



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Prediction of Iranian EFL Learners' Satisfaction with Online Education through the Dimensions of Online Education: A Gender-based Mixed-Method Study

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(Received: 20 November 2022; Accepted: 9 May 2023; Published: 31 May 2023)

The current study employed a mixed-method approach to investigate the most influential dimensions of online education on Iranian EFL male and female learners' satisfaction with online education. To this end, 183 EFL learners (96 females and 87 males) studying English at language institutes with the age range from 16 to 25 were selected through convenience sampling. The Learners' Satisfaction with Online Education Questionnaire designed by Stefanovic et al. (2011), and semi-structured interviews were employed to collect the data. The results of multiple regression analysis demonstrated that three dimensions of online education (instructor, course, and technology) predicted EFL male learners' satisfaction, and all four dimensions of online education (instructor, course, technology, and environment) could significantly predict females' satisfaction with online education. It was also revealed that the instructor was the most influential dimension of learners' satisfaction with online education for both male and female participants. The qualitative results also showed that male and female learners considered the instructor as the most important factor influencing their satisfaction with online education.

Keywords: Gender, Iranian EFL Learners, Online Education, Satisfaction.

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Introduction

With the recent introduction of an open software learning platform, several apps providing a variety of functionalities are being developed. Online classes are becoming the next paradigm-shifting tool for everyday life, just as many students have experienced traditional on-campus study.

The Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, has completely disrupted teaching and learning activities and influenced a huge number of teachers and learners in all countries (Shahzad et al., 2021). While face-to-face teaching is not an option anymore, online learning is considered as an alternative to assist the continuation of training in the pandemic with its adaptability and convenience (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020).

To prevent the education delay caused by COVID-19, educational settings in different countries, including Iran, have started employing learning management systems and online platforms, but at the same time, the students have faced several problems with online education.

This unexpected and quick change has raised concerns and challenges regarding the learning quality learning, learners' commitment, performance and satisfaction as there is not enough information or guidance for teachers regarding the best online teaching and learning practices (Sahu, 2020)

According to Madaus (2013), most teachers would not possess the required skills and proficiency needed for conducting online courses. The other restriction of online education is a inadequacy of engagement in online courses and a failure to fulfill learners' authentic needs (Carnevale, 2004). Despite these challenges and obstructions, many instructors and students believe that online education is a strong and effective way of teaching and learning (Li and Irby, 2008). Furthermore, numerous language education scholars have stated that the usage of online technologies and the Internet will enhance EFL learners' autonomy and improve their learning (Warschauer, 2010). Other elements like as infrastructure, support system quality, material and assessment quality, and peer support networks may also have an impact on the online education experience (Areti, 2006).

Learners' satisfaction with online education is considered as an important factor that influences the use of online education. As Chogo (2020) pinpointed, the majority of learners prefer traditional learning to online learning.

As learners' satisfaction reflects the effectiveness of online learning quality (Alqurashi, 2019), it is essential to understand the role of gender in EFL learners' satisfaction, particularly during the pandemic when traditional teaching and learning has moved to an online form (Kumar, Saxena, and Baber, 2021). However, very little attention has been paid to the EFL learners' satisfaction in an online environment during the pandemic. To date, the issue has received scant attention in the context of Iran. In fact, only one study explored the relationship between the satisfaction of Iranian high school EFL learners' employing SHAD software in their online education and gender (Amirian, Khaje, and Tayyebi, 2021).

Majority of Iranian EFL learners study English at language institutes employing Adobe Connect and Skype applications in their online education. Therefore, by reviewing previous studies conducted in this area, and by identifying the gaps

related to EFL learners' online learning satisfaction, the current study aims to identify the most influential dimensions of Iranian EFL male and female learners' satisfaction with online education.

Research background

The rapid advent of the fatal coronavirus epidemic convulsed the whole planet, confronting the educational systems worldwide and forcing teachers to adapt to online education delivery rather than traditional teaching (Dhawan, 2020). The introduction of online learning has had a significant impact on educational continuity and the advancement of information technology.

Online learning is considered as a new mode of learning in which learners use the Internet to acquire knowledge, access learning materials, interact with teachers and other students, and obtain support during the learning process (Martin, Drew, and Ritzhaupt, 2020). Regarding the flexibility and accessibility of online learning, it can be considered as an effective alternative to traditional education (Sun and Chen, 2016).

Diverse definitions are provided for Online learning systems. In recent years, online learning is considered as a web-based or cloud-based software program which helps the teaching and learning processes (Chaubey and Bhattachary, 2015). According to Sangwan, Sangwan, and Punia (2021), different terminologies such as e-learning, online learning, and internet learning are used to describe online education. However, Sangwan, Sangwan, and Punia (2021) simply defined online education as "an electronically supported way of learning wherein, teacher and students interact via the internet" (p. 187).

Recently, considerable literature has grown up around the theme of online education (Sun & Chen, 2016). Studies on online education are divided into two phases: before the pandemic when most of the studies were focused on universities, and after the pandemic when schools and institutes also had an immediate shift toward online education (Toquero, 2020). Therefore, after the pandemic, researchers showed an increased interest in investigating different aspects of online education.

In the online context, satisfaction plays a significant role in the continuity of online education (Moore and Kearsley, 2011; Parahoo et al., 2016). Learning satisfaction represents learners' emotions, attitudes, and perceptions toward the learning process, as well as their perceived level of fulfillment as a result of learning experiences (Topala and Tomozii, 2014).

Learning satisfaction also relates to how much learners like utilizing online devices and platforms for learning. It assesses whether the learning content efficiently stimulates students' strong desire for knowledge, assisting them in developing a positive learning attitude, and allowing them to fully participate in the learning process, all of which can enhance the efficiency of online courses (Zhang, Li, and Wang, 2008).

Previous online learning research has discovered that learner satisfaction is a significant predictor of learning outcomes and the efficacy of online learning system adoption (Ke & Kwak, 2013). Many elements of learner online satisfaction have been studied in order to fulfill students' true learner needs and develop an effective learning environment (Hew et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2021).

A wide range of research has been undertaken to investigate the factors influencing learners' satisfaction with online education. For instance, Rostami Ravari and Fathi Rad (2021) found that Iranian intermediate EFL learners were satisfied with online education, however, they held negative attitudes toward the challenges and obstacles of online contexts.

Conducting a mixed-method study, Azizi and Rezaei (2021) concluded that Iranian university students' learning satisfaction were moderately satisfied with online classes. Based on the results of the qualitative phase, the researchers concluded that teachers, familiarity with technology, course set-up, and interaction with classmates play a significant role in students' satisfaction. They also found that students' learning satisfaction with online courses is closely correlated with their achievement.

Jalilinia (2021) conducted a survey study to investigate the attitudes of Iranian high school students toward online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the results, the researcher concluded that students mainly had negative perspectives on online learning and most of them did not have pleasant experiences with the online learning platforms.

Mirshekari, Tayebi, and Dehghani (2021) who investigated the dimensions of online education which influenced on Iranian senior high school EFL learners' satisfaction found that the internet quality was the most influential factor on e-learners' satisfaction.

Amirian Khajeh, and Tayyebi (2021) also conducted a survey study to investigate the most influential dimensions of satisfaction with online education among Iranian male and female secondary senior high school EFL learners. The researchers reported that technology and instructor were the most influential dimensions of learners' satisfaction with online education for the male and female participants, respectively.

What can be inferred from the above-alluded studies is that the satisfaction of Iranian EFL male and female learners learning English at language institutes is under-researched. To bridge the gap, the present mixed-methods study explores what dimensions of online education predict Iranian EFL male and female learners' satisfaction with online education

The results of the current study can be useful to educational authorities of language institutes to address effectively the factors that contribute to the learners' satisfaction with online education. Furthermore, the findings of the research can further EFL teachers to accommodate their ways of teaching such that it can lead to increased learning satisfaction among EFL learners.

Research Question

What dimensions of online education predict Iranian EFL male and female learners' satisfaction with online education?

Method

Participants of the quantitative phase

The sample of the current study comprised of 183 Iranian EFL learners learning English at several Shiraz language institutes. The participants were 96 females and 87 males whose ages ranged from 16 to 25 ($M = 19.71$, $SD = 5.27$). Their language

proficiency varied from intermediate to advanced levels. All participants' native language was Persian and all of them had at least one year of the online learning experience.

Participants of the qualitative phase

The qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. To this end, among the questionnaire respondents, 5 female and 5 male learners were selected purposefully based on maximum variation sampling to take part in the interviews. A maximum variation sample contains cases that are purposefully as different from each other as possible. To this end, interviewees were selected from different proficiency levels and different classes of five institutes to ensure the maximum variation sampling. The age range of the interviewees was 17 to 21 years.

Instruments

Learners' Satisfaction with Online Education

The questionnaire of Learners' Satisfaction with Online Education including 7-point Likert scale items ranging from 1 as 'strongly disagree' to 7 as 'strongly agree' developed by Stefanovic et al. (2011) was employed as the instrument of the study. The learners' satisfaction questionnaire encompassed 39 items on four main independent dimensions and one dependent variable as e-learning satisfaction. According to Stefanovic et al. (2011), the satisfaction inventory model used in the learners' satisfaction questionnaire includes one dependent variable (learners' satisfaction) and four independent variables (dimensions of online education) presented in the following:

- The instructor's response time and e-learning attitude are included in the instructor dimension.
- Course dimension encompasses the quality and flexibility of e-learning courses.
- Technology dimension refers to technology and internet quality.
- Environmental dimension consists of diversity in assessment and interaction in the e-learning environment.

The researcher examined the reliability of each variable using Cronbach's Alpha values. The reported values of learners' satisfaction ($\alpha = .87$), and four dimensions of online education, instructor ($\alpha = .80$), course ($\alpha = .79$), technology ($\alpha = .75$), and environment ($\alpha = .81$) were all above 0.7, suggesting high internal consistency.

Semi-structured Interviews

The qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews were employed to enrich the quantitative results. To cross-check the results of the quantitative phase of the study, the researcher considered the interview questions closely aligned with the research question and dimensions of online education presented in the employed questionnaire. The interview questions explored the influence of different aspects of online education on participants' satisfaction. More detailed questions were also asked when they emerged during the interviews. All the interviews were carried out in Persian.

The interviews were performed in face-to-face sessions at the language institutes. Furthermore, the interviewees' consent was obtained to audiotape the interviews.

The interviews lasted between 15 and 20 minutes. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed by the researcher.

Data Collection

Data were collected in the summer of 2021 through a computer-based survey among Iranian EFL learners. In order to collect the data, the researcher e-mailed the institute management of five language institutes in Shiraz. In this e-mail, the purpose of the study was explained for the institute managers. After obtaining their consent, the researcher administered the questionnaire in two modes (hard copy and online modes).

In the hard copy mode, the researcher administered the questionnaire in the face-to-face language classrooms. In the online mode, with the cooperation of the teachers, a link including the google form of the questionnaire was sent to their students' educational groups on social media networks (Whatsapp and Telegram). The first page of the questionnaire explained the goal of the study and how to complete the questions. The participants were also notified on the opening page of the questionnaire that they might withdraw from the study at any time without disadvantages.

After collecting the data, the researcher engaged data analysis in order to answer the study questions. The statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS (version 27). First, Cronbach's alpha was run to estimate the reliability of the instrument. In the next step, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to ascertain if the data distribution was normal. Afterwards, to answer the research question, the multiple linear regression analysis was run to find what dimensions of online education predict Iranian EFL male and female learners' satisfaction.

Research Findings

Quantitative Results

In the first step of data analysis, normality of data was assessed through the skewness and kurtosis tests (Table 1). To verify the normality assumption, the skewness and kurtosis ratios over their respective standard errors must be between ± 1 (Kim, 2013).

Table 1. Normality Tests

		Skewness		Kurtosis	
		Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Males	Satisfaction	-.374	.258	.011	.511
	Instructor	-.373	.258	-.201	.511
	Course	.387	.258	-.147	.511
	Technology	-.297	.258	-.056	.511
	Environment	-.435	.258	-.378	.511
Females	Satisfaction	.252	.246	-.098	.488
	Instructor	-.171	.246	-.640	.488
	Course	.116	.246	-.422	.488
	Technology	-.055	.246	-.514	.488
	Environment	-.269	.246	-.206	.488

As the values are not greater than ± 1.0 , then the skewness or kurtosis for the distribution is inside the range of normality, so the distribution can be considered normal. The descriptive of the descriptive statistics of the male and female participants' satisfaction scores. It is worth noting that as the satisfaction questionnaire included 7-point Likert scale items, the mean score of each variable falls between 1 to 7. With regard to the range of mean scores, the point 4 can be considered as the mid-point.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation
Males	Satisfaction	87	3.10	6.20	4.8437	.07547	.70393
	Instructor	87	3.00	6.67	4.8506	.08315	.77553
	Course	87	3.33	7.00	4.9808	.08811	.82179
	Technology	87	2.67	6.33	4.8238	.08440	.78724
	Environment	87	3.00	6.33	4.8927	.08238	.76839
Females	Satisfaction	96	3.60	6.80	4.9146	.06302	.61746
	Instructor	96	3.00	6.00	4.7917	.07667	.75122
	Course	96	3.33	6.33	4.7882	.06966	.68248
	Technology	96	3.00	6.33	4.9285	.07241	.70952
	Environment	96	3.00	7.00	5.1042	.08583	.84093

As shown in Table 2, all the mean scores are larger than 4 indicating that both male and female EFL learners were satisfied with online education. According to the results, regarding the four dimensions of online education, males and females received the highest mean score in the course ($M= 4.98$) and environment ($M= 5.10$) dimensions, respectively. Figure 1 shows the male and female learners' mean scores.

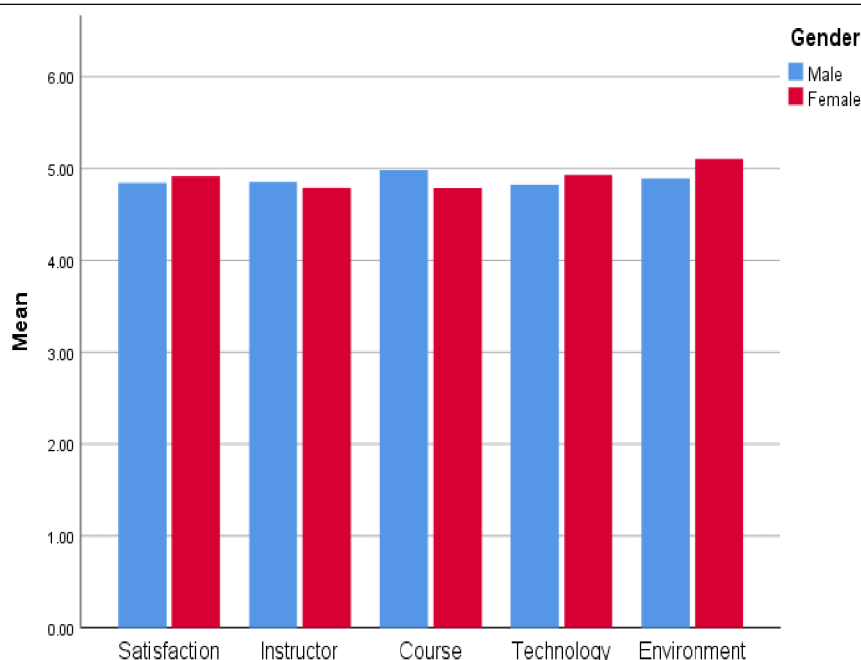


Figure 1. Bar Graph of Male and Female Learners' Mean Scores

In the next step, to explore what dimensions of satisfaction with online education predict Iranian EFL male and female learners, the multiple regression was run. It should be noted that before running the multiple regression analysis, in addition to the normality, its other assumptions (i.e., linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity) were verified. After evaluating the assumptions for multiple regression analysis, the regression analysis was run. Table 3 demonstrates the results of ANOVA test.

Table 3. ANOVA Tests

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Males	Regression	35.947	4	8.987	110.533	.000
	Residual	6.667	82	.081		
	Total	42.614	86			
Females	Regression	29.777	4	7.444	105.157	.000
	Residual	6.442	91	.071		
	Total	36.220	95			

As revealed in Table 3, the general model significantly predicted the satisfaction scores for both males ($F(4, 82) = 110.53, p < .01$) and females ($F(4, 91) = 105.15, p < .01$). The results of the model summary are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Model Summary

	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Males	.918 ^b	.844	.836	.28514
Females	.907 ^b	.822	.814	.26607

According to Table 4, all the predictors (instructor, course, technology, and environment) explain a large amount of the variance for males' ($R = .91$, $R^2 = .84$) and females' ($R = .90$, $R^2 = .82$) satisfaction with online education.

Table 5. Coefficients in Regression Analysis

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Males	(Constant)	-.389	.281		-1.386	.169	-.947	.169
	Instructor	.414	.058	.456	7.143	.000	.299	.530
	Course	.272	.054	.317	5.032	.000	.164	.379
	Technology	.364	.057	.407	6.361	.000	.250	.478
	Environment	.023	.062	.025	.373	.710	-.101	.148
Females	(Constant)	-.241	.259		-.932	.354	-.755	.273
	Instructor	.364	.047	.443	7.831	.000	.272	.457
	Course	.224	.053	.248	4.249	.000	.119	.329
	Technology	.355	.052	.408	6.851	.000	.252	.458
	Environment	.115	.046	.157	2.508	.014	.024	.207

The results showed that among the three significant predictors (instructor, course, and technology) of males' satisfaction, instructor ($\beta = .45$) had the highest beta value and course had the lowest one ($\beta = .31$).

It was also revealed that all four dimensions of online education could significantly predict females' satisfaction with online education with instructor ($\beta = .44$) as the strongest predictor and environment ($\beta = .15$) as the weakest one.

Qualitative Results

The gathered data obtained from the interviews showed that both male and female learners agreed with learning the language through online courses. They considered online learning as a novel, practical and effective method of language teaching and learning and indicated that online learning methods are essential when traditional education cannot continue.

Based on the results of the interview, the learners believed that online learning is less stressful than learning the language in the classroom. The findings of the interviews also revealed that learners who already enjoyed working with online technologies in their face-to-face classrooms were more prepared for online learning.

One of the frequent points in both male and female learners' responses was teachers' performance in online classes. They pinpointed that teachers play an

essential role in their learning satisfaction. The participants considered teachers' behavior, familiarity with online environments, ease of access, and support, as some of the effective teacher-related factors influencing their satisfaction with the online learning.

Furthermore, the participants referred to the internet quality as an influencing factor in their satisfaction. The most frequent technology-related factors in the participants' responses were the quality of internet connections, internet speed, and quality of internet devices.

In some cases, the participants indicated that the flexibility of online education is often an appealing factor for them. They expressed that taking classes anywhere and learning at their own pace has a positive influence on their satisfaction. Some of the male learners' responses are presented in the following.

- I think online education is interesting. It let us learn without stress.
- The only reason to keep me taking online classes is my teacher. He knows how to organize the class in an attractive and friendly way. He also observes our learning and even out of class time, answers our questions.
- Although I prefer online classes to face-to-face classes, sometimes, because of internet connection problems, I lose the class and wish to quit the course.

Some of the female learners' responses are as follows.

- I like online learning, however, I think that we (students) have better performance in face-to-face classes compared with online courses. But sometimes with professional teachers, online classes are more beneficial than traditional classes.
- I think some factors such as teachers' performance in monitoring learners' progress and providing them support are very important in online learning.
- Proper interaction between my teacher and students is what motivates me to continue online learning.
- I think problems regarding the internet and online devices negatively influence in our (students) online learning and our satisfaction with online courses.
- There are no face-to-face interactions in online courses. There is also less opportunity for communicating with classmates. However, compared with traditional classes, I feel less stressed when I answer the teachers' questions or give tests in online courses.

Discussion and conclusion

The goal of the current study was to explore what dimensions of satisfaction with online education predict Iranian EFL male and female learners. Based on the findings it was concluded that three dimensions of online education (instructor, technology, and course) could respectively predict EFL male learners and all four dimensions of online education (instructor, technology, course, and environment) influenced the EFL female learners' satisfaction. It was also concluded that the instructor was the most influential dimension of satisfaction with online education for both EFL male and female learners.

In the interviews, the instructor was the most frequent and the most influencing factor mentioned in male and female participants' responses. They also referred to the internet quality and flexibility of online classes as the other influencing factors in their satisfaction with online education. It can be concluded that the results of the qualitative phase of the study are in line with those of the quantitative phase.

Therefore, the findings signified the prominent role of instructor and his/her response timeline and attitude toward e-learning in EFL learners' satisfaction with online education. These results are partly in line with Amirian Khajeh, and Tayyebi (2021) study. They also found that instructor was the most influential dimension of satisfaction for both Iranian female high school learners.

These results are also consistent with those of Azizi and Rezaei (2021) who found instructor as a critical factor for learners' online learning satisfaction. They also found that after instructor, technology, course set-up, interactions, and outcomes are other significant factors in learners' satisfaction with online education.

One of the essential conditions for successful online courses is learners' learning satisfaction (Azizi and Rezaei, 2021). In fact, learners' satisfaction with online education plays a significant role in the quality of educational programs (Jiang et al., 2021).

In the previous studies, several factors such as teachers, technology, interactions in online classes, and online courses were recognized as the influencing factors in learners' satisfaction with online education (Bolliger and Halupa, 2012). According to Finaly-Neumann (1994), teachers are one of the most influencing factors in learners' satisfaction.

In this regard, Bolliger and Martindale (2004) emphasized the prominent role of teachers in online education and indicated that teachers' role has intensively changed with the advent of online classes.

When learners face problems in an online course, timely assistance from the teachers encourages learners to continue their learning and improve their performance (Sun et al., 2008).

In line with the results of the current study, Bolliger and Martindale (2004) reported that to raise learners' satisfaction in online education, teachers should be available when learners have any questions, they should be flexible, act as a motivator, provide feedback on learners' performance on time, and communicate with learners regularly.

Based on the results of the present study, technology is the second important factor influencing both male and female learners' satisfaction with online education. Datt and Singh (2021) also confirmed that accessibility to the reliable and easy-to-use facilities and familiarity with the technology are influencing factors in learners' satisfaction in online learning.

The findings of the present study demonstrated that course is the other crucial variable affecting learners' satisfaction with online education. Sun et al. (2008) also confirmed that learners' are more satisfied with well-designed and flexible online courses that have clear goals and are easy to navigate.

Furthermore, the findings of the current study revealed that environment of the online education including diversity in assessment and interaction in e-learning

environment is the predictor of female EFL learner' satisfaction. It is worth noting that environmental dimension was not an influencing factor in male learners' satisfaction. A possible explanation for this result might be the difference between male and female learners in the way they approach interaction in classrooms. In this regard, González-Gómez et al. (2012) concluded that male and female learners are different in terms of the importance they attach to specific aspects of e-learning teaching. They reported that compared with males, female learners take greater satisfaction from interacting with teachers. Similarly, Frymier and Houser (2000) indicated that females value student-teacher interaction more than males.

Overall, based on the findings of the present study, instructors are the most important factor in both male and female EFL learners' satisfaction with online education. Therefore, considering the ubiquitous use of online education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers should become acquainted with the significant role of their attitude and performance in the success of online education and strengthen their own online teaching competence. The research's main recommendation for EFL teachers is to offer support to their students and pay particular attention to the management of online tasks in this new learning context. It is also recommended to consider the level of computer and Internet access that students have at home, and seek to mitigate circumstances in which low quality of the internet disturbs conducting the online classes.

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Shahisavandi, Gholam Hossein (2023). Prediction of Iranian EFL Learners' Satisfaction with Online Education through the Dimensions of Online Education: A Gender-based Mixed-Method Study. *Language Art*, 8(2), 77-92., Shiraz, Iran.

DOI: 10.22046/LA.2023.12

URL: <https://www.languageart.ir/index.php/LA/article/view/336>





پیش بینی رضایت زبان آموزان ایرانی زبان انگلیسی از آموزش آنلاین از طریق ابعاد آموزش آنلاین: یک مطالعه ترکیبی مبتنی بر جنسیت

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(تاریخ دریافت: ۲۹ آبان ۱۴۰۱؛ تاریخ پذیرش: ۱۹ اردیبهشت ۱۴۰۲؛ تاریخ انتشار: ۱۰ خرداد ۱۴۰۲)

پژوهش حاضر از رویکرد ترکیبی برای بررسی تأثیرگذارترین ابعاد آموزش آنلاین بر رضایت زبان آموزان مرد و زن انگلیسی زبان انگلیسی از آموزش آنلاین استفاده کرد. برای این منظور، ۱۸۳ زبان آموز زبان انگلیسی (۹۶ زن و ۸۷ مرد) که در موسسات زبان انگلیسی در محدوده سنی ۱۶ تا ۲۵ سال تحصیل می کردند، به روش نمونه گیری در دسترس انتخاب شدند. برای جمع آوری داده ها از پرسشنامه رضایت فراگیران از آموزش آنلاین توسط استفانوویچ و همکاران (۲۰۱۱) و مصاحبه های نیمه ساختاریافته استفاده شد. نتایج تحلیل رگرسیون چندگانه نشان داد که سه بعد آموزش آنلاین (مدرس، دوره و فناوری) رضایت زبان آموزان مرد زبان انگلیسی را پیش بینی می کنند و هر چهار بعد آموزش آنلاین (مدرس، دوره، فناوری و محیط) به طور معناداری می توانند رضایت زبان آموزان زن از آموزش آنلاین را پیش بینی کنند. همچنین مشخص شد که مدرس تأثیرگذارترین بعد رضایت فراگیران از آموزش آنلاین برای شرکت کنندگان مرد و زن بوده است. نتایج کیفی نیز نشان داد که فراگیران زن و مرد، مدرس را مهم ترین عامل مؤثر بر رضایت خود از آموزش آنلاین می دانند.

واژه های کلیدی: جنسیت، زبان آموزان ایرانی زبان انگلیسی، آموزش آنلاین، رضایت.

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