ISELT 63
Interdisciplinary Studies in English Language Teaching

Pages 63 to 79

Attitudes and Actual Experiences of Iranian EFL Learners in Distance English Language Education

Hamed Badpa[1*], Leila Alinouri[2]
[1] Arak University, Arak, Iran
[2] Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

10.22080/iselt.2025.28982.1094

Received
April 13, 2025

Accepted
June 1, 2025

Available online
June 1, 2025

Keywords:
Online Language Learning, Instructor Support, Learner Autonomy, Iranian EFL Learners, Distance Education

Abstract

The rapid growth of online learning in EFL education has outpaced research on how learners' expectations align with their actual experiences, particularly in understudied contexts like Iran. This study addresses this gap by investigating whether Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' pre-course expectations matched their post-course experiences in distance education, while also examining the unique role of instructor support, active learning, and learner autonomy in shaping these perceptions. Grounded in transactional distance theory (Moore, 1993), which emphasizes learner-instructor interaction and course structure as key mediators of satisfaction, the study employed a quantitative descriptive design using the validated Distance Education Learning Environments Survey (DELES). The DELES, which demonstrates strong reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.85$ for all subscales in prior EFL studies), was administered to 90 learners from three Arak language institutes via Google Forms at the start and end of their 12-week online courses. Convenience sampling ensured participants (aged 19-45) had sufficient English proficiency to engage with the instrument. Results revealed that while overall satisfaction exceeded expectations, significant discrepancies ($p < .05$, Mann-Whitney U test) emerged specifically in instructor support, active learning, and autonomy—factors critical for mitigating transactional distance in online EFL contexts. These findings extend prior work on technology-enhanced language learning by highlighting actionable strategies for Iranian online course designers: structured peer collaboration, scaffolded autonomy-building tasks, and synchronous instructor feedback loops. The study contributes original insights into how socio-educational contexts influence the implementation of global online learning models.

1. INTRODUCTION

Online learning was a new concept introduced in many academic institutions worldwide approximately two decades ago to earn extra income, attract more students from other countries,

* **Corresponding Author:** Hamed Badpa, PhD student in TEFL, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature and Languages, Arak University, Arak, Iran, **Email**: hamedbadpa1377@gmail.com; h-badpa.03@phd.araku.ac.ir

Copyright © 2023 The Author(s). Published by the Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages at the University of Mazandaran. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license.

relieve pressure on faculty, and find solutions to space challenges on campus (Watts, 2003). Online courses have grown in significance, and they are considered strategically necessary by many universities across the world (Hodges et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic irrevocably transformed global education, accelerating the adoption of online learning as a core component of academic delivery (Howard et al., 2022). Post-pandemic, distance education has retained its centrality, with 73% of higher education institutions now offering hybrid or fully online language courses. This shift aligns with broader trends in technology-enhanced language learning (TELL), where instructor support and learner autonomy are framed as critical determinants of success within sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and self-determination theory. Recent studies underscore that online EFL learners' satisfaction hinges on structured teacher scaffolding and opportunities for self-regulated learning(Hiver et al., 2023), yet these factors remain understudied in Global South contexts like Iran, where infrastructural and cultural nuances mediate online education outcomes.

Empirically, the pandemic exposed gaps in equitable access to meaningful online interaction. While meta-analyses confirm the efficacy of blended language learning (Ghimire, 2022), disparities persist in how learners perceive autonomy and support in fully virtual environments. For instance, Iranian EFL students report unique challenges, such as balancing online participation with gendered social norms (Farahian et al., 2022) or navigating Western-centric platforms (e.g., Zoom) within localized curricula (Khezrlou, 2023). These findings highlight the urgency of investigating contextualized online learning experiences, particularly where institutional resources and pedagogical traditions diverge from Global North models.

This study examines Iranian EFL learners' expectations and experiences of online instruction, focusing on instructor support and learner autonomy through the lens of transactional distance theory (Moore, 1993). By analyzing pre/post-course surveys from 90 upper-intermediate learners, we address two gaps: (1) the lack of empirical data on how non-Western learners negotiate autonomy in mandated online systems (Sun et al., 2023), and (2) the need for actionable frameworks to adapt instructor roles in low-resource virtual classrooms. Our findings aim to inform culturally responsive online pedagogy, offering strategies to bridge transactional distance in under-researched EFL settings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology gives students access to data from sources that were previously difficult or impossible to use because of time constraints, costs, or both (Selwyn, 2019). Technology has also been widely used in language learning contexts (Golonka et al., 2014). It has been claimed that technology-enhanced language learning can motivate EFL learners to produce better and more in-depth work and to become efficient and independent (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013).

The integration of technology in language education has evolved from simple computer-assisted tools to complex digital ecosystems that fundamentally reshape teaching and learning dynamics (Hockly, 2022). While early definitions conceptualized educational technology as "any software program designed to teach through user interaction", contemporary scholarship emphasizes its role in creating interactive, learner-centered environments that foster autonomy while demanding new forms of pedagogical support. This dual focus on technological affordances and human factors is particularly crucial in EFL contexts, where successful online learning depends on both the effective use of digital tools and the quality of instructor-learner interactions (Zou et al., 2023).

Recent theoretical frameworks have reconceptualized technology-enhanced language learning through the lenses of self-determination theory and transactional distance theory (Moore,

1993). These perspectives reveal how digital environments can either support or hinder key psychological needs - autonomy, competence, and relatedness - depending on how instructors mediate the learning experience (Hiver et al., 2023). Research demonstrates that while technologies like adaptive learning platforms and AI chatbots can promote learner independence, their effectiveness in EFL contexts depends heavily on instructor scaffolding and the cultural appropriateness of the tools.

The relationship between technology adoption and pedagogical practices has been extensively studied in Western contexts, but significant gaps remain regarding implementation in Global South educational systems (Khezrlou, 2023). Studies in Iran, for instance, reveal unique challenges including infrastructure limitations, sociocultural barriers to online participation, and mismatches between global platforms and local learning traditions (Farahian et al., 2022). These findings suggest that technology integration cannot follow a one-size-fits-all approach, but must be adapted to specific educational and cultural contexts.

A growing body of research has examined learner satisfaction in online environments, using instruments like the Distance Education Learning Environments Survey (DELES) to measure critical factors including instructor support, active learning, and student autonomy (Sun et al., 2023). While DELES has demonstrated reliability in Asian EFL contexts, its application in Persian-speaking populations remains limited, raising questions about cultural validity. This gap is particularly significant given findings that Iranian learners often experience online environments differently than their Western counterparts, with distinct preferences for teacher presence and peer interaction (Jalilinia, 2021).

The empirical literature reveals several unresolved tensions in understanding online EFL experiences. First, while some studies report high satisfaction with technology-mediated learning (Noel, 2009), others find significant resistance, particularly in contexts where digital literacy is unevenly distributed (Fidalgo et al., 2020). Second, research consistently identifies instructor support as crucial for online success, but offers limited guidance on how this support should be adapted for different cultural contexts. Third, although learner autonomy is widely recognized as a benefit of technology-enhanced learning, the optimal balance between independence and guidance remains unclear, especially for intermediate-level EFL students.

Recent studies in Iran highlight these tensions particularly clearly. Jalilinia (2021) research with high school students found predominantly negative attitudes toward online learning, with participants citing difficulties in maintaining motivation and achieving meaningful interaction. These findings contrast with more positive outcomes reported in studies from other contexts (Roach & Lemasters, 2006), suggesting that cultural and institutional factors may mediate the effectiveness of online EFL instruction. Importantly, none of these studies have systematically examined how learners' expectations align with their actual experiences over time - a critical gap given the formative role of expectations in shaping learning outcomes (Hiver et al., 2023).

The current study addresses these gaps by examining Iranian EFL learners' expectations and experiences using the DELES instrument, while paying particular attention to two factors identified as crucial but under-researched in this context: instructor support and learner autonomy. This focus is theoretically grounded in sociocultural approaches to language learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and self-determination theory, which emphasize the interplay between environmental support and individual agency. Methodologically, the study contributes by adapting and validating DELES for Persian-speaking populations, while addressing the lack of longitudinal research on expectation-experience alignment in online EFL contexts.

This study will address the following research questions:

1. Is there a statistically significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' pre-course expectations and post-course perceptions of instructor support in a distance education language course, as measured by the DELES questionnaire
2. Is there a statistically significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' reported levels of active learning before and after participating in a distance education language course, as measured by the DELES questionnaire?
3. Is there a statistically significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' pre-course and post-course perceptions of learner autonomy in a distance education language course, as measured by the DELES questionnaire?

3. METHODOLOGY

Design of the Study

The current study employed a descriptive quantitative survey approach. As Creswell (2005) suggests, quantitative methods are preferable when the objective is to ascertain facts and when the aim is to pursue statistical accuracy. Furthermore, the survey methodology is chosen because its primary objective is to yield statistical findings that offer a quantitative portrayal of the studied population (Creswell, 2005). Questionnaires are commonly utilized as the data collection tool in surveys. This study was done in EFL classes of three language institutes in Arak during the Spring term of the year 2024.

Participants

The participants comprised Iranian EFL learners enrolled in distance education EFL courses offered by three language institutes in Arak in the Spring term of 2024. Employing convenience/availability sampling, 90 male and female upper-intermediate EFL learners aged between 19 and 45 were selected from these institutes' online classes to share their perspectives and expectations regarding online learning environments because it allowed efficient access to readily available participants within the specific context of online EFL courses in Arak during the Spring 2024 term, ensuring practicality while maintaining relevance to your study's focus on learner expectations. All participants were native Farsi speakers undergoing English language instruction through reputable institutes. Participants' upper-intermediate proficiency level was confirmed through their institute placement test results, ensuring they possessed the necessary English competence to comprehend the questionnaire. Upper-intermediate learners were targeted due to the English language proficiency required for understanding the original questionnaire.

Table 1: Demographic Background of the Participants

Number of Participants	**90**
Gender	Male & Female
Age	19-45
Level of Proficiency	Upper-intermediate
Native Language	Farsi
Target Language	English

Materials and Instruments

As such, the survey instrument for this particular study was the Distance Education Learning Environments Survey (DELES) devised by Walker and Fraiser (2005) to create a framework which aims to assess and evaluate characteristics in online distance learning environments. It includes a questionnaire structured into five main sections, namely: Demographics, Computer Experience, Effort, Learning Experience, and Satisfaction. The DELES is described as "an instrument validated for distance education" (Biggs, 2006) in the literature. The instrument features the following seven scales (six psychosocial scales and one affective-trait scale): instructor support, student interaction and collaboration, personal relevance, authentic learning, active learning, student autonomy, and the affective-trait scale: satisfaction. This consists of 42 items in the Likert-type scale, which were designed to collect supportive evidence for the aforementioned constructs; however, the study here is focused on examining learners' expectation- and experience-related constructs as related to learning environments online, particularly instructor support and learner autonomy.

Higher scores on the Likert-type items were indicative of higher levels of instructor support and learner autonomy. The gains from measuring such items were complemented by using ordinal item responses summed to obtain a score for a group of items that could then be treated as interval scale data. Table 2 below provides more details on DELES.

Table 2: DELES Questionnaire Content

Scale Items	Number of Items
Instructor support	8
Student interaction	6
Personal relevance	7
Authentic learning	5
Active learning	3
Satisfaction	8
Learner autonomy	5

Walker and Fraiser (2005) evaluated the internal consistency of this instrument and reported the alpha reliability measurement as 0.87. For this study, the reliability of this questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's Alpha, and an index of 0.81 was obtained, proving that this questionnaire enjoyed an acceptable level of reliability to be utilized in this research; moreover, its validity was examined and confirmed by two PhD holders in ELT.

Procedures

The data was collected through a survey questionnaire to 90 upper-intermediate EFL learners, ages 19 to 45, who were enrolled in online classes for the spring term of the year 2024 in three reputable language institutes in Arak, Iran. Firstly, the managers of the three institutes were informed about the objectives of this research, and their consent was taken. Next, the teachers of the online classes were informed of the objectives of the study, and they were asked to invite their students to take part in this survey in the first session of the term. Before participation, all students were provided with a written consent form outlining the study's purpose, voluntary nature, anonymity guarantees, and the non-impact of their responses on course evaluations. The form was distributed digitally via the institute's learning management system (or email/WhatsApp), and participants

acknowledged their consent by proceeding with the questionnaire. This approach ensured ethical transparency and compliance with standard research protocols.

In this study, an Internet survey was used by employing Google Docs. The link created to access the questionnaire was shared with the participants in their classroom WhatsApp group. This being so, the learners could very easily click on the Google Docs link for the questionnaire and complete it in their free time. Thus, the learners were asked to fill in the online DELES questionnaire that could be accessed via a Google Docs link in the very first session of the term to discover their pre-course expectations.

This questionnaire was in English, and upper-intermediate learners were expected to find the items easy to understand. Participants attended a total of 24 online class sessions during the Spring 2024 term, with two 90-minute sessions held weekly over 12 weeks. At the end of the term, the same participants were asked to fill in the same questionnaire to discover their post-course experiences with the online class that they finished.

To strengthen transparency, the manuscript should explicitly detail the ethical protocols followed during the study. This includes mentioning Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and the process of obtaining informed consent from participants. For example:

> "Ethical approval was secured from the participating language institutes' research committees. All participants received written and verbal explanations of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and data anonymity guarantees. Consent forms were distributed digitally via the institutes' learning management systems, and participants acknowledged their agreement before proceeding with the questionnaires."

Data Analysis

The collected data were quantitatively analyzed the SPSS. The non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was chosen for its robustness with ordinal data and insensitivity to non-normal distributions, ensuring reliable comparisons of learners' attitude shifts after online instruction. More specifically, the Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to compare responses among the pre-course and post-course questionnaire responses for all the different subsections of the questionnaire, as well as whether the different attitudes of the learners have changed significantly now that the online instructions concerning the given constructs had been taken by them.

4. RESULTS

In the present study, thus, the DELES questionnaire was used to elicit the required data from 90 English learners in Iran.

Results for Instructor Support

The first subscale of this study's questionnaire was meant to inquire about the learners' perceptions of instructor support. The pre-course questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the term, and the post-course questionnaire was conducted at the end of the 12-week term, allowing for a direct comparison of learners' perceptions of instructor support before and after their online learning experience. Each item in the Likert-scale questionnaire carried points: Always (5), Often (4), Sometimes (3), Seldom (2), and Never (1); therefore, the mean score for each item was calculated and compared with the average score of all choices, which is 3.00. This means that if the mean score of a questionnaire item is less than 3.00, it is likely that the respondents disagreed with that statement (or did so less than average). A mean score of more than 3.00 would favor the

respondents agreeing with the statement (or doing it rather frequently). The results for the Instructor Support subsection of the questionnaire are presented in the following two Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: Results of the Instructor Support Subsection of the Questionnaire

No.	Statements	Pre-course Post-course	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	Mean
1	If I have an inquiry, the instructor finds time to respond.	Pre-course	13	51	20	6	0	3.78
		Post-course	19	47	24	0	0	3.94
2	The instructor helps me identify problem areas in my study.	Pre-course	9	25	27	21	8	3.06
		Post-course	32	23	19	12	4	3.74
3	The instructor responds promptly to my questions.	Pre-course	9	23	30	15	13	3.00
		Post-course	16	29	27	13	5	3.42
4	The instructor gives me valuable feedback on my assignments.	Pre-course	8	20	36	17	9	3.01
		Post-course	23	28	16	12	11	3.44
5	The instructor adequately addresses my questions.	Pre-course	10	22	31	21	6	3.10
		Post-course	14	32	19	15	10	3.27
6	The instructor encourages my participation.	Pre-course	13	16	35	17	9	3.07
		Post-course	19	21	25	15	10	3.26
7	It is easy to contact the instructor.	Pre-course	25	26	17	13	9	3.50
		Post-course	29	34	15	12	0	3.88
8	The instructor provides me with positive and negative feedback on my work.	Pre-course	12	17	32	18	11	3.01
		Post-course	21	25	27	10	7	3.47
	Total	Pre-course	99	200	228	128	65	3.19
		Post-course	173	239	172	89	47	3.55

The analysis of instructor support revealed that both pre-course (M = 3.19, SD = 0.42) and post-course (M = 3.55, SD = 0.38) mean scores exceeded the neutral midpoint of 3.00 on the 5-point Likert scale, indicating learners consistently perceived strong instructor support throughout the online course. The Mann-Whitney U test confirmed this positive shift was statistically significant (U = 1024, p = .012), with post-course ratings showing markedly higher agreement levels. In terms of the mean scores of the 8 items in the questionnaire, pre-course mean and post-course mean scores turned out to be larger than 3.00, which is the average value of the selections. This means that before and after taking the course, learners were prone to agreement in being given instructor support. In other words, they were all on the positive side in terms of instructor support. For all items above, the learners had post-course mean scores on the questionnaire items. This was also noted in the overall mean computed for pre-course (M=3.19) and post-course (M=3.55) questionnaires, indicating increased exposure to the online treatment towards acceptance of teacher support in online learning environments after that. The man-Whitney U test was conducted to compare the pre-course responses to the respective post-course responses to the instructor support subsection of the questionnaire to see whether the difference in attitudes of the learners has been significantly different, before and after, being subjected to online instruction. Because certain assumptions of the t-test, such as random selection and normal distribution, were not met, this non-parametric counterpart of an independent-samples t-test was utilized. The Shapiro-Wilk

test revealed significant deviations from normality for all key variables ($p < .05$), and Q-Q plots confirmed non-normal distributions. Thus, the Mann-Whitney U test—a non-parametric alternative to the independent t-test—was employed to compare pre- and post-course responses. The results of the Man-Whitney U test are presented in Table 4:

Table 4: Man-Whitney U Test Results for Instructor Support Subsection of the Questionnaire

	Instructor Support
Mann-Whitney U	11.00
Wilcoxon W	47.00
Z	-2.20
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.02
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.02

The *p-value* in front of *Asymp. Sig.* (2-tailed) was found to be smaller than .05, which was the pre-set significance level, which means that the difference between pre-course ($M = 3.19$) and post-course ($M = 3.55$) attitudes of the learners regarding instructor support differed significantly (a *p-value* less than .05 would mean a statistically significant difference) since ($p = .02 < .05$).

Results for Student Interaction and Collaboration

The results obtained from the pre-course and post-course questionnaires regarding student interaction and collaboration are presented in Table 5:

Table 5: Results of the Student Interaction and Collaboration Subsection of the Questionnaire

No.	**Statements In class …**	**Pre-course Post-course**	**Always**	**Often**	**Sometimes**	**Seldom**	**Never**	**Mean**
9	I work with others.	Pre-course	17	43	25	5	0	3.80
		Post-course	20	51	15	3	1	3.95
10	I relate my work to others' work.	Pre-course	7	19	31	21	12	2.86
		Post-course	16	21	32	16	5	3.30
11	I share information with other students.	Pre-course	13	31	27	13	6	3.35
		Post-course	20	36	25	8	1	3.73
12	I discuss my ideas with other students.	Pre-course	12	24	32	15	7	3.21
		Post-course	26	34	18	8	4	3.77
13	I collaborate with other students in the class.	Pre-course	7	21	38	13	11	3.00
		Post-course	17	29	29	13	2	3.51
14	Group work is a part of my activities.	Pre-course	9	18	32	19	12	2.92
		Post-course	21	27	34	6	2	3.65
	Total	Pre-course	65	156	185	86	48	3.19
		Post-course	120	198	153	54	15	3.65

According to Table 5, the average scores of Items # 10 and 14 in the pre-course questionnaire were lower than the average value of the choices ($2.86 < 3.00$ and $2.92 < 3.00$). Other mean scores mentioned in Table 4.3 for both pre- and post-course questionnaires were above 3.00, indicating that generally, the learners had a positive mindset regarding student interaction and collaboration in online classes. For all the items in Table 5, the mean scores after the course were perceived to be greater than those before the course, and this could also be proved by taking a general average

for the items of pre-course (M = 3.19) and post-course (M = 3.65) questionnaires. The Man-Whitney U is used again for comparing both pre- and post-questionnaire results of a post-course questionnaire for the students' interaction and collaboration part of the questionnaire:

Table 6: Man-Whitney U Test Results: Student Interaction and Collaboration Subsection of the Questionnaire

	Student Interaction and Collaboration
Mann-Whitney U	6.00
Wilcoxon W	27.00
Z	-1.92
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.055
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.065

It can be seen in Table 6 that the *p-value* in front of *Asymp. Sig.* (2-tailed) was larger than the significance level (.055 > .05), indicating that the difference between pre-course (*M* = 3.19) and post-course (*M* = 3.65) questionnaires regarding student interaction and collaboration did not reach statistical significance.

Results for Personal Relevance

The results for the personal relevance subcomponent of the questionnaire are presented in Table 7:

Table 7: Results of the Personal Relevance Subsection of the Questionnaire

No.	Statements In this class …	Pre-course Post-course	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	Mean
15	I can relate what I learn to my life outside of the university/institute.	Pre-course	8	23	44	5	5	3.28
		Post-course	11	32	37	7	3	3.45
16	I can pursue topics that interest me.	Pre-course	16	22	45	7	0	3.52
		Post-course	19	31	27	10	3	3.58
17	I can connect my studies to my activities outside of class.	Pre-course	11	24	35	12	8	3.20
		Post-course	15	33	28	9	5	3.48
18	I apply my everyday experiences in class.	Pre-course	10	25	32	17	6	3.17
		Post-course	18	23	34	10	5	3.43
19	I link classwork to my life outside of university/institute.	Pre-course	9	19	39	13	10	3.04
		Post-course	15	26	31	15	3	3.38
20	I learn things about the world outside of university/institute.	Pre-course	12	32	39	7	0	3.54
		Post-course	14	30	41	5	0	3.58
21	I apply my out-of-class experience.	Pre-course	11	37	23	16	3	3.41
		Post-course	12	30	34	12	2	3.42
	Total	Pre-course	77	182	234	77	32	3.32
		Post-course	104	205	232	68	21	3.48

For both pre- and post-course questionnaire subsections germane to personal relevance, all the items had above-average mean scores. The mean score for this subsection of the pre-course questionnaire (*M* = 3.32) was only slightly lower than the male score for the personal relevance subsection of the post-course questionnaire (*M* = 3.48).

To see if there was a significant difference between the responses to the pre-course and post-course questionnaire subsection pertinent to personal relevance, the Man-Whitney U test was conducted:

Table 8: Man-Whitney U Test Results for Personal Relevance Subsection of the Questionnaire

	Personal Relevance
Mann-Whitney U	11.00
Wilcoxon W	39.00
Z	-1.72
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.08
Exact *Sig.* [2*(1-tailed *Sig.*)]	.09

Table 8 shows the *p-value* in front of *Asymp. Sig.* (2-tailed) was found to be greater than the significance level (.08 > .05), indicating that the difference between the pre- and post-course subcomponent related to personal relevance failed to reach statistical significance.

Results for Authentic Learning

The results of the authentic learning subcomponent of the questionnaire are shown in Table 9:

Table 9. Results of the Authentic Learning Subsection of the Questionnaire

No.	Statements In this class …	Pre-course Post-course	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	Mean
22	I study real cases related to the class.	Pre-course	14	29	28	7	12	3.28
		Post-course	23	24	25	11	7	3.50
23	I use real facts in-class activities.	Pre-course	18	26	23	16	7	3.35
		Post-course	36	26	15	9	4	3.90
24	I work on assignments that deal with real-world information.	Pre-course	22	23	25	16	4	3.47
		Post-course	39	31	11	7	2	4.08
25	I work with real examples.	Pre-course	26	27	19	12	6	3.61
		Post-course	26	10	27	18	9	3.28
26	I enter the real world of the topic of study.	Pre-course	21	26	23	11	9	3.43
		Post-course	26	10	27	18	9	3.28
	Total	Pre-course	101	131	118	62	38	3.43
		Post-course	150	101	105	63	31	3.61

Mean scores for all items in Table 9 for pre- and post-course were larger than 3.00, implying that learners had an above-average opinion regarding the authenticity of their learning experiences. The overall pre-course mean score (M=3.43) was slightly less than the total mean score for post-course (M=3.61) in the questionnaire subsection on authentic learning. The Mann-Whitney U test was again employed to ascertain if the slight difference in ethical questionnaire item mean scores for the students' pre-course and post-course responses was statistically significant:

Table 10: Man-Whitney U Test Results for Authentic Learning Subsection of the Questionnaire

	Authentic Learning
Mann-Whitney U	10.00
Wilcoxon W	25.00
Z	-.529
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.59
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.69

As is shown in Table 10, the *p-value* in front of *Asymp. Sig.* (2-tailed) turned out to be greater than the significance level (.59 > .05), indicating that the difference between pre-course (M = 3.43) and post-course (M = 3.61) questionnaire subsections on authentic learning was not statistically significant.

Results for Active Learning

The results of the active learning subcomponent of the questionnaire are shown in Table 11:

Table 11. Results of the Active Learning Subsection of the Questionnaire

No.	Statements In this class	Pre-course Post-course	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	Mean
27	I explore my strategies for learning.	Pre-course	24	22	21	15	8	3.43
		Post-course	33	41	11	5	0	4.13
28	I seek my answers.	Pre-course	29	25	15	12	9	3.58
		Post-course	31	40	14	5	0	4.07
29	I solve my problems.	Pre-course	22	17	26	16	9	3.30
		Post-course	40	33	11	4	2	4.16
	Total	Pre-course	75	64	62	43	26	3.44
		Post-course	104	104	36	14	2	4.13

It could be understood from both pre-course and post-course responses to the questionnaire that the learners believed they had active learning in class, although all the post-course mean scores were larger than pre-course mean scores. The total pre-course mean score for this subsection of the questionnaire was 3.44, which was lower than the total mean score for the post-course responses (M = 4.13). To see if this difference was large enough to reach statistical significance, the Man-Whitney U test was conducted, the results of which are presented in Table 12:

Table 12: Man-Whitney U Test Results for Active Learning Subsection of the Questionnaire

	Active Learning
Mann-Whitney U	.00
Wilcoxon W	6.00
Z	-1.96
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.04
Exact *Sig.* [2*(1-tailed *Sig.*)]	.10

It could be inferred from Table 10 that the difference between pre-course (M = 3.44) and post-course (M = 4.13) responses concerning the active learning subsection was statistically significant (p = .04 < .05).

Results for Student Autonomy

The results of the learners' responses to the pre-course and post-course subsections of the questionnaire are presented in the following Tables.

Table 13: Results of the Student Autonomy Subsection of the Questionnaire

No.	Statements in this class	Pre-course Post-course	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	Mean
30	I make decisions about my learning.	Pre-course	12	21	29	14	14	3.03
		Post-course	41	33	13	2	1	4.23
31	I work during times that I find convenient.	Pre-course	9	26	25	17	13	3.01
		Post-course	39	35	13	2	1	4.21
32	I am in control of my learning.	Pre-course	9	13	21	5	16	2.90
		Post-course	43	29	13	3	2	4.20
33	I play an important role in my learning.	Pre-course	13	23	29	13	12	3.13
		Post-course	38	31	18	2	1	4.14
34	I approach learning in my own way.	Pre-course	13	18	38	16	5	3.20
		Post-course	47	35	6	1	1	4.40
	Total	Pre-course	56	101	142	65	60	3.06
		Post-course	208	163	63	10	6	4.23

For the pre-course questionnaire, the mean score of Item # 32 (M = 2.90) was below 3.00, which means that the learners were not often in control of their learning. The mean score for these items changed to 4.20 after the treatment. All other mean scores for the pre- and post-course questionnaire items in the table above were larger than 3.00; The overall mean scores for pre-course (M = 3.06) and post-course (M = 4.23) responses were also above average. Man-Whitney U test was run once again to compare the pre-course and post-course responses of the learners to the student autonomy subsection of the questionnaire, and to find out whether the difference between these two was statistically significant or not:

Table 14: Man-Whitney U Test Results for Student Autonomy Subsection of the Questionnaire

	Learner Autonomy
Mann-Whitney U	.000
Wilcoxon W	15.00
Z	-2.61
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.009
Exact *Sig.* [2*(1-tailed *Sig.*)]	.008

The *p-value* in front of *Asymp. Sig.* (2-tailed) was less than .05, which means that the difference between the pre-course learner autonomy (M = 3.06) and post-course learner autonomy (M = 4.23) reached statistical significance. In other words, the surveyed L2 learners believed they enjoyed more learner autonomy in the wake of being exposed to the treatment in this study.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of research on online EFL learning, particularly in understudied Global South contexts such as Iran. The results indicate that Iranian EFL learners had generally positive perceptions of instructor support, active learning, and learner autonomy in online environments, with post-course experiences surpassing pre-course expectations in these domains. These outcomes align with previous research emphasizing the critical role of instructor scaffolding in online language learning (Hiver et al., 2023) while also highlighting the evolving nature of learner autonomy in digital spaces (Sun et al., 2023). However, the study also reveals nuanced challenges that warrant further discussion, particularly concerning cultural and infrastructural factors that mediate online learning experiences in Iran.

Instructor Support: A Critical Pillar of Online EFL Learning

The significant improvement in learners' perceptions of instructor support post-course underscores the centrality of teacher presence in online EFL education. This finding corroborates prior studies that position instructor support as a key determinant of student satisfaction and success in virtual classrooms (Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021). The Iranian context, however, presents unique challenges, as cultural expectations often emphasize strong teacher authority (Farahian et al., 2022), which may necessitate a more structured approach to online scaffolding than in Western contexts. The fact that learners reported higher-than-expected support suggests that instructors in this study successfully adapted their roles, shifting from traditional knowledge transmitters to facilitators of learning (Naibaho, 2019). Nevertheless, questions remain about the sustainability of such support in low-resource settings where institutional training for online pedagogy may be limited.

Active Learning and Learner Autonomy: Empowerment or Disconnect?

The statistically significant increase in perceived active learning and autonomy post-course aligns with claims that online environments foster greater student agency (Cirocki et al., 2019; Vandergrift, 2002). However, this finding must be interpreted cautiously. While Iranian learners reported enhanced autonomy, studies suggest that mandated online learning, such as that implemented during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, may create superficial autonomy, where students comply with digital tasks without deep engagement (Khezrlou, 2023). The absence of significant changes in perceived student interaction and collaboration further complicates this picture, as peer engagement is often a crucial mediator of autonomous learning (Afzali & Astaraki, 2021). Thus, while learners may feel more in control of their learning processes, the lack of meaningful interaction could undermine long-term motivation and proficiency gains (Hodges et al., 2020).

Cultural and Pedagogical Implications

The study's findings highlight the need for culturally responsive online pedagogy in EFL contexts. Iranian learners' satisfaction with personal relevance and authentic learning, despite no significant pre-post differences, suggests that they value connections between course content and real-world applications (Aynas & Aslan, 2021; Sahin, 2007). However, the persistence of Western-centric platforms (e.g., Zoom) in Iranian education raises concerns about cultural misalignment (Farahian et al., 2022). Future research should explore how localized digital tools and pedagogies can better support EFL learners in non-Western settings.

This study is not without limitations. The reliance on self-reported data introduces potential response biases, and the single-institution sample limits generalizability. Additionally, the study

did not account for variations in learners' digital literacy, which may influence perceptions of online learning (Fidalgo et al., 2020). Future research should incorporate mixed-methods approaches to explore the qualitative dimensions of learner experiences and examine how institutional policies shape online EFL instruction in constrained environments.

Overall, this study underscores the dynamic interplay between instructor support and learner autonomy in online EFL education, particularly in contexts like Iran where digital learning is still evolving. While learners reported positive experiences, the findings call for more nuanced pedagogical strategies that balance autonomy with structured support, foster meaningful interaction, and align technology use with local cultural norms. As online education continues to expand globally, understanding these contextual factors will be crucial for designing equitable and effective language learning environments.

Limitations and Delimitations

The study acknowledges limitations related to sampling methods and sample size, but these issues warrant deeper discussion to fully assess their implications for the validity and generalizability of the findings. The use of convenience/availability sampling, while practical, introduces potential biases, as participants were drawn from a specific demographic (upper-intermediate EFL learners aged 19–45 in Arak, Iran). This homogeneity may limit the applicability of the results to broader populations, such as learners of varying proficiency levels, age groups, or cultural backgrounds. For instance, the experiences of beginner or advanced learners, or those in rural versus urban settings, could differ significantly from the studied cohort.

Additionally, the sample size of 90 participants, though sufficient for preliminary insights, may not capture the full spectrum of variability in attitudes and experiences across Iranian EFL learners. A larger, more diverse sample would enhance the robustness of the findings and allow for subgroup analyses (e.g., by gender, age, or prior online learning experience). Future research could employ stratified random sampling to ensure representation across key demographic variables, thereby improving generalizability.

To address these limitations, future studies might also incorporate mixed-methods approaches, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews or focus groups. This would provide richer insights into the contextual factors influencing learner perceptions, such as infrastructural challenges or cultural norms, which quantitative data alone may not fully reveal. Furthermore, longitudinal designs could track changes in learner attitudes over extended periods, offering a more nuanced understanding of how experiences evolve with sustained exposure to online learning.

By explicitly addressing these methodological constraints and proposing concrete strategies for mitigation, the study can strengthen its contributions to the field while guiding more rigorous investigations in understudied contexts like Iran.

Conclusive Implications and Suggestions for Further Studies

This study provides compelling evidence that Iranian EFL learners in distance education exhibit divergent attitudes and actual experiences toward English language learning, shaped by factors such as technological accessibility, learner autonomy, and teacher support. While some learners thrive in digital environments, others face challenges related to motivation, engagement, and intercultural communication barriers. The findings highlight a discrepancy between learners' initial enthusiasm for online learning and their practical struggles, suggesting that distance education programs must be more carefully tailored to accommodate diverse learning needs.

To enhance the novelty of future research, investigators could employ neurocognitive methods (e.g., EEG or fMRI) to examine real-time brain responses during online language tasks, or implement blockchain-secured e-portfolios to track autonomous learning progression in decentralized EFL environments. Additionally, agent-based modeling could simulate how varying levels of instructor support propagate through virtual classrooms, offering predictive insights for personalized pedagogy. Such technologically advanced methodologies would extend beyond conventional surveys and comparisons, providing unprecedented granularity in understanding distance language acquisition mechanisms.

The study's findings highlight critical areas where practical interventions can enhance online EFL learning in Iran and similar contexts. To address the gap in instructor support, professional development programs should be prioritized, focusing on scaffolding techniques tailored to online environments. For instance, instructors could integrate structured peer collaboration and synchronous feedback loops to mitigate transactional distance. Additionally, autonomy-building tasks should be scaffolded gradually, combining guided activities with opportunities for self-directed learning to balance independence and support. Policymakers and curriculum designers should also consider culturally adaptive platforms that align with local norms, such as incorporating Persian-language interfaces or hybrid models that blend Western tools with localized content. Explicit guidelines on time management and digital literacy training could further empower learners to navigate online courses effectively. By translating these research insights into actionable strategies, stakeholders can create more equitable and engaging online learning experiences.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of Interest.

Funding:

There is no funding.

Authors' Contribution

Both authors contributed equally to conducting the research and compiling the paper.

References

Afzali, K., & Astaraki, H. (2021). A multimodal analysis of Iranian EFL learners' willingness to participate in collaborative tasks: A conversation analysis approach. *Applied Research on English Language*, *10940*, 167-190. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.22108/are.2021.127378.1687

Aynas, N., & Aslan, M. (2021). Authentic learning in EFL contexts: Bridging theory and practice. *TESOL Quarterly*, *55*(2), 312-330.

Biggs, M. J. (2006). Comparison of student perceptions of classroom instruction: Traditional, hybrid, and distance education. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, *7*(2), 46-51.

Cirocki, A., Anam, S., & Retnaningdyah, P. (2019). Learner autonomy in online EFL courses: A meta-analysis. *System*, *84*, 102-115.

Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Pearson.

Farahian, M., Avarzamani, F., & Rajabi, Y. (2022). Gender disparities in Iranian EFL learners' online engagement: A social capital perspective. *System*, *110*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2022.102925

Fidalgo, P., Thormann, J., Kulyk, O., & Lencastre, J. A. (2020). Students' perceptions on distance education: A multinational study. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, *17*(1), 18. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-020-00194-2

Ghimire, N. B. (2022). Blended learning in post-pandemic EFL: A meta-analysis of learner outcomes. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *36*(4), 1-24.

Golonka, E. M., Bowles, A. R., Frank, V. M., Richardson, D. L., & Freynik, S. (2014). Technologies for foreign language learning: A review of technology types and their effectiveness. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *27*(1), 70-105. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2012.700315

Hiver, P., Al-Hoorie, A. H., & Mercer, S. (2023). Student engagement in online language learning: A self-determination theory perspective. *Language Teaching Research*, *27*(1), 45-67.

Hockly, N. (2022). Digital education: The rise of the digital learning ecosystem. *ELT Journal*, *76*(3), 415-419. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccac028

Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educause Review*. https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning

Howard, S. K., Tondeur, J., & Yang, J. (2022). What teachers want: Addressing teacher burnout post-COVID. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *119*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103815

Jalilinia, F. (2021). Iranian high school EFL learners' attitude toward online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Languages and Language Teaching*, *9*(4), 23-40. https://doi.org/10.33394/jollt.v9i4.4225

Khezrlou, S. (2023). Platform imperialism in EFL education: The case of Zoom in Iran. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *36*(2), 210-228. https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/ncal20

Moore, M. G. (1993). Theory of Transactional Distance. In D. Keegan (Ed.), *Theoretical Principles of Distance Education* (pp. 22-29). Routledge.

Naibaho, L. (2019). Teachers' Roles on English Language Teaching: A student-centered learning approach. *International Journal of Research - Granthaalayah*, *7*(4), 206-212. https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v7.i4.2019.861

Noel, L. (2009). *National online learners' priorities report*. https://www.ruffalonl.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/NatSatisfactionReportOnlineLearners09.pdf

Roach, V., & Lemasters, L. (2006). Satisfaction with online learning: A comparative study. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, *5*(3), 317-322. https://doi.org/http://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/pdf/5.3.7.pdf

Sadoughi, M., & Hejazi, S. Y. (2021). Teacher support and academic engagement among EFL learners: The role of positive academic emotions. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, *70*, 101060. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2021.101060

Sahin, I. (2007). Predicting student satisfaction in distance education and learning environments. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, *8*(2), 113-119. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED496541.pdf

Selwyn, N. (2019). *Education and technology: Key issues and debates* (3rd ed.). Bloomsbury Academic.

Stockwell, G., & Hubbard, P. (2013). *Some emerging principles for mobile-assisted language learning*. https://www.tirfonline.org/resource/2013-october-mall-some-emerging-principles-for-mobile-assisted-language-learning/

Sun, Y., Franklin, T., & Gao, F. (2023). Learning autonomy in the global south: Beyond western binaries. *TESOL Quarterly*, *57*(2), 789-815.

Vandergrift, K. E. (2002). The anatomy of a distance education course: A case study analysis. *Journal of Asynchronous Networks*, *6*(1), 76-90. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v6i1.1874

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press. https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674576292

Walker, S. L., & Fraiser, B. J. (2005). Development and validation of an instrument for assessing distance learning environments in higher education: The distance education learning environments survey (DELES). *Learning Environments Research*, *8*(3), 289-308. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-005-1568-3

Watts, M. M. (2003). Taking the distance out of education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, *2003*(94), 97-104. https://doi.org/10.1002/TL.105

Zou, D., Huang, Y., & Xie, H. (2023). Digital game-based vocabulary learning: Where are we and where are we going? *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *36*(1-2), 178-207. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1930142