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Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching Online in an Iranian EFL High School Context During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

With the Covid-19 pandemic sweeping the globe and the transition of education to fully online teaching in Iran, high school English teachers who were accustomed to teaching offline had to face a lot of challenges during this shift. In this paper, we describe the major challenges or dilemmas the first author had to surmount during his online English teaching to a group of senior high school students in the 2020-2021 academic year, how he managed to resolve those dilemmas (e.g., in teaching reading) under the second author's expert guidance, and the opportunities afforded to him by this experience. The paper has implications for teachers who teach in similar English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts and who are confronted with similar challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Hockly and Clandfield (2010) in their book, *Teaching online: Tools and techniques, options and opportunities*, imagined four different situations online learning might offer to learners: "a freelance English teacher, the director of studies of a language school, a teacher in a university language department, and a teacher teaching young learners up to the age of 16" (p. 7). The authors still imagined another situation where "[o]ne day, in a department meeting, it is announced that all courses at the university will have an online component. Teachers will have to deliver twenty percent of their language courses via the Internet" (Hockly & Clandfield, 2010, p. 8). They even went further predicting that "[a]n exclusively online option- where 100% of a course for learning a language is offered online - *is* possible" (Hockly & Clandfield, 2010, p. 9; original emphasis).

With the global outbreak of the coronavirus in January 2020, this last prediction became a reality, and the Ministry of Education in Iran, following 194 other countries (UNESCO, 2020), first announced the postponement and then the suspension of attending schools and universities on the grounds of 'social distancing' and 'coronavirus containment' initiatives when the country was hard hit by the virus in April 2020. After a couple of weeks, the government began to (gradually) transform its educational institutions with digital media as an online mode of pedagogy in an

attempt to both keep the virus at bay and compensate for the deficiencies in education access and education loss inflicted. However, for a developing country like Iran with an already struggling economy - by various sanctions imposed by the US and its European allies since Iran's 2015 nuclear deal - where the technical constraints such as suitable infrastructures and bandwidth availability pose serious challenges, this shift of platforms created many questions about the preparedness, designing, and effectiveness of online pedagogy which have yet to be answered. Moreover, while online teaching - described as 'emergency remote teaching' (Hodges et al., 2020) - was announced as a necessity not an option, there were no detailed guidelines and training programs for school teachers to get prepared for the basics of online teaching in the country. Consequently, for the first few months, confusion abounded particularly among teachers about how to teach fully online.

Teaching online has always proved to be a cause for concern and a feeling of trepidation and exasperation for many teachers and educators (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Hockly & Clandfield, 2010; Hodges et al., 2020; Ko & Rossen, 2017). Hockly and Clandfield (2010) observe that "many teachers are embracing [online teaching] as an opportunity" while many others "perceive [it] as an ordeal, a threat or at least a source of stress" (p. 7). According to Hodges et al. (2020), many teachers and teacher educators are not prepared to take on the challenges they face in emergency online teaching. Some of these challenges are, though not limited to, "creating content for online spaces, learning new delivery tools, understanding online pedagogy, engaging parents, addressing student mental health issues, and attempting various pedagogical strategies to address both synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning" (Hartshorne et al., 2020, p. 138). As stated by Ko and Rossen (2017, p. 37), teaching a course entirely online is "perhaps the most daunting task … particularly if you've never taught online before".

Online teaching is a new pedagogical landscape different in many ways from face-to-face settings, an excursion into a new realm of endeavor, and thus it requires absorbing a whole new world of skills and expertise. This runs counter to teachers, especially older ones, who have developed teaching routines mostly from tacit knowledge gained from experience. As a result, when confronted with experiencing or accommodating something new such as online teaching, they have to unlearn their long-established teaching routines, the corollary of which can be feelings of disorientation, demotivation, and loss of control.

Along the above lines, in this paper, the first author (henceforth I) shares his experiences of teaching an English language teaching (ELT) course online to two classes of senior high school students in Iran during the coronavirus epidemic. I reflect on four 'challenges' I was confronted with, how I managed to surmount them under the tutelage of the second author, as well as the 'lessons' I learned from those challenges, which I appreciate as *opportunities* (hence mentioned in the title).

EXPERIENCE, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

This was the first time I was designated to deliver all the course content online. The two classes consisted of 53 senior high school students from two top schools in a city located in the southern part of Iran. The majority of these students could be described as "high-achievers" or "high-fliers" (Ur, 2012, p. 281) as they had attended private language institutes for a couple of years. In accord with the themes of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), the new English curriculum for high schools, which has been

implemented in the country since 2016, is intended to help learners reach the B2 level at the end of senior high school (Firoozi, Razavipour, & Ahmadi, 2019; Foroozandeh & Forouzani, 2015). This curriculum reform stipulates that English teaching should comply with the principles of a localized version of communicative language teaching (CLT) that "takes account of the Islamic ideology, local values, and the country's local culture" (Firoozi et al., 2019, p. 4).

Challenge 1: Planning the course

Ko and Rossen (2017, p. 37) note that in teaching a course that is entirely online, perhaps "the most daunting task" is "planning a new course", i.e., "composing the syllabus, assembling the exercises and quizzes, [and] weighing the criteria for grades" as well as "clearly identifying and stating the desired learning outcomes" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 63). This was the first challenge I had to cope with by composing and incorporating an appropriate instructional design that could strike a right balance between the content of the students' textbook and new authentic, technology-mediated materials that would free my students "from mundane tasks so that they can focus on activities that promote greater collaboration, more in-depth study, and critical thinking skills" (Cennamo, Ross, & Ertmer, 2010, p. 12). More specifically, the crux of this challenge was related to the instructional sequencing of activities, i.e., arranging my assignments and activities into a logical order so that students will be helped to accomplish their specified learning outcomes (Ko & Rossen, 2017; see also Boettcher & Conrad, 2016; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

To overcome this challenge, learning and trial, perusal of the relevant literature, and professional advice from the second author, who had adequate expertise and experience in computer-mediated language teaching such as blended learning, came in handy. Thus, with the help of a reasonable body of knowledge I accumulated over several weeks before embarking on the teaching project, I realized that the crux of this challenge lies "in technique and in discovering the new teaching and learning opportunities afforded by the new online environment" (Ko & Rossen, 2017, p. 37). I realized that I had to adopt a new role as the "sage on the page" (Ko & Rossen, 2017, p. 37), or variously called "the guide on the side" (Blake, 2017, p. 107), which made me "more a facilitator or moderator than the expert from whom all knowledge flows" (Ko & Rossen, 2017, p. 38): that the students themselves assume the lion's share of the responsibility for learning online and that I need to "step back a bit from the spotlight in order to allow the students to take a more active part" (Ko & Rossen, 2017, p. 38). Nonetheless, I was also cognizant that they might need my help more than in regular in-person classes on the ground because online, they would be surrounded and bombarded with multifarious forms of information which might adversely distract their attention (Garrison, 2017; Ko & Rossen, 2017).

As recommended by the Department of Education, most of the course input and students' assignments, contributions, and responses were supposed to be text-based to ensure compatibility with the demands of their final exams (which are predominantly text-based) and entrance examination for universities (*Konkour*), which is totally text-based. Notwithstanding, I used audio files and included short video clips for teaching grammar, conversations, and listening assignments in addition to the live-stream presentations I was obliged to give during the specified class time. Online teaching was a blend of both synchronous and asynchronous teaching, with an emphasis on the latter, taking into account the 'flexibility' this group of students required based on their needs (Hockly & Clandfield, 2010; Hodges et al., 2020). Conversation between the teacher and the students was both text-based delivered through text messaging, text chats, and PDF files and through video and audio modes, and even phone calls. The content of the conversations and

listening activities of their textbook had been made available to them on a CD that accompanied the textbook at the outset of the school year. Thus, they could use it off-line at their own convenience.

However, as demonstrated by some recent studies (e.g., Asakereh, Yousofi, & Weisi, 2019; Mohebbi & Rahimi, 2019), the textbook series suffer from serious deficiencies. For example, the study conducted by Asakereh et al. (2019) revealed that "unrealistic and unauthentic presentations of English" have been depicted in the textbook series because they "do not provide sufficient exposure to a variety of situational contexts, characters, and cultural elements, and do not provide sufficient opportunities for English teachers to implement the socio-linguistic and socio-cultural realities of the English language in their English classes" (p. 1016). Similarly, according to Mohebbi and Rahimi (2019), reading activities are primarily composed of 'display' and 'fact-finding' questions, the meanings of which are out there in the text. These activities are a far cry from what students actually need and do in their real lives when they read and/or write. The activities mainly require "lower-order thinking" (Ur, 2012, pp. 229-230) and contain few communicative tasks which allow teacher and students to "break through the communicative cocoon" (Kurtz, 2011, pp. 133, 138). This cocoon-like architecture of classroom discourse has long been referred to as 'IRF/E discourse' in the literature (Brinton, 2014; Cullen, 2002; Hall & Walsh, 2002; Kurtz, 2011; McCarthy & Slade, 2007) and constitutes the most frequently occurring template for interaction in foreign language classrooms today (McCarthy & Slade, 2007). It comprises three highly conventionalized and routinized communicative units: teacher initiation (I), learner response (R), and teacher follow-up or feedback/Evaluation (F/E) (Brinton, 2014, p. 345; Kurtz, 2011, p. 137; see Brinton, 2014, for the difference between IRE and IRF).

To break through this communicative cocoon and create more opportunities for students to be more interactively engaged, I thus tried to integrate activities and assignments that were beyond the simple drills, exercises and display questions. These assignments and activities entailed more 'genuine' and 'referential' questions which require "higher-order thinking" and engaged students in more "communicative authenticity" (Ur, 2012, p. 229). Higher-level processing entails the deployment of (a combination of) strategies for a global understanding of more difficult texts, such as main idea identification, recognition of related and thematic information, building a text model of comprehension, forming a situation model of reader interpretation through background information, inferencing, strategic processing, contextual constraints, and so on (Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2014, 2020). Such question types "are much more likely to be genuinely meaningful. … [They involve] real transfer of information and [are] in keeping with the tenets of CLT" approach demanded by the new curriculum in the country (Brown & Lee, 2015, p. 264).

To give a concrete example, motivated by the results of Mohebbi and Rahimi's (2019) study, we didn't spend much time on the post-reading activities designed in their textbooks, as students themselves agreed. Instead, I constructed questions which mostly required the students to approach and process the reading texts strategically for a variety of purposes such as identifying the author's purpose, discussing the author's line of reasoning, identifying main ideas within separate paragraphs as well as for the whole text, recognizing the overall organization of different text genres, summarizing the information in the texts, and providing personal evaluation of and reflections on the ideas expressed in the texts.

More importantly, the students were provided with at least two other texts on the same topic collected from some authentic graded readers (e.g., Anderson, 2013; Lee & Gundersen, 2011; Richards & Eckstut-Didier, 2012). Paying close attention to the 'intertextual' (Allen, 2000; Mason, 2019) nature of the above texts, the students were required to write their ideas in a few paragraphs

and share them with their subgroup members. Then, each separate subgroup was required to send their final draft to the whole group for further discussion and feedback. I also asked the students to look up the meaning of some unknown words in the texts and write them in their vocabulary notebooks for further practice and relearning. In this way, they were engaged in an interactive task of 'reading for general comprehension', 'reading for writing' (Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2014, 2020), and 'writing as social interaction' (Hyland, 2010). In subsequent similar tasks, each student was required to separately send his own assignment to the teacher for assessment and assigning grades.

The first lesson I took from these and other interactions online was that "if you establish a participation requirement", that 'low-achiever' student who used to remain reticent, reluctant and passive in the back row of the classroom "might end up being the most loquacious or even most eloquent contributor to your online discussion forum" (Ko & Rossen, 2017, p. 47). Granted, online teaching "changes the focus of the learner from a passive receptacle to an active engager, even more responsible for his own acquisition of knowledge" (Rosen, 2010, p. 123), this observation might be explicable as students "feel a sense of security 'behind the screen', and this leads to disinhibition, or the willingness to provide more personal disclosure, which, in turn, leads to more closeness to others" (Rosen, 2010, p. 114).

A second lesson for me was that some of my face-to-face teaching procedures will not work well in the online teaching and that I need to learn some new teaching behaviors and strategies. Thus, technology integration into instruction entails some changes such as changes in the resources used, the roles the teacher fulfills, the roles the students are to play, and the nature of the instructional activities (Berge, 2008; Boettcher & Conrad, 2016; Cennamo et al., 2010; Rosen, 2010).

The Instructor's Roles Model, developed by Berge (2008), assumes four roles for the teacher during the transition from face-to-face classrooms to online teaching: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. The first two roles were vital here. The teacher's *pedagogical* role in online teaching changes from being an 'instructor' to being an educational 'facilitator'. In this role, I conceived my responsibilities as revolving around seeking out supplementary materials that match the syllabus content and that can be made accessible to students, posing questions and "prob[ing] for student responses in ways that focus discussions on critical concepts, principles, and skills" (Berge, 2008, p. 409). More specifically, within the social-constructivist theory as an underlying theoretical framework for online teaching (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016; Garrison, 2017; Palloff & Pratt, 2013), I perceived my role as shifting to "preparing recorded or written mini-lectures and resource introductions, preparing facilitation and community building experiences, and monitoring and guiding students in their learning experiences" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 8). I perceived my *social* role as changing from being merely a classroom monitor to an online-guiding-and-supervisory role, "promoting human relationships, developing group cohesiveness, maintaining the group as a unit, and in other ways helping members work together for their mutual benefit [that] are all helpful to the success of any online learning activities" (Berge, 2008, p. 410; see Challenge 4, for a more detailed explanation of this role). I perceived my *managerial* role to be changing from an 'uncritical mediator' of textbook content in face-to-face classroom context to "setting the agenda for the course: the objectives of the discussion, the timetable, procedural rules, and decision-making norms" (Berge, 2008, p. 410). For example, how relevant authentic spoken and written texts will be integrated into my online teaching. The *technical* role of the teacher in online teaching is ultimately held to be "mak[ing] the technology transparent to the user" (Berge, 2008, p. 410). Not surprisingly, students have already accumulated a lot of knowledge about the

online platforms adopted by their schools - that is, *Shad* and other social networking apps (e.g., *WhatsApp*) - thanks to their Web 2.0 technological savvy.

On the other hand, from a constructivist perspective on online teaching, students are expected to "follow their own lines of thinking and inquiry by talking to peers and immersing themselves in resources, rather than listening to the delivery of content from an instructor for long periods" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 8), and they "must do more thinking, writing, doing, sharing, reflecting, collaborating, and peer reviewing as part of a community of learners" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 9; Garrison, 2017). These new roles became evident in what students delivered to the public group through synchronous text-based chats and audio and video activities based on the themes I had announced to them ahead of time and publicized the rules for the conduct of each session, in addition to various asynchronous reflections.

Challenge 2: The LMS and Internet connectivity

A second challenge appertained to Internet connectivity and the learning management system (LMS), or virtual learning environment (VLE), adopted for schools in the country during the pandemic. Before the coronavirus pandemic, the use of digital technologies (especially smartphones and tablet computers) in schools as an educational tool was banned in Iran, viewing them as a "nuisance" (Ur, 2012, p. 213) in classrooms, most likely on socio-cultural and socio-political grounds, but also on grounds of "media-hyped dangers - sexual predators, cyberbullying, and pornography" (Rosen, 2010, p. 104). During the pandemic, the educational network of student, abbreviated as *Shad*, was launched as an LMS and as a proprietary software product by the Ministry of Education for online delivery of education first on mobiles and later also on PCs. This system was supposed to be multifunctional, allowing teachers and students to "'manage' the flow of information and communications" as well as allowing the teacher to "both assess and keep track of the performance of the students, monitoring their progress and assigning grades" (Ko & Rossen, 2017, p. 32), not to mention such other operations as roll calling, voting, question posing, topic discussion, surveys, etc. Fortunately, since its launch in September 2020, free access and use of *Shad* was provided for students and teachers as a special offer across the country. However, given the fact that more than 17 million students, teachers, and headmasters from primary to senior high schools across the country were simultaneously using this VLE, the congestion and slowdown of the Internet was inevitable. Moreover, its multifunctionality also engendered consuming higher amounts of data and creating more technical problems, culminating in constant teaching interruptions particularly during the peak times. More importantly, the most notorious problem with this platform was that video interaction was unilateral (from teacher to students) and that the recorded live streaming was saved for only 24 hours after the presentation. Therefore, it was not possible for the teacher to monitor and ensure the full participation of all the students in all activities after the initial roll-calling. In addition, downloading the video files was not possible for some students due to the inevitable collapse in Internet connectivity.

This challenge had its roots in one of the conceptualizations of the term 'digital divide', that is, the difference between higher-resourced and lower-resourced countries, and even within individual areas and within individual classrooms in a country (Hockly, 2014; van Dijk, 2006). The lesson for me here was that although all students had access to a digital device at home, digital divide did exist in this particular area of the country. But, as stated by Hockly (2014), the effective use of technologies in low-resource contexts depends not only on "the cultural appropriacy of materials and approaches" but also on "using appropriate technologies, keeping costs low, and

ensuring long-term sustainability" (p. 80). This points to the fact that the quality of data was more salient than Internet accessibility, especially in this crisis situation. This data quality could be affected by a number of factors such as the type of digital device, Internet connectivity mode, and bandwidth availability.

To overcome this challenge, the most convenient initiative I could take at the time was to use other appropriate applications and Internet tools in an attempt to optimize the smooth delivery of the course content. Accordingly, I used some external applications such as *WhatsApp* (a popular social app widely used in Iran) and *Skyroom* (a local platform for synchronous teaching) to complement the system. Through *WhatsApp* I could interact with individual students in both audio and video modes, and text chats, among several other functions. Through *Skyroom* - which required payment after a trial period - it was possible to hold desktop video conferencing. Besides, the recorded data were saved for 30 days, allowing students to download them at their most convenience. I also learned that online class discussions are "primarily asynchronous - available at different times depending on the learner's physical location, rather than synchronous in real time at the instructor's location of choice" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, pp. 9-10). Therefore, I didn't have to "schedule a lot of synchronous chat sessions or include video resources when [I knew] that the connectivity is tenuous" (Ko & Rossen, 2017, p. 51), especially during the hours when congestion and slowdown of the Internet was inevitable. This obviated the need for students to stay online inordinately. Additionally, attempt was made to "fashion tasks and exercises that emphasize student collaboration and de-emphasize the traditional role of the instructor as the central figure in the pedagogical play" (Ko & Rossen, 2017, p. 39; Garrison, 2017). Thus, by prior agreement, synchronous discussions were by and large text-based chat (asynchronously) and students were given ample time to chip away at their tasks whenever they were able to. However, I didn't respond to each and every single message instantly; instead, I collected the enquiries, sorted them by subject, provided a single and conclusive feedback for each subject or point, and then sent them on the public group for all to see. Besides, I gave a live-stream presentation on those problematic points as an alternative kind of feedback. This happened almost twice a week.

Challenge 3: The device divide

A third dilemma, closely related to the challenge of Internet connectivity, was the plight reported by struggling families with three or four school children from different schools where they simultaneously had different school subjects to attend to online. This situation was further aggravated by a lack of sufficient mobile devices with 3G and/or 4G networks in some families where they even could not afford to purchase cheap Android phones for all school children. This challenge points to a problem of 'device divide' faced by many of the world's population in the sense of being able only to access social media via mobile phones and non-broadband connectivity (Pearce & Rice, 2013). This issue is easily noticeable in counties and regions where "communications infrastructures are underdeveloped and underfunded" (Selwyn & Stirling, 2015, p. 2). It created a serious trouble for those families to fine-tune their students' various online classes and strike a proper balance between the demands of different classes by different schools.

Within many lower-resource EFL contexts, national projects, institution-led projects, and projects carried out by individual teachers have been launched as digital initiatives based on mobile devices, and with the aim of "obviating the need for expensive hardware and infrastructure [and providing] low-cost mobile phones" (Hockly, 2014, p. 81). An example of such projects is the 'one-to-one' policy adopted in many, even low-resource, counties - the increasingly popular

practice of providing each child with a digital device. Still another instance is the integration of the use of tablet computers into their classroom practice by language teachers at the British Council in Hong Kong (Hockly, 2014) (see Pegrum, 2014 for a detailed discussion of such developments). However, no such initiatives and/or projects have been provided in Iran so far.

The lesson for me here was that digital divide did exist among this rather small sample of students and that online learning and teaching is going to create a new form of problem, the 'digital inequalities' (Williamson, Eynon, & Potter, 2020) problem, for families already crippled by or vulnerable to financial difficulties, particularly in low-resource contexts where communications infrastructures in educational institutions such as schools are underdeveloped and underfunded. Thus, as a teacher, I had to make appropriate adjustments to the various forms of the course components (such as class activities, feedback types and mechanisms, assessment types and procedures, allotted time and volume of synchronous and asynchronous activities) to cater to the various needs of different students.

To overcome this challenge, I tried to make a compromise between my own schedule and those of the students and adjusted and increased my "available times" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 49), adhering to the principle of flexibility in the interests of efficiency. I wanted them to touch base with me almost 24/7 if they had any questions about an assignment, a quiz, or next-class tasks, or just keep me informed about where they were struggling. I made it crystal clear to them that I am always there to help them. Besides, I made PDF and PowerPoint files of almost all the written documents and sent them to the public group so that students could read them off-line at their most convenient time.

Challenge 4: The superficiality of online interaction

A fourth challenge I had to contend with was concerned with Ko and Rossen's (2017) contention that, "a great fear among many instructors is that all human interaction online is inevitably superficial and that such a learning environment leads to more alienation between students and instructors" (p. 46). This might particularly be the problem with students who are rather teacher-directed in terms of their learning styles in face-to-face interactions because they might "feel somewhat lost in an [online] environment that relies heavily on individual initiative and independent learning or even more dismayed to hear that collaboration with peers is an expected element of the class" (Ko & Rossen, 2017, p. 312). To compound the situation, the digitalized presence of teachers and students is an inevitable concomitant of digitalized teaching instruction in fully online classes which tends to cast doubts on the efficacy of this instructional delivery on the part of teachers and students alike. However, informed by the constructivist theory as a theoretical basis for online learning, learners must construct their own knowledge base by doing "more thinking, writing, doing, sharing, reflecting, collaborating, and peer reviewing as part of a community of learners" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 9).

To deal with this challenge, I tried to take two courses of action. First, I tried to make my presence at the course deliberately visible to my students through various communication means such as live presentations, instant messages, feedback, discussion forums, making announcements, and "generally 'being there' frequently" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 44; Lehman & Conceição, 2010). Importantly, I created "a supportive online course community" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 47), which is premised on the idea that "nurturing a learning community as part of a course is almost as important as being present for your learners" and that "in digital environments, more explicit nurturing and planning is required" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 47) than in face-to-face

environments. I was inspired by the community of inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, 2017) as a worthwhile transactional educational experience "whose core function is to manage and monitor the dynamic for teaching and learning collaboratively" (Garrison, 2017, p. 24). More specifically, the model "establishes procedures for critical inquiry and the collaborative construction of personal meaningful and shared understanding" (Garrison, 2017, p. 24). Based on this framework, deep and meaningful learning experiences are achieved within a CoI through the interaction of three interdependent and mutually reinforcing core elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Garrison, 2017, pp. 24-25; see Garrison, 2017, for a full description of the model).

Of the above three core components, social presence is "central to the creation of effective online learning" (Lehman & Conceição, 2010, p. 5) because "it is largely responsible for setting the academic climate" and because it functions as a crucial indicator of online learners' "interpersonal/affective communication, open communication, and sustained group cohesion" (Garrison, 2017, p. 38). Social presence is defined as "the ability of participants to identify with a group, communicate openly in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personalities" (Garrison, 2017, p. 25). In addition to the temporary home quarantine in the spring semester 2020, these students had to live a life of extended home isolation for at least the whole academic year in 2021. Therefore, students' online learning constituted a major part of their social communication, hence stressing the significance of their social presence. To promote this social communication, following some guidelines in the literature (e.g., Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, pp. 47-48; Ko & Rossen, 2017, pp. 88-92), I designed my online communicative activities revolving around three basic interaction patterns: teacher to student, student to student, and student to resource, with a strong emphasis on increased proportion of student-to-student interaction. In so doing, I first established a set of explicit rubrics or protocols for communication expectations for my students and posted them prominently on the course communication spaces for the whole groups of students to see. These criteria encompassed how often each student was required to communicate online, with whom, and how.

For example, for post-reading questions, instead of the typical "literal comprehension questions" (Nuttall, 1996, p. 188) designed in their textbooks (such as true/false, short-response, and matching types), I posed questions requiring 'high-order thinking/processing' which entail "deeper understanding, application, analysis, evaluation or creativity" (Ur, 2012, pp. 229-230; see also Blachowicz & Ogle, 2008, p. 125; Nuttall, 1996, pp. 188-189). The questions were fairly specific, but open-ended so as to tap into as much of the students' personal knowledge and experience as possible for the exploration, application, inference, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of the concepts they were learning. I posted the questions in the open forum on *Shad* and also *WhatsApp* groups they formed for the course and asked the students to do so by text-based chats as well as audio and video responses so that all students could see the questions and their peers' responses, all could benefit from them, and appropriately reflect on them.

The discussion postings were presented by means of a Socratic-type probing and follow-up questions as well as clarification questions. For instance, concerning the topic of '*Earth for our children*" in *Vision 3* for senior high school students in grade 3, I posted two chains of questions, after providing them with two further texts on the same topic from graded authentic textbooks and delivering my own mini-lectures or full presentations on the texts. These included: (1) "Which energy resources do you think are likely to run out in the future in our country and be a problem? What is your reasoning? Do you think of other alternative resources?"; and (2) "What role do you

assign to individuals in our society (concerning the use of natural resources) to ensure a better future for the next generations? Why do you think so?" In the same vein, for the topic of '*culture*', the discussion tasks derived from three authentic texts and presented to the students were: (1) "Where would you go if you were given s student scholarship to spend a year in a foreign country? Why?"; (2) 'How would you think life in your country is different from life in that country?"

In my speaking class, as another example, in lieu of the typical question-and-answer type incorporated into the students' textbooks, the interactions were also modified to include conversations and paired, small-group and whole-class discussions (Goh & Burns, 2012; Lazaraton, 2014; Richards, 2015), since "discussions are probably the most commonly used activity in the L2 speaking class" (Lazaraton, 2014, p. 112). One important benefit of using group discussion tasks is that "they can potentially develop high-level thinking and reasoning skills" (Goh & Burns, 2012, p. 208). A discussion here was defined as "an interaction focusing on exchanging ideas about a topic and presenting points of view and opinions" (Richards, 2015, p. 421). The activities centered on topics at some times or on tasks at others (Bohlke, 2014; Goh & Burns, 2012; Ur, 2012) and included reflections on their quality from both students' and teacher's part (Lazaraton, 2014; Richards, 2015).

Second, as it was previously noted, I conducted my communicative activities via a combination of synchronous and asynchronous formats, taking into account that in an entirely online course "a synchronous mode of discussion might seem to offer the best parallel to face-to-face interaction" (Ko & Rossen, 2017, p. 88) and that "these discussions are [primarily] asynchronous, meaning that students have time for thought and reflection" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 53). Drawing on previous research, Boettcher and Conrad (2016) propose six purposes for which online discussions are designed. In addition to the usual textbook-based purposes, I specifically made use of three of those purposes during the school year. These included: "encourage critical or creative thinking, achieve social interaction and community building, … [and] support students in their own reflections and inquiries" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 53).

As already explained, the discussions were largely text-based, but also embraced audio, video, and webinar formats with paired and larger groups of students. Care was exercised to strike a right balance between fluency and accuracy (Brown & Lee, 2015; Lazaraton, 2014; Nation & Newton, 2009; Richards, 2015) and also between the amount of students' output and my input (Richards, 2015; Ur, 2012).

Through this blend of synchronous and asynchronous discussions, students indeed made use of lots of emoticons and emojis to reflect on their peers' responses, shared their own ideas and interpretations, and even suggested some modifications to be made to their textbooks' content in the course of such digital interactions. In other words, they invested as equal thought and effort in their online learning as they did in their offline classes. This helped them to build up their confidence in freely expressing and sharing their ideas, accommodate and strengthen online bonds with their teacher, groupmates, and classmates, and to partially relieve the stress caused by isolation from their important others. The results of informal class surveys carried out in the beginning, middle, and near the end of the school year indicated that these students eventually learned that by simply empathizing with others, actively participating in their course materials, talking to their classmates and the teacher, it was made possible to recreate the community and the camaraderie they had in their offline classes and make the transition to online learning as smooth as possible.

CONCLUSION

In closing, without aiming to denigrate or criticize the role that educational technologies, including *Shad* and social networking sites (e.g., *WhatsApp*) can play in bridging and/or reducing the inevitable gap in education in times of crisis like the coronavirus emergency, I believe it would be simplistic to claim that such emergency remote teaching is a ready-made remedy for the current and, by extension, future crises in Iran. While the Covid-19 pandemic lingered on for the whole 2020-2021 academic year, we did not experience a massive change in the political and educational climate of Iran, enough to enable a rethinking of how best to fund education, how best to help struggling families to makes ends meet, and how best to provide individuals with access to health care. This meant that teachers had to rely heavily on their own online teaching repertoire and expertise without recourse to any specific formal expert training, guidelines, and whatsoever launched directly by the Department of Education. To exacerbate the situation, none of the internationally known LMSs (such as *Moodle, Sakai, Blackboard, Schoology, Canvas*) was adopted as the particular platform for online teaching; instead, *Shad* was touted as the external local application, despite the many major faults in its design and functionality.

However, teaching digitally transcends a simple knowledge of how to use technology or transition to an online platform (Palloff & Pratt, 2013; Reinders, 2009) and it involves different pedagogies, readiness, and novel procedures for engaging and communicating with learners (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, 2012; Garrison, 2017; Ko & Rossen, 2017; Koehler et al., 2014; Son, 2018). A crucial component of teachers' professional knowledge not only in this emergency remote teaching but also in today's classrooms in general is technological pedagogical content knowledge, or TPACK, defined as "knowledge about the complex relations among technology, pedagogy, and content that enable teachers to develop appropriate and context-specific teaching strategies" (Koehler et al., 2014, p. 102). As submitted by Reinders (2009, p. 231), this could involve "being able to, first, *use* a certain technology; second, being able to *create* materials and activities using that technology; and, third, being able to *teach* with technology" [original emphasis].

With this in mind, the coronavirus pandemic reminded me that my digital competence and online teaching qualifications are in need of development since "learning how to teach online is an ongoing process that includes not only mastering new skills, but also a cycle of review, reflection, and continual revision of one's online course" (Ko & Rossen, 2017, p. 53) which can be quite an overwhelming experience. I am now convinced that I should start learning online teaching skills and techniques almost from scratch, embracing a beginner's mind as the safest way through this excursion as teaching digitally is not the second nature to many teachers (Yen, Lo, Lee, & Enriquez, 2018), myself included. In so doing, I have started retooling my courses by learning about some new software, about some low-tech and high-tech solutions to pedagogical obstacles, about how to restructure and fine-tune my courses, and about how to become an active member of a local, national and international community of practice specifically devoted to online teaching, and by applying for a certificate program for online teaching. I also took a fully online two-credit course as part of my PhD program offered by my university and under the tutelage of the second author "as an extremely effective way of gaining insights into how it feels to study online [in this time of crisis]" (Hockly & Clandfield, 2010, p. 18).

Looking on the bright side, the coronavirus was (and continues to be) a real 'crucible' to test not only the actions taken by different countries to tackle the serious public health, political, economic, and social issues of this global pandemic, but also the appropriate measures the education policy-makers in these countries take to reduce or eliminate their educational deficits. It also put

the online didactic abilities of many ELT practitioners to the test, providing an impetus for them to revise their long-practiced tradition of giving dry monotonous lectures in face-to-face classrooms without so much as a moment for students to pose their questions, to give their feedbacks, and to convey their critical thoughts to a neighbor without getting a hush from their teachers. For me, and by extension for many other teachers and educators, these unique times provided great opportunities to contemplate and to give my online teaching a rethink and to revamp my overall teaching repertoire.

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