

A Comparative Study of Online and Inperson Speaking Assessment and Its Effectiveness from Iranian EFL Teachers' Viewpoint

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the effect of online and face to face learning classes on the Iranian EFL learners' speaking skills and also to investigate the EFL learners' attitudes towards challenges and problems EFL learners experience in online and face-to-face classes. To do so, a mixed methods design incorporating a pre-test post-test treatment was adopted. The participants of this study were 100 male and female Iranian EFL learners selected based on convenience sampling from a language institute in Iran. To collect the quantitative data, one week before the treatment, Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to 100 Iranian EFL learners to choose homogeneous participants in terms of language proficiency. Then 60 learners with the scores between one score up and down the standard deviation were selected as the main participants of the study. Then they were divided into two groups. Both groups were given a pre-test. Then they took part in the treatment. The experimental group received the instruction based on online learning techniques (i.e., phone-based instruction techniques), while the control group received the traditional teaching materials with no online techniques. Then the post-test was given to both groups. The findings of the study suggested that using online techniques significantly affected and contributed to improve speaking knowledge of EFL learners. Some pedagogical implications are drawn from the finding of the present study.

Keywords: *EFL learner; Offline learning; Online Learning; Phone-based instruction techniques*

1. Introduction

Nowadays English is taken into consideration as a lingua franca, a commonplace device for verbal exchange among human beings of different languages and cultures (Khosravi & Nasiri, 2016). Speaking competencies are described as the abilities which allow us to talk successfully. They supply us with the ability to convey information verbally and in a manner that the listener can understand. In the talking test, there can be a discussion with a certified examiner. The motive of a speaking test is to accumulate proof in a scientific manner (through elicitation strategies or responsibilities) in an effort to guide an inference as we outline it from the summary of the evidence (the 'score'). Given this context, the most crucial talking abilities—accuracy, fluency, appropriateness, coherence, etc. —are not emphasized, and the grammar translation method is mainly employed to educate speaking. Several students, gaining knowledge of English, experience destructive situations on their speaking skills due to such a method. Most EFL teachers fail to strengthen their students' speaking capabilities because they pay an excessive amount of focus on grammatical troubles while teaching speaking. This may help give an explanation for why, despite giant publicity to the language, the majority of college students battle to explicit themselves verbally in English (Thorne, 2007).

Online language teaching has attracted the interest of instructors and researchers during ten years. There was an upsurge in studies regarding the contribution of online learning to second language acquisition (SLA) (Thorne, 2007). However, not all online schooling has been nicely welcomed. Many foreign language (FL) instructors, researchers, and directors have questioned the effectiveness of such online academic platforms whilst considering adopting teaching programs online (Blake, 2013). The first priority was for both students and instructors to enhance speaking in the target language (TL), in line with earlier studies (Fukada & Wei, 2013; Harlow & Muyskens, 1994; Houston, 2005; Rivera & Matsuzawa, 2007; Tse, 2000). However, online classes provide fewer possibilities to interact with their instructors and classmates. Additionally, there is a lack of technological equipments to help with speaking exercises.

The learning environment is essential to the teaching and learning process. To get better consequences, there must be interaction between the teacher and the students or among the scholars themselves. Nice interactions have an impact on behavioral and academic results (Claessens, 2017). To assist the learning goal, students are endorsed to steadily exercise speaking, transferring from easy to complex subjects. Speaking exercises were previously done through face-to-face (F2F) training, when instructors interacted with students to offer practises, examples, and exams.

The learners who own the speaking capacity will receive an extra factor. Loss of bodily or human attention is one of the drawbacks of online learning, likewise Dhawan's (2020) study. Because there is no interaction that forces students to exercise speaking abilities that may be directly applied to produce precise speaking abilities, the usage of online learning in this place genuinely makes students much less proficient in learning the language knowledge. This is due to the fact a student's language improvement does not change considerably while s/he learns face-to-face. However, technology can not be used instead of genuine classroom interactions as in conventional lecture rooms (Mardiah, 2020). The research technique used on this study differs from earlier research in that it uses audio-visual recordings made by WhatsApp, which could offer more accurate effects

about students' speaking ability since it permits researchers to pay attention to the students' voices directly. As a result, this study is going to evaluate online and inperson speaking evaluation and its effectiveness from Iranian EFL teachers' point of view.

For a successful evaluation of speaking abilities, there are some elements that can be assessed such as: fluency, evaluation of the usage of appropriate vocabulary, grammar and also pronunciation. Speaking assessment has been a vital part of the assessment of learners' language talent (Weir et al., 2013). The reality that class assessment is one of the powerful factors in improving studying in the class room has been an accepted fact by experts in current years. Lots of studies have been performed since 1980 regarding assessment and the ways to implement it and its impact on students' learning (inTurner, 2001, Guba & Lincoln,1989; Leahy, Lyon & Thomson, 2005; Moya & Malley, 1994). The consequences of such researches display that the teacher can use it to improve students' mastering by changing their ways of wondering and running inside the field of academic assessment. Based totally on the outcomes of these researches, many nations have revised the evaluation gadget and turned to new fashions that were proposed through curriculum plans with the titles of dynamic evaluation, original evaluation, procedure-orientated evaluation, practical evaluation, folder evaluation, qualitative or descriptive evaluation (Hosni, 2014; Esmaili, 2015).

The shortcomings and disasters of the conventional learning assessment system and the spread of the priority of schooling thinkers on the one hand and the incapacity of the traditional evaluation approach to meet society's expectations on the other hand, eventually furnished the ground for its replacement by online assessment system. The technique that seeks to restore the function of assessment and assessment to the scholars' mastering scene, attempts to make its dreams, standards, capabilities, strategies, equipment for organizing facts all in the provider of higher and greater efficient learning.

The approach that seeks to restore the role of assessment and evaluation to the students' learning scene, tries to make its goals, principles, features, methods, tools for collecting and organizing information all in the service of better and more efficient learning. Consequently, according to the above issues, the contemporary study compares online and face-to-face assessment approaches and their effectiveness from EFL teachers' point of view.

speaking appears to be the most important of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) (Ur, 1996). The potential to talk genuinely and efficiently in English has to be the main goal of any English language instruction (Davies & Pearse, 2000). due to a loss of simple information, not all English language inexperienced people are capable of communicating effectively and eloquently in spite of years of study. In keeping with Burns and Joyce (1997), teachers must supply students' particular justifications for speaking as well as instructions on a way to evaluate their performance. Producing, receiving, and processing information are all parts of the interactive manners of generating meaning from spoken language (Brown, 1994; Joyce, 1997).

Speaking is one of the useful abilities that aids language learners in communicating and plays a significant role in language instruction. People who have access to the results of this study might

benefit from them. For instance, it might give English language instructors insightful information on the elements that influence speaking skills instruction. The researcher's primary interest in this study is the impact of speaking in person and online on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy, fluency, appropriateness, and coherence. Additionally, it may result in the instruction of learners on how to improve their speaking abilities. However, there aren't many research that examine the efficiency of speaking assessments both online and in person from the perspective of Iranian EFL teachers. The results of this study may be helpful to teachers and language learners. It might offer helpful tips for developing efficient speaking lessons for EFL teaching and learning.

main purpose of this study is to compare the effectiveness of online and face to face speaking assessment from the teacher's point of view. What functional purposes this study have refer to the type of speaking assessment skills by the teacher. It wants to demonstrate which type of speaking assessments is more beneficial from the teacher's point of view. Regardless of the results of this study, the findings will help the teachers choose the more suitable type of speaking assessment (online and face to face) to achieve the best results and improve the speaking skills of EFL learners.

The objectives of this study are to compare the efficiency of speaking ability tests conducted online and in person among Iranian EFL learners and Identify the oral communication skills necessary for EFL learners.

In order to explore the impact of study online and in person speaking among EFL learners, the following research questions are formulated:

RQ1. Does online learning have any significant effect on developing Iranian EFL learner's speaking?

RQ2. What are some of the problems students face once they talk on-line and in person?

2. Literature Review

This chapter provides detailed information about the concepts related to this study such as second language acquisition, speaking skills, online learning and in person learning. Second Language acquisition is necessary for adults that is essential, because migrants might not have the language skills or the literacy proficiency needed for being successful in the new setting. Language skills are necessary for people in the labour market, and sometimes this skill is evaluated through some tests which is not suitable for the job situations or the social conditions where one will live. Gibb (2015) asserts there is a "global knowledge economy, which the new work order contains a "new word order"" (p. 251); language will be applied for remoting people—it will used as a fostering national identity and creating some limitations of exclusion for deficient people. Instead of helping immigrants, powerful language rules or not having instruction support the persistent control of western colonial powers and the economic and social stratification of the newcomer. Gibb refers to the necessity of language assessors or believes that the assessment tests must have high standards of training and review, else they further reduce the complexity of language to a written test and ultimately fail the newcomer (Mayo, 2023).

Online courses require more time than on-campus classes and make it easier to procrastinate or require good time-management skills as well as may create a sense of isolation. Online courses allow you to be more independent. They require you to be an active learner. An online learning tool is software that provides students with an opportunity to engage virtually in classroom activities. This type of software can include many features and functions to help you review student performance and identify effective teaching strategies.

The biggest difference between online and offline learning is the location. With online learning, you can study anytime and anywhere, even in the comfort of your own home. Offline learning requires you to travel to a classroom location and arrive on time. Sometimes due to the current situation of the society and particularly pedagogical contexts, it is necessary to have online learning services instead of in person learning. Online learning is an educational innovation involving information technology elements in learning (Wulandari & Agustika, 2020). Technology makes it easier for students and lecturers to conduct lectures, even though they are in different places (Alchamdani, Fatmasari, Anugrah, Sari, Putri, & Astina, 2020). Online learning activities utilize networks (internet, LAN, WAN) as a delivery method, interaction and facilities and are supported by various other forms of learning services (Anugrahana, 2020). Online learning is a solution to continue to carry out teaching and learning activities even though it is not done face-to-face (Purwanti & Krisnadi, 2020).

The effectiveness of on-line learning may be accomplished if the prerequisites have been met, particularly the supply of on-line media, time control and internet connection (Harunasari, Dwigustini, Halim, & Susilawati, 2021). The utility of online studying at home (on-line) by means of teachers is expected no longer to lessen college students' know-how in receiving teaching materials/substances at some point of lectures (Widiyono, 2020). The effectiveness of online learning will be achieved if the prerequisites have been met, namely the availability of online media, time management and internet connection (Harunasari, Dwigustini, Halim, & Susilawati, 2021). The application of online learning at home (online) by lecturers is expected not to reduce students' understanding in receiving teaching materials/materials during lectures (Widiyono, 2020).

However, in reality, the implementation of online learning has several obstacles, such as lecturers and students complaining about signal and quota constraints in online learning. Online learning cannot be implemented (Firmansyah & Minandar, 2021). Students feel that there are too many assignments, even though students do not understand the learning material because the methods used are only lectures and question and answer discussions. The monotonous learning causes students to feel bored and lazy to speak and express their opinions. This impacts the lack of student understanding of the lecture material. Students are reluctant to ask questions about material that they do not understand. Whereas in online learning, students are expected to be free to express ideas that do not appear during face-to-face lecture activities because of shame, shyness, fear or even lack of good verbal skills (Munadliroh & Faizah, 2020). Therefore, Speaking skill is one of the productive and expressive language skills used to communicate directly or face to face with other parties for certain purposes (Darmuki & Hariyadi, 2019)

Speaking skills are a set of abilities to express ideas, feelings, or thoughts adequately and accurately (Kurniati & Ervina, 2019). Speaking skill also means a person's skill in language when

expressing opinions or conveying messages according to the needs of his listeners. Students can communicate their ideas and maintain good relations with others (Nuryanto, Abidin, Setijowati, & Simulyasih Sb, 2018). The main purpose of speaking skills is to communicate. While speaking, in general, has a purpose of informing, entertaining, and persuading (Saddhono & Slamet, 2017). Speaking skills are not a type of skill that can be inherited but must continue to be trained to improve speaking skills (Sholihah, 2020).

There are several relevant research results, such as research by Sholihah (2020), which states that during the implementation of online learning, the practice of speaking skills encounters several obstacles so that learning becomes less than optimal. Another study conducted by Syaifudin (2017) stated that the application of the Blended Learning method improved students' speaking skills. Because speaking skills must be trained in person, it will be difficult to do it only through online media. Students think that learning that is carried out using Blended Learning is also more fun and interactive. Furthermore, research by Rodrigues & Vethamani (2015) found that the implementation of online learning affected the development of students' speaking skills. This online learning program demonstrates greater language proficiency and stronger self-confidence, thereby making students' speaking skills more developed. Then research by Purnama (2021) states that students have high learning motivation and are actively involved during online learning activities. Students also find it easier to express themselves and feel that learning is not boring and more interesting, so that students' speaking skills are increasing. This is in line with Fakhruddin (2019) research, which states that the google meet platform can improve students' speaking skills. This increase can be identified from the increase in the achievement of speaking skills. In addition, students' self-confidence also increases. Then research by Purnama (2021) states that students have high learning motivation and are actively involved during online learning activities. Students also find it easier to express themselves and feel that learning is not boring and more interesting so that students' speaking skills are increasing. This is in line with Fakhruddin (2019) research, which states that the google meet platform can improve students' speaking skills. This increase can be identified from the increase in the achievement of speaking skills. In addition, students' self-confidence also increases. Then research by Purnama (2021) states that students have high learning motivation and are actively involved during online learning activities. Students also find it easier to express themselves and feel that learning is not boring and more interesting, so that students' speaking skills are increasing. This is in line with Fakhruddin (2019) research, which states that the google meet platform can improve students' speaking skills. This increase can be identified from the increase in the achievement of speaking skills. In addition, students' self-confidence also increases. Students also find it easier to express themselves and feel that learning is not boring and more interesting, so that students' speaking skills are increasing. This is in line with Fakhruddin (2019) research, which states that the google meet platform can improve students' speaking skills. This increase can be identified from the increase in the achievement of speaking skills. In addition, students' self-confidence also increases. Students also find it easier to express themselves and feel that learning is not boring and more interesting so that students' speaking skills are increasing. This is in line with Fakhruddin (2019) research, which states that the google meet platform can improve students' speaking skills.

2.1. Online Technology Tools

The second element of online collaborative learning is the online technology tools. Through such online tools, the process of knowledge exchange is implemented. Online learning tools are web tools that can facilitate or enable tasks in an online learning setting to be delivered (Harasim, 2012). Such tools can be web tools or other tools that are mainly designed for education. These tools help the teacher or the instructor to incorporate the online collaborative learning pedagogy.

2.2. Online Learning Environments

The third element of online learning is the online learning environment. Online learning environment refers to web-based software that is designed to embrace the learning activities (Harasim, 2012). These environments are not just channels for transferring information, yet through these online channels, students are able to negotiate meaning and engage in conversations with one another. Some common examples of such online environments are video conferencing systems such as zoom and Microsoft teams. These environments are free from place, and time limitations and delivered through the Internet (Harasim, 2012).

According to Garrison, Anderson, & Archer (2011), there are many benefits of online collaborative learning for the students. online collaborative learning enhances learner- learner interaction. It develops students' higher order thinking skills. Streetman (2018) added that online collaborative learning promotes communication such as writing texts, emails, and chats. Online collaborative learning enhances students' communication, shared ideas, and mutual feedback from peers. When students are involved in online collaborative learning within an educational context or task-based learning, they engage in learning group tasks and activities that do not occur in individual learning context (Kharrufa, 2010).

2.3. Offline Learning

In the pre-technology education context, the teacher is the sender or the source, the educational material is the information or message, and the student is the receiver of the information. With offline learning, participants are required to travel to the training location, typically a lecture hall, college or classroom. With online learning, on the other hand, the training can be conducted from practically anywhere in the world. Offline classes provide a stimulating environment that combines both theoretical and practical aspects of learning, unlike online classes. This contributes to the overall cognitive and skill development of the students.

2.4. Empirical studies

There have been some researches done in this domain. There are as:

Baron (2020) investigated Students' Perception on Online Application in Speaking Skill e-Learning. He believed that online applications become a medium that helps the learning process of English in the classroom easier. Many online applications can be used to learn to speak English. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify suitable online applications for learning to speak English that suits student needs. The research method uses descriptive qualitative. The data collection process is interview, observation, and questionnaire. Data analysis used three steps, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The results showed that the zoom and google hangouts meet is a popular video application. While website Youtube is a web

application chosen interestingly for English speaking learning and social media WhatsApp is easy to use in English speaking learning. It is able to make a group. The implication of study is to increase teachers' creativity to use the online application.

Karya Dwi Bawanti & Yudhi Arifani (2021) focused on the impact of using the Zoom application on mobile phones by examining students' perceptions of speaking skills and their attitude during online learning. The students have 4 months of experience using the Zoom application. This research method used a survey design and collects data by giving 12 questionnaire items through Google form to students. The participants are elementary school students with 3 categories, namely grade 4, grade 5 and grade 6 at Ban Loeiwangsai school, Thailand. The findings of this study are that the strategic design of online learning on the use of the Zoom application has an impact on students performance in independent learning and managing time. This also has an impact on the ability and knowledge of students learning English especially in the speaking skill. Their academics are particularly affected by the use of the Zoom application during online learning.

Ahmad Nur Syafiq, Amalia Rahmawati, Anwari & Tyas Oktaviana (2021) believed that YouTube video is one alternative solution in teaching speaking during pandemic. This study attempts to find the use of YouTube videos to improve speaking skill of students and how teaching and learning process using YouTube videos are implemented in the class. A classroom action research was conducted to first semester college students of Muhammadiyah University of Kudus in 2020. The population of this study was all non-English program and the samples were 85 students in redundant class chosen using purposive sampling. The data were obtained from speaking assessment and interview and later analyzed by using constant comparative method and descriptive statistic. This study showed that YouTube video as English learning material improved speaking skill of students including fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and content. Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of YouTube Video is able to improve the students' speaking skill during online learning in pandemic Covid-19. Further study may concern on the use of YouTube Video to teach other English skills like reading and writing.

Nia Noviana & Alvi Raihan Utami (2021) investigated online learning obstacles during pandemic covid-19. During this pandemic, all community activities have changes in their implementation, including learning and teaching activities, it is starting from the learning activities of students at the primary school level to the university level. All teaching and learning activities that were previously carried out face-to-face in class (or offline class) are now being shifted to online learning to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 virus. One example of subject that shifted from face-to-face in class to online is English subject. In online English learning, students used a variety of media to support the running of the online class. Learning media that are commonly used in online classes, for example like video conferencing applications (Zoom Meeting, Google Meet) and other online platforms. The goal from learning English itself is to be able to communicate fluently in English. But, there are still some problems that faced by students in mastering English speaking skill in online learning. Therefore, this article is created to find out about what are the problems that students faced when mastering English speaking skill in online learning, and also the solutions to solve it.

Persis Dineen Rodrigues & Malachi Edwin Vethamani (2015) investigated online learning benefits in speaking performance. They believed that the concept of language learning using technology has allowed both language instructors and learners to explore the effectiveness of the online learning approach. Such computer mediated activities provide an online platform for ESL learners to further practise their language skills as their face-to-face contact learning hours are rather limited. Limited contact learning hours have an impact on ESL learners who desire to further develop their oral skills in classroom. This online learning approach encourages the learners to practise their oral skills.

3. Methodology

As discussed earlier, the main purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of online and in person learning on developing EFL learners' speaking skills. This chapter provides detailed information about the methodology, research design, instrumentation and data collection and analysis procedures.

The present study used a comparative, quantitative approach to measure and examine the collected data. Pre test and post test were used as the research instrument. The participants of this study were selected based on convenient sampling techniques. The participants of the study were 100 male intermediate EFL learners with the age range of 16-23 studying at Safir language institute located in Saveh. In order to select learners who were homogenous in terms of language proficiency, Oxford Placement Test was administrated. After administrating the OPT, 30 learners whose scores were between one standard deviation above and below the mean were chosen randomly as the target sample of the study.

To make sure that the study enjoys the needed appropriateness, the researcher implemented those instrumentations:

Oxford Placement Test (OPT) is one of the most famous and standard tests for specifying ESL or EFL learners' level of language proficiency. The sample of Oxford placement test used in this study is divided into two parts: part A: 40 items, part B: 20 items. Part A contains 25 multiple-choice pictorial items, 15 questions in the format of multiple choice cloze text. Part B contains 10 multiple choice cloze text items and 10 multiple choice vocabulary items. The whole test will last 50 minutes.

Before the treatment, a researcher-made pre-test was administered to the participants to elicit the initial differences among the learners. The speaking pre-test consisted of two main parts: Part one reflected on general information, requiring the participants to give a short introduction about themselves. Furthermore, some fairly common topics related to job, education, hometown, and entertainment were explored. Part two includes a series of pictures which will be given to participants and they were asked to tell the story that the pictures show.

After the treatment, another researcher-made post-test was given to all participants based on the materials or content covered during the treatment or teaching program. The speaking post- test consisted of two main parts, similar to what was mentioned in the speaking pre-test, selected from materials covered throughout the course. Regarding inter-rater reliability for speaking pre- test and

post-test, the correlation coefficients between the two raters were computed. The semi-structured interviews in English language were designed to improve the qualitative component of the project. Two interview guide questions are prepared by three experienced researchers according to the research question. The interview questions were raised about the challenges and problems faced by EFL students when they talk online and in person.

The interview guide was then evaluated and rewritten by two other researchers to remove any potential bias. The audio recordings of the interviews were played several times to select conflicting ideas or views that support the general tendency in the questionnaire findings. Common comments highlighting important differences and similarities were then transcribed.

In order to fulfill the objectives of this study, 100 male intermediate EFL learners with the age range of 16-23 studying at Safir language institute located Saveh, participated in this research. In order to select learners who were homogenous in terms of language proficiency, Oxford Placement Test was administrated. After administrating the OPT, 60 learners whose scores were between one standard deviation above and below the mean were chosen randomly as the target sample of the study. In the next step, they did the speaking pretest and then they were randomly divided into two groups; one as experimental and the other as control group. The experimental group members were taught through online learning instructions and used mobile-assisted application techniques and the control group used routine and traditional teaching process.

The duration of the treatment was 14 sessions in which one session was for making students familiar with online learning techniques. Each session lasted for 90 minutes. The control group received the traditional in-school instruction. The teacher provided traditional and face-to-face environments for communication with other classmates. Also, the teacher did not use of any online programs in this group, and used routine teaching method for developing speaking skills by answering questions strategy in this class; and learners were encouraged to monitor their learning. In the experimental group, however, the same set of topics in speaking lessons in control group were instructed based on online learning application techniques at home.

After 14 complete sessions these two groups, the participants in both control and experimental groups were given speaking posttest questions, to determine which method (online or face-to-face) can improve the speaking skills of EFL learners. Then in order to answer the third research question regarding the problems that students encounter with speaking in online and face-to-face environments, a semi-structured interview was conducted. At the last session of the treatment, 5 students from the control and 5 students from the experimental group were chosen randomly and asked about the problems existed in online and face-to-face speaking environments. The interviews were semi-structured interviews. The responses were analyzed thematically to determine the problems existed in online and face-to-face speaking environments.

To reply the questions concerning the connection among on line and face-to-face speaking assessment and talking abilities of EFL beginners, the records accrued from the scores of pre-test and post-test have been analyzed statistically. The scores were in comparison and analyzed by the usage of SPSS software and T-test. We don't forget the affordable measures of validity and reliability to be examined via specialists' views. Correlation coefficient was used to describe the

relationship between these variables. To fulfil the aims of the study regarding the relationship among on line and face-to-face talking assessment and speaking fulfilment of on-line and offline learning, a Pearson correlation coefficient was used to describe the connection between on line and face-to-face speaking evaluation and talking abilities of on line and offline learning environments. To reply to the question regarding the number of the issues students face after they talk on-line and face-to-face, the response of the interviews had been analyzed thematically to determine the issues they encounter with talking in on-line and face-to-face speaking environments.

4. Results

This study attempted to investigate the effects of online and in person learning on developing Iranian EFL learner's speaking and also determine some of the problems students face when they talk online and in person. The result of the study is discussed in this chapter and tested the following hypotheses;

H01. Online learning has no significant effect on developing Iranian EFL learner's speaking.

H02. in person learning has no significant effect on developing Iranian EFL learner's speaking.

In order to test the hypotheses, the researcher conducted a series of calculations and statistical routines that are elaborated comprehensively in this chapter. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized in the process, details of which are presented below.

As mentioned earlier, OPT test was administered to 100 students of the study and 60 participants who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as the main participants of the study. They were randomly put into two experimental and control groups. The following table shows the descriptive statistics of OPT test.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of OPT Main Administration

N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
100	33.00	36.00	64.00	47.85	9.55	91.24	-.335	.254

According to the Table 1, the mean turned out to be 47.85 and the standard deviation was 9.55. Consequently, among the 100 original students, 60 students whose PET scores fell between one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean were chosen as the homogenized sample of the study.

Evaluation of the First Research Question

Research question one was an attempt to investigate the effect of online learning program on EFL learners' speaking achievement. In doing so, the two groups' mean scores on pretest and posttest were submitted to independent sample t-test. Results are presented in the following table.

Results of the speaking Pre-test

In the following section, results of speaking pretest including descriptive statistics and inferential statistics are presented to check whether the groups were homogenous on the onset of the study.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Control & Experimental Groups' Mean Scores on speaking Pre-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	SEM	
Speaking (pretest)	Control	30	17.53	3.36	.613
	Experimental	30	18.60	2.72	.497

As it is shown in the above table, the mean scores on control and experimental groups are 17.53 and 18.60, respectively. The standard deviations of the two groups are 3.36 and 2.72. To see whether the means were statistically different, the means were submitted to an independent samples-t-test. Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

T-test for Comparing the Participants' Speaking Score before the Treatment

	Levene's Test		t-test		
	F	Sig.	t	df	P
Equal variances assumed	0.002	.960	-1.35	58	0.182
Equal variances not assumed			-1.35	55	0.182

As it is shown in the above table, the variances of the two groups were equal ($F=0.002$, $p=0.96 > 0.5$); therefore, the data in the first row in the above table are reported. The results, as shown in the above table (equal variances assumed) indicate that there was no statistical difference between the two groups' mean scores on the speaking pretest ($t= -1.35$, $df= 58$, $p= 0.18 > 0.05$). As a result, it can be argued that there was no initial difference between control and experimental scores on speaking pretest and they were homogeneous.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of the Groups' Scores on Speaking Post-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	SEM	
Speaking (posttest)	Control	30	19.1	2.17	.34
	Experimental	30	18.60	2.72	.497

As it is shown in the table 4, the mean scores of the control and experimental groups are 19.3 and 22.9, respectively. The standard deviations of the two groups are 2.17 and 2. 15. To see whether the means were statistically different, the means were submitted to an independent samples-t-test. Results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
T-test for Evaluating the groups' means on speaking Post-test

	Levene's Test		t-test		
	F	Sig.	t	df	P
Equal variances assumed	0.052	.821	-6.434	58	0.001
Equal variances not assumed			-6.434	57.97	0.001

As it is shown in the above table, the variances of the two groups were equal ($F=0.052$, $p=0.82 > 0.5$); therefore, the data in the first row in the above table are reported. The results, as shown in the above table (equal variances assumed) indicate that there was significant statistical difference between the two groups' mean scores on the speaking posttest ($t= -6.43$, $df= 58$, $p=0.001 > 0.05$). As a result, it can be argued that the null hypothesis was rejected favoring the experimental group and online program had significant effect on EFL learners' speaking achievement.

Analysis the second Research Question

In addressing the second Qualitative research question "what are the problems and challenges Iranian EFL learners face in online and face to face classes?", qualitative methods were implemented. Creswell (2012) believes that qualitative study uses exploring, investigating, and understanding the individuals or groups' meanings ascribed to social or human problems. In this part, the learners' attitudes toward the challenges and problems of learning English in online and face to face learning environments were investigated. The participants of this part of the research included 10 Iranian EFL learners (5 from online classes and 5 from face to face classes). The participants were selected based on their consent and willingness to participate in this the phase of the study and also according to convenient sampling techniques.

The analysis of the qualitative data was done to organize the descriptive contents into themes, and categories. It is worth mentioning that firstly, all interviews were carefully transcribed to develop recurring themes. By categorizing the contents of transcriptions, the researcher could get a good knowledge of the dominant ideas expressed by the participants. Then, using frequency count, the emerging themes were coded and analyzed. Therefore, the codes related to the attitudes of learners regarding the problems and challenges of learning English in online and face to face environments were extracted from the transcribed interviews. The codes were further classified to form the themes to be further discussed.

To establish the findings, the data were analyzed qualitatively by using the interactive models stated by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). Those interactive models are divided into three parts: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. After the data were obtained from the interview, the data were analyzed through those three steps of analyzing the data. The first step is data condensation. In this step, the data from the field notes of observation and the transcript of the interview are analyzed through the processes of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming. After that, the researcher classifies and breaks down the data in a specific way in the data display. Here, a narrative text is used to display the data. In the last step, the researcher formulates the conclusion of this research and then verifies the data against the

theories and previous research. In this phase of the study, a semi-structured interview was conducted to answer the second qualitative research question. Two interview questions were put forward in this study as follows:

1. How do you think about the challenges EFL learners experience in online classes?
2. How do you think about the challenges EFL learners experience in in person learning classes?

The primary interview question was "How do you think about the demanding situations EFL newcomers experience in on-line training?"

The learners replied to this question otherwise.

First, the analysis of the information received from the interviews with novices were mentioned. Three out of three learners agreed that many students feel a lack of motivation, feelings of isolation, time management problems, having too many distractions, and encountering technical difficulties as they take their first steps into the world of online classes. One of them believed that online learning is problematic due to the lack of interaction with instructors and classmates. Moreover, one of the most crucial skill for a student to learn over their academic career is communication. Two of the learners believed that online learning classes has the problems with budgeting, Financial troubles can significantly impact the process of English language learning in online classes.

The answers of the teachers were categorized into four groups, lack of motivation, feelings of isolation, time management problems, having too many distractions, and encountering technical difficulties (F=2), lack of communication with other classmates and instructors (F =1), problems with budgeting, Financial management (F=2). Four themes were obtained from each category. From the interview of the teachers, the following themes were extracted: "Having problems due to lack of motivation, feelings of isolation, time management problems, having too many distractions, and encountering technical difficulties", "lack of communication with other classmates and instructors and problems with budgeting, Financial management". Some excerpts of learners' statement are presented in the following themes.

"It is widely accepted that students in online learning classes have problems due to lack of motivation, they sometimes feel isolation and have specific challenges regarding time management." (Student 2).

"I believe that learning English language through online classes is sometimes a challenging task because the students have too many problems with distractions, and encounter difficulties with technical issues." (student 3)

The second theme is related to difficulties due to "lack of communication with other classmates". The excerpt is discussed below:

"I think that one of the most important factors influencing learning in online classes is lack of communication with other classmates. Interaction with other students and reviewing the materials learned through using them in actual learning environments is very useful for students, but online learning classes lack the active communication with other students and even the instructors and this is the most important problem of online classes." (Student 5).

"In my opinion, EFL learners learn language more effectively when they communicate with other students and instructors because they learn how to use language skills in relationships with others." (Student 6)

The third theme relates to the problems of online learning classes with budgeting, Financial management".

Some excerpts of the learners are discussed below:

"I think that online learning environments is more expensive than conventional classes because some technical devices are needed to run an online class. Therefore, it needs money and in some cases, problems with financial budgets and management issues are considerable and requires special consideration." (Student 4)

"As I know, in every domain, financial issues are of great importance and in language learning process is the same. In order to conduct a language learning process, financial management should be taught and it requires specific framework which is considered as a prominent obstacle in language learning process in online classes." (Student 7)

The learners' attitudes of the challenges regarding face to face learning environments (second interview question)

The second interview question was "What are the EFL learners' attitudes towards the challenges of face to face learning environments? The learners answered to this question differently.

First, the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews with learners was discussed. Two learners agreed that communicating to class takes additional time. Classes may not be available at your ideal time and you have to structure your day around the set class times. Cost is typically more expensive.

Three learners believed that pace of learning is determined by the teachers and not the students in classroom learning. It means that all the learning process is controlled by the teacher and the learners do not have any role in determining the courses taught, the approaches of teaching so, no attention is paid to learner requirements.

The answers of the learners were categorized into two groups: limitations of time in face to face environments and teacher-based teaching styles. (F=3). Two themes were obtained from each category. From the interview of the learners, the following themes were extracted: "Having limited time for learning in face to face environments, and teacher-based language learning process. Some excerpts of learners' statement are presented in the following themes.

“It is widely accepted that students in offline learning classes have problems due to lack of time management, they sometimes feel frustrated and have specific challenges regarding time management.” (Student 2).

“I believe that learning English language through offline classes is sometimes a challenging task because the students have too many problems with lesson load, and encounter difficulties with time restriction” (student 3)

The second theme is related to difficulties due to "lack of learners' control on lesson plans". The excerpt is discussed below:

“I think that one of the most important factors influencing learning in offline classes is lack of control over lesson plans. Only teachers are allowed to decide on the learning process and students are passive actors in learning.” (Student 5).

“In my opinion, EFL learners learn language more effectively when they themselves decide about the materials been taught.” (Student 6)

5. Discussion

This study was carried out to investigate the effect of online learning program on EFL learners' speaking skills. To do this, two research questions and one null hypothesis were raised. In order to provide an answer to the research questions and test the null hypotheses, the following procedure was carried out.

After administering the OPT test (Oxford Placement Test) to the 100 male EFL learners, 60 participants were chosen based on their scores which fell one standard deviation above and below the mean. After the homogenization, the researcher distributed the speaking pretest among these 60 participants and let them filled it out. After that, participants were randomly assigned into control and experimental groups. The main purpose of this study was to explore the possible effect of online learning program on EFL learners' speaking skills. Various statistical analyses including descriptive and inferential statistics were carried out to fulfill such purposes.

In order to check for any significant difference between the speaking mean scores and ensure the homogeneity of the two groups in terms of the dependent variables of the study, an independent samples t-test was run on the speaking pre-test scores of the participants in bot groups. The result showed that there was no initial difference between control and experimental scores on speaking pretest and they were homogeneous. Also, to find the significant difference between the speaking post-test scores of the two groups, an independent sample t-test was run on the speaking scores of the participants. The result showed that online learning program had significant effect on EFL learners' speaking achievement.

For analyzing the null hypotheses of the study, an independent sample t-test was run on the speaking achievement posttest scores of the two control and experimental groups. According to the available statistical analyses, the first null hypothesis (H01) is rejected and it can be argued that online program significantly affects and contributes to learning speaking skill by Iranian EFL learners.

Discussion of Qualitative Research Question

The last question of the study was qualitative questions regarding the perceptions and preferences of learners about the challenges and problems of online and face to face environments. Therefore, two questions were discussed through a semi-structured interview and 10 learners from two online and face-to-face learning environments answered the interview questions.

Regarding the challenges of online learning classes, the results indicated that the majority of the learners who were exposed to online learning classes thought that online classes is ineffective due to lack of motivation, feeling of isolation, time management problems and having too many distractions and encountering technical difficulties. It was also demonstrated that online learning contexts are ineffective due to lack of communication with other classmates and instructors. It was also demonstrated that problems with budgeting and financial management is also an important factor in online classes. In a study, Anjani and Wachyudi (2022) investigated the effects of online learning classes on speaking skills. The results of the study revealed that most students decrease learning speaking skill achievement through online learning contexts. The researchers discovered a few problems during learning process such as decreasing pronunciation, lack of seriousness, and becoming less enthusiastic about learning to speak English.

The results of this study is in line with Kardana's (2023) study. They demonstrated that online learning has proven to be effectively used to improve speaking skills of UNMAS English education students during Covid-19 period.

The results of this study agree with Wahyudi, Hanum Hanifa Sukma, Ali Mustadi's (2021) study. They showed no effect of online learning on students' speaking skills. Students remain skilled at speaking even in online learning because it is influenced by the mindset of students so that they have the courage and high initiative to respond to the stimulus provided by the lecturer. The ability of lecturers to package impressive learning can also increase learning motivation so that students are more confident in speaking and expressing opinions. Also the results of Rohani Megat Abdul Rahim, Liza Idris, Ilyani Abdul Rahman, Mohamed Syafiq Ya Shaq, Nur Farhana Nasir (2021). They intended to explore the perspective of learning listening and speaking using online among L2 learners. A total number of 102 university students at UiTM Perak Branch took part in this study. They were instructed to answer a set of questionnaires which was created using google document. From the findings the students reported that they do see the benefits of online learning. In addition, they found learning through this interactive medium as interesting and provide them space to progress at their own pace in learning. However, this does not portray students' eagerness in which may be due to several factors. This study is hoped to able to highlight the positive aspects of using online as an alternative to the traditional way of teaching listening and speaking.

This study's results is in line with Rodrigues, Malachi Edwin Vethamani's (2015) study. They concluded that language learning using technology has allowed both language instructors and learners to explore the effectiveness of the online learning approach. Such computer mediated activities provide an online platform for ESL learners to further practice their language skills as their face-to-face contact learning hours are rather limited. Limited contact learning hours have an

impact on ESL learners who desire to further develop their oral skills in classroom. This online learning approach encourages the learners to practice their oral skills.

In a study conducted by Fajaryani, Gita Herliza, Rd M Ali (2023), it was demonstrated that there were two themes of challenges faced by EFL students in speaking English, including lack of vocabulary (academic word issues), and nervousness (communication apprehension). This research also revealed that there were four themes of differences in online and offline learning, including learning process (inattentiveness unmotivated, attentiveness and motivated), classroom activities (non-interactive and interactive learning), time management (undisciplined and disciplined learning), and learning outcomes (understanding the material). Last but not least, this research also pointed out that the participants used three strategies or potential solutions to overcome their challenges. Those strategies are metacognitive strategies (preparing vocabulary), cognitive strategies (entertainment platform), and social strategies (asking and practice). Finally, the transition era gives new experiences to students. They do not experience challenges in terms of environment and internet issue as they face during online learning.

Apriani, Muh Junaidi, Lume Lume's (2021) study was in line with this study. They concluded that poor internet access experienced by the students of Mts NW Sepit is a major problem. Students are often slow to respond to the learning activities carried out online. Especially in speaking skills, students will never be able to communicate using English effectively, and they do not understand how to make sentences in English very well. In addition, teachers also cannot directly measure students' ability. So that students don't have trouble getting on the internet, the school gives teachers and students internet data packages.

6. Conclusion

Regarding the effect of online learning on EFL learners' speaking achievement, results verified that online learning classes had significant effect on EFL learners' speaking achievement. In fact, the result showed that the students' speaking achievement can benefit from online programs more than the students learn speaking with traditional method. In other words, the experimental group outperformed the control group on the speaking achievement, thus the related null hypothesis is rejected.

The results of second question showed that regarding the perceptions and preferences of learners about the challenges and problems of online and face to face environments, the results indicated that the majority of the learners who were exposed to online learning classes thought that online classes is ineffective due to lack of motivation, feeling of isolation, time management problems and having too many distractions and encountering technical difficulties.

The majority of the learners who were exposed to face to face learning agreed that communicating to class takes additional time, classes may not be available at your ideal time and you have to structure your day around the set class times, pace of learning is determined by the teachers and not the students in classroom learning. It means that all the learning process is controlled by the teacher.

7. Implications of the study

The findings of this study, along with those of previous studies, can help a diversity of professions concerned with language teaching and learning. Among all, teachers, syllabus designers, material developers, and learners can be named. Before the Coronavirus, the setting of classes in Iran perhaps does not support online instruction and they mostly focus on traditional approach which is applied in each language school. Students perhaps may not be ready enough to embrace fully online instruction. Hence, for improving the speaking skill which is one of the important skills in language learning, building the capacity of students for embracing these applications is required.

8. Suggestions for Further Research

The current study aimed at investigating the effect of online learning program on EFL learners' speaking achievement. As this study was narrowed down in some respects, the researcher would like to offer some suggestions, hoping that some further research to be done in this regard in the future.

1. The same study could be carried out among females or in the coeducational contexts to see whether the control variable of gender in this study would yield to different results in members of the other gender.
2. Another demographic variable which could be adjusted is age. This study was done on students of age 16 to 23. It would be useful to divide the study in various age ranges such as children, teens, or adults.
3. The second control variable in this study was language proficiency; another study could be conducted including EFL learners at advanced levels.
4. Other language skills could be investigated as the dependent variables of the study.

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