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Experiencing Virtual Online Classes during the Pandemic: Foregrounding Iranian EFL Teachers' and Learners' Voices

Saeed Safdari [1*]

* Correspondence:
saeed_safdari@iauc.ac.ir
1. Department of English, Chalous Branch, Islamic Azad University, Chalous, Iran

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Abstract

Teaching English through virtual online platforms has been practiced by language teachers during Covid-19 pandemic. The present mixed-methods study aimed to investigate EFL learners' and teachers' perceptions of virtual online classes and examine the potential (non)alignment between their perceptions as well. To do so, 80 learners and 30 teachers took part in the quantitative part and then, 18 learners and 12 teachers of English were selected for the qualitative part of the study. In the quantitative part, the participants responded to a self-report questionnaire on their experiences with online classes. In the qualitative part, the participants took part in online semi-structured interviews. After the questionnaire data provided a general profile of the learners' and teachers' opinions, analysis of the qualitative data resulted in the emergence of two major themes of 1) using online instruction as a productive device in language learning; and 2) efficient learning through communication. EFL teachers' data revealed their belief in 1) fostering interactive classroom through online instruction; and 2) learners' involvement and enthusiasm for classroom participation. It was also found that both learners and teachers expressed satisfaction with virtual online classes and creation of an interactive learning atmosphere through virtual classes, which indicated the existence of relative alignment between their perceptions. The findings of the study contributed to the EFL teachers' awareness of applying online instruction in order to create an interactive learning environment for EFL learners and assist them to be enthusiastically involved in classroom communication.

Keywords: learners' perceptions, teachers' perceptions, virtual online classes

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1. Introduction

It has been recurrently endorsed by research that language teachers' and learners' perceptions constitute a significant factor affecting outcomes of the teaching and learning processes (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). Thus, scholars have delved into multitude of variables that can affect or be affected by perception and may influence the quality of language learning activities (Yates et al., 2020). However, Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to a plethora of novel experiences and unforeseen situations (Bączek et al., 2021; Van der Spoel et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Virtual online classes are the first consequence of the pandemic. Although distant learning and virtual environments were not unheard of and have been around for quite a while, the sudden shift was shocking and abrupt. This shift has enforced a change from traditional classes with all the inherent interactions, learning activities, assessment processes, emotional and affective associations to a whole new system. This novel system of online classrooms takes place in a totally different setting where all the classroom elements must be redefined and rethought. Consequently, both teachers and learners have been exposed to a turmoil concerning their roles, identities, responsibilities, pedagogical methods and techniques. This untimely situation has begun so swiftly that there has not been sufficient time to ponder and analyze its repercussions. The pandemic has turned things over so intensively in such a short time that many years of academic enquiry should be spent on the subject in order to digest and interpret the meaning, significance, and impacts of it on teachers and learners, especially in the field of second language (L2) learning and teaching.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic impelled educational executives to look for alternative ways of running classes. Remote or distant teaching was the first way out (Yan et al., 2021). This new paradigm was not without its challenges. Many teachers and learners were unskillful to use the new platform and could not exploit its full potentials (Martin, 2020). Besides, insufficient or poor infrastructure put another hurdle on the way. Poor internet connections, frequent disconnections, and unavailability of proper devices such as laptops, tablets or mobile phones have been a serious problem, especially in less privileged areas (Zhang et al., 2020). Some of the teachers were reluctant to learn and experience technology-based classes (Yan et al., 2021). However, some reports say that teachers' unwillingness or fear of using the technology subsided in a short time and they got used to it (Curti et al., 2020). Moreover, it seemed that some of them began to hold positive attitudes toward it and develop a preference for taking online classes in the future (van der Spoel et al., 2020; Yates et al., 2020). Students are reported to have experienced more enjoyment and pleasure (Yan et al., 2021). Learners' improvement and achievement during online classes was surprising to many who had believed only face-to-face education can exert powerful and effective influence (Liguori & Winkler, 2020; Martin, 2020). Nonetheless, some researchers and scholars came up with contrasting conclusions. Yan et al. (2021) believe that online teaching may bring about a sense of segregation, which can potentially hinder learners' achievement. Similarly, Yates et al. (2020) hold that social interaction and pedagogy need to combine to empower online instruction in an efficient way, particularly when students do not know one another or lack collaborative competence. Despite the fact that constructive interaction can significantly enhance the quality of online education and learning, it has also been suggested that online classes during the pandemic seem to be devoid of interactivity (Bączek et al., 2021; Yates et al., 2020). They found that a large number of students reported reduced interaction with teachers and preferred in-class communication.

As just mentioned, teachers' and learners' beliefs about online virtual classes have encountered a paucity of research during Covid-19 pandemic. So far, teachers' and learners' attitudes, challenges, and competence regarding efficient use of digital technology and online instruction have been briefly touched (Bozorgian, 2018; Fathi & Ebadi, 2020; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020). Some other studies focused on pedagogical and technological knowledge and skill to use technology for teaching and learning the English language (Alves et al., 2017; Maggio et al., 2018). Nevertheless, teachers' and learners' interpretation and perception of potential strengths and weaknesses of virtual online classes and their merits and/or risks need to be addressed by conducting in-depth enquires. Thus, the time seems to be ripe for doing qualitative analyses of learners and teachers' perception concerning the online virtual classes during the covid-19 pandemic to see how the distant classes have impacted the success or failure of L2 learning. Besides, investigating both teachers' and learners' perceptions simultaneously can lead to new insights into possible alignment or discrepancy between their perceptions.

2. Review of the Literature

Learning environment mediated by online learning that is characteristically different from face-to-face learning contexts (Lemay et al., 2021). Previous studies suggest that students hold relatively positive attitudes and perceptions about online learning even though they may express concerns about working with unknown technology (Cole et al.,

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2017; Muthuprasad et al., 2021). A study by Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) demonstrated that distance learning programs are generally effective and students have invested time and energy when adequately supported and guided. Ease of delivery, imposed punctuality, conveniences in terms of staying home and freedom from frequent commuting have been mentioned as other positive points brought about by online classes (Baticulon et al., 2021; Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021; Muthuprasad et al., 2021). In another study, Mokhtarzadeh (2021) concluded that high achievers show robust engagement in online classes during the COVID-19 Era. In a similar fashion, Davari (2022) and Soleimani and Modirkhamene (2020) yielded a positive appraisal of online writing classes and commented that provision of feedback in such sessions is not only feasible but very effective. However, the erratic outcomes and deprivations caused by the outbreak of the pandemic left a large number of learners short of adequate educational support (Flack et al., 2020). Scholars have expressed worry and concern about the situation in the pandemic and its unfavorable impacts on learners' development (Allen et al., 2020; Lemay et al., 2021). Thus, it is not clear how an unintentional transition to distance teaching and learning could influence stakeholders' perceptions of online learning.

As mentioned above, there have been many critical and worrisome issues about online learning that preoccupied educationalists and may have affected students' and teachers' perception. First of all, stable access to the internet has been a critical issue in learning experience. Yan et al. (2021), for instance, highlighted the impotence in both digital and pedagogical readiness in various settings. Western countries had significantly higher access to digital infrastructure compared to Asian and African countries (Bickle & Rucker, 2018). Thus, students from countries like Iran could experience additional glitches. Basuony et al. (2020) and Agung et al. (2020) found that in developing countries only a small portion of learners have appropriate internet connections and frequent disconnections or low-speed connections have been recurring issues. Another important factor in online learning experience is the availability of effective technological instruments, especially computers (Barbour et al., 2018). Even in higher education, there have been reports about incompatible computers and mobile phones (Niemi & Kousa, 2020; Shrestha et al., 2022). Moreover, as reported by Barbour and Reeves (2009), technical issues could also play a role in students' and teachers' perceptions of online learning. Both teacher and students need to possess sufficient digital skills to utilize devices and communicate online. Those who lack these skills could experience hardship in online classes (Bączek et al., 2021).

Apart from the technical and technological problems, the nature of interaction and cooperation in L2 classes undergoes drastic changes (Basouny et al., 2020). This fundamental shift, inadvertently, affects the quality and quantity of learning opportunities in online settings which by itself, reshapes language learners' experience and perception (Lemay et al., 2021). Interaction is influenced by modality through which interlocutors establish communication. Thus, the interaction patterns are expected to alter in online classes (Barbour et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2021). One unintentional but quite probable byproduct of online classes can be the development of a sense of isolation, which may hinder success and lead to negative perceptions (Allen et al., 2020). At the times when students do not actually see or know each other their mental image of what a language classroom is and serves differs a lot. In addition, there is a risk that their collaboration skills remain underdeveloped (Yates et al., 2020). Several research studies have yielded evidence suggesting that online learning during the pandemic goes without reciprocal and collective social engagement (Bączek et al., 2021). Bączek et al. (2021) also found that student-teacher communication and interaction declined too.

2.1 Research Questions

Based on what has been mentioned, the following questions were addressed in this study:

RQ1. Is there any statistically significant difference between students' and teachers' perceptions about online virtual classes during Covid-19 pandemic?

RQ2. What are the major features of online virtual classes from EFL learners' point of view?

RQ3. What are the major features of online virtual classes from EFL teachers' point of view?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

For the quantitative part of the project, a total of 30 Iranian EFL teachers and 80 learners' were selected from two language institutes in Mazandaran, Iran. The group of teachers included 20 female and 10 male ones. The learners group contained 54 female and 36 male students. The method of sampling adopted in the present study was convenience sampling, by which, the researcher chooses the participants who are available at the time of conducting

the research. Hence, convenience sampling was used to recruit the teachers and students who were available and willing to participate in the present study. In the qualitative part of the study, 12 teachers and 18 learners were randomly invited to join the study again. All of them conceded to do so voluntarily. Nine of the participating teachers held M.A in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and three were M.A graduates of Translation studies. Their ages ranged from 25 to 41 (m= 29.33, SD= 4.12). Moreover, 18 intermediate learners from the same language institutes were present in this stage of the project. Their age range stretched from 16 to 19 years old (m= 17.50, SD= 1.19). The sample of learners included 10 female and eight male EFL learners. All the participants were reassured that the data obtained from them would be merely used for academic purposes and that their personal information would be kept totally confidential.

3.2 Design

The present study was a mixed-methods research project. Following Ary et al.'s (2019) classifications, the present study is based on concurrent design whereby the qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analyzed separately but at approximately the same time.

3.3 Instrument

A self-report questionnaire was the major data collection instrument in the quantitative section of the study. For the qualitative part interview was utilized. The instruments are fully described in the following parts.

3.3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was adopted from Mocanu et al. (2021). It contained 23 items in four multi-item scales focusing on characteristics of online classes: attractiveness (5 items), accessibility (8 items), motivation (5 items), and efficiency (5 items). All the items were constructed on a five point Likert-type scale. Internal consistency of the questionnaire was estimated through Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The reliability estimate was for the scales were (α= 0.75) for attractiveness, (α= 0.78) for accessibility, (α= 0.74) for motivation, and (α= 0.82) for efficiency.

3.3.2 Interview

Semi-structured interviews were utilized to explore both learners' perceptions about virtual online classes and see whether they were online instruction during Covid-19 pandemic. Interview sessions were performed via online conversation with learners and teachers. Every individual was met in a different meeting where general prompt questions were asked letting individual participants verbalize their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences. To make verbalization more comfortable and easy, the interviews were conducted in their native language–Persian. The interview questions were designed so to prompt the respondents begin from general ideas and experiences and then move toward more specific and detailed notions regarding what they felt, practiced, and experienced during online classes. The content validity of the questions was acknowledged by three expert researchers who had sufficient experience in conducting research studies in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

3.4 Procedure

Initially, the questionnaire was administered to both teachers and learners. The administration procedure took place online via Google Form platform. The qualitative section was based on interpretation of the data obtained through interview sessions. This part of the study was conducted in two phases: learners' interview and teachers' interview. The data were collected during 40 days. In the first phase, the researcher held general online sessions with the learners. Each learner was interviewed in Skyroom– the same platform where the learners attended their classes. After learners' interview, the second phase of the study was run with EFL teachers' interviews to explore their perceptions of online virtual classes. Similarly, Skyroom platform was used for facilitating the interview process. Each interview session lasted for around 30 minutes on average. The interview sessions, normally, began with greetings and a brief explanation of objectives of the study to put interviewees at ease and comfort. Then, general questions were asked which led to further more specific ones. Care was taken to give as much time needed to the respondents to express their ideas and opinions freely without unnecessary interruption. The interview sessions were audio-recorded for further analysis. Finally, necessary precautions were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the data through principles of credibility, transferability, conformability, and dependability.

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3.5 Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were subjected to statistical analysis through SPSS version 20. An independent samples t-test was used to compare learners' and teachers' responses. Furthermore, learners' and teachers' interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were read several times so that the researcher could make sufficient familiarity with the content of the data. Afterwards, the data were analyzed via qualitative data analysis procedure through three stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, significant and meaning-carrying parts of the transcripts were coded and when applicable, groups of codes were assigned a category. In axial coding of the data meaningful connections between the categories were established. Finally, via selective coding, a unified category of learners' and teachers' perceptions of online virtual classes was achieved.

4. Results

4.1 Investigation of the 1st Research Question

In order to analyze the quantitative data and answer the first research question, the questionnaire data were put to descriptive and inferential statistical analyses as presented in the following section.

4.1.1 Descriptive Statistics

Before running any major statistical analysis, descriptive statistics for the data were computed. Results are presented in Table 1. As Table 1 presents, accessibility gained the highest mean score among both teachers (m= 3.78) and students (m= 3.95) and similarly, efficiency mean score was calculated to be the lowest for teachers (m= 3.00) while motivation (m= 2.95) achieved the lowest mean score for learners. To facilitate grasp of the data, they are visually represented in Figure 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Teachers (n= 30)		Learners (n= 80)	
component	mean	SD	mean	SD
attractiveness	3.26	0.77	3.68	0.48
accessibility	3.78	0.52	3.95	0.28
motivation	3.08	0.65	2.95	0.53
efficiency	3.00	.044	3.17	0.57

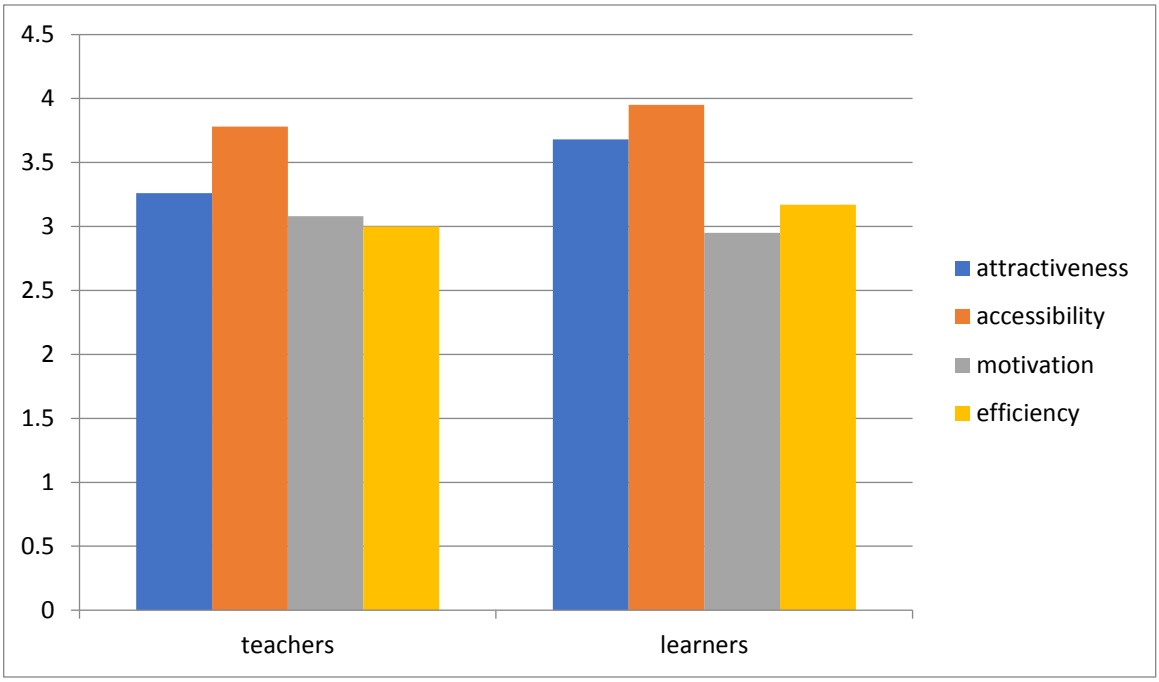


Figure 1. Teachers' and learners' mean scores

In order to pave the way for statistical comparisons, the distribution of the data was checked and secured by running the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality. Results are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality

Data sets	Statistic	Sig.
teachers' data	0.879	0.005
Learners' data	0.223	0.043

4.1.2 Inferential Statistics

After considering the preliminary assumptions, a series of independent samples t-tests were conducted to see if there were any statistically significant differences between the way learners and teachers perceived virtual online classes. Summary of the results are provided in Table 3. As Table 3 demonstrates, with p values above the 0.05 level of significance in all cases, it can be stated that there was no statistically significant difference between teachers' and learners' perceptions in any of the four scales. It means that both teachers and learners held similar opinions concerning online classes and their respective features during the pandemic.

Table 3. Results of t-tests for comparing mean scores of teachers and learners

	t value	df	Sig.
attractiveness	2.021	108	0.13
accessibility	3.415	108	0.25
motivation	2.237	108	0.09
efficiency	3.895	108	0.88

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4.2 Investigation of the Second Research Question

Learners' data analysis revealed two main thematic categories: 1) using online instruction as a productive device in language learning, and 2) efficient learning through communication. The categories are explained and discussed below.

4.2.1 Using Online Instruction as a Productive Device in Language Learning

There is no doubt that using online pedagogy for education is beneficial. Obviously, teachers have an opportunity to focus on essential parts of lessons rather than spending the precious time on writing examples on the board. Moreover, learners encounter a class atmosphere that is much more engaging and attractive for learning. As to the use of virtual online classes, the majority of students (n= 18) mentioned that it was the most effective strategy for learning and practicing language skills they had ever experienced. They also stated that colorful texts and visually appealing parts, which were available in the online platform, were the most interesting parts of online classroom.

The learners believed that the learning environment was equipped with an encouraging platform that supplied the possibility for getting more instances, leading to much better understanding of lessons. By utilizing an online platform, it assisted the teacher to provide more examples on the subject of lessons and use the moments for more vital parts of the lesson. Most of the students indicated a preference for the use of online mobile applications, such as WhatsApp, over the teacher's handwriting and the classroom setting. As the learners mentioned, handwriting was one of the teachers' challenges during teaching process. It seems that because of lack of time, teachers have to write examples on the board as fast as they can; therefore, sometimes it might be difficult for learners to read their handwriting and miss the lesson points. This matter would decrease their attention and motivation for noticing the lessons. The extracts below reveal the learners' positive attitudes toward online pedagogy. It is notable that the English version of learners' interview transcripts were provided since their native language was Persian and interview was done in the learners' native language.

Extract 1.

I have to say that during Covid-19, we had no option to take part in online classes. At first, it was very hard for us, because we had no experience of it before. But, gradually, it was interesting for us. The activities were helpful and we wanted to play the role in the classroom and share our ideas. It was more helpful than the class we had before Covid-19. I enjoyed the platform.

Extract 2.

I feel that Skyroom helped me deal with listening tasks because of the availability of various examples and pictures. I am interested in online learning because it provides larger fonts, colorful texts. Generally I can say they are better than our teacher's handwriting.

4.2.2 Efficient Learning through Communication

Interaction in the online environment offers learners a chance to be associated with discovering procedure. Almost all of the learners (n = 18) believed favorably that making use of Skyroom platform offered the opportunity to exercise their communicative skills. They suggested that in this way the instructor checked their interaction and also they gained from peer communication. Therefore, they might see a significant discrepancy between language learning with modern technology and also what they have actually experienced throughout classroom environment in which the teacher was the sole speaker through the course and also learners acted as robotics that had to duplicate his/her speech. Making use of various sorts of listening and speaking tasks in an online atmosphere made learners more inspired for learning and taking an active part in the online class.

All of students were involved in the learning process. They attempted to be more active in class discussion than their classmates. In fact, it appeared that virtual online classes could pave that way for learners to enthusiastically take part in the learning context and actively take part in contrast with the classroom learning setting. In other words, qualitative analysis of the learners' interview data demonstrated that they were eager to make use of modern technology as it produced communication and they could boost their communication by sharing their concepts with their classmates and the teacher as well. It is worth mentioning that they had developed positive appraisals concerning virtual online classes given that it triggered an interactive and constructive environment for their learning outcomes. The extracts below reveal their perceptions accordingly:

Extract 3.

I think that in our classroom everything was perfect. When we were working in Skyroom and when we were discussing the tasks in the online platform; in my opinion, there was no extra activity to make the students boring. Specially, the grammar activities, we could say them in the sentence and make a lot of sentences…it is very nice when learning grammar is in this way by sharing your answers and receiving your classmates' feedback.

Extract 4.

I actually like the moment when teacher makes use of Skyroom; I mean when our online class started, it was exciting. You know ... because this platform is mainly used in classes of different language institutes during Covid-19 pandemic, it is actually motivating when we make use of it in learning English. I truly appreciate it. This makes me to be extra active in discussions. Besides, it provides further assistance for those learners that are a little reluctant to take part in groups.

4.3 Investigation of the Third Research Question

The third research question of the study qualitatively examined the EFL teachers' perceptions. The emerged categories were: 1) fostering interactive classroom through online instruction; and 2) learners' involvement and enthusiasm for classroom participation. Each category is explained below and a few extracts are provided for clarification.

4.3.1 Fostering Interactive Classroom through Online Instruction

Semi-structured interviews revealed that all the teachers (n = 12) who benefited from virtual online platform in their classes attempted to highlight the meaningful interaction they had experienced in conducting their instruction. In fact, it appears that they were totally satisfied with the learning environment they had provided for learners in order to carry out the tasks more cooperatively with the teacher or benefit from peer scaffolding as interactively as possible. More importantly, they believed in the effective role of online learning environment in creating such an interactive atmosphere for them to implement the materials and trigger learners' interaction. In order to confirm their perceptions of fostering interactive classroom, the teachers' interview extracts are provided below:

Extract 5.

I believe that in an online platform, the teacher has more flexibility in providing the materials and fostering more classroom interaction. In other words, when time is saved in an online environment, the teacher has less challenge regarding class time and try to develop more learners' interactions by using more communicative tasks in teaching skills and sub-skills.

Extract 6.

The online platform that we had used during the term could help us to change our learners' point of view regarding online learning and the fact that how our interactions with our learners could be so much facilitative in the classroom. I can admit that the learners could successfully get used to an interactive class and there was no source of concern or anxiety in carrying out various tasks.

4.3.2 Learners' Involvement and Enthusiasm for Classroom Participation

By scrutinizing the interview data, it can also be inferred that teachers' perceptions were directed toward the undeniable role of online instruction in paving the way for learners' development of language skills and sub-skills through taking advantage of using the variety of tasks. In fact, the task-based classroom was facilitated and made possible by online learning. This advantageous outcome paved the way for an intriguing environment, and resulted in the learners' heightened eagerness to be energetically involved in the classroom activities. Consequently, learners were more satisfied of the learning process. This testifies the meticulous selection of tasks by the teacher, a fact that won the learners' admiration in their interviews, as depicted in extracts presented above.

It was pointed out that when the learners were exposed to online instruction, they were more enthusiastic to feel that they were the members of the classroom, leading them to be more engaged in classroom participation. The teachers believed that all learners showed their eagerness to be involved in carrying out the tasks and be assigned a role by the teacher in order to do a particular activity. It seems that interactive classroom and using a variety of tasks provided a more intimate learning atmosphere for the learners to enjoy such cooperation with the teacher as well as each other,

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which could result in facilitative development of language skills. Extracts below highlight the teachers' viewpoints regarding the creation of interactive classroom to involve them in doing activities enthusiastically.

Extract 7.

The teacher can play an important role in creating a supportive learning environment. He can ask learners to take their time by working on a variety of activities through which all learners try to work on them in a collaborative fashion. The teacher provides different formats of tasks in order to provoke learners' participation and learners can spontaneously be involved in the classroom interaction.

Extract 8.

I could touch the learners' sense that they were always waiting for the next class because it was an active class and it was so useful for them when they felt that they are the teachers because they learnt how to assess each other. These activities in online learning environment resulted in increasing the learners' eagerness to be voluntarily involved in doing the tasks, which could enhance their learning opportunities as well.

5. Discussion

The current study intended to explore EFL learners' and teachers' perceptions of virtual online classes during Covid-19 pandemic on one hand, and investigate the alignment between their beliefs on the other. Examination of the alignment between EFL learners' and teachers' perceptions of virtual online classes confirmed the agreement concerning their perceptions of online pedagogy and its related characteristics. Both learners and teachers held positive views toward the application of online platform for conducting language classes. This similarity is reminiscent of the findings of some previous studies which pointed out the satisfaction of both teachers and students in online classes (e.g., Lemay et al., 2021; Mokhtarzadeh, 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Yates et al., 2020; Yan et al., 2021).

Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews through grounded theory and the categorization of the data revealed the emergence of two components of 1) using online instruction as a productive device in language learning; and 2) efficient learning through communication with respect to learners' perceptions. EFL teachers' perceptions lied in the manifestation of two main categories including 1) fostering interactive classroom through online instruction; and 2) learners' involvement and enthusiasm for classroom participation. Finally, interview results revealed a relatively strong alignment between the learners' and teachers' perceptions of virtual online classes as they both were satisfied with online pedagogy and acknowledged the interactive learning environment caused by an online platform.

Congruity between the qualitative and quantitative data is salient. Analysis of both data sets brought about identical outcomes. Both groups of participants concurred that they were satisfied with the application of virtual online classes in paving the way for learners to be eagerly involved in doing the online tasks. The variety of activities that can be used in online platform could make a learner be more motivated in the classroom. In addition, an online learning environment, such as Skyroom, was a new experience of online learning for the learners as well as teachers during Covid-19 pandemic, which was a source of motivation for teachers to benefit from all the existing materials more consciously and help learners to eager perform their best in conducting the provided activities. In the conditions in which teachers attempt to trigger the learners' motivation to take an active part in the online classroom, and learners themselves are inspired enough to carry out the tasks, it can be assumed that both teachers and learners are satisfied with the online pedagogy as pointed out in their interviews.

Another important common point was fostering an interactive learning environment through an online platform. Learners' and teachers' perceptions showed that there were meaningful teacher-learner and peer interactions caused by online instruction. In an online platform, teachers had more time flexibility in promoting peer interactions through various activities to improve learners' language learning success. Similarly, learners agreed that online learning environment was motivating for them to share their ideas with their classmates and be actively involved in classroom communication. It was also beneficial for the more reticent learners to be more courageous in their communications and try their chances of speaking in contrast with the face-to-face classroom.

The findings of the study also indicated the learners' positive perceptions of virtual online classes in paving the way for them to benefit from online instruction as an effective device to experience a communicative learning environment. The study, to a large extent, revealed that virtual online classroom can be effectively employed to work for the betterment of English language learning within a communicative context. The present research study found empirical support for Yan et al.'s (2021) and Yates et al.'s (2020) findings. They concluded that learners were satisfied with

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online pedagogy since it can facilitate language learners' involvement in an interactive learning context. Furthermore, they would enthusiastically participate in the activities and processes pertaining to language learning, and as a result, enhance their productive and receptive skills. Findings are also in alignment with Wang et al.'s (2020) results. They highlighted the fact that online instruction devices were the most preferred tools for foreign language learning. These observations are consistent with the findings of Lemay et al. (2021) and Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021).Therefore, it is a judicious decision to give more room to online language instruction, computer programs, and mobile phone applications. Such technological aids have the potency to serve language teaching and learning.

EFL teachers' interview data attested the efficiency of online instruction in teaching language skills and sub-skills through fostering an interactive learning environment and helping learners to take an active and enthusiastic part in the classroom. Results revealed that teachers believed in the quality teaching as caused by the virtual online classes being aligned with research studies done by Curti et al. (2020), Bozorgian (2018), as well as Fathi and Ebadi (2020), which highlighted teachers' positive perceptions to benefit from online instruction and at the same time achieving the learners' success while they are doing the target language tasks communicatively. Learners' much inspiration in the online learning environment was uncovered among teachers' interviews, confirming the truth that learners' language learning as well as their fruitful interaction with their peers improved with the online platform. This finding is inconsistent with a number of previous studies that highlighted the complexity and difficulty of interaction in virtual environments where face-to-face communication is obstructed (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Bączek et al., 2021; Barbour et al., 2018).

Finally, it can be added that both EFL learners and teachers recognized the efficient role of virtual online classes during Covid-19 pandemic in motivating learners to have effective communication and be actively involved in the learning environment. To emphasize the value and worth of using online language teaching, Khatoony and Nezhadmehr (2020) alongside Martin (2020) demonstrated the practical and effective application of online language instruction in providing an interactive learning environment where teachers and learners can benefit from purposeful engagement in an online learning environment. They believed that the enhanced engagement ultimately leads to learners' achievement. In fact, as argued by Martin (2020), online pedagogy can be efficiently employed in the language classroom to help learners' concentrate on the learning tasks and activities provided by the teacher, assisting the teacher to smoothly follow the plans and simultaneously ask the learners to carry out the target tasks by textually and orally sharing their ideas in the online learning environment. They can also speed up their communication and save time to develop more interaction, which causes learners' more engagement in the learning environment culminating to their ultimate success in the challenging process of L2 learning.

6. Conclusion

Findings of the present study bear a number of suggestions for both planners and practitioners. The results show that online virtual classes have the potential to and potency to serve language education in a more serious fashion. Unlike what has been supposed and implied in the literature, online classes were appraised very positively by the participants in this specific study. However, caution must be taken in interpreting the observed results as there are a number of limitations that prevent full generalization of the findings. First of all, the present study was a qualitative one which inherently defies generalization and remains context-specific. Second, the number of participants was limited (still owing to the qualitative nature of the study) hence keeping the findings within the local milieu of the study. Notwithstanding all these limitations, the present study showcased a normal setting where online classes achieved favorable effectiveness. Therefore, it can be recommended to future researchers to do replicate this project or conduct similar studies in other contexts and settings with different individuals. If results of such studies are accumulated and meta-analyzed, then, it might be possible to gain a more vivid and inclusive picture of the situation and make more confident decisions regarding the way online classes can be applied to L2 education.

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