Research Paper

English Language Teachers' Reflections on Online Language Practices during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, universities around the world faced closure because of social distancing and lockdown, therefore, unprecedently, education had to move online and universities in Iran were not exceptional. This sudden and abrupt shift required teachers to rethink their attitudes and beliefs. This study has been conducted to explore English Language Teachers' attitudes toward their practices concerning the effects of social distancing and the maximized use of technology in the teaching profession. Having adopted a qualitative method to investigate teachers' experiences, the data of this study were collected through interviews with nine English language university teachers, and their reflective journals. Generally, the results communicate considerable appreciation for integrating technology in English language courses. To be more detailed, this study revealed three main categories for positive attitudes (pedagogical innovation, instructional support, and professional identity formation) each with some subcategories. Also, the analysis highlights three concerns (technology-related challenges, classroom management, and inflexibility in behavior) for online teaching. The implications of the study mainly provide a welcoming environment for utilizing technology in teaching, especially in English language teaching.

Keywords: *COVID-19 Pandemic, English language teaching, online teaching, teachers' reflections*

نظر مدرسین زبان انگلیس در رد آ زش مجزی زبان انگلیسی در طول ران اپیدمی کو ید-19

در طول د .ران اپیدمی کووید-19 دان .گاه های سراسر دن.ا به دلیل فا .له .ذاری اجتماعی و قرنطـنه .ا تع ..لی مواجه شدند و دانشگاه های ایران از.ین شرایط استثنا نبوده انـ.ِ بنابراین به شکل بی .ابقـ. ی آموزش مجازی ا .بار . شد. ا . .....ر .اگهاد . مـر . . رن.مسـزم به بازاندیشی د.دگاه هـ .ا .ایدشان کرد. ا.ن تحقق در .استای بررسی د.دگاه مدرسن .بان انگلسی نسد . به عملکردشان با توجـ . .ِفـاثر .ات .ـصـ. ی اجتمـ .ی . استفاده ی حداکثری از تکنولوژی در عملکرد آموزشی آنها انجام شده است. با استفاده از روش کیفی جهت بررسی تجربه ی مدرسین ،داده های این تحقیق از طریق مصاحبه از 9 مدرس زبان انگلیسی در دانشگاه و .ادا دا . هی انعکاسی آنها .مع آوری شد. به صورت کلی، نتایج گویای رضایت قابل توجه مدرس . از تر . . تکنولوژی در دو .ه های زبِ . انگلیسی می باشد. جزییات بیشتر نشان میدهد که نتایج این تحقِ . نشان گر سه گروه ا . دیدگاه های مثبت (نواروی تدریس،حما . تدر.س. و تشکی. .ویت حر.ه ای) که هر ..ام شامل زیِ..روه هایی هستند .یباشد. همچنین تحلیل داده ها سه دغدغه (چالش هی مرتبط با تکنولوژی، مدیریت کلاس،لا عدم انعطاف پذیری در رفتار) در آموزش مجازی را نشان میدهند . کاربردهای این تحقیق اساسا یک محیط صمیمانه برای استفاده از تکنولوژی در آموزش مخصوصا آموزش زبان انگلیسی فراهم میکنند.

واژگان کلیدی: آموزش زبان انگلیسی، آموزش مجازی، نظر مدرسین،اپیدمی کووید-19

Introduction

Higher education has been involved in implementing online teaching and blended learning over the past two decades (e.g., Singh & Thurman, 2019). The outbreak of the recent pandemic, Covid-19, and the emphasis on social and physical distancing accelerated the shift to Online Teaching and Learning (OTL) especially in higher education around the world, whether teachers were prepared or not (UNESCO IESALC, 2020). The recent pandemic gave birth to a new and unknown situation and left teachers with no choice but only adopt different forms of technology-based classrooms, communication, collaboration, and teaching. This situation requires teachers to become more adaptable and flexible for change, therefore the question of how prepared teachers are for such a shift has come forth (Hung, 2016). Luckily, this threat entailed a golden opportunity to answer and realize the extent to which teachers felt prepared for Online Teaching and Learning (Brooks & Grajek, 2020). However, there is still a continuous and persistent inconsistency in the implementation and adaptation of blended learning and online teaching which have resulted in very different experiences for both teachers and learners in different contexts, disciplines, and programs (Bernard et al., 2014). Therefore, it is critical to acknowledge the existence of multifaceted problems resulting from teachers' perceptions of how ready and prepared they are in implementing OTL in higher education (Martin et al., 2019). On the other hand, this sudden shift or even the willingness to adapt to the shift requires a range of changes in the practices of teaching which are rooted in complicated cultural, individual, institutional, and organizational factors (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012). To have a better-detailed understanding of teachers' perception of readiness for OTL, its relations to such factors need further investigation (Hung, 2016), and if we are to make sure that all students are provided with high-quality learning, exploring a wide range of factors related to university teachers who have adopted and used online teaching (especially to help the institutions to support learning and teach online) is a necessity (Kebritchi et al., 2017).

In the Information era, teacher education has already become a complex endeavor, because teacher educators' role is under continuous upgrades and changes. It is being transformed from being the main source of knowledge to being a role model, and a mentor for those teachers spending their pre-service training course, constructing the foundations of the future society (Niess, 2015; Van der Klink et al., 2017). There are numerous advantages of implementing ICT in teaching practices. One advantage of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is that it overcomes the distance-and-time-related barriers which provide flexibility within a curriculum (Hill, 2006), diversified program, with a range of choices, and offer to make it easier to manage and opens doors for blended learning that is a mixture of digital and face-to-face (F2F) education (Gerbic, 2011). Therefore, implementing ICT demands not only a teacher's beliefs, skills, and self-efficacy, but also a mutual relationship between Information Technology (IT) and the practice of teaching.

However, technology also entails some challenges for the teaching profession, in relevance to teachers' everyday activities, skills, beliefs, and knowledge. Reportedly, within a blended curriculum, teachers have reported the demands of being more organizational, designing, structuring, planning, and executing their activities in a way to be in line with traditional educational contexts (Baran et al., 2013). Moreover, the way teachers interact with their learners, especially their non-verbal communication, the level of friendliness and intimacy, and the form and the amount of humor used in the classroom will change within a blended context (Baran et al., 2013). Some communicational functions, for example, social and cognitive, are put into practice through digital interactions. Teachers need to be "virtually present, in both synchronous and asynchronous communications, to provide feedback, for example. Teachers' presence can be

categorized in two ways. The first is for teachers to contribute to discussions and make learners' learning process more valuable (Smits, 2012), while the second is for the teachers to provide social elements in the communication by making humor and acting compassionately which can be encouraging for learners to continue their communication. Often, teachers fail to pay attention to their second role, the social side of communication, in their online activities (Smits, 2012). To teach successfully, teachers should acquire a wide range of pedagogical repertoire, by giving regular feedback, adding flexibility to learners' assignments, being aware of what learners are involved in, and identifying the critical moments to offer their support (Laat et al., 2007).

According to Comas-Quinn (2011), to become aligned with the characteristics of blended learning, teachers' pedagogical views may need some adaptation. Since such a process is referred to as "learning as becoming" (Wenger, 1998). Without a doubt, teachers who shift from a f2f to an online educational context (even partly), do mention changes in their self-image. As Baran et al. (2013) described this: "While deconstructing and remaking their teaching personas [professional identity], they had to rethink themselves as teachers and resolve the tensions of not having the conditions that they had in traditional classrooms" (p. 30). In their study, teachers' professional identities appeared to be adapted on a practical level by bringing changes in teaching strategies to address the needs of the digital environment; However, on a deeper conceptual level, the teachers maintained and preserved their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning. When switching to online teaching, many teachers cling to their routines and transfer the same routines to the online context (Baran et al., 2011) which happens, at least, when the change period begins (Wiesenberg & Stacey, 2008). Most teachers develop and reform their professional identity while working in a f2f curriculum. These f2f experiences influence teachers' beliefs about teaching and the way they shape their daily practices (Gerbic, 2011). In short, IT incorporation into professional life provides challenges as well as opportunities for teachers. To be able to provide appropriate support, understanding teachers' attitudes toward technology-integrated educational practices is necessary. Accordingly, in the present study, we explore university English language teachers' perceptions of online Language Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Literature Review

The importance of technology in the education system, be it online or offline cannot be undermined, but at the same moment, we cannot ignore the fact that the usage of e-learning tools in online education largely depends on the instructor and student characteristics. Chyung et al. (2009) found that the major enabling or disabling factor in the approval of technology is the instructor's attitude. Kersaint (2003) while advocating the positive attitude of instructors toward e-learning, stated that an instructor with a positive attitude feels comfortable in the usage of e-learning tools and implementing them into their classroom to make the teaching experience better. Xhaferi et al. (2018) surveyed to analyze the attitude of instructors towards the usage of technologies in online education, in which the target population consisted of 49 university faculty members and found that subject of study and gender do not correlate with the attitude towards e-learning. To maintain success in the online educational system, the positive attitude of instructors is very crucial (Woodrow, 1992). However, it has not always been easy for instructors to maintain a positive attitude toward online learning. Watson et al. (1998) while asserting the importance of a positive attitude of the instructor, stated that attitude towards e-learning is a key factor not only in the development of technology but also overcoming their resistance to using the application of ICT in the teaching process. One of the major factors is the peculiarity of the technology itself that is responsible for affecting the instructors' attitude towards ICT (Rogers, 1995). Liaw et al. (2008) have categorized the instructor's attitude toward ICT into three different areas: affective, cognitive, and behavioral measurement. Affective

(perceived enjoyment) and cognitive (perceived usefulness) measurements have a positive effect on behavioral intention (Liaw and Huang, 2002). An instructor with a positive attitude towards e-learning tools maintains the quality of learning and forms an important part of instructor characteristics (Al-Fraihat et al., 2020).

Davis and Fill (2007) mentioned that online instructors should possess more skills, especially in the implementation of technology in the classroom than a traditional ones. They should have a positive attitude towards the usage of ICT, as these skills help them to develop e-competencies, which will have a positive effect on their entire teaching experience. Hiltz et al. (2000) suggested that, with the introduction of e-learning, the role of an instructor has undergone a major shift from a subject expert to a facilitator. Salmon (2012) identified the competencies of online instructors into different categories, which are knowledge of the online system, technical competency, communication skills, content proficiency, and personal features. Instructors' competency in e-learning is a major component of the instructors' role (Li et al., 2017).

Research Questions

As has been mentioned earlier, there are several complicated factors involved in understanding how prepared teachers are. Especially for those who are willing to adapt to this sudden shift. These factors are context-based and are related to cultural, individual, institutional, and organizational (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012) aspects of the context. To this end, and to our knowledge, such factors have been understudied in the context of higher education in Iran where both teachers and learners do not have full access to online resources and materials. Besides, the individual understanding of online technologies varies greatly from one person to another, causing heterogeneous classrooms in terms of the digital skills of teachers and learners, even though learners are homogenous in terms of their language proficiency level. To have a better-detailed understanding of EFL teachers' perception of readiness for online language practices, the following research questions direct our study:

RQ1. How do English language teachers perceive the implementation of technology in their teaching practices?
RQ2. What are teachers' concerns regarding the implementation of ICT tools in their English language classroom?

Methodology

Context and Participants

The current study was conducted at the Islamic Azad University of Kerman, Iran. In brevity, this university is a full degree center, and among the greatest educational centers in the south and southeast of Iran, offering more than 171 disciplines at different levels, ranging from undergraduate to doctorate levels. The number of participants in this study was nine English language teachers, (7 with Ph.D. in English Language teaching and 2 with Ph.D. in English Language Literature). They had minimum familiarity with utilizing technology in their teaching practices before the outbreak of Covid-19. However, the main objective of this study was to investigate and explore their attitudes toward the major educational transformation of traditional classes to fully online instruction.

This study was conducted between February and July 2021, when the shift to an online mode of instruction had already become mandatory, following isolation protocols. At the time of the study, it had already been about two terms that teachers were mandated to handle their classes online. Although all the participants partook in the study voluntarily, a privacy consent form was distributed among the participants to ensure the protection of their rights, privacy, and

confidentiality of the participants. Every aspect of the study and the participants' involvement in the research were explained and all relevant questions from the participants were answered by the researchers. So, the participants were fully informed of this study. Moreover, participants were fully aware of their unconditional right of withdrawal under any circumstances without having to give any reasons. On the other hand, the researchers obtained permission from participants to use their data on any scientific platforms such as academic international journals and conferences providing that their identifiable information in the results is remained concealed. Therefore, we have decided to use pseudonyms to fulfill our duty of ethical considerations in protecting the participants' privacy.

Data Collection Procedure

To study teachers' perspectives and attitudes toward the potential pedagogical changes in online settings, we employed a narrative strategy. In response to the effects of social distancing and increased use of technology, the participants shared their narratives through interviews and reflective journals. This methodology was adopted based on what Creswell (2003) called the consistency of the epistemological, ontological, and methodological aspects of the research. Our primary information was collected from the participants' reflective journals which were asked to be updated three times within the academic semester; in the beginning, in the middle, and at the endc After the journals were obtained, all participants were invited to one of the researchers' rooms to have semi-structured interviews. The interview sessions were carried out in the participants' mother tongue, Persian so that the participants would feel more at ease and their message would be conveyed more thoroughly. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. While the first categorization system was developed from the data, the data were translated from Persian to English by one of the researchers and double-checked by another researcher to ensure loyalty to the original data.

We analyzed the obtained data from the interviews and reflective journals through a system of categorization that we called the Narrative Analysis Framework. To begin our analysis, we had to develop the essential elements in each narrative to form an understanding of each participant's professional identity. Therefore, first, we read and took reflective notes from the transcripts of the interviews and the data from the reflective journals. In the next stage, we used open and pattern coding (Creswell, 2008) to analyze data and find the main groups and subgroups. It was the open coding that was at the center of our analysis through which the interpretative and Vivo codes related to professional identity development were highlighted. Through constant comparison between the open codes, similar codes formed the basis for a category or pattern code. This process resulted in four elements of the narratives or main groups each containing other subgroups. Later, through the mutual discussion between the two researchers, the final agreement between categories and subcategories was obtained.

Results

Relying on Venkatesh and his colleagues (2012) definition of the attitude toward technology, that it is an "individual's positive or negative feelings (evaluative effect) about using a specific technology", we present our findings in two sections to cover the positive attitudes and the negative attitudes. The analysis of the qualitative data is supported by quotations from the participants of the present study. The thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed three main categories for positive attitudes and each of the categories has its subcategories which will be looked at more thoroughly in the following sections.

Positive attitudes

In the first section of our findings, we aim to report on themes regarding the positive attitudes of the participants in this study under three main categories labeled Pedagogical Innovation, Instructional Support, and Professional Identity Formation.

Pedagogical innovation

Yastrebova and Kryachkov (2013) argued that one way of mastering communicative competence is implementing innovation in foreign language teaching and learning, which is not feasible unless new teaching materials and computer technologies are used. After processing the data obtained from both interviews and participants' journals, this study identified some commonly shared experiences of the participants which can decisively support pedagogical innovation.

Challenging Environment

Not long after the breakout of the pandemic, teachers had to step out of their comfort zone and wander around a new virtual context. In other words, online classrooms Once ICT has been integrated into teaching and learning, the environment within which teachers and students operate will change. Such changes are by no means free of challenges. Thus, the effectiveness of integrating ICTs into both teaching and learning demands understanding and applications of basic pedagogy and basic principles of interaction designs to bring the learning environment in line with the intended purpose and context. (Richards, 2006).

"... after 17 years of teaching, it was quite difficult and challenging to change my style of teaching, but this course forced me to adapt myself to modern teaching..."

"... after years of teaching traditional classes, I must admit that I am a total amateur in online classes. I mean, I can and I do teach classes online, but I think there is still much to learn about online classes for effective teaching..."

Change Adaptation

Another sub-theme revealed in the analysis refers to the adaptability of teachers to the new situation. Some participants found themselves more adaptable to upgrading their teaching following the new context while others found it quite difficult to grow accustomed to online teaching. Such delayed alteration can be called "learning as becoming" (Wenger, 1998) which will happen throughout a period.

"... it is easier for me now as a teacher but challenging enough for the students to adapt themselves to that context immediately..."

"... At first, I resisted the situation, so I had to postpone my classes. I thought the pandemic would be tackled soon because I have no idea how to use computers for teaching. However, now I am convinced that the crisis will take time to be tackled, so I am [humorously] kind of forced to adapt myself to modern teaching..."

Technological Awareness

To overcome the new context-related challenges, and more easily adapt to new changes, one way is for teachers to gain more knowledge and become more aware of the available technology. The in-depth analysis of the data revealed that almost 70 percent of the participants acknowledged the usefulness of the course they had taken, meaning that attending teacher training courses where the utilization and implication of technology in teaching and learning is taught can function as an asset for online teaching and learning. This has been previously asserted by Davis and Fill (2007) who recommended that online teachers should be aware of the

technology to possess more skills especially for utilizing technology in their classroom teaching practice.

"...... Before attending this course I knew nothing about using technology in my classes, but now I know how to make PowerPoints, attach soundtracks, send instructional and design online tests, all seem fantastic...."

Flexible Teaching

Our analysis has revealed that online teaching provides opportunities for teachers of any personality traits to teach learners of different styles and needs more effectively, providing that teachers have some level of technological awareness. Thanks to the Internet, teachers have more resources at hand. In traditional classrooms, teachers had some difficulties printing out the materials for learners which could also charge teachers financially. However, in online classrooms, not only do teachers have more flexibility in teaching content to learners, but they can also share digital materials on their smartphones or computers. The more teachers become flexible in their teaching strategies, the more successful their online classes will be (Laat et al., 2007).

"....in online classes, I can tackle the rigidity of paper-based teaching. Now, I do more tasks with cell phones, and I feel that I am not book bound anymore. I also have a wide range of opportunities to create and deliver the content, and deal with different learners ...."

".... music, lyrics, I can make more real-life contexts and discuss real issues with my students more variedly using some authentic sources such as podcasts, I mean it is not like a formal class and it is more like teaching in a native environment rather than a class ...."

Creativity

E-learning tools will provide teachers with a range of activities and possibilities for bringing variety into their teaching to make learning effective with the best possible results. Moreover, some teachers might go beyond the already-prepared materials and take the responsibility to modify, design, and develop carefully tailored activities to not only engage their students with the content but also facilitate learning. As for teachers' responsibility in online teaching, Ascough (2002) argued that online teachers' responsibilities are not limited to only uploading prepared materials then providing an explanation or giving summaries on the given topic, then receiving emails. In our study, almost every participant noted that the utilization of technology has sparked ideas to run their classes more effectively.

".... I am now like a person who has faced lots of new ideas which I can adapt or even create more ideas out of them in my classes ...."

".... I have an observational sense of creativity; I mean even a small thing can sparkle a whole new idea in my mind ...."

Social Involvement

Social constructivism focuses on collaborative learning which helps better the occurrence of meaningful learning (Vygotsky 1978). Socio-situational theories of cognition and learning shift the focus of research from what is happening in an individual's mind (cognitivism) to the cognitive process that results from the interaction of the individual with the social environment, the material world, and artifacts (Cited by Barak, M., 2010, from Vygotsky 1978). After a careful analysis of the data, most participants highlighted more engagement within society and the community.

".... I think technology has made it more possible to be in touch with your learners even outside the classroom, I feel more like a mentor than a teacher....

".... Social networking applications have become more appealing for me now as I can share my opinions with my colleagues or even on a larger scale with society...."

"... I have already started a personal page on a social media platform, and I enjoy making connections with other English teachers around the world and learning from their experiences...."

Systematic Manner

Technologies can significantly improve the procedure of integrating thoughts into practices when the tool is adopted and utilized regularly. Traditional classes might not offer as many tools as online classes; therefore, teachers might not tend to think about the exploitation of available resources. However, online classes, since they are offering a good range of possibilities for teachers to teach more effectively, would encourage teachers to reflect on the most effective way of utilizing technology in their teaching, making them more organized and systematic in their planning, instruction, and activation of the language.

".... the importance of technology had not been clear to me, even though I have been teaching in some special schools with special groups of students where I have full access to technology, but now I know how to use them more effectively for the sake of learning to meet the needs of the system better...."

Optimal Functioning

Finally, participants in our study experienced better teaching. This can be because of the motivation they had built to implement technology in their teaching. To ensure the effectiveness of ICT-based classrooms, attention should be paid to teaching, learning, and assessment based on knowledge, with the help of ICT to promote motivation for active learning as well as resource accessibility (Fullan, 2013; Kozma & Vota, 2014).

".... I have stepped into an oceanic source of knowledge which has provoked my excitement to learn functional teaching...."

"... everything seems to be available within some clicks only..."

"... I think it is only the matter of the unexpected shift in the way of teaching that some learners or even teachers resist online teaching, and it takes time to prove it more effective and convenient to stay at home and learn online..."

Instructional Support

The second major theme extracted from the data is Instructional Support. Almost every interviewee found ICT tools to be time-saving support for instructing the content of their lessons. Based on documented records, any conditions facilitating learning, challenge, and support can help teachers, like other professionals, develop and thrive. (Avidov-Ungar, 2016; Willemse et al., 2016).

".... gradually, during this semester, I could find better ways to convey and communicate my message better to my learners with the support of technology...."

"..... It has been particularly timesaving for me because I have become able to get my message across as clearly as before, or I can say even better, using technological aids, such as PowerPoint, ..."

The in-depth analysis of data yielded three sub-categories for Instructional Support labeled A Role Model, Content Knowledge, and Self-Learning. These three will be more elaborated on in the forthcoming paragraphs.

Self-Learning

When stepping into a new context, teachers are more likely to start reflecting on their abilities following the available technology. In other words, ICT is primarily used as a teaching tool for self-learning (Wong, Choi, & Lee, 2008). Once teachers have utilized technological tools in their practice, they are more likely to become courageous to learn more about other applications and possibilities. The reflection may lead teachers forward in the sense that if the classes are successful, teachers may tend to learn more so that they can improve their classes. Those teachers who perceive the required resources can implement technology in the best way to meet their required resources. Considering the behavior model (Ajzen, 1985), the positive beliefs and attitudes of teachers can help them find resources more effectively and overcome barriers to successful teaching. On the other hand, if using technology is not perceived as successful, due to the Self-regulated nature of online learning (Kauffman, 2015), individuals will become more self-motivated to regulate their learning strategies, meaning that teachers will probably try to learn more about gauging their practice in line with online teaching requirements.

"… at first, I used to take pictures from the textbook and share them with my students, …. When I observed some other classes held online, I realized how easy it can be to make a PowerPoint presentation …Mt increased my teaching quality and learners took the class more seriously…."

"…I have never had to delve into using digital materials, and it was quite hard to think about designing such materials myself, but then I learned there are a lot of materials available online, for example on the Cambridge website, which gave me more ideas for teaching better…"

Role Model

Each platform and application can have certain features which can enable and inform some teaching strategies. To clarify, teachers should know what, for example, PowerPoint is, how it works and what features it offers. Once they have learned about different technological tools, they can exploit and take advantage of the tool much better. Also, modeling teachers' teaching with technological means can be highly effective for preservice teachers, especially in forming their perspective regarding technology (Doering et al., 2003).

"…during the semester, I came across some websites for online testing, more reliable and objective than my tests, which I used as a model for my students' final exams, …."

"…. I used the same way of teaching listening for some years, which was limited to the coursebook I had to teach, and some students would spoil the task by listening to the tracks before the session, but I was introduced to some websites which provide graded listening tracks such as elllo.com. Using it as a model has added a good level of unpredictability to teaching…."

Content Knowledge

In connectivism, individuals perform within a learning network of shared interests and interact and share their ideas freely with their peers which will lead to learning (Goldie, 2016). Through such a network, individuals not only exchange their ideas but also become a member of the network which forms a process through which knowledge can be created. Thus, learning how to put technology in use in a way to deliver the target content more effectively is a necessity for online teachers. Taking social media as an example, according to Buus (2012), teachers need to gain some knowledge about the relevant use of social media in their instructions, such as online learning. In other words, for being able to use social media in teaching more effectively, teachers must be continuously learning about the implementation of social media in online learning.

Teachers' learning strategies of content knowledge can be fulfilled through peer mentoring, and experts highlighted technical aspects Cochrane and Narayan (2012). Teachers' interaction with their colleagues, on social media, can lead to creating new knowledge (Hajli et al., 2013). That can explain why online knowledge sharing has been emphasized to shape teachers' attitudes and learning (Wenger et al., 2011).

"…I believe that the Internet is great as it offers teachers a lot about every content they need to learn about even if the content is about teaching online…"

"......... Living in the EFL context of Iran, our only content is the book, but now using different sites, the limited content is no longer our main concern......."

"….. what I like about the Internet is that I can make the connection with my colleagues around the world and learn from them…."

Professional Identity Formation

Professional Identity has been defined as the picture that an individual has about himself/herself in his profession. This professional self-image, which is based on one's background and experiences, consists of different aspects of a profession, namely, routines, skills, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs (Beijaard et al., 2004). Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) assert that "knowledge of teachers' perceptions of aspects of their professional identity may (…) be useful in helping them cope with educational change" (p. 115). Thus, the formation of their identity in a technological context is vivid in their responses. Almost all participants highlighted such construction of identity. In our study, the participants commented on the effects of using technology on their personal growth as well as their professional growth.

Personal Growth

Previously, Bakker and Demerouti (2007) created a model to understand job demands (which are fluid) and resources (which are provided by employers), and personal resources (which are self-efficacy and self-care practices) within a range of contexts that could influence teachers' stress and burnout. Regarding personal resources, in this study, as many as 7 out of 10 participants claimed that exposure to ICT tools provided a major change in the way they perceive themselves and their capabilities. This has also been supported by several scholars. It has been highlighted that stepping outside their comfort zone provides potential opportunities for personal growth and development (Dweck, 2008) and can thereby lead to perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991). From a deeper perspective, it can potentially cause transformative learning, especially when pre-service teachers are supported to bring new insights into their profession as teachers and deepen their learning (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017).

"…. I can say I have changed a lot. I see things that I didn't like to see before this…."

"….as a person, I feel more motivated for using technology in other aspects of my life, you know, I learned how convenient it makes everything to be, generally I have grown more rounded…"

Professional Growth

In addition to personal growth, the identity of a teacher is defined between confirmed meanings (conventional meaning) and the being-formed beliefs (innovation meaning) during practice (Clarke, 2009). IT-integrated teaching is constantly changing; therefore, teachers are perpetually served with innovation, change, and growth (Mueller et al., 2008), meaning that the teachers' profession is developing continuously. Once teachers have developed their perception

of the technology in their practice, they can tune their teaching and form their professional identity as online teachers more easily than before.

"….. technology has a great role in learning and teaching, I can say I feel more like a modern teacher, more professional…."

"…. this course changed the picture of myself as a teacher greatly, I learned how effective it is to use technology in my classes…."

Teachers' concerns

In addition to positive attitudes and beliefs, a few participants shared some concerns about using technology in their teaching which is worth quoting. The following themes have resulted from the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts.

Technology-related Challenges

Technology cannot be always facilitative. The devices and tools should be always checked before each class so that both teachers and learners can experience a better class. The version of the operating systems, the type and the model of devices, and technological requirements are among those factors that could be managed before a class starts. However, sometimes an unexpected internet disconnection might occur during class. Without the Internet, online learning cannot take place. In the same sense, having a poor Internet connection can be problematic for maintaining a continuous session. Although the participants in the current study have a positive attitude toward ICT tools in general, and the implementation of technology in their teaching practice, they had more concerns about reliable Internet connection for both themselves and their students. According to one of the participants in the current study:

"…. The technology, no matter how useful, cannot operate if the Internet bandwidth is not reliable…."

Another participant mentioned some emotional concerns regarding the Internet connection:

"…. It makes me anxious, and it decreases students' satisfaction from my class when the Internet is disconnected…."

Not only for the participants in the current study, but also in other studies, the Internet connection has been proven to be a real challenge for some groups of people, for example, the intellectually disabled, who are normally at risk of being left behind for not having access to the Internet (Chadwick, Wesson, & Fullwood, 2013; Kennedy, Evans, & Thomas, 2011).

Internet connection might not be very reliable in different countries or areas due to the infrastructure of the Internet. However, the connectivity might be problematic for synchronous classrooms. On the other hand, for asynchronous teaching and learning, a stable internet connection is not as required as it is for synchronous classes. In their study, Mohamad Nasri et al, (2020) mentioned the same problem and offered one very simple alternative for teachers which is to use online messengers, such as Telegram and WhatsApp, as their plan "B" and continue their class asynchronously until connection has become stable.

Classroom Management

Student management can be very different between a traditional classroom and the online one. Almost all participants in this study mentioned the difficulty they have faced in their classroom management. However, even though they have mentioned that they are now used to managing their students more effectively over time, one participant mentions some concerns that are still causing problems and interfering with the teaching practice:

"….. in large classrooms, it is quite impossible to monitor students' activity and real presence in the class while giving the lecture. I cannot check every student all the time to see whether they are well engaged in the topic or not…."

The same problem has been mentioned among other problems by Christensen and Knezek (2018), "lack of self-efficacy to integrate technology, classroom management issues, attitudes toward technology, and a lack of pedagogical strategies" (p. 380). However, in other studies, teaching online has proved to enable teachers to engage learners more meaningfully and provide a better sense of community for learners without the constraints of traditional classes or even without having to struggle with classroom management issues (Archambault & Crippen, 2009).

Inflexibility in behavior

One of the participants highlighted the fact that if online education was more encouraged rather than imposed, it could have caused lower pressure on teachers.

"…. Although it was the only way of educational survival, I did not like the idea of having to use technology without any other options available. This disturbed my attitude toward my classes…."

According to Berger (2020), behavioral changes can be difficult considering the five barriers, called REDUCE which is an acronym for the five barriers, in which the letters represent Reactance, Endowment, Distance, Uncertainty, and Corroborating evidence, respectively. Reactance can be defined as the reactivity of being redirected rather than being empowered, which was highlighted in the current study. The next barrier, Endowment, refers to the discomfort caused by unfamiliarity. Distance is about how far an individual can go beyond their comfort zone. Uncertainty shows the level of suspicion an individual might have toward the new changes in behavior, and Corroborating evidence refers to a lack of endorsement of the new behavior by multiple capacities. However, the proposed solution to overcome such barriers is to break them down Berger (2020) so that teachers can be convinced to adopt the new behavior.

Discussion

Considering the shift into online learning caused by the pandemic of Covid-19, in response to lock-down protocols, this study has been set to investigate whether and how English language teachers might change or adapt their teaching practices. Having probed into participants' experiences within a technology-mediated program, three main categories for positive attitudes (pedagogical innovation, instructional support, and professional identity formation) each with several subcategories have been revealed. Besides the positive attitudes, the participants mentioned some concerns which were reported under three categories (technology-related challenges, classroom management, and inflexibility in behavior) of online teaching.

Undoubtedly and inevitably, the integration of technology has become the basis in language studies since it is the only means of providing input for English language students during the lockdown within an EFL context. The provision of pedagogical innovations helps teachers to present their optimal functioning by systematically utilizing technology, bringing more flexibility in their teaching practice through fostering change adaptation, encouraging creativity among teachers, providing a challenging environment with social involvement, and promoting technological awareness. However, the themes should be interpreted with caution, especially for novice teachers, since technology, on its own, cannot guarantee effective teaching and learning. In addition to the technological knowledge of teachers, pedagogical and content knowledge are equally decisive for the effectiveness of online teaching (Koehler & Mishra, 2005)

Confirming our findings, Hill (2006) reported that one advantage of technology-integrated classrooms is the flexibility that it brings into the curriculum by overcoming distance-and-time-

related obstacles. Moreover, technology enables the diversification of programs by offering choices and options and making them more manageable leading to a blended curriculum that is a mixture of both digital and face-to-face education (Gerbic, 2011). This notion is in line with the idea of connectivism (Kop & Hill, 2008) that: "People can move from a learning environment controlled by the tutor and the institution to an environment where they direct their learning, find their information, and create knowledge by engaging in networks away from the formal setting. They still communicate with others, but their interests and preferences – rather than institutional requirements and choices – are the main drivers for their engagement with more knowledgeable others in their learning" (p. 9). In addition, technology also provides instructional support for English language teachers, as role models, by providing rich content knowledge and encouraging self-learning. Innovation can be brought into foreign language teaching and learning if new teaching materials and computer technologies are used. The main responsibility of teachers is to equip students with future skills which requires teachers to design and develop a curriculum based on optimal functioning regarding students' interests. However, the main attention should be paid to teaching, learning, and assessment of content knowledge following ICT, so that the motivation can be promoted for active learning as well as the accessibility of resources (Fullan, 2013; Kozma & Vota, 2014).

Successful online teachers have been defined based on their capabilities of adopting and utilizing pedagogical strategies with flexibility (Laat et al., 2007), and comprehending the real meaning of blend (Demedts et al., 2015) because flexible curricula with ICT have made the classes very different from traditional expectations of a class (Hill, 2006). Therefore, integrating ICT into teaching effectively can determine the success of teaching and learning. To be able to address the demands of the "new normal" in education, teachers are better to improve their skills and knowledge of using different ICT tools in their practice. According to Ulla & Perales (2021), technology-integrated classrooms have become a necessity rather than optional, so that their function can be guaranteed in the future, in case of unpredicted health and socio-political crisis which can hamper the delivery of lessons.

Moreover, technology-integrated language classes can provide more opportunities for the personal and professional development of English language teachers. Clarke (2009) defined the identity of teachers to be between confirmed meanings (conversation meaning) and the being-formed beliefs (innovation meaning) during teaching. IT-based teaching constantly changes; teachers are being constantly served with innovation with technology (Mueller et al., 2008), which can also be interpreted that teachers' identity is constantly under development which makes teacher education more of a complex endeavor. From being a role model and mentor for pre-service teachers, teacher educators' role is upgrading and changing from being the major source of knowledge to being a role model and a mentor for pre-service teachers, thus preparing the foundation for the future society (Niess, 2015; Van der Klink, Kools, Avissar, White, & Sakata, 2017). The needs of society require teachers to feel more responsible for training pre-service teachers to meet the requirements of making a shift in education including competencies, skills, dispositions, and knowledge. Therefore, before the utilization of design competencies that contributes to the training of 21st-century teachers, not only ICT skills, but also relevant knowledge and the implementation of the knowledge in teaching, plus the development of an up-to-date technology-based curriculum should also be considered (Bower, Highfield, Furney, & Mowbray, 2013). Accordingly, and as Hoyos (2014) has mentioned, teachers' knowledge enhancement and skills in using digital tools and social media platforms will require teachers to grasp their new roles in online learning and facilitate students' learning despite school closure. This is to say that in an e-learning context, the instructor's role is enhanced and enlarges from being a teacher to a facilitator. On the other hand, students also expect their teachers to carry a

positive attitude towards learning online, which will be an encouragement for students to share the same positive perspective (Baber, 2021).

Regarding the reported concerns, some teachers might have the same concerns with traditional classrooms, as numerous studies have investigated the case. Although online teaching is not really in its infancy, it still needs and requires more investigation to find practical solutions to deal with Internet-related challenges, classroom management, inflexible behavior, etc. However, it is worth mentioning that concerns might vary from one teacher to another due to their level of digital literacy. According to Martin and Grudziecki (2006), digital literacy comes in three levels, known as 1) Digital Competence, 2) Digital Usage, and 3) Digital Transformation. While in this digital era individuals might have some digital competence, thanks to computers and smartphones, for professionals there might be differences in the second level, Digital Usage, which refers to their digital competence within a specific profession or domain. This means that the knowledge of ICT tools cannot lead to successful online teaching and learning, and teachers should be trained to be able to use technological advancements in their profession more accurately so that they can benefit from the technology. Also, learners' digital literacy can play a role. Teachers are required to design their materials in a way that needs a minimum level of digital literacy on the learners' side, while at the same time, they should encourage and motivate learners to become digitally more competent. Another consideration should be paid to different types of classes, learners' (age, gender, needs, etc.), and purposes before considering any solutions for the mentioned concerns which means that one possible solution might not work for different contexts. The authors of this article would also like to remark on the fact that this study was conducted within a context where the participants might not have full access to ICT tools and applications, making the concerns more highlighted for those who have the same limitation.

Conclusion

The recent pandemic, Covid-19, transformed education, especially English Language Teaching in an unprecedented way. English teachers were left with no choice but to rethink their practice and modify their teaching within a short time to be able to continue. Similarly, most institutes around the world changed their approach and adopted online learning to continue their practice. Such an obligation requires an investigation into English language teachers' attitudes concerning the effects of social distancing and the increased use of technology in teaching practice during Covid-19. When it comes to the health crisis and in times of similar emergencies when face-to-face teaching is not available, the use of web-based platforms and applications should be pedagogically considered.

On the other hand, when Covid-19 and its threats have been successfully tackled, educational institutions all around the world would probably move back to traditional classes, the so-called "old normal" which has been overtaken by the "new normal" that can be defined as a new conceptual practice to remind everybody including all educators and teachers to remain flexible with the new reality in education where "the application of e-learning [education] is poised to become much more prominent" (Pham & Hanh Ho, 2020). To meet the needs of the "new normal" in the education sector, teachers are suggested to keep their skills up-to-date and upgrade their knowledge of utilizing different tools of information and communication technology in their teaching practices. Rather than an option, integrating technology in the classroom has become a necessity so that in future unpredicted health and socio-political crisis, the delivery of the lessons and the pace of education will not be threatened, disturbed, or even interrupted. Sahlberg (2020) mentioned that "hopefully, when this crisis is over politicians decide to continue to follow that same strategy and use more professional wisdom and evidence from education professionals to inform the next education policies and school reforms" (p.5-6), therefore, another responsibility

is for the government to require its department of education to support teachers through the provision of technological tools and additional training courses. In other words, this responsibility of the government is an ongoing process, even if Covid-19 will be tackled and eradicated.

Another lesson learned from Covid-19 is that the educational curriculum needs to undergo a reformation. To clarify, although different lessons and realizations have been experienced and considered in classroom teaching, the implementation of technology in various teaching strategies and approaches should be considered more seriously, so that teachers can adapt their pedagogy accordingly.

As for the limitation of the study, regardless of every effort of the researchers in this study to present clear results regarding the teachers' reflections on online learning, the number of participants was relatively small in this study, which suggests a difference between the attitudes of the participants and possible additional participants or other teachers. Furthermore, the implemented technology in different educational settings may differ locally, nationally, and internationally. Therefore, generalizations should be approached with caution. Further, this study is qualitative in nature, basically relying on interviews of participants and their reflective journals, through which they shared their thoughts, views, and descriptions of situations in which technology has been utilized the practice of teaching the English language. Hence, to broaden the body of research on teachers' online learning a quantitative study is recommended.

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