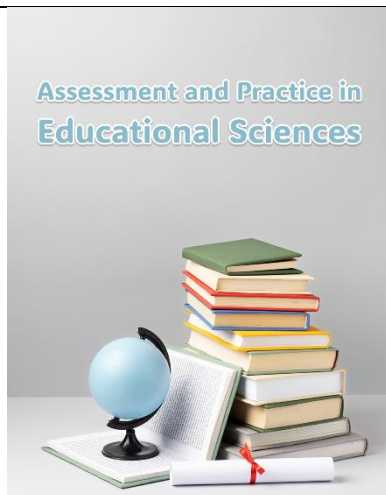




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Comparing the Effectiveness of Online and In-Person English Language Instruction on Students' Speaking Proficiency

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore and compare how learners perceive the effectiveness of online and in-person English language instruction in developing their speaking proficiency, focusing on their experiences, challenges, and perceived progress in each modality. A qualitative research design was employed to capture in-depth insights into learners' experiences. Nineteen English language learners (10 females, 9 males; aged 18–32) from private language institutes in Tehran, Iran, participated in the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure variation in gender, proficiency level, and learning mode. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that explored learners' perceptions of instructional effectiveness, interaction quality, feedback, motivation, and confidence in speaking. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo 14 software. The coding process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, resulting in the emergence of four main themes and multiple subthemes. Analysis revealed that both online and in-person instruction contributed to speaking proficiency through distinct mechanisms. In-person classes enhanced fluency, pronunciation, and pragmatic competence through immediate feedback, peer interaction, and teacher presence. Online instruction promoted learner autonomy, reflective practice, and pronunciation monitoring through digital tools such as speech recognition and recorded feedback. Teacher support, engagement strategies, and feedback modality significantly influenced learners' motivation and willingness to communicate. Despite technological challenges, participants appreciated the flexibility and self-paced nature of online learning, while many expressed a preference for hybrid models that integrate both approaches for optimal results. Both online and in-person English instruction are effective for improving speaking proficiency when pedagogical design, feedback mechanisms, and learner engagement are appropriately balanced. Integrating the social richness of classroom interaction with the flexibility of digital tools can create a more holistic and learner-centered model for developing oral competence in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Online learning; In-person instruction; Speaking proficiency; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Qualitative research; Learner perceptions; Hybrid pedagogy.

Introduction

The development of speaking proficiency remains one of the most complex yet essential goals in second and foreign language education. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, speaking ability often determines learners' perceived communicative competence and academic success. Over the past decade, the rapid expansion of digital technologies and global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated a pedagogical shift from traditional face-to-face classrooms to online and hybrid models of language instruction. This transformation has raised important questions regarding the relative effectiveness of online versus in-person learning environments for cultivating learners' oral proficiency (1-7).

Speaking proficiency is a multifaceted construct involving fluency, accuracy, complexity, and pragmatic appropriateness, each of which depends on cognitive, affective, and sociocultural factors (8). Research has long recognized that the process of acquiring oral competence involves not only linguistic knowledge but also pragmatic awareness, interactional strategies, and confidence in performance. Studies on language learning pragmatics have emphasized that instruction targeting sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions significantly improves learners' communicative effectiveness (9, 10). Pragmatic competence allows learners to select appropriate expressions, manage turn-taking, and interpret context-dependent meanings, which are vital components of successful speaking in both academic and everyday contexts (11). These elements highlight that speaking is a dynamic skill extending beyond vocabulary and grammar to encompass the ability to adapt language use to context, audience, and purpose.

The quality of instruction and exposure to authentic input are critical determinants of learners' speaking development (10). EFL learners often have limited access to natural English-speaking environments, making classroom interaction their main avenue for practice. Studies show that the frequency and quality of language exposure directly affect fluency, pronunciation, and accuracy outcomes (12, 13). However, the mode of delivery—online or in-person—can profoundly influence the type and intensity of such exposure. In traditional face-to-face classrooms, learners benefit from immediate feedback, multimodal cues, and natural peer communication (14, 15). In contrast, online platforms may limit the availability of nonverbal signals and spontaneous turn-taking but provide opportunities for reflection, repetition, and asynchronous interaction (5, 6). Therefore, exploring how these modalities shape learners' perceptions of their speaking growth offers valuable insight into optimizing instructional design for diverse learning needs.

Research on online English instruction has grown rapidly, particularly in higher education contexts where flexibility and accessibility are prioritized (2). Digital learning environments enable instructors to integrate multimedia materials, speech-recognition tools, and interactive platforms to support oral skill development (5, 16). For instance, automatic speech recognition (ASR) technologies have been employed to assist learners in monitoring pronunciation accuracy and fluency (17, 18). These tools provide instant corrective feedback and allow repeated practice, contributing to self-directed learning and pronunciation improvement. However, while such innovations enhance learner autonomy, they may not fully replicate the interpersonal dynamics and emotional engagement inherent in classroom communication. Learners often report feelings of isolation and reduced motivation in online settings, which can negatively affect their willingness to speak.

By contrast, in-person instruction traditionally fosters richer social interaction and immediate feedback loops between teachers and learners. The physical presence of instructors and peers provides social reinforcement that encourages participation and builds speaking confidence (7, 15). Studies have demonstrated that task-based, activity-oriented teaching in face-to-face environments can significantly enhance oral performance by promoting cooperative dialogue, negotiation of meaning, and pragmatic awareness (2, 7). Nevertheless, in-person teaching can be constrained by time, class size, and individual differences in learner participation. In some cases, shy or anxious students may feel intimidated to speak in front of others, leading to unequal participation patterns (3). Therefore, both modalities exhibit distinct pedagogical strengths and limitations that must be examined through the lens of learner experience.

The integration of technology in language instruction has also introduced new pedagogical paradigms emphasizing multimodality and learner-centered approaches. Biomechanical feedback systems and deep-learning algorithms have recently been applied to grammar and pronunciation instruction, offering personalized correction and real-time progress tracking (4). Similarly, speech-recognition-based listening training programs have been shown to enhance learners' auditory discrimination and spoken comprehension (5). While these tools may enrich the online learning environment, their pedagogical success ultimately depends on learners' digital literacy, motivation, and adaptability. Moreover, excessive reliance on automated

systems may reduce authentic human interaction, a factor essential for developing sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic flexibility (9, 19).

The importance of sociocultural and pragmatic competence in oral communication is increasingly recognized across EFL contexts. Pragmatics-oriented instruction helps learners master culturally appropriate ways of requesting, apologizing, or refusing, which in turn improves their communicative fluency and naturalness (8, 20). Developing sociocultural sensitivity enables learners to interpret conversational implicatures and avoid pragmatic failure (21). These competencies are often developed through direct interaction and contextual feedback—elements that are more accessible in in-person learning environments. However, online platforms can also provide exposure to diverse intercultural communication styles through global peer networks, broadening learners' pragmatic awareness (10). Thus, both modalities can contribute uniquely to pragmatic development, though through different mechanisms.

An important factor influencing learners' speaking proficiency is the instructor's linguistic and pedagogical proficiency. Research suggests that learners' perception of the teacher's English fluency, accent, and teaching style directly affects their motivation and confidence (3). For instance, in English-medium higher education settings, students respond positively to lecturers whose language is clear, comprehensible, and appropriately contextualized. Similarly, in EFL classrooms, teachers' use of modified input and supportive feedback fosters learners' sense of competence (12, 15). In online instruction, teacher presence—manifested through timely communication and personalized responses—is a key predictor of student engagement and satisfaction (22). Yet, maintaining consistent teacher presence can be challenging when technological disruptions or asynchronous interactions occur. Therefore, investigating learners' subjective experiences of teacher support across modalities offers insight into how instructional presence affects oral proficiency development.

Another dimension of speaking development relates to assessment practices. Traditional oral examinations and performance tasks have long been used to evaluate learners' proficiency; however, recent studies suggest that such assessments can create washback effects on classroom instruction (23). In online environments, speech analytics and automated scoring systems are increasingly used for formative assessment (18). While these tools provide objective measures of pronunciation and fluency, they may overlook pragmatic appropriateness and interpersonal features of communication. Hence, a balance between technological precision and human judgment is necessary for holistic evaluation of speaking ability.

In addition to pedagogical factors, learners' individual characteristics such as motivation, anxiety, and self-regulation play significant roles in determining speaking performance. Research shows that learners who engage in autonomous learning activities—such as recording and reflecting on their speech—tend to make faster progress in fluency and pronunciation (1, 17). Online settings, by their nature, demand higher degrees of learner autonomy and time management, whereas in-person instruction offers external structure and peer accountability (2). These differences suggest that students' learning preferences and self-regulatory capacities may mediate the relative effectiveness of each modality. Understanding how learners navigate these personal and contextual variables provides deeper insight into their perceptions of success in speaking development.

Neurolinguistic and cognitive studies also contribute to understanding how modality and proficiency interact in second language speaking. For example, brain imaging research demonstrates that neural representation of linguistic feature hierarchies reflects learners' proficiency levels, showing convergence between first and second languages as proficiency increases (24, 25). This implies that exposure to interactive and meaningful communication—whether online or in-person—can facilitate neurological adaptation supporting fluency. Meanwhile, studies on speech rate and intelligibility indicate that heritage and second-language speakers differ in processing constraints, affecting how fluency and rhythm are perceived (14, 26). Moreover, research on accentedness and comprehensibility reveals that listeners' proficiency and shared linguistic background shape their

understanding of diverse English varieties (13, 27). These findings underscore the importance of considering both speaker and listener variables when evaluating speaking proficiency across instructional modes.

Pedagogical interventions grounded in rhetorical and task-based frameworks have also proven effective in enhancing oral skills. For example, instruction based on Aristotle's rhetoric principles has been shown to strengthen students' speech presentation skills by promoting structured argumentation and audience awareness (28). Similarly, explicit phonetic training and action research on pronunciation teaching have yielded improvements in learners' clarity and intelligibility (1). Methodological innovations focusing on the development of speech culture and communication strategies among future teachers contribute to a broader understanding of effective speaking pedagogy (19). Collectively, these studies reinforce the notion that varied instructional approaches—whether digitally mediated or classroom-based—can foster oral proficiency when aligned with learners' cognitive and affective needs.

Empirical evidence continues to suggest that the integration of both implicit and explicit instructional techniques may yield the most substantial gains in speaking ability (2). Explicit instruction can enhance learners' awareness of linguistic form, while implicit practice promotes automaticity and natural language use. Similarly, activity-based teaching fosters experiential learning, allowing students to internalize communicative functions through authentic tasks (7). Online environments can extend these principles by enabling learners to engage in simulated or real-time communicative scenarios using digital platforms. Nonetheless, differences in context, technology access, and teacher mediation may lead to unequal learning outcomes between online and in-person groups (29).

Despite the growing body of literature on EFL speaking instruction, few studies have qualitatively compared learners' lived experiences across online and in-person modalities. Quantitative research has often measured outcomes such as pronunciation accuracy or fluency rate but has rarely captured the nuanced perceptions of learners regarding motivation, interaction, feedback, and confidence. Qualitative inquiry, through interviews and thematic analysis, offers a deeper understanding of these experiential dimensions and how they influence self-perceived proficiency. Such an approach is particularly valuable in contexts like Tehran, where digital learning technologies coexist with traditional classroom settings, and learners navigate between flexibility and social engagement. Therefore, the present qualitative study seeks to explore and compare how learners perceive the effectiveness of online and in-person English language instruction in developing their speaking proficiency, focusing on their experiences, challenges, and perceived progress within each modality.

Methods and Materials

This study adopted a qualitative research design with an exploratory and comparative orientation, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences and perceptions regarding the effectiveness of online versus in-person English language instruction in improving their speaking proficiency. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for the exploration of subjective meanings, contextual influences, and nuanced differences in learners' experiences that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measurement.

The study was conducted among English language learners enrolled in intermediate and upper-intermediate levels at private language institutes in Tehran, Iran. Using purposive sampling, 19 participants were selected to ensure diversity in gender, age, and instructional mode (online or in-person). Inclusion criteria required that participants had completed at least one full academic term of English instruction in either online or in-person settings and were willing to reflect on their experiences. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 32 years (mean = 24.6), and included both male and female learners.

Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—that is, when no new themes, perspectives, or insights emerged from the interviews and the data began to repeat conceptually. This ensured adequate depth and richness of information to support credible thematic analysis and meaningful interpretation of findings.

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted between April and July 2025. The semi-structured format provided both flexibility and consistency, allowing the researcher to explore predetermined topics while probing for deeper insight into participants' individual experiences.

The interview guide was designed to elicit detailed responses about learners' perceptions of teaching methods, teacher feedback, classroom interaction, motivation, challenges, and self-perceived progress in speaking proficiency. Sample questions included:

- “Can you describe how online English classes have influenced your confidence and fluency when speaking?”
- “What differences have you noticed between online and in-person learning in terms of opportunities for speaking practice?”
- “What factors in each mode of instruction help or hinder your speaking development?”

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet and comfortable environment to ensure participant ease and focus. All interviews were conducted in English or Persian depending on the participant's preference and were audio-recorded with informed consent. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher engaged in member checking by sharing summarized interpretations with several participants for confirmation of accuracy and meaning.

Ethical approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation and were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting). NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software was employed to manage, code, and organize the large volume of textual data systematically.

Initially, the researcher engaged in repeated reading of the transcripts to gain comprehensive familiarity with the data. Open coding was then performed line-by-line to identify meaningful units of information. These initial codes were subsequently grouped into subcategories and broader themes that reflected commonalities and contrasts between online and in-person learning experiences. Throughout the process, constant comparison was used to refine emerging categories and ensure that themes accurately represented the participants' perspectives.

To enhance the credibility and dependability of the analysis, several quality assurance strategies were applied. These included maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, engaging in reflexive journaling to minimize researcher bias, and conducting peer debriefing sessions with two qualitative research experts familiar with language education.

The final themes captured the key perceived advantages, limitations, and pedagogical implications of both instructional modes as experienced by learners, forming the basis for the interpretation and discussion presented in subsequent sections.

Findings and Results

A total of 19 participants took part in this qualitative study. All were English language learners residing in Tehran, Iran, and were enrolled in private language institutes offering both online and in-person instruction. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in learning experiences and backgrounds. The sample consisted of 10 females (52.6%) and 9 males (47.4%), ranging in age from 18 to 32 years ($M = 24.6$). Regarding instructional mode, 9 participants

(47.4%) had recently completed online English speaking courses, while 10 participants (52.6%) had studied in traditional in-person classrooms. In terms of proficiency level, 8 learners were at the intermediate level and 11 learners were upper-intermediate according to their institute placement tests. The participants represented a mix of university students ($n = 12$), young professionals ($n = 5$), and high school graduates preparing for higher education ($n = 2$). All participants had completed at least one full academic term of instruction in their respective modality and reported regular attendance during the course.

Table 1. Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts Derived from Qualitative Analysis

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Learning Environment and Interaction Dynamics	Classroom atmosphere	Sense of belonging; Peer support; Teacher presence; Reduced anxiety in small groups; Motivation through social connection
	Feedback and correction style	Immediate correction; Delayed feedback; Peer feedback usefulness; Lack of nonverbal cues online; Clarity of teacher comments
	Technological mediation	Internet instability; Audio delay; Limited spontaneity; Comfort using digital tools; Dependency on technology
	Opportunities for interaction	Group discussions; Pair work; Participation anxiety; Turn-taking; Opportunities for spontaneous speaking
	Engagement and attentiveness	Distraction from home environment; Focus during class; Visual engagement via camera; Fatigue in long sessions; Active participation
2. Perceived Impact on Speaking Proficiency	Fluency development	Confidence in continuous speech; Reduced hesitation; Vocabulary recall speed; Speaking under time pressure
	Pronunciation improvement	Imitating teacher pronunciation; Using pronunciation apps; Lack of immediate correction; Recording own voice
	Accuracy and grammar	Awareness of mistakes; Teacher grammar focus; Learning through repetition; Grammar slips in online classes
	Speaking confidence	Comfort speaking before others; Fear of making mistakes; Self-expression; Peer judgment sensitivity; Motivation from encouragement
	Listening–speaking integration	Listening comprehension practice; Understanding accents; Response timing; Exposure to native input
	Communication strategies	Paraphrasing skills; Using fillers; Clarification requests; Switching between English and Persian
	Teaching methodology	Task-based speaking activities; Role plays; Problem-solving tasks; Student-led discussions; Teacher-centered sessions
3. Pedagogical and Instructor-Related Factors	Instructor adaptability	Adjusting pace; Managing technical issues; Individual attention online; Encouraging hesitant learners
	Feedback frequency and quality	Constructive criticism; Lack of follow-up comments; Audio feedback; Text-based comments on platforms
	Use of teaching materials	Multimedia tools; Slides and visuals; Pronunciation videos; Lack of interactive materials; Textbook reliance
	Emotional support and motivation	Empathy from teacher; Encouragement; Positive reinforcement; Teacher availability outside class
	Self-regulated learning	Time management; Setting learning goals; Self-monitoring progress; Independent speaking practice
4. Learner Autonomy and Motivation	Learning motivation	Desire to improve communication; Career-related goals; Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation; Decline of motivation online
	Technological self-efficacy	Comfort using learning platforms; Troubleshooting ability; Managing online materials; Adapting to updates
	Peer collaboration	Study groups; Sharing resources; Peer encouragement; Competition among classmates
	Reflective learning habits	Reviewing recorded sessions; Keeping vocabulary journals; Tracking mistakes; Using self-assessment checklists
	Learning persistence	Maintaining attendance; Overcoming fatigue; Managing frustration; Resilience after poor performance
	Preferred learning mode	Hybrid learning appeal; Social satisfaction in-person; Convenience of online access; Long-term retention preference

Learning Environment and Interaction Dynamics

Participants' accounts revealed that the *learning environment and interaction dynamics* fundamentally shaped their experience of speaking skill development. Those attending in-person classes emphasized the sense of belonging, immediacy, and rich nonverbal feedback that enhanced motivation and reduced anxiety. One learner described that “*in the classroom, you feel the teacher's energy and classmates' reactions, which make you more confident to speak.*” Conversely, online participants

often faced technical interruptions and felt a loss of spontaneity. Poor internet connections and audio delays frequently limited the natural flow of communication and discouraged active participation. Nonetheless, several interviewees appreciated the flexibility of online learning and the opportunity to speak from a comfortable, low-pressure environment. Feedback practices differed markedly between modes: in-person settings enabled quick corrective feedback, while online teachers tended to delay or type comments. As one participant noted, *“online, I sometimes wait minutes for my teacher to correct me in the chat box—it breaks the rhythm.”* Engagement was also influenced by situational distractions, with many online learners admitting to multitasking or losing focus. These findings highlight that the immediacy, social cues, and shared physical presence of in-person instruction remain crucial to sustaining attention and interactional quality in speaking development.

Perceived Impact on Speaking Proficiency

The second major theme, *perceived impact on speaking proficiency*, reflected learners’ comparative judgments of their own progress in fluency, pronunciation, accuracy, and confidence. Participants commonly acknowledged that both instructional modes improved their speaking skills, yet in different ways. In-person instruction was seen as more effective for spontaneous conversation, immediate pronunciation modeling, and natural listening–speaking integration. A student remarked, *“when the teacher corrects your pronunciation right away, you can repeat and feel the sound—it’s much harder to notice that online.”* Conversely, online learners valued opportunities to replay recorded sessions, use digital pronunciation tools, and practice privately without embarrassment. Fluency development was associated with repeated speaking tasks, peer dialogue, and reduced hesitation; however, online participants expressed difficulty sustaining fluency due to interruptions or muted group discussions. Several learners commented on grammar and accuracy, observing that “in online classes, teachers focus less on grammar mistakes because of time and connection limits.” Speaking confidence emerged as a central outcome across all participants, with many reporting that supportive teacher feedback and peer encouragement—regardless of modality—were vital in overcoming fear of mistakes.

Pedagogical and Instructor-Related Factors

A third prominent category concerned *pedagogical and instructor-related factors*, emphasizing the central role of teaching methods and teacher adaptability in shaping learners’ speaking outcomes. Thematic analysis indicated that the use of interactive, task-based activities, role plays, and problem-solving discussions enhanced speaking engagement in both formats. Participants appreciated teachers who balanced structure and flexibility: *“Our instructor used breakout rooms online and games in class—it made both settings active and fun.”* Instructor adaptability was especially valued in online contexts, where technical challenges and differing learner paces required improvisation. The quality of feedback also varied; some learners praised instructors who provided constructive, individualized feedback through voice messages or annotated recordings, while others criticized the lack of follow-up comments. Teaching materials and multimodal tools played a crucial role: visual slides, pronunciation videos, and online quizzes increased learner involvement, whereas exclusive reliance on textbooks was perceived as demotivating. Moreover, emotional support from teachers strongly influenced persistence and self-belief. One participant shared, *“when my teacher encouraged me after a bad presentation, it pushed me to try again next time.”* These findings underscore that the teacher’s pedagogical creativity, empathy, and responsiveness significantly mediate the success of both online and in-person speaking instruction.

Learner Autonomy and Motivation

The final theme, *learner autonomy and motivation*, reflected participants’ recognition that self-regulated learning and internal drive are indispensable for improving speaking proficiency, particularly in online contexts. Many interviewees described the need to develop time management, self-monitoring, and independent practice habits when learning remotely. *“In online classes, no one reminds you—you have to push yourself to practice speaking,”* one student explained. Others reported

keeping vocabulary journals, reviewing recorded sessions, or practicing pronunciation through apps as part of their autonomous learning strategies. Motivation fluctuated depending on goals and context; while some learners were driven by professional or academic aspirations, others admitted a decline in motivation due to isolation or fatigue from screen-based learning. Technological self-efficacy emerged as a decisive factor in maintaining engagement: students who could troubleshoot issues and navigate digital platforms showed greater confidence and persistence. Peer collaboration—through online study groups or informal chat practice—was another vital motivator, as one participant remarked, *“my friends and I meet online after class just to talk in English—it keeps me going.”* Although preferences varied, many participants favored a hybrid approach that combined the social richness of in-person classes with the flexibility of online learning. The synthesis of these perspectives illustrates that learner autonomy, reflective habits, and sustained motivation bridge the effectiveness gap between instructional modes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study revealed that both online and in-person English instruction contribute meaningfully to learners’ speaking proficiency, yet in distinct and complementary ways. Participants reported that online instruction provided flexibility, opportunities for self-paced learning, and access to diverse digital tools, whereas in-person classes were perceived as superior for interactive engagement, immediate feedback, and social motivation. These perceptions echo the complex pedagogical and psychological dynamics shaping language learning outcomes, suggesting that the effectiveness of instruction depends not solely on modality but on the interplay between technological design, instructional methods, and learner characteristics.

Consistent with previous studies emphasizing the multifaceted nature of speaking competence, learners in both modalities highlighted fluency, pronunciation, confidence, and interactional strategies as key indicators of improvement (8, 9). However, participants in in-person classes more frequently attributed their progress to real-time communication with teachers and peers, aligning with the assertion that direct exposure to authentic speech acts fosters pragmatic competence and turn-taking awareness (10). These learners valued the immediate corrective feedback, nonverbal cues, and natural rhythm of classroom interaction—factors previously shown to enhance pragmatic sensitivity and communicative confidence (11, 21). By contrast, online learners emphasized autonomy, self-reflection, and reduced anxiety when practicing speaking individually or through digital speech-recognition tools, consistent with findings that technology-based environments can foster learner independence and self-regulated pronunciation practice (16, 17).

One of the most prominent themes in the data was the role of feedback modality. In-person learners experienced frequent oral corrections that promoted immediate awareness of phonetic and grammatical errors. This reflects previous evidence that teacher-led feedback and modified input in traditional classrooms promote linguistic accuracy and self-monitoring (7, 15). Conversely, online participants described delayed or text-based feedback through chat or recorded comments, which they found less spontaneous but more reflective. Such findings support the argument that online learning promotes deeper metacognitive engagement, enabling learners to analyze and revisit corrective input at their own pace (5, 6). The diversity of feedback experiences underscores that modality shapes not only access to correction but also the nature of cognitive processing involved in internalizing linguistic knowledge.

Another critical dimension identified was interactional quality. Participants in face-to-face settings emphasized that group activities, role plays, and collaborative discussions fostered motivation and a sense of belonging, thereby encouraging risk-taking in speech. These results parallel previous findings on the positive impact of task-based learning and activity-oriented pedagogy in enhancing oral performance (2, 7). The social immediacy of classroom environments enables learners to negotiate

meaning and observe pragmatic conventions in real time, which contributes to the refinement of sociolinguistic competence (8, 9). In contrast, online participants often cited limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction due to technical constraints, such as unstable connections or turn-taking delays, aligning with reports that digital platforms may restrict natural conversational flow (3, 5). Yet, some learners appreciated the structured nature of online speaking tasks, which reduced pressure and allowed more controlled preparation—an observation consistent with research on self-paced and low-anxiety language learning environments (1, 18).

The study also revealed that learners' confidence and motivation were closely tied to perceived teacher presence and emotional support. Participants consistently linked teacher empathy, encouragement, and availability with increased willingness to communicate. This corresponds with prior evidence that instructor clarity, linguistic proficiency, and supportive behavior significantly shape learner engagement and attitude (3, 12). In-person learners benefited from tangible expressions of support—smiles, gestures, and verbal praise—while online learners valued timely responses, constructive feedback messages, and follow-up sessions. These findings are consistent with Garcia's observation that teacher presence, whether virtual or physical, remains a determinant of learner satisfaction and sustained motivation (22).

Technology-enhanced language learning emerged as both a facilitator and a challenge. Learners reported that ASR-equipped tools and speech recognition software helped monitor pronunciation and track progress, corroborating studies demonstrating the effectiveness of such technologies in promoting pronunciation awareness and fluency (16, 17). In particular, the ability to replay and analyze recorded speech fostered self-assessment and iterative improvement, aligning with cognitive theories emphasizing feedback loops and repetition for skill automatization (24, 25). However, participants also mentioned technological barriers—unstable internet connections, audio lag, and platform unfamiliarity—that disrupted communication. These practical constraints are consistent with the limitations identified in earlier studies on digital oral practice and online speaking assessment (18, 29).

Another noteworthy pattern was the perception of hybrid or blended learning as an optimal approach. Many participants expressed that combining the flexibility of online learning with the immediacy of in-person interaction could yield the most balanced outcomes for speaking development. This perception parallels recent research advocating blended pedagogies that merge technological affordances with human interaction to sustain motivation and communicative authenticity (2, 4). The findings thus suggest that the future of EFL speaking instruction may lie not in dichotomizing online and traditional modalities, but in integrating their complementary features.

The present results also highlight the interdependence of linguistic and pragmatic competence in speaking proficiency. Learners in both modalities reported gains not only in vocabulary and pronunciation but also in context-sensitive expression and conversational appropriateness. These outcomes support the growing consensus that pragmatic instruction is essential to developing communicative competence (8, 9). In-person environments naturally facilitate this through social cues and real-time dialogue, while online platforms, when designed with authentic communicative tasks and intercultural exchanges, can similarly promote pragmatic awareness (10, 20). The findings align with Qizi's argument that developing speech culture among EFL learners requires explicit methodological focus on discourse norms and communicative appropriateness (19).

From a cognitive perspective, learners' experiences also support neurolinguistic findings that frequent interaction and meaningful communication enhance linguistic processing efficiency. The gradual convergence of L1 and L2 representations observed in neurocognitive studies implies that regular, interactive practice—regardless of modality—facilitates proficiency gains (24, 25). However, the mode of delivery influences the quality of attention and cognitive load. Online learners, managing technological interfaces and multitasking environments, may experience divided attention, which can affect linguistic uptake

(26). In contrast, classroom learners, immersed in structured interaction, benefit from sustained focus and multimodal sensory input, reinforcing earlier observations on the role of embodied cognition in second-language communication (12, 14).

An important contribution of this study is the insight into learners' adaptive strategies for developing speaking skills. Online learners demonstrated higher self-regulatory behavior, such as setting practice schedules, reviewing recordings, and using supplementary resources—behaviors consistent with findings on digital learning autonomy (5, 17). In-person learners, conversely, relied more heavily on teacher scaffolding and peer collaboration. These contrasting tendencies confirm that instructional context shapes learner agency and self-efficacy. Furthermore, the data suggest that self-regulated learners tend to perceive online environments as empowering, while others find them isolating. This dichotomy reflects broader debates on learner readiness for technology-mediated language learning (2, 18).

The present findings also reinforce the notion that oral assessment and feedback practices must be aligned with instructional modality. Some participants noted that online speaking assessments felt more mechanical or impersonal, echoing concerns that automated scoring lacks sensitivity to pragmatic and emotional dimensions of speech (23). In contrast, in-person evaluations were described as more interactive and supportive, though sometimes anxiety-inducing. This duality highlights the need for balanced assessment frameworks combining human and machine input, as recommended in earlier research on computer-assisted pronunciation and performance testing (13, 18).

In light of these insights, the findings substantiate the argument that neither modality alone guarantees superior speaking outcomes; rather, success depends on the interplay of pedagogical design, learner engagement, and technological affordances. Explicit instruction in pronunciation, rhetoric, and pragmatic competence—coupled with opportunities for authentic practice—emerges as the most effective strategy (1, 28). Instructors who integrate multimodal materials and interactive digital tools can simulate authentic communicative contexts even online, while maintaining the immediacy and warmth characteristic of traditional classrooms. The findings thus converge with the literature advocating multimodal, communicative, and blended approaches to maximize EFL speaking proficiency (2, 4, 7).

Finally, the study underscores the centrality of motivation and socioemotional factors. Participants' narratives revealed that feelings of connection, encouragement, and enjoyment significantly influenced their willingness to communicate. These affective dimensions have been widely recognized as critical to oral development (3, 12). When learners perceive a supportive and interactive environment—whether physical or virtual—they are more likely to take risks and engage meaningfully in conversation. Consequently, educators and curriculum designers should consider emotional engagement and social connectedness as key components in promoting speaking proficiency.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The qualitative design relied on a relatively small sample of nineteen participants from Tehran, which limits the generalizability of the findings to broader EFL contexts. Participants' experiences may also have been influenced by specific institutional conditions, instructor styles, and access to technology. Moreover, self-reported perceptions of improvement may not fully correspond with measurable performance gains. Although NVivo 14 facilitated systematic coding and ensured analytical transparency, researcher interpretation remains subject to potential bias. Future mixed-method studies incorporating quantitative performance data and classroom observations could provide more triangulated insights into comparative instructional effectiveness.

Future research could extend this investigation by exploring differences across proficiency levels, age groups, and educational settings to determine how contextual and demographic factors mediate learning outcomes. Longitudinal designs could examine how sustained exposure to each modality affects the trajectory of speaking development over time. Additionally, experimental or quasi-experimental studies could measure the impact of specific online tools, such as speech-recognition software or interactive feedback systems, on pronunciation, fluency, and pragmatic competence. Further qualitative inquiries

could also include instructors' perspectives to gain a more holistic understanding of pedagogical dynamics in hybrid and digital learning environments.

In practice, language educators should strive to integrate the strengths of both online and in-person teaching modalities. Creating blended programs that combine synchronous discussions with asynchronous reflection tasks can maximize flexibility while preserving communicative authenticity. Teachers are encouraged to maintain consistent feedback channels, foster emotional connection, and adapt technological tools to learners' proficiency and confidence levels. Training learners in self-regulation, goal setting, and peer collaboration can further enhance the effectiveness of both modalities. Ultimately, emphasizing interaction, feedback, and motivation across contexts will promote sustained growth in learners' English-speaking proficiency.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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