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## Research Article

# Investigating the effectiveness of an online course in English language teaching program in a rural Iranian context<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Technological developments have attracted the attention of educational stakeholders around the globe and tempted them to incorporate these developments into their decisions in training students. Rural areas, on the other hand, have suffered from deprivation and unavailability of educationally relevant instruments and gadgets in education in general and foreign language teaching in particular. Educational centers, therefore, have suffered a lot and students bore the consequence of this deprivation and a lack of basic facilities which is directly because of lack of resources, time restriction and inequalities of budgeting, and even because of human resources. However, thanks to the development of online educational gadgets and related technology the situation has improved. The present study intends to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing the principles of online distance education in foreign language teaching and learning in a rural Iranian EFL context. In so doing, both concurrent and non-concurrent forms of online distance teaching in thirteen schools from rural areas of Gilan, Iran were put into practice. The study, through using a quantitative survey, showed that rural areas' students had more satisfaction in distance online teaching regarding their achievement and having more equal opportunities.

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## Çevrimiçi bir İngilizce öğretim programının etkinliğinin İran'ın kırsal bağlamında incelenmesi

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### Öz

Teknolojik gelişmeler, küresel anlamda eğitim alanındaki paydaşların dikkatini çekmiştir. Dolayısıyla, karar vericiler teknolojik gelişmeleri eğitim ve öğretim ortamına dahil etmeye başlamışlardır. Kırsal bölgelerin ise genel eğitim ve yabancı dil öğretimi özelinde kullanılan eğitsel materyaller ve araçlardan yeterince faydalanamamaları söz konusudur. Eğitim merkezleri bu nedenle yetersiz kalmış ve kaynak eksikliği, zaman kısıtlılığı, bütçe yetersizliği, hatta insan kaynakları bakımından sorun yaşamışlardır. Ancak, çevrimiçi eğitim araçları ve eğitim teknolojileri sayesinde bu durum düzelmektedir. Mevcut çalışma, İngilizce'nin yabancı dil olarak öğretildiği İran bağlamında kırsal bir bölgede çevrimiçi uzaktan İngilizce öğretimi uygulamasının etkinliğini incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. Bu amaçla, Gilan bölgesinde bulunan 13 okulda eş zamanlı ve eş zamanlı olmayan uzaktan dersler uygulanmıştır. Ölçek yoluyla toplanan verilere göre, kırsal bölgelerdeki öğrenciler fırsat eşitliği ve algıladıkları akademik başarı bakımından çevrimiçi uzaktan İngilizce öğretimi programını tatmin edici bulmuşlardır.

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**Anahtar kelimeler**  
uzaktan eğitim  
kırsal eğitim  
çevrimiçi öğrenme  
yabancı dil  
yabancı dil olarak İngilizce

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## **Introduction**

Internet-based instruction has long been in use in most developed countries. It is a rapidly growing issue in many parts of the world not only because of its attractions but also because of ease of extending education to rather remote and less privileged areas or towns (Liu, 2002; Sandholtz, Ringstaff, & Dwyer, 1997). In many private schools and other educational centers in Iran, such an alternative educational plan is strongly supported by both officials and stakeholders involved. The ease and availability with which students and teachers apply these gadgets increased the opportunity of furthering and enhancing education and its quality (Liu, 2003). While there is little official encouragement in distance learning via using high tech gadgets, researchers in private sectors support the idea of implementing internet and related stuff to assist learning/teaching process, especially in less privileged regions. Life restrictions in rural areas, whether infrastructural or environmental are considered as major problems in providing materials for teaching and learning. The idea of using distance learning systems for foreign language learning in rural areas has been a recent movement since supplementary efforts in foreign language teaching in such areas were very little or nothing. Distance learning is beneficial in situations where there is a geographical gap between course providers and students. Therefore, technology is used to bridge the physical gap so that a third party component, namely 'learning' could be enhanced (Sánchez, 1997). He believes online courses reach wider audiences and give more people the chance to study at home or anywhere at any time. Distance learning has been viewed as a rather student-centered in the literature, commonly carried out for college-level students.

### **Rural education condition**

The position assumed to elaborate in this section of the article is economic. Economic imbalance in different societies around the globe is escalating. Aligned with the above-mentioned issue, Japanese economist, Kenichi Ohmae (2006) names this model of life as M-shape community. In societies with such economic inequalities, gaps will never be bridged which in turn will deteriorate the condition. Since foreign language (FL) teaching in most parts of the world is carried out through private sector, which can, therefore, be costly and expensive, it can be significantly hindered because of the gap. One method to alleviate the condition is finding new approaches to spread educational opportunities through technology which is claimed to be one of the requisites of sustainable development. Therefore, a reform in education that creates equal opportunities becomes inevitable since the traditional approaches proved and will prove unsuccessful according to Ohmae (2006). One such inequality, mentioned above, is evident in rural areas (Chen, 2007). Students in these areas are deprived of extracurricular programs and activities since most of the teachers in such areas are not local residents and commute every day. Furthermore, there is no evidence of the presence of private institutions which can administer courses to solve learners' problems. Among other relevant complications met by the majority of far-off schools and areas, such categories as lack of highly qualified instructors, financial problems, and an absence of social unanimity and upkeep are evident. Physical and geographical limitations, lack of teachers and their inaccessibility are still further problems faced in rural areas, while urban educational centers are widely supported financially both from government funds and from the family of the students. Conversely,

schools in rural areas not only lack both of the above-mentioned resources, but they are also deprived of other forms of support because the inhabitants mostly belong to the lower-income class (Chen, 2007; Tsai, 2000; Tsai, 2004). One of the goals in distance education is to provide equal opportunities for all members of the society, however, it is not an easy task to do so (Nash, 2004; Tsai, 2004). Distance learning, among all possible approaches, is one solution to provide equal chances or at least constrict this gap.

### **Variations in distance learning**

Interactionally, distance learning is of two types of concurrent and non-concurrent otherwise known as Synchronous and asynchronous (Soo & Bonk, 1998). In the first type of learning, the primary participants are the teachers and the learners within the collaboration. Their communication becomes possible through using high-speed internet, online video lessons, and software. This real-life interaction enables the learners to have access to the teaching material in various locations. Multimedia will serve both the learners and the teachers in performing their tasks quite normally and naturally. Such a situation will simulate a real physical class with students and teachers facing each other so old text-based instruction will fade away and will no longer be of any use (Huang & Huang, 2002; Soo & Bonk, 1998; Williams, Paprock, & Covington, 1999) and both sides will benefit. This will increase the learning effects. What matters at this point is the fact that the connection should be only and primarily audio-visual since in the old typing-based interaction, the burden of typing would discourage both sides in communicating with each other.

In the second type which is known as non-concurrent learning, the instructor leaves posts to present the material or lessons for the learner to read or use, which in our case it can include leaving a text to be paraphrased or summarized. This can include web links, web pages or already recorded discussions. Since the teacher or students do not have to meet at a special or definite time, time or space limitations are entirely worked out. Both sides can be involved in the process of learning or teaching at their own pace (Soo & Bonk, 1998; Williams et al., 1999). It should not be ignored that like other forms of instruction variations in tactics and materials, reinforcement by the course provider, and usefulness of the course can lead to a better learning (Liu, 2003; Williams et al., 1999).

### **Issues involved in non-concurrent and concurrent learning**

In the Experience Pyramid by Dale (2004) learning instances are classified into two types upon which most of the educational systems have been designed. They include abstract and concrete experiences. The latter includes those of trips into nature and the former refers to classroom-based textbook-based one. According to Dale without the concrete experiences, especially for the younger learners, fundamental understanding upon which more complicated learning would be based, would not be achievable. To this end, what course designers should beware of is the degree of concreteness. It is assumed that distance learning could facilitate learning both through providing concrete experiences of language learning and also a bridge to link less privileged zones or people to instances of education. This would be a treasured, concrete, and real-life teaching and learning experience for rural students.

### **Gadgets which ease language use**

It is inescapable to assume that what most learners are eager to do is actually using their acquired knowledge in real life situations in an interactional manner, which is a loophole in our school textbooks and classroom methodology, indicating a lack of opportunity to become engaged in what the students learn. The problem gets more serious when it comes to rural area education. This is where technology appears to compensate for the lack of communication occasions. One such advancement is the application of video conferencing. This concurrent type of online teaching provides an opportunity to interact with English speakers, which was otherwise impossible for rural learners to occur (Hew & Cheung, 2010; Phillips, 2010). There are even programs like Active Worlds that can provide a chance to live virtually and cooperatively (Terrell, 2011; Wang & Vásquez, 2012; Woo et al., 2011). In addition to involving learners in actively producing instances of language, these gadgets provided a chance for the learners to have interactions where they could exchange ideas. This was based on the comprehensible output (Swain, 1985). Although Krashen (1981) strongly holds to the fact that input might be sufficient, based on what they have done with Canadian bilingual learners, Swain (1985) insisted that feedback plays a great role in creating the ability to produce an instance of language as well. This opportunity which seems impossible for most students even in urban contexts, let alone rural ones, becomes possible via using high tech gadgets. Therefore, learners even in rural areas can have the chance to communicate in the foreign language.

Technology changes and advances during the past decades have had a fast pace and taken different forms. One such further development has been the creation of a pointing gadget which contains a scanning device that changes words into audio. This portable gadget is a great progress in developing speaking skill. What this device can be so great for is the improvement of native or native-like pronunciation and its accuracy. The accuracy in pronunciation is known as to what extent learners' pronunciation is understood by listeners while nativeness in pronunciation refers to the similarity of native people's accent and the learners'. Although the latter is one of the ultimate goals of instruction in online learning, the former is also desirable.

Since comprehensibility of pronunciation achieves the purpose of language users, it is even regarded as more significant than nativeness. The more intelligible the pronunciation of the speaker is, the more comprehensible and understandable it is for the listeners. A lot of studies have taken place both in Iran and in other countries as well. All of these studies have proven that technology-based instruction especially through computer and software as well as through online measures dramatically impacted the quality of TEFL (Marzban, 2010; Khoshsima, Saed, & Moradi, 2017; Ahangari, & Sioofy, 2013; Ghaemi, & Mostafavi, 2015; Talebi, & Teimoury, 2013).

In order for the researcher to know how the rural students feel about learning a foreign language through distance learning, how satisfied they are, and how effective this type of teaching could be, the research question is stated below as:

Are the rural students satisfied with the distance online English language teaching program over a six-month period?

## Methodology

### Research design and context

In this study which adopted survey research method, the participants were 148 students who were randomly selected from schools throughout thirteen schools from five rural areas in the province of Gilan, Iran. Consisting of 86 females and 62 males, they were junior high school students mostly aged 13 to 15. Generally, the sample size required for a survey partly depends on the statistical quality needed for survey findings; this, in turn, relates to how the results will be used (Scheuren, 2004). Even so, there is no simple rule for a sample size that can be used for all surveys. Much depends on the professional and financial resources available. Analysts maintain that a moderate sample size is sufficient statistically and operationally. The students who were considered to form the sample population of this study were chosen through cluster sampling procedure. The students in Iran at the junior high school level do not study any special field of science; they receive general education. Cluster sampling is a probability sampling in which making random sampling is more practical especially when the target population is widely dispersed (Dornyei, 2007). Since the subjects were all junior high school students and their teachers, such factors as age and gender were not accounted for in this study.

### Online class satisfaction survey questionnaire

A questionnaire has been developed by the researcher and provided to the students. Having the goal of understanding the levels of satisfaction in mind, the online learning satisfaction survey questionnaire was applied to the students in five randomly selected villages in Gilan, Iran at the end of a six-month course presented by the Shokouh Fajr Language Center (SFLC). Other questionnaires that had previously been used such as the one by Karatash (2011) were also consulted by the researcher. The questionnaires were designed with some subcategories consisting of teaching atmosphere, instructor and learner interaction, and learning effectiveness or otherwise described as students' satisfaction from either the distance or regular program. The questionnaires were prepared and distributed in Persian so that respondents would feel more comfortable in expressing their ideas precisely. The instrument was developed by the researcher after extensive study of the literature. They then made an inclusive examination of the points posed through the analysis of the related articles, books, journals, and theses conducted both in Iran and worldwide.

Upon the researcher's developing the questionnaire, it was evaluated by four English professors and one statistics expert from the Department of Foreign Languages of Tabriz and Astara Islamic Azad Universities so as to ensure its content and face validity. Once the views of the professors were considered, to measure the reliability, coefficient alpha Cronbach was employed. The reliability study mentioned below, illustrated that the instruments were trustworthy, the items were understandable and the wording was appropriate.

The instrument, which is the questionnaire, was meant to elicit three main types of information. Teaching atmosphere, instructor and learner interaction, and learning effectiveness was the content that was adopted on a five-point Likert scale: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), normal (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). In the reliability analysis, it shows

0.96 in teaching atmosphere parameter, 0.81 in instructor-learner interaction, and 0.82 in learning effectiveness. All the evidences showed that the questionnaire is reliable.

### Procedures

The pedagogic tasks performed and presented throughout the course were via video recordings, smart electronic boards, desktop sharing, chat room, online practice tests, and audio interaction. Both sides were shown on the screen for creating a more effective real-life connection. What they write to each other could be seen by both sides through the smart board which can be especially good for language education. Moreover, pronunciation checking softwares and TV series in English were analytically used for providing more authentic materials. Since students could be recorded, both learners and the teacher had the chance of proofreading, reviewing, and correcting the learners' audio and video performance.

All the participants who were not sufficiently familiar with computer were taught in the first week to know how to use and control some basic computer lessons. The content delivered in the course was the coursebook *Backpack* five and six. Sixteen teachers from the Shokouh Fajr Language Center in Astara, Iran were chosen to teach the individuals via the distance learning for six months. The learners spent around three sporadic hours a day, three times a week. In the final week, after the teachers accomplished teaching the classes, the students completed the online learning satisfaction survey questionnaire.

### Findings

The research question posed in this study was meant to measure the effectiveness and students' satisfaction in their online ELT course. One of the major findings of this research was the relief students expressed concerning their online classes with a mean score of 4.02. Other major findings of the present study include the real life experience students had during the online lessons and also their increasing tendency in learning with mean scores of 3.97 and 3.86, respectively. Learners also expressed more satisfaction in terms of having teacher's attention and increased self confidence in students, each with mean scores of 3.83 and 3.82. However, regarding reading skills improvement and vocabulary acquisition, findings revealed dissatisfaction among learners who took part in the study with a mean score of 3.28.

In general, the findings in the descriptive statistics illustrated the answer to the major enquiry of the present study, which was students' satisfaction regarding the online English teaching atmosphere. High values selected for the items in the questionnaire by the participants prove their satisfaction. Also, regarding the next category of the questionnaire, it was revealed that students were satisfied with their interaction with the instructor during the online distance learning. It was interesting to notice that even after the course was over, the learners were still in touch with the instructor. They formed a community of their own in spite of the fact that they had no vis-a-vis contact.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of satisfaction over class condition

Survey questions	Mean	SD
1. I look forward to getting online to get new lessons.	3.17	1.34

2. I feel more relaxed when expressing my opinions online.	3.2	1.57
3. I am very relieved while having online lessons.	4.02	1.07
4. The condition in online classes is a lot happier than ordinary physical classes.	3.4	1.27
5. I have more self-confidence in online learning that keeps me interested in learning.	3.82	1.29
6. I don't want to stop this new way of learning.	3.05	1.34
7. Teachers are more focused on learners' questions in online classes.	3.83	1.19
8. Learning through online method is more inspiring.	3.61	1.26
9. It is a lot easier to learn in online learning.	3.18	1.25
10. In online classes, there is more tendency to learn.	3.86	1.37
11. It is so satisfying to have online distance learning.	3.36	1.52

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of satisfaction over teacher-student interaction

Survey questions	Mean	SD
1. Online distance teachers can be a good model in how to communicate in a foreign language learners' real lives.	3.16	1.36
2. My teacher speaks more informally, which provides a real-life language experience.	3.97	1.1
3. I trust my teacher and share anything with him.	2.36	1.45
4. I get useful knowledge about furthering my studies at the college level	3.22	1.42
5. I get better pronunciation practice from the teacher in online distance learning.	3.32	1.17

The threats which might endanger the idea of distance learning were also slightly felt among some of the participants. There were such threats as high dropout rate, loneliness, weak educational designs, and technological drawbacks (Dale, 2007; Willging & Johnson, 2004). However, the findings of descriptive statistics showed that learners were also content with the usefulness of the online course.

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics of satisfaction over learning outcomes

Survey questions	Mean	SD
1. I have better a comprehension in reading via online education.	3.28	1.51
2. When my teacher and I get involved in speaking the target language, I don't understand the passage of time.	3.73	1.3
3. I have more noticing and awareness of online distance learning.	3.4	1.36
4. Learning vocabulary through this technique is encouraging.	3.28	1.28
5. I have a better concentration in this method of teaching.	3.6	1.28

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6. It becomes very routine to ask a question in online teaching.	2.77	1.25
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### Discussion

Rural and urban schools are characterized by their unique strength and weaknesses. "Rural and urban schools are not the same when it comes to resources and learning environments" (EQR, 2003, p.45). However, online distance learning presented a totally new experience. The study presented the importance of online distance learning in foreign language teaching in order to facilitate and ease learning in rural areas considering three different issues. Lots of exciting facts have been found out. The first aspect of the findings showed improvement in learning condition both because of availability and reduction of costs. This effectiveness is also reflected in other studies (Nworie, 2012). He mentioned the idea of cost effectiveness which can lead to overall effectiveness. Since, in today`s under-developed and less-developed world, cost is an important concern for e-learning, this aspect of the findings can be of great benefit. This in turn can be another dimension for further studies especially being administered in rural areas to study the cost effectiveness in that context. Another intriguing fact that was solved and driven from this study, is the isolation problem of the learners. This problem can be really deteriorating as referred to in Willging and Johnson`s research (Willging & Johnson, 2004). In such an approach, which we called it online distance learning, learners were not really distant from the teachers and had more intimacy than ever. This can be found from the high values given to relevant items in the questionnaire. As shown in the tables, statistics show that students expressed satisfaction in the rate and quality of interaction. Keegan`s definition (1988) also assumes the possibility of communication not just in a two way model but also in a multi-mode style. His definition seems to suggest communication between the learner and the teacher and even with other learners. Relevant to the findings, others have also found the same result in different terminologies (Saykılı, 2018). Learners were happy with the interactional capacity of this type of education and with the extent of interaction with their instructor. This was evident through the high values they assigned to the items in the questionnaire and the significance they put on the role of their instructor. They even envisaged their future life and academic career through the help of their online teacher. Boredom and losing motives can be a threat in spite of all the merits mentioned above. This is both one of the limitations of the study and a suggestion for further studies, as well. However, one way to increase students` attention to the online lessons and cutting down the boredom can take place through quizzes and immediate questions to be answered. Classes need to be held in shorter hours to prevent frustration caused by laptops and communication.

Finally, as it is evident from the tables, some of the respondents expressed little willingness for further future courses. It was then revealed that they belong to rich families who are most into private one-to-one classes. It was mentioned in different places that costs and affordability play a crucial role in education both from stakeholders` point of view and especially from learners` point of view. Policy makers consider advantages and disadvantages of economic concerns as basic (Grin, 1999). Durden (2001) contends that people belonging to lower walks of life are more interested in such classes. There seems to be more enthusiasm among the lower class of society because, as much as cost effectiveness is considered. Considering all sort of limitations and circumstances, the Distance Learning seems to be among

the very few ways in which such people find the opportunity to expand their knowledge (Grin, 1999). We are going through a rather new path in Iran which can have its own challenges and prospects. There are hopes that through the excitement of using the high tech devices, foreign language teaching and learning would spread. It is hoped that more experts, course designers, and researchers are involved to support this alternative type of education.

### **Suggestions for further research**

Specialists, such as Lovreglio, (2018) anticipate that future is reshaped by technological advances which will be materialized by revolutionary gadgets such as mobile and virtual reality. Considering the non-stop growth and development of communication devices which ease and facilitate contacts among people, the need for incorporating them into educational programs in general and language teaching/learning, in particular, seems to be an urgent decision and enterprise.

Considering the present condition of the world, as far as limitation in natural resources is taken into account as well as escalation in world population especially in developing and under-developed nations, we had better turn to electronic learning which would do a lot for the society's comfort. Many countries have deprived regions where printed textbooks are not available, including Iran. So, distance learning and technology-assisted education present a useful solution to the problem.

Since electronic gadgets have become an incredibly inseparable part of teenagers' life in today's world, students, who are naturally and evidently the main users of such gadgets, have very few or no problems in using them in the learning process. Therefore, students will have more inspirations to participate in learning environments. However, the problem is that teachers especially those in underdeveloped countries need to strengthen their ability to be better users of these technologically supported approaches. Schools and teachers are therefore recommended to get more updated and competent in using gadgets and devices. In so doing, students can be a good source of help to the teachers, which can be regarded as a motivation provoking technique for the students. They can bridge the gap between traditional and teacher-centered classrooms and modernized student-centered approaches.

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