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**Research Paper**

# Teachers' and Students' Perspectives Towards the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats of Iran's EFL High School Curriculum During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Quantitative Study

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**Abstract**
Learning and teaching a second/foreign language is demanding and challenging, especially where it is done in an abnormal situation. The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 and the resulting lockdown took language learning and teaching to another level. Learners and teachers faced various problems and also experienced multiple benefits during the pandemic. This

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Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

quantitative study aimed to investigate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of the online EFL curriculum in Iranian high schools in the context of COVID-19. A questionnaire was developed and analyzed through an exploratory factor analysis to understand the SWOT factors. The factors of SWOT were analyzed and the results revealed a 63.4% value for strengths, 70.3% for opportunities, 78.5% for weaknesses, and 75.5% for threats. The findings indicated that the weaknesses outweighed the strengths, and the threats outweighed the opportunities.

**Keywords**: EFL Curriculum, Exploratory Factor Analysis, Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

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# 1.Introduction and Literature Review

The global outbreak of coronavirus, or COVID-19, in early 2020 caused systematic changes in many people's daily activities (Capuano et al, 2021; Lebrasseur, 2021; Radwan et al., 2020), and education was no exception (Murphy, 2020; Stanistreet et al., 2020). With the official announcement of isolation and social distancing after COVID-19 hit Iran in April 2020, schools were forced to close classes, while the urgent need to change the education system seemed farfetched (Askari & Chen, 2021). Like many countries, the Iranian Ministry of education postponed and then suspended all school enrollment (UNESCO, 2020). This called for an urgent replacement.

Embedded technology is the best way to learn a language, especially in critical situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the importance of program design and development with focus on the advantages such as the strengths and opportunities as well as the disadvantages such as the weaknesses and threats in these urgent situations, without seeking advance planning, should be noted. Accordingly, this quantitative research aimed to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the EFL

curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iranian high schools through a SWOT analysis.

Studies on the Iranian e-learning system show that the infrastructure faces many problems related to the regulation of the e-learning system (Abbasi et al, 2020). Sections about certain training courses, support services, learners, teachers, etc. must be provided by organizations when implementing e-learning (Bashiruddin et al., 2010). Despite efforts, Iran has been unable to enforce appropriate laws and regulations for online teaching and learning (Abbasi Kasani et al., 2018). For example, teachers are required to impart knowledge (Paechter et al., 2010) through computers in online learning; therefore, computer skills become a requirement. However, teachers may feel threatened by these new skill sets or do not know how to acquire them (Abbasi et al, 2020).

The mission of an organization is to provide training courses and seminars for teachers so teachers can become familiar with the needs and benefits of online learning (Abbasi et al, 2020). According to research conducted by Jalilinia (2021), some students believe that teachers are not familiar with online education and do not have the required computer skills.

A major issue during the pandemic was students' financial situation (Kılınç & Medeni, 2023). Even though e-learning has advanced greatly with regards to materials and tools (i.e., tablets, smartphones, computers, other technologies) (Tarin, 2016), many students could not afford technological devices. Furthermore, providing the right e-learning infrastructure is expensive and many decision-makers will not commit to providing the necessary requirements (Mahmoudi & Hashemikia, 2017), which makes the process cumbersome.

Another factor relevant to students is their mastery of information, or information literacy, which is the ability to recognize one's information

needs, identifying available information sources to develop research methods, evaluating obtained information, and making connections between old and new knowledge to create new knowledge (Gholami & Gavgani, 2011). Success in information literacy requires computer and technological skills (Mosakhani & Jamporazmey, 2010; Taha, 2014). Without these skills, learners might experience anxiety (Selim, 2007) and lack of motivation and confusion when learning online (Mohsenzadeh, 2017), resulting in poor learning quality and low participation rates (Abbasi et al, 2020).

However, perhaps the most serious problem facing Iran's online learning system is the lack of appropriate educational principles (Abbasi et al, 2020). Without the right pedagogical principles, there will be no major differences in the learning process efficiency, resulting in no real development of needs analysis that can ultimately address many of the basics of online learning (Ghasemi et al., 2018). Furthermore, online learning requires the right hardware, software, and infrastructure to succeed (Abbasi et al, 2020).

Noting, the provision of all factors comes with limitations in terms of cost, bandwidth, and internet speed (Gulati, 2008) that need to be addressed and supported by the government (Mahmoodi-Shahrebabaki, 2014). As a result, Iran faces a lack of technological, economic and cultural infrastructure (Abbasi et al, 2020).

In a study conducted by Hodges et al. (2020), online teaching comes with its own set of challenges, such as a lack of teacher preparation or "creating content for the online space, learning new delivery tools, understanding online pedagogy, parental involvement, addressing student mental health issues, and trying different teaching strategies to address both synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning" (Hartshorne et al., 2020, p. 138), and sometimes it even becomes an overwhelming task for some teachers (Ko & Rossen, 2017).

To overcome the problems and adapt to the new learning situation, an app was developed by Iran's ministry of education, known as 'Shaad'. Akbari (2021) analyzed the problems and benefits of the app through students', teachers', and parents' attitude. The challenges of using Shaad according to research findings included hardware and software infrastructure problems, lack of familiarity with this new technology, inefficient interactive space, difficulty in evaluating the right operator as well as student-related problems. In addition, students believed that online learning is inferior to face-to-face learning. Despite the fact that parents, teachers, and students have become more involved in learning and teaching, learning has declined during the pandemic. On the other hand, teachers say that this new online teaching and learning environment is more suitable for introverts. Akbari (2021) concludes that the key to improving online learning is solving technological problems and providing the right infrastructure.

In a different study, Rahbari (2021) reflected on the online teaching experience of English teachers in Iranian high schools during the lockdown. The results showed that students do not have equal access to technological tools and many students from impoverished families do not have any support in terms of tools and funds for internet costs. According to this study, the main problems faced by teachers included poor Internet coverage, high costs, uneven access to technological tools for all students in the country, low Internet speed, blocking of some apps, etc. Some teachers have overcome these difficulties by preparing lessons offline and asking students to download content whenever they can, using different Internet channels, and being flexible in their lesson schedules.

Furthermore, Younesi (2021) emphasizes on the significance of virtual teaching and learning in developing countries. In addition, computer-based language learning has also been discussed in previous research (Dashtestani

Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

& Mohamadi, 2023) which prioritizes curriculum development for EFL learning. The perspectives of teachers and students were considered in this study to see how this might prompt curriculum developers and educators to seriously consider online teaching and learning in curriculum design and teaching methods, as well as the importance of integrating virtual teaching with traditional classroom teaching and face-to-face learning.

While there were clearly difficulties and problems with the nationwide shift to an online teaching and learning platform, it also opened the door for the creation of innovative teaching techniques. Therefore, it is imperative to consider both the advantages and disadvantages of the current circumstance. Despite relevant research, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the current EFL curriculum in Iranian high schools have not been analyzed in light of COVID-19. We evaluate the pros and cons that the online EFL teaching and learning process has resulted in over the last two years by conducting a SWOT analysis. We can obtain important insight into the impacts, as they pertain to teacher and learner perspectives in this particular environment.

Examining the results can help us understand where Iran's national EFL curriculum is lacking and where it excels. This is critical when it comes to teacher and learner perceptions in this particular context. Teachers' and students' perspectives towards this case can provide insight to overcome the many problems of this relatively novel approach to learning and teaching in Iran. This study addressed students' and teachers' perspectives towards the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the online EFL curriculum in Iranian high schools in the context of COVID-19 and aimed to address the following questions:

1. Is there any difference between high school students' and teachers' perceptions on the strengths of online EFL learning and teaching in the context of COVID-19?

2. Is there any difference between high school students' and teachers' perceptions on the weaknesses of online EFL learning and teaching in the context of COVID-19?

3. Is there any difference between high school students' and teachers' perceptions on the opportunities of online EFL learning and teaching in the context of COVID-19?

4. Is there any difference between high school students' and teachers' perceptions on the threats of online EFL learning and teaching in the context of COVID-19?

## 2. Method

This quantitative research provided a general understanding of student's and teachers' perceptions regarding the EFL high school curriculum in Iran during the pandemic through a SWOT analysis.

## 2.1 Participants and setting

The participants included 550 junior and senior high school students, as well as 35 EFL teachers teaching at public and private high schools in *Bojnord, North Khorasan, Iran*. Since the target population of students was large enough in this context, a stratified random sampling technique (Johnson & Christensen, 2000) was used to gather data from 11- to 18- year-old students, 50% male and 50% female. Teachers on the other hand, were selected through convenient sampling due to unavailability and difficulty in access during work hours. Out of 550 students, 468 provided useful data, while the remaining were eliminated due to invalidity (i.e., being intentionally left blank, patterned response etc.). All 35 teachers participated with caution and all collected data were used in the analysis.

## 2.2 Instruments and data collection

A questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was developed with the use of previous literature and related questionnaires, informal interviews with some students

and teachers, as well as the rules, circulars, and regulations of the Ministry of Education. In addition, the literature regarding Iran's EFL curriculum assessment was used for the development of this questionnaire.

As suggested by Johnson and Christensen (2000), the newly developed questionnaire was distributed for pilot testing to measure its reliability. This was accomplished by Cronbach's Alpha measurement ($\alpha$), which ranges from 0 to 1. Cronbach's Alpha for 30 subjects was 0.89 which shows a relatively high internal consistency. Content validity was also measured with the help of experts and professionals in the field as well as informal interviews with a number of students and teachers. A total number of 585 questionnaire forms were distributed among 550 students and 35 teachers. The construct validity was measured through an exploratory factor analysis. Finally, T-tests were performed in order to find any significant differences between the students' and teachers' perceptions towards the EFL curriculum in the context of COVID-19.

## 3. Results

## 3.1 Examining and describing data related to respondents' general characteristics

Data obtained from the measurement of different variables were described by case through descriptive statistics methods and histogram charts. Accordingly, respondents' characteristics are described below:

**Table 1.**
*Frequency of Respondents and Their Characteristics*

|  | Group | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | **Frequency** | **Percent** | **Valid percent** | **Cumulative percent** |
| **valid** 1 | 468 | 93.0 | 93.0 | 93.0 |
| 2 | 35 | 7.0 | 7.0 | 100 |
| Total | 503 | 100 | 100 | |

Talebzadeh et al.
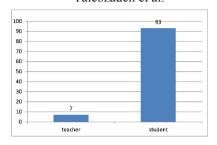


**Figure 1. Frequency of participants**

As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, 35 of the respondents (7%) were teachers and 468 (93%) were students.

## 3.2 Exploratory factor analysis

The designed questionnaire for this research was analyzed in order to identify its dimensions using exploratory factor analysis. The sampling adequacy was measured in the initial stage using KMO-Bartlett test, the results of which are presented below.

**Table 2.**
*KMO and Bartlett's Test*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy. | | .814 |
| Bartlett's Test of Sphericity | Approx. Chi-Square | 3591.445 |
| | df | 780 |
| | sig. | .000 |

The KMO index, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy, is an index of sampling adequacy that scrutinizes the smallness of the partial correlation between variables, and reveals whether the variance of the research variables is influenced by the common variance in hidden and essential factors. The index ranges between zero and one. If the value of the index is close to one, data (sample size) are fit and appropriate for factor analysis, and if not, the results of factor analysis will not be fit for the desired data. Simply put, a KMO value of 0.8 to 1 indicates that the sampling is sufficient to perform an exploratory factor analysis. As the above results

show, the value obtained for this index is equal to 0.814, which indicates the appropriateness of this index.

Bartlett's test also shows whether there is a correlation between the variables. For this purpose, the significance level of chi-square test was used. If the value is lower than 0.05, it indicates a correlation between the variables. If there is no correlation between the variables, it is not possible to perform an exploratory factor analysis. As the significance level obtained shows, there is a correlation between the variables as the significance level is less than 0.05, which confirms the above conclusion.

After determining the sufficiency of the sample size, two methods of eigenvalue and scree plot were used to show the number of factors. The results are presented below.

**Table 3.**
*Total Variance Explained*

| | Initial Eigenvalues | | | Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Component | Total | % of Variance | Cumulative % | Total | % of Variance | Cumulative % |
| 1 | 5.60 | 14.01 | 14.01 | 5.606 | 14.01 | 14.01 |
| 2 | 4.74 | 11.86 | 25.87 | 4.745 | 11.86 | 25.87 |
| 3 | 1.95 | 4.88 | 30.76 | 1.953 | 4.88 | 30.76 |
| 4 | 1.74 | 4.35 | 35.11 | 1.741 | 4.35 | 35.11 |
| 5 | 1.52 | 3.80 | 38.91 | 1.520 | 3.80 | 38.91 |
| 6 | 1.40 | 3.51 | 42.42 | 1.404 | 3.51 | 42.42 |
| 7 | 1.30 | 3.27 | 45.69 | 1.309 | 3.27 | 45.69 |
| 8 | 1.28 | 3.20 | 48.89 | 1.281 | 3.20 | 48.89 |
| 9 | 1.10 | 2.75 | 51.65 | 1.102 | 2.75 | 51.65 |
| 10 | 1.08 | 2.72 | 54.37 | 1.089 | 2.72 | 54.37 |
| 11 | 1.02 | 2.57 | 56.94 | 1.029 | 2.57 | 56.94 |
| 12 | 1.00 | 2.50 | 59.45 | 1.000 | 2.50 | 59.45 |
| 13 | .96 | 2.40 | 61.85 | | | |
| 14 | .88 | 2.21 | 64.07 | | | |
| 15 | .852 | 2.131 | 66.202 | | | |
| 16 | .832 | 2.081 | 68.283 | | | |

Talebzadeh et al.

| 17 | .801 | 2.002 | 70.285 |
|----|------|-------|--------|
| 18 | .758 | 1.895 | 72.181 |
| 19 | .740 | 1.851 | 74.031 |
| 20 | .722 | 1.806 | 75.837 |
| 21 | .682 | 1.705 | 77.542 |
| 22 | .663 | 1.657 | 79.199 |
| 23 | .643 | 1.609 | 80.808 |
| 24 | .612 | 1.530 | 82.338 |
| 25 | .584 | 1.459 | 83.797 |
| 26 | .559 | 1.398 | 85.196 |
| 27 | .552 | 1.380 | 86.576 |
| 28 | .536 | 1.340 | 87.916 |
| 29 | .531 | 1.327 | 89.243 |
| 30 | .484 | 1.209 | 90.452 |
| 31 | .469 | 1.173 | 91.625 |
| 32 | .433 | 1.083 | 92.708 |
| 33 | .426 | 1.066 | 93.774 |
| 34 | .413 | 1.032 | 94.806 |
| 35 | .394 | .984 | 95.790 |
| 36 | .386 | .965 | 96.755 |
| 37 | .365 | .912 | 97.667 |
| 38 | .333 | .834 | 98.501 |
| 39 | .312 | .780 | 99.281 |
| 40 | .288 | .719 | 100.000 |

As shown in the Table, 12 factors have been identified for the research questionnaire. These identified factors should be able to explain at least 0.50 of the variances of the main structure of the research and also have a specific value higher than 1. Based on the results, the eigenvalue of 12 factors is higher than one, which indicates that the cumulative percentage explained in the twelfth factor is equal to 59.45, that is, together they have been able to explain this amount of variance. A scree plot was also used to identify the number of factors. A scree plot provides a description of the eigenvalue in each factor, which is portrayed in Figure 2.

Teachers' and Students' Perspectives
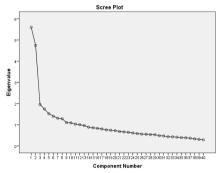


**Figure 2. Scree plot**

Figure 2 demonstrates that all 12 components have eigenvalues more than 1, with the first factor accounting for the majority of variance explanation with a value greater than 5. There are two additional conditions in addition to the ones mentioned above for the factors found. The obtained factor loadings for each item must be more than 0.3, and each factor must have at least 4 items. Table 6 shows the outcomes of the components that were rotated using the Varimax approach. In fact, Varimax rotation is utilized for better comprehension. The outcomes are displayed below.

**Table 4.**
*Rotated Component Matrix[a]*

| Component Question | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q 10 | 0.73 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Q 6 | 0.67 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Q 5 | 0.65 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Q 7 | 0.57 | | | | | | | -0.32 | | | | |
| Q 8 | 0.57 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Q 1 | 0.41 | | | | | | 0.413 | | | | | |
| Q 40 | | 0.74 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Q 17 | | 0.652 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Q 18 | | 0.64 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Q 32 | | 0.55 | 0.48 | | | | | | | | | |
| Q 38 | | 0.53 | | | | | | | | 0.31 | | |
| Q 35 | | 0.45 | | 0.38 | | | | | | | | |
| Q 13 | | 0.40 | | | | | 0.31 | 0.39 | | | | |
| Q 30 | | | 0.67 | | | | | | | | | |
| Q 23 | | | 0.67 | | | | | | | | | |
| Q 22 | | | 0.48 | | | | | | | | 0.47 | |
| Q 33 | | | | 0.78 | | | | | | | | |
| Q 34 | | | | 0.7 | | | | | | | | |
| Q 31 | | 0.444 | | 0.451 | | | | | | | | |
| Q 25 | 0.32 | | | | 0.68 | | | | | | | |
| Q 27 | | | | | 0.59 | 0.44 | | | | | | |

Talebzadeh et al.

| Item | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Q 26 | 0.37 | | | 0.48 | | | | | | | |
| Q 24 | | 0.4 | | 0.47 | | | | | | | |
| Q 29 | | | | | 0.68 | | | | | | |
| Q 28 | | | | | 0.61 | | | | | | |
| Q 4 | | | | | | 0.75 | | | | | |
| Q 3 | | | | | | 0.63 | | | | | |
| Q 2 | 0.4 | | | | | 0.47 | | | | | |
| Q 14 | | | | | | | 0.65 | | | | |
| Q 19 | | | | | | | 0.62 | | | | |
| Q 16 | | | | | | | 0.46 | 0.31 | | | |
| Q 15 | | | | | | | | 0.6 | | | |
| Q 21 | | | | | 0.39 | | | -0.58 | | | |
| Q 9 | 0.365 | | | | | | | -0.49 | | | |
| Q 20 | | | | | 0.369 | | | 0.44 | | | |
| Q 37 | | | | | | | | | 0.776 | | |
| Q 39 | | | 0.331 | | | | | | 0.609 | | |
| Q 36 | | | | | | | | | | 0.702 | |
| Q 11 | | | | | | | | | | | 0.784 |
| Q 12 | | | | | | | | | | 0.311 | 0.376 |

Factors 11 and 12 are eliminated since they are deemed to be outliers and contain less than three elements. The factor loadings of all the items in each of the following 10 factors are all higher than 0.3, and each factor has more than 4 items. Tables 3 and 4 show that the variance explained by the tenth factor is 54.37, and the amount of special value is greater than 1. As a result, the tenth factor meets all four requirements of factor analysis, including the amount of special value being greater than 1, explaining at least 50% of the variance, factor loadings being higher than 0.3, and having at least three items in each factor.

As a result, it is assumed that the first 10 factors are the ones that the questionnaire has found. In accordance with the theoretical underpinnings and the content of the questions, the 10 identified factors are referred to as follows:

**Table 5.**
*Summary of Exploratory Analysis Results*

| No. | Identified factor | Identified groups | Items related to Identified factors | Main factors |
|-----|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | 1 | Materials | 1-5-6-7-8-10 | Strengths |
| 2 | 7 | Perspective and emotions | 2-3-4 | |
| 3 | 2 | Interaction | 13-17-18-32-35-40 | Weaknesses |

Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

| 4 | 4 | Distraction and cheating | 31-33-34 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | 3 | Utilizing technology | 22-23-30 | Opportunities |
| 6 | 5 | Convenience | 24-25-26-27 | |
| 7 | 6 | Participation | 28-29 | |
| 8 | 9 | Interaction | 21-20-15-9 | |
| 9 | 10 | Inefficiency | 38-39-37 | Threats |
| 10 | 8 | Connection Problems | 19-16-14 | |

The identified factors can be categorized into the four primary SWOT analysis categories of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, based on the findings and the analysis of the content of each item, which is compatible with the classification of the factors. The disparity between teachers' and students' perceptions of each component is explained in the following which addresses the research questions.

### 3.3 Answering the research questions

**RQ1.** Is there any difference between high school students' and teachers' perceptions on the strengths of EFL online learning and teaching in the context of COVID-19?

In order to investigate the first research question, high school students' and teachers' perspectives regarding the strengths of online English learning and teaching were measured. The results are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6.**

*Group Statistics*

| | group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| strengths | student | 467 | 3.1465 | .73609 | .3406 |
| | teacher | 35 | 2.9746 | .56853 | .09610 |

As shown in the results, the average score obtained by students is higher than that of teachers. To determine whether this average difference is

statistically significant, an independent T-test was used, the results of which are given in Table 7.

**Table 7.**
*Independent Sample T-Test*

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | Lower | Upper |
| Equal variances assumed | 2.82 | .09 | 1.35 | 500 | .17 | .171 | .127 | -.078 | .42 |
| Equal variances not assumed | | | 1.68 | 43 | .09 | .171 | .1019 | -.033 | .37 |

As shown in Table 7, the assumption of the same variances is not established since the significant value obtained in this regard (0.09) is higher than 0.05. Therefore, the data in the second row of the table is used to interpret the results. Considering that the t-value calculated with the degree of freedom (43) for two-domain tests with a value of (1.68) at the 0.05 level is smaller than the critical t-value (1.96), it can be deduced that there is no significant difference between teachers' and students' average opinions regarding the strengths of learning and teaching English in online courses in the context of COVID-19.

**RQ2.** Is there any difference between high school students' and teachers' perceptions on the weaknesses of EFL online learning and teaching in the context of COVID-19?

In order to investigate the second research question, the average opinions of high school students and teachers regarding the weaknesses of learning and teaching English in online courses in the context of COVID-19 were measured. The results are presented in Table 8.

Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

**Table 8.**
*Group statistics*

| | group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| weaknesses | student | 464 | 3.4726 | .67441 | .03131 |
| | teacher | 35 | 3.1048 | .41290 | .06979 |

According to Table 8, the average score obtained by students regarding the understanding of weaknesses is higher than that of teachers. To determine whether this average difference is statistically significant, an independent T-test was used, the results of which are given in Table 9.

**Table 9.**
*Independent Sample T-Test*

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | Lower | Upper |
| Equal variances assumed | 9.4 | .002 | 3.1 | 497 | .002 | .367 | .115 | .140 | .595 |
| Equal variances not assumed | | | 4.809 | 48.9 | .000 | .367 | .076 | .214 | .521 |

As shown in Table 9, the assumption of the same variances is established since the significant value obtained in this regard (0.002) is less than 0.05. Data in the first row of the above table is used to interpret the results. Considering that the t-value calculated with the degree of freedom (500) for two-domain tests with the value (3.181) at the 0.05 level is greater than the critical t-value (1.96), it can be inferred that there is a significant difference between the average opinions of teachers and students regarding the weaknesses of learning and teaching English in online courses in the context of COVID-19. Students were shown to have a higher average opinion of 3.47 than teachers (with an average of 3.10).

**RQ3.** Is there any difference between high school students' and teachers' perceptions on the opportunities of EFL online learning and teaching in the context of COVID-19?

For the third research question, the average opinions of high school students and teachers regarding the opportunities to learn and teach English in online courses in the context of COVID-19 are presented in Table 10.

**Table 10.**

*Group Statistics*

|  | group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| opportunities | student | 468 | 3.2951 | .57762 | .02670 |
|  | teacher | 35 | 3.2286 | .28569 | .04829 |

As shown in the above table, the average score obtained by students is higher than that of teachers. To determine the significance of this average difference, an independent t-test was used. Results are shown in Table 11.

**Table 11.**

*Independent Sample T-Test*

|  | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | | Lower | Upper |
| Equal variances assumed | 8.443 | .004 | .674 | 501 | .500 | .06649 | .09859 | | -.12722 | .26019 |
| Equal variances not assumed |  |  | 1.205 | 57.575 | .233 | .06649 | .05518 | | -.04399 | .17696 |

As the findings in Table 11 show, the assumption of the same variances is valid as the significant value obtained in this regard is less than 0.05. Data in the first row of the above table is used to interpret the results. Considering that the t-value calculated with the degree of freedom (500) for two-domain tests with a value of (0.647) at the 0.05 level is smaller than the critical t-value (1.96), in can be deduced that there is no significant difference between teachers' and students' opinions regarding the opportunities of online English learning and teaching during the pandemic.

Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

**RQ4.** Is there any difference between high school students' and teachers' perceptions on the threats of EFL online learning and teaching in the context of COVID-19?

To answer the fourth research question, the average opinions of high school students and teachers regarding the threats of learning and teaching English in online courses in the context of COVID-19 are presented in Table 12.

**Table 12.**

*Group Statistics*

|  | group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| threats | student | 460 | 3.3025 | .77221 | .03600 |
|  | teacher | 35 | 3.5905 | .73692 | .12456 |

As shown in Table 12, the average score obtained by teachers regarding the understanding of threats is higher than that of students. To determine the significance of this average difference, an independent samples T-test was used. The results are presented in Table 13.

**Table 13.**

*Independent Sample T-Test*

|  | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | Lower | Upper |
| Equal variances assumed | .12 | .73 | -2.1 | 493 | .033 | -.287 | .134 | -.55 | -.02 |
| Equal variances not assumed |  |  | -2.2 | 39 | .032 | -.28794 | .129 | -.550 | -.025 |

According to the results shown in Table 13, the assumption of the same variances is not established since the significant value obtained in this regard (0.738) is greater than 0.05. Data in the second row of the above table is used to interpret the results. Taking into account that the t-value calculated with the degree of freedom (39.898) for two-domain tests with the value (-2.2) at

the 0.05 level is greater than the critical t-value (1.96), it is inferred that there is a significant difference between the average opinions of teachers and students regarding the threats of learning and teaching English in online courses in the context of COVID-19. Teachers have a higher understanding of this subject (with an average of 3.59) compared to students (with an average of 3.21).

## 3.4 SWOT Analysis

The final step of this study included extracting the percentiles of each SWOT factor in order to investigate the weights. Figure 3 shows the SWOT factors percentile according to the participants' responses to the questionnaire. As shown, the weaknesses factor has the highest percentage for the 'agree' option on the Likert scale with 69.9%. In addition, the opportunities factor was 49.2% for agree and 22.1% for strongly agree, which is the highest value amongst the other factors in the Likert scale. Moreover, it is shown that threats consisted of a higher value compared to strengths by 60.5% and 51.6%, respectively.
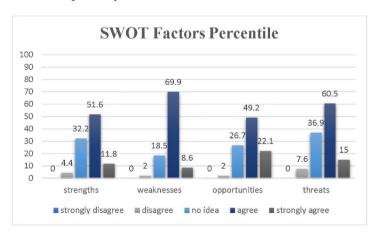


*Figure 3*. SWOT Factors Percentile

Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

For a better outlook on the SWOT weights in each factor, percentiles of agree and strongly agree options of the Likert scale were added together. Accordingly, final results were presented in a SWOT representative figure in percentages. This representative can be observed below.

| Strengths | 63.4% | Weaknesses | 78.5% |
| Opportunities | 70.3% | Threats | 75.5% |

*Figure 4.* SWOT Analysis

The final results show that the strengths and weaknesses of online EFL learning and teaching contribute to 63.4% and 78.5% of teachers' and students' perspectives, respectively. Moreover, the external factors, opportunities and threats, contribute to 70.3% and 75.5% of teachers' and students' perspective, respectively. It can be inferred from the results that the weaknesses and threats outweigh the strengths and opportunities, with weaknesses being the most prominent factor and strengths being the least.

## 4. Discussion

The elements of the exploratory factor analysis in the four dimensions of the SWOT model discovered in this paper are discussed below.

### 4.1 Strengths

Based on the findings, the component of perspective and emotions as well as materials were placed under the strengths factor. Based on the investigations, it was determined that both components, perspective and emotions, as well as materials, are internal factors that can be considered a strength of online English learning and teaching. In other words, different materials are a strong factor in language learning and language teaching, and teachers' and students' general perspective and emotions are also considered a strong factor in online English learning and teaching.

What is meant by the strengths of materials is the possibilities and benefits they provide to teachers, students, and even parents. Accordingly,

easier access to various materials of education and educational assistance is a strong point in online EFL learning and teaching. The requirement of proper and appropriate materials for online learning and teaching has also been discussed by Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) and Nartiningrum and Nugroho (2020).

Another important factor that has been identified as a strength is emotions and different perspectives. Perspective and emotions can play an important role in online EFL courses. It is shown in literature that most teachers and students were experiencing feelings of anxiety and dullness in online EFL courses during the pandemic (i.e., Resnik et al., 2022; Santihastuti et al., 2022). However, in this study it was found that emotions and perspective was a strength.

Emotions affect learners' abilities to process information and understand the input accurately. Generally, language learning emotions can be categorized as pleasant (positive) and unpleasant (negative) (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Emotions can have a positive or negative effect on learning. The learning process can improve or fail with positive and negative emotions.

To enhance learning outcomes, teachers should pay attention to learners' feelings, and this attention is more recommended in virtual environments. The exploratory factor analysis shows the positive feelings of teachers and students in online EFL courses; therefore, this component is classified in the strengths factor of SWOT.

Briefly, the findings align with previous research highlighting the strengths of online EFL learning during the pandemic. A crucial factor in enabling students to engage and participate in class from various locations, as well as socioeconomic background is easy access to online platforms (Sudaryani et al., 2023). This has had great benefits particularly for learners

living in remote areas. Moreover, this flexibility which has been raised by online platforms has allowed users to adapt their study schedules and plans in accordance to individual needs (Alhaider, 2023; Bailey & Lee, 2022).

In addition, using innovative technological tools such as different learning apps, virtual classrooms, and various materials has received positive recognition in participation enhancement and language learning improvement (Alhaider, 2023).

## 4.2 Weaknesses

One of the major purposes of a SWOT analysis is to identify the weaknesses of an organization and build strategies to solve them (Gurel, 2017). Based on the exploratory factor analysis in this study, two factors were identified, and the questions related to these two factors were related to the weaknesses of learning and teaching English. The two mentioned factors were classified as inadequate interaction and distraction and cheating. Based on the exploratory factor analysis, these two factors can be classified as internal factors that deal with the weaknesses of online EFL learning and teaching, according to students' and teachers' perspectives.

Based on the exploratory factor analysis, the first major weakness in online EFL learning and teaching is that students get easily distracted in class and cheat during the class and in exams. In fact, considering that everything in the field of education is becoming digital, it is not surprising that we face old problems and challenges such as cheating. Research shows that the use of the Internet in education has led to problems such as electronic fraud (Herwiana & Laili, 2022; Valizadeh, 2022). The problem of cheating is one of the most obvious problems and challenges of online education (Maleki, 2024), which has also been identified as a major weakness in this research.

In outline, despite the strengths, this study has identified several weaknesses associated with online EFL learning in Iranian high schools in

the Covid-19 context. Previous research show that a major challenge in utilizing technology in education is technological limitations (Septiani & Iswahyuni, 2023). However, in this study, no face-to-face interaction and its potential impacts in EFL learning on students was a major downside. This can negatively impact the students' communicative skills (Yu, 2020). Inadequate interaction and the lack of personalized feedback and guidance in online learning, which is necessary in the language learning process, makes learning more challenging for students (Kamisli & Akinlar, 2023).

## 4.3 Opportunities

Opportunities are external factors that can lead an organization to more success. The results of the exploratory factor analysis and the classification of the identified factors showed that four items were identified and categorized as opportunities. They were labeled under the titles utilizing technology, participation, interaction, and convenience.

The first opportunity that teaching and learning English online provides us is the possibility of more usage of technology. Based on this, it can be said that the combination of education and technology has greatly helped with the growth of the educational system. The concept of education has been transformed to a great extent and digital learning has become an essential resource for students and schools around the world. With the help of technology, online education is possible for all students and teachers on a global scale. Online education can be beneficial for self-improvement with regard to the effective use of technology and various digital educational tools and materials (Çakir & Bayhan, 2023).

A great advantage of using technology in online language teaching and learning is the use of educational videos. Literature shows that most students prefer alternative ways of learning, including video clips to improve language skills as well as vocabulary knowledge and comprehension (Faramarzi et al.,

2019). Using podcasts, recording the class and rewatching it as many times are also other benefits. Therefore, this component can be considered as an opportunity in this teaching method which is in alignment with a study conducted by Cha et al., (2022).

Another component that has been identified as an opportunity to teach and learn English online is the possibility of more student participation. In fact, in online language education, it is possible to increase student participation with the help of different methods. For example, in the online method, it is very easy to access materials. Hence, students can observe shared files easily and at any time or place, and complete online assignments. In addition, sending voice messages and interacting in online groups were enhanced student interaction (Sholikhah & Ningsih, 2023). Gao and Zhang (2020) also found that online EFL teaching and learning might help in promoting learner participation which portrays the results of this study.

The third identified component in the opportunity factor is convenience in access to class and use of materials. It was shown in the study that teachers and students find remote learning to be very advantageous; in a sense that teachers are not required to gather students in a traditional classroom. Instead, they can present lectures in real time using an online platform. Online classes allow teachers and students to not only interact through their cameras, but also create a classroom-like environment for learning. This has also been shown in previous research (Sudaryani et al., 2023). Teachers can use video conferencing programs and other available tools and conduct regular classes to communicate with students. Online or real time classes break access barriers such as geographical issues.

The last component identified under the opportunities factor is the possibility of easier and frequent interaction among students and teachers. Through virtual education, students can easily communicate with their

teachers at any time. Also, teachers can check assignments online and reach out to students at times other than class hours. In an online educational platform, teaching and learning knows no geographical boundaries for neither students nor teachers; therefore, more and frequent interaction is possible through online EFL learning and teaching, also discussed in a study by Baru et al., (2020), as well as Sudaryani et al., (2023). They demonstrated that online learning may lead to more interaction and collaboration among students and teachers.

In short, online education has presented several opportunities for both students and teachers. The ability to leverage technology in learning has been a significant advantage. Online platforms offer numerous materials and resources that allow for a dynamic learning experience. By utilizing online learning platforms and technology, many educational advancements are opened up to students, which may lead to more effective and efficient learning. Moreover, the convenience and flexibility offered by online learning has facilitated participation and interaction. While challenges and limitations existed during the pandemic, the opportunities offered by online learning lay the foundations for the future of education, emphasizing on the potential for technology-driven learning approaches.

## 4.4 Threats

The fourth factor in SWOT analysis is threats. All factors that can lead to a disruption in online English teaching and learning are classified as threats. In this factor, poor Internet connection and inefficiency were identified.

Based on the exploratory factor analysis, the first major threat in learning and teaching English online was poor Internet connection. Internet connection and appropriate internet speed are among the first and most obvious requirements for holding an online class, and all strengths and opportunities of this teaching and learning approach would be jeopardized if

Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

not resolved (Fitria, 2023), even with the great variety of online platforms that could be used in online education. It should be pointed out that online courses, and in general this new educational method, is relatively new in Iran. For this reason, proper tools and infrastructures have not been installed for its purposes which threatens its success in the long run. Therefore, poor Internet connection is a major concern in online EFL learning and teaching. This finding is consistent with literature (i.e., Ghavidel, 2020; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Mahfoodh & Hashim, 2019; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020; Pazilah et al., 2019). Online education heavily relies on a stable internet connection and appropriate devices. Issues such as an unreliable network, internet speed, insufficient bandwidth, and faulty hardware can disrupt the quality of learning, as well as teaching. These issues can also lead to disruptions in class and access to materials. These factors have been mentioned is previous research (Fitria, 2023). High quality learning demands a good and stable internet connection, proper usage of online tools and materials, as well as sufficient interaction. Without them, learning could be hampered.

The second identified threat is related to the effectiveness of virtual education. Although the strengths and opportunities of this method in teaching English were mentioned in the previous sections, it should not be ignored that the effectiveness of this method in some areas may be less than expected. In simple words, students and many teachers do not have a correct understanding of virtual education and online classes, especially in English. Some do not know how to work with related tools and software and have problems in even the simplest issues. This issue may lead to boredom and reduce learning efficiency. Addressing these inefficiencies requires a multi-faceted approach including training and teaching different online teaching methodologies to teachers for better class management and more interaction.

This has been mentioned by Hassan et al., (2020), where teachers revealed that lacking the required computer skills for online teaching as well as using online and digitized materials were major concerns, and they required proper trainings to overcome these problems. In addition, with proper training, teachers will be more proficient in the use of technology and learners will trust their teachers more (Mozafarianpour et al., 2023).

## 5. Conclusion

This quantitative study investigated the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the online EFL courses in Iranian high schools in the context of COVID-19. According to the results, it was found that the weaknesses of these courses outweighed the strengths (internal factors), and the threats outweighed the opportunities (external factors). Some identified weaknesses included cheating, distraction, limited time, additional workload, difficulty in interaction, and materials.

However, materials were also identified as a strength which shows that a theme can be both a strength if used properly, and a weakness if taken for granted. Moreover, the opportunities found in this study shed light on technology usage in the future, while threats call for desperate measures to overcome certain consequences, especially inefficiency of language learning as well as poor Internet facilities.

The findings provide valuable insights into the benefits and drawbacks of the online EFL curriculum in Iranian high schools during the lockdown. Despite the strengths and opportunities, the weaknesses of inadequate interaction and possible cheating, as well as problems with internet connections, indicate areas of improvement. By addressing these weaknesses and capitalizing the strengths, policy makers, educators, and curriculum developers can optimize online EFL learning in Iran and ensure an effective learning experience for all high school students.

Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

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**Appendix 1.**

| No. Items | Items | Measured Factor |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Online EFL courses are motivating in that there is more use of various materials. | Strengths |
| 2 | Online EFL courses are enjoyable for both teachers and students. | Strengths |
| 3 | Much attention is given to both emotional and motivational factors in online EFL courses. | Strengths |
| 4 | Online EFL courses are very motivating. | Strengths |
| 5 | Teachers use an unlimited number of materials and sources in online EFL courses. | Strengths |
| 6 | Authentic materials are used in online EFL courses. | Strengths |
| 7 | Learning and teaching is more cost-effective in online EFL courses due to accessible online materials. | Strengths |
| 8 | Teachers are more engaged in preparing materials in online EFL courses. | Strengths |
| 9 | Students and teachers can interact more in online EFL courses. | Opportunities |
| 10 | More comprehensible, meaningful and useful materials are used in online EFL courses. | Strengths |
| 11 | Online EFL courses suffer from the lack of online facilities. | Eliminated |
| 12 | Students lack the necessary Internet-based skills to participate in online EFL courses. | Eliminated |
| 13 | Learners are not provided with appropriate and sufficient feedback regarding their errors in online EFL courses. | Weaknesses |
| 14 | Poor Internet connection leads to unattendance in class activities. | Threats |
| 15 | Online EFL courses promotes collaboration among students. | Opportunities |
| 16 | There is a lack of appropriate Internet subfrastructure in online EFL courses. | Threats |
| 17 | . Students have limited access to teachers for more effective learning in online EFL courses. | Weaknesses |
| 18 | Teachers have limited time to respond to students' needs in online EFL courses. | Weaknesses |
| 19 | Students and teachers find gaining access to materials to be inconvenient due to Internet connection problems. | Threats |
| 20 | Teachers do not have efficient interaction with students in online EFL courses. | Opportunities |
| 21 | Online EFL learning and teaching can help promote collaboration among students and teachers. | Opportunities |
| 22 | Teachers use useful online materials and technology to help enhance learning about the culture of English-speaking countries in online EFL courses. | Opportunities |
| 23 | Online EFL courses can help promote students' and teachers' computer skills, hence create a better and more efficient learning environment through technology. | Opportunities |
| 24 | Students and teachers can participate in online EFL courses from any location. | Opportunities |
| 25 | Online EFL courses are more convenient for a learner-centered approach. | Opportunities |
| 26 | Various types of English learning materials can be easily used in online EFL courses. | Opportunities |
| 27 | Teachers and students can easily use different apps for learning and teaching. | Opportunities |
| 28 | Online EFL courses requires more student engagement. | Opportunities |
| 29 | Online EFL courses are engaging for introverted students. | Opportunities |
| 30 | Online EFL courses help teachers and students learn more about new technology. | Opportunities |
| 31 | Online EFL courses lead to more distraction among students. | Weaknesses |
| 32 | Poor Internet connection in online EFL courses can lead to very little interaction. | Threats |
| 33 | Students pay less attention to assignments in online EFL courses. | Weaknesses |
| 34 | Students cheat more in online EFL courses. | Weaknesses |
| 35 | There is not enough supervision and communication between teachers and students in online EFL courses. | Weaknesses |
| 36 | Online EFL teaching is costly to be implemented in TEFL contexts. | Eliminated |
| 37 | Online EFL courses do not respond to students' language needs. | Threats |

Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

| 38 | Online EFL courses are less efficient compared to in-class courses. | Threats |
| 39 | Online EFL courses are unsupervised by teachers and parents. | Threats |
| 40 | Online EFL courses do not promote student teacher interaction. | Weaknesses |