Emergence Distance Education (EDE) role in the Learning of English Language Skills during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty members and students had to leave their face-to-face (FTF) classes and move into emergency distance education (EDE) contexts. Due to this drastic change in the system of education, investigating the probable effects of EDE on the quality of education seems essential. As such, this study has attempted to probe the effect of EDE on the language skills of Iranian EFL students. To do so, drawing on the maximum variation sampling, the present study embarked on a qualitative descriptive research method, triangulating data through written open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to collect data from 170 EFL students from different universities in Iran. The sample included BA students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and English Literature, aged above 18. Using Thematic Analysis (TA), students' responses were transcribed, codified, and interpreted. The findings of TA revealed that along with several disadvantages and challenges that Iranian EFL students experienced in EDE with regard to learning English language skills, EDE provided some opportunities and benefits for their learning. The analysis of students' responses also indicated that they deemed speaking skill as the most negatively influenced language skill and listening skill as the most positively affected skill. Furthermore, the findings represented that most of the students held teachers and

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administrators responsible for the problems and challenges they experienced in EDE contexts. The findings of the present study can encourage administrators, teachers, and students to prepare themselves for EDE against the possible subsequent waves.

Keywords: COVID-19, Higher Education, Emergence Distance Education (EDE), English Language Skills, EFL Students, Iran

The COVID-19 pandemic as a global disaster has brought immense impact on the important aspects of our life, and education is by no means an exception. While it is widely agreed that the best public policy resource for education is to go to traditional classes (Karataş &Tuncer, 2020), during the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries have shut down their schools and universities to prevent the spread of the virus by minimizing physical contact. This global closure has turned instruction and assessment into virtual platforms. Due to the global lockdown of educational contexts, many students were deprived of the standard learning process (Carver, 2020). To overcome such a disruption, the instant solution is "to turn to distance and online learning" (Karataş & Tuncer, 2020, p. 2). To continue educational activities during emergency situations, the area of education has been provided with several possibilities. Regarding higher education in particular, university lecturers and students around the world were forced to undergo an abrupt shift to the emergency distance education (EDE) contexts in order to avoid the expansion of Coronavirus on university campuses. EDE is defined by Hodges et al. (2020) as "the temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances" (p. 6). Thus, the key objective of EDE is to offer immediate assistance for the continuation of education.

The transition from traditional contexts to distance education settings might cause many challenges and difficulties that instructors and students come across at different stages of education. Among them, one can refer to student readiness, self-discipline, and computer technology requirements (Moser et al., 2021). Besides, this immediate transition to distance learning requires a comprehensive pedagogical approach embracing various learning styles (Sithole et al., 2019). On the positive side, this forced distance education opens innovative possibilities to transform the current crisis into an opportunity for positive change. Teachers and students' priorities, positions, and programs need to be adjusted to transform traditional FTF classes into the distance and online delivery of teaching materials and assessment, which certainly require inspirational cooperation and creativity to take advantage of novel online platforms and technologies to support students' learning needs, aspirations, and emotions during lockdown and closures (Walther, 2020).

Concerning language education, Sithole et al. (2019) have stated that knowledge of the challenges and opportunities of distance language education can increase the efficiency of the course. Thus, language teachers need to be equipped with this knowledge to take advantage of opportunities and solve challenges (Gao & Zhang, 2020). In fact, being aware of the potential opportunities and challenges of EDE can make it possible for language teachers to ensure more efficient instruction, interaction, and feedback (Moser et al., 2021). Accordingly, evaluating distance language education based on its advantages and disadvantages seems crucial. Much of the previous research in this era investigated the challenges and opportunities of online education in general (e.g., Davis et al., 2019; Toquero, 2021). In fact, the role of EDE during the COVID-19 pandemic has

received less attention. Moreover, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no research study has been carried out to explore the impact of EDE in the learning of language skills. The present study, thus, aims to fill these lacunas by probing the role of EDE in the learning of English language skills during COVID-19 based on Iranian EFL students' viewpoints.

Review of the Literature

Online education practices have been highly prevalent since they can offer efficient environments, tapping on mutual interaction through removing time and place limitations (Biasutti, 2015). Generally, online activities are titled by various terminologies, including "e-learning", "distance education", "virtual learning and teaching", or "online learning and teaching". All these practices come to the areas of agreement that all "refer to the method of content dissemination and rapid learning through the application of information technology and Internet technology" (Zhou et al., 2020, p. 502). In such conditions, students are described as "distance learners who use online, Web-based instruction at a distance from the main campus" (Cain et al., 2007, p. 44). Besides eliminating the time and place limitations, these virtual learning procedures have an adaptive and personalized essence, contributing to autonomous learning. Indeed, remote teaching, distance learning, and online instruction practices are not novel and ambiguous for education. However, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching and learning methods have taken on "renewed salience" (Hodges et al., 2020). It should be noted that well-planned online courses vary substantially from those online classes provided in response to a disaster (Williamson et al., 2020). Schools and universities attempting to sustain instruction during the spread of the Corona virus should consider this

distinction when assessing this type of distance education. Alternative terminologies, including "Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)", "Emergency e-Learning", and "EDE" are applied by scholars for the new mode of online learning to make a distinction between "online education during the pandemic" and "high-quality online education before the pandemic" (Karataş &Tuncer, 2020, p. 3). EDE is defined as the immediate transition of instructional delivery to an alternative mode due to disaster conditions (Hodges et al., 2020). As put forward by Hodges et al. (2020), "emergency distance education" differs from "online education" because the primary goal of EDE is to provide emergency assistance for the maintenance of education.

Several research studies have been conducted to explore the effects of online education on EFL students' reading skill (e.g., Bataineh & Mayyas, 2017; Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017), writing skill (e.g., Ahmadi & Marandi, 2014; Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017, 2018; Fathi & Rahimi, 2020; Ghahari & Ameri-Golestan, 2013; Hosseinpour et al., 2019; Marandi & Nami, 2012; Shams-Abadi et al., 2015), speaking skill (e.g., Baniabdelrahman, 2013; Hamouda, 2020; Wulandari, 2019), and listening skill (e.g., Pei & Suwanthep, 2019; Roth & Suppasetseree, 2016). Regarding the reading skill, Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017) tried to uncover the effects of blended learning on the reading proficiency of EFL learners. To this aim, 60 Iranian EFL students were placed into two groups. The control group was provided with traditional teaching in the reading skill, while the experimental group was provided with blended instruction. The results of independent sample t-tests showed that blended learning positively affected the reading proficiency of learners. Similarly, Bataineh and Mayyas (2017) probed the effects of blended learning on Jordanian EFL students' reading

comprehension. To do this, they selected 32 EFL students from a Jordanian state university. The participants were randomly assigned to the control and experimental group. The latter employed blended learning in which Moodle provided in-class instruction. To evaluate the probable effects of treatment, the researchers designed a reading pretest and posttest. Performing ANCOVA and MANCOVA, they found that the experimental group surpassed the control group in reading comprehension.

With regard to writing skill, Ghahari and Ameri-Golestan (2013), for instance, investigated the effects of blended learning on Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. To do this, 29 upper-intermediate and advanced EFL learners participated in the study. The participants were randomly placed into experimental and control groups. Participants of the experimental group received traditional methods of writing instruction plus online instruction. In order to obtain data, learners' first draft was considered as the pretest, and their last one was the posttest. Employing independent samples t-tests, they found that the participants of the experimental group outperformed the ones in the control group who received traditional instruction of writing. Based on the results, they stated that using online resources in teaching writing skills could remarkably improve the EFL learners' writing performance. In the same vein, Ebadi and Rahimi (2018) probed the effect of WebQuest-based classrooms on EFL learners' writing skills. In doing so, 20 EFL students were selected from a private language institute in Iran. They were assigned into experimental and control groups of equal size. To assess students' writing skills, IELTS academic writing task 1 and task 2 were employed. Additionally, to investigate the students' attitudes and viewpoints towards the role of WebQuest-based classrooms in improving their writing skills, a semi-structured interview was used. To

analyze the quantitative data, they used One-way MANOVA and one-way MANCOVA. The results of analyses demonstrated that both WebQuest-based and FTF classrooms improved learners' writing skills, while WebQuest-based classroom outperformed the FTF classroom. Moreover, the results of the thematic analysis portrayed the students' positive attitudes towards the impact of WebQuest-based classroom. Subsequently, Hosseinpour et al. (2019) also explored the role of blended learning on Iranian EFL students' writing proficiency. To do so, drawing on convenience sampling, 60 senior students of Translation Studies were selected. The researchers assigned the participants to the experimental and control group. They gathered data through pretest and posttest essays written by students. Based on the results of independent sample t-tests, the researchers reported that the writing proficiency of the experimental group who practiced essay writing through the Edmodo application was favorably different from the control group. More recently, Fathi and Rahimi (2020) examined the impact of the flipped classroom (a type of blended learning) on EFL students' writing performance. To do this, 51 EFL students voluntarily took part in this study. The participants were assigned to control and experimental groups. During a semester, the control group was instructed using a traditional writing procedure, while the experimental group was instructed in a flipped learning mode. The students' writing performance was examined through writing tasks. Using paired samples t-tests, the researchers found that the flipped classroom drastically surpassed the non-flipped classroom in terms of writing performance.

For the speaking skill, Baniabdelrahman (2013) explored the impact of using online resources on improving EFL students' speaking skill. To this end, employing the cluster sampling method, the researcher selected 80 first-

year university students. The participants were randomly grouped into the experimental and control group. They were then given a pretest to ensure the equivalence of the experimental and control groups. Then, in order to measure the effects of using online materials in teaching speaking skill, the students were provided with a posttest. To compare the performance of experimental and control group in the posttest, ANOVA test was run. The results of the analysis revealed that there were substantial variations between the mean scores of the two groups. Based on the results, the researcher explicated that employing online resources in teaching speaking skill can favorably affect EFL students' speaking proficiency. In a similar vein, Wulandari (2019) attempted to investigate the effects of online materials on enhancing EFL students' speaking proficiency. To do this, 28 Indonesian university students took part in the study. For the sake of comparison, they were placed into experimental and control groups. To assess probable improvements, the researcher administered pretest and posttest. Analyzing the results of the posttest, the researcher found that the implementation of online resources (Instagram Vlog) improved the speaking proficiency of students in terms of accuracy, fluency, syntax, and vocabulary.

Finally, for the listening skill, Pei and Suwanthep (2019) studied the impact of web-based listening practices on EFL learners' listening comprehension. To this end, 67 EFL students were selected from a second-tier Chinese university. Since no initial differences were found among the participants in terms of listening proficiency, the researchers randomly assigned them into experimental and control groups. To measure students' listening proficiency, the listening parts of two TOEFL sample tests were distributed among the participants both before and after the treatment. In addition, in order to examine students' attitudes and perceptions towards

using web-based resources in teaching listening skill, a semi-structured interview was used. To analyze the quantitative data, two-factor ANCOVA was performed. The results indicated that the participants of the experimental group made significantly greater improvements in their listening proficiency than their counterparts did. The results of interviews also admitted the reported growth in listening abilities. In the reviewed literature, several studies have already been published by scholars around the world, presenting studies on the consequences of online learning for EFL students' language proficiency (e.g., Hamouda, 2020; Wulandari, 2019). However, no research study has been conducted to explore the probable effects of online learning on all language skills simultaneously. In addition, much of the previous research in this era examined the role of online education on students' language skills empirically (e.g., Ghahari & Ameri-Golestan, 2013; Pei & Suwanthep, 2019). Thus, the voices (i.e., viewpoints) of the students regarding the advantages and disadvantages of online education in learning language skills are not extensively heard. Furthermore, all previous studies have explored the effects of well-planned online learning courses on EFL students' language skills (e.g., Bataineh & Mayyas, 2017; Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017, 2018; Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017). Thus, the effects of those online courses which were offered in response to a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic have not been studied.

Hence, the present study tries to fill these gaps by investigating the role of EDE in the learning of all English language skills during COVID-19 based on Iranian EFL students' viewpoints. In doing so, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the advantages of EDE for learning English language skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading) perceived by Iranian undergraduate EFL students?
2. What are the disadvantages of EDE for learning English language skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading) perceived by Iranian undergraduate EFL students?
3. Which language skill is most positively influenced by EDE for Iranian undergraduate EFL students?
4. Which language skill is most negatively influenced by EDE for Iranian undergraduate EFL students?
5. What are the possible solutions for solving the challenges that Iranian undergraduate EFL students face in emergency distance education contexts?

Method

The present study is pure qualitative research, relying on thematic analysis (TA). Thematic analysis is "a descriptive method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6).

Research Context

With the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries have shut down their educational contexts and turned to online education. In the same way, universities in Iran are also forced to undergo an abrupt shift to EDE contexts to control the spread of Coronavirus by minimizing physical contact. Hence, Iranian faculty members and students left their FTF classes

and moved into distance education contexts. This new mode of education caused some problems for teachers and students at all phases of education.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran, the migration of universities to online platforms did not similarly influence all educational contexts: some were already undertaking online classes, some were planning, and some were attempting to do their best in transforming. However, during the second wave of virus, the most prevalent practice of all universities was adopting a virtual platform in which students could receive instructions both synchronously and asynchronously. For now, the direction of higher education institutions, notably universities for the academic year 1399–1400 (2020-2021), remains unclear for some options, including online, FTF, and hybrid classes.

Participants

A total of 170 Iranian undergraduate EFL students majoring in TEFL and English Literature were selected from different universities of Iran. The rationale for selecting university students as the participants of the study was that they are amongst the main people who have been directly affected by EDE. The study employed maximum variation sampling to document the range of unique distinctions and examine how English language students perceive their learning during the COVID-19 pandemic,. It is a purposeful sampling strategy that aims to sample for heterogeneity (Ary et al., 2018). To maximize variation among the participants that contributes to the representativeness and credibility of the findings (Nassaji, 2020; Patton, 2015), the 170 students were selected from both genders (57 male and 113 female), different age levels (M = 21), different majors (i.e., 130 TEFL students and 40 English Literature students), and different types of university

(i.e., State University, Islamic Azad University, and Payame Noor University).

The respondents were chosen based on their willingness to take part in the study. The participants filled out the consent form prior to the study, and they were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and would be used for academic research purposes. The participants were also asked to see whether they agreed to take part in the follow-up interviews.

Instruments and Procedure

Open-ended Questionnaire

To probe into EFL students' perceptions towards the role of EDE in their learning, an open-ended questionnaire was employed. The questionnaire encompassed two distinct sections (Appendix A). The first section aimed at obtaining demographic information, including age, gender, major, and university. In the next section, the participants were asked to answer five open-ended questions about distance education they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The advantages of open-ended questionnaires are that "they are easier to administer (notably when conducted online), provide more time for respondents to complete questionnaires, and do not need to be transcribed" (Friedman, 2012, p.190).

In an attempt to increase the trustworthiness of the questionnaire, the first draft of the questionnaire was sent to seven non-participant Iranian EFL learners. Based on the piloting results, the essential modifications were made accordingly. Prior to finalizing the instrument, all five questions of the questionnaire were checked by two applied linguists who have conducted some studies on online education. The finalized questionnaire was sent via WhatsApp and Telegram to 300 Iranian EFL learners. Out of 300

questionnaires distributed among Iranian EFL learners, 170 questionnaires were returned.

Semi-structured Interviews

To achieve triangulation and reach a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the topic which enhances the credibility of the findings (Nassaji, 2020; Riazi, 2016), semi-structured interviews as the secondary data collection instrument were conducted with 20 participants of the study. Each participant was interviewed individually. The researcher used the same predetermined questions (Appendix A) with some follow-up ones as needed. Due to the adequate English proficiency of participants, the interview sessions were conducted in English.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, to follow the health protocols and prevent the spread of the virus, all the interviews were conducted through an online platform called Adobe Connect Software. All interview sessions were recorded, and the oral data offered by the interviewees were transcribed verbatim for further thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

TA was employed as the method of data analysis in this research. To enhance the credibility of the study, TA was conducted on the whole data by two applied linguists (the researcher and one of his colleagues). Using MAXQDA software, some workable themes and sub-themes were identified. To do so, Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology of TA, including the following six stages, was employed: "(1) Familiarization with data, (2) Generating initial codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the final report" (p. 6).

Before doing TA, the respondents were numbered, and the data obtained through the questionnaire and semi-structured interview were compiled in a separate word file. Then to acquaint with the essence of students' responses, each analyst read and reread them individually. After they thoroughly understood every detail of the data, each of them independently wrote some memos to record initial lists of opinions for codifying half of the data. Prior to initiating the second stage, they shared their memos and opinions for codes. In the second stage, they initiated the codification process through MAXQDA software because "using a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) can improve the credibility of the coding process" (Baralt, 2012, p. 228). Through scrutinizing the extracted data, they generated some initial codes for each question by categorizing students' responses into meaningful labels. The analysts had several codes for each question at the end of this stage. At the third stage, the codes and potential themes for such codes were first established. After reviewing all extracts, the analysts analyzed the related coded data extracts and organized the codes into a set of meaningful themes. For those themes they disagreed with, the debate concluded with an agreement. In the fourth stage, the analysts revisited and named the themes. They focused on initial themes again by examining whether there were any issues with each theme. For problematic cases, they substituted a new theme. In the fifth stage, using existing literature, they identified and named each theme. Prior to terminating this stage, the applied linguists identified the percentage and frequency of codes for each particular theme. Finally, the analysts provided a comprehensive report of the whole process. Using Krippendorff's alpha (α), the inter-coder agreement was estimated as 0.90, revealing a high degree of consensus between the coders.

At the end of this six-stage procedure, the extracted themes were returned to 20 participants of the study to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences because member checking can enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative findings (Birt et al., 2016; Nassaji, 2020; Rolfe, 2006).

Results

The results of this research present the positive and negative effects of distance education on learning English language skills of Iranian EFL learners and the most positively and negatively influenced skill by EDE. On the basis of the research questions, five general patterns arose: (I) "the advantages/positive aspects of EDE for learning language skills of Iranian EFL learners, (II) the disadvantages/negative aspects of EDE for learning language skills of Iranian EFL learners, (III) the most positively influenced skill by EDE, (IV) the most negatively influenced skill by EDE, and (V) the solutions for solving the challenges of EDE contexts". The patterns are represented by a variety of themes and sub-themes. Each theme is directly related to a particular pattern tied with a particular research question. In the following sections, the extracted themes, sub-themes, and their relevant frequencies and percentages were represented.

The Advantages/Positive Aspects of EDE for Learning Language Skills of Iranian EFL Learners

As the first question, Iranian EFL learners were asked about the advantages/positive effects of EDE for learning speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills, respectively. The TA of both written and oral answers related to the positive effects of EDE on learning English language skills of Iranian EFL learners culminated in 28 themes and 24 sub-themes outlining

the causes of this pattern. Some of the extracted themes and sub-themes are similar among different English language skills. The themes, sub-themes, and the statistical data of themes related to each skill are summarized in four distinct tables.

Regarding the advantages of EDE in learning speaking skills of Iranian EFL learners, the TA of students' responses resulted in eight themes and nine sub-themes (Table 1). Based on students' answers, *comfortable environment* (46%) and *speaking engagement* (11%) themes are the two main advantages of EDE for learning speaking skills.

Table 1.

Results of TA for the Advantages/Positive Aspects of EDE for Learning English Speaking Skills

Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Comfortable Environment	Less stress, anxiety, and embarrassment, More self-confidence, More fluency	94	46%
Speaking Engagement	More engagement in speaking activities and practices	23	11%
Properties of Distance Education Platforms	Less interruption, Availability of what teacher has instructed	19	10%
Free Time	More time to practice speaking	17	8%
Use of Computer/Online Resources and Platforms	Wide variety of resources and applications	15	7%
Content and Execution of Online Courses	Appropriate homework	6	3%
No Advantage	_	21	10%
No Answer	_	11	5%
Total		206	100

According to the above table, the most frequent theme related to the positive aspects of distance education on learning speaking skills is the *comfortable environment*. Most of the respondents stated that, due to the relaxing atmosphere of home, they experienced less stress, anxiety, and embarrassment in online classes compared to real classroom contexts. The following extracts represent the students' opinions:

P 1: *I think those who were a little shy or uncomfortable to talk in front of the class felt more comfortable and improved their speaking skill by talking with microphones on the virtual surface.*

P 30: *I feel more comfortable while speaking in my own room without making any eye contact with anyone.*

The second theme related to the advantages of EDE in learning speaking skills is *speaking engagement*. Some respondents explained how online classes encouraged EFL students to talk more and become more engaged in speaking activities. This positive point of EDE for learning the speaking skill was stated by some of the participants through these words:

P 78: *Since the classes are online and the teacher can't see the students, which means there's no facial expressions, students have to speak and explain their ideas during the classes.*

P 83: *Considering the fact that distance learning has caused a change in the typical score system, the emphasis is highly concentrated on class activity so I've been motivated to get more participation points and the easiest way to do so is speaking.*

Concerning the advantages of EDE in learning writing skills of Iranian EFL learners, nine themes and seven sub-themes have emerged from

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students' responses (Table 2). Among them, *content and execution of online courses* (41%) and *more emphasis on writing skills* (16%) are the most frequent themes, respectively.

Table 2.

Results of TA for the Advantages/Positive Aspects of EDE for Learning English Writing Skills

Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Content and Execution of Online Courses	Appropriate assignment and homework	74	41%
More Emphasis on Writing Skills	_	28	16%
Use of Computer/Online Resources and Facilities	Benefiting from wide variety of tools and resources, Faster writing, Less errors in writing	21	11%
Free Time	More time to practice writing	11	6%
Properties of Distance Education Platforms	The chance of reviewing what teacher has instructed	6	3%
Comfortable Environment	_	3	2%
No Advantage	_	21	12%
No Answer	_	15	9%
Total		179	100

As indicated in Table 2, the most frequent theme regarding the advantage of EDE on learning writing skills is *content and execution of online courses*, which refers to what was shared in the class and how the classes were carried out in EDE contexts. With regard to writing skill, this theme is described with one major sub-theme, which is *appropriate assignment and homework*. This sub-theme is closely related to what EFL

students are supposed to do as their homework and assignment. The following responses of participants illustrate this sub-theme better:

> P7: *During this period, due to the fact that the training was virtual and we were given many assignments and projects, our writing skills were highly improved.*
>
> P32: *Due to distance learning, the majority of assignments and projects in classes are done in written form, which led to an increased amount of practice in writing, and finally, an improvement in my writing skills.*

The second recurrent theme which highlights the advantage of EDE on learning writing skill is *more emphasis on writing skills*. Some of the students declared that online education puts a great emphasis on writing skills. To illustrate,

> P 41: *In online class applications, there are chat boxes that are the main way of communication between teacher and students. We have to type most of our requests, demands, questions, answers and other things we want to say to our teachers.*
>
> P 122: *As there is more reliance on writing in online classes, there is an improvement in writing skills.*

Regarding the advantages of EDE in learning listening skills, six themes and four sub-themes were extracted from students' responses (Table 3). Table 3 indicates that the themes with high percentages are *properties of distance education platforms* (39%) and *more emphasis on listening skills* (20%).

Table 3.

Results of TA for the Advantages/Positive Aspects of EDE for Learning English Listening Skills

Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Properties of Distance Education Platforms	Less distraction, More attention, Availability of what teacher has instructed and shared	79	39%
More Emphasis on Listening Skills	_	41	20%
Access to Appropriate Materials, Resources and Websites	_	19	9%
Free Time	More time to practice listening	11	6%
No Advantage	_	36	18%
No Answer	_	16	8%
Total		202	100

The theme of *properties of distance education platforms* is structured into three sub-themes, namely *less distraction*, *more attention*, and *availability of what teacher has instructed and shared*. Regarding the first two sub-themes, many participants mentioned that they experienced less noise and distractions in online classes, which enabled them to become more attentive. For instance, participant 64 stated that,

P 64: *I had fewer distractions in my room than when I was in a real classroom, so I think my listening skills have improved during this time.*

The last sub-theme refers to the capability of the system that students could access the recordings of online sessions whenever and wherever they

wanted. This sub-theme can readily be identified from the following sentences:

P2: *In online classes, teachers can record the class, and students can listen again in order to improve their pronunciation skill.*

P17: *Actually, you can save the audio files that your instructor shares. Then you are able to listen to them every time and everywhere. It can help you improve your listening skills.*

Finally, concerning the advantages of distance education on reading skills, six themes and five sub-themes were generated from students' perceptions (Table 4). As the following table demonstrates, almost half of the statements are related to the theme of *no advantages* (41%).

Table 4.

Results of TA for the Advantages/Positive Aspects of EDE for Learning English Reading Skills

Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Free Time	More time for extra reading/self-reading	30	17%
Content and Execution of Online Courses	Appropriate reading activities and assignments	26	15%
Use of Online Resources and Materials	Wide variety of reading resources and materials	21	12%
Comfortable Environment	Less stress, anxiety, and pressure, More self-confidence	10	6%
No Advantage	_	72	41%
No Answer	_	16	9%
Total		175	101

Regarding the most advantageous aspect of distance education for reading skills, many students stated that during distance education, they had more *free time* to read some extra books and papers. Some statements pinpointing this advantage of distance education are:

P34: *We had more time to read.*

P44: *Due to the pandemic, we had more free time to read lots of novels and books related to our field of study.*

The Disadvantages of EDE for Learning Language Skills of Iranian EFL Learners

As the second question, respondents were instructed to write/talk about the disadvantages/negative effects of EDE for learning speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills, respectively. The analysis of students' responses regarding the negative points of EDE on their learning English language skills resulted in 17 themes and 18 sub-themes describing the sources of this pattern. It is worth noting that, like the previous section, there are also some similar themes among the negative effects of EDE on different language skills, including *insufficient teacher guidance*, *technical issues*, *no disadvantage*, and *no answer*. The derived themes and sub-themes and the statistical data of themes related to each language skill are presented in four distinct tables.

For the disadvantages of EDE in learning speaking skills, five themes and eight sub-themes were identified in total (Table 5). Among them, *passive role of students* (37%) and *Technical Issues* (32%) are the most frequent and recurrent themes.

Table 5.

Results of TA for the Disadvantages/Negative Aspects of EDE for Learning English Speaking Skills

Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Passive Role of Students	Less opportunity to speak, Less interaction among students, No pair/group discussions	69	37%
Technical problems	Poor Internet connection, lack of facility, Sound issues	58	32%
Absence of a FTF Classroom Environment	Lack of eye contact, Lack of body language	25	14%
No disadvantage	_	10	5%
No answer	_	22	12%
Total		184	101

The theme of the *passive role of students*, which is closely related to teacher-centered classes, is comprised of three important sub-themes, namely *less opportunity to speak*, *less interaction among students*, and *no pair/group discussions*. The students declared that in many online courses, the professor is the sole speaker, and there is nearly no chance for students to interact with their classmates and the professor, as illustrated in the following sentences:

P 38: ... *in distance education, teacher talks most of the time. As a result, our speaking skills would not improve much.*

P 28: *Obviously, interaction with the professor and other fellow students is not much applicable in online classes. That is why I think, among the four skills, speaking has suffered from the pandemic more than the other skills have.*

Technical problems, as the second recurrent theme, refers to *poor Internet connection*, *sound issues*, and *lack of facility* (i.e., laptop, mobile). Many respondents expressed that,

P 17: *As a matter of fact, if u want to speak in some applications, it may provide some problems for you. Maybe your Internet connection becomes weak. There are also some noises that interrupt your speaking and make the voice unclear.*

P 36: *One common problem is providing tools like microphones to speak with. Sometimes the microphone has malfunctioned and makes it difficult for us to transmit our voice.*

Concerning the disadvantages of EDE in learning writing skills of Iranian EFL learners, four themes and three sub-themes arose from participants' answers (Table 6). As Table 6 depicts, more than half of the statements (55%) are related to the theme of "*no disadvantage*" which means that most of the EFL students did not experience any particular negative point in EDE contexts with regard to writing skills. For instance, participant 25 stated that,

P25: *Actually, I can't find a demerit for writing skill with distance education.*

Table 6.

Results of TA for the Disadvantages/Negative Aspects of EDE for Learning English Writing Skills

Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Insufficient Teacher Guidance	Insufficient Feedback, Lack of immediate answers	37	21%
Students' Dependence	High reliance on computer facilities	12	7%
No Disadvantage	_	96	55%
No Answer	_	29	17%
Total		174	100

Some students referred to an *insufficient amount of teacher guidance* (21%) as the most important negative effect of EDE on learning writing skills. This theme, which refers to the responsibility of teachers in the educational processes, is accompanied by two sub-themes, namely *insufficient feedback* and *lack of immediate answers*. The following statements shed more light on this theme and the underlying sub-themes.

P115: *We just write some essays, and sometimes we don't receive any feedback about our writings.*

P111: *The problem with this matter is that I can't always get sufficient feedback on my writing due to communication limitations.*

Considering the disadvantages of EDE in learning listening skills, only four themes and two sub-themes have emerged from the gathered data (Table 7). The following table represents that the theme of *technical problems,* which consisted of two recurrent sub-themes, is the most frequent (66%) disadvantageous point of distance education for learning listening skills.

Table 7.

Results of TA for the Disadvantages/Negative Aspects of EDE for Learning English Listening Skills

Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Technical Problems	Low quality of voice, Poor Internet connection	128	66%
No Disadvantage	_	62	32%
No Answer	_	4	2%
Total		194	100

Most of the students expressed that due to *poor Internet connection* and *low quality of voices*, they could not easily understand the audios shared by the instructors in online courses. This theme can easily be illuminated through the below statements.

P24: *Because of some problems with Internet connection, some students may not be able to listen clearly, so they won't get the point.*

P27: *During our classes, Internet disconnects a lot. If our professor plays something for us, we can't hear it well, so our listening skills won't get better.*

Finally, for the negative effects of EDE on learning reading skills, six themes and five sub-themes were extracted from respondents' statements (Table 8). The following table reveals that the most recurrent theme is *no disadvantage* (70%). It means that many students stated that distance education had not any negative effect on learning reading skills.

P 28: *I cannot find any specific negative effect of distance education on learning reading skills.*

P40: *Distance education had not any negative effect on my reading skills.*

Table 8.

Results of TA for the Disadvantages/Negative Aspects of EDE for Learning English Reading Skills

Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Insufficient Teacher Guidance	Insufficient teacher assistance, Insufficient feedback	11	6%
Technical Problems	Poor connection, lack of facility, Technology illiteracy	10	6%
Insufficient Reading Exercises	_	10	6%
No Disadvantage	_	121	70%
No Answer	_	20	12%
Total		172	100

Some of the participants referred to i*nsufficient teacher guidance*" (6%), *insufficient reading exercises* (6%), and *technical problems* (6%) as disadvantageous points of EDE for learning reading skills.

The Most Positively and Negatively Influenced Language Skills

The most positively and negatively influenced language skill were determined through two distinct questions (Appendix A). The following figures demonstrate the results of TA concerning the most positively and negatively influenced language skill. Those patterns encompass five themes: *speaking*, *writing*, *listening*, *reading*, and *none of them*.

Although the thematic elements of these two patterns are all the same, their frequencies and percentages are different. As Figure 1 depicts, listening

is perceived as the most positively influenced language skill (35%) during the COVID-19 pandemic. To illustrate more:

P 25: *As I mentioned before, distance education has a great effect on students' listening skill because they have to listen to their instructors most of the time; so they get involved with the correct intonation and pronunciation.*

P 169: *I think my listening skills because I have more free time to listen to English music and podcasts during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Figure 1.

The Most Positively Influenced Skills
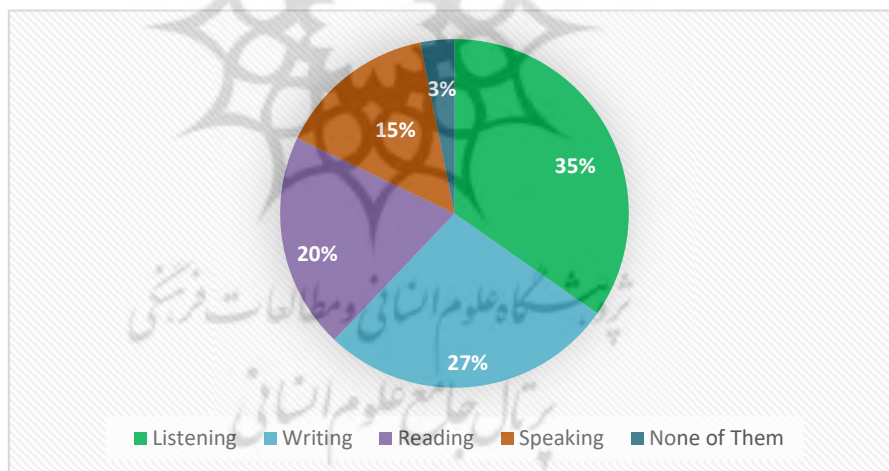
According to Figure 2, speaking is determined as the most negatively influenced language skill with a noticeable difference (55%). To illustrate more, see the following excerpts:

P39: *I think speaking. Because we used to discuss everything in our class but unfortunately nowadays we don't have any partner to communicate with.*

P42: *Personally, my speaking skill was affected mostly in a negative way, mainly due to lack of FTF interaction.*

Figure 2.

*The Most Negatively Influenced Skills*
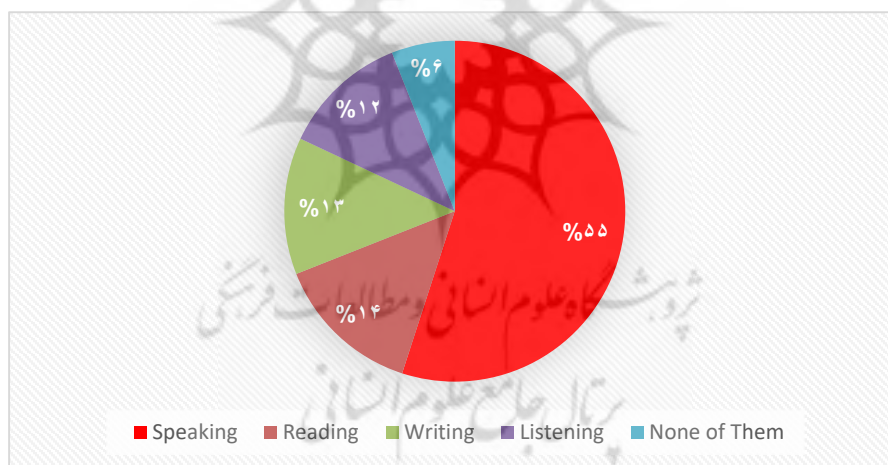
Solutions to EDE Problems/Issues

As the last question, the students were asked to mention some practical solutions to the problems of learning English language skills in distance education contexts. Three general themes emerged from their comments,

including *teachers' role*, *students' role*, and *administrators' role* (Figure 3). According to students' responses, in order to solve the EDE problems, the responsibility of all educational members should be adapted based on online education requirements.

Figure 3.
Solutions to EDE Problems
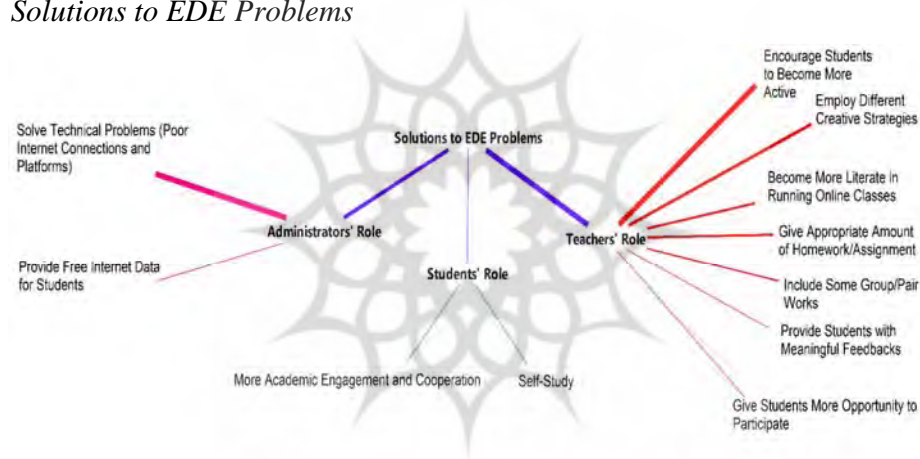
Regarding the above figure, it is important to mention that there is a direct association between the thickness of lines and the recurrence of themes (i.e., the thicker the line, the more recurrent the theme). As Figure 3 reveals, regarding the role of teachers in minimizing EDE problems/negative effects, students enumerated seven practical solutions: *Encourage students to become more active*, *employ different creative strategies*, *become more literate in running online classes*, *give an appropriate amount of homework/assignment*, *include some group/pair works*, *provide students with meaningful feedback*, and *give students more opportunity to participate*.

The following responses of participants illustrate these seven solutions respectively:

P 25: *I think instructors should provide a situation that students talk and participate in the class, for instance, by involving them in some questions and ask them to present their ideas by their microphone.*

P 127: *Use newer and creative methods when teaching because too many presentations are really tedious and seem to be of no use.*

P 10: *I think it would be very nice if our Profs spend some time on how to teach online because some of them just talk in the class.*

P 12: *To my mind, instructors should concentrate more on improving our skills instead of giving a lot of assignments. I don't disagree with assignments, of course, they're necessary. But I think they are just too much.*

P 125: *Perhaps reducing homework and increasing group and pair works instead, can have a greater impact on students' learning in this type of education.*

P 141: *Teachers should check students' assignments and give them appropriate feedback accordingly.*

P 156: *Professors should give students more opportunities for participation.*

Suggesting two important solutions, many students also referred to the role of administrators in solving EDE problems: *solve technical problems* and *provide free Internet data for students*. To illustrate;

P 27: *I think the only solution to our problem is to provide better facilities for students like high speed connection and effective online platforms.*

P 112: *To remove cost-related issues, university administrators can provide free Internet data for both students and teachers.*

Finally, regarding the role of students in minimizing the disadvantages of EDE for learning English language skills, two important solutions were identified from participants' statements: *self-study* and *more academic engagement/cooperation*. In fact, some students believed that some of the negative points of EDE depend on students themselves. They stated that,

P 151: *Students should try more than before and start self-study.*

P 84: *The responsibility and cooperation of students can be helpful for having a better distance education.*

Discussion

This study was an attempt to investigate how distance education is advantageous and disadvantageous for learning English language skills and which language skill has the most and the least advantage under the EDE contexts. The present study also aimed to propose some practical solutions to solve the probable problems and challenges of distance education.

Concerning the first research question, thematic analysis portrayed that the advantageous points of distance education for learning English language skills can be categorized into 11 unique themes: "*access to appropriate materials/resources/websites*, *comfortable environment*, *content and execution of online courses*, *speaking engagement*, *properties of distance education platforms*, *free time*, *use of computer/online resources and facilities*, *more emphasis on writing skills*, *more emphasis on listening skills*, *no advantage*, and *no answer*".

Most of the above themes demonstrate the importance of teachers' responsibilities in designing and implementing online courses. As put forward by Coeckelbergh (2020), teachers can "not only intervene with regard to knowledge and experience but also unavoidably exercise power in relation to that knowledge" (p. 4). Additionally, many students emphasized the significance of online resources/facilities in learning language skills. EDE enabled students to take advantage of numerous computer/online resources and programs, such as spelling-check programs and online dictionaries. Moreover, with distance education, some students could save more hours, which gave them more chances to do some extra activities outside the classrooms.

Additionally, some students pointed out the importance of a comfortable environment in their rooms in which negative feelings (e.g., stress, embarrassment, and shyness) do not exist. Students assume that due to the removal of unpleasant feelings in online classes, they can communicate more easily with their teachers and classmates. With regard to this comfortable environment, EDE enhances students' self-confidence and motivation, which is also confirmed by some other researchers (Davis et al., 2019; Toquero, 2021). Last but not least, the properties of distance education platforms are mentioned as another significant advantage of EDE. Using the EDE platforms, students can access the recordings of the courses with no limitation.

Regarding the second research question, the findings revealed the disadvantageous aspects of EDE with eight unique themes: *the absence of a FTF classroom environment*, *passive role of students*, *students' dependence*, *insufficient teacher guidance*, *insufficient reading exercises*, *technical problems*, *no advantage*, and *no answer*. For speaking skills, students noted

that the main problem was their passive role in online courses (37%), in which they had less opportunity to speak and less interaction with their classmates. This, in turn, prompted them to highlight the absence of FTF classrooms (14%) in which they wished to be placed. Despite the fact that conducting interactive speaking activities (i.e., group work, pair work, and discussion) in online courses with more than six students is very difficult (Payne, 2020), many respondents shared their desire for oral interaction in distance learning. While students perceived distance education as having no disadvantages for other language skills with more than 30%, it is just 5% for speaking skills. For learning writing and reading skills, insufficient teacher guidance mostly caused negative effects. Insufficient feedback, insufficient teacher assistance, and lack of immediate answers were the disadvantages mentioned by students. This finding further supports the idea of Karataş and Tuncer (2020), who expounded that due to the physical absence of teachers in online classes, students need their support and guidance more than ever. Similarly, Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) also stated that insufficient guidance from instructors could be considered as a problem of distance education, since "when things go back to normal, students will not remember the educational content delivered, but they will definitely remember how teachers guided and supported them during the crisis" (p. 3). With regard to learning listening skills, technical problems were the most negative effects students experienced in online courses. They stated that due to poor Internet connection and low quality of voices, they had trouble understanding the audio files shared by their teachers. Similar problems were also reported by some previous studies (e.g., Shahnama et al., 2021; Toquero, 2021).

Regarding the third research question, many students perceived listening skills as the most positively influenced skill (35%). This might be

due to the nature of online courses in which students are just listeners most of the time. Moreover, with the absence of visual connections, students have to listen more attentively, through which listening skills can be improved subconsciously. This finding is in agreement with Pei and Suwanthep's (2019) findings which represented that web-based listening practices positively affect EFL students' listening skills. Considering the fourth question, most of the students declared that EDE had negative effects on learning speaking skills (55%). This can be justified by the fact online classes are often teacher-fronted classrooms in which the teacher is the sole speaker. In such classrooms, there is no chance for students to talk and interact with the professor and other students.

Ultimately, as the last research question, this study focused on the solutions to the problems of learning English language skills in EDE contexts. The suggested solutions were grouped around three general themes, namely *teachers' role*, *administrators' role*, and *students' role*. Most of the students held teachers and administrators responsible for the problems and challenges they experienced in EDE contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic; hence, they provided them with some practical solutions to solve all those issues (Figure 3). It is in agreement with the idea of Gao and Zhang (2020), who articulated that teachers play a pivotal role in resolving EDE problems. Besides, some students criticized themselves as lacking sufficient engagement and cooperation in online classes. They proposed that students should increase their academic efforts to minimize the disadvantages of EDE.

Conclusion and Implications

The present study aimed to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of EDE in learning English language skills, on the one hand, and to determine the most negatively and positively influenced language skill during this new mode of education. This study also intended to offer some practical ways to overcome the problems of distance education.

Based on the research findings, it can be inferred that along with several disadvantages and challenges that Iranian EFL students experienced in emergency distance education with regard to learning English language skills during the COVID-19 pandemic, this immediate transition of instructional delivery to an alternative mode offered some opportunities and benefits for students, including *the accessibility of different online resources*, *the availability of what teacher has instructed*, *comfortable environment*, etc. Besides the positive and negative aspects of distance education, students were asked about the most positively and negatively influenced language skills. Most of the students perceived speaking skills as the most negatively influenced language skill in online courses. Hence, it can be strongly concluded that speaking skills need more attention in online classes compared to other language skills.

As put forward by Moser et al. (2020), being aware of the potential opportunities and challenges of EDE can make it possible for language teachers to ensure more efficient instruction, interaction, and feedback. Thus, language teachers need to be equipped with this knowledge to take advantage of opportunities and solve the challenges. That is why the findings of the present study are informative for language teachers. Additionally, the findings of this research have important implications for administrators. As rightly mentioned by students, administrators are responsible for the

technical problems and challenges they experienced in EDE contexts; hence, they must be aware of these issues to enhance the efficiency of online courses. The findings of the study can easily acquaint university administrators with different technical problems that students faced at different stages of distance learning.

The paper concludes with some avenues for future research. First, the current study was conducted in Iran in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context. To explore any probable changes in the findings, future studies can replicate this study in other EFL/ESL contexts. Second, the instruments employed in this research were limited to semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. For the sake of triangulation, future studies are recommended to use other data collection methods such as observations and close-ended questionnaires. Third, the data of the present study were collected from university students. To see whether the findings can be transferred to other populations, future studies are suggested to be carried in other educational contexts such as schools and language institutes. Moreover, only students' perceptions were investigated in this study. To obtain more comprehensive findings, further research should be conducted to explore the teachers' and students' viewpoints in a single study. Last, by no means least, another line of inquiry is to investigate how students and teachers feel during these online courses, for instance, researchers are suggested to explore the dynamic relationships among individual learning differences such as the state of boredom, anxiety, willingness to communicate, motivation, etc.

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Appendix A (Open-ended Questionnaire)

I. Demographic Information

Gender: (a) Male ☐ (b) Female ☐

Age:

Major:

University:

Year: (a) 1st ☐ (b) 2nd ☐ (c) 3rd ☐ (d) 4th☐

City:

II. Open-ended Questions

1. Considering the distance education you received during the COVID-19 pandemic, write in detail the specific advantages/positive affects you experienced with regard to learning English language skills.

1.1. Speaking skills (advantages of distance education):

1.2. Writing skills (advantages of distance education):

1.3. Listening skills (advantages of distance education):

1.4. Reading skills (advantages of distance education):

2. Considering the distance education procedure, which is the most positively affected skill (speaking, writing, reading, and listening) by the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. Considering the distance education you received during the COVID-19 pandemic, write in detail the specific problems/challenges/negative affects you experienced with regard to learning English language skills.

3.1. Speaking skills (problems with distance education):

3.2. Writing skills (problems with distance education):

3.3. Listening skills (problems with distance education):

3.4. Reading skills (problems with distance education):

4. Considering the distance education procedure, which is the most negatively affected skill (speaking, writing, reading, and listening) by the COVID-19 pandemic?

5. Do you have any comments on solving the problems of learning language skills in distance education?