

Stress and Safety in Virtual Classrooms: A Qualitative Study of Affective Experiences in Online Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on affective and sociocultural perspectives, this study investigates university language instructors' psychological stress, emotional safety, and coping strategies in sustained online teaching. Psychological stress is conceptualized as instructors' perceived emotional and cognitive strain, emotional safety as their sense of emotional security and professional autonomy in virtual classrooms, and coping mechanisms as the strategies used to regulate stress and maintain instructional effectiveness. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study explores how instructors make sense of these affective experiences within their institutional and cultural contexts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 university language instructors (seven from Iran and six from Germany) who had at least five years of experience in both online and face-to-face teaching. Interview data were systematically analyzed using MAXQDA (Version 2022), resulting in 724 coded segments organized into six interrelated themes: (1) psychological stress and workload, (2) emotional safety, (3) virtual classroom conditions, (4) emotional reactions to online teaching, (5) comparisons with face-to-face instruction, and (6) coping strategies. The findings indicate that sustained online teaching intensified instructors' stress due to reduced affective feedback, technical instability, and increased emotional labor, while simultaneously enabling new forms of psychological safety, particularly for more anxious or less engaged learners. To manage these pressures, instructors reported using adaptive pedagogical practices, emotional self-regulation, and peer support, with patterns varying across the two national contexts. Overall, the study highlights the complex emotional ecology of normalized online language teaching and underscores the need for culturally sensitive, emotionally responsive, and institutionally supported approaches to sustainable digital language education.

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Introduction

The expansion of online language instruction in higher education, initially accelerated by global disruptions and subsequently sustained as a normalized pedagogical modality, has foregrounded a wide range of affective experiences for educators and learners alike. As virtual and hybrid formats continue to shape post-pandemic academic practice, online classrooms are increasingly understood not merely as emergency solutions but as enduring instructional spaces that demand sustained attention to psychological stress, emotional well-being, and perceived safety in digital learning environments (Phan & Pham, 2023; Phillips, 2021).

A growing body of research indicates that prolonged engagement in virtual classrooms is associated with persistent affective challenges, including technical instability, reduced social presence, blurred boundaries between personal and professional life, and screen-related fatigue (Joshi et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). These challenges are particularly pronounced in language education, where interaction, immediacy, identity performance, and relational engagement constitute the core of pedagogical practice. In such contexts, instructors are required to perform extensive emotional labor while managing silence, uncertainty, and uneven participation while sustaining an emotionally supportive learning climate.

Research further suggests that instructors' affective experiences are shaped by structural and institutional conditions, such as technological self-efficacy, access to digital infrastructure, pedagogical training, and institutional support (Aktan & Toraman, 2022; Timotheou et al., 2023). In this study, Iran and Germany are examined as analytically comparable contexts across three specific dimensions: (a) technological infrastructure and platform stability, (b) institutional support and digital governance, and (c) socio-cultural norms surrounding visibility, interaction, and authority in virtual classrooms.

Iranian university language instructors often navigate uneven digital access and limited institutional support (Tafazoli, 2021), while instructors in German universities typically operate within more stable technological ecosystems but still report emotional strain related to reduced social presence and relational distance. This comparative framing enables analysis of the ways in which shared affective challenges are differently experienced and negotiated across institutional and cultural settings.

While recent scholarship has increasingly addressed affective dimensions of online teaching in post-pandemic contexts, much of the existing literature remains learner-centered, technologically focused, or confined to single-

context analyses. Moreover, instructors' emotional experiences are frequently examined through generalized stress indicators rather than through in-depth analyses of how emotional safety and coping are constructed and sustained over time. There remains a lack of phenomenologically grounded, cross-cultural research that captures instructors' meaning-making processes within normalized online language teaching environments.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenological and cross-cultural approach to investigate the lived affective experiences of university language instructors in Iran and Germany. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is particularly suited to this inquiry because it prioritizes participants' subjective interpretations of emotionally complex experiences while allowing sensitivity to cultural and institutional context. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, this approach enables analytical depth and contextual reflexivity, which are essential for understanding psychological stress, emotional safety, and coping in sustained online teaching. By foregrounding instructors' voices within a comparative framework, the study contributes nuanced insights into the affective ecology of contemporary online language education and informs the development of emotionally responsive and context-sensitive digital pedagogies.

Literature Review

Online language teaching has long been associated with distinct affective and emotional demands that predate the COVID-19 pandemic. Early research on virtual learning environments emphasized instructors' emotional labor, identity negotiation, and difficulties in establishing presence and relational connection in technology-mediated settings (Gilmore & Warren, 2007; Regan et al., 2012). Extending this line of inquiry, recent studies have shown that individual differences such as personality traits can significantly shape how language teachers perceive and integrate digital tools into their pedagogical practices (Ebadi & Najafi, 2025). These foundational studies demonstrated that online teaching is not emotionally neutral; rather, it requires sustained affective regulation, particularly when instructors compensate for the absence of physical co-presence and spontaneous interaction. This early work laid the conceptual groundwork for subsequent inquiries into stress, emotional regulation, and well-being in digital education.

With the large-scale expansion of online education over the past decade and its intensification during global disruptions, research attention increasingly shifted toward psychological stress, emotional exhaustion, and engagement in virtual classrooms. Numerous studies documented heightened

stress among both educators and learners, often attributed to reduced interaction, technical instability, and disrupted communication (Johnson & Lee, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Instructors reported cognitive overload, role overload, and uncertainty as they navigated new platforms while maintaining pedagogical quality (Nabolsi et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2023). In language learning contexts, students experienced heightened anxiety and isolation due to limited peer scaffolding and reduced opportunities for authentic interaction (Curelaru et al., 2022; Petchamé et al., 2021).

However, much of this literature remains descriptive and crisis-oriented, offering limited insight into how instructors adapt emotionally and pedagogically in sustained online teaching contexts. A recurring theme across studies is the affective strain imposed by prolonged screen-based interaction. Screen fatigue has been linked to reduced attention, emotional exhaustion, and diminished motivation (Wang et al., 2023). In language education, where dialogic interaction and immediacy are central, these constraints pose particular challenges (Friedman et al., 2021).

Students often report anxiety related to speaking in virtual spaces, fear of negative evaluation, and uncertainty about interactional norms (Bergeron et al., 2022). Instructors, in turn, perform extensive emotional labor to sustain engagement and motivation, frequently without sufficient preparation in affective facilitation or digital pedagogy (Burke et al., 2021). Despite these insights, prior research has tended to emphasize deficit narratives, with limited attention to emotionally adaptive practices and coping strategies.

Recent scholarship has increasingly engaged with the concept of psychological safety in online learning environments. Psychological safety refers to individuals' perceptions that they can participate, take risks, and express themselves without fear of embarrassment or negative consequences. In virtual classrooms, psychological safety is closely tied to instructor tone, inclusivity, and the availability of low-risk participation channels (Martinez et al., 2021; Fernandez & Costa, 2022).

Emotionally supportive instructional practices such as flexible participation formats, empathetic communication, and transparent expectations have been shown to mitigate anxiety and foster engagement. Pedagogical interventions such as flipped classrooms and interactive task design further contribute to reduce language anxiety by enhancing learner autonomy and perceived control (Parvaneh et al., 2020). Nevertheless, psychological safety is predominantly conceptualized as a learner-centered outcome, with instructors' own emotional security remaining underexplored.

Closely related to psychological safety are the concepts of affective design and digital equity.

Affective design involves the intentional structuring of learning environments to support emotional engagement, reduce anxiety, and promote relational connection. Digital equity, in contrast, concerns equitable access to technology, institutional support, and digital competence across diverse contexts. While digital citizenship frameworks emphasize respectful interaction and ethical online behavior (Gonzalez et al., 2022), empirical studies reveal a persistent gap between awareness and practice, leaving both learners and instructors vulnerable to emotional and relational risks online (Scott et al., 2023). Instructors report that unstable infrastructure, unclear boundaries, and insufficient training undermine emotional security and pedagogical confidence (Gillespie et al., 2022; Tsegay et al., 2021). Emerging immersive technologies further complicate this landscape by introducing new affective affordances alongside concerns related to emotional detachment and access inequality (Reinders & Wattana, 2014; Onu et al., 2023).

Despite the breadth of existing research, significant gaps remain. Much of the literature is either technologically dated or heavily anchored in emergency contexts, limiting its relevance to sustained online teaching in higher education. Instructors' affective experiences are frequently examined indirectly, within single cultural settings, or through generalized stress indicators. Moreover, coping strategies and the relational construction of emotional safety remain insufficiently theorized, particularly in online language education where affect, identity, and interaction are central. Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a phenomenological and cross-cultural approach to examine university language instructors' lived affective experiences in Iran and Germany, with a specific focus on psychological stress, emotional safety, and coping strategies in sustained virtual teaching contexts.

Empirical Evidence on Stress and Affective Experiences in Virtual Classrooms

Empirical research conducted in Iran and Germany consistently documents heightened levels of stress, emotional strain, and psychological burden in virtual educational contexts. Studies from Germany highlight workload intensification, emotional exhaustion, and reduced interaction as central stressors. Klapproth et al. (2020), for example, reported medium to high stress levels among teachers, particularly among female educators and those facing increased technical and organizational demands. Maurer et al. (2021) reported that teachers working with students with special educational needs during

distance learning experienced challenges to their self-efficacy and increased emotional demands, highlighting affective constraints of remote instruction. In higher education contexts, Michaeli et al. (2021) and Vladova et al. (2020) documented depressive symptoms, emotional fatigue, and negative perceptions of fully digital semesters among university students, raising concerns about the broader emotional climate of online learning.

Parallel findings emerge from Iranian contexts, where infrastructural limitations and uneven institutional support shape affective experiences. Quantitative studies reveal strong associations between online schooling and perceived stress (Sanagouye Moharer et al., 2023), while phenomenological and qualitative investigations highlight mixed emotional responses. Safari et al. (2020) reported challenges related to engagement, interaction, and access among student teachers, alongside cautious optimism regarding flexibility. Goudarzi et al. (2023) observed that instructors initially experienced stress when adopting e-learning tools, followed by gradual adaptation and improved usability over time. However, coping in these studies is primarily framed as technical adjustment rather than as an affective and relational process.

More recent Iranian research within language education contexts begins to foreground instructors' emotions more explicitly. Estaji and Sadr (2024) found that novice EFL teachers experienced higher levels of boredom and emotional fatigue than experienced instructors, suggesting that professional experience mediates affective responses to online teaching. Fathali et al. (2024) linked low digital literacy to anxiety among EFL instructors, though their analysis remained platform-specific. Salmani et al. (2024) documented both positive feelings of safety and negative emotional responses related to infrastructural constraints among medical students, reflecting the ambivalent emotional landscape of virtual learning environments. Across both contexts, three patterns emerge. First, stress and emotional exhaustion appear as persistent features of online education rather than temporary crisis responses. Second, instructors' affective experiences are often secondary to learner-focused analyses.

Third, while adaptation is frequently mentioned, the emotional construction of safety and coping strategies over time remains underexplored. Cross-cultural comparative studies integrating institutional, technological, and affective dimensions are particularly scarce. These limitations underscore the need for in-depth, phenomenological, and cross-cultural research focused, specifically on language instructors' lived emotional experiences in sustained virtual classrooms, which is an aim addressed by the present study.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the lived affective experiences of university language instructors in Iran and Germany as they engage in sustained online teaching. Rather than conceptualizing online instruction as a temporary or crisis-driven response, the study approaches it as a normalized and enduring component of contemporary higher education. Grounded in IPA, this study adopts a phenomenological approach that prioritizes instructors' subjective meaning-making and sense-making processes in relation to their emotional experiences, thereby ensuring alignment between phenomenological philosophy and analytic method. The study seeks to understand how instructors emotionally experience virtual classroom environments, with particular attention to psychological stress, emotional safety, and coping mechanisms.

To guide the cross-cultural analysis, the study is informed by an affective–sociological lens, which conceptualizes emotions as relational, socially situated, and institutionally mediated rather than as purely individual psychological states. Within this framework, the study examines how structural, cultural, institutional, and pedagogical conditions shape instructors' affective experiences and influence the emotional climate of online language instruction over time.

The selection of Iran and Germany as research contexts reflects their contrasting educational systems, technological infrastructures, and institutional support mechanisms. Iranian higher education operates under conditions of uneven digital access and variable institutional support, whereas German universities generally benefit from stable technological ecosystems and formalized digital infrastructures. Examining instructors' experiences across these two contexts enables a nuanced exploration of both shared affective challenges and context-specific variations in sustained online language teaching.

By foregrounding instructors' lived experiences within a phenomenologically grounded and theoretically informed cross-cultural framework, this study addresses a gap in the existing literature, which has largely focused on emergency remote teaching, student perspectives, or generalized emotional outcomes. The findings contribute to the development of culturally responsive, emotionally supportive, and institutionally grounded digital pedagogies for higher education.

To achieve this purpose, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How do university language instructors in Iran and Germany perceive and experience psychological stress and other emotional reactions in sustained online teaching? (RQ1)
- (2) How do these instructors conceptualize and experience emotional safety within the conditions of the virtual classroom? (RQ2)
- (3) What coping strategies do instructors develop to manage stress and sustain emotional well-being in online teaching environments, and how do these experiences compare with face-to-face instruction? (RQ3)

Method

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived affective experiences of university language instructors in Iran and Germany in relation to psychological stress, emotional safety, and coping in online teaching contexts. The research drew on IPA, which focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences and how researchers interpret these sense-making processes (Smith et al., 2009). While IPA traditionally emphasizes small and relatively homogeneous samples, in the present study homogeneity was defined at the level of the shared core phenomenon, namely, sustained engagement in online university teaching rather than at the level of nationality, academic discipline, or institutional type. This design choice reflects an intentional adaptation of IPA to examine how a common pedagogical condition is experienced and interpreted across structurally different but conceptually comparable contexts, without claiming exhaustive idiographic depth for each subgroup.

IPA is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth examination of emotionally complex and subjective experiences situated within specific institutional and cultural environments. Rather than compromising phenomenological depth, this approach prioritizes interpretative insight into convergent and divergent meaning-making processes surrounding psychological stress, emotional safety, and coping within a shared instructional reality. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study prioritizes experiential depth and interpretative understanding, aligning with the exploratory nature of the inquiry (Creswell, 2013).

In this study, psychological stress refers to instructors' perceived emotional and cognitive strain arising from instructional demands, technological challenges, institutional expectations, and sustained engagement in online teaching. Emotional safety denotes instructors'

subjective sense of emotional security, professional autonomy, and freedom to engage pedagogically without fear of judgment, surveillance, or professional vulnerability in virtual classrooms. Coping mechanisms are understood as the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral strategies instructors employ to regulate stress, maintain emotional well-being, and sustain instructional effectiveness in online environments.

Participants

In addition to detailed individual profiles, a statistical overview of participant characteristics is presented in [Table 1](#), which provides a concise demographic snapshot of the sample in terms of gender, country, and field of expertise. This table is intended to contextualize the composition of the participant group rather than to imply demographic representativeness or comparative weighting across categories.

The final sample consisted of 13 university instructors, including four females (30.8%) and nine males (69.2%). Six participants were based in Germany (46.2%) and seven in Iran (53.8%). A purposive sampling strategy, complemented by snowball sampling, guided participant recruitment. This approach aligns with IPA's emphasis on selecting information-rich cases capable of offering reflective accounts of lived experience.

All participants had substantial experience in both face-to-face and online university-level teaching and had actively taught online courses during or after the COVID-19 pandemic. Substantial experience was operationalized as a minimum of five years of university-level teaching combined with sustained engagement in online instruction beyond the initial emergency transition period.

The sample size of 13 participants is consistent with qualitative phenomenological research emphasizing analytic depth over breadth. Rather than claiming full phenomenological saturation across heterogeneous contexts, the study reached analytic sufficiency, defined as the point at which additional interviews no longer generated substantively new insights into the core affective phenomena under investigation. The term "experiential saturation" is therefore used cautiously to indicate saturation at the level of shared affective patterns related to online teaching, not saturation across all national, disciplinary, or institutional variables.

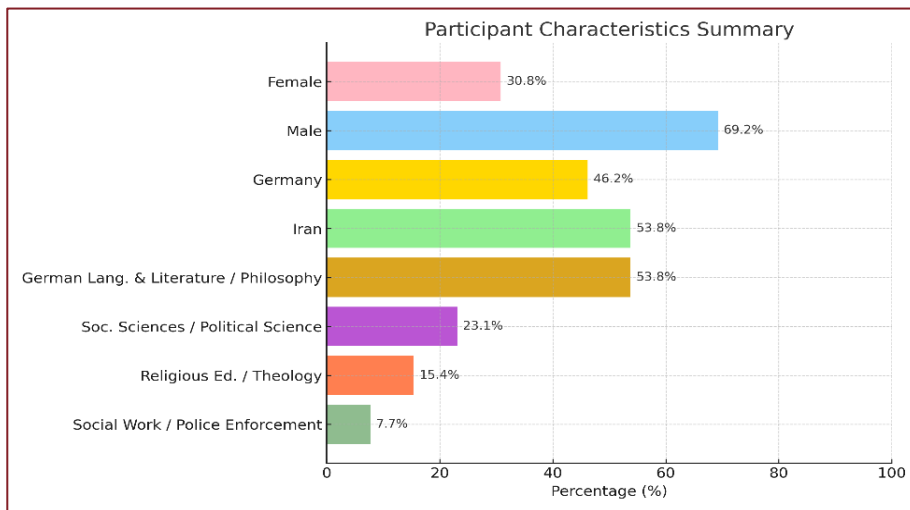
Table 1.*Summary of Participant Characteristics by Gender, Country, and Field of Expertise*

Category	Subcategory	Count (N = 13)	Percentage
Gender	Female	4	30.8%
	Male	9	69.2%
Country	Germany	6	46.2%
	Iran	7	53.8%
Field of Expertise	German Language & Literature / Translation / Philosophy	7	53.8%
	Social Sciences / Sociology / Political Science	3	23.1%
	Religious Education / Theology	2	15.4%
	Social Work / Police Enforcement	1	7.7%

Following Table 1, Figure 1 provides a visual summary of participant characteristics to support reader orientation and enhance transparency of sample composition.

Figure 1.

Participant Characteristics Summary



The figure visually complements Table 1 and is not intended to introduce new analytical distinctions but to facilitate interpretive clarity regarding participant distribution. German participants included professors from institutions such as Fachhochschule Polizei Sachsen-Anhalt, the University of Duisburg-Essen, the University of Leipzig, YMCA University of Applied Sciences Kassel, the University of Kassel, Paderborn University, and Hochschule für Polizei NRW. This group consisted of three male and three

female instructors, all holding doctoral degrees and occupying academic positions ranging from assistant to full professor.

Iranian participants represented institutions including the University of Tehran, Allameh Tabataba'i University, and Shahid Beheshti University. This group included six male and one female instructor, with academic ranks ranging from lecturer to research fellow and assistant professor, holding Master's or doctoral degrees. Detailed demographic and professional information for each participant is presented in Table 2 to provide transparency regarding institutional affiliation, disciplinary background, and teaching area.

Table 2.
Demographic and Professional Information of Participants

No.	Participant ID & Country	Gender	University	Field of Expertise	Teaching Area
1	P1, Germany	Female	University of Applied Sciences of Police Saxony-Anhalt	Police Enforcement Service	Criminal Law, Criminal Procedure Law, Academic Writing
2	P2, Germany	Male	University of Duisburg-Essen / Leipzig / Kassel	Political Science / Communication Science / Religious Education	Sociology, Politics
3	P3, Germany	Male	CVJM University of Applied Sciences Kassel	Religious Education	Biblical Theology
4	P4, Germany	Female	University of Applied Sciences for Police and Public Administration NRW	Social Sciences	Sociology, Political Science
5	P5, Germany	Male	University of Paderborn	Cultural Studies	Practical Theology (Protestant)
6	P6, Germany	Female	CVJM Univ. of Applied Sciences Kassel / University of Kassel	Social Work, Social Welfare	Social Work
7	P7, Iran	Male	University of Tehran	German Language and Literature	Language Teaching, Translation
8	P8, Iran	Male	University of Tehran	German Language and Literature	Language Teaching, Translation
9	P9, Iran	Male	University of Tehran	German Language and Literature	Language Teaching, Translation
10	P10, Iran	Male	Allameh Tabataba'i University	German Literature, Philosophy	Philosophy, Literature
11	P11, Iran	Male	Allameh Tabataba'i University	Philosophy, German Literature	Philosophy, Literature

No.	Participant ID & Country	Gender	University	Field of Expertise	Teaching Area
12	P12, Iran	Female	Shahid Beheshti University	German Language and Literature	Language Teaching
13	P13, Iran	Male	Shahid Beheshti University	German Literature, Philosophy	Language, Philosophy

To further contextualize instructors' affective experiences, [Table 3](#) summarizes the institutional and technological environments in which participants worked. This table supports the interpretation of affective experiences by situating them within specific infrastructural and organizational conditions.

Table 3.
Overview of Participating Institutions and Contextual Characteristics

Country	Universities	Number of Instructors	Contextual Characteristics
Iran	University of Tehran; Allameh Tabataba'i University; Shahid Beheshti University	7	Predominant use of local and regionally supported platforms (Adobe Connect, Zoom, Skyroom); limited international connectivity; variable institutional technical support
Germany	University of Duisburg-Essen; University of Leipzig; University of Kassel; Paderborn University; Universities of Applied Sciences NRW & Saxony-Anhalt	6	Use of internationally established digital tools (Moodle, Zoom, Padlet, Google Docs); stable IT infrastructure; strong data protection regulations and institutional digital support

Participant Selection and Diversity Criteria

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, supplemented by snowball sampling, in accordance with phenomenological principles prioritizing experiential richness. Explicit inclusion criteria ensured analytical relevance. Participants were required to (a) hold an academic position at a university, (b) have at least five years of university-level teaching experience, (c) possess substantial experience in both face-to-face and online instruction, and (d) have accumulated continuous experience in online teaching reflecting its normalization beyond emergency remote delivery.

Recently appointed instructors with limited long-term exposure to online teaching were excluded to ensure that participants' accounts reflected sustained engagement rather than initial adaptation. While diversity across

national context, gender, academic discipline, institutional type, and digital familiarity was intentionally sought to enable cross-contextual interpretation, the study does not claim demographic saturation. Initial participants in each country were identified purposively, after which snowball sampling was employed. Participants recommended colleagues who met the same inclusion criteria. Recruitment ceased once analytic sufficiency was achieved, meaning that core affective patterns related to stress, emotional safety, and coping were consistently observed and theoretically elaborated across interviews.

Cross-Cultural Analytic Approach

The study adopted a phenomenological analytic strategy with a cross-cultural orientation. Rather than fully pooling Iranian and German data at the initial coding stage, analyses were first conducted with sensitivity to contextual specificity. Interview data were examined to identify shared affective themes related to psychological stress, emotional safety, and coping in online teaching, while preserving references to national and institutional context. In a subsequent interpretative phase, cross-cultural comparison was undertaken to examine how institutional, technological, and socio-cultural conditions shaped these shared affective experiences differently in Iran and Germany. Thus, cultural comparison occurred at the level of interpretation rather than through mechanically parallel coding schemes, allowing for both convergence and divergence to emerge organically from participants' narratives.

Data Collection

The study collected data through in-depth semi-structured interviews. In Iran, interviews took place in-person at participants' workplaces within university departments. In Germany, interviews were conducted online via Zoom and Skype between 2023 and 2024. The difference in interview mode was treated as an analytically relevant contextual variable rather than a methodological flaw. Reflexive attention was given to how in-person versus online interview settings might shape affective disclosure and reflections on digital teaching. These considerations were explicitly taken into account during interpretation of findings. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted in Persian or German, depending on participant preference. The interview protocol consisted of approximately 12–15 open-ended questions organized around six thematic domains aligned with the research questions. All

interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized using participant codes.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed a phenomenological approach informed by van Manen's (1990) framework and the interpretative principles of IPA. Initial engagement involved close, line-by-line reading of transcripts to identify experiential meaning units, followed by interpretative clustering into subthemes and overarching themes. This analytic process reflects IPA's double hermeneutic logic, whereby participants make sense of their experiences and the researcher interprets these sense-making processes, rather than a generic thematic analysis detached from phenomenological philosophy. MAXQDA 2022 supported systematic data organization and retrieval. Analytic memos and iterative refinement of interpretations ensured conceptual clarity and coherence. Member checking further enhanced credibility, as selected participants reviewed preliminary thematic summaries to confirm resonance with their experiences.

Operational Definitions

In this study, psychological stress refers to instructors' perceived emotional strain arising from instructional demands, technological challenges, and institutional expectations in online teaching contexts. Emotional safety denotes instructors' sense of emotional security, autonomy, and freedom to engage pedagogically without fear of judgment, surveillance, or professional vulnerability. Coping mechanisms refer to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral strategies instructors use to regulate stress, maintain well-being, and sustain instructional effectiveness in online environments.

Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher holds a doctoral degree in German language education and has approximately eight years of experience teaching German in both online and face-to-face formats at Iranian universities. This positions the researcher as an insider within the Iranian academic context and as an outsider to the German context. Rather than assuming symmetrical positionality, the study adopts a positional reflexivity approach that explicitly acknowledges power imbalances, differential familiarity, and the potential for asymmetric interpretation. Phenomenological reflexivity was therefore enacted in differentiated ways: bracketing was used to counter over-familiarity and assumed shared understanding in the Iranian context, while heightened reflexive sensitivity and peer debriefing were used to mitigate cultural distance and interpretive projection in the German context. Reflexive

journaling, analytic memo writing, and regular peer debriefing supported ongoing critical self-examination and ensured that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than the researcher's prior experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the research ethics board of the lead author's university. All participants provided informed written consent and retained the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. The study anonymized all data and adhered to international ethical guidelines for human subjects research (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

Trustworthiness

The study ensured qualitative rigor by adhering to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, member checking, and peer debriefing. Thick contextual descriptions supported transferability. A transparent audit trail and reflexive documentation enhanced dependability and confirmability. Together, these measures strengthened the integrity, transparency, and methodological robustness of the study.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study, organized into six overarching themes derived from the thematic analysis of interviews with 13 university language instructors in Iran and Germany. The presentation of results is explicitly aligned with the study's research questions. Accordingly, themes one and four address "university language instructors' perceived experiences of psychological stress and other emotional reactions in sustained online teaching" (RQ1). Themes two and three respond directly to "instructors' conceptualization and experience of emotional safety within the conditions of the virtual classroom" (RQ2). Finally, themes five and six address "the coping strategies instructors develop to manage stress and sustain emotional well-being, and how these experiences compare with face-to-face instruction" (RQ3). The analytical foundation of the findings is a hierarchical code system created using MAXQDA (Version 2022), comprising six major themes and multiple subcategories. A total of 724 coded segments were identified, with 547 codes (75.6%) derived from Iranian instructors and 177 codes (24.4%) from German instructors. A hierarchical visualization of the coding structure is presented in [Figure 2](#), showcasing the distribution of themes and

subcategories. This structure served as the analytical backbone for thematic interpretation.

Figure 2.
MAXQDA Code System Tree with Frequencies

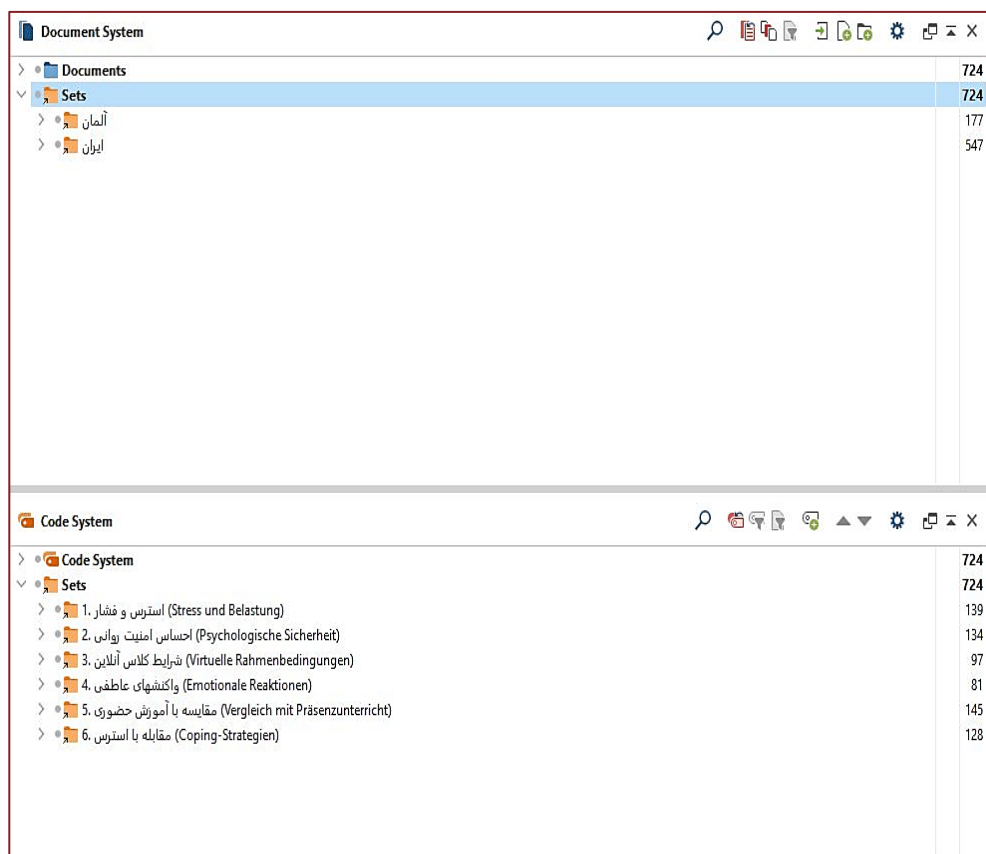


Figure 2 illustrates the hierarchical organization of the six themes and their associated subcategories, providing an overview of how affective experiences related to online teaching were analytically structured across the dataset. A further visual overview of the coded segments, categorized by participant nationality, is presented in Figure 4. This figure highlights the higher frequency of coded segments associated with Iranian instructors and provides an initial indication of cross-contextual variation in affective articulation.

Figure 3.

Country-wise Code Frequency Distribution (Iran vs. Germany)

Code System		
> Code System		724
> Sets		724
1. استرس و فشار (Stress und Belastung)		139
• emotionale Erschöpfung (فرسودگی عاطفی)		23
• fehlende Rückmeldung (نبود بازخورد)		42
• Stress durch Technik (استرس ناشی از مشکلات فنی)		35
• Zeitdruck und Überforderung (فشار زمانی و بار زیاد)		39
2. (Psychologische Sicherheit) احساس امنیت روانی		134
• Respekt und Akzeptanz (احساس پذیرش)		32
• unterstützende Atmosphäre (فضای حمایتی)		52
• angstfreies Sprechen (صحبت بدون ترس)		17
• psychologische Sicherheit (امنیت روانی)		33
3. (Virtuelle Rahmenbedingungen) شرایط کلاس آنلاین		97
• Kamera-an/Kamera-aus-Dynamik (خاموش یا روشن بودن دوربین)		21
• technische Störungen (اختلالات فنی)		27
• Kommunikationsbarrieren (موانع ارتباطی)		49
4. (Emotionale Reaktionen) واکنشهای عاطفی		81
• positive Emotionen (هیجانات مثبت)		29
• negative Emotionen (هیجانات منفی)		29
• emotionale Ambivalenz (دوگانگی عاطفی)		23
5. (Vergleich mit Präsenzunterricht) مقایسه با آموزش حضوری		145
• mehr Stress online (استرس بیشتر در فضای آنلاین)		53
• weniger Sicherheit online (امنیت کمتر در آموزش آنلاین)		53
• fehlender sozialer Kontakt (نبود تماس اجتماعی)		39
6. (Coping-Strategien) مقابله با استرس		128
• aktive Strategien (راهبردهای فعال)		58
• soziale Unterstützung (حمایت اجتماعی)		31
• Selbstregulation (خودتنظیمی)		39

As illustrated in Figure 3, the higher volume of coded segments from Iranian instructors does not merely reflect numerical imbalance but points to context-specific pressures, such as infrastructural instability and limited institutional support, which intensified emotional articulation during interviews.

Quantitative Overview and Code Frequency Analysis: To supplement the thematic insights, a quantitative code frequency analysis was performed. Thematically, the highest frequency was observed in:

Theme 5: Comparison with Face-to-Face Teaching – 145 coded segments

Theme 1: Stress and Psychological Load – 139 coded segments

Theme 6: Coping Strategies – 128 coded segments

Theme 2: Psychological Safety and Emotional Comfort – 134 coded segments

These figures reflect not only the instructors' emotional responses to online teaching but also their adaptive strategies and reflections on changing teaching conditions across contexts. These distributions do not imply statistical weighting or comparative dominance but serve to indicate areas of heightened affective salience across participants' narratives.

Table 4.*Code System with Frequencies per Theme and Subcategory*

Theme	Subcategory	Coded Segments
1. Stress and Psychological Load	Emotional Exhaustion	23
	Lack of Feedback	42
	Technical Stress	35
	Time Pressure and Overload	39
	Total	139
2. Psychological Safety and Emotional Comfort	Respect and Acceptance	32
	Supportive Atmosphere	52
	Freedom to Speak Without Fear	17
	Psychological Security	33
	Total	134
3. Virtual Classroom Conditions	Camera-on/Camera-off Dynamics	21
	Technical Disruptions	27
	Communication Barriers	49
	Total	97
4. Emotional Reactions	Positive Emotions	29
	Negative Emotions	29
	Emotional Ambivalence	23
	Total	81
5. Comparison with Face-to-Face Teaching	More Stress Online	53
	Diminished Safety and Integrity	53
	Loss of Social Contact	39
	Total	145
6. Coping Strategies	Active Strategies	58
	Social Support	31
	Self-Regulation	39
	Total	128
Total		724

Table 4 provides a structured overview of the thematic architecture and the relative frequency of coded segments within each theme and subcategory. To further clarify the distribution of coded segments across national contexts, Table 5 presents the national breakdown of all coded data.

Table 5.*National Distribution of Coded Segments*

Country	Number of Coded Segments	Percentage
Iran	547	75.6%
Germany	177	24.4%
Total	724	100%

Table 5 contextualizes the thematic findings by illustrating how coded segments were distributed across Iranian and German participants, supporting the cross-cultural interpretation of affective experiences without implying direct comparability of emotional intensity.

The following subsections present each theme in detail. Each theme is supported by categories, subcategories, and representative codes that capture instructors' lived experiences of sustained online teaching. This section presents the findings of the study, organized into six overarching themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of interviews with 13 university language instructors in Iran and Germany. Each theme is supported by categories, subcategories, and representative codes that capture the instructors' lived experiences of sustained online teaching.

Theme 1: Stress and Psychological Load in Online Teaching

This theme directly addresses RQ1, which explores instructors' emotional experiences of online teaching, by identifying core sources of psychological stress and emotional burden.

Table 6.

Theme One – Stress and Psychological Load: Categories, Subcategories, and Codes

Category	Sub-category	Codes
Emotional Load	Emotional exhaustion	Fatigue, blurred boundaries, adaptation fatigue, dual roles (technical + academic)
	Lack of feedback	No student response, absence of visual cues, missing spontaneity and eye contact
Technical Strain	Technical stress	Connectivity issues, platform malfunctions, no tech support, students' limited access
Work Pressure	Time pressure and overload	Heavy workload, content prep, digital communication, asynchronous management

Theme 2: Psychological Safety and Emotional Comfort

Addressing RQ2, this theme examines how instructors conceptualized and facilitated psychological safety in virtual classrooms, both for themselves and for their students.

Table 7.

Theme Two – Psychological Safety and Emotional Comfort

Category	Sub-category	Codes
Acceptance	Sense of acceptance	Feeling respected, cultural openness, mutual adaptation (e.g., dress code alignment)
Emotional Support	Supportive atmosphere	Energizing class, name-calling, emotional outreach, WhatsApp groups, audio support

Freedom	Freedom to speak without fear	Chat participation, camera-off comfort, control over visibility, reduced performance anxiety
Security	Psychological security	Comfortable environments, autonomy over appearance and speech, emotional ownership

Theme 3: Conditions of the Online Classroom

This theme further elaborates RQ2 by focusing on how specific online classroom conditions shaped emotional safety and instructional confidence.

Table 8.

Theme Three – Online Classroom Conditions

Category	Sub-category	Codes
Visibility	Camera on/off dynamics	Cultural/privacy concerns, invisible students, speaking into the void
Infrastructure	Technical disruptions	Internet/audio failures, software limits, rural tech gaps
Communication	Communication barriers	Lack of nonverbal cues, impaired dialogue, emotional fatigue

Camera-related practices emerged as a critical intersection between cultural norms, privacy concerns, and emotional safety. For many instructors, allowing camera-off participation functioned as an affective accommodation strategy that reduced student anxiety while simultaneously increasing instructors' own sense of emotional uncertainty.

Theme 4: Emotional Reactions to Online Learning

Die Ergebnisse zeigen ein Spektrum emotionaler Reaktionen auf das Online-Lernen. Auf der positiven Seite standen eine erhöhte Beteiligung schüchterner Studierender und eine dynamischere Gestaltung des Unterrichts. Gleichzeitig wurden negative Gefühle wie Isolation, Frustration und Erschöpfung berichtet. Ambivalente Erfahrungen umfassten emotionale Distanz und ein Gefühl von "hohler Effizienz" beim Lernen.

What follows is the English translation of the above text:

[The results show a spectrum of emotional responses to online learning. On the positive side, there was increased participation among shy students and a more dynamic design of instruction. At the same time, negative feelings such as isolation, frustration, and exhaustion were reported. Ambivalent experiences included emotional distance and a sense of "hollow efficiency" in learning.]

Table 9.*Theme Four – Emotional Reactions to Online Learning*

Category	Sub-category	Codes
Positive	Positive emotions	Increased shy student participation, dynamic breakout rooms, emotional continuity
Negative	Negative emotions	Isolation, frustration, exhaustion, absence of feedback, reduced academic life
Ambivalence	Emotional ambivalence	Emotional detachment, hollow efficiency, lack of depth, multitasking dilemmas

Theme 5: Comparing Online vs. Face-to-Face Teaching

Der Vergleich der beiden Settings zeigt, dass Online-Lehre für Dozierende in mancher Hinsicht belastender ist, etwa durch technischen Stress und geringere studentische Beteiligung. Zudem wurden Sicherheits- und Vertrauensverlust aufgrund von Sorgen um akademische Redlichkeit beschrieben. Als wesentlicher Verlust wird das Fehlen informeller Kontakte und einer akademischen Gemeinschaft betrachtet.

What follows is the English translation of the above text:

[The comparison of the two settings shows that online teaching is more burdensome for instructors in some respects, for example due to technical stress and lower student participation. In addition, a loss of security and trust was described, stemming from concerns about academic integrity. The absence of informal contacts and of an academic community is regarded as a significant loss.]

Table 10.*Theme Five – Comparison of Online and Face-to-Face Teaching*

Category	Sub-category	Codes
Stress Comparison	More stress online	Technical overload, lack of support, student disengagement
Control and Trust	Diminished safety and integrity	Academic dishonesty, unverifiable presence, broken trust during exams
Social Loss	Loss of academic presence	No informal contact, absence of community, stripped-down learning environment

Theme 6: Coping Strategies

Addressing RQ3, this theme captures the coping strategies instructors developed to mitigate stress and enhance emotional safety under sustained online teaching conditions.

Table 11.

Theme Six – Coping Strategies

Category	Sub-category	Codes
Instructional	Active strategies	Cold-calling, multimedia tools, group work, chat-based interaction, breakout room usage
Social	Social support	IT assistance, messaging groups, student encouragement, peer collaboration
Individual	Self-regulation	Asynchronous content, flexible planning, emotional pacing, reduced perfectionism

Notably, many coping strategies described by instructors such as flexible participation modes, emotional pacing, and reduced emphasis on constant visibility also functioned indirectly to enhance psychological safety, illustrating the interconnectedness of stress regulation and emotional comfort.

Narrative Analysis of Themes

Theme 1: Stress and Pressure in Online Teaching (RQ1)

University instructors from both Iran and Germany consistently described online teaching during the pandemic as a source of considerable stress and emotional burden. Four interconnected subthemes emerged under this category: emotional exhaustion, lack of feedback, technical stress, and time pressure and overload. Emotional Exhaustion: Instructors frequently expressed emotional depletion due to online teaching's demands. Blurred personal-professional boundaries and technological adaptation were draining. One Iranian participant shared, *"Online teaching was not just about delivering content it was mentally and emotionally draining."* (P7, Iran) Lack of Feedback: The lack of immediate, authentic feedback frustrated many. Visual and interactive cues were missing: *"When students don't respond... it's like talking to a wall."* (P13, Iran) A German professor added: *"Online, it's just silence."* (P3, Germany) Technical Stress: Platform failures and poor connectivity challenged instructors: *"The platform would crash... and I had no technical assistant."* (P11, Germany). Iranian instructors noted student tech inequities: *"My students were connecting from villages... how can real learning happen in such conditions?"* (P10, Iran) Time Pressure and

Workload: Increased tasks without support caused overload: “I was simultaneously a teacher, tech support, and emotional counselor.” (P8, Iran)

Theme 2: Psychological Safety and Emotional Comfort (RQ2)

Participants emphasized the role of emotional comfort in fostering student engagement. Subthemes included acceptance, support, freedom from fear, and psychological security. Sense of Acceptance: Mutual openness fostered participation: “*That mutual openness fostered real connection.*” (P7, Iran). Dress code adaptation signaled intercultural respect. Supportive Atmosphere: Instructors intentionally created supportive spaces: “*We formed WhatsApp groups just for emotional support.*” (P10, Iran) Freedom to Speak without Fear: Online anonymity reduced anxiety: “*Typing helped them express ideas they would never say aloud.*” (P7, Iran) Psychological Security: Comfort at home and self-regulation enhanced learning: “*They could drink tea, lie down, and still stay engaged.*” (P12, Iran)

Theme 3: Conditions of the Online Classroom (RQ2)

This theme encompassed camera dynamics, technical disruptions, and communication barriers, all contributing to disconnection. Camera On/Off Dynamics: Cultural norms influenced visibility: “*I never asked them to turn on their cameras... It didn’t feel right to insist.*” (P5, Iran). Others described speaking into the void. Technical Disruptions: Audio glitches and log-in issues were common: “*We wasted so much time just checking sound.*” (P11, Germany); Communication Barriers: Instructors lamented missing cues: “*It was like lecturing to ghosts.*” (P7, Iran); “*It wasn’t real conversation.*” (P3, Germany)

Theme 4: Emotional Reactions to Online Learning (RQ1)

Instructors reported mixed emotional responses shaped by digital conditions. Positive Emotions: Some noted better engagement by shy students: “*Some students thrived online.*” (P7, Iran); tools like breakout rooms were productive: “*It gave the feeling the class was more dynamic.*” (P11, Germany). Negative Emotions: Instructors felt isolated and drained: “*There was no energy coming back.*” (P3, Germany); Emotional Ambivalence: Instructors valued efficiency but lamented the lack of depth: “*It worked but it didn’t feel like real teaching.*” (P4, Iran).

Theme 5: Comparing Online and Face-to-Face Instruction (RQ3)

Comparisons revealed heightened stress, reduced safety, and diminished collegiality. More Stress in Online Environments: “*I had to manage everything... and it was exhausting.*” (P8, Iran) Diminished Safety and Academic Integrity: Verification concerns persisted: “*I could never be certain who was behind the screen.*” (P5, Iran) Loss of Social Contact: Instructors

mourned relational loss: “*Being in a classroom... is about the emotional and social experience of learning together.*” (P6, Germany)

Theme 6: Coping Strategies (RQ3)

Instructors developed strategies to navigate the challenges: active strategies, social support, and self-regulation. Active Strategies: Engaging methods such as cold-calling and group work were used: “*I knew I had to constantly energize the class.*” (P9, Iran) Social Support: Technical and emotional support was essential: “*The IT department was truly supportive.*” (P4, Iran) Self-Regulation: Asynchronous tools and expectation management helped instructors cope: “*I accepted that I can't control everything... I learned to adapt.*” (P10, Germany)

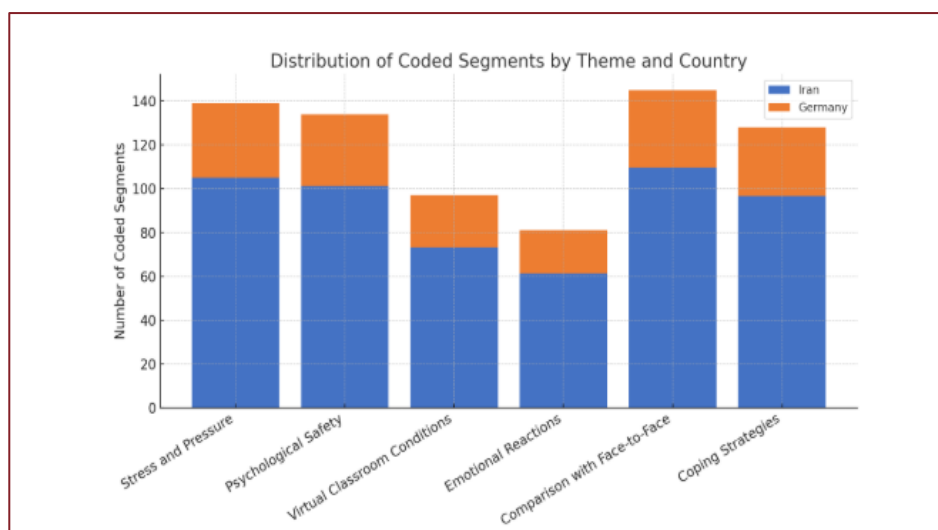
Cross-national Coding Summary and Quantitative Overview

Two additional figures (Figures 4 and 5) summarize the thematic distribution by country. These visuals offer insight into how affective and pedagogical experiences varied between Iranian and German instructors.

Stress and Comparison themes were prominent in both countries. Coping strategies were more frequently reported by Iranian instructors. The chart above illustrates the distribution of thematic codes across six key dimensions for Iran and Germany. Each bar represents a combination of Iran's (blue) and Germany's (orange) contributions to each theme. The chart clearly highlights the relative difference in the volume of coded data between the two countries, with Iran showing a larger share of data.

Figure 4.

Distribution of Coded Segments by Theme and Country

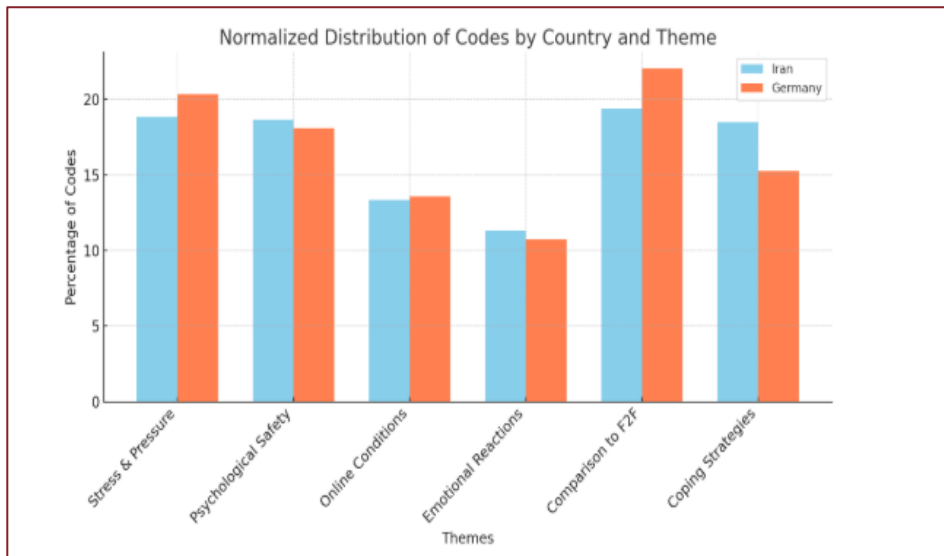


The chart above shows the percentage distribution of codes across six different themes for Iran and Germany. For each theme, the percentages were calculated relative to the total number of codes within each country. Several noteworthy points emerge:

- Stress & Pressure and Comparison to Face-to-Face Teaching show high percentages in both countries, especially in Germany.
- Coping Strategies holds a relatively higher share in Iran compared to Germany.
- The differences in themes such as Emotional Reactions and Online Conditions are relatively minor between the two countries.

Figure 5.

Normalized Distribution of Codes by Country and Theme



Taken together, the results demonstrate that instructors' affective experiences of online teaching were shaped by a dynamic interplay between technological conditions, institutional contexts, and pedagogical agency. While stress and emotional fatigue were pervasive, instructors actively negotiated emotional safety through adaptive practices, revealing both shared cross-cultural patterns and context-specific differences.

Discussion

This study reveals a complex portrait of university instructors' emotional and pedagogical experiences with sustained online teaching, extending and

refining earlier research that framed online instruction primarily as a crisis-induced or transitional phenomenon (Klapproth et al., 2020; Michaeli et al., 2021). Consistent with prior studies conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, instructors in both Iran and Germany reported heightened emotional exhaustion, time pressure, and cognitive overload, confirming that psychological strain remains a persistent feature of online education rather than a temporary emergency response (Nabolsi et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2023). However, this study advances existing literature by demonstrating that such stressors endure even when online teaching becomes normalized, challenging assumptions that institutional adaptation alone mitigates affective burden. Similar to findings by Wang et al. (2023) and Friedman et al. (2021), the absence of visual cues and spontaneous interaction contributed to feelings of emotional flatness and pedagogical disconnection. The erosion of nonverbal feedback mechanisms limited instructors' ability to adjust instruction responsively, reinforcing earlier concerns about reduced immediacy in virtual classrooms (Bergeron et al., 2022).

At the same time, the findings complicate deficit-oriented narratives of online teaching by revealing unexpected affective benefits. In line with Martinez et al. (2021) and Fernandez and Costa (2022), psychological safety increased for many students, particularly those experiencing language anxiety. Text-based participation and camera-off practices reduced fear of negative evaluation and enabled more equitable engagement. This dual effect—enhancing student comfort while simultaneously increasing instructors' emotional uncertainty—represents a central paradox of online pedagogy that has been underexplored in prior research.

Whereas earlier studies often conceptualized psychological safety as a learner-centered outcome, the present findings suggest that emotional safety is relational and bidirectional, continuously negotiated between instructors and students. Reduced visibility may lower students' affective barriers, yet it deprives instructors of essential emotional feedback, intensifying uncertainty and emotional labor. This insight extends affective design frameworks by foregrounding instructors' emotional vulnerability alongside student well-being, a dimension largely absent from previous digital pedagogy research (Burke et al., 2021; Gillespie et al., 2022). Structural and technological conditions emerged as powerful mediators of affective experience, reinforcing findings from Oliveira et al. (2021) and Tsegay et al. (2021). Internet instability, platform limitations, and communication breakdowns contributed to fatigue and disengagement, particularly in contexts with uneven digital infrastructure. However, the cross-cultural comparison reveals

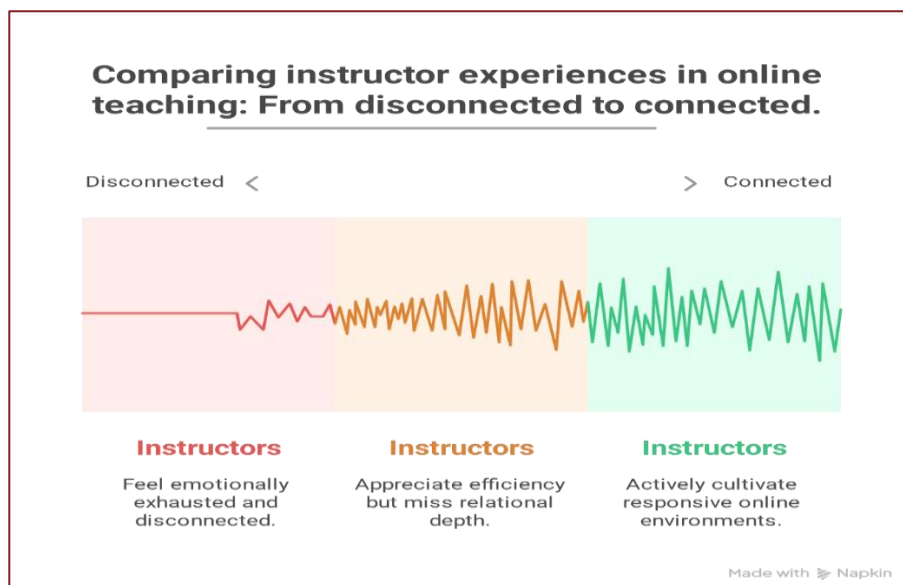
that stress was not uniformly produced by technology itself but by its interaction with institutional and cultural conditions.

In the Iranian context, infrastructural instability and limited institutional support amplified emotional strain, requiring instructors to engage in heightened emotional labor, improvisation, and self-regulation, echoing findings by Safari et al. (2020) and Goudarzi et al. (2023). In contrast, German instructors working within stable digital ecosystems reported stress related less to technical failure and more to emotional detachment, diminished immediacy, and concerns about academic integrity, aligning with Klapproth et al. (2020) and Vladova et al. (2020). These differences underscore that affective challenges are culturally and institutionally situated rather than technologically deterministic.

Emotional ambivalence— simultaneous appreciation of efficiency and frustration with relational loss— was a salient feature across both contexts. This finding resonates with Curelaru et al. (2022), who describe online learning as emotionally efficient yet relationally impoverished, and further demonstrates that adaptability does not equate to emotional satisfaction. Addressing this gap between efficiency and satisfaction, Mashayekh and Dashtestani (2025) demonstrated that carefully designed self-regulatory digital tools can enhance learners' self-efficacy and positive attitudes, suggesting that technology itself is not the source of emotional strain; rather, its pedagogical design and regulatory features determine its affective impact on both teaching practices and student engagement in virtual classrooms. While instructors acknowledged the continuity and flexibility afforded by online teaching, they consistently emphasized the irreplaceability of face-to-face social presence, informal interaction, and embodied co-presence. Figure 6 is inserted here to visually synthesize the interpretative connections between key discussion themes and their theoretical implications.

Figure 6.

The Spectrum of Online Instructor Experiences



Crucially, the affective challenges and coping strategies identified in this study should not be interpreted as residual effects of emergency remote teaching. Rather, they constitute core elements of the enduring emotional ecology of sustained online instruction. By adopting a phenomenological and cross-cultural lens centered on instructors' lived experiences, this study responds directly to gaps identified in the Literature Review, where instructor emotions were often examined indirectly, descriptively, or within single cultural contexts. Unlike prior student-centered or crisis-focused analyses, the present study foregrounds instructors as affective agents navigating normalized digital environments, demonstrating that psychological stress management and emotional safety negotiation are ongoing pedagogical practices rather than temporary adjustments. This reframing has important implications for theory, institutional policy, and the long-term design of online education, which must move beyond short-term technological fixes toward structurally and emotionally sustainable teaching ecosystems.

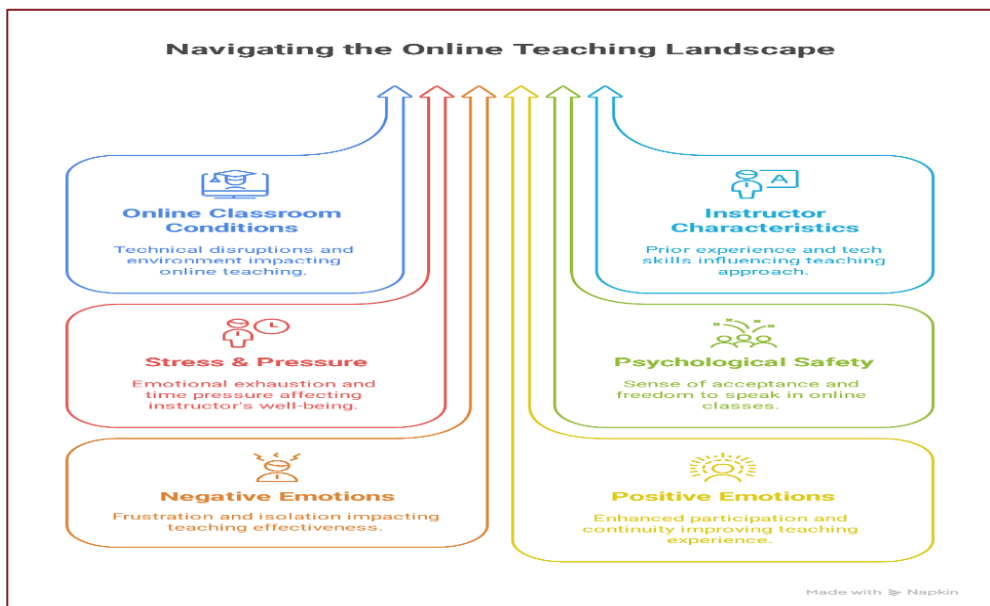
Conclusion and Implications

This phenomenological inquiry into instructors' lived experiences provides a nuanced and integrative understanding of the emotional and pedagogical dynamics of sustained online language teaching. While the adoption and

normalization of digital platforms introduced significant and persistent stress stemming from technical disruptions, diminished affective feedback, and increased workload the findings simultaneously demonstrate that online environments can foster new forms of psychological safety, participation, and inclusion for students. Taken together, the results indicate that online teaching is neither inherently detrimental nor unequivocally empowering. Rather, it constitutes an emotionally complex pedagogical space in which stress, safety, control, and connection are continuously negotiated. Instructors' experiences reveal that psychological strain and emotional labor are not temporary byproducts of emergency remote teaching but enduring features of normalized digital instruction, requiring sustained institutional attention and pedagogical adaptation. Figure 7 is positioned here to provide a visual synthesis of the study's key conclusions and their practical implications.

Figure 7.

Conclusion and Implications



Drawing directly on findings from Theme Three (Virtual Classroom Conditions) and Theme Two (Psychological Safety), this study suggests that educational technologies should prioritize affect-sensitive and instructor-aware design principles. Developers should integrate features that enhance emotional presence and pedagogical feedback, such as non-intrusive visual feedback tools, low-bandwidth participation options, and flexible visibility

controls. In addition, platforms must be intuitive, stable, and supported by accessible, real-time troubleshooting mechanisms to reduce instructors' cognitive and emotional load.

Findings from Theme One (Stress and Psychological Load) and Theme Five (Comparison with Face-to-Face Teaching) underscore that institutional structures play a decisive role in shaping instructors' emotional well-being. Universities should invest in systematic digital pedagogy training, ensure sustained access to technical and pedagogical support, and formalize peer support and mentoring networks. Clear, transparent protocols for student engagement, assessment practices, and academic integrity in online contexts are also essential to reduce uncertainty and emotional strain for instructors.

Based on insights from Theme Two and Theme Six (Coping Strategies), instructors are encouraged to adopt emotionally responsive and flexible facilitation practices. These include enabling multiple modes of participation, balancing synchronous and asynchronous instruction, explicitly negotiating visibility expectations, and acknowledging emotional dynamics as a legitimate component of online pedagogy. Such practices not only support student comfort but also help instructors regulate emotional demands and sustain pedagogical effectiveness.

Future studies should examine instructors' emotional experiences of online teaching through longitudinal and comparative designs to capture how affective patterns evolve over time. Cross-disciplinary and hybrid-context research may further illuminate how institutional cultures, technological infrastructures, and pedagogical norms interact to shape emotional safety and professional well-being. Ultimately, effective online education must integrate technological competence, pedagogical expertise, and emotional intelligence. Designing digital learning environments that sustain human connection is therefore not optional but foundational for meaningful higher education in digitally mediated contexts.

Disclosure statement

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