

Challenges of distance English teaching: Narrative analysis of Iranian mainstream EFL teachers' lived experiences

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine what challenges Iranian EFL teachers in the mainstream educational system experienced in distance classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Telephone unstructured narrative interview was employed to collect data from 20 teacher participants, and two theoretical frameworks, CoI and TPACK, were used to interpret the results. The thematic narrative analysis yielded ten themes: non-customized platforms, material-related issues, connection/internet issues, pedagogical problems, evaluation problems, insufficiency of teachers' knowledge of technology, unmet expectations, physical absence of teacher/student, student-related issues, and dealing with negative emotions. The authors discuss that while some challenges are the antecedent contextual challenges that existed and will probably continue to exist in the context of distance classes, some other challenges can be avoided if teachers are equipped with TPACK to fulfill their new roles in the community of distance classes.

Key words: EFL teacher; distance English teaching; narrative analysis; challenges.

1. Introduction

Although online classes had already been a popular and valuable method of language acquisition before the COVID-19 pandemic (Kawinkoonlasate, 2020), due to school closures school officials encountered unprecedented demand to provide platforms that could be accessed remotely. Consequently, educators and learners had to experience a shift from teacher-fronted classes to online education, which constitutes an essential challenge for teachers (Hodges et al. 2020), as well as students (Agung et al. 2020). Teachers, for example, have had to adapt their lessons to virtual environments, adopt new strategies for class management and instruction, among other things, to carry out their responsibilities (Hodges et al. 2020), and take new roles in this educational context.

For teaching a foreign language, the situation is more complicated because language classes are unique in some respects. First, language is the subject and the object of teaching (Borg, 2006). This issue makes learning and teaching more challenging for both learners and teachers. Second, for teaching other subjects, like science or geography, the methodology is not as important as that for teaching a foreign language because teaching a foreign language is based on opportunities provided for teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions (Borg, 2006), which seems to be affected in various ways in the new context of distance learning. Third, for teaching a foreign language, educational materials, especially audio and video materials, make the core component of the class. Therefore, although a valuable alternative to teacher-fronted classrooms was introduced, the results of studies (e.g., Hodges et al. 2020) together with anecdotal evidence from language teachers, including English teachers and high school students, at least in the context of Iran, may suggest that a great deal remains to be done to achieve the desired goals of language classes. It seems that the first step to obtaining the goals of English courses defined by the Ministry of Education is to know how English teachers perceive the new situation and what challenges they experience. Studying the challenges may provide a window into how the distance education context has placed heavy demands on English teachers to develop the required competencies and skills and adopt new roles in virtual classes. Therefore, to realize the essence of the demands placed on EFL teachers in Iran, after over two years and a half of the coronavirus pandemic, the time is ripe to focus on the lived experiences of English instructors teaching online classes in Iran. Unless there is a deep understanding of what EFL teachers experienced in the new context of online English classes, the teachers and others involved cannot improve the circumstances in which EFL teachers find themselves.

Some remarks are in order concerning the theoretical frameworks used to justify the findings. Although most qualitative researchers are unwilling to use theories in their research process, arguing that using theories might alter their understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Bendassolli, 2014), the present study draws upon two theoretical frameworks, Community of Inquiry (CoI, hereafter) and Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK, hereafter). The reason behind using theoretical frameworks is that if the researchers concluded the analysis with the emergent themes without using any theoretical framework, they would end up with a long list of disconnected categories decontextualized through the coding procedure. The researchers, therefore, employ the theories as guiding tools in data interpretation (Green, 2014).

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical foundation

The availability of various technologies and their growing complexity have provided learners and teachers, particularly language learners and teachers, with an ever-increasing range of options for distance education (Byram, 2000). Yet, the efficiency of distance language teaching is determined by the skills and competencies needed by distance language teachers as well as technology infrastructure, among other factors (Murphy et al., 2010; Piña et al., 2018). As for the skills and competencies of instructors, various frameworks have addressed the roles instructors may take and the challenges they may face in distance education in various contexts and settings (e.g., Egan & Akdere, 2005; Tait, 2000). In the context of language teaching, Bauman et al. (2008) explored the skills, attributes, and expertise required of distance language teachers. Tait (2000) suggested three significant roles for distance language teachers: cognitive role, through which distant language teachers should support and encourage learning through the mediation course materials and learning resources; affective role, which indicates they should provide a supportive and motivating environment that fosters commitment and enhances self-esteem; and systemic/administrative role which states teachers should have effective Information Technology (IT) skills to be able to manage the context and create a student-friendly environment.

The framework corresponds well with the CoI framework, first proposed by Garrison and colleagues in 2000. The CoI presents a model of online teaching and learning that takes place in a community composed of teachers and learners (Anderson et al. 2001). Learning occurs through interaction among three presence types that represent three roles instructors play: social presence; cognitive presence, and teaching presence. The elements reflect those proposed by Tait in the context of online teaching and learning.

Social presence, which corresponds to the affective role in Tait's framework, refers to "the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of protecting their individual personalities" (Garrison et al., 2010: 32). This element supports the cognitive presence by instigating, sustaining, and supporting critical thinking in the community (Anderson et al., 2001). Creation of social presence makes group interaction appealing and intrinsically rewarding, hence its supporting role in the emotional aspects of teaching and learning.

Teacher presence, which partly reflects Tait's systemic role, is directly under the control of instructors and "includes designing and managing learning sequences, providing subject matter expertise, and facilitating active learning" (Anderson et al., 2001: 3). Cognitive presence, analogous to Tait's

cognitive role, is defined as the extent to which the community members can construct meaning through sustained communication (Garison et al., 2000). It is generated through four stages: provoking interest to discuss a topic, generating ideas to solve the problem, integrating ideas, and testing the solutions by applying the acquired knowledge (González Miy & Herrera Díaz, 2015). It goes without saying that the ways these elements are linked in a teaching/learning context impact teachers' as well as learners' experiences.

The three presences of distance learning teachers, functioning, in essence, as learner support mechanisms, cannot be accomplished without having the ability to integrate technology into their teaching process creatively. This is because "there is no one best way to integrate technology into the curriculum. Rather, *integration efforts should be creatively designed or structured for particular subject matter ideas in specific classroom contexts*" (Koehler & Mishra, 2009: 62). The abrupt shift from teacher-fronted contexts to distance education environments, therefore, calls not only for teachers' content, pedagogical, and technological knowledge, but also for the interaction of these knowledge bases, i.e., Technological Pedagogical Knowledge (TPK), Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), Technological Content Knowledge (TCK), and Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). As maintained by Koehler and Mishra (2008), knowledge of content, pedagogy, and technology forms the core of TPACK. However, the requisite knowledge for bringing into play TPACK is interactions between and among the core components, i.e., TPK, TCK, and PCK. Distant instructors possess TPK if they know how to use technology to improve their instructional strategies (Baser et al., 2016). Moreover, they know the pedagogical features and constraints of various technological tools (Koehler & Mishra, 2008). In distant classes, in addition to mastering the subject matter, teachers should know how technology and the content influence and constrain one another (Koehler & Mishra, 2008); that is, they should have TCK. Teachers should also know which technology could be best used for teaching which subject. PCK covers the essential aspects of teaching, such as transforming the subject matter for teaching, realizing what conditions may promote learning, and making connections between students' prior knowledge, curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy (Koehler & Mishra, 2008).

2.2. Previous studies

At the time this study was being written, there existed a relatively vast body of literature documenting the challenges of distance education from the perspectives of learners and teachers. Overall, the empirical studies on the topic, particularly qualitative ones, are of two types. One group of studies has taken an atheoretical approach, although one can alternatively find a fleeting appearance of theories in the discussion section of the studies. For example,

Hebebcı et al. (2020), in a qualitative thematic analysis, investigated high school learners' and teachers' views about distance education activities in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors found the participants had positive opinions about distance teaching. Equal educational opportunities for less developed areas and having time to plan the course and activities were among the positive aspects. One challenge mentioned by the teachers was the lack of interaction in distance learning classes.

In another atheoretical study, Jebbour (2022) investigated the hindrances and benefits faculty members at language departments experienced when delivering distance and online language courses during the pandemic. Employing a phenomenological research design, the researcher used email interviews to collect data from 20 male university instructors. Four themes emerged, two as hindrances and two as benefits. The lack of ICT infrastructure and not being trained in holding distance classes, together with the lack of communication, were the challenges they experienced. The benefits of distance classes were their flexibility and learner-content interactions. Similarly, Boonmoh et al. (2022) surveyed the challenges and needs of EFL university teachers in Thailand. The authors found the major difficulties were engaging and maintaining their students' attention and triggering and maintaining interaction between students and teachers and between students themselves.

Hakim (2020) addressed the challenges of integrating technology into language classrooms in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges were: the time-consuming process of preparing materials for online classes, the lack of tools to assess learning effectively, technical issues, and spending too much time on management tasks. In the context of Iran, Khatony and Nezhadmehr (2020) studied the significant challenges EFL teachers experienced during the crisis through mix-methods research. They found the teachers have encountered many problems ranging from the availability of appropriate materials to unmotivated students, and the lack of students' attention.

Another group of studies has approached teachers' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities of distance classes through theoretical lenses, for example, the technology acceptance model (Maphosa, 2021), stress and coping strategy models (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022) and theories on language pedagogy such as theories on interaction, learner autonomy, and feedback (Davies et al., 2020).

Utilizing an adapted Technology Acceptance Model as the theoretical framework, Maphosa (2021) surveyed secondary school teachers' opinions and practices in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 era. The author identified barriers such as the prohibitive cost of data, lack of digital skills, connectivity, access to computing devices, and the institution's culture. The barriers were found to affect the perceived ease of use of educational technology negatively.

In another study in Iran, Ghanbari and Nowroozi (2022) conducted a case study to explore how two EFL teachers dealt with their teaching during the COVID era. Employing Hill's (1949, 1958) ABC-X model, they found upon shifting to the online context of teaching, the teachers faced institutional, affective, pedagogical, and technological challenges. However, although some problems persisted, the teachers could find solutions to the new situation. The studies reported in this section cover a relatively wide range of contexts and address various challenges teachers, in general, and language teachers, in particular, have encountered after the compulsory transition to remote teaching.

Although the researchers obtained several similar results as to the challenges faced by educators during the COVID crisis, there seems to be a gap in the literature on how the challenges can be attributed to the roles teachers perform in the distance teaching context and the competencies that enable them to serve the functions. With the consistent demand and increase in distance courses offered in educational contexts, scholars have attempted to develop frameworks that account for the new functions teachers need to fulfill, relying on the required knowledge types in the new context. Among these are the well-compatible TPACK and CoI frameworks especially useful for exploring teachers' experiences in distance classes. The purpose of this paper is to study English teachers' challenges in order to unravel the competencies Iranian EFL teachers need to develop to fulfill their roles in the context of distance English teaching.

The present study intends to answer the following research question:

What challenges did Iranian EFL teachers in the mainstream educational system experience in the distance classes during the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. Method

3.1. Design of the study

The current study was a qualitative narrative analysis conducted to elicit information about Iranian English teachers' lived experience of online classes. The narrative approach allows for an intense description of real-life experiences through the stories of the research participants and an investigation of the meanings that the participants derive from their experiences. Narrative inquiry amplifies voices that may have otherwise remained silent (Trahar, 2013).

3.2. Participants and sampling

The participants of the present study were 20 Iranian English teachers, 15 females and 5 males, who had teaching experience between 4 and 31 years. All

the participants were teaching English in the mainstream educational system. The teachers' ages ranged from 24 to 50, with a mean age of 36. They held B.A. ($N = 5$), M.A. ($N = 14$), or Ph.D. ($N = 1$) degrees in TEFL. All the participants had to shift to online teaching of English after the emergence of the coronavirus in 2019. Therefore, they all had at least one year of English teaching experience in online classes.

To select the required sample, the snowball purposive sampling method was employed. Purposive sampling was used because the researchers were interested in studying the narratives of Iranian English teachers with specific characteristics: those teaching English in the mainstream educational system having the experience of teaching in both teacher-fronted and online classes. The sampling process also benefited from snowball sampling. After conducting the first interview with a colleague who possessed the intended characteristics, he was asked to refer the researchers to others he knew might be willing to participate in the study and have those characteristics. As Corbin and Strauss (2014) recommended, the data collection ended when data saturation was obtained. The data saturation resulted in a sample of 20 Iranian English teachers.

3.3. Instrument

The telephone unstructured narrative interview was employed as the data collection tool of the study. The technique was assumed to be an alternative to face-to-face interviews during the COVID-19 outbreak. Moreover, as put by Holt (2010: 116), one of the methodological benefits that accrue from telephone interview is that, since non-verbal communication is absent, "everything has to be articulated" by the participant and the interviewer, which results in a much richer narration to be analyzed.

Unstructured Narrative interviews in this study took the form of a story in response to a single question, i.e., 'What is the story of your online English classes, if you want to describe it as a story, from the beginning, up to this point?'. Therefore, the interviews were conversational since the interviewees shared their lived experiences of English online classes, and the interviewer/researcher would ask follow-up questions to probe for more information, explanation, and clarification (Kartch, 2017). The researchers took a one-shot approach, interviewing the participants in one session.

3.4. Procedure

The second researcher of the study initially sent text messages to each participant and arranged a time and date when he would telephone the participants to conduct the narrative interviews. The interviews began with the

researcher/interviewer explaining that he only wanted to know about their teaching experience in the distance classes after the COVID-19 outbreak and the rapid and mandatory switch to teaching English in the new context. The researcher asked them to narrate their lived experiences of teaching in the classes like a story. They were informed that their voices would be recorded and were assured that their personal information would be remained confidential. The interviews lasted between 40 and 55 minutes. Data collection took place over two months starting on 17 May and ending on 21 July 2021. The recorded voices were transcribed verbatim to be used later for theme elicitation.

3.5. Data analysis

Thematic narrative analysis was employed as the qualitative data analysis tool. The method values the lived experiences of the participants to discover the phenomenon under question (Sahlstein & Baker, 2018). In particular, inductive thematic narrative analysis was used to examine the content of the stories and determine the recurrent themes in the participants' stories. The method is valuable because it lends itself to qualitative analyses. Moreover, the researchers decided to employ narrative analysis because this method of analysis enables the researchers to notice how respondents impose their order on experience and environment by commenting upon their relationships between events and actions using stories (Ntinda, 2019).

Before analyzing the data, the narratives were anonymized; therefore, any reference to the participants or the content of interviews is made using a code in this study. Then, the audio files were transcribed after each interview session. As the next step, a set of initial codes that represented the meanings and patterns observed in the data were created. Subsequently, all the excerpts associated with a particular code were grouped, and the codes were sorted into potential themes based on a set of initial codes. For the fifth step, the themes were reviewed and revised.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the inferences, two techniques were used: member check and referential adequacy. For member checks, the final themes and subthemes were shown to three participants, and they agreed with the interpretations. The trustworthiness was also improved by having five transcripts of the interviews analyzed by the first author of the present study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The researchers then compared the themes that emerged from the analysis of the first and second researchers. Inconsistent categories were omitted with the agreement of the researchers.

4. Results

The coding process aiming at extracting themes representing challenges faced by Iranian English teachers in mainstream distance EFL classes yielded ten categories. Some themes were divided into subthemes.

The dominant themes that emerged from the narratives were: non-customized platforms, material-related issues, connection/internet issues, pedagogical problems, evaluation problems, insufficiency of teachers' knowledge of technology, unmet expectations, the physical absence of teacher/student, student-related problems, and dealing with negative emotions. The themes and the related subthemes are presented in Table 1, with the frequency related to each.

Table 1: Challenges of distance EFL classes as perceived by teachers

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency
Non-customized platforms		20
Material-Related issues		9
Connection/Internet issues		9
Pedagogical Problems	Subject-related problem	5
	Lack of non-verbal communication	7
	Restricted medium for giving/receiving feedback	9
	Failure to do pair work and group work	9
Evaluation Problems	Assessment issues	6
	Cheating and exam malpractice	8
Technology integration problem	Digital illiteracy	5
	Lack of Technological pedagogical knowledge	12
Unmet expectations	Time-consuming	20
	Lack of support	8
The Physical absence of teachers/students	Invisible students	8
	Invisible teachers	8
Student-Related Issues	Distracted learning	4
	Dependence on external sources	7
Dealing with negative emotions	Boring classes	8
	Stressful situation	

Non-Customized Platforms

This theme can be defined as the unsuitability of the platforms designed for holding distance foreign language classes. All the participants referred to this theme in their narratives. For example, TN12 maintained,

At first, the platform we had to use to hold remote classes was Shaad. As soon as I started working with the platform, I found it not suitable for English classes. Because, for example, I needed to listen to my students as they read the text; or I remember once I had problems with speaking, you know what I mean, they needed to talk spontaneously, and they could not, or even when they could, one of them said that the time that was preset for recording their voices was not enough!

TN3 also commented on the problems such as error messages, font changes, scrambled words and paragraphs, and receiving disruptive files of students' tasks.

Material-related issues

This theme summarized those extracts that implied the lack or unsuitability of the existing teaching materials for teaching a foreign language in distance classes. This theme was mentioned by 9 teachers. For example, TN11 said,

I had some problems with the materials we used for the classes. Something was missing, or better to say, something was not suitable enough, not right, or not as good as it should be. I mean, the materials WERE indeed good for any face-to-face class but not for a virtual one! Once I found that one of my students wanted to ask a question, he wanted to mention which part of the reading he meant. It took a long while until I could figure out where it was!

Similarly, TN18 shared his challenge about the voice quality of the tracks on the platforms and the difficulty in uploading audio-visual files.

Connection/Internet issues

This theme is related to the quality of internet connections. Internet-related issues were mentioned by 9 teachers. The theme covers all the issues, such as slow and unstable connections that would get in the way of their virtual classes. In this relation, TN1 reported,

The internet speed is awfully low! This problem is even bigger in some parts of our country. I mean, in smaller cities and towns that don't enjoy as many network towers as metropolitan areas. I have a student who used to spend an hour reaching face-to-face classes. But the Internet speed in her town was not at all near good! And even when the speed was good, I had occasional breakdowns on my Internet!

TN3 stated some of his good students missed the classes because of the connection problem. Narratives revealed that Iranian teachers, not unlike many other teachers, have to cope with the internet connection in online classes.

Pedagogical problems

This theme has four subthemes, namely subject-related problems, lack of non-verbal communication, restricted medium for feedback, and failure to pair work and group work. Pedagogical problems apply to the barriers to effective teaching in distance classes. Although pedagogy covers assessment-related aspects, this aspect of pedagogy and its related issues are addressed in a separate theme, named evaluation-related problems, because some issues are not pedagogic in nature.

The first subtheme, subject-related problems, was mentioned by five participants. TN5 said,

I believe teaching English is much more complex than other subjects. Learning English is learning to express yourself and think in another language. You must teach them this, not just some vocab or grammar! You know, this colleague of mine who is a math teacher only teaches some math formulas!! And gives her students some examples each session and some exercises! That's all!! But I need to teach content and language skills to speak, listen, read, and write, which are more challenging and demanding.

Two teachers, TN 3 and TN1, mentioned that teaching English is difficult because they have to use a medium for teaching that is not something their students yet understand. TN1 added, "*Never, as a language teacher, would I dare to claim that I know English, because it is not my mother tongue.*" At large, the participants believed teaching English in virtual classes is more demanding and challenging than other subjects because of the nature of the subject and their lack of perfect competence in English.

Seven teachers mentioned the second subtheme, i.e., lack of non-verbal communication. For instance, TN10 noted,

What bothers me is that in distance classes, I feel I am disabled! Since the first day, I noticed I could not use body language adequately or the way I wanted. Sometimes I have problems conveying the meaning. Once I even wondered how I could continue this way! Even when I used the camera, my students couldn't see my hands; they could only see something like my medium shot!

Another teacher, TN 3, talked about how she missed the face-to-face classes where she could simply give feedback with a nod and manage the class with her frown. As shown in the extract, due to the loss of the physical presence of teachers and students, visual cues such as gazes, postures, and facial gestures are not transmitted in online classes. The participants believed it is difficult not to see the students and not to be able to depend on visual cues in online classes.

Nine participants mentioned the third subtheme, i.e., restricted medium for receiving/giving feedback. For instance, TN17 stated,

... at some point, I noticed that, unfortunately, I did not have the kind of interaction that I want to have in a class with my students in distance classes. Every day I felt it is getting more challenging to get some proper feedback from my students and to understand the students' reactions, which are very important for teaching English. In one of the sessions that I was teaching passive voices, when I asked my students "did you understand it," some of them did not give me any feedback at all and some of them just wrote yes to make me satisfied. I thought I couldn't just take it for granted that they have learned!

Nine participants described challenges they faced when they needed to provide feedback to their students. TN18 talked about his difficulties when trying to provide encouraging feedback since the students could not see him. Interestingly, TN17 mentioned,

You know, when I was going to give feedback I failed to keep up with them. Imagine they just said something wrong, and before I have time to provide my feedback in written or spoken form, they are talking about something else. What happens? They don't get what I am saying, they get confused, and in a sense, they get distracted.

Similarly, TN8 shared her experience that since she realized it was challenging to provide feedback where and when she should, she decided to wait until they finished their tasks. She also added that in teacher-fronted classes, they did have to wait for the right moment to give their feedback, and, unlike in online classes, they could use non-verbal feedback during the tasks. What can be inferred is that as far as providing feedback is concerned, the real challenge results from the fact that in online classes they cannot give real-time feedback.

Limited pair work and group work were mentioned by nine teacher participants. For example, TN15 said,

I noticed that they [students] do not participate in class activities. You know, in the online classes, some of my students did not take part in pair-works and group-works and even made excuses, such as "I can't hear the voice" or "I have problems with my internet connection." Honestly, in the case of two of my students, I noticed they were not excuses; they had problems, but even when the problems were resolved, they could not get into the activity properly; they simply discarded the whole idea of initiating the pair work task. Furthermore, it was impossible to perform activities like role-playing, which is very useful for language learning.

It is implied that, in the online setting, teachers and students should settle for individual activities. At least for teachers in Iran who had to abruptly adopt online English teaching, effective use of the platforms was difficult.

Evaluation problems

This theme is related to the problems the teachers experienced when they needed to assess what their students have learned in the virtual context. The

theme had two subthemes: assessment issues, cheating, and exam malpractice.

Concerning the first subtheme, six teachers shared their experiences of having difficulty when assessing their students' skills and knowledge. For example, TN6 said,

When the results of my first exam came up, I noticed that some results were too good or too bad to be accurate; I was not sure if my student had or had not learned a specific subject adequately. Actually, it was impossible for me to test my students properly in order to understand if they learned what I taught.

TN9 and TN10 mentioned that they felt holding time-bounded exams in distance classes may not be fair for all students since they might have weak internet connections. TN9 added that most teachers have accepted that their distance exams are open-book exams. Unlike regular classes, they cannot get an accurate understanding of their students' strengths and weakness and their improvements.

Eight teachers talked about cheating and exam malpractice. TN5 said,

You can feel that sometimes students take tests for their classmates, and sometimes students get help for answering the questions on exams, which makes it difficult for teachers to evaluate their students properly. Once I was observing while my students were doing an online test; I noticed two of my students were going through some sections too quickly! You know, I mean faster than the minimum expected time! I could tell they were either helping each other or had other sorts of aid from somebody else.

TN20 recalled how she sometimes had to hold remote testing through telephone calls or asynchronous evaluation through Whatsapp. In both situations, she mentioned, she had to spend a long time assessing the students, not to mention the unreliability of the assessment data they received.

Technology integration problems

This theme is related to the problems the teachers experienced in distance classes because of their insufficient knowledge and skill in using computers and platforms. The theme is further divided into two subthemes, namely digital illiteracy and lack of technological pedagogical knowledge.

Concepts of lacking digital illiteracy were mentioned by five teachers. For example, TN2 stated,

I couldn't tell I wasn't familiar enough with computer programs and applications until I got to have a virtual class, and I noticed I couldn't work with them, at least for the first few sessions. Even when I thought I knew, each drill or section worked differently. I mean, when you teach listening, the system works differently than when you are working on writing or reading exercises. Many times, I found myself unable to use the platform. How many times do you think a teacher says: sorry

guys, I can't see how I cannot upload the slides? Once, it took me two minutes to find the whiteboard annotation feature.

Twelve participants described their experiences with the second sub-theme, i.e., lack of technological pedagogical knowledge. TN11 stated,

..., as soon as I started working with these digital systems and platforms, I felt I could not control either the students or what I was doing. After several months, I thought I am familiar with the features and characteristics of online classes. Yet, I do not know how to teach, say, language skills online because I wasn't trained for these classes. I think what I have learned through my experiences, and my education does not work here in this context. We are left with our own resources and google searches or some advice here and there from other colleagues to acquaint ourselves with the system.

As the excerpt shows, the teachers were unable to transfer their pedagogical knowledge to the new context; it may entail that they fail to convey the content they were going to teach effectively. It seems that they expected to be offered courses on how to integrate their pedagogical knowledge into online classes.

Unmet expectations

This theme addresses the gap between the teachers' expectations of the distance classes and the reality of the classes. The theme consists of two sub-themes: the time-consuming nature of distance classes and the lack of support.

All the teacher participants believed, when compared to teacher-fronted classes, distance classes are more time-consuming. For example, TN 19 maintained,

Online classes were more laborious for me than regular classes. I had to dedicate more time and effort to preparing a lesson plan, and some other things like PowerPoint presentations for my class. You know, I have heard from a friend who works in another country that the institute gives them all online materials and platform instructions, and they work only as a moderator.

Lack of support was mentioned by eight teacher participants. For example, TN4 described the school officials asking them to plunge into the online context of teaching, and all the teachers felt abandoned to handle the classes.

Physical absence of teacher/student

Two subthemes are subsumed under the theme of the physical absence of teacher/student, namely invisible students and invisible teachers. The teachers described how the online classes transformed their teaching experiences because of the physical absence of teachers and students. Eight teachers talked about the issues. For instance, TN17 stated,

At first, it felt as if I am talking to my monitor, and my monitor says something back to me! I had a different understanding of the term "virtual"! I thought virtual was being visible on another platform. I thought I was more like a cartoon that they were told to watch! But not an amusing one! It was difficult to encourage more involvement or even get some feedback when you cannot see them. Since you cannot see them, it is tough to understand the students' reactions and attitudes. In one of my online classes, I was teaching reflexive pronouns, but I couldn't understand if my students got the point or not.

TN7 also said,

It was difficult for my students to understand my feelings in online classes because they could not see me. One of my students complained that in regular face-to-face classes, the students see the behaviors and facial expressions of the teacher. However, online classes do not allow students to know the characteristics of their teacher.

As implied by the excerpts, the mental presence of the students and teachers in distance classes proved inadequate for effective teaching and learning. Teachers seem to have experienced problems in the delivery of their instructions where they cannot see the students or be seen by them.

Student-related issues

The theme 'Student-related problems' refers to those challenges experienced by students in English online classes, yet the problems interfere with effective teaching. This theme has two subthemes: distracted learning and dependence on external sources.

Four teachers shared their experience with the first subthemes, i.e., distracted learning. For example, TN7 argued,

Our students have had all sorts of distractions, younger siblings or kids and grandmas, noisy neighbors, and street repair machines! Once, I could hear a noise for a while in the class! I tried to track it; I found out a student had his mom with a vacuum cleaner around!! Sometimes students get annoyed, embarrassed, or distracted, but sometimes we have a good laugh and a bit of fun.

Dependence on external sources was mentioned by seven teachers. For example, TN12 stated,

In one of my online classes, when I wanted to ask one of my students a question, I could hear her mother's voice, who was trying to help her daughter to answer the question. It is like some parents or elder siblings are curious to see what is going on in the class or to refresh their English knowledge. Once, I noticed that a parent was prompting answers in the class. Another time, I found the student was confused because he had received instruction from the parents.

As indicated by the narratives, teachers believe the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process is affected by some unwelcome interference from parents or other people.

Dealing with negative emotions

Out of 20, eight referred to the boredom and stress experienced in distance classes. TN13 mentioned, "...right from my very first class; I could feel that the class was boring for my students, and me. They were not interested in being in the class. I felt unable to make them motivated. TN2 said, "many a time when I asked them to write their answers in the chat box, there were only a few who did so, and I got angry because I knew they were not in the class; when I tracked their attendance, I learned that they were absent most of the time." TN 11 narrated how stressful it was at the beginning not to know how to prepare materials for the class, engage the students, manage the class, and know if the students are following them.

5. Discussion

This narrative analysis aimed to explore the challenges Iranian EFL teachers faced in the mainstream educational context during the COVID-19 crisis. The first part of this section will comment on the findings of this study in relation to previous works. The authors discuss the themes separately and in connection to each other and end this part with the theme 'technology integration problems,' used as a transition point to justify the findings, guided by the theoretical frameworks mentioned in sections 1 and 2.

The findings revealed that the teachers experienced various pedagogical problems in their distance classes. This part of the results is consistent with Boonmoh et al. (2022), Hebebcı et al. (2020), and Ghanbari and Nowroozi (2022). They reported teachers' difficulty in triggering and maintaining interaction, lack of communication, and lack of prompt feedback. Concerning feedback, the study has confirmed the findings of Yang et al. (2021), who found that in an asynchronous context, there are limited opportunities for the real-time and extensive feedback, and in synchronous distance classes, there is little room for immediate feedback. This challenge can be considered in association with two other sub-themes that emerged from the data, namely the physical absence of teacher/student and lack of non-verbal communication. While previous studies (e.g., Murphy, 2015) have recognized the restriction of distance teaching in providing and receiving immediate feedback and the absence of non-verbal cues, this study's findings raised the new issue of physical absence, which was not offered in the literature. Reconsidering the relationships between the emerged themes, one can argue that the physical absence may dictate how restricted communications would be in distance classes. In

another word, teachers experience restrictions in receiving/giving feedback and non-verbal clues from/to their students. Physical absence might also be a reason why teachers have to deal with distracted students in distance classes. Nevertheless, the issues are partly surmountable by entering new dimensions into the pedagogy, such as using an emotional tone and engagingly presenting the course.

As far as appropriate teaching materials are concerned, the results are in line with Khatoony and Nezhadmehr (2020), who reported Iranian EFL teachers' challenges in dealing with the availability of teaching materials. Apparently, the teachers expected the same materials they used in traditional English classes to be presented in distance classes. Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned if they utilized authentic, stimulating materials downloaded via the internet and integrated into their lessons. Neither did they state if they introduced some online and digital sources that have great potential for enhancing their knowledge and individualizing their language learning.

The teachers stated their concern about the non-specificity of the platforms employed by the educational authorities. This theme can be closely related to another theme, i.e., the subject-related problem experienced and mentioned by some participants and recognized by some other researchers in the field. Murphy et al. (2011), for instance, investigated what EFL teachers and learners believe to be the distinctive feature of effective distance language teachers. The authors found the teachers contrasted language teaching with teaching other subjects, and confirmed Borg's (2006) argument that the distinctive nature of language teaching and learning arises from the distinctive nature of the subject, which is both the end and the means of teaching.

That teachers experienced issues with internet connection was also in line with previous studies (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Jebbour, 2022; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020). What needs to be mentioned is that although this issue is totally out of control and the teachers could not pre-empt the disconnections and limited access caused by poor internet connection, as will be discussed later, they could work out some ways to minimize the consequences associated with this and some other challenges.

The teachers stated they had to deal with negative emotions such as stress and boredom with some distance classes. As far as teachers' stress is concerned, this finding agrees with Ganbari and Nowroozi's (2022) results, which showed EFL teachers experienced stressful situations in dealing with their distance teaching. The unprecedented switch to distance classes seems mentally demanding for teachers, untrained to run distance classes. Part of this stress might originate from their and their students' physical absence, which requires teachers "to be more attentive to emotionally engage with learners" Conceição (2006: 40). This study's findings indicated there are other negative feelings involved in distance English teaching contexts. Boredom experienced

by EFL teachers is not confined to distance classes; however, as found by Derakhshan et al. (2021), for both teachers and students, online classes are more boring than traditional classes. Boredom is likely experienced by distance teachers due to poor teacher-student interaction, a void of visual clues, and constraints on physical mobility (Bailenson, 2021).

As far as evaluation problems are concerned, the results differ from Boonmoh et al. (2022), but they are broadly consistent with Ganbari and Nowroozy's (2022) findings. Boonmoh et al. reported the teacher participants barely mentioned any challenge in relation to the evaluation of students. At the same time, the cases in Ghanbari and Nowroozy's study stressed their concern about academic dishonesty and difficulty in verifying the identity of the examinees. A possible explanation for this result may be that teachers need to develop and update their knowledge of computer-mediated assessment which is different from that of traditional assessment. Moreover, as suggested by Compton (2009), they may benefit from constant formative assessment better to identify their students' progress based on their outputs. Still, teachers can integrate several ways of assessment to discard the challenge of unfair evaluation.

Some student-related problems have been reported in the literature by, for example, Hakim (2020), Jebbour (2022), and Maphosa (2021). With respect to parents' interference in their children's learning, while some authors (e.g., Hakim, 2020), have revealed teachers' opinions on the supportive and monitoring role of parents in technology-integrated distance classes, the participants of this study viewed parents' involvement in their children learning as a challenge. The result might be explained by the fact that the teachers can acknowledge the supportive role of parents if they realize that, unlike the traditional classes, in distance education, teachers' roles are not distinct from those of parents. As a result, they seem to consider themselves the primary source of knowledge and perceive what their parents do as interference.

Unexpectedly, teachers found themselves in a situation, at least initially, where they did not receive organizational support and had to spend an extended time preparing for the classes, downloading students' tasks, sending worksheets through various apps, such as WhatsApp, and providing feedback for individual students through the apps. These findings match those observed in earlier studies (e.g., Casacchia et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Nowroozy, 2022; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Lukas & Yunus, 2021). That the teachers complained about lack of support may be explained by the fact that the teachers expected hands-on training in the technical and pedagogical issues to know how to cope with the requirements of the distance classes. Even the time-consuming nature of distance classes, as mentioned by the participants, can be justified by their unpreparedness for holding remote classes in terms of course design, course content, methodology, and technical issues.

The final part of this section is devoted to the theme of 'technological integration problems.' Similar to the results of the present study, Ghanbari and Nowroozy (2022) and Jebbour (2022) found although teachers have used and been aided by technology in the last decade, they still need to be empowered with digital literacy and acquire knowledge of how to use their technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge interactively (Koehler& Mishra, 2009). The narratives revealed the teachers experienced moments when they felt incapable of implementing their technological knowledge in teaching some specific skills or linguistic elements. The narratives also suggested they thought they failed, at least sometimes, in using their subject-specific teaching strategies. It can be hypothesized that this challenge, along with some other challenges, could have been avoided if the teachers had been armed with the knowledge to integrate their English content knowledge, technological knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge innovatively to teach English in the new context.

A reassessment of the extracted themes suggested that specific challenges seem to be the consequences of other challenges in the context of distance teaching, i.e., the latter group could be partially prevented if it were not for the former ones. There is still another group of challenges that arise from insufficient knowledge on the part of the teachers. It follows that the themes can be reorganized into three general categories: antecedent contextual challenges, defective knowledge, and consequent challenges. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between these three categories.

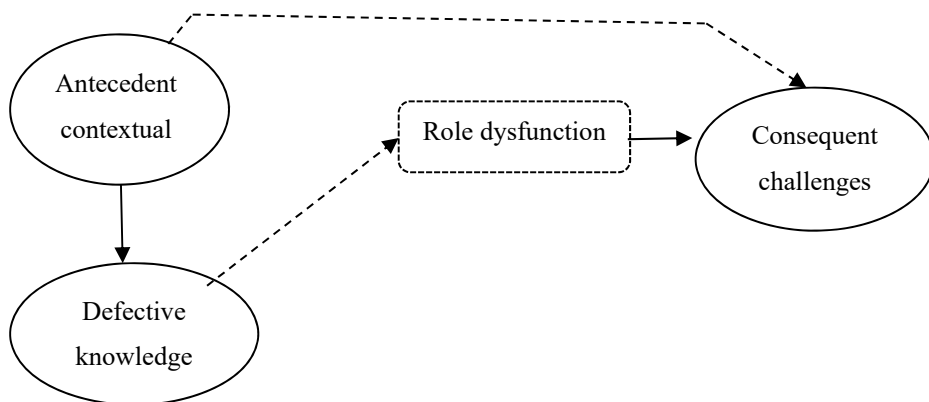


Figure 1: The relationships between challenges faced by teachers

Antecedent contextual challenges are the variables or circumstances not induced by the mandatory switch to remote education. They existed before the crisis and may continue to exist, either due to some deficiencies or the

inherent property of a context. The presence of challenges like non-customized platforms and connection/internet issues are antecedents to what teachers experience in distance classes. The physical absence of the teacher/student is also an antecedent contextual challenge since, similar to internet problems and non-customized platforms; it is out of the teachers' and learners' control. The dashed line linking antecedent contextual challenges with consequent challenges indicates a direct effect of the former on the latter. Some pedagogical problems, such as lack of visual clues, part of teachers' unmet expectations, the time-consuming nature of the classes, and part of teachers' negative feelings, may be triggered by the quality of the internet infrastructure and the platforms and the fact that computer-mediated teaching intrinsically involves the physical absence of members unless webcams are used.

Another type of relationship, as shown in the figure, is a mediated relationship. A key predictor of most challenges language teachers experience is the teachers' coherent set of knowledge about how to integrate content, technology, and pedagogy in online distance classes in the most effective way, i.e., to have technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). Koehler and Mishra (2009) maintain that in this framework, the integrative component of Technological Pedagogical knowledge (TPK) involves knowing how to use technology to support instruction. Therefore, by developing this type of knowledge, the teachers would surmount the challenges they faced in relation to materials, they would speed up preparing materials using multiple sources, and they could use various technological tools to design appropriate materials. Another integrative component of TPACK is Technological Content Knowledge (TCK). The knowledge involves the teachers to understanding, first and foremost, there are technological tools and platforms other than the national learning platforms, like Shaad, or any other platform offered by the ministry of education, they can use and suggest to their students, to support their learning. Moreover, this type of knowledge may entail that there is no *one-size-fits-all* tool and platform that is suited for addressing all the subjects. They need to know which specific tool best meets the requirements of learning and teaching a foreign language. For example, they could guide their students on which tools can be used to support pronunciation or listening skills, or they could take advantage of multimedia to compensate for some limitations they face in their classes. On the other hand, problems in relation to the limited interactions and constraints in pair-work and group work in distance classes would fade away if teachers were amply equipped with TCK. The TPACK framework contains another integrative element, Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), which "covers the core business of teaching, learning, curriculum, assessment, and reporting, such as the conditions that promote learning and the links among curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy" (Koehler & Mishra, 2009: 64). This component primarily involves the selection of practical teaching approaches and relies on the

knowledge and skills pertinent to classroom teaching in general; hence the authors of the present study cannot attribute the context-specific results of distance classes to this component. The results also cannot be distinctively attributed to the content and pedagogical knowledge as two main components of TPACK because knowledge of content and pedagogy are the requisite knowledge for all teaching contexts. Moreover, as for the technological knowledge of the teachers, as put by Koehler and Mishra (2009: 64), delimiting the border of this knowledge is problematic because "Technology knowledge (TK) is always in a state of flux." Therefore, suffice it to say, "certain ways of thinking about and working with technology can apply to all technology tools and resources" (Koehler & Mishra, 2009: 64). It entails that, failing to solve the technological problems in their distance classes may be rooted in their inadequate technological knowledge.

Ideally, teachers' TPACK should be reinforced by their belief about the different nature of learning and teaching in online distance contexts. The teacher participants' concern for providing an appropriate and ample amount of input for their students might reveal that many teachers do not have a good grip on their functions in the new context. They seem to view teaching as knowledge transmission and learning as knowledge acquisition in a teacher-centered class rather than seeing teaching and learning as a social activity where the teachers should take on new roles and identities (Hampel & Stickler, 2015).

Defective knowledge on the part of teachers, that is, not equipped with TPACK and perceiving themselves as knowledge transmitters, contributes to the consequent challenges (Figure 1) through another mediating component, role dysfunction. This implies that teachers must be competent in creating interplay among the components of TPACK and support this knowledge with their understanding that online distance classes are not all about the teachers transferring their knowledge to the students. Instead, effective teaching and learning in online distance classes hinge on how successfully an online learning community is created by "a group of individuals with common expectations and interests" (González Miy, & Herrera Díaz, 2015: 83). The success of the community is related to the roles the members, particularly the teachers, should fulfill in the community. Therefore, associated with online distance classes is a set of roles that are defined as potential actions and behaviors to be performed in accordance with their new roles in the new context. The new roles determine the teachers' relationship with their students and with the content of teaching (Anderson, 2004). Three types of presence actualize the roles: 1) cognitive presence, 2) social presence, and 3) teaching presence (Tan, 2021). It can be postulated that many consequent challenges (Figure 1) can be traced to the defective TPACK that prevents them from representing sufficient levels of these presences, hence failing to fulfill their roles in distance

classes. Cognitive presence is mutilated since the teachers lack TPK to take effective strategies and use resources and tools, which leads to interaction, creation of challenges, making the learners provide their own examples, and constructing knowledge. To maximize cognitive presence, the teachers are obliged to invest time and effort in creating various judicious materials that keep the learners engaged with the content as well as with their peers. To do so, they should rely on their TCK.

Defective knowledge of teachers also impairs their social presence in distance classes. Social presence catalyzes the interactions vital to cognitive presence. Drawing on their TPK and TCK, teachers may intensify their social presence by designing the activities in such a way that may foster interaction, reduce the learners' silence time and distraction, and would mitigate the absence of non-verbal cues.

Although the teachers' TPACK significantly contributes to the fulfillment of their supportive, facilitative roles associated with cognitive and social presences, this knowledge most decisively feeds teacher presence because teaching presence is directly associated with teachers' visibility and their agency to design the course, organize the class activities, facilitate learning, provide additional materials, and evaluate students' learning (Shea et al. 2010). The narratives revealed that teachers' roles, accrued by teaching presence, are not effectively fulfilled. Teachers' dissatisfaction with the existing materials, their complaints about assessment issues, and the pedagogical obstacles they faced are likely to arise from their failure to rely on their TPACK and perform their role as course designers/organizers, communication facilitators, direct instructors, and assessors. For instance, assessment problems in distance classes could be handled knowing that, first, various tasks can be assigned in a variety of formats drawing upon the online resources and technological tools, and second, instead of summative assessments, they can provide formative feedback on the various assignments during the course. Moreover, the teachers should know that the concepts of teaching presence, namely designing individual and group activities that maximize interactions, deciding on the length of time for each activity, setting the sequence of tasks, and preparing context-specific materials for direct instruction and learners' engagement, deserve thoughtful consideration before the course begins and continue during the course.

6. Conclusion

The findings from this narrative analysis confirm the significance of teaching context and teachers' TPACK to function effectively in distance English classes. It can be concluded that, while some challenges are inescapably experienced due to the nature of online distance classes, other challenges can be

prevented if teachers are equipped with TCK, TPK, and PCK to actualize their cognitive, social, and essentially teaching presences. Current findings suggest pre-service and in-service teacher training courses should introduce the affordances and limitations of distance classes and emphasize a set of teaching strategies and knowledge bases that are different from those employed in teacher-fronted language classes.

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