**Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics (IJAL)**
**Vol. 24, No. 2, September 2021, 1-28**

# A Qualitative Evaluation of an Online Teacher Training Program in Iran: EFL Teachers' Perceptions

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## Abstract

With the rapid growth of online education, many language teachers are seeking to gain the necessary skills and knowledge to teach English language courses online. This study investigates the effectiveness of an online training program designed to enhance the pedagogical competencies of teacher trainees in online environments. A qualitative approach was adopted, and four experienced teacher trainers and 25 student-teachers who participated in the program during different semesters were selected as participants for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that while both trainers and student-teachers expressed some level of satisfaction with the program's quality, some areas required improvement. The program's strengths included its well-organized course structure, comprehensive training on online platforms, and effective development of online teaching materials. However, participants reported a lack of training on different teaching methods, writing skill, and adequate real teaching practice for future online teachers. These results have significant implications for online teacher training programs in general. Although the online format has numerous advantages, it also poses particular challenges for teacher education. To better prepare teachers for the unique demands of online teaching, future online language teacher training programs should address these challenges. The insights gained from this study can inform the development of more effective online training programs and contribute to the advancement of online educational policies and reforms.

**Keywords:** Online teacher training, Teacher education, English language teaching, Online classes, Online English teachers

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## 1. Introduction

Over time, advancements in communication technology have revolutionized the way learning and teaching are conducted, leading to the emergence of online classes as an alternative to traditional face-to-face courses. Initially introduced in 1992 to accommodate individuals with various commitments inhibiting their attendance in person, online classes faced skepticism due to concerns regarding internet connectivity and limited face-to-face interaction (Daggol & Akcayogul, 2023; Umedovich, 2023). However, they quickly proved to be a flexible and cost-effective solution, offering learners the freedom to study at their convenience and reaching a broader audience (Kilag et al., 2023; Utomo et al., 2023; Xu & Jaggars, 2014; Adebo, 2018).

In late 2019, the world faced an unprecedented disruption in education caused by the highly infectious Covid-19 virus. Governments worldwide implemented strict measures, such as quarantine and social distancing, which resulted in the closure of schools, universities, and other educational institutions. This sudden shift necessitated a rapid adaptation to new modes of teaching and learning, prompting educators to turn to online classes as a means of ensuring academic continuity while prioritizing safety (Peyravi et al., 2020).

Developed countries demonstrated agility in adopting online learning, leveraging advanced technologies and existing infrastructure to facilitate remote course delivery. However, online learning was not limited to developed nations; educational institutions in countries like Iran also embraced this shift. Iranian institutes swiftly transitioned to online education to ensure uninterrupted learning during the lockdown period, enabling students and teachers to participate in online classes (Marshall et al., 2020).

The pandemic-induced shift to online learning served as a turning point for many students who had previously held negative opinions about online education. Despite its challenges, participants in various language institutes recognized the benefits associated with online classrooms (Yan, Zhang & Lam, 2022). Surprisingly, some students continued to enroll in online courses even after the threat of Covid-19 diminished. Recognizing this shift, certain Iranian language institutes adapted their programs accordingly, offering fully online General English classes taught by experienced teachers selected through demo sessions or trained within the institutes themselves.

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As the significance of online education continues to grow, there is a growing curiosity regarding the quality of training courses offered by online institutes for individuals aspiring to become online teachers. This study aims to evaluate a specific online teacher training program, addressing the need to assess the effectiveness and quality of such courses. The findings will offer valuable insights into the program's strengths and weaknesses, empowering educators and institutes to enhance the training process and improve the overall competency of online teachers.

Moreover, this evaluation study is poised to address a critical research gap by directing its focus towards the online department of a specific Iranian English institute. While previous research has offered valuable insights into online teacher training programs in a broader context, there exists a notable deficiency in studies that scrutinize the effectiveness of these programs within the intricate landscape of Iranian educational institutions. By deliberately narrowing the geographic scope, this study takes a bold step towards forging a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of the distinct challenges and opportunities that characterize the Iranian educational context.

This research, therefore, serves as a pivotal contribution, shedding light on an underexplored territory. Its findings not only stand to benefit the institute under evaluation but also hold the potential to catalyze positive transformations in online teacher training across the Iranian educational landscape. In essence, this endeavor is a call to action, aimed at enriching the quality of education delivery and fostering improved learning experiences for students, a mission that resonates far beyond the confines of this specific institute.

Despite the significant importance of training online instructors, there remains a lack of sufficient research on the effectiveness of online training courses. Therefore, this research aims to evaluate the quality of an online training course offered by the online division of a private language institute in Iran and identify areas where improvements can be made. To guide this study, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the online teacher training program as perceived by student-teachers?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the online teacher training program from the perspective of trainers?

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3. What suggestions do student-teachers and trainers offer to enhance the quality of the program?

By addressing these research questions, we can gain valuable insights into the online teacher training program's effectiveness, identify its merits and shortcomings, and gather practical recommendations for enhancing its overall quality.

## 2. Review of the Literature

### *2.1. The elegance and complexities of online learning*

In this era of remarkable technological innovation, the once inconceivable has become a reality: the ability to attend classes from the comfort of one's own home. Online education, facilitated by technological advancements, provides a flexible learning approach that effectively accommodates individuals contending with demanding professional or familial commitments, thereby rendering traditional classroom settings obsolete (Kara et al., 2019; Xu & Jaggars, 2014).

Online education can be categorized into four groups: web-enhanced, hybrid classes, blended learning, and fully online instruction (Arora & Arora, 2021; Smith & Kurthen, 2007). This study is focused on exploring fully online instruction, a mode of education that initially gained prominence in 1981 as a response to space and budgetary constraints (Barrett, 2010; Harasim, 2000).

Bri et al. (2009) have meticulously delineated the quintessential attributes requisite for both online learners and educators:

For the online learner, the key qualities lie in the realm of self-regulation, discipline, and self-directed learning, underpinned by the indispensable development of metacognitive skills for autonomous learning.

In contrast, the online teacher in the online domain assumes multifarious roles encompassing course design, organizational prowess, and technological adeptness, while fostering interactivity among students remains paramount (Berry, 2009).

Online education proffers an array of advantages, including the flexibility of learning from diverse locations, an expansion of available free time, and a reduction in financial burdens (Dung, 2020). However, the pitfalls of online learning manifest in technical impediments,

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diminished interpersonal interaction, issues of academic dishonesty, and the ceaseless distractions that encroach upon the virtual classroom (Axmedova & Kenjayeva, 2021).

The delicate equilibrium between these merits and demerits is by no means universal. According to the research by Palvia et al. (2018), countries such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and China have emerged as frontrunners in the realm of online education. Conversely, Middle Eastern nations grapple with the challenges of feeble internet connectivity, societal resistance, and governmental negligence (Powell & Barbour, 2011). It is within this complex landscape that this study undertakes an evaluation of online education in Iran.

Iranian institutions, exemplified by esteemed establishments like Shiraz University and Iran University of Science and Technology, ventured into the realm of online education in 2011. Regrettably, the study by Rabiee et al. (2013) lays bare the shortcomings stemming from a dearth of government support, the limited technological acumen of both educators and learners, and an infrastructure ill-equipped to handle the demands of online instruction. Consequently, the legitimacy of degrees obtained through online programs in Iran remains a subject of skepticism and scrutiny.

### *2.2. Adapting and thriving: Online classes amidst and beyond COVID-19*

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 brought about the closure of educational institutions, including language institutes, as part of the global lockdown measures recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO). Faced with the abrupt cessation of in-person classes, numerous language institutes made the pivotal decision to transition to online instruction for their students (Ferri, Grifoni, & Guzzo, 2020). These online classes were conducted through a diverse array of platforms, ranging from Adobe Connect and Skyroom to BigBlueButton, even extending to the use of popular social networking sites like WhatsApp, thereby enabling students to sustain their education remotely (Elekaei, 2022).

However, notwithstanding the commendable efforts to adapt, online classes encountered formidable challenges amidst the pandemic, as underscored by the observations of Masuku (2021) and Sarier and Uysal (2022). These challenges encompassed the students' limited familiarity with online learning, instructors' unpreparedness in managing virtual classrooms, the insufficient training provided by educational institutions, the appropriateness of online language materials, and the complexities of assessing student performance.

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Notably, some students opted to continue their educational journey through online platforms even after the Covid-19 outbreak was contained, a phenomenon elucidated by Chernova et al. (2023). Consequently, online language institutes embarked on a journey to equip their language educators with the necessary skills for the digital realm.

*2.3. Enriching teacher training courses: Crafting excellence in educators*

The significance of pre-service teacher training in shaping professional educators cannot be overstated. These courses serve as the cornerstone for preparing future teachers to excel in their classrooms (Brevik et al., 2019). Traditionally conducted in face-to-face settings, these training programs cover a wide array of essential topics, including material development, classroom management, and the art of building meaningful connections with students. Upon completion, participants undergo rigorous evaluations to ensure that only those who meet the highest standards enter the real-world classrooms (Mirhosseini, Tajik, & Bahrampour Pasha, 2023). Furthermore, trainee teachers are encouraged to observe actual classrooms, fostering familiarity with the dynamic learning environments they will soon inhabit (Yuan & Yang, 2023).

The landscape of teacher education underwent a profound transformation with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the world adapted to remote and online learning, teacher education programs faced the imperative of equipping educators with the skills necessary to navigate this new terrain. Many institutions responded by swiftly transitioning to online teacher training courses, aiming to not only prepare teachers for the virtual classroom but also enhance their Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) knowledge, which became crucial during the pandemic (Atmaca, 2023). Some of these initiatives were so successful that they continued offering online teacher training courses as a permanent feature of their programs.

These online teacher training courses introduced several distinctive elements compared to their face-to-face counterparts. They encompassed technical sessions, instructing future educators on the intricacies of online teaching platforms, digital tools, and remote classroom management. Moreover, trainees were guided on the art of crafting materials suitable for online delivery, addressing the unique demands of the virtual learning environment. The shift to online platforms necessitated a comprehensive revamping of course content and delivery methods (Putri & Sari, 2021).

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## 3. Method

### *3.1. Design*

In order to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the quality of online training courses offered by a language institute in Iran, the data collection was conducted in a natural environment. This involved utilizing qualitative methods, as recommended by Creswell and Clark (2011), which allow for in-depth exploration of processes and provide detailed information about the setting and context. Qualitative data also emphasize the voices of participants through direct quotes.

In this study, we employed a case study approach to gather rich and detailed data on the attitudes of both trainers and trainees towards the online training program offered by the private language institute located in Tehran. A case study approach was selected because it allows for a comprehensive examination of the online training program within a specific context. In our case, this specific context is the private language institute in Tehran. This contextual richness enables us to delve deeply into the intricate details of the program's implementation and its effects, providing a nuanced understanding (Heale & Twycross, 2018).

Case studies are particularly well-suited when examining phenomena in real-world settings. In our case, we are interested in understanding how an online training program functions within the dynamic environment of a private language institute. The case study method allows us to observe and analyze the program in its natural setting, preserving the authenticity of the data.

Given the complexity of the attitudes of trainers and trainees towards the online training program, we needed a research approach that permits an in-depth exploration. Case studies facilitate the collection of detailed data through multiple sources, such as interviews.

### *3.2. Context of the study*

The study is set in a private language institute that previously conducted face-to-face classes for learners before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. However, due to the surging popularity of online classes resulting from the pandemic, the institute decided to incorporate online classes alongside its in-person offerings. Consequently, the institute initiated training programs for its face-to-face teachers to adapt to the demands of online teaching during the COVID-19 outbreak. The success of these programs prompted the institute to continue providing training courses even after the pandemic, specifically for aspiring online teachers who would teach in

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the institute's online classes post-pandemic. To ensure a high standard of training, the institute handpicked professional online teachers with prior experience in instructing and training online teachers across various educational institutions.

### *3.3. Participants*

The present study included two distinct groups of participants. The first group consisted of 25 student-teachers who were enrolled in an online teacher training course that was provided by the online branch of an Iranian private language institute. This group of participants consisted of 19 female and six male student-teachers with an average age of twenty-three; the selection process utilized voluntary sampling to pick this group of participants.

The second group comprised four teacher trainers, carefully chosen through purposive sampling based on their specific attributes and extensive experience (Obilor, 2023). As elucidated by Andrade (2021), purposive sampling represents a deliberate and nonrandom method for selecting individuals who possess characteristics suitable for the study's objectives. This method finds extensive application in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research (Dornyei, 2007).

Three of the selected teacher trainers were female, and one was male, with an average age of 30 years. All of them were actively engaged in conducting training courses within language institutes. These educators were provided with a comprehensive briefing regarding the study's objectives. This briefing not only enhanced their awareness but also instilled a sense of responsibility toward the research, potentially resulting in greater precision and reliability in the final research findings. Table 1 provides a demographic description for the two groups of participants.

**Table 1.** *Demographic Information for the Participants*

| | Number | Age Range | Gender | Sampling Method |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Student-Teachers | 25 | 23 | Male (6) Female (19) | Voluntary Sampling |
| Teacher Trainers | 4 | 30 | Male (1) Female (3) | Purposive Sampling |

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### *3.4. Instrumentation*

Ary et al. (2010) advocated the utilization of a semi-structured interview as a potent method for capturing naturalistic and comprehensive data. Consequently, this approach was adopted for data collection from the study participants. The interview questions were meticulously crafted after an extensive review of the existing literature, particularly studies that delved into the assessment of training courses, whether conducted online or in traditional face-to-face settings. These questions were thoughtfully designed to evaluate the effectiveness of an online training course, commencing with inquiries concerning the course's overarching objectives and subsequently exploring various facets of the program's quality. In conclusion, the final set of interview questions was geared towards eliciting constructive suggestions from the participants, aimed at augmenting the program's overall quality. For improved methodological clarity, the interview questions have been provided in Appendix A.

Prior to commencing the interview process, the set of interview questions underwent a thorough review by three experienced English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals. They were requested to carefully evaluate the questions, provide feedback on their appropriateness, and suggest any necessary additions or omissions. The primary objective of this step was to ensure the questions' validity and relevance. Following the incorporation of the professionals' valuable insights and recommendations, the interview questions were finalized.

Before embarking on the main interviews, a pilot study was undertaken involving a team of online trainers and trainees. This group consisted of four trainees and one instructor, and its purpose was to evaluate and ensure the reliability of the interview questions.

Participants were provided with the option to choose between two interview formats: face-to-face interviews and online interviews. Each interview was conducted individually to maximize the depth of communication and understanding. For face-to-face interviews, participants convened at the institute. In the case of online interviews, contemporary social networking tools like Telegram and WhatsApp were harnessed to facilitate the execution of semi-structured interviews with participants from both groups.

During the interviews, the voices of the participants were recorded for later thematic analysis, which involved extracting the main themes from their comments. Prior to recording, the researchers ensured that the participants were informed about the presence of the recorder. This step was taken to address ethical considerations in the study.

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### *3.5. Procedure*

The main objective of the interviews was to gather in-depth information about the experiences of both online trainers and student-teachers. The study selected two groups of participants: 25 student-teachers and 4 trainers from the online branch of a private language institute. To collect data, a methodology involving semi-structured interviews was employed. These interviews were conducted with participants individually, either through various social networking sites or in-person at the institute, based on each participant's preference. The interviews were conducted in a one-to-one session format, allowing for a semi-structured approach where participants' responses were fully recorded.

The collected responses were subjected to a meticulous manual analysis process carried out by the research team. This rigorous analysis allowed for in-depth exploration and interpretation of the data, ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings.

Initially, the researchers undertook a meticulous coding process as a pivotal step in the analysis of the collected interview responses. The objective was to distill the rich and varied content into meaningful categories that aligned with the research questions.

During the examination of the data, researchers identified key phrases and concepts that were significant to the research questions. These elements were used as the basis for coding. Each key phrase and concept was assigned specific codes to categorize the data systematically.

The next phase involved grouping codes based on similarities, creating broader categories that revealed themes within the dataset. The research team engaged in multiple iterations of coding and recoding to ensure the analysis's robustness, adjusting the coding scheme as new insights emerged. Through this iterative process, previously undiscovered themes emerged, enriching the understanding of the research phenomenon.

By following this iterative coding process, the researchers were able to systematically uncover and explore several key themes. These themes provided a comprehensive and nuanced perspective on the experiences of both online instructors and student-teachers within the context of the study, ultimately contributing to the depth and rigor of the research findings.

To ensure the validity and accuracy of the findings, member checking was employed as a verification step. Member checking involved sharing the identified themes with a subset of the study participants and requesting their feedback. Participants were asked to confirm or challenge the themes that had been identified based on their own perspectives and experiences.

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By incorporating member checking, the researchers sought to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings. This validation process helped ensure that the identified themes accurately reflected the participants' experiences as conveyed in the interview responses.

## 4. Results

To answer the first research question concerning student-teachers' opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of the online training program, two groups of themes were considered. The first group of themes maneuvered on the strengths of this course, and the second group focused on the drawbacks of the current program.

The strengths, as reflected in the interviews, are as follows:

The online training course received positive feedback from the participants, who shared their thoughts on their experiences. One of the major strengths of the program was its focus on meeting individual student-teacher's needs. The trainers identified each participant's specific areas of improvement and provided them with personalized instruction. As trainee (1) stated: *"The trainers worked on my individual needs and weaknesses. They helped me improve my skills as a teacher by providing targeted instruction."* Trainee (2) added: *"In the first two sessions, we got familiar with the basic issues of teaching online, and for the rest of the course, we practiced real teaching, which helped us improve our skills."*

The participants were pleased with the logical order of the subjects and the amount of time spent on each section. They announced that the training programs included various courses about working with the online platforms (Adobe Connect and BigBlueButton), online material development, and teaching all skills and sub-skills online. *"The sequence of classes was appropriate, and I had enough time to learn and practice,"* said the trainee (3).

Professional teacher-trainers were another significant strength of the program. Four different trainers, two of whom worked on the adult learners' textbook and platform, and the others focused on teenagers and kids, taught the participants. They provided quality instruction and helped the participants even after class. *"The most significant strength of this program was its trainers. They were knowledgeable and helpful, and they provided us with excellent support, both in class and outside of it,"* said the trainee (4).

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The course was up-to-date and worked on the latest options of Adobe Connect and BigBlueButton as educational platforms. The participants learned about the latest online teaching methods and novel technological facilities they could adopt in their classes. *"This course worked on the latest options of Adobe Connect and BigBlueButton as educational platforms. It gave me information about novel technological facilities I could adopt in my classes,"* commented the trainee (5).

The technical sessions were one of the most significant strengths of the program, according to the gathered data. Learners received enough training about working with Adobe Connect and BigBlueButton and had access to their trainers' accounts to practice more. *"I appreciate that we had enough technical training, and we were able to practice using the platforms in real-time,"* said the trainee (6).

The participants also received enough training on online material development. They were required to prepare various materials for their practice sessions and received feedback from their trainers to reform their mistakes. *"I learned how to develop suitable materials for online classes, and I received feedback on my work so I could improve,"* commented the trainee (7).

Finally, the high engagement of participants during the program was noteworthy. The participants had many opportunities to teach and practice the theoretical issues presented by the trainers. *"We had many opportunities to teach and practice the theoretical issues presented by trainers. It helped us become more engaged and confident in our abilities,"* said the trainee (8). They received the main theories at the beginning of each session, and the rest was spent on participants' teaching practice.

On the other hand, the weaknesses of this online Teacher- training program, according to the collected data, are as follows:

Some participants expressed concerns about certain aspects of the online training course. One participant reported that the trainers only focused on the accepted method of language teaching in their institute and did not provide any information about other methods and approaches. As trainee (9) stated: *"I would have liked to learn about different methods and approaches to teaching languages online. It was disappointing that the trainers only focused on the accepted method of language teaching in the institute."*

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The collected data indicated that there was a lack of training in teaching writing skills during the course. Only half a session was dedicated to this subject, and even in practice sessions, the trainers did not pay any particular attention to writing skills or assign any writing section for the participants to teach. As trainee (10) said: *"I felt that there was not enough emphasis on teaching writing skills in the course. It would have been helpful to spend more time on this skill, especially considering its importance."*

According to trainee (11), although the trainers emphasized the importance of grammar in online classes, they did not give enough time to work on teaching grammar. The trainers taught how to teach grammar deductively and inductively and assigned one grammar section to teach, but most participants felt that one assignment was not enough to become proficient in teaching grammar. As trainee (12) put it: *"The training on teaching grammar was insufficient. I would have liked more opportunities to practice teaching grammar and receive feedback."*

The participants suggested that having more peer observations would be beneficial. Each participant was expected to observe four adult and two teenager classes before their final demo session. However, some found that observing only seven sessions in two weeks was not enough, and they needed more peer observation to become familiar with real class challenges and online teachers' solutions for sudden problems. As trainee (13) noted: *"Observing only seven sessions in two weeks was not sufficient. More peer observation would be beneficial for becoming familiar with real class challenges and online teachers' solutions."*

Finally, the participants also expressed the need for more real teaching practice and feedback. Although the trainers started assigning different sections of the institute's textbooks for teaching from the first session, student-teachers required more sessions to practice real teaching and receive feedback. As trainee (14) stated: *"We needed more opportunities for real teaching practice and feedback from our trainers. It would have been helpful to have more sessions dedicated to practicing our teaching skills."*

To answer the second research question, which focused on teacher-trainers' attitudes regarding the quality of the current online training program, the following strengths and drawbacks were found:

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The online training program had several significant strengths, according to the collected data. One of the primary strengths was the logical order of courses in the syllabus, as trainer (1) noted: *"We designed the syllabus based on student-teachers' needs and covered all necessary issues like online material development, working with online platforms, and teaching four main skills in an online classroom."* The participants appreciated the appropriate sequence of classes and the focus on meeting their individual needs.

Online technicians provided constant support to trainers and learners throughout the course, according to the gathered data. If a participant faced a serious technical problem, the technicians set up a specific time for them to solve their problem privately. As trainer (2) stated: *"The online technicians were very helpful whenever we had a technical problem. They responded quickly and provided us with the support we needed."*

The trainers also gave participants access to their private accounts for more practice, allowing them to log into their trainers' personal accounts and practice working with Adobe Connect and BigBlueButton even after class. As trainee (3) commented: *"I appreciated the opportunity to practice more using the online platforms. Having access to our trainers' personal accounts was very helpful."* This additional practice helped the participants become more comfortable and proficient in using the online platforms.

The online training program had some areas of concern, according to the gathered data. One participant noted that the program was designed as a super-intensive course, with four three-hour sessions every Friday. Although the trainers tried to assign different projects and work on various skills in each session, the length of the classes made them challenging to manage for both trainers and participants. As trainee (4) stated: *"The sessions were long, and it was difficult to stay engaged for the full three hours. It would have been better if the sessions were shorter."*

Another area of concern was the lack of technical knowledge among the student-teachers. Although all the participants were accepted after passing an oral interview with the institute supervisor, their technical knowledge was not assessed. According to the trainers, many participants lacked understanding of technology and social networking sites, despite being online teachers. The trainers had to spend many sessions explaining technical issues each semester, which could have been avoided if the participants had more technical knowledge beforehand. As trainer (2) commented: *"We had to spend a lot of time*

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*explaining technical issues to the participants each semester, which could have been avoided if they had more technical knowledge."*

The third research question focused on the solutions suggested by the participants to improve the quality of this training program. The solutions reported by the participants were as follows:

The participants in this study suggested that the online training program could be improved in several ways. One suggestion was to hold shorter classroom sessions over a more extended period each semester. The trainers and student-teachers found three-hour training sessions to be tedious, and they believed that one month was insufficient for training online teachers. As a result, they preferred shorter sessions over two or three months. As trainee (2) noted: *"Shorter classroom sessions over a more extended period would be better. Three-hour sessions are too long and difficult to stay engaged in for the entire time."*

Another area for improvement was the need for more peer observation. The student-teachers mentioned that the peer observations they were supposed to have during the course were insufficient, and they needed to observe more classrooms before the final demo session. By observing real classes, they became familiar with the challenges of online classes and learned various strategies to utilize in an online classroom. As trainee (5) commented: *"More peer observations would be helpful. It would give us more opportunities to learn from other online teachers and see different teaching strategies in action."*

Finally, the participants expressed the need for more attention to grammar and writing skills. Despite the theoretical lessons and practice sessions about these two skills, the student-teachers did not feel fully aware of the process of teaching these skills professionally. They suggested that more sessions dedicated to these essential skills would be necessary. As trainee (13) stated: *"We need to pay more attention to grammar and writing skills. More sessions on these skills would help us become better teachers."*

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## 5. Discussion

The student-teachers and training program trainers provided useful information regarding the benefits and drawbacks of the online language training program offered by an Iranian private language institute. They aided us in assessing the efficacy of this program and suggesting solutions to the problems we encountered so that we might increase the quality of this course. In order to have a better understanding and to make an easier comparison, the themes are tabulated below (Table 2).

**Table 2**. An Overview of the Themes

| **Strengths** | **Weaknesses** | **Proposed solutions** |
|---|---|---|
| Meeting individual student-teachers' needs | Lack of training regarding different methods of teaching | Holding shorter classrooms in a more extended period |
| The appropriate sequence of classes | Lack of training in teaching the writing skill | The need for more peer observation |
| Professional teacher-trainers | Lack of training in teaching grammar | Paying more attention to grammar and writing |
| An up-to-date program | The necessity of having more peer observations for student-teachers | |
| Enough training about working with online platforms | The necessity of having more real teaching practice | |
| Enough training on online material development | Super intensive program | |
| High engagement of participants during the program | Student-teachers' lack of technical knowledge | |
| The logical order of courses in the program | | |
| Online technicians' constant support | | |
| Giving participants access to trainers' private accounts for more practice | | |

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One of the program's notable strengths lies in its meticulously structured curriculum, which offers comprehensive coverage of essential topics for prospective educators (Jiao, Jamaludin, & Yi, 2023; Paesani, 2020). The program's design is specifically tailored to equip participants with the requisite skills for effective online teaching. In contrast to traditional, face-to-face training courses, which predominantly emphasize pedagogical skills, classroom management, and curriculum development, this online program takes a focused approach in addressing the unique challenges inherent to online education. Trainers have not only cultivated a rich repository of resources but have also developed a profound expertise in navigating virtual classrooms and digital platforms. This approach adeptly caters to the diverse needs of participants while effectively addressing any potential areas of weakness.

The program's cadre of trainers constitutes a pivotal asset (Zarabi, Gharani, & Yamrali, 2023). These committed full-time instructors extend their support beyond the confines of the classroom, offering valuable guidance to student-teachers in their preparation for demo sessions. Nevertheless, there exists an opportunity for enhancement with regard to the program's instructional balance, specifically in the realm of writing and grammar. Presently, the trainers' emphasis is predominantly directed towards pedagogical strategies for teaching speaking, listening, reading, and vocabulary in the classroom, with comparatively less attention afforded to other linguistic skills.

Regrettably, the training program places exclusive emphasis on the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method, as determined by the institute's curriculum. While CLT is undoubtedly valuable, there exists a missed opportunity for educators to enrich their pedagogical repertoire by gaining exposure to a diverse range of teaching styles. Incorporating supplementary sessions that explore various methodologies could undoubtedly prove advantageous for teachers, enhancing their capacity to adapt to different classroom dynamics and student needs (Mahmoodi, Rashtchi, & Abbasian, 2019)."

An essential element of any training program is the opportunity for participants to actively engage in teaching practice throughout the course (Chien, 2023). In this particular program, student-teachers are granted multiple chances to conduct lessons in front of trainers and peers. Nonetheless, due to the demanding nature of the course schedule, there exists a limitation in providing additional teaching practice, which could significantly enhance the future lessons of participants. In Iran, many training programs are delivered

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through intensive full-day workshops (Amirian, Moghadam & Nafchi, 2016). In order to better cater to the needs of participants, it is imperative for institutes to prioritize educational considerations over financial gains and design training programs that are more streamlined and efficient (Smith, 2014).

Certain challenges within the program have been identified and addressed. Issues such as the course timing and organization led to dissatisfaction among trainers and student-teachers alike. The duration of three-hour classes on Friday mornings proved tedious for participants and challenging for trainers to manage effectively. Additionally, trainees would benefit from more time dedicated to observing online classes. While the program includes observation of two or three adult classes, as well as classes for teenagers and children, it is deemed insufficient (Turhan & Kirkgöz, 2023).

Online teacher training courses exhibit a distinct difference from traditional face-to-face classes, primarily in the realm of technical issues. Fortunately, the institute's online technicians demonstrated their unwavering commitment to providing support by promptly addressing these technical challenges. Furthermore, the institute should pay greater attention to the technical knowledge of student-teachers during the admission process. While general English proficiency is evaluated through interviews, this study suggests that assessing participants' technical expertise is equally important. Given that they will be teaching on an online platform, a basic understanding of technology concepts is essential (Bailey & Lee, 2020; Dashtestani, 2014).

In conclusion, the training program's logical arrangement of courses, comprehensive coverage of relevant topics, dedicated trainers, and provision of teaching practice opportunities are its strengths. However, improvements can be made in addressing writing and grammar instruction, allowing for more varied teaching styles, providing additional teaching practice, optimizing course timing and organization, increasing opportunities for observing online classes, and placing greater emphasis on participants' technical knowledge during the admissions process. By addressing these areas, the institute can enhance the effectiveness and overall quality of its training program for aspiring online teachers.

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## 6. Conclusion

In response to the rapid emergence of online language programs amid the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the imperative to equip educators with proficient online teaching skills became evident. To achieve this, the necessity of providing comprehensive online training courses for teachers was underscored (Fissore, Marchisio, & Rabellino, 2020). This research was guided by the purpose of evaluating the advantages and limitations of an online training program offered by the online department of a private language institute in Iran.

The findings of this study revealed a positive level of satisfaction expressed by both student-teachers and trainers with the quality of the online training program in which they participated. Notably, the logical sequence of courses within the syllabus emerged as a commendable strength acknowledged by both groups. The program extensively covered critical facets of online teaching, encompassing the creation of online content and the effective utilization of online platforms. However, a noteworthy challenge arose concerning the scheduling of the program. The requirement of four sessions lasting three hours each within the span of a month was perceived as suboptimal by student-teachers and demanding for trainers. As a remedy, a recommendation was proposed to shorten the duration of each session and extend the program over a period of two or three months. This modification would afford participants a more immersive experience of actual online classrooms, better aligning them with the demands of their forthcoming teaching practice (Ganji, Ketabi, & Shahnazari, 2018).

It was evident that the nuances of instructing various skills and sub-skills in an online classroom diverged from those in a traditional face-to-face setting (Salbego & Tumolo, 2015). Consequently, teacher trainers incorporated sessions aimed at guiding future educators on delivering the four major skills and two sub-skills through an online medium. However, a shortcoming was identified in the program's attention to writing and grammar instruction. These aspects were insufficiently emphasized during the training and were inadequately integrated into participants' practical exercises.

The teacher trainers' earnest dedication to preparing participants for practice and demo sessions was evident. Nonetheless, a noteworthy concern arose from student-teachers regarding the narrow focus on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to the exclusion of other

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pedagogical approaches. An expanded spectrum of teaching methodologies could better equip participants for varied instructional scenarios.

Prior to enrolling in an online training program, it is recommended that more in-depth interviews be conducted with prospective participants to ensure they possess adequate technical acumen (Cheung, 2021). While technical support was consistently available during classes, a foundational understanding of digital tools and platforms remains essential.

This study not only conducted a thorough analysis of an online training program offered by a private language institute but also yielded valuable insights for potential improvements in similar initiatives. By examining both the strengths and challenges of the program and proposing actionable solutions, this research contributes significantly to enhancing the overall quality of online teacher training programs.

The study deserves recognition for its well-organized course content and comprehensive coverage of essential online teaching components, setting a positive example for future program development. However, it also identified scheduling issues, suggesting the need for a more effective and manageable session plan for both trainers and student-teachers. Additionally, the study highlighted shortcomings in addressing writing and grammar skills, emphasizing the importance of incorporating dedicated training in these areas to better equip teachers for online instruction. Furthermore, the exclusive focus on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) underscores the need to introduce a diverse range of teaching methodologies to foster adaptable educators. To ensure that prospective participants possess the necessary skills for online teaching, it is essential to conduct thorough technical assessments.

These insights and recommendations have the potential to elevate the quality of online teacher training programs in Iran, laying the groundwork for the development of skilled future trainers. Subsequent research should broaden its scope to include a variety of institutions, such as schools and universities, to provide a comprehensive evaluation of online training course quality in diverse educational settings.

It is important to acknowledge a significant limitation of this study, which is its exclusive focus on a single private institute in Tehran offering online Teacher Training Courses (TTC). Future research endeavors should encompass a wider range of institutions to gain a

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more comprehensive understanding of online training course quality across various educational contexts.

Furthermore, the study's geographical scope was confined to Tehran, representing the central region of Iran. To attain a holistic understanding of online training programs, future studies should endeavor to examine courses conducted in other cities, thereby capturing a more representative cross-section of the nation's educational landscape.

By addressing these limitations, future research endeavors can attain a nuanced and holistic comprehension of the efficacy and caliber of online training courses offered by diverse institutes across different geographic locales.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A

**Interview questions (Trainees)**

1. In your opinion, did the program meet your needs, and was it relevant to your goals?
2. Were the training goals and objectives clearly communicated to you before beginning the course?
3. How would you rate the sequence and flow of the course material?
4. How would you evaluate your trainers in terms of empathy, expertise, communication skills, and time management?
5. Was the program up-to-date with current online teaching practices and technologies?
6. Did the program provide sufficient information and support for the online platforms used in the course? Were technical issues adequately addressed?
7. Did the program provide opportunities for developing online teaching materials?
8. Did you feel equally engaged throughout all course sections?

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9. Did the program have good linkages between courses, avoiding any unnecessary overlaps?
10. Were there any particular sections of the course that you felt were lacking or could be improved?
11. Did the program provide sufficient opportunities for real teaching experience?
12. Did you find any aspects of the teaching parts stressful? If so, why?
13. Overall, how would you rate the course?
14. Do you feel that your knowledge and skills have improved as a result of taking this course?
15. Do you have any suggestions for improving the course in the future?

## Appendix B

### Interview questions (Trainers)

1. In your opinion, what were the most valuable components of the online English teacher training program?
2. Could you discuss any challenges or difficulties that you encountered during the program? How did you overcome these challenges?
3. To what extent do you believe that the program covered essential topics such as working with online platforms, managing online classrooms, and developing online teaching materials?
4. Were trainees provided with opportunities to engage in real-life practice teaching or observe experienced online English teachers? How did these experiences contribute to your development as a teacher?
5. Were there opportunities for trainees to collaborate with other participants in the program? If so, how was this facilitated?
6. When providing feedback on your students' demo sections, what criteria did you use to evaluate their performance? Were there any challenges that you encountered when providing feedback?

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7. Was there any training provided on how to handle difficult situations in online classes (e.g., technical problems)? If so, how effective was this training?
8. Did you feel adequately supported by the institute throughout the duration of the program? What types of support were available to you?
9. Based on your experiences, are there any suggestions that you would make for improving the online English teacher training program in the future?
10. Overall, how confident do you feel that the program adequately prepared trainees to be effective online English teachers?

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