ONLINE ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES INSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEXT OF IRAN: EXPLORING THE INSTRUCTOR ELEMENT

by **Reza Dashtestani**

University of Tehran, Iran

rdashtestani @ ut.ac.ir

Abstract

Online learning has become a highly effective tool for many language learning institutions and educational environments. However, very limited attention has been directed towards the teacher element in online learning environments in ESP/EAP instruction. To fill this gap, this study investigated the attitudes of 91 Iranian EAP instructors towards the implementation of online EAP instruction. A mixed-methods design was employed in this study, with both semi-structured interviews and questionnaires used to examine the participants' perspectives. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of the participants hold positive attitudes towards the implementation of online EAP instruction while they are fully aware of the challenges and obstacles to the implementation of online EAP instruction in the Iranian context. Several limitations, including the lack of online EAP teacher training, the lack of facilities for online learning implementation, low digital literacy levels of instructors and students, and the lack of online instruction infrastructures were identified and reported. The participants also pointed out several practical measures and suggestions in order to pave the way for incorporating online EAP instruction which can be considered by EAP policy-makers and course designers. The study can have practical and theoretical implications for the renewal of EAP instruction in Iran and in other countries.

 Keywords: attitudes; challenges; digital literacy; EAP; EAP instructors; online instruction

1. Introduction

The extensive use of technology in educational contexts and environments has attracted the attention of a great number of educational experts and researchers (Ames, 2017; Choy & Ng, 2015; Davis, Lavin, & Korte, 2009; Molebash, 2004; Pepe, 2016; Williamson & Muckle, 2018). Likewise, a plethora of studies have been directed towards the attitudes of students and teachers towards the use of technology in education as well as its challenges and pedagogical opportunities (Lowerison, Sclater, Schmid, & Abrami, 2006; Olusakin, 2008; Parai, Shenoy, & Loh, 2015; Shuell & Farber, 2001; Tamim, Lowerison, Schmid, Bernard, Abrami, & Dehler, 2008). Thus, "educational technology is the act of systematically transforming scientific

knowledge into application" (Fidan, 1986, p.179), which "includes planning, designing, developing and implementing learning-teaching processes" (Alkan, 1997, p.14).

Similarly, the use of technology for language learning has become an interesting area of research (Gómez Flórez, Pineda, & Marín García, 2012; Kourieos & Evripidou, 2013; Kung & Chuo, 2002; Liton, 2015; Mollaei, & Riasati, 2013). Furthermore, there has been a growing interest in the implementation of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and the use of technology in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses (Alavi, Borzabadi, & Dashtestani, 2014; Arn´o, 2012; Dashtestani & Stoikovic, 2016; Jarvis, 2009; Plastina, 2003). In the same vein, the use of technology in EAP instruction has opened tremendous opportunities for the inclusion and development of new and efficient learning resources (Butler-Pascoe, 2009). The inclusion of online learning in the EAP/EAP curriculum has attracted the attention of many EAP/EAP researchers and scholars (Sanz & Sáez, 2016). More specifically, online learning would offer a wide range of considerable benefits and merits for EAP learning, including opportunities for autonomous learning, students' control over their own language learning developmental process, the possibility of self-monitoring, and control over learning styles (Sanz & Sáez, 2016).

Nowadays, online learning is a popular instructional approach and there has been a tendency to implement it among learners and instructors (Dashtestani, 2014: Dawley, 2007; Fish & Gill, 2009). Moreover, language teaching experts have shown a positive attitude towards online learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) due to the benefits and affordances that online learning has provided for EFL learning and teaching contexts (Shin & Son, 2007). Therefore, the implementation of online learning courses would enhance the learning process for students and provide considerable pedagogical options and benefits for EFL instructors.

The present study attempted to provide insights into Iranian EAP instructors' attitudes towards and acceptance of online EAP courses. Furthermore, the perceived challenges and limitations of the implemention of online EAP instruction were explored and discussed. Based on the suggestions provided by the EAP instructors, the study aimed to propose a couple of measures in order to facilitate the integration of online EAP instruction in the context of Iran.

2. Literature review

In particular, numerous benefits of online learning for EFL and ESP/EAP contexts have been reported in previous studies. For example, Sanz & Sáez (2016) reported that EAP students had a high level of satisfaction with the content of an online EAP course. The students showed an

improvement in the learning of the content and technical vocabulary through the online medium of the EAP course. In another study, Chen (2017) investigated the attitudes of EAP learners towards online academic English tutoring. The majority of the participants showed positive attitudes towards online support and believed that the online support was more effective than traditional techniques of learning. Tuomainen (2016) conducted a study of EAP students' perceptions of a blended learning course of academic writing and presentation skills. It was revealed that the EAP students held positive attitudes towards the flexibility and convenience of the blended learning EAP course. Based on the results of that study, recommendations and suggestions on how to include blended learning in EAP instruction were presented and discussed. In her study Ene (2015) analysed the online learning needs of Chinese EAP students. She reported that the EAP students needed more interactive and collaborative approaches to EAP online instruction. It was also suggested that the students needed more technical and cultural scaffolding in order to be involved in the process of learning academic writing.

Even though there are some studies investigating the attitudes of EAP instructors towards online learning (Benson, Anderson, & Ooms, 2011; Dashtestani, 2014; Koo, 2008; Puteh, Semarak, & Lumpur, 2002), EAP instructors' attitudes towards online learning of EAP have not been researched in a systematic way so far. The results of the studies into EFL instructors' attitudes towards online learning have shown the generally positive attitudes of the majority of instructors in spite of the presence of some challenges such as instructors' low levels of digital literacy or a lack of high-quality online learning facilities (Dashtestani, 2014). In the EFL context, Dashtestani (2014) assessed Iranian EAP instructors' attitudes towards online EAP instruction. The majority of Iranian EFL instructors had positive attitudes towards online learning and they mostly favored the implementation of blended learning. Several limitations and challenges, including instructors' low online teaching expertise, low-quality online learning facilities and equipment, as well as cultural resistances to online learning, were also reported.

EAP is "the teaching of English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research or teach in that language" (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p. 8). As argued previously, online learning can be a beneficial learning and teaching mode for both instructors and learners in EFL and EAP contexts. Despite the abundance of research on students' attitudes towards online learning in EFL and EAP contexts, very limited research has been directed towards EAP instructors' attitudes towards online instruction both in Iran and other countries. Therefore, this study is an attempt to fill in this gap and pave the way for a more

comprehensive understanding of online learning and teaching from the perspectives of EAP instructors.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

To achieve the aims of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are Iranian EAP instructors' attitudes towards the online instruction of EAP?
2. What are Iranian EAP instructors' perspectives of the limitations of online instruction of EAP?
3. What are Iranian EAP instructors' perspectives of measures to be taken to include online EAP instruction in Iranian universities?

Since the aim of the study was to investigate the perceptions of Iranian EAP instructors of the challenges and merits of online EAP instruction, a triangulation of methods and instruments, including interviews and questionnaires, was considered in order to collect qualitative and quantitative data. Triangulation is a common technique of data collection in EAP research methodology which enables the researcher to cross-check the data and confirm or reject part of the data based on constant comparison and contrast.

3.2. Participants

A total of 91 EAP instructors participated in this study. The participants were chosen from 10 universities from three provinces of Iran, including Tehran, the capital city. Cluster sampling was employed in order to enrich the representativeness of the study. More specifically, 29 instructors were chosen from the engineering faculty, 41 participants were from the social sciences faculty, 11 instructors were from the faculty of medicine, and 10 instructors were recruited from the faculty of arts. 56 EAP instructors held a master's degree and the rest (35) were Ph.D. holders. The instructors had an average of 8.4 years of teaching EFL and an average of 5.1 years of teaching EAP. The average age of the participants was 43.3. All the instructors participating in the study had an experience of teaching in online courses prior to the study and were aware of the features of online learning. For the interviews, the instructors were invited to take part in the interviews and a total of 32 EAP instructors accepted the invitation to participate in the interview phase of the study.

3.3. Instrumentation and data processing

The first instrument of the study is an adapted version of a questionnaire which was used in Dashtestani (2014). The questionnaire was designed to assess Iranian EAP instructors' attitudes towards the implementation of online learning. It included 31 items and three sections. The first section of the adapted questionnaire assessed Iranian EAP instructors' attitudes towards the online instruction of EAP, the second section elicited Iranian EAP instructors' perspectives of the limitations of online instruction of EAP, and the last section dealt with EAP instructors' perspectives of measures to be taken to include online EAP instruction in Iranian universities. A high range of Cronbach's Alpha coefficients (0.87-0.92) was reported, which indicates reliability of the tool. Moreover, exploratory factor analysis was run to estimate the construct validity of the questionnaire and an acceptable construct validity rate was reported (Dashtestani, 2014). For the purposes of this study, the questionnaire was piloted with 10 EAP instructors before conducting the study and it was revealed that the questionnaire was suitable for the context of EAP. The content of the questionnaire was revalidated by a panel of three professors of TEFL who were all well-known experts and researchers of EAP/EAP.

The second instrument of the study was a semi-structured interview. The questions of the interview were adapted from Dashtestani (2014). The same panel of three professors of TEFL who were all experts and researchers of EAP/EAP commented on the suitability of the questions for the ESP/EAP context and established the content validity of the interview questions. Each interview took 30-45 minutes. The questions asked were also piloted with five EAP instructors prior to the study. More specifically, the questions of the interview were in line with the aims of the questionnaire in order to provide triangulated results. The questions of the interview dealt with such issues as the instructors' attitudes towards the benefits and limitation of online EAP instruction, strategies to adopt in order to implement online EAP courses, and EAP instructors' awareness of their level of online teaching skills.

As for the ethical considerations of the study, consent forms were distributed among the participants and extreme caution was exercised to ask the participants to take part in the study on a voluntary basis. Moreover, the participants were ensured that they would remain anonymous in all stages of study conduction and writing the report of the study. Issues regarding confidentiality were also taken into account.

The data of the questionnaire were analyzed and shown in terms of the mean and standard deviation for each item. SPSS version 16 was used for the analysis of the data. All the interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the participants. The data of the interviews were transcribed and a thematic content analysis was performed by two coders

based on a coding scheme. The frequent themes were chosen and reported afterwards. As for the ethical considerations of the study, issues related to anonymity and confidentiality of the data were explained to the participants. Also, consent forms were utilized for each participant of the study.

3.4. Results

3.4.1. Iranian EAP instructors' attitudes towards the online instruction of EAP

Questionnaire findings

The first section of the questionnaire dealt with the Iranian EAP instructors' attitudes towards the online instruction of EAP. This section was based on five-point Likert items from strongly disagree to strongly agree. As Table 1 illustrates, some perceived benefits of online EAP instruction include access to up-dated materials, autonomy of students, students' motivation, time efficiency of online courses, the use of authentic materials, opportunities for international communication, accessibility for students, learner-centeredness, and the use of different types of materials.

Table 1. Iranian EAP instructors' attitudes towards the online instruction of EAP

	Mean	SD
Updated materials can be used in online EAP courses	4.27	1
Students will be more autonomous in online EAP courses	4.08	0.86
Online EAP courses enhance students' motivation	4.18	0.81
Online EAP courses are time-efficient	4.69	0.97
Authentic materials are used in online EAP courses	4.04	0.99
Learners can communicate internationally in online EAP courses	4.22	1.1
Online EAP courses are based on learner-centered approaches to teaching	4.18	0.79
Online EAP courses are easily accessible to students	4.01	1.12
Multimedia can be used in online EAP courses	3.76	0.90
Various types of materials can be used in online EAP courses	4.38	0.8
Online EAP courses are cost-effective	3.16	1.2
Online EAP courses will promote students' and instructors' computer competence	3.01	0.7

Online EAP courses are in line with experiential approaches to learning	2.56	0.67
Online EAP courses provide equal opportunities for learners to learn English	2.77	1.02
Online EAP courses promote collaboration among students	2.98	1
Expansive feedback can be provided for students in online EAP courses	3.1	0.77
Online EAP courses are easy to be implemented	3.4	1.1
Online EAP courses are more interactive than traditional courses	2.2	1.31

Interview findings

As for the interview results, Table 2 shows that the EAP instructors perceived some benefits of online EAP instruction as important. These perceived benefits include socialization of students into international academic communities, time-efficiency, student autonomy and responsibility, ease of teaching, opportunities for the use of electronic resources, and fostering instructors' digital literacy. In general the results of the interviews are in line with the results of the questionnaires.

Table 2. Iranian EAP instructors' attitudes towards the online instruction of EAP

Themes	Frequency of the Theme (%)
Theme 1: Online EAP courses can motivate students to join international academic communities	68.75
Theme 2: Online EAP instruction is time-efficient for EAP students who are very busy	87.5
Theme 3: Online EAP can make EAP students autonomous and responsible for their learning	81.25
Theme 4: Online EAP courses are easier to be taught for EAP instructors	62.5
Theme 5: Electronic resources can be more easily used in online EAP courses	84.38
Theme 6: EAP instructors can improve their digital literacy in online courses	65.63

3.4.2. Iranian EAP instructors' perspectives of the limitations of online instruction of EAP

Questionnaire findings

The second section of the questionnaire examined Iranian EAP instructors' perspectives of the limitations of online instruction of EAP. This section was based on five-point Likert items from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The EAP instructors pointed out some limitations of EAP instruction such as a lack of online facilities in EAP courses and students' lack of necessary Internet-based skills (Table 3).

Table 3. Iranian EAP instructors' perspectives of the limitations of online instruction of EAP

	Mean	SD
There is a lack of online facilities in EAP courses	4.87	0.7
Students lack the necessary Internet-based skills to participate in online ELT courses	4.35	0.93
There are cultural resistances to the implementation of online EAP teaching	2.84	0.82
There is a lack of interaction in online EAP courses	3.02	1
Students do not have positive attitudes towards online EAP courses	2.2	0.8
Online EAP courses are just appropriate for autonomous students	2.51	0.94
There is not much instructor supervision over students in online EAP courses	3.00	1.1
Online EAP courses are not responsive to students' needs	1.78	0.76
Online EAP teaching is costly to be implemented in EAP contexts	1.2	0.92
Online EAP courses place a lot of demands on EAP instructors	1.61	0.9
Online EAP courses are not motivating for students	1.12	0.79

Interview findings

In interviews, the EAP instructors reported several limitations and challenges to the implementation of online EAP instruction in Iran. These limitations include EAP instructors' lack of online teaching skills to teach in online EAP courses, EAP instructors' low levels of digital literacy, a lack of attention of EAP curriculum planners to include online instruction,

a lack of teacher training for online EAP instruction, the absence of technological facilities for online instruction, and a lack of long-term educational planning for EAP instruction (Table 4).

Table 4. Iranian EAP instructors' perspectives of the limitations of online instruction of EAP

Themes	Frequency of the Theme (%)
Theme 1: EAP instructors' lack of online teaching skills to teach in online EAP courses	90.63
Theme 2: EAP instructors' low levels of digital literacy	84.38
Theme 3: Lack of attention of EAP curriculum planners to include online instruction	93.75
Theme 4: Lack of teacher training for online EAP instruction	81.25
Theme 5: Absence of technological facilities for online instruction	96.87
Theme 6: Lack of long-term educational planning for EAP instruction	75

3.4.3. Iranian EAP instructors' perspectives of measures to be taken to include online EAP instruction in Iranian universities

Questionnaire findings

The third section of the questionnaire assessed Iranian EAP instructors' perspectives of measures to be taken to include online EAP instruction in Iranian universities. This section was based on five-point Likert items from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The participants strongly agreed or agreed on a couple of measures, including that computer-based and online facilities should be improved in EAP courses, students and teachers should receive training on online computer literacy skills, online EAP courses should be combined with face-to-face EAP courses, EAP teachers should receive training on online EAP teaching methodologies and principles, and online EAP courses should replace traditional EAP courses (Table 5).

Table 5. Iranian EAP instructors' perspectives of measures to be taken to include online EAP instruction in Iranian universities

	Mean	SD
Computer-based and online facilities should be improved in EAP courses	4.81	0.9
Students and teachers should receive training on online computer literacy skills	4.78	0.73
Online EAP courses should be combined with face-to-face EAP courses	4.2	0.95
EAP teachers should receive training on online EAP teaching methodologies and principles	4.4	1
Online EAP courses should replace traditional EAP courses	4.00	0.79

Interview results

The interview results revealed some strategies and measures proposed by instructors for online EAP teaching. The EAP instructors referred to some techniques, including the use of online EAP learning teacher training courses for EAP teachers, fostering EAP teachers' online teaching skills, raising EAP students' awareness about the benefits of online learning of EAP, holding digital literacy training courses for EAP students and teachers, preparing the infrastructures of online instruction by EAP decision-makers and course designers, and the inclusion of high-quality online learning facilities for EAP teachers and students (Table 6).

Table 6. Iranian EAP instructors' perspectives of the limitations of online instruction of EAP

Themes	Frequency of the Theme (%)
Theme 1: Inclusion of online EAP learning teacher training courses for EAP teachers	84.38
Theme 2: Fostering EAP teachers' online teaching skills	78.13
Theme 3: Raising EAP students' awareness about the benefits of online learning of EAP	71.88
Theme 4: Holding digital literacy training courses for EAP students	62.5
Theme 5: Holding digital literacy training courses for EAP students	68.75
Theme 6: Preparing the infrastructures of online instruction by EAP decision-makers and course designers	75

Theme 7: Inclusion of high-quality online learning facilities for EAP teachers and students	87.5

4. Discussion

This study was an attempt to evaluate the possibility of implementing online EAP instruction from the perspectives of EAP instructors. Several challenges and proposed measures have been provided by the EAP instructors which can be used by decision-makers and course designers of EAP to offer more flexible and efficient modes of learning. The results of this study showed that Iranian EAP instructors hold positive attitudes towards online EAP instruction. This finding is in line with the previous research which reported the positive reactions of EFL teachers towards the implementation of online instruction (Benson, Anderson, & Ooms, 2011; Dashtestani, 2014; Koo, 2008; Puteh, Semarak, & Lumpur, 2002). This finding would imply that Iranian EAP decision-makers are not fully aware of the attitudes, needs, and preferences of EAP instructors. Including online learning features and options in EAP courses can enhance the quality of pedagogical practices of EAP teachers and result in a more needs-based approach to EAP course design. EAP course designing is dependent on the needs, styles, and preferences of the learners and teachers. It is recommended that more precise and rigorous needs analysis projects on the topic of online EAP instruction be conducted in order to have a more comprehensive and transparent picture of the needs and requirements of all Iranian EAP stakeholders.

More specifically, the EAP instructors participating in this study reported the benefits of online EAP instruction such as access to up-dated materials, autonomy of students, students' motivation, time efficiency of online courses, the use of authentic materials, opportunities for international communication, accessibility for students, learner-centeredness, and the use of different types of materials. This issue suggests that despite the fact that EAP instruction in Iran is based on traditional and conventional approaches to language teaching, the majority of instructors are well-aware of the merits and advantages that technology use can provide for them. Teachers play a pivotal role in all curriculum planning and development activities. In order to follow a bottom-up or interactive curriculum development and listen to the voice of teachers, who are actively involved with the realities of EAP students' learning, policy makers and course designers should take the perceptions and beliefs of EAP teachers into account and plan EAP courses based on the realities of the EAP context of Iran.

Even though the participants' attitudes were generally positive, there exist several impeding factors which might disappoint and discourage Iranian EAP instructors from echoing

their voices and expressing their online EAP instruction perspectives. One important obstacle is the lack of online EAP instruction facilities at Iranian universities. A serious lack of facilities for the implementation of online language learning was also reported in another study based in the context of Iran (Dashtestani, 2014). Given the rapid speed of technology inclusion in a wide range of educational institutions and universities of other countries, it is highly important to remove pragmatic obstacles and provide the required infrastructures for successful implementation of online EAP instruction in the Iranian EAP context. Normally, teachers should not become nervous or disappointed due to the absence of relevant technological equipment in computer-assisted language learning and online learning courses.

The other significant challenge which was perceived by the majority of EAP instructors was the need for online EAP learning teacher training. It was very interesting that the instructors were aware that their pedagogical skills were not at an acceptable level for dealing with the challenges of online EAP courses. The inclusion of any technology means that pertinent pedagogical, assessment, and technical skills should be taught by means of teacher training courses. Participating in online EAP teacher training courses can improve Iranian EAP instructors' confidence and knowledge of teaching online EAP courses. These courses can have a direct influence on the attitudes of EAP instructors and help them understand the benefits and challenges of online instruction more effectively and comprehensively.

Similarly, the participants pointed out that both EAP instructors and students need to enhance their digital literacy levels if online EAP courses are going to be incorporated in the future. Digital literacy plays a remarkable role in preparing students and teachers for the appropriate use of technology. Apparently, future research can deal with online learning and teaching skills and competencies which are required and essential in the EAP context of Iran. After identifying these online learning and teaching skills, specific digital literacy courses based on the demands of online EAP courses in Iran should be planned and considered by educational planners and course designers of EAP.

5. Conclusion

The study offered some suggestions and measures to be considered to implement online EAP instruction in the context of Iran. The strategies proposed by the participants seem to be appropriate to eliminate the limitations and obstacles reported previously. It is essential that EAP supervisors and course planners pay specific attention to the comments and expert recommendations of EAP instructors. Without resorting to EAP teachers and students, it is not possible to design tailored EAP courses at the university level. Most teachers have a sound

understanding of the problems, challenges, and opportunities regarding learning and thus considering their role in the course design process can be very promising and fruitful. Therefore, it is suggested that EAP course designers establish more effective communication with EAP teachers in order to perceive EAP educational and instructional realities.

The study also paves the way for future studies examining the digital literacy levels of EAP students and teachers. Furthermore, the pragmatic challenges and barriers need to be investigated and accommodated in the future. Research should also be directed towards investigating other EAP stakeholders' attitudes and perceptions of online EAP instruction. Policy-makers, course designers, educational supervisors, and all individuals who are involved in the implementation and planning of EAP courses can provide insightful and valuable information regarding the current challenges and potentials of online EAP instruction in Iran. The results of this study might be of importance to many other similar contexts in other countries. Online EAP instruction is a highly interesting area of investigation, however very limited research has been carried out to identify the relevant opportunities and challenges.

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