

English Language Classroom Practices in an Iran Secondary School Context: A Lesson Learned from Online Learning

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Abstract

This study investigates how English language teaching (ELT) practices in Iranian secondary schools evolved during the transition to online learning prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally characterized by teacher-centered instruction focused on grammar drills and rote memorization, English classrooms in Iran have historically marginalized communicative competence. However, the sudden shift to digital platforms necessitated a reconfiguration of pedagogical approaches, prompting teachers to adopt more interactive, student-centered strategies. The study aims to explore how this transition influenced teaching beliefs and methods, as well as how students' engagement with digital tools affected their autonomy and communicative competence. Employing a qualitative descriptive research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with English teachers, student focus group discussions, and document analysis of digital learning artifacts. A purposive sample of 10 teachers and 30 students from urban and semi-urban schools was selected. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that teachers shifted toward more flexible and scaffolded instruction, with increased awareness of student autonomy and engagement. Students, in turn, developed greater responsibility for their learning and enhanced their communicative abilities, especially in written formats through asynchronous interactions. Challenges included initial technological unpreparedness and disparities in digital access, but professional development and reflective practice helped mitigate these barriers. The study concludes that the pandemic-induced transition to online learning serves not merely as an emergency response, but as a catalyst for enduring pedagogical innovation. It highlights the potential of technology-enhanced ELT to foster learner-centered, communicative, and reflective practices in Iranian classrooms.

Keywords: Online learning; English language teaching; Student autonomy; Digital pedagogy; Communicative competence

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INTRODUCTION

The transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has marked a turning point in English language teaching (ELT) practices in Iranian secondary schools. Historically, English instruction in Iran has been rigidly rooted in a teacher-centered pedagogy, where instruction predominantly focused on grammar drills, rote memorization of vocabulary, and preparation for high-stakes standardized examinations. This traditional mode of instruction, while systematically structured and exam-oriented, often marginalized essential communicative aspects of language learning. Consequently, students emerged from these programs with limited practical

ability to engage in real-life English conversations or meaningful interactions (Khansir et al., 2021; Dastgahian, 2021). The learning process was largely passive, with students being knowledge recipients rather than active participants in constructing language competence. This entrenched instructional culture had long resisted change, emphasizing conformity over creativity and performance over process.

However, the onset of the pandemic forced an abrupt but necessary re-evaluation of these long-standing teaching norms. Schools were required to shift from physical classrooms to digital platforms almost overnight. This disruption, though initially met with confusion and logistical challenges, became a catalyst for change. Teachers who had previously relied on face-to-face lecturing and textbook-based instruction had to explore and adapt to digital platforms such as learning management systems (LMS), Zoom, and other virtual tools to continue their teaching. This opened avenues for experimentation with student-centered methodologies that prioritized learner engagement and interactive language use. The integration of group discussions, peer collaboration, multimedia presentations, and task-based learning became more feasible through these tools (Ahmad et al., 2021). Although internet access and digital literacy levels varied across regions, teachers and students gradually became more adept at navigating these technologies, revealing a latent potential for transformation within the Iranian ELT framework (Braslauskienė et al., 2024).

Importantly, the online environment necessitated a pedagogical shift not only in delivery but also in perspective. Teachers were compelled to reconsider how students learn and what kind of learning fosters meaningful outcomes. Remote instruction highlighted the importance of flexibility, both in lesson design and in teacher expectations. Educators had to scaffold tasks differently, often providing step-by-step guidance while allowing room for student exploration. Lessons became more modular and reflective, integrating activities that could sustain attention and build skills progressively. One of the most remarkable outcomes was the growing awareness among educators of the significance of student motivation in online settings. Without the physical presence of a teacher to enforce discipline, students had to cultivate intrinsic motivation to participate and complete tasks, which encouraged teachers to adopt more engaging, authentic materials and participatory approaches (Ahmad et al., 2021).

In parallel, the role of students underwent a profound evolution. The digital classroom promoted autonomy and self-directed learning, which contrasted sharply with the passive reception typical of traditional Iranian classrooms. With greater control over their learning environment—choosing when to study, how to interact, and what resources to use—students began to exercise more responsibility over their progress. As communication shifted to written formats such as chats, forums, and emails, learners were required to articulate their ideas in English more frequently and thoughtfully. This not only improved their writing skills but also enhanced their confidence in using the language for authentic purposes (Khoshnood & Kafipour, 2023). The asynchronous nature of online learning provided students with more time to process information, reflect on their errors, and engage in iterative learning processes—benefits not always available in real-time classroom interactions.

Moreover, the experience of online learning revealed glaring gaps in teacher preparedness, particularly regarding the use of educational technologies and the implementation of communicative teaching practices. Many teachers lacked prior training in digital tools and pedagogical frameworks suited for remote instruction. This realization has prompted discussions within educational circles in Iran about the urgent need for professional development programs focused on digital literacy and modern ELT methodologies. Such programs are essential to empower teachers with the skills and mindset needed to create blended or fully online learning environments that are not only functional but also pedagogically effective (Jamshidian et al., 2024). The pandemic experience emphasized that technology is not merely a delivery mechanism but a vehicle for rethinking the goals, processes, and outcomes of language education.

Beyond classroom logistics and instructional techniques, the transition to online learning also served as a reflective mirror for Iranian English language education. It challenged deeply embedded assumptions about teacher authority, curriculum rigidity, and learner passivity. As students assumed more responsibility and teachers relinquished some control, the relationship between the two became more collaborative. This shift aligns with global trends in ELT that advocate for learner-centeredness, task-based learning, and communicative competence as core objectives of language instruction. Iranian educators began to see value in these principles, not merely as abstract theories but as practical necessities in the digital classroom. The pandemic thus offered a unique moment of pedagogical introspection and potential recalibration of national teaching practices (Dastgahian, 2021; Ahmad et al., 2021).

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on capturing the lived transformation of English teaching in Iranian secondary schools during an unprecedented global crisis. Unlike previous research that mainly critiques traditional practices or promotes theoretical reforms, this study offers grounded insights into how a real-time shift to online learning disrupted, challenged, and redefined conventional language education in Iran. It documents how both teachers and students navigated the constraints and possibilities of digital platforms, and how this navigation led to a reconsideration of core teaching values and learner roles.

This study thus raises important considerations for the future of English education in similar socio-educational contexts. The findings suggest that the integration of technology in ELT should not be viewed as a short-term solution to school closures but as a long-term strategy for pedagogical innovation. As schools in Iran and elsewhere return to in-person instruction, there is a risk of reverting to pre-pandemic norms. However, this research emphasizes the importance of preserving the gains made—particularly the adoption of student-centered practices, the use of authentic digital communication, and the prioritization of teacher training in modern methodologies.

In light of these reflections and findings, the study proposes the following research questions for further investigation: *How has the transition to online learning influenced the teaching beliefs and practices of English language teachers in Iranian secondary schools? In what ways has students' engagement with digital tools during online learning impacted their autonomy and communicative competence in English?*

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, aiming to explore the transformation of English language teaching practices in Iranian secondary schools during the transition to online learning prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative approach is suitable for capturing the complex, contextualized experiences of teachers and learners within real educational settings. This design allows for an in-depth understanding of pedagogical shifts, the use of technology, and emerging learner-centered practices, as well as the challenges encountered in this transition. The study focuses on interpreting how classroom practices evolved and what lessons were learned from the online learning experience, particularly in relation to student engagement, autonomy, and communicative competence. By analyzing firsthand accounts from educators and students, the research seeks to reveal the pedagogical and institutional implications of these experiences and how they may inform future practices in English language instruction.

Participants

The participants in this study comprised English language teachers and secondary school students from public and private schools in urban and semi-urban areas of Iran. A purposive sampling technique was used to select individuals who were actively engaged in teaching or learning English during the shift to online instruction. The teacher participants included 10 English language instructors with varying years of teaching experience, ranging from novice educators to senior practitioners. Additionally, 30 students from grades 10 to 12 were involved, all of whom had experienced at least one academic year of remote English instruction during the pandemic. These participants were chosen to provide a diverse range of perspectives across different school types and socio-economic backgrounds. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process: participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to confidentiality, and their freedom to withdraw at any point without penalty. Written consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Instruments and Data Collection Technique

To gather rich, context-sensitive data, the study employed multiple qualitative instruments designed to capture the complex experiences of both teachers and students during the transition to online English language instruction. One of the primary tools used was semi-structured interviews with English language teachers. These interviews aimed to explore the educators' experiences, adaptations, and perceptions regarding the shift to online learning. Open-ended questions were employed to allow for detailed responses concerning pedagogical strategies, the integration of digital tools, the challenges encountered, and the changes observed in student engagement and performance throughout the online teaching period.

In addition to teacher interviews, student focus group discussions were organized to gain insight into the learners' perspectives. These discussions were facilitated in small online groups to create a comfortable environment for students to share their thoughts. The conversations focused on how the shift to online learning influenced their English language development, particularly in areas such as learner autonomy, motivation, and opportunities to engage in authentic communication.

using English. This approach helped to reveal how students navigated digital platforms and what they perceived as gains or limitations in their learning experience.

Document analysis served as another valuable source of data. This involved reviewing a range of digital learning artifacts, including student-written emails, forum posts, chat transcripts, and instructional materials or feedback provided by teachers. These documents offered a window into actual classroom practices and supported the triangulation of data by complementing the verbal responses from interviews and focus groups. All interviews and focus group sessions were conducted via video conferencing platforms, ensuring accessibility and safety during data collection. Each session was recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data collected through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis were examined using thematic analysis, guided by the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method provided a structured approach to identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data, allowing the researchers to make meaningful sense of the participants' experiences and insights. The analysis began with a process of familiarization, during which the researchers read and re-read the transcripts and field notes to immerse themselves in the data. This step allowed for a holistic understanding of the context and content of participants' responses. Following this, the researchers conducted initial coding by identifying meaningful units of data and assigning labels to recurring ideas, phrases, or issues related to areas such as instructional adaptations, the integration of digital tools, student engagement, and learner autonomy.

After generating the initial codes, the researchers grouped these codes into broader, more abstract categories, which eventually formed the study's main themes. Some of the key themes that emerged included the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered practices, the role of technology in instruction, the barriers to online learning such as digital access and preparedness, and the notable gains in student autonomy as learners adapted to new modes of instruction. The next phase involved reviewing and refining these themes. The researchers revisited the raw data to ensure that each theme accurately represented the participants' experiences and that there was internal coherence within each category. Adjustments were made as needed to consolidate overlapping themes or clarify ambiguous patterns. Finally, the themes were interpreted in light of existing scholarly literature and the guiding research questions. This interpretative process helped draw connections between the observed classroom transformations and broader pedagogical trends, offering insights into the evolving nature of English language education in Iran's secondary school context during the pandemic-induced shift to online learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

In light of these reflections and findings, the study proposes the following research questions for further investigation: How has the transition to online learning influenced the teaching beliefs and practices of English language teachers in Iranian secondary schools? In what ways has students' engagement with digital tools during online learning impacted their autonomy and communicative competence in English?

Each question of the study are broken down into five sub questions delivered to teachers and students. The findings can be presented in Table 1.

Table 1. English Teachers' and Students' Responses on Digital Learning

Research Questions	Sub-questions	Responses
How has the transition to online learning influenced the teaching beliefs and practices of English language teachers in Iranian secondary	How have teachers adapted their instructional strategies in online environments?	Teachers moved from traditional lecturing to using interactive platforms and collaborative tasks.
	How has the shift affected their perception of student-centered learning?	The shift made teachers more aware of the importance of learner autonomy and engagement.
	What challenges did teachers face in managing virtual classrooms?	Teachers initially struggled with managing online behavior and maintaining motivation.
	What role did flexibility and scaffolding play in lesson planning?	Lesson plans became more flexible, integrating scaffolding to support independent learning.
	How has professional development in digital tools changed their practice?	Many teachers pursued training in digital literacy, which transformed their teaching methods.
In what ways has students' engagement with digital tools during online learning impacted their autonomy and communicative competence in English?	How did digital tools encourage students to participate more actively?	Digital tools like chats and forums created new avenues for students to express themselves.
	In what ways did students take responsibility for their learning?	Students managed their schedules and learning activities more independently.
	How did asynchronous communication improve students' writing skills?	Asynchronous platforms gave students time to reflect and refine their written responses.
	What types of digital interactions promoted communicative competence?	Group discussions, peer feedback, and digital presentations enhanced speaking and interaction.
	How did students develop metacognitive strategies through digital engagement?	Students used tools like recordings and transcripts to monitor and improve comprehension.

Table 1 showed that the transition to online learning has significantly reshaped how English language teachers in Iranian secondary schools perceive and practice teaching. Teachers, who once relied heavily on traditional, lecture-based methods, began adapting their instructional strategies to suit interactive, digital platforms. This involved incorporating collaborative tasks, using multimedia content, and engaging students in more dialogic learning experiences. As a result of these changes, many educators reported a growing appreciation for student-centered learning, recognizing that learners' autonomy and active participation are essential for meaningful language development.

Despite these advances, the shift to virtual classrooms also posed several challenges. Teachers struggled initially with managing classroom behavior in online environments and maintaining student motivation without face-to-face interaction. These issues led educators to rethink how they structured lessons, eventually integrating greater flexibility and scaffolding. They began to design learning activities that could support students with varying levels of digital access and learning independence. Professional development also emerged as a crucial factor in this transformation. Many teachers engaged in training programs to improve their digital literacy and adopt modern teaching tools. These new skills empowered them to move beyond traditional instruction and implement more effective, technology-enhanced language teaching methods.

Discussion

The transition to online learning triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a fundamental transformation in English language teaching practices across Iranian secondary schools. For decades, English instruction in Iran had been grounded in a teacher-centered, exam-oriented paradigm, emphasizing grammar drills, vocabulary memorization, and rigid adherence to textbooks (Azizi et al., 2022; Burgess-Brigham et al., 2020). This structure prioritized performance in high-stakes assessments at the expense of communicative competence and interactive learning. Students were largely passive recipients of knowledge, trained to reproduce grammatical forms rather than engage meaningfully with the language in authentic contexts.

However, the abrupt move to online platforms necessitated by the global health crisis dismantled this traditional model, prompting both teachers and learners to reevaluate their roles and practices (Masitoh et al., 2024; Salem M. Alqahtani et al., 2018; Situmorang & Simanjuntak, 2023; Xu & Zhou, 2020). The findings of this study reveal that many teachers transitioned from lecture-driven methods to more participatory, learner-centered approaches. They began to incorporate interactive technologies—such as discussion forums, breakout rooms, digital whiteboards, and shared online documents—to facilitate peer collaboration, group tasks, and project-based learning. This shift marked a critical departure from rigid pedagogical routines and signaled a growing recognition of the importance of student autonomy, engagement, and communicative interaction in language acquisition.

Teachers in the study reported that the new digital context demanded more flexible lesson planning and the integration of scaffolding techniques tailored to diverse student needs. Without the physical presence of students in the classroom, they had to find innovative ways to maintain engagement, assess progress, and offer support. It is in line with Lee and Schmitt (2014) who inform that scaffolding strategies

such as chunking tasks, providing guiding questions, and using visual prompts became more commonplace, helping learners navigate content independently. Teachers also highlighted the essential role of timely feedback and motivational reinforcement in sustaining student interest and effort in virtual environments.

Despite these gains, the transition was not without its obstacles. Many teachers initially struggled to manage student behavior in virtual settings, particularly regarding attendance, participation, and academic honesty. The absence of face-to-face accountability introduced new challenges in classroom management (Anwar & Wahid, 2021; Asrimawati et al., 2024; Haerazi, 2023). Furthermore, the digital divide posed a significant barrier, with students from underprivileged or rural areas often lacking consistent access to reliable internet or necessary devices. These limitations required teachers to adjust expectations and experiment with asynchronous modes of instruction, including recorded lessons, downloadable resources, and email-based communication.

To adapt successfully, many teachers pursued professional development in educational technology and digital pedagogy. They enrolled in online training courses, attended webinars, and participated in peer-led workshops to enhance their digital literacy and instructional design skills (Chen, 2021; Masitoh et al., 2024). The study found that this upskilling process was pivotal in empowering teachers to use technology not just as a delivery mechanism, but as a transformative tool for language instruction. Teachers reported greater confidence in employing multimodal resources, integrating multimedia content, and designing assessments that emphasized process over product. These professional growth experiences reflect a broader shift in teacher identity—from authoritative knowledge transmitters to facilitators of interactive, student-driven learning.

Equally significant were the transformations observed among students. The online learning environment necessitated increased learner autonomy, as students had to manage their time, organize tasks, and seek help without the immediate presence of a teacher. The findings revealed that many students embraced this responsibility, developing skills in self-regulation, digital navigation, and independent inquiry. Platforms such as discussion boards, messaging apps, and shared workspaces enabled them to practice written English more frequently and authentically (Chen, 2021; Hamsia, 2024). The asynchronous nature of many online interactions allowed for reflection and revision, fostering deeper cognitive processing and improved writing fluency.

Students also expanded their communicative competence through online interaction. Group discussions, peer feedback activities, and digital presentations offered them opportunities to use English in meaningful, purpose-driven ways. Unlike traditional classrooms, where speaking is often limited to teacher-directed drills, the online environment encouraged spontaneous exchanges, collaborative decision-making, and expressive language use. Many students gained confidence in initiating conversations, asking questions, and expressing opinions in English, particularly in written formats such as chats and emails. These forms of communication supported their development of language for real-world purposes, a key goal in communicative language teaching.

Another notable outcome was the development of metacognitive awareness among learners. As they engaged with digital content, revisited recorded lessons, and used transcripts or captions, students began to monitor their comprehension and identify areas for improvement. This self-evaluative behavior, often guided by teacher prompts, nurtured reflective learning habits. Learners became more aware of their strengths and challenges, and more proactive in seeking clarification or additional resources (Abutalebi & Clahsen, 2022; Acebes et al., 2022). This growth in metacognitive strategy use suggests that online learning—when supported by effective feedback and scaffolded activities—can enhance not only linguistic outcomes but also cognitive and self-regulatory capacities in language learners.

The discussion would be incomplete without acknowledging the limitations and disparities that emerged during this digital transition. While some students thrived in the online environment, others struggled with isolation, distractions at home, and lack of support. Teachers observed that motivation was uneven across learners, with some disengaging due to frustration or limited access to technology. These findings point to the need for differentiated instruction, targeted interventions, and greater institutional support to ensure equity in learning outcomes. Furthermore, the rapid implementation of online learning revealed gaps in systemic readiness (Chiang et al., 2022; Xu & Zhou, 2020), including insufficient digital infrastructure in schools and a lack of pre-pandemic training in online pedagogy.

Nevertheless, the collective experiences documented in this study underscore a powerful shift in mindset among both teachers and students. The crisis challenged entrenched norms and provided a real-time laboratory for innovation in English language teaching. Teachers reported a stronger belief in the efficacy of learner-centered instruction, while students discovered new ways to take ownership of their language learning. These findings resonate with broader research in ELT, which emphasizes the importance of learner agency, task-based learning, and meaningful communication as cornerstones of effective language education (Khoshnood & Kafipour, 2023; Ahmad et al., 2021).

The study's value lies not only in documenting this transitional period but in illustrating the potential for lasting pedagogical reform. The pandemic served as a catalyst for experimentation, reflection, and professional growth. The insights gained from this period should not be viewed as temporary adaptations but as stepping stones toward a more inclusive, flexible, and interactive model of English language education in Iran. By integrating the lessons learned into post-pandemic curricula and teacher training programs, stakeholders can ensure that the gains made during this time are not lost.

The transition to online learning has had a profound and multifaceted impact on English language classroom practices in Iranian secondary schools. It has prompted teachers to adopt more flexible, learner-centered approaches and has empowered students to take greater responsibility for their learning. Despite challenges, the experience has opened new pathways for pedagogical innovation and professional development. As the education system moves forward, it is crucial to preserve and build upon these insights, ensuring that English language instruction continues to evolve in response to the changing needs of learners and the possibilities of digital learning environments.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings and analysis presented in this study, it can be concluded that the COVID-19-induced transition to online learning has profoundly influenced English language teaching (ELT) practices in Iranian secondary schools. The sudden move from conventional, teacher-centered instruction to digital platforms catalyzed a pedagogical shift toward more learner-centered, interactive, and reflective teaching approaches. Teachers were compelled to reevaluate their instructional strategies, transitioning from rigid grammar-focused lessons to more flexible and communicative frameworks. Digital tools such as chats, forums, and collaborative applications provided new avenues for student engagement and facilitated the development of both linguistic and metacognitive skills.

Teachers not only integrated scaffolding techniques and task-based learning but also underwent professional development to enhance their digital literacy, transforming their instructional roles from knowledge transmitters to facilitators. They reported increased awareness of the need for student autonomy, motivation, and differentiated support. Likewise, students evolved from passive recipients of knowledge to active participants in their learning journey. With greater control over learning schedules and resources, students began to self-regulate their study habits, interact more meaningfully in English, and develop authentic written and spoken communication skills through asynchronous and synchronous online activities.

Despite significant challenges—such as disparities in access to technology, classroom management difficulties, and the digital divide—the experience was largely transformative. It surfaced critical insights about the adaptability and resilience of both educators and learners. Importantly, it revealed that technology, when used meaningfully and with proper pedagogical oversight, can serve as more than a temporary substitute; it can be a driver for sustained educational reform.

As Iranian schools return to physical classrooms, this study underscores the importance of not reverting to outdated practices. Instead, the innovations and pedagogical gains made during online instruction should be preserved and embedded into future teaching models. By embracing blended learning, reinforcing teacher training in digital pedagogy, and fostering student autonomy, Iranian ELT can move toward a more equitable, communicative, and learner-centered future.

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