**Secondary School English Teachers' Challenges of Teaching English an Online Learning Environment**

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**Abstract**

The transformation of educational systems in secondary school level and other levels has allowed integrating a new teaching and learning environment called virtual education. Coronavirus pandemic has led to the closure of traditional classrooms all over the world resulting in an up surging integration of technology in the educational system that led to the spread of virtual educational environment. This study investigated the secondary school EFL teachers' challenges as well as their suggestions in online environment during Covid-19 pandemic. Thirty Iranian EFL teachers were selected based on availability sampling and their classes were observed. The observation checklist measured EFL teachers’ encountered challenges in virtual classes. Besides, the qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 teachers as the participants of this study. The result of the present study revealed eight common important challenges. These challenges were unstable internet connection, preparation of online materials for online classes, checking students' performance through formative and summative assessment, reliability of examinations, lack of motivation of students, lack of interaction, inactive/passive students, limitation in management of students' behavior, weakness of Shad application, and lack of teacher guide manuals and technical support.

**Keywords:** Challenges, EFL, Online Learning Environment, Teaching, Virtual Education.

**Introduction**

The employment of technology has provided valuable occasions and opportunities for language teachers to accept and adopt online application and software to continue teaching and enhance learners’ knowledge and proficiency in complicated conditions such as Coronavirus pandemic. Consequently, with the development of learning technologies, EFL teachers face various challenges in language teaching especially in school s since this replacement happened very quickly and unexpectedly. In the international arena, online education grows every day, offering programs in educational system that benefits all individuals especially in the period of COVID-19 pandemic. During Covid-19 epidemic, most schools round the world have had to face the almost immediate need to replace the face-to-face class environment with the virtual class. Therefore, technology integration is critical during this period to assist teachers in both under-developed and developed countries to connect with students and continue the teaching and learning process.

In fact, COVID-19 affected and altered the process of teaching substantially because most educational institutions and organizations around the world switched to the adoption of technology-blended learning resources and initiatives to ensure the continuity of education. Online classrooms can be helpful during critical situations such as Coronavirus pandemic condition which has not been investigated in the literature of EFL/ESL teaching and learning. The implementation of technology in the educational context provided a variety of opportunities and facilities to teachers. Facilitating teaching in an online environment poses a number of challenges to educators, who often struggle with adapting the practices they have found effective in face-to-face classes to an online environment (Mills, 2015). Unfortunately, there are different challenges that need to be highlighted despite all the positive feedbacks and benefits reported from various studies (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020, p. 90). There are numerous challenges such as lack of sufficient computer knowledge, limited net coverage, connectivity limitations, and incompatible devices bring about challenges and difficulties in the way of teachers’ teaching and the students’ learning (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Sintema, 2020). Maintaining motivation in an online course is yet another challenge that online learners face. Students who lacked independence and self-motivation overall had lower success rates than their counterparts (Savenye, 2005). Moreover, bandwidth and connectivity limitations in all parts of the country or in general in the world are not the same, and due to this, teachers prefer to stop implementing new technologies in their classrooms (Yadav, Gupta, & Khetrapal, 2018). In addition to all these problems, teachers’ satisfaction can be another essential factor that may influence the applicability of the online teaching because conducting and designing the materials for online teaching are very time-consuming and even hard for them (Mahmoudzadeh, 2014). Communication is also an important part of any educational endeavor. Students need to collaborate with their instructor and their peers in order to be successful in an academic course (Brindley, Blaschke, & Walti, 2009).

In view of the COVID-19 pandemic and government policy to carry out online learning which causes students to learn from home and teachers to teach from home too. This research intended to investigate the challenges that secondary high school EFL teachers face in teaching in the online classes during pandemic conditions particularly in Iran. This research also aimed at shedding light on the teachers' suggestions about online classes as well as the merits of online education from teachers' perspective during Covid-19 pandemic.

**Statement of the Problem**

In order to decrease the spread of COVID-19, most countries around the world decided to suspend the educational institutions for a short while. However, this closure did not lead to the cessation of teaching and learning but it was quickly replaced by online classes and schools and universities provided the opportunity of remote schooling. COVID-19 changed the routine process of teaching considerably as the face-to-face classes and replaced them with the virtual ones to manage the spread of recent infectious disease. However, this new condition was not without challenge and difficulty for teachers and students to struggle out the encountered condition. The felt problem was that although there were numerous teachers who were knowledgeable in their own field, they could not easily to get along with the unplanned and rapid move to online teaching with no training courses or support. The first step, therefore, was to find out what their challenges were in teaching in such classes to find out solution in further steps. Although virtual classes are the closest equivalent of physical classrooms in the digital world, they are not yet the exact perfect replacement. This means that it takes all individuals to be equipped with specific requirements and knowledge without which handling and controlling the virtual classes would face difficulties. Teaching in a virtual classroom does not mean to play recordings, videos, or present power points only but to administer the class through web-based platforms and programs, and to incorporate software as well.

**Significance of the Study**

In response to coronaviruses pandemic, most of the schools started to use online classes. Taking online education during COVID -19 pandemic creates an opportunity for teachers to be safe from disease and teach to students from their home. The measures put in place by entities and governments to allow students and teachers to do their daily tasks from home confirms that it is possible to carry out education from anywhere with a phone or computer. Although there are different challenges in this way of teaching, yet this way of teaching has its own difficulties and problems that are needed to be addressed to increase the quality of the education. Getting aware of the challenges experienced by EFL teachers in the web-based platforms can assist not only teachers, students, but also the policy makers, instructors, and senior people in educational institution to resolve them and prepare a better condition to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

**Research Questions**

The present study tried to find the answers to the following questions:

**RQ1:** What are the secondary school EFL teachers' challenges in teaching English to EFL learners in online classes during the COVID 19 pandemic?

**RQ2**: What are the merits of teaching English to EFL learners in online classes during the COVID 19 pandemic from teachers ' view?

**Challenges of Teaching in Virtual Environment**

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, many instructors were forced to pivot their instruction online to allow teaching to continue. "It is essential to go beyond emergency online practices and develop quality online teaching that result from careful instructional design and planning." (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). In recent years, English language curriculum has been dominantly implementing technologies in order to improve teaching context and solve the probable challenges (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020). For instance, many language classrooms have adopted the recent technologies such as online presentation and online applications (Ahmad et al., 2019).

Coronavirus disease makes students to learn from home and teachers to work from home, too. It fully replaces face-to-face learning in classroom setting into online learning, moreover, this situation becomes a new challenge for teachers to run online learning. The first concern which has arisen is that online learning is only available to those who have access to a broadband connection at home and it is fast enough to support online learning (Lai & Widmar, 2021). In addition, students need to access to a good devices such as computers, mobile phones or the necessary software to participate in their online learning course. It can be challenging to create a sense of social attendance so that the online scholar feels a part of the learning community. But cultural restrictions are another area that one should be mindful of when designing an online course. Educational technology continues to represent the dominate culture, therefore limiting individuals who are not included in the dominate culture (Oswal & Meloncon, 2014).

Maintaining motivation in an online course is another challenge that online learners face. Students who lacked independence and self-motivation overall had lower success rates than their counterparts (Savenye, 2005). This challenge appears students found hard to feel motivated enough to study in the online education it requires more independent and autonomous students. Motivation of students refers to the “need to do something out of curiosity and enjoyment” during online classes (Hung et al., 2010, p.1082).One of the main challenges with online education is the changing role of the instructor. Four different roles are identified for online teachers: social, pedagogical, methodical responsibilities, and the managerial (Schullo, Hilbelink, Venable, & Barron, 2007). Pedagogical roles refer to teaching methods; social roles are the way instructors establish social relationships with the students; managerial roles include administrative and organizational tasks; and technical responsibilities are the technical support that instructors provide for students. Through synchronous systems, a teacher can evaluate students’ levels of knowledge and tailor the course material appropriately. In addition, the inclusions of an arranged time adds the perception that the instructor and students are providing external motivation and are encouraging students’ participation, which can result in higher retention and completion rates (Schullo, Hilbelink, Venable, & Barron, 2007).

The reduction of traditional contact and interaction with students is a common concern shared by instructors. Moreover, online education appears to place demands on students that are different from those encountered in a traditional classroom (Cowham & Duggleby, 2005). The ability to talk with other class participants and instructors in real time can enhance the interaction that other forms of communication can't have this ability. Also, synchronous technologies can enhance value to teaching and learning models, either as an addition or replacement for face-to-face or asynchronous learning (Schullo et al., 2007). Meanwhile the establishing of meaningful learning communities is a distinct challenge in online or virtual learning education because of the partial or complete lack of face-to-face interaction between student and teachers and among students. Communication and cooperation are considered the most important features of online education and also the most problematic (Brindley et al., 2009) Moreover, lack of peer response or teacher moderation seemed to be detrimental to students’ identity because they felt isolated from and peripheral to the academic community of the forum. The challenges of online education and the use of educational technologies have created a new chance to obtain indicators about students’ learning. Likewise to what happens with the majority of information systems, students’ interactions in VLEs regarding their online learning activities are all obtained and stored. Moreover, participants need to feel that they are engaging in social interactions that let them to cultivate their professional as well as individual relations, and the presence of an educator can be a key factor in student engagement (Cho & Tobias, 2016). Gilbert (2015) stated, the lower persistence rates of online course were caused by an absence of interaction and social connectedness in an online learning environment. Donlevy (2003, p. 120) mentioned that the lack of interaction between students negatively affected some features of the learning process. He continued that the “social and emotional aspects of learning are as important as the technical information” taught to learners. The next challenge outlined by Anderson, Imdieke, and Standerford (2011) was the non-existence of institutional chances for their online courses. These included expectations of teachers, students, courses, and staff.

Teachers’ knowledge and commitment are among the other influential factors that affect the applicability of the online teaching because conducting and designing the materials for online teaching are very time-consuming and even hard for them (Mahmoudzadeh, 2014). The process of adapting to online teaching environments also requires a time investment on the part of the teachers with respect to the design and development of learning resources, including learning environment setup, organizing and uploading the files, collecting resources, and preparing the materials (Samarawickrema & Stacey, 2007). So teachers should increase the quality of their teaching with the help of new and modern information technologies. Most of the teachers had no experience with this form of teaching. The challenge to transfer what is taught effectively in the face-to-face classroom to online continue to be a problem. Anderson et al. (2011) stated that they saw one of the main challenges as the “disconnect between the way teachers were taught to teach” (p. 4) and how the course content must be delivered in an effective online classroom. According to Kebritchi et al., (2017) learners’ technical skills are related to usage of computers and the Internet (Peng, Tsai, & Wu, 2006), their attitude and perception on the online class and Internet (Tsai & Lin, 2004), their cultural and non-English backgrounds (Luyt, 2013), and their time management skills (Roper, 2007). The quality of education can also be enhanced by access to technology, but not all educators have the maximum skills necessary for online teaching. This sometimes becomes a disparity between students and teachers, and so the technical skill of all educators must continue to be improved (Martina et al., 2020). Online teaching environments are as diverse and complex as face- to-face classroom settings. Many instructors who teach face-to-face are not attracted in teaching online (Osika et al., 2009). One of the main concerns is that these instructors have been teaching face-to-face for years and do not feel easy switching to the online format (Kebritchi et al., 2017). The learning interactions occurring within the teaching space are complex by nature, but the use of online learning environments enables the processing and the obtainment of huge quantities of data from each interaction among the some players in development. As in a face-to-face way, assessments, both formative and summative, are important in an online course (Miller, 2014). Although formative assessment has historically been less highlighted in online courses, it is not only a way to support learning but a strategy to keep students motivated in the online environment (Gikandi, Morrow, & Davis, 2011). Several studies suggest that students may be more externally motivated to learn if they know that their learning will be evaluated. For example, Elikai and Schuhmann (2010) conclude that grades can motivate students to learn. Austin (1978) finds that homework that was assigned and checked turns out to be more effective in improving students’ achievement than homework that was assigned, but not checked. Warden (2013) stated that learning takes place best when the environment is centrally controlled by the instructor. This control minimizes several of the technical problems associated with online courses by providing training and advice to students on using the equipment properly.

**Research Design**

The method applied for this research was mixed method utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather and analyze the data. The study is based on qualitative design as far as the instruments for gathering the data, namely, observation and interviews are concerned. Moreover, observations and interviews were conducted online.

**Participants**

The participants were 30 secondary school EFL teachers who were selected based on availability sampling from state schools. The participants were selected from Khuzestan province because these teachers allowed the researcher to enter their online classes. Twelve of the participants were male and 18 of them were female. All these participants were between 27 and 41 years old with the teaching experience ranged from 5 to 12 years. They had taught English at school in face-to-face way of teaching, however, after Covid-19 pandemic they were forced to use online platforms such as Shad or Whats App .

**Research Instruments**

Two research instruments were used to collect the data for the later analysis. The first one was observation of online classes and the second one interview to enrich the qualitative data.

**Observation Checklist**

The instrument utilized in the current study is a checklist observation. As Mason (1996) declares, observation mainly refers to method of obtaining data that allows the researcher to merge in the context, observe different dimensions of that setting including interactions, relationships, actions, events, and so on in a systematic way. The checklist consisted of two parts. The first part dealt with the demographic features of EFL teachers. The second part was designed in a way that it consisted of 13 about the challenges that might be encountered or emerged in any typical EFL classroom. However, the checklists’ items were revised in some parts during the study. This checklist was designed based on the review of related literature. The reliability coefficient of the observation checklist which was piloted was 0.88 which indicated a strong internal consistency among the items. The reliability results of the observation checklist show that the checklist seems to be reliable enough to be used as an instrument for the main study. The checklist was also validated through a panel of two EFL experts (Appendix B).

**Interview**

Interview was the second instrument used in the present study to collect the data. An open-ended semi-structured interview based on the interview protocol was carried out as an attempt to get in -depth insights about the challenges of teaching during pandemic situation. The interviews consisted of 18 questions which were designed according to the related literature. The interview questions dealt mainly with the participants’ perspective about the challenges they faced using web-based platform in their online classes as well as the suggestions and merits of online classes. The items were further modified based on the comments of two EFL experts to make sure that the items are appropriate in terms of relevancy and feasibility. The validity of the questions was verified by two EFL specialists.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The current study was carried out from September 2020 to June 2021. At first, the observation checklist was prepared and validated by the panel of two EFL experts. Then it was collected with 10 EFL teachers to find out any shortcomings and modify it in case needed. The observation's data were collected from 30 the online classrooms of 30 EFL teachers. These classes were from different cities of Khuzestan Province. Thirty online classes were chosen from 30 different teachers for this section with the permission of the participants. Each online class was observed for 45–60 minutes and also each class was observed 3 times on different days. The observations were all recorded for later transcriptions. Almost all of them used Shad application (the Iranian software made for schools) for their online classes as well as WhatsApp application. At the end of all observations, 90 checklists were prepared.

For the interview part, all 30 EFL teachers agreed to participate, therefore 30 interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted about at least 35 to 45 minutes. These teachers were teaching English in state secondary school s and they were using online environment for their teaching. Most of them were from Ahvaz, three teachers were from Khorramshar, two participants from Abadan, and five of them were from Masjedsoleyman, two from Dezful, and four from Shushtar. Most participants answered in English and just the responses of five participants were in Persian (the native language of the interviewees). To gain insight on teachers’ challenges, a semi -structured interview with teachers were conducted through WhatsApp, whereby recorded voice messages were transcribed in written form. The interview includes 18 questions about the teachers' experience with online teaching, their challenges, and their opinion about merits of online education. The start time of interview was determined by interviewee. The gathered data were subject to content analysis to find out the challenges that these EFL teachers faced in their web-based classes as well as their suggestions or any possible solutions.

**Interview Results**

The next section of this chapter reported qualitative data gathered through individual interview with a purposeful and voluntary sample of 30 participants who were teaching in online classes during the coronavirus pandemic. Items measured EFL teachers’ challenges in an online education as well as their suggestions and recommendations for improving the quality of online course. Of course the merits of online learning and teaching and teachers' experiences in virtual teaching have been transcribed based on the results of interviews. EFL teachers were chosen from secondary schools, represented females and males. Their voices were recorded through WhatsApp and then were transcribed. After that, commonalities and differences from their individual idea were recorded and found. The anonymity of the participants was ensured by assigning them different numbers from 1 to 30.

Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations for the thirteen items of the checklist are given in Table 4.17.

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|  | | | *Table 4.17.Descriptive Statistics for the Items of the Checklist* | |
| Item Statistics | |
| N | **Std. Deviation** | **Mean** | challenges | |
| 30 | .73030 | 2.4667 | Technical difficulties | |
| 30 | .77385 | 2.2333 | Rapport | |
| 30 | .71840 | 2.3667 | Challenges on the assessment of the students’ performance and the Course Evaluations |
| 30 | .85029 | 2.0333 | The complexity for teacher to control students’ behaviors |
| 30 | .69149 | 2.2667 | Insufficient Computer and digital literacy and technical skills |
| 30 | .74664 | 2.1667 | Challenges of Time Management and Organization |
| 30 | .72397 | 2.4000 | Setting Challenge And teaching Environment |
| 30 | .74971 | 2.3000 | Pedagogical / Instructional challenges |
| 30 | .69893 | 2.1667 | Invisibility and lack of visible body language |
| 30 | .49013 | 2.6333 | Lack of motivation in online learners |
| 30 | .46609 | 2.7000 | Effective connection and communication |
| 30 | .74971 | 1.7000 | Lack of supporting staff |
| 30 | .69149 | 1.9333 | Challenge of providing feedback |

According to the data, three important challenges were the effective connection and communication (M= 2.7000; SD= .46609), lack of motivation in online learners (M= 2.6333; SD= .49013) and technical difficulties (M=2.4667; SD= .73030), respectively. Therefore, the most pressing concern during this transitional period from the face-to-face class into the online environment was the effective connection and communication. This implied that teachers’ main concerns were related to implementation of virtual courses. In comparison, lack of supporting staff (M=1.7000; SD=.74971), and challenge of providing feedback (M=1.9333; SD= .69149) were less challenging for the teachers.

**The Interview Results of the First Research Question**

**What are the secondary school EFL teachers' challenges in teaching English to EFL learners in online classes during the COVID 19 pandemic?**

The result of collected data from 30 interviewees explored 8 different common challenges about online teaching. The challenges were listed in this section and some of the participants’ direct quotations are given below after each challenge:

1. According to the content analysis, almost all interviewees mentioned "Unstable internet connection" as the most encountering challenge. They also mentioned most of the students can't send or download different files in online classes easily. One interviewee one stated that "internet restriction, many students live in outlying villages and do not have internet connection. Also in big cities many students encounter internet speed disruption". The interviewee 17 also referred to the internet connection. The interviewee also mentioned poor internet connection and stated that "speed and access of internet" is a big challenge in online classes. Interviewee 24 mentioned the various challenges she had during her online classes. She stated "Poor internet". Interviewee 17 said that the internet problems disturb her teaching during online classes. Interviewee 5 stated "many students are not well equipped with a high internet connection that is required for online learning." As interviewee 29 mentioned "one of the challenges is about internet connection, this challenge makes students' nervous and mad." Other interviewees had the same idea about this challenge.

2. The next common challenge emerged from the content analysis was “preparation of online materials for online classes”. Most of the teachers mentioned preparing materials for online classes and sharing them in online classes take their time". Actually, teaching in a typical virtual class took teachers time because they should share PDF files, preparing the materials before each session" (Interviewee 7). Interviewee 14 strongly believed using virtual class during the pandemic "is very time-consuming and costly for teachers “. Interviewee 21 also stated "The teacher needs to prepare appropriate teaching materials before the class to upload and it takes time". The interviewee 9 actually mentioned "Usually the time is not enough and activities consume the time of the class." Interviewee 24 stated " sometimes we have to skip some parts or tell them to do it at home as homework" because time is not enough for every part of book. "Checking all students' pronunciation and their voice is so time-consuming"(interviewee 6). Interviewee 20 also mentioned "Time management is the most important factor in online learning. It needs time and effort for better learning outcomes."

3. The third challenge, based on the result of interview, was "checking students' performance and the reliability of examination". Most of interviewees were concerned about this challenge because teachers believe that most of the students cheat in their exams so checking students' performance is hard for teachers who teach in an online class during pandemic situation. Interviewee 2 stated "I give exam but obviously it can't be trusted." Interviewee 13 also mentioned on students cheating on their exams during online classes as an important challenge." Evaluation of students in different exams is not reliable because most of them cheat during their exams" (Interviewee 30).

4. "Motivation of students" during online classes was the next challenge. The results of collected data from 30 interviewees showed that most of the teachers were concerned about students' motivation and attention in online classes. As interviewee 7 mentioned "student's lack of attention to lessons" is a challenge. Interviewee 29 also said "because students can't do activities together, it's reducing student engagement." Interviewee 28 stated "teachers should focus on students' motivation. The interviewee 2 stated "Students easily lose focus in these classes and I can feel it. And it's hard to keep them interested about the things you want to teach. I can't blame them, lessons can be boring sometimes and it's easy to lose track of subject when you are supposed to learn things from your bed."

5. According to interview results, the next challenge was "lack of interaction and the presence of passive students" during online classes. Most of the teachers were worried about some students who did not react to class and were silent during online classes. Interviewee 23 stated "Interaction between students and teachers is very low during online classes and teachers are head of class." Interviewee 29 stated "In English learning interaction plays an important role in teaching the materials." Interviewee 10 stated "Total physical interaction is missing. Affection and emotional interaction isn't sufficiently transmitted in an online class". Interviewee 1 also mentioned this challenge too. "The biggest weakness of virtual classes is that the interaction between students is very low and the teacher can't directly monitor his/her children's performance. Interviewee 8 also mentioned the reason of low interaction in online classes and the interviewee stated it is not possible to have interaction. She said "In my opinion students are just passing the course and they don’t want to improve their knowledge about English. Some of my students are absent during online classes and they just are present on exam sessions. How can they have interaction when they are not online?"

6. According to the results of interview, another challenge is "Management of students' behavior". As the collected data showed, teachers were worried about managing students' behavior during online classes. Interviewee 28 stated "In my classes, there are usually between 30 and 40 students. I can't manage them easily. So I have to send them my recorded video or voice and during class I am online for answering their questions." Interviewee 24 also said about her way of controlling maladaptive behavior "I control my students by setting rules, and sometimes telling them directly not to talk or interrupt me." Interviewee 2 believed that his students do not pay attention to him and he thinks that, he can't do anything for maladaptive behavior. Interviewee 2 said "The fact that I know, they are not listening to me." Interviewee 14 mentioned "class management" as another challenge in online class. About online learning education, Interviewee 12 stated "Students don 't attention to online classes". Interviewee 2 stated "The Biggest challenge is that you can't control over student like you do in normal classes."

7. Shad was among the detected challenge that majority of the participants referred to it. "Weakness of Shad application" (the Iranian software used for learning in most of the schools) was the next challenge that teachers faced. According to the results, most of the teachers had problems with this application in uploading and receiving files and connecting. Interviewee 11 mentioned "Different technical problems" in Shad application during online classes. Interviewee 18 mentioned Shad application too. Interviewee 18 stated "the shortcomings of shad application" disturb him in online teaching and learning environment. Interviewee 21 also said "the weakness of shad" is a challenge in online classes.

8."Lack of teachers' guide and technical assistance" to support teachers and preparing them in online classes, interviewee 29 stated "because it is a new situation in our country, I think we can't find a good textbook about this subject." She also said "There is no help; we just can search our questions in Google." Interviewee 24 had the same idea she said "there is no book but she uses some articles and videos on the internet." Interviewee 18 had the same idea about teachers' guide for online teaching. Interviewee 21 "Unfortunately there was no useful in-service program for me and whatever I've done was using my experience in using the technology." Of course the results of 30 participants showed there is not technical assistance to support teachers just in some schools manager support them. As interviewee 3 stated " The headmasters usually assist the teachers, but there is not official assistant." Other interviewees had the same idea.

In sum, the results of the first question of this study related to teachers' challenges in online English teaching course showed that teachers had a variety of challenges. The common important challenges of online English course among teachers include unstable internet connection, preparation of online materials for online classes, checking students' performance and the reliability of examination, motivation of students, lack of interaction and the presence of passive students, management of students' behavior, weakness of Shad application, lack of teachers' guide and technical assistance.

**Discussion**

While schools are closed , many countries have turned to distance learning as a means of continuing education services. Due to the importance of online classes and virtual education, the present study tried to shed light on the problems and challenges as faced by the teachers in secondary school . The result of the first research question about teachers' challenges during online classes showed that, the first important challenges based on the data were challenges of internet connection and also teachers stated some students have no personal device for learning. The results were similar to Burston (2014) and Cakrawati (2017) who also found that inability to afford smartphone and internet quotas for students as well as the unstable internet connection were among the teachers’ problems in most web-based classes. As the results revealed, English teachers stated they cannot upload their materials quickly because of weak internet connection. The results are also in harmony with those of Dal Molin and Masella (2016) who stated that teachers mostly dealt with internet problems. The results of this study about internet coverage is also supported by Khatoony and Nezhadmehr (2020) study who confirmed that "the speed of internet in Iran as the main problem" (p.102). Another challenge was time-consuming activities. The finding was in line with that of Mahmoudzadeh (2014) who found that implanting the activities in online classes took a lot of time and most of the activities were left untouched or worked upon very quickly and insufficiently. providing and designing the materials for online teaching were very time-consuming and even hard for teachers since they needed to be familiar with variety of software to prepare the intended materials. Checking students' performance and examination is the next challenge of online education. According to the results of this study most of the students cheat in their exams. The results of Rajab, Gazal and Alkattan (2020) also confirmed the same challenge among the instructors and showed that students’ online assessment is a challenge during online classes. The result of this study showed that increasing students' motivation and engagement was another challenge to most of the teachers. This result was in accordance with Smart and Cappel, 2006 (cited in Yuyun, 2013) study. They mentioned that "This plays a crucial role in succeeding the program as learner motivation is one of the main factors affecting student performance and learning, particularly online learning success" (p.3). Gonzalez and Louis (2018) had the same results. They stated, that activities should be determined by considering objectives and arranged sequentially in tasks reflect ing students ' real life situations to gain student’s interest and make them motivated.

The findings revealed that most of the virtual classes had the challenge of lack of interaction and communication. This finding is in contrast with Khatoony and Nezhadmehr (2020) who asserted that "technology integration in online classrooms can be communicative by means of interaction between teachers and students" (p.100). It is also in contrast with the findings of Tsui and Ki study (1996) showed that students interacted more frequently over the course of the semester, as they became more comfortable using technology more successfully. But actually the present study was in line with Palvia, Aeron, Gupta,Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner, & Sindhi, (2018). They stated that online education "potentially reduced student/professor interaction". The result of this study about lack of interaction was in line with the results of Rajab et al., (2020). According to their research, communication and interaction is a first challenge of online education during Covid -19 pandemic. And about lack of teachers guide and technical assistance, the results were similar to those of Dhawan (2020) study who also mentioned the same problem in the way of teachers. Keengwe and Kidd (2010) also had the same results in their study. They stated that the "lack of technical training and support" is teachers’ concern in online education.

Based on the findings online educations provided a safe mode of learning during covid-19 pandemic. Most of the teachers were concerned about students' safety during this situation. Online education has reduced these concerns about disease. The finding is similar to that of Jena (2020) study. As Jena stated "Online Learning encourages more productive use of time which keep individuals safe from pandemic situation like spread of Covid-19" (p. 88). The results showed a plethora of merits through online education during epidemic situation. One of the merits of online classes is the accessibility of materials and teachers for students. The results of this study was in line with those of Gunawardena and McIsaac’s (2013) research as they mentioned an important advantage in using recorded materials in virtual classroom is that students can control the process by using stop, rewind, replay, and fast forward features to proceed at their own pace. Oswal and Meloncon (2014, p.274) also confirmed the same results as they found that students can repeat the material until they gain mastery of it by reflecting on and analyzing it. Oswal and Meloncon (2014) also cited virtual learning environment may be the only way “that some students can independently access courses and course-materials – something that is a powerful reminder of the need for accessible online distance education” (p. 272). The results of the study from Ally, Grimus, and Ebner (2014) about accessibility of teachers and their course were similar to this study. As they stated "learning materials will be available in electronic repositories, teachers will be able to assemble lessons, units, modules, or courses in a short time by searching for the learning materials to achieve the learning outcomes" (p.19). Based on the results of this study, most of the teachers focused on flexibility of online education. Recorded materials are also very flexible medium allowing students to use the recorded live virtual classroom at a time that is suitable to them. The finding of Stone, Freeman, Dyment, Muir, and Milthorpe’s (2019, p. 37) study showed the same results. As they indicated "flexibility has an important role to play in enhancing equity in online education." Another study done by Daymont, Blau, and Campbell (2011) about advantage of online education indicated the same finding. According to the results of their study online education "provides greater flexibility". The results of this study also indicated online education can support students' learning. The finding from Summers, Waigandt, and Whittaker (2005) reported similar results. As they mentioned, in online classes students can learn as well as traditional or face-to-face classes. Based on the findings of this study, there are five common suggestions about improving online education in Iran. The first important suggestion was preparing reliable devices like a smartphone for students who cannot afford it. Based on findings there are some students who use their parents' phones. Teachers suggested government & should pay attention to this issue. Qazi, Naseer, Qazi, AlSalman, Naseem, Yang, Gumaei (2020) in their study suggested the same result. They suggested that it's crucial for the governments and other policymakers worldwide to address access and use of online learning resources of their populace amid pandemic. Also the results indicated the teachers' suggestion on improving the quality of Shad application (Iranian platform for education at schools). This application has some different weaknesses such as difficulty in sending and receiving files. However, there is not yet a good study about this issue. The finding of this study indicated that students' motivation is a challenge for teachers during online classes. As for this challenge, the participants suggested that teachers have to focus on students' motivation during online classes. However, it can be difficult to assess students’ motivation for online education due to the lack of personal contact between the learner and teacher. There is similarity of finding between the presented research paper and the study by Abou El-Seoud, Taj-Eddin, Seddiek, El-Khouly, & Nosseir (2014), as they stated "Instructors need to understand their student motivations when teaching online classes"(p.22). Besides, another suggestion, based on the findings, related to strategies and method that teachers used in online classes. Teachers have to use new materials and new way of training in online classes. Also, the research done by Barrett (2010) suggested that instructors have to use new strategies.

**5.2. Conclusion**

The new phenomenon, the Covid-19 epidemic has transformed education scenario all over the world where schools and institutions were closed for a period of time at different levels. Therefore, technology integration became critical during this period to assist teachers to connect with students and continue the education. This study was on secondary school EFL teachers' challenges of teaching English to EFL students in an online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was an attempt to explore teachers' challenges in virtual education, the merits offered in the virtual environment form teachers and also their suggestions to overcome the encountered challenges to improve the quality of virtual education. Thirty participants responded to interview questions and 30 online classes from different cities were observed. Descriptive statistical analyses as well as qualitative content analysis were used for collected data. The findings of observation showed three common challenges. These challenges related to effective connection and communication, lack of motivation in online learners, and technical difficulties. The findings of interview revealed that the participants' opinions about their challenges and suggestions as well as merits of online education. According to the results of 30 interviewees, the common challenge are unstable internet connection, preparation of online materials for online classes, checking students' performance and the reliability of examination, motivation of students, lack of interaction and the presence of passive students, management of students' behavior, weakness of Shad application, lack of teachers' guide and technical assistance. Teachers also indicated six different merits of online education. Based on the results, most of the teachers mentioned accessibility of materials for students, accessibility of teachers for students, flexibility of online education in virtual classes, safe way of education during Covid\_19, free charge internet in Shad application for teachers and students, students could be support by online education. Then, based on information gathered about the last question of research related to teachers' suggestions for improving the quality of online education, five common suggestions were found. These suggestions were preparing reliable devices for students, increasing the quality of Shad app, increasing the motivation of students, using new strategies and method for online classes, using lesson plan while teaching online. At the end, the results of teachers' preference indicated that most of the teachers prefer to teach at schools and in face-to-face ways.

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