Iranian High School EFL Students' Attitude towards Distance Learning throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic[1]

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Abstract

As in other contexts, Iranian students encountered challenges in the closedown of schools due to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. The present study investigated the attitudes of 108 high school EFL students, using an online questionnaire to find out whether students preferred either to receive distance e-learning or the traditional face-to-face methods of instruction at schools. To this end, the participants completed a 20-item questionnaire. Also, the study attempted to explore EFL students' perceptions of the use of distance learning using individual semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data and the major emergent themes were discussed. The results revealed that most of the students were not ready to adopt the ongoing distance e-learning system. They complained that the pandemic had negatively impacted their learning and found the distance e-learning system ineffective. The results suggested the need for further studies on empowering the learners and teachers to improve the effectiveness of instruction in critical situations.

Resumen

Como en otros contextos, los estudiantes iraníes enfrentaron desafíos con el cierre de las escuelas debido al brote de la pandemia de Covid-19. El presente estudio investigó las actitudes de 108 estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera de secundaria, utilizando un cuestionario en línea para averiguar si los estudiantes preferían recibir aprendizaje electrónico a distancia o los métodos tradicionales de instrucción presencial en las escuelas. Para ello, los participantes completaron un cuestionario de 20 ítems. Además, el estudio intentó explorar las percepciones de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera sobre el uso del aprendizaje a distancia mediante entrevistas individuales semiestructuradas. Se utilizó el análisis temático para analizar los datos cualitativos y se discutieron los principales temas emergentes. Los resultados revelaron que la mayoría de los estudiantes no estaban preparados para adoptar el actual sistema de aprendizaje electrónico a distancia. Se quejaron de que la pandemia había afectado negativamente a su aprendizaje y consideraron que el sistema de aprendizaje electrónico a distancia era ineficaz. Los resultados sugirieron la necesidad de realizar más estudios sobre el empoderamiento de los alumnos y profesores para mejorar la eficacia de la instrucción en situaciones críticas.

Introduction

Due to the worldwide Covid-19 outbreak and social lockdown, education was closed down; therefore, both the state-run and private sectors schools resorted to technology to continue with educational programs (Rayhaneh & Al-Batiyha, 2022). The widespread use of technology-based learning became an indispensable part of everyday life throughout the world and the emergence of the internet, computers, tablets and smart phones effectively facilitated learning for different groups of people. For instance, as Traxler (2007) mentioned, with mobile assisted language learning (MALL) each student could have learning resources irrespective of time or place constraints. Similarly, Hemmati and Mojarrad (2016) stated that:

> E-learning is a convenient and cost-effective mode of education for lifelong learning. It has brought about several advantages compared with the traditional mode particularly in implementing learning anytime and anywhere so that learners can access online course materials independent of time and place. Moreover, it allows students to work at their own pace, regardless of race, sex, disability, or appearance, and provides them with the opportunity to reflect on the learning materials and their responses. (p. 54)

Additionally, according to Ahmad and Chua (2015) e-learning also was reported to be considerably more enjoyable, faster, and easier than face-to-face instruction.

However, as Grimshaw et al. (2017) asserted, using different forms of technology, including smart phones, tablets, etc. in school systems may raise concerns, particularly where the use of mobile phones are banned, like in Iran. They further mentioned concerns including "student distraction, academic misconduct, and privacy issues" (p. 135). Also, according to González-Lloret et al. (2014), teachers may be more inclined to use more traditional ways of teaching such as face-to-face, group and private lessons. Pirasteh (2014) claimed that the pedagogical potential of technology was recognized by everyone and almost no one could deny its effectiveness in education. She further argued that despite the significant potential of computer-assisted learning, no serious measure had been taken to develop this phase of education in the Iranian academic context. Although numerous studies on students' perceptions and attitudes toward computer-assisted learning were conducted particularly at university levels over the past decades (e.g., Grimshaw et al., 2017; Habibi & Shouti, 2015; Hemmati & Mojarrad, 2016; Okhovati et al., 2015; Rahimi & Fatemeh Hosseini, 2011), little research had been done to explore EFL students' attitudes towards distance learning in the Iranian high school context.

In the meantime, after the outbreak of Coronavirus, most countries including Iranian had to employ some kind of online or distance learning due to the closure of public schools and universities. More specifically, an application called *Shad* (which literally means 'happy' in Persian) was used throughout the country for the first time in 2020. It should be noted that the app was very slow and most teachers including the first author himself had connection problem when it was first designed and introduced to primary and secondary schools. It was so slow that teachers were unable to upload their own recorded or ready-made videos easily. In general, it was not possible to deliver and present the lesson(s) fully in online classes during all this period.

Literature Review

Distance learning

Distance learning refers to learning that is provided in a manner that the factor of distance cannot impede the learning process. Advancement in technology has made it possible for everyone to learn anywhere. By delving into literature, it can be seen that e-learning is described as a teaching and learning method in which education contexts can be established without time and place restrictions.

The roles of attitude, awareness, and motivation in e-learning

The success of e-learning is affected by a number of factors such as users' attitudes towards e-learning and their satisfaction with technology. According to Brown (2007),

> under the influence of humanistic, communicative, and constructivist approaches, learners' needs, individual differences, experience, and feelings received considerable attention in education. According to humanism, learners' feelings are as important as their mental or cognitive abilities. It is believed that learners' active involvement in the process of learning depends largely on their attitudes. It is this attitude towards computers and related technology that can determine the patterns of users' performance in technology-based learning environments, and the satisfaction they draw from that experience (cited in Rahimi & Fatemeh Hosseini, 2011, p. 184)

Therefore, the positive attitude towards technology and e-learning result in easier learning and better learning outcomes.

Moreover, as Rogers (1995) argued, people's attitudes towards a new technology are a key element in its diffusion. His *Innovation Decision Process Theory* (IDPT) states that an innovation's diffusion is a process that occurs over time in five stages: Knowledge, Persuasion, Decision, Implementation and Confirmation. IDPT is the process through which an individual or other decision makers passes (1) from the knowledge of an innovation, (2) through forming an attitude toward it, (3) to a decision to adopt or reject it, (4) to the implementation of the new idea, and finally (5) to the confirmation of that decision (Shomoossi et al., 2007). Unlike developed countries, the educational context of Iranian does not permit technological gadgets in educational settings. As a result the employment of distance learning should be developed. In other words, students may not have the required knowledge of different types of software to utilize in online learning atmosphere and so they may be unable to implement a new technology.

Being aware is closely tied to maintaining a positive attitude toward information and communications technology (ICT), which is widely recognized as crucial for effective implementation (Al Samarraie, 2019). Developing countries still do not enjoy adequate awareness of ICTs and e-learning. The extent of educational technology awareness and even basic computer skills is low among some educators in the Iranian academic context, which leads to resistance in adopting ICT for teaching. Before the pandemic, many students and teachers had little or no experience in using a computer; and people who were at home with computers, generally only used them as an instrument for entertainment and communication. Thus, students tended to

feel anxious when they began using technology for learning purposes (Rhema & Miliszewska, 2010). High school students did not have the required knowledge and learning experience via ICT which resulted in the lack of ICT knowledge in education, even though they had already been using different types of technologies.

Student motivation is considered as one of the factors influencing students' satisfaction and capacity. As Andersson and Grönlund (2009) argued, "highly motivated students perform well in most cases whereas non-motivated students tend to drop out" (p. 5). Personal motivation plays a key role in effective integration of ICTs into online education.

Studies on student attitudes towards e-learning

Numerous studies have investigated students' attitudes and perceptions about the use of e-learning over the past decades (e.g., Ahmady et al. 2020; Loh et al., 2016; Rhema & Miliszewska, 2014; Rizun & Strzelecki, 2020; Wang, 2003). Earlier findings indicated some inconclusive results. For instance, Hemmati and Mojarrad (2016) noted, there was an increasing demand towards online learning as underscored by the studies carried out by the National Center for Education Statistics. However, as Anawati and Craig (2006) mentioned, different factors played a role in the success of e-learning in distance education including how easily students could access web-based classes. Kim (2013) believed that students could be provided a great deal of authentic educational materials via smartphone apps similar to websites. A study in Poland examined the impact of the pandemic on higher education and the importance of distance education (Rizun and Strzelencki, 2020). The results showed that the students had a medium feelings and positive opinions about distance learning in general. However, it is important to note that although they were comfortable using computers and the internet, they preferred to go back to face-to-face education.

In addition, the limitations and even side-effects of using mobile phones as learning tools must be taken into consideration even though they can be extremely beneficial to students. In this regard, Bryan (2004), claimed cell phones have small screens; so, little information could be presented at once and that the small screens made peoples' eyes tired. Similarly, Thornton and Houser (2005) pointed out that if mobile phones were basically used as a means of communication, students might seldom use phones for educational purposes.

However, e-learning and technology-based learning might have some other essential advantages and merits compared to the traditional mode of learning and teaching. For instance, as argued by Petrides (2002), the students may have the possibility to work collaboratively in groups in an online course a lot easier because the students would not need to rearrange their schedules they may have had to do in a face-to-face course.

In a study in Bulgaria, Tuparova et al., (2006) reported that both students and teachers had definitely positive attitudes towards e-learning and using computers in their learning environments. Similarly, results of a study conducted by Amir et al. (2020) on undergraduate dental students revealed that students had a completely positive opinion towards distance learning despite all challenges in a way that they agreed to later utilize a blended form of both traditional and distance learning. However, Woods (2006) found out that students felt isolated from their classmates and teachers when they experienced online courses. Along a similar line, Forawi and Wonderwell (2003) argued that the main disadvantage of distance learning might be the lack of connection and interaction between students and teachers. In another study, Rahimi & Fatemeh Hosseini (2011) investigated 42 Iranian high school students' attitudes toward learning English through computer assisted language learning environment before and after some computer-based activities. The results of the study indicated that a significant difference was found between students' attitudes before and after the experiment. Also in a different study, Okhovati et al. (2015) examined the attitude of 196 students at Kerman University of Medical Sciences about the development of this modern method of education. The findings revealed that the participants had positive attitudes towards e-learning. However, due to their moderate knowledge and skills, e-learning was not welcomed at this university.

Due to the scarcity of research on high school EFL students' attitudes on e-learning in Iran and since distance learning became obligatory throughout the country with the pandemic, this study investigated Iranian high-school learners' attitudes about distance e-learning. Therefore, considering inconclusive findings of previous studies and obligatory distance learning period during the pandemic, the current study was designed to explore high school EFL students' attitudes, and perceptions regarding distance learning. The following research questions were formulated:

1. What are high school EFL students' attitudes toward distance learning?
2. What are high school EFL students' perceptions about distance learning?

Methodology

Research design

The study used a mixed-methods design as it combined both quantitative and qualitative methods for collecting and analyzing data. As for the qualitative data, inductive thematic analysis was utilized and the emergent themes were discussed.

Participants

The participants of this study were 112 male high-school EFL students including only students from different age groups (15-18 years old) and grade levels (10, 11, and 12) who were chosen based on convenience sampling from three different high schools. namely Allameh Helli, Shahid Saqar, and Maktumqoli in Golestan Province, located in the north of Iran. The students were the first author's EFL learners and they were given pseudonyms. Of the 112 questionnaires sent out, 112 were returned and two were discarded since they were incomplete. Therefore, the remaining 108 were used for description in this study. Informed written consent was obtained from the students and their parents before the study began and the students participated voluntarily in terms of their parents' permission.

Instrumentation

In order to enhance the validity of the findings, multiple data collection instruments namely the Attitude Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were employed in the current study. They are explained as follows.

Questionnaire

A previously published survey questionnaire (Habibi & Shouti, 2015) was given to the students online in order to elicit responses to statements about their attitude towards distance learning and use of different forms of technology including the Internet, computers and especially smart phones and tablets during the pandemic in Iran. The questionnaire was in Persian, the official language in Iran in order to ensure comprehension and to prevent any kind of misunderstanding. It consisted of two parts. In Part 1, demographic information such as age and grade level were gathered. Part 2 of the questionnaire contained 20 items on a Likert-type scale with five levels of strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, and strongly disagree. To ensure validity, the questionnaire was sent to some experts to verify the validity of the items. Also, the questionnaire was piloted with 30 students. The reliability of the questionnaire was 0.95 as measured by Cronbach method.

Telephone interviews

In order to enhance the validity of the findings, to confirm the data obtained from the questionnaire, and to examine the EFL students' perception of distance learning, individual semi-structured telephone interviews were also carried out with eight students who had completed the questionnaire. As in Miles and Huberman's (1994) study, they were purposefully selected for interviews to represent 'maximum variation' in responses. The main reason for choosing telephone interviews over face-to-face interviews was that participants or even their parents might not have consented to leave their homes as most families were self-quarantined or/and under lockdown because of corona virus pandemic.

During the interview sessions, the participants were asked to elaborate on their chosen items (See Appendix A for interview questions). They were guided by the interviewer (the first researcher) to explain their own experiences about distance learning. The interviews were conducted in Persian and lasted for 10-20 minutes depending on interviewees' willingness to talk and to share their views. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English by the researchers, and the themes were identified, extracted, and presented to support the findings of the study.

Data collection and analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in order to answer the research questions. Descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages were used to answer the first research question. Transcripts of the individual interviews were analyzed inductively and the themes that emerged from the data were identified to address second research question. To have dependability in the qualitative research, the second and the third researchers who had enough experience in qualitative research carried out the coding. Their codes were compared in order to identify and refine the emerging themes.

Since it is a mixed-methods study, the researchers, in qualitative phase, employed thematic analysis inductively and utilized a semi-structured interview. In this data-driven analysis, the analysis started from data and broad and main themes were identified, categorized and coded. Coder-reliability was also checked by two authors of the present study analyzing the data and ensuring the agreement between the themes in the data.

Results

EFL students' attitudes towards distance learning

The first research question dealt with secondary EFL students' attitudes towards compulsory distance during the pandemic. To this end, an online questionnaire with 20 items was administered to the students in order to elicit their thoughts and attitudes. The participants' responses to the first research question are displayed in Table 1 below. Students' responses to the items of the questionnaire are explained below one by one in order.

No.	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Strongly disagree	Disagree
1	Distance education can be a good replacement for traditional learning.	4 (3.7%)	20 (18.5%)	25 (23.1%)	26 (24.1%)	33 (30.6%)
2	Learning materials are more accurate in e-learning.	3 (2.8%)	31 (28.7%)	26 (24.1%)	31 (28.7%)	17 (15.7%)
3	I'm not comfortable with e-learning and become anxious when I use it for learning.	31 (28.7%)	25 (23.1%)	24 (22.2%)	20 (18.5%)	8 (7.4%)
4	E-learning can never take the place of a teacher in the classroom.	70 (64.8%)	24 (22.2%)	5 (4.6%)	6 (5.6%)	3 (2.8%)
5	Distance learning does not have credibility.	25 (23.1%)	22 (20.4%)	36 (33.3%)	22 (20.4%)	3 (2.8%)
6	E-learning is simple to work with.	4 (3.7%)	23 (21.3%)	34 (31.5%)	29 (26.9%)	19 (16.7%)
7	Through e-learning I can control my learning more easily.	4 (3.7%)	21 (19.4%)	31 (28.7%)	30 (27.8%)	22 (20.4%)
8	Time management is a lot easier in distance learning.	10 (9.3%)	35 (32.4%)	18 (16.7%)	22 (20.4%)	23 (21.3%)
9	I think distance education lessons are more enjoyable than traditional lessons.	8 (7.5%)	25 (23.1%)	23 (21.3%)	31 (28.7%)	20 (18.5%)
10	Nothing can replace the books and face-to-face learning.	56 (51.9%)	25 (25%)	12 (11.1%)	11 (10.2%)	2 (1.9%)
11	Distance education is more expensive for me than traditional learning.	24 (22.2%)	26 (24.1%)	24 (22.2%)	25 (25%)	9 (8.3%)
12	It is not easy to access classmates online.	46 (42.6%)	35 (32.4%)	25 (25%)	2 (1.9%)	0 (0%)
13	I feel more freedom in distance education.	13 (12%)	46 (42.6%)	20 (18.5%)	14 (13%)	15 (13.9%)
14	E-learning enhances the quality of learning as it integrates all forms of media.	2 (1.9%)	15 (13.9%)	23 (21.3%)	35 (32.4%)	33 (30.6%)
15	E-learning helps me develop my understanding more effectively and deeply.	3 (2.8%)	38 (35.2%)	35 (32.4%)	15 (13.9%)	17 (15.7%)
16	I prefer to write in Word rather than in my notebook.	8 (7.4%)	16 (14.8%)	27 (25%)	25 (25%)	32 (29.6%)
17	I prefer to watch movies produced by the teacher rather than sitting in the classroom.	14 (13%)	11 (10.2%)	9 (8.3%)	31 (29%)	42 (39.3%)
18	I feel anxious when I want to work with electronic tools to study and learn.	14 (13%)	16 (14.8%)	37 (34.6%)	27 (25%)	13 (12%)
19	Since using e-learning needs different skills I have a negative attitude towards it.	8 (7.4%)	18 (16.7%)	34 (31.5%)	36 (33.3%)	10 (9.3%)
20	I feel good when I can repeat my recorded lessons several times using mobiles and the internet.	23 (21.3%)	33 (30.6%)	25 (25%)	14 (13%)	12 (11.1%)

Table 1: Learners' attitudes towards distance education in Iran

Item 1: Distance education can be a good replacement for traditional learning.

As shown in Table 1 above, almost 55% of the students (n=59) strongly disagreed or simply disagreed that distance education should be replaced with traditional education. About 23% (n=25) had no idea or were undecided and only 22% (n= 24) either strongly agreed or just agreed with this statement. Although some participants (22.2%) believed that distance education could be a good replacement for traditional education, most of them believed that applying distance education seemed to be inappropriate in the context of Iran.

Item 2: Learning materials are more accurate in e-learning.

As in the previous section, most of the EFL students (44.4%; n=48) strongly disagreed or just disagreed that presented materials through e-learning are more accurate than the traditional education; about twenty four percent (n=26) were not sure and thirty four percent (n=34) either strongly agreed or just agreed with this statement.

Item 3: I'm not comfortable with e-learning and become anxious when I use it for learning.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the students (52%; n=56) strongly agreed or agreed while just 26% (n=28) either strongly disagreed or disagreed that they experience some kind of anxiety while using distance education. And twenty two percent (n=24) were not sure about this item.

Item 4: E-Learning can never take the place of a teacher in the classroom.

For this item, most of the respondents (87%; n=94) overwhelmingly strongly agreed or just agreed that e-learning or distance learning can never replace traditional teaching and teachers. As displayed in Table 1, only five were not sure about this idea and only nine of them disagreed with this statement. In other words, the responses to this item showed how extremely unsatisfied Iranian high school EFL students were with their distance learning situation.

Item 5: Distance learning does not have credibility.

Consistent with previous questions, in this item also most of the students again voted against distance education (43%; n=47); whereas, only 23% (n=25) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement and about 33% (n=33) were not sure.

Item 6: E-Learning is simple to work with.

The response to this item is again in line with previous ones since almost half of the EFL students (43.6%; n=47) either strongly disagreed or just disagreed and only 25% (n=27) agreed or strongly agreed with it. A little over 31% (n=34) were undecided. It seems EFL students were not comfortable using and working with different forms of technology for learning and preferred to return to traditional face-to-face education.

Item 7: Through e-learning I can control my learning more easily.

About 43% (n=52) of the students strongly disagreed or disagreed that controlling learning process via e-learning WAs easier traditional learning. However, some students (23.1%; n=25) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement and almost 30% (n=31) were undecided.

Item 8: Time management is a lot easier in distance learning.

The response to this item is significantly different from the responses given to the previous items, since a considerable number of the participants (41.7%; n=45) felt that they could manage their time better through distance learning and exactly the same number (41.7%; n=45) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. The rest (16.7%; n=18) remained undecided.

Item 9: I think distance education lessons are more enjoyable than traditional lessons.

About half of the respondents (47.7%; n=51) did not find distance learning more enjoyable than traditional learning. However, about thirty one percent (n=33) agreed or strongly agreed to this statement and about one fifth of the students (21.5%; n=23) were not sure.

Item10: Nothing can replace the books and face-to-face learning.

Almost 77% percent of the respondents (n=83) agreed or strongly agreed that face-to-face learning was the best method of instruction for Iranian high school students. Only two students (1.9%) disagreed and twelve (11.1%) remained undecided.

Item 11: Distance education is more expensive for me than traditional learning.

About half the students (46.3%; n=50) strongly agreed or agreed that distance learning costs more than traditional learning. About 31% (n=34) disagreed or strongly disagreed and about 22% percent (n=24) were not sure.

Item 12: It is not easy to access classmates online.

A vast majority of the respondents (75%; n=81) strongly agreed or agreed that they could not access their classmates easily in online classes. Only two students disagreed with this statement and 22% were not

sure. The main reason why most students agreed with this item probably is that they were unable to visit their classmates during this period of pandemic. On the other hand, the idea of online or distance learning was their first experience. Moreover, the application which was used obligatorily did not have enough capabilities to make this experience enjoyable or pleasurable since teachers simply could send their recorded voices and written texts because of the weaknesses of *Shad* application.

Item 13: I feel more freedom in distance education.

More than half of the participants (54.6%; n=59) strongly agreed or just agreed that they felt more freedom with distance education compared with traditional education. However, twenty-nine people (26.9%) disagreed and twenty students (18.5%) were not sure. Not surprisingly, students had more time and freedom to do certain activities and assignments since they did not have to attend the classes or they could choose not be online and participate in online sessions when they feel they were not ready for a class.

Item 14: E-learning enhances the quality of learning as it integrates all forms of media.

Many respondents (63%; n=68) said they strongly disagree or disagree with this statement; maybe because the teachers are not well-trained to develop contents and materials that could draw students' attention. Only seventeen students (15.8%) agreed with this statement and the rest (21.3%; 23) were undecided.

Item 15: E-learning helps me develop my understanding more effectively and deeply.

The respondents who strongly agreed or just agreed (38%; n=41) with this statement outnumbered those who disagreed or strongly disagreed (29.6%; n=32) without a big difference. About one third of the respondents (32.4%; n=35) was undecided.

Item 16: I prefer to write in Word rather than in my notebook.

More than half of the respondents (52.7%; n=57) strongly disagreed or simply disagreed, meaning they preferred to write in their notebooks than to use *Word* for writing or note taking purposes. Only about 22% (n=24) students agreed to this statement and 25% (n=27) were undecided. This suggests that it is not easy for students to communicate live and face-to-face with their teachers and other students during tutorial sessions. Therefore, they could only participate in class activities by just typing when they wanted to give their responses or express their views and ideas on their cellphones or PC screens which might not be a comforting and pleasant experience per se especially when they had to give long answers.

Item 17: I prefer to watch movies produced by the teacher rather than sitting in the classroom.

As expected from responses given to previous items, a vast majority of the EFL students chose either strongly disagree (n=31, 29%) or just disagree (n=42, 39.3%) to this statement which again implies replacing teachers with online or recorded videos. However, about twenty three percent (n=25) preferred to watch online or recorded movies or videos instead. Only nine respondents (8.4%) did not have an opinion.

Item 18: I feel anxious when I want to work with electronic tools and different hardware.

According to students' responses to this statement it seems they were not afraid or anxious to use different kinds of electronic tools. A little over 37% (n=40) disagreed while about 28% (n=30) agreed with this statement and interestingly, a considerable number of respondents (34.6%; n=37) was undecided.

Item 19: Since using e-learning needs different skills I have a negative attitude towards it.

Somehow consistent with previous item, this item also targets students' attitude and the required skills they might need to have in order to benefit from online or distance education the most and as expected, their dissatisfaction seems to have nothing to do with their tech-skills. More than 40% (n=46) of the students either strongly disagreed or simply disagreed with this statement while twenty-six people (24.5%) agreed with this item, indicating one fourth of the sample population may not have either the necessary skills or the required devices such as smart phones or laptops. It is worth mentioning that 32% (n=34) did not share an opinion.

Item 20: I feel good when I can repeat my recorded lessons several times using mobiles and the internet.

More than half of the respondents agreed, at least, with this advantage of technology that the lessons were always available as many times as they wanted which might have be very useful for repetition purposes. More than half of the students (52.3%; n=56) agreed or strongly agreed while only about twenty four percent (n=26) disagreed with this fact. Twenty-five respondents (23.4%) were undecided.

EFL high school students' views and perceptions towards distance learning

The second research question dealt with the students' views and perceptions in order to see the suitability of distance learning during pandemic. To achieve this purpose, semi-structured interviews were carried out. Having analyzed the transcripts inductively, the researchers identified and extracted the themes from the data. The main extracted themes were lack of technical facilities, lack of teachers' technical knowledge, and problems related to e-learning platforms. (Note: all names stated in quotations are pseudonyms.)

Lack of technical facilities

During the interview, the students expressed their views on the lack of facilities. Most students, particularly those who came from lower socioeconomic levels did not even have personal computers or even smart phones at home. Several students complained about the speed of the internet. They said whenever their teacher was giving audio-based or video-based lessons online they kept losing the connection so they could not keep up with the lessons taught online.

Regarding the lack of technical facilities Mohammed stated: "some students and their families live in poor conditions and do not even do not have their own mobile phones and some of them do not have access to the internet in their homes". Javad also said: "at some hours a day when we have an online class, we do not have internet access or the net is down and cannot get connected, so we just miss the class. Especially in rural areas, my friends say, this was even more so".

Analyzing students' interviews, it seemed like they were dealing with some big technical challenges and unfortunately most the interviewees shared these views about basic requirements for e-learning and expressed their discontent with the lack of electronic devices and also internet downtime during online sessions.

Lack of teachers' technical knowledge and students' motivation

Most of the interviewees commented that most of the teachers seemed not to be confident about designing and developing appropriate online materials and providing useful activities and lessons for their students on online platforms. Based on the student's comments, this issue was demotivating for students.

In this regard, Yasin said: "teachers were a lot better in traditional face-to-face classrooms. I personally think this new way of learning does not have the quality of old classes. I sometimes do not understand the presented lessons online well. And I do not get to ask questions as the teacher just talks or sometimes gives some kind of note, printout or pamphlet and leaves the platform. He is not there to answer my questions".

As seen from some comments given by the interviewees, obviously it is clear that apart from the lack of electronic tools, teachers also seem not to have completely met the needs of students in terms of accessibility and availability. This made some students feel demotivated. In other words, distance learning decreased most students' motivation to study and learn.

As Reza mentioned: "students do not show any sign of interest as before or there is no feeling of competition left for me and my friends. I think the atmosphere of the school was really encouraging and motivating. Some teachers who were very good in traditional classes even cannot express themselves very well in online education". Mohammad also said: "we can hardly communicate, cooperate, and interact with our friends and classmates in online learning. I do not enjoy online education at all. I cannot focus on my studies anymore. Moreover, I cannot understand lessons either".

E-learning platform-related problems

The last major theme that emerged from the data was the challenges and problems students had with the online platform during this period. Regarding using online platforms some interviewees stated some positive points consistent with item 20 of the questionnaire. They believed that they felt well when they could access the recorded lessons and used them as many times as they want regardless of time and place.

As Mannan said: "it can be both easy and difficult at the same time. Firstly, it is easy because we can watch and listen the posted lessons several times and repeat and practice, without the need of a teacher, whenever we want to… as it is always available online. On the contrary, our internet access with a limited speed makes things difficult".

Some other interviewees shared this view that the online platform had some major shortcomings. For instance, Mannan said "it is impossible to interact with other friends and classmates through this platform; students are not able to text or contact each other out of the classroom at all".

Moayyed said: "technology is definitely an important part of learning today. However, this platform has some certain deficiencies like lack of interaction between the students themselves and with the teacher".

Therefore, most of the interviewees mentioned that there was a lack interaction, and lack of internet access in this newly-developed remote learning system and that they mostly believed nothing could ever replace the traditional face-to-face system of education.

Discussion

The main purpose of this survey study was to analyze Iranian high school EFL students' attitudes towards the compulsory distance learning they had to take during pandemic. Unlike most other studies (e.g., Baleghizadeh & Oladrostam, 2010; Kim, 2013; Mehra & Omidian, 2011; Petrides, 2002; Tuparova et al. 2006), the results of current study indicated that Iranian high school students had negative attitudes toward distance or online learning. The results corroborate the work of Woods (2002) who reported that despite several personal emails sent to students during the semester, a statistically significant difference between groups could not be found along the lines of perceived sense of community, satisfaction with the overall learning experience, or personal relationship with the teacher.

Moreover, the results of the study seem to be more in line with Forawi and Wonderwell (2003) who found the lack of connection and interaction among students as well as with their teachers as the main weakness of online or distance learning. Therefore, according to the findings of this study it seems the students preferred to go back to usual traditional education system as soon as possible. This was probably due to a number of reasons; one of which could be the lack of hard-tech and facilities necessary to maintain online classes.

Maybe, the second reason why the majority of the EFL students chose the traditional face-to-face mode of education (item 10) stems from the unprepared teaching staff. A well-prepared staff would include teachers and other school administrators using different forms of technologies to design and develop appealing and/or absorbing materials and activities. As cited in Shomoossi et al. (2007), the utilization of technology, no matter how sophisticated or voluminous it was, would be feasible only when instructors have the competence, knowledge, and the right approach to incorporate technology into the syllabus (Baylor & Ritchie, 2002). They further added, teachers should become effective agents to be ready to use technology within the classroom. Eventually, teachers must be the foremost outstanding agents of change within the classroom environment.

The third reason most EFL students seem completely unsatisfied and strongly unwilling to continue with current online system is that they cannot interact with their peers, friends and classmates anymore. In other words, perhaps online education did not meet students' needs to actively engage with online tasks and activities during the pandemic. Most importantly, as indicated by the responses to items 10 and 12 of the questionnaire, as well as the interview results, most students feel they were deprived from communicating and interacting with their classmates and their teachers. This fact may even have negatively affected the students more emotionally than academically.

The findings have implications for online teaching in the Iranian context. First, the main reason for the lack of interest in online education was shown to be the lack of technological facilities in educational environments. Iranian schools, particularly in rural areas, were not well-equipped with needed technological infrastructure and the required facilities to perform online education appropriately. Ahmady et al., (2020) mentioned that universities may have the necessary resources and expertise for distance learning during the pandemic. However, they also noted that achieving virtual education goals in primary and secondary schools can be challenging due to various factors, such as differences in infrastructure and experience compared to universities.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to examine high school students' attitudes toward distance learning during Covid-19 pandemic.. The study used a questionnaire along with interviews to collect data. The results and responses to the questionnaire indicated that the majority of the students opposed the online program for the following reasons: (1) There was lack of familiarity with new technologies which could cause serious problems for students upon graduating from high school in their university studies or future employment situations. Therefore, there is an urgent need for more technological equipment at schools across the country. (2) A large number of the instructors lacked the required training and did not have the necessary qualifications to utilize different kinds of technology such as computers, tablets, and mobile devices to provide online materials and present them to their students in the form of online lessons. Therefore, as a

result of the pandemic, the time has come to make the fundamental changes and reforms to our education system and go beyond conventional approaches and methods limited to only blackboards and course books. Also, in the future, universities involved in teacher education should include more courses related to technology in order to familiarize pre-service and in-service teachers with new technologies to improve teachers' overall digital literacy. (3) Most importantly, the students need to be equipped with technical knowledge in both elementary and secondary levels. The responsibility falls on government officials, policy makers ,and administrators since they need to allocate sufficient funding to schools and universities so they can equip and modernize themselves with required.

This study had a number of limitations. Future research could use a larger sample size randomly selected from the population of learners. Secondly, while this study investigated students' attitudes towards distance learning, future studies may investigate teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences towards e-learning during the pandemic. The present study should also be replicated on female high school students in order to gain new insights regarding students' attitudes towards their remote learning experience. Despite these limitations, our study has suggested that online learning in the population that was examined was not well received by students.

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Appendix

1. Do you have access to required tools such as smartphones, personal computers and so on to use distance learning? If yes, can you explain?
2. In your view, are teachers well-trained and have enough knowledge to provide you with helpful, absorbing, and appealing lessons and materials via E-learning programs?
3. Do you think you can interact easily with your classmates and teachers in distance learning platforms?
4. Do you believe distance learning has positive or negative impact on increasing students' motivation to learn? Can you explain how?
5. Do you think working and learning through distance learning platforms is easy? If yes, can you explain why and how?
6. It is said that technology plays an important part in learning process nowadays. Do you agree or disagree? What are the strengths and weaknesses of distance learning in your view?