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# Teachers' Complexities of Moving to Online Language Teaching

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## Abstract

In response to the COVID-19 emergency, many governments forced educational sectors to move to fully online education, and they encountered challenges in the transition from traditional to online education. In order to overcome the challenges, the Ministry of Education in Iran, like many other countries, commenced some professional development courses for the in-service language teachers to prepare them for online education. Along with the necessity of teachers' knowledge of technology use, the researchers believe that teachers' experiences of the complexities of moving to online education play a significant role in professional development amid the COVID-19 outbreak. To investigate language teachers' experiences, a qualitative study based on Hong's (2010) spherical model was conducted. The participants of the study were 159 language teachers in Iran who enrolled in the Ministry of Education's professional development courses. Collected data from an open-ended questionnaire were analyzed through qualitative content analysis. The findings revealed that most of the teachers were not well-prepared through teacher education courses for online language teaching. The findings indicated that effective and continuous professional development courses based on the teachers' needs and current situation are required to ease the transition to online teaching.

*Keywords*: Online language teaching, Teachers' professional development, Teachers' complexities, Qualitative study

## Introduction

In light of technological changes in the many education sectors worldwide, the Iranian Ministry of Education (MoE), teacher educators, and curriculum designers have taken several steps to provide schools with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and to improve pre- and in-service teachers' ICT skills (Esfijani & Zamani, 2020). The starting point for the integration of ICT into education in Iran was through the 'IT application development' (*"TAKFA"* in Persian) in early 2002 when a considerable budget was allocated to the development of ICT in education and the development of digital skills of the country's human resources. Later on, the massive

investments in ICT, capabilities of technology in education, and the Fundamental Evolution of Education Document (Ministry of Education, 2011) have forced the MoE and the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) to integrate technology (e.g., the Internet, computer hardware and software, learning management systems) in education through several national projects, including 'Roshd Network' (Hamidzadeh et al., 2011), 'Smart School' (Seraji et al., 2020), 'Shaad mobile application' (Tafazoli, 2021), among others.

In addition to providing schools with digital infrastructure, educating both pre- and in-service teachers also become part of this focus. The inclusion of three stand-alone ICT courses into the pre-service teacher education program is one measure taken to meet this objective (Esfijani & Zamani, 2020; Kaveshi & Soltani, 2018). However, the primary focus of these courses was mainly on generic ICT skills and technology rather than its application in pedagogy, which made it less effective for teacher integration (Kaveshi & Soltani, 2018). The efforts have not, as experienced in other countries, resulted in significant changes in teachers' level of ICT integration in their pedagogy due to the lack of integrated technology, pedagogy, and content approach (Bostancıoğlu & Handley, 2018; Esfijani & Zamani, 2020; Mai et al., 2022; Raygan & Moradkhani, 2022; Rienties et al., 2022; Seraji et al., 2020; Tseng et al., 2022). Davis (2010) explained that holding stand-alone ICT courses is the most common approach to teacher education programs, which is mostly concerned with teaching about technology rather than with technology. She further states that such courses are limited in scope and pedagogy and are usually incapable of helping teachers integrate ICT into their teaching practice.

Other influences have also been reported by various researchers for the very low level of ICT integration in schools (see Tafazoli, 2022). These influences on the Iranian education system included but were not limited to issues such as inappropriate school climate and culture (Raygan & Moradkhani, 2020; Seraji et al., 2020), incompatibility of curriculum structures (Meihami, 2021; Seraji et al., 2020), teachers' negative attitudes and resistance (Tafazoli, 2021), lack of information/computer literacy, technology, infrastructure, motivation, access to academic databases, practical guidelines, clarity in the policies and missions, support system and supervision (Ebrahimi & Faghigh, 2017; Maftoon & Shahini, 2012; Monjezi et al., 2021; Seraji et al., 2020; Taghizadeh & Ejtehadi, in press; Tafazoli & Picard, 2023; Taghizadeh & Hasani Yourdshahi, 2020), leadership and decision-making (Dashtestani, 2019; Dashtestani & Hojatpanah, 2022).

The level of ICT integration in education has been changed due to the MoE's uncertain and unpredicted response to the COVID-19 outbreak and the forced closure of schools. Hodges et al. (2020) used the term emergency remote teaching (ERT) or pandemic pedagogy to particularly emphasize the temporary nature of this transfer from the 'normal' modes of teaching to respond to a critical situation or crisis (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). Even though teachers in such emergency situations utilize various online tools, it would not be accurate to name it online teaching in some educational contexts like Iran. Since "ERT is a provisional situation and a conditional reaction to challenging circumstances, not a pre-planned and appropriate instructional design and curriculum" (Hodges et al., 2020, as cited in Tafazoli, 2021, p. 5). Yet, such a dramatic change is likely to have required extraordinary work from a range of people, including the staff in the MoE and those who have collaborated with them, including teachers, teacher educators, schools, parents, and students. Some of these initiatives included launching a national messaging application specifically designed for teachers and

students through mobile-assisted learning and teaching application named '*Shaad*,' offering half-price Internet packages to both students and teachers and broadcasting educational programs through national TV (Farshadnia & Nazari, 2021b; Tafazoli, 2021).

The pandemic and the closure of schools forced teachers to shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. This situation placed many teachers in the position of novice learners, particularly those who had been teaching in the traditional educational systems in which online or blended teaching and learning were not recognized. Hence, an emergency professional development (PD) course was required for the online teaching situation that was happening. In line with the need, many language teacher educators and researchers set up specialized online professional courses to help teachers in their transition to online teaching and conducted studies to understand the teachers' professional needs at this special time (Lockee, 2021; Mai et al., 2022; Stockwell & Wang, 2023; Tafazoli, 2021; Trust & Whalen, 2020).

Since the educational legacies of COVID-19 are expected to continue into the future of online teaching, education providers worldwide, in general, and in Iran, in particular, are to think ahead of ERT to improve the quality of online teaching to meet their stakeholders' needs. However, this requires comprehensive work not only on extrinsic factors such as context and infrastructure but also on intrinsic factors and what pertains to the teachers themselves (Boonmoh et al., 2022; Ertmer, 1999; Park & Son, 2022; Tafazoli & Picard, 2023).

In this vein, in his spherical model, Hong (2010) emphasizes the importance of teacher education, individual teacher factors, and contextual factors on a teacher's ICT practices and their ICT integration decision-making process. As a consequence of this special condition and the recognized importance of teacher PD, we, the researchers of this study, were invited by the MoE to design and develop an online teacher education program. However, since teachers' experiences of technology use are of great significance in teachers' adoption and integration of technology (Lee, 2022; Puebla et al., 2021; Sun & Mei, 2022), understanding teachers' perceptions and complexities from this PD course before conducting the course was deemed necessary. This was particularly important since, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the teachers' perceptions, challenges, and expectations from a PD course could have differed from the past as they were experiencing a different teaching context and situation (Lockee, 2021; Tafazoli, 2021). Thus, investigating language teachers' experiences of complexities in moving to online language teaching and finding out how a PD course could assist them in meeting their needs was important. Thus, the current study aims to respond to the following research question:

What are the language teachers' complexities in moving to online teaching?

## Method

### Research Design: Qualitative Study

This study aimed to discover how teachers "construct their worlds, and what meaning they attributed to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). Also, teachers' experiences as inspirational stories were considered (Creswell, 2014), which assisted in

moving towards effective online teaching. Thus, it was necessary to understand, define, uncover, and explain sense based on teachers' experiences. It was also theorised that teachers' experiences are incalculable. Therefore, a qualitative research design would be the best method to respond to the research question. Content analysis was employed as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context" (Krippendorf, 1980, p. 21) and which "uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from the text" (Weber, 1990, p. 9). To meet the criteria of a qualified qualitative study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) proposed four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were followed.

**Context and Participants: Iranian K-12 Teachers**

Iran is a multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multilingual country located in Western Asia. The K-12 education is supervised by the MoE and includes the first mandatory six years (primary school from ages 7-12) and the next six years (high school from 13-18). In accord with the technology-based changes in today's modern world, the MoE started to integrate technologies into K-12 education. However, the integration of technology was not successful, and the use of technology was assumed to be an unnecessary extravagance in classrooms, until it became a vital part of the education in the COVID-19 outbreak when all the education systems of Iran moved to online teaching to some extent. As influential players of such a massive transition to online teaching, 159 Iranian language teachers participated in the MoE's PD courses to prepare themselves for the academic year 2020-2021 (see Table 1).

**Table 1**
*Participants' Demographic Information*

| | | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | | | |
| | Male | 23 | 14.5 |
| | Female | 136 | 85.5 |
| Age | | | |
| | 24-29 | 2 | 1.3 |
| | 30-35 | 6 | 3.8 |
| | 36-41 | 12 | 7.5 |
| | 42 and above | 139 | 87.4 |
| Teaching experience in MOE | | | |
| | 0-4 years | 5 | 3.1 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 5-9 years | 4 | 2.5 |
| | 10-14 years | 9 | 5.7 |
| | 15-19 years | 12 | 7.5 |
| | 20 and above | 129 | 81.1 |
| Academic degree | | | |
| | Associate | 1 | 0.6 |
| | Bachelor's | 72 | 45.3 |
| | Master's | 65 | 40.9 |
| | PhD | 21 | 13.2 |

The researchers of this study were invited as the instructors of the PD course. The PD course, which was designed and developed by the authors, consists of three main chapters, further branching into sections, as in Table 2 below:

**Table 2**
*Content of the Professional Development Course*

| | |
|---|---|
| Chapter 1 | **Technology in language education** |
| | a) Main concepts in online teaching |
| | b) Differences between online and face-to-face teaching |
| | c) Netiquette |
| | d) The need for technological pedagogical and content knowledge (TPACK) |
| | e) Substitution, augmentation, modification, and redefinition (SAMR) model |
| Chapter 2 | **Appropriate management** |
| | a) Real expectations in online language teaching |
| | b) Planning a learning sequence |
| | c) Clear guidelines for online teaching |
| | d) The vital role of parents |
| | e) How to check students' progress |

| | |
|---|---|
| Chapter 3 | **Creating effective content** |
| | a) The importance of online content |
| | b) The goal of content creation |
| | c) Language and register in content creation |
| | d) Planning for content creation |
| | e) Creating textual content |
| | f) Creating multimedia content |

Along with the main content, teachers were provided with supplementary self-created and open access sources, including a) podcasts for understanding the audience, learning styles, utilizing videos in online teaching, and e-portfolio, b) vodcasts on online assessment and testing, c) questionnaire on students' learning styles, d) infographic on learning styles, e) instructions on how to use Google Docs for designing a quiz, and e) templates for planning a learning line.

**Data Collection and Instrument: A Qualitative Survey**

Several ethical issues were considered in this research. The teachers' privacy and rights were protected by keeping their identities anonymous. Not even the researchers, had access to the participants' real names. Numbers were assigned to each participant for identification in data collection, analysis, and dissemination of the findings. After registering for the PD program at the MoE, the volunteer teachers were required to sign the electronic Informed Consent form. The researchers only had access to the data that the teachers gave permission to use.

An open-ended qualitative survey was developed as an effective tool for exploring and scrutinizing the participants' voices and views and sought the approval of three professionals with PhD in the field of Education. Having reached a consensus on its content, an online version of the survey was shared with the teachers who had signed off the Informed Consent forms. The qualitative survey focused on teachers' perceptions about using technology consisted of five demographic questions (gender, academic degree, age, teaching experiences, and previous experiences with technology) and 10 open-ended questions, general enough to provide flexibility to teachers while sharing their perceptions (Moustakas, 1994). The survey was in Persian (or Farsi), the official language of Iran. In addition, the open-ended questions were general to give enough flexibility to teachers for sharing their perceptions (Moustakas, 1994).

**Data Analysis: Deductive Content Analysis**

This study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions who had participated in a PD course to prepare themselves for online teaching amid the COVID-19 outbreak. Accordingly, content analysis was adopted to analyze the obtained qualitative data. The content analysis is "an unobtrusive technique that allows researchers to analyze relatively

unstructured data in view of the meanings, symbolic qualities and expressive contents they have and of the communicative roles they play in the lives of the data's sources" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 44).

The data analysis consisted of four main stages: 1) decontextualization, 2) recontextualization, 3) categorization, and 4) compilation (Bengtsson, 2016). In the first stage, the second researcher read and re-read the collected data to get familiar with them and reach the whole sense. After that, the data was coded deductively, through a top-down approach, based on Hong's (2010) spherical model. Deductive coding secures coding reliability and minimizes a cognitive change during the coding (Morse & Richards, 2002). According to Hong's (2010) model, teachers' integration of technology into the classroom can be categorized based on contextual factors, individual teachers' factors, and CALL teacher education. Therefore, all the collected data were coded based on these three main factors. The second researcher used the color-coding system through NVivo 12 for better clarification.

In the recontextualization stage, the first researcher reviewed the original codes alongside the final codes to achieve inter-coder reliability and validity (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), examining whether any meaningful unit was skipped or left uncoded. The final codes were compared against the pre-agreed list of codes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In the categorization stage, first, a consensus regarding the meaning units (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) was established and then categorized. The compilation stage is presented in the next section as 'Findings'.

## Findings

In this section, the findings of analyzing Iranian language teachers' complexities of moving to online teaching are reported. The findings revealed that teachers had positive perceptions regarding technology use; however, they faced a lot of challenges. The main themes based on Hong's (2010) model and sub-themes that emerged are presented as follows.

### Contextual Factors

#### *Social and Economic Inequality*

One of the main prohibitive factors in moving to online teaching is social and economic inequality. Almost all the teachers (n=124) argued about the lack of quality infrastructure and equipment for students and teachers. For example, one of the teachers complained about the inequality and economic divide, remarking that '*Some families cannot buy smartphones or provide Internet for their children due to financial problems, which causes discrimination in online teaching*'. Another teacher said that '*most of them* [i.e., parents] *are so much involved in economic issues and providing the basic needs of the family that they don't have the time to support their students. So they prefer the face-to-face and traditional approach'.*

The financial problems were not restricted to the students and their families alone. Even teachers criticized '*high Internet expenses*,' '*expensive technological devices such as smartphones and tablets,' 'lack of school facilities*,' '*lack of access to the Internet*,'

and '*old tools that do not support the current software*.' A teacher stated that '*the most important obstacle is not having the appropriate equipment such as laptops or tablets to perform online teaching*.'

Some of the teachers believed that the MoE should provide teachers and students with the required technological tools and free Internet access. Along these lines, one of the teachers pointed out that '*the biggest disadvantage is the cost of the Internet and the lack of support from the MoE and Ministry of Communication. Also, the use of a personal phone for schoolwork causes the phone to wear out and fills up the memory, etc., which in turn causes the phone to break down*.'

***Parental Role***

The direct contribution of parents to students' education is a phenomenon that occurs in online teaching in the Iranian context. Out of 159 teachers, 112 teachers acknowledged how parents were positively or negatively involved in online teaching. One of the teachers stated that '*most of the parents cooperated with the school staff after a few weeks, but sometimes they interfered with the teaching process. They were sometimes unhappy with the heavy syllabus and the amount of content uploaded on their phones, such as educational videos, etc. Unfortunately, in the tests, they sometimes helped their children. Also, the untimely travels of some parents prevented students from attending classes*.'

Some teachers contended that some of the parents '*are dishonest*' and that '*confirming the true identity of the respondent as a student is challenging*.' Sometimes parents '*abused the situation'* by *'filling the roll call form*' and '*taking the test*' instead of students. Also, they believed that some parents '*are pessimistic*' and '*they believe that online teaching is not effective or useful'* and, therefore, did not *'take it seriously*.' Three teachers complained that parents sometimes scolded them as they believed that '*teachers are responsible for the current situation* [COVID-19 pandemic] *and online teaching*', and they expected them '*to do miracles*.' Also, the teachers reported that '*they blame teachers for the Internet costs and lack of technological tools*.' One of the teachers indicated that '*parents are usually unhappy because they have to put in a great deal of effort and for much of the day they have to monitor their children's education, providing smartphones for the children. They have to pay a lot of money for the Internet and allocate a large amount of their phone memory to the children's lesson materials.'*

Parental *expectations* are among teachers' concerns in online teaching. Teachers believed that parents expected '*too much*' in online teaching in comparison to traditional education. Teachers should be '*always available*' and '*sacrifice their time*' based on parents' demands. One of the teachers used the term '*infelicitous expectations*,' explaining that '*parents are very demanding. They expect teachers to be online day and night and answer their child's questions. Also, some parents wanted me to test their child at midnight because they were at a party and couldn't be online. They are looking for a 24/7 servant rather than a teacher.'*

Meanwhile, 36 teachers emphasized the positive role of parents. They suggested that other teachers empathize with parents on the novelty of online teaching in Iran. Parents are not familiar with the benefits of online teaching, and, as such, teachers proposed that '*more briefing and follow-up sessions are required for parents*.' Moreover,

teachers believed that IT support is required for parents '*to assist them in solving their technical issues*.'

### *Security and Privacy*

Among the participating teachers, five of them believe that the available software and programs are not sufficiently safe and secure. Regarding the 'Shaad mobile application,' which is the dominant mobile-assisted learning and teaching tool in Iran, one of the teachers declared that '*the worst fault in the Shaad program is that phone numbers and cell phones are not secure. Parents and students can send messages at every hour of the day*.' Also, a teacher expressed that '*sometimes they used different mobile phones (belonging to their mother, father, brother, and sister) to call their teacher, and this was problematic. Some family members used this opportunity for marketing purposes*.' Teachers complained about parents' and students' disturbance out of working hours: '*Personal phone has become an unsafe environment for me, and all my students are messaging me till midnight*.' Another teacher revealed that '*They* [parents and students] *can disturb someone anonymously without being recognized, or they can call in inconvenient times*.'

### *Technical Issues and Technician Support*

Ninety-nine teachers addressed the technical issues they encountered in online teaching and the necessity of having technical support: '*Online teaching is very useful, but it requires a lot of time, and it's in constant need of someone with the knowledge to answer our questions about technical issues*.' Some teachers asked their children to assist them in technical issues. For example, '*These are hardware problems, but the lack of enough knowledge is also a problem for teachers. Of course, I tried to learn how to use the software I needed and I was able to use it by studying and following up as well as getting help from my children*.'

### *Lack of Suitable Ready-made Content*

One of the teachers' concerns was about the availability of classroom-ready materials, which was reported by eleven teachers. They believed that suitable content is '*rarely available on the Internet'* and that '*the created high-quality content*' should be given to teachers prior to the commencement of the academic year. In other words, they held the view that teachers should not be '*responsible for creating and producing educational videos for every lesson*.'

## Individual Teachers' Factors

### *Job Satisfaction*

Job satisfaction in online teaching is one of the key issues for teachers in Iran, which is rooted in two underlying factors: lack of appreciation and low pay. Sixteen teachers said that they had not received enough '*value*,' '*attention*,' or '*appreciation*'

from education authorities. As an example, one of the teachers said that '*the MoE does not value or pay attention to teachers' opinions.'* Some teachers discussed the discrimination made against some courses with respect to value or significance: '*The principals and school authorities do not pay attention to and take into account the needs, concerns, and suggestions of the teachers who are actually teaching and are aware of the problems and issues. Only certain courses such as the STEM ones get credit and attention.'* Another teacher believed that '*Online instruction offers significant advantages, particularly when it comes to teaching subjects like geology and astronomy, which inherently lack tangibility and comprehension unless experienced firsthand in nature or through visual media such as movies and animations.'* In contrast, a teacher said that '*online teaching is very good for courses that require memorization, such as religion, history, etc., and it is better to continue in this way for these lessons. But it becomes a problem for basic science lessons*.'

One of the teachers argued that successful online *teaching* requires the cooperation of all stakeholders: '*When all the members of the education department cooperate with each other, we will have success in online teaching. The teachers were ignored last semester, and many of the teachers themselves were seeking students themselves, while the school administration did not help much*.'

Almost all the teachers talked about low salaries. They speculated that low salaries and the high cost of technological tools made them '*unable to buy the required equipment*.' They also reasoned that low pay '*demotivates them to accept online teaching*' because they cannot '*afford it*.' In this vein, teachers expected that the government increased their salary due to the '*high cost of equipment*,' '*excessive workload,'* and '*their new roles*.' Some teachers argued that if the MoE cannot increase the salaries, they should at least '*reduce teaching hours to enable them to produce suitable content for students*.'

### *Perceptions about the Quality of Online Teaching*

In general, teachers held the view that the quality of online teaching was not satisfactory due to many factors such as; a) Effectiveness: '*possible reduction of the efficiency and effectiveness of education due to the elimination of the direct relationship space between the students and teachers*.' b) Learning outcome: online teaching '*is useful when used as an add-on to the face-to-face classrooms, but the desired educational outcome could not be achieved through the online mode of learning alone*.' Some teachers even called it '*superficial learning*' and '*fake learning*': '*The fake scores and the fact that everywhere we have to compromise in favor of the student have reduced the quality of education*.' Another teacher said that '*so far online teaching has not been effective in learning, and because the subject is not discussed in the class, it does not involve deep learning. More student interaction leads to more learning, and students should be implemented some strategies*.' c) Practicum: Teachers thought that online teaching has reduced '*the innovation and diversity in teaching*,' and it is suitable mostly as '*a supplementary form of education but is not enough for education alone*.'

### *Teachers' Required Knowledge*

Teachers admitted that they were not knowledgeable enough in various domains such as; a) Technological knowledge: '*The most important obstacle for me is that I don't*

*know how to use new technologies let alone teaching with them*,' and '*it's difficult to choose the best and most appropriate technology for teaching purposes*.' Teachers believed that the education authorities should '*first educate the teacher and then expect them to teach online.'* b) Technological-pedagogical knowledge: Teachers divulged that '*we know how to use some applications and we know that they are useful for teaching. But we don't know how to use them for online teaching'*. '*I can't involve my students in group activities*' and '*I have no control over my online classrooms*' because '*I can't observe their presence*.' c) Content knowledge: '*We do not have enough knowledge to produce content*.'

### *Online Culture*

Teachers complained that many teachers, students, and parents did not follow the ethics and academic integrity in the online environments: '*Teachers do not observe the copyright and use content produced by other teachers without acknowledging the producer*.' Many students '*copy and paste other students' assignments and I can't approve of that*.' Moreover, '*students spend most of their time on entertainment and playing online games instead of studying*.' Teachers believed that '*families also need to be educated about online teaching*' and that they '*should be briefed about the fact that online teaching is just as important as face-to-face education*.' '*Families should culturally accept this mode of education*.'

### *Mental and Physical Health Issues*

Another challenge in online teaching had to do with mental and physical health issues, which were reported by 47 teachers. Teachers expressed that online teaching required teachers to be '*more patient*.' Also, establishing a good emotional relationship with students proved difficult for some of them '*because we can't see the students, and we are not familiar with their personality and characteristics*.' They also expressed that they felt '*very upset*,' '*nervous*,' '*anxious*,' '*stressed*,' '*dissatisfied*,' '*disappointed*,' '*worried*,' and '*frustrated*' when they had to deal with an unstable Internet connection or when students cheated on their exams. They declared that '*introverted students have better academic and emotional performance in online teaching. However, extroverted students get hurt emotionally*.'

Teachers complained about more '*headache*' and '*poor eyesight*' and possible '*excessive dependence on and addiction to technology and online environment'* due to the excessive use of tablets and laptops. They believed that students '*lost their concentration and focus on their studies*.' Teachers also argued that in online teaching, students had "*fewer opportunities for socializing*' and that they missed *'the happy atmosphere*' and '*emotional relationship*' in the classroom. This lack of interaction, in turn, caused difficulty in '*understanding students' feelings, problems, and issues*' because '*the presence of teacher next to students has better emotional and educational effects.'*

## CALL Teacher Education Factors

### *Professional Development*

Except for four teachers who thought they did not need PD courses, all the participants believed that continuous PD courses were a '*must*' and a '*necessity*' for being a competent online teacher. Around one-third of the teachers disclosed that they needed PD courses on '*quality content development*.' They said that '*because we are not trained for this type of teaching*,' '*we need some courses and instructions for selecting and developing educational content*.' They stressed that '*some efficient ways of creating educational content, especially videos and multimedia*' should be taught to enable them to '*make the content more useful, simpler, easier, and smaller in size*.'

Seventy-three teachers expressed their interest in attending PD courses focused on upskilling their teaching methodologies and best practices in online teaching. They were eager to develop their teaching skills in '*attracting students' attention and involving them in classroom activities*,' '*testing and evaluating different skills and subjects*,' '*managing online classes*,' '*controlling students*,' and '*presenting various content effectively.*'

However, many teachers mentioned that the previous PD courses were not effective enough because '*the instructors were selected based on their connections to the MOE, and not necessarily based on their expertise in the field*.' In this way, the MoE and the instructors '*wasted their time and money for nothing*.' One of the teachers pointed out that '*due to the low quality of the previous PD courses, I paid one of my friends to attend the courses instead of me. The completion certificate was more important than the content of the PD course*.' Regarding the quality of the PD courses, another teacher said that '*the previous PD courses were impractical, useless, and long, and so I decided to self-train myself through the Internet*.' They believed that an effective PD course should be '*up-to-date*,' '*short*,' '*convenient*,' '*realistic*,' '*interactive*,' '*practical*,' '*constant and continuous*,' '*step-by-step,' and it should start from the very basic concepts*' and be '*based on the teachers' needs and the current situation*.'

## Discussion

This study was an attempt to explore the Iranian language teachers' complexities of moving to online teaching in a PD course that was held by the MoE for transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 outbreak. The findings indicated that language teachers expressed their positive perceptions about the use of technology in education. However, in such a massive transition to online teaching, they have also faced many complexities. While some of these complexities were contextual, others were related to individual teachers or had to do with CALL teacher education factors. The findings revealed that social and economic inequality, parental role, security and privacy issues regarding technological tools use, technical issues and technician support, and lack of suitable ready-made content are major contextual barriers to online teaching. Moreover, issues relating to teachers' job satisfaction, perceptions about the quality of online teaching, required background knowledge, online culture, mental and physical health were the prohibitive factors, from the individual teachers' perspectives. Finally, lack of efficient, continuous, convenient, and practical PD courses designed in response to teachers' needs considering the current situation to upskill themselves in technological pedagogical content knowledge was another hindrance while moving to online teaching.

The findings established that the Iranian education system was not yet sufficiently prepared for the transition to online teaching. This unanticipated change brought about many difficulties for education stakeholders. The findings revealed that teachers expected governmental authorities, particularly the MoE, to provide both teachers and students with the required technological tools to facilitate the process of forced transition to online teaching. We believe that providing basic and affordable tools for teachers and students is feasible for the authorities.

The Iranian education sector now has the opportunity to renovate its infrastructure to infuse technology into classes (Le & Song, 2018) as one of the positive educational 'legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic' (Tafazoli & Atefi Boroujeni, 2021). If the educational authorities want to establish an appropriate relationship between pedagogy, theory, and technology to create spaces conducive to effective learning and teaching, they should reconsider the fundamental role of technological infrastructure (Garrett, 2009). This serves to demonstrate how decision-makers can positively impact the educational system of a country. For a smooth transition from traditional to online teaching, the education authorities should play their supportive role in equipping the main role players (i.e., teachers and students) with the much-needed tools and technologies. Along with the aforementioned limitations and challenges, lack of enough attention to and appreciation for teachers' new roles has led to job dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the findings revealed that low salary is one of the main barriers to accepting online teaching due to financial issues. Overall, the current and other studies in this context reveal that lack of appropriate equipment and support is not a new issue, and the previous attempts in integrating technologies in education (e.g., in English language education) have failed for the same reasons (Dashtestani, 2014; Esfijani & Zamani 2020). However, these barriers are not limited to Iran, and many countries have experienced the same challenges (Laabidi & Laabidi, 2016; Tafazoli & Picard, 2023).

Apart from the contextual and individual teachers' factors that are out of teachers' control, other challenges should be resolved through PD courses. Now, teachers should develop their generic skills and digital literacy. As the findings indicate, teachers should know how to secure themselves and their tools in online teaching. Also, they should learn how to protect their privacy in an online environment—a goal that is not attainable without relevant PD courses. Sometimes, the PD courses needed for the current situation are beyond the generic use of technology or teaching practices. Moreover, efficient PD courses should be aimed at changing teachers' perceptions and behavior in dealing with parents. The new and crucial impact (both positive and negative) of parents in online teaching cannot be ignored. The findings of the study point to the teachers have faced with parents in online teaching. We suggest establishing a mutual relationship and understanding between teachers and parents through briefing sessions before and during the academic year with the presence of both sides to specify the advantages of such cooperation, enhance trust, and modify expectations. This finding is in line with the other studies (e.g., Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006) that underscore the fact that a sustainable relationship is imperative.

Required knowledge and literacies (see Dudeney et al., 2013; Mishra & Koehler, 2006) are among the other key concerns of teachers. The current study also highlighted the importance of developing not only technological knowledge but also expertise in technology-pedagogy integration, on the part of the teachers. This resonates with Peters' (2006) observation that teachers need to learn how to use technology, not merely the

knowledge of technology types. This entails that new PD courses should reflect the interplay between technology and pedagogy, which was reported to be lacking in the previous PD courses. Teachers reported that they mainly needed to develop their skills in online evaluation and assessment, online classroom management, and quality content production. Once again, this indicates the significant interface of pedagogy, technology, and content, commonly known as TPACK (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). We believe that some issues in the findings related to online culture are rooted in a lack of teachers' competency in creating materials and content based on their taste and teaching methodologies. Thus, they use other teachers' content and materials. Moreover, the Iranian educational system is only in the early stages of online teaching, and many teachers are unaware of the netiquette (Farshadnia, 2010) and academic ethics of the online environment and, as such, their violation of the online codes of conduct may not necessarily be intentional.

Apart from the health issues, which are beyond teachers' control, we believe that training teachers on using technology for teaching purposes can go a long way toward removing such psychological barriers as fear, stress, and negative attitudes. Hence, to decrease the negative affective factors, we should increase teachers' readiness and preparedness in accepting technology (Park & Son, 2022). Moreover, teachers' negative attitudes towards the quality of online teaching, including effectiveness, learning outcome, and practicum can be resolved through appropriate PD courses aiming to change teachers' attitudes and teaching philosophies.

## Conclusion

In this qualitative study, we investigated teachers' complexities of moving to online teaching. This transition to online teaching was a major, unpredicted change for an unprepared education system and teachers in this context reported how they faced various challenges in the uncertain times of pandemic. Apart from the challenges beyond teachers' control, this study showed how appropriate, efficient, continuous, and up-to-date PD courses could positively impact teachers' efficiency in the new environment of online teaching.

Overall, the findings revealed that respecting language teachers' opinions and needs should be prioritized in designing and developing PD courses. Although commencing PD courses can be fruitful in many ways, attention should be paid to what teachers need and how they want to upskill themselves. If PD courses are designed and implemented according to teachers' needs and opinions, it can a) change their negative attitudes and perceptions about online teaching, b) develop their skills, literacies, and best practices in online teaching environments, c) enable them to create and develop their own content based on academic integrity, and d) decrease their resistance to change and the experience of online teaching.

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