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Experiences, Causes, and Solutions for Injustice in Covid-19 Online Classes: Evidence from University EFL Students in Iran

Masoomeh Estaji[a,*], Kiyana Zhaleh[b]

[a]mestaji74@gmail.com, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran
[b]k_zhaleh97@atu.ac.ir, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran
* Corresponding author, mestaji74@gmail.com

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Abstract

Although the investigation of justice has gained momentum in in-person, traditional classes during the last two decades, not much is known about this phenomenon and its violation (known as injustice) during Covid-19 imposed online classes. To address this gap, university students' experiences of injustice during online classes were examined, and the perspectives of 91 Iranian EFL students were explored. The data were collected by employing an open-ended questionnaire and subsequently content analyzed via MAXQDA (Version 2020) to extract the themes and subthemes on the questions under study. Results uncovered that (1) the majority of the students had experienced injustice during their online EFL classes; (2) online-, teacher-, and class-related factors were the leading causes of injustice; and (3) the suggested solutions to mitigate the experience of injustice revolved around

	improving teacher-student interpersonal relationships, teaching practice quality, online teaching literacy, and online-related factors, and creating an enjoyable learning environment. The findings are discussed with the prospect of developing the practices of university EFL teachers and teacher educators to enhance EFL students' experiences of online language learning during and beyond the Covid-19 outbreak.

Introduction

Learning a second/foreign language (L2) is inherently social and relational as the knowledge of language is conveyed and co-constructed through constant communication between the teacher and students (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). In language education, teaching and learning cannot be separated from the individuals involved in this process (Farrell, 2014), and transmission of language and content knowledge is facilitated through L2 teachers' recognition and appreciation of students and emotional support for them (Pishghadam et al., 2021). Thus, how effectively instructors treat their students and how successfully students perceive their relationships with the teacher can greatly affect learning and teaching experiences (Farrell, 2014).

To establish good rapport with students and to efficiently presenting instruction, teachers can employ various interpersonal communication tactics, one of which is classroom justice behavior (Chory, 2007). Justice can be realized at three levels: distributing educational outcomes and resources (i.e., distributive justice), enacting classroom procedures and rules (i.e., procedural justice), and communicating information and developing interpersonal relationships with learners (i.e., interactional justice). There has been growing acknowledgment in the domains of instructional communication, general education, and – very recently – L2 education research that classroom justice is at least as essential – if not more important – than other teacher communication behaviors like care, clarity, immediacy, or confirmation (Chory et al., 2017; Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021a).

Nevertheless, classroom justice has its negative counterpart, namely classroom injustice (Rasooli et al., 2019). While classroom justice merits attention for its influential role in enhancing the quality of instruction and making learning experiences more engaging (Gasser et

al., 2018), injustice is similarly in need of scrutiny. As an aversive instructional behavior, injustice not only impedes teachers' effective teaching and delivering of content but also hinders learning processes and results in students' negative cognitive, behavioral, and psychological responses (Chory et al., 2017; Chory et al., 2014; Čiuladienė & Račelytė, 2016; Sabbagh, 2021).

To date, there has been a paucity of empirical studies investigating injustice in online classes, particularly those due to unanticipated crises like the recent Covid-19 outbreak. The pandemic has demanded students and instructors, who were used to attending face-to-face and physical classes, to move to crisis-prompted remote education (Gacs et al., 2020). Currently, more than two years into the outbreak, the education system in Iran still imposes distance teaching and learning, with students and instructors continuing to grapple with the challenges of this new mode of education (Derakhshan et al., 2021; Estaji & Zhaleh, 2022). Against this backdrop, L2 researchers are advised to study classroom justice and its potential acts of violation (i.e., instances of injustice) in Covid-19 imposed online L2 classes. Classroom justice is an important component of teacher professional quality practice (Chory et al., 2017). Therefore, to expand our knowledge of classroom (in)justice, particularly in online EFL classes, this qualitative study addresses the perceptions of Iranian EFL students from various universities regarding their classroom injustice experiences, as well as the primary causes and solutions for injustice in Covid-19 imposed online classes. This large-scale exploratory view of classroom justice and injustice can present a more fine-grained and detailed picture of classroom justice, providing results that are potentially extendable to similar educational contexts.

Literature Review

Classroom justice

The concept of justice was initially theorized and empirically studied in domains of organizational behavior and social studies in the West, where it was considered a crucial value in human life and a building block of a successful organization (Tyler, 1987). Following the Western social psychology theories of justice, this concept was conceived both at individual and social levels, where a person's unique and

subjective perceptions about fairness are influenced by how (s)he is treated by other people in social exchange (Adams, 1965). Thus, justice can be simultaneously studied from social, subjective, and phenomenological standpoints (Cropanzano et al., 2015).

The term *organizational justice* was coined, encompassing three dimensions of procedural, distributive, and interactional justice, involving individuals' subjective perceptions of fairness about processes, resources, or interactions happening in an organization, respectively (Cropanzano et al., 1975). Following this movement, key scholars such as Tyler (1987) started to extend this conceptualization of justice to different instructional contexts due to tremendous implications that it could bear on practices of key educational stakeholders, namely teachers and students. It was only after Chory-Assad and Paulsel (2004) and Chory's (2007) prominent studies in which they coined the term *classroom justice* that systematic studies on classroom justice started to emerge.

Distributive justice is the first-introduced dimension of classroom justice It refers tostudents' perceptions of fairness regarding the outcomes or resources that the teacher distributes to students (Chory et al., 2017; Sabbagh & Resh, 2016). In essence, such perceptions were formed by students' evaluation of outcomes or resources allocated to them in relation to their contributions and efforts as well as outcomes that are allocated to other students with similar abilities or needs (Rasooli et al., 2019). Examples of typical outcomes or resources that teachers distribute among students in the instructional context are grades, teacher affect, feedback, time, assistance, care, praise, reward, and punishment (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021a). Distributive justice is implemented through three principles of equality, equity, and need, meaning that distributive justice occurs if the teacher allocates outcomes equally toward all, based on students' efforts and contributions, or according to their unique needs and exceptionalities, respectively. On the other hand, when the teacher violates equality, need, and equity principles, distributive injustice occurs (Deutsch, 1975; Sabbagh & Resh, 2016).

The second classroom justice dimension is *procedural justice*, referring to students' perceptions of fairness regarding procedures/processes that teachers enact in classes (Cropanzano et al., 2015; Kaufmann & Tatum, 2018). Such classroom processes include

decisions on class attendance policy, grading criteria, syllabus design, materials development, exam content, and assessment procedures (Rasooli et al., 2019; Wallace & Qin, 2021). Procedural justice can be implemented through consistency, transparency, ethicality, accuracy, bias suppression, correctability, reasonableness, and voice principles, These principles refer to enactment of procedures and policies (1) consistently across individuals or time, (2) in a clear way, (3) based on moral and ethical standards of behavior, (4) by drawing on sufficient and accurate information, (5) impartially, (6) which are modifiable, (7) which are reasonable, and (8) by considering all students' concerns and opinions, respectively. In contrast, procedural injustice occurs when the teacher violates one or more of these eight procedural principles (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021a; Rasooli et al., 2019).

The last dimension of classroom justice is *interactional justice*, referring to students' perceptions of fairness regarding teachers' communication of information to and interpersonal relationship with students (Chory, 2007; Estaji & Zhaleh, 2022). This dimension is enacted through six principles of justification, timeliness, truthfulness, respect, caring, and propriety (Bies & Moag, 1986; Colquitt, 2001; Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021a). The first three principles relate to teachers' communication of information. In particular, the justification principle occurs when teachers provide sufficient justifications and explanations to students regarding any aspect of their instructional practice such as the grading criteria, their treatment of students, or attendance policy (Cropanzano et al., 2015). Timeliness occurs when the teacher communicates information in a timely manner regarding classroom procedures, policies, or decisions at the beginning of the semester (Rasooli et al., 2019). Truthfulness, which is a component of teacher credibility (Pishghadam et al., 2021), refers to teachers' communication of information such that students perceive it as honest, credible, or truthful.

The three remaining principles are associated with teachers' interpersonal treatment of students. The caring principle relates to teachers attending to students' concerns, understanding their needs and exceptionalities, paying attention to them, or providing help (Gasser et al., 2018). Teacher respect is actualized when teachers respect students, respond to them, or call their names. Finally, propriety happens when, for instance, teachers do not accuse students of wrongdoing, have no favorite students, and respond gently to students' questions. Whereas

interactional justice occurs through the implementation of these six principles, interactional injustice occurs when these principles are violated in the instructional context (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021b; Rasooli et al., 2019).

While classroom justice promotes desirable students' psychological, educational, and interpersonal experiences (e.g., Gasser et al., 2018), classroom injustice can have serious negative impacts on students' performance. To address this issue, some studies have focused on students' experiences of classroom injustice and its negative consequences. Results of such studies indicated that experience of injustice leads to students' feelings of anger, humiliation, helplessness, stress, dissent, verbal aggressiveness, and academic disengagement (e.g., Chory et al., 2014; Chory et al., 2017; Čiuladienė & Račelytė, 2016; Ehrhardt-Madapathi et al., 2018; Rasooli et al., 2019; Sabbagh, 2021).

The essentiality of classroom justice is even more intensely felt in the L2 instructional context, in which language learning and teaching are inherently more interpersonal, relational, and social than other academic subjects (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). To build effective interpersonal relationships and rapport with their students, language teachers must meet such important qualities as honesty, open communication, caring, warmth, respect, credibility, enjoyment, equality, trust, and mutual reciprocity, which mainly converge with the principles of classroom justice (Gasser et al., 2018; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Notwithstanding its prominence, classroom (in)justice has been marginally addressed in L2 education research. This significant area of investigation did not grab the attention of L2 researchers until very recently, when Estaji & Zhaleh (2021a, 2021b, 2022) extended the Western social psychology theories of justice to the L2 education context of Iran.

In their first study, Estaji and Zhaleh (2021a), through adopting a qualitative research design, attempted to reach an in-depth understanding of Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their own justice behaviors. They took a holistic view of Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of classroom justice by simultaneously studying distributive, procedural, and interactional justice dimensions and principles in all classroom domains of learning, teaching, interactions, and assessment. In their second qualitative study, Estaji and Zhaleh (2021b) moved a step further and studied Iranian EFL teachers' classroom injustice experiences. Overall, the results of these two studies indicated that Iranian EFL

teachers had a good understanding of the concept of classroom justice and its core dimensions, considered classroom justice as a core element of their successful practices, and evaluated themselves to be mainly fair teachers. Nevertheless, they reported seven groups of challenges, namely environmental factors, unexpected problems, teacher factors, student factors, educational and institutional factors, ambiguities in the concept of justice, and cultural factors, that hinder their attempts to behave fairly in classroom.

Injustice in online L2 classes

Online education has been present since the emergence of the Internet (Derakhshan et al., 2021); yet, research evidence on students' experience of injustice in online learning and teaching environments is sparse. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, to date, only two studies have explored the concept of classroom (in)justice in remotely-delivered online classes. The first study was conducted by Kaufmann and Tatum (2018), who proposed a model hypothesizing that the students' willingness to talk in online classes might be influenced by factors of perceived cognitive learning, affect toward the instructor, and procedural justice. Two hundred and twenty-six undergraduate university students in the United States participated in this quantitative study by responding to close-ended cognitive learning and classroom procedural justice scales. The model was empirically supported by the findings, showing that when the students perceived classroom procedures to be fair in online classes, they had higher levels of cognitive learning, more positive attitudes toward the teacher, and finally, were more willing to talk.

In addition, in a large-scale quantitative study, Goke et al. (2021) examined the relationship of perceived instructor procedural, distributive, and interactional justice with student-related variables during Covid-19 imposed online classes. In this study, through volunteer sampling, 600 students from an Eastern and a Midwestern United States university participated. The results indicated that the procedural, distributive, and interactional justice positively predicted perceived teacher immediacy, control of learning beliefs, and student participation during online classes.

Online education, facilitated by the growing access to technological devices and fast improvements, has increased learning

opportunities through eliminating space and time restrictions. Nevertheless, some obstacles, including a wide range of aversive emotional and behavioral experiences because of teacher unfairness, can slow down the students' learning process. These obstacles are augmented when, because of unanticipated or critical circumstances like the Covid-19 pandemic, the students and teachers have to abruptly shift to remote forms of education (Derakhshan et al., 2021). This sudden change of setting can strongly influence the teachers and students' educational performance (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020).

Like many countries around the globe, since the first wave of the Covid-19 outbreak in early 2020, the national government and Ministry of Education in Iran decided to deliver all school and university courses and activities remotely to prevent the spread of the virus. At the time of conducting this study, it was still the case. Teachers and students had never imagined this unknown scenario – a period of university and school closure due to a universal outbreak – and had not been sufficiently trained to smoothly function in this health-crisis remote education system. This brought about a wide range of unexpected challenges and difficulties.

As stated by Gacs et al. (2020), it is important to understand the differences between normal online education and emergency distance education. The former is typically supplied with long-run investment strategies, meticulous, extensive, and anticipated planning, as well as evidence-based approaches to prepare the intended education environments. However, the latter is based on ongoing design and planning, immediate and unforeseen adjustments to face-to-face classes, and little, if no, familiarization of teachers and students with new technologies for instruction and learning. The possible lack of preparation by teacher education programs, lack of teachers' expertise for working with digital technologies, and their lack of sufficient experience in virtual education can negatively influence different aspects of the teachers' instructional practices, including their fair treatment of the students.

Purpose of the Study

The present study diverges in some respects from the extant research studies on classroom justice as they stopped short of studying justice in the domain of L2 education in remote environments and non-

Western instructional contexts. They also failed to explore justice and injustice representations through more qualitative data collection instruments that provide more in-depth data, uncover causes of classroom injustice, and suggest injustice-mitigating solutions or strategies to enhance students' fairness experiences in physical and online L2 classes. Thus, it seems a desideratum to explore the experiences of (in)justice in online classes, a concept that, with the exception of Goke et al.'s (2021) and Kaufmann and Tatum's (2018) studies, has received scant notice so far.

In an attempt to fill these gaps, this large-scale exploratory study has approached classroom injustice through the lens of EFL students from five universities in Iran. Therefore, this study will add fresh insights to the narrow but growing body of research evidence on classroom justice in L2 education by exploring the students' perceptions, experiences, proposed causes and solutions regarding injustice in EFL university classes. It is also one of the first attempts to study injustice experienced by EFL students in imposed Covid-19 online classes, extending the increasing literature on the students' undesirable behavioral and emotional experiences in crisis-prompted remote education. More specifically, the present study aims to inspect the extent to which Iranian EFL students feel they are treated unfairly in online classes as well as the causes and solutions for injustice in online classes. To this end, three research questions were posed:

1. To what extent do Iranian EFL students experience injustice in online classes?
2. What are the causes of injustice in online EFL classes from Iranian EFL students' perspectives?
3. What solutions do Iranian EFL students suggest to deal with EFL unjust treatment of students in online classes?

Methodology

Participants

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, all classes at the tertiary level of education in Iran unexpectedly became online, imposing instructors and students to participate in distance learning via learning management systems like Skyroom, BigBlueButton, or Adobe Connect. In this study,

the participants were 91 English-related major students, who consented to respond to an open-ended questionnaire. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1. Accordingly, the participants were from both genders (Female = 56; Male = 35), different age groups (less than 20 = 10; 20-29 = 65; and 30-39 years old= 16). They were BA (N = 39), MA (N = 42), and PhD (N = 10) students. They studied teaching English as a foreign language (N = 62), English language and literature (N = 19), English translation (N = 6), and linguistics (N = 4). They were studying at five different universities in Iran, namely Allameh Tabataba'i University (N = 50), Gonbad Kavous University (N = 28), Khatam University (N = 6), Golestan University (N = 5), and Islamic Azad University of Tehran, South Branch (N = 2). These different numbers of universities, age groups, majors, academic levels, and genders found in the sample are because of the convenience sampling strategy adopted as the researchers selected the participants who were convenient and available source of data for them.

Table 1

The Demographic Information of the Participants

Demographic information	Participants (frequency)
Gender	
Female	56
Male	35
Age	
Less than 20	10
20-29	65
30-39	16
Educational Status	
BA students	39
MA student	42
PhD student	10
Major	
Teaching English as a Foreign Language	62
English Language and Literature	19
English Translation	6
Linguistics	4
University	
Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran	50
Gonbad Kavous University, Golestan, Iran	28

Khatam University, Tehran, Iran	6
Golestan University, Golestan, Iran	5
Islamic Azad University of Tehran, South Branch, Tehran, Iran	2

Instruments

To gather data, two instruments were utilized in this study; first, a demographic information scale, which elicited such demographic information as age, gender, major, educational status, and university from the participants, was used. Second, an open-ended classroom injustice questionnaire, allowing respondents to provide a wide spectrum of potential answers, ranging from a single word to a number of paragraphs, was employed. Using such an instrument is in line with the exploratory nature of qualitative studies seeking in-depth and rich information from participants regarding the phenomenon under investigation.

The classroom injustice questionnaire items (Appendix A) were prepared by the researchers to evoke the students' perceptions and experiences regarding the degree of injustice they felt to be present, causes of classroom injustice, and solutions for injustice in their Covid-19 imposed online university classes. To ensure the content validity of the items and the trustworthiness principle in qualitative research (Nassaji, 2020), three expert researchers in the domain of educational justice checked the questionnaire items for their linguistic clarity and content relevance. Based on their evaluations and feedback, few modifications were made to the items, and they were finalized through several rounds of discussion between the experts and the researchers.

Data collection procedure

To meet the ethical standards in doing educational research with human subjects, before collecting the data, the participants filled out a consent letter whereby they voluntarily declared their approval to participate in this study and their awareness of their rights as participants. They were assured about the anonymity and confidentiality of their data and use for the sole purpose of the study. To protect the identity of the participants, numbers were employed rather than actual names (e.g., P2 stands for Participant Number 2). The participants were

informed of the general aim of the study, duration and nature of their cooperation, and the notions of classroom injustice and online education. Since all the participants were English-related majors, who constantly received instruction and content through the medium of English in their university classes, the questionnaires were prepared in English, and they were urged to provide their responses in this language as well. The link for the instruments, produced in an online format via Google Forms, was sent to the potential participants via email or WhatsApp. All the data were extracted in Microsoft Word format and was used for content and thematic analyses.

One important issue in qualitative research is researcher positionality, i.e., the position taken by the researcher in a particular research study (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021a), which might influence the processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Accordingly, two points need to be highlighted. First, currently being EFL university professors and previously English major students themselves, the researchers acknowledged their experiences and encounters of unjust situations during their teaching and studying. Thus, they had lived a similar context to the participants and admitted their understanding of the participants' experiences and situations. To meet the qualitative research principle of trustworthiness (Nassaji, 2020), the researchers did their best to disregard their potential biases at the data collection, analysis, and interpretation stages.

Second, as academics studying social psychology theories of justice in education and, more importantly, teaching different undergraduate and graduate EFL courses during the Covid-19 pandemic, the authors are well aware of the disruptive and debilitative nature of classroom injustice. Other EFL practitioners and students, nevertheless, might not share this understanding and grapple with undesirable negative emotions and experiences, including classroom injustice, which can make them frustrated.

Data analysis

The collection and analysis of the data were jointly done by both researchers in several online sessions; involving two or more researchers in collecting and analyzing the data in a single study, known as investigator triangulation, enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of

the findings (Patton, 2015). Since "using a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) can improve the credibility of the coding process" (Baralt, 2012, p. 228), all the analyses were done through the MAXQDA software (Version 2020).

To systematically do the analysis, Gao and Zhang's (2020) five-step data analysis model was followed. At the cleaning step, the original data were checked for potential language errors, irrelevant responses, and inconsistency. Next, in the coding step, the data were read for several rounds; 137 and 118 open codes were generated for the causes and solutions to classroom injustice respectively. In the generating themes step, also called the axial coding where open codes are compared and grouped under relevant themes, 34 and 36 subthemes were generated for the causes of and solutions to classroom injustice, respectively. In the categorizing themes step, the subthemes were placed under higher-order umbrella themes, a process also known as selective coding. Finally, in producing the report, an accurate and detailed report of the analysis was generated including the compelling and transparent excerpts from the data, which were linked back to the research questions and the theoretical and empirical literature.

The first questionnaire item solicited the extent to which the participants had experienced classroom injustice in online classes. The responses were categorized into "to a great extent", "sometimes", and "not at all". The answers belonging to each category were tallied to calculate the frequencies. The answers to the second and third questionnaire items were content and thematically analyzed in a recursive and iterative process, which revealed the causes and solutions for injustice. These data were inductively analyzed as the codes and themes were completely arrived at from the data.

To ensure the credibility principle in qualitative studies, the participant/respondent validation, known also as member checking, was done (Nassaji, 2020). To this aim, the codes, categories, and themes emerging from the data were given to 10 participants to evaluate their precision and resonance considering the actual data. They all approved the emerged codes and themes. An expert in qualitative research in applied linguistics independently analyzed 20% of the entire data, and a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of .95 was found as a result. To increase the confirmability of the study (Nassaji, 2020), an outside researcher audited all the data and the generated codes, subthemes, and themes for their

accuracy and credibility. To do so, all the MAXQDA data files and the authors' notes and memos were given to the auditor, which resulted in multiple sessions of discussion between the auditor and the researchers to resolve issues of disagreement regarding the classification or naming of some codes and themes and finalizing the analyses.

Results

Degree of injustice in online classes

The first research question dealt with the extent of injustice, experienced by Iranian EFL students in online classes. It was revealed that injustice had been present in participants' online classes to a great extent (*N* = 36), to some extent (*N* = 30), and to no extent (*N* = 19). Six of the participants provided no answer to this question (See Table 2). Overall, these results indicated that the majority of the students had experienced teachers' unfairness during their imposed online classes.

Table 2

Extent of Injustice in Online Classes from Students' Perspectives

Extent of Injustice from Students' Perspectives	Percentage
To a great extent	40%
To some extent	33%
To no extent	21%
Did not respond	6%

Causes of injustice in online classes

The second research question pertained to the causes of injustice in online EFL classes. Three themes of online-related factors, teacher-related factors, and class-related factors emerged from the analysis. The exhaustive list of themes, subthemes, and codes, and their respective frequencies are presented in Appendix B.

Table 3

Causes of Injustice in Online Classes

Code	Frequency	Code	Frequency	Code	Frequency
Online-related factors	82	**Class-related factors**	**10**	**Teacher-related factors**	**45**
Lack of face-to-face interactions	23	Time constraints	5	Interactional and interpersonal practices	15
Digital illiteracy	20	Time of the class	2	Instructional practices	12
Poor connection	19	Class size	1	Procedural practices	9
Newness of online classes	9	Task overload	1	Distributive practices	4
Inefficiency of online classes	3	Materials overload	1	Personality	4
Risk of cheating	2			Age	1
Nature of online classes	2				
Students' noisy environments	2				
Insufficient interactivity	1				
Poor online platforms	1				

According to Table 3, the most frequently mentioned factor relating to the causes of injustice in online classes was online-related factors (82 references; 60%), including the subthemes of lack of face-to-face interactions (23 references; 17%), digital illiteracy (20 references; 15%), poor Internet connection (19 references; 14%), newness of online classes (9 references; 7%), inefficiency of online classes (3 references; 2%), students' noisy environments (2 references; 1%), risk of students' cheating (2 references; 1%), nature of online classes (2 references; 1%), insufficient interactivity (1 reference; 1%), and poor online platforms (1 reference; 1%). These causes emerged as a result of particular features of online learning and, thus, may never happen in physical learning environments.

As for the lack of face-to-face interactions, the participants noted that the lack of face-to-face interactions in online classes "leads to teachers' unawareness of the students' learning style and potentials" [P1], "results in wrong understanding of the students' ability" [P16], "makes the teacher think that the students who are reticent in the class are weak" [P70], or "causes teachers' not getting the students' messages in a way that they intended" [P74], which, in turn, would increase teachers' unfairness toward students. Regarding digital illiteracy, some participants complained that "teachers are not prepared for online classes, and they are confused" [P8], or "the majority of teachers are unaware regarding how to teach online" [P34]. Concerning poor Internet connection, the students pointed out that "when the Internet traffic is at its peak time, students may have difficulty with the stable connection" [P18], "the quality and speed of Internet cannot satisfy the needs of both teachers and students" [P41], or "the Internet connection problems of some students may cause the teacher to think negatively about them" [P57].

The second most recurrently stated factor, namely teacher-related factors (45 references; 33%), directly held teachers responsible for the students' experience of injustice in online classes. Included in this theme are the subthemes of teachers' interactional and interpersonal practices (15 references; 11%), instructional practices (12 references; 9%), procedural practices (9 references; 6%), distributive practices (4 references; 3%), personality (4 references; 3%), and age (1 reference; 1%). As for the teachers' interactional and interpersonal practices, some students complained that teachers' "not being able to understand their students" [P43], "not being able to establish a proper relationship and rapport with the students" [P44], "unavailability outside the class to respond to students' questions" [P2], "not paying attention to students" [P39], or "paying a lot of attention only to some special students" [P79] were the sources of injustice.

Concerning teachers' instructional practices, some participants referred to teachers' "lack of experience" [P80], "poor teaching methods" [P76], "not being able to manage online classes properly" [P14], and "lack of skills in teaching" [P10] as the causes of teacher unfairness. Regarding teachers' procedural practices, some participants mentioned teachers "score [assess] us based on their own tastes and senses not our abilities" [P8], "give too much assignment" [P33], or

"judge only based on student's presence" [P79]. For teachers' distributive practices, some students wrote that "feedback is not given" [P27], or "teachers don't devote enough time to each student" [P26]. As for teachers' personality, the participants referred to teachers' "tiredness" [P51], "personality types" [P7], "not feeling the responsibility" [P78], and "lack of conscience" [P10].

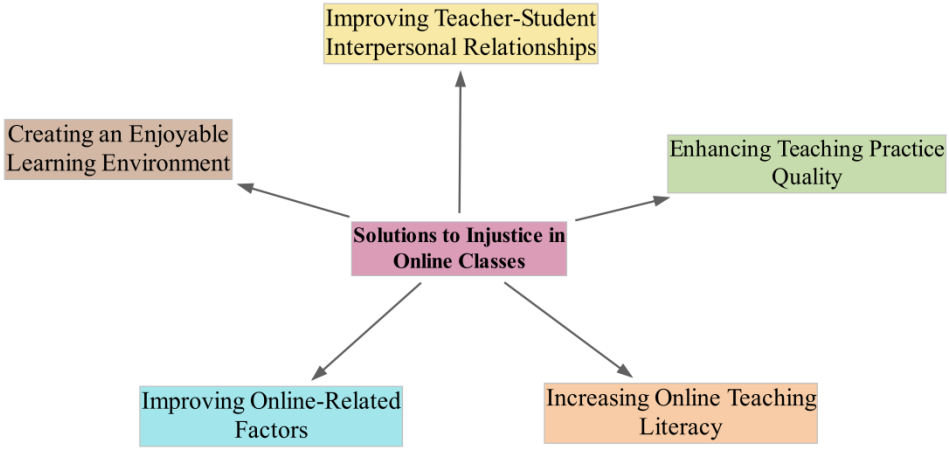
The last theme perceived by the participants to be injustice-inducing in online classes was class-related factors (10 references; 7%), including the subthemes of time constraints (5 references; 3%), class time (2 references; 1%), class size (1 reference; 1%), task overload (1 reference; 1%), and materials overload (1 reference; 1%). In this respect, some students mentioned that "time pressure causes teachers to ignore some less active students and rely on more extroverted ones" [P34], "time limitation is another reason that teachers make it an excuse to avoid teaching well" [P73], "mostly everything is a heavy burden on students' shoulder and that's really unfair" [P70], or "there is too much material to be taught" [P65].

Solutions to injustice in online classes

The third research question aimed to solicit Iranian EFL students' views regarding the ways through which their experiences of injustice can be reduced in online classes. According to Fig. 1, the solutions proposed by the participants were categorized under five themes "improving teacher-student interpersonal relationships" (54 references; 46%), "enhancing teaching practice quality" (22 references; 19%), "increasing online teaching literacy" (18 references; 15%), "improving online-related factors" (13 references; 11%), and "creating an enjoyable learning environment" (11 references; 9%). The exhaustive list of these themes, subthemes, codes, and their respective frequencies are presented in Appendix C.

Figure 1

Solutions to Injustice in Online Classes



For improving teacher-student interpersonal relationships, the participants suggested teachers knowing the students and their needs, dedicating more time and attention to students, acting equally toward all students, encouraging students' participation and involvement, establishing friendly relationships with students, and listening to students' concerns and feelings. For enhancing teacher practice quality, the participants recommended the setting of reasonable expectations and workload for students, attending to the psychological and affective aspects of teaching, providing students with choices, creating task-course alignment, eliciting students' feedback, providing ample materials and resources, making everything clear at the beginning of the term, not being too strict, teaching more constructively, not overloading oneself with too many classes, being more conscientious, fine-tuning the teaching and assignments according to students' needs and abilities, and increasing the teaching time. For increasing online teaching literacy, the participants recommended different strategies for teachers like increasing their knowledge of how to teach in online classes, attending teacher-training courses, reflecting on their teaching practices, observing other teachers' classes, coping with technological problems, gaining digital and media literacy, and receiving experts' feedback on their teaching practices.

As to improving online-related factors, the students suggested the provision of good network connection to students and teachers, provision of digital facilities to students and teachers, teachers' use of webcam, distinguishing productive and unproductive student presence and contribution, recording classes for later student access, running flipped classrooms, and paying attention to the chat box/pane. Finally, the students recommended that creating an enjoyable learning environment through maintaining a fair and warm atmosphere and running friendly classes would mitigate students' feelings of injustice.

Discussion

This study explored the extent, causes, and solutions for injustice, as perceived by Iranian university students in online EFL classes. As for the extent of injustice, most of the students reported experiencing teachers' unfairness to a great extent. While evidence of injustice in remotely-held language classes is sparse, the present study's findings support those of previous studies which reveal that in spite of the prominence of teachers' just behavior in instructional contexts, many students reported frequently witnessing teacher classroom unfairness toward themselves or their peers (Chory et al., 2010; Ehrhardt-Madapathi et al., 2018; Rasooli et al., 2019).

Regarding the causes of injustice, the Iranian students' most-frequently mentioned causes pertained to online-related issues. They mainly complained about a lack of face-to-face interaction in their online classes. Online EFL classes in Iran during the Covid-19 pandemic have been held in such platforms as Adobe Connect, Skyroom, or BigBlueButton, where the teacher and students communicate mainly through turning on their microphone, with little opportunity for both the teacher and students to simultaneously turn on their webcams and interact face to face, a useful and important feature that is taken for granted in traditional and physical language classes (Derakhshan et al., 2021). Although this lack of face-to-face interaction might seem unavoidable, EFL instructors and, ideally, all the students in an online learning setting, can activate their webcams – a solution to injustice recommended by the students to assimilate distance face-to-face interaction. This strategy, notwithstanding obstacles like noisy environments, poor online platforms, and poor internet connection

mentioned by a number of students, can lead to increased possibilities of verbal and nonverbal communication and the feeling of co-existence (Kozar, 2016), which relate to the interactional dimension of classroom justice (Chory, 2007). This finding is in line with previous theoretical and empirical accounts (e.g., Farrell, 2014; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Teacher-student interpersonal interactions and communication are considered inherent to L2 learning and teaching to the extent that their absence in online classes leads to the students' sense of injustice.

Furthermore, many participants highlighted that the newness of online classes to instructors and their digital and media illiteracy cause unfair treatment of students. This finding can be justified by explaining that due to the sudden outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020, Iran's language education system was forced to shift online (Derakhshan et al., 2021; Estaji & Zhaleh, 2022); thus, many Iranian EFL teachers who were unaccustomed to and unfamiliar with the complexities of online education and working with technological devices had to continue their teaching online, despite their potential unwillingness and lack of preparation. This finding is in line with Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison's (2020) assertion that digital literacy is inherent to teachers' successful instructional practices in remote education environments. In line with Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison's (2020) account, such a sudden change of setting can adversely affect teachers' professional performance, including their justice enactment in the instructional setting.

As for the second cause of injustice, the students put the blame on instructors and mainly their interactional, interpersonal, instructional, procedural, and distributive practices, which overlap with the interactional, procedural, and distributive justice dimensions described in the social psychology theories of education (Chory et al., 2014; Sabbagh, 2021). In this respect, the students' report of their teachers' inability to establish a proper relationship and rapport with students, not paying attention to students, and teacher unavailability outside the class are violations of the caring principle, and the teachers' attention to some special students violates the propriety principle, both being inherent principles of teacher interactional justice (Cropanzano et al., 2015; Gasser et al., 2018). These findings can be justified by explaining the online nature of such classes. First, because of the lack of face-to-face interaction, Iranian EFL teachers might not be able to establish a proper relationship and rapport with students. Similarly, because in such forced

online EFL classes, typically there are many students in a single class, the teacher might not be able to pay enough attention to all students. Additionally, it should be explained that before the pandemic, the teachers were more available to students as they could not find the opportunity to visit teachers after the class at university; however, during the pandemic, neither have the teachers been physically present for students nor did they have sufficient time to be available for students virtually after the class.

Similarly, in line with the extant literature (e.g., Chory et al., 2017; Ehrhardt-Madapathi et al., 2018; Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021b; Rasooli et al., 2019), EFL teachers' biased scoring based on their own subjective inclinations not on students' actual abilities (violation of the bias suppression principle), giving too many assignments (violation of the reasonableness principle), or judging students only by their presence (violation of the accuracy principle) as mentioned by the participants are instance of teacher procedural injustice. These findings might be explained by taking into account the online nature of EFL classes during the pandemic in Iran. Teachers might not have accurately evaluated all students' efforts, abilities, and performance because of the physical distance between them and their students.

Finally, the students' accounts of teachers' not providing feedback and devoting enough time to each student can be considered acts of teacher distributive injustice (Sabbagh & Resh, 2016). This finding can be explained, on the one hand, by the Iranian EFL teachers' lack of preparation and digital literacy needed to handle challenges and manage classes during their crisis-prompted online teaching. On the other hand, the potentially large number of students in a single online class for limited class periods may have constrained teachers' interaction abilities. Both of these two reasons could potentially bring about teachers' inability to provide sufficient feedback and time to students. All these accounts confirm the notion that teachers, as the main stakeholders, are accountable for enacting justice in learning environments (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021b).

The least frequently mentioned cause of injustice pertained to class-related factors. In this respect, a few students complained about their class time, time constraints, presence of too many students in a single online class, and tasks and materials overload (Derakhshan et al., 2021) as antecedents of teacher unfairness. These findings indicate the

actual obstacles, constraints, and challenges faced by many EFL teachers during Covid-19 imposed online classes in Iran that did not allow them to adequately attend to their students' need for being treated fairly (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021b).

To mitigate the experiences of injustice in online EFL classes, the participants suggested five main groups of solutions. The most-frequently recommended solutions were related to improving the teacher-student interpersonal relationships. This is in line with one of the causes of injustice in online classes as suggested by the participants; namely injustice in teachers' interactional practices. This indicates the participants' awareness of the significance of positive teacher interpersonal communication behaviors in providing a fair and effective classroom environment, a notion that is supported by previous research (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2022; Gasser et al., 2018). The strategies put forward by the students to enhance teacher-student relationships in support of interactional justice (Chory, 2007), are all substantiated as effective in the extant literature. Such strategies include acting equally toward all students, establishing friendly relationships with students, encouraging students' participation and involvement, listening to students' concerns and feelings, knowing students and their needs, and dedicating more time and attention to them (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021a; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Pishghadam et al., 2021).

The second most frequently mentioned group of solutions suggested by the students revolved around teachers' enhancement of their pedagogical practices, in line with their concerns about injustice. In this respect, they suggested strategies like setting reasonable expectations and workload for students and not overloading oneself with too many classes, both overlapping the reasonableness principle of justice (Rasooli et al., 2019). The third strategy is attending to psychological and affective aspects of teaching, the importance of which is corroborated by Dewaele et al., (2019) among others. Other strategies are fine-tuning teaching and assignments based on students' needs and abilities and providing students with choices, both meeting the caring principle of justice (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021b), and making everything clear at the beginning of the term, thus coinciding with the transparency principle of justice (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021a). Moreover, providing ample materials and resources and creating task-course alignment are other

strategies both of which ensure the accuracy principle of justice (Cropanzano et al., 2015).

The third most frequently mentioned group of solutions was to increase online teaching literacy, which attends to the students' complaints about teachers' digital and media illiteracy as a cause of their unfairness toward students. It seems that because of the sudden shutdown of schools and universities due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many language instructors did not have time to acquire the essential expertise and knowledge of how to enact new communication and information technologies into their teaching practices (Gacs et al., 2020), which can adversely affect their justice practice toward the current generation of language learners, typically called digital natives as they are born in the age of technology (Derakhshan et al., 2021). To address this issue, the participants recommended certain practices for teachers like attending training courses, coping with technological problems, increasing their knowledge of how to teach in online classes, reflecting on their teaching practices, receiving experts' feedback on their teaching practices, and conducting peer observation. This group of strategies confirms the argument for the growing importance of information and communication technologies in English teaching and learning processes (Yu, 2018).

The fourth group of solutions urges improving online-related factors, which attends to the students' complaints about online-related problems as precursors to classroom injustice. As found both in the current research and Derakhshan et al.'s (2021) study, a weak infrastructure of local online platforms, Internet connection and the sudden malfunctioning at the beginning of online classes, such as frequent disconnections and difficulty of accessing platforms, are among the technological problems faced by the students. These issues certainly need to be fixed as they can disrupt teachers and students' teaching and learning effectiveness, respectively. Furthermore, the digital divide, defined as "a gap between those accessing new information technologies and those who did not" (Yu, 2018, p. 69), was an issue witnessed during the Covid-19 imposed online English classes.

Hence, students and teachers who live in better socio-economic conditions or communities and are equipped with better information and communication technology infrastructures. Similarly, they can afford to attend remote learning classes and may have better Internet

connectivity. However, students and teachers living in more disadvantaged conditions may face poor Internet connectivity or lack of access to digital devices and, as a result, may struggle with functioning in online classes (Yu, 2018). In line with this argument, the participants recommended the provision of reliable network connection and digital facilities to students and teachers to improve online-related factors in remote language learning classes.

The digital divide, in another way, can be defined as the difference between individuals who utilize information and communication technologies effectively and those who do not (Sipior et al., 2002). This difference can be noticed in the practices of using technology by different EFL teachers. To improve working with technology, the participants recommended solutions such as teachers' use of webcam, recording classes for later access, running flipped classrooms, paying attention to the chat box/pane, and distinguishing productive and unproductive students' presence and participation, which they believed could mitigate teacher unfairness toward students.

The last group of solutions to injustice, as recommended by the participants, was about creating an enjoyable learning environment and running friendly classes through maintaining a fair and warm atmosphere. This result corroborates previous findings highlighting the significance of enjoyment, positive classroom environment, and teacher-student friendship in foreign language education (Li, 2020; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

Conclusion, Pedagogical Implications, and Recommendations for Further Research

The concept of teacher classroom injustice is an under-represented area of research in L2 education and is even more so in the domain of online L2 education. To address this lacuna, the current research attempted to explore undesirable teacher behavior as experienced by Iranian EFL university students in online classes. It particularly aimed to reveal the degree of injustice felt by the students and what they believed to be the main causes and solutions for injustice in imposed online L2 classes. The findings indicated that (1) the majority of the students had experienced teachers' unfairness during the remote-learning classes; (2) online-, teacher-, and class-related factors were

mentioned as the main sources of injustice; (3) improving teacher-student interpersonal relationships, enhancing teaching practice quality, increasing online teaching literacy, improving online-related factors, and creating an enjoyable learning environment were the solutions proposed to mitigate the experience of injustice in L2 online learning classes.

Being one of the initial strides toward investigating injustice in online EFL classes, the present research provides significant tips for EFL instructors, practitioners, and teacher educators. The causes of injustice found in this study would be an eye-opener for L2 instructors who, in the midst of the abrupt shift to crisis-prompted remote classes, might have failed to think of their learners' technological complications, unfamiliarity with online learning environments, emotional struggles, unfair treatments, and undesirable interpersonal experiences. Based on the findings, teachers would also be in a position to search for sources of injustice in their own classroom behaviors, seek to understand how their instructional practices, interpersonal relationships and enacting classroom procedures could bring feelings of injustice and inequality to learners. Based on the solutions suggested by the students, teacher educators would also be able to instruct pre- and in-service EFL instructors in appropriate techniques to prevent, or at least decrease, injustice in remote L2 learning environments, so that they could maintain a fairer and more enjoyable environment for learners during and beyond the present pandemic.

Moreover, language teachers can be trained to provide more room for students to engage in classroom discussions, endeavor to understand students' exceptionalities and needs, behave more equally toward all students, dedicate more time and affection to them, set reasonable workload for students, fine-tune their teaching to students' abilities, attend to psychological and affective aspects of teaching, and update their knowledge of how to teach effectively in online classes. Teacher educators are also advised to adapt their programs to higher education regulations and practices due to the sudden change from face-to-face education models to a health-crisis remote education practice (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020).

Teacher educators are also encouraged to incorporate digital, media, and online education literacies into their programs for teachers' learning and professional practice improvement. Likewise, they are urged to inquire into teachers' online teaching experiences and challenges to

support their professional development, considering the unusualness and uncertainty of the Covid-19 imposed online teaching scenario for most of the teachers. The outcomes of the present study would assist EFL students and instructors to have a more just and fulfilling experience during online classes so that, when the epidemic ends, they will have made their best and enjoyed to the full their experiences in remote EFL classes.

Although the current study was the first of its type in the Iranian context, it can be enhanced through attending to its limitations by future research. While exploratory large-scale research endeavors, like the present one, could raise fruitful initial points for reaching a broader view with thick descriptions of unexplored contexts of injustice in online L2 classes. Future studies can additionally take a more micro-perspective approach to explore injustice by studying particular online classes from the lens of a few purposefully-selected students. In addition, in the present study, only students' perspectives were considered. As both groups of students and teachers play unique roles "in smoothly moving the justice give-and-take seesaw" (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021b), it is beneficial if future studies explore teachers' opinions regarding their own classroom (in)justice behaviors. Future studies can also focus on teachers' enactment of (in)justice to examine if they are cognizant of their classroom behaviors. Furthermore, the present study investigated injustice in Covid-19 imposed online L2 classes. It will be beneficial if future research endeavors to explore this behavior in planned online L2 education environments that have been held by technologically literate L2 instructors who adroitly handle complexities of online classes to uncover if, and to what degree, the causes of classroom injustice obtained in the present study also emerge.

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About the Authors

Masoomeh Estaji: An Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at Allameh Tabataba'i University. She has presented and published

numerous papers in Educational Assessment, Language Learning in Higher Education, Reading Psychology, English as an International Language, The Asian ESP, Asia TEFL, and Classroom Interaction. Her research interests include language testing and assessment, ESP, and teacher education.

Kiyana Zhaleh: A university lecturer (PhD, Allameh Tabataba'i University) in Iran for the past three years. She has published papers in System, Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching, TESL-EJ, Current Psychology, Language Related Research, Polish Psychological Bulletin, and Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics. Her research interests lie mainly in the areas of Teacher Education, Instructional Communication, and Social Psychology of Justice.

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Appendix A

Open-ended Questionnaire Items

1. To what extent do you feel to be treated unfairly by your teachers in online classes?
2. From your point of view, what are the causes of Iranian EFL teachers' unfairness toward students in online classes?
3. What solutions do you recommend to Iranian EFL teachers which can help them treat students more fairly in online classes?

Appendix B

Causes of Injustice in Online Classes

Code	Frequency	Code	Frequency	Code	Frequency
Online-related factors	**82**	**Teacher-related factors**	**45**	**Class-related factors**	**10**
Lack of face-to-face interactions	23	Interactional and interpersonal practices	15	Time constraints	5
Digital illiteracy	20	Having pet students	4	Time of the class	2
Poor connection	19	Difficulty of knowing students well	4	Class size	1
Newness of online classes	9	Unavailability and time constraints	3	Task overload	1
Inefficiency of online classes	3	Uncaring behavior	3	Materials overload	1
Risk of cheating	2	Poor relationships and rapport with study	1		
Nature of online classes	2	Instructional practices	12		
Students' noisy environments	2	Poor teaching skills	5		
Insufficient interactivity	1	Poor teaching methods	4		
Poor online platforms	1	Inexperience	2		
		Poor class management	1		
		Procedural practices	9		
		Unreasonable workload	7		
		Inaccurate judgment of students	1		
		Biased grading	1		
		Distributive practices	4		
		Unfair affect and attention	2		
		Poor time management	1		
		Inadequate feedback	1		
		Personality	4		
		Irresponsibility	1		
		Lack of conscience	1		
		Fatigue	1		
		Age	1		

Appendix C

Solutions to Injustice in Online Classes

Code	F	Code	F
Improving teacher-student interpersonal relationships	**54**	**Enhancing teaching practice quality**	**22**
Knowing students and their needs	18	Setting reasonable expectations/workload for students	6
Dedicating more time and attention to students	17	Attending to psychological and affective aspects of teaching	3
Acting equally toward all students	8	Eliciting students' feedback	2
Encouraging students' participation and involvement	5	Fine-tuning teaching/assignments to students' needs/abilities	2
Establishing friendly relationships with students	4	Providing ample materials and resources	1
Listening to students' concerns and feelings	2	Making everything clear at the beginning of the term	1
Increasing online teaching literacy	**18**	Not being too much strict	1
Increasing online classes literacy	9	Teaching more constructively	1
Attending teacher training courses	3	Providing students with choice	1
Reflecting on one's teaching practices	2	Not overloading oneself with too many classes	1
Gaining digital literacy	1	Being more conscience	1
Being patient with technological problems	1	Creating task-course alignment	1
Receiving expert feedback on one's teaching practices	1	Increasing the teaching time	1
Observing other classes	1	**Creating an enjoyable learning environment**	**11**
Improving online-related factors	**13**	friendly class	9
Using webcam	4	Warm atmosphere	1
Distinguishing productive and unproductive students' presence/contribution	2	Fair atmosphere	1
Providing digital facilities	2		
Providing good network connection	2		
Running flipped classrooms	1		
Paying attention to chat box	1		
Recording classes for later access	1		