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Teacher Reflections on Distance English Teaching to Iranian Young Language Learners during COVID-19

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Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 led to a swift transition from traditional classrooms to distance education to ensure the continuity of learning. This sudden shift resulted in some problems for language teachers while offering some opportunities. This paper focused on language teachers' reflections on the challenges they faced due to the urgent shift to virtual teaching of English to young language learners (YLL). The study also explored teachers' reflections on the opportunities offered by distance language teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown. The data for the study were triangulated through a questionnaire filled out by 100 language teachers, a survey completed by 12 teachers, and an interview with five teachers. Based on quantitative analysis of the questionnaire data and thematic analysis of the survey and interview responses, distance education led to five main categories of challenges, including technological issues, communication issues, psychological issues, pedagogical issues, and worries and offered opportunities in five areas, comprising of technological knowledge, and psychological, pedagogical, economic, and safety issues. The results stress the crucial role of technology in education, specifically in times of emergency such as the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, they imply the need for enhancing teachers and learners' digital literacy, equipping educational environments with technological tools, and removing barriers in the way of implementing virtual education. Further implications of the study for language teachers, learners, and policymakers are discussed in the paper.

Keywords:
 COVID-19,
 Language
 teaching/learn
 ing, Distance
 language
 teaching,
 Teacher
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Introduction

By the end of 2019, the world faced the unexpected and obscure situation of the rapid spread of COVID-19. The spread of COVID-19 started in China, and Iran was the second country that encountered this unknown disease. Tackling the unusual and new circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic proved challenging for all organizations and institutions, impacting all aspects of human life. Education, being one of the most significant parts of human life, was not exempt from the effects of this new situation. To address the unfamiliar challenges and ensure continuity in the education process, there was a conversion to distance education. As Meirovitz et al. (2022) maintained, COVID-19 was “a wake-up call to help educators prepare for the immediate and long-term future” (p. 6). Thus, numerous studies have examined distance language education during the COVID-19 pandemic from various perspectives.

Some studies have addressed the effect of COVID-19 on language teaching (e.g., Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020), language assessment (Abduh, 2021), effectiveness of using technology in education (e.g., Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Karaeng & Simanjuntak, 2021), and new approaches or methods of language teaching (e.g., Safira et al., 2021) during the crisis. Additionally, a few studies (e.g., Algethami, 2022; Daniel, 2020; Magomedov et al., 2020; Karakaya et al., 2021; Safira et al., 2021; Sugianto & Ulfah, 2020) have focused on advantages and disadvantages of distance education during the pandemic from teachers' viewpoints. However, to the researchers' knowledge, research is scarce on teachers' reflections on distance language teaching in Iran throughout the pandemic. Moreover, as highlighted by Taghizadeh and Hasani Yourdshahi (2020), little research has focused on the issues related to distance English teaching to young language learners (YLLs). Therefore, this study aimed to explore language teachers' reflections on the challenges of distance English teaching to YLLs in Iran during COVID-19. In addition, the study examined teachers' views about the opportunities offered by distance English teaching to YLLs throughout the pandemic.

Literature review

COVID-19 emerged as an unforeseen global pandemic which significantly influenced education, among many other dimensions of human life. In order to effectively navigate this unforeseen situation in education, the educational structure must ensure the required adaptations as well as planning for the next post-COVID-19 program (Daniel, 2020). Consequently, a considerable amount of research has been done globally, aiming to investigate teachers' perspectives on the diverse dimensions of distance language education during the COVID-19 lockdown. Some studies (e.g., Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Nakhriyah & Muzakky, 2021) have addressed teachers' reflections on the efficacy of distance language teaching amidst COVID-19 which could result in the

suspension of education as a whole without the possibility of virtual education. Khatoony and Nezhadmehr (2020) found that despite the challenges that Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers faced during the move from face-to-face classes to distance education, the teachers stressed the importance and usefulness of integrating technology into the online classroom. Analyzing the consequences of the COVID-19-related postponement of education, Tarkar (2020) stressed the helpfulness of flexible distance learning and asynchronous learning as ways of avoiding such consequences. Additionally, Nakhriyah and Muzakky (2021) reported that teachers in junior high schools in Jakarta found interactive teaching through various applications and platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, Google Classroom, and WhatsApp beneficial.

Despite its effectiveness, this abrupt conversion to distance education faced language teachers with some challenges. According to MacIntyre et al. (2020), teachers faced high pressure as a result of the abrupt shift to distance teaching without prior technological preparation and the need to provide online course content, adapt to a new environment, and work from home which was compounded by the presence of their children at home. English teachers were even more affected by the abrupt move to distance education (Sayer & Braun, 2020). Thus, a large part of the literature (e.g., Karaeng & Simanjuntak, 2021; Nakhriyah & Muzakky, 2021; Nambiar, 2020) has addressed language teachers' reflection on the challenges they confronted due to the switch to the entirely virtual mode of education.

The most critical challenge reported by language teachers in the majority of the studies (e.g., Fatima, 2020; Magomedov et al., 2020; Nakhriyah & Muzakky, 2021; Sayer & Braun, 2020; Whittle et al., 2020) was the internet connectivity. In addition, an important detrimental consequence of distance language teaching was losing direct mutual student-teacher interaction (Nakhriyah & Muzakky, 2021; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). According to Karaeng and Simanjuntak (2021), teachers mentioned facing various obstacles in implementing successful distance teaching, including lack of meaningful interaction in E-learning due to limited time and insufficient opportunities for effective interconnection between teachers and students. A further problem was that this sudden and unexpected change compelled language teachers and learners to abruptly shift from traditional teaching and learning methods to online platforms without prior technological preparation (Fatima, 2020; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). Lack of adequate infrastructure and facilities to support the transition to online classes (Magomedov et al., 2020; Nambiar, 2020) and limited technological proficiency among both teachers and students created challenges for them (Nambiar, 2020). Students' decreased interest in attending online classes was a further problem (Al-Samiri, 2021; Nambiar, 2020). Educational constraints (Al-Samiri, 2021), and concerns regarding psychological well-being (Al-Samiri, 2021) were among other challenges. Generally, the challenges in the literature can be summarized into a number of issues, as identified by Chahkandi (2021), Meirovitz et al. (2022), and Sidi et al. (2023). Chahkandi identified

six main areas of concern for EFL teachers, including technical problems, exam safety and validity, policy planning and regulations, struggles with adaptability, pedagogical challenges, and inadequate ICT infrastructure. Meirovitz et al. (2022) specified four factors as the main challenges faced by teachers. These challenges included a lack of pedagogical-technological knowledge, professional guidance, and face-to-face communication with students, as well as tedious lesson preparation. Sidi et al. (2023) found that teachers' concerns in virtual teaching emerged into five main categories, including social, emotional, cognitive, pedagogical, and system support issues.

However, some studies (e.g., Afrin, 2020; Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Karaeng & Simanjuntak, 2021; Karakaya et al., 2021; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020) have shown that language teachers believe that the sudden shift to distance language teaching has provided them with some opportunities as well. Based on teacher reflections, the positive influences of COVID-19 have been the integration of technology into education (Magomedov et al., 2020; Safira et al., 2021), the potential for teachers to boost their self-confidence (Nambiar, 2020), the opportunity to explore creative and innovative teaching methods (Nambiar, 2020), teachers' acquisition of technology skills, enhanced awareness, and improved skill development (Karakaya et al., 2021), and reduced stress for students (Nambiar, 2020).

In addition, in an effort to mitigate the adverse effects of this sudden change in education, new methods and educational activities have been introduced. According to Moorhouse and Beaumont (2020), video conferencing facilitated effective learning for YLLs in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 situation. Yi and Jang (2020) studied South Korean English teachers to see how they tried to adapt their teaching to remote education with the closure of schools. They reported that the two teachers introduced a new method called translanguaging orientation, incorporating both the students' native language (L1) and the target language (L2), which their students responded positively to and found easy to engage with. Young and White (2024) examined the experiences of eight Polish complementary school heads to see how they responded to the pandemic lockdown, what measures they took, and what challenges they faced in providing distance learning to their students. The results suggested that despite facing several challenges, they took a creative approach to distance learning, and they experienced increased cooperation between different schools and between schools and external organizations. The findings suggest that despite facing several challenges, they took a creative approach to online learning and they experienced increased cooperation between different schools and between schools and external organizations. These innovative practices have been interrelated with teacher cognition (Gao & Cui, 2024; Gao & Zhang, 2020). Gao and Zhang (2020) showed that teachers had clear cognitions about various aspects of distance English teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown, including the features of distance teaching, its positive consequences, and its challenges. Gao and Cui (2024) noticed a complex link between teachers' educational beliefs and their distance teaching practices concerning

their use of online technology during and beyond the times of COVID-19. Karaeng and Simanjuntak (2021) found that teachers implementing distance education during the COVID-19 crisis believed they had two crucial roles in E-learning: facilitating student learning and promoting self-regulated teaching.

The skills and expertise acquired by teachers and learners during the COVID-19 lockdown can prove to be highly valuable in the post-pandemic era (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). However, despite the existence of numerous studies, research specifically focusing on language teachers' perspectives on language teaching to YLLs during the COVID-19 crisis in Iran is limited. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate language teachers' reflections on the challenges they faced in teaching English to YLLs in Iran during the COVID-19 lockdown and the opportunities that this sudden shift offered them. In line with the stated purpose, the following two questions were posed.

- What are the language teachers' reflections on their challenges with distance English teaching to YLLs in Iran during the COVID-19 lockdown?
- What are the language teachers' reflections on the opportunities offered by distance English teaching to YLLs in Iran during the COVID-19 lockdown?

Method

Participants

Describe the participants' characteristics (age, educational background, gender, nationality). Provide criteria for choosing the samples. Indicate criteria for selection or inclusion of the subjects. Language teachers engaged in teaching English to YLLs in 11 Iranian language institutes attended the three phases of data collection, which occurred online due to the COVID-19 lockdown. Ellis (2014) considers all language learners under the age of 18 as YLLs. In this study, YLLs were defined as individuals aged between 6 and 18 years old who were studying English in language institutes. The participants in the first phase were required to fill out the questionnaire on challenges and opportunities arising out of emergency distance language teaching. These participants were 100 male and female teachers who had returned the completed questionnaire, which had been sent online to 145 teachers selected based on convenience sampling. Using the random number method, 40 of these 100 teachers were selected randomly for the next phase of data collection, and the survey questions were sent to them. Twelve of these teachers completed the descriptive survey. Finally, the 12 participants of the second phase were invited to attend the last phase, which was the interview, and five of them agreed to be interviewed. The participants signed consent forms for the interview sessions being recorded and for the data from all three sources being published. Table 1 provides more details about the teachers attending the three phases. To keep confidentiality, the names of the institutes are not mentioned.

Table 1.*Demographic Information of the Participants*

Phases	Teachers invited	Teachers attending the study			Age range			No. of institutes
		Total	Male	Female	18-25	16-33	33>	
Phase 1	145	100	31	69	18	37	45	11
Phase 2	40	12	2	10	5	3	4	8
Phase 3	12	5	0	5	3	2	0	3

Instrumentation

A questionnaire, a descriptive survey, and an interview were the three instruments prepared and used to gather the data in this study.

Questionnaire on Challenges and Opportunities of the Emergency Distance Language Teaching

A questionnaire was prepared for this study. The initial questions of this questionnaire were 70 items on both positive and negative sides of the sudden shift to distance language teaching. These items were constructed based on the review of the literature and authority consultation. During the revision process, the number of items was reduced to 61. The revised version was then piloted with 20 teachers who were at that time teaching English online to YLLs. The teachers received the questionnaire through the WhatsApp platform and were told that the second researcher was available online to answer any questions about the items. In addition, at the beginning of the questionnaire, they were asked to write their comments about any of the items if they felt there were problems or ambiguities. Based on the analysis of the teachers' questions in WhatsApp and their comments within the questionnaire, which were mostly related to ambiguities in content expression, some items were modified, and six of the items were omitted. Therefore, the final questionnaire consisted of 55 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, indicating "Strongly Disagree", to 5, showing "Strongly Agree." The items of the questionnaire could be divided into two categories, one on the challenges and the other on the opportunities. However, to get better results, the items were presented in random order. The reliability of the questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach alpha, and the Cronbach alpha coefficient (.89) indicated a high measure of internal consistency for the instrument.

Descriptive Survey Questions

To complement the data gathered through the questionnaire, a descriptive survey was run with 12 of the participating teachers. This survey was carried out by sending a pair of questions to the teachers via the WhatsApp platform, asking them to write answers to the questions, and sending them back to the second researcher. In accordance with the objective of the study, the descriptive survey included two questions that aimed to capture their overall perspectives on the positive consequences and negative effects of remote

classes throughout the pandemic. This survey provided teachers with an opportunity to express their viewpoints on the issue that had not been touched on in the questionnaire.

Interview

To further complement the data gained from the two previously mentioned instruments, an interview was done with five of the teachers. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown, the interview was run through video calls via WhatsApp with the teachers. A total of seven questions were used to ask the teachers about their ideas on the sudden shift to distance language teaching, the negative and positive consequences of COVID-19 on their practice of teaching English to YLLs, and their reflections on distance language teaching.

Design of the Study

This study was designed based on an exploratory, descriptive design that utilized both qualitative and quantitative data. Triangulation of data was employed to gather data from three sources: a questionnaire, a descriptive survey, and an interview. The study was exploratory in the sense that the examination of the teachers' reflections on the challenges and opportunities of distance English teaching during COVID-19 was not based on any predefined categories of challenges and opportunities. It employed a deductive approach in the questionnaire stage, followed by an inductive approach in the survey and interview. The results obtained through the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively, and those collected through the survey and interview were analyzed qualitatively using the semantic approach to thematic analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process involved three sequential steps. Initially, the questionnaire that the researchers had designed was sent through the WhatsApp online platform to 145 English teachers from 11 Iranian institutes in Tehran. Out of this number, 100 teachers returned the completed questionnaire. Next, 40 of the teachers who had filled out the questionnaire were randomly selected and were given the descriptive survey questions via WhatsApp. Twelve teachers sent answers to the survey. Finally, the 12 teachers attending the descriptive survey completion were invited to attend an interview on the topic, and five showed readiness to participate. Therefore, to get more comprehensive information, the volunteered teachers were interviewed based on the interview questions which had already been prepared. These interviews were recorded to facilitate the analysis of the responses. Throughout the interview, any additional insights or thoughts that emerged during the interviews were integrated to ensure a dynamic and holistic approach to gathering information.

Data Analysis

First, descriptive statistics were conducted for the questionnaire data. Then, all the data from the descriptive survey and the interview were analyzed qualitatively based on the semantic approach to inductive thematic analysis. Within the semantic approach, the themes are identified based on their surface meaning of the data, not what might be

beyond what has been said (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was selected because the purpose of this study was to rely on teachers' expression of what they thought about challenges and opportunities of distance instruction, rather than going beyond that to interpret what they had expressed. To extract the themes, first all the responses were coded based on the purpose of the study. Then, the extracted codes were sorted into some themes which were collated into two main categories: one related to the negative effects and the other to the positive consequences of COVID-19 on teaching English to YLLs. Next, the extracted themes were reviewed and refined based on Patton's (1990) dual criteria for judging themes, that is, internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. In other words, the themes were checked for the extent to which the codes within them go together, while the themes are clearly distinct from each other.

Findings and Discussion

To achieve the objective of the study, the data gathered through the questionnaire, descriptive survey and interview were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively and were presented first with regard to the challenges and then the opportunities of distance language teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges Faced by Teachers Teaching English to YLLs during COVID-19

Challenges Based on the Analysis of Questionnaire Data

Out of the 55 items of the questionnaire, 32 items were on challenges perceived by the teachers. According to the responses to these items, internet-related issues were of high concern to most of the teachers. Sixty percent of the language teachers reported that one of the most significant challenges faced by both teachers and students during the COVID-19 pandemic was the lack of internet connection. Additionally, 62 percent of the teachers stated that the internet speed in Iran was very slow. The high price of internet services in Iran was also highlighted as a challenge by 61 percent of the teachers. Lastly, increasing costs for language teachers due to internet expenses throughout the pandemic in online classes was identified as an obstacle by 62 percent of the teachers.

Another major challenge identified by a considerable number of teachers in online classes during the pandemic was the absence of proper equipment. The limited availability of facilities for online classes during the pandemic was identified by 65 percent of the teachers. Some other difficulties were related to technical issues. The insufficient class time was highlighted by 46 percent of the teachers; they believed that online classes needed to be extended due to possible technical issues. Sixty percent of the teachers also experienced the drain of energy due to technical problems and inadequate infrastructure. Furthermore, 64 percent of the teachers agreed that teachers in online classes during COVID-19 needed technical education 59 percent confirmed that students needed technical education.

Some problems were related to teachers' and students' emotions and affective states. The decrease in students' motivation to attend classes as a result of distance learning during the COVID-19 lockdown was recognized as another difficulty acknowledged by 59 percent of the language teachers. Furthermore, 54 percent of the participating teachers noted that students did not take remote language teaching classes as seriously as they did in-person classes. In line with the responses of 52 percent of the teachers, student engagement in distance classes throughout the pandemic was lower compared to traditional classes. Lack of concentration due to teaching from home was identified as a drawback of distance teaching by 53 percent of the teachers. Moreover, 65 percent of the teachers acknowledged a lack of concentration among students while learning from home. Lack of computer literacy among language teachers had negative impacts on their self-confidence, as reported by 57 percent of the teachers.

Another drawback of distance education, as reported by 61 percent of the language teachers, was the lower interaction among students compared to face-to-face classes. Involving students in group work was identified as a demanding task in distance classes during COVID-19, as stated by 61 percent of the language teachers.

More than half of the language teachers (56%) agreed that managing distance classes during the pandemic was more challenging than traditional classes. Cheating in online final exams by students was recognized as a challenging issue of remote distance education during the pandemic, according to 66 percent of the teachers. Creating and planning for online classes during COVID-19 was reported to require more time than traditional classes, as agreed upon by 62 percent of the teachers.

Difficulty in assessing students in online classes throughout the pandemic compared to face-to-face classes was another challenge, as reported by 58 percent of the language teachers. Sixty four percent of the teachers agreed that there was a need for training teachers on how to evaluate students in distance classes throughout the pandemic. Providing feedback in online classes during the pandemic was reported to be more challenging than in-person classes, according to the responses of 61 percent of the teachers. Furthermore, 57 percent of the teachers agreed that not all language skills could be equally improved in online classes during the pandemic. It was also noted by 52 percent of the language teachers that they required more time to provide educational content for distance classes during the pandemic. Furthermore, 62 percent stated that creating educational content for online classes during the pandemic required computer literacy. Fifty-six percent of the teachers agreed that language teaching in face-to-face classes was more effective than in distance classes. A significant percentage of teachers (57%) approved of the need for more creativity in remote language teaching compared to face-to-face teaching.

In sum, the findings from this analysis show that the participating teachers teaching remote classes during the pandemic faced numerous challenges. Technological challenges involved a lack of internet connection, very slow and expensive internet access, the

absence of proper equipment for teachers and/or students, and technical issues leading to teachers' waste of time and energy. Affective and emotional issues included decreased student desire to attend online classes, students not taking remote classes as seriously as face-to-face classes, lower student engagement, and teachers' decreased self-confidence as a result of the abrupt changes in their teaching situation. There were also concerns over decreased interaction between students in distance classes and involving students in group activities in remote classes. Difficulties in managing online classes called for more time to plan online classes and concerns about cheating in online exams. Educational challenges included problems with providing feedback in distance classes, equal development of all language skills, language assessment, and provision of educational content, which required more time, as well as digital literacy.

Challenges Based on the Analysis of Descriptive Survey Data

Inductive thematic analysis was carried out for the data gathered through the first question of the descriptive survey which focused on the challenges that the teachers faced during COVID-19. The codes and themes extracted are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Codes and Themes for the Challenges Based on Descriptive Survey Data

Themes	Codes	Teachers
Technological issues	Poor internet connection	T1, T2, T7, T11
	Technology problems	T9
Communication issues	Students' not seeing each other physically	T3, T10, T12
	Students' not having eye contact	T3, T10, T12
	Undesirable communication among students	T12
	Learners' difficulty in making friendships	T12
Psychological issues	Students' boredom	T3, T9, T12, T6
	Students' lack of motivation	T3, T6, T9, T12
	Unusual class atmosphere	T12
Pedagogical issues	Teachers' poor control over online classes	T5, T10
	Teachers' poor control in checking learners' homework	T5, T10
	Undesirable outcomes of distance teaching	T6, T8
	The need for more creative classes	T3, T5
	The need for more attractive classes	T3, T5
	The need for more fun in online classes	T3, T5
	The need for teaching in a clear way	T4
Worries	Learners' suffering from COVID-19 when infected	T6

Unclear future of distance teaching

T6, T8

Thus, the negative effects of COVID-19 on teaching English to YLLs were summarized into technological issues, communication issues, psychological issues, pedagogical issues, and worries.

Challenges Based on the Analysis of Interview Responses

Through thematic analysis, the interview responses of the five participants which aligned with the negative effects were coded, and the codes were categorized into a number of themes as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Codes and Themes for the Challenges Based on Interview Responses

Themes	Codes	Teachers
Technological issues	Poor internet connection	T1, T3, T4, T5
	Technology problems	T4, T9
	Teachers' lack of technological knowledge	T2, T5
	Students' lack of technological knowledge	T2, T5
Communication issues	Students' communication problems	T1, T2, T3, T4
	Students' not having eye contact	T5
	Lack of cooperation among students	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5
	Low interest in group work	T3, T5
Psychological issues	Challenging situation for teachers resulting from the sudden change	T1
	Challenging situation for students resulting from the sudden change	T1
	Students' loss of interest	T2, T4
	Students' becoming passive learners	T2
	Teacher hopelessness	T1
	Student hopelessness	T1
	Students' sense of isolation	T4
Students' becoming passive learners	T2, T4	
Pedagogical issues	Difficulty in teaching particular subjects or skills	T4
	Students' escaping doing activities	T4

Briefly stated, the challenges based on interview responses fell within four major themes, including technological issues, communication issues, psychological issues, and pedagogical issues.

Overall, all the challenges that teachers thought were brought about by distance language teaching to YLLs amidst COVID-19 could be classified into five major categories: technological issues, communication issues, psychological issues, pedagogical issues, and worries. Poor internet connection, the absence of proper equipment, and slow internet speed were the most significant obstacles faced by language teachers and students amidst the pandemic. This calls for government planning for times of crisis, like the COVID-19 lockdown, so that education continues online with little disconnection or technical problems. Based on the findings, preparing the necessary infrastructure, such as free high-speed internet access, appropriate platforms with high-quality features, and stable internet connections with minimal disruptions, is essential for successful distance education. The finding that technological problems were considered a major challenge by most teachers aligns with the results of some other studies (e.g., Afrin, 2020; Fatima, 2020; Flores & Gago, 2020; Karakaya et al., 2021; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Magomedov et al., 2020; Nakhriyah & Muzakky, 2021; Sayer & Braun, 2020; Whittle et al., 2020). Flores and Gago (2020) found low internet accessibility as one of the factors influencing virtual education, and Karakaya et al. (2021) identified poor internet connection and associated challenges as significant obstacles faced by teachers in online classes in Turkey. The results are, however, in contrast with the finding by Algethami (2022), who found Saudi universities well-equipped and prepared for distance education during the COVID-19 crisis.

The results further showed that teachers thought insufficient computer literacy among teachers and students impeded effective communication between students, created difficulties for teachers in managing online classes due to potential technology problems, and led to decreased motivation and confidence among the teachers. In addition, the findings indicated that teachers showed dissatisfaction with pedagogical issues like giving feedback, checking the students' assignments, assessing the students fairly, teaching all the skills equally well, and getting desirable teaching outcomes. Providing proper technological training for teachers (Taghizadeh & Hasani Yourdshahi, 2020) and equipping them with suitable tools and equipment can help teachers manage their classes in similar contexts. Keeping the teachers updated with the latest technological tools and their potential in language instruction can help them overcome other problems like low interaction among students, which was reported by the teachers in this study as an important challenge. This has been strongly suggested by Habibi et al. (2019). The research findings about the challenges conform to other studies with regard to teachers' insufficient digital preparedness (Fatima, 2020; Meirovitz et al., 2022; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020; Taghizadeh & Hasani Yourdshahi, 2020), communication problems (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020; Karaeng & Simanjuntak, 2021),

challenges with managing online classes (ur Rahman, 2020), and less effectiveness of online classes (Algethami, 2022).

Opportunities Offered by Distance Teaching of English to YLLs during COVID-19

Opportunities Based on the Analysis of Questionnaire Data

Of the 55 items of the questionnaire, 23 were on the positive consequences of COVID-19 on teaching English to YLLs. The analysis of these items showed that teachers' believed distance education during the pandemic encouraged their creativity and flexibility. Forty-eight percent of the teachers admitted that language teachers could make distance classes more attractive with the help of online tools. Fifty nine percent of the teachers agreed that as a consequence of COVID-19, language teachers discovered new ways of teaching English. According to 64 percent of the teachers' viewpoints, educational books were not the only resources that language teachers used in online classes. Based on 63 percent of the teachers, teachers should have been able to use more flexible ways of language teaching as a result of remote language teaching during the pandemic.

The results also indicated that distance education could increase their awareness of various aspects of distance language teaching. A majority of language teachers (63%) admitted that online classes made them aware of the importance of staying up to date on classroom trends. Sixty-one percent of the teachers acknowledged that up-to-date language teachers dealt more easily with the new pandemic situation than other language teachers. Additionally, the conversion to online classes as a result of COVID-19 made language teachers aware of the importance of being familiar with the applications of technology in teaching, as reported by 66 percent of the teachers. Fifty-six percent of the teachers admitted that by transitioning to online classes during the pandemic, they became aware of their teaching weaknesses. From the viewpoint of 48 percent of the teachers, language teachers became more aware of the shortcomings in textbooks as a result of distance language education.

It was also revealed that the distance education experience enhanced their capabilities and made more prepared for similar times of crisis. According to the thoughts of 55 percent of the teachers, the move to online classes during the pandemic motivated them to overcome their language teaching weaknesses and gain confidence in their skills. As reported by 66 percent of the teachers, distance education during COVID-19 promoted the computer literacy of language teachers. Based on the viewpoint of 58 percent of the teachers, learning how to confront critical conditions and manage them was an advantage of distance education throughout the pandemic.

The participating teachers also acknowledged more and better communication as another advantage of the distance teaching experience. Based on the results, 35 percent of the teachers admitted that communication between language teachers and students had

improved in distance teaching classes. Distance education increased global communication among language teachers, as stated by 57 percent of the teachers.

Finally, the teachers believed that distance language teaching had positive economic consequences. As stated by 53 percent of the teachers, saving time was one of the benefits of teaching language from home during the pandemic. Additionally, according to 56 percent of language teachers, saving money was identified as another advantage of distance education during the pandemic.

In general, based on the findings from the questionnaire data, the teachers believed that distance education during COVID-19 increased their creativity, flexibility, and awareness of their strengths, their needs, and their own and the educational system's weaknesses, showed the importance of digital literacy, enhanced local and global interaction among language teachers, helped teachers learn how to overcome unexpected conditions, and saved them time and cost.

Opportunities Based on the Descriptive Survey Results

One of the two questions of the descriptive survey was about teachers' opinion about the positive consequences of COVID-19 on teaching English to YLLs in Iran. Teachers' responses to this question of the descriptive survey were thematically analyzed and four major themes were induced. The extracted codes and themes are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

Codes and Themes for the Opportunities Based on Descriptive Survey Data

Themes	Codes	Teachers
Enhanced technological knowledge	Increased technological knowledge	T5, T7
	Getting updated with educational technology	T5
	Using technology in practical ways	T1, T5, T7, T11
	Using pictures and slides in classes	T1, T11
	Using different platforms for teaching	T3, T5, T8
Psychological benefits	Using videos in classes	T4, T5
	Teachers' increased concentration	T6, T9
	Teachers' learning to deal with new circumstances	T1, T3
Pedagogical benefits	Students' learning to deal with new circumstances	T3
	High speed of teaching	T2, T7
	More accessible classes	T12
	Students' experience of a different world	T3, T8
	Teachers' experience of a different world	T3
	Innovating new methods of teaching	T3, T5, T8
Using different types of materials in teaching	T1, T4, T11	
More popularity of online classes	T12	

	Teachers' saving time	T6, T10
Safety issues	Staying safe from pandemic	T10

Therefore, based on the survey responses, the positive consequences of COVID-19 on teaching English to YLLs during the pandemic included teachers' enhanced technological knowledge and psychological, pedagogical, and safety advantages.

Opportunities Based on the Analysis of Interview Responses

The thematic analysis of the interview responses related to the opportunities arising from distance education due to COVID-19 pandemic led to the identification 16 codes and four themes which are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Codes and Themes for the Opportunities Based on Interview Responses

Themes	Codes	Teachers
Enhanced technological knowledge	Discovering new accessible ways of teaching	T1, T2
	Using technology in practical ways	T1, T2, T3, T5
	Discovering various facilities to use in teaching	T1
Psychological issues	Encouraging learner autonomy	T1, T2, T4
	Encouraging teacher autonomy	T2
	Students' learning to deal with new circumstances	T1, T3
Pedagogical issues	New experiences for teachers	T1
	New experiences for students	T1, T5
	Innovating new methods of teaching	T1
	Getting more parent support for the students' learning	T2, T4
	Teachers' easier communication with students	T2, T4
	Teachers' changing knowledge into practice	T3, T5
Economic issues	Saving money	T3, T4, T5
	Teachers' saving time	T3, T4, T5
	Students' saving time	T3, T4, T5
	Avoiding traffic	T4

Overall, based on the interview responses, the positive consequences of COVID-19 included teachers' and students' learning to use technology in better and more effective ways and psychological, pedagogical, and economic benefits.

In sum, the results of the study indicated that teachers faced numerous challenges due to the abrupt change to distance language teaching to YLLs. However, they found the experience advantageous, too. They believed that the major challenges were related to technological, psychological, pedagogical, economic and safety issues. Interestingly, they found the situation offering opportunities in all these areas. The majority of teachers

agreed on positive consequences, such as enhanced technological and pedagogical knowledge and improved communication, flexibility, creativity, and accessibility. The findings indicated that teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic provided them with the opportunity to experience a new educational situation. Therefore, they had to innovate new ways of teaching and learning.

Additionally, the situation helped them learn about the potential of technology in language education, including saving time and money, enhanced communication with the students and their parents, and easier accessibility of the classes. Moreover, it led to their awareness of the need to be updated with the latest educational technologies. It is interesting to note that the teachers found opportunities in almost the same areas in which they faced challenges. This shows that teachers and students need training in being flexible enough to face unforeseen situations with little stress. The results of this part of the study conform with some other studies regarding teachers' new teaching experiences (Magomedov et al., 2020; Safira et al., 2021), increased technological skills (Al-Samiri, 2021; Karakaya et al., 2021), enhanced self-confidence (Nambiar, 2020), awareness of their needs (Al-Samiri, 2021; Karakaya et al., 2021), and students' enhanced personality characteristic (Fatima, 2020; Nambiar, 2020), easy access to classes (Algethami, 2022; Al-Samiri, 2021), as well as saving time and cost (Afrin, 2020).

Generally, the findings suggest that although facing unforeseen circumstances in education creates challenges for teachers, students, and all the other individuals involved, it might have positive consequences as well. This is in line with the findings of some other studies (e.g., Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Meirovitz et al., 2022; Nakhriyah & Muzakky, 2021; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). In fact, the potential of technology to assist teachers with diverse areas of language education, including language assessment (Asadi & Taheri, 2024), psychology of language learning/teaching (Ho et al., 2023), and language teacher professional development (Zhang, 2022) indicates that the advantages of technology integration into language teaching are more than the disadvantages.

Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze teachers' reflections on the challenges in the teaching of English to YLLs brought about by the COVID-19 crisis and to look at the opportunities that arose out of the crisis. The study showed that teachers confronted challenges, such as poor internet connection, the absence of proper equipment, and slow internet speed, which could lead to decreased student desire to attend online classes as observed by the teachers. Additionally, the lack of communication between students and the challenges of managing online classes due to potential technology problems were highlighted. Language teachers expressed a decrease in motivation and confidence resulting from their limited computer literacy. Furthermore, difficulties faced by language teachers in assessing learners at a distance, lack of concentration for both language teachers and

students due to teaching and learning from home, instances of cheating in online final exams by students, and the drain on language teachers' energy caused by technical problems were reported as the negative consequences of COVID-19 on the teaching of English to YLLs in Iran.

The stated challenges make distance education during crises seem overwhelming. The promising point, however, is that the same teachers have found the distance teaching experience fruitful as well. They have identified several benefits of the experience, including the provision of technical education for language teachers and learners, enhanced communication between teachers and learners, cost and time savings, the use of diverse platforms for teaching and learning, the promotion of up-to-date teaching practices, the development of learner and teacher independence, increased awareness of language teachers' weaknesses, improved creativity in language teaching, the provision of a safe learning environment during the pandemic through online classes, and increased parental involvement and support for their children's education.

The findings of the study have a number of implications for language teachers, learners, teacher trainers, and educational systems. First, the findings suggest that although digital literacy is becoming a requirement for both teachers and learners, many teachers and learners are not sufficiently digitally literate. Therefore, teachers, learners, and teacher trainers must address this immediate need and should plan to equip teachers and learners with enough digital literacy. Second, language teachers were concerned with a lack of motivation in both teachers and learners to use online English classes. This implies that planning for making online courses attractive and intriguing should constitute a part of teacher training programs. Third, teachers admit that teaching and learning from home decreases their concentration, which shows that families need to be aware of the importance of their cooperation with teachers and learners during their online classes. This must be transferred from educational centres to the parents and other family members. Fourth, one of the main complaints of the teachers was about internet access, which caused many problems in language teaching, learning, and assessment during the online classes. The educational systems are expected to discuss the significance of having fast and easy access to high-quality internet connections to overcome problems like the ones experienced by the teachers during the COVID-19 crisis. Fifth, there were various infrastructure problems which led to problems in time management, lesson delivery, assessment, and learner engagement in online classes. Therefore, educational systems are recommended to equip their centres with the required tools and instruments for distance education.

There were certain limitations to consider when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the results of this study are solely based on the reflections of English teachers, while the viewpoints of students, schools and institutes, parents, and technical operators could have contributed to our deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities arising out of the COVID-19 lockdown. Second, the challenges and opportunities found

in the study are those perceived by the teachers, while a better, more transparent picture of the issue could have been achieved by observing some of these online classes because teacher reflections are not necessarily congruent with the real happenings in the classroom. Third, even though factors such as teachers' teaching experience, experience of virtual education, and digital literacy are important attributes influencing their class management, specifically in times of a crisis like COVID-19, these factors have not been taken into account in interpreting the results. Fourth, due to the pandemic lockdown at the time of data collection, all the data were gathered online. However, the researchers' face-to-face contact with the participating teachers might have helped to get more detailed information, especially through the interview.

Based on the mentioned limitations, systematic reviews of studies on the various aspects of language teaching and learning during COVID-19 are suggested. Furthermore, it is suggested that teachers', learners', and authorities' reflections on their educational experiences during COVID-19 be delved into, and ask for their suggestions for teaching and learning when facing unforeseen situations that impact the practices of language teaching and learning. The outcomes of the study demonstrated that the lack of infrastructure and internet connection was the most significant challenge faced by teachers and learners. Further research can investigate institutional settings' proper infrastructure, internet connection, and required equipment for distance education and also can address the effects of the experience from COVID-19 on equipping the institutions with the requirements for distance education. The research revealed that the lack of technological knowledge among language teachers and learners resulted in boredom and a loss of motivation in online classes. Future studies could focus on examining the role of digital training in enhancing both language teachers' and students' motivation in online classes during such crises. This would shed light on the importance of providing adequate training and support in educational technology to improve the engagement and enthusiasm of participants in distance language learning environments.

Bio-data

Masoumeh Arefi Moghadam holds a master's degree in TEFL from Islamic Azad University, West Tehran Branch. She is passionate about teaching English and actively explores different methods of online teaching to make learning easier and more engaging for students through creative approaches.

Collected the data and wrote the first draft. Designed and conducted the procedures.

Servat Shirkhani* holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics and is an assistant professor at Islamic Azad University, Iran. She has presented articles at national and international conferences and has published some books and papers. Her areas of interest include L2 pragmatics, technology-assisted language learning, corrective feedback, and psycholinguistics.

Designed and conducted the procedures, reviewed the final draft, and made necessary revisions.

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