn, how they learn, and when they learn. In addition, motivated students often participate in activities, are active users, and change their learning techniques, showing improvement and persistence in their studies.

Roper (2007) noted that successful online learners always make time for research and for asking questions to achieve greater clarity and understanding. He also mentioned that students admitted to questioning as one of the strategies for engaging both learners and teachers.

*5.2.4. Proper Time Management*

The last theme extracted from the participants' discussions was their upbeat attitude, even amid the difficulties and problems that e-learning brought. The management of time was regarded as an essential and advantageous factor for successful e-learning. The participants managed to address, conquer, and fulfill their educational needs through careful planning, effective time management, and, most importantly, self-discipline.

This theme is supported by the findings of Ahmad et al. (2019), who reported that students' learning outcomes are closely linked to their ability to manage time effectively. They achieve peak learning performance through effective time management. Moreover, Ahmad noted that effective time management practices can lead to greater academic achievement, whereas poor time management can result in lower levels of accomplishment. Therefore, time management is crucial in distance learning. Effective time management helps students be more academically successful.

Abuliwahed et al. (2022) noted that students who viewed time management and deadlines positively achieved better grades. He also noted that writing a to-do list or making a task calendar is a good way to manage time and achieve good academic results.

**5.3. Insights and Lessons Shared by Students on the Results of the Study**

For the third research question, two major themes were identified and developed on the basis of the interviews conducted by the researcher: (1) self-confidence (self-reliance) and (2) hard work and determination.

*5.3.1. Self-Confidence*

The theme reveals the participants' self-reliance: although they faced many difficulties with e-learning, their determination to find solutions to their learning challenges was stronger. The participants also demonstrated different learning strategies across all the courses. Most importantly, they demonstrated the independence of their learning.

Landrum (2020) supported this notion by claiming that learners who believe in their online learning ability and employ appropriate techniques for online learning are more satisfied with the use of digital platforms. He suggested that learning management system (LMS) platforms are more conducive to learning when students believe in their ability to learn online and have the necessary skills to execute them. Students who had taken online classes before were also more satisfied with their e-learning because they had more confidence in their capacity to perform well in an online setting. Moreover, online classes were considered to be more beneficial when students had a relatively high level of self-confidence in their learning.

This finding was also supported by Alhassora et al. (2020), who noted that the correlation between attitudes and self-esteem is developing. The students' positive attitudes toward online learning were correlated with their self-confidence because self-confidence is directly tied to feeling in control, greater motivation, and the ability to manage one's own learning processes—attributes that are very important in an online learning environment.

*5.3.2. Hard Work and Determination*

The last theme that emerged from the second question indicated that the practices of the participants, such as reading, formulating and answering questionnaires, writing learned lessons, and creating task schedules, were essential.

Self-Brown et al. (2020) reported that motivation develops alongside students' learning. This motivation affects the content, methods, and timing of learning. Moreover, motivated students tend to be more involved in activities, be active listeners and learners, and even change the ways they learn, thereby becoming better and persistent in the process.

Moreover, Roper (2007) suggested that successful online learners spend time not only on research but also on questioning as a way of gaining better understanding and clarity. He also noted that the students accepted the view that asking and formulating questions was a significant strategy for both student and teacher engagement.

## 6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic can be said to be the cause of death in the traditional education system in the country, and the adoption of e-learning, a mode of learning supported by modern technologies, was almost the only alternative. This "new normal" brought many challenges to students' learning through e-learning.

The interviews with participants and the data analysis revealed the significant experiences, issues, and coping strategies of students who learned about Filipino through e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the various difficulties and problems faced by the students, the most significant were issues related to Wi-Fi or data connections, household responsibilities versus e-learning, lack of a proper environment for online learning, problems regarding the strength and stability of Wi-Fi or data connections, lack of knowledge in software/LMS, and barriers caused by noise and surrounding events.

Although there were difficulties and problems in e-learning, the students managed to cope with them through personal strategies and initiatives, such as independent and consultative learning, research, and diligence in learning software/LMS and time management. All these strategies were coping mechanisms for the students. In addition, these findings indicate that the students continued their studies in different ways. When e-learning poses challenges, it does not become a barrier. In contrast, it was a means for students to succeed and learn through self-improvement, development, perseverance, and a positive attitude. They could adapt, learn to use software/LMS, gain confidence, and manage their time effectively, which helped them maintain good academic performance. In summary, e-learning proved to be a valuable learning opportunity.

This research indicates that students experienced a variety of hardships caused by the pandemic that, in some way or another, influenced their learning. However, through this challenging experience, the students chose to develop their skills, maintain a positive attitude, and ultimately respond to the challenges. The stories of these students do not end here as the country's COVID-19 situation continues. The results of this research are still not definitive and cover only a small portion of students' e-learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Compliance with ethical standards

*Statement of Ethical Approval*

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical research standards. Prior to data collection, the research design, procedures, and instruments were reviewed and approved by the institution's Research Ethics Committee. All participants were informed of the study's objectives and procedures and provided their voluntary consent before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process, and all data were used solely for academic purposes.

*Statement of Informed Consent*

All participants in this study were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the research before their participation. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were given the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. Informed consent was obtained either in written or digital form prior to data collection. The researcher ensured that all responses and personal information remained confidential and were used solely for academic and research purposes.

*Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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