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Research Paper

Opportunities and Challenges of Implementing Online English Courses in Iranian Public and Private Schools

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Abstract

With the rapid growth of technology, face-to-face education has been overshadowed by virtual or online education. The increasing popularity of this educational mode has inspired a huge number of researchers worldwide to study its potential challenges and opportunities in different educational contexts. Nonetheless, the benefits and obstacles of online English courses in school contexts have rarely been explored, which warrants further empirical investigations into this subject. In an endeavor to narrow this lacuna, the present inquiry scrutinized the opportunities and challenges of implementing online English courses in Iranian middle schools. In doing this, the electronic version of a researcher-developed questionnaire was distributed among a sample ($N = 315$) of administrators, teachers, students, and parents recruited from different public and private schools in Iran. Respondents' answers to the open-ended questionnaire were analyzed using MAXQDA. The data analysis resulted in 3 higher-order themes and 17 subthemes. The examination of the generated themes revealed that virtual education's challenges outweighed its benefits. The study outcomes displayed the majority of participants perceived pedagogical and technical factors as the most important challenges of virtual courses. The outcomes also demonstrated that most respondents mentioned the possibility of reviewing the course content and accessibility of educational tools and resources as 2 major benefits of virtual courses. The study's implications for administrators, teachers, students, and parents are also discussed.

Keywords: Virtual Education; Virtual Courses; Online English Courses; Challenges and Opportunities; Middle School.

1. Introduction

The advancement of technology has brought about substantial shifts in different facets of our lives (Johnson & Wetmore, 2021; Zheng, 2022), and education, as an inextricable aspect of human life, has not been an exception by any means (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2020; Nurieva & Garaeva, 2020). Whereas it is widely believed that face-to-face education is the most efficient method of teaching and learning (Jaggars, 2014; King et al., 2019; Shakki, 2022; Stevens et al., 2021), with the rapid growth of technology (Vassilieva & Drugov, 2019), some educational institutions, including schools, colleges, and universities tend to shut down face-to-face classes in favor of virtual courses. In the past 3 years, due to the global closure caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of virtual education has gained momentum in educational settings (Hari et al., 2023; Traxler et al., 2023). That is a huge number of teachers and students worldwide have abandoned their face-to-face classes and moved into virtual educational environments (Okagbue et al., 2023; Romero-Hall & Jaramillo Cherez, 2023).

As put by Sithole et al. (2019), changing the mode of education (i.e., from face-to-face to virtual) without implementing the necessary modifications would be troublesome for both teachers and students. Similarly, Davis et al. (2019) stated that the immediate transition of teachers and students from in-person to online classes may result in some serious challenges. According to Swan (2017), one of the most serious issues of online education is teachers' and students' insufficient knowledge of virtual platforms. Another important challenge facing online education includes technical issues



such as inconsistent reception and low bandwidth (Simamora, 2020; Vahdat et al., 2023), which spoil the online education experience for both learners and instructors (Sadeghi, 2019). As pinpointed by Derakhshan et al. (2021), boredom is another serious challenge some students may experience in online courses. Notwithstanding its potential challenges, virtual education may provide teachers and students with a wide range of opportunities as well (Derakhshan, 2021; Dung, 2020; Liguori & Winkler, 2020). According to Dung (2020), the most valuable opportunity that comes with online education is the autonomy of teachers and students in creating their own timetables. Another important benefit of online education, as Liguori and Winkler (2020) noted, is the availability of different educational resources.

Being aware of the challenges and opportunities of virtual education helps policymakers, educational administrators, and teachers enhance the quality and efficiency of online courses (Greenhow et al., 2022; Mashhadi et al., 2023; Moser et al., 2020). Therefore, identifying the potential challenges and opportunities of virtual courses is crucial. Considering this, multitudes of studies have probed the challenges and opportunities of virtual education (e.g., Besser et al., 2022; Garg et al., 2020; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Maatuk et al., 2022; Momenanzadeh et al., 2023; Monjezi et al., 2021; Stone, 2019; Toquero, 2020; Wang et al., 2018). However, most previous investigations have mainly examined the benefits and challenges of online learning in higher education contexts (i.e., colleges and universities). That is, the potential challenges and opportunities of implementing online education in school contexts have remained relatively unknown (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Alea et al., 2020; Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Hebebei et al., 2020). To address this lacuna, the present qualitative research sought to explore the challenges and opportunities of virtual education in public and private middle schools. To accomplish this, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the opportunities or advantages of implementing online English courses in Iranian middle schools?
2. What are the challenges or disadvantages of implementing online English courses in Iranian middle schools?
3. What solutions do school administrators, teachers, students, and parents propose to improve the quality and efficiency of online English courses in Iranian middle schools?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Underpinning

To explore the potential challenges of implementing virtual education in school contexts, Khan's (2001) e-learning framework was employed. In his comprehensive framework, Khan (2001) anticipated the potential issues and problems of virtual education and clustered them into eight broad dimensions. The reasoning behind the development of this theoretical framework was that identifying and mitigating the challenges and problems of virtual education enables school administrators and teachers to provide students with an enjoyable e-learning experience (Khan, 2000; Zhang et al., 2001).

As illustrated in Table 1, each dimension comprises several sub-dimensions, and each sub-dimension includes several issues related to the e-learning environment. To develop a successful e-learning environment (Khan, 2015; Khan et al., 2021), these issues should be addressed by administrators, teachers, students, and technical and other support services staff involved in virtual education:

Table 1. *Khan's (2001) Model of E-Learning*

Dimensions	Sub-dimensions
Institutional	Academic affairs, administrative affairs, student services
Technological	Infrastructure planning, software, hardware
Management	E-learning content development, e-learning maintenance
Ethical	Cultural diversity, social and political influence, bias, learner diversity, geographical diversity, digital divide, legal issues, etiquette
Pedagogical	Audience analysis, content analysis, goal analysis, medium analysis, methods and strategies, organization, design approach
Interface Design	Content design, page and site design, accessibility, navigation, usability testing
Evaluation	Evaluation of the educational environment, assessment of learner

2.2. Related Studies on the Opportunities and Challenges of Virtual Education

Due to the widespread use of virtual education in instructional-learning contexts, a huge number of studies worldwide (e.g., Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Al-Obaydi et al., 2023; Escobar & Morrison, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Garg et al., 2020; Mashhadi et al., 2022; Maatuk et al., 2022; Stone, 2019, among others) have explored the benefits and challenges of this educational mode in different educational institutions. For instance, Adnan and Anwar (2020) looked into the potential challenges of online learning from Pakistani university students' viewpoints. To this end, an online survey was administered to 126 Pakistani students. According to the data, the majority of participants cited limited internet access and insufficient interactions between students and teachers as the most significant challenges of online learning. In a similar vein, Ferri et al. (2020) inspected the challenges of online or remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, some semistructured interview sessions were held with a group of Italian school students. Poor internet connection, teachers' and students' digital illiteracy, lack of interactivity, and insufficient academic motivation were found to be the most severe problems and challenges of online education.

By the same token, Garg et al. (2020) evaluated the opportunities and challenges of online learning faced by students in the school context. They found that online learning comes with a range of positive and negative impacts on teachers and students. Improvement in collaborative work and increased digital literacy were reported as the most important benefits of online learning. Besides, loss of academic integrity and loss of nutrition were discovered to be the most disadvantageous aspects of online learning. Similarly, Escobar and Morrison (2020) studied the opportunities and challenges of online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 outbreak. To this aim, 27 Chilean school teachers were requested to answer an online questionnaire and take part in a virtual interview session as well. The findings evinced that factors such as insufficient student-student interaction and inadequate electronic facilities were the most important shortcomings of online education. The outcomes of the study also depicted that factors such as increased technology literacy were among the significant benefits of online education. More recently, Maatuk et al. (2022) investigated the challenges and benefits of e-learning from the university instructors' and students' perspectives. For this purpose, two types of questionnaires (i.e., student-report scale and instructor-report scale) were developed and distributed among the participants (140 students and 20 instructors). The analysis of the completed questionnaires demonstrated that both instructors and students perceived online learning to be full of potential and opportunities. Notwithstanding, they enumerated the high cost of implementation and poor internet services as the serious challenges of online learning.

More particularly, some education researchers (Abbasi et al., 2020; Derakhshan, 2021; Hajizadeh et al., 2021; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Shafiei Sarvestani et al., 2019) studied the challenges and opportunities of virtual education in Iranian educational environments. For instance, in a phenomenological inquiry, Shafiei Sarvestani et al. (2019) evaluated Iranian students' perceptions and experiences of online learning challenges. To this aim, using a purposive sampling strategy, 10 university students were recruited from Shiraz University. The analysis of the participants' experiences displayed that they mostly perceived educational, organizational, ethical, and technical problems as the most important challenges of online learning. In another phenomenological study, Abbasi et al. (2020) assessed the challenges and opportunities of online education from school teachers' perspectives. In doing so, 21 Iranian teachers were asked to engage in some online interview sessions. The interview outcomes demonstrated that almost all the participants mentioned "increasing parental responsibility and engagement with students' teaching-learning process," "increasing the teaching speed of new and updated information," "motivating teachers to promote media literacy," and "recognizing capable and creative teachers" as the main advantages or benefits of online education. They also enumerated "inequality in education opportunities," "high internet costs for many families," and "slow internet speed" as the major disadvantages or challenges of online education.

Similarly, Hajizadeh et al. (2021) examined the benefits and drawbacks of virtual learning from the viewpoints of primary school teachers. To this aim, some semistructured interviews were conducted to investigate the attitudes of 31 Iranian teachers selected from various primary schools in Mahabad. The examination of the participants' attitudes towards virtual learning indicated that they viewed "decreasing mental health," "expressing and promoting values immorality," and "incidence of social harms" as the main drawbacks of this education mode. The findings also revealed that the majority of respondents perceived the "possibility of developing effective evaluation" and "increase parental participation in education" as the most significant benefits of virtual learning. Despite these research efforts (Abbasi et al., 2020; Hajizadeh et al., 2021; Shafiei Sarvestani et al., 2019), the challenges and opportunities of implementing virtual courses

in Iranian school contexts are not widely known. This justifies further qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods studies on this topic.

Methodology

3.1. Participants

Through maximum variation sampling, four groups of participants, including middle school students ($N = 113$), teachers ($N = 97$), parents ($N = 42$), and school administrators ($N = 63$) were chosen to engage in the research process. A maximum-variation sample “is constructed by identifying key dimensions of variations and then finding cases that vary from each other as much as possible” (Patton, 1990, p. 7). The student sample comprised 64 males (57%) and 49 females (43%), ranging in age from 11 to 13 years old. The teacher sample included 69 males (71%) and 28 females (29%), varying in their age from 25 to 36 years old. The sample of parents encompassed 27 males (64%) and 15 females (36%), whose ages ranged from 30 to 45. The group of school administrators consisted of 44 males (70%) and 19 females (30%). Their age ranged from 28 to 55 years. The participants were fully selected from different cities in Golestan Province. To promote the trustworthiness of this inquiry, all the participants were told that engaging in this study was quite optional and that they were free to withdraw at any time. For the same reason, they also received some explanations about the key objectives of this investigation.

3.2. Instrument

An open-ended scale (see Appendix B) was developed by the researchers to evaluate the participants' viewpoints on the opportunities and challenges of virtual English courses. The scale consisted of two different parts. The initial part was designed to gather the participants' demographic information. The second part, comprising three open-ended questions, was designed to delve into the respondents' attitudes toward implementing online English courses in Iranian middle schools. The rationale for employing open-ended scales as the means of data collection is that “they are easier to administer (notably when conducted online), provide more time for respondents to complete questionnaires, and do not need to be transcribed” (Friedman, 2012, p. 190). To check the content validity of the instrument, the developed questionnaire was sent to three experts who had conducted several investigations on the advantages and disadvantages of online education. They evaluated the questionnaire's items for their content pertinence and linguistic transparency and refined them based on their previous experience. Following that, to make sure of the credibility and trustworthiness of the questionnaire (see Nassaji, 2020), it was sent to some nonparticipants who were highly similar to the participants of the current inquiry.

3.3. Procedure

To comply with the research ethics (BERA, 2011), the e-version of a consent form (see Appendix A) was initially sent to a large sample of administrators, teachers, students, and parents via WhatsApp, Telegram, and other popular messengers. Following that, the researcher-made scale was virtually distributed among the respondents who signed and returned the consent form. The participants were informed that their demographic information would be kept confidential and that their responses to the given questionnaire would be solely used for research purposes. The participants filled out and submitted the questionnaire within 2 weeks.

3.4. Data Analysis

The participants' responses to the open-ended scale were systematically analyzed using MAXQDA software (version 2022). The reason behind the use of MAXQDA software in this inquiry is that “employing a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) can remarkably enhance the reliability of the coding process” (Baralt, 2012, p. 225). Content analysis (CA), which is a popular method of qualitative analysis, was adopted to evaluate the collected answers. CA, as Friedman (2012) mentioned, involves “coding data in a systematic way in order to discover patterns and develop well-grounded interpretations” (p. 191). According to Elo and Kyngäs (2008), CA can be performed either deductively or inductively. In the inductive approach, analysts codify the content without any theoretical model or framework, whereas in the deductive approach, they do so in light of a theoretical model. In the present research, the participants' perceptions of the challenges of virtual education were analyzed in light of Khan's (2001) e-learning framework. The rest of the data, on the other hand, were analyzed inductively (i.e., without any theoretical model). As

put by Friedman (2012), analyzing the qualitative data by two or more analysts will raise the credibility of the findings. Because of this, the three stages of CA, including preparation, organization, and reporting, were implemented by two experts who had sufficient experience working with MAXQDA software. Despite the fact that the transferability of findings is not crucial in qualitative research (Gasson, 2004), to enhance the findings' transferability, the three stages of CA are thoroughly discussed hereunder.

At the preparation stage, the analysts individually went through the participants' answers to become informed of their attitudes toward virtual education. Then, at the organization stage, the analysts tried to codify the participants' viewpoints in three related phases (i.e., open coding, creating categories, and abstraction). In the first phase, they reread the participants' answers and produced some tentative codes. Then, they classified the produced codes into higher-order categories. Finally, during the third phase, they named each category using content-characteristic words. They also grouped the lower-order categories with similar statements into some major themes. Following the organization stage, a detailed report of the whole process was provided by analysts. After the data analysis process, the intercoder agreement was calculated via Krippendorff's alpha (α). Krippendorff's alpha (α) was found to be 0.98, which demonstrated a high level of agreement between the analysts. In this research, participant validation was also implemented to maximize the trustworthiness of the findings. During the participant validation process, the generated codes and subcodes were returned to 30 participants (10%) to acknowledge their accuracy.

4. Results

The findings of this investigation outline the opportunities and challenges of virtual English courses from the viewpoints of middle school students, teachers, parents, and school administrators. The findings also present the solutions that the participants recommended to mitigate the challenges of virtual education for their English classes. With respect to the research questions, the findings were categorized into three overarching patterns (opportunities of virtual education for the English course, challenges of virtual education for the English course, and solutions for the effectiveness of the English course), which are discussed below.

4.1. Opportunities for Virtual English Courses

The analysis of the participants' perspectives towards the opportunities or benefits of virtual education for their English courses resulted in six unique themes (Figure 1): The possibility of reviewing the course content, more free time to study, more access to educational tools and resources, comfortable educational environment, cost savings, and access to a wide range of instructors.

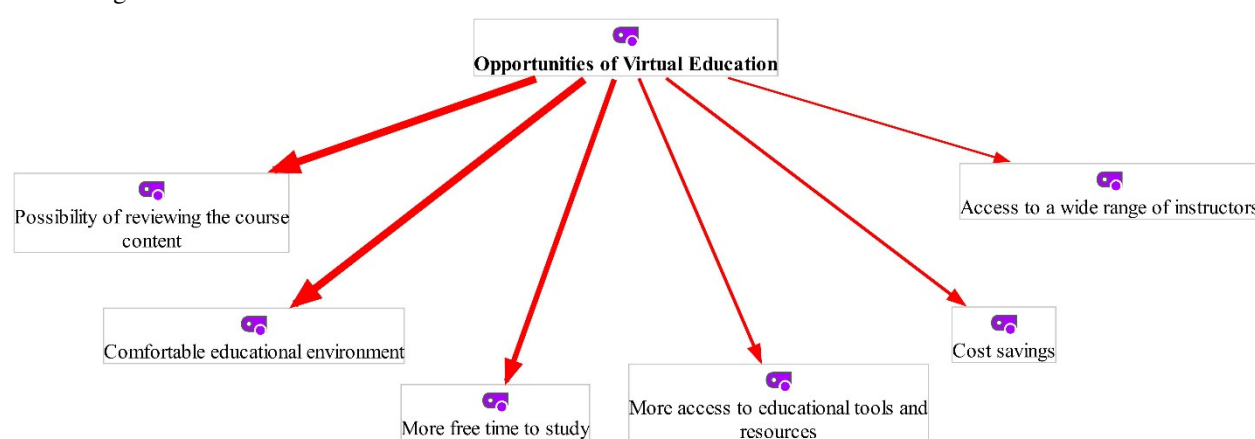


Figure 1. Opportunities for Virtual Education

Table 2. Opportunities for Virtual Education

Themes	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Possibility of reviewing the course content	87	28%
More access to educational tools and resources	85	27%
More free time to study	70	22%

Comfortable educational environment	28	9%
Cost savings	26	8%
Access to a wide range of instructors	19	6%
Total	315	100

As shown in Table 2, the possibility of reviewing the course content ($F = 87$) and having more access to educational tools and resources ($F = 85$) were the most frequently mentioned opportunities by participants. The following excerpts illustrate these important opportunities, respectively:

Participant 7 (student): *In my opinion, the most important advantage of virtual education is that it allows students to review the course content several times.*

Participant 13 (teacher): *Virtual education makes it possible for students to review the learning content at any time.*

Participant 18 (teacher): *We now have more access to various instructional tools thanks to virtual education.*

Participant 20 (student): *The availability of a wide range of academic resources is one of the lovely aspects of virtual learning.*

According to Table 2, having more free time to study is another important benefit of virtual education. Many participants mentioned that online learning enables students to have better time management. This benefit of virtual education is illustrated in the statements below:

Participant 17 (administrator): *Virtual education offers students more time to study the course content.*

Participant 23 (teacher): *Distance education gives students more time and energy to study.*

Among other important benefits mentioned by participants, one can refer to the comfortable educational environment and cost savings, which are represented in the following sentences:

Participant 27 (parent): *Distance education provides students with a more comfortable learning environment.*

Participant 33 (student): *Online education offers students a comfortable and stress-free learning environment.*

Participant 29 (administrator): *Online education alleviates learning costs by letting students take advantage of their current living situation.*

Participant 37 (teacher): *Online learning is more affordable than face-to-face learning in that it saves students' time and money.*

As the last valuable opportunity for virtual learning, the participants referred to the availability of a wide range of instructors. To illustrate:

Participant 49 (administrator): *The possibility of hiring quality instructors living in different provinces of the country seems to be another benefit of virtual education.*

4.2. Challenges of Virtual English Courses

The evaluation of the respondents' open-ended answers regarding the challenges or disadvantages of virtual education for their English courses culminated in three themes and eleven subthemes (see Figure 2):

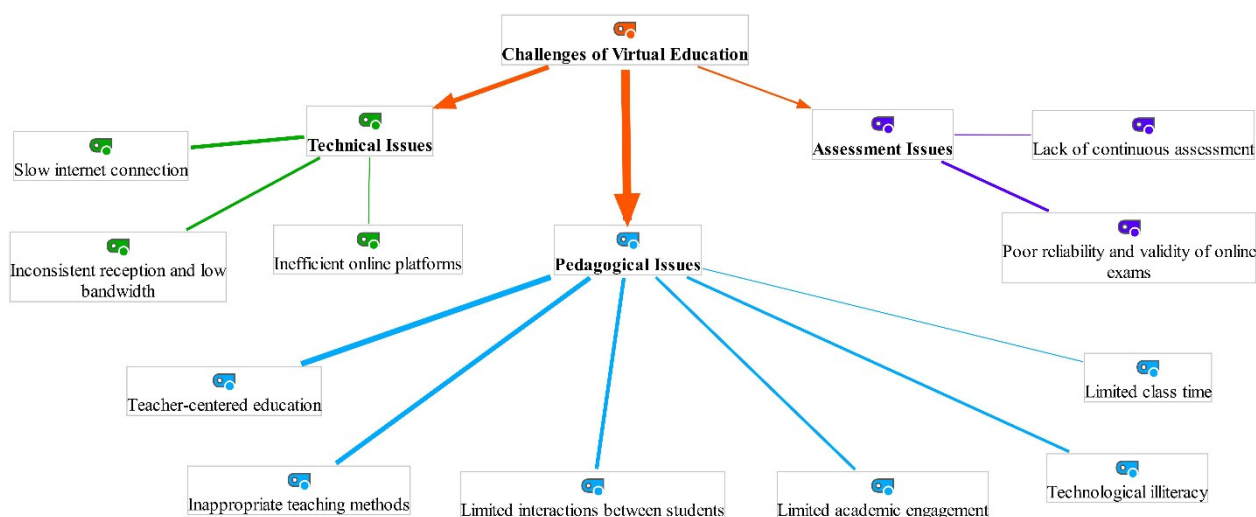


Figure 2. Challenges of Virtual Education

Table 3. Challenges of Virtual Education

Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Pedagogical Issues	Teacher-centered education, inappropriate teaching methods, limited interactions between students, limited academic engagement, technological illiteracy, limited class time	169	53%
Technical Issues	Slow internet connection, inconsistent reception and low bandwidth, inefficient online platforms	100	32%
Assessment Issues	Poor reliability and validity of online exams, lack of continuous assessment	46	15%
Total		315	100

As illuminated in Table 3, pedagogical issues comprising six subthemes were the most challenging aspects of virtual education in the eyes of the participants. Teacher-centered education, inappropriate teaching methods, and limited interactions between students are three pedagogical-related challenges mentioned by participants. These challenges are demonstrated in the following excerpts:

Participant 47 (parent): *In virtual education, students have less opportunity to engage in the educational process.*

Participant 62 (student): *The majority of instructors employ traditional teaching methods in online classes.*

Participant 67 (teacher): *Unfortunately, my students are less likely to interact with each other.*

Other pedagogical challenges of virtual education are limited academic engagement, technological illiteracy, and limited class time, all of which are illuminated in the following sentences:

Participant 73 (teacher): *Students commonly put less energy and effort into accomplishing their academic tasks.*

Participant 77 (administrator): *Teachers and students do not have a good command of technology.*

Participant 83 (teacher): *In online classes, we do not have sufficient time to instruct the course content.*

Besides pedagogical challenges, technology-related issues were also perceived as important problems of virtual education. Technological issues include slow internet connection, inconsistent reception and low bandwidth, and inefficient online platforms. Several participants articulated that:

Participant 90 (student): *Slow internet speed is a severe challenge that we commonly experience during virtual education.*

Participant 103 (teacher): *The most significant obstacles that online educators face are inconsistent reception and limited bandwidth.*

Participant 114 (parent): *My children suffer from working with inefficient online platforms such as Shad software.*

Other important challenges that teachers and students encounter in virtual education contexts are the poor reliability and validity of online exams and the lack of continuous assessment, which are called assessment issues. These issues are represented in the statements below:

Participant 90 (teacher): *Online exams are not reliable as they are highly susceptible to cheating.*

Participant 103 (teacher): *Another important challenge of virtual education is that it deprives teachers of continuous and dynamic assessment.*

4.3. Solutions for the Effectiveness of Virtual English Courses

The solutions participants proposed to mitigate the virtual education challenges for the English course were categorized into four higher-order themes and fourteen sub-themes (see Figure 3). The frequency and percentage of each theme are presented in Table 4:

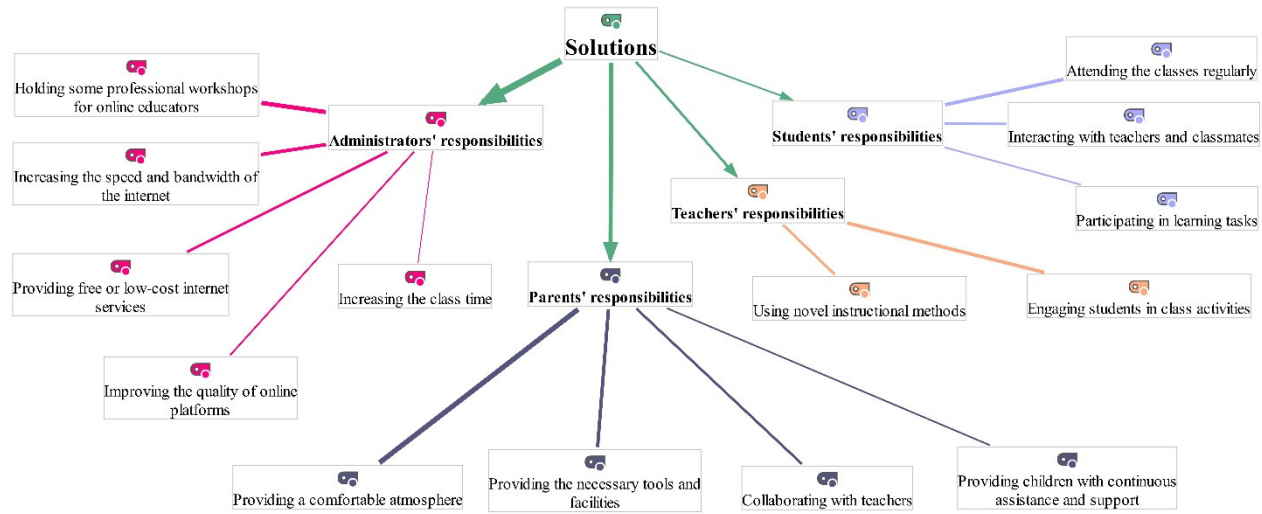


Figure 3. Solutions

Table 4. Solutions

Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Administrators' Responsibilities	Holding professional workshops for online educators, Increasing the speed and bandwidth of the Internet, providing free or low-cost Internet services, improving the quality of online platforms, increasing the class time	167	53%
Parents' Responsibilities	Providing a comfortable atmosphere, providing the necessary tools and facilities, collaborating with teachers, providing children with continuous assistance and support	88	28%
Teachers' Responsibilities	Engaging students in class activities, using novel instructional methods	35	11%
Students' Responsibilities	Attending classes regularly, Interacting with teachers and classmates, participating in learning tasks	25	8%
Total		315	100

As demonstrated in the above table, administrators' responsibilities with five underlying components are the most recurrent theme ($F = 167$) derived from the participants' suggested solutions. The solutions that the participants suggested about administrators' responsibilities are illustrated in the following extracts, respectively:

Participant 103 (teacher): *To improve the quality of online education, administrators and managers are required to hold some free workshops for in-service teachers.*

Participant 179 (teacher): *To mitigate the technological issues of virtual education, the speed and bandwidth of the internet should be increased.*

Participant 183 (student): *Offering free internet services would be of great help to both teachers and students.*

Participant 211 (parent): *The low-quality platforms such as Shad need to be replaced with more efficient software.*

Participant 230 (teacher): *The class time also needs to be enhanced.*

The second recurrent theme derived from the participants' responses is parents' responsibilities, which is comprised of four significant solutions: Providing a comfortable atmosphere, providing the necessary tools and facilities, collaborating with teachers, and providing children with continuous assistance and support. To illustrate:

Participant 163 (teacher): *A comfortable home atmosphere is what students need during virtual learning.*

Participant 200 (administrator): *Parents need to provide all the learning tools and facilities students require in online courses.*

Participant 111 (teacher): *Parents should constantly interact with teachers and school directors.*

Participant 118 (teacher): *Providing students with continuous support is what parents are responsible for.*

The participants also suggested some solutions for teachers' responsibilities in virtual education. The solutions are represented in the following sentences:

Participant 225 (parent): *Teachers should try to enhance students' academic engagement using attractive activities.*

Participant 313 (student): *Employing some novel instructional methods can dramatically enhance the quality of online classes.*

Additionally, the participants recommended three valuable solutions with regard to students' responsibilities, which are illustrated in the following statements:

Participant 177 (teacher): *Students' regular attendance at online classes will improve the quality of virtual education.*

Participant 249 (administrator): *To gain desirable outcomes, online learners are advised to actively communicate with their teachers and classmates.*

Participant 302 (teacher): *Improved student engagement will raise the quality of online classes.*

5. Discussion

This research was conducted to explore the opportunities and challenges of implementing virtual English courses in Iranian public and private schools. The present study also sought to suggest some solutions for minimizing the challenges of virtual education and increasing the effectiveness of teaching English online. As to the opportunities of virtual English courses, the analysis of the collected data resulted in six different themes: Possibility of reviewing the course content, more access to educational tools and resources, more free time to study, comfortable educational environment, cost savings, and access to a wide range of instructors. The majority of the aforementioned themes, such as the possibility of reviewing the course content, having more free time, and having more access to educational tools and resources, are directly related to the nature of virtual education. This finding is in congruence with Stone's (2019) outcomes, which illustrated that the chance to review classroom content and the availability of learning resources were two important benefits of online education. As evidenced by the content analysis outcomes, several participants enumerated the comfortable educational environment, cost savings, and access to a wide range of instructors as other valuable benefits of virtual education. These opportunities are also related to the intrinsic properties of virtual education that make it somehow more effective than face-to-face education. These opportunities are also related to the intrinsic properties of virtual education, making it more attractive than in-person education. This outcome is in line with Derakhshan's (2021) results, which represented that distance education was more affordable than face-to-face education

and provided the learners with an enjoyable learning atmosphere. This finding, further, supports Garg et al.'s (2020) findings, which evinced that remote education made it possible for school directors to hire instructors from different provinces of the country.

As to the challenges of virtual English courses, the outcomes of data analysis revealed that pedagogical, technological, and assessment issues are the most serious problems teachers and learners experience during virtual education. Among these challenges, pedagogical issues, including teacher-centered education, inappropriate teaching methods, limited interactions between students, limited academic engagement, technological illiteracy, and limited class time, were the most recurrent challenges mentioned by participants. The first two issues may be justified by the fact that many in-service teachers have insufficient experience in the online instruction domain and are not informed of novel teaching methodologies (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2021). There are similarities between the challenges expressed by the participants in this research and those reported by Khatoony and Nezhadmehr (2020). Other pedagogical issues highlighted by the participants were limited student-student interaction and student academic disengagement which may be due to students' feelings of boredom and isolation in online classes (Derakhshan et al., 2022). This accords with Escobar and Morrison's (2020) observations, which indicated that insufficient student-student interaction is an important disadvantage of online education. Another serious challenge stated by the participants was teachers' and students' technological illiteracy. It implies that both teachers and students lack a solid understanding of technology. This issue is in agreement with what Ferri et al. (2020) discovered in their study. Limited class time was the last pedagogical challenge noted by the participants. Insufficient class time may be due to the internet interruptions that commonly occur in online classes (Simamora, 2020). Other significant challenges raised by participants included slow internet connections, inconsistent reception, low bandwidth, and inefficient online platforms, which are called technological issues. These challenges align with those mentioned in some earlier investigations (e.g., Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Escobar & Morrison, 2020; Maatuk et al., 2022). Other pedagogical challenges of virtual education included the low reliability and validity of online exams, as well as the lack of continuous assessment. These assessment issues align with what Khan et al. (2021) highlighted in their research.

In addition to the aforementioned challenges and opportunities, the participants recommended some valuable solutions to prevent or mitigate the challenges of virtual English courses. These solutions were classified into four distinct categories: administrators' responsibilities, parents' responsibilities, teachers' responsibilities, and students' responsibilities. Through suggesting these solutions, participants determined the roles and responsibilities of administrators, teachers, students, and parents in increasing the efficiency of virtual English courses. The administrator-related solutions such as holding professional workshops for online educators, increasing the speed and bandwidth of the internet, providing free or low-cost internet services, improving the quality of online platforms, and increasing the class time were the most recurrent themes derived from students' solutions. It implies that the majority of participants held school administrators responsible for the challenges of virtual education. Put differently, most participants believed that school administrators could play a key role in preventing or mitigating the challenges of virtual courses.

The findings of this qualitative research are limited in several ways. First, the current investigation was entirely performed in private and public schools. The findings thus may not be transferable to other educational environments. Accordingly, researchers are advised to replicate this study in other educational institutions such as colleges and universities. Second, this study solely looked at the benefits and drawbacks of implementing online English courses in school contexts. It would be interesting to look into the advantages and disadvantages of implementing online courses for other school subjects like Math, Biology, or Geography. Third, the current study's data were collected using an open-ended scale. To gather more reliable data, future studies should also employ other data-gathering instruments (e.g., interviews, diary writing, observation, etc.).

6. Conclusion

The present research was an endeavor to explore the opportunities and challenges of implementing virtual English courses in Iranian middle schools. The CA's findings revealed that the challenges of virtual English courses are greater than their opportunities. According to the findings of the study, the majority of the participants regarded pedagogical and technological issues as the most serious challenges of virtual English courses. Considering this, one can conclude that the success of virtual classes heavily depends on the pedagogical and technological aspects of education. Besides the opportunities and challenges of virtual English courses, the participants recommended some significant

solutions for reducing the challenges of virtual education. These solutions may be illuminating for administrators, teachers, students, and parents. To enhance the quality of virtual English courses, administrators are required to hold some professional workshops for online educators. They are also expected to provide free or low-cost internet services for both teachers and students. For the same reason, teachers need to employ novel instructional methods in their classes, especially online ones. To achieve desired outcomes in online English classes, students should attend their classes regularly. They are also expected to devote more time and energy to their academic responsibilities. The virtual education problems also leave a heavy burden on the parents' shoulders. To mitigate the virtual education problems, parents need to constantly cooperate with teachers and school directors. They are also required to provide their children with a joyful learning atmosphere to help them overcome the obstacles and barriers of virtual education.

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Information on Informed Consent or any Data Privacy Statements

Informed consent was obtained from all the individual participants included in this study.

Data Availability

The datasets analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

Both authors have materially participated in the research and article preparation. Additionally, both authors have approved the final article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1

Consent Form

Please tick ✓ as appropriate.

- a. I **do not** wish to participate in this study. Yes ☐ No ☐
- b. I would like to find out more information about this study. Yes ☐ No ☐
- c. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and have received satisfactory answers to any questions. Yes ☐ No ☐
- d. I understand I can change my mind at any time and withdraw from participating in this study without having to give a reason. Yes ☐ No ☐
- e. I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint. Yes ☐ No ☐
- f. I hereby agree to participate in this study. Yes ☐ No ☐

Appendix 2

Open-Ended Questionnaire

1. Demographic Information

Name:

Gender:

Age:

2. Open-ended Questions

1. What do you think are the advantages or opportunities of implementing online English courses in Iranian middle schools?
2. What do you think are the disadvantages or challenges of implementing online English courses in Iranian middle schools?
3. Do you have any comments on mitigating the challenges of online English courses in Iranian middle schools?



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