Studying English teachers' attitudes toward speaking tasks in online classes

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Abstract

The present research was an attempt to shed more light on the current wave of teaching English in Online classes. To achieve the intended object, this study examined Iranian teachers' attitudes toward teaching in online classes. To find out if teachers think online lessons are helpful and efficient in helping students learn how to speak, data was obtained through interviews. What makes the present research different from the other language attitude studies is in the context of research, namely Iran, an underrepresented country in the literature concerning teachers' attitudes toward speaking tasks in online classes. To collect the data, the researchers employed interviews. The results indicated that the participants maintained contradictory and ambivalent attitudes toward teaching in online classes. The results of the study may have fruitful implications for teachers and EFL researchers.

Keywords: English; online classes; speaking skill; teachers' attitudes

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1. Introduction

Speaking is the most basic part of communication. Therefore, to communicate well, one must speak skillfully and fluently, use proper grammar and vocabulary, and use appropriate social and cultural etiquette according to the situation. The purpose of teaching speaking skills is to create effective communication among learners. Carroll (2003) noted that "technology is a force worth paying attention to, whether one wants to focus on technological potential, examine the practical use of technology, or critique both" (Carroll, 2003). Activities used to teach speaking skills should balance language input, structured output, and communicative output. Language input occurs from the language heard or read inside and outside the classroom. From listening to a linguistic speech from various sources, listeners acquire material for their speech production. Language input can be categorized into content-oriented input and form-oriented input. Content-oriented input provides information to students. It may also describe learning strategies with examples. Form-oriented input deals with ways of using language. Learners can receive formative input in terms of guidance from teachers or other sources about how to speak in a particular context, how fast to speak, where to pause, what kind of vocabulary to use, and more. This claim is further supported that second language learners, especially low-proficiency learners, may find it difficult to attend to language structure and content simultaneously (VanPatten, 1990).

Of all four key language skills, speaking is the most important in learning a second or foreign language. As Ur (1999) stated, speaking included all the other skills of knowing that language. Speaking is "the process of making and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in different contexts" (Chaney & Burk, 1998). Speaking is an important part of learning and teaching a second language, the art of communication, and one of the two productive skills, which must be mastered in foreign language learning. Speaking a language is especially difficult for foreign language learners because effective oral communication requires the ability to use language appropriately in social interactions (Shumin, 2002). Good speaking skills are the act of producing words that can be understood by listeners. According to Brown and Yule (1983), speaking is the skill on which students are most judged in real-life situations. It is an important part of everyday interaction usually the first impression received from a person is based on their ability to speak fluently and comprehensively. Therefore, teachers must prepare students as much as possible so that they can speak English efficiently in the real world outside the environment.

In the past decade, the use of online learning has expanded, especially in higher education. Online learning is leading this demand, as "in all cases, the proportion reporting increased demand for online offerings is greater than for corresponding in-person offerings" (Allen & Seaman, 2009). Comparing online and face-to-face courses is a complex and potentially deceptive endeavor (Bagheri et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2021). Online learning outcomes are influenced by a variety of factors, including student motivation and demographics, instructional design, and strategies, as well as technology choices. These factors can affect online courses in unique ways, thus potentially compromising the validity and reliability of comparative approaches. Online courses need to motivate online learners to invest the time and effort necessary to succeed study consistently, working hard and learning, and actively participating in online courses (Styer, 2007). However, the straightforward approach of comparative studies is compelling. Since online courses initially replicated face-to-face courses, it is hard to resist the temptation to compare these two environments.

Another important integration of online practice in the language classroom is to facilitate time management. Online practice can support teachers and students in planning their lives. Course instructors and learners can share and coordinate to complete the course. The online practice also provides students with responsibility. It forces students to check their goals with teacher-set schedules and deadlines. One of the fastest growing trends in technology use today is online training as part of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) or Learning Management Systems (LMS), a technology-based program designed to manage, track, and learn, and it is also designed to create courses, student registration, and progress monitoring (Lewis, 2017). Additionally, the study of LMS has become significant in ELT. Kasim and Kalid (2016) examined choosing the right learning management system

(LMS) for the higher education institution context in a Malaysian University. This systematic review found that the lecturer chose the right platform according to its specification and the needs of the users. The platform had to be up-to-date. Moodle, one of the popular free and open-source learning management systems became the best selection among some learners because of its wide range of functions that met the student's needs and teacher requirements, such as up-to-date resources and user-friendliness. Online practice motivates learners to overcome their goals and the teachers to introduce new styles of teaching the language through technology (Woldetsadik et al., 2022; Shadiev & Wang 2022; Fathi et al., 2024).

1.1. Literature review

The teachers had three main challenges in teaching speaking via online learning, namely: lack of interaction, lack of knowledge about software for online learning, and lack of ways to apply various teaching methods. This may be because the generalized learning assumptions associated with collaborative learning tasks are often applied in an online environment where they may be less focused on delivery and more attention to task/content (Graham & Misanchuk, 2004). English conversation skills require high-level experience and a good background. Speaking is very important in people's daily life. Speaking is one of the ways of verbal communication of ideas and messages. For students to communicate, we need to use language in real communication. Furthermore, Brown (2004) argues that speaking is an interactive process of meaning construction that involves producing, receiving, and processing information. When someone speaks, they must be able to make sense of the information in context. For example, status context and participation. From the above definition, it can be concluded that speaking is the process of expressing ideas to make meaning. Online learning brings different social attitudes because students have limited interaction (Siemens et al., 2005). Gathumbi & Masembe (2005) and Goldfeld et al., (2022) identified learner-centered classroom activities, including storytelling, lectures, and debates. Group discussions and peering can alleviate the problem of poor oral skills (Homayouni, 2022). A student-centered approach allows learners to work together, not feel intimidated, correct each other, and practice English language skills in a classroom rather than in a teacher-centered manner.

Speaking is an important part of communication, especially in language learning for social interaction and other communication purposes on various occasions. Richard (2005) said that there is a constant need for good communication skills in English with high demand around the world. Speaking is one of the essential skills in English because it occupies the top position. Therefore, English teachers should prioritize English skills in the classroom. This shows that a real communicative approach should be adopted when teaching English classes. In addition, English language skills are vitally important for learners in and out of the classroom. In the communicative approach, language is a communication tool. Brown (2007) believes that communicative language teaching methodology should emphasize authenticity, interaction, student-centered learning, task-based activities, and real-world communication.

Effective teaching of speaking skills provides many benefits for communicating in both the target language and the student's mother tongue. speech, and knowledge. Grammar, vocabulary, and phonology of the target language. These domains of knowledge must then be activated appropriately so that they are available for use in regular speaking practice in the classroom and beyond. With the apparent increase in the preference of domestic and foreign students to use online media (e.g., via social media) in the preparation, creation, and management of group assignments, additional possibilities for assessment are fostered (Napier et al., 2011; Atmazaki et al., 2023). Al Hosni (2014) explained that anxiety and unwillingness to speak in class are the two main obstacles to learning English. Teachers in Institutes who teach English should focus on essential qualities such as fluency and accuracy in teaching. They should be fluent and precise in learning English conversational skills and focus on grammatical structures, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Speaking skill strategies were considered communication strategies. Iranian learners are less exposed to the English language because it is introduced to them later.

English speaking skill is considered one of the most challenging aspects of the language for many EFL learners in Iran. Dewi (2015) pointed out that English is used in every corner of the world as a medium to interact with people from different cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds. Talking and communicating happen in different situations. However, it can be said that the most visible behavior is speaking and thus communicating in the classroom, especially during the course learning activities (Yusuf & Zuraini, 2016). It refers to the teacher explaining the material being taught, which is certainly through talking to the students. In the context of EFL countries, where the English teacher has to speak often, it should be clearly explained because English is not their native language (Paneerselvam & Mohamad, 2019).

Previous studies around speaking have been broadly investigated. Especially, in the context of challenges in teaching speaking, numerous studies show that various challenges further become influential during teaching and learning activities in the EFL context. Speaking and writing skills are called productive skills. They are important because they give students a chance to practice real-life activities inside the classroom. Discourse in spoken or written language in a certain context is to achieve communication between the target audience and is considered the main educational tool used by the teacher. It has been noted that learners who interact and speak can achieve better oral skills in most cases than those who are always silent (Namaziandost et al., 2019). Some challenges that occurred are guiding the development of the content, enhancing students' accuracy, providing media to create a fun learning climate, preventing errors in pronouncing the words, and other challenges that are specific in a special scope (Widiastuti et al., 2020).

1.1. Purpose of study

This research aims to discover some solutions that teachers have found in teaching speaking. Another novelty is to become a reference and provide indirect experiences for the Iranian teachers who instruct in online classes. In addition, it can motivate other researchers to conduct other studies in the same scope. In other words, this study mainly aims to answer the following research question:

1- What attitudes do Iranian teachers hold about the effectiveness of online classes in teaching speaking skills in English institutes?

2. Methods and materials

In this study, English teachers' attitudes toward the problems that they encounter in gaining speaking skills in online classes were investigated. The qualitative research method was used in the research.

2.1. Data collection instrument

The data was gathered through interviews to see if teachers find online classes effective and facilitative in promoting students' learning of speaking skills.

2.2. Participants

Thirty-eight teachers participated in the study. The participants were English language instructors at language institutes in Shiraz. In addition, teachers had previous work experience in the face-to-face method to be able to compare their experiences with the online method. However, there was no limit to their age or years of work experience in this study.

2.3. Procedure

To collect the qualitative data of the current research, an interview containing 19 items was provided to all participants. The interview questions introduce the community and the studied sample, some of their characteristics, and education. Each interview session lasted for about 30 minutes. The advantage of such a tool is that it allows uniformity in collecting information from respondents. The collected data was later analyzed to find out the recurring themes. Concerning the teachers' answers to the interview questions, the following table shows the recurring theme of how the teachers perceive

their performance and the feelings of the students in three different categories: emotional impact, training, and strategies performance.

3. Results

Some recurring themes contemplating the participants' answers to the interview questions and analyzing the collected data revealed in online classes. The most frequently recurring themes are categorized based on the questions they address and presented in the following tables (1,2,3):

Table 1

Teachers' attitudes toward teaching speaking in online classes (emotional impact)

Questions	Themes
1-Have you felt insecure while teaching speaking activities in online lessons? Explain.	**Theme 1**: Some teachers agreed that they feel insecure and nervous in online classes because of the lack of knowledge in choosing appropriate techniques in online classes. **Theme 2:** Some teachers believed that online classes do not hinder students' participation and teachers' use of traditional methods for teaching speaking activities.
2-Were you emotionally prepared to give online lessons during the pandemic? Explain.	Most of the teachers claimed that they were emotionally ready, but most of them were anxious about teaching in online classes because of the sudden change to online classes.
3-Do you enjoy teaching speaking skills in online lessons? Explain.	The effect of teaching speaking skills is determined when there is a high level of interaction between language learners, so, in classes where this interaction is less, teachers do not enjoy teaching speaking.
4-Do you think that your free time has decreased since the online lessons? Explain.	Most of the teachers claimed that preparing lessons for online classes was much more time-consuming than face-to-face classes because a series of things that could be said orally in face-to-face classes should be taught in online classes by using and making PowerPoint files so that they could better convey the lessons to the students.
5. Do you feel that you have developed a proper performance as a teacher during online lessons? Explain.	Most of the teachers claimed that they performed better during online classes over time and showed better performance in online classes for teaching on online platforms after a while.
6-How do you feel when your students do not turn on the cameras?	In online classes, students having fewer activities can mean that the teacher is not following the class and by not turning on the camera or microphone, the teacher feels that because of not having eye contact with the student, the student is distracted and not listening to the lesson.
7-How do you feel when your students do not turn their microphones on?	Most teachers believe that those who do not turn on their microphones in online classes may be afraid of this online space, so teachers try to increase the activity of all students in speaking activities by creating a friendly atmosphere.
8-How do you perceive your students' emotions during the online speaking lesson? Explain.	**Theme 1**: The time of teaching in online classes should be less because students get tired quickly. **Theme 2**: Teaching can be exciting for the students if the teacher uses the favorite discussions of language learners to increase their interest in learning online lessons.

Table 2

Teachers' attitudes toward teaching speaking in online classes(training)

9-Were you prepared to develop a speaking online lesson before the pandemic? Explain.	**Theme 1:** Most of the teachers agreed that they had not prepared the teaching materials for the online classes to develop them in the online classes. **Theme 2:** A small percentage of teachers had prepared themselves for online classes.
10-If your answer was "no", how did you manage to develop a speaking online lesson in this new modality?	Most of the teachers use discussions about current world news, which can be very interesting, to increase the interaction of students' speaking skills. Some others tried to increase speaking activities by greeting and dedicating half of the class time to it.
11-Do you think that your students have improved their speaking skills during online classes? Explain.	Many teachers believe that students with active participation can improve their speaking skills, but those who do not show much activity are shy and do not participate in class activities cannot improve their speaking skills.
12-Do you think that your students are more worried about approving than learning in this online format? How is that different from traditional classes? Explain.	Most of the teachers believed that students are stressed and worried about participating in online classes, but most of the students are more concerned about getting a passing grade at the end of the term and a small percentage of students are looking to improve their language skills.
13-Do you think that your classes achieve their aim in this online modality? Explain.	Most teachers agree that they reached all the goals of the lessons, but considering the online modality and checking all its aspects, it can be very difficult to transfer all the goals of the lessons to online platforms.
14-Do you think that your students working in pairs or groups during speaking online lessons is a good strategy? Explain.	Most of the teachers believe that participation in pairs or group discussions can be very important and can be effective in learning the language learning skill and makes all students participate in the activities and this causes fear and stress going away from them.
15 What do you do to create a proper environment in online lessons?	Some teachers agree that to create a proper environment, attractive topics and topics that are of interest

	to students should be used, but others believe that asking them about the events of the previous week or their feelings in Their life case can lead to interesting discussions.

Table 3

Teachers' attitudes toward teaching speaking in online classes (strategies performance)

16-Do you believe that you're teaching in the online learning environment is optimal? Explain.	Some teachers believe that the online class environment is the optimal environment for them, but others believe that there can be some distractions in this environment that they will not encounter in face-to-face classes.
17-How do you separate your work from your free time?	Some teachers believe that it is possible to separate work from free time, but if there is a specific work plan, and a fixed schedule the holidays are free; due to the low income of teaching in Iran, Iranian teachers have to take a large number of classes to be able to afford their living expenses.
18-Do you prefer working offline to working online in order to teach a topic for speaking? Explain.	In this particular case, there were some differences in teachers' answers; Some of them were very satisfied with the conditions of online classes because they could participate with students in speaking activities, and in addition, the introverted students showed more interaction than in face-to-face classes for class interactions. They agree that the current teaching model is not the most suitable or appropriate one for speaking lessons.
19-Which teaching techniques do you consider the best to develop a speaking online lesson?	On this occasion, teachers have different methods for speaking lessons. Nevertheless, some teachers agree that the most useful strategies to develop speaking skills are by providing interesting topics for discussion in small groups or pairs or having greeting time at the beginning of the class to increase the participation and involvement of the learners.

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4. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to examine English teachers' attitudes toward the online teaching method and implementing speaking skills in English lessons. The study also sought to explore the various skills or qualifications required to practice this method, problems that teachers face in the English teaching process, student's reactions to the method during English lessons, ways to enhance students' involvement in English lessons, and attitudes towards learning in online classes. Thirty-eight teachers participated in the study. The qualitative findings were based on collecting the respondents' answers. The answers were later analyzed, categorized, and classified.

In conclusion, one can say that Iranian EFL learners need help to overcome challenges in online classes. Thus, using a communicative language teaching approach in teaching and learning English-speaking skills would benefit both the teachers and the learners. Teachers should play a significant role in teaching Iranian EFL learners the strategies of speaking communicatively. Regarding teaching, the teachers felt that they were not sufficiently prepared for the online modality, but still managed to create an effective speaking class. Additionally, they stated that students who actively participated in online lessons improved because they could ask questions and receive immediate feedback. The teachers also felt that they had achieved the objectives of the lesson.

It was difficult to teach speaking in online courses. However, teachers can cope with those challenges in ways, such as training them through some practical workshops and equipping them with novel and effective techniques. Here, teachers are suggested to always upgrade their knowledge in online learning so that problems can be solved more easily. The findings of this study also indicated that the online teaching method helped students to develop self-confidence and motivation, cooperation and mutual respect, tolerance, teamwork, and new vocabularies introduced through multi-media teaching.

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