

**Fostering Engagement in VCE English as an Additional Language
Students during the Pandemic —Challenges and Opportunities in
Online Learning in Victoria, Australia**

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy

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Abstract

The COVID-19 outbreak created an imperative in the education sector to gauge the emotional and wellbeing-related implications that influence the academic performance of learners engaging in online learning during emergency lockdowns. The challenges faced by students learning English as an additional language (EAL) in this context further complicate this concern. However, there is a dearth of research conducted on this recent phenomenon.

Through a qualitative research design, this research sought to interpret the experiences of teachers and Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) EAL students in Victoria to determine the factors that affected the latter's academic performance during the pandemic. Utilising a modified grounded theory approach for data collection and a Freirean lens for data analysis, the research considered existing literature and built upon the collected data to theorise the phenomenon, suggest improvements to online teaching practice and recommend learning opportunities for teachers to adjust their practice to cater to future online learning needs of students learning EAL.

Through semi-structured interviews, the study investigated the perceptions of six teachers from four schools across Metropolitan Melbourne and six EAL students on their experiences with remote learning and general views about teaching and learning EAL online. Findings arising from these perceptions revealed that while few VCE EAL students benefited from the flexibility of online learning, many struggled with academic and wellbeing concerns that created gaps in their learning. The findings were also crucial in critiquing the current VCE EAL curriculum and how the pandemic paved the way for a new dialogue on how students learn English and whether existing curriculum factors empower them to be independent learners. The research suggests extended professional development for teachers to engage EAL learners in online learning, culturally responsive pedagogy in EAL classrooms and more dialogue between teachers and students to increase engagement and improve academic performance in EAL classrooms.

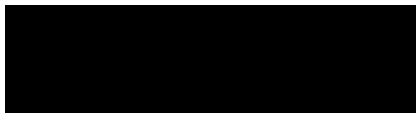
Keywords: pandemic, English as an additional language, remote learning, Victorian Certificate of Education

Declaration

I, Madushka Shamindi Siman Meru Pathirana, declare that the PhD thesis entitled ‘Fostering Engagement in English as an Additional Language Students in Remote Learning Settings—Challenges and Opportunities in Victoria, Australia’ is no more than 80,000 words in length, including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

I have conducted my research in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and Victoria University’s Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE22-073).



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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Achievement Ranking
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CEEA	Canadian Engineering Education Association
EFL	English as a foreign language
ERL	Emergency Remote Learning
GEKoS	Global Ethics-Key of Sustainability
IJNMS	International Journal of Nursing and Midwifery Science
LEEA	Linguistic, English Education and Art
MYLNS	Middle Years Literacy and Numeracy Support
RISEC	Research in Schools and Early Childhood
SAC	School-Assessed Coursework
SFOE	Student Family Occupation and Education
SIDE	School of Isolated and Distance Education
VCAA	Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VPN	Virtual Private Network

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led the world to face an unprecedented set of events that affected all facets of human life. Upon being declared a global pandemic by WHO in March 2020, the virus' rapid-spreading nature, the severe symptoms among those who were infected and high mortality rates across the world led most countries to impose strict lockdown measures to prevent people from any form of social interactions that could exacerbate the spreading of the virus. As a result, these periods of nationwide closures in 192 countries compelled millions of students to detach from their regular school environments and enter an exclusively virtual educational setting (UNESCO, 2020).

During these nationwide lockdowns worldwide, schools resorted to emergency remote learning, defined as a temporary shift of learning and teaching due to crisis circumstances (Hodges et al., 2020). Unlike online learning, where curriculum and learning design are pre-planned and executed in pre-mediated circumstances, remote learning across the world saw a rapid transition and adaptation of teaching and learning, and hence, it was impossible to make optimum use of online learning approaches (Hodges et al., 2020). This unprecedented challenge has uncovered growing educational and emotional concerns for students and teachers in remote learning settings (Drane et al., 2020). It is believed that the lengthy periods of lockdown caused anxious symptoms and other mental health concerns among individuals, as social isolation, the concept of quarantine and the directive to remain at home were novel to the younger generation (Paudel, 2021). Research suggests that prolonged periods away from schools can lead to irregular sleep cycles, increased screen time, lack of socialisation with peers and a sedentary lifestyle in children (Wang et al., 2020). Hence, the psychological stress, extended periods of isolation and distraction could have affected their academic performance. It is also believed that limited collaboration between peers while engaging in online learning can affect students' sense of identity and expectations regarding their learning (Kool, 2017). In the context of the pandemic, limited collaboration implies that many students would have spent months without experiencing any face-to-face interactions with their friends during lessons.

This would limit their opportunities to expand their social and academic skills and challenge themselves in their learning as they are confined to their own academic space.

The pandemic outbreak also posed unexpected challenges to teachers at both school and tertiary levels. Even though prior to the pandemic, teachers had been using online learning tools to enhance the learning experience of students and drive engagement, the imperative to prepare for emergency remote learning that arose from lockdowns across the world was a challenging experience for teachers. They had to customise existing teaching material to cater to online platforms, create new online learning materials, and, in some cases, familiarise themselves with standard online learning tools recommended by the school leadership. Thus, the novel circumstances under which emergency remote learning occurred could have led to many gaps in teaching practice that may have directly affected the learning experience for students (Trust & Whalen, 2020). In addition, teachers are said to have struggled to establish a mutual connection with their students in terms of communicating during explicit online teaching sessions, providing feedback and engaging and encouraging learners to participate in classroom discussions or seek assistance when required (Halpern, 2021). During this period, teacher communication was a prime necessity not only for learners but also for parents to facilitate learning for their children. Evidence suggests that teachers had to put more effort into communicating expectations, learning intentions and outcomes as many parents often struggled to assist their children owing to gaps in communication and their personal challenges in using technology (Garbe et al., 2020).

1.2 The Australian Context

The Australian Bureau of Statistics states that ‘in 2019, there were 3,948,811 students enrolled in 9,503 schools, with 2,263,207 primary students and 1,680,504 secondary students’ (Schools, 2019, 2020). This implies that more than 4 million students in Australia were affected by mass school closures and online learning during the pandemic. The first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Victoria on 25th January 2020 (Australian Government Department of Health, 2020) and by the time WHO declared the spread of the virus a pandemic in March 2020, Australian schools had been operating face-to-face with minimal social distancing measures. Each state had their restrictions put in place depending on their rate of infections with Victoria and New South Wales recording the

highest number of infections during the pandemic's peak. However, by early May, only 3% of students in Victoria had physically attended school, while in the Northern Territory, face-to-face teaching had resumed, standing at 79% of students in attendance (Abey Suriya et al., 2023).

Some states, like Victoria, imposed strict measures to restrict social interaction through a series of lengthy and short-term lockdowns from 2020 to 2021. International and domestic travel was restricted, and socialising was regulated and monitored. The restrictions in Victoria were imposed in stages to minimise the spreading of the virus in the community. Table 1.1 provides an outline of the stages of restrictions that were imposed on the residents of Victoria (Cheek et al., 2021).

Table 1.1: Staged restrictions imposed in Victoria

Stage	Restrictions
2	<p>Public and outdoor gatherings can be held with a maximum of 20 people.</p> <p>Private gatherings at home can be held with up to 20 people, including the members of the household.</p> <p>Schools remain open.</p> <p>In sporting activities, up to 20 people allowed outdoors.</p> <p>Non-contact activity spaced 1.5 m apart.</p>
3	<p>Public gatherings up to 2 people or household members only.</p> <p>No visitors allowed in private gatherings.</p> <p>Stay at home except for 4 reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Necessary goods • Medical reasons • Work • Education. <p>Cannot enter metropolitan Melbourne for exercise or recreation.</p> <p>Remote learning in schools state-wide.</p> <p>Specialist schools remain open for students.</p> <p>Childcare and kindergarten remain open for all students.</p> <p>Community and indoor sports closed.</p> <p>Outdoor sports limited to 2 people where a 1.5 m distance can be maintained.</p>
4	<p>Curfew from 8 am to 5 pm.</p> <p>Shopping limited to one person per household per day within a 5 km radius.</p> <p>No visitors allowed in homes with the exception of an intimate partner within a 5 km radius.</p> <p>All schools in the applicable region study remotely.</p> <p>All universities and TAFE colleges study remotely.</p> <p>Childcare and kindergarten are closed.</p> <p>Exercise limited to 1 hour per day within a 5 km radius.</p> <p>Exercise group limited to maximum 2 people.</p>

Note: TAFE = Technical and Further Education.

Schools in metropolitan Melbourne were closed to students and staff, forcing a large number of students to learn remotely for over 200 days (Wright, 2021; see Table 1.2 for a chronology of primary and secondary school closures in Victoria).

Table 1.2: School closures in 2020 and 2021

Date	Announcement
24 March 2020	Term 1 concludes
14 April 2020	Term 2 begins with a student-free day
15 April 2020	Term 2 begins remotely
26 May 2020	Prep, Year 1 and 2, Year 11 and 12 resume onsite learning Students in Years 3–10 whose parents cannot work from home resume onsite learning
9 June 2020	Year 3–10 resume onsite learning
26 June 2020	Term 2 concludes
13 July 2020	Prep–Year 10 students in metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire begin Term 3 remotely Year 11 and 12 students return onsite
5 August 2020	All schoolchildren in Victoria return to remote learning
5 October 2020	Term 4 begins All students in metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire continue to learn remotely Primary school students in regional Victoria return to onsite learning
8 October 2020	Prep to Year 6 students in rural and regional schools return to onsite learning
12 October 2020	Primary school, Year 7, Year 11 and 12 students return to onsite learning in metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire Years 7–12 students in rural and regional Victoria return to onsite learning
26 October 2020	Year 8–10 students in metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire return to onsite learning
18 December 2020	Term 4 concludes
27 January 2021	Term 1 begins for 2021
15–17 February 2021	All students return to remote learning
18 February 2021	All students return to onsite learning
28 May 2021	All students return to remote learning
3 June 2021	In metropolitan Melbourne, Year 11 and 12 students return to onsite learning. All students in regional and rural Victoria return to onsite learning
11 June 2021	All students return to onsite learning
25 June 2021	Term 2 concludes

13 July 2021	Term 3 begins
16 July 2021	All students return to remote learning
28 July 2021	All students return to onsite learning
6 August 2021	All students return to remote learning
Date	Announcement
9 August 2021	All students in rural and regional Victoria return to onsite learning
23 August 2021	All students in rural and regional Victoria return to remote learning
10 September 2021	Prep–Year 2 and Year 12 students in regional and rural Victoria return to onsite learning
17 September 2021	Term 3 concludes
4 October 2021	Term 4 begins
6 October 2021	Year 12 students in metropolitan Melbourne return to onsite learning Year 11 students in regional and rural Victoria return to onsite learning Monday to Friday
11 October 2021	Years 3–10 students in regional and rural Victoria resume onsite learning in stages throughout the week
18 October 2021	Prep to Year 2 students resume onsite learning in stages throughout the week
22 October 2021	Years 3–11 students in metropolitan Melbourne resume learning in stages throughout the week All year levels in regional and rural Victoria return to onsite learning Monday to Friday
5 November 2021	All students in Victoria return to onsite learning full-time
17 December 2021	Term 4 concludes

Prior to the first lockdown in Melbourne, school holidays at the end of Term 1 were brought forward by a few days on 24 March, allowing teachers to prepare for emergency remote learning beginning in Term 2. Teachers and school leadership were said to have gone into overdrive, using these few days to create new teaching material, change the curriculum to suit remote learning, re-write existing resources to cater to remote learning needs and familiarise themselves with online learning tools to create virtual classrooms. While distance education existed prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, its implementation was often properly structured and planned; hence, teachers and learners could anticipate the challenges arising from virtual learning in that sphere (Cowden et al., 2020). In emergency remote learning, schools had to capitalise on existing facilities and use ‘a combination of different learning mediums to ensure students are engaged and learning’ (World Bank, 2020, p. 1). This could be applied to the case of schools in the

state of Victoria when the first leg of remote learning in 2020 was announced by the state government. Teachers and students had to navigate the lesser-known territory of emergency remote learning, which could have affected the academic achievement of learners. It could also be presumed that the subsequent lockdowns that occurred in Victoria throughout 2020 and 2021 would have caused unpredictability, burdening teachers with additional workload and students when transitioning from face-to-face teaching and learning to remote education and vice versa.

Studies outline that existing socio-economic inequities among schools in Australia have been exacerbated as a result of the pandemic (Flack et al., 2020). A study conducted by the ANU research centre discovered that 47.8% of parents who participated were either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their children's school or educational institute (Biddle et al., 2020). However, in the same study, it was also discovered that parents who were born overseas or did not speak English as their first language were more concerned about the pandemic and its impact on their children's education (Biddle et al., 2020). Australia is considered one of the unequal countries when it comes to the distribution of funding and resources among primary and secondary schools, with a direct correlation between socio-economic advantage and learning outcomes (Gonski et al., 2018; UNICEF Office of Research, 2018). It is reported that the pandemic undoubtedly exposed the inequities in the education system and how these inequities negatively affected students' learning (Eacott et al., 2020).

1.3 EAL Learners and the Impact of the Pandemic on Their Learning

English as an additional language (EAL), commonly referred to as EAL, is a strand of English as a subject for students for whom 'English is not the most familiar language (e.g. it is a second, third or foreign language) of the students and yet it is used as the medium of instruction in content lessons' (Lin, 2016, p. 2). EAL also implies the acquisition of English as an addition to the existing capabilities of students as bilingual and multilingual learners (Bracken et al., 2016). This means that the diversity of the learners is encouraged in the classroom and the curriculum through pedagogy, collaboration and inclusion strategies.

In the Australian context, students who originate from diverse cultures can be classified in the following ways:

- New arrival students
- Migrant students
- Refugee students
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students.

It should be noted that all students classified as CALD are not identified as EAL learners, as some students speak English as their first language and have good command over the use of language despite having one or both parents from different cultural backgrounds.

According to the EAL handbook published by the Department of Education and Training Victoria (2015), students who learn English as an additional language in the state of Victoria are a diverse cohort who may be:

- beginning school in Australia at any year level
- born overseas or in Australia
- beginning school with little, some or no exposure to English
- with schooling equivalent to that received by their chronological peers
- with little or no previous formal schooling in any country, or with severely
- interrupted education in their first language. (DET, 2019 p.5)

In the state of Victoria, newly arrived EAL students are required to enrol themselves in a language school or centre and within a time period of 6 to 12 months, they are expected to attend mainstream schools regardless of their language proficiency level (Premier, 2021). In Australian states and territories, schools receive additional funding to prepare EAL programmes, employ support staff with EAL expertise and to facilitate professional development of teachers (Premier & Parr, 2019).

Students from EAL backgrounds often face challenges surrounding culture and language when adapting to mainstream schooling in Australia. A significant portion of EAL learners in Australia comprises of children from refugee backgrounds (Odhiambo, 2025). These learners often come with limited and disrupted education which has a negative impact on their academic achievements (Ziaian et al., 2018). Some EAL students often come from backgrounds with traumatic experiences and these emotional experiences can lead to disruptive behaviour and disengagement among them (Premier, 2021). Despite facing trauma prior to migration to Australia, it should also be noted that the majority of these students have not been discovered to develop mental health issues (Ziaian et al., 2013).

Other EAL learners may fall under the category of full-fee paying international students. Although not challenged by experiences of displacement and economic hardships, these students too face unique challenges in schools. In a study conducted by Wong and Hyde (2024), it was discovered that the cultural differences that existed between newly arrived Chinese students and their Australian classmates in secondary schools prevent the former from fostering connections with the latter. Therefore, these international students often find themselves lonely, homesick and feeling isolated in educational settings (Wong & Hyde, 2024). Despite the diversity that exists among EAL learners in terms of their cultural, socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds, the primary pedagogical requirements lie in their ability to learn English as well as learn other subject areas ‘through English’, (Hammond, 2012, p. 6). These students face many challenges in classrooms, including understanding instructions, following whole group interactions, understanding the meaning and implications of language features in texts, writing complex sentences and understanding new vocabulary (Scott, 2009). Therefore, it is evident that special programmes are required to be designed at school levels to support these learners. To engage these learners, teachers and teaching assistants not only have to incorporate literacy development in their teaching practice but also have awareness regarding the cultural backgrounds of these students. Teachers must be aware of the different ‘ideas of family life and the roles and the responsibilities of family members’ as well (Graf, 2011, p. 62).

According to the Melbourne Declaration, all schools in Australia are required to ‘promote equity and excellence’, and all students are expected to be ‘active and informed citizens’ (Barr et al., 2008, p. 8). This entails the use of technology in classrooms and the importance of using it to empower learners to have a sense of agency and autonomy in their learning and beyond to become informed citizens, assist those around them and be ethical citizens (Hartnell-Young, 2017). However, in a world driven by the use of technology, it has become increasingly challenging for many to participate in digital platforms owing to the advanced and sophisticated literacy skills that are in demand. For many EAL students, this poses an additional obstacle to their learning as they are expected to learn and utilise these skills in a foreign language and in a foreign culture (Tour, 2020). The following table outlines the number of enrolments of newly arrived EAL students in 2020 and 2021 and the number of language backgrounds.

Table 1.3: Number of students enrolled in VCE in 2020 and 2021

Year	EAL enrolments of newly arrived students	Number of language background
2020	3608	106
2021	2695	102

Note: EAL = English as an additional language; VCE = Victorian Certificate of Education.

1.4 Victorian Certificate of Education

In 1989, the Victorian State Government introduced the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), which was awarded to students completing Year 11 and Year 12 in secondary schools in the state (Potts, 1999). This was structurally similar to other high school certificate studies in other states and territories in Australia. This study culminates in an end-of-year examination in which 50% of the results contribute to the final score, known as the study score, while the school-based assessments contribute the other 50% to the score (Cairns, 2021). The final study scores of individual subjects also determine the Australian Tertiary Achievement Ranking for their tertiary studies (Roberts, 2019). In Australia, senior secondary school certificates across the state where the exam and assessment scores are externally moderated and scaled to give the students a score to rank them (Polesel et al., 2021). English, English as an Additional Language, English Language and English Literature make up the compulsory English component of the VCE study, where students are required to complete at least one English subject to complete their VCE studies (Mulder & Thomas, 2022). The VCE studies are divided into four units, with Units 1 and 2 being completed at Year 11 and Units 3 and 4 being completed at Year 12. Tables 1.4 and 1.5 provide figures on the enrolment and completion of VCE studies in 2020 and 2021.

Table 1.4: Year 11 enrolments and completions in 2020 and 2021

Year	Unit 1 Enrolment	Unit 1 Completion	Unit 2 Enrolment	Unit 2 Completion
2020	338,713	321,778	328,813	315,137
2021	336,348	318,492	324,768	308,090

Table 1.5: Year12 enrolments and completions in 2020 and 2021

Year	Unit 3 Enrolment	Unit 3 Completion	Unit 4 Enrolment	Unit 4 Completion
2020	272,003	268,099	267,070	264,681
2021	275,102	270,352	268,481	265,690

Source: (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2021, 2022)

1.5 Objective of Study

Referring to the context of the outbreak of the pandemic, the learning of EAL students during the pandemic and post-pandemic and VCE studies, this study seeks to investigate the factors that affected the learning of VCE EAL students during lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 as well as the impact the pandemic had on VCE EAL learning post-pandemic. This study refers to the perspectives and experiences of teachers and students to evaluate both the positive and negative impacts of the pandemic and how students from vulnerable backgrounds were affected by these factors. The study also seeks to investigate the existing academic and wellbeing challenges faced by these students with a close study of whether these concerns proliferated in the context of the pandemic.

Existing studies have outlined that the pandemic necessitated a sudden shift to online learning in school settings, but further research should be conducted on the educational structure and curriculum (Camargo et al., 2020). This study capitalises on this notion and seeks to evaluate pedagogical strategies that are effective in an EAL classroom in relation to online learning strategies and critique the structure of the VCE EAL curriculum with reference to the impacts of the pandemic on student learning. Existing studies also have more focus on how the pandemic affected the learning of students in universities where students found online learning to be helpful despite the increase of emotional and wellbeing concerns arising from social isolation (Chakraborty et al., 2020). While there are studies that evaluate the repercussions of the pandemic on EAL students and school children overall, there is a dearth of literature on how EAL students in Australia were affected by remote learning in their final decisive years of schooling. This research addresses this problem by analysing teaching strategies in online learning settings, engagement concerns and student achievement with comparisons between online and conventional EAL teaching to determine the extent to which the pandemic was an influential factor in VCE EAL student learning.

Based on existing studies, it is also reported that teachers' struggles with underdeveloped digital competency negatively affected their online teaching practice during remote learning (Damsa et al., 2021). This is stated to have contributed to an increased workload during lockdowns, and combined with the emotional concerns surrounding health and safety measures outlined by the government, teachers insisted that remote learning

complicated student learning and affected their achievement (Portillo et al., 2020). This research project seeks to delve into the teacher's use of online platforms during the pandemic and their efficacy in a VCE EAL classroom and recommend professional learning areas teachers can explore to enhance the use of technology in a VCE EAL classroom.

1.6 Positionality as Researcher

At the start of the research project, I decided to take a neutral stance and position myself outside the scope of the research to approach the study without bias and preconceived notions. However, when collecting data and conducting the literature review, it became evident that a researcher's position is an integral part of the data collection, analysis and outcomes (Cuthill, 2015) and that my ontological and epistemological perspectives are integral to the research. My current role as a VCE EAL teacher at a public school in Victoria and my experience as a VCE English teacher during the pandemic enabled me to adopt an emic perspective and formulate the interview questions as an insider in the context of the research rather than an outsider. It is further argued in existing literature that research is a co-constructed activity with the researcher and the researched shaping the interaction (Cuthill, 2015). In the context of this research, being an insider as a VCE EAL teacher enabled me to empathise with both teachers and students and establish a more interactive environment, which encouraged the participants to be more forthcoming with their responses.

However, the position of the researcher as an insider carries its own challenges. One such challenge is the presumed understanding that can exist between the researcher and the researched. While this established understanding gave me an informed perspective of the subject that was being researched and interviewed, some participants at times carried the assumption that there was a mutual professional understanding in the interviews that prevented them from giving detailed responses to the questions (Aburn et al., 2021). To mitigate this tendency, I found myself asking more probing questions during the interview process to obtain more insightful responses from the participants. Another challenge that I encountered was the tendency of my own views on education and EAL students to influence the interpretation of the data. This could have led to a subjective interpretation of data which would seek to view the participants on a more compassionate level as

opposed to an objective interpretation of the phenomenon that is being researched. On a positive note, my subjectivity as a teacher and researcher became somewhat of a moral and professional responsibility towards outlining the factors that impede and support student learning to contribute to existing knowledge on EAL learners.

During the process of the research, I received an opportunity to go to Japan as a part of the Destination Australia Cheung Kong Exchange Program conducted by Victoria University. During this study tour, I had the opportunity to observe a Year 12 English class in a Japanese Secondary school and attend lectures conducted by Dr Naoko Araki on ‘English Language and Imagined Identity—Globalisation Impacting Japanese Students’ and Teachers’ “Self” and by Dr Naomi Kurata on ‘The Effects of Social Networks on Second Language Experiences and Motivations in Home-Country Settings’. These experiences further reinforced the importance of community-based practice and dialogic learning in an EAL classroom, and this is explored in detail in this research. The experience also emphasised that there is a homogenous perspective of the concept of globalisation and the role English as a language plays in it. These sessions reinforced the notions and experiences I had as a learner of English from a non-native-speaking cultural background and as a teacher of English to students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It further unearthed the question as to whether English is taught as a means of assimilation or whether it is taught to empower learners to carve their own identity in a globalised space. These aspects are aligned with the analysis and interpretation of data in the context of this research, and they will be discussed further in the subsequent chapters.

1.7 Outline of the Thesis Chapters

Chapter 1

The first chapter provides background and contextual information, such as facts about the outbreak of the pandemic in Australia and the rest of the world, VCE examinations and EAL students, to justify the decision to undertake this research project.

Chapter 2

This chapter reviews existing literature on pre-pandemic online learning, online learning during the outbreak of the pandemic, EAL learners during the pandemic and education across the world during the pandemic. The literature review refers to existing studies that explore teaching strategies employed by teachers during the pandemic, assessment strategies, and emotional and wellbeing concerns that affected student learning. The chapter outlines the gaps in the literature and what the study will address in reference to these opportunities for exploration.

Chapter 3

This chapter outlines the methodological framework and processes that underpin this research. The chapter explains the research paradigm, data collection and analysis processes while also looking at the ethical considerations surrounding the project. It will discuss the critical lens that will be used to analyse the collected data.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the interviews conducted with participating teachers and the emerging themes arising from the data. It will also present quotes and extracts from the interviews to support these emerging themes.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the interviews conducted with participating students. It will outline the emerging themes arising from the data while supporting these themes with quotes and extracts from the interviews.

Chapter 6

This chapter analyses the collected data with reference to existing studies and literature and through a critical Freirean lens. The analysed data will address each research subquestion and gaps existing in the literature.

Chapter 7

The concluding chapter summarises the findings of the research and outlines the contribution of the knowledge to the field of education, limitations of the study, recommendations for teaching practice and future research opportunities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on the literature that underpins the study of the factors that affected the learning of VCE EAL learners during the lockdown in Victoria. While there has been limited research conducted on remote learning and how it has affected students across the world, it is vital to review the literature surrounding the concept of online learning, how students from diverse backgrounds have used online learning tools over the years and how teachers have used online learning to assess student learning.

In addition to reviewing literature surrounding online learning and EAL learners over the years, this chapter will also review the literature on how lockdowns across the world affected student learning, the pedagogical approaches teachers took in engaging learners and the challenges and successes they experienced in the process. The chapter will also look into studies and findings around the external factors that influenced academic performance in students across the world after the outbreak of the pandemic. Finally, the literature review will look into studies around assessments in online learning environments in secondary school settings.

2.1.1 Victorian Certificate of Education

In the previous chapter, the VCE was defined as an integral component of education in the state of Victoria, Australia, which determines the tertiary pathways for students (Horton & McLean Davies, 2023). For a successful completion of the VCE study, students must complete three units from one of the English subjects: English, EAL, English Language and Literature (Horton & McLean Davies, 2023). Schools are expected to facilitate learning for students who are enrolled to study EAL and make necessary flexible adjustments where applicable (VCE Administrative Handbook, 2022).

A students' eligibility to study English as an Additional Language at VCE level, is determined by the following criteria:

1. A student will not have resided in Australia or in a predominantly English-speaking country for more than seven years prior to January 1 in the year the student sits for the VCE examination.

2. A student will not have studied in a school where the medium of instruction is English for a period of seven years or less over their schooling period.
3. A student who is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin whose first language is not English.
4. A student has impaired hearing who meets the eligibility criteria as per the Australian Government Hearing Service Program or having received the Visiting Teacher Service or enrolled in a school for special needs.
5. A student who has studied in a school in India or in Singapore regardless of whether they prove their eligibility stated in criteria (1).

(VCE Administrative Handbook, 2022)

The teaching and learning of each subject are outlined in what is known as the study design, where each unit has a specific focus on an aspect of language and key knowledge and skills (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA], 2022). Students are assessed on their achievement of these knowledge and skills for each subject area. Each subject, including English, has school-based assessments as well as an external examination at the end of the course, which students need to complete to affirm their eligibility to pursue tertiary education. In the context of VCE subjects, the assessments are known as School-Assessed Coursework (SAC). These are set tasks that assess a student's level of achievement in the units as outlined in the study design (VCAA, 2023). When a student completes their VCE, their results are collated by the VCAA and reported in the student's statement of results, including the following:

- Unit results (S for Satisfactory completion, N for non-satisfactory completion)
- Three graded assessments
- One study score out of 50 where the results of school-based assessments and the end-of-year external assessment are combined into a single score. (VCAA, 2023)

Every study design of every subject as a limited accreditation period, and with the conclusion of an accreditation period, a new study design has to be introduced. During the outbreak of the pandemic, VCE English and EAL were taught under a study design in which the implementation was between 2016 and 2021. This also means that students were assessed on the successful completion of the units in this study design until 2023 (VCAA, 2014). According to the rationale of this study design for English and EAL, students are expected to develop their creative and critical thinking skills and improve

their analytical skills in the process (VCAA, 2014). Table 2.1 lists the key aspects of this study design for students studying English or EAL in Year 11 and Year 12:

Table 2.1: Study Design for VCE English and EAL in 2020/2021

Year	Unit	English	EAL
Year 11	Unit 1	Reading and creating texts Analysing and presenting argument	Reading and creating texts Analysing and presenting argument
Year 11	Unit 2	Reading and comparing texts Analysing and presenting argument	Reading and comparing texts Analysing and presenting argument
Year 12	Unit 3	Reading and creating texts Analysing argument	Reading and creating texts Analysing argument Listening to texts*
Year 12	Unit 4	Reading and comparing texts Presenting argument—oral presentation	Reading and comparing texts Presenting argument—oral presentation

Note: *This area of study was limited to EAL students.

The external VCE examination, as stated above, will have the following specifications based on the study design:

Table 2.2: Exam specifications—VCE English and VCE EAL

Section	English	EAL
A	Text response essay on a set question.	Listening to texts.
B	Comparative text response based on a pair of texts studied at school.	Text response essay on a set question.
C	An analysis of written argument based on an unseen persuasive text.	A set of limited answer questions and an analysis of written argument based on an unseen persuasive text.

During the pandemic in 2020, minor changes were made to the study design, yet no changes were made to the structure of the exam for both English and EAL learners. The amended structure of the English and EAL course is depicted in Table 2.3, with the amended section written in bold:

Table 2.3: Amended study design for VCE English and EAL in 2020

Year	Unit	English	EAL
Year 11	Unit 1	Reading and creating texts. Analysing and presenting argument	Reading and creating texts. Analysing and presenting argument
Year 11	Unit 2	Reading and comparing texts Analysing and presenting argument	Reading and comparing texts Analysing and presenting argument
Year 12	Unit 3	Reading and creating texts Analysing argument	Reading and creating texts Analysing argument Listening to texts*
Year 12	Unit 4	Reading and comparing texts Presenting argument—written argument	Reading and comparing texts Presenting argument—written argument

In 2022, a new study design was implemented as a result of a review observing that students are not taught creative writing at the VCE level (Carey, 2019). It is also stated that the growing population of students from diverse cultures prompted the VCAA to introduce a curriculum that is more inclusive and provides more opportunities for learners to express themselves through their writing (Carey, 2019). Additionally, the previous study designs of VCE English and EAL were questioned for constraining teachers' pedagogical agency, limiting opportunities for teachers to have a voice in the curriculum they deliver to their students (McKnight, 2016). Taking into consideration these concerns, the VCAA proposed the following study design and new exam specifications (see Table 2.4).

Table 2.4: Study design for VCE English and EAL 2022–2027

Year	Unit	English	EAL
Year 11	Unit 1	Reading and exploring texts Crafting texts	Reading and exploring texts Crafting texts
Year 11	Unit 2	Reading and exploring texts Analysing and presenting argument	Reading and exploring texts Analysing and presenting argument
Year 12	Unit 3	Reading and exploring texts Creating texts	Reading and exploring texts Creating texts
Year 12	Unit 4	Reading and exploring texts Analysing and presenting argument	Reading and exploring texts Analysing and presenting argument

Table 2.5: Exam specifications VCE English and EAL exam based on the new VCE study design

Section	English	EAL
A	Text response essay on a set question	Text response essay on a set question
B	Creative piece on given stimuli	Creative piece on given stimuli
C	Argument analysis on a persuasive text	Argument analysis on a persuasive text

2.1.2 Online Learning, Distance Education and Blended Learning

The term online learning was first used in 1995 when the first Learning Management System was developed for uploading texts and PDFs, and since then, the term has been used interchangeably with e-learning, flipped learning, and online courses (Singh & Thurman, 2019). Over the years, scholars have given various definitions to the concept of online learning addressing its ambiguities around how it is interpreted. According to Curtain (2020), online learning can be described as an embellishment of interaction between teachers and students that takes place over the internet, covering different aspects of learning, including assessment. Another definition of online learning is that its sole objective is to obtain information via the internet (Means et al., 2014). Furthermore, online learning has also been defined as a learning design that incorporates ICT elements wholly and partially (Patel, 2014).

While online learning is used as an umbrella term to denote any form of learning that takes place via the internet, distance education refers to the process of making education accessible to learners who are geographically remote (Moore et al., 2010). This implies that distance education is not limited to learning conducted over the internet but also other mediums. Over the years, distance education has been a predominant form of course delivery in Open Universities, and it is said to provide many benefits not limited to providing education to learners from rural areas, making learning more accessible to learners with disabilities and allowing learners to have more control and agency over their learning (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). In spite of these advantages, distance learning has also been said to have disadvantages, such as increased levels of distraction requiring more dedication from learners to complete courses, the need for different types of technologies making the process complicated (Brown, 2017), difficulty in maintaining

consistent communication with teachers and instructors (Hutt, 2017) and the risk of distance courses being rejected in the job market (Nagrle, 2013).

While distance education has often been associated with tertiary and adult education, there have been studies which have been conducted to explore the impact of distance education on teaching and learning in school settings. Homework is considered one of the earliest approaches to distance education that is still practised today in school settings (Passey, 2000). From students taking their homework to be completed at home to schools using technology to enable students to access learning from holidays and hospitals, distance learning approaches have played an important role in the field of education. In countries like Australia, where there is a scattered rural population, schools such as Western Australia's Schools of Isolated and Distance Education have provided students with innovative learning material to enable students to have access to uninterrupted learning (Lopes et al., 2011). These distance education programmes have been established to prevent school closures in rural areas as a result of the decline in populations, inability to retain qualified teachers and economic degeneration (Irvin et al., 2010).

Alongside the attempts of such schools to deliver quality education through distance learning, barriers not limited to academic, cultural and technical have been said to hamper the learning of students enrolled in distance courses (Berge & Mrozowski, 1999). However, the significance of student perception towards distance learning has become important in understanding its impact on student learning. While students have identified that there are teaching and academic factors that students believe to be of importance in distance education, non-teaching factors such as convenience, readiness to learn and antecedent conditioning play a crucial role in impacting the quality of distance education (Van Wart et al., 2020). It should also be noted that there has been debate surrounding the efficacy of distance learning programmes and virtual schools. When evaluating the impact of learning distance education has had on adolescent students, the common trend that emerged was that student performance was evaluated on 'test scores that may reveal more about student background than about the quality of the school' (Chingos, 2013, p. 3). This prevents the scope for accurate study that differentiates virtual schools and conventional schools and of the factors that hamper or drive student performance in distance education programmes and settings. However, some studies indicate the analysis of lessons and curricula identifying the evidence of higher-order thinking and the studying of online

student activity in distance courses and demography as a means of investigating the efficacy of distance education programmes (Darling-Aduana, 2021).

Alongside online learning and distance education is the concept of hybrid learning or blended learning, which is often defined as ‘an educational tool or delivery of instruction in which both face-to-face and online teaching are offered simultaneously’ (Abdelrahman & Irby, 2017, p. 2). Over the years, scholars have had different perceptions regarding what blended learning can be defined as. According to Garrison and Kanuka (2004), blended learning transcends the combination of face-to-face and online learning and is a far more complicated form of delivery that uses strategies that differ from both face-to-face and online learning. However, Johannes Cronje (2020) argues that most definitions of blended learning do not acknowledge learning underpinned by theory and hence proposes a new definition of it as ‘the appropriate use of a mix of theories, methods and technologies to optimise learning in a given context’ (p. 120). While the upfront definition of the terms ‘hybrid education’ and ‘blended learning’ indicates the use of both online and in-person learning, scholars explore how the concept provides flexibility to teachers in formulating the delivery of their course or subject content (Abdelrahman & Irby, 2017).

While blended learning is assumed to pose obstacles similar to online and distance education, such as technical difficulties, issues regarding communication with teachers and instructors and increased workload, it is also said to improve student satisfaction and outcomes in learning as the availability of resources online permits teachers to spend more time in providing more one-on-one support smaller groups of students or individual students (Oh & Park, 2009). Other advantages include the opportunity for students to gain more knowledge and understanding of content through access to multiple resources on the web (Chen & Jones, 2007) and the improvement of interactions within the classroom and beyond as a result of using online platforms (Yuen, 2010).

Flipped learning or flipped classroom ‘is a blended model of learning that essentially reverses what would traditionally be considered classwork and homework’ (Wells & Holland, 2017, p. 30). This method has been utilised to eliminate monotony surrounding homework to engage students in their learning and to encourage them to obtain new knowledge. It is geared to create ‘a more flexible learning environment’ (Carbaugh & Doubet, 2020, p. 4) where the teacher is able to differentiate learning according to the needs of the students. Flipped learning shares similarities with online learning and

distance education owing to its use of technology. However, a significant difference that sets the notion of flipped learning apart from other forms of learning is that teachers are able to foster student autonomy in learning, thus creating an environment for student agency (Hamdan et al., 2013).

2.1.3 EAL Learners and Online Learning

Learning English as a second or an additional language can be a challenging endeavour for many students owing to the absence of a stimulating learning environment that engages them and encourages them to interact not only with their teachers and peers but also with the content. As a departure from the conventional practice of learning English through reading books, completing grammar activities and writing essays, using online learning platforms may be integral in reducing feelings of anxiety and doubt in learning English for these students (Haron et al., 2021).

It is also imperative to understand that EAL learners' response to online learning and the acquisition of language and methods of learning are said to be influenced by their cultural heritage (Chen, 2009). Students originating from certain cultural backgrounds may have academic values and classroom etiquette and decorum that affect their learning style (Alhamami, 2018). For instance, in more conservative countries where education is underpinned by B.F Skinner's behaviourist theory of operant conditioning, where students adapt and respond to the learning environment based on rewards and punishment (Vargas, 2017), learners often memorise content, resort to the excessively repeated practising of a skill and rely heavily on teachers and instructors. For these learners, the use of online platforms can be both a novel and unusual experience that requires well-thought and planned lessons incorporating online learning that can engage them.

In terms of EAL learners' perspectives towards online learning, a common observation that has often arisen is that EAL learners thrive on social interactions and face-to-face support from teachers when learning English. Hence, online learning may prevent these students from socially interacting with their peers and teachers effectively to improve their linguistic skills (Alhamami, 2018; Sailsman, 2020). Conversely, there are arguments in support of online and blended learning assisting language learners. Some scholars believe that 'the versatility afforded by computers and the internet enables students to attend English Lessons in virtual classrooms' (Al Fadda, 2019, p. 89). There are also

studies that outline that online learning is crucial in subverting power dynamics and factors that suppress student voice and agency (Hamamra & Qabaha, 2021). Some studies also identify the importance of technology in improving students' oral skills in the classroom and can encourage autonomous development of speaking skills (Dzięcioł-Pędich & Dudzik, 2021). Therefore, online interaction is believed to increase student performance compared with conventional teaching methods (Liu et al., 2022).

Closely connected to the role of social interactions in language learning for second or additional language acquisition can be drawn from Vygotsky's (1978) theory of sociocultural theory. When applied to language learning, the social and cultural context of a student can play an integral role. . In learning English, the knowledge and ability of students are said to be 'constructed during social interactions with people around them' (Min, 2006, p. 89). This reinforces the significance of the necessity of constant communication between learners and their peers and teachers. Students who come from diverse backgrounds can discover similarities in learning styles and learn from each other how to adapt to different contexts collectively while learning English. Additionally, their improved communication skills would contribute to increasing cultural awareness among learners and create a more collaborative learning space (Angelova & Zhao, 2016).

In conventional methods of language learning, collaboration and scaffolding are usually conducted through peers and teachers, but in an online learning space, students have access to a variety of resources and portals. Existing studies revealed that online learning, where students use various resources to make meaning in a collaborative learning environment, has the power to empower learners. The use of these technological resources can often be a means of mediating interaction and collaboration between students who learn English (Mavrou et al., 2010). According to Hsieh (2017), online learning tools can be utilised to drive three ways of scaffolding in collaborative English classrooms: peer-to-peer scaffolding (students using online tools to support their fellow peers), multi-directional scaffolding (learners collectively rely on multiple resources to scaffold their learning) and individual scaffolding (the scaffolding that takes place between the individual learner and online learning tools). In a classroom of students from non-native speaking backgrounds, collaborative learning that emulates these three strategies has a better capacity to assist learners in finding common ground with their peers when navigating a new language rather than leaving students in an alien learning environment

where collaboration and interaction fail to connect learners. This again substantiates the significance of social interaction within an English language classroom where online learning is frequently utilised.

In terms of formative assessments, scholars believe that they should be classroom-based and an important aspect of teaching and learning (Can Daskin & Hatipoglu, 2019). In an English language classroom, the most commonly used assessment tools that have been studied in research are student performance in standardised testing and progress tests, which are summative assessments and may not always display the linguistic capabilities of learners in their true potential. Therefore, ‘special features of the formative and for learning perspective are likely to be lost if it is assimilated into a standardised assessment paradigm’ (Leung & Mohan, 2004, p. 337). When looking at the impact of assessment in an EAL classroom, it is imperative to investigate as many diagnostic assessments as possible to comprehend the extent to which learners are able to implement their knowledge of language more critically. As opposed to face-to-face assessments, online assessments are presumed to promote student autonomy in allowing students to evaluate their own progress while teachers are often facilitators in this process (Vonderwell et al., 2007). For EAL learners, this indicates that through various online learning platforms, students can not only practice their linguistic skills but also keep track of their progress and receive more accessible and constructive feedback from teachers and peers away from the classroom (Cunningham, 2019) and engage in evaluating their own learning (Mahapatra, 2021).

2.2 Online Learning Within the Context of the Pandemic

The field of education has been undergoing a transformation, with digital learning being utilised as an integral facet of student learning, engagement and academic performance. This necessity for education as a sector to evolve in an interconnected world is what Kariippanon et al. (2021) term ‘a paradigm shift’. With the outbreak of the pandemic, schools across the world were compelled to adapt the practice of emergency remote learning (ERL) as a means to fulfil the educational needs of learners during a public health crisis (Toquero, 2021). ERL, according to existing literature, refers to a temporary shift to online learning in educational settings owing to unforeseen crisis circumstances (Bond et al., 2021; Moore & Hodges, 2023; Schlesselman, 2020; Shin & Hickey, 2020). As a

result, teachers, regardless of their knowledge and expertise in the field of information technology, had to plan, structure and deliver lessons to ensure minimal disruptions to student learning in the face of the crisis. This section of the chapter will focus on student engagement in remote learning, not limited to online learning tools prevalent among educators and wellbeing strategies implemented by schools, factors that affected student learning during the lockdown periods and assessment strategies utilised during remote learning to evaluate student performance.

2.2.1 Student Engagement in Remote Learning

Student engagement has been defined in various ways over the years. According to The Glossary of Education Reform (2016), student engagement is ‘the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education’ . Closely connected to this is Barkley’s (2010) definition of student engagement where she builds upon the notion of a student’s interest and passion in learning and defines engagement as the combination of motivation and active learning that are synergistically geared towards increasing student ability. This interpretation of student engagement has been called one-dimensional by scholars, and they have instead proposed a model where student engagement is an amalgamation of interactions with the curriculum, teachers, peers and the broader community (Groccia, 2018).

With the outbreak of the pandemic, teachers were compelled to explore different strategies to engage students in a full-time online learning environment. During the pandemic, as expected, students and teachers increased their use of video conferencing platforms and used emails as their primary medium of communication (Stecula & Wolniak, 2022). Most teachers transcended conventional teaching tools and used tools such as MS Teams, Kahoot and Google forms to engage learners (Niemi & Khousa, 2020). According to a study, platforms like Zoom and Moodle were effective in improving student engagement and academic performance for their adaptability (Adeyeye et al., 2022). Another study discovered that Google Classroom was rated the most effective platform among teachers and students for remote learning, especially for English language learning (Khalil & Alharbi, 2022). Similarly, Bergdahl and Nouri (2021) in their study observed that using basic online learning platforms like MS Teams fosters student engagement. However, they

also state that social aspects of learning are crucial to drive student engagement. Therefore, their study discovered that preparedness to teach on the teacher's part had a significant impact on student achievement and engagement and pre-recorded seminars and video-based communication were essential to allow students to control the pace of their learning while interacting with their teachers (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2021).

In addition to the more common online learning platforms stated above, schools also utilised learning management systems and non-interactive websites to deliver more individualised learning instructions, which proved to be effective in engaging learners (Hash, 2021). These platforms enabled teachers to ensure that a range of material was available for students online, and this, in turn, was said to have improved student engagement (Yuan, 2021). By providing a range of options for students to connect with, it is plausible to say that many academic settings used Moore's interactional model where students received opportunities to interact with peers, teachers and also subject content through various platforms. Gopinathan et al. (2022) observe that there is a correlation between digital collaborative tools, motivation and interactivity when it comes to student engagement. Based on the concepts of collaborative learning theory and social learning theory, their study states that digital collaborative tools promote student engagement while there is a tendency for learners to learn from each other, even in online learning.

In the words of Rashid and Yadav (2020), 'the pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities and shortcomings of the current education system and has also emphasised the need for digital literacy development' (p. 2.). In the context of EAL classrooms, this indicates that

ERL conditions revealed the need for teachers to discover means of improving students' abilities to use technology while facilitating their language acquisition. Studies reveal that digital literacy is integral to the learning process of EAL students, and the absence of these skills can impede their academic performance (Arsari, 2022). Arsari's (2022) study further outlined that EAL students faced difficulties in completing learning tasks and researching information online owing to their limited digital literacy levels.

A challenge that most teachers in EAL classrooms faced was to improve students' online interactions. For instance, students would prefer to speak with their peers instead of teachers in their own language to understand content. However, during the pandemic, there was a decline in students' speaking skills owing to their lack of interaction in their

classrooms (Ying et al., 2021). Additionally, it is also stated that EAL students have often had a general reluctance to speak in their classroom owing to anxiety, fear of failure and cultural influences (Savaşçı, 2014). This discomfort was carried forward to remote learning where there was a decline amongst EAL students in interacting with their teachers owing to feeling a sense of discomfort taking through a microphone (Seynhaeve et al., 2022). To minimise this, some schools allowed students to anonymously engage in interactive activities. This enabled students who were not confident in expressing their ideas to groups of individuals to be more active and autonomous in their learning (Frankie & Har, 2022). These students also believed that more collaborative activities and engagement with their learning communities had a direct impact on their language acquisition and engagement in learning (Huang, 2021).

This also closely aligns with the theory that English language learning is underpinned by the Communicative Language Teaching paradigm (Cheung, 2021). Fostered by this paradigm, effective learning of an additional language is a combination of various aspects not limited to student autonomy, the social nature of learning, diversity and curricular integration (Jacobs & Farrell, 2003). Additionally, online community building through creating a shared identity was considered a driving force in improving student participating in learning during the pandemic (Jiang, 2021). During remote learning, EAL learners depend on each other for support and technology and the latter is considered to 'maximise the learning opportunity for EFL [English as a foreign language] learners and minimise the learning problems' (Khatoony & Nehzhadmehr, 2020, p. 102). Through this, not only were the students engaged in their learning, but it also prompted them to believe that remote learning is the way forward (Tulaksar & Turunen, 2022).

In their study of the implementation of the universal design for learning in EAL classrooms, Hu and Huang (2022) identify that learning obstacles often arise from rigid learning materials and assessments 'that fail to achieve efficient interactions with students' (p. 73). They further state that teachers who exposed students to multiple forms of content and assessments, such as using Zoom breakout rooms for discussions and online debates, were able to foster and sustain student engagement for longer periods, while teachers who were didactic in their approach failed to engage their students (Hu & Huang, 2022).

Some schools used the opportunity of remote learning to introduce students to e-books and kept track of their reading through reading log data and measured the correlation between the completion of books and the effectiveness of this strategy (Kuromiya et al., 2022). The main purpose of this approach is to reduce student anxiety over the pace of their learning and to allow more scope for student autonomy (Hiroyuki et al., 2022). Another study connected to the notion of student autonomy and engagement explores the constructivist approach taken to identify how students during the pandemic used iPads to discover new information and to create and design content (Al-Bogami & Elyas, 2020). Such studies often reveal that providing audiovisual stimuli can have a positive impact on student autonomy and learning new knowledge and skills, particularly language acquisition (Perez, 2022).

While some studies have focused on the use of online learning tools to measure student engagement during the pandemic, there has also been a keen interest in exploring the impact of emotional wellbeing on student engagement, as many scholars identify the emotional state of learners as a key for engagement (Yorke et al., 2021). It is believed that stressful events like the COVID-19 pandemic can increase anxiety levels among students, thus directly affecting their wellbeing and, subsequently, their engagement in learning (Aristovnik et al., 2020). It is also believed that the socioeconomic status of families has a direct link to the amount of support parents can provide students to ensure the latter remain engaged in learning (Trevino et al., 2021). Reinforcing this notion is the positive environment theory that predicts that wellbeing results from a positive family environment (Romero et al., 2022). Based on this premise, the survey conducted by Kurtz (2020) reveals that students who attended private schools were more motivated compared with those in public schools. While this study does not paint a holistic picture of students' home environment in relation to student engagement it does imply that students who attended private schools could have had more academic support from teachers and financial and emotional support from families.

However, the study conducted by Kurtz (2020) also revealed that certain emotional factors, such as self-consciousness regarding their own appearance, prompted many students to keep their cameras turned off during online learning. This ethical consideration surrounding digital privacy is believed to have affected their engagement as it created a barrier between students, their peers and their teachers, which in turn prevented them from

being active participants in their learning (Bhattacharya et al., 2022). Student engagement was further affected as students could be apprehensive about sharing their work online, receiving feedback online and exposing their strengths and weaknesses in an online learning setting (Chang, 2021). In addition, Salas-Pilco et al. (2022) outline three types of engagement, namely, cognitive, affective and behavioural engagement. Lack of motivation and diminished positive self-perception are said to affect all three aspects of engagement and it further lays emphasis on the impact of digital privacy on online learning .

There has been an emphasis on wellbeing strategies apart from pedagogical approaches to increase student motivation and engagement. As stated earlier, events such as the outbreak of the pandemic can lead to anxiety and distress among individuals. In addition, students are said to have led a quite sedentary lifestyle during this period owing to nationwide lockdowns (Stockwell et al., 2021). Prolonged periods of low physical activity and sedentary lifestyles are said to increase anxiety levels in students (Reyes-Molina et al., 2022; Schwartz et al., 2021). To prevent this from impacting student's wellbeing and also engagement, some schools are said to have facilitated self-care practices which can improve both student and school outcomes (Cook et al., 2018). Alongside this, it is believed that mindfulness can lead to self-fulfilment and increased skills (Ghanizadeh et al., 2019). Building on this theory, some schools in countries like the Philippines facilitated self-care practices among students with the intention of improving the emotional and psychological wellbeing of students, which are directly correlated to increased engagement in online learning (Cleofas, 2021). Substantiating this notion, studies have discovered that students with high levels of resilience practised self-care during the pandemic and consequently saw an improvement in their engagement in learning and alleviation of stress and burnout (Khachaturova, 2023; Meine et al., 2021; Zúñiga et al., 2021).

Closely related to the aforementioned notion is the importance of social-emotional learning programmes to assist students in managing their behaviour and staying engaged in online learning during the pandemic. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, social-emotional learning programmes are programmes where:

All young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (2023)

Student's emotional response to online learning is a predictor of how engaged they would be in a virtual learning environment. Students who harboured a poor perception towards online learning would have been less motivated to participate in online classrooms. This could have also led to 'an associated reluctance, disillusionment and anger which may block emotional connectivity to learning' (Andrew et al., 2021, p. 3). This was also revealed in a study where students reported high levels of uncertainty towards their academic and personal futures, which led to disengagement and being susceptible to external stressful factors (Clabaugh et al., 2021). In their study, Zhang et al. (2021) discovered that there is a direct correlation between adaptability and positive academic emotion among students at the tertiary level in China. Additionally, it was also discovered that there is a direct correlation between students' emotional intelligence and spirituality with their stress levels during the pandemic (Mamat et al., 2022). Therefore social-emotional learning programmes would have been effective in the context of the pandemic as students would be taught coping measures to face the wellbeing obstacles posed by a global health crisis (Cooper et al., 2022). Closely connected to this are the gratitude interventions, which also increase positive emotions towards learning (Brunzell et al., 2016) and this was demonstrated through various gratitude writing that assisted in alleviating stress and anxiety in learners (Fekete & Deichert, 2022). In some schools, emotional regulation programmes such as Zones of Regulation were implemented where students could identify their emotional zones during online learning and seek support accordingly (Bishop et al., 2022).

Similarly, there were also classrooms that used emotional regulation strategies within subject areas that reconciled wellbeing and online learning engagement (Zhoc et al., 2022). These strategies sought to build positive relationships in an online learning environment, which would, in turn, improve student outcomes and engagement. When discussing the significance of positive relationships, it should be noted that teacher engagement and peer engagement affect student engagement (Ewing & Cooper, 2021). This means that teachers who structured lessons with clear expectations and emotional

involvement promoted student autonomy, and this allowed students to have a positive relationship with them (Chiu, 2022). It is evident that the pandemic transformed the conventional classroom environment into a learning space where teachers had to experiment with various pedagogical and wellbeing strategies amidst concerns surrounding administrative facilities, technology and teachers' digital literacy in a short amount of time (Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020). In such an environment, positive relationships with teachers were crucial in increasing student engagement and classrooms that were more student-centred were more engaging as opposed to those that were not (Bray et al., 2021). This denotes that the more students practised agency in learning, the more improved their relationships became with their teachers and hence increased learning outcomes and engagement. This included more personalised lessons and more flexible policies and practices to include students and their families in classroom activities (Vilchez et al., 2021). In addition, providing regular feedback to students added meaning to online learning and allowed students to stay more connected with their teachers (Kaslow et al., 2020).

2.2.2 Factors that Impeded Student Learning

While the outbreak of the pandemic paved the way for investigations surrounding different strategies that can engage students and their efficacy, it also revealed numerous factors that impeded student learning and had consequences on their internal and external wellbeing.

2.2.2.1 Technical Factors

Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, online learning was considered to enhance student learning outcomes owing to its flexible nature in terms of student agency in time management, choosing content and self-evaluation of their progress (Kokoc, 2019). Before the pandemic, it was revealed in studies that students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds had limited access to computers and technology (Leal & Hess, 2001). In other cases, where students had access to technology in education, they had also demonstrated a divide in digital knowledge and literacy (Chan et al., 2011). The use of devices in the classroom has been directly proportionate to student ownership of digital devices. (O'Mara et al., 2017). Enforcing programmes such 'Bring Your Own Device'

popularised digital learning in schools but it also implies the obvious difficulties faced by students who come from financial background inhibit them from owning their own devices for learning. For instance, a country like Australia which is considered a high consumer of technology also reports an unequal pattern of how this consumption is distributed with household income being a crucial factor in determining the domestic use of the internet by learners (McLaren & Zappala, 2002). Therefore, it can be identified that while digital divide among learners was a topic of discourse and policy-making prior to the pandemic, the outbreak of the pandemic revealed the consequences of this divide in relation to the challenges faced by learners across the world.

The urgency with which teachers and schools have had to facilitate online learning during the pandemic lockdowns has assisted researchers in identifying factors that have affected student learning and performance. One of the main factors that has affected student learning during lockdowns across the world has been the challenges some institutes have faced in providing technological support and devices to students (Ali, 2021; Asanov et al., 2021; Baldock et al., 2021; Choi & Chiu, 2021; Hash, 2021; Khlaif et al., 2021; Mukuka et al., 2021; Serhan, 2020).

Students who lived in remote regions of the world had limited access to devices and internet connections, which significantly affected their participation in learning (Alvarez, 2020). In a study conducted in Indonesia, it was discovered that poor signals in some suburbs and the fact that not all parents had laptops and mobile phones often made students miss instructional content and, hence, could not complete given tasks efficiently and submit assignments on time (Rasmitadila et al., 2020). Even though this study focused on the technical factors that affected learning for students in remote areas of Indonesia, it can be considered a holistic reflection of similar issues faced by students who live in similar environments across the world (Azubuike et al., 2020; Maciel et al., 2021; Morgan, 2020).

Associated with the lack of proper internet connection and devices is the limited contribution learning communities could make to facilitate a successful and efficient online learning experience for all students. Along with a lack of technological facilities, it is also expected that students and teachers in remote areas ‘often lack expertise to implement remote teaching and learning’ (Onyema et al., 2020, p. 113). Since most

schools around the world and teachers had to implement emergency online learning, it can be expected that not all schools and teachers were equipped with the knowledge to use online learning tools and platforms to ensure students remained connected to their learning and subsequently promote student achievement (Damsa et al., 2021). This was also stated in a literature review that was conducted on challenges faced by teachers during the pandemic. It was identified how the low digital literacy levels of teachers combined with the shortage of devices among students negatively affected online learning in schools across Malaysia (Haron et al., 2021). This is also related to the notion of a lack of community that arose from limited connectivity and knowledge during the pandemic (Cronin, 2021). Lack of technical facilities and expertise also implied that disadvantaged students often did not receive adequate feedback, and the participation rates of these students in learning were significantly low (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). Moreover, challenges in adapting to remote learning also implied that schools ended up overlooking certain inequities like disability and language barriers when facilitating learning, and this implied that not every student received equitable opportunities for learning during the pandemic (Schafer et al., 2021). Learning and teaching are integral aspects of an educational community, and when these aspects do not function to its fullest potential, then it can lead to the breakdown of the educational community.

While the digital divide exists between students of different socio-economic backgrounds, the pandemic reveals itself to have widened this gap further. A survey conducted on students in China found that the digital divide existed on several levels and that students who came from high socioeconomic backgrounds had access to better devices and online learning materials (Guo & Wan, 2022). Therefore, these students would have had access to more innovative online platforms that were more engaging as opposed to students who had to rely on standard applications like WhatsApp. Another study outlined that the existing digital discrepancy among students of diverse backgrounds widened during the pandemic, causing vulnerable students to be digitally displaced (Norman et al., 2022). The increase in digital access during the pandemic was further perpetuated in a study conducted by Müller et al. (2023), where they discovered that students of working-class families were disadvantaged, thus affecting their learning and academic performance. It was further extended in studies that explored how students in developing and less developed countries were further disadvantaged owing to limited accessibility to the internet and devices. (Kashyap & Tamuli, 2022). In countries like Bangladesh, where

there was poor digital infrastructure and network facilities, student participation in online learning was reported to be as low as 35% (Badiuzzaman et al., 2021). The studies conducted in different parts of the world on the technological factors that impacted student learning during the pandemic cannot be viewed as a holistic view of education during the global health crisis as different countries' economic and technological prowesses would determine the access and types of platforms used by students during remote learning. Hence, further contextual analysis is required on how different regions in the world responded to the technological factors impacting student learning during the pandemic.

2.2.2.2 Emotional Factors

A global health crisis is always expected to increase emotional and psychological stress in individuals, and the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus and the nationwide lockdowns across the world increased this further in both adults in young children. It is believed that with extended periods of lockdown, there are expected to be changes to routines and habits in individuals. These changes in habits and routines are believed to have increased the risk of depression in students (Ustun, 2021). Studies that explored the impact of changes in lifestyle instigated by the pandemic on students discovered that there were negative shifts in their daily routine, which led to worsened sleeping and studying patterns and increased mental health symptoms (Perez-Dominguez et al., 2021). Simultaneously, psychological concerns surrounding the uncertainty of life that arose with the pandemic are said to have led to negative emotions like depression and hence affected student learning as it affected their concentration and creativity (Huang et al., 2022). Along with disruption in routine, students also had limited access to social support during the pandemic, which led to an increase in anxiety and stress (Deng et al., 2021).

On many occasions, students had initially expressed enthusiasm towards online learning as the prospect of learning in a platform that is familiar to them in the comforts of their home would have been a motivating factor behind their enthusiasm. However, with the increasing number of cases in individual regions, boredom in following the same routine and negative perceptions towards the effectiveness of online learning began to affect learning with time (Irawan et al., 2020). This was further explored in a study by Grubic et al. (2020), which outlined that increased pressure to learn independently and abandonment of daily routines led to a rise in school drop-out rates among students .

In addition to the lack of discipline and motivation in students, it is also believed that educators were often burned out during this period (Hermanto & Srimulyani, 2021). The stress that came with an uncertain global health crisis would have put educators in a vulnerable position, thus preventing them from effectively facilitating learning for their students. According to a cross-sectional survey conducted on stress levels of teachers during lockdown in Germany, 50% of teachers spent more than four hours online conducting lessons and teachers who taught at grammar schools experienced more stress than those who taught at the other schools (Klapproth et al., 2020). Other studies outline that teachers found every aspect of teaching difficult during the pandemic particularly dealing with language and academic barriers of learners (Marshall et al., 2020). Additionally, teachers were also reported to have experienced burnout and technostress when utilising online learning tools to engage their students, and this also affected their overall perception of online learning (Pânișoară et al., 2020). Technostress refers to stress experienced by individuals when using information technology and systems and is a form of stress that can also positively impact an individual's efficiency and quality of work (Tarafdar et al., 2019). This form of stress experienced by teachers during the pandemic supports pre-existing studies that affirm that increased levels of technostress reduce satisfaction and performance in a collaborative environment (Jena, 2015).

While diminished social interaction, financial issues in families and changes to routines affected the wellbeing of students, thus creating a loss of motivation and self-esteem (Williams et al., 2020), some children also resorted to self-injury and suicide attempts to cope with loss of contact with the outside world and the drastic measures governments took to protect society from the virus (Thandavaraj et al., 2021). In a survey conducted on adolescent behaviours and experiences during the pandemic, the data revealed that 31% of students experienced feelings of despair during the pandemic, with 19% having suicidal intentions as a coping mechanism. In contrast, students who maintained close relationships with their friends and families fostered improved mental wellbeing (Jones et al., 2022). Another study supporting this notion also reported that 18% of university students in China harboured suicidal thoughts during lockdown (Wang et al., 2020).

Another wellbeing risk that negatively affected students during the outbreak of the pandemic is the increased rates of cyberbullying incidents that were reported. Students were often left to their devices during the day to engage in learning, and hence owing to

reduced parental supervision, they were more vulnerable to cyber bullying (Ghosh et al., 2020). The increased time students spend online and increased boredom, as stated earlier, would have given those who would procrastinate to end up on online platforms that pose a risk to their security and wellbeing. It has also been revealed in studies that increased workload among students and piled-up schoolwork also made them susceptible to cyber bullying (Nurfauzia et al., 2021).

2.2.2.3 Socio-economic Factors

Socio-economic factors not limited to cultural background, family background and religious affiliations play an integral role in the academic success of students who belong to underrepresented and minority groups (Mishra, 2020). As stated earlier, students from low socio-economic backgrounds struggled to participate in learning as they did not have proper access to devices or internet connections (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023). When it came to online learning during the pandemic, access to devices such as smartphones, laptops and tablets, which were once considered an enhancement to learning, suddenly became a necessity. Therefore, while remote learning across the world paved the way for opportunities to investigate the efficacy of online learning, it also widened social gaps in the likes of culture, economic situation and digital divide (Goudeau et al., 2021). Goudeau et al. (2021), in their study, further reveal how the pandemic highlighted the differences in how students had access to learning activities and explicit instruction. Students from low socio-economic and minority backgrounds struggled to cope with learning owing to this disparity in access to devices and internet connection (Lederer et al., 2020). These students often relied on traditional school settings to access their learning, and educators and school administrators often ensured that there was equity in terms of how each student engaged in their learning (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Studies also state that socio-economic factors play a crucial role in a student's perception and acceptance of online learning, with students who come from more affluent backgrounds seeing the merits of digital learning (Baber, 2021). With the outbreak of the pandemic, several studies found that children from wealthy and well-to-do families preferred online learning while students from low socio-economic backgrounds struggled as their sole access to education often depended on the traditional school setting where they could often reach out for support (Halpern, 2021).

Additionally, a survey conducted by Aucejo et al. (2020) reported that students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds are 55% more likely to graduate later than students who are from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds . This was extended in a Household Pulse survey conducted on American schools in 2020, where it was discovered that this is closely linked to the notion that student motivation saw a negative shift owing to racial inequality being an extrinsic factor that further affected students during the COVID-19 outbreak (Fong, 2022). The pandemic was also recorded to exacerbate exclusion and inequality in school environments as a result of school closures and effecting student academic years being affected by it (Azevedo et al., 2020). Further substantiating the impact of income on student motivation and academic achievement is a study that delineated that students who come from higher-income families with access to educational resources had more ability and motivation to complete their courses as opposed to students from lower-income families (Errisuriz et al., 2022). However, contradicting studies claim that the pandemic was instrumental in lower academic attainment among students of lower income backgrounds, but it did not widen existing income gaps among individuals (Xu et al., 2022).

A survey conducted in the UK found that parents, guardians and carers were more anxious about schools reopening and hence preferred to keep their children at home. This eventually led to a further increase in the disparity in academic performance between advantaged and disadvantaged learners (Sharp et al., 2020).

Such concerns posed a threat of an increase in school drop-out rates around the world. In Pakistan, it was suspected that the pandemic would lead to increased school drop-out rates, hence having detrimental impacts on the economy of the country in the long run (Khan & Ahmed, 2021). A report by the World Bank (2020) reinforces this notion by declaring that students who were previously reluctant to engage in school would be inclined to dropout as they are more likely to feel unable to catch up on schoolwork and feel a further sense of detachment from the school setting.

2.2.2.4 Family, Gender And Culture And Online Learning

Apart from economic factors, notions surrounding gender culture and families also had an impact on student learning. Online learning requires self-discipline. A survey found that female students were better at self-regulation compared with their male counterparts.

Hence, male students were believed to have struggled to adapt to the changes brought by online learning (Chang, 2021). However, in some studies, it was revealed that female students had reported higher levels of anxiety and loneliness during the lengthy confinement period during the COVID-19 outbreak (Nomie-Sato et al., 2022). In another study that investigated student perception of online learning among university students in Qatar, it was discovered that male students had a more positive outlook towards teaching, learning and assessment than female students and, hence, were more satisfied with remote learning (Newsome, 2022).

In addition, in societies where gender segregation exists, females are expected to have more access to online learning tools as they would have more restrictions with regard to face-to-face learning involving members of the opposite gender (Al-Rasheed, 2021; Alyahya et al., 2022; Gaofeng, 2021; Pilotti et al., 2022). Contrary to these revelations, studies have been conducted in countries with conservative cultural and religious backgrounds where families tend to have preconceived notions regarding the use of technology and the internet as well as clearly defined values based on traditional gender roles (Dong et al., 2020; Khlaif et al., 2021; Meler, 2021). Based on certain cultural and religious norms, some parents have expressed their objection to female students being exposed to the internet without parental supervision, thus preventing them from consistently attending their online classes. (Khlaif et al., 2021). In families

with more traditional gender roles, female students were expected to shoulder domestic responsibilities and were sometimes not allowed to watch online learning programmes (Ahmadon et al., 2020). A similar trend was also seen among female students of minority communities in developing countries, where their domestic responsibilities impeded their capacity to allocate time for their online learning (Fazal et al., 2022). In their study, Navaneeth and Siddiqui (2022) observe that technological advancements are meant to 'democratise knowledge' (p. 142), which is meant to create opportunities for women to reap the benefits of learning in various circumstances. However, they observe that gender and cultural roles assigned to women often hinder this purpose, and this was evident during the pandemic, where female students in many developing countries were often made to prioritise societal responsibilities over their learning (2022).

While students had to deal with struggles with their mental wellbeing, technical factors and inevitable socio-economic factors, they often found themselves coping with various

domestic constraints. Parental attention has a direct relationship with student learning, and this is a phenomenon that was true of education prior to the pandemic as well (Mayona et al., 2022). This attention during the pandemic took the form of preserving and sustaining the education of students through parental encouragement, supervision, motivation and facilitation of learning (Amirudin et al., 2021; Khotimah & Afandi, 2021; Suswandari, 2022). In the absence of such attention, it can be presumed that student academic rigour and motivation would have been negatively affected. During the pandemic, parental wellbeing was influenced by factors like marital harmony, financial stability, the child's learning stage and social support (Wu et al., 2020). It was reported that parents with school children experienced elevated stress during the pandemic, emphasising the necessity to cultivate more support for their children during remote learning (Davis et al., 2020). It was revealed in studies that the unemployment of parents affected student learning (Barrot et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2022). Household harmony was directly proportionate to its financial status. Students who were exposed to the conflict that arose from this struggled to concentrate on their learning (Afifah, 2021; Garrote et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). The role of parents in this context of remote learning is to reduce stress levels and provide optimum support for their children to achieve excellence during online learning at home (Brown et al., 2020). When parents struggle with their own financial issues, it is obvious that they fail to provide a safe learning environment for their children (Patre & Chakraborty, 2022). Adjusting to a home environment where parents were not prepared to provide effective and safe spaces for online learning was a challenge students had to overcome (Alhazmi, 2022).

The pandemic and the financial constraints brought psychological trauma, which was a catalyst for domestic violence (Abdullah, 2020; Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020), and students were often victims of different forms of emotional abuse from their parents. As mentioned before, financial stress often renders it difficult for parents to provide adequate support to their children in their learning and often ends up neglecting and abusing them (Lee et al., 2021). Therefore, failing to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for children is also considered emotional abuse (Subedi et al., 2020). Parents under financial stress often vent their anxiety on their children (Jonson-Reid et al., 2012). In such an environment, children often found themselves managing their own stress levels as well as the additional burden of managing the emotional levels of their parents, which hampered their process of concentrating on their learning. During the pandemic, parents

reported increased verbal and emotional conflict in households, which were the result of mental wellbeing concerns (Rodriguez et al., 2020). A literature review stated that parental burnout was another factor that is directly linked to an increased risk of child maltreatment, which leads to children's wellbeing being severely compromised (Griffith, 2020). A survey revealed that parents intentionally or unintentionally are said to have committed child abuse by yelling and threatening to confiscate electronic devices when not used for the purpose of online learning (Selvi, 2022). This often proved to have the reverse effect, compelling students to detach from their learning and have anxiety over their academic performance (Farhan et al., 2022). This is connected to parents criticising their children's academic performance as disappointing and dissatisfactory can lead to low self-esteem in students and subsequently cause further anxiety in children (Kerns & Brumariu, 2014).

Another factor that prevents parents from supporting their children in learning is their perception towards online learning. A survey conducted on parental perceptions towards online learning in China revealed that most parents did not believe in the efficacy of online learning and hence felt they were unable to support their children in their learning (Dong et al., 2020). A study that investigated parental perception of online learning in India revealed that parents believed remote learning to be ineffective and the process only increased workload and reduced social interactions for their children (Suresh et al., 2022). This implies that parents who have a more traditional perception towards education often believe that the traditional school environment is the sole medium through which children can experience academic success. In contrast, there were parents who also believed that remote learning was more beneficial to their children as they were exposed to web conferencing and digital technology, which improved learning outcomes (Bower et al., 2023; Jhoanita & Khadijah, 2022). Another study revealed that while parents preferred face-to-face learning, students preferred online learning, leading to clashes of perception towards education in households (Maksum et al., 2022). In addition, parents also believed that they struggled with digital literacy, time constraints and infrastructure in facilitating learning for their children and hence stated that schools are not yet ready to implement online learning (Iskandar et al., 2023).

2.2.2.5 Assessment Strategies

Assessment in education is considered to be a complex endeavour that focuses not only on student development but also on interactions among peers as well as between students and teachers (Cocorada & Clinciu, 2009). It can also be identified that ‘assessments are powerful tools for addressing equity and informing instruction’ (Lake & Olson, 2020, p. 4). Traditional tests are often considered reliable, albeit failing to evaluate student performance effectively (Rovai, 2000). Online platforms are said to make assessments innovative and learning more engaging (Mekky, 2021). In the era of e-learning, the complexities around assessing students have been intensified. One such challenge surrounding online learning is the necessity for instructors to often modify their methods of instruction to make them different and more effective than traditional instruction (Liang & Creasey, 2004). Gaytan and McEwan (2007), in their study, observe that effective online assessment includes:

- Wide range of assessment formats
- Providing effective, meaningful and timely feedback
- Using online chat and commentary platforms for interactions
- Use of rubrics for self-assessment. (Gaytan & McEwan, 2007)

With the outbreak of the pandemic, educational instructors were compelled to tailor their assessments, which they would have conducted in face-to-face settings, to be conducted in online learning environments. Effective assessment practices during the pandemic required schools to align student evaluation with learning objectives, student diversity and a balance between different types of assessments (Rahim, 2020). A survey in Indonesia revealed that WhatsApp and Google Classroom were the primary platforms used for assessing students during the pandemic (Perwitasari et al., 2021). The pandemic allowed teachers to explore new learning platforms and have more time to have work–life balance. However, technical difficulties and the inability of remote assessments to correctly measure student learning abilities made online assessment challenging (Perwitasari et al., 2021). Hash (2021), in his research, has discovered how elementary and secondary school teachers had given students the autonomy to choose their own assignments within limitations around music performance and theory. Through enabling students to exercise a sense of agency in selecting their assessments, it is believed that students remained more engaged and were not overwhelmed by the notion of assessment

while experiencing the emotional and physical constraints brought by the pandemic. In Ramadani and Xhaferi's (2020) study on using the online platform Zoom for English as a foreign language students, it is mentioned that teachers utilised methods such as voice recordings, presentations and images as formative assessment strategies to evaluate student participation in online lessons. This strategy is also endorsed by Vollbrecht et al. (2020) in their study where they recommend the use of more low-stakes assessments synchronously to evaluate student understanding of core concepts. Similarly, some schools believed that Quizziz is an ideal application to be used during the pandemic as students can complete the assessment from home, and it can be an authentic form of formative assessment as students do not view the questions beforehand (Darmawan et al., 2020). Furthermore, informal assessments conducted during online lessons assisted in engaging students in their learning (Muhammad & Srinivasan, 2021). These assessments would have taken the pressure off students to complete assessments alongside online learning tasks and hence drive more engagement in their learning.

Some schools also promoted the practice of self-assessment among learners as a measure to encourage learner autonomy, which is an academic strength regardless of the method of learning and content delivery (Allaymoun & Shorman, 2022). It is believed that self-assessment has the ability to enable learners to realise their strengths and weaknesses and to foster positive relationships between teachers and learners, as there is expected to be a better understanding of academic expectations and less reliance on the didactic approach taken by teachers in classrooms (Yekefallah et al., 2021).

Despite using a variety of strategies and platforms to assess student performance, there were many challenges that affected student achievement during remote learning. During the conducting of summative assessments, teachers often faced the challenge of invigilating students via online platforms (Montenegro-Rueda et al., 2021). Some teachers reported that their schools had barred them from monitoring students during assessments through cameras owing to privacy concerns. This further reinforced the need to establish and implement policies around assessments conducted online in the future (Muhammed & Srinivasan, 2021). The challenges teachers faced while invigilating students during online assessments also raised questions surrounding the authenticity of student work and plagiarism (Nurwahidah et al., 2022). Academic integrity during online assessment sparked debate during the pandemic, and this prompted teachers to design assessments that were geared to minimise students' cheating (Slade et al., 2022). This is

where the role of teachers became crucial as they were expected to be competent in making effective assessment tasks, measuring student engagement and performance and collecting and collating data for future policies (Fitriyah & Jannah, 2021).

In their study on the tendencies of students to plagiarise during the pandemic, Simatupang et al. (2020) discovered that through platforms such as Turnitin, it was discovered that students were more inclined to copy and paste materials from sources and did not consider it a severe violation of assessment guidelines. While these tendencies can be evaluated and reviewed for future circumstances at the tertiary level, the majority of schools around the world did not have such platforms in use to detect student plagiarism as most assessments were conducted under test conditions in examination halls under teacher supervision. This would have raised further challenges for schools to authenticate student work when assessing and reviewing them. Although Wu et al. (2020) propose the use of artificial intelligence at school levels to detect plagiarism in students for future online assessments, not every school would possess the funding to facilitate such platforms, and many schools in developing countries and regions are more likely to return to conventional assessment practices.

Another issue faced by many schools is the impact of remote learning on student performance in standardised testing. A study conducted in the Netherlands discovered that students lost one-fifth of a year's learning owing to learning from home, and they made little to no progress based on the data collected on their performance in standardised testing conducted after the eight-week-long lockdown (Engzell et al., 2020). This could imply that students were negatively affected by the lack of rigorous preparations that would have been conducted by teachers in conventional classroom settings and the lack of academic motivation during the extended periods of social isolation brought forth by the pandemic. Some countries opted to delay or cancel standardised testing altogether as student performance in these tests would be more of a reflection of the uncertainty surrounding student wellbeing in the face of a global health crisis rather than their academic capabilities. One such country was South Africa, where standardised testing was cancelled in schools, and formative assessment strategies were adopted to allow students to adjust to ERL and its challenges (Hoadley, 2020). In the context of Australia, where education is more centralised through standardised testing like NAPLAN (National Assessment Programme—Literacy and Numeracy) and school leaving exams, there were

many questions regarding whether students would be significantly affected by the cancellation of the NAPLAN exams in 2020 (Biddle et al., 2020). Given the more conformist nature of the Australian education system, concerns arose about whether schools would have to focus more on preparing students for the following year's exams instead of focusing on their wellbeing when they return to face-to-face learning (Sahlberg, 2021).

While formative assessment took precedence over summative assessment in many schools, there were many gaps in the implementation of these tasks (Robiasih & Lestari, 2020). A very crucial part of online distance learning is the availability of helpful formative assessments and timely feedback to online learners (Satiman et al., 2024). Students found it difficult to obtain feedback on their learning as teachers often delayed giving feedback via online methods. This also affected their understanding of assignments as they were not in their regular classrooms (Ozturk, 2021). Contrary to this theory, a survey conducted in Portugal discovered that most of the teachers who participated claimed that even though they spent more time on remote learning than they would spend with face-to-face learning, student participation in formative assessment decreased (Assucao-Flores & Gago, 2020). This could imply that while teachers were willing to give feedback to students on their learning, the limited participation in assessment on the part of students may have hindered the process. In addition, formative assessment strategies used online often failed in assessing higher-order thinking, and this was prominent when conducting online quizzes (Payadnya & Wibawa, 2021).

Simultaneously, students would also be further detached from the notion of peer feedback as the social distancing and lack of engagement in students would have made it difficult for teachers to conduct peer assessment tasks (Gurajala, 2021).

2.3 Freirean Perception of Education

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator whose pedagogy remains valid as education and school systems in the present face challenges around the use of technology and creating inclusivity while promoting democracy and social justice (Gadotti, 2017). Freire, in his text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, believes that to develop a pedagogy that promotes critical thinking, teachers must understand the behaviour of the oppressed, their values and their ethics (Freire, 2005). He also states that the oppressed have a tendency to internalise their

position within social structures and that education should be geared towards disrupting this act of internalisation and liberating the oppressed (Souto-Manning & Smagorinsky, 2010). In the context of this research, students who study EAL can be considered ‘the oppressed’ cohort in the wider demography of the school environment as their existing limitations, such as language barriers and limited access to technology, were further enhanced by an education system that failed to support their learning during the lockdown periods in 2020 and 2021. While Freire (2005), in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, critiques the role of the teacher and how teachers can embody oppressive elements within the education system, Farag et al. (2021) argue that in a digitised form of learning not only exacerbates the dichotomy between teachers and students but also oppresses teachers along with their learners. Therefore, it is important to investigate the extent to which the teachers of EAL were stakeholders of an oppressive system and whether they, too, were oppressed to an extent by the same system they work for

Freire was also critical of ‘the banking concept’ of education. According to Freire, the dynamic between a teacher and students is that of a narrator and subjects. The process of teaching is rather an act of depositing knowledge in the form of narration, and students memorise the deposited narratives (Freire, 2005). Freire’s concerns with this method of teaching are that it treats the learner as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge that those in power want them to acquire (Yeo & Yoo, 2022). In other words, it hinders the creative power of students and limits their ability to think critically and question the oppressive structures that alienate them as they are always being told and taught how to navigate society (Farag et al., 2021). It is his belief that teachers should challenge learners to overcome obstacles that prevent them from practically implementing their learned skills while avoiding imposing their knowledge arrogantly on disadvantaged learners (Jackson, 2007). Furthermore, his critique of this model is believed to encourage fruitful and more equitable partnerships in the school community (Goodall, 2018). Research suggests that to some extent, EAL learners can benefit from the banking concept of learning when teachers use strategies like providing students with targeted vocabulary (Oxley & De Cat, 2018). However, enabling learners to make connections between content and language and fostering social interactions are believed to be more effective in engaging EAL learners (Facella et al., 2005). Researchers also refer to Freirean concepts in English language learning when they state that while these notions provide an empowering perception towards language learning, it has done little to subvert the

imperialistic undertones that constitute English pedagogy across the world (Macedo, 2013). This implies that the process of English language acquisition among foreign students is more focused on linguistic assimilation than linguistic empowerment, thereby perpetuating the need for more problem-based and interactive learning.

Connected to this is Freire's view of critical pedagogy. Critical theory initially found its roots in Europe, developed by scholars such as Habermas, Horkheimer, Adorno and Gramsci (Shih, 2018). Its primary objective is to achieve social reformation and enrich student lives (Mahmoudi et al., 2014). Freire believes that education plays a key role in emancipating learners from the shackles of ignorance and restrictive cultural and political practices (Nayestani, 2009). In such a positive learning environment, students recognise the reality of their social, cultural and economic circumstances and actively participate in creative and reshaping their futures while acknowledging their histories and contexts (Souto-Manning & Smargorinsky, 2010). To ensure this takes place in classrooms, Freire proposes students and teachers engage in ongoing discourse about themes generated from the former's everyday world and the issues surrounding it while allowing learners to bring their own knowledge to broaden their understanding of their own contexts (Souto-Manning & Smargorinsky, 2010). This builds a learning community that endorses creating dialogue that improves critical thinking among learners (Boyd, 2016). An integral aspect of this learning community is the participation of students in the process of curriculum development. This is not to say the teacher and student are on an equal level, but that students can assume the role of teachers to act as stakeholders in creating curriculum that engages them and enhances their learning (Bartlett, 2007).

Santiago and Mattos (2023) define dialogue as a collective process in which the objective is to establish and transform mediation and interaction between involved parties. Freire emphasised the importance of concepts such as faith, humility and critical thinking supporting dialogue and how dialogical activities promoted student agency as the interactions that take place in these activities are not restricted and thus assist them in making meaning of the wider world (Santiago & Mattos, 2023). This is critical in pedagogy that supports education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Freire believed that disadvantaged specially refugee education must be a site that questions not only the factors affecting their circumstances but also re-establishing refugee learners as active subjects of education rather than objects that need intervention and constant support

(Yeo & Yoo, 2022). Hence, it is important to investigate how the pedagogy endorsed by Freire empowers EAL learners of diverse backgrounds particularly those of disadvantaged backgrounds. . It is also important to evaluate if transitioning from face-to-face learning to remote learning during the outbreak of the pandemic promoted effective dialogue between students, peers and teachers, enabling them to challenge the existing oppressive social factors not limited to social isolation, restricted social interaction and economic impacts on the home setting through academic and non-academic written and verbal communication.

When investigating the collected data from a Freirean perspective, it is imperative to review Freire's perspective of online learning. Boyd (2016) argued that 'Freire did not object to the introduction of technology into the practice of teaching' (p. 167) but rather believed educators should critically examine the role of technology to ensure that it was used for humanising education. Online learning is considered to be a political decision rather than a pedagogical act, and its purpose should be to liberate the oppressed from their circumstances (Boyd, 2016). As far as the oppressed are concerned, Freire believed that technology could serve their interest to improve critical thinking and communication (Frag et al., 2021). Like Freire's view of the banking concept of education, online learning also challenges the teacher's authority by compelling them to implement innovative ways of designing curriculum and planning lessons (Boyd, 2016). Given the nature of the pandemic, this project investigates how the political decisions of ERL in 2020 and 2021 affected the pedagogical decisions of schools and teachers. It also closely examines whether remote learning improved the technical knowledge of students to adapt to not only the demanding conditions of a global health crisis but also to adapt to global economic and technological advancements

2.4 Neoliberalism and Education in Australia

It can be deduced that the pandemic was a catalyst in unveiling how neoliberalism further perpetuates social inequality in terms of economic and ethnic factors (Frey et al., 2021). According to Navarro (2021), neoliberalism is the opening of national economies to global parties, thereby leading democratic practices to be replaced by socio-economic polarisation . In other words, it is an ideology that creates a market-friendly economy that informs the inception and execution of social and political activities (Venugopal, 2015).

In a utopian context, neoliberalism is expected to create opportunities for individuals, regardless of their background and gender, to reap the benefits of an open economy to enhance the quality of their lives. Monboit (2016) notes that the ideology has led to social inequalities and unequal distribution of wealth among the masses. One of the major repercussions of neoliberal ideals in society has been indoctrinating the individual to consider themselves as consumers and to exercise their rights and choices in self-interest rather than in the interests of the collective (Becker et al., 2018).

In the Australian context, neoliberal economic ideals have been adopted by governments since the 1980s, leading to the privatisation of many sectors, including education. With the deregulation of finances provided to universities, students pay for their tertiary education in the form of a loan system, while some universities have established lucrative business models that attract full-fee-paying international students to generate more income (Marginson & Considine, 2000).

History provides us with a context for this shift to education as a commodity. In the 19th century, Australian education saw an educational policy that was hierarchical in structure, which provided opportunities for tertiary education to children of wealthy families who could afford it, while children from working-class backgrounds who could afford public education had limited access to extravagant secondary education (Reid, 2020). This further reinforces the notion of a colonised education system which promotes dangerous notions of exclusivity, power dynamics and discrimination (Gatwiri, 2018). Over the next century, education in Australia became more egalitarian and inclusive in nature, with more academic opportunities provided to students regardless of their background. Public education was made more accessible to all students across the country, and a system that valued meritocracy over hierarchy was established. However, in the first half of the 20th century, the correlation between sociological factors experienced by students and their academic achievement was not considered. Subsequently, the existing social inequalities were mirrored through student academic achievement (Campbell & Proctor, 2014). By the 1970s, the interconnection between student backgrounds and academic performance was more apparent and educational policy recognised the necessity for all students to be active citizens and receive equal opportunities to participate in a democratic society. As a result, there was an initiative to establish equal distribution of resources among schools and create educational programmes to engage and include students with disabilities (Reid,

2020). However, the increasing discrepancy between academic achievement and social inequality led to more neoliberal ideals entering the Australian education system, whereby policymakers identified education as the sector that generates human capital in the economy. Hence, there was a need for an educational system that prepared students to become stakeholders in a competitive market. This market-driven educational focus subsequently found its way into school curriculum, overlooking the need for students to strive to serve the greater good (Coffield, 2012).

A byproduct of this education system is the widening disparity between students from high and low-socio-economic backgrounds in terms of academic achievement (Bonnor, 2019). Existing studies on standardised testing such as NAPLAN and PISA scores reveal that students from low-socio-economic backgrounds, Indigenous backgrounds and newly arrived migrant and refugee families were ranked way below their peers in their academic performance generally and their literacy and numeracy levels specifically (Hetherington, 2018). This inequity exists in Year 12, where socio-economic factors remain a key player in determining the academic success of students, with only 61% of the disadvantaged students gaining entry to university as opposed to 89% of their counterparts from advantaged backgrounds (Lamb et al., 2020).

In a neoliberal context, language is seen as a commodity which provides opportunities for individuals to achieve economic success, gain prestige in society and participate in wider community (Nguyen, 2019). Other studies extend this claim and argue that the purpose of education is to handle diversity in a way that promotes integration among migrant communities (Barnard, 2020). While there are merits in integrating communities in mainstream society, this process also seem to deny the existing emotional needs English-language learners in the wider curriculum. To position the language learner as a subject in the commercialised process of learning language, researchers have called for decolonisation of language teaching to identify the nuances of oppression that underlies inclusion in education (Welply, 2023). These researchers also claim that there are concealed aspects of discrimination and inequalities in EAL teaching that impose monolingual ideologies on learners (Cushing & Snell). The renouncing of the 'one size fits all' approach to teaching English which clearly negates the historical, political and socio-cultural origins that form the identities of EAL students is endorsed as a way in which educators can tackle linguistic imperialism within the field of education (Welply,

2023). Therefore, this leaves room for researchers to investigate the extent of inclusivity of English language learning in Australia and whether the curriculum further perpetuates monolingual ideologies.

Additionally, a deficit view of English language learners in predominantly English-speaking countries places responsibility of language acquisition on the student whereby holding them responsible for their own academic failure and marginalisation (Morrison et al., 2019). This calls for a requirement in the curriculum for more inclusive pedagogy which is often endorsed by EAL teachers in Australia who believe that their learners will still improve their literacy skills if they are allowed to express their views freely in the classroom without simply restricting them to rigid assessment structures (Alford, 2024). In the Australian context, in addition to EAL learners, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students become important stakeholders in creating more culturally inclusive pedagogies. In Morrison et al.,'s research (2023), it is concluded that all learners including Indigenous students must be welcomed within the neoliberal schooling system without having to reject their own cultural values and that calls for a need to create a system where this is put to practice.

With the outbreak of the pandemic, the impacts of exclusivity in education seem to have exacerbated. As a result, many educators are calling for education to act as a form of resistance to neoliberal concepts that underpin the functioning of the society (Wood et al., 2024). Wood et al., (2024) believe that teacher training in Australia and New Zealand can be a catalyst in promoting resistance of discriminatory notions in broader society. However, this perception is viewed from a holistic perspective and further investigation is needed to identify how this form of resistance can take place in an English classroom in a secondary school. The pandemic also exposed the reality of educational systems in countries like Australia where students are prepared for employment rather than to be active participants in mainstream society (Serikbekovna et al., 2022). This is further substantiated with research that report a wave of pessimism overtaking young Australians on their future and the increase of mental health issues among the youth post-pandemic (Zhou, 2020). Such trends create opportunities to investigate the role of education in questioning ideologies that inherently leave subjects unprepared in the face of global catastrophes and how language can play a more transformative role in creating a more inclusive pedagogy and empower learners in neoliberal contexts.

2.5 Gaps in Literature

This research seeks to build on the literature in terms of research design and conceptual knowledge regarding the impact the lockdown has had on the learning VCE students who study EAL. Most of the reviewed studies have been constituted around the personal experiences of teachers and learners learning during the context of the pandemic. Surveying students and teachers appears to be the dominant method of data collection for most of the reviewed studies. Surveys play an integral role in quantitative research in obtaining ideas and opinions from a large number of participants (Nardi, 2018). For instance, Hash (2021), in his research, conducted a survey to identify student engagement strategies implemented by 474 elementary and secondary school band directors in remote learning settings. The survey also focused on the personal experiences of teachers regarding recreating virtual learning experiences for their students in remote learning settings. This proposed research study also seeks to investigate pedagogical strategies teachers implement to enhance the learning experience of students as well as the anecdotal experience of learners in remote learning settings. However, this project will adopt a qualitative research design where semi-structured interviews with participants, along with the analysis of documentation, will be instrumental in gaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences undergone by both teachers and students in remote learning settings. Therefore, this project will build on Page et al.'s study of inclusive education in Australia during the pandemic in terms of the research design and the data gathering and analysis. Page et al.'s (2021) study primarily focuses on the emotional implications underpinning student engagement in Australia during the pandemic. This project intends to borrow this concept and expand this to encompass emotional, pedagogical and demographic implications that influence the online learning of students of diverse backgrounds during lockdowns in the context of Victoria. This project also focuses on the academic performance of VCE EAL learners, and hence, the correlation between online classroom practice and student performance in formal assessment will be given significant attention.

A gap that has been identified in the literature is that there is a significant number of studies that have been conducted in the higher education sector across the globe (Chattaraj & Vijayaraghavan, 2021; Dorsah, 2021; Fitriyah & Jannah, 2021; Serhan, 2020; Tzafilkou et al., 2021; Westwick & Morreale, 2021; Zawadka et al., 2021). This implies that the concerns students and teachers face in remote learning settings and the

suggestions highlighted in the literature for further improvement in teaching practice are not universally applicable to the context of secondary schools. For instance, the wellbeing concerns faced by school children differ significantly from those faced by adults studying at a university. This distinction intensifies further when cultural and traditional factors are taken into consideration. Therefore, this project seeks to address this gap by describing emotional implications specific to VCE students who come from diverse backgrounds and the manners in which they grapple and struggle with the challenge of switching to online learning during the pandemic.

While there have been numerous studies conducted around the impact the pandemic has had on education on a global scale, there has been limited research conducted surrounding the Australian context in comparison. Angelico (2020), Paredes et al. (2020), and Page et al. (2021), in their respective studies, emphasise how the pandemic has necessitated the inclusivity of education for vulnerable students who live in rural communities or those who suffer from various learning disabilities. This research will build on these studies under the premise that students who study EAL can be considered vulnerable under the pretext that they do not speak English as a first language in their home setting. This indicates the possibility of students studying EAL facing additional challenges in relation to remote learning, and this project intends to identify and explain them. While Khlaif et al. (2021) in their study also examine the influence of home setting and cultural values on student learning and academic performance, it is to be noted that the participants involved in the study were living in their native country, Palestine, at the time the COVID19 outbreak. Therefore, the challenges they faced in engaging in online learning were more common across the demography. This proposed research will draw upon this finding and apply it to the Victorian context to explore how students from multiple cultural backgrounds are influenced by home settings as they prepare for their VCE EAL examinations through remote learning. This research will attempt to transcend Khlaif et al.'s (2021) research context and examine whether inclusivity has been an influential aspect practised by Victorian school communities to promote academic performance in EAL students of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, Morrison et al., (2019) situates their research in schools in South Australia and focus on the need of a culturally inclusive pedagogy that acknowledges and includes Indigenous perspectives in the classroom. Building on this, this research project will

attempt to examine the impact of neoliberalism in EAL education in Victoria with special focus on VCE year levels and how the pandemic has impacted teaching learning of culturally diverse EAL students in the state.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Approach and Methodology

The previous chapter provided a review of the currently available literature surrounding the studies that have been conducted on student and teacher experience with online learning in remote learning settings during the global pandemic of COVID-19. The review began with defining the terms ‘online learning’, ‘distance education’ and ‘blended learning’ and closely studied the role of these types of virtual learning in the history of education. Continuing the review, there was a special focus on EAL learners and how online learning plays a significant role in their language acquisition. This section of the chapter also focused on the challenges these students faced when utilising online learning platforms to learn English. The next section of the chapter reviewed literature that dealt with student engagement in online learning during the pandemic, followed by a study of how different factors impeded student learning. The review then examined how assessment was conducted during this time across the period, and the review was concluded through identifying gaps in the reviewed literature and studies that will be addressed in this study.

3.1 Research Questions

This chapter will focus on the aims of the study and provide a justification of the methodological approaches that were chosen. The main aim of the research was to investigate the factors that contributed to the academic performance of VCE EAL students in remote learning in the context of the pandemic. Closely studying the lived experience of both teachers and students aimed to draw attention to factors that both enhanced and impeded the remote learning experiences of students and their achievements. Through the identification of these factors, the research also sought to identify further developments teachers can make to their practice to incorporate online learning tools effectively in their regular classrooms. Therefore, the main research question that underpinned this research was:

What are the factors that affected the learning of the VCE EAL students in the context of the pandemic in Victoria, Australia?

The following research sub-questions were also addressed in detail in the thesis:

1. Did the academic and wellbeing challenges posed by remote learning during the COVID-19 outbreak impact the subsequent academic performance of VCE EAL students?
2. Were there distinctive teaching strategies that teachers of VCE EAL implemented to engage students more effectively in remote learning during the COVID-19 outbreak?
3.
 - a. Did teachers adjust formative assessment processes to cater for remote learning during the COVID-19 outbreak?
 - b. Did the VCAA adjust summative assessment processes to address the impacts and consequences of COVID-19 on EAL learners?
4. Did the COVID-19 outbreak amplify existing sociological inequities and did this have an impact on learning and learning outcomes?

3.2 Research Paradigm

A paradigm can be defined as ‘a comprehensive belief system, world view, or framework that guides research and practice in a field’ (Willis, 2007, p. 8). All research paradigms have ontological and epistemological assumptions. Ontology can be referred to as the true essence of reality and the nature of a phenomenon (Heidegger, 2013). Epistemology refers to the development of knowledge and objects (Carson et al., 2005).

According to Lorraine Ling (2017), by ‘adopting the interpretivist paradigm the researcher gains a personal insight into and understanding of the subject of research’ (p. 32). This paradigm underpinned this research as it sought to investigate factors that contributed to the academic performance of a certain cohort of students in a temporary setting in the context of the pandemic. The ontological assumption of this paradigm is relativism, which believes that reality is subjective and differs from person to person and hence there can be multiple interpretations constructed on a single phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, the belief surrounding interpretivist ontology is that social reality is made up of these multiple yet mutual interpretations of life and how subjects make meaning as they live (Blalkie & Priest, 2017). This ontological perspective argues that reality is socially constructed and hence, there can be multiple versions of reality

given the complexity that exists among individuals in society (Junjie & Yinxing, 2022). The research in assuming a relativist ontology acknowledges these multiple realities and believes that meaning of these can be made and reconstructed through interaction with research participants (Otoo, 2020). This approach was utilised in this research project to investigate how teachers and students interpreted their respective experiences during the pandemic in the field of education and how they made meaning of it. While the reality of the pandemic for VCE EAL students was not a singular reality that was common to all students across the state, the conversations between the researcher and participants revealed often obscure emotional and pedagogical facets of EAL teaching and learning that created more room for further discussion and research.

Interpretivist epistemology is rooted in subjectivism, which argues that meaning and knowledge are not discovered but rather constructed. Aligned with this is the argument that to experience the world, one must participate in it and structure and encounter it (Heron & Reason, 1997). Heron and Reason (1997) build on this and further assert that interpretivist epistemology focuses on the way of knowing reality as ‘propositional knowing’, which means knowledge by description of some energy, entity, person, place, process or thing expressed through statements and theories. In this research, the exploration of the phenomenon of online learning during the pandemic was conducted by studying the subjects who were directly involved and the processes they adhered to make teaching and learning success for the cohort that was the main focus of the research project. This is closely related to the theory that humans interpret their world and act accordingly while the world does not (Hammersley, 2012). Therefore, interpretivist researchers seek to understand the phenomenon and its complexities in its unique contexts rather than resort to generalising (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Another aspect of epistemological subjectivism that was relevant to this research was that it enabled the researcher to be more aware of the diversity that exists among individuals as well as between themselves and others (Hanly, 2014). Given the scope and nature of the project, it was imperative to highlight the diversity that exists among learners and their unique academic and emotional needs that were amplified as a result of the pandemic. It was also integral to outline out this identified diversity can further inform EAL teaching and hence, assuming a subjectivist epistemological view was effective in the context of this research.

Interpretivist research has the advantage over other research approaches in the fact that it can both describe and understand subjects in their own social context (Pham, 2018). In the context of this project, it was used to analyse and discuss the argument that reality changes according to demography and socio-economic setting, meaning teachers and students would have their own interpretations of their experiences, which were closely connected to their individual backgrounds and histories. Interpretivist projects can be conducted in natural settings to gain insight into the research subjects (Tuli, 2010). Investigating students and teachers in their own environment to determine the factors that affected the former's learning and the latter's practice was expected to provide more opportunities to gain insight into their views on remote learning. Furthermore, interpretivist research can investigate what we cannot observe (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007). This is where the researcher receives a further opportunity to look into the future of the phenomenon and look for further action that can arise from the phenomenon studied. In terms of this research project, this benefit aligned with one of the research aims, which sought to identify future professional learning opportunities for teachers to use digital learning spaces in their mainstream classrooms.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Qualitative Research Design

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that 'qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences' (p. 5). As stated earlier, ontology refers to the true essence of nature. The ontological assumption of qualitative research states that research is a human experience, and it can have multiple realities and truths for all those involved in the research, including the researcher. This is then connected to the epistemological assumption (how knowledge is viewed and gained) of qualitative research, where researchers argue that knowledge is built on an individual's subjective experiences (Ravitch, 2020).

This study used a qualitative research design as it was an investigation of determinants that affect VCE students in EAL classrooms in remote learning settings. It involved a thorough exploration of the experiences of participants and how they responded to the experience of learning online in the context of the pandemic. Furthermore, based on the

ontological and epistemological assumptions surrounding qualitative research, the diversity in the demographics of the participants involved in the research provided varied perspectives on how they coped with remote learning during the pandemic, how the home settings of students affected their learning and academic performance and how the school policies surrounding remote learning affected both teachers and students. Therefore, a quantitative research design would have assisted in analysing student performance in terms of ranking within the school and their numerical scores in their assessments but would not have assisted in achieving the objective of investigating participant experiences and perceptions regarding the subject area.

3.3.2 Modified Grounded Theory

In this study a modified grounded theory approach was been adopted as the basis for the methodological strategy. A methodology drawing on grounded theory focuses on approaching data without any preconceptions (Goulding, 1998). In this methodology, theory is formulated as the data and is analysed and is analysed through an inductive approach, and as a consequence, theories based on this specific data are less likely to be refuted by further research or data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Over the years, there have been various modifications of what a grounded theory research approach might entail. According to Glaser and Strauss, qualitative research can transcend the description of data and strive towards building theory on human behaviour (McCann & Polacsek, 2024). Therefore, grounded theory takes on a more interpretivist approach, focusing more on how people make meaning of their lives and experiences (McCann & Polacsek, 2024). Turner and Astin (2021) state that it is a research approach that understands the ‘perspective, or point of view, of an ‘insider’, those who have experience of the phenomenon’ and the theory is emergent from the data that is shaped from the views and experiences of the participants (p. 285,). Hence, the data, once analysed through a modified grounded theory method, should explain how participants deal with the issues and concerns investigated and how they resolve their concerns (Cutcliffe, 2005). It should also be noted that grounded theory seeks to provide the basis for emergent theories based on the specific dataset rather than to provide proof of a predetermined hypothesis (Biaggi & Wa-Mbaleka, 2018).

A key characteristic of grounded theory, as stated by Glaser (1999), is that since ‘grounded theory refers to a specific methodology on how to get from systematically collecting data to producing a multivariate conceptual theory’ (p. 836), it is plausible to conduct a literature review beforehand as existing theories can affect and hinder the development of a new theory from the collection and analysis of data. However, the Straussian perspective of grounded theory recommends that researchers conduct a preliminary literature review to gain a basic understanding and overview of the phenomenon. This is reiterated by Biaggi and Wa-Mbaleka (2018) when they believe that literature reviews must only be conducted when the research design demands it, and they agree with Glaser’s latter belief that if a literature review is conducted, the researcher must ensure they are not influenced by theories that are not related to the area of study . In addition, in the context of modern qualitative research, it is imperative to conduct a literature review to identify areas of focus and refine the research questions. This refutes the belief that the researcher is a blank slate that has no connection to the research (Timonen et al., 2018). Timonen et al. (2018) believe that the main premise of grounded theory is to be open to diverse portrayals of the world while referring to existing theories and interpretations. This is where modern grounded theorists believe that data or theories are not discovered, but rather theories are constructed based on the researcher’s involvement and interaction with people and their perspectives (Charmaz, 2006).

A common challenge faced by researchers adopting a grounded theory approach to conduct their research is conducting theoretical sampling when selecting participants for research. It is believed that the characteristics of the participants are not relevant to developing theory, and hence, it is impossible and ineffective to predetermine the nature of the sample before collecting data (Oktay, 2012). However, it should also be noted that researchers are often under the restrictions and obligations placed on them by ethics committees and other boards of approval and review. As a result, they have to depend on these reviews and outcomes to recruit participants in their research project (Timonen et al., 2018). Therefore, it is impractical on most occasions for researchers to resort to theoretical sampling when recruiting participants for their research projects.

Taking these concepts into consideration, this research project adopted a modified grounded theory approach. Since the research adopted an interpretivist paradigm as described earlier, the objective of the research was to provide an interpretive portrayal of

the factors that affected the learning of VCE EAL learners during the lockdown periods in 2020 and 2021. While this study does not give a definite picture of how the pandemic affected teaching and learning in the EAL space, it sought to provide an outline of how teachers and students of diverse cultural backgrounds navigated through the challenges posed by the global health crisis and how it affected student academic performance.

Furthermore, this research project adopted a modified grounded theory approach where the researcher conducted a literature review and defined the research problem prior to data collection (Kambaru, 2018). This modification of the Glaserian grounded theory approach was necessary to the parameters of this research project's context, as the outbreak of the pandemic can be considered a novel phenomenon that complicated the established norms and concepts around online learning. Hence, having a clear overview of the published literature and theoretical concepts was crucial to understanding how this global crisis affected the field of education (Alnsour, 2022).

Another deviation this project took from the conventional grounded theory approach was that, as stated earlier, it did not adopt theoretical sampling to recruit participants. Given the specific focus on the cohort of senior secondary (VCE) EAL in this project it was not plausible to resort to theoretical sampling as a key factor in the recruitment process was diligently selecting school settings based on their demography.

3.3.3 Participants

As stated earlier, this research identified factors that had affected student learning during remote learning in the context of the recent COVID-19 outbreak. To receive a holistic perspective of how pedagogical, socio-economic and linguistic factors contributed to this phenomenon, it was important to study the academic and professional experiences of both students and teachers respectively during this period. When recruiting participants, the process took place on two levels. First, a criterion-based selection process adhering to the strategy of maximum variation sampling was used to identify and seek VCE teachers who represented the widest possible range that fits the purpose of this study (Khalil et al., 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020; Ramos-Morcillo et al., 2020). They were selected based on the following criteria that 'directly reflect the purpose of study' (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97).

1. Teachers selected for the study should have taught EAL at the VCE level in 2020 or 2021.
2. In the case of not teaching a VCE EAL class in either 2020 or 2021, teachers should have taught either Year 9 EAL or Year 10 EAL in 2020 or 2021.
3. Teachers should have at least a year's experience teaching in a VCE EAL classroom prior to 2020.
4. Teachers were spread across three schools in the areas of Melbourne and the outer suburbs, respectively.

The aforementioned criteria held significant importance in selecting teachers for the study because they had experience in adjusting their teaching practice to cater to the necessities of ERL, which occurred in the first quarter of 2020, teaching content via online platforms throughout lengthy periods of lockdown and curriculum planning to cater to future potential periods of remote learning. In addition, the perspective of teachers who taught Years 9 and 10 EAL during the pandemic was fundamental in determining the impact remote learning had had on VCE EAL learners as these teachers' experiences can provide insight into how VCE learners have coped with the learning post-pandemic and whether they have thrived or suffered negative consequences of online learning.

The selection of the second study population was based on snowball sampling, where the participants who met the criteria referred the researcher to other participants (Parker et al., 2019). The second study population comprised of students who studied EAL in 2020 and 2021 and completed VCE studies before 2023. Initially, it was decided that the students would be selected from the participating teacher's classes since the teachers would have a more comprehensive understanding of their students, and their recommendations and output would be taken into consideration in the selection process (Naderifar et al., 2017). However, the process of obtaining ethical clearance to conduct the research experienced a delay owing to unavoidable circumstances, and hence, the students who would have been potential participants were beyond the reach of communication for the school settings. Hence, the students were recruited according to their availability and willingness to participate in the project. The recruitment of former VCE EAL students was significant to this research project as it sought to identify the impacts the changing learning environment had on their overall learning experience and how they coped with it with the expectations of the VCE exam overarching their studies.

3.3.4 Data Collection

The data was gathered using a multi-method approach involving reviewing documentation such as teaching material and student work examples and interviewing participants. This method of data collection was suited to this type of study as it was imperative for the researcher to establish an understanding relationship with the participants to learn their experiences and to unravel their diverse perspectives on the subject investigated.

3.3.4.1 Interviews

Interviewing participants is an integral aspect of qualitative research (Doody & Noonan, 2013) as it gives the researcher the opportunity ‘to acquire unique, non-standardised, personalised information about how individuals view the world’ (Cohen et al., 1996, p. 412). In this research project, the participants were interviewed utilising semi-structured interviews where they were asked questions on their teaching and learning experiences during remote learning, factors that contributed to or hampered academic performance, impact of home setting on teaching and learning etc. This also coincided with the modified grounded theory approach taken by the research, as scholars recommend that ‘less structure is better from the perspective of following where the conversation takes you’ (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 75). The less structured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher to tailor the interview questions based on the responses of the participants and also certain unprecedented responses from them.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing measures that were put in place, using video interviews has started to become a norm rather than an option (Parker, 2020). When formulating the interview schedule to collect data, the post-pandemic policies surrounding school visits were taken into consideration, and the schedules were created through the awareness that the interviews can be conducted using a variety of methods not limited to face-to-face, telephone and online platforms such as Zoom (Cherif, 2020). While video interviews are said to be a hindrance in building rapport with participants, they can also be ideal in research projects where the physical workplace is not given significance (Villiers et al., 2021). In addition, conducting interviews online enabled the researcher to have more control over aspects of the rapport

with participants, such as arranging interviews at convenient times and taking into consideration the schedules of participants (Oates, 2015).

In terms of formulating questions for the interviews, the researcher adhered to the concept of using prompts rather than direct questions related to the research questions, which would restrict the researcher from gaining insight into the richer interpretations of the respondents about their experiences with the phenomenon studied (Jimenez & Orozco, 2021). In the first round of interviews with the teachers and the sole interview round with the students, the prompts used were guided and comparative, while in the second round of interviews with participating teachers, more ‘counterfactual’ and ‘no-limit’ prompts were used to generate data that encompasses the participants’ in-depth interpretation of their own experiences during the pandemic (Jimenez & Orozco, 2021). Scholars believe that an effective interview guide comprises ‘how?’ and ‘what?’ questions that probe into everyday practice and everyday conversations, respectively (Silverman, 2017). While some scholars believe that in the absence of theoretical sampling, it is difficult to determine what and how the questions will be asked in an interview, in the context of this research in which theoretical sampling is not an aspect of the modified grounded theory approach taken, the interview questions were deciphered through reviewing published literature on the phenomenon (Foley et al., 2021).

3.4 Thematic Analysis

The first stage of data analysis for this research was compiling the collected data. The interview recordings were transcribed and read and reread thoroughly to be intimately familiar with the perceptions of the participants. As a part of transcribing the interviews, it was done ad verbatim ensuring that data reviewed would be the authentic expression of ideas by the participants without any alterations. The participants and school settings were also de-identified to preserve their privacy and anonymity.

The transcribed data were then disassembled through coding using the computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis platform NVivo. This platform was instrumental in identifying patterns in codes and their associations with each other. (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). These codes were clustered according to their frequency across the 18 interview

transcripts that were reviewed and analysed. Codes that related to ideas that were unique to participants were still taken into consideration.

The next step was to identify emerging themes and construct themes based on the data that was reviewed. A theme is defined as a notion that captures a significant idea within reviewed data in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this research, the themes emerging from the data were fundamental in identifying the commonalities that existed in the experiences of teachers of EAL and students and view the contrasting perspectives that determined the nature of their perceptions in relation to teaching and learning during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

Thematic analysis is referred to as a process of ‘identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within the data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Inductive thematic analysis refers to the approach of reviewing the data without preconceived notions, where themes are allowed to arise autonomously without being bound by a theoretical framework. Deductive thematic analysis refers to the process of exploring data through a pre-existing theoretical framework or lens. In this research, a hybrid thematic analysis was utilised where an inductive approach was implemented to read the interviews thoroughly and for themes to emerge organically through the perceptions of the participants. The hybrid thematic analysis method was also instrumental in complementing the research questions while simultaneously allowing themes to emerge from the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). These themes were then compiled and interpreted through a Freirean lens, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6..

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Given this research involves teachers and students, special ethics approval was required by the Human Research Ethics Committee. While obtaining approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee, approval was sought from the Department of Education and Training by submitting a detailed Research in Schools and Early Childhood Settings application. This process was imperative as the data collection process could not commence unless the Department of Education approved the project.

When obtaining informed consent to participate in the investigation, information is usually provided through cards or flyers, whereby standard information is evenly distributed to all participants (Oliver, 2010). In this research, each of the participants was provided with information regarding the nature of the research and potential risks and benefits to participants in plain language (Refer to Appendix A for the document that was provided to the participants). Initially, the research project was designed to include students under the age of 18 as according to the proposed timeline, the prospective participants were expected to be in Year 12 at the time of data collection. However, owing to the fact that this project was initially deemed high risk as it involved participants under the age of 18 and other unavoidable circumstances, further reviews and refinements were made consistently to the ethics application. (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2023). Hence, there was a significant delay in obtaining approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Davis et al., 2022). When this research project received clearance to be conducted, the proposed students had left their respective schools and hence, further amendments were made to the sample size of students. It was later determined that students of the respective selected participating teachers' classes would receive an open invitation requesting their voluntary participation in the project. Owing to anticipated circumstantial changes, it was acknowledged that not all students would remain in touch with their school, and hence, the interview rounds were conducted employing only the students who had agreed to participate in the project (Berndt, 2020). Since by the time the data collection process had commenced, the participating students were of the age of 18 and above, it was not required to obtain consent from their parents and guardians.

Upon obtaining approval from the Human Research Ethic Committee and the Department of Education and Training, Principals of prospective school settings in metropolitan Melbourne were contacted via email, outlining the aims of the research project, the criteria for teacher selection, sample size and the methods of data collection. The consenting Principals then directed the researcher towards voluntary teachers, who then received information regarding the research and consent forms (Refer to Appendices A and B for the documents provided to the participants). Their assistance was also sought to recruit voluntary students for the project. All modes of correspondence took place via email. They were given the option of selecting suitable timings for interviews as well as the mode of delivery for the interview rounds.

In ethical research conduct, confidentiality refers to ‘an obligation on the part of the researcher to ensure that any use of information obtained from or shared by human subjects respects the dignity and autonomy of the participant’ (Bos, 2020, p. 153). In the context of this research project, there was an obligation to preserve the rights of both participating teachers and students. It was expected that the following two possible ethical issues may arise regarding confidentiality:

1. Participating teachers may be hesitant to reveal certain information owing to the fear of fracturing their relationship with their employer.
2. Participating students may discover themselves at conflicting values with their teachers when participating in the research.

To resolve these ethical issues, the researcher preserved the anonymity of all participants during the process of data collection as well as the drafting of the thesis. One strategy that was implemented to secure anonymity is to substitute direct identifiers of every participant with pseudonyms (Bos, 2020) and to de-identify the participating schools. Through this, participants could reveal vital information that assisted the research project while the researcher maintained a dignified and respectful relationship with them as well as the information they provided. In addition, the researcher ensured that in the process of interviewing participants, each round of interviews would be considered an individual case devoid of bias, and the personal information of a participant would not be shared with another.

A study conducted by Jester and Kang (2021) found that the pandemic and lengthy periods of social isolation have resulted in a decrease in creativity and social harmony among adolescent learners in the UK . This could be applied to the Victorian context and there was a possibility of the participating students experiencing similar concerns of lack of motivation and loss of productive communication during this period. Hence, participating in a research project that dealt with the factors that affected their learning during the outbreak of the pandemic could be emotionally challenging for some learners. Similarly, participating teachers were also likely to have experienced varying levels of stress during the course of lockdowns owing to personal and professional factors (Oducado et al., 2020). In addition, the increase in workload during the pandemic and the requirement to balance professional and personal caregiving obligations simultaneously has also affected

teachers' mental health (Beames et al., 2021). Therefore, like participating students, teachers were likely to face emotional challenges in relating personal experiences during the crisis of the pandemic.

To eliminate the possibility of respondents in this research project feeling disturbed by their participating in the project, the researcher informed the participants prior to obtaining informed consent that the interview process would involve questions that may be emotionally challenging. This gave the participants the autonomy to opt out of the research project, and their request would be respected, as indicated by the National Health and Medical Research Council et al. (2007). This was reiterated during the interview process, where the participants were reminded how some interview questions would be triggering and that they had the freedom to momentarily stop the interview or opt out of the interview altogether. They were also informed that the interview would be recorded while no video recording would be conducted at any stage. Should there be any distress during the course of data collection, participating teachers were notified that as employees of the Department of Education and Training, they have access to the Employee Assistance Programme, which provides confidential emotional and wellbeing support to school staff. This gave the opportunity for the researcher to establish rapport and a sense of understanding with the participants thus making the data collection process smooth and devoid of interruptions.

Referring to the aims of the research and its questions, this chapter explored the methodology with which this project was conducted. The chapter then discussed the interpretivist paradigm that underpins the research and the qualitative research design that is utilised in the project. The subsequent section then focused on the recruitment of participants and the methods used to collect data. The chapter then focused on the analysis of the collected data and the significance of thematic analysis. In the concluding section of the chapter, there was a discussion on the ethical considerations underpinning this research and the steps taken to mitigate these concerns.

Chapter 4: Analysis of Interviews on Teacher Experience

This chapter presents the findings of the semi-structured interviews conducted with the participating teachers and students, and the emergent themes. In the first part, I will look closely at the findings of the first round of interviews conducted with the teachers where they recollected their experience as EAL teachers during the lockdown period in Victoria in 2020. They responded to questions about how they adjusted to ERL, the teaching and engagement strategies used in remote learning, assessment strategies and the wellbeing of students. The second part will focus on the same group of teachers' experiences teaching EAL during the lockdown periods in 2021. In this round of interviews, the participants reflected on how they drew from their previous experiences with remote learning in 2020 in their teaching practice in 2021, their perspectives on how students continued to cope with remote learning, assessment strategies and how their teaching practice and understanding of the curriculum transformed with remote learning. In the third part of presenting data from interviews, student perceptions of remote learning are analysed. Here, students recalled their struggles in adapting to remote learning, the language barriers that hindered their learning, their holistic view on education, and how remote learning affected the academic performance of EAL students at the VCE level.

4.1 Participants

For the purpose of confidentiality, Table 4.1 presents the de-identified participating teachers and schools along with the year levels they taught in 2020 and 2021.

Table 4.1: Teacher participants in the research

Participant	Setting	EAL Year Level 2020	EAL Year Level 2021
Teacher A	School 1	Year 11	Year 10
Teacher B	School 1	Year 11	Year 11, Year 10 MYLNS*
Teacher C	School 2	Year 11	Year 11
Teacher D	School 2	Year 8	Year 12
Teacher E	School 3	Year 12	Year 12
Teacher F	School 4	Year 12	Year 12

Note: *The Middle Years Literacy and Numeracy Support (MYLNS) initiative seeks to provide 'intensive teaching' to students in Year 10 in government schools in Victoria who are at risk of completing their schooling without the literacy and numeracy levels required for their future education and career pathways.

4.2 School Settings

While the research's primary aim is to examine the factors that impacted EAL student learning in Victoria during the outbreak of COVID-19 and its ramifications on their VCE performance, it is also important to evaluate the impact of the context of the school settings and the socio-economic background of the local area of the schools on EAL student learning and academic performance during the lockdown periods in 2020 and 2021.

Prior to looking closely at the school settings selected for the research process, it is important to examine how schools are ranked in Victoria and the most common index used to rank schools is known as the Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA). ICSEA is an index that is computed for each school in Australia to make effective and equitable comparisons between schools based on their NAPLAN (National Assessment Programme—Literacy and Numeracy) performance. The index was developed taking into account the educational and occupational backgrounds of parents, school location, and socio-economic backgrounds of students and it determines the overall educational advantages and disadvantages that affect the education of students. There are schools with ICSEA values ranging from 500, representing schools with students who are severely disadvantaged, to schools with an ICSEA value of 1,300, where students come from very educationally advantaged backgrounds. It has to be noted that when determining the ICSEA value of each school, the personal wealth of students and parents was not taken into account. For the purpose of this research, the ICSEA value of each school setting is referred to as a means of understanding the context of students and the school, and there will be no reference to or comparison between their NAPLAN performances.

4.2.1 School 1

School 1 is located in the Western part of metropolitan Melbourne, with a total student enrolment of 1,582 students in 2020 and 1,545 in 2021 (ACARA, 2022). The school also demonstrated an ICSEA value of 1,032 in 2020 and 1,031 in 2021, which indicates that students who attend this school generally come from educationally advantageous backgrounds (ACARA 2022).

Further substantiating this is the school's band value of low to medium in the Student Family Occupation and Education list, which measures the socio-educational disadvantage of a school based on the educational and employment characteristics of parents and carers of students enrolled in the school.

In 2021, it was recorded that 33.6% of the local area's population spoke a language other than English at home and in 2020, 48% of students in School 1 had EAL (Australian Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). According to Teacher A and Teacher B, students studying EAL in School 1 fall into two groups: international students and students of refugee backgrounds. International students in School 1 comprised primarily of students of Vietnamese and Chinese backgrounds, and refugee-background students comprised of Karen and Karenni background students from Myanmar and a few Uyghur students from China. Both teachers stated in their respective rounds of interviews that international students came from primarily affluent backgrounds, with most parents living in their home countries, while students from refugee backgrounds came from low socioeconomic backgrounds with parents possibly unemployed, non-English speaking and with some parents and carers on the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Both teachers also claimed that students initially faced difficulty in accessing the internet when remote learning started, which they believe to have affected their learning.

4.2.2 School 2

School 2 is located in a Southeastern suburb of metropolitan Melbourne, with a total number of student enrolments of 1,515 in 2020 and 1,533 in 2021 (ACARA, 2022). The school demonstrated an ICSEA value of 978 in 2020 and 2021, and 74% of the students fall under the bottom and lower-middle quarters in the distribution of socio-educational advantage (ACARA, 2022). This implies that more than half the student population comes from socio-educational backgrounds that are considered disadvantaged.

Additionally, School 2 reported a 'high' band value in the Student Family Occupation and Education Index, which places the school in the high socio-educational disadvantage category.

In the local area where the school is located, 51.8% of the population speak a language other than English at home, and 56% of the school population is made up of students who

speak a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). According to Teachers C and D, most of the students who studied EAL in 2020 and 2021 were of refugee background from Afghanistan, and they came from mostly low socioeconomic backgrounds. Teacher C stated in their interview that it was discovered during the pandemic that many students who study EAL did not have their own devices, and siblings often shared devices with each other. This is a further reflection of the data that suggests that the students who attend School 2 are at risk of being at a socio-educational disadvantage. Teacher D recollected how there were students who had to shoulder financial responsibilities on behalf of the family and take on a carer role during the pandemic. This further substantiates the socio-economic disadvantages outlined here.

4.2.3 School 3

School 3 is located in one of the Eastern suburbs of Melbourne and was home to 470 students in 2020 and 427 students in 2021. Unlike School 1 and School 2, School 3 had only 22% of their students come from a language background other than English (ACARA, 2022). The school reported ICSEA values of 993 and 992 in 2020 and 2021 respectively (ACARA, 2022). 71% of the students fall under the bottom and lower-middle quarters in the distribution of socio-educational advantage. This implies that more than half the student population comes from socio-educational backgrounds that are considered disadvantaged (ACARA, 2022).

Additionally, the suburb also recorded 3 in the quantile in the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage, which implies that most families in this region would fall in the mid-range of socio-economic disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). The school is also accredited by the Council of International Schools and the International Baccalaureate Organisation and is one of the schools in Victoria that offers the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. According to Teacher E, the EAL students in this school were all international students whose parents were financially capable of funding their education, accommodation and living expenses, while none EAL students were primarily from working-class families.

4.2.4 School 4

School 4 is located in South-East Melbourne and had a student population of 1,603 in 2020 and 1,555 in 2021 (ACARA, 2022). The school's ICSEA values were 911 and 907 in 2020 and 2021 respectively (ACARA, 2022). This indicates that many students who attend this school are from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Compared with the other school settings in this study, 90% of School 4's student population spoke a language other than English at home (ACARA, 2022). Additionally, 85% of the students fall in the low and lower-middle quarters in the distribution of social-educational backgrounds that are considered disadvantaged (ACARA, 2022). This was evident in the interviews conducted with Teacher F, who stated that most of the EAL students came from refugee backgrounds from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The suburb was also recorded to be one of the most disadvantaged regions according to the Index of Relative Socioeconomic Advantage and Disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). Hence, it can be presumed that the students who were referred to by Teacher F and their families would have faced adverse impacts of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

4.3 Analysis of the Interviews with Teachers

As mentioned earlier, the participating teachers were interviewed for two rounds where they were asked questions on their respective experiences as Year 10 and VCE EAL teachers in 2020 and 2021. The two rounds of interviews were unpacked and coded to gain a holistic understanding of the EAL teaching experience of participants, and then the findings were brought together to identify emerging themes that address the research question and subquestion. This section of the chapter will look closely at the emerging themes that arise out of the perception of teachers regarding their own experiences as teachers of EAL to Year 10 and VCE students, as well as their perspectives on how students adapted to remote learning and how online learning affected their learning during lockdown and post lockdown.

4.3.1 Adapting to Emergency Remote Learning

The participants all had a common perception of how they adapted to ERL in 2020. All participants were of the view that it was a learning curve for them, and they found themselves rapidly self-educating on how to approach teaching content that would have

been taught in a face-to-face classroom in an online setting. Teacher B stated that the first stages of emergency lockdown were about ‘feeling my way forward trying to gauge the needs of the class’. This sentiment was further echoed by Teacher C who also stated that they were ‘trying to get their heads around how to give the best instructions to students and how to make information accessible to them’. While the participants acknowledged that this was the case for teachers of all subject areas, it should be noted that teachers of EAL faced additional challenges, as teacher presence is crucial in an EAL classroom as it helps students who are new to learning English understand nuances of pedagogy (Flynn & Curdt-Christiansen, 2018). Additionally, the presence of a teacher in an EAL classroom is impactful as it facilitates the students’ access to curriculum content that further develops their literacy knowledge and skills. Students develop a deeper understanding of the content (Ollerhead, 2016; Roefs et al., 2021) when they have assistance accessing the language around it. While the presence of a teacher in an EAL classroom is considered essential for student learning, it has to be noted that this necessity intensifies as students prepare themselves for VCE examinations where, in addition to the expectations of mastering a foreign language, students are expected to demonstrate a deeper understanding of texts under timed conditions. This further substantiates the significance of teacher guidance for these students to achieve their learning outcomes.

Therefore, EAL teachers of VCE classrooms, in particular, had to make additional efforts to adapt to ERL. The phrases ‘feeling my way forward’ and ‘trying to get our heads around’ further reiterate how teachers were compelled to rapidly learn how to navigate the basics of online teaching. Teachers were faced with the challenge of converting learning resources into online tasks, using new online platforms, and overcoming their lack of preparedness and low digital literacy (Alakrash & Razak, 2022; Castañeda-Trujillo & Jaime-Osorio, 2021). While teacher training courses touch upon the importance of multimodal learning and blended learning to maximise student engagement and academic performance, the responses of the participants emphasise how they were not prepared to completely transform their teaching practice to suit an online learning environment in a short amount of time. The participants explained how they used various online platforms such as ‘Loom, OneNote, WebEx, Zoom, [and] MS Teams’ to transition from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. These responses of the participants, in particular, reveal that, while they had a clear understanding of online platforms and their impacts, integrating them into effective content delivery was challenging.

Connected to this is the impact of school structures and policies around transitioning to remote learning. Studies reveal that one of the challenges faced by teachers when adapting to remote learning is adhering to school structures and how each school responded to the pandemic (Mateos-Ronco, 2022). State schools in Victoria structure their curriculum and teaching around high-impact teaching strategies and the Victorian Teaching and Learning Model and Framework for Improving Student Outcomes. Online learning is often not integrated into the wider curriculum. Hence, schools had to adapt to the demands of the sudden change of circumstances when the state of Victoria entered an emergency lockdown period in 2020. However it has since changed to include online learning as a result of the pandemic. Discussing their school's response to the outbreak of the pandemic and entering remote learning, Teacher A stated that:

Internet access was a biggie. So, the school would provide that. We didn't know about it straight away and took a while to, I guess, collate the data of the students that didn't have access. We had members of our education support in making phone calls to find out what was going on there. We provided; the school provided internet dongles to these students.

Teacher B who teaches at the same school setting confirmed this view with:

There were definitely issues around access to fast internet. I had a few students who moved house during the period and would go for maybe one or two weeks with no internet.

This further supports the notion that facilitating online learning was not a priority of state schools before the pandemic and, hence, it would have affected how teachers structured their online lessons. This sentiment was repeated by Teacher C, whose school's priority was:

Making sure that they knew how to, how to do the work and actually making sure, as well, that they have the resources to do the work and that they were provided with the necessary like laptops and all those things that they needed to actually be able to do the work and access it.

Teacher C also added that 'for some students that actually did take a few weeks for them to get their own laptop because in the past apparently they had been sharing with the sibling which I was not aware while we were at school'.

According to the perception of Teacher F, the outbreak of the pandemic was initially a novelty for students and teachers which created a sense of intrigue among the school community. However, this feeling of novelty was soon replaced by challenges that ‘started to arise, particularly around figuring out how to best deliver the coursework to make sure students were getting different opportunities to meet the knowledge and skills, technological issues, language barriers’.

These observations by teachers align with the earlier discussion of the socio-economic backgrounds of the students at the respective schools chosen for the research, as well as the extent to which students are disadvantaged in terms of socio-educational factors. Because all the participating teachers stated that their EAL students who came from refugee backgrounds were often from low socio-economic backgrounds, it is plausible to presume that they required support from the school to be able to obtain laptops and have access to an internet connection. Given students were required to fulfil the basic requirements to be able to learn online during the pandemic, it is evident, in preparation for remote learning, teachers, particularly those who teach VCE EAL, were restricted to prioritising the accessibility of work under existing curriculum and pedagogical strategies, rather than experimenting with innovative approaches to teaching content.

It was also observed that owing to the novelty of the circumstances and the complexities arising from it, teachers needed to lower the expectations of learning when planning their online lessons. They were not expected to plan for hours of classroom teaching in an online setting. Teacher A observed that:

We didn't make them come to every scheduled class.... we would often do a check-in at the start of the week, but the first class of the week, well, maybe it might have to be the second class of the week and we do a little bit of a check-in where we could and explain the learning intentions and the success criteria.

Adding to this, Teacher B stated that teachers felt it was feasible to lower expectations when it came to online learning for VCE EAL students because teachers believed that the ‘VCAA would be more flexible with the recovery period (post lockdown)’.

Teacher C, in their explanation, revealed that at the beginning of the lockdown, the expectations of student learning:

Wasn't made very clear at the school for quite a while as well as what was expected of them and that it wasn't just a choice. I think at the start it was kind of a choice thing that they could decide if they wanted to or not.

Teacher D, who was a teacher at the same school, reported that it was 'a mad scramble' where the school lowered expectations and shifted its core focus to enabling students to access the work set by their teachers.

Recalling a different experience from the rest of the participants, Teacher E stated that their school mandated that all teachers and students follow the same timetable as they would in face-to-face teaching. This, according to them, was 'bloody horrible', and students struggled to adjust to the school's expectations around remote learning. Teacher E's views further reiterated the discrepancies in school policies and protocols around remote learning, revealing the inequities in learning instructions and content delivery for students.

These observations by teachers expose the unpredictable and complex nature of online learning when conducted under emergency circumstances and how adapting to these situations as a teacher is dependent more on school requirements and socio-economic factors of students than on an expression of their own knowledge of online pedagogy. This is further connected to the phrases of 'feeling my way around' and 'wrapping my head around' to define how teachers applied their expertise to student needs and organisational needs as they arose under unpredictable circumstances. This is more effective than adhering to a set model to engage students in online learning, such as the ADDIE model, which was said to assist EAL teachers in their planning, as stated by Oliveira et al. (2021) in their study on instructional design for remote learning .

4.3.2 Engagement and Differentiation Strategies

In terms of engaging EAL learners, the views of the participants suggest that in 2020, when they first entered lockdown, they were experimenting with different online platforms and simplifying tasks. By 2021, they were better prepared and trained to implement different engagement strategies to deliver content to their students. One of the recurring engagement strategies that was highlighted by participating teachers was the scaffolding of tasks and learning. Given that EAL students, especially at the VCE level or at year levels preparing them for VCE examinations, need to learn how to structure essays,

develop critical thinking, and generate insightful concepts of texts that they study, scaffolding is crucial in fostering a culture of student autonomy and improving academic performance (Lee & Hannafin, 2016). It is also believed that EAL students naturally struggle with engaging with material written in English, and hence, scaffolding can enable students to access these materials on their own (Rodrigues, 2017). Under remote learning conditions, the absence of a teacher figure increased the necessity to scaffold the learning as a means of engaging students.

Teacher A mentioned, ‘We scaffolded a lot of work. We scaffold a lot in class’. They indicated that, depending on student performance in class and the level of completion of their work, they would have to revisit the lesson and do some further scaffolding to ensure students could grasp the learning concepts. This practice was carried on to remote learning in 2021 where the importance of scaffolding in an EAL classroom was further highlighted. Teacher A emphasised that one of the biggest learning curves of the pandemic as an EAL teacher, especially teaching at the VCE level, was learning the importance of scaffolding, which in the EAL context means breaking down content and sequencing skills. In their own words:

It's just reaffirmed how much... how much support we really need to give them, how much scaffolding we need to give them. It's really tricky because you want to be able to take scaffolding away from them at a time so they can be independent learners.

According to Teacher A’s views, the success of scaffolding is determined by the type of text studied in class. From their experience teaching a Year 10 EAL class in 2021, they discovered that when teaching graphic texts to the class, scaffolding was a lot easier, and the process made it easier for students to understand the elements of the text and the meaning of the text better. Teacher B also endorsed the value of scaffolding texts as they used it as a strategy to enhance the learning experience of students who are at a lower competency level. In addition to extensive scaffolded tasks, they also provided students with ‘sentence stems and cloze activities’.

Similar to scaffolding, participating teachers also stated a strategy they used to engage students was to modify learning tasks as much as possible for their students. All participating teachers revealed that they used some sort of modification of learning tasks,

including minimising the amount of expected work and lowering expectations. According to Teacher B, given the lower level of engagement by students in their learning:

'they slowed the learning down across the board. So, I modified most of my tasks. So instead of, you know, getting them to write a five paragraph, essay response to a text, I'd focus on really in-depth teaching one paragraph because I found their concentration and application was a lot lower. So, the first thing I would say is I slowed down my teaching and I modified assessments to make them shorter but more detailed.'

They continued with this strategy in 2021 as well with their VCE EAL class, where they focused 'on the micro skills rather than looking for 1,000-word essay responses'. They emphasised that their main objective was to focus on teaching the key knowledge areas and skills to their students rather than taking a quantifying approach to their teaching. The same method was adopted by Teacher A, who said that 'we tended to focus on skills rather than bigger pieces of work'. It appears that the main reason teachers modified and simplified learning tasks for students is for the latter to feel a sense of achievement rather than feel depleted amidst the other challenges brought by the pandemic. The same sentiment was expressed by Teacher C who:

'Tried to make the tasks as kind of self-explanatory as possible and as accessible as possible for them so that it would actually give them a chance to feel like they are getting things done instead of having like an overwhelming amount of things that they found hard to do.'

They also added that they provided stretch tasks for students who were higher achievers and those who completed the work in order for them to stay engaged in learning and not feel complacent about their achievements.

Despite various challenges teachers face in formulating an engaging curriculum for EAL learners, teachers also attempted to use interactive strategies to keep students motivated throughout the duration of the lockdown periods. Both Teachers A and B referred to a platform called 'Loom', which allows teachers to make short videos, and they used the platform to make videos where they explained the tasks and content to their learners. Teacher A used Loom extensively in their teaching of texts, where they could read out texts to their students while explaining key aspects of those texts. Although, according to them, this process took time, it was convenient for the students to have access to resources

in the absence of their teacher. Teacher B also had a similar approach to using this platform, where they used it to record themselves and read chapters of texts for students to access. It is evident that in addition to the online learning sessions, teachers were inclined to record themselves delivering content to not only create a resource bank for students to access at any time but also to create a teacher-guided learning experience. It should not be ignored that most EAL students come from backgrounds where they are oblivious to student-centred learning approaches, and they need constant guidance from their teachers to be motivated to learn.

In addition, teachers also resorted to interactive learning activities to engage these students in learning. Teacher C utilised ‘quizzes and things on Kahoot or other online games or gamified’ activities to make the online sessions more interactive. Teacher B also resonated with this when they said:

I tried to incorporate more games into learning using Teams, the channel function for chat. So, I guess looking at ways to make technology more interactive through using different platforms. And trying to embed some personal activities into my teaching so things like I might start a lesson with ‘what’s a song you’ve been listening to? why do you like it?’ or ‘what have you been watching?’ So just trying to kind of connect with the students outside of the curriculum as well.

Teacher D also stated how teachers had to emulate and stimulate interaction to suit the requirements of online learning. They, too, referred to interactive platforms like Kahoot as a means of making learning more interactive and engaging for learners. Additionally, they also made reference to how they also tried to create a collaborative space for students to share their ideas and hence create an authentic learning experience in an artificial learning environment:

The 12s did do work in breakout rooms. With the EAL class being that it was a smaller class and a class of 10, it is harder to do group work because you can only make so many groups out of a group of 10.

But we did do sort of paired work... And then we used the collaboration space option in OneNote quite a lot during that time to try and do things where we might have otherwise done, I guess, in class discussion, because we were limited in the amount of time that we could spend online in face-to-face sessions.

Adopting a similar strategy, Teacher E stated that ‘we tried to do the things where, you know, we were encouraged to do the things where you break into rooms and have them doing the pair work’.

Teacher B also adopted a similar approach when they stated in their interview that they used Microsoft Forms to allow students to voice their opinions on various topics while also conducting quizzes ‘to keep it a little bit interesting and take the pressure off their actual... their schooling’.

Through these responses, all the participating teachers highlight the need to create an authentic and enjoyable learning environment for their learners. Based on the contextual backgrounds of the school settings and the challenges of the pandemic, it is imperative for students to experience a sense of normalcy through their education and through interactive activities. Simultaneously, when looking closely at the data, it was visible that all these interactive strategies were mostly implemented in 2021 during the second round of lengthy lockdowns in Victoria. Therefore, the emerging concept from the data is that teachers began to incorporate more interactive strategies in their learning once they were able to establish effective methods of content delivery.

4.3.3 Student Engagement in Remote Learning

This section will focus on the impact of the engagement strategies used by teachers during remote learning and the extent to which those strategies were successful in engaging EAL students. The primary observation made by the participants was that engaging students during remote learning was an extremely difficult endeavour. Teacher A called engaging students ‘almost impossible’ and ‘really tricky’. They also pointed out that:

The kids that wanted to do well, continued to do well and the good students were doing well. They worked. The kids who were a little bit, disengaged already, remained so. It was... it's one of those things.

This implies that students who were always focused, engaged and motivated to learn in conventional classrooms continued to be engaged in remote learning, and their agency and autonomy as learners were sustained during lockdown periods. However, students who were often disengaged and needed guidance from teachers did not participate in learning as they lacked the presence of their teachers to motivate them to learn.

Like Teacher A, Teacher C also noted that:

I would say even the ones, like they were a few who kept doing the work and kept doing all the work, but they were also those who did a significant amount less that they would have usually done in a classroom and then some just completely dropped out.

These perceptions appear to elucidate that despite needing clear guidance from teachers to navigate through the curriculum content, EAL students, especially those beyond Year 10, are also capable of cultivating a sense of independence in their learning. However, there are other factors that affect the autonomy of these students, and they will be discussed further in this chapter.

It was also observed that the lack of engagement was linked to student absence from online learning sessions. As stated earlier, learning expectations were lowered compared with face-to-face learning, and the teachers believed that some students did not engage in any form of online learning in the absence of clear expectations and consequences.

Teacher C critiqued this leniency and its impact on the students and mentioned that:

I think at the start it was kind of a choice thing that they could decide if they wanted to or not. And that kind of give them gave them a bit too much choice and they chose the wrong thing and didn't really come and therefore kind of missed out on the support and missed out on their online interaction as well. And once you fall behind by a couple of weeks, it's probably a lot harder to then get up and find motivation to start again.

Teacher A also observed a similar trend arising from their school regarding student expectations and engagement when they said:

I think a lot of them took advantage of it knowing that we're in a special case and teachers don't have the same expectation so they might do a little bit less and not try as hard.

These trends seemed to have continued through to 2021, where the situation was similar to the lockdown period in 2020, where students who were naturally engaged in class continued to be motivated to learn while students who were often disengaged considered the pandemic a 'get out of jail free card' (Teacher A) for not doing the work.

Another way in which teachers evaluated student engagement was through reflecting on how students responded to remote learning in 2020 and 2021. The responses of teachers

illustrate that at the beginning of the lockdown, students found the novelty of staying at home and not having to adhere to a daily routine appealing. However, with time, students struggled to cope with the lengthy lockdown periods. Teacher C's students at first:

Almost found it a bit exciting that they weren't in regular classes anymore and that they didn't have to get up in the morning and be somewhere but then that quite quickly turned around as well. It kind of became a holiday for them for them initially, but then they couldn't really find a way back into the new normal.

Similarly, Teacher B also stated that there was 'a real sense of restlessness' among the students despite the initial satisfaction of learning outside their school uniform at home. This was also reiterated by Teacher A whose students 'themselves sort of took advantage of the positives or what they thought were positives' while discovering with time that the monotony of education in the confines of their home was impacting their wellbeing and learning. These perceptions seem to divulge the unpredictable nature of the pandemic as students experienced multiple lockdowns that kept them away from school and conventional learning and how this disruption impacted their online learning and engagement. While the known forms of online learning are believed to modernise education, enhance independence and allow for meaningful interaction between teachers and students (Zaitun et al., 2021), the online learning experiences of these students seem to be marred by factors such as wellbeing concerns, restricted social interactions, and lack of motivation and hence resulted in them to be disengaged from their studies.

An interesting tendency that also arose from the collected data was the correlation between student voice and student engagement. The participating teachers acknowledged that for EAL students, regardless of the year level they are in, it is imperative to constantly reach out to their teachers and engage in active discussions to improve their English knowledge. Teachers E and B, in particular, stated that the main difficulty they faced when trying to engage learners was encouraging them to talk more in class:

But my classes were quite small already. It was very difficult to get students to say anything. That was the other big challenge. They really didn't want to speak on the computer. You know, the confidence that it takes for somebody learning English to speak to in the class'. (Teacher E)

I think getting them to ask questions and move beyond, just following instructions, listening to lecture style lessons and then producing some sort of writing. Though I tried with my classes to incorporate, I guess more creative type activities that weren't necessarily connected to the learning as a way into getting some life out of them. 'What type of music, if you've been listening, do you like? Is there object in the room that means something to you?' And yeah, so, those sorts of activities but it was very difficult to get anything from them'. (Teacher B)

The phrase 'getting some life out of them' draws attention to the extent of their inactivity, which made the learning process mechanical while also limiting teachers from applying further strategies to enhance the learning experience of students. The absence of student voice was further explained by Teacher C when they said, 'I just didn't hear anything for quite a while or how to really, like, get in touch with them separately and try to get any work out of them'. The importance of student voice and its correlation to engagement is also expressed through the words of Teacher A, where they said, 'I don't think a lot of students were reaching out as much as they could have. And I'd spend a lot of time on the computer waiting to be contacted. So, they weren't terribly engaged'. On the contrary, Teacher F noted that students were eager to reach out to their teachers but also noted that it had no relation to engagement in learning:

In terms of, like, I kept my camera on the whole time, which we weren't always recommended to do. And I sort of just, like, students obviously were allowed to leave the meet to go and do their work. But I was always kept myself there in order anyone had questions or wanted to talk. And funnily enough, more students came just to talk than they did to actually ask questions about the work.

While seeking support and feedback is necessary for students of all subject areas, the concerns voiced by these teachers are specifically more important for EAL learners, especially those who are at the VCE level and those who are preparing for VCE year levels. These teachers are aware of the impact their roles have on student engagement and how students were disengaged as the pandemic limited student-teacher interaction.

When looking closely at student engagement, the data also showed a significant difference between international students and students of refugee backgrounds. As stated earlier, School 1 had both international students and refugee-background students and therefore, the teachers were able to see clear distinctions in how they were engaged in learning. Both

Teachers A and B stated that international students who came from more affluent backgrounds were more engaged than students from refugee backgrounds. A main reason these students were able to engage with learning, according to Teacher A was owing to having ‘plenty of internet access’. The fact that these students came from more financially stable backgrounds and had access to the internet also brings to light the possibility that they had the appropriate devices necessary for them to stay engaged in their learning. Teacher B confirms this through their words, ‘I would say that it was better suited to the international students and the refugee-background students struggled more with it’.

Teacher E confirms this notion by stating that students who were more engaged in face-to-face learning and had no financial constraints still had no motivation to learn during the pandemic:

In terms of engagement, I don't think they were anywhere near as engaged. And one of the ways you could see that, I had several Chinese students with really a very good work ethic and high aspirations, which is why their parents had spent such a large sum of money to send them to Australia. And the decrease in their, what they produced during lockdown as compared to on face-to-face learning, it was really noticeable.

However, it should also be noted that having access to devices and the internet also became a reason for international students at times to lose motivation. Teacher A’s view is that:

But I think it says, any more pronounced with a lot of Chinese and probably to a lesser extent, Vietnamese students that I've taught their ... their reality can be games and yeah, I think that impacts them.

They also added that international students are ‘sort of tech addicted’ and they suffer ‘because of technology as they are so their social skills lack that they're completely you know, engrossed in their device’.

In contrast, the participants presented similar ideas regarding the impact remote learning had on students of refugee backgrounds. Teacher C’s students were primarily of refugee background, and as stated earlier, they faced issues with regard to accessing the internet and often came from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Space was a massive issue and for some students that actually did take a few weeks for them to get their own laptop because in the past apparently they had been sharing with the sibling which I was not aware while we were at school.

This was further affirmed by Teacher D, who also stated that:

I remember one of my older EAL students joining a Zoom, a Teams meeting for an online class for a revision and trying to do it on his phone because they didn't have, they had two working computers at home, but for a family of four students. And stories like that were not uncommon.

As the data suggests, this is in direct contrast to the circumstances of the international students who had easy access to technology, which was the fundamental requirement for remote learning. The fact that the students had been sharing devices with siblings before the pandemic also brings to light the fact that there could have been engagement issues with these students before remote learning as well. This will be discussed further in the subsequent chapters.

Similar to this perception, Teacher B revealed that the refugee-background students in their class faced difficulties around internet connections and displayed ‘a little bit of reluctance and embarrassment about having cameras on’. This feeling of hesitation to leave cameras off is connected to the previous notion of student absences from online lessons as well as their limited participation in classroom discussions. This would have affected their engagement, and as EAL students who need additional support in their final years of schooling, it is evident that it would have had detrimental impacts on their academic performance.

Teacher A responded to this by saying that the pandemic unveiled the ‘vulnerability’ faced by students of refugee backgrounds. It can be assumed that the circumstances around the pandemic would have exacerbated existing issues for these students and they would have faced issues in trying to engage with their learning.

4.3.4 The Impact of Home Environment on Student Learning

Closely related to the theme of student engagement is the impact of the home environment on student learning. As mentioned in the previous section, teachers discovered that there were clear disparities between international students and refugee-background students in terms of engagement in online learning. This section will focus on how the home environment of these students further influenced their learning.

As indicated earlier, international students at School 1 came from more affluent backgrounds. However, it was mentioned by Teachers A and B that most of these students lived away from their parents as the latter lived in their home countries. According to Teacher A, ‘they had plenty of access to internet. They might not have had someone standing over their shoulder to help them. Make sure they're doing the work or set of tasks or do the right thing’. This is connected to the previous view that these students were often distracted by their own devices. It is directly related to the fact that they did not have parental guidance, which other students would have had during remote learning. This tendency carried onto 2021 as well, and this was also outlined by Teacher A when they said:

International students who weren't, you know, they don't have parents who would be making sure that they're doing the right things. They were with their other family. I mean like this. The kids who were probably doing a bit less when we were in face-to-face teaching as well.

Additionally, Teacher A pointed out that international students who lived with their families still faced challenges that affected their learning.

They got parents that are really busy. If their parents are there, they're really busy with their own careers. And if they're not there, they're probably just checking in on them.

The other thing is how much support can their parents offer them educationally with, you know, in English. So, I mean, even though they come from affluent backgrounds and parents can speak, some can speak English quite well. But then, you know, they are not going to be able to help with a text response essay, or email or that kind of thing.

This perception reveals that, despite having minimum financial difficulties during the outbreak of the pandemic and living with parents, students still lacked the proper guidance

that they required to stay focused on their learning. It further elucidates how EAL students were disadvantaged during the pandemic, as they were unable to actively seek support and assistance from parents because the latter often lacked proficiency in English.

Teacher B also referred to the absence of parents of international students when commenting on their introverted approach to online learning:

I think most of my students in 2020 and 2021 didn't have parents living here. So, they'd have their parents back in their home countries, they weren't very forthcoming with challenges. I don't know if that's because they didn't have challenges, or they were just less inclined to tell me about them. I would say that it would be more likely for those students to disengage from the face-to-face video learning and just do the bare minimum of what they knew they had to do online.

According to Teacher E, the importance of having a supportive environment for students who were living away from their parents was more emphasised through the hardships faced by her own students. She recalls how:

Not all of them had an appropriate place to study or operate because they were living in somebody else's home. So, for example, one of my students in winter, I could see him on the camera rugged up in his coat and his beanie because his host family wouldn't allow him to have any heating in his room. So, in lockdown, he was constantly in a cold room as opposed to coming to school where there's heating.

This further reiterates the significance of parental and carer support and presence for students to have a more effective learning experience, and this is imperative for EAL students, given the additional obstacles they face in remote learning.

In terms of the home environment for refugee students, all teachers believed that they were at a disadvantage owing to coming from larger families and, hence, an increased number of disruptions to their learning, as compared with studying in a conventional classroom. Teacher A outlined that these refugee students 'have big families, ones that particularly for refugee kids, big families, noisy environments to work in. So that was another big challenge'. Supporting this view, both Teachers B and C also added that the EAL students in their classes were constantly disrupted by 'other young kids jumping around in the background or out of their chair' (Teacher C). Teacher B's input to this

perception is that the Karenni background students in their class often had to deal with 'little brothers and sisters' while engaging in remote learning.

Teacher D compared the EAL learning experience in the suburb in which her students lived to EAL students who lived in more affluent suburbs and believed that while all EAL students faced academic challenges during the lockdown periods, students who came from low socio-economic backgrounds found face-to-face learning more difficult as 'with greater financial stability comes greater access to resources'. Teacher F also believed that often, students who come from larger families could not find an appropriate physical space for studying owing to having many siblings. This increased their stress levels, which eventually affected their learning:

I remember, like, one student we had, you know, there's like three or four brothers or sisters at high school, a couple of brothers, sisters at primary school, everyone's trying to use the internet trying to find space. I think also, I guess for students, like I'm just talking to a lot of them, just the cognitive load and stress.

The similar pattern of families being unable to provide adequate privacy and facilities for these EAL students showcases how the home environment is a crucial factor that affects their learning. It is important to consider that while this is a valid perception regarding every student, for EAL students who are on the path to completing their schooling, this placed additional burdens, preventing them from improving their knowledge and skills as they had to deal with these disruptive factors while coping with disruption to their learning.

It was also noted that, unlike international students, the parents of refugee-background students were unable to provide proper support for their learning. Teacher A's view was that 'their parents for the most part can't even, can't read or write their own languages and don't speak much English'. They also added that 'the parents probably working long hours in low paying jobs can't offer the same support'.

This also coincides with the socio-economic context of refugee-background students, as earlier stated by Teacher B, where parents of these EAL students would have been possibly unemployed and on government financial support. In this case, the teachers considered parental support for student learning lacking and owing to this reason, the

students remained disengaged. This data also reveals the importance of the presence of teachers for EAL students as they would receive the guidance required to achieve their learning outcomes.

Connected to the absence of parental supervision and the existence of large families is the notion that refugee-background students often had to shoulder household responsibilities. Teacher A recollected that:

I remember one girl from Syria and she went on to do VCE and she had to look after her, you know, baby sister because she was at home and I feel...I am sure her parents worked... She missed classes you know, often didn't get to work in them.

The student referred to by Teacher A appeared to play a parental role while struggling to deal with her studies. Similarly, Teacher C observed that ‘especially the girls took over quite a bit of responsibility there. And were probably more busy than looking after the younger siblings and cooking and all of those things’. Teacher B also echoed this sentiment when they said, ‘I knew that they might be looking after siblings as well as trying to do their lessons’.

Teachers D and F both also revealed in their interviews that EAL students had taken on parental responsibilities to support their families for reasons including lack of English competency in their parents to support their siblings, accessing legal documents regarding the pandemic and vaccination and on some occasions, even financially supporting their families. Teacher D recalls students who:

Had the additional responsibilities of acting as interpreters for their parents, helping to navigate any of the information that came out around COVID restrictions, vaccinations, what you could do, what you couldn't do. And so, that kept a lot of students just simply from not being able to access their work because they had so many other duties that they had to do.

Both Teachers D and F acknowledged that most EAL students always fulfilled additional responsibilities around their home environment, but the pandemic exacerbated the impacts of these responsibilities. During lockdown, these responsibilities became a hindrance to their education, as students ended up in a paradoxical situation with their

‘conflicting priorities around getting their own education but also supporting their families in the ways that they needed to as well’ (Teacher F).

These statements express how the participants associate student disengagement with the carer responsibilities students had to fulfil around their homes. Their views also reveal that the pandemic threw light on how the domestic environment of EAL differed between international students and refugee students, which reveals the diverse challenges faced by these learners as well as the importance of family influence on a student’s education.

4.3.5 The Impact of Socio-political Circumstances in Home Countries on EAL Students.

The interviews with Teachers D and F revealed how the impact of socio-political circumstances in the world impacted academic and emotional wellbeing of learners in their classes.

So at the same time, at the same time as we had lockdown, the socio-political situation in Afghanistan collapsed. Obviously, the Americans withdrew and within a month less, I'd have to go back and have a look, the Taliban started a repush and overthrew the government and retook Kabul. That was incredibly traumatizing for the wider community, but particularly for a lot of students.

The number of the students, I remember really specifically a number of the students, really were doing a lot of additional work at that time and reaching out and asking for help with it as well. In doing things like trying to support their parents to navigate legal issues like how to contact an embassy, how to apply for an emergency visa, how to try to get emergency plane tickets and visas to get their relatives out of Afghanistan. There were times when I think we spent a couple of lessons, one whole lesson where we didn't do work, we just sat with it (Teacher D).

Because the other issue that we had in 2021, was obviously with the demographic of our students, what was happening in the world, because the Taliban took Kabul in 2021.

And so and there was also a lot of like a lot of the media around Black Lives Matter. And so there's sort of a lot of really heavy stuff going on in the world. And a lot of our students were directly affected by what happened in Afghanistan. (Teacher F).

Teacher D also highlight how one student in particular, was more severely impacted by the political unrest in her home country:

It really hit her quite hard because she lost contact, they lost contact with family. Her aunt had been an educator and so it was very high risk then profession when the Taliban came in to be targeted. It was a really difficult time for those students.

These perceptions of the teachers outline how the political instability that existed Afghanistan would have disrupted the learning of EAL students. The perceptions also reiterate the notion that many EAL students had to shoulder additional responsibilities to support their families during the pandemic. While the students would still have had to fulfil these responsibilities regardless of the pandemic, it can be deduced that the latter crisis would have made it more difficult for learners and families to navigate these challenging circumstances.

4.3.6 Academic Performance of EAL Students

4.3.6.1 Student Performance During Remote Learning

In terms of the academic performance of EAL students during remote learning, the participants presented their views based on students who produced some form of work during the pandemic. A recurring perception that was identified through the interviews was that students did the bare minimum in terms of reading and writing during the pandemic. Teacher B links this tendency to lowered expectations and lack of motivation among learners:

‘I guess not doing or trying to do anything beyond what they have been asked to do, you know, that kind of resignation to, 'I have to tick these boxes' though quite uncreative responses even if it's a text analysis essay very much, you know, till nothing beyond TEEL [a paragraph structure]’.

They also associated this lack of creativity in student work to their lack of participation in classroom discussions:

I guess what I'm trying to say—what does spring to mind is that the difference between the generation of ideas in a classroom, the dynamic, discussion focused give us more interesting writing. Take that away and you get in paragraphs that look, very similar. That discuss only the examples from the text that I made in Loom video of and nothing beyond it.

Participants also commented that the lack of stamina in EAL students was more evident in an online learning environment as students lacked practice of their writing skills, and this, in turn, affected their performance in the VCE examination:

And that ongoing practice of writing at year 12, and at year 11, in both English and EAL is so important, just doing that constant practice of writing, and writing by hand. And again, that the students, a lot of the students came out and said they didn't finish the exam. It's not while that's not unusual for students to not finish in both the EAL and the English exam. I think it was compounded by the conditions of remote learning, the fact they weren't handwriting, if they were doing work, they were typing it and submitting it. (Teacher D)

The same experience was reiterated by Teacher F, who also believed that students struggle to produce a sustained piece of writing, echoing the perception of the previous participants regarding student performance at the VCE level. It is evident that there is a distinct correlation between student motivation and educational opportunities when it comes to academic performance. In the absence of these factors, EAL students struggled to achieve desired academic success during the pandemic:

I think like, and obviously the ability to write in a sustained way is also connected to how many ideas you have to write about too. So, in the, in the absence of sort of a willingness and motivation to study the texts on a deep level or even a deeper level beyond your chapter summaries and you sort of, yeah, more literal stuff. Um, it became quite difficult for most students to produce sustained and like quality work in writing.

As far as reading is concerned, Teacher B still believed that there was a lack of agency among students to expand their literacy skills, and they continued to demonstrate a lack of motivation to stretch themselves academically. There also seemed to be a mutual understanding of the circumstances the students were experiencing. Teacher B's response showcased a sense of empathy for the 'robotic' nature of student work:

So, you know, reading a text and having to write an essay, I'll have students who I know I haven't read the text and they'll just read the segments that I've decided to analyse with them as a class and they won't go beyond that. So, almost a sort of a rebellious resistance to doing anything extra which I can totally understand professionally. I felt very similar at the end of the period of lockdown, you know that real sense of I guess it's a broader anger at being in an unknown uncontrolled situation.

The main trend that springs from this participant's views is that the nature of the pandemic and remote learning conditions placed limitations on students' creativity and their attempts to produce insightful work:

It's like there's a ceiling and it stops there and nothing goes beyond that. Even with my strongest students who you know, in the past would read a lot more, choose quotes that I haven't talked about, come up with ideas, that maybe I hadn't thought about none of that kind of extra investment.

This participant observed a similar trend among their students during remote learning in 2021 as well:

So the international students were still able to complete writing tasks. They probably didn't achieve such high scores, but I would say that was due to more so to disengagement or not feeling like they had to whereas my refugee-background kids dealing with little sisters and brothers at home, babysitting, moving house, internet issues. So, often I would have no work submitted by those students whereas with the international students they'd still submit the work but it wasn't at the same standard.

Their view unveils the disparity in academic performance between international students and refugee students and how EAL students need fundamental environmental factors, such as accessibility of work and uninterrupted learning space and time at home, to maintain some level of consistency in producing work for their teachers.

However, Teacher C was able to experience a difference in academic performance among their stronger students where they demonstrated a sense of autonomy and dedication in their learning:

For some of the higher students I actually got the impression that some of them were working at a higher level because they were able to if they had the right setting of course

at home as well, but they seem to actually have the chance to be a lot more focused than they would have been in a classroom with other things happening around them.

While most students in this participant's class were from refugee backgrounds, it is interesting to identify that among them, there were some students who demonstrated resilience and diligence in their learning despite their disadvantageous circumstances. Conversely, Teacher E noted that their international students who were already motivated and had access to resources such as tutoring were able to produce better work compared with students who were not academically motivated prior to the pandemic.

My motivated Chinese boys, even though their motivation or what they turned over did decrease, they still tried to produce quality work. And I think for them, ultimately, didn't really affect them too much, because they were already, you know, pretty good with their language and fairly capable and very, very motivated.

And then the next year, they both went to tutoring schools and just did extra and, you know, wanted to make up the ground.

Teacher C also stated that the pandemic was instrumental in unearthing certain learning disabilities of students. Their statement further highlights how the pandemic can also give a misleading interpretation of student disengagement:

I remember one specific student who kind of in the classroom always appeared to be quite chatty... and during the lockdowns, I just did not really see anything from her for ages and it became clear kind of due to, missed her assessments during that time as well, and then afterwards that she actually had some learning issues that should have been discovered. But I guess the lockdowns kind of helped her to cover that up a bit because it seemed like she was just not engaging but she couldn't really do it.

Teacher A also had a similar experience as Teacher C with his stronger students, where 'those kids that... those students, you know, that wouldn't matter if there was a great teacher in front of them or mediocre teacher or poor teacher were going to succeed in the world'. They also shared Teacher B's observation that:

They knew what they were doing, they were doing enough work but the work, the quality of work, wasn't so great and they just did enough to get by whereas if they'd been face-to-face, they'd be probably doing a bit more than what was required.

This once again echoes Teacher B's perception that owing to lowered expectations and lack of motivation, students did not endeavour to strive to excel in their academic performance. The teachers' views on student autonomy and dependency on teachers reveal the dichotomy of effective teaching of VCE EAL students where the curriculum oscillates between student centrism and teacher centrism.

4.3.6.2 Student Performance Post-lockdown

The participating teachers noticed a great decline in student motivation and concentration post-lockdown. Teacher A believed that students struggled to show stamina once they returned to regular schooling, and this has continued to the present when they said, 'I think that concentration levels are not as high as they were pre-lockdown'. Teacher B's reflection also echoed this perception as they evaluated student academic performance by saying, 'the level of stamina that students are able to show in sustained writing, sustained concentration has been incredibly challenging for the last two years'. It should be noted that the students they had taught during the pandemic completed VCE in the last two years, and hence, they were able to witness the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on EAL students.

The teachers' allusion to the reduced concentration and stamina further emphasises the difficulties the students would have faced when preparing for their VCE examinations. Teacher D further supported this argument when they said, 'ongoing practice of writing at Year 12, and at Year 11, in both English and EAL is so important, just doing that constant practice of writing'. This refers to the importance of handwriting at the VCE level as the final examinations are all handwritten, and hence, apart from the quality of work, students also suffered a disintegration in their efficiency as writers.

The participants also noticed that while the students who were engaged in online learning had cultivated a new sense of independence, those who were disengaged continued to fall behind in their academic performance. Teacher B summarised this as:

I think for those students who are quite self-motivated, I've seen an independence in those students that perhaps I haven't seen before... But for the students who don't have that internal motivation and there's been a real apathy, 'unless the teacher is there right

in front of me telling me what to do. Then, I can't make any decisions myself. I can't use my initiative'.

Teacher C held a similar view about her students when she said:

I think those who actually took it as a challenge and tried to kind of make them the most of it or at least like try their personal best, they probably profited from that and actually saw that they could achieve even if it was hard. But the other ones who just decided that it was too hard from the start onward, I don't think they got much out of it.

They further identified that, on some level, the pandemic would have given the more independent and dedicated students some new perspective on their sense of agency:

I think some of them probably discovered that they do learn well by themselves so that there are some strategies that they can use when doing something at home or revising at home, that they might have not been aware of before maybe.

Teacher E observed that students were more than eager to return to conventional learning, and 'they really got into that with vigour because they knew that they had missed out on that and it was helpful'. This further reiterated the preference EAL students had towards face-to-face teaching, where there was more interaction with teachers and peers and how they were more motivated to learn despite the technological advancements that inform contemporary English pedagogy.

Despite the general perception that EAL students need more guidance from teachers in their learning, it is evident that these participants believed that students could achieve success when they take the initiative and responsibility for their learning. On the contrary, the teachers also identified that students who became more passive continued to demonstrate this passivity in their work.

Another observation that the participants made was that students had become more introverted after the pandemic. Teacher A believed that given these were EAL students, the lengthy period they had spent away from an English-speaking environment would have hindered their speaking skills:

They weren't around people speaking in English, as much. They missed a year and a half doing that. You can see now they are quiet or don't talk much. The development in their language, their spoken language skills I think is lacking.

Teacher A also found a connection between introverted students and their increased use of technological devices in relation to their reduced motivation to engage in learning: 'I think they're more used to looking at a screen which is... know that's an issue. And it's, but that was an issue before lockdown, but it's become, I think, maybe more of an issue'.

Teacher B's words highlight the irony of the post-pandemic VCE EAL classroom, where teachers are attempting to separate the students from their attachment to their devices and revert back to conventional pedagogies to prepare students for the VCE examinations. They also expose how the expectations around VCE examinations and the expectation for pedagogy to revolve around technology contradict each other:

So, if anything as much as technology is a bit of a buzzword and we're trying to move with the times. We're pretty limited in what the students are expected to do at the end of their VCE. So personally, I'm more inclined to be moving back towards reading and writing, putting devices away, deep diving into texts and talking to each other and learning in a way that's going to best benefit the students who have to hand write their exams at the end of the VCE.

Teacher C also held the same view where they believed that despite the new pedagogical strategies that are endorsed in the field of education, for EAL students, especially at the VCE level, face-to-face instruction has a significant impact on how students attain knowledge and skills. In addition, the importance of EAL students receiving constant face-to-face wellbeing support was also emphasised in their interview:

Teaching face-to-face is a lot easier and a lot more useful for majority of students, I believe. And regularly being able to check in with them not just for their learning but actually for their wellbeing as well it's very important to actually see them face to face rather than on screen.

The participants further discussed how over-reliance on technology does not align with the expectations at the VCE level and how the transition from online learning to face-to-face learning exacerbated existing issues around student use of technology:

Some of them, they open up their devices as they come in the classroom without permission. I don't, particularly think it's very good for education. They don't, they don't tend to write any notes, which certainly is, you know, there's been studies that show that if you write down notes, you will recall it better. You'll think about it more critically

rather than just reading off a PowerPoint or a screen or whatever. So yeah, I think that's probably thing that's hindered students. (Teacher A)

This participant also revealed how the pandemic reverted teaching back to the teacher being more didactic, where student independence was not fostered, and the teacher was the authoritarian figure delivering content and resources without students making much effort other than recording them:

It's really tricky because you want to be able to take scaffolding away from them at a time so they can be independent learners and you know think on their own two feet and work problems out but I feel like we're really spoon-feeding them more than ever now unfortunately. And you really have to keep them honest, you really have to keep them on it. You know, push them to work hard or they would just sit back and don't do anything or don't do enough. I think that often the teacher is exhausted because they've done all the work in the in the room and students, haven't done much.

4.3.7 Assessment Strategies

4.3.7.1 Formative Assessments

With the level of disengagement outlined, the conducting of assessments was also impacted as teachers had to adapt new strategies to evaluate student learning and to make students feel they had achieved academically.

With the lowered expectations in remote learning, as stated earlier, teachers believed that the formative assessments conducted should be short, concise and achievable. Teacher A referred to the modification of assessment tasks to ensure that students also had time away from their screens:

For formative tasks, they were weekly, so more like portfolio tasks. Again, it was just modified. The amount was not as much. When the amount required was not as much or onerous, we really encourage kids to not spend, you know, six to eight hours on their screens every day. So, they could go out for a walk within their 5K radius, cook or whatever it was they could do.

The idea of breaking up tasks into measurable and attainable levels was continued further into 2021 where teachers continued to scaffold and provide supporting materials for the students to complete learning activities. However, it should be noted that Teacher A

believed that they did not reinvent assessment tasks to cater to online learning but transformed formative assessments to be conducted online but with more modification and supporting materials to make the written tasks less complicated:

I mean that's not that different what you're doing class, it was just more online. You know, there any presentation they had to do, they submit a little video. If it was for the graphic novel that we did, they'd do a little scene analysis of the, of the graphic novel. I'd give him sentence starters, which is stuff that I would do for in the classroom as well. I think that essentially the written component wasn't as intense but the things they had to do was still of the same kind of level was just that it was an online medium.

Teacher B believed that it was difficult to conduct formative assessments for EAL at the VCE level online, given the format, the nature of the VCE curriculum and the lack of engagement among students:

Formative, I found really difficult because not having them in the classroom with me, them being reluctant to engage on WebEx. So those things that I use a lot in the classroom weren't at my, I guess what, there so I guess I moved more to a summative type of small assessment tasks.

However, Teacher D's perception was that formative assessment was conducted in a similar manner to how it had been conducted in a conventional classroom setting. Their views further revealed that the structure and design of the curriculum gave limited opportunities for teachers to tailor assessments to suit online learning:

So they did have formative assessment work in terms of similar to the types of work, I guess that we would have done. Had it been in sort of the normally, so when we're studying a text, they had text comprehension questions, character study, some visual sort of character mind maps and character profiles, quote work. So the tasks remained, I would say, fundamentally, they were quite similar'

They noticed that conducting formative assessments was still difficult in 2021, with a decrease in student attendance in online classes. In this situation, formative assessments were limited to simply ascertaining what students have understood regarding the content:

Not so much with the formative. You know, I think I didn't necessarily record assessments for formative. It would be trying to get as many students online on Teams so that we could run a class with questions and answers.

The difficulty of conducting formative assessments for EAL students in remote learning settings was also reported by Teacher C, who said the school used the same platform for conducting assessments as they had done before the pandemic and how student disengagement was a crucial factor in determining the efficacy of the process:

So, the formative assessment happened mostly via OneNote, checking their work online. But again, in some cases there was nothing to check which meant that it was a bit tricky.

Most participants were in favour of the manner in which they provided to students as it gave them the opportunity to give detailed feedback outlining areas of improvement, which is crucial for EAL students as they need extensive feedback from teachers to improve their writing.

While Teacher A acknowledged the importance of verbal feedback for EAL students, they found it beneficial that during lockdown, students always had access to written feedback on their writing. At the same time, they also pointed out that the difficulty with verbal feedback for EAL students as language constraints may not always make it accessible:

I think with some EAL kids verbal feedback is really good but written feedback is much better because they can get it back, they can check it again and again. Verbal feedback they might not catch everything you say. And once it's gone, it's gone. So, I actually think feedback during lockdown was always, there.

Similarly, Teacher B ensured that students had access to recorded feedback as well as performance descriptors to identify their strengths and areas of improvement: 'I did move at some point to recording my feedback as well as giving them rubrics, so that in the hopes, I guess that they would get more from that'.

Teacher C reiterated that they found themselves giving more feedback during remote learning than they would have in face-to-face teaching:

I found that I was giving more feedback to those students who were actually doing the work. I found that I was giving a lot more direct, like not directly to their face, but like direct feedback on their work rather than just kind of having something read out in class and kind of commenting on it with one sentence. You would actually check their work more thoroughly.

They further believed that this gave the students who were engaged more opportunities to extend themselves in their writing. It also revealed their perception that students who did not produce adequate work lost the opportunity to receive feedback and that they felt it was unfortunate that the students who really needed thorough feedback failed to receive it:

I think the ones who would have accepted support kind of did some extra work anyways and asked for extra feedback and asked for more detailed feedback from me. I guess the ones who would have actually profited from more direct support were the ones that just didn't really attend any live sessions anyways, so giving them the extra support would have been really tricky.

4.3.7.2 Summative Assessment

In terms of summative assessments, teachers were restricted by guidelines and conditions established by the VCAA. The participants stated that the summative assessments that were conducted during remote learning adhered to the structure outlined by the VCAA, but the conditions were tailored to suit online learning:

We'd released the task all at the same time. And so, for that was a whole new level and you know, they had online submission enabled and there was a cut-off time. So, we could see who handed in late and that kind of thing and obviously if we suspect, they haven't written their original work., we shared among staff. And if they recognised anything we catch them out and we can obviously follow protocol' (Teacher A).

A similar strategy was adopted by the other teachers where they too used the platform, Compass, for students to submit their assessments at a given time frame. They, too, acknowledged that the structure of the assessments remained the same as pre-lockdown circumstances:

So, I would put the work up at a set time and then they would have to submit their work on Compass and it was time-stamped and I would set you know, an hour or an hour and a half and then close that submission down. (Teacher B)

I believe the way how the SAC was done or the expectations of that SAC was very similar to what would have been the years before. I think we did it online with the time

limit. They got the task. They had probably approximately two hours or three hours.
(Teacher C)

The teachers also outlined issues regarding authenticating student work during this period and admitted that it was a reality they had to acknowledge, given the circumstances. This raises the question as to whether summative assessment was a success during the pandemic or a formality that schools were expected to adhere to as a result of extrinsic conditions posed by the curriculum:

There's a lot of issues around authentication and validation and things like that. So, again, we would have, like, when students had to write their essay, there was a timed, like, a live document on Google Classroom, and they would need to, like, it was timed, so it would open and close at whatever time that would happen. And so the idea was that they had to just work on that document in that time. (Teacher F)

Even though the outcomes were not modified by the VCAA, teachers demonstrated a level of flexibility, taking into account the individual circumstances of the students and the fact that they are EAL students while still assessing them on the knowledge and skills outlined in the curriculum. Teacher A mentioned while they did not make dramatic changes to their assessments, they were able to modify it to make it more accessible to their students:

They weren't the simplest to discuss like concepts and themes and that kind of thing. But for example, if instead of doing sort of like a three-body paragraph essay but you know, with an intro and conclusion, we got them to do an introduction and one body paragraph and then maybe like a table where they kind of put in what their second argument or topic sentence would be, which evidence they would draw upon. And so instead of just putting it together in a paragraph, they'd have to somehow identify the things that they would if they were going to expand upon.

They also demonstrated some leniency with submission because, as discussed earlier, many EAL students faced issues regarding accessing the internet and online resources. Through this, they further emphasised the importance of supporting EAL students beyond the curriculum within the parameters of the curriculum:

I was sort of lenient with my EAL students because I know that some of them didn't have reliable internet and that they do take a bit longer. You know, I kind of had my own rules for those guys and for the most part.

Teacher B also outlined the importance of leniency and the use of teacher discretion in the absence of any form of concession from the official curriculum authority, especially with EAL students from disadvantaged backgrounds:

What I did find was it disadvantaged kids who might not be as savvy with technology and might have connection issues. And so, for those students, I'd always be pretty flexible with extending that cut-off time by half an hour if they needed it.

In evaluating VCE assessments during the pandemic and the subsequent student performances in assessments post-lockdown, teachers also voiced their concerns about the curriculum and its impacts on EAL student learning. Teacher A stated that the curriculum puts extra burdens on teachers in terms of content while failing to provide more opportunities for students to develop key skills. They believed that this was an ongoing issue which was exposed further by the pandemic:

The curriculum is crowded and I think that we spend too little time on too much where we need to spend more time on less and really go deeper into some things and I think that's a problem. Maybe it's exacerbated by the pandemic, but it was underlying one that existed beforehand and now it's still there. I think overall it was a hindrance to education.

Teacher B was also critical of the VCE system and how the pandemic revealed how the rigid nature of the system was not beneficial to students in pursuing their preferred pathways. They also emphasised the role of the school and teachers in assisting EAL students who struggle to achieve success at the exam in selecting a suitable pathway. What was interesting about this participant's perception was that it revealed how teachers often find themselves searching for more flexible pathways in the face of an unyielding system:

It highlighted the problems with a top-down model that is very inflexible. There's one exam set by VCAA and that's you know, that's the goal and there's very little that we can do to be flexible in the way we deliver our content when there's no flexibility with

the final exam. So, if anything, I think it's highlighted the rigid nature of the system and that as a school we need to be looking at pathways looking at the VM [Vocational Major] program and how we can offer students all initiative pathways to university, if that's what they want to do. So, in my role as coordinator, I'm always looking at ways to I guess inform the parents about diplomas, certificate for entry points into university later so that these students have more time to sort of catch up on the learning because there's not much that we can do in terms of VCAA and the expectations placed on the students.

Teacher D further outlined the recurring impact the pandemic had left on EAL students and how the curriculum has failed to evolve and adapt according to these requirements. They believed that instead of providing differentiated support for EAL students, they had been compelled to learn an exclusive curriculum. Hence, it was their view that EAL students might underperform at the VCE level, and their views implied that the post-pandemic curriculum may have complicated the process for students to gain success in their learning:

So, we're reducing the adjustments and the differentiation for EAL rather than providing the supports. So, it'll be interesting to see at the end of this year what that looks like in the assessment on the exam and how many students even complete that.

Echoing this sentiment, Teacher E insisted that the curriculum and assessment authority failed to recognise the level of support needed by EAL students. This established discrepancies between teacher views and understandings of the pedagogical strategies required to support these learners to achieve their learning outcomes, and their obligations to adhere to the standards of the curriculum authority:

I don't think they understand the extent to which you actually have to go really individually with your EAL students in terms of actually giving them some support.

4.3.8 Use of Technology in an EAL Classroom

It was evident through the collected data that an online learning model in a VCE EAL classroom is not impactful in facilitating students to achieve their learning outcomes. Teacher participants unanimously agreed that the presence of the teacher plays a significant role in student engagement, evaluating learning, personalised learning and

cultivating an interactive classroom environment where students can enhance their language skills:

I think it would be even more difficult when you're talking about students who need more support and more personalised support too. I mean, that is why we teach EAL and have the smaller classes, so that you can have that personalised support. (Teacher E)

It was also reported that the nature of the curriculum hinders any opportunity for teachers to incorporate technology extensively within the curriculum. Therefore, conventional teaching and assessment strategies were identified as more effective in preparing students for examination compared with novel pedagogical strategies involving technology.

I'm more inclined to be moving back towards reading and writing, putting devices away, deep diving into texts and talking to each other and learning in a way that's going to best benefit the students who have to hand write their exams at the end of the VCE. (Teacher A)

Additionally, it was revealed that the pandemic created opportunities for schools to opt for a more hybrid model of teaching where students have access to videos of content delivery, multimodal resources and how that would be beneficial in an EAL classroom where students may not always be able to retain information owing to language barriers. However, it was also acknowledged that given the learning needs of EAL learners, a full-fledged online learning model may not be efficient and effective.

For EAL students, I don't think a straight remote learning can work... the capacity to be able to watch things more than once, rather than just have a single, say, a lesson where the teacher would present the material and talk about it, gave them a greater opportunity to go back and check their understanding, re-listen to vocabulary, and especially when it's new terminology or Tier 3 vocabulary, and that that was a benefit... if I had the chance to do perhaps more recorded lessons and then upload them so that the students could go back and could then re-watch them, I think for EAL students that could be a great benefit. (Teacher D)

However, it was also outlined that the pandemic generated opportunities for teachers and students to enhance their digital literacy skills, and it was a learning curve in educational settings to educate individuals to become 'more critical consumers of their digital world'

(Teacher F). It was also evident from the data that teachers were able to learn online assessment strategies, and this was believed to be useful in the event of assessments transitioning to an online format.

I think probably there's a big opportunity there just to play and to start to experiment and start to build that world in your classrooms. (Teacher F)

4.3.9 School-wide Support for Students

It was stated earlier that the first priority of schools was providing laptops and internet access to students who did not have them. This section seeks to present other different support systems put in place by the participating schools.

Teacher A praised their school's employment of multicultural aides during the pandemic, as their support was instrumental in bridging language barriers between the school and parents of refugee-background students and ensuring that student wellbeing concerns are taken care of by the school:

At the time we employed three or four. And yes, we were using them to translate to call up parents. So, we could identify who needed support and then how to get the support... our Karenni ones but you know they were really helpful. I would liaise with them about students that weren't turning up the class. So that was, that was an issue. Like, a lot of kids went in and this was big for mainstream kids too as but we had our multicultural aides as well as other education support calling these families to find out.

Referring to the same school setting, Teacher B also mentioned how schools realised the dilemma of online learning, where students must complete set tasks while also limiting time spent on the screen. As a result, in 2021:

It was pushed by the school to run a lesson at the beginning of the week outlining the work and a check-in lesson at some stage during that week for students who wanted to ask clarifying questions. So, trying to I guess cut down the screen time that the students were having to commit to daily.

They also discussed how the school used existing programmes to foster student engagement and to ensure that their wellbeing concerns are addressed. In their interview, they discussed the MYLNS (Middle Years Literacy and Numeracy Support) programme

that sought to provide additional support to EAL students on coping with the pandemic as well as completing work from other subject areas:

It was actually really good and mostly because it's such a small class. So, I think I had eight students and was quite a personally close class that the students got on really well with each other. And because the way we run MYLNS, there's no assessment attached to it. I could run it as basically extra support for anything. So, I might be supporting them in their science work, or it might even be a chance to connect with if the parents have an appointment and they don't know what to do or talking about the pandemic and you know safety protocols.

They also added that the fact that there were no assessments in these support sessions, which eased the pressure on students; they were more relaxed about seeking support and having conversations where they felt supported by the teacher.

Moreover, School 1 also conducted a re-engagement programme for all students who had been disengaged during the pandemic. Discussing the efficacy of this programme, Teacher A implied that the school-wide approach to re-engaging students worked well for lower year levels, but when it comes to VCE, student autonomy plays a crucial role:

And we even spent some time creating online re-engagement programmes but this wasn't just limited to EAL students. This was for the whole school. There were some EAL students who attended these. But as far as VCE goes, Obviously the expectations are a bit higher.

However, Teacher C was not particularly pleased with the approaches the school took to engage students. As stated earlier, they expressed that the school's lowered expectations from the beginning of the pandemic affected student learning as they chose not to engage in their online lessons. In addition, they believed that the lack of multicultural aides to support EAL learners took away a significant factor that could have assisted in engaging learners:

It might have definitely helped. I think the multicultural aides we have got at this school now would have been really like a speaking Dari and speaking Farsi would have made a massive difference and actually contacting parents because I would assume those students that we never really got to see online. I saw any work from that their parents wouldn't have been aware of that at all. And then quite often there wasn't

really a way of contacting them and I guess the team leaders tried but didn't really get anywhere with that either.

The same sentiment was reiterated by Teacher E who also expressed their displeasure at 'EAL students being small in number are not even remotely a priority in our school'. The data revealed that in such school settings, the responsibility of supporting the students as well as assisting the rest of the staff to facilitate and engage these learners fell naturally on the EAL teacher:

The teachers who are teaching them have no background or training or even professional development in teaching EAL students. I still do their assessments.

The participants condoned collaboration among colleagues and how they supported and coached each other to provide the best teaching practice for the students. Teacher B highlighted the significance of teachers with positions of responsibility in sharing their expertise to support teachers in implementing online learning strategies to engage students:

Disengagement was the number one issue across the school. So, the strategies like I mentioned offering staff PL [professional learning] in different platforms that they might not use, optional PL around games or different activities that you could run with classes and this offered by our combination of our leading teachers and our learning specialists.

Apart from conducting professional learning sessions, EAL teachers also took it upon themselves to support their students by liaising with teachers of other subject areas and sharing strategies on how to engage them in learning. While Teacher A found this beneficial from a student perspective, they also highlighted how it was not always accepted by others:

On a personal level I used to just ask my kids how they are going in their other subjects whether it be geography or history or science. And then if there were any issues I would try to discreetly, contact their other teacher and offer some suggestions on how to support them. It wasn't always met with, you know, the most thanks for doing that as it looked like I was telling them how to do their job.

Further referring to close collaboration with colleagues, Teacher C alludes to how teachers who shared classes often met to plan lessons and to discuss how they could assist students in achieving their learning outcomes:

We kept having like this one-hour session once a week and it kind of got extended every once in a while from one hour to a lot more than that and we were just like planning the next week ahead and talk in detail about what we've been doing and how they've been going and what we need to change and what we need to do and add and so on.

Teacher D described the significance of EAL, who held positions of responsibility where they would assist teachers of other subject areas adapt different pedagogical strategies to cater to the needs of EAL learners in an online environment. This positions the role of the EAL teacher as a facilitator of learning for their students in other subject areas, emphasising their wider role within the school's academic community:

I did have a number of teachers come, and again, particularly from sort of humanities and science areas, I seem to be saying those words a lot, to ask for support around, particularly students who would broadly be falling in those, I guess, higher C1 and those C2 ranges. And mostly what I worked with was ways to modify or to differentiate the content they already had. So, it's just as simple as instead of having short answer questions, changing it to a closed exercise or a multiple choice, simplifying some of the task.

This role that leading EAL teachers played extended to a more wellbeing-centred role where they liaised with different members of the school community to reach out to parents and guardians. It is evident from the data that schools had to shoulder more responsibilities regarding student wellbeing during the pandemic as they had to pay special attention to the safety of students who were compelled to work to financially support their families during the lockdown periods:

I would work with the year-level team coordinators. And I sort of, I kind of, like I had a big list, I knew all the students in the school, the EAL students. And we would try to get in contact where we could by our interpreter to check in with the students and the parents, but more around particularly the safety of the student if they were doing labouring.

It was also reported that teachers were also responsible for maintaining communication between the school and families during the pandemic. In particularly larger schools, Team leaders were stated to have worked ‘overtime, like in overdrive’ (Teacher F) to ensure that families were constantly informed about how the learning was conducted during the pandemic and to ensure that students were engaged in their learning.

However, while Teacher C also referred to staff meetings held to share ideas among colleagues, their observation further revealed how some schools were struggling to assist teachers in adapting to online learning. Teacher C critiqued that ‘apart from staff meetings I cannot remember anything at least. And those were not really PD [professional development], they were more catching up with each other and kind of conveying information and those kinds of things’.

4.4 Summary

This chapter provided the findings from the interviews conducted with the teachers. The data analysis provided seven emergent themes: (1) Adapting to remote learning, (2) Engagement and differentiation strategies for online learning, (3) Student engagement in remote learning, (4) The impact of the home environment on student learning, (5) Academic performance of students, (6) Assessment strategies implemented and (7) School-wide support to engage and support EAL students.

The interview findings revealed that teachers were consistent in scaffolding learning for EAL students at a VCE level to provide support for them to learn how to write coherently and efficiently. However, all teachers identified the limitations of online learning in engaging learners and how the pandemic had ongoing impacts on student learning and academic performance. The findings also revealed that while online learning was theoretically endorsed as a means of empowerment in education, the circumstances around the pandemic made it a hindrance to many students’ learning. Additionally, the data looked closely at the impact of the home environment on student learning, and all participants were able to identify concerns pertaining to students’ domestic context and how it affected their learning. While there was evidence that schools and teachers worked collaboratively to ensure the best teaching practice and assessments for students, evidence

also suggests that school communities were restricted under policies and guidelines dictated by examination authorities, and this was also a factor that influenced EAL students' academic performance. The participants further compared learning before and after lockdown and noted that while the pandemic had inspired some students to be more independent as learners, it has also been instrumental in the decrease in stamina of many EAL students, resulting in a decline in their reading and writing skills.

The next chapter will analyse the findings from the interviews conducted with students.

Chapter 5: Analysis of Interviews with Students

In the initial rounds of interviews, teachers of VCE EAL discussed their views on teaching and learning and EAL student engagement during the pandemic, as well as the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on VCE EAL students. This chapter analyses the findings of the semi-structured interviews conducted with volunteering EAL students. These students participated in individual interviews where they were asked questions about the following concepts:

1. Individual experiences during remote learning in 2020 and 2021
2. Online platforms used during remote learning
3. Adapting to online learning and difficulties faced
4. Academic challenges faced during remote learning
5. Emotional challenges faced during remote learning
6. Support received from schools and teachers to cope with challenges around remote learning
7. Advantages and disadvantages of remote learning
8. The impacts of remote learning on academic performance
9. Impact of home environment on remote learning

Six students volunteered to participate in these interviews, and for the purpose of preserving the identity and confidentiality of each student, the students will be referred to as Students A, B, C, D, E and F. Additionally, Students E and F were international students attending a mainstream public school in Melbourne, Victoria. While they were able to do remote learning from Melbourne in 2020, further travel restrictions prevented them from returning to Australia in 2021, and hence, they had to complete their remote learning from their home country. It should also be noted that for the purpose of an efficient analysis of their responses on how they adapted to remote learning, the following table refers to their ethnic background, gender, as well the year they arrived in Australia.

Table 5.1: Student participants in the research

Student	Ethnic background	Gender	Year arrived in Australia	Refugee or International student status
Student A	Afghan	Female	2019	Refugee
Student B	Afghan	Female	2017	Refugee
Student C	Afghan	Male	2019	Refugee
Student D	Afghan	Female	2019	Refugee
Student E	Chinese	Female	2019	International
Student F	Chinese	Female	2019	International

The interview analysis revealed five emergent themes and their respective sub-themes, as stated below:

1. Academic challenges during the pandemic
 - i. Difficulties around the use of technology
 - ii. Language barriers impeding learning
 - iii. Decline in academic performance
2. Emotional challenges faced during the pandemic
 - i. Stress and isolation
 - ii. Minimal support
 - iii. Bullying
3. School-wide support during the pandemic
 - i. Academic support
 - ii. Wellbeing support
4. Home environment and contextual factors
 - i. Parental support and influence
 - ii. Domestic responsibilities
 - iii. Ethnic background
5. Student perception of education
 - i. Resilience in education
 - ii. Positives of remote learning
 - iii. Preferred learning format for EAL students

The following section will provide a detailed analysis of the interviews conducted and how they connected to the themes and sub-themes stated above.

5.1 Academic Challenges During the Pandemic

It has been established that while the pandemic posed all students with challenges around learning, engagement and wellbeing, for EAL students these challenges were further intensified (Goldrick-Rab, 2021). This section seeks to present the perceptions of the participating students on the academic and emotional obstacles they faced during remote learning.

5.1.1 Difficulty in Accessing Technology

One of the main difficulties the participants faced during remote learning, especially at the start of the outbreak of the pandemic, was difficulty in accessing and using technology. Given learning transitioned to an online format, most of these students being newly arrived in Australia, stated that they struggled to use certain online platforms endorsed by their school. It is interesting to note that while in teacher interviews, the participants discussed issues around internet accessibility, the student interviews focused more on personal struggles in learning how to use it to achieve learning outcomes.

Student A recalled her experience with using technology for the first time in an educational setting and how her limited experience with technology affected her engagement with her learning:

I was not familiar with like using laptop, using OneNote especially so it was really difficult for me and like even submitting my assignments was difficult because like if I was in class, I'd be like putting my hand up asking for help. But at home it wasn't like that. Like I did have a brother but we all struggled because it was early stages coming like adjusting to this whole new way of education with technology having like a great big presence and so it was difficult.

Her views reveal the level of assistance EAL students in her circumstances require in face-to-face learning and how, with that support system taken away in the context of the pandemic, students find themselves adjusting to a method of learning in which technology is an integral aspect. She further added that while her understanding of technology and its

usage in education was minimal, it was more like an opportunity to learn and a challenge to overcome rather than a source of embarrassment and a feeling of dejection:

I am not going to say this was embarrassing but it's not because I was at a stage where I did know that not knowing is not an embarrassment. But like I didn't know how to like convert like a Word document into a PDF which is like really a big thing because you can just do it on Google now I know that but at the time I didn't know.

Similar to Student A, Student D also struggled with grasping the fundamental computer skills that were required to complete learning tasks during remote learning:

When we came here, I didn't really know how to use them like I used to ask my brother like I didn't even know how to turn it on like that on button and then um yeah, I think my brother showed me how to like turn it off and on and then after that I got used to like typing. My typing was so bad at the start I used to type like a word like it took me like probably like one minute. It was like the top the task that would have taken time for others probably like let's say 20 minutes for me that would have taken like at least like 40 minutes so at least.

Her words echo the general struggle one would face when learning to use a computer and a keyboard for the first time, and one can identify that in such instances, students would spend more time attempting to complete the task than learning and implementing new knowledge and skills required for them to achieve their learning outcomes.

However, Student D also revealed how remote learning compelled EAL students to be more independent with the use of technology through her experience of learning how to use online platforms by herself:

So it is like learn how to find it then do it or search it I didn't even know how to use Google at the time to check. I used to do it myself. I was like 'okay how do I do it?' And then yeah and then with OneNote I feel like it was easier to use because the teachers would have given us on the instructions. You just go on the tab and then you would find the task you need to do but for I think word document and stuff even though it sounds easy but I think I learned it through a hard way. I had to learn like typing I had to learn yeah everything and then how to use it or like yeah even PowerPoint I didn't know how to use it at the start like in 2020.

Her experiences highlight how, along with challenges and obstacles brought by the pandemic, EAL students had to cultivate a sense of agency when navigating the use of technology.

Student C did not allude to specific difficulty in using online platforms but stated how he faced issues in staying engaged in online learning sessions as poor connectivity was a disruptive factor during the pandemic:

Because in remote learning there's a lot of... it's also about internet connection that sometimes makes it harder because during the lockdown, in our home, the Wi-Fi and the internet was bad enough that we could, like, get out. If I got locked out of it (online lesson) just because the internet was there so maybe up to 10 minutes, 15 minutes and then when you came back I think you had missed some of the learnings.

The data also revealed that a country's internet policy had a direct impact on how students accessed online learning platforms. It was revealed by both Students E and F that they needed a virtual private network (VPN) to access the online learning platforms their school was using in Australia. They outlined how that was a major technological difficulty they had faced during the pandemic as the instability of the internet was a hindrance to their learning as it inhibited effective communication with their teachers and led to disrupted learning.

And also sometimes because the internet problem, you know, because we're in China, if we want to do the Zoom from Australia, we have to have the VPN, and the VPN sometimes is not stable. So, it's quite hard and quite challenged' (Student E).

In the previous chapter, it was discussed how EAL students depend on teacher guidance to achieve success in learning. In a remote learning setting where interaction between teachers and students is limited, students who are dedicated to their learning would attempt to make optimum use of the online learning sessions. Student C's view reveals that even a 10–15 minute delay can create major disruption in learning for an EAL student.

The data revealed that it was more likely that the longer a student had lived in Australia, the easier it was for them to access technology and engage in learning. Student B was not a new arrival to the country when schools in Victoria commenced remote learning; hence, her struggles were limited to familiarising herself with the new online platforms used by

her teachers. When asked whether she faced difficulty in using technology during the pandemic, her response was:

I guess not so much. Because we know how to use technology, basically. So it wasn't as hard for us to get the hang of it. So, after a few Zoom meetings, we already were introduced to it and get used to it. So it wasn't that bad.

5.1.2 Language Barriers Impeding Learning

An obvious hypothesis regarding EAL students is that they would inevitably face difficulty in using language in reading, writing, speaking and listening in any form of learning. During the pandemic, it can be expected that this difficulty would have been exacerbated without a teacher's presence to guide them in their learning and without being in an environment where they could practice their language skills.

Student A outlined that the obstacles regarding using language for academic purposes hindered her performance in the earlier VCE subject she was doing as well in EAL. Her words further emphasise the importance of the role of the teacher and being a part of a learning community in improving their linguistic skills and how the limited number of online sessions had detrimental impacts on their use of English:

I was doing an earlier VCE subject. I was doing politics and language was a barrier and it was kind of getting my in my way of like excelling in my politics class the way I wanted to and in EAL, it was kind of hard because when we were in class our teachers would give us instructions. That way we would understand like visually and everything but it was difficult during remote learning because we had the classes once a week. Even though like the teacher will provide us help, but it was kind of difficult. And communication was another big thing that you were not communicating in English as much so that kind of like brought my English speaking down by the time I came back like I could notice those like difference, those gaps in my language.

She further lamented the loss of opportunity she and her peers had faced to improve their English during the pandemic as they were removed from an English-speaking environment and had to remain at home for months where English was not the medium of communication:

There's no rule for us to improve because we are not in class like, we are not challenged like we're not speaking as much so when you like learning a new language personally,

I think you learn something like a word or a thing every day and to not be speaking for like months and months be at home and not being in an environment when everyone speaks English is yeah, it is hindering. It is not healthy at all.

Student B also reiterated this view of requiring more support with English as for EAL students, it is an additional language: 'It's a subject that you need a lot of help from, because it's our second language. So, we might not know a lot of stuff'.

As an international student, Student F revealed that she was apprehensive about online learning owing to the language barrier she experienced and how that would inevitably affect communication with her teachers. This further reveals the necessity for online learning to be more accessible to learners of diverse linguistic backgrounds and how the learning model that was utilised in certain schools during the pandemic would not have taken this factor into consideration.

I was really worried about my study because I, as an international student, I have a like language problem with the teacher. So, I was worried that I cannot understand what the teacher is talking about. So, we cannot meet face-to-face and learn, so that's why I was worried about the online class.

In Student C's case, he was required to study both mainstream English and EAL at his school, which made him prefer EAL to mainstream English as with language constraints and challenges with the pandemic, it would have been difficult for a student from a non-English-speaking background:

As far as I remember there was more because I get to do English in year 10 especially I get to do year English and EAL so given that I used to do English it made it easier to do EAL because just because maybe English was a bit harder.

For EAL students who joined mainstream schools in Australia during the pandemic, language constraints would have increased their concerns regarding engaging in learning as well as establishing relationships with the school community. Student D related her experience as a newly enrolled student at her school during remote learning and how the absence of face-to-face support from her teachers impeded her learning as low competency in language prevented her from establishing a rapport with them:

I did not know like proper English and then I could not see my teachers like communicating in class is different like you can talk to them and then like because uh if you know if you don't know how to speak English like communicating through the phone like it's hard.

Student D further emphasised the significance of language in fostering peer relations. She believed that it would lead to a sense of belonging for students who are integrating into mainstream schooling. This was true, especially for students who were struggling with language incompetency:

I did not have any friends because communicating is a key thing I could not, because my English wasn't like that good to uh talk to like um the students whose English was like really good.

The observations of these participants elucidate that while language barriers are anticipated among EAL students, the pandemic and remote learning conditions intensified existing learning challenges, rendering it difficult for these students to voice their concerns and seek support from teachers and peers.

5.1.3 Decline in Academic Performance

All the participating students witnessed a noticeable decline in their academic performance during the pandemic as well as leading to their VCE examinations post-COVID-19. The pandemic has redefined traditional learning issues faced by EAL students with the addition of restrictions on physical movement and limitation of social interactions, and this was reflective of the perceptions of the participating students in their evaluation of their academic performance from 2020 onwards.

One of the primary lapses students could identify in their academic performance was the limited understanding of language conventions and grammatical structures when producing written work. Student A believed that the academic years that were crucial to building key skills needed for VCE EAL were spent away from the conventional classroom, and hence it had created ongoing flaws in her written work, which affected her academic achievement:

In terms like grammar I still struggle because of that like when I wasn't there like to build those foundation in class where the teacher would teach us actual grammar and

everything. So like I think I missed that part and to this day I struggle with my spelling. Sorry with my spelling with my grammar. And even if you ask my teacher, she would tell you that there are like SACs that I've done that my results was really good but my grammar and my spelling... I don't know want to say inability. But like yeah, it kind of brings my results down.

This participant also identified that her knowledge of texts and her ability to read and unpack texts were severely affected owing to spending two years of vital schooling under remote conditions. She acknowledged how these fundamental skills are crucial at the VCE level and that without proper foundational knowledge, it can be difficult for EAL students to apply these skills in their work:

I wasn't aware of how to use the techniques how to apply them. So, it was really difficult to like read a book and actually understand what the author is try to say, the themes to pull out of the book and to like use techniques to see like how they approach to persuade the audience like all those knowledge. You need those like you need the foundation to like understand text fully and be able to like write essays about it or like use it in like an actual SAC or CAT at a time. So, like I did not have that foundation. So, it was really difficult. But yeah, but once we came out of COVID, our teacher would like actually teach us that I would like...I remember thinking I'm like, we should have known this early on.

Another perception that arose from the interviews was how remote learning was an impediment for many EAL students as they lost the opportunity to be a part of an interactive classroom where they would brainstorm and unpack texts with their teachers and peers and how those interactive sessions were crucial to their understanding of texts and subsequent academic performance embodied in their writing.

Because in Australia, the way we are doing the EAL is just to read through the book and to have the deep understanding of the book and the character, right? And so I like to have the interaction with my teachers' (Student E).

This perception was echoed in the words of Student D when she said that the pandemic was a reason behind many students' decline in reading skills and motivation. She believed that without the right motivation and ability to read, it would be difficult to understand a literary text. She also added that this decline was collective rather than personal, and it was associated with a common disinclination to read texts that arose with the pandemic:

I feel like it decreased the knowledge of the text. Because if you're not reading as much of the books as you're supposed to, you don't know as much. Like, you don't have the knowledge that you should have. And also, some people, I feel like the lockdown made a lot of people, I would say, lazy. Because even in year 12, there were some people that ignored reading the books that they had to. Even, like. Like, English or, like, EAL, they would have read it, like, one night before their SAC or, like, exam. They would have started reading it. But then if, I feel like if there was no lockdown, they had to, they wouldn't have been like that.

Outlining a similar view, Student E also attributed her decline in academic performance to a decrease in motivation as a student. While her revelations highlight the importance for learners to balance their studies with academic expectations and foster independence in learning, they emphasise how students often fail at achieving this balance and sense of agency:

I feel like just the most important thing is just to get myself like motivated because the remote learning is just about like individual study and learning. And I admit that I didn't do well on that one.

Connected to the knowledge of texts and coherent writing skills is the notion of creativity. It was revealed that the time spent away from the conventional classroom contributed to the lack of creativity demonstrated by students in their written responses. Student B's view was that limited social interaction and increased hours spent on technological devices severely affected students' creative capacity during the pandemic:

I guess, yeah, there was not much of imagination, creativity going on. And just like plain writing. So, I guess that affected in a way that later on we couldn't think of any bright ideas... We were locked in a house where we couldn't go outside and see everything else. We were just using our phones all day on the phones. And there was not much of creativity going on. There was not much of anything going on. So, it really dulled our imagination and creativity.

The interviews also unveiled the common perception among students that when it comes to writing in English, having legible and neat handwriting is an integral component. It was interesting to discover that, for some participants, good writing was synonymous with

good handwriting. Student B referred to how lack of writing during the pandemic affected her handwriting at the VCE level and how that was a flaw that could not be recovered:

Since I was not writing a lot and therefore my handwriting really got bad. So, when I started VCE in year 11 and 12, it was hard for me to get back on the same level. Because if there was no lockdown, we were taught from year 9 and 10, it would have helped us so much in year 11 and 12. Because we already had the basics and everything else. But since that wasn't the case, it was harder for us to... I struggled till year 12 with my handwriting.

Student C also echoed this sentiment when he said:

Because of the lockdowns, you had to do a lot of typing. And then we, when we came back to school, we had to write now. And then like, obviously, my handwriting is not so good. Because just because you also didn't practice a lot writing with your hands at home, that makes the writing a little harder.

Student F stated that lack of proper practice in handwriting a sustained piece of writing affected student performance in the VCE examination, where they were required to write essays under timed conditions. It was her belief that remote learning was a hindrance to students practising their writing, and this echoes the concern outlined by teachers in the previous chapter about the impact remote learning had on student writing skills:

As an international student, I think just writing on the paper during the test is really hard because you need to write beautiful writing that can make the teacher easy to read, but you also need to write quickly because the time is not really enough.

The data seem to suggest that owing to the mode of delivery of the VCE examination being in written format, students would attribute great importance to handwriting and, hence, may feel a sense of failure for not having the same efficiency as typing when it comes to handwriting.

5.2 Emotional Challenges Faced During the Pandemic

While remote learning unveiled several academic challenges for EAL students, there were also emotional challenges that impeded their learning. This section will look closely at the emotional challenges that were identified by the participants during the pandemic. While some emotional challenges are common across the wider cohort of school students,

certain emotional challenges are unique to the online learning experience of EAL students.

5.2.1 Stress, Isolation and Loss of Motivation

When asked about the emotional challenges that affected EAL students during the pandemic, the participants often mentioned anxiety and isolation as the main hindrances that prevented them from staying motivated as students. This feeling of isolation was not limited to the circumstances around the pandemic and the socio-political context of these students' home countries also had an impact on their emotional wellbeing. Student A remembered how the Taliban insurgency, which took place in 2021, took an immense toll on her mental health and how the fact that it took place while Victoria was in lockdown increased her anxiety, which had left a lasting impact on how she perceives the world:

It was a lot of emotions like sad. I guess anger because the world was literally silent not doing anything and I was just yet frustrated and heartbroken like seeing all those footages online. I'm sure you've seen it, the airport scene and everything. It's just hard and to this day, I can't get it off my mind and it's good to talk about those stuff, but there weren't people I could talk to. My family was there but they were impacted too. So, I didn't want to burden them with my emotions and my feelings.

She explained the impact this event had made her lose motivation to learn, emphasising that EAL students are often affected by the socio-political events of their home country, which further affect their education:

I was the type who like at the start of COVID-19, I was the first one to like wake up do everything like I was like a nerd in fact. Not that it's a bad thing, but I was doing all my work but at when it first happened the Taliban taking over, I had no motivation to study nothing. So, like it did impact my results as well because I wasn't attending my classes. I had like no energy to do my work and yeah, it was difficult times.

When discussing the influence of remote learning on the emotional wellbeing of students, Student B also agreed that isolation was one of the worst aspects of the experience as it took students away from their peers and created a pervading sense of boredom, which disrupted student concentration and motivation:

That was the worst part. It was very boring. The same thing every day. Yeah. And like we could not focus on our studies too much. Yeah. I think the worst part was that we could not have outside contact and focus on our studies.

Student B also referred to how the novelty of the pandemic and remote learning became overwhelming for EAL students, and they had to make additional efforts to be on par with other students in their school setting in terms of academic performance:

I think it was overwhelming. Because something new, I guess. It was overwhelming to get the hang of it. To, at that period when you're at home getting distracted by everything else, do your work.

Referring to the overwhelming nature of the pandemic, Student D discussed her experience where physical isolation from peers led to emotional isolation, which affected her wellbeing:

It was hard. I used to cry a lot. And then I used to cry a lot. Like, everyone asking in my home, like, 'why are you crying?' I was like, 'leave me alone. I just want to cry. Like, I could not explain the reason. But I was just like, I emotionally needed that cry to get out, like, my feelings. Because I could not describe them. It was just there. And I had to, like, let it out. I think, yeah, emotionally was, it was challenging the fact that we did not have any friends or we could not go out.

Another emotional challenge that EAL students faced was the loss of motivation that resulted in a lack of authenticity in assessments produced by students and the generic scores certain teachers had given students. Her views show that for EAL students who work diligently, not receiving adequate feedback would be demoralising as their assessment feedback is not a real reflection of their capabilities and does not show a direction where they could make improvements:

I feel like some of the CATs the teachers were just giving us like numbers. I feel like they were not checking it properly because anyone you'd ask they would have got like the same score. I was like, 'okay' because some people used to just copy you know like off the website or it wasn't their own work but then we would have ended up with the same score like all the time. I feel like that hurt my feelings because I used to like study, study, study like even in lockdown I used to put a lot of effort... I kind of lost motivation and yeah and that I didn't want to put that effort anymore.

Further elaborating on the notion of isolation impacting EAL students during remote learning and loss of motivation, Student C also recalled how his capacity as a student was challenged by the pandemic and how stress, feelings of isolation and loss of motivation affected his academic performance:

I get to experience some kind of stress just because of the learning. And at the same time, it makes you a little more less motivated with your whole education. Because I used to be a very good student getting high marks. But when it got to lockdown, I don't know, something happens and I got my grades got lower and lower and lower. So I don't know, maybe just because of personal things. I don't know. But yeah, maybe more stress a little. And I could... I felt lonelier than I had ever been to experience before.

While the international students had some level of experience of being isolated from friends and family, the notion of academic achievement and its relation to student fulfilment was an emotional challenge they had to overcome during the pandemic:

I think I often get confused and get lost and a little bit depressed about my studying progress. Because that was year 11 and I was turning to year 12. So, I'm a little bit worried about my study program. (Student E)

While the challenges outlined by the participants are universal for school students, it is evident that for EAL students, these challenges would have increased the impact of pre-existing concerns they would have faced in their learning. The participants' idea of isolation during the lockdown reflects how they lost a sense of community, which they relied on for moral support when facing obstacles of living and studying in a foreign country.

5.2.2 Minimal Support at the School Level

The data also revealed that while students praised teachers for supporting them during the pandemic, they also believed that some teachers lacked a level of understanding of their experience, which made the latter ignorant of the circumstances of EAL students in the context of the pandemic. It was also revealed that teacher motivation had a direct impact on student learning. In the absence of teacher motivation, students found it difficult to stay motivated to learn in an online learning environment:

Sometimes the teachers in school are not motivated to do the remote learning as well because sometimes because they need to put like two screens together, the PowerPoint one and the class recording one together. And sometimes they think it's just like too complex and waste lots of time to do it. So sometimes they won't do it' (Student E)

Student A strongly believed that while her teachers assisted her with accessing work and giving them support to complete learning tasks, it was evident that they were unable to comprehend the individual needs of students:

It was difficult for her like it was difficult to like meet the individual needs of students; see how what they are like, different level of obviously and it was difficult for her to notice that and I think we all struggled a bit.

While this student acknowledged that teachers also face novel issues arising from the pandemic, she lamented the lack of emotional support she received from most of her teachers and their ignorance of what EAL students were going through, especially regarding the socio-political climate of her home country:

They didn't really see us struggle so I'm not blaming them. But yeah, there wasn't any help extra help that help us with those.

This student's views reveal that for EAL students, emotional support plays as important a role as academic support, and teachers need to be aware of the wider concerns that affect their learning and wellbeing to make these students feel safe and supported in an academic environment.

Student D added to this perception, stating that she was perplexed by the behaviour of some teachers as they demonstrated a level of ignorance of what EAL students were experiencing during lockdown:

Some of the teachers they were like kind of rude like they... not the word not rude, but they would have like not really understood the amount of pressure.

5.2.3 Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a form of harassment where individuals use technology to intimidate, threaten and exploit others (Bansal et al., 2024). It is also reported that misuse of technology can lead to over-reliance on technology, pseudo-socialisation and cyberbullying (Mihai, 2021).

While most of the participating students in this research did not report any incidents of cyberbullying, one participant reported an incident where a student had attempted to make inappropriate contact with female students through misuse of school-approved online platforms. Student D also noted that it was an incident that affected several students and required the intervention of the school wellbeing team:

He used to text like girls uh and like not bully but like um somehow I don't know how to say it but um I can say bully or like abuse them like you know online. And then it was one time he texted me he was like on the thing like on the app he was like 'I like you' and then that turned out to a big problem because he texted every other girl in the class. That turned out a into a big problem in the school and then the school was calling us like 'are you okay?' like the wellbeing support team and everything because it was online.

It should be noted that this incident took place at a language school in Victoria where every newly arrived student with low levels of English knowledge is enrolled to learn English and other subjects before they are integrated into mainstream schools. Therefore, the incident further reflects issues EAL students can face regarding the use of technology. While there is inconclusive evidence from the collected data that cyberbullying was a common issue that affected EAL learners in general, the incident highlighted by Student D, highlights how, factors such as limited supervision, isolation and lack of motivation can lead to such incidents..

5.3 Academic and Wellbeing Support During the Pandemic

In the previous section, participants revealed the emotional challenges they faced during the pandemic and how, in certain aspects, the support they received had been limited. This section will probe into the support these students received from their schools and will present findings pertaining to academic and wellbeing support provided by schools and teachers.

5.3.1 Academic Support

It has already been established in this research that EAL students need constant academic support regardless of the mode of content delivery. It has also been established that in an online learning environment and taking VCE examinations into account, it is imperative for these students to receive additional support from teachers. In this phase of interviews, students referred to the strategies employed by teachers to assist them in their learning. Through looking at the data, it was discovered that the students who identified themselves as ambitious and more independent were not particularly satisfied with the support they received during the pandemic and believed that they received more academic support once they returned to face-to-face learning. Student A briefly referred to how her teachers supported her learning by scaffolding the content and assisting with the use of technology:

So, like we've used to have like classes like once a week and she (the teacher) will explain everything but it was difficult for her.

One of my teachers showed me how to do it (convert a file into PDF format) like when we were on MS Teams, so that was really nice.

She also added that the support she received from her school was generic and not specifically catered to EAL students as they were not able to witness their struggles, as stated earlier in this chapter:

I guess they didn't see it happening. So, they were all like knew you will not be on site. I mean some teachers maybe did help.

This participant further alluded to how she sought feedback from teachers during the pandemic, and her views reveal the mechanical process of communicating with their

teachers and how, as EAL students, they would need more support than engaging in constant rounds of emails:

We used to like send it through or submit it on Compass or what not and they will look at it, give us feedback on there or like send us an email saying areas of improvement or like they can add a little comment on a Word document and stuff. That's our only way of communicating with our teachers for like areas of improvement.

However, this student felt that she received better academic support once she had returned to school after the pandemic:

Once we came out of COVID, our teacher would like actually teach us that I would like...I remember thinking I'm like, we should have known this early on so that it wasn't so difficult for us during COVID but it would like I was like as we were learning, I was like this is good we were learning but it's too late.

This shows that as an EAL student, the participant was more appreciative of the explicit teaching she received from teachers, and she considered it academic support that would enhance her learning.

The interviews revealed how teachers had also allocated additional time to conduct support sessions for EAL students and this was helpful to international students who were studying from a different country and a different time zone to catch up with the missed lessons.

My teacher, like my EAL teacher, she will send some notes from the class and then she will send me after class and teach me like more things. And she will also send some extra documents to support me to understand the and also my EAL teacher, she will have another time, like she will email me, say like we can have another time to have a chat after the class.

Student D also noticed that the support she received from teachers at her school varied, and it was not consistent throughout remote learning. She observed that some teachers were not familiar with online learning, and the short sessions were not sufficient for them to explicitly teach content and explain the weekly tasks set for them. For an EAL student in Year 10, lack of explicit teaching would inevitably affect their learning as explicit instructions avoid cognitive overload and improve academic performance (Siregar, 2021):

Some of my teachers in year 10 in here, they were not very good at teaching in remote like they would just come to the online class like for like 15 minutes and then they would have explained to us what to do but not in detail. They would have barely given us like instructions on what to do and then they would have been like okay like time is up like 'I'm gonna go I have another class.

However, she also believed that there were teachers who were very supportive and understood the academic constraints EAL students were under and hence demonstrated a level of flexibility with deadlines and submissions:

Some of our teachers they were very supportive ... they would have understood. If I was stuck on a task like um doesn't matter imagine like a task they've given us we had to finish by a deadline, I would have like emailed them 'hi miss like I won't be able to do it' and they would have given us more time.

Like Student A, she too understood that teachers were limited in their capacity to provide support during the lockdown and believed that away from it, they were able to maintain constant interaction with students to ensure they learning the fundamental skills needed for academic success:

They could not, like. In class, they can come and, like, show it to you. But, like, in lockdown. All they could do is to write an email. Or, like, to send you a video. They would not have done... could not have done as much as they could have. They could not, like, put, like, time. Lunch time. Or, like, recess time to show you.

Student B had a more positive view of the support she received from her teachers. She stated that teachers were more lenient with EAL students during remote learning and were very understanding of the difficulties they were facing with online learning. She highlighted how teachers reduced the workload to allow students to feel a sense of achievement:

They were very understanding, first of all, because they know it's a hard period of time. So, they were trying to go easy on the work, the homework, so like what we had to do. They would provide us with not too much, but enough to keep us busy at home to make sure we do work and stuff like that. Yeah, they would like check in on us, be like, 'oh, how are you guys doing?' If we had any questions that we would like ask them about any of the work.

Similar to Students A and D, Student B also believed that she received more support to learn content and improve her knowledge and skills after the pandemic. Referring to how she improved her reading and grammar skills, she stated that ‘luckily my teachers helped me fix my grammar and spelling mistakes’ and ‘I got my teachers to improve’ reading and writing skills.

Of all the participants, Student C was the most appreciative of the support he had received during the pandemic from the school and teachers. He called his teachers ‘great’ for the amount of support they had shown him, and he expressed his positive views about how the lessons were broken down to make them more accessible and interactive for EAL students and to prevent learning from being an overwhelming process:

A lot of simple lessons. And then we still had to do the lessons one at a time, step by step. Not too much works at all. But one. So each work was... Each learnings, intention or those things were organised. So, we had to go step by step so that we are not overwhelmed with that. Yeah. And some supports could be... They would give you a little links for quizzes and surveys that would make it a bit easier to learn.

He also appreciated his teachers for the detailed feedback he received and how he felt supported to make improvements to his learning as a result:

Yeah. So during each task, when we submitted, we got to get a lot of feedbacks and we had to redo it and again and again. So that makes it very good to learn it. And it's like better, better learning experience. It makes you to learn even better.

Like the other participants, he too admitted that once he returned to face-to-face learning, the process became easier and that the teachers ensured that students’ circumstances were taken into consideration when reinstating them into the conventional classroom:

But the learning was... I would say it got smooth, just because it was... Because the teachers knew that we were coming from lockdown, so I think they took it easy on us a little. And then we had to, like, little by little, we just could adjust. So I think just because they knew that coming after lockdown, they wouldn't want you overwhelmed with work. So I think they just took it a little at a time.

A significant trend that arose from these interviews was that when asked about school support, students primarily referred to their teachers. It is evident that the role of teachers is crucial for EAL students in their process of language acquisition and academic success.

However, the interviews seem to suggest that for EAL students, teachers are also representative of a direct support system that creates a safe learning environment.

5.3.2 Wellbeing Support

As stated earlier, EAL students faced emotional difficulties during the pandemic that impeded their learning. This section will focus on the wellbeing support students received to cope with the challenges posed by the global health crisis. Students presented different views regarding the wellbeing support they received from their school communities, and it should be noted that the students who felt more supported academically also felt more supported emotionally during the pandemic.

It was referred to in this chapter how Student A explained the emotional trauma she experienced as a result of the Taliban insurgence in her home country in 2021. She also lamented that most teachers were unable to acknowledge this event and its impact on EAL students of a similar background. However, she was grateful to receive emotional support from her VCE Global Politics teacher and given the subject expertise of the teacher; it is obvious that he would have been aware of the extent of the impact the military event had on Afghan students:

But I did have a teacher who reached out and to that I am grateful to this day to Mr H who reached out because it was impacting me to the extent that I wouldn't like to attend my classes or do my work but it was yeah, it was bad times. He reached out saying like, 'how are you doing?' and 'you were not in class'.

Further referring to the wellbeing support provided to EAL students, Student D recalled how the school responded to the cyberbullying incident experienced by female students, including herself. Even though it appeared that she did not understand the gravity of the situation through her recollection, it is evident from her words that the school had treated the incident with diligence and duty of care, and the wellbeing support team were in contact with the parents as well:

That turned out a big into a big problem in the school and then the school was calling us like 'are you okay?' like the wellbeing support team and everything because it was

online and everything. I think yeah it was now I think about it it's funny like they even called my parents about it.

Student D also appreciated her teachers for understanding that students would be under stress when assigning work during remote learning in 2021. Her perception showed that teachers were able to build on the experiences of remote learning in 2020 and to be more considerate about the emotional wellbeing of students:

They tried I think the teachers tried their best to give us like understanding amount of work to just like um because they knew that some of their students are already like experiencing like mental health issues. Because of that uh lockdown and then like 'this will put pressure on them'.

When discussing emotional support received from the school, it was revealed that consistent wellbeing support contributes to enjoyment in learning, reduced anxiety, and improved educational support (Apostolidis & Tsiatsos, 2015). While remote learning struggled to engage students in learning, Student B's view substantiated this argument as she believed because of regular wellbeing check-ins, she did not feel traumatised by disrupted learning:

I don't remember much, trauma. Yeah, basically they provided us support by making sure our teachers are checking in on us. And they would daily post on Compass about what's happening, stuff like that. They would just be like, 'oh, don't be stressed. Don't be overwhelmed. Everything is going to be fine. They would make sure that we know that we have their support.

Another wellbeing support measure taken by schools during the pandemic and beyond in was to incorporate mindfulness activities and encourage students to cultivate and practice gratitude in classes. Student C's experience with gratitude journals and meditation during remote learning echoed the notion that mindfulness during COVID-19 improved focus and stress management (Koner & Weaver, 2021).

In the mornings, we had to, or maybe every day, or maybe once a week, I'm not sure. We had to do some reflection, then like gratitude, and then like some relaxing. Maybe we were doing some meditation at some times. That helped us. Like during the class, even when we went to school. When we were learning remotely, we sometimes we were

doing meditation. Okay. Yeah. It could make you more relaxed and like be more in the presence. It was a good one. Yes.

Students E and F, who were international students, stated how the school had appointed a teacher whose responsibility was to support EAL students academically as well as emotionally. This reference emphasises the positive measures schools took during the pandemic to ensure that students whose learning was somewhat disrupted owing to travel restrictions and other public health measures were engaged in their learning and were achieving their academic outcomes:

So they have hired a teacher like outside and she is just the head of remote learning. Sort of things to particularly support us. All her job is just to support the international students like us to do our remote learning better. So she's responsible for our study program. And she had the like checking meeting with us like every week' (Student E)

5.4 Home Environment and Contextual Factors

One of the main foci of this research is to examine the domestic and cultural factors that affected VCE EAL student learning during the pandemic. In the interview phase with teachers, it was revealed that EAL students had to face obstacles such as parent unemployment, sharing domestic responsibilities and disruptive home environments. This section will present student perceptions of their own experiences at home with their families during remote learning, and it will focus on the sub-themes of parental support and influence, domestic responsibilities and ethnic factors.

5.4.1 Parental Support and Influence

To understand the experiences of EAL students in the context of online learning, it is imperative to understand their domestic context and how that influenced their learning in 2020 and 2021. It is commendable to discover that none of the participants reported any compulsion from their home environment to simply engage in continuous study, and the flexibility that the teachers showed the students was also shown by parents. In Student A's description, one can identify that despite the unemployment of some parents and its challenges, students appreciated the time families were able to spend together during the pandemic:

Yeah, but it was good that we were all together so it was good times. Yeah. Like our parents would not be working and we would always like it breakfast together because otherwise like it when it come to school we wouldn't have that and like having all those quality family time. Those were good. Yeah, those were the positives.

She further added that her family was only able to provide her with emotional support but not academic support. This could be because most parents of EAL students were not proficient in English, and hence, they were unable to provide assistance with schoolwork, especially at the VCE level.

However, she also reported feeling isolated among her own family members during the Taliban insurgence in 2021, as she felt it was insensitive of her to burden other family members with her own emotional dilemma. In this case, she expressed her displeasure at not having an adult figure who could be of solace during this challenging time:

When Taliban took over everyone's emotions mixed up not mixed up, but everyone was feeling the feelings. So it was kind of difficult here. It impacted my parents and all the elders in our family like I couldn't like speak to them and like as I said, I didn't have my teacher like that elderly like figure so I couldn't speak to my parents about it.

Student B also stated that she had a supportive learning environment at home where her parents were a source of encouragement for her and her siblings to engage in learning and how they ensured that they were given a comfortable learning space:

My home environment... Um... During lockdown... Everything was pretty chill. Like... Me and my sister, we would study in our room. My parents would... Yeah, they would just support us. They would bring us food. Fruits and stuff like that. When we were studying, they would not disturb us. They would like... Maybe get us up some mornings. They would be like, get up, study. Or like, you have to mark the roll. Come eat breakfast. And then stuff like that, yeah. It was a supportive environment.

Like Student A, Student D also had unemployed parents at the start of the pandemic; her family had to face financial difficulties, which would have added to other stressful factors impacting the family:

So we were relying on payments for, from Centrelink to, you know. So we had to pay, like, \$1,000, like, I do not know, at the start, \$1,600 per month for, like, rent. I mean, with the Centrelink payments, you could not, like, get that much. Like, even if you did,

you had to, like, pay for your bills. You had to pay, like, for the food. So it was, in our house, it was a really challenging year.

She also highlighted issues around space that affected her learning where she had to share a learning space with her siblings and her mother, and this would inevitably have affected her learning as it is believed that student space at home is directly correlated with student motivation and academic performance (Ramatillah et al., 2021).

So, at that time, we did not really have, like, separate rooms. But then when I had, like, a meeting or, like, I had, you know, like, a meeting with my mom, like, a teacher or, like, I had a class, my, even though my mom had a class and my sister, she had a class, they used to go, like, into separate rooms to just not, like, disturb each other.

Like the previous two participants, Student D also endorsed the concept of extended periods of spending time together with her family, and she appreciated the flexibility remote learning offered to spend more time with her family while also engaging in learning:

Now the thing, we had much more time to spend with the family. We had, yeah, we had, I mean, the mornings, I used to get up, I used to, like, put my hair, comb my hair and then, like, get ready. I had time to do everything and then eat breakfast and then I had a meeting. Instead of, like, me waking up, like, in a rush or, like, just to, like, wear your uniform and then come to school. And then we, yeah, we had more time with the family. We, it was, like, you could do the tasks in your own time.

Student C extended this perception and stated that the pandemic was instrumental in revealing aspects of individual personalities that encouraged individuals to be grateful and appreciative of family and their contribution to student learning:

When we started during the lockdown, I remember my father was supporting me more than we were coming to school because just because we were studying in front of him. He was at home and when he went home he could see us then he would support us more and encourage us more to study more I mean. Did it help? I'm not sure but there was more support from my dad especially my mom always supports but more support from my dad okay I think it reveals some new faces during the lockdown.

This participant's view also reveals that for most EAL students, the extent to which parents can provide support is moral, emotional and encouragement and hence, if they

required academic support, they would have to reach out to their teachers, whereby emphasising the latter's importance even further.

It is also interesting that out of all the participants, only Student C discussed the disruptive home environment and its impact on his learning. As stated earlier by the participating teachers, most students of refugee backgrounds had difficulty engaging in learning owing to large families being a disruptive factor, and Student C's view seemed to echo this belief:

One of the major obstacles was that from when it was during the lockdown, it was studying at home because of too much noises. And given that we had eight people in one home, so a lot of noises. And we also got a... I got also a baby sister who's just now three years. So a lot of noises makes it very hard to concentrate and everything. You always had to move from one place to another place just because you don't want to hear all the background noises.

What was also intriguing was that Students E and F, who were international students, did not divulge explicit information on the level of support they received from their parents. They outlined that their parents facilitated learning by providing them with snacks and food and how the family dynamics remained similar to what it was before the outbreak of the pandemic. Therefore, it would be accurate to presume that the domestic environments of these learners were not a disruptive factor in the learning of these students.

5.4.2 Domestic Responsibilities

In the interview phase with teachers, it was revealed that students of refugee backgrounds had to shoulder domestic responsibilities, and that affected their learning, while international students did not have any household or carer responsibilities that would have potentially disrupted their learning. Supporting this claim, the two international students also stated that they did not have additional responsibilities to shoulder in their homes. The participating refugee students were asked whether they had to fulfil domestic responsibilities during the pandemic. While none of the students reported having to assume a parenting or caregiving role to younger siblings, they stated that they had to complete chores around the house. It is also worthy to outline that while teacher participants believed that students were burdened with household responsibilities preventing them from engaging in learning, the student participants seemed to

acknowledge household duties as a part of their daily routine that was not a hindrance to their learning.

Student A briefly mentioned that she continued to do ‘regular chores’ around the house. Student B’s opinion was that given the students were at home, they had to do more household chores than usual:

Probably more. Because when we were in school the whole day, my mom would do everything (household chores) until we come back. But during the lockdown, yeah, we had to help my mom with a lot of things. So... We had to do a lot of things like cleaning, washing dishes and stuff like that.

However, she also believed that it was not always a distraction, and at times, it proved to be a much-needed interval from the tedious process of online learning:

Sometimes it was a break where if I needed one, it was a really good break. Sometimes it was a distraction preventing me from studying.

Student C’s belief was that the responsibilities around the house were more collaborative tasks she completed with her siblings:

We had to, I had, I personally had to clean the kitchen and then, like, cook sometimes whenever I felt like. And then, yeah, and then we all, everyone had a chore in the house. Like, I had to wash the dishes after every, like, yeah, lunchtime was my time. And dinner was my sister's and then morning was my brother's. So, we had to, like, everyone, like, had a chore to do.

Her views also revealed how in families that have financial constraints, children found themselves contributing to support their parents. She narrated how she had to assist her mother in her catering business during the pandemic and how she had to balance it with schoolwork. It is important to note that while she outlined that she at times had to postpone completing schoolwork owing to supporting her mother, she did not consider it a major hindrance to her learning:

Probably sometimes, not always. Sometimes when, whenever I had, like, meetings or, like, I would have put my laptop next to me and then, like, make it (food). Or I would

have balanced it that way. But then if it was, like, a busy day, I had to put my task for, like, the day after to do. Okay. Yeah. Like, I could not finish all of them on that day.

Student C's experience with household responsibilities demonstrated that fulfilling domestic responsibilities was not a gender-defined task for EAL students:

Two things I remember doing or maybe more was every day vacuuming the house so cleaning the house. Then sometimes we had to clean the rugs so we had to wash them outside the house so it took us like two hours, three hours. I think those are two things and besides that we had to do some little chores like washing. I don't remember other stuff, maybe cleaning the cars with your dad helping them or maybe going shopping. I remember going shopping more than ever during the lockdown.

When asked if these responsibilities were a hindrance to Student C's learning, he responded by saying it was more of a 'routine' that brought a sense of normalcy for him during lockdown. His and the other participants' views about domestic responsibilities reveal that for most EAL students doing chores is not a burden but an act that reflects familial spirit that makes difficult experiences more tolerable.

5.4.3 Ethnic Background

As mentioned at the start of the chapter, the majority of the participating students of this research come from refugee backgrounds in Afghanistan. While no specific questions were asked regarding the cultural backgrounds of students and their impact on learning, the students referred to their ethnicity, culture and experiences in their home country to make meaning of their experiences as EAL students during the pandemic and at the VCE level.

Student A referred to the lack of use of technology in the Afghan education system to denote the novel challenges she had to face as a student in Australia and during the pandemic. Referring to the online platforms used by her school during the pandemic, she said:

It was difficult yet because using Compass using Outlook using OneNote. They were all like different to us coming from Afghanistan.

Connecting it to his view of large families, Student C presented a generalised view of the

Afghan community by stating that they suffered ‘a lot of limitations’ owing to the ‘language barrier’ (Student C) and that these limitations led to heightened emotions among the community members. It could be assumed that these conflicts would have had detrimental impacts on the learning of children, especially at the VCE level.

We, especially we Afghans in the lockdown, I think because of a lot of time at home, with families, I think there was a lot more troubles and conflicts at home. Not necessarily in my family, it wasn't, but I've heard from other people and I've seen from in the community, in the suburbs we live, there are some Afghan families who had some serious conflicts and then led to some injuries maybe and stuff. I think more time during the lockdown, I think they get more angry, maybe too much noise makes some people angry.

5.5 Student Perception of Education

Some of the fascinating details that arose from this interview phase are the insights students had regarding language learning for EAL students. They presented their perceptions of English education and the benefits they were able to gain from a difficult remote learning experience. This section will also report the findings on how the participants were able to foster a sense of resilience to face academic challenges and the preferred learning format for VCE EAL learners.

5.5.1 Independence and Resilience in Education

One of the key findings of this interview phase was the sense of resilience and independence they were able to foster when learning English in remote learning settings. Despite the emotional and academic challenges faced by these students, they shared their views on how they educated themselves to be more unyielding and autonomous through the use of language.

It is believed that expressive writing is crucial in improving resilience and reducing perceived stress (Glass et al., 2019). Earlier in the chapter, Student A’s emotional distress regarding a military and political event that occurred in her home country was analysed and how she did not receive emotional support to cope with those feelings. In her interview, she explained that in the absence of external assistance, she turned to expressive writing to understand turbulent emotions and to overcome the challenges arising from it:

I guess what helped me was like writing about it. So, I did write about it. I journaled a lot and I feel myself talking to myself as if like I'm talking to someone else. So yeah, like... like I'm filming a podcast or something. So, I started talking about my emotions and how I'm feeling like day to day.

This information highlights the extent to which EAL students were emotionally isolated in remote learning, but simultaneously, there is an advocacy for using language to overcome isolation. What Student A emphasised through her experience was that EAL students can not only use reflective writing beyond the curriculum to improve literacy skills but also use writing as a way to build resilience and experience independence as learners.

The process of reading was also endorsed by this participant. It was mentioned that reading is an integral aspect of vocabulary development. It was also highlighted that when combined with ambition and persistence, reading can be an empowering endeavour:

I read a lot. It's something I never did back home, but when I came here, I purposely read for my English to get better because I knew I was going to go and just study law and for that I needed my English to be good. Not perfect because nothing's perfect. So I used to force myself to read and I would read even if I didn't understand it.

Supporting this view was Student C, who believed that the pandemic provided time for students to read and improve their writing skills to enrich their perceptions. His view was that extensive reading would assist EAL students in improving their language as well as their ability to generate insightful ideas that would assist their writing process. While endorsing reading, he also lamented that with schools returning to face-to-face learning, he lost time to enjoy the endeavour of reading and writing:

Just because of the, a lot of reading and like when you're in, during the lockdown, you have more time to think for yourself and like think and have some ideas, maybe for yourself. Yeah. And that's make your writing a bit more enjoyable and more like, I think, professional, I guess.

Like Student A, he too acknowledged that he engaged in expressive writing during remote learning to develop perceptive ideas as an EAL student:

I enjoyed, I think just having more time to think for yourself, because I like writing a lot, and I wanted to write a book, yeah, but more time to think for yourself, and then more ideas, and I wanted to write a book for myself, just like that, but I did tend to write stories.

This participant also believed that the pandemic was pivotal in fostering independence and resilience in EAL learners. He further highlighted through his reflection that this feeling of resilience and independence can be nurtured with the aspiration to use language and education for a greater purpose:

I think if I started learning better and having my English improve, then at the same time I could, I could help someone. Maybe just like start a program, maybe like volunteer somewhere, and then help them at the same time so that I can learn and gain experience at the same time and at the same time I can share some experience and some knowledge with my own people especially those who are coming from I think in other countries and not knowing English as good at the same time learning myself.

Further supporting the notions of independence and resilience, Student B stated that remote learning created an opportunity for EAL students who are severely dependent on others as far as learning is concerned to learn how to detach from that mindset and challenge themselves to use solitude to become more autonomous learners:

I feel like lockdown helped me in that aspect of being independent because I was, I was a very depend... I'm a very, still very dependent person, but I'm a less dependent person. Because before I would be very, depending on my friends, on my family, on my teachers. But after lockdown, I would just, I would like to do my own. I got my own time, alone time. I would like that a lot.

Student D believed that while remote learning took away many opportunities from EAL students, it also taught them how to overcome academic challenges with resilience, as thriving under pressure is a vital skill to possess at the VCE level:

I feel like lockdown showed many students other ways to learn, you know. And then other ways to learn. They showed them to be, like, I don't know, hard. Not even hard work. But they showed them to be resilient through tough times. Because and that's an important skill, like, in VCE to have.

It is evident from these views that the participants all believed that the pandemic was a learning curve for EAL students which helped them gradually become less dependent on teacher and peer support and comprehend individual potential to thrive and survive in an exam-oriented learning environment.

5.5.2 Preferred Learning Mode for EAL Learners

An aspect of student agency discussed in the previous section is that with the experiences of the pandemic, students would have developed a clear understanding of the learning needs of their peers, which, like their needs, should be catered to achieve academic success at the VCE level. All participants endorsed face-to-face learning as the ideal mode of learning for EAL students, especially at the VCE level, because they need consistent teacher guidance and support to learn, practice and implement key literacy knowledge and skills in the writing they produce.

Remote learning for many EAL students was a collection of many leaps from one skill to another without the opportunity to master them. This was Student A's perception who believed that if lockdown had not existed, she, along with her peers, would have grasped the fundamental skills needed to unpack texts and respond to them:

I guess it wouldn't like make my writing an essay that like to the teachers like when they look at. It's like me not being able to apply those skills those persuasive techniques the way that I should be. They would be looking like all those stuff she doesn't know yet and like cutting my marks. But if I did know no doubt, they would see it in my work'

Student B also echoed this perception in which she believed that if she had not experienced disruption to her learning with the pandemic, she would have been able to maintain consistent academic rigour. The importance of constant practice of writing skills in achieving VCE success was further illustrated in her observation:

I would kind of known the foundations of a good essay because I would have had a lot of practice. I feel like I would have done better because in year eight and nine, I was a very hardworking student and I was really focused on getting good grades. But after the lockdown, I really got lazy and didn't want to do any more work, wasn't as much

focused on my studies as I was before. So that kind of affected it, affected my year 11 and 12. I think that's all.

It was also revealed remote learning is not suited to many EAL students who live with large families as they have to overcome constant disruptions. Student C was of the view that lack of concentration can be an impediment to students learning a new language and that a face-to-face learning environment is more suited to their needs:

I know a lot of people, Afghans whose English are worse than me and struggles going online because they told me that when they're doing online learning they just can't concentrate just because a lot of noises and they like they can't concentrate. They zone out and those things so that they can't focus for too long so either they go maybe after five minutes maximum five minutes concentration and then go back to thinking and zoning out and thinking about other stuff.

Another reason conventional learning was endorsed by the participants was the restricting nature of online learning. It was expressed by Student D that without ample support, opportunities and resources, EAL students would inevitably be further disadvantaged compared with other students, which would affect their academic performance:

Because the lockdown took, like, so many opportunities from us that we could have used to, you know, not only improve, but, like, better or, like, improve our work in every way that we could. Improve our work and then. I feel like, yeah, it limited us to, like, limited resources that we could use or, like, that we had access to. And that can be a disadvantage. Because. If you have access to limited stuff, your knowledge will be limited to that point. Like, you won't have the knowledge that, I mean, like, everyone should have.

Both Students E and F outright rejected online learning as an effective mode of learning for EAL students. They believe that technology has little to no impact in an EAL classroom and that learning skills in a conventional way, such as reading physical copies of the texts, enriching conversations with teachers and peers and practising writing, are the optimal ways to learn English and achieve academic success. Therefore, they believed that online learning was a hindrance to EAL students during remote learning and it failed to empower them:

I personally prefer the physical book than the like electronic or like PDF. So I don't think that technology matters and is very important for EAL. Yeah. I think for EAL, the most important thing is the skills of like teaching skills. Yeah. And I believe it would have been a challenge to have actually to transition from typing a lot during remote learning and then to, of course, writing the VCE exam as well. (Student E)

While these participants preferred face-to-face learning over remote learning, they acknowledged the importance of technology as an integral pedagogical aspect that enhanced student learning at the VCE level. Student B believed that blended learning is beneficial to EAL students as it provided a wholesome learning experience where they constantly interacted with teachers but also had access to a breadth of resources to use independently:

I think technology is a part of our learning because it gives us access to a lot of resources that we can use as a student to be better, enhance our knowledge and skills. Aside from just teachers, we could use a Edrolo, YouTube videos to get the best out of everything.

An intriguing concept that was discovered in the findings of student interviews was that, unlike teachers, students preferred to receive face-to-face feedback from teachers rather than read online comments. It was discussed by Student A that for an EAL student, feedback is a formative dialogue where the student learns through applying teacher feedback to improve their writing while also probing further possibilities to extend their expression and seeking clarification on the teacher's comments. While in an online learning environment, students had access to detailed feedback, the lack of interaction made the process less effective:

In face-to-face you can actually like get them to elaborate on what they're saying, but it's difficult to like email back and forth. So it's more like it when they're doing it on Word or OneNote, you are not able to like communicate over like 'what you mean by that?', 'How I can do that?' 'What can I do to improve it here?' Like 'what can you do to help me?' So it's difficult to communicate those.

It was also outlined that in order for teachers to give effective feedback, students are required to produce quality work. As admitted by Student B, during the pandemic, students lacked direction when completing tasks, and therefore, teachers did not receive

enough work to give feedback. She also believed that in a conventional classroom, this issue would have been alleviated as students would have produced better writing for teachers to give effective feedback to:

I guess because we were not face to face, so it was harder for them to give proper feedback. Because we would just do the work, not care about what we were actually doing. So I guess it was harder for them to give proper feedback on how we're doing. While if now we're face to face and they see our work, they can talk to us face to face, it makes it easier for them to give pretty good feedback on how we can improve, how to do better.

5.6 Summary

This chapter provided an analysis of the findings of the interviews conducted with the EAL students of refugee backgrounds and international students. The themes that were identified are important to the context of the research as they provide insight into student experience during remote learning and the impact of remote learning on their VCE learning. The interviews revealed that students faced both academic and emotional challenges during remote learning, thereby illuminating their vulnerability as EAL learners in mainstream schools. The analysis of domestic and social factors gives a holistic view of the influences that drove or hindered student engagement during the pandemic. The discussion of the importance of the school community in student learning further enlightened the concept of teacher and student dynamics in promoting academic success. The participants' expression of the academic needs of EAL students gives insight into their understanding of their own experiences, and their endorsement of resilience and autonomy showcases the ability of students to transform another challenge into a source of inspiration. Their views of the use of technology, feedback and mode of content delivery create further opportunities for discussion regarding how education can be utilised to empower EAL students, and this will be further investigated in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the health and safety measures taken by governments had a significant impact on school students across the world. While the pandemic increased the elements of didacticism in teaching practice, disengagement among students and wellbeing concerns among both educators and learners, it also provided schools with opportunities to alleviate these concerns generated by the global health crisis (Morgan, 2022). The literature reviewed in the context of this research project revealed that while there are studies conducted on how the pandemic affected learning for learners of EAL, there was a dearth of studies conducted on how the outbreak of the pandemic affected the learning of these students at senior secondary school level. The literature also revealed a lack of research conducted on school settings, while there was a heavier focus on the impacts of the pandemic on students at the tertiary level. Taking these gaps in studies into consideration, this research project addresses the main research question:

- What are the factors that affected the learning of the VCE EAL students in the context of the pandemic in Victoria, Australia?

The study was conducted by interviewing six teachers who taught EAL in 2020 and 2021, as well as students who did EAL at Year 10 and VCE levels as their English subjects in 2020 and 2021. The teachers were questioned on their planning and teaching experiences and the strategies they employed to engage students in remote learning. The interviews also explored student engagement and disengagement and how the pandemic affected the learning outcomes of their students. They were also queried on whether they adjusted assessment practices to cater to the needs of VCE EAL students and what learning for these students looked like post-pandemic. The students were interviewed on their learning experiences during the pandemic and how they adapted to academic expectations brought by the pandemic, possible challenges they faced during the pandemic and how they coped and overcame these challenges. Through these rounds of interviews, the research seeks to address the following research subquestions:

1. Did the academic and wellbeing challenges posed by remote learning during the COVID-19 outbreak affect the subsequent academic performance of VCE EAL students?
2. Were there distinctive teaching strategies that teachers of VCE EAL implemented to engage students more effectively in remote learning during the COVID-19 outbreak?
3. Did teachers adjust formative assessment processes to cater for remote learning during the COVID-19 outbreak? Did the VCAA adjust summative assessment processes to address the impacts and consequences of COVID-19 on EAL learners?
4. Did the COVID-19 outbreak amplify existing sociological concerns relating to background, ethnicity and family structure and did this have an impact on learning and learning outcomes?

This chapter seeks to provide an analytical discussion on the findings from the interviews conducted with the participating teachers and students through a close examination of existing literature and a critical Freirean lens as outlined earlier in the dissertation.

6.2 Subquestion 1: Did the Academic and Wellbeing Challenges Posed by Remote Learning During the COVID-19 Outbreak Affect the Subsequent Academic Performance of VCE EAL Students?

6.2.1 Academic Challenges Faced by Students During the Pandemic

All the participating teachers reiterated that the pandemic posed significant academic and wellbeing concerns for EAL students, which subsequently affected their academic performances at the VCE level. The primary academic challenge that all the participating teachers highlighted was the absence of face-to-face interactions in an online learning environment, which led to decreased participation of EAL learners in online learning. This, in turn, decreased their academic performance at the VCE level. Supporting this view, the participating students believed that online learning was influential in their lack of engagement in learning during the pandemic and their decreased academic performance during this time.

6.2.1.1 Impacts of Reduced Face-to-face Interactions in the Classroom

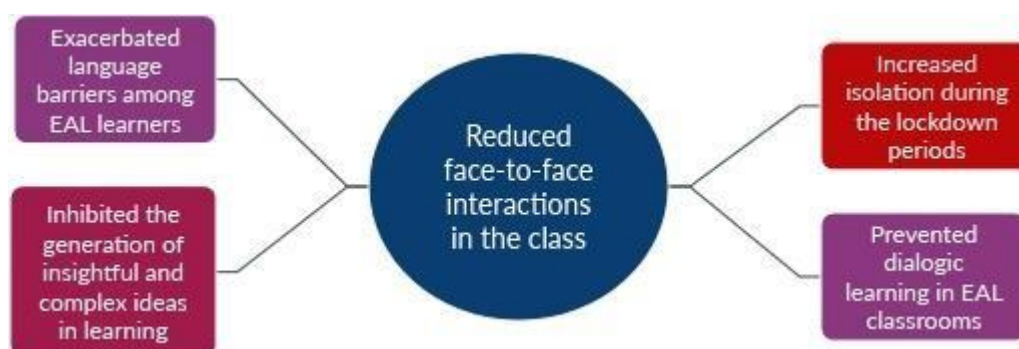


Figure 6.1: Impacts of reduced face-to-face interactions in the classroom

The more effective medium for language learning has often been subjected to debate. While students studying EAL cannot be classified as conventional language learners acquiring language, it can be stated that learning conventions of English, vocabulary, syntax and written and oral expression are crucial skills taught in their regular classrooms (VCAA, 2023). Studies indicate that language learners prefer face-to-face learning rather than online learning for language acquisition owing to their perceptions towards learning as well as their own behaviour (Alhamami, 2018). Additionally, face-to-face interactions lead to more collaborative learning and critical thinking in language learning as opposed to online learning (Kim, 2014). It is also believed that for EAL students, face-to-face learning can be functionally oriented where multiple exposures can assist in engaging students in more collaborative and interactive learning. In contrast, online learning can be effective in developing communication and other linguistic skills but proves to be rather transactional in the process (Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2023). However, studies also indicate that technology can improve students' oral skills in an EAL classroom and promote the independent development of speaking skills (Dzięcioł-Pędich & Dudzik, 2021). Pre-pandemic studies have also argued that computer-mediated learning can improve communication among EAL learners, create cross-cultural awareness and improve collaboration in the classroom (Angelova & Zhao, 2016). Furthermore, pre-pandemic studies also revealed that online reading based on constructivism has the ability to empower students and improve their communication skills and exam results, as opposed to traditional textbook methods of teaching texts in the classroom (Liu et al., 2022). In other studies, it was revealed that online learning before the pandemic was more effective for EAL learners when they had a sense of belonging to the classroom and were able to learn and work collaboratively using technology (Lewandowski, 2021).

The findings of this study seem to challenge pre-pandemic studies that endorsed online learning to foster interaction among EAL students and consequently improve their academic performance. Rather, this study reveals that EAL students at the VCE level were severely disadvantaged owing to the lack of interaction with their teachers as well as their peers (Refer to figure 6.1). The interviews revealed that there was an overall reluctance by students to speak during online learning sessions. The teachers revealed that most students had their cameras and microphones off during online lessons and would only speak when obligated to. They also stated that some students, as the lockdowns progressed, would participate in online classes for socialising without engaging in learning. While some teachers revealed that they were able to build a rapport with their students and offer emotional support to navigate the concerns that arose from COVID-19 as well as other sociopolitical issues that affected their students, there was a lack of productive classroom discussion taking place during online classes (Rech & Pescador, 2022).

The participating teachers revealed that this lack of discussion prevented them from having a more personalised teaching experience. The absence of paralinguistic communication made it difficult for teachers to determine the progress of students and cater to the needs of students. This resonated with many studies which also reported that students displayed an overall reluctance to keep their cameras on during online lessons owing to anxiety, fear of exposure, shyness and concerns about privacy (Gherhes et al., 2021). This was also reported to have a direct negative impact on the perceived ease of participation in online lessons (Kim, 2020).

6.2.1.2 Privacy Concerns Impacting Social Interaction Among Learners

The participants for this study believed that the main reasons why students refrained from turning their cameras on were out of fear of revealing their spaces to their teachers and peers, to conceal their family dynamics and to drown out the noises from their siblings in the case of students coming from larger families (Farid et al., 2022). While all the participating teachers agreed that the students were within their rights to protect their online privacy during lessons, they also revealed that this negatively affected their academic performance as well as emotional wellbeing as it kept them continuously isolated during the pandemic (Hermanrud et al., 2023). It is further argued that leaving cameras off is a means of preserving the privacy of students who feel vulnerable in online

learning environments (Cleland et al., 2021). The participating teachers acknowledged that some students in their classrooms came from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds, and hence, they showed a reluctance to reveal themselves online to their peers and friends. However, while this acknowledgement was morally and ethically compliant, it is also believed that engaging in online learning with the cameras off prevented students from engaging in visual interaction and building a sense of community within an online setting (Al Mahadin & Hallak, 2021). This is relevant to the adolescent cohort in consideration of this study. For adolescents on the brink of adulthood, social interaction is key for emotional wellbeing, stress regulation and overall life satisfaction (Shahrestani et al., 2015). In an EAL classroom in COVID, these concerns would be exacerbated as in an already isolated environment, further isolation from teachers and peers increases stress among students, as well as disengage them from having meaningful conversations. Such conversations are crucial to the development of novel ideas and the improvement of their language skills (Gardner, 2019). In such a setting, social presence is considered a predictor of increased academic performance, as the discussions in class promote the improvement of learning outcomes (Joksimovic et al., 2015). This is further reiterated in studies that endorse peer interaction as a means of driving collaborative learning to promote higher-order thinking and increased test results for EAL students (Jacobs et al., 2016). The findings of this study revealed that these collaborative measures are a regular feature in the participants' face-to-face EAL classrooms and that the pandemic deprived teachers and students of the opportunity to establish collaborative learning.

The teacher participants further reiterated that this absence of interaction had negative impacts on student learning as it prevented the students and teachers together from generating complex ideas on the texts they were studying and engaging in rich discussions about texts. Moreover, they were unable to provide one-on-one support for students who were academically struggling and needed more guidance and also missed opportunities to extend the knowledge and skills of more engaged and autonomous learners. Supporting these views by the participating teachers, the student participants also noted a decline in academic performance, which stemmed from a lack of interaction in the classroom, leading to a decrease in developing and mastering communication and the fundamental skills needed to produce sustained pieces of writing with complex ideas required at VCE level.

6.2.1.3 *The Absence of Dialogic Learning in EAL Classrooms.*

These findings seem to suggest that the lowered expectations of learning owing to the pandemic and the restricted conditions surrounding remote learning prevented teachers and students from engaging in effective dialogue, which is crucial in empowering students with the necessary skills to increase their academic performance (Howe, 2017). The data outlined that teaching and learning were not aligned with Freirean concept of sharing of knowledge in order to achieve an efficient learning experience (Santa-Anna, 2018). The passivity of students during remote learning, as identified by the teachers, illustrates remote learning as a form of didactic learning where the teacher is the active dispenser of knowledge and skill while the student remains the passive receptor. This is contrasted with the recommendations of the VCAA, which endorses a more deductive approach in unpacking texts, giving students more opportunities to be independent constructors of knowledge and, through that, enhance their key knowledge and skills (VCAA, 2022).

This didactic approach is critiqued by Paulo Freire in his text, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he questions the ‘banking concept’ of education and reveals how the status of being passive receivers of knowledge does not empower students in their learning but rather ensnares them further in an oppressive system of education where they are expected to learn a new language and use it as a medium of communication in their learning (Freire, 2000).

While the VCAA endorses learning strategies that allow students to refer to their home language to understand content, they are simply recommendations for the teacher rather than mandatory concepts endorsed in their study designs. This absence of formal acknowledgement within the study design further objectifies them in the education system, where their linguistic backgrounds are not formally acknowledged in a pedagogical framework. The findings elucidate that remote learning for VCE EAL students according to the participants of the research, was similar to the banking concept, which Freire deemed ineffective, where teaching and learning was more of a transaction that sought to provide knowledge and skills to these students with the expectation that they have adequate skills required to succeed in their end of year examinations. Additionally, the absence of active communication and interaction in an online VCE EAL

classroom is synonymous with the absence of dialogic pedagogy, which, according to Freire, promotes critical thinking.

According to Freire, dialogue does not mean allowing one party to ‘deposit’ knowledge in another party, creating more room for domination, but rather using knowledge to challenge accepted thinking (Freire, 2000). In the context of a VCE EAL classroom, based on the findings, dialogic pedagogy refers to students being actively involved in unpacking texts, generating complex ideas and collaborating with peers to deduce information on texts, which would then be collated in written format. In terms of socio-ethnic backgrounds, EAL learners fall under a spectrum of backgrounds, including low socio-economic, refugee and international students from affluent backgrounds. The interviews implied that these students also faced additional challenges in their educational journey that went beyond socio-political, ethnic, socio-economic and emotional challenges. Therefore, dialogic pedagogy in their context would also involve fostering discourse in classrooms where teachers make connections between content and student experiences and create opportunities for students to use language as a tool of expression, liberation and empowerment to perceive society through a critical lens (Omland & Rodnes, 2020).

However, in the context of the pandemic, the results of the data analysis reveal that owing to limited interactions with students reduced student engagement and shortened online class durations, teachers and students identified in the research could not engage in critical dialogue. Instead, they resorted to completing the curriculum under restricted conditions prior to the VCE examination, which evidently became a vehicle of oppression in this context. While the data refers to some students achieving success and fulfilling the language requirements to pursue a tertiary pathway, there was a general absence of stamina and critical thinking in students’ written responses that should critique language and content and challenge existing social norms. While the pandemic would have limited interactions among every student irrespective of their subjects or socio-economic backgrounds, EAL learners have unique academic and wellbeing needs that were not always addressed. Hence, it can be argued that VCE EAL students were the oppressed subjects in a hierarchical system of education in the context of the pandemic, where their voice was restricted and not given a safe platform to drive active discourse (Freire, 2003). This does not mean to imply that teachers were the oppressors in the context of the pandemic but also highlights that they, too, were under restricted conditions dictated by

the emergency lockdowns that took place in Melbourne and, hence, did not receive adequate opportunities to use their expertise to empower these learners through meaningful discussions (Foley, 2022).

6.2.1.4 Technological Concerns Underscoring Learning During the Pandemic

Another challenge highlighted by the data was the difficulty that students faced when accessing the internet, as well as over-reliance on technology by those who had access to it, which eventually hampered their learning. While the participants acknowledged that students received adequate support from the school to access the internet, the findings reveal that access to the internet and learning activities were determined by other factors, such as family sizes and socio-economic backgrounds. The findings support pre-existing literature on access to the internet, identifying limited access as a major factor that impeded learning for students across the board. The pandemic has evidently accentuated pre-existing disparities among learners in how they accessed digital devices and resources (Deursen, 2020).

According to the participants, there seems to be a significant divide between EAL learners from refugee backgrounds and EAL learners who were full-fee-paying international students as far as access to technology is concerned. The participants unanimously identified that students from refugee backgrounds they had taught, came from larger families that often prevented them from having access to a strong internet connection and, on occasions, found these learners sharing devices with their siblings. While the interviews indicated that these students are familiar with accessing online resources in face-to-face learning, the technical issues that occurred during the pandemic seemed to have had a direct impact on their learning as they were not able to maintain consistency in participating in online learning (Refer to Figure 6.2). Hence, the impact of the disruption was reflected in their academic performance in their assessments and VCE examinations (Gun & Selvitopu, 2023).

In addition to this impediment, the student participants also revealed a low level of digital literacy that affected those of refugee backgrounds, particularly those who were new arrivals to the country, whereby educators struggled to integrate them into the content of the curriculum (Potocky, 2021). The student participants revealed that while they had to cope with issues that arose from weak internet connections, they also had to deal with low

digital literacy skills with minimum support. They note how these factors slowed down their learning during COVID-19 and prevented them from attaining key skills required at the VCE level. They believe that they would have shown more resilience in their learning had they known how to access online learning tools, revealing further disadvantages faced by EAL learners (Baker et al., 2022; Gun & Selvitopu, 2023; Ogwang, 2022).

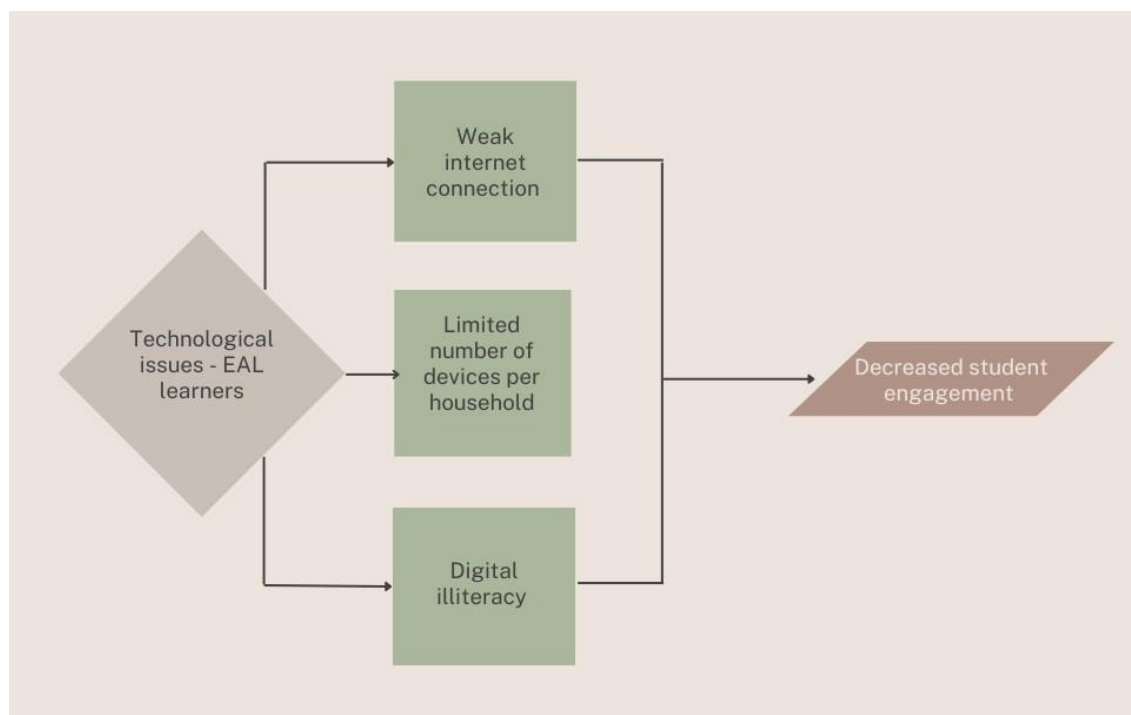


Figure 6.2: Technological issues—EAL learners

In addition, the findings also revealed that some international students faced difficulty in accessing the internet while engaged in online learning from China. They revealed how they needed to use a VPN to access online learning content in Australia in accordance with the internet regulations and policies in China. The participants outlined that this method made access to online learning less efficient and contributed to disruptions in learning as opposed to learning online from their Australian school campus. While these students did not encounter issues pertaining to digital literacy and access to technical devices, they were as disadvantaged as other learners who had issues accessing the internet. Additionally, the fact they were EAL learners at the VCE level accessing content away from Australia made them vulnerable as learners during the pandemic. It should also be presumed that these students had been affected in a similar manner regarding accessing the content of all their VCE subjects during remote learning. In the context of this research, it can be noted that disruption to VCE EAL learning would have also affected their academic performance of other subjects. It is noteworthy that the teacher

participants in this study seemed unaware of the low digital literacy skills among EAL learners. This was an area which accentuated students' struggles with the shift to online learning but their struggle, in the context of this research, was effectively invisible to those best placed to support them.

While interrupted access to the internet proved to be a major concern that prevented learners from being engaged in their subjects, both teachers and students outlined that over-reliance on technology was also a disruptive factor in the learning of EAL students during the pandemic. The study illuminated that students who already had access to devices and were familiar with online platforms spent more time on their devices and disengaged themselves from online learning. This partially resonates with existing studies, which outline that during the pandemic, students used the internet as a coping mechanism to navigate through the wellbeing concerns posed by the pandemic and to stay connected to their peers (Vidojković et al., 2023). However, no concrete evidence rose from this research that students' over-reliance of technology had direct connections to social interaction among peers.

In a context where technology has become the only means of connecting students to the world outside, it is expected that they would be overly dependent on their smartphones (Serra et al., 2021). While one would expect their persistent use of smartphones to enhance their learning, the data contradicted this assumption and revealed that the pull of students to digital platforms hampered their critical thinking skills as well as social skills during the pandemic (Katz et al., 2021). This, in turn, emphasises the need for educational programmes to promote regulation when using technology (Gomez-Galan et al., 2020). The educators who participated in this research did not reveal any attempts on their part to help these students regulate their online screen time, and it can be presumed that it was not their primary objective to limit students from using the only platform that allowed them to stay connected to the world, which was otherwise restricted by social distancing measures dictated by the government (Ismail et al., 2021). Yet, the participating teachers did highlight the ongoing negative impacts of digital over-reliance, which contributed to decreased academic stamina and increased disengagement among VCE EAL learners (Refer to Figure 6.3).

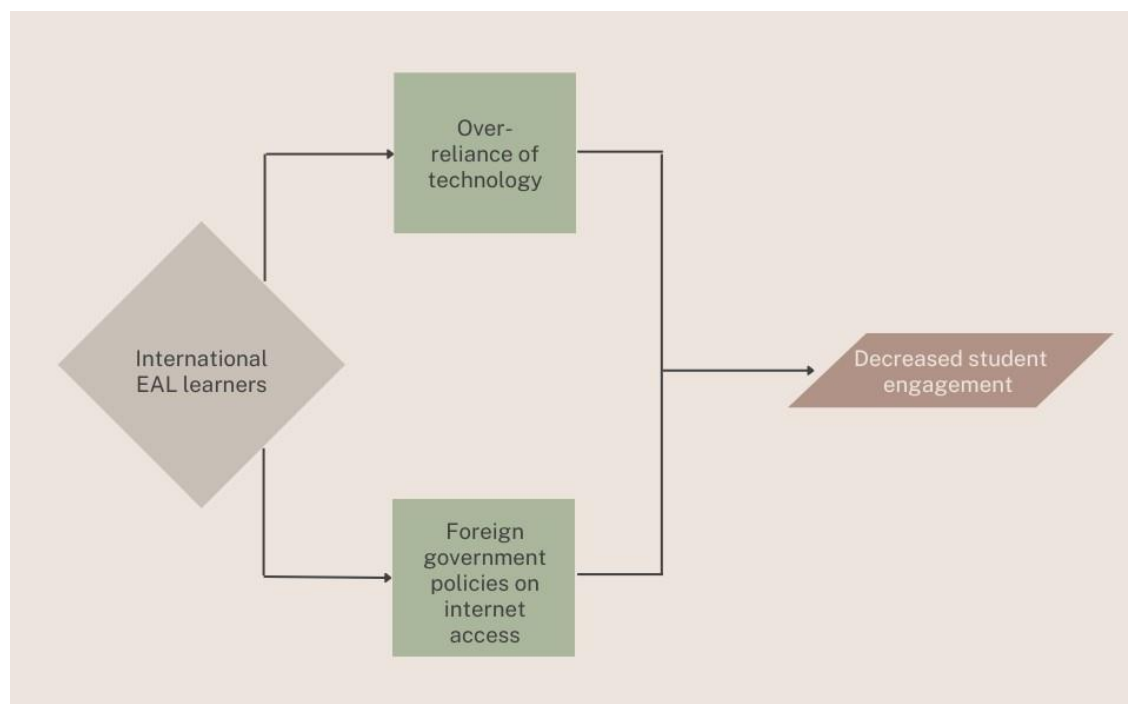


Figure 6.3: Technological concerns—international EAL students

A recurring motif that arose from these discussions with both teachers and students was that reliance on technology and social media inhibited students from extending themselves in their learning and limited them to staying within the parameters of the content that had been delivered to them (Katz et al., 2021). This implies that students in the context of this research often relied on textual content and knowledge provided by their teacher without using their digital literacy skills in independent learning and construction of knowledge (Bama et al., 2023). It was also revealed by students that there was a lack of creativity evident in their writing owing to extended periods spent online during the pandemic. They directly linked this lack of creativity to the lack of interpersonal contact and the desire to write well within the context of a face-to-face class. Doing so, they draw a link between the repetition of life in lockdown and their own writing as mundane. Additionally, both teachers and students commented on how heavy reliance on technology diminished the latter's skills in the physical aspect of writing. It should be noted that the VCE examinations are handwritten, and in English and EAL, students are expected to produce coherent, cohesive and critical pieces of writing under timed conditions with no access to external resources other than a bilingual dictionary (VCAA, 2022). Both teachers and students believed that apart from the quality of their written work, there was difficulty in producing sustained handwritten pieces of writing as a result of two years of online learning.

While most studies conducted around the impact of the pandemic on students' handwriting focused on students at the primary school level, it cannot be ignored that the same principle of digital learning negatively impacting the fluency of handwritten work applies to the context of VCE EAL students (Sheedy et al., 2021). Furthermore, the notion that handwriting instruction contributes to greater fluency and quality in student writing can also be associated with EAL learners across all year levels (Santangelo & Graham, 2016). At VCE level this notion would prove to be more effective as studies have revealed that handwritten essays led to novel connections between the hand and the brain, promoting more freedom to reflect (Velden, 2021). Other studies have also suggested that the physical act of writing activates regions of the brain related to memory and comprehension and has a direct link to higher academic performance (Al-Ghabra, 2015). Therefore, the absence of practice in writing essays by hand and the inclination to type essays for convenience can affect students' ability to produce cohesive and coherent responses, which are crucial to their academic achievement.

Despite these challenges, the participants also noted the technical challenges posed by the pandemic had had a positive impact on student use of the internet post-pandemic, promoting more autonomy and agency among EAL learners. From teachers' perspectives, it was revealed that educators learned how to teach students to become more responsible and critical digital consumers post-pandemic. In addition, they also believed that the technological challenges posed by the lockdowns also promoted a sense of autonomy among learners, making them more independent than they were before the pandemic. Some teachers also believed that with the right amount of support and resources, students who already preferred independent learning thrived under remote learning conditions and this was reflected in their examination results. Echoing this perspective, students believed that the reliance on technology and the absence of consistent teacher guidance during the pandemic gave them the opportunity to become more independent as learners. These views resonate with existing studies that argue that independent learning ability has a significant positive effect on efficacy in academic performance and acts as a mediator between academic pressure and academic self-efficacy (Zhao et al., 2023). Other existing studies also reveal that inevitably, students had to learn to be more independent in their learning to successfully complete learning activities (Nurazizah, 2021). While there have not been wider examinations between independent digital learning and the conditions of the pandemic, there have been studies conducted to determine what postulates

independence among students. According to Sugianto (2020), learning independence is influenced by discipline, self-confidence, natural conditions, community encouragement and responsibility. In the context of this research, it can be suggested that many students were driven by the technical challenges posed by the pandemic and realised that they must take the initiative to compensate for the minimum guidance they received from their teachers and strive to achieve academic success independently.

6.2.2 Wellbeing Challenges Faced by Students During the Pandemic

6.2.2.1 Decrease in Self-Confidence and Motivation Among Learners

In terms of wellbeing concerns, existing studies reported that many school students suffered from loneliness and anxiety as a result of being socially restricted during the pandemic (Holm-Hadulla et al., 2021). With the outbreak of the pandemic, many students experienced a drastic shift in their routine and found themselves in the confines of their homes, leading to stress, anxiety and disengagement from the less personalised learning process (Ewing & Cooper, 2021). In the Australian context, it was discovered that over 50% of students reported depressive symptoms, and one-quarter reported symptoms of anxiety because of school closures mandated by the government (Mundy et al., 2023). In Mundy et al.'s (2023) study of the impact of the pandemic on the mental wellbeing of Year 11 and Year 12 students in Australia, it was reported that a fifth of the students in the cohort studied with mental health concerns during the pandemic had no prior history of mental health issues before the pandemic and it was also reported that with Year 11 and Year 12 students, this had lasting impact as the final years of schooling determine future pathways and the course of their lives . While the pandemic affected the emotional wellbeing of many students across the world, it is evident that students from disadvantaged backgrounds and who are already considered vulnerable, such as students of refugee backgrounds and students studying EAL, were considered more vulnerable in the face of the challenges posed by the lockdowns (Dorn et al., 2020).

While the findings of this study did not report significant mental wellbeing concerns like suicidal tendencies of students, participants outlined wellbeing concerns that had a direct correlation to a decline in student performance in assessments and exams. A wellbeing concern that was highlighted by participating teachers was a decrease in self-confidence and an increase in a lack of motivation in students to engage in learning and excel

academically. The findings indicated that students who were consistently motivated and engaged in learning prior to lockdown continued to be engaged, provided they had adequate support and resources at home. Conversely, students who were inclined to rely on teacher support and needed to be present in a conventional classroom to be motivated to learn were disengaged from their learning throughout the lockdown period. This supports the argument of existing studies that state that the pandemic negatively affected student academic motivation owing to a lack of teacher presence and interaction (Ferri et al., 2020; Lepinoy et al., 2023). The interviews elucidated that students who did not receive adequate teacher support were less motivated to complete the work and, hence, were slower to acquire key knowledge and skills required to succeed at the VCE level.

Studies have shown that there is a correlation between teacher interaction and student motivation in an EAL classroom, where teachers can make connections to student lives and model examples of enthusiasm in learning and academic excellence (Ghafarpour & Moinszadeh, 2019; Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Korur & Eryılmaz, 2018). Additionally, emotional interaction between students and teachers has a direct link to student motivation to extend themselves to achieve higher examination scores (Yu, 2020). The nature of lockdowns, with teachers and students isolated for months from each other's presence, inhibited students and teachers from establishing an emotional interaction with each other where they could conference on areas of improvement, clarify ambiguities of the curriculum and collaborate on effective knowledge construction. Both teachers and students in this study outlined that the conditions around the pandemic, such as isolation, reduced interaction and the unstimulating nature of content delivery, prompted learners to be less motivated in schoolwork. The anecdotal evidence in the data suggests that some students failed to succeed in Year 12 VCE altogether as a result of a lack of motivation which arose from the pandemic. However, there is no evidence from the interviews to suggest that the aforementioned students who failed to succeed in their VCE examination would have been more motivated in a context that was not impacted by the pandemic. Nevertheless, the data does indicate that the high-achieving students would have scored higher scores in their assessments and examinations had they been in a face-to-face learning environment motivated by teacher guidance and presence. Furthermore, the data also divulges that the reduced motivation was somewhat carried over to learning post-pandemic in some schools, while in other schools' students were more likely to be

motivated to return to face-to-face learning and use that as an inspiration to extend themselves in their learning.

While online learning is said to drive student motivation in language learning (Bohat et al., 2015) and well-designed learning environments and self-directed learning can enhance the learning experience of students learning English (Meri-Yilan, 2021), online learning in the context of the pandemic was neither well-designed nor carefully planned to promote self-directed learning among students. Students were expected to achieve the same learning outcomes outlined by the VCAA with few changes made to the curriculum. Therefore, it is expected that students would feel less motivated to complete learning activities that were primarily designed to be completed in a face-to-face learning environment in a virtual setting.

It is also important to investigate the emotional wellbeing of teachers when examining their capacity to motivate students during remote learning. In a pre-planned online learning environment, teachers would be expected to have adequate training to support students in online learning and drive engagement. However, in the context of an emergency lockdown, teachers found the circumstances as novel as did the students, and they too are expected to experience the emotional challenges of uncertainty, navigate through online learning platforms to engage students, cater for the vulnerable students and show resilience in the face of a global health crisis (Kim & Asbury, 2020). In the interviews, teachers expressed their emphatic displeasure with remote learning, the ongoing impacts it had on vulnerable students and how it prevented students from acquiring key linguistic skills needed for academic success. These emotional challenges would have had a direct impact on their job satisfaction and the expectations they had laid out for themselves and the students, and hence, it can be expected that they, too, would not have been emotionally equipped to foster student motivation during lockdown (Lindner et al., 2021). This was referred to by students in their interviews where they praised their teachers for providing them the best possible support to survive the lockdown periods. Students also acknowledged that the novelty of the circumstances made it difficult for teachers to understand them enough as EAL learners to motivate them. Therefore, it is plausible to deduce that the nature of remote learning prevented teachers from exercising their best pedagogical behaviours to promote student motivation (Asarzadeh et al., 2016).

6.2.2.2 Home Environments and Living Arrangements Impacting Student Learning

Another wellbeing concern that affected student learning was students taking on parental responsibilities that prevented them from engaging in learning and which subsequently affected their academic performance. While the impact of the home environments of these students will be discussed later in this chapter, it is imperative to discuss additional responsibilities that students had to shoulder during the pandemic, which they would not have otherwise done on a regular basis. The teachers reported that most students of refugee backgrounds came from low socio-economic backgrounds and that the pandemic exacerbated these conditions. Studies have revealed that parental unemployment has a direct relation to a decrease in the self-efficacy of the youth (Mortimer et al., 2016). This is applicable to students of refugee backgrounds in the context of the research, as teachers outlined that these students had to take on a parental role at times to support their families financially during the global health crisis. In addition, it was reported that students of refugee backgrounds came from large families where either one or both parents were not proficient in English. Hence, the responsibility of assisting younger children in the family with online learning, household chores as well as assisting parents to navigate through vital information related to the pandemic, such as health and safety regulations and vaccinations, fell on older siblings. These views support the notion outlined in some studies that there was a shift in parental roles in families during the pandemic, where young adult children had to emotionally support their families while suppressing their own needs (Hernandez & Colaner, 2022). Therefore, it is evident that many of these students prioritised their families over their learning and, hence, were not able to engage in their learning as they would have done in a face-to-face learning environment. This also lowered the attendance of students in their online lessons whereby negatively impacting their learning outcomes (Nieuwoudt, 2020; Tomaszewski et al., 2023).

The anecdotal evidence provided by teachers presents individual cases of students whose learning was disrupted as they had to take care of younger siblings or engage in online learning using a mobile device from a workplace. The data state that these students did not achieve high scores in their examinations even though they managed to receive a VCE certificate at the end of the year. Although it was not explicitly stated, it can be presumed that financial burdens and emotional constraints on parents would have elevated the level

of stress and dissatisfaction in home environments, which would have directly affected the learning of these students (Fong & Iarocci, 2020).

However, the findings also indicated that international students who came from affluent families and had resources were able to achieve higher results in assessments and examinations. Teachers believe that they had more support and facilities to work independently to achieve these outcomes. In some instances, it was reported that some of these students performed better than they would have done in a face-to-face learning environment, as there were extrinsic factors that supported and facilitated their learning. Prior studies indicate that parents had a more salient role in their children's education during the pandemic, where they would be actively engaged in using better communication and home learning strategies to ensure their children were engaged in their learning (Hapsari et al., 2020). The data collected in this research suggest that international students who came from families where parents had prior knowledge of English and could provide children with learning resources were better equipped to create a productive learning environment (Milovanska-Farrington, 2021). Hence, the findings are consistent with existing literature that claims that there is higher educational attainment among students who came from families that maintained higher standards of education (Bonal & Gonzales, 2020).

Apart from students from refugee backgrounds, international students were also reported to have experienced wellbeing concerns related to their living arrangements during the pandemic. These students were away from their families and often had to abide by the rules and conditions laid out by host families, which at times proved to be an impediment to their learning. In such circumstances, it is expected for them to feel a lack of sense of belonging and loneliness, which would, in turn, affect their learning (Gomes, 2022). It is probable that these students also experienced higher levels of stress as global travel restrictions imposed by governments prevented them from seeing their families. They were living in a foreign country, trying to navigate through the academic and emotional complexities brought forward by the pandemic (Alam et al., 2021). These concerns were reported to be an additional emotional burden for these students. They prevented them from being wholly engaged in their learning, and their limited engagement was subsequently reflected in their academic performance.

While the students interviewed in this project also outlined loneliness, financial burdens and distraction as main wellbeing concerns that affected their learning, they also highlighted a sense of resilience, which helped them survive the challenges posed by the pandemic (Labrague, 2021). While the students cherished the time with their families, some resorted to reading and writing as coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic. This coincides with notions about coping with crises where knowledge can be used in action, which can lead to improvement in skills and abilities (Arnall, 2017). Students who used language as a coping mechanism during the pandemic also saw success in their VCE exam scores post-pandemic. Additionally, handwritten journals were a means of alleviating stress and anxiety brought forth by the pandemic. Hence, it can be deduced that these students who engaged in reading and writing outside of schoolwork succeeded in diluting stress and anxiety, leading to more success in their academic performance (Santri et al., 2022). It can also be presumed that reading and writing were more than coping mechanisms in the context of the pandemic for these students; they were also a source of resilience that set them apart from their counterparts who were affected by stress and anxiety during the course of remote learning (Meine et al., 2021; Patston et al., 2021) but had no effective outlet.

6.2.2.3 Academic and Wellbeing Implications During the Pandemic Through a Freirean Lens

One of the concerns Freire had regarding modern education is the focus it had on the educator rather than the learner, leading to the dehumanisation of education and the loss of its humane aspect (Firdaus & Mariyat, 2017). His belief was that traditional education was oppressive, with students as subservient objects, which led to a lack of humanity in education (Mahur et al., 2019). This notion is linked to political oppression and neoliberal economic systems, which he believed were factors that dehumanised education (Latecka, 2022). His definition of humanisation is the transformation of humans from being objects to subjects who are able to understand their circumstances and act to overturn them (Tan, 2018). Freire's education theory endorses the notion that education should exhibit democratic responsibility and promote subjectivity, autonomy and self-reliance among students (Lee & Chae, 2022).

Examining the wellbeing concerns faced by EAL students during the pandemic and the subsequent impact they had on students' academic performance in their VCE assessments

and examination, it is evident that the pandemic itself is one of the crises in addition to climate change, systemic racism, displacement and political unrest that is a hindrance to what Paulo Freire defined as quality education (Walsh, 2021). In the Freirean sense, educational quality was measured by how much education is relevant to social and cultural contexts (Freire, 1997). In the context of the pandemic and the findings of many studies, including this research, it is evident that while the pandemic illuminated academic challenges that existed within the system of education, the education system was not designed to empower students to respond to the global health crisis (Serikbekovna et al., 2022). While the findings showed that schools used some form of online learning as per norm and had wellbeing support teams established to support both teachers and students, none of these measures were designed to withstand a global health crisis marred with unpredictability (Dobrowolski, 2020).

The outbreak of COVID-19 was a time of restlessness, hopelessness and anxiety for both teachers and students. In a period of despair, the only way out is to reconstruct hope by understanding the extent of the circumstances and through an education system that seeks to empower teachers and students to reconstruct hope and resilience (Freire, 2003). Freire further reinforces this notion when he claims that education must be the central feature of starting movements for radical social change (Gottesman, 2010). Ideally, the educational system should have provided opportunities for students to overcome the emotional challenges posed by the pandemic. While students utilised reading and writing as a coping mechanism and to cultivate resilience to face academic and wellbeing challenges during the pandemic, there was no evidence arising in the data collection in this research to substantiate the role of the educational system in inspiring learners to become resilient through literacy (Saldanha & Barclay, 2021).

While prior research showed teachers to be in a more authoritative position where they were the dominant subjects in the education system, the pandemic revealed that teachers, too, were restricted objects, just as students were. During the outbreak of the pandemic, both teachers and students were at the mercy of political decision-making, and they were objects in an education system that required them to follow guidelines with limited freedom to be creative and innovative. Consequently, both parties experienced dehumanisation. The dehumanisation process of teachers during the pandemic will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

The data of this research indicate that education for VCE EAL students during lockdowns was far from liberating. Prior to the pandemic, EAL students faced linguistic barriers, cultural differences, in becoming active learners, instructional issues and coping with reading materials (Fook & Sidhu, 2015). These challenges were exacerbated during the pandemic and additionally, these students lost teacher guidance, emotional support from the school community and social interaction that would have proved to be sources of solace to face academic challenges. Hence, it is plausible for learners to feel despair and a lack of self-insufficiency, which would negatively affect their academic performance (Martínez et al., 2019). This elucidates how it was difficult to reconstruct hope in the Freirean sense during this time, as students did not have the appropriate resources and facilities to construct hope to cope with the challenges during the pandemic. Therefore, the data revealed that students were merely waiting for the lengthy lockdown periods to conclude so that they could attain a sense of normalcy. However, it is also inaccurate to presume that returning to face-to-face learning was achieving complete liberation. The challenges EAL learners had already faced in conventional classrooms were routine-based; EAL learners were already disempowered learners through curriculum and pedagogy that produced rather than reduced social inequality (Boer & Hoeve, 2017; Miller, 2017). Hence, the data of this study suggests that the students were merely transitioning from a more oppressive education system to a less oppressive education system after the pandemic. This will be unpacked in more detail later in this chapter.

6.3 Subquestion 2: Were there distinctive teaching strategies that teachers of VCE EAL implemented to engage students more effectively in remote learning during the COVID-19 outbreak?

In a conventional VCE EAL classroom, teachers are expected to use a variety of teaching strategies to engage students to achieve academic success. In the context of Victoria, teachers refer to high impact teaching strategies such as explicit teaching, multiple exposure, feedback, differentiation, questioning, collaborative learning and worked examples (Department of Education and Training, 2017). At the VCE level, teachers additionally refer to the advice for teachers outlined for each subject area. In an EAL classroom, teachers design learning activities on key aspects of texts, collaborative learning activities to generate ideas on informative and persuasive texts, model examples of analytical paragraphs, foster creativity through low-stakes writing tasks and conduct classroom discussions on issues pertaining to texts and current affairs (VCAA, 2022).

When the pandemic forced school closures in Victoria, teachers were faced with the challenge of designing learning activities that engaged students in learning as well as maintaining their academic momentum, creating an environment that promoted academic excellence (Pappas & Giannakos, 2021). The participating teachers all stated that when the first emergency lockdown was announced in 2020, their priority was simply to adjust learning to cater to the needs of students across all year levels and reduce expectations to make the transition from face-to-face to online learning smoother for their students. Additionally, they were required to adhere to school policies on how online learning was expected to be conducted, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the curriculum while trying to cater to the needs of the students (Uleanya, 2022). They also expressed the difficulties they faced when adapting a curriculum that promoted academic excellence while also managing the wellbeing concerns of their students (Nerlino, 2022). This coincides with existing studies that contend that designing a curriculum to cater to the conditions laid out by the pandemic was challenging and required the expertise of IT for teachers to be successful at it (Shuhaibah et al., 2022). Figure 6.4 encapsulates the teaching strategies VCE EAL teachers had used during the pandemic as per the analysed data and these will be discussed in more detail the subsequent sections of the chapter.

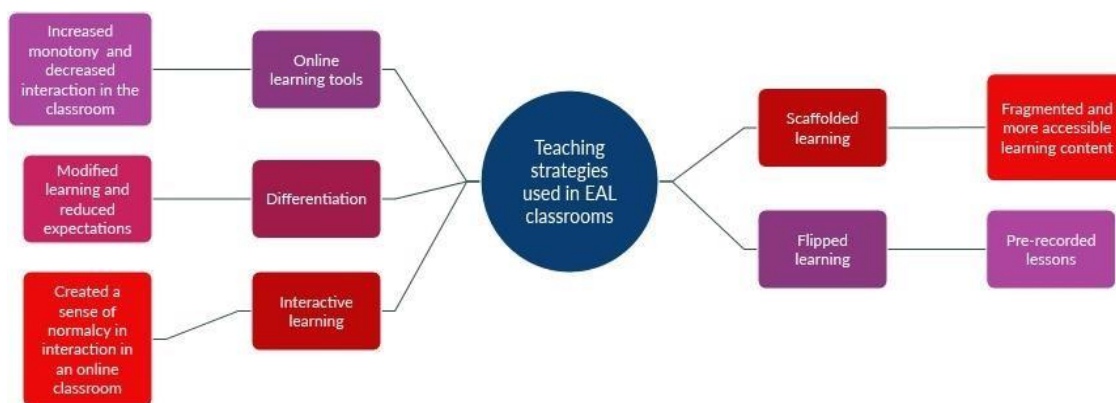


Figure 6.4: Teaching strategies used in EAL classrooms and their impacts on learners

6.3.1 Online Platforms During the Pandemic

A common observation that was made by the teachers who participated in this study was that they all used common online learning platforms like Zoom, MS Teams, WebEx and Google Classrooms to conduct their lessons online. These online communication platforms were effective in English classrooms as they facilitated student learning through different features like breakout rooms for collaborative learning, improving student-teacher communication and conducting different formative assessments during online lessons (Mu’awanah et al., 2021). The participants outlined that with support from the school and collaboration with colleagues, they were able to utilise these platforms in their online classrooms to attempt to deliver an authentic learning experience to their students. However, one of the main limitations of these video conferencing applications was the monotony that invaded once the novelty faded. The teachers and students in this research experienced a similar sense of infinite boredom and disengagement with time (Tobing et al., 2022). While students who were interviewed in this research considered using these video conferencing platforms a novel experience, they echoed the sentiments of many students in other studies who had argued that these platforms negatively affected their motivation to learn (Serhan, 2020). These students preferred face-to-face interaction with their teachers, where they could ask questions and seek clarification on subject content. As EAL learners prepare for their VCE examination, they consider teachers and the school environment to be vital aspects of their learning. In addition, when analysing the perceptions of these students towards education, it was evident that they thrive in a more didactic learning environment with multiple resources and verbal support (Cloonan & Fingeret, 2020). These students attribute success in exam preparation to achievement to

overall academic success, and they consider online learning as a hindrance to their learning (Đigić & Zdrakovic, 2019). Hence, it can be deduced that for these learners, it was more engaging for them to be in a face-to-face environment for prolonged engagement as opposed to using video conferencing tools (Khashab, 2023).

6.3.2 Scaffolding and Segmenting Learning

Other strategies the teachers used to engage these learners during remote learning were scaffolding and segmenting learning tasks into achievable activities. Scaffolding is a technique where the teacher helps the student master a task that the student is unable to grasp independently (Bruner, 2021; Lipscomb et al., 2010; Leon, 2012). Scaffolding in a classroom is proven to be effective in enabling learners to overcome challenges, become more independent learners, and achieve their academic goals (Diaferia et al., 2018; Gonulal & Loewen, 2017). In an EAL classroom, teachers use scaffolding to analyse the abilities of their students and provide the materials needed to achieve success in writing effective pieces with examples for the students to refer to (Rodgers, 2018). Furthermore, scaffolding is a valuable teaching strategy for special educational needs, accelerating these students' learning while differentiating according to their abilities .

EAL learners can be considered students with special educational needs as they have various linguistic barriers to overcome, such as vocabulary, structuring grammatically correct sentences, comprehending complex texts and inferring vital information from texts to achieve success in their learning. During remote learning, these academic needs increased, making content more inaccessible for students without appropriate support. Therefore, it was expected that scaffolding content would effectively address the academic needs of the students. This was the general view of the participants, who outlined that they engaged in more extensive scaffolding than in a face-to-face environment as an engagement strategy. Previous studies conducted on scaffolding in remote learning state that it is a strategy that can be effectively used in an English classroom to brainstorm ideas and develop communication to assist young learners achieve academic success (Sylvia et al., 2022).

Building on this concept is the argument that scaffolding instruction in online learning improves collaboration and critical thinking, facilitates independent learning and endorses linguistic and academic development (Liu et al., 2022). The objective behind the

participants using scaffolding as a strategy to engage VCE EAL learners seems to align with previously conducted studies in this context. However, it should also be noted that for scaffolding to be an effective strategy in online learning, it must be implemented in a sustained teaching model, which was not the case with the scenarios revealed through the interviews (Laso & Paredes-Velasco, 2021). In a scaffolded learning environment, students actively participate in making meaning of knowledge, and it is a supportive learning environment where the teacher is more of a facilitator than a dominant figure (Kamberi, 2013). The data revealed that teachers were able to engage in extensive scaffolding for their EAL students during the pandemic and how that became an integral differentiation strategy to support learners in achieving their learning outcomes. While students did not use the term 'scaffolding', they described that their teachers simplified and broke down content and instruction and appraised the impact the differentiated instruction and delivery had on their academic performance. However, there were no data that outlined that students worked collaboratively to make meaning of the content through scaffolding during the pandemic. The data suggest that scaffolding was more of a set of guidelines for students to follow in online learning settings rather than an opportunity for them to work together with peers.

The overall perception of the teachers in this study was that students were either completely disengaged from their learning or, if engaged, did not extend themselves. Their written work was mechanical and lacked insight. Teachers also acknowledged that there was a minority of students who thrived under remote learning conditions. As stated earlier, there were very limited opportunities for teachers to create a more collaborative learning environment owing to disengagement, lack of motivation to learn, lack of creativity, technical difficulties that arose during this time and school policies around the conducting of remote learning. The data indicates that teachers did try to scaffold more explicitly; but it did not have the expected result. Mahayasa et al. (2021) state that without the appropriate learning conditions and student motivation, scaffolding may not be a factor that improves student written competency. In the context of this research, it can be concluded that scaffolding was yet another strategy that simplified content for students who participated in online learning. However, it did not necessarily improve academic performance or engagement.

6.3.3 Differentiated Learning Strategies

The teacher participants of VCE EAL also report using differentiated strategies to engage students in remote learning. Differentiation in learning is a method of teaching that aims to reach all levels of learners with careful consideration of factors like prior knowledge, learning ability, and context (Howe, 2020). Differentiation gives teachers the opportunity to plan and deliver learning experiences according to the diversity of learners, providing multiple pathways to understanding information (Desinguraj & Ebenezer, 2021). An advantage of differentiated learning is that it is believed to reduce student disengagement and assist students in learning according to their preferred learning styles (Morgan, 2014). Previous studies also reported that differentiated instruction leads to higher levels of intellectual growth, interest in content and subject, and an improved understanding of concepts for the majority of students in a classroom (Least, 2014).

In an EAL classroom, a teacher encounters students who have come not only from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds but also students who demonstrate different English competency levels and diverse experiences. Hence, teaching becomes an act of community practice that supports students (Premier & Parr, 2019). At the VCE level, differentiated instruction becomes imperative to engage these learners as they prepare for a common formal assessment while being at different stages in their educational and migration journeys. As EAL learners, they are also required to develop literacy skills on different levels to compete with the demands of contemporary economic and social challenges and requirements (Veliz & Hossein, 2020). Additionally, differentiation is imperative in an EAL classroom because, according to studies, these students do not achieve academic success through a pedagogy that is meant for native English-speaking students (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2016).

All the participating teachers outlined that they modified their lessons and lowered expectations to render it easier for EAL students to navigate through the online learning process. The teachers agreed that their main objective was to teach the key knowledge and skills rather than quantifying the learning tasks and potentially overwhelming the students. The teachers also referred to how they provided students with the choice of selecting the work they deemed achievable and manageable and how they adjusted their practice according to the needs of the students as they proceeded with the lockdown. This perception of differentiation aligns with existing literature on differentiation during

remote learning, which argues that it promotes a growth-oriented mindset in EAL students with mixed abilities and improves academic performance (Abramova & Mashoshina, 2021). One school's justification for the use of Google Classroom aligns with existing studies that contend that the platform makes it easier to track student progress and hence modify lessons (Sharda & Bajpai, 2021) and enables students to use a variety of other applications to support their learning such as forms, creating a work portfolio and assessment (Baharun et al., 2021).

While teachers in this research modified learning for students who were struggling with the challenges of the pandemic, teachers also claimed that they provided extension tasks for more motivated learners. These learners, according to the teachers, were a minority of learners who knew how to self-regulate in their learning and often showed autonomy and agency in their learning prior to the pandemic. These students adapted more easily to the new learning environment and had already been using digital literacy to support their learning. These skills and attributes enabled them to achieve academic success during the pandemic (Syed et al., 2021). According to existing research, high-achieving students use strategies such as note-taking, reading strategies to access learning material, and metacognitive strategies to apply knowledge during the pandemic (Syadiah et al., 2021). Other studies have claimed that a factor that determines the academic success of students is the growth mindset which encourages students to diligently engage in their learning and assessments (Kizilcec & Goldfarb, 2019). It was also revealed in the findings that a few students considered the pandemic to be a challenge that they needed to overcome, and their academic endeavours were constituted by this mindset. This made these learners stand apart from their peers as they were able to use this mindset to alleviate stress and be more independent as learners during the pandemic (Jiang et al., 2023). While the students interviewed in this study did not identify themselves as high-achieving students during the pandemic, the perceptions of the teachers support the notion of independent learning among high-achieving students and hence their justification for providing extension tasks to challenge some students' academic rigour in the context of the pandemic. It also demonstrated that teachers have an important role to play in encouraging the growth mindset of students to foster engagement and success. Teachers' strategies to modify learning and provide opportunities for extended learning were synonymous with providing students with a supportive context to flourish academically (Yeager et al., 2021).

6.3.4 Flipped Learning Elements in Online EAL Classrooms

Another strategy that was reported to be used by teachers in this study during the pandemic is the use of elements of flipped learning. Hwang et al. (2015) identify flipped learning as an innovative instructional approach that replaces traditional instruction with access to learning instruction outside of classrooms. Flipped learning is also reported to save time for teachers as they can use class time for activities while students have access to lectures and lessons online (DeLozier & Rhodes, 2016). In a flipped learning environment, students have access to pre-recorded material by the teacher and they can engage in productive learning through collaboration with their peers (Hwang et al., 2019). In EAL classrooms, flipped learning seems to be an effective method of content delivery as it has been discovered to support the acquisition of vocabulary more effectively than conventional methods (Knezevic et al., 2020). It is also considered to be an effective method to improve student writing skills as the method is more interactive and collaborative (Pavanelli, 2018). Furthermore, this learning model is identified to be more effective in promoting autonomy among EAL learners and improving their overall academic performance (Kvashnina & Martynko, 2016).

In the context of remote learning and this research, all forms of learning took place in an online learning environment, but teachers used elements of flipped learning in the form of recording lessons using online platforms for students to access. In a VCE EAL online learning environment with reduced class time with teachers, pre-recorded lessons prove to be helpful to students who would have missed online learning, had internet connection issues and struggled to grasp the pace and accent of the teacher in a virtual environment (Botha et al., 2021). Based on the home environments of students outlined in the data, pre-recorded lessons may also have been more equitable than live-streaming lessons, especially for students in larger households with more distractions and issues accessing the internet (Pilkington & Hanif, 2021). The impact of the absence of pre-recorded lessons was highlighted through the views of students who accessed remote learning from China in 2021, where they missed lessons owing to internet issues and time differences and faced challenges in catching up with missed online instruction. While teachers made efforts within their knowledge and understanding of online learning to prepare these additional resources as a means of engaging learners, there is no evidence in this current study to indicate that these measures led to an increase in academic achievement.

The student participants appreciated their teachers for their efforts and creating resources to support their learning but also revealed that they need to be present in a learning environment where their teachers deliver and explain content to them. This coincides with existing studies, which have also claimed that both pre-recorded and online lessons had little impact on student academic performance during the pandemic (Lim et al., 2022). Other studies also claimed that pre-recorded lessons have had a lower impact on low-achieving students and no impact on high-achieving students (Le, 2022). These views can be attributed to other academic and wellbeing factors that predominantly influenced academic performance in EAL students, outweighing the benefits of flipped learning during the pandemic.

6.3.5 Interactive Learning Strategies

The final distinct strategy that was recorded in the findings of this study was the use of interactive activities to keep students engaged in learning. It should be noted that these activities, according to the teachers, were not particularly pertaining to the VCE curriculum but to the wellbeing of students. The teachers in this study acknowledged that students found themselves confined to small and isolated physical and digital spaces with minimal physical and mental stimulation during remote learning. Studies have discovered that social isolation is strongly associated with poor health conditions and behaviour patterns in young adults compared with older adults (Hammig, 2019; Beam & Kim, 2020; Clair et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important that educators implement strategies to reduce these wellbeing concerns among young adults and engage them in their learning. The information that arose from the interviews indicated that teachers attempted to incorporate activities that made connections to students' real-life experiences as a means of building a rapport with them in a digitally isolated environment. They also claimed to have used online platforms like Kahoot! and Quizzes to maintain a sense of normalcy in a rather mechanical setting. Previous studies conducted around the context of the pandemic argue that interactive activities during the pandemic helped teachers understand students' fears and concerns and resolve them while building resilience (Saxena & Saxena, 2020). These activities would also compensate for the absence of community-based activities, which were restricted by social distancing guidelines (Tulchin-Francis et al., 2021). Furthermore, these activities were one of the few means of improving social interaction among students in an isolated environment during the pandemic (Ratnaningsih et al.,

2022) while also improving academic enrichment (Gheorghe & Dumitrache, 2021; Huang, 2021).

In an EAL classroom, interactive activities are expected to foster better communication between teachers and students (Gardner, 2019). While interactive activities are effective in student acquisition of knowledge, they are also effective in assisting EAL students build personal skills within the classroom (Obskov et al., 2015). Furthermore, studies have found that these activities stimulate EAL students' creativity and enthusiasm for learning (Yang, 2022). From a curriculum perspective, the VCE EAL study design rationalises its curriculum as promoting learners to become critical thinkers and effective communicators who interpret issues and participate in a democratic society (VCAA, 2014). It appears that while trying to create a more humane classroom in a digital space the teachers in this study endeavoured to fulfil the objectives of the VCE study design through incorporating more interactive activities in their lesson plans. While teachers generally believed that their attempts at engaging learners through more interaction were not as effective as they had expected, a few student participants believed that the informal activities conducted by their teachers helped reduce the overwhelming nature of learning activities and make learning as interesting as the circumstances allowed it to be.

6.3.6 Online Learning Strategies Through a Freirean Lens

Looking at engagement through a critical lens, Freire believed that learning is successful when educators examine knowledge and learning from the perspective of students and then encourage them to transform their realities (Shor & Freire, 1987). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire outlines the paradox that the oppressed subject often internalises their reality and believes that their authentic existence comes from freedom, but at the same time fears their authentic self (Freire, 2019). In the context of an EAL classroom during the pandemic, the students acknowledged that their true potential as learners of English exists in a face-to-face classroom where they have access to resources as well as teacher support. While they are not completely liberated in the education system, where they are made to achieve success in a standardised exam to pursue their higher studies regardless of their migration status and proficiency in English, conventional learning became a form of liberation from the constricts of the pandemic. Therefore, Freire's argument urges further thought regarding meaningful engagement for EAL students in the

context of the pandemic where the students were encouraged to think critically and not just complete set tasks. They were also encouraged to use the experience as a means of understanding their circumstances and creating their own narrative (Toit, 2018). It is also believed that while student alienation from their learning is often attributed to psychological and emotional factors, the impact of the prevalent social conditions determines the extent to which they are disengaged from their learning (McInerney, 2009). McInerney (2009) further argues that when students are faced with curriculum content that they do not relate to and do not have an active voice in, it is natural for them to detach from the process of learning. Hence, a more student-centred pedagogy is recommended to minimise students from resisting education and transforming school structures into more inclusive, humanist and less detached institutions promoting student agency (Starkey, 2019). Ideally, during the pandemic, the curriculum would have been structured to incorporate engagement strategies that examined inequitable social structures and make connections between everyday life and the global health crisis to challenge its impact on student learning (Bigelow & Petersen, 2002). However, the unpredictable nature of the pandemic and the externally imposed VCE EAL curriculum limited teachers' capacity to be innovative with their pedagogy. They were compelled to merely facilitate student learning and teach key knowledge and skills outlined by the curriculum that was constructed to be completed in a conventional, face-to-face classroom. Therefore, the strategies such as scaffolding, lowering expectations, and interactive activities outlined in this thesis seem to be extended resources that support a more teacher-guided approach to acquiring knowledge. However, it can also be argued that these strategies, to some extent, were implemented to build resilience in students and promote independence, albeit conforming to the parameters of a curriculum imposed on them.

Supporting differentiation in teaching practice, critical theorists like Freire conceptualised the notion of equality and stated that equality and difference coexist in relation to one another. Critical pedagogy asserts that the objective of emancipated education is to cultivate these differences and use them to eliminate superiority and inferiority from a democratic society (Kohan, 2019). This does not mean that there is epistemological equality between teachers and students but involves the notion that teachers should be aware of the diverse needs of learners and use this diversity to achieve pedagogical equality (Casali, 2001). The findings of this research revealed that the diverse needs of

EAL learners had become more apparent during the pandemic owing to their amplified academic and socio-economic needs. Therefore, differentiation was a necessity to cater to these differences to empower learners to liberate themselves from crisis. However, the inequality of student participation in learning during the pandemic seems to have reduced differentiated learning to a strategy that further increased inequality in learning: students who were motivated regularly attended online classes and had more opportunities for success, while students who were disengaged from learning, often owing to unavoidable circumstances, were further disadvantaged (Santibañez & Guarino, 2021).

In promoting student engagement and liberation in their learning, Freire also outlined the notions of love and care underpinning effective and humanised teaching practice. He repeatedly affirmed that students are multidimensional beings who can comprehend, interpret, critique and analyse their own surroundings, emotions and experiences (Freire, 1997). The teacher who understands this concept identifies the importance of students feeling connected to their learning and having a sense of agency in their learning and acknowledges that students are diverse and multifaceted in terms of how they see and understand the world around them. While this does not allude to teachers forming personal connections with learners outside of the classroom, it refers to teaching practice where teachers understand the oppressive nature of education's impact on students while humanising the process by building resilience in students to face academic challenges (Darder, 2017). The EAL teachers in this study all demonstrated empathy and acknowledged the dehumanising form of curriculum learning during the pandemic, which reduced their students to mere receptors of knowledge (Nafati, 2015). Their knowledge of student contexts, the impact of student learning abilities and their learning trajectory across the pandemic was insightful and supported Freire's philosophy of compassionate understanding and respect for students as subjects and using this knowledge to foster resilience in students (Shih, 2018). This is not to imply that empathy and compassion were limited to EAL teachers alone but to suggest through the data reviewed that the pandemic illuminated EAL teachers' understanding of their students' concerns on a humane level. Consequently, teachers attempted to incorporate more interaction that sought to foster connectivity to create a safe and supportive environment for students to achieve academic success (Kim et al., 2021; Meluch & Hannah, 2021).

It is also stated in studies that Freire's pedagogical theories were formulated in a pre-internet era, and hence, it would be difficult to fathom how he would perceive an education system where students and teachers were not in the physical space but connected through technology (Boyd, 2016). However, Freire was open to the use of technology in education if it opened new pathways of discourse, creating new knowledge and empowering learners to think critically (Freire, 2013). He also outlined the dangers of online pedagogy, noting that it can intensify the teacher-student dichotomy and create a data-driven, dehumanising education experience (Farag et al., 2021). Applying these views to the context of the pandemic and remote learning among VCE EAL learners in Australia, it can be identified that these students were in a dichotomous relationship with their teachers where the latter often found themselves depositing knowledge for the purpose of enabling the former to achieve academic success in an online environment. However, the data in this research also substantiates the inclination of teachers to humanise the process of online learning while adhering to the requirements of the curriculum.

6.4 Subquestion 3: Did Teachers Adjust Formative Assessment Processes to Cater to Remote Learning During the COVID-19 Outbreak? Did VCAA Adjust Summative Assessment Processes to Address the Impacts and Consequences of COVID-19 on EAL Learners?

6.4.1 Formative Assessments During the Pandemic

School systems across the world during the pandemic saw a shift in how they conducted formative and summative assessments with their students. Formative assessment is a type of assessment conducted in a classroom to monitor student's academic process and provide feedback (Dixson & Worrell, 2016). It is considered that formative assessments are linked to students' motivation to learn and autonomy. They lead to increased levels of competence and an improved sense of agency among learners (Leenknecht et al., 2020). Scholars also view formative assessment as a powerful learning tool that can be used in a test-dominated environment where this form of assessment can be used to track students' progress before and after a formal test (Xiao, 2017). Building on this concept is the evidence that formative assessment is effective in preparing students for end-of-course assessments by measuring competence and performance (Kulasegaram & Rangachari, 2018). While formative assessment is a strategy that seeks to collect data on student strengths and areas of improvement to enrich individual teacher practice (Tudor, 2016), it can also be used as a whole school measure where teachers of different subject areas adapt common assessment strategies to engage their learners (Bond et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, teachers across the world adapted formative assessment practices to keep students engaged in learning as well as to improve their academic performance. Existing studies indicate that effective formative assessment practices include empathic, reflective and adaptive methods that focus on the holistic development of learners in a restricted environment (Kim et al., 2021). Some of these effective assessment strategies were creative e-portfolios, online learning journals, blogs, online presentations and creative writing tasks (Koris & Pal, 2021). Departing from conventional assessment methods, some teachers also utilised a hybrid approach where they combined digital methods with traditional formative strategies (Morze et al., 2021). These methods used

online learning platforms to assess student performance in standard learning activities. However, it has also been determined in studies that for formative assessments to be successful in an online learning environment; they have to be cohesively planned while staying aligned with the curriculum (Nurfiqah & Yusuf, 2021; Ogange et al., 2018; Steen et al., 2022).

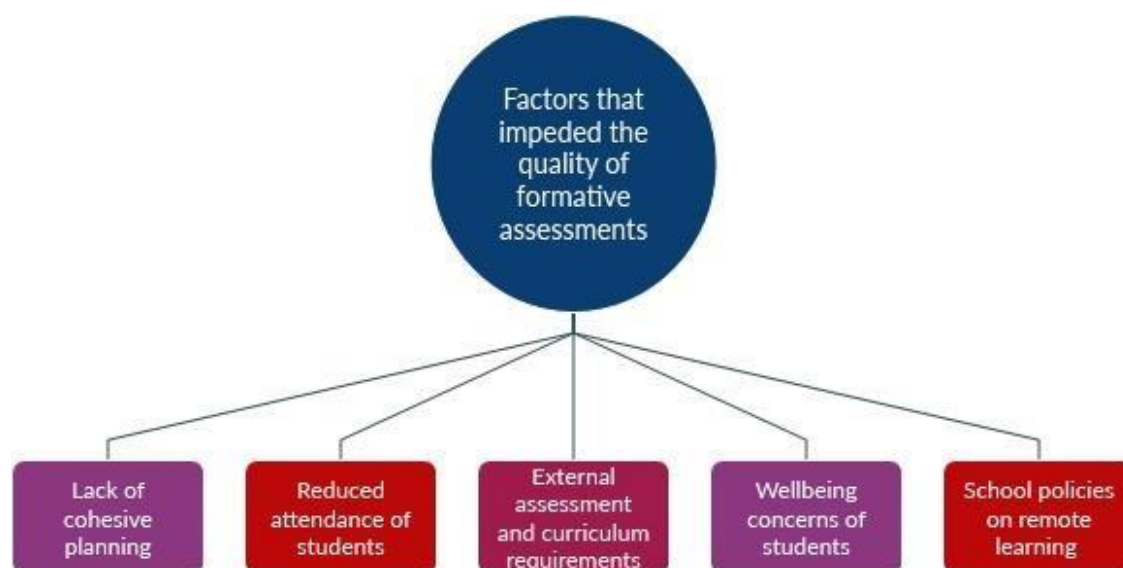


Figure 6.5: Factors that impeded the quality of formative assessments

It was evident that during the pandemic teachers of EAL adapted formative assessment strategies to engage students and enhance their academic performance. Figure 6.5 depicts factors that impeded the quality of formative assessments which will be discussed further in this section. Given that remote learning occurred under emergency circumstances and the curriculum constraints laid by VCE, these teachers found themselves adapting regular formative assessment practices in an online learning environment. They used strategies such as shorter comprehension tasks, portfolio tasks, online classroom discussions, live documents and checklists to ensure that students were completing their assigned online learning tasks while also emphasising the importance of digital literacy in an EAL classroom (Prastikawati, 2022). It was revealed from the findings that the strategy of assessing micro skills during remote learning served the functional purpose of allowing the teacher to evaluate the needs of the students and further modify their teaching practice accordingly (Ilic, 2022). The teachers of this study believed that modifying assessments to evaluate shorter tasks and micro skills was an effective strategy to keep students engaged while also improving their learning outcomes.

Another factor that influenced teachers' motivation behind adapting and implementing formative assessment strategies was the emotional implication behind online learning. As discussed earlier in this chapter, students faced many academic and wellbeing concerns during the pandemic, and it was evident from the interview data that teachers had taken this into consideration while creating formative assessment tasks for their students (Xu, 2016). This justifies the teachers adapting traditional formative assessment practices in an online environment for VCE EAL students to enhance the learning of students but also to ensure that the learning process was not overwhelmingly and negatively affecting their wellbeing (Burke et al., 2023). Aligned with this notion is the positive response teachers gave regarding student familiarity with a blended learning approach prior to lockdown. This rendered it easier for teachers to cultivate empathy and facilitate formative assessment in an online setting (Hodges & Barbour, 2021). However, students believed that their low digital literacy levels affected their performance in learning and assessments. This implies that EAL teachers underestimate the power of teacher support not only in learning content but also in acquiring micro-skills, which are crucial in assessments. Further connected to this is student attendance which was affected by the wellbeing concerns they faced during the pandemic. The interview data revealed that the success of the formative assessment strategies implemented by teachers during the pandemic was somewhat determined by the attendance of the students. Lower attendance levels indicated that teachers could not engage in collaborative work and that there was no room for peer assessment. Therefore, the data indicated that during remote learning, the efficacy of formative assessments was not clearly identified owing to the lack of student participation (Catalano et al., 2021).

The conditions and requirements imposed by an external curriculum also determined the nature of formative assessment conducted by EAL teachers. Existing academic studies on formative assessment during the pandemic argue that strategies like gamifying assessments have had a positive impact on student wellbeing and learning during the pandemic (Zainuddin et al., 2021). Supporting this idea is the notion that such assessments can reduce anxiety levels in EAL students and enhance their confidence in their learning (Vallorani et al., 2022). It is also argued in previous literature that gamified assessments have the potential to make the curriculum more accessible and interesting for students (Barata et al., 2017). In other studies, flexibility in formative assessment has proven to be an effective tool to assist students in retaining information (Young, 2023).

However, it should be noted that the existing literature on the use of formative assessments in remote learning is not based on senior secondary classes such as Years 11 and 12. In an exam-driven learning environment, it is implied, according to the interviews conducted with teachers, that formative assessments and learning activities were geared towards increasing academic performance as opposed to fostering student engagement. It can be deduced that in such a learning environment where student academic achievement and scores are prioritised, it is expected that teachers are inclined to use less innovative methods to teach and assess their learners. The teacher participants' hesitancy to gamify tasks may have been found to align with what Hernández-Fernández et al. (2020) state that while gamification of learning improves subject motivation, it can negatively correlate with academic results. The fact that the teacher participants highlighted the inability of students to produce a sustained piece of writing with creative ideas further reiterates how teachers as educators were under pressure to ensure students achieved their learning outcomes rather than using the pandemic as an opportunity to experiment with innovative pedagogical and evaluation strategies

In the context of this research, teachers of VCE EAL were evidently under the constraints of the curriculum, as the content and assessment requirements had not changed drastically despite the academic and emotional impacts of the pandemic. Therefore, despite their attempts at making formative assessment more interesting, their primary objective undoubtedly was to ensure that the academic disadvantages of the pandemic were minimised as much as possible. Therefore, it can be said that teachers did not experience much autonomy in structuring their formative assessments, which are an integral criterion for effective assessment for EAL students (Davison & Michell, 2014). Even though the VCAA (2020) suggests that teachers and schools must adopt a variety of assessments and activities that provide multiple opportunities for students to acquire skills and knowledge, their recommendation that these assessments be completed in class under timed conditions complicated assessment processes for teachers during the pandemic .

The data suggests that every school had their own policies and procedures regarding the implementation of remote learning during the pandemic, and these policies also affected the implementation of formative assessments in VCE EAL classes during the pandemic. The interview data revealed the mixed reactions to school policies, with teachers critiquing them according to how well schools were able to facilitate effective learning

for EAL students. The overall views of teachers regarding school-level support and strategies mirrored the contention of existing studies that supportive measures from schools, such as targeted training and communication, helped teachers maintain stability in their practice during the pandemic (Kraft et al., 2021). In the Australian context, schools prioritised the wellbeing of students when formulating creative activities and support sessions and measures to enhance student engagement and establish a sense of normalcy during and after crises (Burde et al., 2017). According to the interview data, these strategies, along with lowered expectations, encouraged teachers to be creative with their formative assessments while also reducing the workload of students. However, the constraints of the exam system presented contrary pressures, which imposed less innovation and greater attention to what was required to succeed in an exam setting. With schools that followed their regular class schedule in online learning settings, there was monotony and a lack of creativity displayed in formative assessments in EAL. According to the data, in these school settings, formative assessments were more rigid and tedious, increasing the workload for both teachers and students. In such circumstances, the lack of creativity and flexibility negatively affected the engagement and academic performance of students as well as their perception towards the pandemic and education. This substantiates existing studies that claim that during the pandemic, creative opportunities for students decreased their anxiety and stress levels and attributed to more satisfaction, enjoyability and efficacy in learning (Patston et al., 2021). These creative opportunities would have normalised remote learning to some extent and would have prevented students from being dehumanised and objectified.

6.4.2 Feedback from Teachers to Students

Both teachers and students had divisive views regarding feedback in the context of remote learning. In an EAL classroom, feedback is of utmost importance as effective feedback can develop learner autonomy while positively impacting learners' cognitive processes (Komorowska, 2018). Teachers in EAL classrooms combine both written and verbal feedback at varying levels to facilitate language learning for students from diverse backgrounds (Shatri & Zabeli, 2022). In an EAL classroom, verbal feedback in the form of corrective feedback has been identified in studies that argue that it is important for learners to assist them in identifying their mistakes and following teacher instructions to rectify them (Zhang, 2022). The importance of this type of feedback has been identified

in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development framework (the ZPD), which deals with the distance between a student's level of understanding and the potential level of development while arguing that students learn best when they are in a collaborative environment (Shabani et al., 2010). Connected to this theory is the belief that, apart from teacher feedback, peer feedback during the writing process can enhance the quality of written expression (Maatouk & Payant, 2020).

The interview data revealed a mixed perception from both teachers and students regarding the process of giving and receiving feedback in remote learning. Some teachers believed that giving detailed written feedback was more effective as students could frequently refer to it, while verbal feedback would be more difficult to retain for EAL students owing to various linguistic barriers and ambiguities (Miller et al., 2014). This aligns with existing studies that argue that personalised feedback proved to be an effective strategy to enhance EAL student learning in online learning settings (Istemic, 2021; Staikopoulos & Conlan, 2018). This strategy also proved effective as it allowed teachers to be corrective, reflective and informative and therefore encouraged EAL students to refer to feedback as a learning resource and a scaffold throughout their online learning process (Savvidou, 2018).

However, students in this study were predominantly in favour of verbal feedback in an EAL classroom regardless of the mode of learning. They perceive verbal feedback as a means of directed and focused conversation that can help students set goals, seek clarity and address academic concerns (Kerr, 2017). This is not to undermine the autonomy of EAL learners but rather to bridge the language barriers that might exist in the classroom and to provide further personalised guidance for them to achieve their learning outcomes (Demaidi et al., 2018; Pardo et al., 2019). In the absence of this opportunity to provide verbal feedback, it was evident from the data that the reduced interaction between teachers and students had a significant impact on the extent to which students could track their progress and how they could improve their knowledge and skills. While in a conventional classroom, teachers had the capacity to experiment with a variety of ways to give feedback on student learning; remote learning seems to have limited opportunities for teachers to give feedback and limited opportunities for students to effectively apply them. On one level, the data reveal that the level of feedback students received was directly proportionate to the amount of work they had completed. On another level, it was suggested that for VCE EAL students to become successful learners, personal interactions

between teachers and learners are imperative for teachers to map out the learning trajectory of students and use meaningful dialogue to monitor their learning and ensure that they achieve academic success (Hafidi & Lamia, 2015). The limited personal interactions outlined in both student and teacher interviews link back to the didactic form of giving feedback rather than taking a dialogic approach that promotes academic growth and agency engagement in students (Winstone et al., 2017).

6.4.3 Summative Assessments

In terms of summative assessments, all the participating teachers outlined similar conditions put in place for summative assessments to be conducted under remote learning circumstances. Summative assessments are assessments that measure student understanding of a unit of work, and they are often used for reporting purposes (Mohabuth, 2015). In a VCE EAL classroom, summative assessments are referred to as SAC, and in a conventional classroom, they are usually conducted under timed conditions with limited resources available to students (VCAA, 2020). In an online classroom, these assessments were conducted under similar conditions where once the task was released to students, they were expected to complete and submit it at a set time. While some schools made it mandatory for students to turn on their cameras for the assessment to monitor breaches of assessment guidelines, it was evident that there were no formal measures put in place to authenticate student work. Existing studies on summative assessments during remote learning also suggest that authenticating assessments and reliability are some of the challenges surrounding summative assessment in remote learning (Almeida & Monteiro, 2021; Guangul et al., 2020; Namada & Kiarie, 2023). While teachers did not outline any plagiarism that could have occurred during these assessments, it was evident that under ERL conditions and lack of access to authenticating software, it would have been difficult for teachers to detect misuse of resources by students (Rahim, 2020). This finding necessitates schools to provide their teachers with access to plagiarism-checking software and platforms where online assessments are conducted. It should also be noted that teachers of other year levels were not bound by extrinsic curriculum factors, but VCE teachers were required to adhere to the guidelines set by the VCAA. This would have further complicated the process of conducting assessments online. Uncertainty about the nature of summative assessment during the pandemic raises the question of whether the work students produced at this time was an

accurate reflection of their learning. This finding outlines the opportunities that the pandemic provided regarding rethinking assessment practices within secondary education while also highlighting the possible challenges of assessment authentication (Ostojic et al., 2021).

The findings of this study point towards the need for the educational authorities to rethink assessment and student evaluation in an age where technology in classrooms is gaining prominence. The study further reveals that for students to reap the benefits of online assessments, significant changes must be made to how assessments are formulated and conducted in an online setting. Conducting traditional assessments in a virtual setting may raise questions regarding student academic integrity, and this was looming in the background of the data presented in this study (Parker et al., 2021). Especially in an EAL classroom, it is necessary to incorporate online assessments to align with the digitalised environment and to improve the digital literacies of learners, provided the curriculum allows it (Mahfoodh, 2021). This implies that teachers need special training and professional development to adapt and conduct assessments in a more effective way that accurately evaluates student performance while also establishing protocols to maintain ethical standards (Gratani, 2021).

6.4.4 Issues Surrounding External VCE Examinations

One of the concerns of the teachers participating in this research was that the VCAA did not make changes to exam specifications during the two years Victoria faced lockdown and did not take into account the impact the pandemic had on students when conducting VCE examinations post-lockdown. It is evident that the pandemic exposed the exam-driven tendency and the inflexible nature of the education system, as the VCE exams were neither modified nor postponed in both 2020 and 2021 (Cairns, 2021). This also implies that VCE students who were in metropolitan Melbourne were more disadvantaged than their counterparts living in regional Victoria, which was not under strict lockdown laws (Wright, 2021). While students in regional Victoria were generally considered more disadvantaged than their metropolitan counterparts (owing to reduced access to services and educational opportunities), the pandemic may, in fact, have established a more equitable examination circumstance for all students in Victoria. John Hattie's study claims that VCE English exam scores during the pandemic were more stable than in the pre-

pandemic era. He suggests that the negative impacts of the pandemic had little effect on students' academic achievement (Hattie, 2021). It should be noted that the exam scores indicated in the study do not include the performance of EAL students. It should also consider the fact that the students who sat their VCE exams in 2020 had completed Year 10 and Year 11 in a face-to-face environment. Hence, they had the opportunity to learn fundamental knowledge and skills in a face-to-face learning environment. The interview data of this research revealed that while Year 12 EAL students did not experience a drastic decline in VCE study scores in 2020, students who did Year 12 in 2021 were more disadvantaged, having completed both their VCE years under remote learning conditions. Additionally, all the students claimed that having spent longer periods in isolation over the course of their fundamental schooling years had a significant impact on their knowledge and skills at the VCE level. While none of the students who participated in the research did their VCE exams in 2020 and 2021, they believed that losing two fundamental years of schooling to COVID-19 had a negative impact on their reading and writing at the VCE level.

These findings of the study identify that existing issues regarding the structure of the VCE EAL examination and its previous and current study designs were amplified by the conditions imposed by the pandemic. In the previous study design, in which the accreditation period is 2016–2021, students were expected to complete a listening task, a text response essay and an argument analysis essay on an unseen persuasive text in the final three-hour exam (VCAA 2014). In preparation for this exam, EAL students were expected to study at least six texts with literary merit over the course of two years. At least one text each year should be of Australian literary origin (VCAA, 2014). In Year 11, teachers have the freedom to use their professional discretion and select texts for study, while in Year 12, they select texts from a common prescribed list (VCAA,2014).

One of the perceptions that arose from this study was that the pandemic exposed the extent to which the curriculum was increasing the workload on teachers and stress on students. The inflexibility of the curriculum in the face of the pandemic prevented teachers from providing a fully-fledged differentiated learning experience for their students, and this subsequently had an impact on their academic performance. While being an effective EAL teacher ensures one is aware of the disadvantages experienced by their students, the

pandemic enabled teachers to acknowledge the obvious discrepancies that existed within the VCE curriculum that complicated learning for EAL students across all subject areas. It is understandable that the unprecedented nature of the pandemic made it obvious that the VCE EAL was not originally designed to equip students and teachers with the skills and knowledge to overcome logistical challenges brought on by the global health crisis. Instead, stakeholders like institutions and educators were compelled to adapt the curriculum and make crucial decisions in a short amount of time (Brinks & Ibert, 2020).

According to UNICEF's Office of Research (2021), schools around the world were advised to reduce expectations and minimise formal evaluation where possible . As remote learning did not offer the same number of opportunities that conventional face-to-face learning offered, it was imperative to prioritise curriculum content and differentiate learning, identifying elements that students could work on at their own pace (Arvisais et al., 2020). However, the minimal to no significant changes made to the curriculum during and after the pandemic by the VCAA, wellbeing concerns and the disengagement and reduced academic performance in EAL students raise concerns as to whether VCE EAL is a curriculum that has been designed to promote mental wellbeing, confidence in academic ability and writing alongside academic achievement (Yu & Mocan, 2018). Additionally, a well-designed curriculum includes a proper diagnosis of student needs, formulation of objectives, selection of learning experiences and determination of student evaluation (Namaziandost, 2019). This study reveals that the VCE EAL curriculum lacked a proper diagnosis of the impact of the pandemic on EAL student needs and experiences and made only minor adjustments in the form of concessions and lowered marking scales. While these measures assisted EAL students in achieving academic success on some level, the curriculum failed to be context-specific and responsive to the needs of the learners (Gul & Khilji, 2021).

In 2022, a new study design was introduced by VCAA where there were some significant changes made to the curriculum as well as to the structure of the examinations. According to the new study design, a Year 12 EAL student will study two texts for analytical study, create texts on a framework of ideas such as writing about country, protest, personal journey and play, drafting and delivering a persuasive oral presentation and an analysis of persuasive texts (VCAA, 2022). Compared with the previous exam specifications, EAL students are now expected to complete three pieces of writing in three hours, including an

impromptu creative writing piece based on a framework of ideas that they study as a part of their coursework (VCAA, 2023). The participants of this research raised concerns regarding the new study design and believed that the VCAA failed to take the impacts of the pandemic on EAL learners into consideration and instead increased the workload for both students and teachers while having unrealistic expectations of student academic achievement.

Another significant change that has been outlined in the new examination specifications and study design is that students doing EAL and mainstream English will now study the same curriculum and sit for the same examination, with minor adjustments being made to the marking scale and rubrics for EAL students (VCAA, 2023). While students across the board were affected by the pandemic, it is evident that EAL students were more disadvantaged owing to language barriers, cultural barriers, minimal parental support, more familial responsibilities and isolation from peers and teachers. This refutes the notion of social justice in education that takes students' individual identities into account in an educational setting and instead approaches the curriculum from the point that all students studying English begin VCE from the same academic level and identity (Hahn Tapper, 2013).

Hence, the findings of this research indicate that the impacts of the pandemic and teachers' learning from that experience were ignored when formulating the new curriculum. Consequently, EAL students are burdened with unrealistic expectations. Additionally, according to the VCE EAL administrative handbook (2024) and as stated earlier in the research, students who are eligible to do VCE EAL should not have completed more than seven years of schooling or resided in Australia or another anglophone country. The first batch of EAL students sitting the VCE examination under the new study design in 2024 would have arrived in Australia no earlier than 2017. It can be accurately presumed that some of these EAL students would have arrived and begun mainstream schooling in Australia during the pandemic, and hence, they would have missed two vital years of schooling to improve their linguistic skills. As mentioned in the interviews of this study, while teachers acknowledged and appraised the independence of most EAL learners post-pandemic, one of the biggest challenges for current EAL students remains to produce sustained, cohesive, coherent and handwritten essays. Therefore, the increased

expectations of the VCE EAL examination are expected to be challenging for most learners across the state of Victoria.

The content of the new VCE EAL study design also exposes the complexities of the curriculum in engaging students from diverse ethnic and academic backgrounds and raises concerns over the relevance of the curriculum to student context. This was outlined in previous literature where it was stated that while the prescribed texts for VCE study address some needs of students from different backgrounds, the fact that mainstream English and EAL share the same text list exposed the authority's oblivion of the diversity of student experiences in an EAL classroom. Additionally, it means that EAL and mainstream English learners have similar levels of academic expectations placed on them even though the two cohorts are assessed separately (Janfada & Thomas, 2020). This resonates with the notion of the hidden curriculum where scholars believe that, while the curriculum has been implicitly designed to cater to the needs of diverse learners, there are nuances of an Anglophone approach to teaching students from different ethnic backgrounds (Janfada & Thomas, 2020).

In the context of the new study design and EAL learning post-pandemic, it seems that the emotional and academic needs of EAL learners have been overlooked in favour of a more administrative-friendly model where these students are expected to integrate themselves academically into a robust curriculum alongside their mainstream counterparts, who have had prolonged English education in Australia. As a result, the data findings also revealed that EAL students refrain from completing VCE and instead opt for vocational major pathways owing to the academic difficulties arising from the curriculum and the fact they are behind their peers in language acquisition and written and verbal expression. This is not to undermine the power of vocational education in paving the way for learners to understand social inequities, marginalisation and social justice (Philpot et al., 2021). However, in line with the Freirean ideal of liberation, it is important for those who are marginalised to have the political and intellectual power to challenge social inequality and push for social reformation (Lissovoy, 2018). Therefore, it is imperative that more EAL learners receive opportunities to nurture their intellectual prowess and pursue academic pathways that would subsequently empower them to overcome all social limitations.

6.4.5 VCE Examinations Through the Eyes of Freire

There has been a divisive opinion on the impact of exams on student learning and achievement. Some studies have revealed that exams are integral in determining student knowledge and skill and establishing meritocracy in society (Davis et al., 2020; Gjersvik, 2018; Marmsoler, 2022). However, there are studies that also claim that low-socioeconomic factors determine student performance in examinations, and hence, they expose existing sociological disparities (Rahal et al., 2022). In the Australian context, VCE exams and other Year 12 exams are fundamental aspects of secondary education as they determine a student's capacity to enrol in many university pathways (but not all) (Sikora & Pitt, 2018). These exams are also aligned with the pivotal role of STEM subjects in the country's future (Jaremus et al., 2018). Furthermore, these exams are said to make students 'job-ready' in various fields and open doors for further academic and employment opportunities (Lewis, 2018).

Examining the VCE curriculum and the previous and current study designs through the critical lens of Freire, it can be observed that the VCE EAL curriculum assimilates EAL students into a rigid and exam-driven academic culture. Resonating with previous studies, it can also be stated that with the conditions of the exams and the raised expectations at the VCE level post-pandemic, this culture tends to favour a middle-class elitist perspective towards education and contribute to social inequality by expanding existing social discrepancies (Anson, 2017). While Freire did not outright reject the concept of exams, he criticised the bureaucratic and banking concept of education (Torres, 2022), which is what is measured frequently in VCE exams. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) endorses a system of education where students are the subjects of their own learning and believes that an effective education system and curriculum should endeavour to empower students to challenge forces that objectify them and dehumanise them. It is evident through this study and the existing views on VCE that the academic needs of EAL students during and post-pandemic have not been given space in the wider narrative of secondary education. Hence, these learners have been reduced to learners of English needing extra leniency when marking assessments and examinations even if assessed as a separate cohort.

This manner of objectifying EAL learners negates their unique experiences during the pandemic and their distinct needs as EAL learners and reduces them to objects who are at

the mercy of the generosity of an oppressive education system (Freire, 1970). Instead of nurturing the diversity of EAL students and designing a curriculum that empowers them to overcome the emotional challenges brought forth by the pandemic and other socio-economic factors, it can be presumed that VCE education in post-pandemic society has likened the exclusive exam model to Darwin's theory of evolution where only the fittest are naturally selected to achieve academic success and pursue a tertiary pathway (Kumar, 2023). In this case, there is less differentiation in the VCE curriculum for EAL students, prompting a more homogenous view of teaching English at the VCE level.

Therefore, from Freire's critical lens, these previous and current VCE curricula and assessment practices lack the notion of liberation of the oppressed individuals within the education system. Rather, they oppress them further without giving them a distinct voice (Freire, 1970).

Looking at the positives of the VCE curriculum, the rationale for the VCE English and EAL Text List, as outlined by the VCAA, states that the texts that have been selected to reflect the diverse Victorian community and contain challenging ideas for learners (VCE English and EAL Text List, 2024). Additionally, the VCAA has also provided students with the opportunity to use their knowledge and understanding of the world and give voice to their perceptions through their own texts in the new creating texts unit, which has been introduced in the curriculum (VCAA, 2023). Furthermore, in Year 11, students have also been given opportunities to personally connect with set texts and respond to them, allowing their perceptions to culminate into cohesive written pieces (VCAA, 2023). These new amendments to the curriculum seem to positively relate to the Freirean lens of hope in education, where students have interactions with the curriculum in a manner that encourages reflection, liberation, creativity and criticality (Carolissen et al., 2011). These amendments, alongside the findings of this research, further emphasise the role of the educator in post-pandemic education. The data of this study indicate that teachers are not the powerful and authoritative figures in the classroom who dictate how students learn, but rather objects of a rigid education system that limits their capacity to empower their learners to challenge existing social realities (Chetty, 2015).

The new VCE EAL curriculum has provided teachers with the liberty to make effective pedagogical decisions that seek to increase student engagement. The new curriculum encourages learners to unveil and demythologise social realities and use a more dialogic

approach to enrich their knowledge of the world. It also equips them with the literacy skills to overturn oppressive factors such as racial profiling, discrimination, stereotyping and neoliberal economic values (Kester & Aryoubi, 2020). However, this new change also implies that EAL learners are comparable to mainstream English students. This overlooks the fact that EAL students have developing skills, and these new changes could be overbearing for them. For teachers to use pedagogy effectively in an EAL classroom, it is important not to limit their assessment of student needs to numeric data but to gather anecdotal data from students themselves to make an informed judgement about text selection and the topics that would engage and influence students to achieve academic success (Razzak, 2020).

It is also evident that the VCE study design has excluded any scope for discourse on the pandemic and its impacts on learners. Scholars argue that the role of educators is not to create a sense of utopian optimism or to view the future with a sense of despair but to ground their practice in present-day realities to shape the way students create their future (Kool, 2017). Ignoring the impact of the pandemic on society in a VCE EAL curriculum is similar to blatantly ignoring its repercussions present today. The consequence of ignoring the pandemic is that students are compelled by the education system to minimise their experiences, thus silencing their voices while allowing them opportunities to thrive in other aspects of the curriculum deemed appropriate by the VCAA. This is what Freire criticised as an education system that seeks to indoctrinate students into a model that dominates and controls their knowledge acquisition (Freire, 1970). In an EAL curriculum, this would appear very similar to the current study design, where students are somewhat given freedom of literary expression on various themes and concepts but under the constraints of a data-driven system where there is no indication that their voices were consulted prior to the designing of the new study design. Hence, authentic liberation in praxis becomes difficult in this context, as students already hold a disempowered position in their own academic narrative. They are, therefore, unable to truly free themselves from the oppressive education system (Freire, 1970).

6.5 Subquestion 4: Did the COVID-19 outbreak amplify existing sociological inequities and did this have an impact on learning and learning outcomes?

6.5.1 Sociological Factors that Affected Learning During the Pandemic

Previous studies have stated that sociological characteristics like parents, peers, religion, and locality are strong determinants of a student's academic achievement (Agyeman et al., 2016; Kassarnig et al., 2017). Agbon et al. (2023), in their study, argue that social environment, academic environment and health and wellbeing of students are key sociological characteristics that influence academic performance in students. Similarly, Uddin (2015), in his study, contends that in addition to these factors, student psychology and self-esteem play a crucial role in student academic achievement. Another study agrees with these notions and argues that student ability, context and motivation are key sociological characteristics influencing academic performance in students (Meel, 2018). These studies all seem to reveal that the decrease in student achievement is attributed to their individual contexts rather than their own engagement in learning and efforts. Vygotsky's (1978) social cultural theory outlines a similar view where he states that social experience plays a dominant role in human cognitive development. This implies that students come from diverse backgrounds and contexts to the classroom, and hence, they have diverse ways of learning, knowledge retention and application in an educational setting.

In the context of EAL students, it is believed that students are already vulnerable as learners. Consequently, schools with large populations of EAL students in anglophone countries receive special funding from the governments to minimise the impact of these vulnerabilities on their learning (Hutchinson, 2018). It is acknowledged that these students are heterogeneous owing to their diverse cultural backgrounds, home environment and migrant experiences and this heterogeneity is understood to have a direct impact on their educational performance (Hessel & Strand, 2023). Some of these students would undoubtedly be from refugee backgrounds, and they are expected to face emotional and socio-economic challenges such as interrupted schooling, emotional and psychological trauma from their experiences in their home countries, issues resettling in different countries, and economic issues (Basharati & Dore, 2019). These factors are expected to impede the learning of many EAL students in mainstream schools.

Additionally, the English language proficiency of these learners is determined not by their individual capacities but by these extrinsic factors. Therefore, these learners need years of consistent intervention and support from their teachers to improve their learning and bridge the language proficiency gap with their monolingual counterparts (Paradis & Jia, 2017).

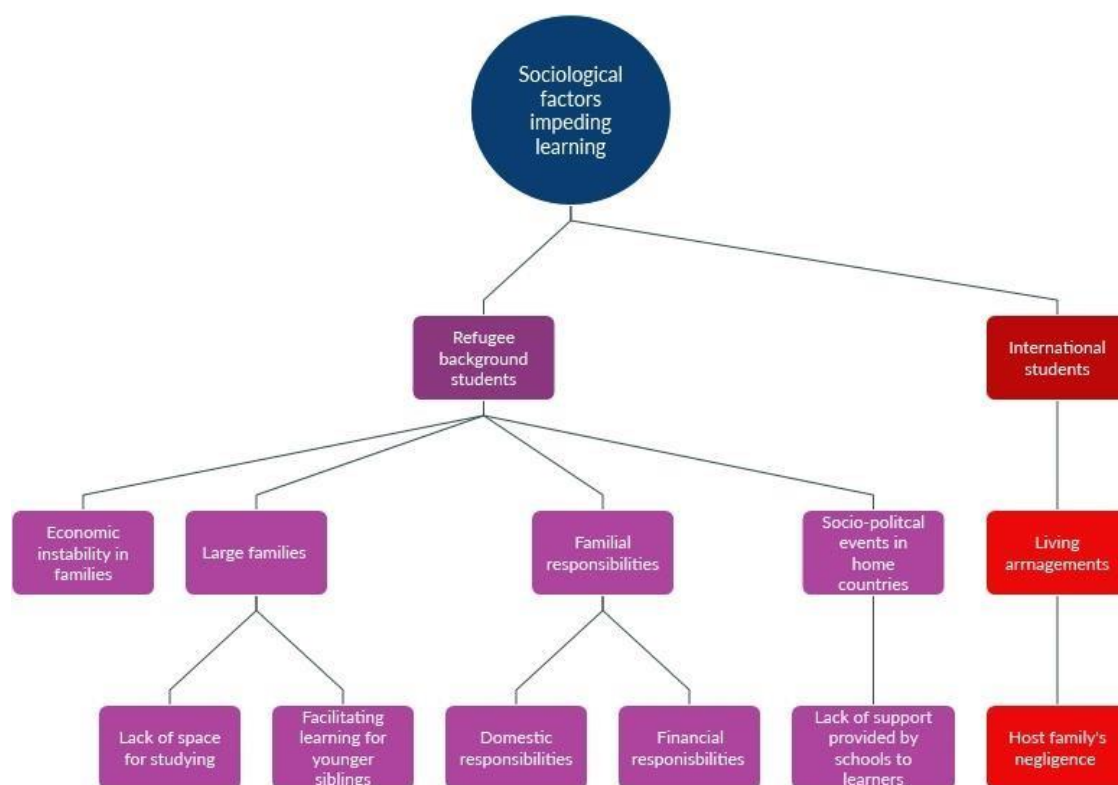


Figure 6.6: Sociological factors impeding student learning

6.5.1.1 Refugee Students and Online Learning During the Pandemic

Existing studies conducted on the impact of the pandemic on EAL learners conclude that economic conditions, health conditions and social interaction played an important role in student achievement during the pandemic (Nurhopipah et al., 2021). The data findings of this study clearly reveal that students who had stable home environments with fewer economic issues had more opportunities to stay motivated and engaged during remote learning. These students were more likely to achieve academic success despite the challenges brought forth by the global health crisis. Home environments where families had a stable income were better equipped to facilitate student learning by providing them with technical devices and stable internet connection as well as a physical space for their children to study. Additionally, the educational background of parents also played an

important role in improving student learning outcomes as they were able to provide additional support to their children to complete their learning tasks (Onadipe et al., 2021). The participating teachers were aware of their students' socio-economic backgrounds and stated that most of their students were from refugee backgrounds where their parents were not employed, had no formal education, limited to no proficiency in English and came from predominantly large families. They concluded that these factors were exacerbated because of the pandemic, and hence, they negatively affected student engagement and achievement.

This observation resonates with previous studies, which also outline that COVID-19 presented unique challenges for students of refugee backgrounds and their families where they witnessed an escalation of economic issues, mental health concerns and economic hardships (Brickhill-Atkinson & Hauck, 2020). Such factors made these families more vulnerable, in need of more government assistance, as well as requiring school-wide assistance for their children to mitigate the impacts of the emotional and financial constraints arising from the pandemic (Santiago et al., 2021). In the context of the study, while most schools in Australia already had wellbeing and other supportive measures put in place to integrate these students and their families into the wider school community, the pandemic gave further insight into the domestic environments of these learners and how those environments affected student learning (Nazli & Culha, 2023).

A common perception that arose from the interviews was that students who came from large families (As depicted in Figure 6.6) were more disengaged from learning than those who were not. This was the result of these students not having adequate space to study and continuous disruption owing to the increased noise levels in their home environment. A further implication was that students at the VCE level are responsible for their own learning as well as that of their younger siblings. Additionally, students from EAL backgrounds often assist their non-English-speaking parents with interpreting policy, legal documents, and news reports outlining public health guidelines necessary to navigate the difficulties of the pandemic. This inevitably took them away from their own studies while they facilitated the learning of their younger siblings and supported the household. While the students who participated in this study acknowledged that fulfilling familial responsibilities was an integral cultural practice, it was also discovered in this study that increased familial responsibilities increased stress levels and anxiety in

students, and that affected their disengagement from their learning to some extent (Mudwari et al., 2021). Furthermore, it was also revealed in this study that some students from low-income families also had to financially support their families because of the rising unemployment rates during the pandemic (Sharin, 2020). The absence of face-to-face learning in schools gave these students more time and freedom to engage in employment. As expected, increased employment disengaged them further from their learning (Aristovnik et al., 2020). This study further revealed that the attitude parents held towards education, as well as their knowledge and awareness of online learning, had a significant impact on student learning. Parents who understood the importance of education were able to facilitate their children's learning more effectively than those who did not (Balayar & Langlais, 2021).

Previous studies around the roles and responsibilities of students of diverse backgrounds claim that culturally conservative families had reservations regarding their female children participating in online learning. In addition, female children often had increased pre-existing responsibilities around the family during the pandemic, which was an impediment to their learning. (Hong et al., 2021; Meler, 2021; Pandey et al., 2022; Prowse et al., 2021; Rostom, 2022). The student participants in this research did not outline these responsibilities as a significant impairment to their learning. However, their teachers believed that the pandemic exposed the impacts of these responsibilities on a more vivid scale, revealing the dual roles these students played within their own family dynamics as children and as secondary caregivers (Avorgbedor & Vilme, 2021). It is notable that this is something teachers observed, but students did not..

The refugee-background students who were referred to in this research were primarily from Afghanistan and Myanmar. It is believed that the socio-political dynamics in home countries have a direct impact on migrant communities' emotional and psychological wellbeing (Khattab & Mahmud, 2018; Qureshi, 2018). On 15th August 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, staging a coup and enacting a complete takeover of the country's political and economic landscape (Muzaffar et al., 2021). During the lockdowns in 2021, the insurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan led to civil unrest and fear of an increase in violence and discrimination against women and different ethnic groups owing to the militant group's notorious history of extremist laws (Hussain, 2021). The interview data revealed that many Afghan students were emotionally affected by the

insurgence of the Taliban during the lockdown, and it amplified existing sociocultural barriers for them and subsequently impacted their motivation and engagement. The data from both the teachers' and students' perspectives further revealed that there was inadequate support given by the school setting to mitigate the emotional implications of the political situation, and hence, it affected the students in a negative way. This brings to light the notion that multicultural education is not the only means of achieving inclusivity within a school setting. Multicultural education also requires that schools organise support for students to overcome racism, xenophobia and fear (Au, 2017).

The insufficient support provided by schools to support Afghan students to cope with the emotional challenges of the political unrest in their home country during the pandemic illuminates the need for schools to be more actively involved in preparing students for citizenship by assisting them in addressing political issues within democracies (Solhaug, 2018). During the pandemic, it would have been ideal for schools to educate students on using technology to recognise their voices and develop their capacities to fight for their rights as well as the rights of others (Loza et al., 2021). However, the data of this study suggests that schools failed to use this opportunity, and ultimately, students of Afghan background were rendered more vulnerable during remote learning. It is plausible to believe that the impact of the political unrest on students was as significant as its impact on adults, as students rely on the education system for assistance (Nunn et al., 2014). In this case, the lack of support coupled with social isolation failed to enhance the social and emotional health of these students and consequently affected their learning (Lee & Cheung, 2022).

6.5.1.2 International EAL Students During the Pandemic

The pandemic also revealed the dichotomy between the socio-economic factors impacting refugee students and international students (As depicted in Figure 6.6). As per the interviews with teachers, some international students who came from more affluent families and lived with their own parents were more advantaged as EAL learners during the pandemic. They had access to an uninterrupted internet connection, devices and physical spaces for study. While the teachers believed that these students did not extend themselves as they had hoped during the pandemic, it was evident that their sociological advantages were made apparent because of the pandemic (Domina et al., 2021). These

advantages had undoubtedly given these students an upper hand in terms of access to resources, tutoring, and physical space to study, but the data does not indicate that these benefits were equivalent to improved academic results at VCE level (Li & Dockery, 2015).

Among international students who lived in Australia were also those who lived in homestay arrangements with host families. The data revealed that the academic engagement and wellbeing of these learners were largely determined by the support they had received from their host families. This study further revealed how the neglect of host families towards international students can have an impact on their learning. In contrast, the lockdowns emphasised the significance of the school environment in providing a safe and supportive space for these students (Maleku et al., 2021). Pre-pandemic studies reveal that international students living away from their families experienced wellbeing concerns such as lack of belonging to their host families, academic stress, homesickness and cultural barriers (Hwang et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2019; Maleku et al., 2022). At the start of the outbreak of the pandemic, it was reported around the world that there was xenophobic hatred towards international communities. This increased anxiety and isolation among international students (Chen et al., 2020). There is limited data on whether there was perceived racism among the Australian community towards international students at the start of the pandemic. The interviews did not reveal that students had experienced nor were affected by the racist overtones of public perception. However, it was evident that students were more affected by loneliness, lack of parental supervision and travel restrictions rather than sociological factors.

The pandemic undoubtedly emphasised the need for a more inclusive pedagogical praxis for students of diverse cultural backgrounds to bridge the gap between existing social inequalities and academic achievement. The impact of remote learning on EAL students at the VCE level and the challenges they faced on a socio-economic level, as outlined in this study alongside existing literature, provides evidence to work for a more equitable curriculum that addresses sociological discrepancies (Laing et al., 2019). Rebranding and reformulating the Year 12 examination system may be a far-fetched ambition at this stage, but there can be measures put in place to realise that there is indeed a wide disparity between students of advantaged backgrounds and vulnerable students for which there can be some mitigation that can be applied through equitable distribution of resources and

opportunities for these learners to succeed (Young, 2011). The data of this study indicate that post-pandemic, school systems have reverted to their previous neoliberal model of engaging in competition with other schools to boast of higher examination results (Netolicky, 2016) and being ensnared in producing learners that fit the mould of the parameters of the curriculum rather than focusing on the impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable students.

6.5.2 Neoliberalism, Freire and EAL Learners

Referring to the neoliberal ideal that the student is a consumer who must act in self-interest to achieve success and the Freirean notion that students in a neoliberal education system are oppressed individuals, it is evident through the study and the recent changes made to the VCE EAL curriculum that EAL students remain further disadvantaged in the academic sphere and are left at the mercy of their own resilience and determination to achieve academic success. The interview data reveals that there is an increase of students of EAL background opting for more vocational pathways, underlining the exclusivity of higher education, where students who are more advantaged in terms of family income, cultural adaptation to mainstream society and language proficiency are better suited to pursue university courses, as opposed to students who are not. This result reflects the idea that social inequality, as reflected in the curriculum and education system in Australia, has not changed drastically over the years and still holds a significant place in highlighting the disparity between student academic achievement and sociological factors. Therefore, it is imperative to address diversity within the curriculum to promote collaborative learning, focusing on EAL students' diversity and cultural capital (Gomez-Hurtado et al., 2021). This is expected to promote social justice in the education system and to foster academic achievement among culturally diverse students (Dordic, 2019).

To create a pedagogical praxis that celebrates and nurtures diversity and promotes academic achievement, educators must go beyond the curriculum and situate the learner as an intrinsic representation of the wider community. They must encourage students to use academic achievement to challenge discriminatory forces (Johnson & Pak, 2019). The data presented in this research reveal that EAL students are indeed diverse with varying cultural and political experiences making up their unique identity as learners in a mainstream school. While the pandemic was instrumental in highlighting these

differences, it also revealed the inability of the education system to appreciate this diversity as an integral part of the economy. This aligns with the Freirean notion that for true liberation to take place within an education system, students must not be alienated and transformed according to a prototype within the system but be recognised for their individual histories as a part of their identity as learners (Freire, 1970). This, according to Freire, is the act of conscientisation that seeks to acknowledge personal sufferings, histories and inequities that lead to social justice for the marginalised population (Freire, 2020). In a post-pandemic era, these EAL learners will have their experiences during the pandemic as learners attached to their identities. Hence, educational praxis must be rooted in identifying this aspect and subsequently encourage students to use their experiences to transform their realities. Ideally it would be pedagogy that would enable the learner to be the subject of their own education “rather than an object of the system’s educational agenda” (Aronowitz, 2015 p., 114).

However, it is not practical to scrap the neoliberal ideals within education in favour of a critical approach to learning, as outlined by Freire. Rather, we must endeavour to find a means for critical pedagogy to exist within neoliberal ideals (De Lissoy, 2018). With the outbreak of the pandemic, there was an overall increase in prevalent anxiety levels among young people of marginalised and low-socio-economic backgrounds (Santabárbara et al., 2020). A neoliberal ideal that was reemphasised during the pandemic was the element of anxiety, which situates the individual in a wider topography entrenched in competition. In this notion, a student’s success depends on their ability to overcome stress and anxiety through individual resilience and accountability (Standing, 2011). Additionally, neoliberalism takes this anxiety in individuals and develops a necessity in them to take responsibility for their social conditions and develop a sense of autonomy and self-regulation to confront them (Lemke, 2001). This sense of anxiety and agency leads to the fragmentation of the individual who is in a constant battle to reconcile these fragments and immerse in the continuous act of navigating multiple domains as a means of achieving success (Dean, 2009).

In the context of the classroom during the pandemic, EAL students can be said to have experienced a further fragmentation of identity where they played dual roles of student and caregiver to their families while also attempting to overcome the emotional and psychological repercussions of the geopolitics of their home country and remaining

engaged in their learning. Post-pandemic, while the fragmentation may not be as intricate as it was during the lockdowns, it is now more evident that students are now expected to cultivate self-regulatory practices and manage their behaviour (Garcia & De Lissovoy, 2013) while ignoring the proliferation of anxiety that this has brought in their education. In such an educational climate, the multifaceted use of technology is an example of this fragmented sense of self which leads to mobilisation of the learning subject rather than improving their learning (Burbules, 2016). Hence, it is important to use the Freirean notion of critical pedagogy in classrooms to emancipate learners in a neoliberal context and celebrate subjectivity in learners, which will help them overcome social inequities while transforming anxiety as a product of social inequality into acts of collective resilience and sustainability (Saltman, 2014)

6.6 Summary

This chapter provided an extensive analysis of the findings of the interviews conducted with teachers and students with reference to existing literature and the Freirean notion of critical and problem-solving pedagogy. The analysis was subcategorised in the form of detailed responses to the research subquestions, where it was concluded that the academic and emotional challenges posed by the pandemic had a direct impact on student academic achievement directly after the lockdowns as well as the years following lockdown as well. In the section that responded to the question as to whether teachers used distinct teaching strategies to engage student learning during the pandemic, it was identified that teachers used limited online platforms but used extensive scaffolding to engage their learners. This further revealed the constraints of the curriculum which reduced online lessons to teaching micro skills to the students. The next section examined assessment strategies implemented during the pandemic and their efficacies. It also examined the structure of the VCE EAL curriculum with comparisons between the old and new study designs and concluded that while there are elements in the curriculum that promote student agency, the structure of the new examination is oppressive to EAL students who had faced academic and emotional challenges during the pandemic. In the final section, there was an analysis of how the pandemic amplified existing sociological inequalities and how that subsequently affected student outcomes. This was further analysed by looking at how the

pandemic emphasised social inequalities created within a neoliberal economy and how critical dialogue can assist students in overcoming oppressive forces while existing within a democracy.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Research Contribution

This thesis studied the factors that affected VCE EAL students' academic performance during and after the pandemic. Using a qualitative research method, six teachers and six students were interviewed on their experiences in teaching and learning during the pandemic respectively, and how that affected the students' academic performances in EAL.

Prior research and studies conducted on the impact of the pandemic on Year 12 students discovered that student academic performance varied according to their socio-economic status, and their academic achievement was stable during the pandemic compared with that of their counterparts overseas (Wade et al., 2023). A study conducted by ACER argues that school closures are more likely to intensify existing sociological inequities and that context rather than technological factors determine the success of student performance in school (Dabrowski et al., 2020).

The findings of this research indicated that the pandemic had an overall negative impact on the achievement of EAL students at the VCE level on an academic and emotional level. It has also been established in previous studies that some EAL learners already face language barriers, cultural barriers and sociological disadvantages (Miller et al., 2014). The EAL students referred to in this research were affected by the concerns. The findings revealed that the pandemic exacerbated existing sociological concerns, thus impeding student learning. The study's findings further reiterated Freire's beliefs of neoliberalism influencing modern education and creating an inequitable educational system. In this system, only those who are financially, linguistically and culturally advantaged are capable of academic success in an online learning environment. This research urges further thought into how online learning and school policies can be adapted in an online classroom in a more equitable manner where students from every background have opportunities to succeed (Freire & Shor, 1987).

One of the major findings of the research is that dialogic learning is crucial for EAL learners to learn key skills while improving their knowledge of the content and the world around them. Apart from assisting with language acquisition, dialogic learning

encourages learners to contribute to the construction of knowledge as they bring multiple perspectives regarding issues to the classroom based on their individual experiences and cultural backgrounds. (Haneda & Wells, 2008). Since remote learning deprived students and teachers of engaging in meaningful conversations as they would in a conventional classroom, it hindered EAL students' connection to content, texts and the issues of the wider world. The study revealed that this lack of connection had a negative impact on student academic performance. The impact of lack of connection was reflected in their assessment and examination scores, as well as their proficiency in language. Supported by the Freirean concept of dialogic pedagogy, the results of this study further indicated that meaningful conversations between teachers and students are integral for enhancing the learning experience and academic outcomes of EAL students. In a world where technology is becoming a regular stakeholder in education, the student–teacher dynamic still takes precedence in the EAL classroom.

The research also discovered that remote learning in an online environment during the outbreak of COVID-19 differed significantly from conventional online learning as outlined in existing literature. Conventional online learning is believed to be advantageous for reasons such as flexibility, its cost-effective nature and convenience (Brown, 2017). While technological concerns and socio-economic factors affected student access to online learning, remote learning during the pandemic was marred by unique as well as existing wellbeing and emotional concerns of students leading to their inevitable disengagement from their learning. It was revealed by the data that students' home environments, parental support and facilitation of their learning, and sociological factors had a direct impact on the extent to which students were engaged in online learning during the pandemic. Additionally, the data also revealed that the policies that schools adhered to during remote learning were directly correlated to student engagement and overall satisfaction of both teachers and students. The data also indicated an obvious disparity between the academic performance of students from refugee backgrounds and international students, where the former were considered more disadvantaged in terms of access to resources and physical spaces to study. It was further exposed in this study that the pandemic emphasised the impacts of existing sociological factors such as income, ethnicity and family structure on VCE EAL student learning. The study briefly examines neoliberal concepts that underpin education in Australia and how neoliberalism creates a learning environment centred on the individual rather than the collective. It further argues

that the pandemic proliferated the impacts of neoliberal ideals in education on student learning and how curriculum must be formulated where students learn how to overcome their socio-economic limitations through critical pedagogy. It is also believed that the EAL learners in metropolitan Melbourne would be more affected by these sociological concerns as students in metropolitan Melbourne underwent severe lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 while their regional counterparts were able to continue their learning in standard classrooms. Hence, it can be deduced that EAL learners from metropolitan Melbourne would have had limited opportunities to improve their language skills leading up to VCE. This further links back to the notion of dehumanisation in education as EAL learners in regional Victoria had a more humanised learning experience as opposed to their counterparts who were under strict lockdown measures. Teaching and learning in regional Victoria during this period was more interactive and engaging compared with online learning in Melbourne, where teachers and students found themselves in a more mechanical process of dispensing and depositing knowledge (Dias & Boulder, 2023).

The study further identified that given the parameters surrounding an externally imposed curriculum, teachers had limited opportunities for formative and summative assessment practices in remote learning. Assessment during the pandemic for VCE EAL students was more or less restricted to evaluating the micro-skills they were expected to acquire during online learning rather than allowing students to make meaningful connections to the world around them. The study also questions whether the VCAA had adjusted assessment practices during remote learning. It was revealed that the authority had not modified assessments or the exam for VCE EAL students during the pandemic and after. The thesis questions the new VCE EAL study design and exam specifications and argues that the VCAA had failed to recognise the needs of EAL students and the impacts the pandemic had on current VCE EAL students' learning when formulating their new study design. While there was an acknowledgement of including more opportunities for student voices to be reflected in their written work, this study still argues that the VCE examination is oppressive and creates a sense of anxiety in both teachers and students in a post-pandemic era.

The thesis further outlines the different strategies teachers adopted to engage their students in online learning and enhance their learning outcomes. The data indicates the importance of scaffolding in an EAL classroom and how that was fundamental to breaking

down skills, learning instructions and assessments for EAL students to make content more accessible as well as improve their cognitive skills and provide feedback (Li & Zhang, 2020). In an ideal classroom, scaffolding assists EAL students to gradually become more independent learners (Colter & Ulatowski, 2017) while keeping them motivated to learn and stay on task (Radford et al., 2015). However, in the context of the pandemic, scaffolding was limited to making content more accessible and acted as a substitute for the teachers' presence.

In a world where scholars believe that education is becoming increasingly digitised, the study revealed that EAL classrooms in mainstream schools are still not ready to transition to a fully-fledged online learning model. The data suggests that EAL students require the physical presence of their teacher and peers to successfully engage in their learning. For these students, social and cultural interaction is a necessity to improve their language proficiency. The thesis revealed that virtual learning is a flawed and complex mode of learning, and to achieve some level of success, there should be a combination of elements of flipped learning, digital resources and face-to-face dialogue and collaboration embedded into the curriculum (Gourlay, 2021). While some EAL participants acknowledged that they had limited and restrictive digital literacy, the important notion here is that they valued the in-depth interactions that helped them make meaning of the world around them (Shu & Gu, 2018). This notion aligns with the Freirean concept of critical dialogue acting as a catalyst for emancipating learners. This study supports the idea that real emancipation can happen in the classroom when there is meaningful interaction. The current online platforms dehumanise the learning process for EAL students and consequently impede their academic achievement (Al-Amoudi, 2022). It is also evident that the platforms utilised during the pandemic were more transactional and did not provide teachers and students with the opportunity to decolonise learning. In such an emancipatory classroom, students and teachers actively engage in making meaningful connections with each other and the world around them. While the absence of such interaction is successful in a neoliberal society where education is purely transactional and investment (the success of which is reflected in achievements), it undermines the human capacity to self-educate through strong connections to the community and the world (Mackinlay & Barney, 2014).

The research discovered that there was a correlation between the sociological factors of EAL students and their academic performance. While EAL students attempted to cultivate resilience to face the academic and wellbeing challenges posed by the pandemic, there were inevitable impacts of their individual contexts on their learning. The findings revealed that there were different measures the school settings had taken to support these learners in achieving their learning while providing mandatory wellbeing support

7.2 Recommendations for Teaching Practice

The following recommendations emerge from this study.

7.2.1 The Continuing but Nuanced Use of Online Platforms

Referring to the findings of this thesis, it can be suggested that it would be effective for EAL teachers to continue to use online learning platforms to engage their students. However, it is evident from the analysed data that the most effective teaching practice uses digital learning tools to assist a carefully structured face-to-face learning model. Therefore, online platforms can be further used for collaborative learning and flipped learning and collect anecdotal data in the form of student feedback to regulate teaching practice. Platforms like Loom can continue to be employed by teachers to record their explicit teaching for students to access as a part of their study process outside school. Another platform that could be used is MS Forms, which was outlined by the participants as an effective method to collect data from students and can be used to allow students to provide feedback on the content and text selection, which will give students a sense of agency and voice in their own learning process. Furthermore, in a post-pandemic classroom, teachers can continue to use live documents as a learning trajectory where they can provide feedback on student writing while the latter can apply feedback to improve their written output.

7.2.2 Scaffolding in EAL classrooms and engaging in culturally responsive pedagogy

Based on the findings of this research, it is evident that scaffolding instruction and content continues to be an effective learning method in an EAL classroom. In spite of a more permanent transition to face-to-face learning, it can be presumed that scaffolding essays, content and instructions, using graphic organisers, and chunking activities into measurable tasks should play a regular role in a teacher's explicit teaching with examples

modelled for the students. With regular teacher presence, these scaffolding strategies can be used to drive student autonomy, where students identify their level of understanding and strive to extend themselves and subsequently learn to use language in a more independent way in their writing (Radford et al., 2015).

Additionally, teachers of EAL can implement more culturally inclusive teaching strategies to engage their learners as well as enhance their academic performance. Where given freedom by curriculum policies around text selection, teachers can give students a sense of agency where they can actively participate in selecting texts which interest them and appeal to them and their cultural backgrounds. This will not only engage learners but also encourage learners to use language to express their views about factors that oppress and inspire them. Furthermore, where applicable, allowing students to use their native languages to interpret texts and using these languages as a teaching tool can also be effective in fostering engagement and increased academic performance in EAL students. This is where EAL teachers can be encouraged to and assisted in developing their digital literacy levels to use online tools available to translate sections of texts into other languages, educate themselves on the cultural contexts of the diverse learners in their classrooms and facilitate culturally responsive pedagogy.

7.2.3 Changing Assessment Practices to Cater to the Demands of Online Learning

During the pandemic, it was identified that teachers faced difficulties in authenticating student work as the latter had unlimited access to the internet when completing summative assessments. Post-pandemic education also witnessed an increase in student reliance on artificial intelligence (AI) platforms like ChatGPT to assist them in completing their learning tasks. While AI platforms can be instrumental in enhancing language skills in learners through personalised and interactive learning experiences (Rusmiyanto et al., 2023), they can be predicted to raise ethical concerns like plagiarism and originality (Carobene et al., 2023). Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to rethink assessment processes and revise assessment structures where possible to accommodate the use of AI in a VCE EAL classroom while also encouraging students to preserve their academic integrity in their work (Zohny et al., 2023).

7.2.4 Improving Digital Literacy Among EAL Teachers

The pandemic also became pivotal in emphasising the importance of teacher digital literacy in EAL classrooms. Based on the data and existing literature, it is evident that remote learning was a novel experience for all teachers where they had to rapidly learn the significance and function of various online learning platforms. Collaboration was evident among staff aimed at helping each other navigate these platforms to optimise their benefits in an EAL classroom. Additionally, in a world where there is an increase in the use of AI platforms in all aspects of life, it is important for all teachers to engage in professional learning on online learning and technology to ensure that these platforms continue to be used to their merit (Starkey, 2019). The emerging themes outlined in this research emphasise that the following professional learning areas can help teachers improve their teaching practice and empower their students in the ethical and regulated use of technology in an EAL classroom:

1. Using live documents in an EAL classroom.
2. AI tools to enhance teaching practice and academic writing.
3. Using technology to collect qualitative data on student learning.
4. Using flipped learning strategies to enhance student learning.
5. Giving effective feedback in an online learning environment.

It should also be noted that the data also highlighted the need for teachers to incorporate more collaborative learning and critical dialogue in their classrooms to enrich student understanding of the content and facilitate their academic achievement. Therefore, teachers can also benefit from further professional learning on using dialogic and collaborative strategies in a VCE EAL classroom.

7.2.5 Using Data for School Administrators and Leadership

Furthermore, school administrators and leadership can use the findings of this research to consider re-distribution of funding allocated for EAL learners within individual schools and apply additional engagement and wellbeing measures to ensure to creation of a safer learning environment for these students to achieve academic success. School leaders and administrators can further use the data from this research to adapt measures to engage parents of EAL students in the school community by facilitating multilingual information sessions and curriculum sessions to enhance their knowledge of the Australian education

system with the intention of integrating them as important stakeholders in student academic performance (Siegel et al., 2019). Freire rejected conventional classrooms and substituted them with a 'a circle of culture', rejected standard curricula and pedagogy and endorsed a form of learning where students and teachers work together to create knowledge (Gadotti & Torres, 2009).

These notions cannot be implemented in their entirety in the context of secondary schools in Victoria for the following reasons:

1. EAL teachers are considered experts in their subject area, and students, given their linguistic needs, will, to an extent, always rely on the support of their teachers to achieve their learning outcomes.
2. Students are required to complete school-based and external assessments to successfully complete their senior secondary schooling and enter tertiary and vocational pathways.
3. Teaching and learning are centred around an external curriculum.

However, elements of Freirean critical pedagogy can be implemented in the EAL classroom, where students can be provided with opportunities to be active participants in their learning. In such classrooms, dialogue between students and teachers will be collaborative, where both parties will actively participate in making meaning of the subject content. Assessment practices will also be transformed to be centred around the learner rather than the learner being forced to adapt to existing assessment strategies. Furthermore, teaching and learning strategies can be informed by the sociological factors that affect learners where school administrators and leadership support learners to not only achieve success in standardised testing and external examinations but to ensure students achieve emancipation through learning.

7.3 Limitations and Opportunities

While conducting this research, a few limitations were discovered; they also paved the way for more opportunities. One limitation that was prevalent when conducting the research was the timeline and its impact on the data that was collected. Prior to obtaining ethical clearance, the research project received approval from the Department of Education and Training. Referring to this approval and citing pending ethical clearance,

several schools and teachers were approached to seek their voluntary participation. However, owing to unavoidable circumstances, there was a significant delay in obtaining ethics approval for this project. This delay affected the recruitment process of teacher participants owing to staff turnover and schools taking on other research projects in the interim period. This, however, did not have a significant impact on the recruitment of teachers as I was able to interview six teachers from different school settings, allowing the study to explore how remote learning was conducted in diverse school environments.

Additionally, potential student participants had already graduated by the time this project commenced, and hence, it was difficult to recruit students who were taught by the participating teachers during the pandemic, and they were selected according to their availability and inclination to participate in this research project. The consequence of this limitation was that the sample ended up having more refugee students than international students, and five of the six student participants were female. There was limited opportunity to equally examine the experiences of both refugee students and international students as EAL students during the lockdown. The fact that they were of different ages also made their experiences vastly diverse, thus hindering further comparisons between the participants. However, the diversity in age enabled a comprehensive study of how the pandemic affected EAL students who were at different stages of their academic life and how it subsequently affected their learning outcomes. Given that the majority of the student participants were female, it was not possible to probe deeper into how gender roles could have been a factor that affected VCE EAL learning during the pandemic. This limitation, however, creates an opportunity for future research that can build on this idea and explore how gender dynamics affected learning for EAL students during the pandemic.

Furthermore, the research was conducted with a small sample of teachers and students and the findings and conclusions are based on their perceptions. While this was a limitation as the findings were not the reflection of every EAL learner in the state of Victoria, it provided significant opportunities as a researcher, to the academic and emotional concerns both teachers and students faced in an online learning environment. The personalised interactions allowed the participants to freely express their perceptions in more detail and the semi-structured interviews resulted in participants revealing additional impromptu information which were valuable to the research.

7.4 Future Research

In this research, I used a Freirean lens to analyse the factors that affected EAL student learning VCE EAL level in the context of the pandemic. Further studies can be made to enrich the findings of this research project. The findings can be compared with a study that examines the factors that enhanced or hindered the learning of mainstream VCE English learners in the context of the pandemic. This study looked closely at the impact of the pandemic on EAL students in government schools. It would be beneficial for the field of education to also study how the pandemic affected the learning of EAL students in Independent and Catholic schools and compare the findings. While the research primarily examined the impact the pandemic had on VCE EAL students, it also discovered that there are elements in the VCE curriculum that failed to take these impacts into consideration. Given the limited studies conducted on VCE EAL and the inception of its new curriculum, future research can be conducted on the structure of VCE and its impact on overall student education in a post-pandemic era.

Another research pathway that can be explored by building on the findings of this research is to use a larger sample of teachers from schools across the state of Victoria and examine the impact of the pandemic on students of refugee background. Future studies can also be conducted on school systems during the pandemic, collecting data from school leadership and administration to analyse the policies and protocols they adapted and implemented to facilitate student learning during remote learning while also focusing on how they continue to support EAL students in post-pandemic education.

In a world where equity in education is constantly scrutinised and debated, it is necessary to conduct further research on the factors that affect the learning of EAL students with a special focus on their contexts. This thesis used a Freirean lens to explore these factors and what pedagogical measures can be implemented to empower these learners to become active citizens within a democracy. The findings of this research can be expanded and extended to conduct further in-depth studies using Freirean concepts of critical pedagogy to analyse the correlation between the sociological needs of EAL students and their academic performance.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information to participants – Teachers and students

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

You are invited to participate

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled ‘Fostering Secondary School Student Engagement in Remote Learning Settings - Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of Victoria, Australia.’

This project is being conducted by a student researcher, Madushka Shamindi Siman Meru Pathirana as part of a PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Mary-Rose McLaren and Dr. John Martino from the College of Arts and Education.

Project explanation

This project seeks to investigate the factors that impacted the learning of VCE EAL students during the lockdown periods of 2020 and 2021. The research project involves identifying the challenges teachers faced when engaging students in face-to-face learning and how they overcame or succumbed to these challenges. This project also seeks to explore digital pedagogies that can be incorporated with face-to-face learning and to outline professional learning opportunities for teachers to enhance the use of digital pedagogies in EAL classrooms.

The completion of this research project may contribute to the field of education through identifying how students in VCE EAL classrooms were impacted by the periods of lockdown in Victoria. It will also be of relevance to current and future VCE EAL teachers and the outlined professional opportunities will assist current and future VCE EAL teachers in engaging students of diverse cultural backgrounds in online learning.

What will I be asked to do?

Upon signing the consent forms, you will be invited to be involved in two interviews with the researcher where you will be asked questions based on your teaching experiences with VCE EAL classrooms during remote learning in 2020 and 2021. An interview will run for no longer than one hour and there will be two rounds of interviews held 3 months apart from one another. In addition, you will contribute to the research process by providing the researcher permission to access teaching materials, curriculum documentation and student work samples.

What will I gain from participating?

By participating in this research, you may contribute to pre-existing knowledge of engaging senior EAL students in online learning in the context of the pandemic. You may also assist the researcher in outlining professional learning opportunities to educate current and future teachers in engaging students of other cultural backgrounds in online learning. Furthermore, you may be gaining further knowledge on how to gauge students in their learning, identify individual learning needs of students and to improve your practice based on qualitative data analysis.

How will the information I give be used?

The information you provide will appear in the researcher's thesis, articles and conferences. The interviews will be transcribed and analysed and used for the purpose of this research. The information will be stored securely in the drive provided by the university and the researcher will follow the guidelines outlined by the university to retain the information. In addition, proper university guidelines will be adhered to when discarding data after the duration of its retention.

What are the potential risks of participating in this project?

Given this project is focused on the professional and academic experiences of teachers and students during the lockdown periods in the face of the COVID-19 outbreak, revisiting the experiences during the challenging periods of lockdown can be a stressful endeavour for the participants. In the event of a participant feeling distressed, the interview will be stopped and the participant will be directed to the Employee Assistance Programme or the school counsellor.

How will this project be conducted?

The interview rounds will be conducted in an informal manner. The interviews will be conducted under school regulations around visitors, either face-to-face or an online platform like zoom or MS Teams. While your voice will be recorded under your permission, there will be no filming or photography involved in this project. All the information provided will be used anonymously in the thesis, articles and conferences and the information provided will not be handed over to principals and members of the leadership team.

Who is conducting the study?

Chief Investigator:

Assoc. Prof. Mary-Rose McLaren

College of Arts and Education

Mary-Rose.McLaren@vu.edu.au

Student researcher:

Madushka Shamindi Siman Meru Pathirana

Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, Victoria University

madushka.simanmerupathirana@live.vu.edu.au

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Chief Investigator mentioned above.

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

You are invited to participate

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled ‘Fostering Secondary School Student Engagement in Remote Learning Settings - Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of Victoria, Australia.’

This project is being conducted by a student researcher, Madushka Shamindi Siman Meru Pathirana as part of a PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Mary-Rose McLaren and Dr. John Martino from the College of Arts and Education

Project explanation

This project seeks to explore how the pandemic impacted the learning of you and your peers across the state of Victoria. It is research conducted by gathering data from teachers and students in three public schools in Victoria on how they experienced remote learning.

What will I be asked to do?

If you would like to volunteer to participate in this research programme you will be given a form to be completed. You will be given a consent form which you will fill and sign and that will be proof that you have agreed to volunteer to be interviewed.

After receiving the forms, you are invited to participate in an interview with the researcher. You will be asked a few questions about your experience with remote learning and how you faced the challenges posed by it. The interviews will run for no longer than one hour.

You will also be requested permission to access samples of your work through your teacher. These samples will be scanned to annotate and analyse in the project.

What will I gain from participating?

You will not gain any direct benefit by volunteering in this research project but it may help you gain experience in how to contribute to a research project and this may be good exposure for your higher studies.

How will the information I give be used?

- The information you provide will be used anonymously in the thesis, articles and conferences.
- The information will be stored securely in an online drive provided by the university.
- Your responses in the interview will not be shared with your teachers or your peers who have volunteered to participate.

What are the potential risks of participating in this project?

During the interviews, you will be asked to reflect on your experiences during lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. This could lead to remembering certain events that could be disturbing to you.

In addition, you would have different opinions about how your teachers engaged you in learning during remote learning. You may feel hesitant to reveal these details out of respect for your teachers and to avoid any conflicts that may arise.

If the interview process becomes stressful, the interview will be stopped and you will be directed to Lifeline on 13 11 14 which is available to support you throughout the day.

The researcher and your teachers will make sure that your commitments will not be affected by volunteering in this project.

As mentioned above, the information you provide will be confidential and your teachers or the principal will have no access to them.

Your identity will not be revealed in the thesis and any information that could reveal your identity will be removed from the thesis.

Furthermore, while samples of your work will be scanned for the research, they will not appear in any publication or conference.

How will this project be conducted?

First, you will be invited to volunteer to participate in this project by your school. You will be given this information document about the research and what your contribution would be like. Any questions you may have can be directed to the Chief Investigator mentioned below.

If you are willing to volunteer, you will complete the consent forms and hand them to the researcher.

Then you will be invited to participate in an interview where you will be asked questions about your experience with remote learning.

Your responses will be recorded using a voice recorder and there will be no filming or photography. If the interview is conducted via zoom or MS Teams, you may turn off your video once the interview begins as the interview will be recorded for the research.

Who is conducting the study?

Chief Investigator:

Assoc. Prof. Mary-Rose McLaren

College of Arts and Education

Mary-Rose.McLaren@vu.edu.au

Student researcher:

Madushka Shamindi Siman Meru Pathirana

Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, Victoria University
madushka.simanmerupathirana@live.vu.edu.au

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Chief Investigator mentioned above.

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

Appendix B: Consent Forms

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:

This project seeks to investigate the factors that impacted the learning of VCE EAL students during the lockdown periods of 2020 and 2021. The research project involves identifying the challenges teachers faced when engaging students in face-to-face learning and how they overcame or succumbed to these challenges. This project also seeks to explore digital pedagogies that can be incorporated with face-to-face learning and to outline professional learning opportunities for teachers to enhance the use of digital pedagogies in EAL classrooms.

The completion of this research project will contribute to the field of education through identifying how students in VCE EAL classrooms were impacted by the periods of lockdown in Victoria. It will also be of relevance to current and future VCE EAL teachers and the outlined professional opportunities will assist current and future VCE EAL teachers in engaging students of diverse cultural backgrounds in online learning.

CERTIFICATION BY PARTICIPANT

I, of
.....

certify that I am at least 18 years old* and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in the study: 'Fostering Engagement in EAL Students in Remote Learning Settings - Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of Victoria, Australia' being conducted at Victoria University by: Madushka Shamindi Siman Meru Pathirana.

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by the researcher and that I freely consent to participation involving the below mentioned procedures:

- Two rounds of face-to-face interviews based on teaching experience during remote learning in 2020 and 2021.
- Providing access to unit plans for the purpose of reviewing learning intentions and success criteria, selected student work examples (written assignments, formative assessment tasks), teaching resources and online learning material if applicable.

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the researcher will endeavour to ensure the confidentiality of the information I provide.

Signed:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to:

Chief Investigator:

Assoc. Prof. Mary-Rose McLaren

College of Arts and Education

Mary-Rose.McLaren@vu.edu.au

Student researcher:

Madushka Shamindi Siman Meru Pathirana

Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, Victoria University

madushka.simanmerupathirana@live.vu.edu.au

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email Researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled ‘Fostering Secondary School Student Engagement in Remote Learning Settings - Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of Victoria, Australia.’

This project is being conducted by a student researcher, Madushka Shamindi Siman Meru Pathirana as part of a PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Mary-Rose McLaren and Dr. John Martino from the College of Arts and Education

This project seeks to explore how the pandemic impacted the learning of you and your peers across the state of Victoria. It is research conducted by gathering data from teachers and students in three public schools in Victoria on how they experienced remote learning.

CERTIFICATION BY PARTICIPANT

I,
.....
.....
Former student of
.....
(name of school) voluntarily give my consent to participate in the study: ‘Fostering Engagement in EAL Students in Remote Learning Settings - Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of Victoria, Australia’ being conducted at Victoria University by: Assoc. Prof. Mary-Rose McLaren.

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by: Madushka Shamindi Siman Meru Pathirana and my teacher and that I freely consent to participation involving the below mentioned procedures:

- An interview with the student researcher reflecting on remote learning experience in 2020 and 2021.
- Access to my samples of work namely, written assignments and class learning tasks.
- Scanning of the samples of work for analysis.

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the researcher will endeavour to ensure the confidentiality of the information I provide and will be presented anonymously in the thesis, articles and conferences.

Signed:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Chief Investigator:

Assoc. Prof. Mary-Rose McLaren
College of Arts and Education
Mary-Rose.McLaren@vu.edu.au

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email Researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview Round 1 – Teachers

1. Which year levels of EAL did you teach in 2020?
2. How would you describe the VCE cohort you taught in terms of ethnic and socioeconomic background?
3. Tell me about your experience as a teacher in facilitating learning for your students during the first emergency lockdown period in 2020.
4. What did you do to prepare for emergency remote learning in 2020?
5. What strategies did you implement to engage students in online learning?

Probe:

How did you differentiate learning to cater to the needs of students of diverse abilities?

6. How did online learning tools help or hamper student engagement?
7. Did you have an understanding of what VCE EAL students underwent during the remote learning period of 2020?
8. What were the main challenges that impacted learning of VCE EAL students during remote learning in 2020?
9. How did your students respond to this sudden transition from face-to-face learning to learning in a virtual setting?

Probes:

How did their home setting impact their learning during this period?

Were there wellbeing concerns that were of significant effect that hampered their learning during this period?

10. How did the aforementioned challenges impact engaging students in their learning during this period?

11. How did you conduct formative and summative assessments in remote learning for your EAL students?
12. How did you conduct formative and summative assessments in remote learning for VCE EAL students?
13. Compared to pre-pandemic learning in mainstream classrooms, what significant changes did you identify in student performance in assessments?

Probe:

How did the transition to remote learning impact their levels of reading, writing and unpacking questions?

Tell me how you collaborated with peers in the domain to support student learning

Probe:

Were measures put in place to seek support from multicultural aides during online learning?

What challenges did you face in re-engaging students in face-to-face learning after remote learning?

Interview Round 2 – Teachers

1. What EAL classes did you teach in 2021?
2. Were they of the same ethnic backgrounds as Chinese, Vietnamese and Karenni?
3. Compared to the emergency lockdown in 2020, how were you prepared for the second and longer lockdown in 2021?
4. How did the students respond to the lockdown in 2021 after tasting what a lockdown was like in the year before? Was their response positive or negative?
5. How did you engage the students in learning in this leg of the lockdown? Did you adopt new strategies?
6. Drawing on your experience from the previous lockdown period, how did you teach texts to VCE EAL students during this lockdown period?
7. How would you describe the performance of students in this lockdown period compared to the first emergency lockdown period?

8. How did you conduct assessments in this lockdown period? Were there changes from the previous lockdown period? (Formative and summative)
9. What strategies did the school implement in this lockdown period to facilitate the learning of EAL students?
10. Looking back, how did the students respond to learning post lockdown?
11. Do you think the way VCE EAL students have changed the way they learn post lockdown or has learning simply reverted back to its usual self?
12. What do you think the pandemic taught teachers of EAL specially those who teach VCE?
13. What opportunities do you believe EAL teachers have in incorporating more online learning in their VCE classroom?
14. Do you think the pandemic was a helpful or a hindrance in terms of how you approach your classroom today?

Interview Questions – Students

1. What was your experience during remote learning in 2020?
2. Which Year level were you in at that time?
3. What was your experience during remote learning in 2021?
4. What were the academic obstacles that you experienced as an EAL student during remote learning?
5. In terms of reading and writing, what obstacles did you face during remote learning?
6. What were the emotional obstacles you faced during remote learning?
7. What sort of support did you receive to cope with these concerns?
8. How did you seek feedback on your work from your teachers?
9. How did your teachers support you in achieving your learning outcomes during this time period?
10. When you returned to school after lockdown, how did you readjust to face-to-face teaching?
11. When you went into Year 12, how did you think remote learning impacted your learning and eventual performance in the VCE EAL exam?
12. Do you think the pandemic impacted your reading and writing skills at Year 12?

13. Was there anything you enjoyed about remote learning? If so, what was it?
14. Did remote learning make you more independent as a learner?
15. What sort of support did you get from your family and home environment during remote learning?
16. Did you have responsibilities to fulfil at home during lockdown?
17. What do you think are the advantages of remote learning for EAL students?
18. How did the school support EAL students, particularly VCE students during lockdown?
19. What form of learning do you think is more effective to EAL students; face-to-face or online learning?