Challenges and Opportunities of Shifting to Online Education in University EFL Classes During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 revolutionized education all around the world. The urgent shift to online education (emergency remote teaching) has been very demanding for administrators, teachers, students, and anyone involved in education. Although online and blended learning has long been practiced in education, this sudden unplanned shift created a different image, especially in less technologically developed countries. Accordingly, the present case study aimed at understanding the existing challenges and opportunities of this urgent shift to online education through the perspectives of Iranian EFL university students in online General English (GE) classes. A total of 68 university students participated in the study and the data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and students' reflection sheets. Content analysis using Nvivo 11® was conducted for the triangulated textual data. The findings were categorized into four major groups of challenges and opportunities, including technological, psychological/affective, linguistic, and environmental/social. Overall, 16 challenges and 11 opportunities were investigated that are discussed thoroughly in the paper.

Keywords: computer-assisted language learning, COVID-19, EFL students, emergency remote teaching, online education

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Introduction

Following the growth of computer networking and access to computers, in the mid-1970s, a new form of education emerged as *online education* (Harasim, 2000), which is well defined as "a form of distance education where technology mediates the learning process, teaching is delivered completely using the internet, and the students and instructors are not required to be available at the same time and place" (Joksimović et al., 2015, p. 100). Thus far, several other key terms, with slight differences in nature, have been used interchangeably referring to online education including, e-learning, web-based learning, internet-based learning, technology-enhanced learning, distance learning, computer-assisted learning, or computer-mediated learning. Besides, the use of computers for learning has been extended to other areas of study, such as language learning and resulted in an independent area of study named computer-assisted language learning (CALL) which Levy (1997) defines as "the study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning" (p. 1). However, in 2020, with the sudden spread of the Virus, the pre-planned, well-organized teaching, either face-to-face, blended (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), or online courses all changed to a newly created form of online education called emergency remote teaching (ERT, Hodges et al., 2020).

Due to the importance of continuing courses and the impossibility of conducting face-to-face classes, educational institutions had to make spontaneous decisions about switching to entirely online education. The demanding and complicated shift to online education caused difficulties for administrative managers, staff, teachers, parents, and most importantly students, especially in less technologically developed countries (Demuyakor, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020; Yusuf, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). This sudden change happened to all disciplines around the world, including English language teaching (ELT). Even though online and blended learning has long been practiced in ELT with the emergence of CALL, as highlighted by Gacs et al. (2020), this unplanned shift is not comparable to the planned online language teaching. Several studies have been conducted all around the world to investigate ERT in different contexts and disciplines (Bao, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Jeffery & Bauer, 2020; Shim & Lee, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). However, very few studies focused on the area of ELT (Gacs et al., 2020), in particular from the perspective of English as a Foreign language (EFL)

students.

The findings of the previous studies in different disciplines in students' first language (L1) indicate several technological, psychological, and environmental challenges and opportunities (Ferri et al., 2020; Jeffery & Bauer, 2020; Shim & Lee, 2020). Even though the medium of delivery (i.e., technology) have been the center of several recent studies at the time of COVID-19, the medium of instruction (i.e., language) and the possible linguistic challenges and opportunities have not been considered, even in ELT-related studies (Demuyakor, 2020; Karuppannan & Mohammed, 2020; RahmtAllah, 2020; Sayuti et al., 2020). Therefore, regarding both the medium of delivery and the medium of instruction, the present exploratory study aimed at investigating the challenges and opportunities caused by this sudden change from EFL university students' perspectives in Iran. Although previously there had been multiple studies on CALL and MALL (mobile-assisted language learning), the new online ELT education during COVID-19 in Iran has not been studied in terms of the existing challenges and opportunities. Therefore, it is hoped the findings of the present study would help the improvement of the unplanned online education in Iran.

Literature Review

The advent of packet-switched networks, email, and computer conferencing gradually paved the way for computer networking and the formation of the first fully online course in 1981 (Harasim, 2000). According to Garrison (2011), online education is different from traditional distance education that dates back to the mid-1800s (Verduin & Clark, 1991), in terms of both theory and practice. While distance education was based on the "industrial production of prepackaged study materials" (p. 3), online education was derived from theories and approaches of constructivism. As stated by Wilde & Hus (2019), online education is the use of a delivery method through the medium of technology when students and instructors are physically away from each other. Online education gives new roles to students and instructors whereby students become more active and the instructors more passive (Harasim, 2000; Koch, 2014). Joksimović et al. (2015) clearly defined online education as "a form of distance education where technology mediates the learning process, teaching is delivered completely using the internet, and the students and instructors

are not required to be available at the same time and place" (p. 100). As stated by Nakayama et al. (2014), learning management systems (LMS) or web-based platforms are the main mediums for fully online classes. Effective online education, which has been studied for decades, is the result of careful long-term planning and arrangements. However, the online education offered in response to the lockdown situation caused by COVID-19 is entirely different from the actual online education (Hodges et al., 2020). The unplanned hurried shift to online education during the pandemic cannot be compared with online education and it should rather be named as ERT that was followed by specific operational challenges (Hodges et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the challenges of this sudden shift differed in different contexts and for different disciplines. Although everyone in each context faced several challenges, highly technologically developed countries could adapt themselves easier and faster to the new situation than the developing countries (Demuyakor, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020; Yusuf, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). "In developing countries, digital learning remains a challenge because of the limited scope of Internet services and related technologies" (Zheng et al., 2020, p. 4).

In addition, the challenges differed from discipline to discipline. One of those affected disciplines has been English language teaching, in which not only the medium of instruction is a language different from the students' first language (L1), but also the medium of delivery differs. Of course, the pandemic is not the first time that computers are integrated into ELT. The emergence of CALL dates back to the 1960s (Warschauer & Healey, 1998), and Levy (1997) defines this multidisciplinary field of study as "the study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning" (p. 1). Since then there have been myriad studies in this regard reviewed by several scholars (Gillespie, 2020; Hwang & Fu, 2018; Pérez-Paredes, 2019). ELT has witnessed numerous fully online courses, blended courses (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), and flipped classrooms (Bergmann et al., 2011). Nevertheless, similar to all other disciplines, the sudden shift to online education created a different image and caused several difficulties.

According to Bailey and Lee (2020), "For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses, newcomers to online teaching must set realistic online teaching goals, avoid common obstacles in online teaching, and learn which online

assignment types are appropriate" (p. 179). It is believed that the difficulty of transferring language courses to online environments is not the same for all courses. Some courses, such as conversation, pronunciation-based, and writing might have more difficulty in being transferred to online education (Bailey & Lee, 2020; RahmtAllah, 2020; Sayuti et al., 2020). During the pandemic, several researchers studied the challenges and opportunities of the quick shift to online education in different contexts as well as EFL contexts (Demuyakor, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Jeffery & Bauer, 2020; Karuppannan & Mohammed, 2020; RahmtAllah, 2020; Sayuti et al., 2020; Shim & Lee, 2020).

Shim and Lee (2020) investigated students' experience with online education in terms of their satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and desired improvements. The findings indicated that the students were highly satisfied with "comfortable educational environments, smooth interactions, and efficient time utilization" (p. 3); however, the three main areas of their dissatisfaction were related to network problems, lack of enough interactions, and lack of concentration. In the same year, Jeffery and Bauer (2020) also conducted a study to investigate chemistry students' experience with online education during COVID-19, and interestingly, the findings of their study reflected some critical factors that are important not only in online education but also in face-to-face teaching. They emphasized the importance of cognitive and affective issues like hands-on practice tasks, motivation, self-efficacy, the accessibility of teachers, and enough interactions as highly influential factors. They also highlighted that all the challenges of online education are augmented in ERT.

In a study conducted by Ferri et al. (2020), the investigation of the students' challenges with online education revealed technological, pedagogical, and social factors. Lack of access to the required digital devices and poor internet connection were the main technological challenges. Moreover, low digital literacy, lack of motivation, unstructured course content, and lack of teaching methods for online education were the main pedagogical issues. Finally, the social issues were related to poor human interactions between teachers and students, lack of appropriate space at home, and interference with other family members working in the same area. They concluded with an emphasis on the importance of finding solutions to overcome the challenges of ERT and developing new policies that accord with the existing

situation.

Karuppannan and Mohammed (2020) conducted a study to find out the factors affecting English language learners during the shift to online education in Malaysia. Through a conceptual framework, they proposed factors affecting e-learning such as language-related and psychological factors. Lack of motivation was one of the main psychological factors. Among the language-related factors, they hypothesized that language proficiency level, language skills, and teaching methods were among the highly influential factors. Students with lower levels of proficiency had more difficulties adapting themselves to the new situation. Besides, the two language skills of writing and speaking were among the most challenging skills to deal with in online education (RahmtAllah, 2020; Sayuti et al., 2020). And finally, teachers had difficulty in adapting their teaching methods to the new online education. According to Demuyakor (2020) there are a few factors that affect online learning among the English language learners such as, teaching methods, psychological factors, language skills, and proficiency level.

In general, considering the integration of technology in the context of the present study, firstly, the Iranian Ministry of Education with the assistance of the Ministry of ICT gradually integrated technology into the educational system (Ebadi, 2005). A report given by Shafiee (2005) indicated that between 2005 and 2009, integrating e-learning in the educational system of Iran was the responsibility of the Ministry of ICT (cited in Fotouhi-Ghazvini et al., 2008). Therefore, teachers, both at schools and universities, were invited to welcome different technological tools into their classes. Along with this notion, CALL courses started to appear in Iran and several studies were conducted focusing on the use of technology for language learning (Dehghanzadeh et al., 2019; Elekaei et al., 2019; Sharifi et al., 2017). Fathali and Emadi (2021) reviewed 687 Iran-based CALL publications in the three leading databases of Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar from 2007 to 2019. The findings indicated the importance of research on the use of technology for language learning and some gaps that should be overcome in this area, including the lack of theoretical basis for the studies. Overall, at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the obligatory shift to online education, the number of studies increased in this area. However, similar to other contexts that lack studies in ELT (Gacs et al., 2020), a limited number of studies conducted in Iran mainly focus on

teachers and instructors (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Mousavi et al., 2021; Saidi & Afshari, 2021). Therefore, the present study tries to bridge the existing gap by answering the following question,

- What are the challenges and opportunities caused by the sudden shift to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic from Iranian EFL university students' perspectives?

Methodology

The present study is an exploratory qualitative study that tried to investigate the challenges and opportunities of shifting to online education. As stated by Ary et al. (2010), one of the most primary and simple ways of investigating a phenomenon through a qualitative study is a basic qualitative/interpretive approach in which the data is collected through different methods such as interviews, observations, and so forth. The goal of such studies is "to understand the world or experience of another (Ary et al., 2010, p. 29).

Participants

The aim of the present study was to explore the challenges and opportunities of the sudden shift to online education from the perspectives of EFL Iranian students taking part in general English classes at a national university. Two GE classes, including 79 students (N_1=38, N_2=41) that had gone through the sudden shift to online education were chosen for the present study. The participants were from different disciplines including, civil engineering, financial management, literature, art, history, biotechnology, etc. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 24 ($M = 19.37$, $SD = .86$) and they were all female. Four students dropped the course in the middle of the semester, and seven students did not deliver the requested reflection sheets throughout the course. Finally, 68 participants remained as the main participants of the study. All the participants signed an informed consent form that explained the aim and procedure of the study.

Research Context

The study was conducted at a national university in Iran. The General English classes are three-credit courses that are held twice a week (a 90-minute

session and a 60-minute session). The whole course consists of 16 sessions including a session for the final exam. Before the pandemic, the classes were held as traditional face-to-face classes at the university. However, after the spread of COVID-19 and the lockdown of universities, the educational system of the universities changed to online education through learning management systems (LMSs). The LMS used at this university was a web-based platform for delivering course materials, assessing students, interacting with students, delivering asynchronous mode of teaching, and conducting online synchronous sessions through Adobe Connect (Figure 1). It should be noted that all the sessions of the present GE courses were held as real-time online synchronous sessions through Adobe Connect (Figure 2). Usually, there are no pre-defined curricula for GE classes, and depending on students' needs and levels of language proficiency, the course lecturer designs a syllabus at the beginning of the course. Considering the context of the present study, the students practiced all the four main language learning skills of reading, listening, writing, and speaking. The students practiced reading and writing using the book *Strategic reading 1,* published by Cambridge University Press; and practiced listening and speaking using audio files prepared by the teacher followed by discussion times.

Figure 1

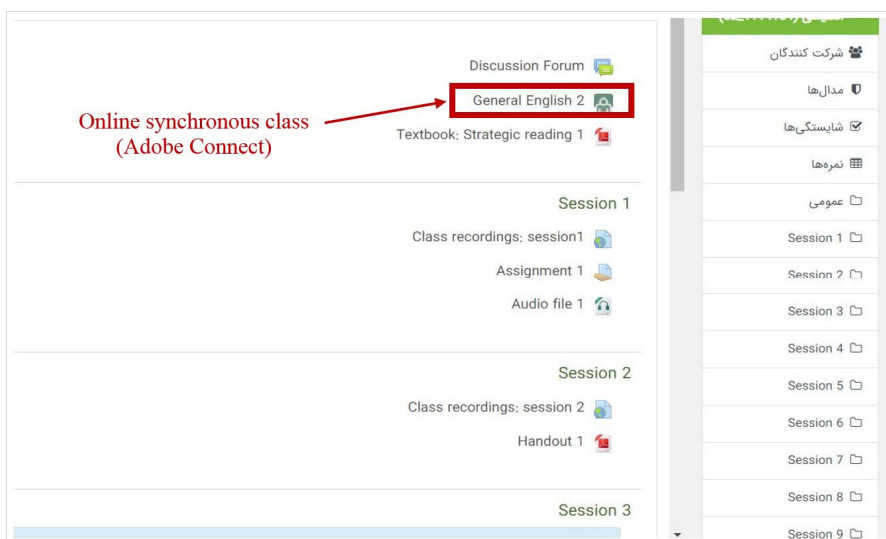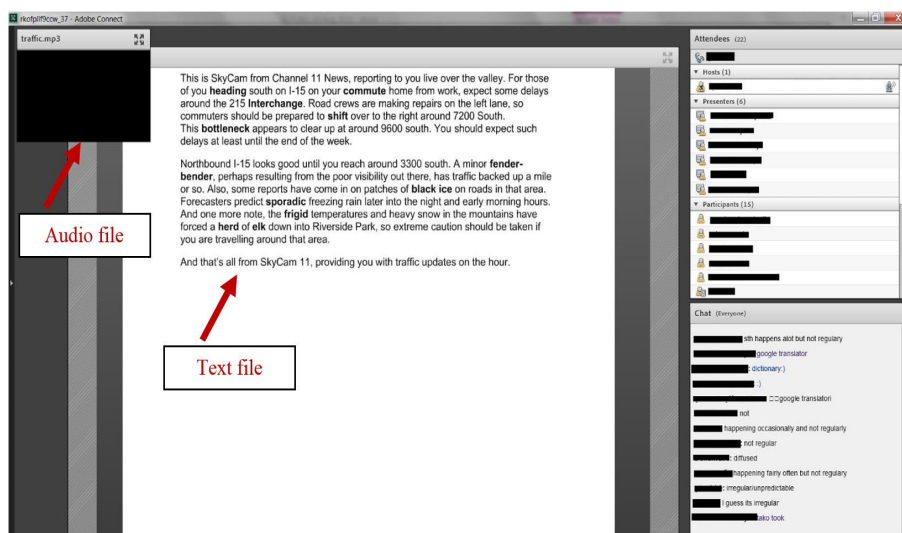*University's learning management system (LMS)*

Figure 2

An online synchronous session in Adobe Connect

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for the present study was collected through three data collection instruments including reflection sheets, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. The researcher who is also the teacher of the classes asked the students to write a reflection sheet indicating their challenges with online education and more specifically online language learning, the existing barriers, the opportunities caused by this sudden shift, the pros and cons of online language learning compared to traditional education, and so forth. Almost every four sessions, the students received a link to a blank reflection sheet prepared through Google forms and they were supposed to freely write their reflections in the sheet. The students were asked to write their reflections in English as much as possible. However, some students delivered their reflection sheets partially in Persian due to their low English language proficiency. It should be mentioned that no word limit was considered for the reflection sheets. Every student delivered a total of three reflection sheets at the end of the course. Two rounds of focus group interviews were conducted throughout the course, each time with around 15 students, in which the students shared their reflections about online education. The students were asked to talk about their experience with online language learning and freely express their challenges and in

general their feelings toward online language learning. Finally, 23 students were randomly selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews with the focus on the students' challenges and opportunities with online education including all the four categories of technological, psychological/affective, linguistic, and environmental/social. The interview guide is presented in Appendix 1. The interviews were held online and each lasted around 20 to 30 minutes. The focus group discussions and interviews were recorded and transcribed for the content analysis. It should be noted that, upon the request of a few very low proficient language learners, the interviews were conducted in Persian (students' L1) and were translated into English for the content analysis.

A rich amount of data was collected through the three instruments of the study and they were analyzed via qualitative content analysis. According to Downe-Wamboldt (1992), content analysis is a good way to "provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study" (p. 314). A qualitative content analysis software, Nvivo 11®, was utilized for the analysis of the textual data. The analysis was conducted through several steps. Initially, the collected reflection sheets and transcribed data of the focus groups and interviews were imported into the Nvivo 11®. Then, the data were organized, read several times, and coded carefully. Coding is a process of labeling pieces of textual data in order to identify what each piece is about (Charmaz, 2006). Child nodes (sub-nodes) and nodes were assigned to do the coding of the data in Nvivo 11®. Groups of codes (nodes) that were repetitively found in the data helped the formation of themes and categories. Categories include a group of codes while themes include a group of similar categories. A deductive approach to categorization was implemented in this study (Given, 2008). Based on the previous literature and the researchers' experience, the data was coded and categorized against the four categories of technological, psychological, linguistic, and environmental. The trustworthiness of the findings was addressed by inter-coder agreement. A colleague with extended experience in ELT and qualitative data analysis was requested to do the coding of two reflection sheets and two interview transcripts independently using the developed coding categories, and the comparison of the two sets of coding revealed a 91.3 level of agreement (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results and Discussion

The present study aimed at investigating the challenges and opportunities of the sudden obligatory shift to online education from the perspectives of Iranian EFL learners studying English in GE classes. Four main categories of technological, psychological/affective, linguistic, and environmental/social were elicited from the three bodies of data. Due to the space limitation, for each section one interview extract is provided, and some samples of reflection sheets are provided in Appendix 2.

Challenges of Shifting to Online Education in GE Classes

Technological Challenges. The primary category with the largest amount of data was related to the technological challenges associated with the Internet connection, digital literacy, and digital devices. As presented in Table 1, almost all the students experienced challenges with the Internet connection and its instability. They all complained about the low connection speed and the difficulty of entering the online classes as well as multiple disconnections during the class. The findings of several studies at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed quite similar technological challenges, especially in technologically developing countries (Chiner et al., 2021; Demuyakor, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020; Yusuf, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). Lack of appropriate infrastructures added to the difficulty of shifting to online education in developing countries more than the developed countries.

> *Because of low [sic] internet connection, sometimes it take [sic]*
> *me 15 minutes to enter the class and I disconnected [sic] during*
> *the class several times*

Moreover, the students mainly referred to their lack of digital skills and low digital literacy within their reflections (Table 1). Although the students use technology in their everyday life frequently (Fathali et al., 2022), and they are considered digital natives, who have spent "their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age" (Prensky, 2001, p. 1), they are still not ready for online education and the use of technology for learning. The students looked for specific training and how-to-instructions for proper online education.

Similar to previous studies (Chiner et al., 2021; Ferri et al., 2020; Shim & Lee, 2020), it was difficult for the students to adapt themselves to online education in terms of the online environment, materials, assignments, assessment, etc.

> *I think it is very difficult to learn LMS and download and upload*
> *files. I see video [sic] on You Tube to use Adobe Connect*

The last technological challenge with online education was associated with some students' difficulty in accessing appropriate digital devices. Along with the study conducted by Ferri et al., (2020), several students in their reflection sheets and the interviews repeatedly mentioned that they had no appropriate digital devices for the online classes (Table 1). One of the major requirements for the online class was a working microphone which had become the students' main obstacle. Students had either old desktop computers or laptops that could not transfer the voice. In addition, the students using mobile phones for the online classes suffered from the small interfaces and the difficulty of clearly seeing the shared screen. It is found that several eye problems could be caused by computer screens, and there is a big difference between reading from a computer screen and a hardcopy (Chu et al., 2011; Thomson, 1998), thus, it is obvious that small screens of mobile phones could make learning much more demanding.

> *We don't have computer in the house [sic] and I use my mobile*
> *phone to come to online class. It is very very difficult to see the*
> *teachers [sic] screen. I cannot read the text.*

Psychological/Affective Challenges. The second category dealt with the psychological challenges. Following the technological challenges, psychological issues have been the center of so many other studies during the pandemic (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Chiner et al., 2021; Ferri et al., 2020; Göksu et al., 2021; Karuppannan & Mohammed, 2020; Jeffery & Bauer, 2020; Neuwirth et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). Similar to the findings of several previous studies such as Chiner et al. (2021), one of the major issues that students frequently referred to in their reflection sheets and the interviews was their lack of motivation for online education and the feeling of being isolated (Table 1). The students underlined that being in face-to-face classes and meeting teachers and friends could give them more motivation to continue education. They referred to the importance of meeting up with their friends and having interactions. So many students were freshmen who had

not yet seen their university and they could not even imagine how university classes differed from high school classes.

> *I was happy that high school finished and I wanted to go to university. But this classes are worse than high school and so boring. I want to see my friends at university and go out after classes with my friends.*

As indicated in Table 1, another psychological issue that was mentioned frequently by the students was their fear of being heard online and being recorded. The students pointed out that it was more stressful for them to speak using technology rather than speaking face-to-face. Beaudoin and Hong (2021) also found that students' emotions such as fear are associated with their use of digital and social media. The students also felt anxious about being recorded especially when they had an online presentation. Due to the poor internet connection, the students hardly shared their cameras while speaking or having presentations, and it was only their voice being heard, but they still felt stressed about the recording and their privacy. On the contrary, Neuwirth et al. (2020) found that the students only felt uncomfortable when they turned on their cameras.

> *I don't like speaking with microphone because I think about my friends listen [sic] to me and I am shy*

The third psychological issue, shown in Table 1, was associated with the students' anxiety with assessment. They repeatedly stressed that they were worried that their low digital literacy and internet connection would influence their outcome and final score. They were concerned with being compared and judged with the ones who have higher digital literacy and better digital devices, and are faster in adapting themselves to online education.

> *I always have problems with microphone and I know my teacher think [sic] I don't work hard. I study a lot but my computer is very old and I can't talk in the class*

The last issue in this regard was the students' concern about the current situation which influenced their concentration both in their everyday life and during the classes (Table 1). They were worried about getting sick themselves or their family members. They believed the long-term worry had influenced their concentration and attention span. Also in previous studies (Chiner et al., 2021;

Jeffery & Bauer, 2020), students' lack of concentration during synchronous classes at the time of the pandemic was found as a learning barrier, yet the reasons for the loss of concentration were not deeply investigated.

> *I am all the time thinking about this virus. I think my mind is full with news [sic] about covid [sic] and it is difficult to concentrate on my learning*

Table 1

Categories and themes related to the challenges

Challenges	Thematic classifications	Number of occurrence (N)
Technological challenges	• Poor internet connection and its instability	232
	• Low digital literacy	192
	• Lack of appropriate digital devices	153
Psychological/ affective challenges	• Lack of motivation and feeling isolated due to the lack of interaction with teachers and friends	187
	• Fear of being heard and recorded online	119
	• Anxiety of being judged and measured inappropriately and unfairly	103
	• Being stressed due to the pandemic and lack of concentration	73
	• Low linguistic literacy	
Linguistic challenges	• Not being able to see the teacher talking face-to-face	179
	• Heterogeneous classes with different proficiency levels	136
		112
	• Difficulty of having interactions in L2 rather than L1	97
	• Lack of concentration due to the language of the class	58
Environmental/ social challenges	• Lack of appropriate area at home to participate in online classes, and also surrounding noise that caused reluctance to enable microphone and camera	162
	• Financial issues related to preparing digital devices and the Internet	134
	• Families' negative viewpoint about the excessive use of digital devices	74
	• Feeling uncomfortable to be heard by the family members	32

Linguistic challenges

Throughout the reflections, some themes were extracted that were associated with the English language. As reported in Table 1, the students frequently referred to the difference they felt between their online classes in L1 and L2. They highlighted their low linguistic literacy as one of their major challenges in EFL online classes.

My English is bad. I don't understand the lesson on computer

[sic]. It is difficult more [sic] than Farsi classes.

Furthermore, as shown in Table 1, limited facial expressions and body language, which are key teaching aids (Bao, 2020), also increased the students' difficultly in EFL classes.

I like to see teacher in class so I can see her face she talk [sic]

The students referred to the heterogeneity of the classes in terms of English language proficiency as another linguistic challenge in online classes (Table 1). General English classes at university are not homogenized regarding the students' English language proficiency, and the classes are usually a combination of elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels. Gillett-Swan (2017) is of the opinion that the "one size fits all approach" that is applied to traditional face-to-face classes cannot be similarly applied to online classes and its misapplication can kill engagement and participation of the students in the online classrooms.

Some friend [sic] have good English and teacher think [sic] we

have good English too and teacher teach [sic] very fast in class

Moreover, as reported in Table 1, another students' challenge in online EFL classes was related to interactions in L2. Besides the challenges with the online environment and lack of interaction with teachers and other students that exist in L1 classes, the students frequently highlighted more restrictions in L2 classes regarding interactions.

I forget English when I am stress [sic] because of internet [sic]

and teacher hearing [sic] my voice. Farsi is good to speak with

microphone.

Finally, compared to the online classes conducted in L1, the students pointed out the difficulty of concentration in English classes. English, the central medium of instruction of the GE classes, in addition to the obsessions with the

online environment such as internet connection, voice over the microphone, etc. cause the absence of intense concentration of the students.

> *In Farsi class I listen, but in English class I don't understand*
> *English, I think about other things when teacher speak [sic]*

Environmental/social challenges

As displayed in Table 1, similar to the previous studies at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic that investigated environmental/social issues related to online education (Demuyakor, 2020; Ferri, 2020; Neuwirth et al., 2020), the findings of the present study indicated environmental/social challenges as below,

- Lack of appropriate areas at home to participate in online classes. Students mainly complained about surrounding noise that caused reluctance for enabling microphones and cameras.

My family is always at home and it is difficult for me to find a
quiet room for my classes and I can't use microphone

- Financial issues related to preparing digital devices and paying the Internet fees. Several students could not afford to buy appropriate digital devices, even a few had trouble buying a smartphone.

My English is good and I like the class, but I can't afford the cost
of the Internet, therefore, I have to skip some of the classes

- Families' negative viewpoint about the excessive use of digital devices. As a kind of sociocultural issue, several students mentioned that their families do not feel comfortable with their children being engaged with digital devices for long hours as they think it might not be for the sake of studying only.

My mother is all the time checking me and making sure if I am
really studying while I am at the computer. She is afraid I waste
time surfing on the net [sic]

- Students' felt uncomfortable being heard by the family members while they had to speak through their microphones in the online classes.

In the home [sic] my brother laugh to [sic] me when I speak
English in online class

Opportunities of Shifting to Online Education in GE Classes

The most interesting finding was that the primary reflection sheets and the first interview session were just filled with challenges, worries, and anxieties that left no room for talking about opportunities. However, towards the end of the course, the students started experiencing some opportunities that are also categorized into technological, psychological/affective, linguistic, and environmental/social challenges.

Table 2

Categories and themes related to the opportunities

Opportunities	Thematic classifications	Number of occurrence (N)
Technological opportunities	• Digital literacy improvement	66
	• Getting digitally equipped	28
Psychological/ affective opportunities	• Willingness and confidence to participate in other online courses available on the Internet	62
	• Feeling more competent to use digital devices	57
	• Having access to the recorded classes and being able to repeat learning on their own speed	58
	• Being able to have more listening and speaking practice	55
Linguistic opportunities	• Access to additional materials online throughout the class including dictionaries.	53
	• Taking part in other online English courses and using available online materials	31
Environmental/ social opportunities	• Saving time	56
	• Not being forced to be present in a specific place at a specific time.	43

Technological Opportunities. Towards the end of the course, the students referred to their progress in digital literacy and how they had become more accustomed to the use of digital technology for learning. A few students also highlighted the opportunity of getting digitally equipped due to online education.

> *Online class help [sic] me to learn computer [sic], I didn't know*
> *LMS before*

Psychological/Affective Opportunities. The two major psychological/ affective opportunities were identified as the increase in the students' self-confidence and willingness, firstly, to participate in other online courses available on the Internet, and secondly, to use digital devices for learning.

> *I like online class now and I search in Google for free online*
> *classes*

Linguistic Opportunities. One of the major linguistic opportunities pointed out by the students in online classes was their access to the recorded classes and the possibility of watching the class several times. Since some low-proficient students lagged behind in the English classes, they found it helpful to be able to repeat the class at their own speed.

> *English is difficult and it is good to see video of class again, I*
> *learn more*

Another remarkable finding associated with linguistic opportunities was related to the students' use of online dictionaries/ translators during the class. They stressed that during the face-to-face classes they could hardly access dictionaries/translators. However, the EFL online classes provided the opportunity of using dictionaries/translators to better understand the course materials and instructions, as well as facilitate their correct interaction.

> *I use Google translate when I say something in class. I first write*
> *in Google translate and after [sic] say it.*

Finally, a few students referred to the larger amount of input including audio/video files to listen/watch that they received through online classes than traditional face-to-face classes.

> *I like listening to files in adobe connect. My listening very*
> *improved [sic].*

Environmental Opportunities. *In line with previous studies (Shim & Lee, 2020), some students referred to saving time and flexibility of place as the two environmental/social opportunities of online classes.*

> *This is good that I don't waste time going and coming from*
> *university*

Conclusions and Implications

At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the entire changes in everyone's life, several fundamental changes happened in the educational systems affecting administrators, teachers, students, parents, and everyone involved in education. Therefore, the present study was conducted to explore the challenges and opportunities of this unexpected shift from the perspectives of EFL students. The findings resulted into four main categories of challenges and opportunities including, technological, psychological/affective, linguistic, and environmental /social. Even though towards the end of the course some opportunities were highlighted by the students, taken together, the findings suggest a much larger number of challenges than opportunities. The results confirmed previous studies that investigated several technological, psychological, and environmental challenges (Demuyakor, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Jeffery & Bauer, 2020; Karuppannan & Mohammed, 2020; RahmtAllah, 2020; Sayuti et al., 2020; Shim & Lee, 2020). However, the present study also provides insights into the ELT area where the medium of instruction is a language different from the students' L1, and online education brings different challenges and opportunities.

The findings of the present study have considerable implications during and after the pandemic. The challenges investigated as technological, psychological /affective, and environmental/social challenges must seriously be taken into consideration by policymakers, educational institutions, and even families, and they must quickly find and offer solutions to overcome these challenges. Iranian EFL teachers and students need further assistance to deal with these challenges to be able to transform them into opportunities. For instance, in line with some previous research, especially in developing countries (Chiner et al., 2021; Demuyakor, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020; Yusuf, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020), issues related to the Internet connection demand quick governmental actions. Additionally, educational institutions should provide systematic training to improve the students' digital literacy and enhance their use of LMSs and online teaching platforms.

Moreover, it is of significant importance to enhance students' psychological state of mind during the lockdown and facilitate their motivation. Teachers might need to reconsider materials and teaching methods they used in face-to-face traditional classes and make them more interactive and engaging in online

classes. Another considerable issue is related to the assessment. Different systems of measurement and assessment should be developed for online education in order to ensure the students of fair and logical assessment. Teachers must be aware of the students' anxiety with unfair assessments and online exams which is not only measuring their content knowledge but also involves some other factors such as digital literacy and facility.

It is also necessary to control the students' anxiety with environmental issues such as surrounding noise. It can be explained to the students that these noises are common in everybody's house and there is no need to be embarrassed by family members' voices being heard in online classes. Furthermore, simple indoor environmental issues could be solved by family members valuing online education more and preparing appropriate spaces at home for their children's education.

In particular, the present study concentrated on general English classes in Iran with English as the medium of instruction. Therefore, in addition to the common technological, psychological/affective, and environmental/social challenges that the students experienced in all online classes, they also faced several linguistic challenges. Low linguistic literacy, lack of essential teaching tools such as body language and facial expressions, multi-level classes in terms of language proficiency, lack of concentration, and adequate interactions due to the language of the class were the linguistic challenges of the students that should be thought of seriously. Second/foreign language classes should be treated differently from other online classes held in L1. General English classes are similarly held at universities all around the world with diverse curricula and teaching methodologies. However, according to my exposure to and experience of GE classes in some EFL contexts such as Iran, Japan, and Malaysia, most of the GE classes share the common condition of being multi-level. In terms of online education, a multi-level class is not only a matter of language proficiency, but other factors, such as psychological, situational, individual, and digital literacy also become crucial. These factors correlate fairly well with experiencing different challenges and opportunities. As indicated by the findings of this study, the Iranian EFL students have been able to feel the challenges of being in a multi-level class in terms of digital literacy, digital facilities, language proficiency, and individual differences. The existing differences added to the students' anxieties with online education and caused several problems.

Therefore, it is of significant importance to consider the existing inequalities, especially in EFL contexts, and to find solutions to help overcome them in different contexts.

It should be highlighted that the present study has two major limitations. Even though the findings of this study might portray the existing challenges and opportunities of the sudden shift to online education, the participant of this study were EFL students of a national university in Iran, accordingly, the generalizability of the findings should be taken into consideration carefully across other countries. In addition, this was a female-only university and further research might reach other challenges and opportunities with male participants.

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Appendix 1

The interviews started with a general question of "What kind of challenges did you have with the online classes?", then depending on the participants' replies, they were guided with some questions such as

- Did you face any connection problems? Please explain
- Do you think your computer knowledge was important in online classes?
- Did you have any anxieties with the online classes? Any specific feeling toward the online classes? Any fears, stress, dislike …
- How different you think your challenges (difficulties) in English classes were from your other classes in Persian?
- Did you have any challenges with online classes in terms of time and place?

And then about the opportunities, "What do you think were the good points of online education?" followed by questions such as

- Do you think online classes had any positive effects on your computer knowledge?
- Do you have any positive feelings towards online classes?
- Did you find any positive points in your online English classes that you did not find in your online classes in Persian?
- Did you find any positive points about online classes in terms of the time and place of the classes?

Appendix 2

Samples of students' reflection sheets extracted from Excel files

I had bad connection. I want see the record again. LMS is very difficult. I don't like online class. I didn't have microphone and is very expensive. But teacher all time ask me speak in class. I don't have money for buy microphone. I pay a lot of money for internet. I don't speak in all classes and techer think I am absent. all freinds speak and say they were present. I don't like online class and I want go to university and go to class.

My weak internet connection cause many difficulties for me. I can't hear professor well, her voice gets off many times. My laptop doesn't have microphones and I have to all the time use chat box to type my answer and show I am present in class. I am tired with caht box. I think I don't like studying anymore. Many times I think about giving up and starting university again after covid-19. I want to see the university and friends. I want to see teachers and classes. I want to sit in the class. This is funny that I am university studetn but I have't seen my university yet.

My English is good, I have IELTS certificate, and I don't know why I should sit at online classes that get interrupted several times due to the poor internet connection. Yesterday I noticed that the classes are recorded but I don't like to be recorded while I speak in the class. The only good point of online classes is that my mom bought me a brand-new laptop. I totally don't like online classes, but I think at least I learn something in my Chemistry classes, but the English class has no outcomes for me. I think I am wasting my Internet.