



A Probe into Experiences of Female Iranian EFL Teachers and Students in Rural High Schools amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic: Hurdles and Achievements

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Abstract

The global outbreak of COVID-19 necessitated a swift transition from conventional face-to-face (F2F) teaching to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) in educational institutions worldwide. This sudden shift posed significant challenges for both teachers and students, particularly those in low-resource rural schools. This study sought to probe into this experience in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, focusing on the perspectives of teachers and students in rural high schools within Iran. The study participants were 13 female EFL teachers and 15 female EFL students teaching and studying in rural high schools in different cities in Iran. Employing a qualitative approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, online observation, and one of the researcher's reflective journals. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the data, identifying several categories encompassing the hurdles encountered by the participants and the achievements they attained. The identified categories pertaining to hurdles encompassed technological, financial, educational, personal, professional, and well-being problems. Similarly, the categories pertaining to achievements comprised technological, educational, and professional progress, as well as enhanced convenience. Exploring the dilemmas and aspirations expressed by these participants can inform and better equip the educational system of Iran to effectively respond to similar crises in the future. Furthermore, this study offers insights to education authorities, aiding in the resolution of barriers to distance online education and facilitating enhanced preparedness for potential future emergencies.

Keywords: ERT Adoption, Hurdles, Achievements, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Rural High Schools, COVID-19

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Like other contexts, Iranian English teachers and students experienced Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) for the first time in March 2020 due to the spread of COVID-19. This virus was first detected in Wuhan, a city in China. It then continued spreading worldwide and gradually became a global pandemic. The worldwide shutdown of educational sectors precipitated an abrupt shift from the conventional method of teaching to an online instructional modality. The COVID-19 outbreak led to the global closure of schools and universities; however, developing countries encountered formidable obstacles in meeting the demands for essential resources in online education, including access to electronic devices and reliable Internet connectivity. Additionally, these challenges were exacerbated in rural and low-resource settings, which are predominantly characterized by digital disparities and limited access to socio-economic and educational infrastructures (Tafazoli, 2021; Tafazoli & Picard, 2022).

This unforeseen and abrupt transition forced teachers, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, to adapt to the changes by adopting ERT as a means to adhere to safety protocols. Concurrently, EFL learners encountered challenges in acclimating themselves to this novel medium, given their prior reliance upon the more customary medium of instruction.

Against this backdrop, over the last three years, a considerable number of studies have been conducted around the world with the aim of investigating this experience from the perspectives of English teachers and learners in diverse geographical and educational contexts (e.g., Abdi & Mohsenpour, 2021; Boonmoh et al, 2022; Coman et al., 2020; Pham & Phan, 2023; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Hassani, 2021; Jalilinia, 2021; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Malekolkalami, 2020; Shahnama et al., 2021; Syafrayani et al., 2022; Zhang & Wu, 2022, Wang, 2023). According to the findings of these studies, EFL teachers and learners encountered a multitude of challenges, including, but not limited to, restricted digital literacy skills, diminished opportunities for interactions, inadequate Internet speed, limited access to electronic or digital devices, physical, psychological and mental health issues, financial constraints, technical difficulties, unsuitable learning environment at home, inefficiencies of learning platforms, and lack of motivation, inter alia. Additionally, these studies highlighted a range of opportunities that emerged for EFL teachers and learners, including enhanced digital literacy, increased convenience, improved accessibility to instructional materials, as well as the fostering of learner autonomy and independent learning.

Despite the existing literature, to the best of our knowledge, no previous study to date has specifically explored the hurdles and achievements associated with the adoption of ERT in the context of rural high schools in Iran, considering the unique perspectives of both EFL teachers and students who encountered online instruction for the first time. This research gap prompted the initiation of the present small-scale qualitative study, which aimed to examine the hurdles encountered by a purposive sample of female EFL teachers and students, as well as the achievements they acquired along the way.

Within the Iranian context of English language instruction, conducting an investigation of this nature can hold significance due to the prevailing circumstances. Notably, the inadequate infrastructure, including restricted access to technological resources, financial constraints, the absence of training programs focusing on technology-enhanced teaching and learning, as well as sociocultural barriers, such as "cultural resistance" towards the integration of technology in education, among other factors, had already resulted in Iranian English teachers and learners having no or limited prior experience in utilizing online technologies during the pre-pandemic era (Hedayati & Marandi, 2014; Shahrokni & Sadeqjoola, 2015). Concerning rural areas, the compulsory transition to ERT at the time of the pandemic, along with the pre-existing digital rift, made teaching a demanding task for language teachers and students. Hence, undertaking an exploration of the experiences of language teachers and learners operating in low-resource areas, including the hurdles they confronted and the achievements they gained, holds intrinsic value as it may aid in having a deeper understanding of dynamics surrounding online education in Iran and comparable contexts, thereby fostering more informed implementation of it in future endeavors.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What hurdles did female EFL teachers face during the pandemic in rural public high schools in Iran?
2. What hurdles did female EFL students face during the pandemic in rural public high schools in Iran?
3. What achievements did female EFL teachers gain during the pandemic in rural public high schools in Iran?
4. What achievements did female EFL students gain during the pandemic in rural public high schools in Iran?

Literature Review

Although there has recently been a surge of interest in distance education due to the emergence of new technologies, the origin of distance education dates back to several decades ago (White, 2003). Distance education refers to a form of education that provides learning opportunities for those who cannot attend face-to-face classes or are unwilling to participate in such classes (Holmberg, 1995). As stated by White (2003), in contrast to the conventional method of education in which learners and teachers are close in place and time, distance education makes teaching and learning possible from any place such as home or workplace, and at different time zones. Another related term is online education, which refers to "an approach to teaching and learning that includes the use of Internet technologies for learning and teaching" (White, 2003, p. 27). The unique feature of online education is the use of the Internet as the main medium for communication and access to web-based course content delivered via virtual learning environments (Hartnett, 2016; Ko & Rossen, 2010).

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the adoption of online education as a substitute for conventional face-to-face instructional approaches within educational systems worldwide. However, it is important to recognize that this form of online education, commonly referred to as ERT, differs from the standard online teaching employed under normal circumstances (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2021). As highlighted by Huang et al. (2021), ERT offers flexibility in terms of time and location for both educators and learners; nevertheless, it significantly deviates from the quality and structure typically associated with conventional online teaching. In other words, “online distance education” is a complex process that needs to be planned, designed, and administered carefully and can allow learners to be agents, responsible, and flexible (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). On the other hand, ERT, as defined by Hodge et al. (2020), is

a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. ERT involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. (p.6)

On empirical grounds, the global educational response to the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a plethora of scholarly investigations worldwide, with several researchers undertaking studies to uncover the multifaceted challenges and potential advantages associated with ERT implementation in the domain of EFL education. A number of these English-related studies explored this experience from the perspectives of EFL teachers (e.g., Civelek et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Noowroozi, 2022; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Malekolkalami, 2020; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020), while others delved into ERT implementation from the viewpoint of EFL students (e.g., Coman et al., 2020; Jalilinia, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020; Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020; Pham et al., 2022; Sofianidis et al., 2021; Syafrayani et al., 2022; Zhang & Wu, 2022). The subsequent paragraphs provide a concise overview of the major findings gleaned from the empirical research, plus a review of selected studies conducted in this area to offer a glimpse into the scholarly investigations undertaken.

According to various researchers, EFL teachers confronted a range of challenges encompassing a lack of digital literacy (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Malekolkalami, 2020), reduced opportunities for interaction (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020; Sundarwati & Pahlevi, 2021), unavailability of or inaccessibility to digital devices (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020), difficulties in creating suitable instructional materials (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Malekolkalami, 2020), and a lack of motivation (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). In addition to these challenges, several potential advantages were identified and reported by different researchers. These include the improved digital literacy of teachers (Ghanbari &

Nowroozi, 2022; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020), as well as the convenience, comfort, and flexibility afforded by online education (Alolaywi, 2021).

For instance, Ghanbari and Nowroozi (2022) conducted a study examining the experiences of two EFL teachers at Persian Gulf University during the pandemic. The findings revealed that these teachers encountered many challenges, including limited digital literacy, instances of student plagiarism, insufficient access to devices, and a lack of interaction, training, and financial support. To overcome these obstacles, the teachers employed various coping strategies, such as utilizing WhatsApp as a support platform, seeking technical assistance from the university, and engaging in online workshops. In another study by Khatoony and Nezhadmehr (2020), the barriers confronted by Iranian EFL teachers during COVID-19 were investigated. These researchers discovered that the participants, who were teaching in English language institutes, could use the platforms and exhibited a positive outlook toward online teaching. However, they confronted barriers such as the low speed of the Internet, learners' lack of motivation and attention, lack of support, and a dearth of appropriate instructional materials. Another study by Malekolkalami (2020) also showed that the sudden outbreak of the pandemic and the lack of essential training temporarily disrupted the career of a number of teachers due to various factors, including their unfamiliarity with technologies, limited access to digital devices and the Internet, as well as resource constraints.

In addition to the aforementioned studies, which focused on EFL teacher participants, several studies focusing on EFL student participants shed light on the challenges encountered by them during the pandemic. These studies discovered that EFL students confronted several obstacles during the pandemic, such as the low speed of the Internet (Mahyoob, 2020; Nartinigrum & Nugoho, 2020), lack of access to devices (Pham et al., 2022; Sofianidis et al., 2021), physical and mental health issues (Pham et al., 2022; Rahiem, 2021), financial challenges (Rahiem, 2021; Tumen-Ayildiz et al., 2021), taking online exams (Farrah & Al-Bakry, 2020; Mahyoob, 2020), technical issues (Coman et al., 2020; Sofianidis et al., 2021), the unsuitable environment at home (Pham et al., 2022; Syafrayani et al., 2022; Zhang & Wu, 2022), limited opportunities for interactions with peers and teachers (Jalilinia, 2021; Pham et al., 2022), the inefficiency of the learning platforms (Coman et al., 2020; Jalilinia, 2021), lack of digital literacy (Farrah & Al-Bakry, 2020; Mahyoob, 2020), and lack of motivation (Al Shlowiy, 2021; Pham et al., 2022; Zboun & Farrah, 2021). The studies underscore the complexity of the difficulties faced by EFL students during the pandemic, necessitating targeted interventions and support to address their unique circumstances and ensure effective language learning opportunities.

Apart from challenges, several studies have reported that EFL learners also experienced certain opportunities amidst the pandemic. Specifically, EFL learners benefitted from enhanced access to instructional materials (Rahim & Chandran, 2021; Rahman, 2020; Syafrayani et al., 2022; Zboun & Farrah, 2021), the convenience of remote learning (Tumen-Ayildiz et al., 2021; Zboun & Farrah, 2021), increased

autonomy and promotion of independent learning (Al Shlowiy, 2021; Zhang & Wu, 2022), and the development of digital literacy skills (Farrah & Al-Bakry, 2020; Syafrayani et al., 2022). These identified opportunities indicate that, alongside the challenges, the pandemic also brought forth certain advantages for EFL learners, allowing them to engage with learning materials more easily, foster independent learning skills, and acquire digital competencies. Below, a couple of these studies are reviewed.

Focusing on high school settings, Sofianidis et al. (2021), for instance, conducted a study in Cyprus to explore secondary high school students' challenges, perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the instruction they received, and suggestions for enhancing the instruction in the future. They discovered that students faced difficulties mostly related to the environment at home, access to technology and the required devices, and their teachers' competency in digital technologies. In another study by Golding and Jackson (2021), high school students' satisfaction regarding their experience of online learning during the pandemic was studied. Findings revealed that students were mostly satisfied with the teaching staff's responsiveness in providing them with assignments and feedback on their performances. These researchers asserted that the students who experienced positive emotions were more satisfied with their online learning experience during the pandemic. Jalilinia (2021) also carried out a quantitative study to explore Iranian high school EFL students' perceptions regarding their experience of online learning during the pandemic. It was found that the participants mainly held negative attitudes regarding their experience. They experienced difficulty while interacting online and did not consider the SHAD application, the Student Education Network software designed by the Iran Ministry of Education (MOE), to be a suitable platform for learning. In this study, a number of suggestions were made for a better experience in the future, including improving SHAD, solving the Internet problem, and enhancing digital literacy.

Despite the presence of a considerable amount of literature on ERT implementation, it seems that previous studies have not examined this topic from the perspectives of EFL teachers and students in rural areas of Iran. This study sought to expand the existing knowledge in this regard.

Method

Research Design

This study was conducted using a basic qualitative approach as the researchers sought to gain insight into the hurdles and achievements associated with ERT by exploring the participants' lived experiences. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), in basic qualitative studies, "The overall purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences." (p. 24). The data were gathered utilizing personal reflective journals prepared by one of the study's researchers, online classroom observations, and interviews; this ensured triangulation via deploying multiple sources of data and allowed for the examination of the phenomenon in depth.

Participants

This study's first group of participants consisted of 13 Iranian EFL high school teachers (including one of the researchers of the study). These participants, as "information-rich cases" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), were selected using a purposeful convenience sampling method due to their first-hand experience teaching English during the pandemic in rural high schools. These rural areas are characterized by lower economic opportunities, services, amenities, and infrastructures, including limited educational institutions and technological advancements, compared to urban areas (Moqadam-Tabrizi, 2018). All the participants were female and had no prior experience in online teaching. Their educational backgrounds varied, with four holding a Bachelor of Arts (B.A) degree, five possessing a Master of Arts (M.A) degree, and four being M.A students in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at the time of the study. The age range of the participants was between 26 to 30 years old, and their language teaching experience ranged from four to nine years. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the participant teachers.

Teacher Code	Age	Degree	Years of Teaching Experience	Place of Teaching
1	26	M.A	4	Khorasan Razavi-Rural districts of Razavieh
2	28	M.A student	6	Khorasan Razavi- Rural districts of Roshtkhar
3	27	M.A student	5	Khorasan Shomali-Shirvan- Hossein Abad Village
4	30	B.A	9	Khorasan Jonubi- Rural districts of Zirkuh
5	29	B.A	8	Mazandaran- Chalandar Village
6	26	M.A	5	Mazandaran- Sari- Kola Kardeh Village
7	28	B.A	5	Golestan- Minoodasht- Alghajr Village
8	30	B.A	8	Khorasan Razavi- Bakharz-Qaleh Now-e Olya Village
9	27	M.A	5	Khorasan Razavi-Neishabour, Marzan Village
10	28	M.A	5	Tehran- Rural districts of Shahriar
11	29	M.A student	7	Golestan- Rural districts of Bandar Torkaman
12	28	M.A	6	Alborz- Rural districts of Karaj
13	28	M.A student	9	Khorasan Razavi-Dizbad and Robat Sefid Villages Tehran-Abali Village

The second group comprised 15 female EFL students studying at rural public high schools. They were from the suburbs of Khorasan Razavi (Dizbad and Robat Sefid Villages) and Tehran (Abali Village), and their age ranged from 13 to 18. They were all students of one of the EFL teachers participating in this study. They were selected according to the purposeful convenience sampling method and based on their willingness to cooperate, due to the difficulty of accessing participants at the time of the pandemic. Prior to the study, full consent was obtained from the participants, and they were provided with clear explanations of the study's objectives and the information required from them.

Data Collection

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, as the primary means of data collection, were conducted using an interview guide designed by the researchers (Appendices A & B). The interview guide was prepared by consulting the literature on ERT and taking notes on the major issues the researchers had to explore. One of the researchers conducted the interviews from May to June 2021. Due to the pandemic-related restrictions and geographical distances between researchers and the participants, interviews were conducted online or through phone calls. The interviews, lasting between 40 minutes to one hour, were done in Persian, the participants' mother tongue so that they could express their views and experiences more comfortably. These interviews were later transcribed verbatim and translated into English.

E-Observation and Fieldnotes

Another data source was the observation of the online classes of the teacher participants. To collect data related to the hurdles faced by the EFL teachers, three sessions of each participant's classes were observed by one of the researchers (36 sessions in total, each lasting 35 minutes). These classes were held in the SHAD application designed by the Iranian MOE. One of the researchers joined these EFL teachers' classes as an observer-participant to gain a first-hand account of what was actually taking place in the virtual English classes of the participants. She meticulously observed the interactions between the English teachers and students, as well as the pedagogical strategies employed and the evaluation methods utilized during the instructional sessions. This approach allowed for a direct examination of the actual occurrences within the virtual English classes of the participants.

Researcher Reflective Journals

When the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, it was a historical moment to reflect on ERT as an English teacher and researcher. One of the researchers, an MOE-employed English teacher with a teaching tenure exceeding six years in rural schools within Khorasan and Tehran, embarked upon keeping her reflective journal from almost the beginning of the pandemic in February 2020 for 10 months. The journal contained detailed descriptions of the major educational events occurring in her virtual English language classes as well as her reflections. Journaling helped the researcher keep track of the events and document her observations, challenges, and gained experiences.

Data Analysis

This study deployed several qualitative data sources, including interviews, field notes from observation of online English classes, and researcher-reflective journals that were meticulously transformed into written and transcribed data. To analyze the data, the researchers adopted the thematic method of analysis, which refers to "the process of analyzing data according to commonalities, relationships and differences across the data set" (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p.127). Working collaboratively, the researchers engaged

in multiple iterations of reviewing the data transcripts, aiming to familiarize themselves with the content and identify potential codes. After assigning codes to segments of the data, all the codes were checked several times by both researchers, and the rationales for clustering them into certain categories were negotiated until consensus was reached. That is, similar codes were merged under an overarching category, and distinct categories with sufficient supportive data were added. In analyzing the data, the researchers employed a bottom-up or inductive approach, where categories and themes were derived solely from the data and subsequently complemented by relevant literature for interpretation (Riazi et al., 2023; Saldaña, 2011; Tracy, 2020).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, rigorous measures were taken to enhance the transferability, dependability, credibility, and confirmability of the findings. Transferability was addressed by providing a rich description of the study and its contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Riazi et al., 2023). To ensure dependability, the researchers delineated the design, execution, and analysis processes in the methodology section. In addition, the researchers employed various data sources (interviews, online observation, classroom discussions, and reflective journals) to enhance the credibility of the findings (Riazi et al., 2023; Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, in an effort to substantiate the coding process, an external reviewer, an applied linguistics university professor, was invited to examine the categories, excerpts extracted from the data, and the English translations of the Persian excerpts. Lastly, to strengthen confirmability and transparency, the research audit trails of this study are available for further examination and verification of the data by other researchers if needed (Tracy, 2020).

Results

Hurdles Faced by Both EFL Teachers and Students

The first two research questions were related to the hurdles experienced by the EFL teachers and students. Several categories pertaining to challenges faced by both groups were found to overlap. Thus, this section will first present the shared concerns, followed by the unique hurdles encountered by each participant group.

Technological Problems

Limited Access to Digital Devices. One primary technological hurdle identified was the limited availability of smartphones, tablets, or laptops necessary for attending online language classes. These resources were not readily accessible to the EFL students who were from low-income rural families.

T4: *Lots of students couldn't buy cell phones in time and fell behind the rest of the students...*

S13: *One of my problems was that my phone model was old and it couldn't open some of the files...*

S11:... *I was using my fathers' phone and sometimes he needed the phone or took it out with him and I couldn't study...*

Slow and Disrupted Internet Connection. Another significant technological hurdle involved the slow and disrupted Internet connection. EFL teachers pointed out that the weak and intermittent Internet connectivity in rural areas posed difficulties in conducting English classes and hindered the downloading and uploading of teaching materials. Similarly, EFL students from these areas encountered obstacles in participating in classes, accessing instructional content, and submitting their assignments due to the slow Internet speed.

T8:... *One was the very, very low speed of the Internet, especially in rural areas which prevented us from holding our classes and our messages were not even sent. We had difficulty in uploading and downloading videos during this time....*

S9: ...*The speed of the Internet in SHAD is too low and rural students like us often have problems...*

Inefficiency of the Educational Platform. The third technological hurdle centered on the inadequacies of the designated online platform, SHAD. The participants expressed dissatisfaction with its “technical flaws,” “inappropriate design,” and the lengthy duration of “updates”. Moreover, they noted that the platform primarily functioned as a “messaging tool” rather than a comprehensive virtual classroom, hindering their ability to conduct live English classes. This limitation was particularly problematic given the importance of communication in English language instruction.

T12: ...*We cannot hold a real or simulated English language class in this application...*

S4:...*The speed of this application is too low. Sometimes I can neither open the photos nor the videos...*

S11:... *It hangs a lot and it is constantly being updated...*

Lack of Technological Knowledge. The fourth identified hurdle was the insufficient technological knowledge and low level of digital literacy among teachers and students. Engaging in English language practice within an online environment necessitated a certain level of technological proficiency, which many teachers and students lacked. EFL teachers who were not adequately familiar with technology struggled to provide high-quality language teaching materials. Likewise, EFL students with limited technological knowledge encountered difficulties in “taking online language exams,” “completing assignments,” and utilizing the full potential of the digital space for learning.

T5:... *Some of my students in rural areas were already familiar with cyberspace but others were not, and it took long for them to be adapted to the virtual space....*

T4: ... *During the pandemic, some of my colleagues were teaching English very simply just by sending voice as they did not know how to use other tools...*

S1: ... *In the beginning, I was very afraid of getting online because prior to corona, I wasn't very familiar with cyberspace. I was afraid that teachers ask me to do things which I don't know how to do...*

S14: *I had never used the Internet before...*

Technical Issues. The final technological hurdle encompassed various technical issues encountered by the EFL teachers and students, including disruptions such as system hang-ups, freezing, low memory, low battery, and glitches, which consumed class time and negatively impacted the participants' quality of language teaching and learning. ...*I had to constantly charge my phone and transfer the large videos to my laptop or my external hard from time to time...* (Excerpt from the researcher journal, December 2020).

S5: ...*My phone memory becomes full very soon and I have to delete some of the videos or my homework. Sometimes in the middle of the class, my phone dies as well.*

Financial Barriers

Cost of the Internet Packages. One financial barrier that both groups of participants faced was the high cost of the Internet packages that they had to afford.

T7: ... *The government provided free 40GB and 60GB Internet packages for teachers, but their size was really small and actually we had to pay for the Internet ourselves....*

T1: ... *The cost of the Internet was high for us as teachers let alone students in rural areas.*

S9: *I have problems buying Internet packages....*

Cost of Purchasing or Repairing Devices. Another financial barrier encountered was the cost associated with purchasing or repairing devices. The teachers expressed that excessive reliance on cell phones and prolonged usage necessitated device repairs. Similarly, students often had to use their parents' outdated cell phones, requiring frequent repairs. As argued, most of the students in rural areas were from low-income families and could not afford these costs.

T4: ... *I even had to change my phone because it wasn't working as I overused it and this left me with extra expenses...*

S7: ...*I didn't have a cell phone and the financial condition was not suitable to buy a cell phone...*

S10: ...*My phone was crashed and since cell phones are expensive, I have to go to work to buy a cell phone to attend my classes...*

Well-being Issues

Psychological and Physical Well-being. One of the health concerns pertained to the participants' psychological well-being. Both the teachers and students asserted that they experienced various negative emotions, including feelings of “isolation,” “depression,” and “anxiety” because of the pandemic and its consequences. According to the teachers, they felt “alone and helpless” in adapting to the new situation and dealing with the problems. Additionally, they felt “the negative view of the society” regarding their remote working; assuming that they were shirking from their responsibilities. Most of the students also felt negative about being away from school, teachers, and their classmates.

The other well-being problem was the physical health of the participants, which was negatively affected by online education during the pandemic. Sitting for long hours, working a lot with phones and laptops, and looking at the screen for a long time all affected the participants' well-being and made them suffer from eye strain, decreased mobility, pain in the neck and shoulder, backache, and so forth.

T5:... *During this period, we were under a lot of psychological pressure because of the problems related to teaching, corona, the conditions of society, and the problems of the students...*

T1:... *Online teaching greatly affected my eyesight and my neck hurts most of the time...*

S11: *When I was working a lot with my phone and looking at the screen for a long time, I got headaches.*

Personal Problems

Unsuitable Home Environment. The next shared challenge was the unsuitable environment of their home to be used for teaching and studying purposes. The teachers argued that their home condition was not suitable enough to be used as a proper workplace for holding their English language classes and preparing language-teaching materials for students. A number of EFL students also mentioned that they did not have a suitable and quiet place for study, especially because of their younger siblings.

T10:... *Because I have a little child at home and there was a lot of noise, I could not use the live feature or sometimes I had to find a quiet environment where I could record an instructional video....*

S8: *Sometimes the house is so noisy and I couldn't understand the lessons well or I couldn't study well for the exams.*

In addition to the aforementioned-shared concerns among EFL teachers and students, there were distinct categories specific to each participant group; which will be presented separately for clarity.

Educational Problems Faced by EFL Teachers

Class Management. The first pedagogic challenge was related to the difficulty of managing online English language classes. FFL teachers argued that they faced challenges such as a lack of control and supervision over students' presence and language learning, lack of discipline and schedule, and lack of time in their English classes. These challenges impeded the effective delivery of English teaching lessons and hindered the participants' ability to maintain control over their classes.

T3:... *In F2F classes they were raising hands but now they just send messages and voices all together and I found myself helpless and tired most of the time.*

T8:... *Sometimes I had to send the English teaching videos during the hours when there is less traffic or during the non-educational hours, for example, before 7 a.m. That is because the limited time of the English class did not allow me to upload language-teaching contents at that time....*

Online Assessment. The second educational challenge was finding a proper way to “assess the language skills of students,” to detect “plagiarism,” and to “correct language exams”. As stated by some of the participants, despite their best effort to reduce cheating, there were so many identical answers in the students' language homework.

T2:... *In face-to-face classes, we were able to evaluate students better and diagnosed their language learning problems. Back then, cheating was less common and the students were more competent in English...*

11:... *It was very difficult to correct the papers by phone. The student's English handwriting was illegible...*

Language Teaching Challenges. The third educational challenge the teachers highlighted was the pandemic's negative impact on students' language learning, particularly their “speaking” and “listening” skills. The data also revealed that teaching these two skills posed significant challenges for teachers. It was observed that less time and practice were dedicated to developing these skills compared to reading and writing. Moreover, students displayed limited cooperation in practicing speaking and listening, and the teachers encountered difficulties in providing effective opportunities for students to develop and practice these skills.

... *In the pre-pandemic era, I used to play audio files of their books to practice listening. I used to pause after each sentence and asked them to repeat. However, now I had to send the files to the group and asked them to write down what they heard. It was not effective since they just found the listening script on the Internet and sent it to me...* (Excerpt from the researcher reflective journal, February 2021)

... *The teacher introduced students to the topic of the lesson (having a healthier life) and asked volunteers to send voices and tell the class what they can do to have a healthier life. No one volunteered. She repeated her request and this time some students said that they can write about it. But the teacher insisted that they should send her their voice because she wanted to practice speaking, not writing...* (Sample of class observation, T4)

T7: *Students did not open the listening audio files that I sent them, and did not cooperate with me in doing their listening activities that I assigned for them...*

Lack of Students' Participation and Engagement. The next educational challenge was students' lack of participation and engagement in English language classes. As the participants argued and observed, the students exhibited a lack of involvement in the language learning tasks that teachers designed for them. According to the teachers, many students were absent because of weak Internet connections or were passive and silent in the group. Many teacher questions remained unanswered or answered only by very few students.

...The teacher asked a student, whom she had chosen as her assistant, to give a report about her classmates' homework. She argued that several students had not sent her the language learning assignments and projects that they were supposed to do. She claimed that she reminded them several times in the group and PV; however, they did not pay attention... (Sample form class observation, T1)

T12: *They became less active and for example out of 30 students in the class, maybe only 8 were really active and the rest were just present...*

Professional Problems Faced by EFL Teachers

Increased Workload. The initial professional problem involved an increased workload imposed on the EFL teachers. The participants referred to their new "responsibilities" such as "preparing and recording English teaching materials," "editing instructional files and compressing videos," "designing creative language learning assignments," "answering numerous questions asked by the students," "dealing with technical issues of SHAD," and "searching and downloading various application and online tools and learning how to use them". Moreover, the participants argued that they had to "prepare learning materials for both off-line and online learners," "design new exam questions for absent students," and "deal with technical issues". The teacher participants expressed feeling overwhelmed by the increased workload and the consequent sacrifice of their personal time, including weekends and off-days, which they spent with their families, preparing materials and managing similar tasks. The new digital environment necessitated the creation of content in formats different from those used in face-to-face classes. Creating such content was time-consuming and tedious for these participants.

T11: *... I spent all my time at home teaching English, producing language-teaching contents, evaluating students' language skills, and the related matters....*

T3: *... Students ask too many questions in my PV and I have to dedicate even my off days to answering their questions...*

Career Discontentment. The second professional problem was the increased rate of job dissatisfaction among the teacher participants. Almost all the EFL teachers mentioned a lack of support from the MOE of Iran and the organization's high expectations or low appreciation, leading to a loss of motivation and growing negative sentiments or discontentment towards their professional careers.

T6: ... Authorities should put away their weird expectations and try to understand teachers and provide them with solutions to their problems... Teachers' working conditions are not good at all...

T12: Unfortunately, there are many teachers who spend much more time in virtual school in comparison to the time they were going to school in person, but no one notices their efforts...

Inconveniences and Interferences. The last problem was the ease of access to teachers through social media for students and parents even after school time which caused discomfort and inconvenience for the teachers. In addition, as argued by a number of participants, parents sometimes interfered with their job as English language teachers, questioned teachers' work, had unreasonable expectations or requests from the teachers, and gave unprofessional opinions about teaching and learning English. The teachers expected the parents to actively monitor their children's progress, without encroaching upon their professional responsibilities, which was chiefly outside the expertise of the parents.

...One of the parents was not able to open the audio file of the listening exam. She didn't even bother to install another application and expected me to change the way listening exams were being held only because she said so! I had to spend 10 minutes on the phone justifying what a listening exam is to her. (Excerpt from the researcher journal, January 2021)

T10: One was the occasional inconvenience caused by students who were easily making video contact with me and texting me day and night. Another problem was parental interventions in my professional job via text messages....

Educational Problems Faced by EFL Students

Poor Language Learning Progress. The primary pedagogic concern was the students' inadequate academic performance in English classes. Several students expressed dissatisfaction with their language learning outcomes and perceived limited improvement in their language skills during online classes compared to the pre-pandemic era. They mostly agreed that they had to spend more time and effort to learn English lessons in online classes compared to face-to-face ones. They stated that they encountered learning difficulties since they had "illiterate" or "not educated" parents at home who could not help them with their English lessons.

S4: F2F interaction results in a better understanding of English language lessons. The virtual class isn't like that...

S13: My grades were not good at all this year and I feel that I didn't learn English language lessons like I did before.

S14: I used to learn English easier at school because the teacher was helping me but now I have to study a lot in order to learn English.

Online Assessment. The next pedagogic problem was related to online assessment. A number of EFL students argued that online exams were “stressful” and “not fair”. Referring to the technical problems related to online assessments, they stated that when they “couldn’t open the link”, “didn’t know how to answer on the site”, the “Internet was slow” or “the exam time was so limited”, they “felt stressed out”.

S3: *Sometimes our teachers make video calls with us for exams and when they call, I feel stressed and forget whatever I studied. I wasn’t like this in school.*

S11: *Exam time was so limited because teachers thought that students were cheating. Of course, some did but not all.*

S4: *Sometimes my answers were not submitted or suddenly disappeared and I got stressed.*

Achievements Gained by Both EFL Teachers and Students

The last two research questions were related to achievements gained by EFL teachers and students. Interestingly, the achievements gained by EFL teachers and students were identical, except for one category of “professional achievements” that was specific to EFL teachers; which will be presented below.

Technological Achievements

Increased Technological Knowledge. One notable technological achievement identified was increased technological knowledge and improved digital literacy among EFL teachers and students. Both groups reported that they became more familiar with various technological tools and platforms as a result of their online learning experience. Particularly, this achievement was significant for EFL students residing in rural areas and villages, as many of them had little to no prior experience with technology or were technophobic. The pandemic provided an opportunity for these students to gain exposure to and develop more skills in using technology, which they might not have had otherwise.

T10: *...Many teachers, parents, and students were forced to update their digital literacy, and that was great.*

T7: *My students and I progressed in the field of technology and got familiar with different platforms and applications like how to record and edit videos for some of my English classes. This is very valuable to me...*

S3: *I am happy that I got to be more familiar with cyberspace. I didn’t know what Google is prior to the pandemic...*

Availability of Various Digital Resources. Another noteworthy technological achievement was the access to diverse digital tools and resources, which proved beneficial for both EFL teachers and students. EFL teachers were able to utilize these resources to access supplementary English materials or produce language-teaching contents for their classes. Likewise, various digital resources offered by cyberspace allowed EFL students to use them as language learning aids and improve their English language skills.

T8: ...Another advantage of this teaching was that we were able to provide students with various language learning resources which was not possible for us in the F2F classes...

S2: I got familiar with good software and applications specially for English subject. I also found some useful telegram channels for sample exam questions...

S15: ...Due to my effort and various resources that I got familiar with recently, I suppose I even learnt English lessons better...

Educational Achievements

Positive Language Learning Outcomes. The first educational achievement was improved language learning of “certain” students compared to the pre-pandemic era. EFL teachers observed a positive change in some “previously passive” students, noting their increased engagement and participation in virtual English classes. Similarly, some EFL students expressed that their language skills improved due to the ease of “accessing teachers” for assistance. Furthermore, the students expressed satisfaction with providing fairly permanent “access to educational materials,” regardless of their physical presence during classes. This unrestricted access enabled them to review the materials at their convenience, multiple times if necessary, thereby fostering enhanced comprehension and improved learning outcomes.

T2: ... It was very good for some shy and silent students. Because I had such a case in my class who was very shy and silent but now she has become more active and easily participates in the class.

T4: ...Some of my students who were passive in F2F classes now became active in our virtual classes, their stress has been reduced, and their self-confidence has increased...

S6: Sometimes I even understood the lesson English better because I always had access to both the teacher and the teaching content for review.

Enhanced Students' Autonomy. Another notable educational achievement was the increased autonomy of students in language learning. The data indicated that some EFL students began taking more responsibility for their own language-learning process. They became less dependent on their teachers, and more dependent on various self-study resources such as dictionaries, online multimodal materials, websites, and other relevant materials. As was also observed in virtual classes, some students were willing to “take part in different language learning tasks such as preparing and creating English language learning clips and PowerPoint slides,” “checking their peers’ language homework and exams,” and “assisting the teacher in teaching English”.

T9:... *It can also be said that to some extent, students learned to search, and became more autonomous...*

S7: *I learned how to study English on my own because there is no one home to help me and I can't see my friends due to corona...*

S10:...*I was forced to become more responsible and to study English lessons on my own.*

Convenience. The next advantage mentioned by both groups of participants was saving time and energy. The participants, who either lived or traveled to rural areas, faced the challenge of enduring lengthy daily commutes. The hours spent traveling to their workplaces or schools resulted in physical exhaustion and financial burdens due to transportation expenses, among other related factors. Consequently, online teaching emerged as a convenient solution, offering substantial benefits in terms of time efficiency, conservation of energy, and cost reduction.

T2: ...*Another benefit of virtual teaching for me was that I did not have to spend 85 kilometers on the road twice a day for commuting to the workplace.*

S1: *In the winter when the weather is cold, we can study from home and we don't have to get out of the house early in the morning...*

S2:...*Its positive effect is that I have more time to study...*

Teachers' Professional Achievements

Updating Language Teaching Methodologies. One significant professional achievement reported by EFL teachers was updating their English language teaching methodologies. Prior to the pandemic, teachers in rural schools primarily relied on traditional methods, utilizing books, printed materials, and whiteboards for English instruction. However, these teachers adapted their teaching approaches during the pandemic and incorporated technology-based tools and resources. They embraced flipped learning methods, utilized PowerPoint slides, and incorporated short English videos, interactive worksheets, and other digital resources in their English teaching practices.

T4:...*It was a new experience and it made you consider and try other ways of presenting the educational contents...*

T5: ... *We were forced to try different teaching methods and focus more on our strengths and weaknesses...*

Increased Collaboration among Colleagues. The teachers also stated that the pandemic fostered increased collaboration among EFL teachers. With limited access to traditional sources of support, teachers relied on each other for guidance and assistance during this challenging period. They actively engaged in sharing their experiences and exchanging ideas about language teaching.

T6: ...*I also learned so many things from my other colleagues.*

T9: ...*During this period, English teachers' cooperation with each other increased...*

Provision of an Archive of English Language Instructional Content. The next professional opportunity was the compilation of a complete archive of English teaching materials. These English teaching resources archives contained several language teaching PowerPoint slides, pamphlets, instructional English videos, and language learning worksheets that could benefit teachers in the post-COVID era.

T4: ...*Although it was difficult and time-consuming at first but in the end you are provided with a complete archive of resources and contents available to you for the next years of your teaching...*

T5: ...*Now we have many educational files which we made ourselves, and in later years, even if classes were in-person, we could play our files for students in the class whenever we were not feeling well...*

New Job Opportunities. Another notable professional achievement was the new job opportunities created for the teacher participants. Prior to the pandemic, none of the teachers had the experience of online teaching and now the ERT experience instilled them with the self-confidence to hold online English language private classes, make English instructional videos, and establish English language teaching pages on Instagram.

T11: ... *As a teacher, I learned to have virtual teaching and started holding virtual teaching courses outside of school...*

T12: ... *I created an educational page on Instagram and I have decided to start my activity there as well.*

Discussion

The present study was conducted to discover the hurdles and achievements of ERT implementation from the perspective of both Iranian EFL high school teachers and students who experienced online teaching and learning in rural contexts for the first time during the pandemic. Findings revealed several hurdles and achievements, which are discussed below.

The data analysis conducted in this study revealed several categories pertaining to the hurdles encountered by EFL teachers and students during the implementation of ERT in rural high schools. The first category was related to technological issues, including limited access to devices, slow and disrupted Internet connection, teaching and learning platform inefficiency, lack of technological knowledge, and technical issues. The issue of disrupted and unreliable Internet connectivity posed a significant impediment within rural contexts. It led to difficulties such as loss of time, difficulty in downloading and uploading files, particularly in the SHAD application, the increased rate of absenteeism, and comparable difficulties. In addition, several students from low-income families in rural contexts could not join their classes due to limited access to digital devices. Indeed, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the pre-existing “digital divide,” leading to a distinct set of challenges. These technological predicaments chiefly stemmed from the living conditions prevailing in rural areas, necessitating heightened attention from authorities towards underprivileged students who are deprived of access to quality education compared with students residing in urban settings who enjoy higher socio-economic conditions.

Furthermore, the lack of technological knowledge inhibited teachers from creating quality materials for online classes and prevented students from taking full advantage of the virtual learning environment. This underscores the need to equip EFL teachers and students with the required digital skills to get more prepared for similar crises in the future. This category was similar among both EFL teachers and students and is also in line with the findings of previous studies which discovered technological challenges during the pandemic such as lack of digital literacy (Farrah & Al-Bakry, 2020; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Malekolkalami, 2020), low speed of the Internet (Mahyoob, 2020; Pham et al., 2022; Sundarwati & Pahlevi, 2021; Zboun & Farrah, 2021), inaccessibility to digital devices (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Malekolkalami, 2020; Pham et al., 2022), the inefficiency of the learning platforms (Coman et al., 2020; Jalilinia, 2021; Raheim, 2020), and technical issues (Al Shlowiy, 2021; Sofianidis et al., 2021; Tumen-Ayildiz et al., 2021).

Another category was financial problems, which concerned the high cost of buying and repairing devices as well as the high cost of Internet packages. As argued, most of the students in rural areas were from low-income families and could not afford these costs. Although online learning is known for efficiency in terms of factors such as time and cost, some participants argued otherwise as they believed it imposed additional financial burdens on them. Other studies have also reported financial barriers related to the cost of Internet packages or electronic devices at the time of the pandemic (Raheim, 2020; Tumen-Ayildiz et al., 2021).

Another identical category among both groups of participants was well-being issues. Both the teachers and students lamented that online education had caused emotional and physical problems, affecting their teaching and learning quality. This indicates that measures need to be implemented to safeguard teachers and students from physical and

mental health problems during such crises. This could be done by designing special programs focusing on the improvement of positive psychology traits like emotion regulation, well-being, grit, hope, and resilience by teachers and learners. In view of that, Mercer (2021) underscores the importance of serious “practical work on well-being in ELT” and suggests, “we need to understand how to integrate non-linguistic goals such as well-being alongside linguistic goals in a sustainable way” (p. 20). This finding is also in line with the findings of previous studies, which discovered that the mental or physical well-being of the participants was negatively affected during online teaching and learning (Dangal & Maharjan, 2021; Pham & Phan, 2023; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Kaya, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Wang, 2023).

The next extracted category was related to personal and professional problems experienced by EFL teachers. EFL teachers faced challenges such as increased workload, high expectations and responsibilities, lack of support and appreciation by authorities, job dissatisfaction, unsuitable workplaces, and disturbance and inconvenience by students or parents. Similarly, EFL students argued that they had personal problems related to the environment at home and not having a suitable study place, which impeded their active participation in classes and the completion of homework tasks. Likewise, other researchers have highlighted challenges such as disturbance and inconvenience caused by family members (Al Shlowiy, 2021; Pham et al., 2022; Khanna & Kareem, 2021; Syafrayani et al., 2022; Zhang & Wu, 2022).

The next category was educational problems. The EFL teachers confronted problems such as students’ drop-out, class management, students’ lack of participation and engagement, poor academic performance, and online assessment issues. The EFL teachers participating in the study perceived a lack of authority within their English classes. Moreover, the reduced time of English classes during the pandemic imposed great stress on language teachers, hindering their ability to efficiently manage time and deliver English lessons within the constrained timeframe. This, in turn, negatively affected the quality of their teaching. These EFL teachers also struggled with a high incidence of cheating during online examinations, which highlighted concerns regarding the credibility of exam results. The significance of developing effective online examination methods and strategies for future implementation is underscored by these findings.

Furthermore, as argued by the teacher participants, the limited possibility of interactions in English, like pair work or group activities, as well as listening and speaking practices in online English classes, had an adverse impact on students’ English language learning outcomes. Given that English is predominantly taught as a foreign language in Iran and students, particularly those residing in rural or deprived areas, rarely practice and apply English outside of their classrooms, online learning of English may exacerbate the limitations on language use.

Quite similarly, EFL student participants faced educational challenges such as poor academic performance in English, online assessment, and language learning difficulties. They expressed dissatisfaction with their English learning achievements and confirmed

the prevalence of academic dishonesty among their peers. They stated that they encountered learning difficulties since they had poorly educated parents at home who could not help them with their English lessons. They also attributed their learning challenges to a perceived lack of control and teacher presence, which potentially reflects their dependence on their teachers and a limited sense of autonomy. Interestingly, the concerns expressed by the teacher participants regarding insufficient control, supervision, and authority over student performance may indicate their preference for more teacher-centered instructional approaches. This suggests a need to encourage teachers to facilitate student autonomy and embrace learner-centered instructional practices to address these issues.

These findings are also in line with the findings of previous studies, which revealed educational challenges during the pandemic, such as reduced interactions (Civelek et al., 2021; Coman et al., 2020; Jalilinia, 2021; Sofianidis et al., 2021) the difficulty of online evaluation (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Mahyoob, 2020; Rahiem, 2021), lack of time (Hermansyah & Aridah, 2021; Sundarwati & Pahlevi, 2021), and lack of control and guidance on the part of teachers (Albiansyah et al., 2021; Nartinigrum & Nugroho, 2020).

Analyzing the data resulted in emerging a number of categories related to achievements the EFL teachers and students gained during the process as well. The first category was technological achievements, which was quite identical among the two groups of participants. EFL teachers mentioned achievements such as increased technological knowledge and acquisition of greater familiarity with technology, compelled by its mandatory utilization during the pandemic. EFL teachers stated that they participated in several workshops and webinars, which increased their technological knowledge. Likewise, students pointed out increased technological knowledge during the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, students in rural areas were primarily limited to traditional textbooks and paper-based educational materials. However, during the pandemic, they gained access to digital educational resources, including educational videos, PDF versions of books, and interactive worksheets. This shift allowed the students to engage more comfortably with materials in their preferred formats, considering their unique preferences and learning styles. Similarly, previous studies revealed that online teaching during the pandemic resulted in improving the digital literacy of EFL teachers and students (Farrah & Al-Bakry, 2020; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Sundarwati & Pahlevi, 2021; Syafrayani et al., 2022).

The next category was related to educational achievements gained by both groups of participants. The teacher participants pointed out achievements such as positive language learning outcomes by their students, enhanced autonomy, and provision of English resources archive. The teachers observed that some of their students had become more independent and autonomous as they learned to self-study and rely on themselves more than ever. Additionally, according to a number of teachers, some of their reticent students in face-to-face classes became more active and gained more confidence to participate in discussions in the online class and express their opinions. This is a topic

that needs further investigation in future studies. Likewise, student participants mentioned achievements such as positive language learning outcomes, enhanced autonomy, and being taught by more interesting methodologies. Furthermore, the students expressed satisfaction with the provision of permanent “access to educational materials”. This unrestricted access enabled them to review the materials at their convenience, multiple times if necessary, thereby fostering enhanced comprehension and improved learning outcomes. This may suggest that blended learning could be taken into consideration in teaching and learning in rural areas in case infrastructures are developed. Previous studies also confirmed the findings of this study by showing that online teaching during the pandemic resulted in promoting autonomy (Albiansyah et al., 2021; Al Shlowiy, 2021; Zhang & Wu, 2022), and using different teaching methodologies by teachers (Alolaywi, 2021; Mirza et al., 2021; Wang, 2023).

Another classification pertained to the professional accomplishments of teachers, which stemmed from the utilization of innovative teaching approaches, heightened cooperation among colleagues, and the identification of novel career prospects. Correspondingly, acquiring professional development by EFL teachers during the pandemic was also reported in previous studies (Alolaywi, 2021; Sundarwati & Pahlevi, 2021). During the pandemic, English teachers nationwide embarked on sharing diverse instructional materials through social media platforms. This facilitated their exposure to novel teaching methodologies, enabling them to update and refine their existing approaches. Notably, although none of the participants possessed prior experience in online teaching, the ERT experience bestowed them with the necessary self-confidence to engage in additional endeavors such as conducting private online English classes or establishing educational Instagram pages to teach English. While this professional expansion may be viewed as an opportunity for “online teacherpreneurship” (Lasekan et al., 2020), it also highlights these teachers' current dissatisfaction with their economic conditions. Despite being employed full-time, these teachers sought additional income sources, which potentially detracted them from their main classes by focusing on their private ones. Thus, authorities should be more supportive of teachers and improve their working conditions. This would hopefully lead to increased job satisfaction and motivation, which would increase the quality of teaching.

Conclusion

This qualitative study was an attempt to shed light on the hurdles and achievements of implementing ERT from the perspective of Iranian EFL high school teachers and students in rural contexts during the pandemic. The findings revealed several significant concerns teachers and students face, including technological, financial, well-being, personal, professional, and educational challenges. Despite the hurdles, there were notable achievements in the process, like increased technological knowledge and educational and professional achievements.

Although the ERT experience during the pandemic was just a temporary solution for this period, lessons learned from it can inform future strategies to tackle similar crises and ensure equitable and effective education for teachers and students. In view of that, policymakers and education authorities should take measures to bridge the digital divide, provide necessary support for teachers and students, and foster a conducive environment for effective online teaching and learning.

It should be noted that this study has some limitations, including being gender specific and limited in the methods of data collection. Hence, further studies are suggested to be carried out with the participation of male teachers and students and by employing varied methods of data collection.

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Appendix A

Teachers' Interview Guide

1. Demographic information: Age- Teaching experience- Latest educational degree- Level and grade of teaching- Name of the city and the province where you teach.
2. What was your opinion concerning the technology integration in English language teaching prior to the pandemic and at the time of it?
3. How did you hold your English classes at the time of the outbreak? What challenges did you face in teaching and assessing?
4. What were the positive and negative points of SHAD for English language learning and teaching?
5. What was the effect of online teaching and learning on EFL students' academic performance?
6. Please describe the barriers that you faced during the pandemic.
7. What benefits did you gain by teaching online during the pandemic?
8. What is your opinion regarding the future of virtual teaching in Iranian high schools?

Appendix B

Students' Interview Guide

1. Did you have a virtual learning experience before the pandemic?
2. How was your experience of virtual school? What challenges or obstacles did you face in English language learning during the pandemic?
3. How do you see the effect of online education on your English language learning and performance?
4. What is your opinion about SHAD application for English language learning?
5. Besides these obstacles, what opportunities could you gain?
6. How were the facilities and conditions for studying at home like?
7. What is your opinion about assessment in virtual English classes?