INVESTIGATING THE PERCEPTIONS OF EFL STUDENTS TOWARDS PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF ONLINE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT
This study aimed at exploring the psychological challenges of Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in online courses during the pandemic. The present research had a qualitative design and used thematic analysis (TA). The participants of this study were 50 Iranian EFL students, including 31 females and 19 males, who were selected from the English translation B.A. program of the English department of Islamic Azad University, Iran. To select the participants, the convenience sampling was applied. They were students of 6th and 7th semesters. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 participants of the study. Each participant was interviewed individually. The interview consisted of 15 researcher-made questions. The interviews were administered in ten one-hour sessions. Each session five participants were interviewed. The results of the present study showed that the main reasons and causes of psychological challenges perceived by the participants in online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic include on-line classes as a stress-provoking learning context, lack of digital literacy, low quality and speed of internet connection, platform issues, coronavirus disease stress, and lack of direct interactions. At the end of the paper, the implications of the study are presented.

Keywords: Challenges; COVID-19 Pandemic; EFL learners; Online Classes

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the first report of coronavirus disease in 2019 (COVID-19) in China (Zhu et al., 2020), this disease has swiftly spread across the globe. Because of the respiratory infection caused by COVID-19, most of the countries worldwide halted all in-person activities, such as sporting events and conferences. The COVID-19 pandemic as a universal disaster has significantly affected varying dimensions of people’s lives, and education is by no means an exception. In response to COVID-19, education at all levels had to undergo an immediate shift to online education (Toquero, 2020). In many countries, universities implemented online teaching-learning mode in the advent of this pandemic. Therefore, all of the instructors and learners needed to swiftly adapt to online teaching and learning modes (Abdi & Mohesnpour, 2021; Derakhshan, 2021; Toquero, 2020).

Accomplishing the swift and constant technological developments in the 21st century, the chance of universal communication and the essentiality of a global lingua franca made English language the focal attention more than before as a means of interactions an international communication, science, technology, and tourism among people with different languages (Rao, 2019). English as a foreign language (EFL) (Zairova & Reymova, 2020) and English as a universal language (EUL) (Melitz, 2016) have been investigated widely to study different teaching methods and learning strategies as implemented by many people around the world (Abdi & Mohesnpour, 2021). Moreover, internet availability has made remarkable alterations to educational contexts, and consequently, teaching and learning methods and strategies are altered in all fields of study (Crawley et al., 2009). Subsequently, e-learning as a remote learning presented the chance for many students to carry on their education by their favorite instructors based on their own proper time and location (Simpson, 2018). Before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, e-learning was mainly regarded as a part of blended learning, which was an alternative to improve learning, or a chance for specific persons who like to participate in online sessions. Notwithstanding, the lockdown in many countries, including Iran has led to the implementation of e-learning as the practical option to traditional in-person education (Abdi & Mohesnpour, 2021). As a result, researchers undertook studies to explore the various dimensions of this phenomenon across the globe (e.g., Ali, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Dung, 2020; Ghafoorifard, 2020; Abdi & Mohesnpour, 2021; Derakhshan, 2021; Davis et al., 2019; Toquero, 2020).

The immediate shift from traditional settings to virtual education contexts leads to lots of challenges that teachers and learners face at different levels of education (Derakhshan, 2021). Based on Moser et al. (2021), student readiness, self-discipline, and computer technology requirements are the main issues in e-learning. Furthermore, this immediate shift to online classes demands a thorough instructional approach including different learning styles (Sithole et al., 2019). Regarding language instruction, Sithole et al. (2019) argued that knowledge of the challenges and opportunities of language e-learning could develop the course effectiveness. Therefore, ESL/EFL instructors should be provided with this knowledge to benefit from the opportunities and tackle the challenges (Gao & Zhang, 2020). Indeed, knowing the opportunities and challenges of online learning lets ESL/EFL instructors implement and design more effective instruction, communication, and feedback (Moser et al., 2021). Due to this immediate shift from traditional classes to online ones, we lack this knowledge at the present time (Shahnama et al., 2021).
This study was conducted in Iranian EFL context where learners mostly attended in-person English classes before the pandemic to learn English as a foreign language. However, during the pandemic, all of the English classes shifted to online mode. In spite of the recent attention to challenges of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, there is still no research on the psychological challenges of Iranian EFL learners in online courses during the pandemic. Thus, this study aimed at exploring these challenges to fill this gap in the related literature implementing the qualitative approach. The research question of the study was as follows:

- What are the psychological challenges of Iranian EFL learners in online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Review of the Related Literature
Online Teaching and Learning
Though the emergence and dissemination of the COVID-19 pandemic substituted the traditional in-person learning with online learning, the improvement and popularity of social or e-learning (e.g., social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, and wikis) has attracted the attention of educational policy-makers to online classes over two last decades. The attention includes establishing e-learning higher education centers, holding the webinars, announcing new events through social networking sites, and implementing new technologies for educational purposes (Rahimi et al., 2021). Online teaching and learning could be regarded those activities that implement social technologies to develop teaching and learning quality in collaborative contexts (Hamid et al., 2015). Content-generating, sharing, interacting, and collaborating are the examples of some of the activities, which could be implemented to enhance online teaching and learning (Hamid et al., 2015). Based on Osman and Koh (2013 as cited in Rahimi et al., 2021), implementing social technologies, learners could easily design and develop their own content, make their especial opinions, and uphold them. In addition, learners are provided with the required skills to make and spread their opinions and content with others (Gao, 2013). Furthermore, social technologies lead learners to take part in online collaborations actively (Munoz & Towner, 2009). Lastly, based on Kane and Fichman (2009), social technologies allow learners to act and acquire collaboratively and share their ideas and attempts together to tackle a problem. The most significant advantage of online learning is flexibility (Wasilik & Bolliger, 2009), which means that online classes can be accessible to learners with less limitation of time and place. Another important and major merit could be self-motivation (Pacansky-Brock, 2016). In other words, as self-directed and motivated learners, they could acquire on the basis of their own pace, and they are not limited to the deadline of courses, they could embed the required time in their study plans for their tasks and learning activities. Cost-effectiveness is regarded as the next significant benefit of online learning (Everson, 2009) in which learners should not commute to educational institutions, and they could save their both time and money. Being independence could be another important advantage of online learning (Davis et al., 2019) in which they could be more comfortable for introverted persons.

Empirical Studies
Some research studies have been undertaken to evaluate and specify the online courses quality and their challenges from various dimensions. Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) undertook a
qualitative study and asked 16 Indonesian EFL instructors to make written reflections considering their practices in performing online EFL learning and the challenges they face. A semi-structured interview was conducted to obtain more in-depth explanations on their teaching methods in the online context. The results of their study showed that the challenges include the difficulty developing materials for online context, low digital literacy or related experience, the difficulty of presenting personal feedback to learners, encouraging introverted learners, hi-tech equipment absence, the lack of online course preparation or training, the lack of ability to empower affective bonds with learners because of the absence physical exposure, and the lack of teacher-student communication. Their study was conducted in Indonesian EFL context, and they did not specifically address the psychological barriers of the Indonesian EFL students. In a similar line of studies, Alam (2020) investigated the challenges of teachers and learners in online education during the COVID-19 lockdown in Bangladesh. The findings indicated that the challenges included both teachers’ and learners’ lack of online education experience, restricted internet coverage in remote areas, digital literacy, time and feedback management. His study was undertaken in Bangladeshi EFL context, and he studied the challenges from both learners and teachers generally about online education. Shrestha et al. (2021) investigated instructors’ and learners’ experiences of online class during the COVID-19 disease in the Bangladesh and Nepal higher education settings. The results indicated that they adjust the action potentials of the digital materials to local contexts and through the best ways implement them to improve their interaction and develop learners’ acquisition in tough contexts. The main problems and limitation they had in the course of transition to online class consist of weak internet connection, the absence of digital abilities, and the absence of technological aids from the educational institutions. They studied the challenges of online education in the Bangladesh and Nepal higher education settings, and generally, they investigated the teachers and learners’ perceptions on the online education hurdles. In the same vein, Al-Kumaim et al. (2021) investigated the challenges of online class platforms implemented by students during the COVID-19 pandemic. An exploratory qualitative research method was applied that was supported by content analysis techniques of the literature. The data was collected during the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. A descriptive analysis and NVivo12 were applied to analyze the collected data from 486 learners from various Malaysian universities. The results showed that different challenges they faced while they implemented online platforms, including (a) work and information overload received from teachers, (b) the lack of adaptability and familiarity of the novel online class setting, and (c) health problems associated with stress and anxiety. Their study was done in Malaysian EFL setting and they specifically addressed the challenges of online platforms. In a similar line of studies, Butnaru et al. (2021) studied learners’ views considering the efficiency of online class during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The results showed that the learners respond diversely to online instruction, and their reaction is according to their skill in applying online instruments, their capability to technically access online materials, and the teachers’ behaviours in presenting learning tasks. This study was conducted in Romanian ESL context, and the authors addressed the general efficiency of online class during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Along the similar lines of investigations, Muthuprasad et al. (2021) explored the student’s perspectives to the online education via an online survey of 307 learners. They also investigated the learner’s inclinations for different attributes of online education that could be effective to improve efficient online education setting. The findings showed that most of the learners (70%) are prepared to take online classes to handle the curriculum during the
COVID-19 pandemic. Most of them were content to implement smart phone for online education. Applying content analysis, they explored that learners like recorded classes with quiz at the end of each class to develop the learning efficiency. They also mentioned that network issues in remote areas created a challenge for learners using online education. They studied ESL student’s perspectives through an online survey in Indian ESL context, and they investigated the general perceptions of ESL students regarding online classes.

All in all, based on the review of the related literature, there is still no research on the psychological challenges of Iranian EFL learners in online courses during the pandemic. Thus, this study aimed at exploring these challenges to fill this gap in the related literature.

METHOD

Participants
The participants of this study were 50 Iranian EFL students, including 31 female and 19 male, who were selected from the B.A. program of English department of Islamic Azad University. Convenience sampling method was used to select the participants. They were students of 6th and 7th semesters. The students were all native speakers of Persian language. The age of the participants was between 21 to 23 years old.

Instrument
Semi-structured Interviews
The semi-structured interviews as the data collection instrument were conducted with 50 participants of the study. Each participant was interviewed individually. The researcher himself made the 15 interview open-ended questions. The content validity of the interview (trustworthiness) was proved by three experts in the field. Before conducting the main study, ten participants were interviewed in a pilot mode to improve the interview questions regarding the dependability of the instrument. Then, formal interviews were carried out with the main participants.

Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, to come after the health protocols and preserve the health of the participants, all the interviews were undertaken through WhatsApp.

Data Collection Procedure
The interviews were administered at English language departments of Islamic Azad University by the researcher. The individual semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 50 EFL learners (19 male and 31 female). The interview consisted of 15 researcher-made questions. Ten students were taken part in the pilot study to develop the interview questions. Then, the main interviews were administered. Regarding the ethical consideration of the study, prior to conducting the interviews, the students were explained about the objective and the time of the interviews, and by the permission of the interviewees, the interviews were conducted, audio-recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were administered in ten one-hour sessions. Each session five participants were interviewed. Therefore, 50 students were interviewed, totally. The participants were assured about the confidentiality of the data considering the research ethics.

To analyze the qualitative data, thematic analysis (TA) was used to specify the related themes and categories. To do so, Braun and Clarke’s (2006 as cited in Derakhshan, 2021) methodology of TA, including the following six stages, was employed: “(1) Familiarization with data, (2) Generating initial codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5)
Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the final report” (p. 6). The coding process was done by two applied linguists who were expert in qualitative data analysis. Ary et al. (2014) suggested inter-rater agreement methods for assessing dependability (reliability). The results of the inter-rater agreement analysis showed that most of the extracted codes and themes by the two raters agreed with each other, and there was not any significant difference between their extracted codes and themes. Upon reaching data saturation in which no new code could be found out of the data, the data collection and analysis was terminated.

RESULTS
The results of the analysis showed the following psychological challenges perceived by the EFL students in on-line instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic,

On-line Classes as a Stress-provoking Learning Context
Some of the students believed that online classes were stress-provoking since they were not sure how to use the platform to connect to the class and how to use its equipment during the class. They maintained that there was not any instructional guide to show them how they can use the platform, correctly. Ali one of the participants in this regard noted,

After passing 5 sessions of on-line classes, I could not use the platform. This caused stress and anxiety for most of the students, which affected on the quality of learning and teaching. The immediate shift into online class should take place concerning its infrastructures.

Therefore, this abrupt change into online mode of learning created anxiety for EFL students.

Lack of Digital Literacy as a Source of Anxiety
Some participants stated that lack of digital literacy resulted in anxiety for them because most of the assignment had to be done by computer and they did not have even a single experience in face-to-face classes regarding using computer-based assignments. They noted that this immediate shift to online classes forced them to learn some the basic computer literacy for doing their assignment. Mina mentioned,

I did not do any task using my computer before starting the online classes, and when I understood that we should do our assignment by computer, I took part in computer class, too. That was very demanding and stressful. I should handle both my university classes and computer class at the same time.

So, another factor that was perceived as one of the largest psychological challenges among the students was lack of digital literacy.

The Low Quality of Internet Connection as the Major Source of Anxiety
Most of the students stated that they had internet connection problems most of the time, and as a result, they could not enter the class on time, and this problem created stress and discomfort for them. On the other hand, during the class, they missed most of the teachers’ instructions
due to the internet disconnections. The condition is even worse for the students from remote areas.
Narges in this concern mentioned that,

Unfortunately, most of the time, I could not connect on time and the teachers thought that I am not a punctual person, so I should explain my connection problem every session, and I was afraid that teacher did not believe me. Therefore, it was very stressful and created anxiety.

Thus, the low quality and speed of the internet connection was one the major causes of creating psychological challenges among the participants and majority of the students noted that they experienced this problem during the semester.

The Platform Issues Leading to Psychological Barriers
Most of the participants maintained that they suffered from the stress related to platform connectivity. It was a new platform for the new version of instruction, which had different types of problems, such as connectivity, audio-visual issues, and microphone interruptions. Mohsen in this regard stated that,

One of our main issues during the online classes was platform performance. It was awful, and we cannot get along with this disastrous platform at all. As far as I am concerned, it was the main source of our anxiety and stress. Every session, we had a new problem with this platform.

As a result, the lack of platform quality and performance can be another source of stress and anxiety among the students that led to discouragement and demotivation.

Coronavirus Disease Stress
Another factor that was mentioned by the participants was the stress of COVID-19 infection. Some of them stated that they were afraid of getting the disease; therefore, it had negative effects on their education. Elahe, one of the participants, noted, “It was a nightmare. Every moment I felt that I got this nasty disease. It was one of the main reasons of anxiety for us”.

Lack of Direct Interactions Creating False Illusions
Another important reason of psychological challenges was the lack of in-person interactions. As the students used to direct interactions during in person classes, e-learning interactions created a stressful situation for some of the participants. They believed that virtual learning is not as efficient as real and in person learning. Arman maintained that, “I could not perceive the online classes as the true and actual means of learning due its virtual essence. I think that face-to-face class can be the best way of presenting the education”. All in all, lack of direct exposure led to false illusions among the students due to the efficiency and effectiveness of online learning.

DISCUSSION
The results showed that the main reasons and causes of psychological challenges perceived by the participants in online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic include on-line classes as a
stress-provoking learning context, lack of digital literacy, the low quality and speed of internet connection, the platform issues, coronavirus disease stress, and the lack of direct interactions.

The results of the present study are in line with the findings of Muthuprasad et al. (2021) who found out their participants reported that technological constraint, distractions, instructor’s incompetency, learner’s inefficacy and health issues were challenges in their online learning experience. The findings are also in agreement with the results of Al-Kumaim et al. (2021) who investigated the challenges of online class platforms implemented by students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their results showed that different challenges they faced while they implemented online platforms, including (a) work and information overload received from teachers, (b) the lack of adaptability and familiarity of the novel online class setting, and (c) health problems associated with stress and anxiety. The results of the present study are in harmony with the findings of Shrestha et al. (2021) who investigated instructors’ and learners’ experiences of online class during the COVID-19 disease in the Bangladesh and Nepal higher education settings. The results indicated that the main problems and limitation they had in the course of transition to online class consist of weak internet connection, the absence of digital abilities, and the absence of technological aids from the educational institutions. The findings of the present study lend support to the results of Shahnama et al. (2021) who explored the challenges facing an EFL teacher throughout an online English course of intermediate level. The results of their study indicated that the main challenges the instructor encountered were platform constraints, poor network, and unpreparedness of human resources for online learning. Furthermore, the instructor’s and most learners’ digital literacy, as well as their media literacy, increased by the end of the course, but some learners’ rather slow adjustment to the sudden online environment challenged the teacher during the course.

Another factor that is very critical and mentioned by the participants of the study was physical burnout with regard to consecutive and frequent classes during a single day, which affects the psychological aspect of the learners. To improve the productivity of the learners’ long duration classes need to be avoided and sufficient break must be given between two consecutive classes. It would not only decrease cognitive load but also protects the physical strain caused by prolonged implementation of electronic devices (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). Based on Thompson (2014), the formula of work for 52 min and break for 17 could be a good recommendation in this respect.

**CONCLUSION**

This study aimed at investigating the psychological challenges perceived by the Iranian EFL students in on-line instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the present study showed that on-line classes as a stress-provoking learning context, lack of digital literacy, the low quality and speed of internet connection, the platform issues, coronavirus disease stress, and lack of direct interactions are the main reasons and causes of psychological challenges perceived by the participants in online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the students’ points of view, the biggest challenge of the online classes was technological issues and constraints, such as a powerful internet connection. Lack of access to internet connection led to the exclusion of some learners from the online classes. The low quality of connections could also make accessing the platform and instructional materials frustrating and disappointing. Online classes will be practical only if internet facility is provided to all by making it equitable and affordable (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). So one of the infrastructures of the online classes to some extent was not available in a perfect quality for the Iranian EFL
students, which led to frustration and anxiety. This gives us a view that if a country intends to improve online instruction, then internet facilities as a prerequisite should be the primary focus. One of the integral elements that remarkably influenced the success of online learning, specifically in underdeveloped or developing countries during the COVID-19 lockdown, is regarded as the gap of the digital divide (Azubuike et al., 2021; Ramsetty & Adams, 2020). Digital literacy of the students is a major factor that affected the quality of online classes and specifying the efficiency of online classes that was proved by Tsai and Lin (2004), Peng et al. (2006), and Muthuprasad et al. (2021). Another important variable was the type of platform used in online courses (Jin et al., 2021). The platform type influenced the satisfaction of the students toward e-learning and manipulated their learning outcomes.

Regarding the positive side, online learning results in initiative chances to shift the crisis to opportunities for positive alterations. Instructors and learners’ preferences, conditions, and programs should be adapted to transition traditional in-person instructions into the remote education and evaluation that surely need strong collaboration and innovation to benefit from the new mode of education and technologies to scaffold students’ learning requirements, desires, and feelings during this crisis (Walther, 2020).

The findings of the present study entail some pedagogical implications. At first, EFL university lecturers and professors need to encourage their learners to enhance their self-confidence, self-efficacy, and creativity facing any problem to cope with e-learning platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic and the similar situations. Secondly, the platforms designers and e-learning material developers could focus more on the quality of the platform interface, and also instructional software need to highlight the function of interactivity, friendly usage, and learners’ interest for fulfilling instructional tasks with less stress and anxiety. Finally, to improve the quality of instructional materials, universities and higher education institutions could assist their instructors and professors to update and redesign their syllabi based on the new context faced by both learners and instructors during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Even though this research could present a substantial contribution to related literature through its findings, it suffered from some limitations, which would open up some possibilities for further studies. Firstly, the present study was conducted with limited number of participants, which was selected from one of the Iranian universities. Additional studies might explore the phenomenon in a wider range of populations from more institutions and universities in Iran and other countries. Secondly, this study used semi-structured interview as the main instrument of data collection, so further studies could be undertaken implementing various data collection instruments, such as questionnaire and observation.

REFERENCES


