

The Effect of Covid-19 Pandemic on Online Education of the EFL Learners

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Abstract

With the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid growth of online education, Iranian universities of English language began to hold online classes for students. Accordingly, the present study aimed to examine the effect of Covid-19 pandemic on online education of the EFL learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The global COVID-19 epidemic has changed and challenged many aspects of our lives, including our interactions, relationships, learning and teaching styles. It encouraged scientists around the world to help the education system to reorganize policies to find solutions for problems. It has also taught us how to adapt to unexpected circumstances in order to survive. To this end, students are learning in new ways during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Schools, universities and other colleges are facing unexpected challenges as a result of the pandemic. In response to this global crisis, educational institutions are turning to online education and digital tools. Educational simulation systems and online education support systems are useful in teaching English courses to EFL students and promoting interactions between teachers and students. In this study, the researchers found the importance of online English teaching during the COVID-19

pandemic in Iran as well as the English Learners' views and attitudes on internet-based English learning and teaching programs.

Key Terms: Covid19 pandemic, English Learning Motivation, Online Learning

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1. Introduction

Motivation is widely recognized by both practitioners and researchers as an important factor in successful language acquisition, among the variables that can influence FL learning outcomes. Motivation is learning a foreign or second language that is one of the most important characteristics for students to become more active and engaged in language learning. In addition, they found that a certain group of her EFL/ESL students who lack sufficient motivation and good attitudes may not fully participate in the learning process, preventing them from fully developing their language skills¹.

More broadly Adnan stated that "When asked about factors that influence an individual's degree of success in an activity such as language acquisition, most people undoubtedly, I will identify"². It is found that motivation, as an affective factor, can make learners more active and engaged in relevant learning tasks, put in more effort to achieve better results, and be more persistent. I thought it was a good reason to have sex and focus on my goals. Do language-related activities, demonstrate attitudes to achieve goals, and finally enjoy the activities. More specifically, the emergence and prevalence of online learning has changed the speed and quality of second or foreign language acquisition, especially among school students ³. In short, the COVID19 outbreak has given universities the option of completing coursework, resulting in an abrupt and rapid transition³.

As a result, the abrupt move has increased anxiety among EFL students who are very concerned about technology, internet access, and the appropriate equipment. Due to inadequate technological infrastructure, limited technical skills, and low levels of digital literacy in most educational settings, including technical assistance, teachers also encountered comparable issues⁴. Accordingly, it may be expected that exposure to the new teaching and learning environment may result in a variety of demotivating variables for EFL teachers and students that greatly eclipse the effectiveness of the language learning process. Despite the potential challenges and problems resulted from the pandemic on the language learning and teaching process, there was some research evidence which have been reported a positive role for the virtual-based education imposed by pandemic on the learners' motivation and attitudes in the EFL context⁵.

Taking the apparently drastic shifts as a major result of pandemic to the educational policies and procedures into account, as well as the controversies and mixed results into account, it is highly essential to explore to what extent Covid-19 pandemic can influence different aspects of education

in general, and foreign language learning in particular. The current study was therefore conducted to continue this line of investigation by examining the challenges and opportunities that the pandemic has posed for the Iranian ELT community from different perspectives. For teachers and other stakeholders, online teaching practices have presented many possibilities and challenges⁶. To provide research-based evidence, either positive or negative, due to the novelty of these disorders and the lack of sufficient knowledge and familiarity with the various aspects of the challenges or opportunities that may arise from this particular condition, some research needs to be done. The impact of the pandemic on the education system.

Convenience, effectiveness, challenge, and the potential for pleasure and reward are some of the advantages of online instruction that are regularly emphasized. It also gives you the opportunity to handle Online teachers can teach from anywhere as long as they have an internet connection. There are no absences due to illness, academic conferences, holidays, natural disasters, etc. The online environment is not only convenient, it also provides stimulation and new challenges for students and teachers. Instead of using static images and words in face-to-face lessons, teachers can use interactive learning tools to communicate difficult ideas. This makes it more engaging and stimulating for students. However, learning course management systems and staying up to date with new technology are challenges that all online teachers must overcome. Technical support and guidance from your university or CLS department makes the process easier and more enjoyable. The textual structure of all exchanges allows online learning to engage in a higher level of reflection and understanding of course material than face-to-face learning. be connected

The results of current and similar studies can therefore play an important role in identifying and recognizing the overall impact of his Covid-19 pandemic on his EFL learners in Iran. The results will also guide future paths and steps to address subsequent similar crises that may affect education systems.

2. Review of literature

Motivation is an emotional construct widely used in psychology and pedagogy. Motivation is generally seen as an important factor that is effective in initiating or carrying out an action and is a commonly used concept in various situations. Because of the large number of terms and theories associated with motivation, establishing a comprehensive definition and conceptualization of this multidimensional structure with any degree of consensus appears to be a difficult task⁷. The current middle school curriculum focuses on teaching vocabulary, pronunciation, and letter recognition (although the latter is limited) to acquire basic English proficiency. Grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension are prioritized in high school. At this level, write priority is very low. Speaking and listening are also largely neglected. The main purpose of some syllabus tasks is grammar practice. Furthermore, the use of basic conversations in the accredited curriculum is limited as it is primarily concerned with the introduction of new language elements. As a result, their communication skills are underdeveloped. Only students who have the opportunity to take

private her lessons can practice communicating in English ⁸.

Many private schools have opened in recent years, teaching General English, Business English and English for Special Purposes (ESP). We offer preparation courses for foreign language exams such as TOEFL and IELTS. However, many schools are closed because of negative attitudes towards English⁹. The current middle school curriculum focuses on teaching vocabulary, pronunciation, and letter recognition (although the latter is limited) to acquire basic English proficiency. Grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension are prioritized in high school. However, at this level writing is not given much importance. Speaking and listening are also largely neglected. The main purpose of some syllabus tasks is grammar practice.

Even simple dialogue, which is part of the approved curriculum, is limited because it focuses primarily on the introduction of language functions. As a result, communication skills are underdeveloped. Private He only students who have the opportunity to take lessons can practice communicating in English (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016, p.4). In recent years, many private schools have been established offering General English, Business English and English for Special Purposes (ESP). We offer preparation courses for international exams such as IELTS and TOEFL¹⁰.

Despite these restrictions, English is offered as a major in most Iranian universities (Ministry of Education, Iran, 27 February 2017 www.sanjesh.org/). At the Bachelor's level, students can choose from 'English and Literature', 'English Teaching' or 'English Translation'. Various master's or doctoral degree programs are also offered in various English majors. The competition for doctoral programs is particularly fierce. Iran recognizes the increasing importance of English-language publications in academia. However, some scholars write in Persian and have to translate their work. Others require the services of a proofreader. Despite these problems, the number of conferences in English is increasing nationally and internationally ¹¹.

3. Methods

The present study is carried out primarily and specifically to investigate the effect of Covid-19 pandemic on the EFL learners in Iran. It intends to identify the potential challenges and opportunities which the pandemic might bring for different aspects of the foreign language teaching and learning process in Iran. For the purpose of the current study, a mixed-method design was utilized. In fact, the quantitative phase of the research was followed by an interview as the qualitative part of the study. In the quantitative phase, a motivation toward learning English questionnaire was given to the group of EFL learners to complete. Further, in the subsequent qualitative phase, an interview was conducted with a group of EFL learners, teachers, and managers of the language institutes to delve into their views on the effectiveness of Covid-19 pandemic on the ELT community. A mixed methods research design is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and “mixing” both quantitative and qualitative research and methods in a single study to understand a research problem ¹². To utilize this design effectively, you must understand both quantitative and qualitative research. Thus, this study enjoyed a mixed methods design to provide

comprehensive answers to the posed research questions. In this study, the virtual teaching was the independent variable and the receptive vocabulary knowledge was the dependent variable.

The data required for the present study was gathered from three groups of stakeholders and agents played a role in the ELT community and the foreign language process in Iran. The first group of participants was 80 EFL learners selected based on convenience sampling procedure from two English colleges. This sample was selected from three different groups of EFL learners based on their proficiency level, lower-intermediate, intermediate and advanced. The age range of the EFL learners was between 18-22 ($M=25$, $SD= 0.744$). All the selected EFL learners were Iranian and they spoke Farsi as the first language and learned English as the foreign language.

The second group was 20 EFL teachers working in the universities. The teaching experience of the EFL teachers was from 5 to 18 years. All the selected EFL teachers had got their post-graduate degree (MA. Degree) in English teaching. The age range of the teachers was from 27-35 ($M= 39$, $SD= 0.799$). The third group of the participants was 4 managers of the English university department. The selected managers were graduated in TEFL. All the four managers had more than 18 years of working experience in management of the language institute. The age range of them was between 35-48 ($M= 47$, $SD= 0.545$). Two instruments were utilized in this study to collect the required data. English Learning Motivation Questionnaire (ELMQ) was administered to quantitatively identify the EFL learners' motivation toward English learning. Further, an interview with open-ended questions was conducted to determine the EFL learners, teachers, and managers' motivation qualitatively. The brief description of the two instruments is presented below.

In order to collect the required data for the quantitative phase of this study and identify the EFL learners' motivation toward English learning, English Learning Motivation Questionnaire (ELMQ) was utilized. It was a 5-point Likert Scale adapted from Likert Scale format 6 original points from Gardner's Attitude / Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree'.¹³ The English version of the AMTB questionnaire was used because AMTB provides good validity and reliability of the questionnaire. It can also measure non-linguistic aspects in learning the target language¹³. AMTB consists of 104 questions that are classified in several parts. In this questionnaire (ELMQ) among the 104 items of AMTB, all motivational surveys of 20 items were questioned.

The questionnaire consists of two main parts: instrumental motivation (items 1-10) and integrative motivation. Indicator of instrumental motivation: assignment, knowledge, good job, education, achievements, people view. Indicator of integrative motivation: understanding, communicating, join a group, skill. As describe on the next table:

Table 3.1. The Indicators of Questions

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Items Number

Motivation	Instrumental	Assignment	1
		Knowledge	2, 3, 7
		Good Job	4
		Education	5, 8
		Travelling abroad	6
		Achievements	9
		People View	10
	Integrative	Understanding	11, 12
		Communicating	13, 14
		Join a Group	15, 16, 18, 19
		Skill	17, 20

Gardner has distinguished the motivation into two kinds in learning English language. They are integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. In the present study the reliability of the questionnaire and its subscales was calculated using Cronbach alpha method and it was found to be 0.91 for the total motivation. Further, the reliability of the subscales was found to be 0.89 for instrumental and .092 for integrative motivation.

In order to collect data for the qualitative phase of the study, a structured interview was conducted to delve into the students, teachers, and managers self-report perceptions of the effect that Covid-19 might exert on the ELT community of Iran. It was designed by the researchers in the form of the structured interview with 20 open-ended questions. To ensure the validity of this interview, the items was sent to a TEFL professors and he was asked to ascertain whether the selected open-ended questions were appropriate based on the purpose of the study. For the reliability of the qualitative data, two experts in the field were asked to perform coding and classifying of the responses obtained from the interview. After the performance of a pilot study, inter-coder reliability between the evaluators was checked for consistency between the data. The correlation of 0.99 indicated a satisfactory level of consistency between the two judgments. In the sampling phase of this study, two private language institutes were selected from a previously organized list of the language institutes. Then, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the closure of the educational

settings contacting the officials and manager of the selected universities, the researchers received the required permissions and the contact information (email address) of the number of EFL learners and teachers studying and teaching in these universities.

Having received that permission and contact information, the researchers sent an email to the number of EFL learners and teachers explaining the purpose of study try to encourage and convince them to participate in the study. After ensuring the participation of the intended numbers of the EFL learners and teachers, the open-ended questions of interview which were related to the learner and teachers' perceptions were sent to them and they were asked to provide a full answer to the questions based on their personal perceptions and opinions. Further, the managers and officials of the two institutes were also given the related open-ended questions of the interview to answer. The EFL learners were also received a questionnaire to delve into their motivation toward English learning. The obtained data from the interview open-ended questions and questionnaire were analyzed using the appropriate statistical analyses.

3.5 Data Analysis

In order to analyze the obtained data from the questionnaire, the descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, and maximum, minimum, skew, etc. was calculated. To analyze the qualitative data obtained from interviews, two general steps were followed, namely, data coding and data analysis. Coding is about developing concepts from the raw data. The researchers coded and analyzed the data inductively. In analysis phase, the prominent themes related to learners' motivation in general and the L2 self-motivating system was identified in particular. The researchers then analyzed the data using the thematic framework. The learners' answers were marked and identified by their pseudonyms.

Discussion and Results

This study was conducted to explore the effect of Covid-19 pandemic on the motivation of EFL learners in Iran. More specifically, it intended to identify the effectiveness of pandemic on the motivation of ELT community, as well as to specify the potential challenges and opportunities which the pandemic might bring for different aspects of the foreign language teaching and learning process in Iran. Furthermore, in this study, there was an attempt to explore the strategies which can be adopted to increase the efficiency of language learning during Covid-19 pandemic. The data required for the present study was gathered from three groups of stakeholders and agents played a role in the EFL learners and the universities in Iran. The first group of participants was 80 EFL learners selected based on convenience sampling procedure from two universities. The second group was 20 EFL teachers working in the universities. The third group of the participants was 4 managers of the English university department. Two instruments were utilized in this study to collect the required data. English Learning Motivation Questionnaire (ELMQ) was administered to quantitatively identify the EFL learners' motivation toward English learning. Further, an interview with open-ended questions was conducted to determine the EFL learners,

teachers, and managers' motivation qualitatively. In order to analyze the obtained data from the questionnaire, the descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, and maximum, minimum, skew, etc. was calculated. To analyze the qualitative data obtained from interviews, two general steps were followed, namely, data coding and data analysis.

The first major finding of the study concerning the effect of pandemic on the motivation of EFL learners revealed that the pandemic was considered and perceived by a large number of participants as dramatically unexpected event which exert negative effect on the motivation of EFL learners consisting of EFL teachers and instructors, EFL learners, and universities managers. It was found that the sudden extension of Covid-19 forces them to appreciate and value the technological advances in the realm of language education, as well as to recognize the necessity and essentialness of integrating technological tools in this respect. In addition, the respondents contended that there is an emergent need to apply some drastic and basic shifts in the old teaching and learning habits and procedures which in turn might increase their responsibilities as the main stakeholders in the language education to accomplish the intended objectives. More specifically, based on the thematic analysis, it was found that the motivation during pandemic can be divided into three major categories. The first one is attitudes toward EFL which was proved to be overshadowed and minimized by some negative consequences of pandemic. Reducing the students' engagement and involvement resulting from the lack of physical presence is one of the identified factors. Another factor determined as the obstacle to incline the learners toward EFL during pandemic was the learners and teachers' financial problems to get mobile phones which in some cases might lead to drop-out or give-up. Looking from another point of view, it was found that the Covid-19 pandemic gave an insight to the teachers, students, and other effective agents in the realm of language education which raising digital literacy, taking advantages of social media, shifting the learning habits, taking advantage of additional materials, changing conventional viewpoints and methods and appropriate equipping of the educational settings are potential line of actions encouraged and motivated by pandemic.

The second important result of this study is that most students learn English with the aim of obtaining a university degree, becoming respectable, skilled and competent people, reading foreign newspapers, books, magazines, etc. as a means to an end. In addition, it was indicated that the majority of respondents considered learning English to be one of the prerequisites and qualifications for getting a job and being successful in their professional lives. In other words, most participants believed in the benefits of learning English.

The last finding concerning the challenges and problems of Covid-19 pandemic on the EFL learners indicated that three groups of challenges were identified. The first group was a technology-related deficiency which encompasses such problems as the connectivity issues, lack of computer knowledge, lack of electronic equipment, and lack of affordance. The second group of problems were efficiency-based problems which includes ineffective time management; lack of self-discipline; low motivation; time consuming; boredom; environmental disturbances and inadequate

feedback. Finally, the next groups of challenges were communication-based deficiencies which encompass such subthemes as lack of instant communication; no face-to-face interaction; sense of isolation, and lack of cooperative learning.

In a traditional classroom, professors can provide students immediate feedback in-person. Students who have inquiries about the course material can receive a prompt response either during the lecture or during the scheduled office hours. Personalized feedback benefits students because it facilitates easier, more significant, and deeper learning processes while also boosting motivation. Many students and teachers who unavoidably spend a lot of time online may start to show signs of social isolation due to the lack of human interaction in their life.

Lack of communication and social isolation frequently cause a number of mental health problems such increased stress, anxiety, and negative thoughts ¹⁴. One of the main causes of students failing to finish online courses is still a lack of self-motivation on their own. The difficulties of explaining the material virtually, the limitations of students' internet access, students' economic backgrounds, and the patented support system are some of the issues with virtual learning in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Other issues include teachers' lack of access to technology, specific school facilities, and the difficulties of explaining the material virtually. Therefore, it may be expected that the government is more concerned with technical problems experienced by the students during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The absence of face-to-face interaction between classmates, students, and teachers in an online environment may prevent some students from functioning well in a team environment. Lack of attention to students' communication abilities will certainly produce a large number of graduates who excel in theoretical knowledge but are unable to impart that information to others. The rates of computer literacy are still far from ideal despite the explosive rise in technology capabilities¹⁵.

Without these social differences, online education would not reach all citizens. It is therefore important to consider online learning as a complement to traditional education rather than a replacement. Although the number of people using the Internet has increased dramatically in recent years, it can be difficult to establish reliable connections at reasonable speeds in small towns and cities ¹⁶.

To answer the question how the motivations and attitudes of EFL learners in Iran were affected during the Covid-19 pandemic in this study, participants' responses to the relevant open questions of the interviews were qualitatively analyzed using topic-based analysis. Two general steps were performed: data coding and data analysis. Coding is developing concepts from raw data. The researchers inductively coded and analyzed the data. During the analysis phase, prominent themes related to learner motivation in general and self-motivation in particular to the L2 system were identified. Researchers then analyzed the data based on a thematic framework. Learner responses were tagged and identified with a pseudonym. Responses to interview questions from three groups

of people involved in EFL teaching and learning are analyzed in terms of content and thematic methods. Respondents (interview partners) were students, teachers, and managers.

Answers to the question show that the majority of EFL learners and teachers, as well as language school leaders, perceive the pandemic as a motivating, preventive and unexpected event in terms of the language learning process. They also argued that the Covid19 outbreak was a driving force not only to recognize the role of technology in the education sector, but also to integrate various technology devices to experience effective teaching and learning processes. In addition, respondents indicated that the pandemic emergency and educational institution closures have played a role in teaching and learning practices that overwhelm their responsibilities as teachers, students, or administrators to achieve their language teaching goals. I admit that I am forced to make drastic changes. According to the content analysis and thematic method, the following themes and subthemes were extracted from the participants' responses to the open-ended questions.

Table 1.1

The Themes and Subthemes Concerning the Participants' Perceptions on the Effect of Pandemic on Motivation

Theme	Sub-theme	Example
Attitudes toward EFL	Lack of engagement Lack of physical presence Financial loss Continuity of learning	In my opinion, for many years the situation of foreign language learning in the context of EFL in Iran has been terrible and full of disincentives. The sudden Covid-19 pandemic amplifies and maximizes the impact of these factors by depriving students of their physical presence in the educational environment, resulting in demotivation.
Attitudes toward Technology-based instruction	Providing mobile phone Raising digital literacy Appreciation of social medias Equipping the educational settings	In my opinion, the most important and important impact of the pandemic on the positioning of technology and cyberspace has been to remind and convince the Iranian people and authorities that the use of technology and cyberspace poses challenges and problems. So many possibilities and advantages.

Attitudes toward innovative methods	Shifting the learning habits Taking advantage of additional materials Integrating technology Changing conventional viewpoints and methods Encouraging the new teaching procedures	There is no doubt that not only old ways of thinking about language teaching and learning, but also traditional educational processes and methods need to change in order to accommodate the new situation and attract more learners to my institute. I do my best to provide the necessary equipment and technical equipment so that my institute colleagues can provide an effective and satisfying education.
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As it is illustrated in the above table, the effect of Covid-19 pandemic on the motivation and attitudes of the EFL learners of Iran was found to encompass three major themes including a) Attitudes toward EFL; b) Attitudes toward technology-based instruction; c) Attitudes toward innovative methods. More specifically, based on the interviewees' responses to the open-ended questions, it was found the first theme contains subthemes such as lack of engagement, lack of physical presence, financial loss, and continuity of learning. Furthermore, for the second theme four subthemes were identified which include providing mobile phone, raising digital literacy, appreciation of social medias, and equipping the educational settings. Finally, for the third theme, five subthemes, i.e., shifting the learning habits, taking advantage of additional materials, integrating technology, changing conventional viewpoints and methods, and encouraging the new teaching procedures.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted with an attempt to identify the effectiveness of Covid-19 pandemic on motivation of EFL learners in Iran. More specifically, it intended to specify the potential impact which pandemic might have on the motivation of EFL learners of Iran. In many instances, switching from face-to-face learning to totally online mode was the only way to keep up educational activities, but it resulted in a sharp decline in course satisfaction due to several difficulties¹⁷. Both teachers and students must make several adjustments and attempts in this situation. Students may encounter mental health concerns when taking classes in an online environment, and that the use of basic self-care activities is helpful to sustain students' learning motivation and welfare. This study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the Covid-19 pandemic on the motivation of EFL learners in Iran. More specifically, we need to identify the possible impact of the pandemic on the motivation of her EFL learners in Iran. Switching from face-to-face classes to a fully online mode was often the only way to sustain educational activity. Students may encounter mental health problems while teaching in an online environment, and

that using basic self-care activities can improve student engagement and well-being. In addition, the results of this study found that there are challenges and problems such as connectivity issues, lack of computer skills, lack of electronic equipment and affordability, inefficient time management, and lack of self-discipline. Low motivation, time consuming, boring. Disturbed environments and inappropriate feedback, lack of immediate communication and face-to-face interaction. Isolation and lack of collaborative learning were other demotivating factors stemming from the pandemic situation. In general, during the Covid-19 pandemic, government-ordered school closures to stem the spread of the deadly virus have forced English classrooms around the world to shift entirely to distance or online learning. Rapid changes in learning modes will inevitably require significant adjustments in teaching tools and tactics, requiring a high degree of customization.

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