

Transforming ELT Undergraduate Research Approaches During and Beyond Covid-19: Lessons from an Islamic University in Indonesia

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Received: 05/03/2026

Revised: 16/05/2026

Accepted: 18/06/2026

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed undergraduate ELT research practices in higher education. This study investigates shifts in research topics, methodologies, technology use, and ethical considerations in undergraduate ELT research at an Islamic university in Indonesia during and beyond the pandemic. This study employed a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through open-ended online questionnaires involving seven student researchers and five lecturer supervisors, as well as document analysis of 41 undergraduate thesis abstracts selected purposively from 2020–2022, and were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Findings indicate a notable rise in discourse-based and technology-mediated research topics, with qualitative approaches dominating methodological choices. Digital tools, such as online questionnaires, virtual interviews, and electronic academic databases, played a central role in data collection. However, students also encountered challenges, including access constraints, ethical requirements, and technological and communication limitations. The study highlights how crisis-driven adaptations, particularly digital research literacy, flexible methodological decision-making, and strengthened ethical awareness, constitute valuable lessons for sustaining and improving undergraduate research supervision in post-pandemic contexts. Recommendations are offered for integrating blended research training, ethical digital research competencies, and culturally grounded supervision strategies within Islamic higher-education ELT programs.

Keywords

Digital Research Practices; Islamic University; Research Supervision; Undergraduate ELT Research

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged at the end of 2019, profoundly reshaped educational systems worldwide and accelerated the digital transformation of English Language Teaching (ELT) (Alimyar & Lakshmi G, 2021; Cahaya et al., 2022; Moser et al., 2021). Instruction shifted rapidly from face-to-face delivery to remote learning environments, compelling both lecturers and students to adopt digital tools and reinvent pedagogical practices (Koh & Daniel, 2022; Maqsood et al., 2021). Beyond



teaching and learning, the crisis also influenced the academic research culture, forcing researchers to modify their methodological choices, research topics, and ethical procedures to adapt to restricted learning environments (Damayanti et al., 2022; Gozali et al., 2023).

The significance of understanding this transformation lies in both its academic and practical dimensions. From an academic perspective, the pandemic forced the reevaluation of research traditions, methodological flexibility, and digital literacy demands among ELT student researchers and their supervisors (Maqsood et al., 2021; Syafri & Saude, 2022). Practically, universities, including those in faith-based contexts, were required to ensure academic continuity, uphold ethical standards, and revise supervision strategies amidst uncertain and technologically mediated conditions. As higher education moves into a post-pandemic era, insights into how undergraduate ELT research practices evolved are crucial for designing sustainable research curricula, strengthening ethical research training, and enhancing supervisory systems.

The rapid transition to online learning environments during the pandemic also accelerated the adoption of digital research methodologies in ELT research (Gozali et al., 2023; Ibna Seraj et al., 2024). Researchers increasingly relied on virtual communication platforms, online questionnaires, cloud-based collaboration tools, and digital repositories to conduct academic inquiries under restricted physical interaction. These methodological shifts not only altered technical research procedures but also transformed how researchers conceptualized participant engagement, data validity, and ethical responsibility in digitally mediated contexts. In ELT research specifically, digital methodologies enabled broader participant access and greater flexibility while simultaneously requiring stronger digital literacy and ethical awareness among novice researchers and supervisors. Recent discussions in educational research suggest that digital research practices have evolved into sustainable methodological alternatives that may continue shaping post-pandemic research culture in higher education (Arthi & Gandhimathi, 2025; Lai & Lee, 2024).

Recent research has documented pedagogical and technological shifts within ELT during the pandemic, including online learning strategies, digital collaboration, hybrid learning, and the integration of educational technology and AI tools (Demissie et al., 2025; Lee & Jeon, 2024; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). Studies have also examined psychological, social, and cultural implications for learners and teachers (Chen, 2023), as well as emerging themes such as critical digital literacy and remote academic engagement (Arthi & Gandhimathi, 2025; Lai & Lee, 2024). However, the majority of these studies focus on what was taught and how instruction was adapted, rather than how research practices themselves were transformed at the undergraduate level.

In Indonesia, Islamic universities where academic activities are guided by cultural and religious values face additional ethical and contextual considerations in upholding research integrity (Sukirman, 2023; Sumin et al., 2021), yet systematic evidence of how these institutions have adapted undergraduate ELT research practices remains limited. In addition, studies examining the integration of Islamic educational values with digital technology in ELT research and higher education practices remain relatively scarce, particularly in the context of undergraduate research during and after the pandemic (Adima et al., 2025). As a result, undergraduate ELT researchers encountered unique methodological and academic challenges, from online participant recruitment to navigating ethical protocols and institutional expectations.

Therefore, a significant gap remains in understanding how the pandemic has reshaped undergraduate ELT research practices, what methodological adaptations have emerged, and which challenges and innovations may persist beyond the pandemic. Addressing this gap is crucial for enhancing research supervision, curriculum design, and institutional preparedness in post-pandemic academic settings.

Examining these transformations is important because many pandemic-driven adaptations continue to influence ELT research practices beyond the health crisis itself. Digital communication,

remote supervision, online data collection, and technology-mediated collaboration have become increasingly normalized within undergraduate research environments. Consequently, investigating how these practices emerged and were sustained may contribute to the development of more flexible, resilient, and digitally oriented ELT research frameworks in post-pandemic higher education. The findings of this study are also expected to support curriculum developers, research supervisors, and educational institutions in designing more adaptive research training and ethical digital research practices for future undergraduate researchers.

This study responds to that gap by examining transformations in undergraduate ELT research conducted at an Islamic university in Indonesia during the COVID-19 period. It explores shifts in research topics, methodological approaches, digital data collection strategies, and the challenges faced by novice researchers. The unit of analysis in this study comprises undergraduate thesis abstracts and questionnaire responses from student researchers and their thesis supervisors in an Islamic higher-education context. While the pandemic may have passed its peak, many adaptations, such as digital research methods, remote collaboration, and increased ethical scrutiny, continue to influence undergraduate research practices. Thus, this study not only documents temporary responses to crisis-driven constraints but also identifies lessons and sustainable practices that can inform post-pandemic ELT research, training, and supervision in Islamic higher education contexts.

This study aims to investigate the transformation of undergraduate ELT research practices at an Islamic university in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic and their continued relevance in post-pandemic contexts. Specifically, the study explores how the pandemic influenced undergraduate research topics, methodological orientations, digital data-collection strategies, and the integration of technology into research processes. The study also examines the challenges faced by student researchers and thesis supervisors in adapting to remote, technology-mediated research environments. To achieve these objectives, the study analyzes undergraduate thesis abstracts alongside questionnaire responses from student researchers and supervisors to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the changing landscape of undergraduate ELT research. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the growing discussion on sustainable digital research practices and to the future development of undergraduate ELT research and supervision in Islamic higher education contexts.

2. METHODS

Research Design

This study employed qualitative research methods utilizing a case study approach to explore the shift in English Language Teaching (ELT) research during the COVID-19 pandemic at an Islamic university in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables researchers to gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences and social contexts in response to changes during the pandemic (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Case study research enables an in-depth examination of real-world phenomena using multiple sources of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study specifically investigated shifts in research topics, methodologies, technology integration, and challenges faced in ELT research during the pandemic.

Participation and Setting

The study was conducted in the English Education Department at the State Islamic University of Kudus, located in Central Java, Indonesia. The participants consisted of two groups:

- a. Seven undergraduate students who completed ELT-related theses during the pandemic (coded as SR1–SR7, where SR stands for Student Researcher), and
- b. Five ELT lecturers who supervised thesis research during the same period (coded as LS1–LS5, where LS stands for Lecturer Supervisor).

All participants were selected purposively to ensure their relevance to the phenomenon being studied. The coding system was used to protect anonymity while enabling the clear attribution of statements and insights during data presentation.

In addition to questionnaire responses from participants, 41 undergraduate thesis abstracts written between 2020 and 2022 were analyzed. These documents were selected based on the following criteria: (a) relevance to ELT research, (b) conducted within the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic, and (c) addressing themes such as teaching methods, technology use, or curriculum adaptation in pandemic contexts. These abstracts served as key sources for exploring trends in research topics, methodological choices, and the integration of digital tools.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through two main instruments:

- a. An online questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms to the selected students and lecturers. The questionnaire included open-ended items to capture participants' experiences, perceptions, and adaptation strategies during the pandemic.
- b. Document analysis of 41 undergraduate thesis abstracts, which served as a primary source to explore the dominant research topics, methodological approaches, and use of technology.

The 41 thesis abstracts were selected purposively based on relevance and timeframe, ensuring that the studies were conducted between 2020 and 2022 and addressed ELT topics in pandemic-related contexts.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze both the questionnaire responses and thesis abstracts. This method was chosen because it offers a flexible yet rigorous approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Byrne, 2022). The analysis followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (Oka et al., 2022): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study adhered to the criteria for credibility, dependability, and confirmability as suggested by Nowell et al. (2017). Strategies included maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, peer debriefing, and cross-checking interpretations with research team members. For example, after initial coding, recurring concepts such as "online teaching challenges" and "shift to document-based research" were developed into broader themes like "Methodological Adaptation" and "Technology Integration in Research." This process enabled a structured yet context-sensitive interpretation of how ELT research evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic, grounded in participants' experiences and documented trends in the thesis.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Shifts in Research Topics

The analysis of 41 undergraduate ELT thesis abstracts revealed a notable shift in research direction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally, undergraduate research in English Education programs has prioritized classroom-based investigations, including teaching methodologies, classroom interaction patterns, assessment practices, and student motivation. These topics usually require physical school access to conduct observations, interviews, or experimental learning designs. However, pandemic restrictions significantly altered this trend. Social distancing regulations, campus closures,

and the prohibition of in-school research activities compelled student researchers to reconsider not only their research foci but also the feasibility and ethical parameters of conducting studies in a time of crisis.

To illustrate the shift in research themes during the pandemic period, the distribution of research topics in 41 undergraduate theses was examined. Figure 1 presents the proportion of research foci, highlighting the predominance of discourse-based studies and the decline in field-based ELT topics.

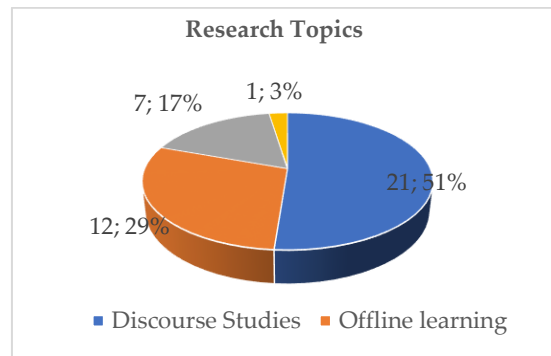


Figure 1. Distribution of ELT Undergraduate Research Topics (2020-2022)

As shown in Figure 1, 51% of the theses focused on discourse-based inquiries such as textbook analysis, media discourse, and written text analysis. Research on offline learning accounted for 29%, while online learning comprised 17%, and only 3% addressed blended learning. This distribution confirms a clear shift toward topics that require flexible and non-interactive data sources, aligning with mobility restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, despite the global rise in online learning studies, most students opted for document-driven designs, underscoring the strategic role of feasibility in topic selection during the pandemic.

Student responses further support this interpretation. One student described having to restructure their entire research plan, stating:

“I had to change the research theme so that it could still be conducted during the pandemic.”
(Questionnaire response, SR5)

Similarly, SR6 recounted shifting from classroom observation to library-based inquiry:

“The initial concept was field research, but I changed it to library research because the school was closed.” (Questionnaire response, SR6)

Lecturers also confirmed that even before the pandemic, they occasionally encouraged document-based research for feasibility; however, during the pandemic, this became a necessity rather than an option. As one lecturer stated:

“Textbook studies became a safe choice, as students didn’t need to interact with participants.”
(Questionnaire response, LS5)

Interestingly, despite the widely acknowledged surge in online learning research globally, only 17% of theses in this study focused on online learning. Supervisors mentioned that digital-learning themes were perceived as relevant, but this did not translate to a proportional number of digital-method projects. As LS3 noted briefly:

“Yes, many students talked about technology-based topics.” (Questionnaire response, LS3)

However, the quantitative data suggest otherwise, indicating a perceived versus actual engagement gap. This mismatch highlights an interesting local research culture: while technology-enhanced pedagogy became widely discussed, students gravitated toward research that ensured procedural certainty, a reflection of risk management under academic pressure.

In summary, the shift in topics reflects strategic adaptation driven by institutional research policies, limited physical access, ethical considerations, supervisors' guidance, and students' digital research readiness. Rather than viewing these topic shifts as a decline in academic diversity, they may represent a pragmatic form of academic resilience, even though one that warrants further inquiry into how topic choice influences academic rigor in emergency conditions.

Adaptation in Research Methodologies

Methodological shifts were equally evident. While the English Education program typically employs a balanced mix of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research, the pandemic created an asymmetry: 90% of these utilized qualitative methods, while 7% adopted quantitative designs and 3% employed mixed methods. Students faced logistical barriers to quantitative designs, including experimental studies and classroom-based interventions.

To further understand how the pandemic influenced research design choices, the methodological approaches used in the theses were mapped. Figure 2 illustrates the dominance of qualitative frameworks, which became the most feasible option during periods of restricted physical access.

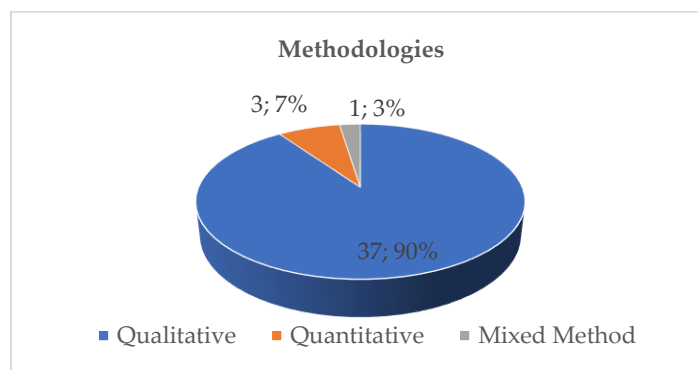


Figure 2. Methodological Approaches in Undergraduate ELT Research

As depicted, 90% of the theses employed qualitative approaches, only 7% used quantitative methods, and 3% adopted mixed-method designs. While qualitative inquiry has long held a strong position in ELT research, the extreme imbalance reflects the limitations imposed by the pandemic rather than purely epistemological preferences. This result aligns with student testimonies indicating they shifted from planned classroom-based studies to document or online-based analysis due to school closures.

SR6 illustrated this clearly:

“My original plan was to investigate classroom teaching, but I switched to textbook analysis due to school closures.” (Questionnaire response, SR6)

SR2 similarly reported:

“I chose online media as research objects and avoided student participation.” (Questionnaire response, SR2)

Lecturers confirmed that methodological changes were comprehensive, involving shifts in research settings, participant engagement, ethical procedures, design justification, and even research literacy expectations. As LS4 explained:

“Methodology, setting, data collection, ethics, everything had to change.” (Questionnaire response, LS4)

Students relied heavily on online surveys, asynchronous interviews, and virtual focus groups. Yet, the findings also reveal a conservative methodological stance: students primarily used digital tools as substitutes rather than as transformative research instruments. For example, many used Google Forms

merely as a replacement for questionnaires instead of exploring richer possibilities, such as multimodal data, interactive analytics, or learning-management-system logs.

Thus, while students demonstrated commendable adaptability, their methodological choices were still driven more by practicality than by conceptual justification. This reflects an important developmental insight: emergency research competence does not automatically equate to methodological literacy. Future curriculum strategies must account for this gap.

Technological Use in Research

Although the pandemic accelerated digital adoption across education sectors, undergraduate ELT research demonstrated uneven technology integration. Only 27% of these incorporated digital tools into the research process beyond basic communication. Most students used: Google Forms, WhatsApp, Google Meet, and Google Scholar. Figure 3 summarizes the extent to which students incorporated technology into their research activities, including data collection, communication, and online resource use.

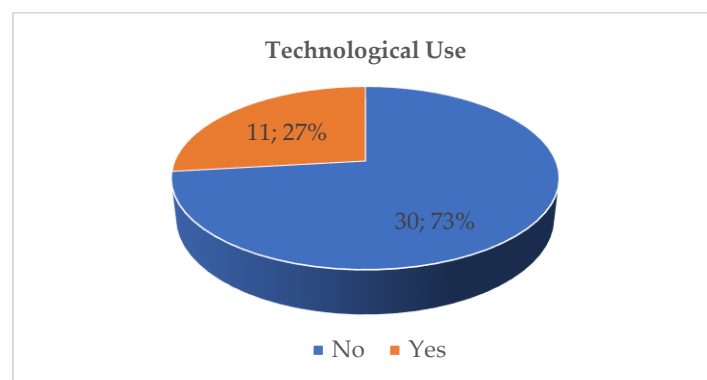


Figure 3. Extent of Technology Integration in Undergraduate ELT Research (2020-2022)

The chart reveals that only 27% of undergraduate theses integrated digital tools in substantial ways, while 73% relied on conventional research procedures despite the online learning context. Digital tools used included Google Forms, Zoom/Google Meet, and online databases; however, the majority of students employed them as direct substitutes for traditional instruments rather than as transformative methodological tools. This pattern suggests that although students have adapted to digital environments, a deeper level of digital research literacy has not yet been fully developed.

SR3 explained:

"I used Google Forms and Google Meet for collecting and analyzing data." (Questionnaire response, SR3)

Some students independently leveraged platforms like YouTube Analytics, but this was not a widespread practice. Lecturers reported that sophisticated tools such as Harzing's Publish or Perish, SurveyMonkey, and analytics dashboards were available, but rarely utilized by students:

"Many tools existed, but most students used only basic ones." (Questionnaire response, LS4)

Thus, findings suggest that access to technology did not automatically produce advanced digital research practice. The gap was not technological but pedagogical and motivational.

Methodological Challenges

Students encountered multiple practical and ethical research obstacles, including closed research sites, unresponsive online participants, limited access to supervisors, a lack of digital ethics training, and diminished motivation during remote study.

SR1 stated:

“Schools were closed, so we couldn’t collect data in person.” (Questionnaire response, SR1)

SR3 added:

“Students rarely joined online classes or filled out questionnaires.” (Questionnaire response, SR3)

Supervisors echoed broader systemic challenges, including low research readiness, fatigue, and limited intervention opportunities during remote supervision:

“Students modified methodology because they couldn’t go to the field.” (Questionnaire response, LS4)

These difficulties highlight the fragility of traditional research training models when exposed to digital-first environments, signaling the need for flexible, ethical, technology-enabled research skill development in future ELT programs. This underlines the need for ethical preparedness and digital research literacy among undergraduate researchers in Islamic university contexts.

To consolidate the key findings, Table 1 presents a thematic synthesis of the major shifts observed in undergraduate ELT research during the pandemic.

Table 1. Thematic Summary of Shifts in ELT Research During the Covid-19 Pandemic

No	Theme	Description	Supporting Evidence	Connection to Literature
1.	Shift to Discourse-Based Research	Due to limited access to schools and participants, students shifted toward discourse and textbook studies	51% of theses analyzed discourse (Figure 1); “I must change the research theme...” (SR 5)	Jung et al. (2021); Back et al. (2021)
2.	Dominance of Qualitative Approaches	Researchers preferred qualitative methods like document analysis and online interviews	90% of theses were qualitative (Figure 2); “...study by only analyzing textbooks...” (SR 6)	Creswell & Poth (2018); Tracy (2020)
3.	Uneven Technology Integration	Although some students used tools like Google Forms and Meet, most relied on non-digital methods	73% didn’t use technology (Figure 3); “I used Google Form and Meet...” (SR 3)	Salmons (2022); Bryman (2021)
4.	Methodological Challenges	Challenges included participant access, classroom observation, and online data collection ethics	“Schools closed”; “Students rarely active” (SR 1 & 3)	Creswell & Creswell (2022); Bryman (2021)

Discussion

Interpreting Shifts in Research Topics

The significant shift toward discourse-based studies during the pandemic reflected strategic academic adaptation in response to field restrictions. With 51% of students selecting document-focused inquiries, the pattern suggests pragmatic decision-making aligned with restricted access to participants and learning environments. This trend aligns with global adjustments in language education research during the COVID-19 pandemic (Back et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2021), yet contrasts with the international growth in technology-mediated research topics (Gozali et al., 2022; Meirovitz et al., 2022).

The findings indicate that students' choices were influenced by institutional norms, supervisory guidance, and the desire to minimize methodological risks. Tracy (2020) notes that novice researchers often prioritize feasibility over innovative design in uncertain contexts. This tendency was confirmed through lecturers' questionnaires, where supervisors acknowledged that they encouraged conservative topic selection to avoid procedural challenges. Within Islamic higher-education environments, such choices also aligned with ethical caution, community welfare concerns, and institutional prudence (Sumin et al., 2021).

Rather than signaling academic limitation, this pattern illustrates context-bounded resilience and situated academic agency (Archer, 2022). However, moving forward, ELT programs should broaden topic literacy and foster confidence in emerging research areas, especially digital pedagogy and AI-mediated language learning (Lai & Lee, 2024). Structured exposure to cutting-edge ELT research is essential to enable students to explore complex themes without compromising feasibility or ethical integrity.

Another important interpretation emerging from these findings is that the dominance of discourse-based research may also reflect unequal levels of digital research readiness among undergraduate ELT researchers. Although the pandemic accelerated the use of educational technology, many students still lacked sufficient methodological confidence to conduct technology-intensive studies involving online experimentation, learning analytics, or AI-assisted language learning platforms. This condition suggests that the digital transformation in ELT research was not always accompanied by equivalent growth in students' digital research competencies. In Islamic higher education contexts, where institutional priorities often emphasize ethical caution and academic practicality, students may have perceived document-based research as a safer, more manageable option. Therefore, the findings highlight the need for ELT programs to strengthen digital research literacy, methodological innovation, and supervised exposure to technology-integrated research practices so that future undergraduate researchers can engage more confidently with emerging trends in post-pandemic ELT scholarship.

Evaluating Methodological Adaptations

During the pandemic, qualitative approaches dominated student research, primarily driven by considerations of feasibility and practicality. This aligns with Asaie's research, which finds that qualitative research is easier to conduct because the complexity of quantitative research leaves students unprepared and stressed (Asaie & Nushi, 2026).

While qualitative flexibility is appropriate in restricted settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018), relying on online interviews and document analysis can sometimes lead to methodological drift (Bryman, 2021), where the method choice prioritizes convenience over epistemological fit. This pragmatic focus enabled progress but revealed limitations in foundational methodological understanding.

The results echo Salmons' (2022) critique that many pandemic-era student projects substituted physical tools with digital equivalents without re-conceptualizing methodological design. Limited triangulation, reflexivity, and thick description reinforced this trend, resembling global patterns of novice research struggles during remote academic supervision (Gebremariam & Mulugeta, 2025). In

Islamic higher-education settings, heightened ethical responsibility amplified caution, shaping conservative research practices.

To strengthen future preparedness, research method courses and supervision models must emphasize epistemic justification, qualitative rigor, and ethical digital inquiry. Programs should train students in online trustworthiness strategies, multimodal data collection, and secure consent procedures. The pandemic revealed capacity gaps but also an opportunity to formalize hybrid research literacy as a standard competency in ELT undergraduate curricula. This finding suggests the importance of fostering greater methodological autonomy among undergraduate researchers through scaffolded supervision, reflective methodological training, and increased exposure to diverse digital research approaches. Encouraging students to critically justify their methodological choices may help develop more adaptive, theoretically grounded, and context-sensitive ELT research practices in post-pandemic higher education.

Technology Adoption: Gaps and Opportunities

Grosbois et al. (2022) stated that technology is a new learning mediator in language teaching and learning, supporting learners in improving their foreign language skills, helping them keep up with the dynamic world, and enhancing their employability. In this study, although students relied heavily on digital platforms for learning, only 27% effectively integrated technology into their research, indicating a shallow digital research culture. This gap mirrors broader ELT patterns where technology use surged in teaching but lagged in research (Gayatri et al., 2022). Students demonstrated digital procedural literacy, knowing how to operate tools but lacking methodological imagination to employ them for deeper inquiry.

Salmons (2022) emphasizes that digital qualitative research enables multimodal and asynchronous data collection; however, tools were primarily used as logistical substitutes rather than epistemological extensions. Lecturers' questionnaires confirmed that webinars and digital tools were accessible; however, students' uptake varied, consistent with Indah et al. (2022), who found that although students engaged with technology, their digital research competence did not automatically improve. In Islamic contexts, digital ethics further shaped cautious decision-making (Sumin et al., 2021).

To strengthen the digital research agency, ELT programs should integrate training in multimodal analysis, digital ethnography, AI-aided coding, and ethical online data collection. As AI and virtual research environments emerge, undergraduate researchers require not only technical but also conceptual digital literacy (Park et al., 2021; Zhang, 2023). Post-pandemic initiatives must shift from temporary adaptation to sustained innovation in digital academic inquiry.

While students were highly familiar with using technology for online learning, communication, and accessing academic resources, many still struggled to transform digital tools into instruments for systematic research inquiry. This indicates that technological familiarity alone does not necessarily translate into digital research competence. The findings also suggest that students tended to perceive technology as a supportive utility rather than as a methodological framework capable of shaping research design, data interpretation, and knowledge construction. In Islamic higher education environments, concerns about ethical online interaction, data privacy, and institutional appropriateness may have further reinforced cautious engagement with technology-integrated research. Therefore, future ELT research training should move beyond operational digital skills and focus more on developing critical digital scholarship, methodological creativity, and ethical awareness so that students can engage more meaningfully with emerging digital and AI-mediated research environments.

Understanding Research Barriers

Similar to the digital education scholarship, access to online tools alone did not generate research competency among undergraduate researchers (Valladares-Celis & Timmis, 2022). Rather, post-COVID research conditions require broader institutional structures that promote methodological equity and

support supervision, aligning with Biberman-Shalev & Sabbagh's (2025) argument for reshaping educational justice in higher education. Students reported difficulties in participant recruitment, motivation, and ethical decision-making online, reflecting global disruptions in thesis progress (Chen, 2023; Sukirman, 2023). These constraints required resilience and creative adaptation under limited institutional scaffolding.

Faith-based contexts introduced a cultural-ethical layer, where Islamic academic values, such as *amanah*, *adab*, and *hikmah*, guided cautious engagement and ethical sensitivity (Sumin et al., 2021). While this supported responsible research, it also reinforced a preference for low-risk designs. The experiences underscore the need for explicit instruction in digital ethics, research resilience, and online academic integrity.

Strengthening supervisory systems, digital research infrastructure, and structured research-method mentoring will better prepare students for future academic disruptions. Hybrid academic support, peer-research groups, and institutional ethics protocols can enhance motivation and research competence (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Kholid et al., 2023; Nash, 2021). This is supported by national and institutional evidence showing changes in supervision practices and the need for formalized online mentoring during the pandemic (Satriani et al., 2023).

Research barriers during the pandemic were interconnected with students' emotional readiness and academic self-efficacy as novice researchers. Uncertainty in accessing participants, limited face-to-face interaction with supervisors, and the pressure to complete research under rapidly changing conditions often reduced students' confidence in conducting more complex or innovative studies. These conditions may explain why many students preferred safer, more manageable research designs during the pandemic. The findings suggest that research challenges in crisis contexts are not solely methodological or technical issues but also involve psychological and academic adaptation processes. Therefore, higher-education institutions should not only strengthen technical research training but also provide more supportive supervisory communication, academic counseling, and collaborative research communities to help undergraduate researchers develop resilience, confidence, and adaptive problem-solving skills in future digitally mediated research environments.

Lesson Learned

The pandemic revealed that students adapted well under pressure, yet relied heavily on safe and feasible research choices. This aligns with Tracy's (2020) finding that novice researchers tend to prioritize manageability in uncertain environments. Table 2 summarizes major lessons that emerged, highlighting the need for stronger theoretical grounding, digital research skills, and innovation support in EFL thesis supervision.

Table 2. Lesson Learned During the COVID-19 Research Period

Key Lesson	Educational Significance
Feasibility strongly shapes undergraduate topic choice	Supervisors must guide toward innovative yet manageable inquiry
Qualitative flexibility is beneficial but must be theory-aligned	Methodological reflexivity needs strengthening
Digital tools were used but not maximized	Training must go beyond technical skills to digital methodology
Ethical sensitivity increased in Islamic Higher Education Institutions	Must formalize online ethics & consent systems
Crisis forced adaptive resilience	Hybrid research competence should be institutional standard

Supervisors played a critical role in guiding topic and method selection, often steering students toward practical and ethically sound approaches. Moving forward, supervision must strike a balance between practicality and innovation, introducing digital ethnography, virtual case studies, and multimodal discourse research. Islamic values of ethical research should continue to inform practice, while institutional systems build digital consent protocols and online research infrastructure.

These insights reaffirm that research resilience is not only individual but institutional. Undergraduate programs should strategically integrate hybrid research training, digital tools, and academic writing support to prepare students for the evolving educational environment.

Post-Pandemic Implications

Post-pandemic ELT research training must integrate digital research literacy, multimodal data collection, and ethical online methodologies (Salmons, 2022). While students quickly adopted online platforms during the pandemic, competence now needs to evolve into intentional, theoretically grounded digital inquiry. Table 3 outlines future research skill priorities.

Table 3. Future Research Skill Priorities in the Post-Pandemic ELT Context

Research Skill	Priority
Digital research ethics	Very high
Data security & consent	Very high
Advanced online data collection	High
Theoretical justification	High
Multimodal data literacy	Medium
Accessing digital academic resources	Medium

As Creswell & Creswell (2022) emphasize, aligning methodology with epistemology, research courses must therefore strengthen theoretical justification, paradigm awareness, and training in reflexive methodology. Islamic universities should leverage their ethical tradition to lead in digital ethics, blending global standards with Islamic moral values in research training.

Beyond student-level competencies, these findings highlight broader institutional implications. Post-pandemic higher-education policies should formalize blended supervision systems, digital ethics guidelines, and sustainable research-training models. Universities need to institutionalize structured digital research workshops, access to academic databases, and technology-supported research mentoring systems. This aligns with global calls to build resilient research ecosystems capable of navigating future academic disruptions through digital fluency and ethical research culture.

Ultimately, undergraduate ELT curricula should incorporate hybrid research simulations, digital writing labs, AI-assisted research literacy, and peer collaboration systems. The pandemic experience provides a foundation not only for resilience but also for innovation in future ELT research ecosystems.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the pandemic prompted notable shifts in undergraduate ELT research practices in an Islamic university context, particularly in topic selection, methodological decisions, and technology use. Students navigated institutional and contextual constraints by adopting discourse-based and qualitative approaches, while technology served primarily as a functional substitute for conventional data collection methods, rather than as a transformative research tool. These patterns signal both adaptability and areas requiring stronger pedagogical support, particularly in relation to digital research ethics, methodological justification, and critical engagement

with research design in evolving academic landscapes.

While offering valuable insights, this study is bound by its focus on a single institutional setting and its reliance on thesis abstracts and self-reported experiences from students and supervisors. Future research may expand to include multi-institutional comparisons, longitudinal tracking of undergraduate research development, and the exploration of more advanced digital research practices, such as multimodal, AI-assisted, and virtual fieldwork methods. Strengthening structured research mentorship, incorporating systematic research training within the curriculum, and enhancing digital research literacy are recommended to support sustainable post-pandemic ELT research cultures in higher education.

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