

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Associated with the Online EFL Course in Iranian High Schools in the Context of COVID-19

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Research Paper

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Abstract: The COVID-19 outbreak in 2019 and the consequent lockdowns have taken language teaching and learning to the next level through a more practical use of technology in education. In this unprecedented situation, both learners and teachers encountered diverse obstacles, yet the pandemic became a catalyst for significant advancements in language education. The utilization of technology emerged as a key tool, offering unique opportunities for growth, while creating a number of challenges related to technological infrastructures, accessibility, and digital literacy. This qualitative study sought to explore the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) associated with the online EFL course in Iranian junior and senior high schools within the context of COVID-19. Detailed interviews were held with 9 junior and senior high school students and 4 English teachers, and through a thematic analysis, the study identified key themes and sub-themes aligned with the SWOT factors of online EFL courses. The findings revealed an overlap in some sub-themes, which were classified into two SWOT categories, such as materials, interaction, and convenience. The findings unveiled a prevalence of weaknesses and threats, overshadowing the strengths and opportunities in the examined context. The study highlights the necessity for improved digital infrastructure and targeted training programs to better equip both teachers and students for future challenges in online education. These findings are critical for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders aiming to enhance the quality and effectiveness of online language learning environments.

Keywords: Course, Online Learning, Opportunities, Strengths, Threats, Weaknesses

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the educational sector on a global scale (Murphy, 2020; Stanistreet et al., 2020), creating a desperate need for a rapid transition to online teaching platforms (Askari & Chen, 2021). With the advent of the digital age and the use of new technologies, learning and communication have undergone significant changes (Khatooni & Nezhadmehr, 2020). The Internet helps learners create a significant communicative linguistic context through exposure (Black, 2005). This rapid shift from a more traditional learning space to a modern and technologically based platform can have both negative and positive outcomes, which should be investigated.

In addition, the pandemic helped accelerate the global transformation of education, pushing policy and decision makers to rethink traditional models of teaching and learning (UNESCO, 2020).

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Hence, this sudden shift in response to the pandemic highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of technology in education (Rahimi & Fathi, 2023). The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program during the Covid-19 outbreak has not been investigated in Iranian high schools. A SWOT analysis allows us to explore the positive and negative aspects of online EFL teaching and learning in detail. The outcomes of this study is critical to enlighten decision makers for enforcing proper regulations which meet the nation's educational needs in similar circumstances.

Literature Review

Research on Iran's e-learning system reveals various challenges in online learning (Abbasi, et al., 2020; Abbasi Kasani et al., 2020). In implementing online learning, organizations should provide rubrics on specific trainings, support services, learners, teachers, and so forth (Bashiruddin et al., 2010). In a similar study, Ghanbari and Nowroozi (2022) found that teachers faced numerous challenges regarding technology management, incompetent computer skills, the lack of institutional rules, and little interaction among the teachers and students during online sessions. Low interaction in class was also a negative factor according to Octaberlina and Muslimin (2020). The importance of emphasizing technological competencies for effective learning has also been reported by Khatoony and Nezhadmehr (2020) and Tavangarian (2004). It has been shown that instructions and training programs can positively impact teachers' level of confidence as well as classroom management and teaching self-efficacy in online platforms (Farkhani et al., 2022). Online platforms have made way for an altered and continuous path of learning with new methods, however, disparities in access and lack of computational skills among students and teachers were also exposed (Azizpour, 2021).

Despite the efforts made, Iran has not been very successful in enforcing the appropriate laws and regulations for online learning and teaching (Abbasi Kasani et al., 2018). However, due to the pandemic and the urgent need to adapt to the new situation, the Iranian Ministry of Education developed an application called "Shaad." A research by Akbari (2021) analyzed the problems and efficacy of the program during the pandemic according to the students, teachers, and parents. According to research findings, challenges in using Shaad included hardware and software infrastructure issues, unfamiliarity with the new technology, ineffective interactive models, challenges in evaluating the correct operator, and learner-related issues. Nevertheless, Shaad was not the only challenge. Students adhered to the belief that online learning and teaching is inferior to classroom teaching (Akbari, 2021).

Another major downside of online EFL learning in the literature is the low efficiency and quality of education. Khalid et al. (2021) as well as Chen and Chen (2021) found online learning to be less efficient when compared to traditional classrooms. Cheating was also a common misbehavior among learners in online classrooms, according to Ibrahim and Alqahtani (2021) and Alqahtani and Ibrahim (2021). In addition, other studies have found that other great challenges in online classes include distraction (Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020; Pazilah et al., 2019), low motivation (Jalilinia, 2021), and multiple student-related and teachers' work-related stressors (Bakhtiari & Afzali, 2023). However, in a different study, learners reported increased motivation in online classes (Jiang et al., 2023). While studies have explored different approaches to enhance learner engagement and interaction, such as flipped classroom models (Afzali & Izadpanah, 2021), others have found that challenges regarding learners' motivation and interaction are still persistent (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Jalilinia, 2021).

On another level, one issue facing students during the COVID-19 pandemic was their financial state. Although the importance of access to online learning materials increased (e.g., computers, smartphones, tablets, and other digital devices) (Tarin, 2016), many students could not afford these tools. In addition, access to these digital devices and efficient online infrastructures is not affordable for everyone, and many are not committed to the necessary requirements (Mahmoudi & Hashemikia, 2017), which makes the process cumbersome. Moreover, access to information and resources on the Internet is essential in addressing the financing disparities in Iran, a (Abbasi et al., 2020). Investments in online learning infrastructures should be prioritized, especially for those with undeserved communities (Atay

& Vafadar, 2023). In addition, to improve technology usage for learners, governments and other investment agencies and stakeholders can leverage online resources to make better use of technology-based learning for learners (Ahmadi, 2022).

A key concern in online EFL learning is access to quality online materials which are engaging and interactive other (Ghavamnia et al., 2018). Even though efforts have been made to enhance learners' digital competence (Dashtestani & Hojatpanah, 2022), access to these online materials remains a challenge particularly for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Rahimi & Fathi, 2022). Yet, perhaps some of the greatest issues and challenges in Iran's e-learning system are the technological, sociocultural, managerial-organizational, and financial dimensions (Abbasi et al., 2020). There is no great difference in the effectiveness of learning without the right pedagogical principles (Dosti et al., 2018), which is caused by the lack of real needs analysis development that could ultimately address many of the basics of online learning (Ghasemi et al., 2018). For example, the Internet speed in rural areas is very low, Ghavidel (2022), hence, class participation and accessibility can be problematic due to these technological difficulties.

In addition, online learning requires the right hardware, software, and infrastructure to operate successfully (Abbasi et al., 2020). Note that ensuring all factors come with expenses, bandwidth, and internet speed limitations (Ghavidel, 2022; Gulati, 2008), which must be addressed and supported by the government (Mahmoodi-Shahrehabaki, 2014). However, Iran lacks appropriate technological, economic, and cultural infrastructure (Abbasi et al., 2020). Furthermore, the mission of an organization is providing necessary facilities as well as courses and seminars for teachers and students (Abbasi et al., 2020). The perspectives of teachers and learners in this subject may provide insight into various challenges associated with this relatively new approach to learning and teaching in Iran.

In spite of the challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has also created opportunities for advancement and collaboration within the field of education (Chen et al., 2021). Teachers in Iran have embraced modern tools and materials to enhance student engagement and interactive learning (Afzali & Izadpanah, 2021). Online platforms such as virtual classrooms and video conferencing software have facilitated real-time communication and collaboration among teachers and learners, overcoming geographical barriers and enhancing online education opportunities (Baru et al., 2020)

Technology integration has changed teaching and learning practices and offered innovative solutions to inevitable problems. In order to improve educational outcomes and enhance access to quality education in Iran, the adaptation of modern and technological tools, as well as online platforms in education has been aimed at improving educational outcomes and increasing access to quality education. Technological progress has made it possible to access educational resources more easily, fostering greater interaction (Ghavamnia et al., 2018), and ultimately resulting in more teacher and peer feedback (Bigverdi & Khalili Sabet, 2024).

The need to shift to an online teaching and learning platform on a national scale undoubtedly faced challenges and issues, but it also paved the way for the development of cutting-edge instructional strategies. It is, therefore, essential to take into account both the upsides and downsides of the situation. In light of COVID-19, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the current EFL course in Iranian high schools have not been examined. A SWOT analysis enables us to examine the advantages and disadvantages that the process of online EFL teaching and learning has brought about during the pandemic. By examining the effects, particularly as they relate to teacher and learner perceptions in this specific setting, we can gain valuable insight into the areas where Iran's national EFL course falls short and where it outstands. This qualitative study investigated the perspectives of teachers and students regarding the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the online EFL course in Iranian high schools in the context of COVID-19.

This was done by answering the following questions:

Research Question One: What are the strengths of the junior and senior high school EFL course regarding online learning and teaching in Iran in the context of COVID-19 based on high school students' and teachers' perceptions?

Research Question Two: What are the weaknesses of the junior and senior high school EFL course regarding online learning and teaching in Iran in the context of COVID-19 based on high school students' and teachers' perceptions?

Research Question Three: What are the opportunities of the junior and senior high school EFL course regarding online learning and teaching in Iran in the context of COVID-19 based on high school students' and teachers' perceptions?

Research Question Four: What are the threats of the junior and senior high school EFL course regarding online learning and teaching in Iran in the context of COVID-19 based on high school students' and teachers' perceptions?

Methodology

Participants and Setting

In this qualitative study, a total of 9 high school students and 4 English teachers were recruited after the interviews and reaching the saturation point. Teachers had a bachelor's and master's degree in TEFL or other related fields in education. Students and teachers were selected from public and private high schools in Bojnord, North Khorasan, Iran, through convenience sampling due to access constraints. Difference in context was not considered in this study. The students included 5 females and 4 males, among which 4 were in junior high school and 5 in senior high school. The teachers included 2 females and 2 males and had 3-5 years of teaching experience. Participants were invited for in-depth interviews (see Table 1) via video calls or face-to-face interviews in the school setting. They were asked about their perceptions regarding the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the EFL course in an online platform during the pandemic.

Instruments and Data Collection

An interview protocol was designed based on literature and the categorization of SWOT to investigate the perceptions of SWOT factors towards the online EFL course or the interview sessions (see Appendix 1) and was pilot-tested before data collection. An important element of interview preparation is conducting a pilot interview. Piloting helps researchers identify limitations and errors the interview questions may have so that they can make necessary modifications (Kvale, 2007). The pilot testing helped the researcher revise some items in the interview protocol to make it more organized and goal-oriented. The questions were also reviewed and checked for trustworthiness. After the pilot testing, in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews were conducted in order to gain a microsystematic understanding of students' and teachers' perceptions of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the online EFL course in the context of COVID-19. It also allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes and 1 hour for the individual and the focus group interviews, respectively; that is, until saturation was achieved. Although this type of interview is structured and the same questions and words are used for all participants, the questions are worded in a way that leaves room for further discussion (Gall et al., 2003), thus, motivating participants to fully express their ideas (Turner, 2010). Interviews were recorded, and the researcher took notes to complete the data. The interview sessions took place online and continued until saturation was reached. The criteria of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1986), credibility, transferability, dependability, and transferability, were confirmed in this study through a thematic analysis, as suggested by Nowell et al (2017).

Table 1

Demographic Background of the Participant.

Status		No. Participants	Male	Female	Age
Teacher	Junior and senior high school	4	2	2	25 – 43
Student	Junior high school	4	2	2	13 - 18
	Senior high school	5	2	3	

Data Analysis

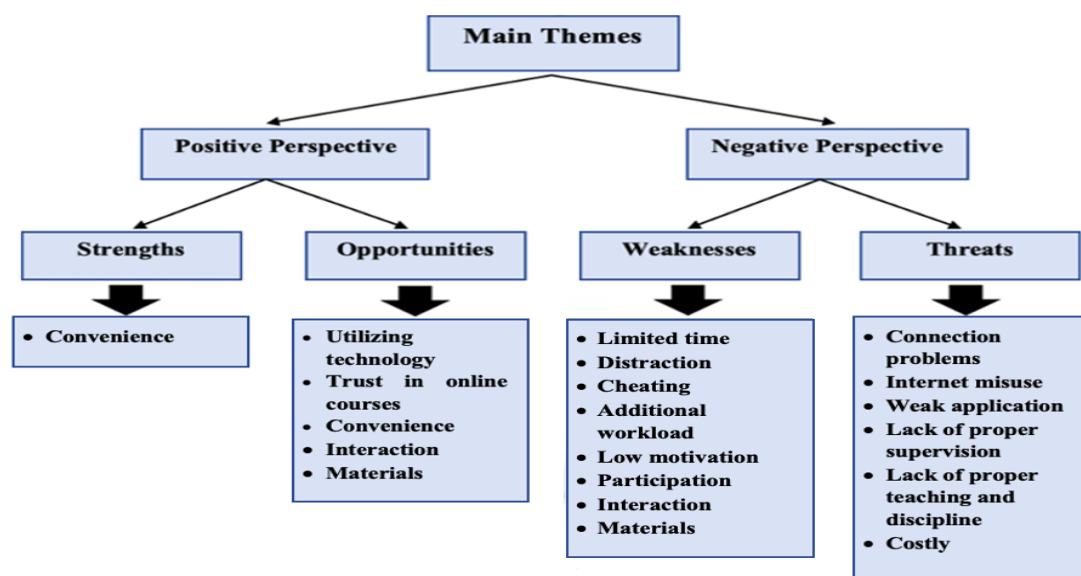
Data provided from the interviews were transcribed using MAXqda software (2020) and coded for data analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al., 2015). In this method, words, phrases, and themes were identified using the field notes in the interviews. Subsequently, the data were coded, themes were generated, reviewed, named, and identified, and finally, all themes were reported and described (Caufield, 2019; Clarke et al., 2015). The data were re-coded after some time by the researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, the researchers reviewed the list of themes with external reviewers, identified the excerpts mentioned by the participants, and sought their placement in the list of themes (Alhojailan, 2012). It is important to note that the researchers' subjective experience, as well as repetition and patterns in the data, are central to understanding data and identifying themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Results and Discussion

In this study, themes were identified to describe a certain concept, element, or attribute (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), referring to the four elements of SWOT. Concepts were defined as latent themes that organize repetitive ideas (Guest et al., 2006). They included commonalities related to the themes. In the first stage of theme analysis, familiarization, transcripts were checked to find repetitions, patterns, or concepts to initiate key themes. Two main themes were extracted from the data, one presenting a positive outlook on EFL online courses during the pandemic and the other a negative outlook. In the second phase, the two main themes were examined in more detail to derive the central themes. These themes were arranged in a SWOT category based on the researchers' subjective understanding and interpretations of the interviews to produce a more understandable outcome. Since the focus of this study was to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the online EFL course, teachers' and students' perspectives are taken together, and all themes and sub-themes were extracted from all responses. The results of the themes are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Themes and Sub-Themes of a Qualitative SWOT Analysis



As shown in Figure 1, the positive theme illustrates teachers' and students' views on how online classes has benefited from certain strengths and opportunities. In addition, the negative outlook includes a long

list of weaknesses as well as several threats. These sub-themes (Aronson, 1995; Lopez & Willis, 2004) were determined by the frequency and repetitions, through MaxQDA, in 13 one-on-one interviews and one focus group interview (see Table 2). The SWOT classification of the repeated terms were then accomplished manually through the researchers' subjective understanding and interpretations.

Table 2

Frequency of SWOT themes

Factor	Themes	Frequency	(%)
Strengths	Convenience	13	93.45%
Weaknesses	Limited time	7	50%
	Distraction	9	64.5%
	Cheating	11	78.74%
	Additional workload	7	50%
	Low motivation	6	42.91%
	Participation	7	50%
	Interaction	11	78.74%
	Materials	9	64.5%
Opportunities	Utilizing technology	11	78.74%
	Trust in online classes	4	28.57%
	Convenience	14	100%
	Interaction	12	86.2%
	Materials	11	78.74%
Threats	Connection problems	14	100%
	Internet misuse	8	57.14%
	Weak application	11	78.74%
	Lack of proper supervision	6	42.91%
	Lack of proper teaching and discipline	7	50%
	Costly	5	35.71%

The participants were asked about their views on the online EFL courses during the pandemic. The four elements of SWOT were frequently mentioned by the participants and repeatedly stated in their responses, as discussed in the following sections. Some sample responses are provided in the following section. Responses from one-on-one interviews are shown as *PI* (personal interviews), and responses from Focus Group Interviews are shown as *FGI*.

Theme 1: Positive perspective; Strengths and Opportunities

Respondents were asked about the strengths and opportunities of the online EFL course during the pandemic, providing an answer to the first and third research questions. Strengths refer to the superiority of a certain method or topic over others. According to the participants, convenience was the only sub-theme identified in the strengths factor. However, this sub-theme not only demonstrated strengths but was also identified in the SWOT factor of opportunities. For instance, one teacher explained that:

Online classes are a lot more convenient, you don't need to move, drive, you could easily switch from one class to another while sitting comfortably at home. You can join the class even when you're on vacation. It's great. (Teacher 3, PI, November 2022)

A student also stated that:

When all of my family and myself were diagnosed with the Corona virus, I wasn't feeling very well. But I could still join the class from home while lying in bed. (Student 7, PI, November 2022)

Participants emphasized the flexibility and accessibility of courses that allowed students to engage from any location, and let teachers interact more efficiently. The use of technology was perceived as an opportunity to enhance learning outcomes, with the potential for more professional use of innovative tools. The study highlights the positive impact of technology on education, transforming the classroom setting into a more advanced and globally accessible learning environment.

According to the participants distance learning paved the way for better learning opportunities through innovative technology. The use of technology, another opportunity identified in the SWOT analysis, can be improved and used more professionally for better learning outcomes; however, it is believed that this advantage has not been used to its full potential.

For example, one teacher stated:

I think the best part of participation in online classes is using technology. Using 'Shaad', even as a very simple app, helped and motivated students learn how to use more modern platforms. (Teacher 2, FGI, October 2022)

The 'Shaad' application was the only platform for online EFL courses. The participants elaborated on the negative aspects of this application in detail, which are categorized under the threats factor.

Online learning and teaching allowed students and teachers to access the classroom from any location with just a few simple clicks on their PC or smartphones. This made it possible to attend class at any time and in any given place, even when students and teachers were not feeling well. Additionally, the results showed that students could access course materials and review sessions at a later time. Unlimited and easy access to online EFL courses as well as the convenience of using technology to attend and use multiple resources was found to be a great strength, which has also been confirmed in previous research (Bailey & Lee, 2020; Cha et al., 2022; Fageeh & Mekheimer, 2013; Heirati & Alashti, 2015; Underdown & Martin, 2016; Xia et al., 2013). In this study, eleven participants agreed that the requirement to use technology is beneficial and it provides a great opportunity to try a different educational approach. Two teachers talked about how using technology was at first a weakness but developed into an opportunity later on:

As they say, desperate times call for desperate measures. Even though there were many problems in the beginning, an app was developed, and it was made clear that we had no choice but to learn how to teach and connect with students through the app. (Teacher 4 FGI, October 2022)

On that basis, it can be said that the employment of technology in education in an online platform can have multiple benefits in education as digital learning has turned into an essential resource for students and schools around the world. With the help of technology, online education is possible for all students and teachers across the globe.

Therefore, it can be said that this opportunity may help students and teachers use technology in education, as found in previous studies (Dashtestani, 2014). Moreover, it can be said that the use of technology in teaching and learning English may pave the way for different approaches to learning. For example, one teacher mentioned:

In online classes we could take advantage of more technology like virtual reality or 3D glasses just to create a more real environment for the students. Even with AI technology we could take online teaching to a higher level. Students would feel they are in the real world. It stimulates motivation to a great extent and would make learning more fun, an opportunity we cannot take for granted. (Teacher 2, FGI, October 2022)

The possibilities of using technology in online language teaching and learning, to employ alternative materials such as videos and authentic sources, were also mentioned by the participants. Literature shows that most students prefer alternative learning methods, including videos, to improve language skills as well as vocabulary knowledge (Faramarzi et al., 2019). According to the participants in this study, enjoying learning and teaching languages is an important factor that emerges from appreciating different materials. Prospect and Vision textbooks, which are currently used in junior and senior high

school respectively, did not satisfy students' needs. They believed that online courses paved the way for the use of more authentic materials, as discussed by Cha et al (2022).

Another factor that has been identified as an opportunity is the ability to engage more students in classroom activities. In fact, in online language learning and teaching, it is possible to increase student engagement through different methods. For example, in the online method, accessing documents is very simple; students can view shared files easily and complete assignments online which can help with interaction. Additionally, sending voice messages and interacting in online groups improved student engagement. Gao and Zhang (2020) also found that online EFL teaching and learning can help promote learner engagement, aligning with the results of this study.

In addition, these opportunities have paved the way for more trust in online courses; a method of learning and teaching that was not taken seriously before the pandemic in Iran, according to the participants. Trusting online courses is another sub-theme identified in this study, showing that despite all the weaknesses and drawbacks, it still succeeded in engaging learners and teachers. For example, one teacher explained:

Many students preferred online classes even after the pandemic. Many have come to trust online classes because before the pandemic, people wouldn't pay for an online class. They believed it was a waste of time. (Teacher 1, PI, November 2022).

Previous studies also show that online teaching and learning has been on the rise (Al-khresheh, 2021; Tram & Thi, 2021), indicating that more and more users are recognizing its opportunities. Although online teaching and learning is relatively new in Iran (Badrkhani, 2021), the pandemic and its aftermath have provided the opportunity to take serious steps and develop strategies to maximize its potentials.

Finally, through virtual teaching, students can easily communicate with their teachers at any time. Teachers can check assignments online and contact students outside of school hours. In an online education platform, teaching and learning have no geographical boundaries; therefore, it is possible to interact more and more often. This was also discussed in a study conducted by Baru et al. (2020). As teacher 2 mentioned:

During the class there were less questions. But at other times, if you have enough time, I mean if you have all day to respond to messages and phone calls, then yes there is a lot more interaction with the students. If you have the time, it's good to see their progress. (Teacher 2, FGI, October 2022)

Theme 2: Negative Perspective; Weaknesses and Threats

The second and fourth research questions asked participants about their views on the weaknesses and threats of online EFL courses during the COVID-19 outbreak (RQ2 and RQ4). For a better understanding, the researcher pointed to certain recurring themes in the form of follow-up questions. Many sub-themes were identified, making weakness the most prominent aspect of the study.

To determine what weaknesses the EFL online courses consisted of during the COVID-19 outbreak, the participants were asked to point to any downsides they believed made learning and teaching more challenging. According to the participants' responses, eight sub-themes were identified, including limited time, distraction, cheating, additional workload, low motivation, low participation, low interaction, and materials in the EFL course.

One of the main purposes of a SWOT analysis is to identify an organization's weaknesses and develop strategies to address them (Gurel & Tat, 2017). With all its technological advantages and facilities, online language learning comes with problems and weaknesses, especially in the context of this study, where the lifespan of this new education system is not very long, and perhaps its potential has not been seriously explored. Weaknesses should be identified based on their value and location. It is possible that the weak points of online teaching also exist in other teaching methods. The identified factors in this study can be classified as internal factors that address the weaknesses of online EFL teaching and learning from the point of view of students and teachers.

The first major weakness of online EFL learning and teaching was ‘not paying enough attention in class’, copying homework, and cheating in exams. In fact, since everything in education is digitalized, it is not surprising that we face problems and challenges like cheating. Students explained cheating in many occasions for homework and exams while teachers believe the main cause of this is the lack of proper guidelines and supervision by the parents:

Cheating was definitely very common in online classes. It was very rare to find an honest student. Maybe I'm being pessimistic but I would say more than 95% would cheat in exams. More than 30% would copy their homework off others or other sources (Teacher 1, PI, November 2022)

One teacher emphasized the role of parents in such behaviors and their cautious participation in cheating. In one example the teacher talked about an extreme act of cheating by a parent:

You won't believe this, but a woman once imitated her child's voice for a reading exercise. (Teacher 4, FGI, October 2022).

Furthermore, the students also responded positively when they were asked about cheating in EFL online classes. One student described a number of ways for completing homework or taking exams:

I don't usually cheat but everything was different with online classes. My friends and I found some answer sheets on the Internet and used it for our homework. During exams we would chat and share answers or just surf the net to find answers. I'm pretty sure the teacher knew, but we got away with it anyways. (Student 2, PI, November 2022)

Research shows that using the Internet in education has led to problems such as electronic fraud (Herwiana & Laili, 2022; Valizadeh, 2022). The issue of cheating is one of the most prominent problems and challenges in online education, which is identified as a major weakness in this study.

To consider this as a fundamental weakness in online EFL teaching and learning, its causes must be addressed. In this regard, it can be said that one of the most obvious factors leading to the increase of cheating in online classes is the lack of a proper monitoring system during the lessons and final exams or proper supervision, which was identified as a threat in this study. Without effective monitoring systems in place, challenges and problems such as cheating arise. These results coincide with (Valizadeh, 2022).

In addition, the lack of budget and sufficient time to choose a suitable security system to conduct virtual exams created a new challenge, as observed in this study. This weakness needs to be addressed with new methods that can be added to the EFL course to prevent online course cheating. When participants were asked about the possibility of cheating, most confirmed that they had cheated at some point in both exams and homework. Students reported copying homework and cheating in exams multiple times, and teachers addressed parents for their lack of proper guidance and supervision. It can be said that cheating may lead to learning inefficiencies, which was confirmed in a study by Rofiah and Waluyo (2020).

Furthermore, the lack of traditional schooling and the existence of repetitive schedules in online learning leads to a lack of student motivation. Students feel demotivated and exhausted because of increased stress, communication problems, and lack of technological knowledge. Challenges regarding motivation and interaction were also discussed by Afzali and Izadpanah (2021). All of these issues indicate that the online approach cannot meet the diverse needs of all students (Esra & Sevilen, 2021). When participants were questioned about their levels of motivation during the pandemic, most of them agreed that they were demotivated. For example, Teacher 1 said:

Teachers can't use up teaching hours to prompt motivation, nor can they take students' recess time. There's really no interaction so the teacher would notice students are demotivated and want to do something about it. (Teacher 1, PI, November 2022)

Another teacher also emphasized on the importance of time:

I don't think online classes are very motivating. If we have more time, perhaps it would be possible to do so. (Teacher 2, FGI, October 2022)

The results showed that EFL courses did not stimulate student motivation during the pandemic. Students believed that a lack of motivation led to an unenjoyable experience. Furthermore, a link between motivation and enjoyment was found, with most students and teachers stating that the joyless online class was due to a very low level of motivation. One student compared motivation and enjoyment in EFL online classes to in-person classes. It was found that without enjoyment, motivation was difficult to generate. However, according to this student, teachers enjoy online classes more:

I think teachers enjoy online classes more because it is easier for them to hold. (Student 2, PI, November 2022)

Esra and Sevilen (2021) also found that online EFL courses do not meet the needs of learners due to the lack of interaction and motivation to participate.

Among the identified weaknesses, additional workload was a major drawback. Teachers described being inundated with messages and having to provide online materials for the classroom. Furthermore, the students also had to deal with more homework as they could not attend all the online sessions and had to check messages and redo assignments later on to keep up with the class. According to the participants, poor internet connection and lack of motivation did not make things any easier. Students and teachers spent a lot of time checking homework, handing out documents, replying to messages, and more.

For example, one student mentioned:

I couldn't ask questions in class and sometimes I had to watch the class videos again and again. I usually did my homework in class before the pandemic but now it's like I'm on my own and I have to do everything by myself. (Student 4, FGI, October 2022)

Another student explained the amount of work teachers had from their own perspective:

They should record videos and their voice and prepare pdf files and everything should be perfect. My dad's a teacher and I see the time he puts preparing for class. (Student 7, PI, November 2022)

One student mentioned that understanding assignments was difficult because they would either miss it due to connection issues or would not be present at all:

All problems aside, the good thing was that we could send a message to our teacher and ask our questions there. (Student 8, FGI, October 2022)

Azizi (2022) found similar results in terms of additional workload in online EFL courses at a university. Other studies such as Chory et al (2022) and Honar zad (2022) also found that instructors incur additional workload during online courses. This is closely related to limited study time, which was another sub-theme identified in this study, according to half of the respondents (mostly teachers). As EFL weekly hours were reduced during the pandemic, teachers were required to teach only in class, respond to texts, and check assignments afterward. For example, one teacher described feelings of frustration concerning the timing of the classes since there was no time for practice and certain activities:

The only thing I can do in that time is teach the lesson, go over the topics and that's it. Time is up. (Teacher 3, FGI, October 2022).

Another teacher also stated:

There's no time to have students participate in certain activities or put them in groups. (Teacher 1, PI, November 2022).

Moreover, due to this great inconvenience, most of the teachers could not use a variety of materials and only used predefined textbooks; Prospect and Vision. Regarding the weakness of this sub-theme one teacher mentioned:

I only really focus on text books. I don't use a lot of authentic materials. I have to follow a syllabus. I ask the students to focus on the book too, nothing more. (Teacher 4, PI, November 2022)

In response to this statement, teacher 4 was asked a follow up question:

Do textbooks alone respond to learners' needs in online classes? (Researcher, PI, November 2022)

Textbooks are very limited and the focus is mostly on vocabulary and grammar. There is very little attention to conversation or improving language skills and preparing students for a real-life setting. So, if the first and most basic learner need is improving communicative skills, I don't think we're there yet, especially in online classes where we face multiple problems; connection problems and insufficient time just to name a few. (Teacher 4, PI, November 2022)

Although the material is rated as an opportunity, it is also rated as a weakness due to time and mere focus on the syllabus. Its opportunity revolved around its ability to use a variety of sources, but its weakness is that this ability is taken for granted, and textbooks alone do not meet students' educational needs.

It should be noted that both teachers and students, reported low attention levels and frequent distractions in online EFL classes during the pandemic. Teachers felt that the lack of proper supervision led to distraction.

One teacher mentioned that:

First you got to get them to be present in class. Attention is step two. Never really got there. (Teacher 1, PI, November 2022).

One student described factors such as boredom and inefficiency of classes as reasons not to attend and pay full attention:

Honestly, I was easily distracted and besides checking for homework, there was nothing else that would make me want to listen. Besides, maybe if we could take turns to talk and enable our webcam to see each other, it would've been way cooler. (Student 7, FGI, October 2022)

In addition, teachers complained about careless behaviors from the students, such as leaving their microphones on during class at times while engaging in other non-relevant activities:

Sometimes the students would mistakenly leave their microphones on and you could hear them playing a video game or having lunch or talking to someone. (Teacher 4 FGI, October 2022).

All in all, this behavior during class was pointed to by both teachers and students, emphasizing the initial reason for why students are not willing to pay attention to class; lack of motivation.

To identify threats, you need to ask what factors can reduce the effectiveness of online teaching and learning, or if these threats were caused by weaknesses or by other reasons. The goal is to identify threats and find solutions to turn them into opportunities where possible.

Based on the results, a major threat to online English learning and teaching was a poor Internet connection. A strong Internet connection and speed are some of the first and most obvious requirements to organize an online course. Once again, it should be emphasized that online teaching methods are relatively new in Iran. For this reason, proper tools and infrastructure were not installed for educational purposes, which threatened its long-term success. Therefore, a poor Internet connection was a major

concern in EFL teaching and learning according to the participants. For example, when the participants were asked about the importance of a strong and stable connection, one teacher responded:

Some students have connection problems or don't have smartphones or computers to participate in these classes. Sometimes the connection is so weak that it gets frustrating. Materials won't upload, students can't download files or listen to voice messages. I think this is a great weakness. (Teacher 2, PI, November 2022)

In addition, a student points to missing sessions because of poor connection and unwillingness to participate later:

I firmly believe that disconnection is the biggest problem because in online classes when the Internet disconnects there's really nothing you can do, unless the session is being recorded. But honestly, I would never watch the recorded sessions...they are already so boring. (Student 9, FGI, October 2022)

The results of the interviews showed no difference in the opinions of teachers and students regarding Internet connection problems. This finding is consistent with the literature (i.e., Abbasi Kasani, et al., 2020; Ghavidel, 2022; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020; Pazilah et al., 2019)

Lack of proper supervision was another major threat to online EFL courses during the pandemic. For working parents, the students' continuous use of the Internet without any supervision or discipline can have social consequences. Also, Internet misuse was mentioned by most teachers and students. According to the teachers, students had free access to the Internet and used it for purposes other than school. The teachers also felt that the misuse of the Internet has irreparable consequences for the students' future. The main consequence is learning inefficiency, followed by learning and perpetuating negative behaviors such as cheating as mentioned previously, as well as Internet misuse. These are some of the consequences that have been mentioned in this study. For example, when asked about the critical consequences of Internet usage, one teacher stated that:

Parents would often tell us that their kids don't only use the Internet for class. They were not supervised properly. This behavior would lead to many social and psychological harms. (Teacher 2, PI, November 2022)

Another teacher agreed with this statement and said:

I would say for teenagers having free access to the Internet all the time is a great threat. The classes themselves are not a threat because they have an excuse to use the Internet. But you never know what they're up to. (Teacher 1, PI, November 2022)

Accordingly, students mentioned that they would use the Internet engaging in activities other than school:

Honestly, there were times that I'd surf the web, download new games or movies. I knew I wasn't allowed but did anyway. (Student 9, FGI, October 2022)

Based on the findings, most participants found misuse of the Internet to be harmful and considered it as a threat. Moreover, with the urgent need to compensate for school lockdown during the pandemic, the Ministry of Education designed and developed the Shaad app for educational purposes. Although Shaad was an attempt to overcome some obstacles, it was not very successful due to Internet problems and technology infrastructure. This study showed that limited functionality and digital illiteracy are the main problems of the application. Most participants agreed with its ineffectiveness and poor implementation, which was mostly felt due to limited options and resulted in inadequate classroom supervision. One student mentioned that:

The app was even weaker than the weakest social network on a global level. (Student 2, PI, October 2022).

Moreover, teachers criticized the app for its limited options and pointed to students' lack of proper attention:

We've all seen videos on social media that students are lying in bed or asleep while the teacher thinks they are present because the app does not have the option to share cameras. (Teacher 3, FGI, October 2022).

One teacher pointed to the limitations of the *Shaad* application and suggested the classes would be more efficient if more advanced applications were used or designed:

The app was limited to voice messages which you cannot do much. There are many suitable apps for teaching online in which you can teach live or share your camera. It would've been better to use alternative platforms, but we are to stick to the rules. (Teacher 1 PI, November 2022)

Studies have mentioned that educational costs are not a major challenge for learners and teachers (e.g., Azizi, 2022; Nikdel Teymori & Fardin, 2020). However, the cost of online courses was identified as a weak point in this study. The results showed that some participants believed that the high cost of online EFL lessons was a major problem. The interviewees mentioned that online classes are more expensive for various reasons, such as providing technological equipment and purchasing online Internet packages:

Online classes are expensive. You'd need a good connection, good technology, and more. The government should cover the expenses but they don't. They helped out for the first few months but that was it. (Teacher 2, PI, November 2022)

One student stated that:

Students usually pay a fee for a whole school year, but Internet is not cheap and you have to keep buying credit for your Internet packages. (Student 7, PI, November 2022)

Mahmoodi-Shahrehabaki (2014) suggested that due to the high cost of online education, the government needs to support learners and instructors and provide alternatives to improve learning outcomes. In addition to costs, the lack of proper teaching and discipline was also defined as a threat, according to the participants. They were asked about their readiness for online courses and how they conducted and managed their lessons. Most teachers agreed that online courses required an introductory course for students and teachers, which was only dealt with superficially. Decision makers should be more involved in the development of useful management solutions. Based on teachers' comments, it can be concluded that teachers, students, and parents must be trained to use such platforms. Studies have suggested solutions to overcome this problem, such as publishing certain rules and regulations (Slade & Prinsloo, 2013; Toprak et al., 2010).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study shed light on the multifaceted landscape of online EFL courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis, grounded in the SWOT framework, provided a comprehensive understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with this educational shift.

The positive perspective, encompassing strengths and opportunities, highlighted the transformative impact of technology on EFL education. The convenience and flexibility of online courses emerged as a significant strength, allowing students and teachers to transcend geographical constraints and access educational resources at their convenience. The integration of technology not only facilitated access but also opened avenues for innovative teaching methods, fostering a positive outlook on the potential of online education. The participants emphasized the importance of leveraging technology to its full potential, recognizing its role in transforming traditional teaching methods and providing a platform for more engaging and interactive learning experiences. Furthermore, the study illuminated the opportunities presented by online courses, such as increased trust in the efficacy of

virtual learning and the potential for authentic material utilization, a departure from traditional textbooks.

Conversely, the negative perspective delved into the weaknesses and threats associated with online EFL courses. The prevalence of weaknesses, such as the challenges of limited time, distractions, and cheating, underscored the need for addressing internal factors that impede the effectiveness of online education. The study emphasized the significant issue of cheating in online exams, attributing it to a lack of proper monitoring systems and supervision. Additionally, the increased workload on both teachers and students, coupled with issues of low motivation and participation, highlighted the strain on the educational system during the pandemic. These findings suggest a critical need for strategies to enhance monitoring, reduce cheating, and manage the increased workload associated with online education.

The threats identified, notably poor Internet connection, lack of proper supervision, and the high cost of online courses, pointed to external factors that pose challenges to the sustained success of online EFL courses. The study highlighted the urgent need for infrastructural development, proper supervision mechanisms, and financial support to mitigate these threats. The inadequacies of the Shaad app underscored the importance of effective technology implementation and the potential consequences of inadequate digital literacy.

In essence, this study provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in EFL education. The strengths and opportunities identified underscore the transformative potential of online learning, while the weaknesses and threats call for targeted interventions to ensure the resilience and effectiveness of online EFL education. As the education landscape continues to evolve, addressing these challenges and capitalizing on opportunities will be crucial for shaping a robust and adaptive EFL educational framework.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study provide educators, policymakers, and institutions with valuable insights into the nuanced landscape of online EFL education. To address the identified weaknesses and threats, there is a need for comprehensive strategies and solutions:

Investment in Technology Infrastructure: Addressing internet connectivity issues and enhancing the overall digital infrastructure is crucial for the success of online education. Governments and educational institutions should prioritize investments in technology to support effective learning.

Implementation of Robust Monitoring Systems: To mitigate the threat of cheating, there is a need for the implementation of effective monitoring systems during online classes and examinations. This includes exploring technologies that can ensure academic integrity.

Teacher Training and Student Orientation: Proper training for teachers, students, and parents is essential for successful online education. This includes technical proficiency, effective use of online platforms, and strategies to maintain discipline and motivation in the virtual classroom.

Diversification of Learning Resources: To capitalize on the opportunities presented by online education, there should be a focus on diversifying learning resources. Incorporating authentic materials, interactive tools, and alternative teaching methods can enhance the quality of online EFL courses.

Continuous Evaluation and Improvement: Regular evaluation of online education programs is crucial for identifying areas of improvement. Feedback from both students and teachers should be considered to refine online EFL curricula and address emerging challenges.

While online EFL education during the COVID-19 pandemic has showcased strengths and opportunities, it has also revealed critical weaknesses and threats. A holistic and adaptive approach, taking into account the specific context and challenges, is essential to maximize the benefits of online learning and ensure its long-term sustainability.

This study's findings are limited in their generalizability due to the qualitative nature of the research. Qualitative research typically involves smaller, context-specific samples, which may not represent broader populations (Mason, 2002). As a result, the insights gained should be understood within the specific context of this study.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

I confirm that neither I nor any person or organization with which I am associated have any personal or business interest in or potential for personal gain from any of the organizations or projects linked to this research.

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Appendix I.

Interview Protocols:

1. What do you think are the strengths of online EFL learning and teaching?
 - Do you believe using various materials is a strength?
 - What is your perspective towards the convenience of online EFL courses?
2. What do you think are the weaknesses of online EFL learning and teaching?
 - How do you think can we avoid weaknesses such as cheating in online EFL courses?
 - Do you think there is any way to compensate for the weaknesses in online EFL courses? and how?
3. What do you think are the opportunities of online EFL learning and teaching?
 - How do you think the opportunities can benefit students, parents, and teachers?
 - Do you think the opportunities were in alignment with learner needs?
4. What do you think are the threats of online EFL learning and teaching?
 - How successful can teachers be in preventing threats?
 - What do you think are the consequences of the threats in time?