Online Courses in Higher Education in Iran: A Stakeholder-Based Investigation into Preservice Teachers' Acceptance, Learning Achievements, and Satisfaction: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

This study focused on the perspectives of higher education stakeholders on teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in online courses in Iran, as well as preservice teachers' learning achievements in online courses. Three cohorts of participants were included in the study: preservice teachers of TEFL ($n = 104$), TEFL university instructors ($n = 23$), and heads of TEFL departments ($n = 10$). Data was collected using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The Kruskal Wallis test was used to detect differences among participants' perspectives. Preservice teachers' mid-term and final scores in the online courses were also compared. Results show significant differences among the perspectives of the three participant groups regarding online courses. The preservice teachers appeared to have relatively positive attitudes about online learning, while the university instructors and department heads showed lower levels of satisfaction with this medium. Participants identified several challenges in online learning, including lack of rigor in online courses, lack of credibility of course certificates, lack of technological infrastructures, technical problems, lack of practical content in the lessons, lack of human interaction, students' low knowledge of the content, and employers' lack of interest in employing graduates of online courses. Participants also noted the need for pedagogical and technological training for both university instructors and preservice teachers of TEFL. The comparison of preservice teachers' mid-term and final scores in the online courses showed a significant difference and improvement in students' learning achievements with medium to large effect sizes. In the interviews, participants confirmed that online courses could improve student learning.

Keywords: acceptance, challenges, online learning, preservice teacher training, student achievement, TEFL stakeholders

Introduction

Online learning has been established as an effective and influential learning medium in many educational organizations and institutions (Ahmed Abdullah & Sultana Mirza, 2020; bin Mohd Amin, Kumar Piaralal, Rosli bin Daud, & bin Mohamed, 2020; Lee, Chang, & Bryan, 2020; Westine et al., 2019). Online courses provide a convenient and flexible approach to learning, and students have the option of studying even when they are working (Kim, Liu, & Bonk, 2005). Dashtestani (2014) argues that online learning can assist students and teachers in their educational practices. Furthermore, due to the increased need for higher education institutions to respond to the needs of students and admit new students, the justifications for including online education are plausible and pertinent (Kim et al., 2005).

Cost-effectiveness can be regarded as a significant benefit of online education, a benefit not commonly found in traditional courses. There are also considerable opportunities for students to communicate and collaborate online through social network sites, a benefit that computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools can provide for their users (Stone & Perumean-Chaney, 2011). The opportunities for learning anytime and anywhere, the focus on the learner and their needs and preferences, and the activation of students' critical thinking are also significant benefits of online education (Dashtestani, 2014). However, it can be argued that implementing online learning may be problematic due to issues, such as university instructors' incompetence in teaching online courses, students' and instructors' low digital literacy levels, insufficient and low-quality instructor feedback, and the absence of interaction in online courses (Dashtestani, 2014).

Students' Perceptions of Online Courses

A large body of research has explored the acceptability levels of online courses in different educational settings and contexts. Grimes (2002) analyzed the attitudes of dentistry students towards online learning in a course. The students' view of the online course was positive overall, and they perceived it as a valuable learning experience. Convenience was perceived as an important benefit of the course. The students were satisfied that they did not need to commute in order to attend the class. The challenges they faced were isolation and technical problems, which impeded the learning process. Furthermore, Grimes found that students with visual styles of learning had more positive perceptions of the course compared to students with auditory learning styles. Hughes and Daykin (2002) investigated students' attitudes towards online learning as well. Results of their qualitative study indicate that students were able to reduce their anxiety levels regarding the online course they attended and showed rapid socialization in the online environment. The limitation students raised was that discussions were limited, and they only shared information.

Kim et al. (2005) conducted a study on students' perceptions of the benefits and limitations of an online master's of business administration (MBA) course. Results show that students had positive attitudes towards the online MBA course, and that they believed that the online course could provide them with employment opportunities at an international level. The students' perceived benefits of online learning included flexibility, learning new online learning skills, and a high level of interaction. The perceived challenges included lack of feedback and limited communication between peers. Students also suggested that more training, support, and interaction be considered in order to enhance the effectiveness of online learning in MBA programs. Karaman (2011), similarly, investigated nurses' perceptions of online learning. He found that nurses had positive attitudes towards online learning. However, there was a significant difference between the perceptions of nurses who seldomly used computers and nurses who frequently used

computers. The settings in which the nurses worked also had a significant influence on their perceptions of online courses.

Fortune, Spielman, and Pangelinan (2011) measured students' perceptions of online versus face-to-face learning. They found that there was no significant difference between the students' preferences for the two modes of learning. Both online students and face-to-face students had positive attitudes towards their learning modes. Lowenthal, Bauer, and Chen (2015), similarly, evaluated student perceptions of online and face-to-face learning. They suggested that students' attitudes towards face-to-face courses were more positive compared to their attitudes towards online courses.

Teachers' Perceptions of Online Courses

Dashtestani (2014) assessed English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' attitudes towards teaching English online. He found that EFL teachers held positive views on online teaching. The teachers' perceived challenges of teaching EFL online included lack of digital equipment and facilities, limited interaction in online courses, instructors' low levels of knowledge about online teaching, and cultural limitations and problems. The teachers also emphasized the importance of training and their interest in receiving training on teaching EFL online.

Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) is a major field of study in the context of higher education in Iran. A large number of students are now studying TEFL as a major, and each year many applicants strive to be admitted to this program at Iranian universities. Considering the popularity of the program in recent years, online TEFL courses at the master's level have been introduced and included in the higher education curriculum in Iran. However, there is a paucity of research on the effectiveness and acceptability of the online TEFL courses in the context of Iran. More importantly, the majority of studies on the effectiveness of online courses have explored the perspectives of teachers or students separately. The perspectives of preservice teachers, university instructors, and department heads have been a neglected area of research. To address this gap, this study examined the perspectives of key stakeholders on online learning in higher education in Iran. The learning achievements of Iranian preservice teachers of TEFL were also identified and analyzed. Results of this study, including the differences and similarities among the stakeholders' perspectives, have implications for educational planners and policy makers.

Methodology

This study adopted a sequential mixed-methods design. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, both interview guides and questionnaires were developed and used. Due to the complexity of investigating the participants' perspectives, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. According to Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007),

> mixed-methods research is the type of research in which a researcher, or team of researchers, combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration (p. 123).

In this study, methodological and participant triangulation were conducted in order to provide supplementary and confirmatory data.

Research Questions

Based on the specific aims and objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the perspectives of Iranian online TEFL preservice teachers, university instructors, and department heads in terms of their acceptance of online TEFL courses? Are there significant differences among the perspectives of the three participant groups in terms of their acceptance of online TEFL courses?

2. What are the perspectives of Iranian online TEFL preservice teachers, university instructors, and department heads about the challenges of online TEFL courses? Are there significant differences among the perspectives of the three participant groups about the challenges of online TEFL courses?

3. What are the perspectives of Iranian online TEFL preservice teachers, university instructors, and department heads about the measures that can be used to improve the acceptability of online courses of TEFL? Are there significant differences among the perspectives of the three participant groups about the measures to improve the acceptability of online TEFL courses?

4. What are the perspectives of Iranian online TEFL preservice teachers, university instructors, and department heads about their training needs for online TEFL courses? Are there significant differences among the perspectives of the three participant groups about their training needs for online TEFL courses?

5. Are there significant differences in the learning achievements of Iranian online TEFL preservice teachers in online courses based on the comparison of their mid-term and final scores? What are the perspectives of Iranian online TEFL preservice teachers, university instructors, and department heads about the learning achievements of preservice teachers in online TEFL courses?

Participant Sample

Three participant cohorts were included in this study. The first group comprised 104 master's students (preservice teachers), who studied in online TEFL courses and were aged 25–30 years. The sample was chosen from six highly ranked Iranian universities that offer online courses for master's studies. The cluster method of sampling was employed to recruit the participants of the study. The second participant group comprised 23 university instructors, who taught TEFL lessons and subjects online and had 3–18 years of university teaching experience, and 2–5 years of experience teaching online TEFL courses at a university. Of this sample, 15 instructors were faculty members, and 8 instructors were invited to teach TEFL in online courses. The third participant group comprised 10 department heads who taught online and traditional TEFL courses, were faculty members, and had 8–23 years of teaching experience. All 127 participants completed the study questionnaire; 27 master's students (preservice teachers), 9 university instructors, and 4 department heads participated in the interviews as well. In addition, access to the mid-term and final

scores of a total of 53 students from three courses was provided with the permission of the instructors of the courses.

Measures and Data Collection

Questionnaire. Four factors were taken into account in designing the survey. The first factor was the acceptance levels of preservice teachers, university instructors, and department heads. Therefore, the first section of the questionnaire focused on participants' agreement with some of the benefits of online learning. The second factor was linked to the current challenges of online learning of TEFL in Iran. The second section focused on participants' agreement with a list of items on the challenges of online learning. The third factor was associated with measures that can be used to facilitate the implementation and acceptance of online TEFL courses. The third section considered the perceived importance or priority of each measure. The fourth factor was the issue of training. The fourth section focused on whether the participants believed that training was an important factor or not and aimed to identify the training needs of the participants. To write the initial list of items, a review of previous studies was undertaken and consultations were conducted with a group of computer assisted language learning (CALL)/educational technology specialists and a few university instructors and students who are involved in online learning in Iran. In order to achieve a high response rate, the participants were provided with paper-based questionnaires. Some participants completed the questionnaires at the time of its administration and some other ones returned the questionnaires in one week's time.

In order to examine the suitability of the questionnaire for the particular goals of the study, statistical analyses were undertaken. Cronbach's alpha test was conducted for all sections of the questionnaire to explore the reliability of the instrument. Specifically, the first section of the questionnaire was designed to assess the acceptance of online TEFL courses (18 items; Cronbach's alpha = 0.894), the second section examined the challenges of online TEFL courses (18 items; Cronbach's alpha = 0.604), the third section assessed measures to improve the acceptance of online TEFL courses (13 items; Cronbach's alpha = 0.777), and the final section focused on the training needs of students and university instructors (6 items; Cronbach's alpha = 0.634). The total Cronbach's alpha index of the questionnaire (55 items; Cronbach's alpha = 0.750) demonstrated an appropriate level of item reliability. Five-point Likert Scale items were included in all the sections of the questionnaire.

The structure of the questionnaire was also validated using exploratory factor analysis. The first section of the questionnaire contained four factors (KMO = 0.879, Bartlett's test of sphericity = 865.692, df = 153, p = 0.000), the second section of the questionnaire comprised six factors (KMO = 0.772, Bartlett's test of sphericity = 527.157, df = 153, p = 0.000), the third section included four factors (KMO = 0.772, Bartlett's test of sphericity = 324.265, df = 78, p = 0.000), and the last section contained two factors (KMO = 0.639, Bartlett's test of sphericity = 92.655, df = 15, p = 0.000). As results indicate, the questionnaire had a suitable factorial structure and the items had factor loadings higher than 0.30. A group of specialists were also invited to provide feedback on the questionnaire items as well to assess and validate the content of the instrument.

Interviews. The interview questions were also designed based on the objectives of each research question. The interview questions explored participants' acceptance of online TEFL courses and their

attitudes towards them, the challenges and limitations of current online TEFL courses, the measures that can be used to improve the status quo, the necessity of training and the training needs of the participants, and student achievements in online TEFL courses. The same group of specialists who were consulted in the development of the questionnaire were asked to provide feedback on the interview questions to assess and validate their content. The interviews were semi-structured. Each interview took about 30 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. Those participants who were not willing to take part in the interviews or provided insufficient information were excluded from the data analysis.

Preservice teachers' mid-term and final scores. In order to assess the learning achievements of the preservice teachers, three online university instructors agreed to share the mid-term and final scores of preservice teachers who attended their online courses. According to the university instructors, the criteria for the mid-term and final scores were students' engagement in online discussions, students' presentations in the online classes, students' mid-term or final exam scores, and students' completion of assignments and projects. The average of the mid-term score (out of 20) and the final score (out of 20) was considered the final score of the course, which was reported to the department. Final course scores of 14–20 qualified the students to pass the course. The improvement in preservice teachers' learning was measured by comparing the mid-term scores and final scores of the three online courses. For ethical considerations, the exact scores of each student are not presented to respect the confidentiality of the students' personal information.

Data Analysis

Several statistical methods were employed in the data analysis. SPSS 16.0 was used to analyze the data collected in the questionnaire. The descriptive results of the questionnaire are presented in terms of the mean and standard deviation for each item. The non-parametric Kruskal Wallis test was used to identify significant differences among the perspectives of the three participant groups. Cronbach's alpha test and exploratory factor analysis were conducted to determine the reliability and construct validity of the questionnaire. The data collected in the interviews was analyzed and common themes were identified. More specifically, the interview data were transcribed and coded. In order to enhance the reliability of the coding, two coders coded the interview data and the themes which were reported by the two coders were included in the study. Following a Shapiro-Wilk test of normality, the parametric paired samples t-test was used to estimate the differences between the preservice teachers' mid-term and final scores. To identify the effect size, Cohen's d was estimated for each of the three online courses.

Findings

The Acceptance of Online TEFL Courses

As Table 1 shows, the findings regarding the attitudes of TEFL preservice teachers, university instructors, and department heads towards online learning of TEFL were mixed. The preservice teachers' responses to the questionnaire items (M = 3.997, SD = 0.757) show that their attitudes were relatively positive about online TEFL courses. The university instructors' responses to the items (M = 3.58, SD =1.19) reveal that

their attitudes were less positive towards online learning. The most negative attitudes were those of the department heads (M = 2.9, SD = 0.98). The results of the Kruskal Wallis test indicate that there were significant differences among the attitudes of the three participants groups towards online learning of TEFL. Specifically, the preservice teachers seemed to have positive attitudes towards all of the benefits of online learning of TEFL, while the university instructors had positive attitudes towards some of benefits, including the interactivity of online TEFL courses, compatibility with students' learning styles, exceptional access to learning materials, and the enhancement of students' digital literacy. The department heads agreed only that online learning of TEFL can reduce students' commute to university.

Table 1

Questionnaire Results on TEFL Stakeholders' Acceptance of Online TEFL Courses

Questionnaire item	Participant group	M	SD	Chi-square (Kruskal Wallis)	p
1. Online TEFL courses are convenient for students/instructors	Preservice teachers	4.18	0.73	14.403	0.001*
	University instructors	3.04	1.33		
	Department heads	3.60	1.64		
2. Online TEFL course are interactive	Preservice teachers	4.21	0.63	3.654	0.161
	University instructors	3.91	0.90		
	Department heads	3.50	1.43		
3. Learning in online TEFL courses is effective	Preservice teachers	4.16	0.67	53.719	0.000*
	University instructors	2.86	0.91		
	Department heads	1.7	0.94		

4. Personalized learning takes place in online TEFL courses	Preservice teachers	4.26	0.59	12.673	0.002*
	University instructors	3.34	1.33		
	Department heads	3.4	1.7		
5. Online TEFL courses are cost-effective	Preservice teachers	3.26	0.97	0.018	0.991
	University instructors	3.26	1.48		
	Department heads	3.2	1.22		
6. Adequate feedback can be received in TEFL online courses	Preservice teachers	3.96	0.93	19.381	0.000*
	University instructors	3.17	1.49		
	Department heads	2.6	0.69		
7. Online TEFL courses are time efficient	Preservice teachers	4.01	0.73	18.448	0.000*
	University instructors	3.73	1.60		
	Department heads	2.3	0.67		
8. Online TEFL courses provide students opportunities for learning anywhere	Preservice teachers	4.08	0.69	22.015	0.000*
	University instructors	2.56	1.8		

	Department heads	2.4	1.34		
9. Online TEFL courses are flexible	Preservice teachers	4.02	0.82	4.012	0.135
	University instructors	3.78	0.99		
	Department heads	3.2	1.31		
10. Online TEFL courses facilitate communication between students	Preservice teachers	3.25	1.07	5.293	0.071
	University instructors	3.82	1.11		
	Department heads	3	0		
11. Attending online TEFL courses reduces the problem of everyday commuting	Preservice teachers	4.14	0.74	6.654	0.036*
	University instructors	3.78	0.95		
	Department heads	4.3	1.05		
12. Studying in online TEFL courses can provide students with better job opportunities	Preservice teachers	4.06	0.65	16.289	0.000*
	University instructors	3.65	1.40		
	Department heads	2.70	0.82		

13. Studying in online TEFL courses can provide students with learning based on their learning styles	Preservice teachers	4.11	0.80	26.18	0.000*
	University instructors	4.60	0.83		
	Department heads	2.90	1.1		
14. Online TEFL courses provide students with exceptional access to materials	Preservice teachers	4.09	0.75	30.407	0.000*
	University instructors	4.73	0.68		
	Department heads	3.30	0.82		
15. Online TEFL courses give students control over their lifestyles	Preservice teachers	4.15	0.65	15.248	0.000*
	University instructors	3.2	1.44		
	Department heads	3.40	0.84		
16. Studying in online TEFL courses can foster students' digital literacies	Preservice teachers	4.03	0.72	10.950	0.004*
	University instructors	4.2	0.90		
	Department heads	2.5	1.35		
17. Online TEFL courses facilitate the process of sharing resources	Preservice teachers	3.93	0.74	22.193	0.000*

	University instructors	3.56	1.19		
	Department heads	2.1	0.87		
18. Online TEFL courses facilitate students' autonomy	Preservice teachers	4.05	0.76	22.437	0.000*
	University instructors	3.39	1.11		
	Department heads	2.1	1.28		

Note. 5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree.

*p ≤ 0.05

The participants of the three groups voiced different views about online TEFL courses in the interviews as well. As in the results of the questionnaires, the preservice teachers had relatively positive attitudes about online TEFL courses. They believed that online learning was convenient, it allowed them to work and study at the same time and reduced their commute to university. They also stated that online learning provided them with the opportunity for learning anywhere and distance learning. Some of the preservice teachers noted that they had easy and exceptional access to the content of the course sessions. They also regarded the session recording feature of online TEFL courses as suitable and effective. However, most university instructors and department heads regarded online learning as inferior to face-to-face courses. They believed that online TEFL courses were not as effective as face-to-face courses and were of lower quality.

The Challenges of Online TEFL Courses

As Table 2 illustrates, there were significant differences among the perspectives of the three participant groups regarding the challenges of learning TEFL online, based on the results of the Kruskal Wallis test. However, the three participants groups all agreed that online TEFL courses were less rigorous than face-to-face courses, were limited by technical and Internet connection problems, and lacked human interaction and practical content. They also agreed that employers lacked acceptance of certificates from online TEFL courses, that certificates/degrees from online courses lacked credibility, and that online TEFL students had low knowledge of the content.

Table 2

Questionnaire Results on the Challenges of Online TEFL Courses

Questionnaire item	Participant group	*M*	*SD*	Chi-square (Kruskal Wallis)	*p*
1. Tuition fees of online TEFL courses are high	Preservice teachers	4.17	0.64	35.919	0.000*
	University instructors	3.30	1.29		
	Department heads	1.90	0.56		
2. Learning in online TEFL courses causes distraction	Preservice teachers	3.38	0.95	24.095	0.000*
	University instructors	2.57	0.94		
	Department heads	1.90	0.99		
3. Online TEFL courses are less rigorous than face-to-face classes	Preservice teachers	4.13	0.72	16.517	0.000*
	University instructors	4.70	0.47		
	Department heads	4.60	0.51		
4. Online TEFL courses are limited by technical problems	Preservice teachers	4.12	0.67	0.264	0.876
	University instructors	4.09	0.99		
	Department heads	4.10	0.73		
5. Online TEFL courses are limited due to Internet connection problems	Preservice teachers	4.12	0.78	7.183	0.028*

	University instructors	4.57	0.59		
	Department heads	4.20	1.03		
6. There is not enough human interaction in online TEFL courses	Preservice teachers	4.12	0.75	0.939	0.625
	University instructors	4.04	1.22		
	Department heads	4.20	1.03		
7. Content taught in online TEFL courses is not practical enough	Preservice teachers	4.10	0.84	6.921	0.031*
	University instructors	4.39	0.89		
	Department heads	4.50	0.97		
8. Limited feedback is provided to students in online TEFL courses	Preservice teachers	3.56	1.06	30.319	0.000*
	University instructors	2.48	0.94		
	Department heads	1.80	0.91		
9. Online TEFL courses reduce communication between students and instructors	Preservice teachers	3.33	1.01	6.391	0.041*
	University instructors	3.87	1.21		
	Department heads	3.00	1.33		
10. Degrees received from online TEFL courses are	Preservice teachers	4.03	0.70	11.853	0.003*

not as credible/accepted as the ones received from face-to-face TEFL courses					
	University instructors	4.30 0.82			
	Department heads	4.70 0.48			
11. There is an under-representation of the learning content in online TEFL courses compared to face-to-face courses	Preservice teachers	3.02	1.33	11.917	0.003*
	University instructors	2.04	0.76		
	Department heads	3.10	1.19		
12. Students are not accountable enough in online TEFL courses	Preservice teachers	3.12	1.5	9.720	0.008*
	University instructors	3.87	1.29		
	Department heads	4.40	0.96		
13. Online TEFL courses lack an adequate level of professionalism	Preservice teachers	3.12	1.5	9.720	0.001*
	University instructors	3.87	1.29		
	Department heads	4.40	0.96		
14. Employers would not accept certificates of online TEFL courses	Preservice teachers	4	0.68	24.588	0.000*
	University instructors	4.52	1.12		

	Department heads	4.80	0.42		
15. Online TEFL courses are teacher-centered	Preservice teachers	4.12	0.70	43.462	0.000*
	University instructors	2.09	1.04		
	Department heads	3.70	1.33		
16. Online TEFL courses need a lot of time for planning	Preservice teachers	3.16	1.30	14.216	0.001*
	University instructors	4.26	0.86		
	Department heads	3	1.24		
17. Instructors are not always available for students in online TEFL courses	Preservice teachers	3.88	0.83	3.223	0.199
	University instructors	3.52	1.5		
	Department heads	4.30	1.16		
18. Students admitted to online TEFL courses do not have adequate competence levels	Preservice teachers	4.04	0.82	14.896	0.001*
	University instructors	4.52	0.59		
	Department heads	4.80	0.42		

Note. 5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4. Agree = 5. Strongly agree.

*$p \leq 0.05$

In the interviews, the study participants stated several challenges of online TEFL courses. The department heads and university instructors seemed to be more aware of the limitations of online learning compared to the preservice teachers. The participants believed that online TEFL courses do not have high levels of credibility and acceptance in society, and that students who graduated from online universities/courses were unable to be employed in prestigious institutions and organizations. Some of the university instructors and department heads noted that online courses were not that important for universities, and that students were recruited for financial purposes alone. The preservice teachers reported that the tuition fees they paid for these courses were very high, and that the services they received did not match the cost. The preservice teachers also noted that some of university instructors did not know how to use the technology and did not take online courses seriously. Other disadvantages mentioned by all of the participants were the lack of infrastructure and low Internet speeds. Some of the university instructors and department heads pointed out that the online TEFL courses lacked adequate human interaction. They also argued that the standards and levels of online students, who were admitted to the national university entrance examination, were unacceptable and low.

Measures to Improve the Acceptance of Online TEFL Courses

As Table 3 demonstrates, there was consensus among the participants about the importance of some of the measures to foster the acceptance of online TEFL courses. The participants emphasized the importance of fostering preservice teachers' and university instructors' digital literacy, improving teaching methods in online environments, increasing the credibility of online course certificates, blending online and face-to-face courses, enhancing technological infrastructures, raising social awareness about the credibility of online courses, providing technical support for university instructors and students, enhancing the speed of the Internet, updating the learning management system (LMS), and paying more attention to the importance of online TEFL courses.

Table 3

Questionnaire Results on Measures to Improve the Acceptance of Online TEFL Courses

Questionnaire item	Participant group	*M*	*SD*	Chi-square (Kruskal Wallis)	*p*
1. Fostering students' digital literacy	Preservice teachers	4.22	0.80	0.874	0.649
	University instructors	4.09	0.84		
	Department heads	4.40	0.51		
2. Fostering instructors' digital literacy	Preservice teachers	4.06	0.74	0.147	0.929

	University instructors	3.96	0.87		
	Department heads	4.10	0.73		
3. Improving teachers' methods/approaches of teaching in an online environment	Preservice teachers	4.35	0.69	6.562	0.038*
	University instructors	4.00	0.73		
	Department heads	4.10	0.31		
4. Increasing the credibility of online certificates/degrees	Preservice teachers	4.42	0.64	2.037	0.361
	University instructors	4.39	0.58		
	Department heads	4.70	0.48		
5. Blending online courses with face-to-face courses	Preservice teachers	4.13	0.75	0.596	0.742
	University instructors	4.04	0.76		
	Department heads	4.30	0.48		
6. Strengthening the criteria for student admittance	Preservice teachers	3.93	0.89	14.002	0.001*
	University instructors	4.57	0.50		
	Department heads	4.50	0.70		
7. Improving the level of technological infrastructures	Preservice teachers	4.23	0.76	2.124	0.346

	University instructors	4.26	0.75		
	Department heads	4.00	0.51		
8. Providing more technical support for teachers and students	Preservice teachers	3.99	0.90	3.893	0.143
	University instructors	4.30	0.97		
	Department heads	4.00	0.66		
9. Enhancing the speed of the Internet	Preservice teachers	4.31	0.65	1.164	0.559
	University instructors	4.35	0.88		
	Department heads	4.50	0.52		
10. Raising the awareness of society about the credibility of online courses	Preservice teachers	4.21	0.82	8.806	0.012*
	University instructors	4.70	0.47		
	Department heads	4.20	0.42		
11. Updating the LMS currently used	Preservice teachers	3.94	0.94	5.442	0.066
	University instructors	4.39	0.78		
	Department heads	4.10	0.56		
12. Using more interactive learning and teaching approaches	Preservice teachers	3.93	0.85	8.973	0.011*

	University instructors	4.13	0.75		
	Department heads	4.70	0.48		
13. Paying more attention to the importance of online learning	Preservice teachers	3.88	0.98	0.394	0.821
	University instructors	3.91	0.59		
	Department heads	4.10	0.31		

Note. Likert scale: 1 = Not important at all; 2 = Slightly important; 3 = Moderately important; 4 = Important; 5 = Very important.

*p ≤ 0.05

In the interviews, the majority of participants agreed that several measures should be implemented to improve the status quo. The three participants groups reported that online TEFL courses should be offered in the form of blended learning instead of fully virtual courses. They also believed that the quality of online courses should be enhanced in order to convince society that online courses have the same credibility as face-to-face TEFL courses. The university instructors and department heads shared the opinion that student admittance standards should be reviewed and revised. The need for improving the technological software and hardware infrastructures and enhancing the quality and speed of the Internet was also noted.

The Training Needs of Preservice Teachers and University Instructors

As Table 4 shows, there was consensus among the TEFL preservice teachers, university instructors, and department heads that preservice teachers and university instructors required training on the proper use of the LMS, competent use of the Internet, autonomous learning, the proper use of online learning materials and resources, and how to foster digital literacy.

Table 4

Questionnaire Results on the Training Needs of Preservice Teachers and University Instructors

Questionnaire item	Participant group	M	SD	Chi-square (Kruskal Wallis)	p
1. Training for the proper use of LMS	Preservice teachers	3.93	0.85	51.83	0.075

	University instructors	4.13	0.75		
	Department heads	4.10	0.31		
2. Training for competent use of the Internet	Preservice teachers	3.86	0.98	3.220	0.200
	University instructors	4.17	0.83		
	Department heads	4.30	0.48		
3. Training for autonomous learning	Preservice teachers	4.06	0.77	0.433	0.806
	University instructors	3.96	0.92		
	Department heads	4.20	0.78		
4. Training for the proper creation/use of online learning resources	Preservice teachers	4.11	0.86	2.163	0.339
	University instructors	4.35	0.88		
	Department heads	4.30	0.48		
5. Training students/teachers for use of interactive teaching/learning methods	Preservice teachers	4.54	0.55	12.851	0.002*
	University instructors	4.09	0.9		
	Department heads	3.90	0.56		
6. Training for fostering students' digital literacies	Preservice teachers	4.43	0.69	2.104	0.349

University instructors	4.26	0.61
Department heads	4.50	0.52

Note. 5-point Likert scale: 1 = Not important at all; 2 = Slightly important; 3 = Moderately important; 4 = Important; 5 = Very important.

*p ≤ 0.05

The results of the interviews, in general, support the results of the questionnaires. All of the participants shared the opinion that training plays a central role in enhancing the quality of online TEFL courses. However, the participants stated that they had not received an adequate level of training and had learned how to work with the online system through experience and trial-and-error. Digital literacy training was identified as an important need for university instructors and preservice teachers. The preservice teachers and the university instructors wanted to learn more about the LMS and the properties of the software and the online courses. Some of the university instructors and department heads stated that there should be continuous on-the-job training for university instructors.

Preservice Teachers' Learning Achievements in TEFL Online Courses

Tables 5, 6, and 7 present the means of preservice teachers' mid-term and final scores in three online courses. The normality test showed normal distributions for the scores in the three courses (Course 1: Shapiro-Wilk = 0.958, p = 0.182; Course 2: Shapiro-Wilk = 0.969, p = 0.161; Course 3: Shapiro-Wilk = 0.942, p = 0.085). Significant differences were identified in the score means in the three courses (Course 1: t = 6.999, p = 0.000; Course 2: t = 5.673, p = 0.000; Course 3: t = 3.557, p = 0.003). The means of the final scores indicate significant learning improvements compared to the means of the mid-term scores in all three courses (Course 1: mid-term score mean = 16.9028, final score mean = 17.7083; Course 2: mid-term score mean = 17.3553, final score mean = 18.3553; Course 3: mid-term mean = 18.3125, final score mean = 18.8906). The effect size indices showed medium to large effect sizes for all three courses (Online Course 1: Cohen's d = 0.589766; Online Course 2: Cohen's d = 0.788153; Online Course 3: Cohen's d = 0.612974).

Table 5

Paired Samples t-Test Results for Preservice Teachers' Achievements in Online Course 1

	Mid-term scores (n = 18)		Final scores (n =18)	
Course 1	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
	16.9028	1.52946	17.7083	1.17964

Test of normality
Shapiro-Wilk = 0.958 p = 0.182

Paired samples test

M	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
0.80556	0.68361	6.999	17	0.000*

Effect size
Cohen's d = 0.589766

*p ≤ 0.05

Table 6

Paired Samples t-Test Results for Preservice Teachers' Achievements in Online Course 2

	Mid-term scores (n = 19)		Final scores (n=19)	
Course 2	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
	17.3553	1.32108	18.3553	1.21425

Test of normality
Shapiro-Wilk = 0.958 p = 0.161

Paired samples test

M	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
1.0000	0.76830	5.673	18	0.000*

Effect size
Cohen's d = 0.788153

*p ≤ 0.05

Table 7

Paired Samples t-Test Results for Preservice Teachers' Achievements in Online Course 3

	Mid-term scores (n = 16)		Final scores (n=16)	
Course 3	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
	18.3125	0.88019	18.8906	1.00208
Test of normality				
Shapiro-Wilk = 0.942 *p* = 0.085				
Paired samples test				
M	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
0.57812	0.65012	3.557	15	0.003*
Effect size				
Cohen's *d* = 0.612974				

*$p \leq 0.05$

The interview results show that the three participant cohorts generally agreed that online courses were effective in promoting preservice teachers' learning achievements. The preservice teachers reported that the lessons were recorded so that they had opportunity to review lessons many times, and that this repetition was important in fostering their learning and retention of the content. The university instructors and department heads stated that online courses were somewhat effective in promoting students' learning. They noted that the motivations of online students to attend online courses differed from the motivations of face-to-face students. The department heads and university instructors believed that to achieve the most effective and the highest level of learning, face-to-face sessions should be added to online courses.

Discussion and Conclusion

The data analyses indicate mixed findings regarding the TEFL stakeholders' acceptance levels of online courses. While the preservice teachers were relatively positive about online learning of TEFL, the university instructors and department heads were not as positive. Previous research indicates similar attitudes towards online learning (e.g., Dashtestani, 2014; Karaman, 2011; Kim et al., 2005). Stakeholders' acceptance of and positive attitudes towards online learning can lead to the success of online courses. The differences in participants' attitudes may be the result of various factors, some of which can be controlled. The views of the university instructors and departments heads are thought-provoking and important to the analysis of the factors that play a role in their dissatisfaction with, and low acceptance levels of, online courses. Therefore, it is necessary to pave the way to meet the needs, preferences, and requirements of university instructors and departments heads in order to increase their interest in implementing and teaching online courses.

Although there were differences among the participants' perspectives regarding the challenges of online learning of TEFL, the participants were all aware of the presence of challenges. The issue of admitting incompetent students to online courses is a significant challenge, which can influence the attitudes of society about online courses. Participants suggested that more rigorous and stricter assessment procedures be implemented in admitting students to online courses. Another challenge is the lack of credibility of online learning certificates and degrees. While many universities emphasize that online and face-to-face course certificates have the same qualities, many employers are reluctant to employ individuals who received their degree from an online course. Addressing this problem requires both awareness-raising in society and implementing immediate plans and actions by educational planners and the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology. The challenges of technological infrastructures and the speed of the Internet are another impeding factor, which can reduce the popularity of online TEFL courses. This issue may require the direct attention of university deans and government authorities. Similar findings regarding the challenges of online education have been reported in previous research (e.g., Grimes, 2002; Hughes & Daykin, 2002)

The participants made some suggestions to improve the status quo of online TEFL courses in Iran. Promoting the digital literacies of both university instructors and preservice teachers is an important recommendation. Students are usually admitted to online courses based on their knowledge of the field they plan to study in and not on their digital literacy. Taking into account the issue of the digital divide, many students may join online courses without adequate digital literacy skills. This can pose significant challenges for other students and university instructors in these courses. Therefore, stricter standards for digital literacy should be considered and stipulated for applicants who are admitted to online TEFL courses. Raising social awareness about the importance and credibility of online learning in higher education is another important measure to consider. All individuals involved in the process of developing and implementing online courses should undertake relevant measures to accommodate these challenges and limitations.

The majority of the participants agreed that training was needed for online learning stakeholders. Both university instructors and preservice teachers must receive training in order to enhance their teaching/learning effectiveness in online courses. This training can include different digital skills or teaching and learning methods for online learning environments. Training should be offered on a regular basis in order to enable teachers and students to address the challenges they encounter in online learning. Training is also needed for both novice and experienced online learning users. The need for training on online learning features and competencies has been discussed in previous literature as well (e.g., Dashtestani, 2014; Kim et al., 2005).

The results pertaining to preservice teachers' learning achievements in Iranian online TEFL courses show improvements in the final scores of the preservice teachers. The results of the paired samples *t*-test confirm the existence of significant differences between students' mid-term and final scores. The perspectives of the three participant groups also confirm that online courses can foster students' learning. However, while online courses can be effective in fostering students' achievements, the attitudinal and pragmatic barriers highlighted above can have significant impact on students' achievements in online courses. More importantly, many employers and proponents of face-to-face learning may question the quality of students' achievements and the assessment procedures in online courses.

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