

Investigating the Effectiveness of Online English Learning: Explaining Learners' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Online learning is one of the educational channels that learners and educational centers have recently turned to. However, there are still concerns about its effectiveness. The study aimed to explain learners' perspectives on the effectiveness of online learning. The present study was a qualitative study using the content analysis method conducted in 2023. The participants were 38 female (n=22) and male (n=16) language learners from Tehran Language School who had experience in online learning and were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through interviews and analyzed using content analysis. The overall analysis of the interviews indicates that 63% of learners (n=24) rated the method as weak, 20% (n=8) rated the method as average, and 17% (n=6) rated the method as good. Twenty-nine percent (n=11) believed that the method was effective in improving their knowledge, and 23 percent (n=9) considered the method effective in improving speaking skills. Fifteen percent (n=6) are willing to participate in online learning again, and 83 percent (n=31) believed that the most important problem of online learning is the lack of necessary infrastructure, and 83.6 percent (n=32) of the participants believe that the best learning method to improve English language skills is face-to-face learning. The findings indicate that online learning is not a suitable method for improving English language knowledge and skills compared to face-to-face education, and if it is necessary to learn English online, it is necessary to provide infrastructure.

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1. Introduction

Today, all over the world, teaching and learning English is considered an important tool for communication between nations (Aulia, 2023; Seidlhofer, 2005). On the other hand, technological advancements have led to changes in all areas of education and learning, including language education, notably through online platforms. This is a form of

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virtual education that is carried out through the use of the Internet (Friedman & Ashley, 2019), and due to its novelty, it is necessary to examine its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges (Grabinski et al., 2020). For this purpose, it is necessary for educational institutions and centers to conduct research in this field (Dhawan, 2020). In our country, many studies have been conducted on online English language teaching, but so far, limited studies have been conducted with a qualitative approach using theoretical foundations. Therefore, due to the importance of the subject, the present study aims to determine the effectiveness of online English language teaching, discover the hidden realities of the subject, and develop new and applied knowledge in this field.

Research Question 1: What are the attitudes of learners towards online English learning?

Research Question 2: What advantages and disadvantages do learners cite for online learning compared to face-to-face learning?

2. Review of Literature

With the spread of COVID-19 worldwide, social and physical distancing have been proposed as a preventive method of disease spread (Kapasias et al., 2020). Most governments around the world have imposed social or physical distancing to avoid face-to-face education. Online classrooms have brought about a digital revolution in education (Gonzalez et al., 2020), which has had an inevitable impact on all education, including language education, and language education institutions have been forced to convert their face-to-face education to online education (Abidah et al., 2020). Zounek and Sudický highlighted some of the advantages and disadvantages of online learning that constantly occur in educational contexts and drew attention to the complexity of online education. They believe that many factors in the use of online courses, such as the subject of education, the type of course, and the technological and methodological support, a friendly learning environment, increase the effectiveness of the course for both teachers and learners (Zounek & Sudický, 2013).

In developing countries and societies with low standards, many students do not have a strong internet connection or critical tools for online learning, which disrupts the teaching-learning process (Sindiani et al., 2020).

A survey conducted on students and graduates showed that online education cannot lead to desired results in underdeveloped countries. Because the majority of them are unable to access the internet due to technical issues. Apart from technical and financial complexities, there are other complexities such as a lack of interaction and reduced socialization process (Adnan, M., & Anwar, 2020).

Research shows that underdeveloped countries need more attention and support for online education, and assessing learners' satisfaction in using this method is crucial (Qazi et al., 2020).

Online education in Iran is still in its infancy, and what this paper focuses our attention on is evaluating its effectiveness according to the perspectives of Iranian learners.

3. Methods

The present study was conducted qualitatively using content analysis. Content analysis is one of the easiest methods of preparing a report. In content analysis, the researcher

gives meaning and significance to the data obtained from the interviews by checking and interpreting.

3-1. Participants

The aim of this study, which was conducted in 2023, was to explain the views of language learners on the effectiveness of online education. The participants were 38 female (n=22) and male (n=16) language learners from Tehran Language School, aged between 12 and 18 years old, and their educational level was primarily junior or senior high school, who had experience in online learning, and were selected through purposive sampling. The data were collected and analyzed through interviews. The inclusion criteria for the study were studying at a language school, having experience in online education, and willingness to participate. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study if they did not wish to cooperate.

3-2. Data Collection Instruments

The setting of this study was a language school in Tehran in ۲۰۲۳, which was accessible to the participants. Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection. The data collection method was in-depth, semi-structured interviews with guiding questions and recording of the interviews.

3-3. Data Collection Procedure

The interview began with a general question and was guided by the participants' responses, allowing participants to fully express their perceptions of the topic under study. The focus of the questions was on learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of online English language learning, with questions such as: What is your experience of online language learning? How has online learning affected your learning rate? What factors make you learn better in online classes? What are the problems and challenges of online learning? How is online learning compared to face-to-face learning? Would you be willing to participate in online learning again? The interviews were then recorded, and the guided content analysis method was used to analyze the data. Finally, conceptual categories and main themes were extracted. Before the interview, the purpose of the research and how to collect data, the criteria for selecting the sample, the benefits of participating in the study, and the right to refuse to continue the research were explained to the participants. After obtaining their cooperation and informed consent, permission was obtained to record the interviews. They were also assured of the confidentiality of the information. The interviewers were four people who had been trained in this field and had the necessary interview skills, including active listening, non-judgment, patience, the ability to establish effective communication, and questioning skills, and were familiar with the objectives of the study.

The duration of each interview was 30 to 45 minutes. Data saturation was carried out with 38 interviews. The content of the interviews was written word-for-word after each interview.

3-4. Data Analysis

The materials were read several times, and a general understanding of the participants' statements was obtained in line with the purpose of the research. After that, meaning

units that included sentences or paragraphs related to each other were extracted, and the initial codes were assigned. The codes were merged based on similarities and classified under the heading of subcategories.

Several subcategories were placed in a category based on at least one common feature, which was the basic part, content analysis, and was named. In order to ensure the accuracy of the data, the Goba and Lincoln method was used, which considered the four criteria of acceptability, confirmability, dependability, and transferability essential for the consistency and robustness of qualitative data.

Therefore, to ensure the acceptability, accuracy, and reliability of the data, continuous engagement with and validation of the data was carried out by the participants, and the research team and two experts from outside the research team collaborated, and to determine the reliability, two members of the research team separately coded the interviews and reached a 90% agreement.

In addition, utmost care was taken in collecting, implementing, and recording the data, and sufficient time was allocated for data collection. In terms of transferability, the information obtained was reviewed and confirmed by two members of the academic staff outside the research team and an expert in the field of qualitative research. In addition to describing the field under study, necessary explanations were provided about the participants, and their direct statements were also used.

4. Results

The participants in the study were 38 language learners who were studying at Tehran Language School, including 22 girls and 16 boys.

Table 1

Main categories and subcategories from the learners' perspective

Sample Quote	Subcategories	Main categories
"I have no desire to take online language classes again."	Satisfaction	Overall response
"In online classes, I am afraid that the internet will be disconnected at any moment."	Emotional reactions, stress	
"In online classes, I am less likely to speak my mind."	Overall self-confidence	
"Because of the slow internet and problems with my laptop, I cannot use the online classes well."	Educational facilities and equipment	
"In the face-to-face class,	Class participation	

we would engage in more discussions"		
"In the online class, I'm embarrassed to turn on the microphone and ask questions."	Inquiry	
"In the online class, there is no competition, it's like everyone is working for themselves."	Competition	
"In the online class, we are very far from our classmates."	Interaction with classmates	
"In online classes, it's harder to communicate with the teacher."	Interaction with the instructor	
"It's easier to get grades in the online class."	Evaluation method	Implementation
ten lose contact in the middle of class."	Internet instability	
Sometimes I don't know exactly what homework the teacher has assigned.."	Educational assignments	
"Online classes are boring."	Creating interest in education (willingness to re-participate)	
"Few people talk in online classes."	Class dynamics	
"Some kids have good laptops, but it's hard for me to participate in online classes with a simple phone."	Educational inequality	
"In the online class, the teacher doesn't understand." "Do kids	Teacher supervision	

really listen?"		
"The online class has increased my vocabulary."	Improvement of knowledge	Utility
"There is less dialogue in the online class."	Improvement of speaking skills	
"Overall, I think online education is a poor teaching method."	Qualitative evaluation	Overall effectiveness

Table 1 shows the main categories and subcategories separately. Four main classes were extracted in the field of student response, implementation, usefulness, and overall effectiveness of online education. The students participating in the study mentioned the factors of satisfaction, emotional reactions, stress, self-confidence, educational facilities and equipment, participation in class, questioning, competition, interaction with classmates, and interaction with the teacher, and they believed that these factors are affected by online education. A participant says, "When I was going to participate in online classes, I was already stressed that my laptop and educational equipment would not be disrupted, and I would not miss the class." Or another student says, "In online classes, the passion for competition is not like in a face-to-face class, and in these types of classes, it seems like you only have a relationship with the teacher." A learner says, "When in a face-to-face class, the teacher asks a question and I answer well, I see the admiration of the teacher and my classmates on their faces, and this gives me confidence, but in an online class, I never feel that way." Regarding implementation, participants mentioned the evaluation method, educational assignments, creating interest in education (willingness to re-participate), the instability of the Internet, class dynamics, educational inequality, and teacher supervision. In this regard, a participant says, "Maybe if the online class exam is held in person, it will be effective in increasing the effectiveness of online classes. Of course, it is necessary to inform the students at the beginning of the semester that the end-of-semester exam will be in person." Or a participant says, "In an online class, the teacher does not closely monitor the students." Or a language learner says, "Given our conditions, online classes are problematic for some because they do not have all the necessary facilities such as laptops, internet, etc., which are essential for online classes. These high-quality facilities are essential." Regarding usefulness, increasing knowledge and speaking skills were mentioned. In this regard, a participant says, Online classes can be effective for learning vocabulary, grammar, and listening skills, but face-to-face classes are more effective for increasing speaking ability.

And in the overall evaluation of the interviews, it is indicated that 63% of the learners (24 people) evaluated the method as weak, 20% (8 people) evaluated the method as average, and 17% (6 people) evaluated the method as good.

Table 2*Percentage of effectiveness of online education from the perspective of learners*

Category	N	%
Knowledge improvement	11	29
Speaking skill improvement	9	23
Satisfaction	6	15
Desire to participate in online classes again	6	15
Lack of infrastructure for online education	31	83
Comparison of the effectiveness of online education with face-to-face education	۳۲	83.6

Given the repetition of the issues in the interviews, their conclusion shows that learners of online classes believe that these classes are more successful in improving knowledge than in improving speaking skills. The willingness to participate in these courses again is low. The lack of infrastructure was raised as the main problem, and they believe that face-to-face training is more effective.

5. Discussion

Online education is a completely new experience, and despite the growing need for using this teaching method, there is little information about the effectiveness of the method and the absorption of lessons by students. Given the increasing use of this method as a new method, it is essential to understand its effectiveness from a realistic perspective in order to identify the opportunities and limitations of the method, in order to help promote this educational method by reducing its limitations and utilizing its opportunities. (Kapasias et al., 2020).

In the present study, an attempt was made to obtain a deep and correct understanding of the learners' perspective on the online education method. In this study, the low interaction between the instructor and the learner and the low interaction between the learners in the online education method were among the disadvantages of the method.

In Abdipour's study of the disadvantages of online education, the reduction of interactions between the instructor and the learner, and the inefficiency of the method, especially in skill courses, were raised. (Abdipour & Jamshidmehr, 2021).

The findings also showed that the willingness of learners to re-participate in this method of education was low. A study by Grabinski et al. also showed that online education is not widely used by learners and that learners must be motivated by the educational institution to use this new method (Grabinski et al., 2020).

If this method is required, it is necessary for instructors to use methods to increase interaction between the instructor and the learner and to increase the interactions of learners with each other. Organizing face-to-face meetings to get to know people or

meetings to fix problems and solve exercises, forming groups in virtual networks for greater interaction, asking questions and posting answers to the instructor's questions are methods that can increase interactions between individuals, increase a sense of competition, strengthen questioning, improve learners' self-confidence and increase their willingness to participate in this method of education.

From the learners' perspective, educational inequality was raised as a problem in implementing the program. In a study by Kapasia et al., educational inequality was also raised as a problem in this method of education. (Kapasia et al., 2020).

In addition, learners have had relatively low satisfaction with online education and have raised the instability of the internet as a weakness of online education. Qazi et al.'s study also showed that Bruneians, who have better access to the internet than Pakistanis, were more satisfied with online education (Qazi et al., 2020).

Providing the necessities for using online education, including high-speed internet and providing necessary equipment such as laptops, phones, tablets at reasonable prices and in the form of installment purchase contracts or benefiting from charitable support for low-income learners, can reduce educational inequality in this regard to some extent.

Studies show that to improve online learning, it is necessary to receive accurate feedback (Jahanian, 2022). In this study, 83.6% of participants considered face-to-face learning to be more effective than online learning, and in the study by Mortagy et al., 54.6% of participants believed that face-to-face learning was more effective than online learning (Mortagy et al., 2022).

The present study pointed out the low effectiveness of online learning on improving speaking skills. While speaking skills are one of the basic communication skills in learning English (Harmer, 2003), and in fact, learners convey their ideas, thoughts, and feelings through speaking (Dionar & Adnan, 2018), and the problem of learners is that they are afraid of speaking English in non-native environments (Aulia, 2023). In online learning, the lack of face-to-face interaction, the feeling of being alone, the fear of being recorded, the lack of eye contact, the inability to see the body language of others, and the lack of receiving quick feedback cause learners to feel insecure. Therefore, to learn speaking skills in face-to-face learning, it is more effective than the online method to overcome the learner's fear and anxiety, and to improve speaking skills in online learning, it is sometimes necessary to hold face-to-face sessions for learners to overcome their fear of speaking in English. Therefore, to learn speaking skills in face-to-face education, it is more effective than the online method to overcome the fear and anxiety of the learner, and to improve speaking skills in online education, it is sometimes necessary to hold face-to-face sessions for learners to overcome their fear of speaking in English.

One of the main weaknesses raised in this study was the lack of infrastructure in practice. Khazaei Nejad also concluded in his study that it is necessary to provide the necessary infrastructure to improve online education (Khazaei & Zareh, 2022).

Considering the most important problem raised by learners, which is the lack of infrastructure, and considering the benefits of online education such as location flexibility, reduced travel costs for teachers and learners, reduced gasoline consumption, reduced air pollution, reduced traffic, and time savings, it is necessary for policymakers to take action to provide the necessary infrastructure and make this learning method more useful.

6. Conclusion

The challenge for our educational planners is always the lack of a clear picture of the different dimensions of the problem. The findings of this study are an answer to the need of researchers in the field of the Effectiveness of Online English Learning. The present study provides a deep understanding of the learners' perspective, which can be exploited by planners in educational planning. The results indicate that in the current situation, online learning is not a suitable method for improving English language knowledge and skills compared to face-to-face education, and if online English learning is necessary, it is necessary to provide infrastructure.

The study limitations were the unwillingness of some participants to participate in the study, which was resolved by their justification regarding the confidentiality of the information, and in some cases, we were forced to replace the samples. It is suggested that future studies, in order to improve the quality of online English language education, examine the effect of content design and learning paths based on the needs, interests, and individual language level of learners on motivation and academic progress in online platforms.

The cooperation of the school officials who have cooperated to the fullest in selecting the samples and creating a suitable research environment is appreciated.

Conflict of Interest

No organization covered the costs, and the researchers were responsible for the costs. Moreover, the authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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